

Organizer Cancels 2007 World Free Fall Convention

by Robin Heid

The organizer of the World Free Fall Convention has canceled the 2007 event but said it will be back better than ever in 2008.

Don Kirlin put on the Convention for 17 straight years, the first 12 in Quincy, Ill., the last five a couple of hours north of there in Rantoul. Thousands of skydivers from all over the world attended each year. Although Kirlin's attendance and jump numbers were sometimes greeted skeptically, there's no doubt the event was the biggest boogie going for a long time.

"We had skydivers from 65 countries and all 50 states," he said after the cancellation announcement was posted March 27 on the Convention website. "They made more than 600,000 skydives from jump altitudes of 300 to 30,000 feet."

Attendance in recent years had declined noticeably, in part because the Convention lost its signature aircraft, a Boeing 727 jet transport, in part because it moved from Quincy to the much smaller Rantoul, in part because the event had gotten a little stale.

On top of all that, Kirlin's other business left him with less and less time to plan and execute the Convention the way he had during its earlier years.

"I'm providing adversarial air-to-air combat training for the U.S. Navy through



A zipper comes down over Rantoul. The square swoop pond is visible in the lower right. Photo by Karen Lewis.



my company Red Air," Kirlin said. "We have 22 aircraft, including L-59s, a MiG-21 and the world's only civilian-operated

MiG-29. . . Some people think the Free Fall Convention is the only thing I do, but we're doing more and more contracts for the U.S. government every year."

Kirlin also said that, in addition to taking a year off to "recharge our batteries," he wants to restructure the Convention and get new people involved to make it a fresh, cutting-edge event again.

"We weren't bringing enough skydiving expertise into the staff," he explained, "or enough people who were in touch with the newest disciplines and practices in the sport. That's part of what we'll be doing during the next year and a half as we get ready to restart the Free Fall Convention as the world's best skydiving event."

But while Kirlin said the Convention "will absolutely happen in 2008," he's not

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Convention Aircraft List

by Robin Heid

The World Free Fall Convention set many skydiving precedents during its 17 years, not the least of which was the regular and recurring use of exotic and often rare specialty aircraft. Here is a partial list of the aircraft that flew jumpers at one or more Conventions, not counting, of course, the Twin Otters, CASAs, Caribous, King Airs, DC-3s, Skyvans, Caravans, and other "standard" parachuting aircraft.

Jets:

Boeing 727, McDonnell Douglas DC-9.

Airliners, bombers, and transports:

Lockheed Super Constellation, Martin 404, Ford Tri-Motor; B-17 Flying Fortress, B-24 Liberator, B-25 Mitchell; Lockheed C-130A Hercules, Lockheed L-100-30 Stretch Hercules, Curtiss C-46, Bushmaster Tri-Motor, Douglas DC-4.

Helicopters:

Bell 412, Bell 47D and G-4, Sikorsky S-58 (turbine), Huey UH-1H, Bell Long Ranger, Bell Jet Ranger, Robinson R-44.

Unusual:

Navy N3N biplane, T6 Texan, Pitts Special, Stearman, Beech Staggerwing, 1929 New Standard biplane, Antonov An-28 Skytruck, Antonov An-2 biplane, Helio Courier, Helio Stallion, Schweitzer 2-33 glider, Family Channel blimp, and hot air balloons ranging from 80,000 to 216,000 cubic feet. □

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