



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

Craig Rullman
Columnist

This jump's for you, Chief

"...I can remember everything: From horses and cart days right up until today; jet planes and computers. When I was a boy there weren't even any fences ... all just open prairie. The world has changed so quickly ... It's so short a time ... I've had a long life, but it seems like yesterday..."

— Chief David William Wounded in Winter Beautiful Bald Eagle

The world lost a great man last week.

Chief David Beautiful Bald Eagle died on July 22. He was born in a tipi on the edge of the Cheyenne River on April 8, 1919, and he was the grandson of Chief White Bull, who some 43 years earlier had led a memorable charge against Custer at the Little Bighorn.

In 1936, Beautiful Bald Eagle joined the 4th Cavalry, and in 1940 re-enlisted with the 82nd Airborne at Fort Bragg. He was decorated for

bravery after his first combat jump at Anzio, and was severely wounded and left for dead on his second, at Normandy, on D-Day.

After the war, he played semi-pro baseball. He acted in movies and served as Errol Flynn's stunt double in "Flaming Arrow." He became a champion ballroom dancer and is enshrined in the Ballroom Hall of Fame. He raised horses. He raised children. A lot of them, 25, in fact, including five that he and his wife — an actress from Belgium named Josee, whom he met at the World's Fair in 1958 — adopted. He raced cars. He went back to rodeo, forking bareback broncs and bulls. He was a close friend of rodeo legend Casey Tibbs, and once danced with Marilyn Monroe.

He acted in more movies, including "Dances With Wolves," and starred in his final film at the age of 95. He was made traditional Chief of the Miniconjou Lakota band and the United Native Nations Goodwill Ambassador for the Cheyenne River Sioux, and he went skydiving.

Skydiving.

I've seen a lot of that lately, while working the horses or out watering the garden. I look up and see the brightly patterned canopies swinging back to earth, and on some days I can even hear the delighted shrieks and shouts of people living their lives with a dramatically renewed sense of awe.

Surely you know what comes next.

What better way to honor

a life of service and dedication to family, friends, neighbors; a life so well lived, so perfectly bookended by tipis and supercomputers, that it almost defies articulation? Why wouldn't we, after considering one man's model, take a minute to examine the mundane routines that we fall into so easily, to throw them out with Monday's garbage, and to purposefully aim for a place completely beyond our comfort zone?

We did, my wife and I.

We drove down to the airport and signed up. We entrusted our lives to a pair of complete strangers, Ryan and Steven, strapping into the harness, and donning the surprisingly simple garb of human flight. And it was not lost on me, as we flew over the drop zone and Ryan cinched up our tandem rig, that Beautiful Bald Eagle believed that the harness he wore on D-Day had saved his life, as he and his brothers from the 82nd were shot, in his own words, "like clay pigeons" descending over Normandy.

The harness was so tight, he said, that it prevented him from bleeding out from his wounds when he hit the ground.

I won't tell you I wasn't scared. I was. Ryan, my instructor, told me just before the door opened and we tumbled out — which in that first few seconds is like falling in a vacuum of pure shrieking insanity — that he could feel my heart beating above the vibration of the plane. He wasn't kidding.

But then, just as suddenly,



PHOTO BY PETE RATHBUN

In the spirit of Chief David Beautiful Bald Eagle...

we were flying, buoyant even, as if the air were pushing us back into the sky, and we were carving our descent in a series of controlled and rewarding turns. Fear vanished. It was true flight, loud, windy, with all of Central Oregon spread out beneath us in a vision of mountain lakes and forests and volcanoes holding snow in the lees. We could see St. Helens, Rainier, the raw power of the Cascade peaks marching off into the horizon, and far below, the little town of Sisters, looking something like a cartoon hamlet just recently hacked out of the forest.

And then the parachute opened and we began to float, the world gone so suddenly quiet it seemed we were drifting in the primordial. And there is nothing like hanging lazily under the canopy,

taking in the curvature of a world you might never quite see again in the same way, and looking up to see your wife, still streaking earthward at 150 mph, in a pink flight-suit, freefalling.

We could do worse than to model something of our drive for life after David Beautiful Bald Eagle, who just kept living well when age and gravity and time might have forced him to close up shop. But he didn't allow that, and instead seemed to grow bigger and stronger with age.

We should do so well. His example inspired us, and we were happy to shove complacency aside, widen the path, and just get after the good and sweet business of being alive.

So ... this jumps for you, Chief Beautiful Bald Eagle — "walk on."

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