

Ride with the Golden Knights
2011-07-07

Rifle Air Show

So what is it like to get a media ride with the Golden Knights parachute team? I did not anticipate getting a chance find out as it is not in my normal circle of experience. But with Mr. T's Hardware and Building Supply as one of the sponsors of Garfield County Regional Airport's 2011 Airshow the opportunity to publish an article of a different flavor was an experience I am excited to write about. This all came about on the day before the official airshow began. I met up with airport manager Brian Condie while waiting with the other media personnel for the weather check for the flight. As we approached the plane I could see the Gold demonstration jump team out by the plane waiting preparing for the practice jump they do preparing for the next days performance. The Fokker F27 (designated C-31A by the military) with twin Rolls Royce Dart 7 four blade turboprops was bigger up close than I expected. It was laid out with a few small airline type seats near the front and some bench type sling seats along the body between them and the aft cargo doors. We started up in the front seats for a briefing about what was expected. We had to sign the waivers, get the sick sacs, and earplugs. Next was the flight sequence explanation, multiple racetrack runs to get positioned just right. While waiting for an inspection of the jump target I got to meet the pilots and talk with them. CW4 Steven Lowell who had 23 years under his belt as a military aviator was sitting left seat for this flight. Mr. Allen Aber who also had 23 years as an enlisted aviator and another 17 as a civilian contract pilot was sitting right seat. They appeared to really enjoy their job flying the demonstration teams around the country. The plane was a straight forward airplane with the real fly-by-wire controls (we're talking cables not electrons) and pneumatically assisted landing gear. There was an autopilot and I spied an modern avidyne display along with the steam gauges throttle, prop quadrant and nose wheel steering controls. The yokes were substantial things (need to be with the un-boosted controls) that looked in keeping with the age of the design. Of their four jump teams, two use the Fokkers and two use twin Otter aircraft. It was nice to be on the bigger plane.

The six reporters were strapped into sling seats nearest the open rear cargo doors. And yes I double-checked my seat belt thinking about the open doors we were placed next to. Next was the briefing about not letting anything go out the doors that might injure someone on the ground and all of our cameras were attached with straps to the seat framework. The ground roll and takeoff were exhilarating as the ground and little puffs of black exhaust flashed by the open doors. Rotating at 102 knots the plane climbs rapidly as we circle our way up into the air. The jump team begins their preparations adding their jump coveralls, helmets, goggles and parachutes. They check each other's equipment and yell out phrases in unison at various points in the obviously well practiced routine. They all are now in their gold jump suits except the parachuting camera man who is in black. I'm told the cameraman always has the right-of-way as he is focused on filming it is the responsibility of all the others to watch out for him. The breeze from the open doors gets turns from warm to cold as we gain elevation. I can

see the analog altimeter strapped to the left leg of the jumper nearest me as the needle slowly rotates to 8000 feet AGL (above ground level). SGT Tom Pryjda explains about the two altimeters they have. One is a digital altimeter that is in their helmet that they zero on the runway and the set multiple audible tones to alert them to certain action altitudes for their jump routine. They also have the backup altimeter strapped to their leg that they also zero on the runway before the jump and use as a visual confirmation for the digital helmet mounted altimeter.

When have started the racetrack pattern at altitude and they listen to the ground wind reports and prepare to drop the ribbons that allow them to see the wind pattern from altitude all the way to the ground. After the ribbon drop and another positioning racetrack circuit the show narrator prepares to exit. "Hot target" is called and moments later the narrator exits. It amazes me how quickly he disappears when he steps into the slipstream. There is relatively little wind in the cabin even with the doors open. I have no trouble holding onto my notes, but at the door there is a momentary severe wind shear as the jumpers step out. The rest of the jump team now masses near the open doors in preparation of the group jump. You can hear the shouts of ground wind speeds and "smooth under canopy" report from the show narrator's jump. Soon we have completed another circuit and the jump light comes on and a buzzer sounds and seconds later the command is given and they're gone. The plane seems strangely quiet as I watch the quickly disappearing form of the last one out as he does a graceful backflip into his head first descent position. Then all together my senses are assailed by the return of the awareness of the rushing sounds of the wind past the doors and the smiles and wondering looks on the faces as we look to see each other's expressions. I feel the plane start descending rapidly in a spiral that makes the inner ear take notice. My crude timing was later confirmed by the pilots that we dropped at about 1000 feet a minute. It felt like a spinning elevator as I watched the world go round beneath us. All too soon the flight is over and we taxi back to the ramp through a misting rain. The rain has stopped by the time we brake to a stop and then we watch as the ladders are positioned, the wheel chocks placed, and the engines spin down. The earplugs come out and we can talk without shouting. It seems like the jumpers are back to the plane almost as soon as we are out. They are a great bunch of guys with an obvious camaraderie as they willingly answer our questions and graciously accept their well earned praise.

I want to thank the Golden Knights for making the Rifle Air Show a great success.

Written by Ross M. Talbott for Mr. T's Hardware and Building Supply major sponsor of the airshow.



Where did Col. Jack Wilhite go when he discovered the steel rod needed so the tug could properly move his MIG-17 was missing? The Mr. T's Hardware airshow booth of course!

For more pictures go to <http://riflearport.com>

Other stories:

<http://www.citizentelegram.com/article/20110714/MISC04/110719997/0/FRONTPAGE>

<http://www.usarec.army.mil/hq/goldenknight/>



CW4 Steven Lowell



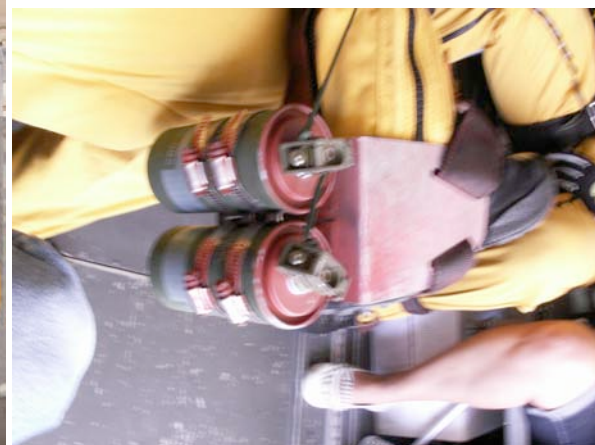
Mr. Allen Aber



Walking and talking through the jump.



Suited Up and Checking gear



Smoke Generators



Fokker F27



Looking down from 8000ft AGL