

pull mes y, the hard way

zigged and zagged his way across the sky in a ride that seemed like a rollercoaster. With the sharp banking turns, and my nervousness, I was glad I had not eaten all day. I think I turned a little green.

If you like rolling around in the dirt, (learning how to land) is kind of fun. Judging from the mud I was wearing, I know why they gave us the white overalls.

After leveling off at 3000 feet, the jumpmaster threw out a marker to determine which way the wind was blowing. That way, after we jumped, we would drift toward the airport and away from the trees and power lines. When he opened the door, I glanced out at the ground below. It was a long way down.

Finally, we were over the spot for the first jumper—me. The first thing I had to do after the jumpmaster opened the door was to hang my feet out. Before stepping out on the platform to jump, I asked the jumpmaster if anyone had ever fallen out the door. He said, "you've got to go anyway." He was right; I wasn't about to turn back now, kiss \$65 goodbye, or worse endure the shame in front of my friends.

So, picture this: wearing overalls, the parachute and heavy boots, I put my feet out on the 10" by 18" platform under the wing. Leaning forward, I grabbed the wing strut, and lifted one leg up. Standing on one foot, under the wing of a plane 3000 feet up is difficult. It's even harder when the plane is flying at 100 miles an hour. (And the pilot had even slowed it down!)

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.

I let go of the strut and pushed back away from the plane. The only memory I have is looking up as the plane flew on. I did not yell ARCH, LOOK, etc. until after my chute had opened. I didn't really arch, either. But I damn sure looked up to make sure my parachute had opened. That's when the whole trip became worth it.

In the air, 3000 feet up, the earth looks beautiful. That afternoon, with the sun getting lower, everything was tinged with gray and orange. I looked down and saw the runway to my right. I steered toward it. (The parachutes have small openings in them that help you steer them). I turn around 360 degrees to look at everything. Off behind me, I could see Louisburg. The rest of the ground was farmland.

The relief that it was all over was immense. I laughed, cried, shook, felt sick and in general, had a minor nervous breakdown after folding my parachute up. But I had done it.

Only one minor detail remained—landing in one piece. To help beginner parachutists, a radio is strapped on to the front of the chute. The controller down below tells you which way to steer, for a safe landing. I had a weak radio, and whenever I wasn't facing the airport, the radio died. The only sound I heard when that happened was the wind rushing by.

I came pretty close to the target—if you call 15 yards close. But I landed hard. From above, it appeared if I was lazily floating to a soft landing. No way. It was like jumping from the second floor of a two story house. Instead of looking straight ahead as I got ready to land (Like I had been told), I looked down. And I did not roll very well when I slammed (yes, slammed) into the ground. As a result, I pulled a tendon on the top of my foot. (It swelled up for a while, but I was all right within three days.) After my friends landed, our jump instructor pointed out a young woman getting ready to go up for the 30th time. She had broken her leg in three places the first time.

The relief that it was all over was immense. I laughed, cried, shook, felt sick and in general, had a minor nervous breakdown after folding my parachute up. But, I had done it.

I could now say that I had taken off in a plane, but never landed in one. I just wished I could tell my parents about.

Ken Mingis is a staff writer for *The Daily Tar Heel*.

ART BY NICK DEMOS



'On top of the world — literally'

By JIM WRINN

Nearly 20 million Americans have participated in skydiving, and their emotions and passions for the sport make it a habit if not an addiction.

On the UNC campus, there is an informal skydiving club. There are no meetings, no officers and no dues in this club: only people who enjoy skydiving.

Andy Bertron, a 22-year-old international studies major from Tampa, Fla., is one of those people.

He became interested in sport parachuting after jumping in an ROTC exercise almost two years ago, and his logbook now credits him with 62 jumps.

Bertron, who took his training at the Franklin County Sport Parachute Center at Louisburg, said his only concern during his first jump was to make a good exit from the plane.

"At 3,000 feet, you're riding on the wheel (of the airplane), hanging on a strut, looking at this guy who's going to tell you to jump. I just wanted to make a good fall," Bertron said.

During that first jump, Bertron was in freefall for only about three seconds. A static line, a device which automatically pulls out the parachute, popped out his canopy almost immediately after leaving the plane.

That was too short a time for Bertron. He now goes to the Franklin County jump site regularly on weekends and makes several jumps a day.

"There's a few of us that love it so good, we can't stand it without it," he said.

Bertron, who has jumped at the nationally acclaimed Florida jump site, Zephyr Hills (near Tampa), said there's a certain camaraderie among skydivers.

"We have our meetings at the drop zones and meet in the air sometimes," he said. "Those are the best meetings we've had."

There is a good feeling to feel the parachute come out, but an even better feeling to have performed a formation with other skydivers while plunging towards the Earth at 120 mph, Bertron said.

Ralph Hardy, another "member" of the UNC club, shares Bertron's enthusiasm for the sport.

Hardy, a 21-year-old English major, said, "There's an electricity when four of us make a formation in the air. It's just like connecting a circuit—the feeling flows through the whole group."

"You go back because there's a certain enthusiasm. You've jumped and you're not hurt. You face your fears in a way that's difficult to do in today's society," he said.

Hardy, a veteran of 43 jumps, said freefall was the greatest of skydiving's experiences. "From 12,000 feet, there's 70 seconds of freefall," he said. "You can do a lot in 70 seconds."

For the beginner, Hardy said instruction is relatively simple with the primary focus on making a safe jump and learning what to do on the way down.

One girl who sang on the way down of her first jump is Lynn Johnson. A junior from Franklin, she described her first and only jump as a quiet experience.

"You just swing back and forth. It was so quiet and you could see so far," she said.

Johnson said she never really considered jumping until seeing an ad in *The Daily Tar Heel*. "It just hit me as something I'd like to do," she said. "I'd like to do it again."

Hardy, who quit jumping for a year, said he started jumping again last September.

"My dad didn't like my doing it," he said. "He'd send me newspaper reports about people getting hurt or killed doing it, so I quit."

What made him go back? "It was a pretty day in early September," he said. "I saw an airplane flying over and I just had to go."

What made the millions of Americans who've jumped go? Bertron probably summed it up the best. He said, "You're sitting on a huge air cushion with the wind blowing at you, and you are—quite literally—on top of the world."

Jim Wrinn is a staff writer for *The Daily Tar Heel*.