

FORUM & FEATURES



First Jump in China

BRIGADIER GENERAL BERNARD LOEFFKE

- *The People's Liberation Air Force will provide parachute.*
- *The People's Liberation Air Force will provide airplane.*
- *The People's Liberation Air Force will take action to ensure safety of jump.*
- *General Loeffke will examine and pack the parachute himself.*
- *In case of accident, neither side will blame the other.*

These were the initial ground rules set forth when I was invited to be the first U.S. officer to jump with the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) during my tour as Defense Attache to China. The fourth ground rule was eventually modified. (Like the Soviets, Chinese paratroopers are assigned to their country's air force. The Chinese People's Liberation Air Force is subordinate to the PLA.)

The jump was to take place during the period of 9-13 May 1984 in Wuhan Military Region, about 200 miles south of Bei Jing. To coordinate the various details of the jump, a meeting was arranged with Chinese parachute officers on 4 May. The exchange at that meeting went something like this:

Parachute Officer (PO): "General, we want to assure that you have a safe jump with us. We want, therefore, to ask you several questions. Finally, we

need to agree on the wording of a document that we will both sign. First, please tell us your desires concerning the altitude of the jump and the speed of the aircraft."

Loeffke (L): "I wish to jump the way you normally jump."

PO: "It is agreed then that we will jump at an altitude of 800 meters and at a speed of 180 kilometers per hour. We should now agree on the letter we are asking you to sign. We agree to provide a safe aircraft and assure that safe conditions exist on the ground — that is, no obstacles and moderate winds. You will be responsible for packing and using your own parachute."

L: "I wish to jump Chinese parachutes packed by your riggers."

PO: "We would rather you jump your own parachute packed by yourself. We will, however, discuss your wishes to jump Chinese parachutes. Our concerns are that our chutes are different and you may not be familiar with their handling. What personal equipment do you need?"

L: "I have uniform and boots, but will need a helmet."

PO: "We will provide you a helmet. Do you have your own knife?"

L: "No, what do you use the knife for?"

PO: "We use it to cut our straps in case we have problems such as becom-

ing entangled with the airplane."

It was obvious that the Chinese were concerned with the safety of the jump. They finally agreed, however, to let me use a Chinese chute for my jump.

During the discussion, I learned that their methods differ from ours in several ways. For example, the jumper needs to hold the Chinese reserve chute tightly as he exits the aircraft or it may come up and hit him in the chest or chin. Also, the knife is needed because the Chinese parachute has no capwell releases. In the case of an entanglement with the aircraft, therefore, the parachutist cannot be hauled in and is expected to cut the straps where the capwell releases are on the U.S. chutes. The paratrooper then falls free and uses his reserve chute.

All Chinese paratroopers pack their own chutes. Each is assisted by a colleague, and every platoon has a specialist who oversees the packing. It takes about 30 minutes to pack a chute. They have no special area to use. There are no parachute packing sheds; they simply use a parade ground or the floor of a warehouse. A parachute is used about 80 times before it is cannibalized for other purposes.

Interestingly, there are no special riggers for equipment drops either. The artillery battalions assigned to each regiment, for example, are re-



Members of Chinese PLA double check General Loeffke's parachute before jump.

sponsible for packing the parachutes of the organic artillery that will be dropped.

Jump procedures are equally challenging. Chinese paratroopers exit the aircraft falling forward, body bent almost perpendicular, never touching the door of the aircraft with their hands. Chinese soldiers fold their arms on top of the reserve chute, while U.S. soldiers place their hands to the sides of the reserve and jump up and out. The Chinese have a pilot chute on their main parachute, but none on the reserve, while U.S. parachutes are configured just the opposite. The signals to exit the aircraft are similar, however. A red light with an intermittent noise signal advises the troops to get ready and hook up. A green light and a continuous signal is the command to jump.

Parachute landing instructions are vastly different. U.S. soldiers are taught to face into the wind to slow down the horizontal speed of the chute. The Chinese face downwind so that they can land facing forward and run and collapse their canopies.

The U.S. soldier, until recently, has been taught to look to the horizon so that he will not unconsciously tighten up when he hits the ground in a close, bent-leg, parachute landing fall, rolling to either side. He lets buttocks and push-up muscles take up much of the

impact of the fall. The Chinese soldier looks at the spot where he is going to land and lands on his feet with knees bent, and then starts running.

On 11 May, I was introduced to these airborne procedures and given a demonstration of the Chinese methods of exiting the aircraft and of landing. After the demonstration, I was taken to the military airport to meet the pilots and crew who would be responsible for the jump from a four-engine, Soviet AN-2 aircraft.

The next day, the day before the jump, two officers, accompanied by the Airborne Division Chief of Staff, came to the hotel to pack my parachute. After the packing was completed in the lobby of the hotel, I was asked to sign a statement to verify that I was satisfied with the way the chute was packed. Two Airborne Division doctors then came to my hotel room to take a blood pressure reading and conduct an electrocardiogram. One of the physicians examined me to assure there were no sprains or lumps. Finally, the two doctors agreed that I was fit to jump.

The wind on the day before the jump was gusting up to 50 miles per hour. On the morning of the jump, the wind was still too strong, and the jump was delayed for eight hours. As the jump hour approached, the wind was still gusting up to 20 miles per

hour, well beyond allowable U.S. training safety standards, but within limits for the Chinese.

Finally, the time for the jump arrived. As the AN-2 reached 2,400 feet, one of the soldiers who had seen me exiting from the mock door earlier leaned over and whispered: "General, if you jump the way you did at the mock-up, you will get twists in your risers. To jump safely with our chute, you must not touch the sides of the door and spring out of the aircraft." But it was too late then to change habits, so I jumped the U.S. way. Sure enough, when the chute opened, the risers had several twists in them.

The descent was somewhat unusual. Two Chinese jumpers leaped right behind me and flanked me coming down. They were there to give me directions so I would not drift from where they wanted me to go. The ground was soft mud so even with the strong wind the landing was uneventful. Thus ended the first U.S. Army/Chinese PLA parachute operation.

Some interesting airborne lessons were learned on both sides. The Chief of Staff of the Airborne Division later told me that after seeing our parachute landing falls, he was going to consider adopting these techniques. He also felt that our static line was better and that they needed a quick release like the one we used.

Among other subjects that I felt the Chinese might explore in detail was the relative merits of landing with and against a 20-mile an hour wind.

All in all, for me this was a most rewarding experience. We and the Chinese have much to learn from each other.



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