

At 83, sky is not the limit for Chapin



By Andrew Westel

A few shots of the skydive of Don Chapen at the age of 83. 10-18-08

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La Grange Park, IL -

Don Chapin is the kind of guy who would not take a dive for anyone — except himself.

In his case, he decided to do it from an airplane, at 83 years old.

On Sept. 16, the resident of Plymouth Place in La Grange Park did something he said he has wanted to do for about 10 years. He, along with Dale Lilburn, CEO of Plymouth Place, went out to the Chicagoland Skydiving Center in Hinckley to find out what it is like to be a bird.

“I mentioned it to Dale in a casual conversation, and he said ‘I want to go, too,’” Chapin said. “My wife had kind of pushed me on to it because there are so many other things going on at Plymouth Place it’s kind of hard to sandwich something else in. She said, ‘For your anniversary, I’m going to insist that you go ahead and do it because I want to stop hearing about it.’”

After some instruction on the ground, the two loaded into an airplane where they were each secured to an experienced jumper. At an altitude of about 15,000 feet, they found themselves with their legs

dangling out of the plane. They jumped, then soared until it was time to pull the rip cord.

"To me it was exhilarating," Chapin said. "I've seen a lot of pictures of people doing it, and I talked to people who have done it."

Chapin said the landing was effortless and went without a hitch.

"It was probably the most exciting thing I've done. I was in World War II, but I didn't do any parachute jumping or anything like that. You get up to this age and you figure: How bad could it be?"

An infantryman with the Fifth Armored Division, Chapin saw action in Germany, which he described as "not very pretty." Sent home after VE Day, he was transferred to a unit preparing for the invasion of Japan. The dropping of the atomic bomb changed the plans.

Lilburn said he was surprised at the sensation, or lack of it, once they were outside of the airplane and free-falling.

"The first thing that surprised me the most is once you are away from the airplane, falling 120 mph face down, there is absolutely no sensation of falling," he said. "It's like standing in front of a fan, blowing 120 mph. It's noisy. Then the landing is like standing on a kitchen chair and jumping to the floor on your feet."

Lilburn said he and Chapin were more anxious to get on the plane and getting to it than they were nervous.

"I enjoyed the bejabbbers out of it," Lilburn said. "I think next summer I'm going to do it a couple times. And to do it with someone like Don; he's a real card. I probably would never have gotten around to it if it hadn't been for Don."

Chapin's wife, Ruth, admits she was the one who pushed her husband to quit the talking and jump into action.

"But I didn't go along because I didn't want to see him go 'splat'," she said. "He's been a daredevil always. When he was with Electromotive, he would fly out to oil rigs on helicopters. He's quite a guy."

Chapin said he is game for another dive.

"I wouldn't mind doing it again," he said. "I think sometime I would like to try it by myself. I think I would like to try an ultra light, those little flying kites with the chainsaw engines. Flying has always been kind of a wannabe hobby for me."

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