

**Lawrence A. Colby**



# **The Devil Dragon Pilot**

**EXCERPT**

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## ***Tidal Area, Virginia***

The Air Force Reserve's 328th Airlift Squadron of Niagara Falls, New York, flew C-130H2 Hercules aircraft. The four-engine, turboprop aircraft, originally designed with a pencil and slide rule in the 1950s, could fly anything and everything from vehicles to combat troops to special operations forces. New Herks continue to roll off the Georgia assembly line even today. The workhorse of tactical cargo, the C-130 has done everything from fly in the Blue Angels to landing on aircraft carriers. The two Niagara pilots, a flight engineer, a navigator, and two loadmasters, taxied the Herk to the ramp at Oceana Air Station to pick up the squad of twelve SEALs from Team 8, plus a rubber F470 combat rubber raiding craft, or Zodiac.

Niagara's 328th had a rich history of real-world missions, and the SEALs enjoyed flying with the reservists because they either had gray hair, or no hair, meaning the aircrew was overdosing in experience. When you jumped, you wanted an aircrew who knew what the heck they were doing, and the SEAL squad felt relaxed flying with them. The 328th had flown plenty of special operations teams and parachute forces, especially since they have been conducting aerial transportation since the China-Burma-India theater from 1944 to 1945 and, later, troop carrier training from 1947 to 1951. The Niagara squadron also deployed to Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War and knew how to handle guys from the Teams.

Ford was also on the tarmac, mixed in with the squad from SEAL Team 8. He looked just like they did at a glance, except his clothing and gear was a bit different. Assigned to be with an experienced wing-suit jumper, Captain Gabe Peoples partnered Ford with an E-6, a senior chief by rank, to ensure he got the wing-suit training he needed.

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“You ready, sir?” Senior Chief Special Warfare Officer Bobby Tosca yelled over the roar of the C-130 taxiing to where they were standing, in addition to hooking up his oxygen mask for prebreathing. “You look good. Any last-minute questions from our orientation class from earlier?” Tosca’s rank, used solely by SEALs, is the corresponding rank of a senior chief petty officer or master sergeant.

Ford shook his head no. He was reviewing the plan, going over the details for the jump altitude today at thirty-five thousand feet and ensuring that his gear was properly set. The brief earlier in the day consisted of the flight crew from Niagara, the leads from SEAL Team 8, and included crucial things like weather, winds, other aircraft in the area, emergency procedures, and drop-zone conditions.

Ford was wearing a flat-black wing suit, gray-black helmet, and a tinted visor, in addition to donning the MFF ARAPS, or military free-fall advanced ram air parachute system. He was also carrying his personal oxygen supply, connected to a gray oxygen mask that connected to his helmet.

Their jump today was considered a HALO, pronounced *hay-low*, which was a high-altitude–low-opening jump. The HALO ARAPS provided a multi-mission, high-altitude parachute system that allowed military members to jump as low as thirty-five hundred feet, up to today’s max height at thirty-five thousand feet. Their plan called for breathing oxygen for thirty minutes prior to the jump, which they were getting ready to begin, just to get rid of any nitrogen in their bloodstreams.

The wing suit provided Ford the lateral distance he needed, while the rest of the team was aiming for a separate, sister-water drop zone a few miles away. Only Ford and Tosca were hitting the land-drop zone today.

Since Mark talked specifically with Gabe about acquiring some additional gear required for the mission, at DIA’s expense, Ford figured he’d better use it today for practice. His first option offered, almost like a new toy, was the Electronic Automatic Activation Device, or EAAD, and it would allow an automatic activation of the parachute if either of them was unable to deploy the parachute at the designated altitude. Ford considered it but didn’t accept because of the added extra weight.

Ford was also sporting a personal navigation aid, a navaid, which was a moving map displayed on a screen that he wore on his wrist. It provided in-flight navigation, winds, weather and previously uploaded mission-planning capability, which allowed him to concentrate on the jump itself first. This navaid allowed Ford to free-fall and

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glide in the wing suit and while under the canopy to continue to track and locate himself, steering directly to the intended drop zone. Ford's navaid system used an encrypted GPS that integrated multiple satellites and would be usable in Asia.

The last item that differentiated Ford from the average civilian parachutist was his oxygen mask. Since they were jumping today above thirteen thousand feet, they wore the new parachutist oxygen mask, or POM, rather than the MBU-12P mask issued to basic military parachutists. The POM provided Ford with a terrific range of vision, as well as an unobstructed range of motion, ensuring the oxygen reached his body at such dangerous altitudes. It also allowed him to communicate by talking to other teammates over a common radio frequency, but they didn't plan on using that feature today.

The Herk stopped taxiing a few hundred feet in front of them, all four of the T-56 Allison turboprop engines roaring. Just after the loadmaster lowered the ramp, he waved in the guys from Team 8, carrying the Zodiac in first. Both loadmasters were outside the aircraft now, headsets on and wire cords trailing, to stay in contact with the rest of the aircrew. The Zodiac did not have an engine attached to the rear, but it did have one fastened down to the interior of the small boat. It also had a parachute that would not only deploy but steer onto the middle of the drop zone with pinpoint accuracy due to the self-steering parachute attached to a GPS device. The device, called JPADS, for joint precision aerial delivery system, would bring it right down to its intended target using GPS satellite navigation.

Senior Chief Special Warfare Officer Bobby Tosca also had, on his body or inside the raft, a backpack, a radio, hundreds of rounds of ammo, an HK416 rifle, and a harness full of pockets that carried everything from rifle magazines to grenades to a first aid kit. Because he was not doing a regular simulated combat jump with the rest of his squad from Team 8 and doing the special wing-suit jump today, he couldn't wear anything else. If he did, it would interfere with the aerodynamics of the wing suit, which was not lost on Ford.

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Another aspect that Ford was familiar with, but certainly not an expert on, was the weapons. He was a pilot, not a ground firearms expert. So Tosca gave Ford the once-over on the Heckler and Koch HK416 assault rifle, which was based on the AR-15 platform. Ford recognized it immediately because it looked like a smaller M-16 rifle, but he still needed an orientation. Tosca said that the designers of the HK416 thought of this smaller rifle as an improvement over the Colt M4 that was a new issue to the US military. Tosca even showed Ford the short-stroke gas piston system, native from another Heckler and Koch product, called the G36. Ford nodded yes to the lesson but as an aviator he had nothing beyond a basic understanding and laughed to himself about it.

The ramp on the C-130 remained down, touching the ground, even after the rest of the team was on board. Engines were still going, gray exhaust trailing and blowing with force out the back and then dissipating down the flight line. Ford and Tosca boarded last and were eyed by the Niagara loadmaster. The loadmaster was busy talking into his headset microphone, most likely busting their chops due to their unique-looking wing suits. Ford could only imagine what the loadmaster was telling the rest of the Herc crew about how funny they looked. The loadmaster pointed to the two last positions near the doorway since they were heading out first, signaling that was where to sit.

Today's military free-fall operation was the perfect training ground for Ford's mission. It was also a typical SEAL team jump that they used to deploy quickly and quietly, compared to a complete conventional static line jump that the Army would most likely conduct. The Army had a chute that opened up as soon as they departed the side door of the aircraft, and the procedure was usually performed by having hundreds of jumpers out the door in the same time window, over a lengthy drop zone of a mile or more.

The Niagara C-130, using "BISON 82" as their call sign, took off and departed from the runway on the way up to altitude. BISON 82 climbed and climbed, taking about thirty minutes for them to get to altitude and cruise awhile, especially so the aircrew could complete their checklists up front between the pilots, flight engineer, and navigator. Just as important, they needed to get their aircrew oxygen going, too.

As the navigator gave the pilots a solid approach to the insertion point over the

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Suffolk, Virginia, drop zone, the flight engineer ran the checklists for decompression and oxygen, among other things, to prepare the Herk for the jump. The flight engineer then signaled to the loadmaster over the intercom headset to lower the ramp. Between the noises, freezing temperatures, smell of exhaust from kerosene-like fuel, and rush of outside air, all communication between the jumpers and the loadmaster was done by hand and arm signals. The teammates did have intrateam radios but were not connected to the aircraft. Because of the two separate missions going on with the wing-suit training and the tactical jump, and that Ford would be doing the real mission solo, Ford and Tosca had zero comm gear.

The loadmaster signaled to the jumpmaster SEAL to verify that their helmets were fastened, to unbuckle seatbelts, and to double-check personal oxygen. Ford and Tosca signaled OK. The loadmaster gave the two-minute signal as well. At this point, the jumpers unplugged the oxygen hoses from the aircraft system, then plugged in to their own oxygen tanks.

Then, the loadmaster raised his arm, which told the jumpers they should stand up, which they did. A few more seconds went by. The loadmaster then raised his arms straight out with his palm up at the shoulder level and touched his helmet. This told all the jumpers to move to the rear of the aircraft. Some shuffled because of their heavy packs and gear, while Ford and Tosca moved effortlessly because they weren't hauling anything but themselves. They were also sitting in the far rear of the Herk, closest to the ramp.

BISON 82 was bringing them near the insertion point, and Ford and Tosca stopped at the hinges of the cargo ramp. The rest of the SEAL squad, complete with their packs, Zodiac boat, rifles, ammo, communication gear, and other strange tactical items Ford had never seen before all moved to the rear of the plane. Ford could not hear much because of his helmet and earplugs but did hear some of the SEALs yelling out of motivation just in back of him.

This was always the point when Ford had butterflies in his stomach. It never prevented him from jumping, but it was more of a nervous excitement. His neighbors and friends, ever since high school, always laughed and criticized him for jumping out of a perfectly good airplane. This was the moment, though, and he was ready. Ford said under his breath that they must be seconds away now, but it seemed like days.

Up in the C-130 cockpit, the navigator was talking with the pilots on the proper

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insertion point. Giving them one- or two-degree heading changes for accuracy, the navigator was verbally telling the pilots to come left or a little right and verifying their altitude and airspeed. At the precise moment, the navigator gave the command to the copilot to flip the light.

“Green light!” yelled the navigator.

“On!” replied the copilot. The copilot reached his right hand over to his right console and flipped the silver toggle switch to the on position, putting in motion a series of events that could not be reversed, even if tried.

Ford and the other jumpers could not hear any of the BISON flight crew, but they stared intently at the light system above the ramp, waiting for the red light to change to green. It was all Ford and Tosca needed to see. Green light! This was it!

“GO! GO! GO!” yelled the jumpmaster and loadmaster, and off the ramp they went.

Ford and Tosca leaped off the back of the ramp and into the thin, freezing air. Ford’s arms were extended out and slightly to the rear, as his wing suit material under his arms filled up with air. His legs were spread apart, too, with the same airflow that forced them open. The wing suits had a large piece of material between the feet that looked like webbing on a duck’s feet; it helped bend back their legs slightly at the knees. Their bodies were in belly flop position as if they were about to hit the surface of a swimming pool. Ford and Tosca were free-falling, fully separated from the C-130 and literally flying like an airfoil. They both fell straight down initially and then climbed for a few moments above the height of the aircraft as their aerodynamic foil acted like the wing on an aircraft, creating lift. This extra lift was what provided a wing-suit flier to move through the air laterally like an aircraft wing, rather than fall straight down like a standard jumper.

An altimeter, which was worn on their right wrists and closely resembled a large and bulky watch, determined their height above the ground using air pressure. On their left wrist was the GPS-based navaid. Both altimeters were set up with alarms for chute opening at thirty-five hundred feet. This would provide the rapid descent they were seeking, the lateral glide path for the insertion, as well as the minimal parachute time just gliding through potential bad-guy territory.

Ford noticed how different the wing suit was in cutting across the earth, only because he was able to pass relatively close to some clouds. The FAA rules in civilian

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jumps did not allow him to parachute close to clouds, but today under the military rules, he could enjoy the ride a bit. He wondered whether, if he was closer to the ground, say from a free-fall base jump off a tower or a mountainside, he would be able to see the terrain and trees go by his eyes. He also kept an eye on his instructor, Tosca.

Ford looked down at his GPS moving-map display on his wrist and saw he had already flown laterally 8.3 miles, with another 1.2 miles to go. He double-checked his height on the altimeter at forty-six hundred feet. *Looking good*, he thought.

Just another few moments and he would pull his rip cord. The wind was howling around his ears, continuing to be piercingly loud with the rush of air going by despite his earplugs and helmet. Ford looked down again at his altimeter and counted down silently. *Three seconds. Two seconds. One second. Pull.*

The parachute came out of the packed compartment on his back, with the top of the chute filling up with a bit of air. Ford waited to feel the jerk. Waiting...waiting. He glanced upward and saw that the chute was not as full as he was used to seeing. The risers went up into the air as the chute jerked his shoulders with only a small degree of tug, but nowhere near what he was expecting. Ford placed his hands on the risers, but he could tell something was off. He didn't feel the tightness on the material like he had so many times in the past. Ford bent his head back to look up again, only to see his worst nightmare. His chute was not fully inflating with air.

An awful feeling came across Ford instantaneously. Normally the chute would fill up with air and reduce the rapid descent by now. Ford would be able to steer with the risers toward his landing spot in the drop zone. Instead, he continued to fall as the chute malfunction continued to get worse. Ford struggled as he passed through twenty-one hundred feet. He was rolling now in the air, struggling with straps and material and the bewilderment of the situation.

Passing through eighteen hundred feet.

Ford twisted and turned his body attempting to unravel his main chute.

Passing through twelve hundred feet.

Ford wasn't calculating his time, but he sure knew he was only moments away from hitting the earth. Depending on the Virginia air density and his body weight with his wing suit and parachute on, his rate of descent was about twenty-two to twenty-four feet per second. Only moments left.

Passing nine hundred feet.

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He struggled and struggled and just could not unravel his main chute. *Emergency*, Ford said to himself. Ford only had seconds to go until impact. *Shit. Shit. Shit.* In his mind, Ford thought only one thing: *Right frickin now...need to fix this right now.*

Rapidly passing through seven hundred feet. This was it.

