

Leaping Lizards!

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It was the summer of 1956. I was serving my obligatory two years in the Army, as a newly minted second lieutenant, at Fort Bragg, North Carolina... and life was good. I was recently engaged to be married, the fighting in Korea was just over, there was no shooting war anywhere to which I might be sent, and I had an assignment of considerable interest but very little importance, attached to the commanding general's office... a vantage point from which I saw many curious sights at America's largest military base. But none stranger than the one I am about to tell...

Fort Bragg prided itself on being "The Home of the Airborne." More specifically, it was the home of the XVIIIth Airborne Corps, which at that time included all three of America's airborne divisions: the 82nd (which was based at Ft. Bragg), the 101st (at Ft. Campbell, Ky), and the 11th (then at Augsburg, Germany). In addition to the 82nd, there were a number of highly specialized combat airborne groups also stationed at Ft. Bragg, some of them kind of obscure and secretive.

But the 82nd was cock of the walk at Ft. Bragg. They ruled the roost. They had, of course, a fiercely proud combat history in Normandy during World War II. They were the Army's elite, lean and mean, trained to the taut peak of perfection, in the trimmest uniforms with the spit shiniest jump boots, and they were America's first call soldiers standing ready to be flown overnight to the world's next hotspot. All the other organizations at Ft. Bragg deferred to them. Except one...

Located on Smoke Bomb Hill, a remote corner of the Ft. Bragg reservation, there was a small, new group of soldiers who kept very much to themselves. They wore green berets and called themselves the 77th Special Forces Group, Airborne (whatever that meant). The most obvious thing about these secretive soldiers was that they were DIFFERENT from the rest of us. Their peculiar headgear, absolutely unique in the U S military at that time, clearly set them apart. And from the start it was quite obvious that they had no interest in deferring to the troopers of the 82nd. Over time, word began to leak out about these Special Forces with the funny hats. Apparently they were a new kind of soldier, training for a new kind of guerilla warfare, fighting beside indigenous peoples behind main lines of resistance while living off the land.

And their training made even the 82nd pause and think. For starters, the Special Forces scorned jumping onto Ft. Bragg's well-groomed sandy drop zones. They ran a twelve week training cycle, which started in the Canal Zone where they jumped into the jungle with essentially no supplies - and ran military exercises for three weeks, feeding themselves off the land. Next, they flew to Fort Carson, Colorado where they jumped into the high Rockies, again without

supplies, and ran three more weeks of training exercises. Then, they flew to Thule, Greenland, where they jumped onto the polar ice cap for still more weeks of training, again living off the land (or ice). Finally they came back to Ft. Bragg where they jumped into a remote wooded corner of the North Carolina sand hills to start the cycle over again. It was daunting stuff, and gradually the men of the 82nd Division became less sure who was top dog at Ft. Bragg.

And then things took a surprising turn. One of the three regiments of the 82nd - the 505th, if memory serves - was always on the lookout for ways to put the other two regiments in the shade. They came up with the totally new idea of a jumping mascot. Somewhere, they found a Scotch terrier who wanted to earn his wings. So they rigged a small harness and parachute for him, and he made his first jump onto the Anzio drop zone at Ft. Bragg. And he just loved it, yapping happily all the way down. He was cute as anything. He couldn't get enough of it and soon he was jumping every week with one part of the regiment or another.

The idea caught on like wildfire, and the 82nd's other two regiments went off in search of jumping mascots of their own. The obvious choice would have been another kind of dog - a bigger, fiercer one, like a pit bull or mastiff - but it was felt that the canine world had already been claimed and more originality was called for. Candidates from every quarter of the animal kingdom were auditioned. Cats proved, as a species, totally uninterested and uncooperative... and not very manly, either. Someone trapped a bobcat while on maneuvers at Ft. Bragg, but no one could get a parachute harness on him. One unit came up with a billy goat who was a mild success. Another had a handsome ram - who proved difficult to deal with in the airplane, and was not an overly eager jumper.

The fad created a happy buzz all over Ft. Bragg, and the commanding general, while not sure how the Pentagon would feel about the whole business, chose to look the other way and let the fun continue, but with no publicity. In the fullness of time, word reached the Special Forces who were eager to find a jumping mascot so classy that it would put the 82nd's Scotties, goats and rams forever in their place.

And just at this juncture one of the Special Forces teams training in the Canal Zone jungle came across a fifteen foot boa constrictor, and the search was over.

So they put the snake in a very big box (he was a very big snake: the average boa is closer to twelve feet) and flew him back to Ft. Bragg where the finest minds in parachute technology were put to work on the next problem: how do you put a parachute on a boa constrictor? The obvious answer was to leave the snake in his cage and attach a parachute to the cage. But this solution pleased no one. Who wants a caged mascot jumping by their side? How macho is that? How much free will is there in parachuting in a cage? Certainly, this was not good enough for a high-rolling, daring, adventure-loving and free-spirited bunch like the Green Berets.

In time, the best thinking moved to a consideration of girdles - a series of corsets - each with a riser going up to the parachute canopy above. So they constructed eight experimental girdles and set about lacing the boa into them. But the snake proved to be utterly uncooperative, writhing into a convoluted mess of loops like a monstrous night crawler on a fish hook. Clearly, this was not going to work because it would create a hopeless tangle of the nylon risers and probably cause the canopy to collapse in midair.

And then someone came up with the concept of making the snake into a giant donut by lacing his head to his tail. There would still be the eight girdles spaced along the fifteen foot length of his body, but an additional sort of duplex girdle would be fashioned with two pockets side-by-side. One would hold his head and the other his tail. In this way, they reasoned, the snake would be restrained in his writhing and would float down from the skies rather like a very large inner tube suspended on its side.

It turned out to be quite a task getting the snake into this circular rig. But word of the project had leaked out and the Special Forces were determined to make it work, despite the snake's total lack of cooperation. Once they had thought their way through the doughnut harness concept, the next challenge was getting the snake into a circular configuration. The snake had very little interest in this. In the end, it took five brawny, sweaty Green Berets to wrap the snake around a large tree stump in order to get the circular bend in him while a sixth and seventh struggled to lace his head and his tail into the special double corset.

With these technological challenges behind them, the day finally came for the snake to make his first jump. I was standing around the general's office on some trivial errand when he emerged on his way to the drop zone: he was not going to miss this! Out of the goodness of his heart (and because his regular aide de camp was away on leave) he said, "Come on Carey, you want to see this!" How right he was.

The jump was to take place at Nijmegen drop zone, a long sandy strip carved out of the North Carolina pine woods. When we got there, about twenty or thirty officers - including the colonel commanding the Special Forces - were standing around in a buzz of excitement, waiting for something to happen. In the distance we heard the sound of C119 aircraft approaching. They were using planes configured for dropping heavy equipment, like Jeeps, with the entire back end of the fuselage wide open. This was obviously because they could never have gotten the circular snake out of a conventional doorway. But it gave the spectators below an excellent view, with field glasses, of the drama that was unfolding above us.

The lead plane passed by, and forty parachutes blossomed in the sky. Next came the second plane, with the snake. And we could clearly see a titanic struggle being fought out a

thousand feet above us. There were about six soldiers doing their level best to wrestle the snake out the door. But he took one look out of the plane and said "No f---g way!" He writhed and wriggled and loops of snake went every which way but out the door. While the soldiers fought the snake and the snake fought the soldiers the C119 flew the length of the drop zone, and then circled around for a second run.

This time, the soldiers were ready, standing in a circle in the back of the plane each holding a section of the snake in a more or less level circle. At just the moment of truth they all gave a concerted heave. Out came the snake, and out came the soldiers hard on his heels, as it were. (You've got to jump with your mascot). The snake's chute opened perfectly and he began what should have been a peaceful descent.

But he fought his harness every foot of the way and, to our horror, we saw the progressive failure of the girdles. First went the head-to-tail girdle. Now he was thrashing and flailing in the air. His body slipped through first one corset and then another until at last he was suspended by a single girdle, hanging by his tail, his head straight down toward the earth below. And then the last girdle gave way and he free fell for about five hundred feet. It was curtains for the snake.

But the drama was not over yet. They calculate very carefully where a jumper is likely to land, assuming that he will spend several minutes drifting down and will hit the ground a considerable distance from where he left. the airplane. The snake should have touched down about a quarter of a mile from where he came out the door. But this snake was in a freefall, dropping like a rock to the ground straight below. And immediately beneath him there was a platoon of new recruits seated on the sand being given instruction in some military skill or other, with no notion of the drama happening above them.

And then, dropping out of the sky, with absolutely no warning, a gigantic snake plummeted into their midst. A snake far, far bigger and more horrible than any they had ever seen or dreamed of in their worst nightmare. The terrified soldiers yelled and screamed. We heard, after the fact, that some of the men had gone into shock and suffered such severe emotional trauma that weeks passed before they were found fit to return to duty (though some maintained this was typical military malingering).

The general turned to me and growled "Carey, get my car." He never uttered a single word as we rode back to headquarters (and I was certainly not going to break the silence). The entire affair was buried as deep as the snake himself. And the 82nd Airborne's Scotty proudly stood tall as the unchallenged top dog jumping mascot!