GEARED UP FOR MY FIRST JUMP, I LOOK, IT HAS BEEN WRITTEN, LIKE A LOW-BUDGET ASTRONAUT.

The equipment weighs 85 pounds: Leather logging boots. A body suit made of Kevlar, with dual-density reinforcements at every protrusion. A parachute strapped to my back, another at my chest. And a motorcycle helmet with a face mask that looks like a hibachi grill.

I waddle back toward a gaping hole in the fuselage and hook my static line clip to a cable inside the plane. The metal hook with its attached yellow cord will pull my parachute out of the stuff-sack as soon as I bail out. At least that’s what they told us in training. I’m putting a lot of trust in all this equipment that I have never used before to work properly and deliver me to the ground, 1,500 feet below.

I take a calculated step toward the spotter and halve my distance to the open door. The spotter, an experienced jumper in charge of the mission, tells me there is 100 yards of wind drift. I process the information and use it to adjust the elaborate plan for flying my parachute that I have been forming in my head for the last 10 minutes. (Having only had classroom sessions and no practical experience, my plan, I later learn, is virtually useless.)

Before I can wrap myself too thoroughly in my concocted plan, the spotter yells out his next command over the noise, “Get in the door!”

I slap my left foot firmly on the doorsill, two inches of boot over the edge. By this time the spotter’s head is pressed tightly against my knee as he pushes me slightly out
I feel a firm slap to the back of my calf, indicating it’s time to throw the ball of flesh that is me out the door.

SMOKE JUMPING IS A PROFESSION THAT BEGAN AND MATURATED IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST. In the spring of 1939, the U.S. Forest Service contracted with the Eagle Parachute Company to provide silk parachutes and training for 13 Forest Service employees.

In theory, these foresters would learn how to parachute into the heinous tangle of boulders, cliffs, timber, water hazards, and wilderness that characterize the nation’s national forests. Their mission: drop safely into areas that were impossible to reach by vehicle and help extinguish the forest fires that plagued the region each summer. Based in the tiny town of Winthrop, Wash., this crude team tackled the daunting task of proving to themselves and the Forest Service the feasibility of such a precarious occupation. It was the first nonmilitary parachuting operation in history and the first to attempt landings in unimproved terrain. Despite many critics, the adventurous young crew completed 58 injury-free practice jumps that summer and paved the way for what would become known as smoke jumping.

Today smoke jumpers begin their season at the beginning of April and typically work until autumn snows make mountain roads impassible. From early-season work in the dry southwest to June fires in Alaska and hunter-caused fires on the Rocky Mountain crest in October, smoke jumpers are busy chasing fires continuously. Normally working 14-day tours and 16-hour shifts, the grunt labor of peak season fatigues even the most fit and resilient. Using a Pulaski, a tool used to scrape and chop the soil beneath, while most smoke-jumper fires remain small, roughly a fire line into the landscape, and chain saws, which cut down the larger spots become increasingly smaller during training, and only those who consistently make it into the narrow openings earn their jump wings to test rookies and prepare them for actual fire jumps, practice-jump platform. I’m thinking of this comparison as the landing area comes up into the light breeze streaming down the valley. My glide is faster than I anticipated; my feet hitting the earth with a thud. Momentum propels me to my knees and then quickly to my face. It is about as far from the graceful side-roll of a textbook landing as one can achieve. As if adding an exclamation point to my poor performance, next I pile into a big, fresh cow patty. But I had made my first parachute jump and survived. I will never forget the first few seconds after opening, the relief of knowing my parachute would work, coupled with the overwhelming and euphoric sensation of individual flight.

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INTO THE BLUE ATMOSPHERE, I GO THROUGH MY COUNT: jump thousand, two-thousand, three-thousand, check canopy. My parachute is open.

It’s noisy and crowded inside an airplane. People bump into each other constantly, parachutes and gear hang obstructively and, annoyingly, and twin engines whine, rattle, and drone incessantly. But outside, after the crack of the canopy material filling its gigantic, life-saving air pocket, all is silent in my own, personal section of atmosphere. My feet pendulum up as the parachute slows my descent. I hang suspended by 28 strings to a big blue and white piece of nylon. It is one of the most peaceful experiences of my life until I realize I am only a few hundred feet off the ground. From 1,500 feet to 300 feet, the ground doesn’t come at you very fast, so it’s easy to relax and enjoy the ride. From 300 feet on in it looks like the ground is coming at you like an 18-wheeler on the interstate, and you’re trying to land right in the middle of the grill.

In smoke jumper school they told us we’d be traveling about 15 feet per second when we hit the ground. Landing, they said, is a little like strapping a lawn mower to your back and jumping off a 6-foot-high platform. I’m thinking of this comparison as the landing area comes up fast and my serene state turns to mild panic. My training kicks in. I pull the small wooden toggle on my right side down to turn the canopy and face into the light breeze streaming down the valley. My glide is faster than I anticipated; my feet hitting the earth with a thud. Momentum propels me to my knees and then quickly to my face. It is about as far from the graceful side-roll of a textbook landing as one can achieve. As if adding an exclamation point to my poor performance, next I pile into a big, fresh cow patty. But I had made my first parachute jump and survived. I will never forget the first few seconds after opening, the relief of knowing my parachute would work, coupled with the overwhelming and euphoric sensation of individual flight.

The people attracted to smoke jumping are professors, authors, lawyers, ski bums, and world travelers. In the past, smoke jumpers were generally younger males putting themselves through college or working for a few summers to get off the family farm. Today smoke jumping is a career for many or creatively piggybacked with additional pursuits by others. Women make up nearly 10 percent of the workforce.

EACH YEAR THOUSANDS OF APPLICANTS VIE FOR THE FEW SMOKE JUMPING SLOTS THAT BECOME AVAILABLE. Due to extremely low turnover rates, some years as few as 30 positions are available nationwide. Those lucky enough to receive a job are put through a six-week training program similar to a military boot camp. With up to four hours a day of strenuous physical fitness workouts and fast-paced classroom work to learn the intricacies of parachuting, a 40-percent dropout rate is not uncommon. Within two weeks of beginning the program, rookie candidates are jumping from a plane and getting their first experience with steering the parachute. Using two steering lines, smoke jumpers are able to maneuver the canopy from right to left, forward, and even slightly backward. To test rookies and prepare them for actual fire jumps, practice-jump spots become increasingly smaller during training, and only those who consistently make it into the narrow openings earn their jump wings and the right to be called a smoke jumper.

The path that led me to that pile-up next to the cow patty began during my summer breaks from ups. After nine months of exercising my brain in the Business Leadership and Honors programs, preparing, I thought, for a future in corporate America, I decided to sign up for a Forest
Service fire crew to give the other parts of my body some exercise. I stuck with the Forest Service for the next three summers, earning money for tuition and continuing along the business path. But my required BLP internship provided a turning point. As I sat in a Seattle cubicle working at a company I respected in an industry I found interesting and with co-workers I enjoyed, I realized over the course of my three-month internship that I just wasn’t ready for a corporate lifestyle. When the North Cascades Smokejumpers called in the spring of 2004 to offer me one of four positions, I immediately said yes. A few weeks later, as friends and family gathered at the pagoda in Point Defiance on a beautiful Sunday evening for a post-graduation celebration, I quietly grabbed an extra cheeseburger and began the four-and-a-half hour drive to Winthrop and my new life.

At eight the next morning on Winthrop’s impersonal grey tarmac, four serious and scolding trainers provided a severe departure from the joviality I had so recently left. Within a week I would be standing on a five-story platform, attached to a 200-foot zip-line. My rookie trainer, a man with bulging red eyes and stringy dreadlocks, would be screaming in my face, his words barely audible over the putrid coffee and Copenhagen smell that preceded it. My jump suit, both layers of Kevlar and a half-inch foam insert, would be soaked through with sweat. As he would yell, “Get-ready,” I would brace myself to jump off the tower and practice my exit procedure. Two hundred feet later the cable would jerk me to a stop on a dirt mound, and I would sprint the distance back to the top of the tower to begin again. At the end of each day, muscles aching and ego bruised, it was hard not to think of the people left behind back in Tacoma and wonder if I had done the right thing.

Now, four years and nearly 100 jumps later, smoke jumping has become an integral part of who I am. From early April until the snow flies I can end up anywhere in the West, digging fire lines, cutting hazardous trees, setting prescribed fires, and in general working to make our national forests healthier ecosystems. It’s not a job with rewards in paychecks or expense accounts. For smoke jumpers, the benefits are in waking up to high-mountain sunrises, working side-by-side with extremely capable co-workers, exploring seldom-reached nooks of the world, and providing a service that will have ramifications for generations to come.

And, I must admit, now that I’ve learned to steer my parachute a little more effectively, that adrenaline-filled ride into a blazing forest has a mystical allure that few will ever fully understand.

Cameron wrote this for Arches as the summer fire season was winding down. At press time he wasn’t yet sure how he’d spend the winter. Two years ago he was on the ski patrol at Big Sky in Montana, and last year he was a fishing and rafting guide in Patagonia. For sure, he says, he will continue to work on finding outlets for his writing. And he has little doubt that, come spring, he’ll be back in the green pants of a Forest Service smoke jumper.