



'chuting star

At 13,500 feet above earth, Carl Lambert zooms through the sky like a shoeless, smiling bullet. A skydive instructor and freefall fanatic, this Virginia native gives new meaning to living life at full speed.

by NICHOLAS ADDISON THOMAS

Dan Wayland Photo





(Right): The famous "Mr. Fabulous," a Super Otter, twin-turbine engine airplane capable of holding 22 jumpers.

(Below): Lambert waits to jump while in full video regalia. The shooting begins when you board the plane and ends with footage of the landing.



A few feet from the fenced-in entrance, tresesides the hollow carcass of a single-engine plane, its parts strewn about like the bones of a skeleton. Fifty feet behind it sits a 6,400-square-foot hangar, a common site to area residents but a second home to the region's X-factor folk. This is what's known as a drop zone, a place where skydiving enthusiasts bond and boogey 13,500 feet above ground. This is Skydive Orange.

I arrived here on assignment one muggy Saturday, anxious to meet Carl Lambert, an experienced skydiver and safety-focused instructor. From our phone calls, I could tell he was addicted to the sport. His infectious energy, coupled with his warm personality, inspired me to see him at work. Since I was going to profile him and Skydive Orange, a place that conducts roughly 18,000 jumps a year, it was only fitting that I see him in action.

The first thing I noticed when I entered the gravel parking lot was the noise emitting from the hangar. Dozens of people were walking around, reminiscing about freefalls and watching recent jumps on a television the size of a Mini Cooper. The veterans were carefully packing their parachutes, ironing out the wrinkles of "rip-stop" nylon with their fists and forearms. Others bided their time playing foosball and connecting over pizza. It was a colorful environment full of helping hands, hardy smiles and high-fives.

As I stood there, taking it all in, I noticed Lambert from across the room. First thing you should know about the veteran skydiver is that he lives and breathes for the sport. It's in his blood. Second, he has the kind of smile that can light up the skies, which perfectly complements his calm and collected swagger. And the way he talks about skydiving? It's the same way kids behave on Christmas morning— with unfiltered, wide-eyed joy. You'd think this was the first time he's done this, but it isn't; he's been skydiving for 16 years and has

more than 4,000 jumps under his belt. He immediately welcomed me into the community like a long-lost brother, and began telling me about the diverse culture.

"This place hosts the most eclectic groups of people you could ever meet. On a given weekend, I might jump with a preacher, lawyer, mechanic, U.S. Marshall, even a retiree who picked up the sport when she turned 60," said Lambert. "These guys would probably never hang out together in 'normal' society, but they're here sharing their passion for the sport."

A freefall fanatic who started skydiving on a dare, Lambert is a multi-rated instructor, which means he teaches static-line, tandem and accelerated freefall (AFF) students. He also shoots aerial video and pictures, and serves as the main safety and training advisor at the drop zone. Every year, Lambert works with several hundred students, teaching them the ins and outs of the sport,



(Left to right): Bobby Page, Michael Jasienowski and Josh Mitchell launch a freefly exit from the Twin Otter over Skydive Orange.

the proper safety precautions and how to get the most out of jumps. His impressive experience comes from years of working within the industry.

Prior to working full time at Skydive Orange, Lambert spent three years as Managing Editor of the United States Parachute Association's (USPA) magazine, *Parachutist*. Before that, the James Madison University graduate attended flight school in Harrisonburg— he got his commercial pilot's license there— and worked as the director of admissions at a Waynesboro military school, where he also taught eighth-grade English, coached basketball and ran the drama club. It wasn't until recently that he transitioned from editing to the airfield. Lambert is currently working on getting his flight instructor ratings so he can pursue a job in the airline industry.

"Teaching skydiving has definitely given me an appreciation for the myriad learning styles people have and the countless things that drive people to jump out of airplanes. It has also taught me that Murphy's Law prevails in the skydiving lives of those who take anything for granted," said Lambert, who has taught every weekend for a decade.

We began the day by taking a quick tour of the hangar— there's an on-site classroom, showers, a training facility— and the unique exterior of the place. Adjacent to the facility is a dilapidated tiki bar dubbed "The Fabulous Saloon," as well as a colony of RVs inhabited by weekenders who jump during the day and party at night. After the overview, I was guided to the padded hangar floor where we sat and discussed all-things skydiving.

Lambert told me how a lot of couples gravitate to the sport (some even meet here), and how his crew usually does as many as 29 loads a day with anywhere from 8 to 22 jumpers a flight. He talked about how weather-dependent the sport is— it's all up to the winds and weather gods— how you need 500 jumps to get your master's license and how purchasing skydiving equipment is like buying a small car (roughly \$6,500 for new gear, \$2,500 for used). And then there are the parachutes, which like the people they support, come in a variety of shapes and sizes.

"Parachutes love to open. And the newer you are, the bigger the parachutes you'll use. Exit weight, which includes the parachutes, backpacks, helmets, etc., is taken into account. Basically, it's one square

foot per pound for the average jumper. The smaller the parachute, the faster you go," said Lambert.

I wondered just how fast you could go during a freefall and how long the drop takes. As it turns out, it can last about 50-70 seconds, at which point you're lunging 120-170 mph toward that place your feet love so much. If you're a master jumper, you can pull your chute at about 2,000 feet, though first-timers have to pull theirs at about 5,500 on the first couple of jumps. Most beginners, Lambert says, start out making a tandem jump, then transition to AFF training, where they graduate to solo skydiving. That usually takes about seven jumps, and then the crew helps you succeed in your first individual flight.

We talked like this for the next hour or so, and Lambert would occasionally leave to assist his co-workers, advise beginners or conduct a training session. Meanwhile, I'd find myself wandering among the people and parachutes, eager to learn more about what it takes to jump from a plane. Little did I know I'd soon be finding out. A little while later, Lambert returned. He had some news.

"I talked to my co-workers and we want you to jump," he said. "We'll have the video camera going. Are you ready to skydive?"

I'm part Welsh, Italian and Irish. Nowhere in my DNA am I avian. That said, the idea of throwing all 235 pounds of my gelatinous self out of a plane had me a little worried at first. Like most beginners, a kaleidoscope of worst-case scenarios ran through my head: What if my parachute doesn't open? What if my tandem partner commits Hari Kari on me mid-flight? What if I miss my mark and land on a cow? Sure, I already knew the answers. I knew that skydiving is safer than driving down I-95, and that these experienced instructors always put safety first. Still, jumping out of a plane that's roughly 45 football fields above the earth went against my natural instincts.

"What a lot of people don't realize is that tandem skydiving has been made as simple as possible for the student. Then, if someone chooses to take up the sport, he or she is slowly given more responsibility on each dive," said Lambert. "Skydiving is not something you take for granted as foolproof, but done with care, the right gear, some common sense and the right amount of training, you can and will have a long, happy and healthy time in the sport without any problems."



(Left): The author, Nicholas, prepares for his inaugural jump with veteran Nancy Koreen in position.

(Below): Nicholas and tandem instructor Mike French freefall as Nancy takes a front-row seat



Before I could jump out of a perfectly good airplane, I had to undergo the proper training. For the next half hour, I learned how to handle myself on the plane, communicate with my tandem partner and position myself during freefall. I discovered that ninety-nine percent of the responsibility and work would be in the hands of my instructor, which in this case was Mike French, a charming veteran who has completed more than 8,200 jumps. After the class and consultations, I concluded my training with a video featuring an instructor with a ZZ Top complex.

A half hour later, I was donning parachute pants, a harness, a wrist altimeter, goggles and a helmet that looked like it belonged on a World War II fighter pilot. After going over the final details with French, I trekked valiantly toward the plane with the rest of the dive crew. There, on a new tarmac, was the Twin Otter, an extremely safe aircraft in all of its purple- and orange-striped glory. I was told the plane could fit 22 jumpers, and that the four harness attachments that connected me to French could lift it up with ease. That was reassuring. Minutes later, we were up in the air, Orange County looking more like an ant farm than a robust agricultural community.

“What are we at, four-thousand feet?” I asked confidently. “This isn’t so bad.” “Good, because we have about 10,000 more feet to climb,” Lambert said with a smile.

Roughly ten-thousand more feet to go, and then I’d hurl through the atmosphere like a pale, bald comet. When we finally hit our mark, people started exiting the plane one by one. Some threw themselves out like human darts, others barrel-rolled. As I waited for my turn to come, I remembered what Lambert told me on the ground: bend

your back like a banana, hands in the safety position, let the instructor do the rest. Before I knew it, it was my turn to leap. I waddled toward the open door, saw the colors of the distant earth melt into one another, and then 1-2-3 jumped.

What did it feel like swimming through the atmosphere? It was indescribable; the marriage of awe and shock. I remember thinking: I’m actually floating on a bed of air. You’re so in the moment, so focused on what you’ve been trained to do that you absorb the experience in pieces. You forget that you’re occupying the skies with just your body and a few pounds of fabric. All you can do is open your mind and experience the pure joy of it all. I remember seeing Lambert to my right, shoeless and recording my goofy grin. And then BOOM, French pulled the parachute and we zig-zagged toward the earth with ease.

In just a half hour, I managed to join an elite group of people. I experienced my first skydive, and I didn’t scream like a little girl. All in all, this was a once-in-a-lifetime experience; one made better by the unbelievable generosity, intellect and overall kindness of Lambert and the Skydive Orange crew. I had heard great things about this place, and now that I’ve experienced it in person, I understand that skydiving is only as amazing as the people who teach you. Just ask Lambert.

“To me, skydiving and the community that comes with it is one of the best-kept secrets around. I think there is almost no one who wouldn’t enjoy trying it at least once. Many people will find it a life-changing event that they might make into a regular hobby,” said Lambert. “I love sharing that with anyone willing to learn.”

To learn more about skydiving, visit www.USPA.org. When you’re ready to fly the open skies with a parachute pack the size of a lunchbox, visit www.SkydiveOrange.com or call 540-943-6587.





The free-spirited Lambert goes to work in his typical skydiving attire