

The Modesto Bee

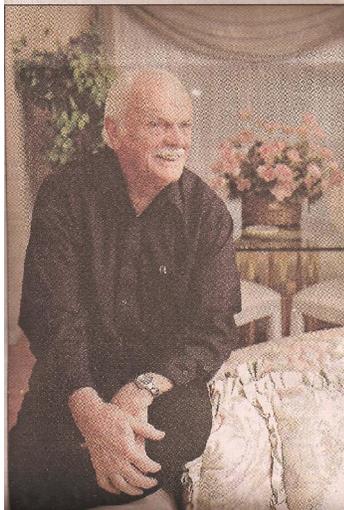
modbee.com



Published December 25, 2004

DOCTOR, 80, STILL JUMPING INTO LIFE MODESTAN JUGGLES PRACTICE, MEMOIRS AND PARACHUTING

By *ROGER W. HOSKINS, BEE STAFF WRITER*



Top, Dr. Samuel Delos Champaign (shown in a handout photo) began parachuting shortly after World War II. Left Champaign at his home in Modesto. He originally wanted to be an animator for Walt Disney, and decorated V-ma

Samuel Delos **Champaign** would be amazing even if he weren't an 80-year-old skydiver. He has lived a wonderful, meaningful life even if you take away his World War II service with a battalion that fought at the Battle of the Bulge and later nursed people back from the brink of death at a Nazi concentration camp.

Champaign pilots his own Cessna plane, has served as a missionary in Russia and plans to serve again in Ukraine. He's been a popular cartoonist since his youth.

More than all that, he's a doctor.

A family physician for 48 years, he calls his patients his children and, by his conservative estimate, that family includes 5,000 or more.

And he is active with three offices, two in Modesto and one in Newman. And Delos, as his friends and family call him, still has personal and professional goals. He is learning Russian and Italian, his fourth and fifth languages. He already speaks Spanish and German, along with English. He says learning languages helps prevent Alzheimer's.

He also is adding to his surgical skills, learning bariatric technique to staple the stomach to help patients achieve weight loss and better health.

Champaign almost didn't become a doctor. He was on his way to a career in animation, hopefully with Walt Disney, when World War II caused a detour.

"I had taken classes, and art was what I wanted to do," **Champaign** said from his home in northwest Modesto.

During his tour of duty, he took a lot of what he calls "spy pictures" with a tiny camera he had painted to make it look like official Army issue.

He also kept drawing, and his talent drew everyone in his battalion. "They all wanted me to draw something on their V-mails," said **Champaign**. V-mail was the way Uncle Sam could speed up delivery of letters to GIs and cut down on their bulk at the same time. On forms that were like a post card in width but twice as long, GIs and families would write messages. The forms were photographed and transferred as film by plane. The letters in film form only weighed 2 percent of their paper cousins.

To personalize them, the men in **Champaign's** unit asked him to make drawings. Even the commanding officer called on **Champaign**. "It got to where I was treated pretty special," he recalled.
HUMOR WAS A SURVIVAL TECHNIQUE

The only V-mail drawings from **Champaign** that have survived are the ones he sent his family. One was a self-portrait where his saddened countenance dreams of home. Another was a Christmas Santa bearing holiday good wishes.

There was humor or pathos in most. Humor was an important element of surviving "what we had to do and see."

Champaign said faith was another element crucial to his survival. A Seventh-day Adventist, he said he had absolute trust in God and faith that even if he died, Jesus would be there with him. "If I was awake, I was praying," said **Champaign**. He never found time to worry because he had heard, "you never hear the bullet that gets you."

Champaign still was on track to be an artist about the time the war ended in Europe in May 1945. His battalion came across the concentration camp Ludwig Lust in northwestern Germany. "It smelled like rotten turnips. That was all they were feeding those poor people. You couldn't tell the turnips from the fecal piles. They both looked and smelled the same."

Champaign said it was almost as hard as telling the living from the dead. To distinguish the living, **Champaign** said he would put candy bars on their chests, also so "they could eat when they felt like it."

The stench of Ludwig Lust carried more than five miles to the town of Redefin. **Champaign** and other GIs marched the entire town's population to the camp at gunpoint to show residents what the Nazis had done.

There was something else about Ludwig Lust and the miracle there that would change **Champaign's** life.

"I watched these people heal with nothing but food and water and letting them know we cared about them."

MEDICAL CAREER BEGAN AT CAMP

That was when **Champaign** first contemplated being a doctor. He was elected to choose some survivors to become part of the unit as cooks and orderlies. He said he would pick people who most needed care.

Against orders, **Champaign** kept taking pictures, even inside the death camp. "When my commanding officer asked to see me I thought I was going to get court-martialed. He asked to see all the pictures.

"After he looks at them he says, 'These are pretty good. I want you to put together a history book for the battalion.'"

His official record includes a journal, a map of the unit's travels and a complete listing of the dead and

wounded. Then there are **Champaign**'s pictures and some V-mail art. While it was given to all the men in the 605 Tank Destroyer Battalion, **Champaign** knows of no other copies.

Champaign has scores of photos and V-mails to do another book, and he has been writing down as many experiences as he can remember. "I don't know how much longer I'll get to tell these stories." He drew a picture for the cover and called his upcoming memoirs "Sentimental Journey," in part for the song loved by so many soldiers and sailors.

FOLLOWS ORDERS INTO MARRIAGE

When he came home in 1946, he still was taking orders after he left the Army. "My dad said there was this girl at church I ought to woo and I was a good soldier, so I did."

He and that girl, Dorothy, married later that year and went on to raise two sons and two daughters. Dorothy said it's been a wonderful 58 years, but she hasn't always followed her husband's lead. Skydiving, for instance, was not her cup of tea. **Champaign** went through the war coveting the 82nd Airborne paratroopers' mode of travel. He said he went across the Ruhr in a truck, and often in Europe his unit linked up with the 82nd, which usually jumped into position. He started jumping shortly after returning from the war.

Skydiving always has been such a rush that **Champaign** urges his patients to try para-therapy. The patients jump with an experienced parachutist. Freefalling "takes your mind off the little stuff and the endorphins last for months."

The cost for an escorted jump is about \$100. In a reluctant concession to his 80 years, that's the way **Champaign** jumps now.

Champaign said none of his children followed him into medicine. But they all followed him into parachuting.

Even his wife finally joined the family fun by parasailing off a cliff in Austria. But she still refuses to jump out of airplanes.

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Published December 25, 2004

Section: LOCAL NEWS

Edition(s): ALL

Page: B1 1214 words

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Caption: Samuel Delos **Champaign** in a tandem parachute jump, a reluctant concession to his 80 years.