

About 3,030 words

THE PHOTOGRAPH

by

Derek Mathias

Green Ramp, Pope Air Force Base. Attached to Fort Bragg, U.S. Army Base, North Carolina. Home of the 18th Airborne Corps and the 82nd Airborne Division. The sun breaks over the horizon, temporarily painting the windy airstrip in cold orange. It will soon disappear again behind the gray ceiling of clouds blanketing the sky. Neat rows of sleeping C-130 and C-141 transport aircraft crouch on the frozen asphalt.

One green-camouflaged C-130 whines to life. Its four propellers whip around with increasing speed, from dull thumps to a shuddering scream. When they reach full speed, the lumbering craft turns its nose toward the row of white buildings at the edge of the airstrip. It rolls to within a hundred meters, turns, and the engines cut back to idle.

Another C-130 awakens. And another. They repeat the process, forming a perfect line parallel to the edge of the airstrip.

Figures in Battle Dress Uniform begin moving out from the shelter of the largest building.

Private First Class Leeds dropped his parachute, reserve, and weapon's case on the stretch of crunchy brown grass along the airstrip. He shrugged off his sixty-pound rucksack and his M-16 and dropped them alongside the other equipment. Then he cupped his black-gloved hands over his mouth and breathed into them for warmth. Through the rising fog from his breath he looked toward the sun. He eyed the low cloud layer and growled to himself. The last four jumps had been cancelled, and this was his last chance to jump before he would lose a month's jump pay. But between the clouds and the wind he was willing to bet the candy-assed Air Force pilots would scrap the jump.

"Enough shamming, Leeds," Staff Sergeant Rodriguez called out from where he was helping someone with a chute. "Let's move like we got a purpose."

Leeds nodded and dropped to one knee. He unzipped the canvas weapon's case, shoved his rifle in, and zipped it up again. He began attaching the lowering line to his rucksack.

"Sergeant Rod got a case of the ass again?" Private E-2 Philemon, a skinny black guy with big teeth, dropped his parachute beside Leeds'. He rubbed his arms through his camouflaged BDU jacket and grinned.

"Always, son." Leeds flipped over his parachute and removed the aviator's kit bag. He began undoing all the straps and buckles. "You want to give me a hand?"

"Shor." Philemon reached down and hefted Leeds' parachute up to his chest. Amazing the skinny son-of-a-bitch can lift the thing, Leeds thought. He worked his arms into the shoulder straps, and Philemon helped him attach the leg straps over the aviator's kit bag.

"So-o." Philemon said, watching Leeds attach the reserve chute across his front. "You bring it?"

"The camera? Yeah, sure." He touched the upper left pocket of his fatigues.

"Okay. Just hope the jumpmaster don't find it when he feels you up."

"He won't." Actually, Leeds wasn't too sure. This was his new unit: Alpha Company, 4th Battalion, 325th Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division. He and Philemon had finished Jump School together at Fort Benning, and were now assigned to Fort Bragg. They knew the routine, but they were both "cherries" to everyone else in the 82nd. At least they weren't ground-hugging "legs" anymore. "Airborne all the way" and all that shit.

At Benning they had been told it was a court martial offense to be caught taking photographs on a jump. But to Leeds everyone seemed a little more relaxed here at Bragg; he had jumped with his new unit once before and they hadn't paid much attention to him. He decided to risk the photo. Two days ago—payday—he bought a compact digital camera that cost a month's salary. It

could be set to continuously shoot picture after picture with just one push of the button. If this camera couldn't take his prize-winning shot, nothing could....

"Wuh-oh," Philemon said, lowering his voice, "Mistuh Motivation himself...."

Leeds glanced up to see Corporal Danning approaching. The thick-necked NCO had already chuted up and was now checking over his squad. Pretending to ignore him, Leeds picked up the other parachute and struggled to fit it on Philemon's back.

"Hey dickweed, you forgot the safety clip," said Danning, giving the metal wire dangling from Leeds' reserve chute a sharp tug.

Leeds gave him a cold stare, then attached the safety clip. "Sorry."

"That's 'Sorry, Corporal.'" Danning grinned. "You want I should slap you with a Article 15 for disrespect, Private Leeds?"

"Sorry, Corporal." *Asshole*, Leeds thought.

"And don't forget the road march tomorrow. 0530 hours. I'm gonna check your shit over first at 0500...and make sure you got at least forty-five pounds in your pack. Otherwise you do it over again. Thirteen miles round trip. You'll be ready, right Leeds?"

"Yes, Corporal."

"You too, Philemon." He grinned. "Have a nice jump." He walked off.

Philemon shook his head and began buckling up his parachute. "That is one broke dick individual...."

Leeds glared at Danning's back. "Cheese-eating motherfucker. When he jumps I hope his fucking static line wraps itself around his fucking neck and rips his fucking head off."

"He'll have your ass if you're caught taking pictures."

"Yeah, yeah...."

Grunting under the awkward weight on their backs, Leeds and Philemon attached the weighty rucksacks under their reserve chutes, clipped on the lowering lines, then tied their weapons cases to the left leg. Waddling like pregnant women, they joined a line of paratroopers waiting for inspection by the jumpmasters at the edge of the airstrip.

With damp armpits and an uncomfortable feeling in his stomach, Leeds stepped up to the jumpmaster.

The tall black sergeant looked disgusted. "Airborne, you want that Kevlar to slip down and break your nose? You a cherry or somethin'? Buckle up, Troop, you're holding up the line."

Leeds mumbled an apology and tightened the neglected chin strap on his Kevlar helmet. The jumpmaster then rattled through the inspection commands:

"Arms up.... Hold.... Squat.... Turn.... Good to go. Next!"

Leeds shuffled off, found Philemon, and collapsed beside him. "Man, it feels good to get this load off my feet," he said. Then, "He didn't find it."

"Ain't free yet. They might see you on the jump."

Leeds shrugged. He'd worry about that later.

The two paratroopers shared a cigarette and stamped their boots to keep warm. The sun disappeared into the thick layer of clouds overhead. The breeze picked up slightly.

Just when Leeds was about to say he thought they would scrap the drop, a jumpmaster called for everyone to line up. The nearest C-130's engines began to roar again, and a wash of warm exhaust flowed over the two paratroopers.

Corporal Danning called Leeds and Philemon over and stuck them in the front of one line. This meant they would actually be the last to jump, which meant they just had more time to be uncomfortable. Philemon complained about the fact that his rucksack was banging against his shins, until Danning told him to shut the fuck up. The line marched up the lowered rear cargo door of one C-130, and moved along the four rows of simple seats of nylon webbing. Two rows of seats lined the hull of the aircraft, and the other two rows ran back-to-back down the center of the cabin. The cabin interior was decorated with insulation, exposed pipes, red nylon webbing, and a few small windows.

Leeds was the first one onto the plane, so he had to sit all the way forward on one of the center rows. Next to Leeds sat Philemon, and next to him sat Danning. Soldiers kept climbing onto the plane until all 64 seats were filled. Then the cargo door slowly lifted back up into place and clunked shut.

The paratroopers waited, listening to the sounds of Air Force personnel and jumpmasters calling to one another, and the monotonous hum of the four engines. Several soldiers fell asleep immediately, the rest just stared at each other or off into

space. One of the senior NCOs walked down the rows of paratroopers to make a final check. The troops were packed in so tightly he had to walk over their knees.

Finally the engines raised their pitch. The heavy transport plane shuddered, then began rolling slowly towards the runway. Some of the sleeping troops awakened, then fell back asleep; the rest looked interested for a short while, then went back to staring blankly.

The heavy C-130 lifted from the runway, banked, then began a slow climb toward the clouds. CPL Danning began to drowse, and Philemon nudged Leeds in the ribs. "Hey, still gonna do it?" he asked, just loudly enough for Leeds to hear.

Leeds nodded slowly.

"You crazy? Danning's here. He catches you and you'll soak a HEAT round right up your ass."

"Back off. It's my ass."

"Yeah, you better believe it. What you want the photo for anyway...danger just get your dick hard?" He laughed.

"Yeah, so shut up."

Actually, Leeds wanted the picture for a magazine photo contest back home in Phoenix. First prize: \$5,000. Leeds planned to use the money for a down payment on a kick-ass cherry red Corvette he had his eye on. What better place to get a really cool shot than up in the air—a really bitchin' shot of a sky full of paratroopers coming down over a drop zone. The weather sucked, yeah, but at least the jump looked like it was

going down. And it looked like this would be the only chance to get a jump shot in before the contest deadline.

He remembered his uncle's famous photo of a WWII trooper who caught the deflated parachute of another jumper falling past him--the guy actually caught the chute and landed them both safely, and Leeds' uncle had photographed it from the ground. Leeds hoped he could get as lucky, but he was sure any decent air shot would take the prize.

The drone of the engines made Leeds drowsy. He soon drifted off....

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"Six minutes!" half of them yelled, repeating the jumpmasters' command. They swayed back and forth to wake up the other half.

Leeds shook his head and blinked. He had really been out.

"Hey, home boy, wake up. Our turn." Philemon jabbed Leeds in the ribs. His grin was bigger than normal and his fingers played with the ripcord on his reserve.

Leeds stretched as much as he could in the cramped seat, then looked around. The rearward seats of the plane were already empty; the first passes of troops had already jumped. The two rear sliding doors on the sides of the plane were up, and the wind howled inside. Near the doors two jumpmasters stood side-by-side facing forward, one for each of the remaining rows of jumpers. The commands came:

"Get ready!" the jumpmasters yelled in unison, thrusting their arms forward in a hand signal that meant the same thing.

"Get ready!" the jumpers repeated, as they did every command. No one could say they didn't hear or see a command. They unbuckled their flimsy seat belts. Leeds and Philemon also put one foot forward, just as they had learned in Jump School. No one else bothered.

"Inboard personnel stand up!"

"Inboard personnel stand up!"

Everyone stood up and faced the rear of the plane.

"Hook static lines!"

"Hook static lines!" Everyone hooked the snap clip of his static line to the taut metal cable running the length of the cabin, then pinned the snap clip into place with a safety clip, and took a firm grip on the line with one hand.

"Check static lines!"

"Check static lines!" A brief check over one's own static line. Then a check of the person in front to make sure the static line wasn't caught on anything.

"Check equipment!"

"Check equipment!" A formality. Each jumper double-checked his front and the back of the person in front of him. There was rarely anything wrong.

The one minute command came. There were darting eyes, chewed lips, and a lot of smiles that came and went too quickly.

"Stand in the door!" This command was not repeated. The first jumper in Leeds and Philemon's row, a second lieutenant,

stepped up to the door. He put one foot on the small protruding platform and slapped his hands to the outside of the door frame. He stood there, licking his lips and waiting, alternately watching the red light beside the door, and the forested land sweeping by 2,000 feet below.

The light turned green.

"Go!"

That was the final command, and Leeds' stomach twinged. The lieutenant jumped and was gone.

The lines on both sides surged forward. A jumper leaped from each side every second. Leeds pushed nervously like everyone else, and the line carried him forward. The open door approached too fast. He heard someone yell, "Put your knees to the breeze!"

Then he was there, thrusting his static line forward for the jumpmaster to grab and pull out of the way. Heart in his mouth, he stepped to the platform, crouched, slapped the outer skin of the craft, and jumped--

--A frigid blast of 130 mile an hour wind whipped him from the plane like a spitball from a speeding car window. The universe whirled and exploded around him, and for a moment it felt like he was committing suicide. Then the static line attached to the aircraft wrenched the parachute from its pack, and the line snapped free to trail behind the plane.

There came a thick pop of snapped silk, and Leeds was jerked into place beneath the beautiful wide canopy of green.

The C-130 droned on before him, its muffled roar fading into the rush of wind and the strained creak of his harness. The

clouds still hung above him, and Rhine Luzon drop zone swayed below only a few seconds away. Fine flakes of snow floated...up? He was falling faster than the snow. The world seemed all wrong, but the *feeling*... Leeds breathed deeply of the cold air and grinned.

The objective. Take a photograph. Leeds pulled off his gloves and fumbled with frozen fingers to unbutton his jacket pocket. He tugged the camera out, slipped his hand through the carry strap, and yanked off the lens cap.

The breeze carried a shout to him, and he swiveled his head around to look. An uneven line of drifting parachutes trailed down behind him. The two closest to Leeds were Private Philemon and Corporal Danning--

They had drifted too close to one another. Danning had maneuvered under Philemon and stolen his parachute's air. Craning his neck, Leeds watched as Philemon landed on Danning's canopy, slid down over the edge, and slipped through Danning's suspension lines. Philemon became entangled. His canopy began to collapse, and his weight pulled down one side of Danning's canopy.

"Oh, shit," Leeds whispered, twisting in his harness. This was it. A disaster, a real-life disaster! My God, what a photo it would make....

But Leeds faced the wrong direction. He couldn't rotate the parachute, not the T-10 type, and he couldn't twist himself in the harness far enough to get a clear shot. He tried anyway, jerking violently back and forth.

He watched as Danning pulled his reserve. The white parachute leaped from his middle and swirled up, only to entangle itself in Philemon's collapsed parachute.

Then Danning's main chute collapsed. The two soldiers dropped in a flurry of flapping silk and trailing suspension lines.

"Godammit!" Leeds screamed. He had almost succeeded in twisting around far enough to take a picture, but then the two struggling paratroopers dropped from sight. Too bad about Philemon....

And now it was too late to do anything but prepare to land. A hundred feet below him lay the stretch of forest that bordered Rhine Luzon drop zone. The wind had carried him off the DZ, and now it was too late to try pulling his risers to slip back over the clear stretch of sand. So a tree landing it would have to be. Okay, no problem, he could deal with it; they had taught him how in Jump School.

Leeds let the camera dangle from his wrist, and quickly reached down to untie the strap holding the weapons case against his leg. Then he yanked loose his rucksack and let it fall the full length of the lowering line.

The pack disappeared into a sea of leaves. Leeds quickly reached up and grabbed two risers, and drew them down to face level. He covered his face with his arms and ducked his head to protect it from scratching branches. Knees and ankles together, knees slightly bent--

--*Impact.* Leeds swept in at an angle, crashing through a large tree's green canopy. Smaller branches cracked and ripped free; the larger ones struck his legs like baseball bats and twisted him around as he fell.

He jerked to a halt in an instant. A branch caught him in the stomach and knocked the wind out of him. He struggled to draw in a breath. Then he opened his eyes and looked around. He hung almost vertically, partially draped over a thick branch. The grass and leaf covered ground lay only ten feet below him. He had made it.

Leeds reached for his riser release...and a sharp pain wrenched his gut. With his face twisted in pain, he disconnected his reserve and pushed it away from his stomach.

A second branch forked off from the one he was draped over. It was as thick as Leeds' wrist and soaked red. It had been driven up through his stomach and deep into his lungs.

Leeds coughed. He felt a thick wetness on his chin and throat. Then the pain hit....

Strength drained from his body and his arms fell limp. The camera slipped from his wrist and dropped to the mat of grass and leaves. It bounced off a rock and landed facing up.

Leeds stared unseeing into the lens.

Click-whirr...click-whirr...click-whirr...

The End