

Resident Jumps From Russian Aircraft

By John Gregory
The Beacon

His thoughts were a long way from Point Loma when Peninsula resident Richard Mandich peered out the open door of a Russian military jet at 180 mph.

But he didn't hesitate to leap through that door with members of the elite Vozdushino-Desantnaya Voyska (VDV), Russian paratroopers.

Mandich was participating on a very rare journey into the bases of the elite airborne units of Russia and Hungary. A World War II veteran of the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne Division, Mandich was invited on this special trip in July with other veterans from the United States, France, Germany, Britain and Canada.

At 67, Mandich was the oldest member of the group. He was also the only one to jump wearing tennis shoes and casual pants. The others brought along camouflaged uniforms and jump boots.

Six jumps were made from Russian-built aircraft — three in Hungary and three in Russia. Two of Mandich's jumps were free-fall. In Hungary the group jumped from the Mi-8 medium transport helicopter and the An2



Point Loma resident Richard Mandich, 67, prepares to leap from a Russian plane with elite airborne units of Russia and Hungary in July.

transport, a unique biplane. In Russia, they jumped from the world's second largest helicopter, the Mi-6, and from the Il 76 jet transport. Mandich said most jumps from transports are made at 100 mph, so exiting at 180 mph was "an exciting experience...a real kicker."

The Russians also dropped an armored personnel carrier and a truck from the Il 76.

Both the Hungarians and Russians gave demonstrations of their weapons and tactics. The visitors were allowed to fire an assortment of weapons, includ-

ing AK 47 assault rifles, a machine gun, a sniper rifle, a grenade launcher and an anti-tank missile launcher.

In Russia, the group traveled to the city of Ryazan, a five-hour bus ride from Moscow. From there they rode another 45 minutes to a jump school base.

Mandich said the Russian parachutes looked like they should have been retired 20 years ago, "but they worked." He was relieved as he felt the tug of his chute when it opened.

Mandich had turned against the wind in preparation for his landing. He floated toward the Russian countryside and noticed his Russian comrades doing something unusual. The Russians were turned the wrong way. "I couldn't believe it. They land with the wind...they keep running," he said.

Before Russia, the group gathered in Budapest, Hungary. From there they traveled to a parachute training center in Szolnok. Mandich said the Hungarian parachutes were much more technically advanced.

Later the group went to Eger, a historic castle town. It was there that the Hungarians held off the Turkish Ottoman Empire in 1552, according to Mandich.

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In Eger the Hungarians treated the visitors to a feast in an old wine cellar. "It was a party to remember," Mandich said. Everyone locked arms and swayed from side to side as they sang, he added.

After the jumps, the participants followed a paratrooper tradition and exchanged airborne wing insignias from their respective units.

Veterans groups often go on tours such as this, but this was the first of its kind to tour a Russian airborne base, Mandich said. This international meeting of veteran paratroopers was named Operation Arpad Shield. Arpad was a famous Hungarian hero circa 907 A.D.

Mandich, an active sports parachutist, participated in a similar tour in 1984 to celebrate the anniversary of Operation Market Garden, the 1944 WWII liberation of Holland.

He said when paratroopers from other parts of the world meet and share a jump, it's a special time. "Every time you put your knees to the breeze — it's a unique experience," Mandich explained. "No matter what the nationality, it's a common spirit."