



## An American Hero



AP Wirephoto

GREG ROBERTSON, D-7112, SAVES UNCONSCIOUS JUMPER

## An American Hero

by Larry Jaffe

**W**e've all thought about it," explained Gregory Robertson. "I didn't know if she was alive or not. I decided I didn't care what she was, I was going for that reserve." Haven't all experienced skydivers thought about "it?" There you are, in freefall, when you realize your fellow jumper has lost consciousness and is hurtling helplessly, defenselessly, toward certain fatal impact. Instinctively (you hope), you drop into your best max track, flare out after a 20-second dive and gently pull up next to the victim. As you deploy his reserve and watch it open you dump your main. Everyone lands safely and you begin packing up for the next load, remarking that

you'd only done what any other skydiver would have done in the same situation. Inside though, you know you've ascended beyond the ranks of mere mortals. You've achieved legitimate hero status. Fortunately, few of us are ever faced with such a situation. On Saturday, April 18, at the annual Skydive Arizona Easter Boogie in Coolidge, Gregory Robertson saw it happen. Robertson, 35, has accumulated some 1,500 jumps since he began nearly eight years ago. Most of those jumps have been in Coolidge; Robertson has been around the drop zone long enough to see more than one skydiving administration come and go. An Accelerated Freefall Instructor with some 300 AFF jumps under his belt, Robertson, D-7112, has assumed various su-

perisory duties at the DZ. He's the drop zone's Safety & Training Advisor and one of the loadmasters for the DC-4 which often hauls jumpers at Coolidge during special events. On Saturday of the Boogie, with the Arizona sky clear and the day warming up toward a high in the 90s, Robertson was supervising boarding of the aircraft when he noticed a mixed group of jumpers from Texas and California. Robertson, who said he has trained himself to pick out the inexperienced groups of jumpers and pay close attention to them, decided to put them out last and follow them out.

### Low Time Load

Debbie Williams, who normally jumps at Westex Skysports in Midland, TX had just met several California jumpers the previous day. With fewer than 100 jumps, she was only too happy to join them now for a simple 6-way. Williams' partners on board the DC-4 with her were Alex Rodriguez of San Jose, TX and four more jumpers from the San Diego area: Gary Bellamy of Santee, CA; Ken Nevil of El Cajon, CA; Blair Oaks, A-8992, of Coronado, CA; and Guy Fitzwater, A-9188, of Van Nuys, CA. The "senior" jumper among them had fewer than 200 jumps and several had fewer than 100.

Once on jump run, Robertson relayed final corrections to the pilots and watched the various groups exit. He gave Williams' group about a one-second head start and followed them out over the Coolidge triangle. He set up some 50 feet up and out from their formation, observing their inexperienced attempts at relative work.

Williams, who exited last of the six, had assumed a surprisingly good track position as she accelerated to terminal. But as she approached a 3-way she began orbiting the formation, unable to close further before it funneled.

Meanwhile, Guy Fitzwater, who had been reverse-arching from below the formation as Williams dove down to it, now relaxed into a normal arch as the jumpers in the funnel rapidly lost altitude. The 51-year-old painter from Van Nuys, CA never saw Williams until she slammed into him from above, at a closing speed Robert-



Shortly after the accident, Robertson visited with Fitzwater in a local hospital where Fitzwater was treated for torn ligaments in his left leg. He was released shortly after and returned home.



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son estimated at between 40 and 50 mph. "I didn't know what hit me," Fitzwater said later. "It nearly knocked me out."

Fitzwater was forced onto his back by the impact. Rolling over face to earth, agonized by pain in his back and left leg, Fitzwater only then spotted Williams, now falling away from him "limp as a rag." He glanced at his altimeter and saw he was at 9,000 feet. He didn't want to pull that high; that would have meant a long canopy ride before he could expect any first aid. Instead, he elected to continue freefalling until closer to normal opening altitude.

Fitzwater's decision posed a brief problem for Robertson. He'd seen the collision and had no doubts as to its severity. Did someone need help? Which one?

Seeing Fitzwater assume a stable body position, Robertson turned his attention to Williams. She was on her back, spinning, and accelerating away from him. Blood was flowing freely from her mouth.

"I thought, 'Oh no, I wonder if this can be done?'" Robertson said later.

He began diving, flared once, too early, dove again and finally caught up with her. He thought briefly he had seen some arm movement, but then decided it was only the relative wind. Hovering next to her, he was beginning his final approach when he realized that, intent only on saving Debbie Williams' life, he had completely lost track of altitude awareness. "But it was too late to do anything but drive on in."

Robertson allowed her feet to spin past him and then quickly moved in to dock. Grabbing her lift web in his left hand, Robertson took hold of her reserve ripcord with his right. Before pulling, he pushed down with his left hand to force Williams into something approaching an upright position—to get a better deployment. Then he pulled her ripcord, transferred the handle to his left hand, and dumped his main.

Opening in the midst of the group Wil-

liams had jumped with, Robertson was forced to front-riser his canopy away from another jumper before gaining clear airspace.

Bob Kuhn, assistant operations manager at Skydive Arizona, happened to step outside and see the last minute of Williams' descent.

"It looked like a thermal had lifted her up, turned her into the wind and set her down. I didn't even know it was an abnormal landing."

But Williams' problems didn't end once she was on the ground. She needed her life saved at least one more time, this time by a skydiver grounded by an eye injury who happened to be an emergency medical technician.

Dean Baker, 28, was only watching the skydiving activity this weekend. A Marine sergeant stationed at Camp Pendleton in California, he had taken seven stitches above his eye and suffered a bruised retina recently when he was struck accidentally by an armored vehicle antenna. The injury wouldn't allow him to jump, but after talking to Fitzwater, a skydiving buddy, the 79-jump veteran decided to come out anyway.

Baker was watching canopies with Fitzwater's wife when he noticed a cut-away main. He scanned the sky for a round reserve, found none, and then located the white ram-air reserve.

"The person looked limp," he said. "Right away I thought something was wrong."

Baker is no stranger to emergency medical situations. Some 18 months ago he was credited with saving the lives of two Marines severely injured by an accidental explosion. Two others were killed. Baker was subsequently decorated with the Navy Achievement Medal.

Baker was among the first to reach Williams. Others were assisting Fitzwater, whose injuries were less severe.

Williams was still bleeding from the



Marine sergeant Dean Baker was instrumental in keeping Williams alive after she landed.

mouth and was experiencing difficulty breathing when she reached the ground. Although she regained consciousness soon after landing, she was delirious and her blood pressure began dropping. Internal damage and bleeding were suspected.

### Second Save

Together with a doctor on the scene, Baker assisted in immobilizing Williams and applying an inflatable device to her legs; that forced the blood from her lower extremities into her chest and head and prevented shock from setting in.

"That probably saved her life—the second time," Baker said. "Greg saved her life the first time."

Finally, after about 90 minutes, a helicopter evacuated Williams to Scottsdale Memorial Hospital.

"I'm glad I was there to assist her," Baker said. "I was truly afraid she was going to die lying there for so long."

Long before then, Greg Robertson had decided he had done all he could and things were now up to the medical experts. "Her boyfriend came over and thanked me. Then I got my other rig and got back on the DC-4 for the next load."

Fitzwater was hospitalized for a couple of nights recovering from severely bruised ribs and torn ligaments in his left knee. He underwent reconstructive knee surgery shortly thereafter, with recovery time estimated at nine months.

Williams had sustained much more serious injuries: nine fractured ribs, a concussion, a bruised lung and lacerated kidney. She underwent surgery soon after being admitted to Scottsdale Memorial Hospital to repair the kidney damage.

By Monday, April 27, her condition had been upgraded to fair; she was released from the intensive care unit several days later.

### Riding the Media Bandwagon

The media had found a new hero. Elevating Gregory Robertson to a level previously reserved for people with names like Yeager and Patton, they swamped him with questions, requests and offers.

Nor was USPA immune from the sudden rush of national attention. Headquarters' officials spent a large portion of their days immediately after the incident answering telephone inquiries and giving interviews.

He was the darling of the nightly news, the favorite of wire service writers. In a week of reporting that included shopping mall killers and fatal building collapses, Robert-

son's death-defying act was a refreshing change.

His phone calls are now screened by a "public relations" division.

Time magazine featured him in full color in the May 4 issue; People and US both are planning major reports.

There have been requests for public appearances and inquiries about movies.

Just ten days after being just another jumper, Robertson could report—with a straight face—"We turned down \$10,000 to appear on the Joan Rivers show... We're waiting for Carson." —L.J.