

## History of Free Flight

Originally co-founded in 1976, Gary Douris and Jim Handbury, two aero sport enthusiasts, had visions of making skydiving and hang gliding safer for sport enthusiasts like themselves.

Gary was well known in the aviation industry for his experience and skill not only as a pilot with multi type ratings and ATP, but as well as a skydiver, master parachute rigger, and an FAA Examiner for parachute riggers.

Jim was well-known for his innovation in products designed for skydiving. One of his first was a light-weight sport harness and container back pack system. He also designed various shapes of parachutes, one of them being his diamond-shaped parachute, named the "*Para-dactyl*".

Considerable pioneering was being accomplished in the 1970's for the sports of parachuting, hang gliding, and sail planes. Lake Elsinore was a prime location for these sports because of the reliable sunny weather. And, this is where Gary and Jim started **Free Flight Enterprises, Inc. ("FFE")**.

It was in 1976 that Jim and Gary were approached by a fellow skydiver and hang glider pilot to design a recovery parachute system for hang gliding. The challenge was accepted and the first emergency parachute was developed for an aircraft. The hang gliding pilot in an emergency situation was able to throw the packed parachute into the air, and this became known as a Hand Deployed Parachute System, which is the standard of today.

During the 1980's the ultralight aircraft became very popular and there was a high demand for an emergency parachute system for these aircrafts. A parachute system other than the hand deployment was needed. These aircraft required a parachute with a ballistic charge to deploy the parachute. FFE was contracted by BRS to manufacture these parachutes.

As larger aircraft called for larger parachutes, FFE manufactured the BRS GARD Parachute, General Aviation Recovery Device, for aircraft such as the Cessna. This system called for a powerful ballistic rocket to extract the parachute for deployment. Much testing and aircraft modifications were required, and FFE not only took part, but Gary was first to do the inflight test!

Free Flight Enterprises was involved in the fabrication, rigging and flight-testing of the first parachute for a whole airplane. In current production by FFE is the Cirrus Aircraft parachute, CAPS™, for their SR22 airplane. The parachute system protects the occupants in the event of an emergency by lowering the aircraft to the ground.

As of 2014, Free Flight holds seven (7) FAA TSO approvals to fabricate and build emergency parachutes, both Round and Square-type. In addition to owning parachute designs, Free Flight has partnered with several other aero companies to manufacture parachute and emergency back pack systems, as well as numerous Hollywood production jobs.

"Gary was a true friend, great business owner, and true visionary" he never sought recognition for his pioneering and accomplishments. He was a man of purpose and true integrity. He earned both the Silver Star and Bronze Star for bravery in Vietnam and was a true hero to the sport of skydiving.

The company is currently co-owned by brothers, Ernie and Abraham Villanueva, who worked under Gary and Jim from the company's early years. They credit Gary and Jim for all these accomplishments.

FFE parachutes have saved hundreds lives. Today, aircraft pilots and personnel use the FFE line of Preserve™ parachutes as their canopy of choice for an emergency parachute system. Pilots who use them and riggers that pack them know our parachute worldwide.

## Abraham Villanueva

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**From:** Louanne <ldouris65@yahoo.com>  
**Sent:** Wednesday, June 10, 2015 2:04 PM  
**To:** Ernie; Abe Villanueva; Pam  
**Subject:** Gary - A Bit of History

NOTE: After Memorial Day, my niece Carlee and I had an exchange of emails about the true meaning of Memorial Day, the fact that I had spent part of the day at the Oregon Vietnam Veterans Memorial, etc. After commenting on how lucky we are that Gary's name is not on that memorial, I mentioned that it had taken 40 years for me to learn about the most important of the medals Gary had been awarded during the Vietnam war. Carlee asked who had Gary's medals. This is my rather long response. I hope it will provide a bit of insight into who Gary was.

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Who has Gary's medals? Therein lies a rather complicated story, so pull up a chair and get comfortable.

Let's start at the beginning, with a list of his medals/citations -

- two Purple Hearts
- Bronze Star with V for Valor
- Silver Star

Gary wasn't the "traditional" combat Marine - he went to Vietnam as a photographer to document the conflict, and, as I understand it, worked with a number of platoons, units, etc., in the field. He was not based in Saigon. During the last year of his life, he wore a Third Marine Division ball cap, so I assume that was of special significance - perhaps he worked with more than one unit within that Division.

I know about only one of the Purple Hearts, and only because of an experience he had while filming a TV series in the early 1980s. He was a "stunt double" for one of the stars, doing a complicated and rather dangerous jump, which went well - until he landed awkwardly on a rock, injuring his lower back. He was medivaced on one of the filming helicopters, and from the hospital told me he had flashbacks to when he was medivaced by helicopter after being wounded in Vietnam fifteen years earlier. To which I replied "What?!" So he told me the story of one of the Purple Hearts; I do not know about the second. (By the way, I have the rock he landed on in my China cabinet.)

The Purple Heart -

While on patrol, a chunk of shrapnel went up inside the back of his helmet. While the actual wound was apparently not especially serious, he was knocked out and landed face down in a flooded rice paddy. If one of his comrades had not rolled him over/pulled him out, he would have drowned.

The Bronze Star with V for Valor... As I understand it, receiving a Bronze Star was not uncommon, but one had to have done something even a bit more special to receive it "...with V for Valor." Gary would not tell me the story behind this medal, as he felt it had somehow been exaggerated in the telling/citation, and that he had not really done anything to deserve it.

The Silver Star -

During some sort of patrol (not sure of size of group, whether squad, platoon, etc.), Gary ended up being "the last man standing." The survivors had taken shelter in the jungle around a clearing - where two Marines were down and unable to get out on their own. The corporal (wounded) leading the patrol looked at Gary and basically said - "it's up to you" - Gary says when he rather plaintively said "I'm a photographer," the corporal replied "You are a Marine!" So Gary put down his camera equipment, picked up a rifle from a Marine who would never again need it, and, while the corporal and at least one other wounded Marine provided covering fire, went into that clearing twice, bringing out one living and one deceased Marine.

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So, where are the medals? Another interesting story -

During a patrol of some sort, a Chinese hand grenade landed in the middle of the group of Marines. These grenades apparently were a bit unreliable, and one never knew if they would actually explode. A Lance Corporal threw himself on the grenade, it did explode, and he was killed.

That heroic act should have been recognized with a Medal of Honor. Gary found out this young man had only been nominated for/awarded a Silver Star. You see, the Lance Corporal was black, and the nominating Lieutenant was white - and from Mississippi. And this was in 1967...

Gary, and at least a couple of other Marines whose lives had been saved by this heroic young man, were so angry when they learned of the slight they bundled up all of their own citations/medals and sent them to the USMC Commandant with a strongly worded letter of protest.

Apparently as a consequence of this action, Gary's name does not appear in the official USMC list of Marines who have been awarded the Silver Star.

He only reluctantly told me all of this after he started wearing that Third Marine Division cap with the small ribbons/bars (of the sort normally worn on a uniform) indicating tours in Vietnam, rank, the medals received, etc. I basically had to pry it all out of him.

So those small bars - now in the "memory box" hanging in my hall - are all we have, not the actual medals themselves. The box includes the flag presented to us by the Marine Staff Sergeant who commanded the Marine Honor Guard at Gary's ash dive. Before the actual ceremony, I told the Sergeant (who happened to be black) the story of why we do not have the actual medals; I think that is perhaps why he became emotional, and choked up a bit while presenting the flag to the family.

During the last week of Gary's life, while the house was full of friends from near and far, I told the story of the medals to one of his veteran friends (Eike, who jumped with the enormous American flag during the ceremony). He offered to get replacement medals for the family. I considered it - very briefly - and then replied that Gary had returned them as a matter of principle - and it would dishonor both his act of integrity and his memory to replace them.

Hope you find this interesting and not too long/tedious. I just want to provide a bit of a window into the life, actions, etc., of a beloved friend, uncle and brother.