

FREE FALLING

ESCAPE ARTIST DEFIES DEATH WITH DARING LEAP

By Brian Haynes—Times-News writer

Jerome—As escape artist Anthony dons his yellow jumpsuit and prepares for his latest escape, he doesn't seem nervous.

Yet in about an hour he'll be falling from a plane at 140 mph. His hands will be cuffed, and he'll have roughly 30 seconds to pick the lock and open his chute.

But on this Wednesday morning at the Jerome County Airport he doesn't use words like "fear" and "scared" when discussing his death-defying stunt. Instead he talks about respecting the danger and the reality of what can happen if something goes awry.

"If I don't deploy (my parachute), I'll be at the bottom of the Snake River Canyon, he said.

He knows the dangers. Three times before he's jumped from an airplane with restraints, including once inside a locked box. But he's never done one like this before, he says.

The high altitude of southern Idaho means 20 fewer seconds to open his chute. And with the automatic opening device shut off, Anthony's chute won't open unless he frees his cuffed hands and reaches behind him to pull the ripcord.

As he prepares to board his plane, Anthony talks about how as a child he watched Evel Knievel's infamous attempt to jump the Snake River Canyon. For the past 10 years he's wanted to try his own brand of stunt there.

"The canyon has been staring in the face of every daredevil since Evel Knievel tried to jump it 25 years ago." Anthony said. "I'm going to try to put that to rest today."

Anthony Martin began his career as an escape artist at age 10, and a few years later he was appearing on Milwaukee television as "Anthony the Handcuff King."

A few years before then he got a magic set for Christmas, but he didn't like magic's deception so he gave it up in favor of picking locks, he said.

"I always felt I was cheating the audience because I had to lie and tell them something

wasn't there when it was," He said. "I'd rather be applauded for my skill rather than my ability to deceive somebody."

In the two decades since he's escaped from a submerged metal cage, several jails near his Sheboygan, Wisconsin home and countless other artificial predicaments. He even requested permission to break out of Fort Knox, but the White House denied him.

Ripley's Believe It or Not! already called him the "King of Escapists," but Anthony wants to keep pushing his limits. Tuesday's stunt, which was filmed by the Discovery Channel for an upcoming show on escape artists, was one more step toward becoming the greatest escape artist ever.

Along the way Anthony's goal is to purify his craft, he said. No fake cuffs. No smoke. No mirrors. In fact he's so confident in his ability that he offers \$25,000 to anyone who can prove he's a fake.

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For Wednesday's stunt Anthony went to great lengths to prove he's legit. The handcuffs were bought by the Jerome County commissioners, and their authenticity was verified by a locksmith before they were sealed in an evidence bag.

Jerome County Commissioner Roy Prescott opened the bag on the airport tarmac, and after Anthony was shackled and cuffed, Jerome County Sheriff Jim Weaver checked the handcuffs.

"They're secure," he said confidently.

Prescott held out the keys, but Anthony refused to take them. His key is a lock pick of his own design.

A few minutes later Anthony's plane took off from the Jerome County Airport and headed toward 12,000 feet. Around 8:30 a.m. three dots fell from the plane. Less than 20 seconds later the dots opened their chutes and glided toward the landing area in the Devil's Corral area just east of U.S. Highway 93.

Anthony floated to the ground and threw his hands in the air. Observers responded with a smattering of applause

At a post-stunt press conference an up-close video of Anthony was shown.

Almost immediately after jumping from the plane he frantically works on picking his handcuffs. He gets out in less than 10 seconds then tries to pick another set of cuffs

that hold his arm restraints. But the cold air numbs his hands and he can't work quickly enough, so he reaches behind him and opens his chute before finishing the job on the trip down.

"I filled a dream here today," he said.