

Diving catch

Valley parachutist pulls off midair rescue

By Clay Thompson
The Phoenix Gazette

All in all, even dropping through the sky headfirst at 200 miles an hour, Gregory Robertson doesn't seem to have given it a lot of thought until he caught up with Diane Williams about 10 seconds above the ground.

"It was at that point that I realized I had lost total track of altitude. I had no idea where I was . . . I watched her feet swing by me, and then I just sort of said, '(Expletive), I'm hitting her rip cord.'"

He propped her up, pulled her rip cord and pulled his own, climaxing what may be one of the most amazing life-saving efforts in the history of sky diving.

In about 20 seconds of terror and glory played out in the desert sky, Robertson, a

35-year-old sky-diving expert and American Telephone & Telegraph engineer, pursued and caught Williams, who had been knocked unconscious in a collision with another jumper. Falling headfirst for about 6,000 feet, he pulled up next to Williams, opened her chute and saw her land, seriously injured but miraculously alive.

Williams, 31, of Slaton, Texas, was in serious but stable condition today in the intensive care unit at Scottsdale Memorial Hospital.

The fact Williams is alive at all "is a miracle," said Guy Fitzwater, the man with whom she collided. "That guy is a hero."

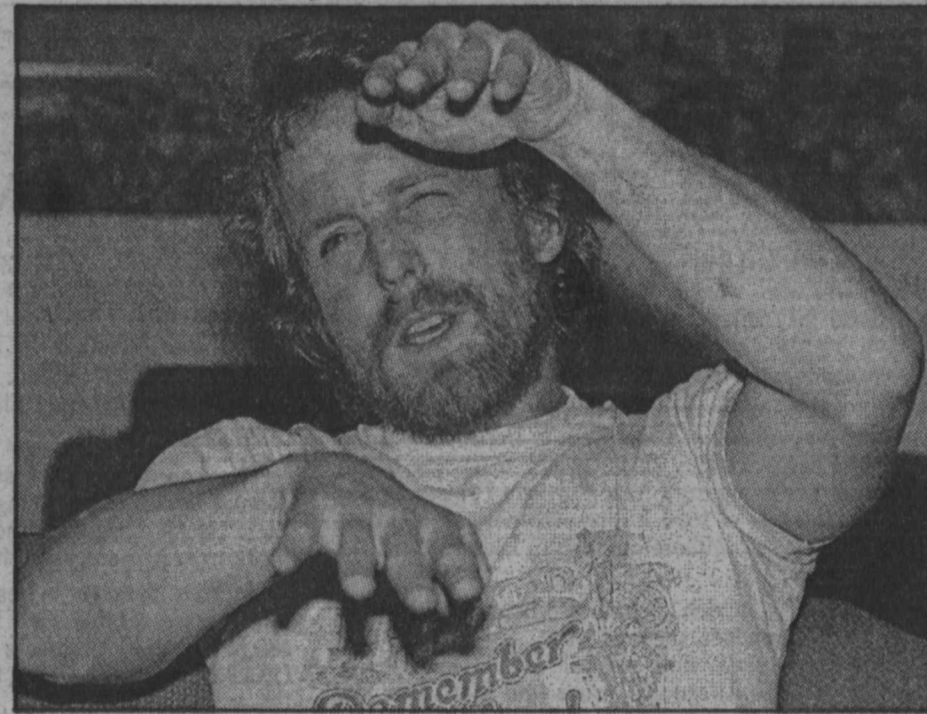
Robertson, a Phoenix resident who has made more than 1,500 jumps, was a little more matter-of-fact about it.

How did he do it? "I sky dive," he said Tuesday in an interview at the hospital where he had gone to visit Williams.

Williams, a veteran of about 50 jumps, was one of about 450 sky divers who gathered over the weekend of the annual Easter "boogie" — sky divers' rendezvous — at Skydive Arizona, near Coolidge.

Saturday morning, just before noon, she was one of a party of six that jumped at about 13,500 feet from a DC-4, planning to link hands and drop down in formation. Robertson, a free fall instructor at Skydive Arizona and a safety and training adviser for the U.S. Parachute Association, was the jump master, the man in charge of seeing the divers off the plane safely.

See ■ **Rescue, A-4**



Nancy Engebretson, *The Phoenix Gazette*

Greg Robertson explains how he maneuvered to save a sky diver's life.

The Phoenix Gazette

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35¢

■ Rescue

From A-1

As he often does with a less experienced group, Robertson jumped out of the plane a second or two behind Williams' group.

Robertson checked the arrangement of the falling formation — "just a normal sky dive" and "set up about 40 feet up and 70 feet out and just hovered there."

What happened in the next few seconds involves a lot of sky diving jargon — corkscrewing, funneling, D-arches, tracking — and is best told with a lot of tilting and waving of hands.

Basically, this is what Robertson saw as he hovered above Williams: Williams and Fitzwater were above the formation as it shaped up. As Williams dived toward the group, "she turned and ... hit right on him, right on his backpack ... at closing speed of what I estimate to me about 40 (mph) or 50 on the horizontal ... It was rough. It was a big bang," Robertson said.

"I watched her fall off him. She sort of hit his backpack and then skidded down and hit his leg and then just sort of rag-dolled off ... total rag doll."

Her control lost, unconscious and 9,000 feet above the earth, Williams fell from the sky like a stone.

"I just gave the 'aw, shoot' and started diving down," Robertson said. To build up speed, Robertson, who had been floating horizontal to the earth, dived toward the desert like a swimmer would dive toward the bottom of the pool. Arms pinned to his side, legs closed, he aimed himself at Williams's spinning, tumbling body by small movements of his shoulders.

It took two tries to reach her — "I pulled up too soon the first time" — but Robertson dropped next to Williams, deployed her chute and then parachuted to safety himself.

Williams' fiancé, Bill Rothe, a sky diver from Andrews, Texas, who was at the scene, compared Robertson's feat to "trying to catch a football that was flopping down the road at 40 miles an hour."

"It's not so amazing to be able to catch someone. We do that in formations," Larry Hill, owner of Skydive Arizona, said. "What's amazing was that he saw this happen and was able to do something."

Even with her chute open, Williams hit the ground hard, flat on her back. She suffered several broken ribs, extensive internal injuries and a lung contusion.

"I remember rolling over on my back and seeing Diane all crumpled up, and I knew she was unconscious," he said in a phone interview from his home in Van Nuys, Calif. "I thought I was going to black out, but I didn't. I went down to 3,500 feet and opened my chute. ... I said, 'Dear God, how is she going to make it.'"

When Williams landed, other sky divers, among them a doctor and a Marine Corps medic, raced to help her. She was taken by Air Evac to the hospital.

And Robertson?

"I put my rig back on and got on the airplane and went up to work again. It was another day of sky diving," he said.

"This is what I like to do."