

Snake River BASE Academy

Higher Education for Lower Freefall

El Cap 1966

By Mike Pelkey

The year was 1966. BASE jumping didn't have a name yet and there were no FJC instructors around, so we had to play it by ear. The square Ram-air parachute technology hadn't been invented yet, so we had to make do with the round state-of-the-art modified military parachutes which were widely used those days. The Cap had never been jumped. In fact, the only "BASE" jump in the 1900's was from the Statue of Liberty by Frederick Law. We were not aware of that jump at the time.

Our mission was quite simple. We wanted to be the very first parachutists to conquer the Cap. The hike to the top was extremely arduous. Brian Schubert, Jim Cleary and I made the tiring trip to the top in approximately 8 1/2 hours. The gear was much heavier back then. We did our utmost to appear as backpackers in the event we might be seen by anyone in authority on the way up. We had no idea whether the park rangers would stop us if they happened to recognize that we were parachutists, but we didn't want to take any chances.

When we reached the top we came to the most perfect launching pad we could ask for. It was as close to perfectly horizontal as it gets and hung out over the edge at least 6 to 8 feet. Jim Cleary was not there to jump. He was with us to do his best to record the event with a still camera.

As I was finishing getting geared up (we both wore full jump suits, paratrooper boots, helmets, 28 foot TU-7 mains and 24 foot reserves), Brian beat me to the punch and exited without so much as a warning. I followed right behind him. We knew nothing about still air jumps and we both apparently exited in the same haphazard manner. Two hundred feet below me, to my amazement, Brian began executing a front loop. As I was wondering why he would be performing ariel maneuvers while he was still within ten feet or so of the face, I started my own unintentional front loop, perfectly identical to his.

We had no reason to be real concerned about off-heading openings. That was one redeeming characteristic of the good old round parachute. They were made more to float you safely down to earth than to fly you where you might want to go. There was no chance of clearing the trees and making it all the way to the clearing so our only choice was to land on the rocky talus right below the face.

Once open, the winds were incredibly erratic. At one point I was considerably higher in my open canopy than I was when I opened. I encountered some extreme updrafts and sidedrafts. The wind blew in every direction except directly away from the face. At one point, coming out of a tricky side draft, I made an unfortunate decision to turn my canopy around to face the mountain so I could see when I hit it and kick myself away. Striking the cliff fractured a bone in my ankle. I knew I would somehow have to be able to land on it at the bottom and I could be in trouble.

Brian had worse problems. His canopy collapsed from the erratic winds as he rode the last 50 feet or so down the face of the mountain. Landing on the rocks below with a collapsed canopy cost him some very severe injuries to both his feet. I was very fortunate to end up landing like a feather with my broken ankle.

We both spent some time in the hospital. I was released the same day but Brian was confined a bit longer with his injuries.

We did, however, accomplish exactly what we came for.

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