

ARIZONAFLYER

THE ENTHUSIAST'S GUIDE TO LIFE ON THE WING

THE QUICK ROUTE TO LUKE AFB

By Joe Sage



IN FLIGHT : LUKE AFB : GOLDEN KNIGHTS US ARMY PARACHUTE TEAM

During the Luke Air Force Base "75 Years of Airpower" air show in April, a US Air Force liaison set us up to fly with the US Army Parachute Team—the Golden Knights—as they performed a group jump for the crowd.

We arrived at the base before O-dark-thirty, so K-9 Technical Sergeant Wax could give media and their vehicles a good sniff and security clearance. This also gave us lots of time to take in the air show hardware before the crowds poured in.

As the sun rose, so did the temperature. We had been advised to bring a jacket for the flight. We had also stashed gloves and a ski hat in our kit. It was getting hot enough that we almost stashed all that back in our car. Almost. But the plane would be wide open, and when the call came to assemble, we learned that it had been just 17 degrees Fahrenheit up there at 12,500 feet the day before, outside the plane and in.

The eighty-two men and women who make up the Golden Knights are separated into nine sections—the Black and Gold demonstration teams, a tandem team, four competition teams, an aviation detachment and the headquarters section.

THE DEMONSTRATION TEAMS

Golden Knights team members are qualified by hundreds of jumps before acceptance into the program, hundreds more during training, and thousands more as members of the Team.

Team members are also chosen for their ability to be top-notch ambassadors, conducting parachute demonstrations, competitions and a tandem orientation program to connect the Army with the public, nationwide and worldwide.

The Team also augments recruiting efforts.

They test and evaluate new equipment for military free fall teams and provide personalized coaching and assistance for military freefall infiltration skills and techniques, while preparing for deployment in support of Special Operations.

USAPT members are chosen for character and camaraderie needed to travel, work and live in close quarters for months on end. The single main ingredient of the Team is teamwork.

THE AVIATION SECTION

The aviators, known as Team Six, include both military and civilian former Golden Knight pilots, who ensure the Team a safe jump platform. They

Every step of preparation for the Golden Knights' jump flight is efficient and meticulous, from gear to aircraft to altitude, wind and weather checks.

KEEP RIGHT >>





Descent photo series: Cathy Smith



have flown over 113,050 hours under the most demanding weather and air traffic conditions.

Our Fokker C-31A Troopship is a military version of the commercial C-27 Friendship, built in the US from 1955 to 1987 by Dutch company Fokker in cooperation with US builder Fairchild.

The overall fleet includes two Fokker C-31A Troopships and three Canadian DeHavilland UV-18 Twin Otter STOL aircraft, a military version of the DHC-6-400 used by Grand Canyon Airlines.

OUR FLIGHT

Powerful twin engines and large open doors on both sides in the rear—where we sit—provide a thrilling takeoff. Several loops above the West Valley gradually bring us to jump altitude, 12,500 feet, where today it is just 14 degrees. The hat, jacket and gloves prove to be a good idea.

We would not be jumping. Not that we would not, er, jump at the opportunity. We and our equipment were firmly bungied into the aircraft, as we were only a couple of feet from any unintended exit with no chute. With gloves and heavy rubber straps, it was cumbersome to use a camera. But we had one or two bars on our phone for much of the flight. In a late-breaking idea, we texted a friend attending the show on the ground, who grabbed the jump sequence photos at left.

Planning is meticulous, but quick. Tests are run to check wind and drift, then one jumper goes first, who will join the announcers as the rest of the Team descends. It takes the jumpers about 3 minutes and 40 seconds to join the audience. Aerobatics, colorful smoke trails and the unfurling of Old Glory all add to the show.

Our descent was impressively quick. We asked whether this is an STOL aircraft, like the Twin Otter. Ha, no, laughed the aviators, quite the opposite. Clearly, they are aces.

The Golden Knights have performed more than 17,000 shows in all 50 states and 48 countries, reaching more than 20,000 people per show. We thank the Army and Air Force for this opportunity.

You can find more information about the Golden Knights, including individual team member biographies, pictures, show schedules and more at www.armykg.com. ■

Left: the US Army Parachute Team—the Golden Knights—with their Fokker C-31A Troopship (also called the Friendship). • At right: all smiles, camaraderie and confidence, the team works its way to altitude. Doors are wide open for the duration. “See ya on the ground!” Army Staff Sgt. Sherri Jo Gallagher exits the plane (bottom photo: US Air Force photo by Senior Airman James Hensley).



Bottom: US Air Force photo by Senior Airman James Hensley

Luke Air Force Base presented "75 Years of Airpower" to the Arizona community on April 2-3, 2016, a commemorative milestone for their popular annual air show. Visitors witnessed exciting aerial acts, and static displays both classic and ultra-modern. The show gave civilians a chance to interact with the Airmen who carry out the Luke mission of "Training the World's Greatest F-35 and F-16 Pilots." More than anything, it's a chance for the Airmen at Luke to say "thank you" to the community for the incredible support given to their mission each day.

Featured demonstrations included the US Air Force Air Demonstration Squadron, known to fans everywhere simply as the Thunderbirds, in a 75-minute show combining solo and formation flight, including the popular diamond formation and head-to-head passes that demonstrate the power and agility of their F-16 Fighting Falcon.

The US Army Golden Knights Parachute Team (featured on prior pages) took off from a strip elsewhere on the base and landed with the utmost precision right at the crowd's feet.

"Farmer Clem Cleaver" of the Alabama Boys ascended the announcers' stand demanding a flight lesson, "stole" a 1946 Piper J-3 Cub, then wowed the crowd by landing it atop a moving truck. The Commemorative Air Force brought history alive 75 years after Pearl Harbor with their "Tora! Tora! Tora!" attack simulation. Other features included Jack Lind's Screaming Sasquatch, the Desert Rat Warbird Demonstration Team, Red Bull Demonstration Team, Gregory "Wired" Colyer in his T-33 Ace Maker, and our hosts, the US Air Force, with their F-35 Heritage Flight Team.

Static displays ranged from the small T-6A Texan II, T-38 Talon and F-15 Eagle fighter jet, to the huge KC-135 Stratotanker and C-17 Globemaster II cargo plane. Bombers spanned the decades, from B-17, A-26 and B-25 Mitchell, to the blended-wing supersonic B-1.

Visitors also enjoyed booths of fried foods and chilled refreshments worthy of any county fair.

Crowds entering from the east also had a chance to spend some time getting up close with nine aircraft at the Luke Air Force Base Air Park, featuring planes that have served at Luke. ■

Thousands of attendees thrilled to aerobatics by the Thunderbirds (Doris Ong photo, top); this B-25 Mitchell Bomber catches the dawn light before the crowds arrive; "Tora! Tora! Tora!" the Commemorative Air Force recreates the attack on Pearl Harbor (but in a much dryer environment); and dozens of show-goers seek afternoon shade below a Fairchild Republic A-10 Thunderbolt II Warthog.



US Air Force Thunderbirds photo: Doris Ong