

# Arch, look, reach, punch,

## First-time airplane passenger overcomes his fear of heights and flying.

By KEN MINGIS

Whether it's cold or hot, winter or spring, sport parachuting (yes, jumping out of planes) does not stop. Every weekend, parachutists gather at an airport near Louisburg, jump out of planes thousands of feet up and float to Earth under the protection of a parachute. I found out for myself when I went in November, despite the fact that I had never been in a plane, and did not like heights.

When I first heard about, I thought, "this might be fun." It also occurred to me that I was probably a little crazy. I called a friend to see if he would go too; I thought he would chicken out. To make a long story short, after much soul-searching, a friend and I decided to jump the day after Halloween, 1981. (It cost \$65 for the first jump, which includes all-day training.)

The drive to the Franklin County Sport Parachute Center near Louisburg, took about an hour. That Sunday morning, there were four of us; one guy was here for his second or third jump. The rest were newcomers. The weather was cold and drizzly, with low clouds, but the forecast called for clearing later in the day. Actually, having gotten this far, I wanted the weather to turn nice; I was getting an ulcer worrying, and I wasn't sure I could muster up the courage to come back a second time.

We arrived at the airport about 10 a.m. and had to wait a few minutes for someone to show up to teach us the basics of parachute jumping. (I say airport, but the runway was just a dirt strip cut into the red Franklin County mud.) Before the lessons began, though, everyone had to sign a waiver form to protect the sport parachute center from damages in case of injury or death. I knew all along

I was going to have to fill out a waiver, but actually doing it was still scary. That, and the \$65 check I handed over, made me even more nervous.

The advertisement for the sport parachute center said the price included several hours of intensive training with jump equipment and in the art of getting to the ground safely. It did.

We went over the mechanics of jumping—how to jump, how to hold your body in the air, how to land, what happens is your chute doesn't open and other such fun topics. I now know what to do if my parachute "streamlines" (opens up, but doesn't fill with air). This is known as a "fast-fill" and if it happens, it's time to use the back-up chute. (It's called a fast-fall because you are falling at 120 miles per hour by the time you hit the ground.)

After two hours of class, we went over to a hangar and actually strapped on a dummy chute to learn how to fold it up. There is a special technique used that cuts the number of tangles in the chute when you roll it up after the jump. We were also shown the proper way of getting into the plane with our parachutes on. Yes, there is a right way, and a wrong way. The wrong way is to get in the plane without your rip-cord covered by your hand. It gets kind of nasty when a chute pops open in the pilot's face because your rip cord accidentally catches on something.

There is one part of the course that no one who goes will forget: the series of yells you are supposed to cream as soon as you jump out the plane.

**ARCH, LOOK, REACH, PULL, THOUSAND ONE, THOUSAND TWO, THOUSAND THREE, THOUSAND FOUR, LOOK, REACH, PULL, PUNCH.**

We practiced yelling and going through the appropriate motions at least an hour, and frequently during the rest of the day.

ARCH is the position you try to get into as you let go of the plane. REACH, LOOK, PULL is when you look down to where the rip-cord handle is, and pull it. The



counting is done to give the chute time to open. After you reach four thousand, the parachute should have opened up. If it hasn't, heaven forbid, the count continues, with LOOK, REACH, PULL, PUNCH the motions for opening the reserve parachute. You look down, reach for the reserve cord, pull it, and give the second parachute a small punch to make sure it opens. (When your life depends on knowing all this, in order, you pay close attention.)

I should explain that for beginners all jumps are on a static line—we didn't actually open the parachute ourselves. A line attached to the chute is hooked to the plane, so that when you jump, it opens automatically. (If you have ever seen a war movie where the soldiers in the plane all clip their lines inside the plane before jumping, you've got the general idea.)

We went outside to practice landing, and sure enough, the drizzle had stopped and the sky was lightening up. My stomach rolled a few times at these glad tidings.

*I don't remember praying, or cursing or anything. Mentally I was numb. I do remember having to turn back to the jumpmaster—he had told us we had to smile before he would let us go. I smiled. He said go.*

After putting on overalls and boots, we moved to a platform about three or four feet off the ground. From there we learned how to land, and roll right, roll left, roll forward, roll backward and every other imaginable way possible. If you like rolling around in the dirt, this part is kind of fun. Judging from the mud I was wearing, I know why they gave us the white overalls. (Of course, you've got to remember, this is so we wouldn't break a leg when we landed. It must have helped, nobody was seriously hurt that day.)

The final part of the training is when you are strapped into a harness in the air, and actually practice what you should do in an emergency. ARCH, LOOK, etc. all over again, this time with actions. The instructor calls out a problem, and you have to make the appropriate response. While we were doing this the sun came out, the jump was on.

It may seem that there is a lot of instruction, but before you are OKed to jump, you know everything you need to know to come down safely. (A picture of me, tumbling out of the sky at 120 miles per hour kept flashing through my head all day long. I paid close attention to what they said.)

It takes about five minutes to strap on the full parachute attire, reserve chute included, so it wasn't long before I found myself beside a small single-engine plane. It looked like it had flown many miles since World War II (or maybe many miles in it), hardly something that calmed my nerves. Remember, I had never been in a plane of any kind before.

We boarded the plane along with the pilot and our jumpmaster, the person who would actually give us the go-ahead to jump. There was no room for anyone else—the cabin of those planes is small—not much more floor-space than the area single beds take up in dorm rooms. At least, it seemed that way. It was about 4 p.m. and the November sun was behind some high clouds as we took off. For the millionth time, I wondered what I was doing here.

The flight up was, scary—the pilot's goal was to get us up to 3000 feet as quickly as possible. That means that he