

GROUNDED

Cheryl Stearns was on a mission to collect her 20,000th skydive, until things down on earth got complicated

BY MICHAEL GRAFF

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LOGAN CYRUS

On November 12, 2014, a warm Wednesday with one of those storybook Carolina blue skies overhead, the greatest female skydiver in history lay unconscious on a patch of hard blacktop just west of Charlotte. Her head, nose, elbow, and mouth were cut open, her

glasses were smashed, and she was bleeding inside her skull. It was just after 1 p.m. The only witness to the accident told police she couldn't tell who was at fault. No camera crews came to the scene. There was no press conference at the hospital later. But when the police officer returned the skydiver's mangled mountain bike to her house that evening, he made sure to feed her cats.

In the weeks leading up to the accident, I'd been following Cheryl Stearns as she made her final push to an unfathomable record—20,000 career skydives. Only a handful of men before her have reached that number. She was to be the first woman. She was preparing for a skydiving competition in Dubai, scheduled for just after Thanksgiving. The previous weekend, she made 11 practice jumps, each time falling under the cover of a red, white, and blue parachute with "U.S.A." spelled out in the middle.

Her biggest worry that week had been shoes. She was considering switching to a new pair of Nikes. She's an accuracy skydiver, so when she lands, she's scored on how close the heel of her right shoe lands to a nickel-sized dot on a mat. For most people who jump out of a plane, landing safely is the only important thing. For Stearns, who won her first world skydiving championship in 1978 by landing on the exact same spot in a field in Yugoslavia 18 consecutive times, landing even a centimeter to the right or left of that dot is failure. The Nikes were producing mixed results.

Few people on the planet are as precise as Stearns. She spent 15 years in the Army and was the first female member of the elite parachuting team the Golden Knights. She's jumped out of a plane in 35 countries and 32 states. She's won 30 women's national skydiving championships, five world military championships, and two overall world championships. And in November 1995, she jumped 352 times in one day, setting a world record that still stands for jumps in a 24-hour period by a woman.

She once jumped out over New York Harbor and curled around the crown of the Statue of Liberty with smoke streaming out of canisters on her shoes and an American flag tied to her back, landing in front of hundreds of people. Another time, she steered her parachute underneath the St. Louis arch. Another time, she jumped out of a hot-air balloon and into a pool at Sea World.

The numbers and places add up to an amazing life story, but 20,000 could be her most impressive, and defining, number. Most people who skydive do it only once. They pay for video and photos, evidence of their moment of courage for YouTube or an office desk. Stearns, who is now 59, is nearly 20,000 of those moments packed in a 5-foot-6, 128-pound frame and dressed in a red, white, and blue jumpsuit.

She's revered in the aviation community. But at this age, even Stearns knows that she'll come down someday. She may not have a 30,000th jump, or a 25,000th jump. This might be her last big, round number.

She wanted 20,000 to be special. She wanted it to happen in Dubai, and on the winning jump. So she spaced out her training in October and early November. She'd get three or four practice jumps in Dubai, she knew, and then 10 competition jumps. A skydiving accuracy competition is like golf; the lowest score wins. On each landing, a sensor measures the jumper's distance from the target. One centimeter off target equals one point, two centimeters equals two, and so forth. The points are added together after 10 jumps. The best score is zero.

"What I really hope happens is that I get to 20,000 with a dead center to win the meet," Stearns told me the Saturday before the accident.

In order to make that happen, she needed to schedule her training so that her last practice jump onto Carolina soil was number 19,986.



When she jumped into stadiums or festivals, public address announcers called her name over the speakers: "Coming in now is Cheryl Stearns, the first female Golden Knight!" drawing rousing ovations.

SHE AWOKE BRIEFLY ON THE SIDE OF THE ROAD and saw her twisted mountain bike next to her. She saw a car stopped in the street a few dozen yards away. An officer asked for her name and address, and she was able to give them to him, but then she started mumbling and slurring. An ambulance rushed her 11 miles to Carolinas Medical Center in Charlotte.

Medics stopped blood from flowing. At CMC, doctors put eight staples in her head and stitches in her arm and ointment on her face. She refused painkillers. Miraculously, nothing was broken. But she'd suffered what doctors said was a moderate traumatic brain injury.

In her day job, Stearns is an on-call pilot for US Airways. Nineteen days a month, her

shift starts at 9 p.m. and runs until noon the next day. If the airline needs someone to fly, her phone will ring, and she'll pick up her travel bag and drive eight minutes from her home to Charlotte Douglas International Airport. She has more than 21,000 flying hours without incident.

On her off days, she drives to Shelby to fly her private plane, a Cessna, which she uses as a member of the Civil Air Patrol. The day before her accident, she flew a young boy and a photographer around for a few hours before sunset.

In the few moments of her life that she's not flying, she goes on hikes or rides one of her two bikes. That Wednesday, because she was training for the Dubai competition, she hopped on her mountain bike, which gives her a better physical workout. Her standard ride is a 25-mile route that travels through neighborhoods and past a lake and on the trails at the U.S. National Whitewater Center. It should've taken two hours and 15 minutes, exactly.

Later that evening, though, she awoke in the emergency room. Her longtime friend and roommate, Lindy Leach, was there. Stearns told Leach she couldn't remember anything. That night, she caught brief blinks of sleep in between the throbbing headaches. The next morning, she tried to call home to tell Lindy she was being moved out of intensive care, but she couldn't remember her home number.

She did, though, remember her mother's number. Stearns had moved her mom from Arizona to Aldersgate retirement community in Charlotte in 2011 so that she could watch over her. Stearns braced for the call in between headaches.

JOAN STEARNS WAS ALWAYS the most vocal opponent of her daughter's skydiving.

Growing up in Arizona, Cheryl started babysitting when she was 13. Her father, who designed and sold hearing aids for a living, was so tight with money that he wouldn't loan his daughter a nickel for a Dilly Bar at Dairy Queen. Thriftiness being hereditary, young Cheryl saved every penny of her 25 cents-an-hour wage for the next four years.

"What are you saving all that money for?" her father would ask with a laugh.

"I'm not sure yet," Cheryl responded.

In the summer of 1972, Stearns told her

parents she wanted to skydive. She was 17 years old and needed one of them to sign a permission slip. Her father was a hard no. Her mom tried to dodge the question: In July, she told Cheryl it was too hot to jump out of planes; in October, she said it was too cold.

Joan had good reason to object. Sport parachuting didn't start in the United States until the late 1950s, and the first two decades were marred by fatalities.

In 1966, an 11-year-old boy named Danny Rutledge convinced his father, Carl, to let him jump in Virginia. Back then, first-time skydivers were required to make several static-line jumps before they were cleared for freefall. In static-line jumps, a cord automatically opens the diver's parachute just seconds after he leaves the plane. Danny Rutledge had made eight of these by the time he was 11, and on that November day, he begged his dad to let him make his first freefall jump. Carl eventually said yes.

Danny quickly reached 120 miles per hour, falling at 1,000 feet every six seconds. He panicked. He never pulled his ripcord, leaving Carl standing in a field watching his son die.

Stearns's mother told story after story about skydiving tragedies. "What does that have to do with me?" Cheryl would respond. That fall, her mom relented. She gave Cheryl \$40 for one jump. And on November 19, 1972, the woman who'd become the greatest female parachutist in history took a signed permission slip to a drop zone in Casa Grande, Arizona, stepped into a C-180, and with a static line tied to her back, she made her first skydive.

She hated it. The static line didn't give her the full experience, she thought. She wanted more. Knowing her mom certainly wasn't going to pay for another, Stearns tapped into her \$600 in babysitting savings. She quickly made five more jumps before being cleared for her first freefall. Two days before Christmas that year, she jumped from 4,200 feet without a static line and landed safely.

STEARNS DIALED HER MOM'S number from the hospital. It was hardly the first time she'd had to call about a bad fall, but curiously, the only injuries she's suffered from skydiving have been minor.

Activities on the ground have proven to be far more dangerous. In 2003, for instance,



When Stearns retires, she plans to move to New Mexico, where she will have an airstrip near her backyard, allowing her to fly her private Cessna wherever she wants. She plans and documents everything she does, and she still has her first parachuting logbook (below), which tells the story of her first skydive in Arizona.



she was riding her bike down a hill near Fort Bragg when an eight-year-old boy backed his bike out of his driveway and pulled into her path. She hit his back tire and flipped over the handlebars, breaking her shoulder. It took six months to recover from that, and friends laughed when they told her she was safer in the sky than down here.

After a couple of rings, a nurse, not Stearns's mom, answered the phone. "Cheryl, your mother's just fallen," the nurse told her. "It just happened."

Stearns listened as the nurse told her that her 86-year-old mother fell asleep while sitting in her chair that morning, tilted forward, and landed on her head. She was being rushed to Carolinas Medical Center. After spending a day in the emergency room, Joan Stearns moved to a room on the seventh floor—just two floors below her daughter.

Hospital protocol prevented Cheryl from moving between floors until she was discharged. So Leach brought in two iPads for them. The Stearns women talked to each other in a video chat, one 86 and one 59, mother and daughter, in the same hospital on the same day.

Joan asked Cheryl what happened out there on that asphalt. Cheryl still couldn't remember anything, except the sound.

"It wasn't like the sound of metal," she said. "It was more of a *whoomph*."

EVERY NOW AND THEN, IF WE'RE LUCKY, we come across a force in life—a person, a job, a moment—that changes the course of everything. Skydiving walloped Cheryl Stearns.

To a skydiver, freefall is peace. The 120-mile-per-hour winds notwithstanding, up there is one of the only truly quiet places humans can go anymore. It's a place to be physically and mentally detached from the man-made crust on the earth's surface, a place where a person can do nothing but focus exclusively on surviving, and on the distance between life and death. It's altogether freeing.

Stearns has always been averse to noise. When someone beeps a horn, she cringes. When a visitor knocks on her door, she races to pet her dog to quiet her bark. When she first moved to Raeford, near Fort Bragg, in the 1970s, she jumped whenever she heard the sound of gunfire from the Army post. And on her bike rides, she can't listen to music on earbuds.

If you add together all of her skydives, Stearns has been in that quiet state of freefall for five days, 13 hours, and 35 minutes of her life. That comes out to about 20 seconds per jump, which might seem modest to present-day skydivers, most of whom don't make low-altitude attempts. She's recorded every one in 125 parachuting logbooks, which she keeps piled in a plastic bin in her attic. "Numbers have been inflated over the last decade, [but] not so for old-school jumpers like Cheryl," says Jim Hayhurst, director of competition for the U.S. Parachute Association. "Her numbers are true blue." To read the logbooks takes weeks. Each line represents something that would be, by itself, the experience of a lifetime for most people.

The early pages are crowded with dangerous encounters. After her 38th jump, she was standing on the ground while a pilot buzzed the field. He swooped too low, clipped a telephone pole, and flipped over. While the 17-year-old Stearns ran to escape the flying splinters and falling hot wires, the plane pancaked on the ground, cockpit down, killing the pilot. A dozen jumps later, she watched two experienced skydivers collide in freefall, knocking each other unconscious. They never opened their chutes.

On jump 56, May 6, 1973, she had her first malfunction. Her main parachute didn't open. She "cut away," or released the faulty main. Back then, the reserve chute was on a diver's belly. She should've flipped over with her back facing the ground before pulling, but fear can disable reason, and she forgot. The reserve fired straight between her legs. Only luck kept the lines from ripping her foot off or tangling with each other. When the chute opened, it yanked her into a forward somersault in the sky, and she landed safely.

When she had her second malfunction a few months later on jump 166, she was determined to deploy her reserve the correct way. She flipped over, secured the ripcord, and tossed it. But she'd taken too long. The chute snatched her by the stomach, and her back arched violently. By the time she turned around to look for the ground, she was only 300 feet up. If she'd waited two seconds longer, she'd have been dead.

After she landed, Stearns sat on the ground, sobbing. Later that day, she made her 167th jump.

"If I didn't get back up that day," she says now, "I knew I never would."

THE MOUNTAIN LION didn't notice her, but she noticed the mountain lion.

Stearns's father loved to take his kids on hikes in the mountains of Arizona. It rarely rains there, so they'd leave their tent at home in favor of sleeping bags under the stars. When Cheryl was 11, the two of them hiked to Mazatzal Peak, 7,900 feet above sea level. One night, Stearns was in her bag when she felt an animal climb on top of her. Skunk. She didn't move for hours, waiting for it to leave.

She is a rare mix, a person who needs to be in control and fears danger, then confronts those two things in extreme ways.



The next year, they went back. This time, after they bedded down, they heard rustling nearby. Stearns's father recognized the animal first. He turned toward his daughter and whispered, "Cheryl, don't say anything." A mountain lion stood about 30 feet away on a ridge. Again, Stearns stayed completely still for hours until the mountain lion trotted off.

She is a rare mix, a person who needs to be in control and fears danger, then confronts those two things in extreme ways. Her life has been shaped by discipline. She exercises every day. She doesn't smoke. And if she drinks, she limits herself to two glasses of wine a week. Skydivers have a tongue-in-cheek rule that whenever you have a "first"—first jump, first malfunction, first water jump—it's your turn to buy beer for the group. Stearns always bought Diet Cokes. Straitlaced and focused, she is an anomaly in her sport, a skydiver who insists she's not a daredevil.

"I don't like pain. I don't like adrenaline," she said. "I like a little, I guess, but not so much where I have to poop my pants."

She became a pilot because riding in an airplane scared her—and because her dad paid for it. She was in church one day in 1973 when her father told her he wanted to take her to a late breakfast afterward. At the restaurant, he asked if she'd ever thought about flying. "Of course," she told him, "but I can't afford it." Her dad offered to pay \$1,000 for flying lessons. "This was a man who wouldn't give me a nickel for a Dilly Bar," she says. "I couldn't believe it."

She wore big, Coke-bottle glasses then, and in her male-dominated flying school they called her Ding-A-Ling, but it didn't matter. When she learned to fly, she stayed there.

In 1975, she sent a letter to Gene Thacker, an expert skydiver and coach, asking if she could train with him in Raeford. "I have 450 jumps and 450 flying hours [as a pilot], but I don't have any money," she wrote. "Can I come? And can I bring my golden retriever?"

Thacker agreed to train her if she worked at the drop zone. Stearns piloted the plane for about six hours a day in exchange for six skydives a day, \$20 a month, free hamburgers from Thacker's wife's grill, and sleeping accommodations. Stearns slept in the hangar for a year.

She made 1,511 jumps as a civilian before joining the Army in 1977. She soon became

the most sought-after member of the Golden Knights, and arguably one of the greatest recruiters in Army history. When she jumped into stadiums or festivals, public address announcers called her name over the speakers: "Coming in now is Cheryl Stearns, the first female Golden Knight!" drawing rousing ovations. But being the only woman presented some problems. For instance, at military meets, the male skydivers could sleep on cots in the same hangar. But Stearns had to sleep in a separate facility, and often that meant a military hospital. Also, the Golden Knights traveled with matching suits, supplied by the Army, for receptions.

"I remember them saying, 'We've got to buy different clothes for Cheryl,'" says retired Colonel Guy Jones, the former commanding officer of the Golden Knights. "We had to contact one of the local department stores to tell them that Cheryl was going to come down for a gray suit and slacks."

Even as she became famous—she did the Statue of Liberty jump, a few Fiesta Bowls, the opening ceremonies at the 1980 Olympic Games in Lake Placid—she was careful.

In January 1980, she called off a jump into the Super Bowl in Miami because the winds were too high. She never jumps through clouds. The most dangerous thing she's ever willingly done occurred in 1993, when she went to West Virginia for one of parachuting's most celebrated events—Bridge Day. Hundreds of jumpers travel there each year to leap off the 876-foot high bridge over the New River. The night before, a friend talked her into meeting at a coal mine on private property for a "practice jump" off a 200-foot-high bridge. "I was scared to death," she wrote in her logbook. The next day she made the leap off the New River Gorge Bridge and landed in the water. "Fun," she wrote, and then she swore off Bridge Day.

Her parents grew to accept her trade. About eight years after that day in the church pew, Stearns's dad told her why he gave her the money for her pilot's license.

"I was hoping you'd like that so much it would change your mind about skydiving," he said. "But look at you now. You're doing both."

Stearns's father died in 1998. In his will, he wrote that he wanted Cheryl and her siblings to take his ashes to Mazatzal Peak, "where we slept with a mountain lion and a skunk."

She hiked with her brothers and sisters as far as they could go in a day. She pointed over to the ridge where they'd set up camp decades earlier. And then they each took a scoop of his ashes and tossed them. As the ashes landed in the mountain dirt, out of nowhere, a flock of blackbirds filled the sky.

An upstairs room in Stearns's home near the airport contains hundreds of medals, plaques, and pictures from her 42-year career. She also has a map that marks every place she's jumped, covering 35 countries and 32 states.





Stearns starts as a dot in the sky when she jumps at 3,000 feet (left), and as she approaches the ground, she reads the winds and her parachute to land on a small target.

RETIRED AIR FORCE MAJOR AMY MARKERT didn't know what to say when she met Stearns for the first time. It was 1980, and Markert was at her first U.S. Parachuting Nationals in Oklahoma. All week, she'd seen Stearns walking around the facility, but Markert avoided eye contact. "She was my idol," Markert says now.

One afternoon, Stearns asked Markert if she wanted to join her on a run. They've been close ever since. Stearns has made friends all over the world. In 1995, many of them came to Raeford to mark two milestones on the same day—her 10,000th skydive, and her 40th birthday. After they jumped from 15,000 feet, they lined up to shove 40 whipped cream pies in her face.

Six months later, on November 8, 1995, they returned. Stearns wanted to set a new world record for parachute jumps in 24 hours. They set up tables for hot chocolate and coffee. They arranged a rotation of 10 people to help pack her parachutes, one after the other, so that she could land, grab one, and get back into the sky.

She made six practice jumps that afternoon, before starting the clock. She logged every jump over the next 24 hours in her books, writing down the exact second of landing. The first occurred at 5:28.55 p.m. on November 8, and she stuck No. 352 at 5:25.18 on November 9. The longest stretch between landings was nine minutes and 22 seconds, and that was for what's simply recorded in her books as a "bathroom break." The shortest break between landings was two minutes and 54 seconds. The rest mostly ranged from three to four minutes.

By the last hour, to help her conserve energy, her friends were catching her just after she landed, scooping her up by the legs, and carrying her to the plane. She outlasted most of her help.

"I could not believe how she kept going and going and going," Markert remembers.

When it was over, she'd covered 704,000 feet of sky and had spent 29 minutes and 33 seconds of her 24 hours in freefall. She also added another degree of difficulty: She'd secured a new world record with 188 dead center landings in 24 hours.

A few years later, she chased another impossible record. She wanted to jump from 130,000 feet and set the new mark for highest skydive. The previous record had been held for 40 years by Joe Kittinger, whose jump from 102,800 feet in 1960 is still considered one of the top moments in aviation history. Stearns called the campaign StratoQuest, and several national magazines profiled her. But to jump from such an altitude required millions of dollars in research and equipment, including a pressurized suit to protect her blood from boiling in the intense air of the stratosphere. Although Stearns's personality makes her beloved among her friends, she struggles as a self-promoter. She spent thousands of dollars of her own money on StratoQuest but had trouble convincing national sponsors to invest. Kittinger didn't offer support for her mission—or for two other aspiring high-skydivers at the time—and Stearns wasn't able to raise the money.

When it was over, she'd covered 704,000 feet of sky and had spent 29 minutes and 33 seconds of her 24 hours in freefall.

On October 14, 2012, Stearns was at the Wings and Waves Air Show in Daytona Beach. She'd made several exhibition jumps for the crowds that weekend and had just returned her rental car when she saw people circling a television. Felix Baumgartner, backed by Red Bull, was in a balloon and climbing to 128,000 feet. The camera showed Kittinger, too; he was Baumgartner's primary radio contact during ascent. And as the world cheered Baumgartner's landing in a desert in New Mexico, Stearns dropped her head and quietly walked away from the television.

"It just tore my heart out," she says. "It was everything I'd ever dreamed of."

JUST BEFORE 1 P.M. on that blue-skyed Wednesday last fall, Stearns strapped on her Camelbak water pack, rolled her mountain bike out of the garage, and went off down a route she knows by heart. She was thinking about Dubai. She was thinking about how she'd ended her last practice jumps that Sunday. She was thinking about those Nikes. Twenty-five miles. Two hours and fifteen minutes. Around the whitewater center. Around the lake. Then back through a new neighborhood called the Vineyards.

"I like to ride where it's quiet," she says.

At the heart of the Vineyards is a traffic circle. If she doesn't see a car coming toward the circle on the left, she'll cut across. If she does see one, she'll stay right and go around the circle. She remembers almost cutting over this time. But at the last moment a red car came into view on the left, so she went around.

Spinning off the circle, she pedaled up the hill on Amos Hill Road, then over a bridge that crosses railroad tracks, and toward an intersection with Old Dowd Road, a fairly

busy two-lane road in western Mecklenburg County. As she approached the intersection, the bike lane ran out. Stearns hugged the right shoulder. She doesn't remember looking back. A police report lists various accounts of what happened next. A witness says Stearns was on the white line, but in the lane. Stearns believes she was over far enough. The driver of a 2010 Nissan, an 83-year-old named Mary who did not return phone calls for this story, says in the report that Stearns swerved into her lane. Mary also says that Stearns was wearing headphones. The report, which includes charges against Mary for failing to reduce speed, says that only the Camelbak and bike were at the scene, and that there were no headphones.

Mary's right-side mirror struck Stearns in the left side of her back at 30 miles per hour. Stearns doesn't know when she was knocked out, but she was, and more than the broken glasses or a cut lip or pending court cases, that's the damning part of all this.

Her head, doctors tell her, can't handle abrupt changes in altitude.

The most accomplished skydiver in the world is grounded.

Sitting in a chair in her home a week after the accident, Stearns broke in conversation several times, wincing while explaining what happened. She couldn't bend over because blood rushed to her head.

"Even sneezing hurts," she said.

Federal Aviation Administration guidelines dictate that a pilot who has a concussion can't fly for at least six months and must go back through a flying school before returning to the cockpit. Stearns's concussion was so severe, she's already been ruled out for a year. She also can't pilot her private plane.

A neurologist initially told Stearns it

would be six to eight weeks before she can even ride in an airplane again, let alone jump out. In the best-case scenario, they told her the earliest she could skydive again would be April.

Even Stearns, who's built a career around possibilities and optimism, couldn't prevent a thought from creeping into her head, if only momentarily.

"I guess there's a chance it's forever," she told me in December. "I can't have that, though. I don't know what I'd do if I can't go up."

One thing is certain: Stearns says she's never riding a bike on the road again. The 2003 bike accident in Raeford left her without use of her left arm for six months. This time, the brain injury has her grounded for at least that long. That's a year of life for someone who keeps track of every minute. She plans to install a bike rack on her car, and she'll ride only on trails or on her stationary bike upstairs.

"I've told her to stay off that damn bike so many times," says Guy Jones, her former boss with the Golden Knights. "You're safer in the sky."

A PARACHUTE IS ATTACHED TO ITS PACK by 16 nylon lines. The Saturday before the accident, Stearns was on the ground at Skydive Carolina, a drop zone in South Carolina, separating the lines, grouping them, and checking for tangles before going up again. She'd just completed jump 19,777, a dead center. "That jump was absolutely picture perfect," she said. "Now all I need is 10 of those in Dubai, and no one will touch me."

As she waited to board the plane for her next jump, she saw two young women in line. Their faces were sick with worry. First-timers, Stearns thought. They climbed into the plane first, and she climbed in last. As the plane rose into the sky, Stearns looked at the two women and saw their tandem instructors pointing at her. She couldn't hear the conversation, but she read one of the young women's lips when she mouthed, "Wow." Stearns smiled and waved.

At 3,000 feet, the door opened. Stearns stood up for jump 19,978 and gave them a thumbs-up: "Have a nice jump," she shouted over the engine's noise. Then she was gone. About 15 minutes later, when the women landed safely, they proudly held certificates that marked their accomplishment for their family members to see. When Stearns walked past, the women whispered something to their families, and several people in the group turned and mouthed, "Wow."

We're not meant to fly. Ultimately, the only thing we can do when we're in the sky is fall. And maybe scream. Whether you believe God made us this way or natural evolution limited us in this way, when we plunge out of a plane or over the edge of a bridge, we're little more than magnets with toes and fingers, shooting toward the earth's hot, iron core.

"It's not natural to fall out of an airplane," Stearns says. "When we're kids and we're with our mother, the last thing we want is to be dropped. But anybody who has done it has learned something about themselves."

Stearns has never married, though she's been asked three times, she says. Her house is decorated with pictures and knickknacks of eagles, her favorite creature on the planet beside her cats and dog, a Sheltie named Sienna. After she won the world championship



As she prepared for a meet in Dubai, Stearns practiced her heel placement and tested out new Nikes. Nearly half of her jumps throughout her career have resulted in dead center landings.



in China in 1994, she bought a silk-woven picture of two eagles approaching a branch, talons curled. It hangs over her fireplace.

"I'm an eagle person," she says. "It means speed, freedom, all that stuff."

There were 3.2 million skydives throughout the United States in 2013, and 24 of those resulted in someone dying. That's one death for every 133,000 attempts, making it safer than most other physical activities. To put it in perspective, if you send a text message while driving, you're about 130 times more likely to die than you would be if you jumped out of an airplane with a parachute strapped to your back. And about 700 people die in the U.S. every year while riding a bike, about 30 times more than skydiving fatalities.

The things we fear the most aren't often the things that wind up hurting us.

Doctors initially told Stearns her mother would be fine after leaving the hospital. She was transferred to a rehabilitation center around Thanksgiving.

That week, many of the world's best skydivers met in Dubai. Stearns wasn't there, but on the meet's website, a preview of the event remained: "Former world accuracy champion Cheryl Stearns is always a favorite to take a podium spot in the female competition."

A week later, her mother's condition turned. She struggled to put sentences together. Doctors discovered a herniated disc. She had trouble breathing. Stearns went to the rehab facility daily, and she grew frustrated with the staff there. She criticized doctors for not giving her answers. Just before Christmas, they told

There was no wind that day, but with the new shoes, she struggled to land on the tiny target. Each time, her heel touched a centimeter or two to the right or left.

her that her mother had pneumonia. But it wound up being congestive heart failure. In the months I'd been working with Stearns on this story, I'd never seen her angry. But in late December, her voice pitched when she told me she thought her mother had been mistreated.

Just before the new year, Stearns's mom asked her to stop fighting, to let go. The daughter said she couldn't do that, but eventually, she relented. And on New Year's Eve, Joan Stearns went into hospice care. She died four days later.

ON THE MORNING OF HER LAST

skydive, the Sunday before the accident, Stearns's phone rang around 5 a.m. She'd been pinged to pilot the 6:30 a.m. US Airways flight from Charlotte to Philadelphia. She picked up her bag and drove eight minutes from her home to the airport and went north. She didn't know how long she'd have to stay, but by a stroke of luck, the 8:20 a.m. flight back to Charlotte needed a pilot, too.

She made it home a little after 10 and packed up her car with her skydiving gear.

There was no wind that day, but with the new shoes, she struggled to land on the tiny target. Each time, her heel touched a centimeter or two to the right or left. In competition, a centimeter equals a point. Skydivers often call them pennies.

"Son of a bitch," she shouted after a two-point landing on jump 19,983.

"Man, I haven't gotten a dead center yet today," she said while recording 19,984.

"One penny," she shook her head while writing down 19,985.

As the sun began to fade, she made an announcement before going up one more time, for jump 19,986. Photographer Logan Cyrus and I were the only ones there to hear it.

"Alright, the Russian and I are tied," she said in her best television commentator's voice. "If I get a dead center, I win."

Just then, the pilot fired the engines on the Beechcraft King aircraft named the "Palmetto Belle." The propellers thumped. Stearns, as always, was the last one in.

At 3,000 feet, she jumped and did a backflip in the air for fun. Then she thrust her pelvis out toward the ground, giving her the pose that, under any circumstance, will take

a flailing, falling human and put her face down toward the earth. She fell for a few more seconds and pulled the pilot chute, which pulled the main parachute.

To the west, the sun was down, its orange glow still flowing across the top of the trees. To the east, the trees were crowned by shades of pinks and purples. And in the lonely, dimming sky between the two horizons, Stearns's parachute opened.

"U.S.A."

She fell toward the ground slowly under the chute, pulling two toggles to steer in the breezeless air. She spun and stole a glance to the north, seeing Charlotte's skyline about 40 miles away. Everything was as it should be. At 400 feet, she turned for home. At 200 feet, she was right on line. She had been doing this for 42 years, over and over nearly 20,000 times since her mother told her it would surely be the thing that killed her—and not once had Cheryl Stearns given any thought to the idea that her next jump might be her last.

She smiled as she came down. She didn't have to reach her foot toward the target. She was right on line. Her heel dug into the sensor. The landing for jump 19,986 was perfect. The electronic scoreboard beeped and showed her score. She pulled herself up from the mat to look.

"Ah," she said, "that'd better be a zero." 📺

Michael Graff is the executive editor of this magazine. He can be reached at michael.graff@charlottemagazine.com, or on Twitter: @michaelgraff.