



# COMBAT CONTROL TEAM

Excerpts from “The Eye of the Storm” by Gene Adcock

## CHAPTER 3 DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF AFA CADET PETER JOHNSON

**BIRTH OF THE USAF ACADEMY SPORT PARACHUTE CLUB** by Bob Olmstead, SMSgt. USAF (Retired) – Bob Olmstead was there at the beginning of parachuting at the Academy. He provided the following first hand account of the early days and start-up of the USAF Academy parachuting program:

“Because a few cadets (4 or 5) were slipping away on weekends to make sport jumps at nearby drop zones, Academy Commanders wanted to get a handle on their activities. It was during the 1963-64 school year that a couple of cadets took the initiative and entered the collegiate championships and made a good showing for the Academy. Academy commanders seized the opportunity to push for and gain official sanctioning for a USAF Academy Sport Parachute Club; the club for cadets was officially sanctioned in the summer of 1964.”

“Pete Johnson was the most experienced cadet jumper at that time. I knew Pete from other activities, and because I worked in the Department of Instructional Technology (DFIT), I was at the meeting to form a club to run the PCA film *Sport of The Space Age* for the group. Cadet Johnson encouraged me to apply for participation with the newly forming club as an enlisted advisor. I did just that in a letter written September 8<sup>th</sup> 1964 and was approved by the two faculty officers assigned the additional duty of supervising the club. I was an A1C and had about a dozen jumps with a sport club in the Denver area. An officer assigned to help start the club was Captain Wallace (to whom my letter was addressed) from the Political Science Department was assigned to help start the club.”

“Since I worked in DFIT, in which Training Devices was a branch, part of my contribution was to have packing mats made, along with packing paddles, pressure plates, tension straps, and shot bags to support the parachute club. I made a total of about 10 sets of each.”

“I made my first jump at the Academy airfield in the Fall of 1964 and was the first enlisted individual assigned at the Academy to jump with the club. On Feb. 24<sup>th</sup>, 1965, the Academy sent me TDY to Olmsted AFB in Harrisburg, PA - an AF depot for surplus parachute equipment - for three days. My mission was scrounge equipment that would be useful in supporting the club. I returned with a C-47 loaded from cockpit to tail with boxes full of harnesses, containers, several dozen surplus 28’ & 24’ canopies, and a couple dozen sensitive altimeters. (Over the next few weeks, I took those instruments to an altimeter shop at Stapleton Airport in Denver and swapped them for non-sensitive altimeters.) From my trip to Olmsted, the Academy got its first equipment to support the club.”

“It wasn't long before the Academy contracted with Art Ibanez, a rigger at McConnell AFB in Kansas; asking him to come to the Academy on weekends and on his days off with his sewing machines. During his visits, he worked tirelessly, modifying parachutes and harnesses. He cut double L, and 7TU modifications, sewed D-rings on harnesses, and assembled the first club rigs from all that surplus gear.”

### **The Parachute Club's First Meet**

“The first meet the new AFA parachute club participated in -- as a sanctioned and recognized team -- was at the Los Angeles Sky Divers 4<sup>th</sup> Western Invitational Parachute Meet held at Lake Elsinore, California on May 15-16, 1965. We didn't make a good showing as many of the cadets were not yet spotting for themselves (a meet requirement) so we had to give some quick dirt-drawn lessons. However, we were well accepted and had a great time!”

### **CCT Visits Academy**

“On their way home from the National Championships held in Salt Lake City in the summer of 1965, Captain John Garrity, along with Sergeants Jim Howell and Mort Freedman stopped at the Academy for a few days to look over the program, offer advice, and look over all the surplus equipment I had acquired during my trip to Olmstead, a few months earlier. Sergeant Howell saw to it on that visit that I was outfitted with enough surplus gear to make up my first very-own rig.”

“In December 1965, Mort Freedman was assigned PCS to the Academy and with that, the program had its first NCOIC; although it was still designated a sport parachute club. Mort really got things rolling at this point with the acquisition of commercially manufactured rigs and Para-Commanders for the cadets along with occasional helicopter jump support from Ft. Carson. Up to this time we had been using a contracted Cessna 205 as a jump plane. At about the same time, Captain Walter Miller was assigned the additional duty as OIC of the club.”

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**THE EARLY AFA PARACHUTE PROGRAM** by SMSgt Morton J. Freedman

“It was Easter 1965 when Chief Howell, Vern Morgan and I visited the CCT at Forbes AFB, Kansas. We stopped there to use their facilities and support for training jumpmasters from the Academy Parachute club. As I remember of the cadets there for the training only one cadet passed. His name was Peter Johnson.”

“I found out right after I returned to Hurlburt Field, Florida that the USAFA requested that I volunteer for duty there; I refused. As a result, I was sent to the Academy TDY to do the work. Within days we began work to get the parachute program off the ground. General Louis Sieth was the Commandant of Cadets and the *horsepower* behind the development of the Academy parachute program. During one of our first meetings, I asked General Sieth what he wanted from the Academy parachuting program he said: **“leadership!”** Thus the birth of parachuting at the Academy was begun on a very positive note.”

“Within a few weeks, I was transferred to the USAFA. At the Academy, I was helped with the rigging of the reserves and mains by a retired military parachute rigger named Arturo Ibanez; he was later hired as a civilian rigger. Major Miller was given the additional duty of Officer in Charge (OIC) of parachute club; but, he wasn't a jumper. Later, Colonel Jim Keating was transferred to the USAFA to be a Lacrosse Coach. At Hurlburt he was the OIC of the Pararescue detachment. During his assignment to Hurlburt he often accompanied the AFA parachute club at parachute meets.”

“In 1966 we were invited to the collegiate competition. In one of the training jumps – on March 19, 1966 - we lost Cadet Peter Johnson in a tragic parachute accident. The fatality was the result of a break away from a malfunction at an altitude too low for proper reserve parachute activation. At the Academy, incident was treated as a major aircraft accident; so there was a full accident board convened, along with an IG investigation. I was in the hot seat, since I had ordered Pioneer Piggybacks. With Piggyback reserve parachutes a breakaway was the only possible emergency procedure, but never at an altitude lower than 2000 feet.”

**NOTE**

*The Peter Johnson Award is presented annually - at graduation - to the Academy's most outstanding parachutist.*

“The Air Force requested an expert from the newly formed US Army parachute team – the Golden Knights. Captain Perry, US Army was sent for the investigation. I was asked at the board how to prevent any other accidents from happening again. I said: **Stop Jumping!** and followed with: **but, parachuting is the best leadership training offered to our cadets.**”

“The outcome of the accident investigation was very positive for me; I was promoted to Technical Sergeant. In addition, I was asked to pick any enlisted man and officer in the Air Force to help with the program. I selected TSgt Vern Morgan and the officer was Major John J. Garrity.”

By this time, the AFA Parachute-490 Program (series) was firmly rooted. The Airborne School at Fort Benning, Georgia was sent a copy of the training syllabus. As a result of their review, they authorized the Academy to issue of US Army airborne wings in 1966.