

50th Anniversary of the Parachute Team

West Point Sport Parachuting at Fifty Years By Ted Spiegel

CDT Ty Stephens jumps with teammate, CDT Christian Desbalmes, from Austria.

Fifty years ago, a plebe and a private first class pulled on a lot of lines together to launch the Black Knights, West Point's pace-setting sport parachute team. As the club's golden anniversary was being celebrated with a fall reunion weekend at West Point, other honors were underway. Invitations soon would be sent calling that plebe, now LTC (Ret.) Henmar "Gabe" Gabriel '61, and that private first class team coach, now parachute designing manufacturer Ted Strong, to Felicity, CA, for induction into the Parachuting Hall of Fame on 14 Feb 2009. We'll get to those honors later. This story rightly leads off with Gabe's tale of the Black Knight's brave beginnings:

"As a brash Plebe at West Point, I wrote the Commanding General of the 82nd Airborne division and asked for permission, as an ex-member of the division, to come to Ft. Bragg during my leave at the end of Plebe year and participate in parachute jumping and training for sky diving with the intent of starting a Cadet Sport Parachute Club."

Gabe's bravura was reinforced by the April 1958 publication of AR 95-19, outlining how Army personnel could participate in sport parachute activities. His Tactical Officer, CPT Amos B. Shattuck IV, '46, supported and guided his efforts, and soon the 82nd Airborne answered that they would support his presence if he obtained the permission of his Installation Commander (the Superintendent). As Gabe's request went up through the chain of command, he heard of road blocking questions about his request—what if a cadet were injured, what academy personnel could help train the club members, what about aircraft and drop zones?

Gabe remembers that no answer was forthcoming until Graduation Week. "Recognition proceeded, and a little glum, I returned to my room to start leave. There on my desk was a note to report to the Commandant (BG Throckmorton '35) before going on leave. When I reported to him, he called me forward, handed me a pile of papers and said, 'Cadet Gabriel, your request to go to Fort Bragg and jump has been approved. Good luck.' During the next three weeks I made 28 jumps: day troop jumps, night troop jumps, light aircraft static line jumps and, finally, freefall jumps. I jumped from C10s, C123s, C119s, L-20 Beavers and small Cessnas. I jumped with units of XVIII Airborne Corps and the 82nd Airborne's Special Forces Group." Gabe's month at Bragg and the ensuing first years of the Black Knights provide a saga of scrounged support—for lodging, food, jump time, and



CDT Ty Stephens '11. Photos on this page by Sean Patrick Tillery.

parachute gear. Logistical resourcefulness was a founding skill of the Black Knights.

Though Gabe didn't qualify himself as an instructor in that month at Ft. Bragg, his zeal upon return to the academy gained the respect of his new Tactical Officer, CPT Walter Meinzen '48. In short order, the cadet adjutant made a dinner-time announcement: "Any cadet interested in forming a sky diving parachute club, meet Gabriel to the right of the mess hall door." The ten cadets who formed the nucleus of the new club were all prior service and airborne qualified. Non-Commissioned Officers assigned to West Point included many airborne soldiers who wanted to stay qualified; soon enough they formed a Post Sport Parachute Club for all serving ranks. Since the 1st Regimental Combat Team had an airborne detachment—with a parachute rigger section—sport parachuting at West Point had some expertise to draw upon. By their second year, the cadets had an assigned Parachute Club of America "C" license-holding coach in PFC Ted Strong (who had made 100 jumps as a civilian before joining the 82nd Airborne). CPT Meinzen took on the responsibilities of Officer-In-Charge.

Throughout the weekend honoring 50 years of sport parachuting at West Point, the Black Knight's history—past and present—was the focal point. Scores of returning team members showed up for the Army-Air Force football weekend, joining in the Friday practice jumps originating from Blue Sky Ranch at nearby Gardiner, NY. The three guests of honor at the Saturday night banquet at the Class of '49 Lodge were Gabe Gabriel, Jacques Istel (the founder of the Parachute Club of America and a long-time Black Knight supporter) and Tom Falzone (a professional competitive skydiver and coach who volunteers his services in support of the club). All three seem guided by the mentoring principle Falzone shared with CDT Matt Palange '10: "If I don't share what I have learned in 10,000 jumps with young skydivers, all that knowledge will go to waste".

CDT Arthur Murphy '10 was one of a group of six—two cadets and four old grads—who jumped from a twin engine Otter at 10,000 feet onto The Plain during Friday's practice session. As they faced each other in their descending free-fall circle, Murphy sensed a special moment of his life: "The beauty of seeing West Point from the air—with all of the fall foliage glowing, the Hudson River, the camaraderie with those who had been on the team before us, and the hope that I could come back and jump on The Plain long after I had graduated—being able to share that with them was awesome".

Next year, Art Murphy and his classmates will share their skydiving prowess with the fans at Michie Stadium;



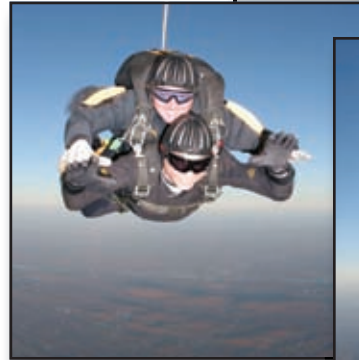
COL Kolditz & Gabriel '61, Founder.



Photos on this page by Kamuran "Sonic" Bayrasli.

the Class of 2010 will have the honor of delivering the game ball. By that time, they will have accumulated more than 500 jumps as well as proven their ability to complete ten standup landings in a row no

Kolditz & Gabriel with MAJ Katie Blue, EE&CS.



Kolditz & Gabriel.



Kolditz & Gabriel.

more than five meters from a fixed target. These are the requirement for the coveted Professional Exhibition Rating from the United States Parachute Association, required before they can jump into stadiums. By contrast, a serving airborne soldier needs only 65 jumps plus jumpmaster training and experience to earn the Star and Wreath of Master Jumper. Black Knight team members will have ten times that many jumps when they graduate—more than most airborne troopers will accumulate over a career of 20 years.

In a formation skydiving event, a team of four needs to fluidly form 20 or more separate formations in 35 seconds of free fall time before opening their canopies. That's about a formation a second, all the while being videotaped for the judges. Their free-fall from 10,000 to 2,500 feet lasts about 50 seconds. To gain a sense of what the Black Knights accomplish in that 50 seconds, see the video at: <<http://www.usma.edu/uscc/dca/clubs/jump/teamvideospage.html>>.

In recent years, West Point has garnered scores of skydiving honors, including a number of National Championship titles. At the first intercollegiate competitions hosted by Jacques Istel at the Orange, MA, skydiving center back in 1959, there were a few events and three collegiate teams competing. At the 2008 mid-winter Collegiate Championship, the Black Knights competed in nine events and brought home 29 medals from eight of those events.

But the yield is not all measured by medals and stadium jumps. COL Thomas Kolditz, the head of the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership, is one of the team's OICs. In his book, *In Extremis Leadership*, Kolditz writes about the cadre of ten cadets selected from 100 candidates to join the Black Knights. "The development that occurs in 40 months is profound and

is unquestionably enhanced by the seriousness inherent in the everyday danger of parachuting Of the last six cadet first captains ... four have been parachute team members ... in 2006 and 2007, the majority of the pinnacle command slots in the U.S. Corps of Cadets were held by sport parachute team leaders."

The shared skydiving experience forges strong bonds. Over the 50th Reunion weekend, Frank Canterbury '81 spoke firmly of his experience. "We won together; we lost together. That's what made me stick with it—the teammates. I'm still in touch with many of them." Fast forward to Matt Palange '10. "I don't think I'd be the same person had I not been selected for the team. This is where I've made my best friends."

But there's even more to skydiving for Tom Kolditz. "It's a very addictive sport. The spirit and attitude of those who are in it is both adventuresome and very competent. It's hard to find an unhappy skydiver."

During the reunion weekend, Kolditz tandem-jumped into Gardiner's Blue Sky Ranch with two VIPs. The first was Susan Dewhirst, mother of LT Nick Dewhirst '06, Parachute Team Captain when he graduated. He was serving with the 101st Airborne in Afghanistan when he was killed in action in July of 2008. "She wanted to experience what her son felt when he was jumping—it was a way for her to connect with his life and his experiences, even though he had passed." The second was "Gabe",

who hadn't been in harness since 1970. Both were warmly greeted by the team—circling around them in the air and surrounding them on the ground.

And on 14 Feb 2009, through the recognition of the excellence of both Gabriel and Strong, West Point was linked up with the Parachuting Hall of Fame.

If you are interested in supporting the Parachute Team with a private financial gift, please contact the Office of Development at the West Point Association of Graduates at 845-446-1650, or by email at development@wpaog.org. You can also visit the WPAOG website at www.westpointaog.org/givetowp.

These funds will help insure that the Black Knights possess the support to perform at the highest level well into the future.

If you have been a club/team member and would like to stay informed of the activities of the team and future reunions, please send an email to: gabe.gabriel@westpointaog.net.

For an update on the activities over the past 50 years go to: <http://sites.google.com/site/blackknightsblueskies/Home>.



Mrs. Dewhirst jumps in honor of her son.



Kolditz & Gabriel '61—thumbs up.



Tom Falzone gives the team last minute coaching before a jump.



The Team.

All photographs on this page by Ted Spiegel.