

THE HARNESS

By John S. Halbert

Florence Alabama, March, 1976:

When I came off the noon newscast that day at the television station, the telephone in the newsroom was ringing. On the other end of the line was a man who identified himself as the adjutant of the local National Guard unit with a question: "Would you like to go with our group on our semi-annual 'parachute-qualification' jump from a helicopter?" I wouldn't actually be jumping, he went on to say, but I would be tethered inside the chopper with a camera and a tape-recorder.

I accepted in a hurry. How often does one get to take a ride like *that*?

"Be at 'McFarland Park' at 'ten-hundred hours' this Saturday morning," he said.

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Saturday morning, a day that was clear and cold for that time of the year, found me standing beside a hefty-looking, olive-drab, twin-rotor Army helicopter, surrounded by a dozen rugged-looking, fully-outfitted paratroops, one of the whom identified himself as the "jumpmaster". Two other soldiers in fatigues, wearing aviator's sunglasses, shook my hand and told me that they were the pilots.

The jumpmaster motioned for the paratroopers and me to climb aboard. The jumpers took their places in bucket-seats along both sides of the cabin; my place was in a jumpseat at the rear facing forward, next to the gaping doors on each side. As soon as the soldiers were situated, each clipped a rip-cord onto a line running along the ceiling of the aircraft that would open their parachutes when they jumped. Not to be outdone, even though I was wearing a body harness just like the jumpers but without the parachute, I clipped onto the line a cord attached to the front of the harness, as I had seen the jumpmaster also do, an impulsive act that would save my life.

In a few minutes, the jet engines whined, and with a thumping roar, the helicopter lifted-off, stirring up a cloud of dust and leaves. With a twisting motion close to the ground, the chopper swung about and headed downriver.

After a steady climb of some minutes, we were about three-thousand feet above the ground. The pilot banked the aircraft around and we started our run toward the drop-zone that was near to where we had taken off.

As the paratroopers adjusted their gear and the jumpmaster issued a steady stream of instructions, I fingered my camera, making sure its connector-cord was buckled to my body harness, and flipped-on the portable tape recorder strapped to my waist. A loud buzzer sounded and a red light on the forward wall started flashing---evidently a warning, as the troops tensed. While the helicopter executed a series of sharp turns, then flew straight again, gravity forces alternately shoved us down into our jumpseats, then released its grip. Looking out the big open doors on both sides, I could see that we were approaching the drop-zone, thousands of feet below us. A moment later, with another shout from the jumpmaster, the troops stood and gripped their

rip-cords, firmly affixed to the fore-and-after overhead cable.

The jumpmaster bellowed an order, whereupon the paratroopers dashed for the side openings, each leaping out in turn from both sides into the void. I leaned out the open right-side door as far as I dared, snapping pictures as the parachutes opened. Seen from above, the unusual downward photo angle made the parachute canopies appear as if a line of outsized mushrooms were floating in midair.

With the troops safely gone, I relaxed and checked my camera. But the pilot all at once swung the chopper into a sharp left turn---and I lost my grip at the edge of the door frame! In a split-second, I was swept out into space---hanging in my harness, tethered to the helicopter only by the ripcord line, which I had casually clipped onto the cable! For long seconds, I hung helplessly spread-eagled out there, eight feet from the yawning door, as the helicopter made a tight left turn! Then the pilot reversed his course, whipping the chopper into a steep right turn with the twin overhead, three-bladed rotors streaking scant inches above my head! The gyrating aircraft literally flew itself into me, as I shot back through the big gaping door onto the floor! The wide-eyed jumpmaster grabbed my leg as I slid across the deck, which kept me from again sailing out the opposite door into the open! The frantic soldier stabbed the intercom button and yelled for the pilot to land---fast!