



My Word

Can you stand it if I bring you another skydiving story this week? It's actually not about jumping though, but springs from something I wrote in last week's episode: ... *did a lot of odd-jobs around the zone, like packing parachutes for beginners* ...

The drop zone did most of its business on weekends. They advertised a 'first jump' program, and most people who signed up for it came on Saturday or Sunday. So I did most of my own jumping on the 'peaceful' weekdays, and on the weekend, kept useful by helping out with the packing job.

When a first-time jumper landed out in the field, the chute - these were the old-fashioned round ex-military type - usually collapsed around them a moment later. Being completely inexperienced, not to mention exhilarated by their completed jump, the last thing they were thinking of was how to keep the chute from getting tangled, and by the time they had bundled it up and carried it back to the barn, then unclipped and stepped out of their harness, the thing was a ball of tangled cords and fabric.

Parachute packing at the zone was handled by a guy called Jerry. Being vastly overweight he was unable to do any jumping himself, but he had good skills at packing, and the first time I saw him untangle one of these messes I was very impressed. One day I asked him to take me through the process, and as I turned out to be a good learner, he started to let me in on all his little tricks and secrets. After a bit more practice and experience, I too became pretty good at it.

The barn had four or five very long and narrow tables, each with a hook at one end. The crown of the chute was first disentangled from the mass of cords and fastened to this. It was then the packer's job to try and untwist and unravel all the tangles. You had to look at the mass of cords, and decide which way to twist and flip the bundle so that everything would fall flat. If you got it wrong, you made it worse, and had to backtrack. Only when everything was all smooth and straight could the chute be folded carefully - in a very strict pattern - and inserted into the covering bag, to be then carefully closed by the 'pin' which would be pulled out at the time that the next jumper left the plane, resulting in a - to be hoped - smooth and perfect deployment.

Now on a busy weekend at the drop zone, the first jumpers lined up by the dozen waiting for their turn, and it was the job of the packer to get the tangled chutes re-packed as fast as possible. The zone couldn't afford to have two full-time packers, but were willing to trade jump tickets in exchange for packing work, so I ended up spending most weekends packing side-by-side with Jerry, doing many dozens of chutes every day.

If I said we raced each other to see who could get a chute finished first that would be untrue, because we both knew that working too quickly on a job like this was really not the best policy, but there was definitely a sense of competition between us. Sunny summer days were the busiest of course, and the barn could become a furnace, but we kept at it hour after hour, until the planes had landed for the final time and all the chutes were back on their racks.

There is one other important memory I have of those days. The final step in each packing job was to sign your name to a 'packing card' that was kept in a pocket on each chute harness. If ever something should go

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wrong with a chute, and it failed to open properly, the investigators would of course check this card, and then come calling ...

I can still remember the first time I ever signed one of those, my hand pausing for a moment before going ahead with it.

"My word is my bond ..."

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