

## The drop zone

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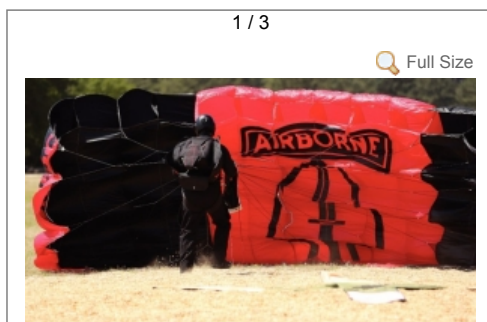
Sgt. 1st Class Aaron Figel takes aim.

The "X" in the middle of a 10-foot woodchip circle marks the spot.

But hitting the considerably wide target is not as easy as it sounds.

Not when you are coming at it from 15,000 feet.

So the soldier steps out of a plane and, within seconds, is free-falling toward what, from his view, is a microscopic mark.



NEWS-ARGUS/CASEY MOZINGO

Staff Sgt. William Wallace collects his parachute after landing on the target during a Black Daggers training exercise at Drop Zone in Raeford Thursday. The team is scheduled to perform on Saturday and Sunday at Wings Over Wayne.

And when his parachute opens, he goes to work.

Moments later, his chute collides with another and Figel grabs the hand of one of his teammates -- creating a breathtaking formation in the sky above whatever crowd happens to be below.

They break formation and Figel slows his descent.

Then, just minutes after he stepped out of that plane, his chute flaps wildly in the wind as his heel hits the center of the target with pinpoint accuracy.

Thus is the life of a member of the U.S. Army Black Dagger Parachute Demonstration Team -- one of the headlining acts that will take to the skies Saturday and Sunday at the 2015 Wings Over Wayne Air Show.

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Figel loves his job -- even if each jump is like a rollercoaster ride.

The flight to jumping altitude is like going up the rickety tracks.

Anticipation builds, even after two decades of jumping for fun or work.

"When you step off the airplane, that's like going over the top," he said.

The free fall is the ride itself.

He describes being under the parachute canopy as peaceful.

"You're in complete control," he said.

Figel first jumped in 1992, dared by his boss, and inspired by the movie "Point Break."

"It's nothing like the movies," he said, laughing. "First, you can't talk in free fall."

Figel jumped with the Army's Golden Knights before transitioning to the Black Daggers. He has jumped in front of the Statue of Liberty and the Pentagon. He's landed in a Philadelphia intersection and on the field of the Army versus Navy football game.

But it's not all fun and tricks.

The Black Daggers represent a group of highly trained individuals.

"We show the public the Special Operations umbrella, that's the purpose of our job," Figel said.

Each day of Wings Over Wayne, the Black Daggers will perform twice --

a tactile jump and a formation jump.

During the tactical jump, the Daggers will arrive in combat gear and oxygen masks, strapped with fake weapons. They demonstrate what a military utility jump would look like into enemy territory.

"We want to keep a wrap on the all of the capabilities," Figel said. "But we want to inform the public. We're just the tip of the spear."

The formation jumps include all six members of the team.

Master Sgt. John Perusek will fly in first with an American flag. He is followed by the rest of the team -- soldiers demonstrating tricks like "Down Plane," where two men interlock arms and legs and create one over-arching parachute, or "Two-Stack," where one parachute climbs on top of another, creating a tower.

They practice almost every day, weather permitting at their drop zone in Raeford.

"A lot of things can go wrong in the air," Perusek said.

But whether they are jumping into a football stadium or the Seymour Johnson Air Force Base flight line, the size of the target never changes.

"You fall back on your training," Figel said.

Perusek no longer thinks about the risk or the nerves.

He does it for the roar of the crowd.

"I'm 46 years old," he said. "There's not going to be a lot I do that gets the roar of the crowd beside landing."

He has 28 years of service in the Army, and as he nears retirement, Perusek wants to leave his mark.

"Whatever I can draw in by my performances," he said. "We need young, motivated soldiers."

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