

Florida mayors skydive to support military

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PETER ANDREW BOSCH / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

The Golden Knights, the U.S. Army Parachute Team, parachute to the ground at the Homestead Air Force Base. The team performed before thirteen South Florida mayors made the 12,000-foot jump.

His ears popped, cold air wrapped around him and loud engines roared, as North Miami Mayor Andre Pierre waddled to the edge of the open door of the military plane.

Looking 13,500 feet below, he squeezed his eyes shut -- and jumped.

Pierre was one of 14 mayors -- most from South Florida -- prepared to make a tandem skydive in Homestead Saturday with the U.S. Army's parachute team, the Golden Knights. They

volunteered to help drum up support for the military.

The Golden Knights travel the world demonstrating their skills at sporting events and air shows, competing and speaking to the public as ambassadors of the Army.

"I didn't realize what I was doing until I was actually jumping," Pierre said after his feet were back on the ground. "I opened my eyes and I was like, 'Wow.'"

An approaching cold front with winds gusting above 20 mph grounded most of the expeditions, but three mayors made the plunge from the C-31 Troopship Fokker before the remaining jumps had to be called off.

Before the wind set in, most of the mayors -- from Miami-Dade, Broward, Palm Beach, Orange and Lake counties -- boarded the military plane at Homestead Air Reserve Base and took off toward the coast around 10 a.m.

A tandem instructor told them where to find doggy bags -- just in case. Coral Gables Mayor Don Slesnick, a Vietnam veteran, helped organize the mayors'

jump, turning down an offer by the Knights to jump solo. Instead, he brought the idea to the Florida League of Mayors, of which he is president.

Rolling his eyes, Slesnick admitted he sent out the invitation hoping no one would respond. "There must be a lot of mayors who need more excitement in their lives," he joked.

Slesnick wasn't able to jump due to the weather, but Hallandale Beach Mayor Joy Cooper did. She gave the Knights' cameraman a rock-'n'-roll sign before taking the plunge.

"That was so awesome!" she said after landing.

Back on the ground, the mayors signed a symbolic document pledging support for the military.

"It's an easy way to recognize what the military does," said Hollywood Mayor Peter Bober, who said the city recognizes service members with applause at the beginning of commission meetings.

Pierre said he is considering sponsoring a recruitment drive, and Homestead Mayor Steven Bateman said his city plans on giving children of military families priority in enrollment at a newly planned charter school. Deerfield Beach Mayor Peggy Noland presented the tandem team with a proclamation declaring Saturday as Golden Knight Day.

"The mayors are leaders," said Golden Knight Joe Abeln.

"By showing the mayors what the army is about, they show the community."

Other South Florida mayors who participated were Margaret Noland, Deerfield Beach; Manuel Maroño, Sweetwater; John Workman, Palm Beach Shores; Beth Talabisco, Tamarac; Roger Wishner, Sunrise; Joy Cooper, Hallandale Beach; Myron Rosner, North Miami Beach.

The others will get a second chance to jump next week.