

Drama in Real Life

The free-falling sky diver slammed into a fellow jumper at 9000 feet and was knocked unconscious. Limp as a rag doll, parachute unopened, she plummeted toward earth. Only a miracle could save her

## RESCUE IN MIDAIR!

BY PER OLA AND EMILY D'AULAIRE



**O**N A BEAUTIFUL GOOD FRIDAY morning, last April 17, a Twin Beech jump plane, its sardine-can interior stripped of seats, droned toward Coolidge, Ariz. Aboard, Debbie Williams, 31, and half a dozen friends talked of the upcoming Easter weekend "boogie"—sky divers' lingo for a parachute convention, with 420 divers from all over the nation.

Skydive Arizona, the drop zone at Coolidge Municipal Airport, some 50 miles southeast of Phoenix, is the nation's second-largest jump spot, renowned for its clear skies and 200 square miles of obstacle-free desert.

At the Beech's controls was its

owner, Bill Rothe, 36, Debbie's fiancé and veteran of some 300 jumps. Receiving the all-clear, Bill throttled back while Debbie, her jump buddy Alex Rodriguez and four others launched themselves into thin air.

**Six-Way Circle.** Arching their backs, arms spread, legs bent up at the knees, the divers turned and swooped like eagles as the air roared by their ears at 120 miles per hour. To Debbie, a fifth-grade teacher, "flying her body"—the exhilarating sensation of free fall—was the closest thing humanly possible to pure flight.

At 2500 feet the divers pulled their rip cords, and colorful chutes

ILLUSTRATION: GEORGE ANGELINI

snapped open, slowing their descent to 10 m.p.h. The six guided their parachutes toward the target center of the drop zone, turned into the wind to slow down, then touched down as lightly as sparrows returning to roost.

Inside the huge hangar, filled with other jumpers repacking their parachutes, Debbie and Alex found a spot next to Guy Fitzwater, a painting contractor from Van Nuys, Calif., and three San Diego buddies. It was Fitzwater's 51st birthday, and he was in high spirits. When Debbie exclaimed in her heavy West Texas accent, "We'd love it if you-all would join Alex and me for a six-way," he enthusiastically agreed.

The group made two jumps together that afternoon, joining hands after tumbling from the plane to form a horizontal circle, then cutting away from one another, spreading out in a line and opening their chutes at 2500 feet. Everything meshed perfectly. The next morning, they again successfully jumped in formation.

Back in the hangar, Debbie had trouble repacking her chute; the lines were snarled. Her problem caught the sharp eye of safety-and-training adviser Gregory Robertson. Sky diving was the most important thing in the 35-year-old electrical-design engineer's life. After graduate school in Virginia, he had moved to Phoenix for the unsurpassed sky-diving opportunities.

"On my first jump, I was scared

out of my mind," he recalls. "Instead of arching like I was supposed to, I went into a fetal-position tuck, screaming with terror. Then my parachute, hooked to a static line from the plane, opened, and all went quiet as I floated gently to earth. *Wow, I thought, this is great!*"

Gregory was hooked. Now, with almost 1500 jumps in his logbook, he was an instructor and a jump master, certified by the U.S. Parachute Association to teach the accelerated free fall (AFF) technique of sky diving. Traditional training requires half a dozen low-altitude static-line jumps before a free fall is attempted; AFF students free fall on their first jump. They are accompanied by two jump masters who, with precise aerodynamic movements of shoulders, arms and legs, remain in physical contact with their sometimes bewildered and frightened students, ready to pull a main rip cord or reserve chute should a student become too panicky to do it himself.

Gregory had shepherded AFF students to safe landings over 300 times. "But when you're no longer a student," he says, "there's no one to help you up there. Once you're out the door, you're on your own."

Now, in the hangar watching Debbie struggle with her chute, Gregory was concerned. He introduced himself and asked how many jumps she had made. "Fifty-five," she replied. *Not a lot of experience*, he thought.

Debbie told Gregory she and

Alex were about to do another six-way jump with Guy Fitzwater and the other Californians. Gregory was confident in Guy's skills, but his instructor's instinct told him to keep close tabs on Debbie.

**Unexpected Bonus.** The plan was to dive from a DC-4, a four-engine prop plane, at 12,500 feet. Some 90 parachutists were crammed into the fuselage. But the plane's No. 3 engine balked. The jumpers clambered out to await repairs, reloading after 45 minutes. Debbie and her group sat near the cockpit. They would exit last, followed closely by Gregory.

As the plane strained skyward, Gregory suggested to the pilot that they compensate for the delay by giving the jumpers an extra thousand feet of altitude—six more seconds of free fall. "Sounds good to me," the pilot replied. As it turned out, each extra foot of added altitude would be an unexpected bonus.

Gregory carefully metered out the groups of divers, spacing each a few seconds apart. Finally, it was time for Debbie's group. Gregory put on his leather helmet and goggles, then yelled, "Six-way!"

The Californians exited first, holding hands to form a "base" of four with which Alex and Debbie would try to dock. Gregory was surprised that Debbie was last; catching up with the group below would be difficult. *She should have been in the base*, he thought.

Debbie was tracking well—a move that covers horizontal as well

as vertical distance. In her red helmet, white T-shirt and jeans, she was easy to spot. The other divers wore full jump suits, but Debbie compensated for her light weight by wearing clothing that offered less wind resistance.

*Not bad*, Gregory thought as he watched Debbie from above. *Maybe my hunch was wrong.*

**Out of Control.** When the first four had jumped from the plane, Guy Fitzwater had been caught in the wash from the DC-4's prop and yanked from his friends, leaving a three-man base. He went into a tracking dive to catch up, but overshot.

Meanwhile, Debbie circled the stabilized formation. *She doesn't have the proper skills to move straight in and link up*, Gregory realized. *Her directional control is off.*

At about 10,000 feet, Alex closed in and docked with the formation. But he was moving too fast and he "funneled" the group, turning the stable horizontal circle of divers into a precarious vertical wheel. When that happens, the formation streaks downward at 165 m.p.h. until it can stabilize.

Guy was stranded 500 feet above the out-of-control circle, with Debbie about 20 feet above him. Above them all was Gregory. It was a dangerous situation—two groups of sky divers stacked vertically. If the lower group opened their parachutes and Debbie and Guy barreled into and collapsed the chutes, they all might "bounce"—a para-

chutist's euphemism for a fatal fall.

Gregory dived toward Debbie, intending to hook up with her and lead her away from potential danger. But as he started his move, both Guy and Debbie began to dive to catch up with the four below. To accelerate, Debbie went into a corkscrew—a fast dive that turned her directly toward Guy and increased her speed way beyond his. *They're going to collide!* Gregory realized.

As he watched in disbelief, Debbie's face and chest smacked into Guy's backpack. The right side of her body then snapped around into his left side and leg, knocking him onto his back. The 50-m.p.h. impact was devastating. Debbie bounced away, limp as a rag doll.

**Guided Missile.** At the instant of impact, Guy Fitzwater couldn't imagine what had hit him. Then he saw Debbie, hanging limply, spinning away. *Please, God*, he prayed, *watch out for her.*

Guy's leg and rib cage were in agonizing pain. Knowing he had to get down quickly for medical help, he went into a steep track—keeping the orange-roofed hangar below in sight—then pulled his rip cord at 3500 feet. Fighting for a soft landing, he flared into the wind just before touchdown, then crumpled on his left knee, its ligaments torn by the collision. Another jumper ran up to him. "How's Debbie?" Guy called out. Nobody knew.

THE COLLISION knocked Debbie unconscious and threw her in Gregory's

direction. When she crossed under him, some 70 feet below and traveling at about 165 m.p.h., he saw that her face was covered with blood. Looking quickly around to assess the situation, he saw Guy snap back to stability and check his altimeter. He was okay. Gregory was relieved. There was no way he could save both of them.

Noting Debbie's position, Gregory went from a flat 120-m.p.h. fall into a 180-m.p.h. "no-lift" dive. Facing straight down, toes pointed, arms at his sides, head tucked into his chest, he concentrated on diving as fast as he could.

After seconds that seemed like hours, he raised his head to get his bearing, momentarily slowing his speed. Debbie was still accelerating away from him, though not as fast as before. He made a mental picture of where she was, then tucked back into his no-lift dive. Screaming earthward, making fine-tuned maneuvers with his shoulders, he streaked toward Debbie like a guided missile. His peripheral vision told him that the horizon was coming up awfully fast and he knew he had just seconds to pull off a rescue—if he could pull it off.

Much like Superman without a cape, he pulled to within a foot of the unconscious Debbie. She was still spinning on her back, but he noticed her right arm coming across her body. *Is she subconsciously trying to pull her rip cord, or is it the wind?* Gregory wondered. *No matter, the ground's coming up fast. I've*

got to pull it for her. He grabbed Debbie's reserve cord, yanked it, then quickly moved away. "There's your chance!" he yelled as Debbie's white reserve chute billowed open.

At 2000 feet, a mere 12 seconds from impact, Gregory opened his own main chute. He had chased the young lady from Texas for 7000 feet—straight down. The entire action had taken 25 seconds.

**Tough Little Texan.** Debbie was still unconscious and limp in the harness. If she landed the wrong way, her neck could break. Miraculously, she drifted toward the drop zone, her chute tracked into the wind and she touched down in the drop zone lightly, the canopy falling softly over her inert body.

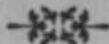
Gregory was down as well. He bunched up his chute and sprinted toward Debbie, who lay crumpled on a grass strip not ten feet from a blacktop runway and less than 100 feet from the hangar. Medics quickly evacuated her by helicopter to Scottsdale Memorial Hospital. Her multiple injuries included a hairline fracture of the base of her skull, a concussion, a broken collar bone, eight broken ribs, a bruised right lung, a lacerated liver and a bruised kidney. After a 1½-hour operation to repair her liver, she

was put in the intensive-care unit, where her condition remained critical for nine days.

On April 21, Guy Fitzwater, his leg in a cast, hobbled into Debbie's hospital room on crutches. "We've got to stop bumping into each other like that," he quipped. Debbie was unable to speak, but Guy saw the sparkle in her eyes and knew that the "tough little Texan," as he called her, was going to pull through. (She is now fully recovered.)

When news of Gregory Robertson's astonishing feat got out, the press dubbed him "Superman" and labeled his airborne rescue "the Easter Miracle." Awards and congratulations poured in, including a personal letter from President Reagan. But nothing acclaimed what he had done better than the huge poster tacked to the hangar wall on Easter Sunday. It read: "In appreciation and recognition of sky diver Gregory Robertson who saved a life on 18 April, 1987." Beneath the 400-plus signatures was this postscript: "Good job, Gregory!"

Embarrassed by all the hoopla, Gregory Robertson says, "I don't want to be a hero. I just want to be a sky diver." This attitude is reflected in the terse entry scrawled in his logbook after that eventful day: *Pulled unconscious girl's rip cord. We both lived.*



SAM SNEAD'S ADVICE to golf widows: "When your husband comes home with cockleburs in the cuffs of his pants, don't ask him what his score was."

—Quoted in *The Christian Science Monitor*