

Jumping for Joy

Golden Falcons Skydivers Want to Shed Old Military Image

By MIGUEL PEREZ
Herald Staff Writer

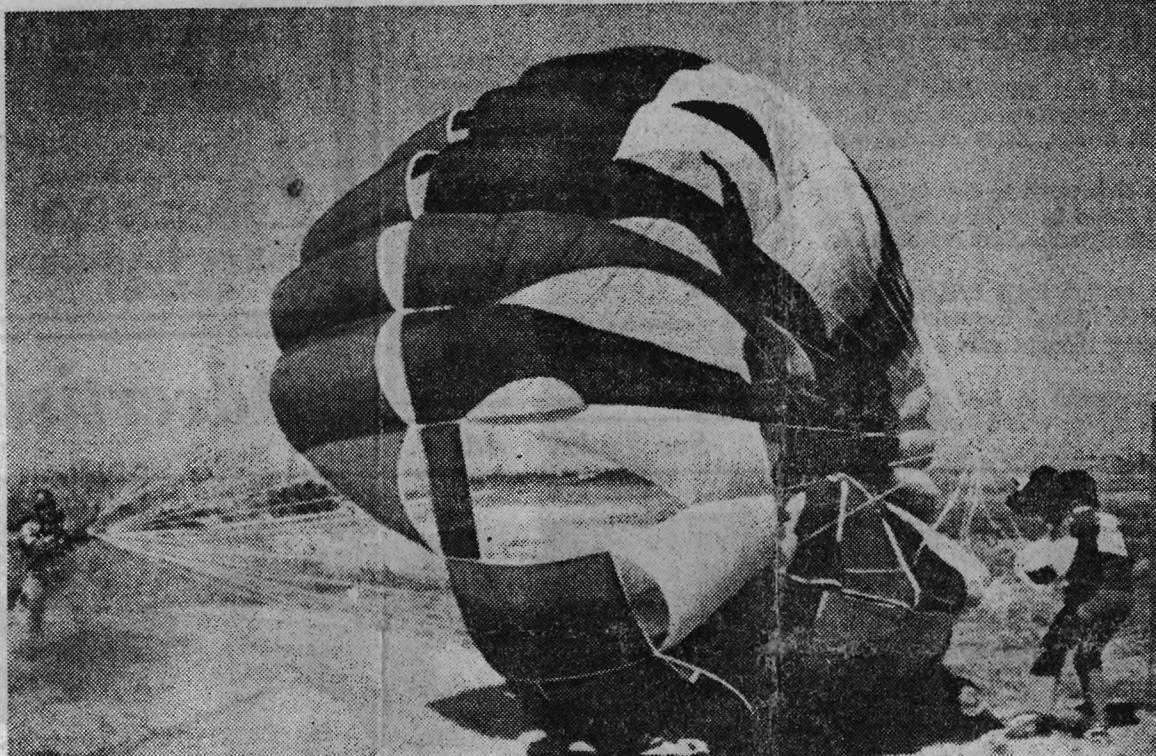
Gracefully, as if walking in the sky, the "Golden Falcons" skydivers who once trained hundreds of exiles to invade Cuba, are still teaching newcomers the art of jumping from a plane. They do it as a sport now, they say, not as military training.

Older members of the "Halcones Dorados" club have not forgotten the ideals for which they trained men to fight communism, but they say those days are part of history now, and they resent recent publicity that has tied the club to onetime members accused or convicted of terrorist activities in Dade County.

"We're making the headlines," said Manuel Alen Jr., one of the oldest active members, "but we wish we weren't making them that way." He said most of the original club members, who trained more than 500 Cubans from several exile organizations, are no longer active with the club.

"They are free and welcome to participate in our activities," said Rene Corbo, the club's current president and instructor, "but they have no say in what happens at the club."

TWO former club members, Humberto Lopez and Luis Crespo, were crippled for life when a bomb they were making blew up in the garage of a Little Havana home March 20, 1974. They were not active with the club at that time. Both were convicted of unlawful possession of explosives. Rolando Otero, another non-active member, is wanted by federal authorities to



—JOE RIMKUS JR. / Miami Herald Staff

Manuel Alen Jr. Gathers in Parachute During a Skydiving Session

iles every two weeks at an airfield near Homestead in the late 1960s and early '70s. The training was all free. The expenses were paid with Cuban exile money.

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from a 3,000-foot fall. "As long as I can afford it, I'll keep doing it."

Les Keller, 25, another student

trying his first jump, said he was scared before the jump, "but they trained us so well that when they

said 'Jump' I forgot I was scared.

"When I saw myself coming down," said Keller, "the first thing

I thought was: What the hell am I doing here?" He jumped again an hour later.

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garage or a Little Havana home March 20, 1974. They were not active with the club at that time. Both were convicted of unlawful possession of explosives. Rolando Otero, another non-active member, is wanted by federal authorities to face charges for the rash of bombings that shook several Miami post offices, the police department and the State Attorney's office late last year.

Alen, 30, an electronics service technician, fought in Vietnam for two years. Corbo, 35, a nurse in a hospital intensive-care unit, is a veteran of the Bay of Pigs invasion. Both were taught to jump from planes in Fort Benning, Ga. — by the U.S. Army.

Skydiving has become a weekend hobby for Alen and Corbo, "a way to relax, to get away," they said. But they said negative publicity is harming the club's image and scaring prospective new members away.

"A woman, a new student, told me jokingly that she may not even get to jump because by being with us she could get arrested," said Corbo.

"I believe that if a Mason robs a bank, that doesn't mean all Masons are bank robbers," he said. "But also, he (Otero) is yet to be proven guilty. One thing is being a suspect and another thing is being convicted."

Corbo said Otero is one of the best free-fall photographers he has seen. "As a paratrooper, as a veteran of Bay of Pigs, and as a friend who was in prison in Cuba with me after the invasion, I respect him," Corbo said. "But his personal activities are his own, not the club's."

CORBO SAID some of the 30 active club members still want to fight Castro's communism, but individually — not as a club.

"We're not a selective, secret organization," said Corbo. "But some of us maintain the thought that at a given moment, if the situation arises for us to serve our country, we will be ready."

He said club membership is not limited to Cubans. "The only requirement," he said, "is interest in skydiving."

There were Anglos, Latin Americans and Cubans within the group of about 20 skydivers who jumped from a Cesna-182 last weekend at the Oasis airfield, about an hour's drive west of Miami on the Tamiami Trail. The jumpers included

free. The expenses were paid with Cuban exile money.

CASTRO said the club trained men for the Executive Committee for the Liberation, an umbrella organization made up of several exile groups. When plans for that organization to invade the island failed to materialize, the club's military activities ceased, he said.

On June 25, 1972, a young Cuban woman who was training with the club fell 3,000 feet to her death, the only Falcon to die in a jump. Teresa Torres, 26, a Miami Beach key-punch operator whose brother served time in a Cuban jail, was training with an anti-communist group.

"She was a revolutionary woman, an idealist," recalls Castro, who witnessed the fall. "Something happened up there that we never were able to figure out. I think she must have frozen. All we know is that she didn't pull her reserve chute." Miss Torres was buried in Woodlawn Cemetery with military honors.

The club taught Dominican paratroopers how to freefall in 1971 and has competed in several tournaments with the Dominican air force. Club members have also participated in several skydiving exhibitions in Dade and Broward Counties.

"A jump over Cuba, it would have been our intention, we would not need to freefall," said Alen. "Military jumps are from only 600 feet. You want to get in as quick as possible."

New students pay a \$40 fee for three classes, the use of a parachute and a jump. However, once they get more involved in the sport, the equipment costs about \$1,000. Active club members pay \$5 monthly dues to cover the plane's maintenance "and when we have surplus cash we throw a party," said Alen.

CORBO said some members have considered changing the club's name, to get rid of its revolutionary image — but older club members have opposed that. The silver wings insignia awarded to each skydiver after five jumps still bears the Cuban coat of arms.

"I've seen the club come from a small group of poorly trained individuals to one of the best parachuting clubs in South Florida today, with all the latest equipment," said Ed Barns, the plane's owner and a club member who hopes to put the Oasis airfield "on the map as one of the main skydiving centers of South Florida."

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From Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, the club's founder, Frank Castro, said the organization was strictly for Cubans when it began in 1968. He said many Anglos joined later.

"In reality," he said, "our interest was in the sport, but we always maintained the memory of the fatherland — and it was also a way to be prepared in case paratroopers were needed. The club had two functions, sports and military."

"In the past, I would say, 99 percent of the members of Halcones Dorados have been Cubans with patriotic ideals," Castro said. He added that the club, incorporated as a non-profit organization (Association of Cuban Skydivers in Exile) trained new classes of 30 to 40 ex-

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Barns said about \$60,000 already has been invested in making the airfield an aerial competition center with picnic areas and facilities for spectators. He said that within two years, three planes will be operating at the field, two or three days a week. The club only practices on Sundays now. It has no other meetings.

At the airfield last Sunday, Lyn Hunter, trying her first jump after two weeks of training, said she was "scared to death" when she was getting ready to leave the plane, "but once the chute opens, it's fantastic. The landing was easy. The problem is just getting out of the plane."

"It's something you have to feel to believe," said Joe Garcia, 23, moments after he landed on his feet



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