



Ripcord!

by Hal Streckert



Para Ventures, Inc.

- COMPLETE PARACHUTE OPERATIONS
- ADVENTURE MOTION PICTURE FILMING

F.O. Box 2021
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Phone PO 3-1826

RIPCORD

starring **LARRY PENNELL**
with **KEN CURTIS**

THE
QUICKEST
WAY
TO
HIGH
ADVENTURE
IS
STRAIGHT
DOWN!

The Developers of Para-SCUBA Diving



Turn back the clock for a moment and imagine it's the early 1960s. The television screenwriters of the time are scrambling for something sensational to base their next show on. The genre of the day, aside from westerns, is low-budget action-adventure. The writers use a simple but sure-fire formula, in which some new-fangled technology forms the backdrop for good guys to fight bad guys. The concept worked successfully for scuba diving in "Sea Hunt," twin-engine aircraft in "Sky King," high-speed airboats in "The Everglades" and helicopters in "Whirlybirds." So what's left? Well, there's this daring, new sport of parachuting looking for an outlet ... Voilà! "Ripcord" is born.

The show ran for two full seasons, with a total of 76 episodes airing from 1961 to 1963. Every episode opened with this melodramatic narration: "This is the most danger-packed show on television. Every jump, every aerial maneuver is real, photographed just as it happened, without tricks or illusions. All that stands between a jumper and death is his ripcord." Obviously there were lots of tricks, but it sounded good to the non-jumping public.

The show starred Ken Curtis as Jim Buckley and Larry Pennell as Ted McKeever, skydivers who ran a jump school and parachuting-service company called Ripcord. They would spring into action for crime fighting, rescues of one type or another, customized skydiving lessons and various other cooked-up adventures that could be resolved only by parachuting into the thick of things. Pennell was a ruggedly handsome former baseball player for the Milwaukee Brewers who later became known for his role as Dash Riprock on "The Beverly Hillbillies." Curtis made a career out of playing strong support roles; the most famous was Festus on "Gunsmoke."

In the Beginning

"Ripcord" was the brainchild of parachuting pioneers Dave Burt, C-27, and Jim Hall, C-68. They roughly based the show on their own adventurous lifestyles. Burt started jumping as a paratrooper in the U.S. Air Force in 1945, then became a smoke jumper for the Forestry Service before switching to exhibition jumping and stunt work. Hall, after leaving the Air Force at the end of World War II as a B-29 flight engineer and L-5 pilot, became his partner in Para Ventures, Inc., the first professional parachuting company in the world. Together they jumped into air shows, fairs, rodeos and sporting events.

Opposite page, clockwise from top: Bob Sinclair jumps an experimental camera setup in 1961 for one of the early episodes of "Ripcord." Photo by Milt Platt. Larry Pennell (left) in his role as Ted McKeever and Ken Curtis as Jim Buckley pose for a "Ripcord" publicity still. A ZIV-United Artists photo. Jim Hall (center left) and "Ripcord" actor Ken Curtis (center right) pose at a Hollywood trade show in the early 1960s. Photo courtesy of Jim Hall. A brochure promoting Para Ventures, the parachuting company founded by Dave Burt and Hall. Courtesy of Jim Hall.

Hall combined his day job as a geologist with his passion for jumping to become the world's first parachuting exploration-mining engineer. Before helicopters were ubiquitous, he went to Mexico looking for the long-lost gold mines of the Spanish Conquistadors in Chihuahua, Sinaloa and Durango. He'd scour the Sierra Madre Occidental Mountains and jump into rugged canyons and remote areas to prospect for mineral deposits. One of his jumping buddies was his dog, a pit bull-boxer mix named Ace. Ace's first time out of a plane was a static-line jump from 3,000 feet over Zacatecas complete with a four-point landing and a picture-perfect PLF. Hall wrote a captivating account of those wild days in a recently published book called "Parachuting for Gold in Old Mexico."

In 1958, Burt was contracted to do a high-paying demonstration jump onto the beach in Acapulco, Mexico, with a large Coca Cola® logo emblazoned on the canopy. Just days before the jump, he busted up his femur doing a freebie exhibition jump for a charitable organization. In order to fulfill the contract, Hall substituted since they figured no one would know the difference. Of course, the jump did not go exactly as planned—he plunged into the water next to a noisy yacht full of party-goers. The festivities on the yacht were in full force, and the folks gawked over the railing, pulled him on board and shoved a beer in his hand. As it turned out, it was a going-away party for Marvin Greenberg, a big-shot producer for the film studios in Hollywood.

Greenberg and Hall had an impromptu business meeting where Hall agreed to shoot three stunt jumps and write the original screenplay for a new action-adventure show. Greenberg and Hall sold the idea, along with a contract for the parachuting, to Ivan Tors Films in association with ZIV-United Artists Television. Hall and Burt hand-picked a group of expert jumpers to assist, including Bob Henry; Bud Kiesow, D-55; and Vern Williams, D-54. The original skygod, Bob Sinclair, C-59, rounded out the team and captured the air-to-air action on film during the first season, which he shot in black and white.

Technology Development

Freefall cinematography was in its infancy, and new problems requiring new solutions were an everyday occurrence. A lot of things that seem standard today had to be invented, and Sinclair was the main man behind those innovations. Helmet-mounted cameras, small wingsuits that helped photographers adjust their fall rates, hid-

Below, from left: During a film project for which Para Ventures provided the aerial talent, Jim Rinder (right) and Bob Henry portray an instructor and student. Photo by Bob Sinclair. Jim Hall flies a Coca Cola-logoed canopy. Dave Burt (left) and Hall pose for a photograph before an exhibition jump in Sinaloa, Mexico. Photos courtesy of Jim Hall.





Stunt jumpers perform aerial maneuvers during filming of the second season of "Ripcord." Photo by Lyle Cameron Sr.

den chutes and breakaway clothing, night freefall photography, adjusting the fall rate of an object (such as a box of pretend nitroglycerin) and parachuting in scuba gear were just some of the challenges Sinclair tackled.

For camera work, Sinclair graduated from hand-held cameras to gyro-stabilized cameras. He understood that the most stable part of a jumper is his head and began mounting the camera there rather than holding it in freefall. At first, Sinclair attached the camera to a football helmet. He followed that by using tighter-fitting, custom, fiberglass helmets. He originated, improved and optimized camera mounts and viewfinders to continue to bring skydiving into the living rooms of millions of people.

Much of the work the team performed for "Ripcord" was outside the abilities of the era's sport jumpers. Therefore, the studio execs depended on the few professionals who had the expertise and means to apply and advance the technology of the day in a safe manner. Because it was a rapidly developing field, most jumps and stunts were custom or first-of-a-kind, and Para Ventures had an edge it could exploit. The company could negotiate prices for individual jumps and novel stunts because it was all so new.

Up in the Air

The team shot most of the jump footage at a small airport in Elsinore, California, owned and operated by Cy Perkins. Other in-air filming occurred at a dirt airstrip outside of Thousand Oaks, near Los Angeles (temporary DZ permits were available from Sacramento, California, at that time). The producers liked Thousand Oaks since it was closer to the studios, and the area's rolling hills and seemingly wide-open, mountainous terrain worked well for a lot of the show's plots.

Over the course of the two seasons, the show used a variety of planes including Cessna 172s, 180s and 210s, a Howard DGA-15P and a World War II-era L-13. The Cessna 210 had retractable landing gear, which looked good on film but made clean exits a little tricky. Sinclair was a master rigger, and he and Jim Rinder were in charge of equipment and modifying canopies and harnesses. The parachutes were mostly World War II surplus, such as 28-foot flat circular canopies with B-4 harnesses, from the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions. They jumped them as-is, or they'd modify them by strategically cutting out panels to create what were called "blank-gore" canopies. These modified canopies, which often had many panels removed, provided the jumper additional landing and directional control.

The Show Must Go On

At the end of the first season, not only did the Hollywood bosses switch to filming in color, but there was a changing of the guard in the stunt department. Sky Diving Inc.'s multi-talented Lyle Cameron Sr. came onto the scene with a new contract that included fixed fees for jumping, something very attractive to the producers. In addition to performing stunt jumping and aerial-photography work, Cameron also began playing the role of the pilot in front of the camera. The famous

Bob Buquor tackled much of the air-to-air filming. Later, after Cameron broke his arm falling from a tree, Don Molitar took over some of the photography until the end of the series. Cameron also brought a new crew of stuntmen with him including Darrell Creighton, Howard Curtis, Doyle Fields, Leigh Hunt, Jim Lizzio and Glen White.

The cameramen of the day depended heavily on the alertness of the other skydivers, since other jumpers' late openings could cause the cameramen to open lower than planned. Reportedly this is what happened to Buquor when, after "Ripcord," he drowned in the ocean near Malibu Beach while filming a stunt sequence for the Hollywood movie "Don't Make Waves." Jumper Bill Newell later created the Bob Buquor Memorial Star Crest Awards to honor his contributions to freefall photography and formation skydiving.

A Plot is a Plot is a Plot

The TV viewers of the time demanded adventure stories that were far removed from everyday life, and that's what "Ripcord" delivered. Never mind that the plots sometimes bordered on the absurd—foiling international spy rings, searching for sunken treasure, fighting bad guys, last-minute rescues at night—the parachuting and aerial photography were always top notch.

Henry recalls this anecdote that took place while he was performing stunts for the episode "Escape":

The plot involved a young woman with zero jumps conning the pilot into taking her to altitude. She exits and lands unhurt in a forested area. But an armed and dangerous convict who just escaped prison is hiding and takes her hostage. The character Buckley parachutes in to rescue her. The script then calls for the convict to fire shots at him in midair.

Henry was doubling for Curtis' Buckley character on that jump. After spotting and taking the upper winds into account, Henry left the Cessna at 2,000 feet for a pinpoint landing near the film crew. Under canopy, he threw his head back and flailed his arms around to mimic having a bullet ricochet off his helmet. He had been given instructions to hit the ground with a limp body so that he appeared unconscious. So when he landed, he went down like a sack of potatoes to stay in character. He must have done a good job, because the ground crew thought that he was hurt after coming in too hard and rushed over to help him. Curtis tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Bobby, are you okay?" Henry lifted his head and replied, "Yeah, are you done filming?" While he was still lying on the ground, Curtis offered him a cigarette and said, "Glad you're OK. You sure make me look good."

Henry was also involved in the "Para-Nurse" episode, in which McKeever and a female nurse are the heroes who need to render medical aid to a sick boy in an inaccessible area at night. Henry is an ex-Marine, but he's not a big guy. Since there were no women stunt doubles at the time, when the script called for a woman they padded Henry in the right places and—presto!—the audience saw a woman jumper.

In another episode, "Radar Rescue," the skydivers can't make a rescue jump due to thick clouds. They are desperate to land near a small



Camera flyer Bob Buquor uses an early still-photo setup circa the early 1960s.

plane that crashed on a remote mountainside to assist an injured pilot and his little girl. The bombardier of a B-52 in the same airspace suggests guiding them in by radar from 20,000 feet as if they're bombs. Sitting in the Cessna considering their options, the two main characters banter:

McKeever: "Skydiving by radar. I bet that's never been tried before."

Buckley: "No, because it's suicide."

McKeever: "I'm gonna give it a whirl. You can pass."

Buckley: "That will be the day. I'm jumping with you."

Needless to say, the exit does not go according to plan, but they make adjustments and come to the heroic rescue of the father and daughter. As usual, the good guys win.

Disaster Strikes

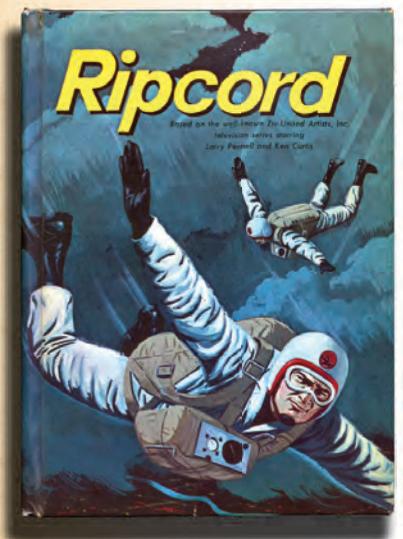
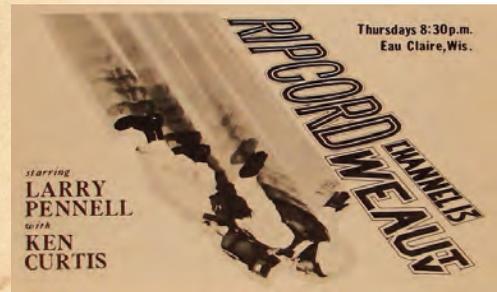
A stunt during a second-season episode had the good guy, stunt-doubled by Cameron, switching from one plane to another in midair to stop the bad guy from escaping. The planes were flying in a tight formation over Somis, California, with a cameraman in a third plane doing the filming. Cameron then rappelled from a Cessna (piloted by Cliff Winters) to an L-13 (piloted by Howard Curtis). Once Cameron eased onto the tail, the L-13 became unstable. The front end of the L-13 pitched up, and the planes collided with a loud bang followed by a buzz-saw sound.

Curtis was able to briefly keep his plane airborne, but it was uncontrollable. In quick succession, both planes turned into worthless hunks of metal and started falling from the sky. Since Cameron was on the outside of the plane and all geared up, he reacted in a fraction of a second, disengaged the rappel line and launched himself clear of the flying wreckage. Curtis was wearing his pilot's emergency parachute and bailed out immediately.

Because the Cessna's cockpit was cramped, Winters was wearing only his quick-attachable chest (QAC) harness, which requires a separate parachute container to be clipped to it in case of emergency. As the plane nose-dived toward the ground, he reached over his shoulder to grab the emergency chute from the back seat. According to some accounts, his dilemma was compounded by the fact that there were two parachutes in the back seat, and one was a movie prop filled with styrofoam! He grabbed the closest one and dove out while still questioning what was in the container. In freefall, he managed to clip the chute to the QAC, wondering what could go wrong next. When he pulled the ripcord, he quickly got an answer. He had fabric over his head, not a lump of styrofoam. All three men landed unharmed, although Winters ended up in a tree. Both planes were trashed. The L-13 crashed in a tomato field and the Cessna in a walnut grove.

The silver lining was that the camera crew in the third plane kept the film rolling, and the crash scene was built into two later episodes. After the crash, the show continued but used more stock parachuting footage than before. Insurance premiums for the planes, pilots and stunt jumpers went up, which had an impact on one important part of the show's success formula: a low budget. Some speculate that the crash may have led to the show's demise. There may have been additional factors, but regardless, the show ended after the second season.

Some of the old TV shows such as "Bonanza," "The Beverly Hillbillies," "The Andy Griffith Show" and "Leave it to Beaver" currently get recycled on Netflix,



Above: Various "Ripcord" promotional material and tie-in merchandise produced in the early 1960s.



TV Land or some of the other oldies channels. Unfortunately, “Ripcord” does not get the same treatment, so the easiest place to catch an episode is on YouTube. Though the show didn’t last long, it did leave a legacy in the world of skydiving.

The '60s

The 1960s were a good time for skydiving, especially in the media. Pioneering jumpers agree that “Ripcord” had a smashing impact on skydiving, even more so than “Point Break” did 30 years later. For

moviegoers, a couple of engaging skydiving movies followed “Ripcord.” The film “The Skydivers” came out in 1963, and the all-time classic “The Gypsy Moths” was released in 1969.

“Ripcord” also inspired a number of products for children. One particularly popular toy consisted of a plastic parachute with a generic, G.I. Joe-type figure attached. Some of the kids who played with this novelty undoubtedly aspired to become real skydivers.

Translated into numbers, USPA’s predecessor, the PCA (Parachute Club of America), saw a nearly 100-percent increase in membership between 1961 and 1963. Therefore, in a very real sense, “Ripcord” may be the ultimate patriarch of the skydiving community, leading to the creation of generations of skydivers.

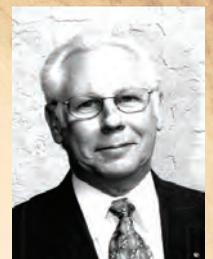
About the Author

Hal Streckert, C-35945, is from La Jolla, California. As a weekend fun jumper he has logged more than 330 jumps and has jumped in four countries—Australia, Germany, New Zealand and the U.S.

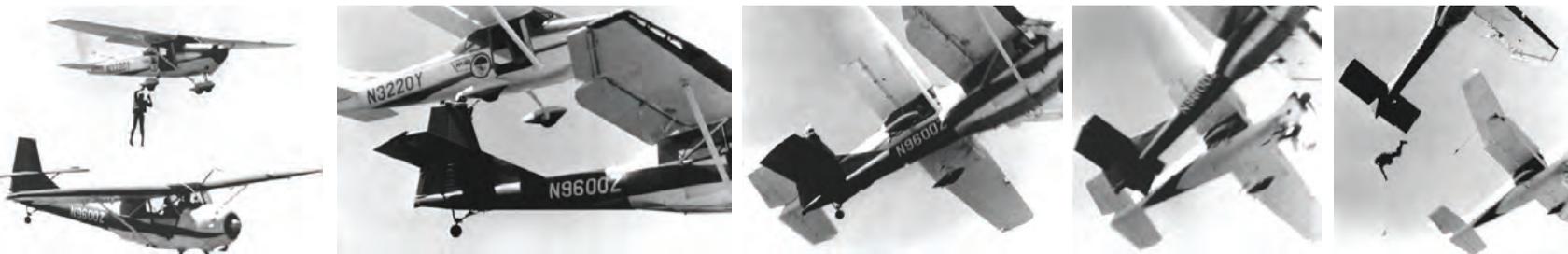


Acknowledgement

“Ripcord” dates back nearly 50 years. Unfortunately, many of the players are difficult to track down or have done their final jump in life. It took input from a lot of people to piece this story together. Jim Hall, retired Brigadier General with the Colorado Air National Guard and co-creator of “Ripcord,” took the time to discuss the series in length and reviewed the final draft to check for accuracy. Lyle Cameron Jr., son of Lyle Cameron Sr.; USPA National Director John DeSantis; Gary Goltz, a collector of “Ripcord” memorabilia; Bob Henry, a stuntman during season one; Bill Newell, the founder of the Bob Buquor Memorial Star Crest Awards; Larry Perkins, the son of Cy Perkins; and Howard White, skydiving historian, contributed to this piece in many ways.



Above: Contemporary photos of Jim Hall (left photo) and Bob Henry.



Above, from left: The “Ripcord” crash sequence, with the final frame showing stuntman Lyle Cameron launching himself from the wreckage. ZIV-United Artists photos.



Above, from left: Lyle Cameron Sr., still in costume, examines the wreckage of the L-13. Lyle Cameron Sr. and a crew member carry gear back from the wreck site. Photos courtesy of Lyle Cameron Jr. Still involved in sport parachuting almost 20 years following “Ripcord,” Lyle Cameron Sr. poses for the camera circa 1981.