

Midair rescue: How tale of daring deed landed on front page

Too often, we neglect to share with you, our reader, the story behind the news. We believe you are entitled to know the background on how much of our material develops and how the tough decisions are made.

Your inquiries to my office are welcome.

This insight into how *The Gazette* works was written by Bob Crawford, assistant managing editor.

— M. Lynne Holt
Managing editor

Most stories in this or any newspaper are the products of routine hard work by reporters pounding their beats.

A select few are born of out-of-the-ordinary legwork, enterprise, snooping and plain unadorned hustle.

And once in a great while, when the moon is just right and the force is with us, a truly great tale falls from the sky.

Which is precisely how *Gazette* reporter Clay Thompson happened to break the story on that incredible midair sky diving rescue in Coolidge last week.

The story behind this story began when photographer Tom Tingle was in Coolidge to shoot pictures of a

Insight

mass jump Sunday, April 19.

Two of his pictures ran in full color on *The Gazette's* front page the next day. One showed a perfectly healthy sky diver under his parachute somewhere between airplane and earth. The other showed that same sky diver on the ground studying his own broken ankle.

On Tuesday morning, my intercom beeped.

"Who is responsible for the sky diving pictures?" secretary Linda Freeman asked. "I have a call holding from a gentleman who wants to talk about them."

Anybody who has been in this business very long knows that kind of phone call means only one thing: a complaint.

Happy readers turn to the next page. Unhappy ones turn to the telephone.

As I told Linda to put the call through, I prepared my defenses. By the time I picked up the phone, I was ready to recite why *The Gazette* would run a picture of the only sky diver who had suffered so much as a

hangnail in the jump.

That's not what Jay Thompson wanted to talk about.

He said he and his son were visiting in the state from Jacksonville, Fla.

They were sky divers who happened to be in Coolidge over the weekend for the scheduled festivities.

"When I saw the pictures on your front page, I thought you might be interested in something a little unusual that happened," he said.

It seems there was another mass jump Saturday, he explained. Sort of a warm-up for the big one Sunday.

And during the free fall, a man and woman collided in midair.

After that, his story became difficult to believe.

Jay Thompson told me that the woman was knocked unconscious and fell through what he called the "breakaway zone" without opening her parachute.

He said "some guy named Craig, I don't know his last name, except that he's training and safety officer for the Coolidge drop zone" saw the problem.

He said Craig, too, did not open his chute. Instead,

Craig maneuvered himself to the injured woman, pulled her rip cord first and — with only seconds to spare before he crashed into the desert — pulled his own.

I thanked him as calmly as I could thank someone who has just tipped us to the best feature story of the year.

And I told him I would send him a copy of the story if we ran it.

If we ran it?

Well, it turned out the hero's name was not Craig, but Greg Robertson.

Close enough.

And I suspect the copies of *The Gazette* that we sent to Florida didn't get there before Jay Thompson saw his story on every national wire service and television network.

What's more, I suspect that the next time the intercom buzzes and Linda says somebody wants talk about the pictures on Page One, I'll pick up the phone a little more quickly.

I suspect we all will.