

## Skyhawk parachute team prepares for Westerner Days performance

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The Canadian Forces parachute team the SkyHawks arrived in Red Deer and soared through the cloudy skies above the Red Deer Airport on Tuesday.

The SkyHawks jumped in aerobatic parachute formations to get ready for their demonstration that will open the North American Pony Chuckwagon Championships at Westerner Days on today and Thursday night.

On Tuesday, the SkyHawks jumped from a roaring, gigantic J-Model Hercules at 3,600 metres. The Hercules is a four-engine military transport aircraft from Trenton, Ont., that replaced the CC-130 Legacy Hercules Aircraft in June 2010.

The 2012 demonstration season for the SkyHawks is in full swing. It is the 41st season for the team. They started their tour in Yellowknife and have spent the last 18 days free-falling through the skies. Their mission: to go across the country and showcase a well-trained military.

Sgt. Kevin Walker joined the team last March and has 20 jumps under his belt. The sergeant has been deployed to Bosnia, Macedonia and Afghanistan.

His first jump with the SkyHawks wasn't his first experience falling from an aircraft thousands of metres above ground, but despite his previous experiences, it was a little nerve-racking, he said.

"The first jump, when we had to come together and build formations, yes, I was a little nervous," he admitted.

"We are taught in the military to stay away from other parachuters and on the SkyHawks we are taught how to bring it in and build formations so it is not natural, that is for sure.

"But after the first jump, you want to get back up and do it again."

Walker, who is based in Pedawawa, Ont., has a wife and two daughters aged eight and six. When asked what his wife thinks about his adrenalin-filled occupation, he smirks.

"She knew what I was going to do before I jumped."

The SkyHawks have a five-week training camp in Perris Valley, Calif., during the winter months.

"We have really good instructors and they know what you are going to do wrong before you do it so you are set up for success immediately," Walker said.

Before they jump, the team does what is called a dirt dive practice on the ground of what they will do in the air while free falling.

Before jumping out of the aircraft, the team notes the altitude. They then take part in a unique handshake, communicating confidence and reliability.

Logan Thompson, nine, and Brittany Thompson, 12, from Calgary, got to look inside the Hercules and meet the SkyHawks with their grandparents on Tuesday.

"Really cool," they said enthusiastically.

Master Warrant Officer Rick "Flipper" Barrett, who is a load master on the aircraft, was also available to speak about the Hercules. The aircraft can transport 128 personnel and was widely used during the Canadian Forces mission in Afghanistan. "It is fantastic flyer, it takes off like a space shuttle," he said.

The SkyHawks will be available on Wednesday evening at Westerner Days for autographs and pictures after they soar above the crowds.

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