

in focus: outdoor recreation

Hang gliding: Man-made mountain serves as launch pad for flatland gliders

By John Drescher

If you have ever seen a graceful swan in flight, or even a constantly flapping pigeon, you have probably wondered what it would be like to have wings.

I'm no different. I always wondered what it would be like to fly, to leave the ground and stay aloft by my own power, but other than a few Saturday nights at the local pub I never really gave it much of a try.

Until last week, that is. I heard an advertisement on the radio for a hang gliding shop in Fayetteville. The ad flicked a lightbulb in my mind: just because I did not have any wings did not mean that I couldn't get some.

After a few phone calls to Fayetteville, the time was set. Sunday the people from Sandhill Kite, Inc. would give me the chance to live out my life-long dream of flying.

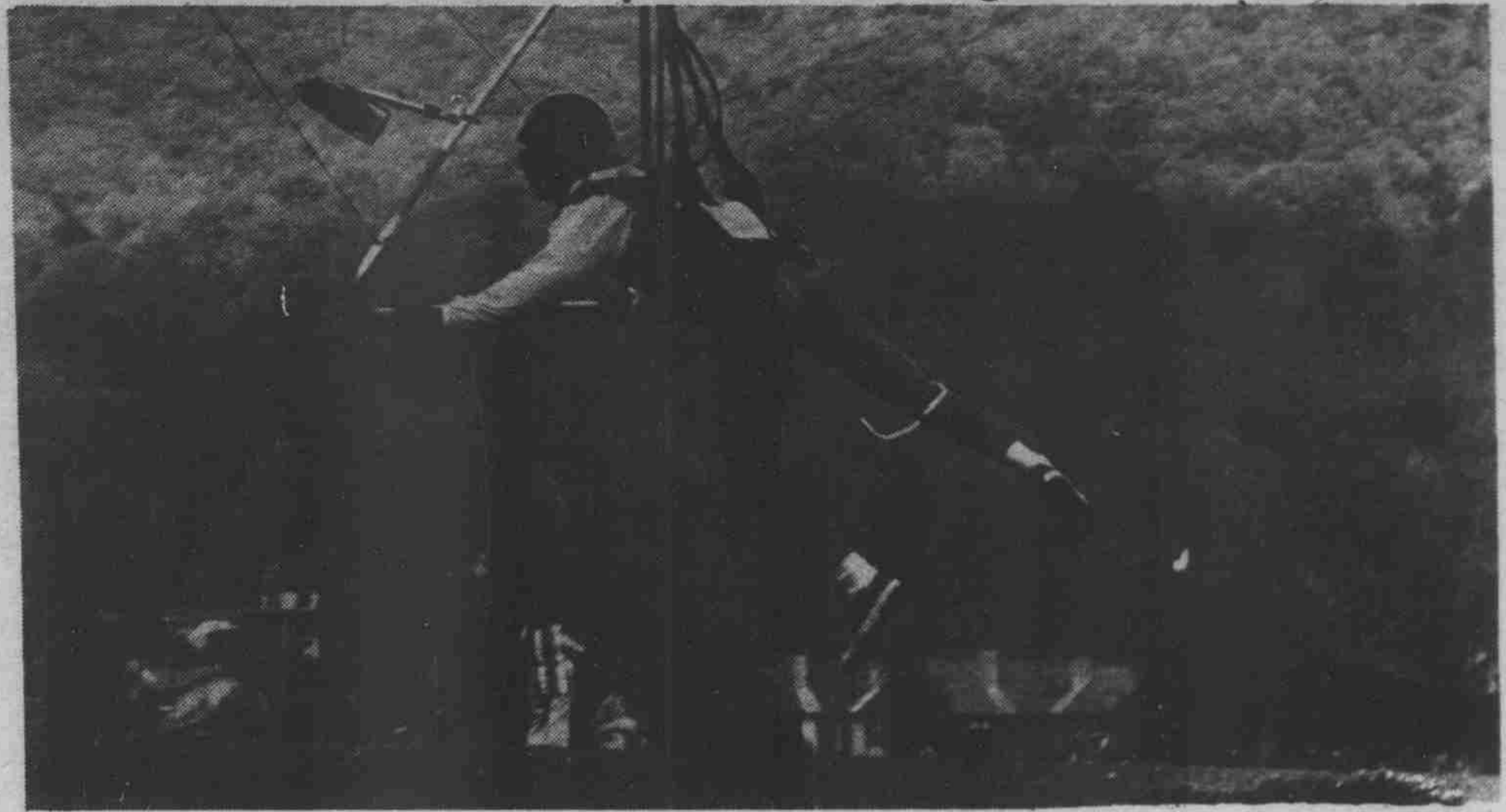
Sandhill Kite is the recently spawned brainchild of Tom Pendergraft. Pendergraft first hang glided two years ago at Kitty Hawk. After many trips to the coast to learn how to hang glide, Pendergraft decided that people from the central part of the state should not have to travel to the coast or the mountains to learn how to hang glide. So he created his own hang gliding school right smack in the flatlands of North Carolina, brought in one of the East Coast's finest professional hang gliders, Scott Buchanan, and christened his project Sandhill Kite, Inc.

Wait a minute, there is something missing here, isn't there? Hang gliding in the flat Fayetteville area seems somewhat akin to swimming on land. But Tom Pendergraft was a man with a dream, and rationality did not stop him.

"I asked myself, why can't some one construct a course here?" Pendergraft said. After checking with some experts from California, he put his two-year-old dream into effect. What God did not provide, Tom Pendergraft made. So now, on Highway 24 West, one mile off Highway 87, stands a 50-foot tall man-made mountain. And that is how Sandhill Kite got started.

Pendergraft is president of Sandhill Kite, and runs the four-week old business along with his wife Brenda. In four weeks, the Pendergrafts already have had 80 students.

An initial instructional lesson is given for \$45 at their Fayetteville location on Bragg Boulevard, and the actual flying takes place at the "mountain." Pendergraft makes it clear that he is running an



Hang gliding gives man a chance to fly

DTH file photo

instructional school and not just a one-shot deal. Hang gliders are given classifications that range from Hang One to Hang Five. Pendergraft is dealing mostly with first-timers, so he is trying to get them to become Hang One flyers.

The lessons become cheaper as they go on; the whole idea is to learn and progress so that the pilot can launch from higher and higher heights. Pendergraft is currently trying to get the state to open up Morrow Mountain in Stanly County so that qualified flyers can glide at a nearby location for free, but he has received little attention from the state.

Pendergraft requires that students be given two and a half hours of classroom instruction before they travel to the launching site. Early Sunday morning I ventured to Fayetteville to get my classroom training.

First comes an exotic movie about guys jumping off of 10,000 foot cliffs and gliding for miles and miles... it looks so easy and natural.

Instructor Ed Miller then shows a couple of diagrams of the gliders, and explains the effects of aerodynamics on the wings.

Normally this is the time when students are taught to inspect and construct the kite,

but Pendergraft decides that we can learn this later at the field, so we take off for the mountain.

The "mountain" is a 50 foot tall pile of sand. Now I know why they call it "Sandhill" Kite.

Fifty feet does not seem very high until you are on top looking down, and realize that you are four stories above the ground. My attempted flight will be comparable to jumping off an Olde Campus dormitory.

Classroom training is over, but ground training is not. Helmets and harnesses on, we experiment with the gliders, trying to acquaint ourselves with the wind currents and the weight of the glider. We practice takeoffs by running with the glider.

It proves to be much more difficult than it looks. I have a lot of trouble running just 10 feet with the glider on my shoulders. I cannot keep the nose level, definitely a major problem. What all seemed so clear three hours ago in the classroom now becomes difficult. Realizing the laws of aerodynamics is one thing; applying them is another.

Finally, after two hours of practice, the moment of truth arrives. Pendergraft stands behind me, holding the rear of the glider steady and shouting instructions.

"O.K. Launch!"

I take four or five steps as fast I can down the hill—and then I am airborne.

Great. I'm up here. Now what the hell do I do?

Well, I did not do too much. Rather than keeping the nose of the glider level, flying up, I was heading toward the base of the hill. Finally, just after seeing a few scenes from my early childhood, I got the nose up and avoided a collision.

The whole flight lasted only about 10 to 15 seconds.

To land on your feet, it is necessary to raise the nose of the glider before landing. I never really got around to raising the nose of the glider, and consequently, in all five tries I never landed on my feet.

I found this out best on my fourth try, when I left most of the skin from my left knee somewhere in the landing area. Yet, it was not discouraging. I was flying, and those few precious seconds of ecstasy were worth the scrapes and bruises. Like a moth headed for a flame, each time I knew my flight would probably end in near disaster. But I kept trying.

Like a graceful swan or a struggling pigeon, I was flying. That's what really mattered to me.

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