

**A YEAR AGO,
PARACHUTIST
DIANA PLUMMETED
1,250 FT TO EARTH
— AND LIVED. BUT
THAT WAS JUST THE
START OF HER
INCREDIBLE STORY**

DIANA MITCHELL plunged 1,250 feet from an airplane and lived—but that's probably the least amazing thing about this pretty and plucky miracle woman.

After 14 harrowing months of surgery, unbearable pain and agonizing physical therapy, the tiny 19-year-old is rebuilding her shattered body with a display of guts and courage that continues to astound doctors and awe her friends.

And, incredible as it seems, her unrelenting battle to beat the odds is working. Diane, who still has seven pounds of metal plates and rods embedded in her slender frame, smiles as she tells how a bunch of young guys started hollering: "You're a 10! You're a 10!" as she lounged recently by the pool in a leopard-print bikini.

"I don't think so," she said as she showed off her scars and recalled the incredible story that began a year ago last June when she was living out her dream as a paratrooper at U.S. Army Airborne School at Fort Benning, Ga. It was graduation day, she told STAR, and her proud mother, stepfather and little sister were watching as disaster struck when her parachute refused to open.

Staying calm, she remembered her training and yanked on the reserve cord—only to feel her heart stand still as the chute wrapped itself uselessly around her body.

This is the end, she thought, as the ground rushed up to meet her at 120 miles per hour.

"I don't understand why I survived," the petite blonde said at her



Brave blonde beauty Diana Mitchell savors a quiet moment by the pool. Her T-shirt (l) conceals her scarred back. "I weigh only 91 pounds," she says, "so you can see the metal through my skin."

home in Tallahassee, Fla. "I remember being really angry because my family was there and they were going to have to see me die."

But somehow she did survive—and soon discovered that the terror of her fall was just the start of her ordeal.

She hit the ground so hard, emer-

Miracle survivor's back in action thanks to tons of courage — and 7 lbs of metallic plates, bolts and rods in her body



gency room doctors were stunned to discover that she was four inches shorter than the height listed in her medical records. Surgeons managed to give her back two inches with a 10-hour operation—but the other remedies were not so quick.

"It's been over a year now and this has affected every area of my life, physically and socially. People look at you and they don't know what to say," says Diana, who longs for the day when she can put away her crutches for good.

"I weigh only 91 pounds, so when you look at my back, you can see the metal through my skin. The pain is worse when it rains, then I feel it a lot.

"I have a full medicine cabinet and I've had to change my diet. I used to pig out all the time.

"The doctors say that maybe, one day, they can take out the plates. I hope they'll be able to because right

now they're pointed at my uterus and I'm unable to carry a baby.

"Before I went into the Army, I said that I was never going to have kids, never going to marry. But now that I can't, I sort of want it.

"I also have to decide what I want to do all over again. I retired on May 1 from the Army. That was sad. I loved being in the Army."

Diana admits there have been a few times when she has drifted into depression and wondered if sudden death might not have been better than the endless pain. But always, when things were worst, her family kept her strong.

"Sometimes, even now, I say it just isn't worth the pain, but I think of them and I know I have to go on.

"I used to be petrified of death, but now I'm not afraid. I know everyone has to die and, when my time comes, it will be OK." —LISA ARCELLA