

Cloud Diving

JOHAN REINHARD

Near disasters are always unforgettable, but rarely are they sublime. In 1973 I experienced one that was both. I had returned to Austria the year before in order to finish my university studies in Vienna after spending three years in Nepal. I also started skydiving again.

The day started out simply enough. "Johan, can you come out to the airport now?" It was Hans, a friend of mine, and he called with an offer he knew an impecunious student couldn't refuse—getting something for free. "They are putting on a demonstration of Pilatus Porters, and we've been offered free jumps to help spice up the show."

Pilatus Porters are small, short take-off and landing planes, which at the time were something of a novelty in Vienna. The "we" was to be Hans, myself, and three other skydivers who had been training to form the core of the first Austrian ten-man star team. Stars are made by skydivers jumping out of a perfectly good airplane and joining up in a free fall to hold hands forming a circle. The first international ten-man star competition was to take place in Innsbruck the coming spring, and Austria was determined to field its own team.

Hans was an experienced skydiver with over two thousand jumps—a substantial number at any time, and especially so in the early 1970s. He had also won international accuracy competitions, where skydivers maneuver their parachutes to try to hit a small metal disk only inches wide. This was located at the center of a large, cleared circle called a "drop zone." Hans once landed on eight such disks in a row.

Within the hour we were all assembled at a regional airport some ten miles outside Vienna. (The international airport at Schwechat had too much flight traffic to allow jumpers to clutter up the sky.) We discovered to our glee that the authorities had given us permission to jump out from five thousand meters (over fifteen thousand feet)—the highest ever allowed. Oxygen would have been required to go higher, but even had it been available, such jumps were verboten in Vienna. Unfortunately, the weather was not as cooperative as the authorities had been. Thick, gray clouds filled the sky, but we were confident that we could find an opening once the plane was able to fly above them.

And if we couldn't find an opening? We would have no choice but to jump out beneath the cloud bank. If that happened, we wouldn't have time to form a star. The clouds began at about one thousand meters—only two hundred meters above the altitude we would have to open our parachutes.

Then again, we had to consider the possibility that if we did find an opening, we might not be able to form the star before we entered the clouds. We could lose sight of each other and have to pull our ripcords without any idea of where the other jumpers were. "If you don't see anyone, track away at two thousand meters," said Hans.

Tracking involved creating horizontal distance when skydivers put their hands along their sides and keep their legs straight—becoming human gliders, as it were. Of course, the higher this is started, the farther a skydiver can go. Hans reasoned that, with only five of us, we would have to be awfully unlucky to collide in free fall or open our chutes too close to each other.

On our first flight, we weren't able to put this to the test. The pilot wasn't happy flying in the clouds and insisted that we jump out below them. We were a discouraged bunch when we gathered back on the ground. If we couldn't do any real free fall, why bother going to the trouble of making another jump?

Hans walked over to the pilot and convinced him that he could find a break in the clouds for us to jump through—that is, if he would just take us up to five thousand meters. If not, we would just fly back with him. As soon as we had packed our chutes, we were climbing back into the plane.

We took off in the same unpromising weather conditions as before, but our spirits rose when the plane eventually emerged from the clouds into a brilliant, clear sky. You've probably observed similar sights from a jet, but it is unusual for skydivers to see a blazing sun shining on a billowing, white layer below. Unfortunately, we soon realized that the cloud bank was *too* white. If we couldn't find a break in it, we would have to abort the jump.

Hans leaned outside the open door. After a few seconds scanning below, he called out to the pilot. "Five left." Twice again Hans gave this order and each time the pilot aligned the plane by five degrees to enable us to reach the best exit point.

Hans is something else, I thought to myself as we looked out at the white mass. He must have spotted enough of an opening to figure out exactly where we were. Me, well, when I looked down I only saw clouds . . . or rather one huge cloud that covered the entire field of my vision.

On Hans's count of three, we were out the door and in only seconds had put together a star. It was so fast that we were still well above the clouds. I knew we would all feel foolish at not having planned something else to do during the jump. Several seconds passed by before whiteness enveloped us. We grinned across at each other as the air roared by, mixed with the sound made by the frantic flapping of our jumpsuits. We were, after all, falling at *one hundred twenty miles an hour*.

Suddenly, we emerged out of the clouds only to see another cloud bank below us. Two cloud jumps for one, I thought, and the others looked like they were equally pleased at this unexpected development. We held the star together and were soon engulfed in gray cloud vapor—not white this time. We let the two-thousand-meter break-off point go by since we were still together. Once we reached one thousand meters, each jumper would simply turn one hundred eighty degrees and briefly track away in order to cause separation. But still, I didn't like the idea of not seeing the ground that I knew we were fast approaching. Then, like magic, we left the clouds behind and looked down to see . . . Vienna!

I stared down toward the Ring Road, Saint Stephen's Cathedral, the Hapsburg Palace, and, hey, there was my university. For a few seconds, I marveled at the colorful scene spread out below. Then I felt a rush of adrenaline as the realization hit me that we were going to land in the city. I immediately let go of the star and started tracking for the suburbs. But it was a lost cause, as we were too low to make any horizontal progress.

Once I had opened the parachute and was hanging in my harness, I heard the characteristic *whooshes* and *whomps* as other chutes opened. This was immediately followed by shouts. "*Gotteswillen!*" (For God's sake!) was one of the milder exclamations that erupted from my companions. "The parking lot! Head for the parking lot!" someone shouted.

We guided our parachutes toward the only open space among the mass of high-rise buildings that rushed toward us. Fortunately, the parking lot was only about a quarter full, but I was still concerned that one of us could hit a car and be seriously injured. Worse, a jumper might get too close to the side of one of the nearby buildings. If even a small piece of his parachute caught on something, the air could be emptied from it, and he might plummet to his death.

It took about two minutes for us to descend under our parachutes, and there was plenty of time for thoughts to begin running through my mind—some a bit bizarre. If we wrecked a car, would the owner's insurance company cover the damage? How much of a fine would we have to pay for sky-diving into the city? Would this, um, "diversion" get me booted out of the university? If so, I would have to leave my girlfriend and return to the United States—God, there goes my rent deposit!

But such musings ended as I got closer to the ground. I saw one jumper miss the cars. Then it was my turn. I laughed with relief as I landed amid a pair of them. Then, I watched as the remaining jumpers landed without even their parachutes touching a single vehicle. Someone exclaimed, "Volkswagens! It would have been terrible if I had hit anything less than a Mercedes!" Chuckling like the fools we had amply proven ourselves to be,

we gathered our chutes and ran for a restaurant—the nearest cover. We wanted to be out of sight before the cops came.

Meanwhile, back at the airport, the realization gradually sank into the bystanders who were waiting for us that we were not going to materialize. It was as if we had vanished into some Bermuda Triangle in the sky.

As soon as Hans reached the restaurant, he called the airport to tell them where we were. While we assembled inside, the questions were flying, but one dominated: "What the hell happened?" Hans was clearly a bit embarrassed. How had a champion accuracy jumper not just missed a drop zone, but the entire airport? Gotteswillen, we had ended up in a city miles away.

"Well, I knew no one wanted to jump out below the clouds," he explained, "so I took a chance on seeing an opening once we were above them."

"Well, how did we end up here, if you saw an opening?" someone said.

"I caught a glimpse of the Danube River, and I figured out our position using it as a reference." Then he grinned sheepishly and said, "Unfortunately, we happened to have been on the wrong side!"

To our surprise we managed to be picked up by bemused friends before the police arrived. While guiding our parachutes toward the parking lot, we had seen cars stop and people emerge to watch us land. Hadn't anyone notified the authorities? Did they think the whole thing had been planned, an exhibition put on for someone's benefit? Then the realization hit us: What other conclusion could they have reached? How could five skydivers land here *by mistake*?

Soon we were back at the airport. While we packed our chutes, I contemplated how the day's event had been mixed with such a unique blend of beauty, wonder, and peril. I turned to Hans and said, "No doubt about it. That was one experience I will never forget." He looked at me—the man who had leaped out from airplanes over two thousand times—and said, "You know, that was the best jump I ever made."

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Johan Reinhard is currently an explorer in residence at the National Geographic Society. Born in Illinois, he received his PhD in anthropology from the University of Vienna in 1974. He is best known for his discovery of frozen Inca mummies on Andean mountain summits. In 2002 he was awarded the Explorers Medal from The Explorers Club for his explorations in the Andes and Himalayas.

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