

Other champions of the sky

Article and photo by Capt. James Bishop

When Belchertown native Pete White was 11 years old, his dad took him to an airshow, where he met the Army Golden Knights parachute team. One member pulled him out of the crowd and had White help him pack his parachute. The man gave White a signed photograph.

Thirteen years later, when White went to Ft. Bragg to attend the six-week, invitation-only tryout to become a Golden Knight, he brought that signed photo as inspiration.

Twenty-four highly-trained jumpers tried out. White was one of 12 selected.

"The most dangerous thing we do is drive to the airport."

"There's no set number," he said. If no one measures up to the world-class standards, no one is selected, said White, who has been a member for two years.

White returned home this year — from the air, as a Golden Knight, jumping into the very back yard he played in as a boy.

The event was an advance performance for the Great New England Airshow. The Golden Knights made five more jumps August 10-13 before and at the show, amazing audiences with their mastery.

In one example of above-ground acrobatics, a Knight deployed a parachute, then intentionally caused it to malfunction by releasing one side. The soldier began to spin, then released the chute and began to free fall. Finally, he opened a second parachute and landed safely.

Long considered the world's best parachute team, the Golden Knights perform precision maneuvers while falling to earth at speeds reaching 120 miles per hour, then land dead center on target.

In 1997, the Golden Knights helped George Bush jump from 12,500 feet, undergo an 8,000 foot free fall, and make a "picture-perfect" landing at Yuma Proving Ground, Ariz. Bush is the only president to have parachuted.

They train hard. Before going to the Golden Knight tryouts, White had about 150 jumps in his record.

White made another 150 jumps and lost about 20 pounds during the six week tryouts. Cpl. Angela Nichols from Dallas is the only female demonstrator in the Golden Knights. In an interview after her jump, she said being the only female "is like having 12 brothers, which is a good thing most of the time."

Since its inception in 1959, the team has had 408 national champions and 65 world champions.

The United States Army Parachute Team is nicknamed the Golden Knights because of their record of winning gold medals at national and international parachuting competitions. The team has performed a combined total of more than 26,500 jumps before an estimated 12 million people.

Most of the Golden Knights have over 1,500 jumps, some have over 4,000, none have had serious injuries.

And they aim to keep it that way. "Keep your seat belts on," SSGt. Dave Dicks told the media — repeating it three times — as they prepared for the flight. "It's not like in the movies," said Dicks, a personable 23-year-old from North Carolina. "We can't fly down and save you if you fall."



HIGH-ALTITUDE ACROBATICS — The Army's premier parachute team, the Golden Knights, arch and reach for each other's hands during a jump on August 11. The team jumped at 12,500 feet.

With their parachutes packed, the demonstration team rehearsed their performance one last time on the ground. Then they loaded into their C-31 Fokker. With the cargo doors open the entire time, they flew directly over the drop zone, then dropped streamers at 2,000 feet to determine the wind drift.

The plane then climbed to 12,500, cooling about 30 degrees with the altitude. The demonstrators lined up when the leader yelled "On Target." Then, "Ready, set, go!" and they were out the door together. In three seconds they were completely out of sight.

Dan Elias, a reporter from Channel 22, jumped in tandem the day before the airshow. He had no parachute, but was harness-hitched to a master jumper, chest to back. They underwent a 50-second free fall. At about 4,000 feet, the parachute opened and they floated on target to the flight line. All touched down safely.

Of the job they perform, Dicks said, "The most dangerous thing we do is drive to the airport."