



# THE BIG PLUNGE



In this first of a potentially limitless series, *Excalibur's* resident cynic-film critic Alex Patterson discovers the joys of airborne abandon via that elusive and romantic vehicle: the parachute.

After weeks of doubt and procrastination, augmented by coercion by *Excal* editors and staff, Patterson finally agreed to sign his will and journey off the Downsview map to an open field in Arthur, Ontario.

Although the death-defying plunge lasted a mere 180 transcendental seconds, Patterson claims "DAMNIT, IT CHANGED MY LIFE!"

Photos by Michael Davies

It was just prior to last spring's exam period when Fate called on Extension Two in the *Excalibur* office. One thing this writer is *not* known for around the news office is answering the telephone. Yet that day, I welcomed the opportunity to procrastinate. Uncharacteristically, I punched the flashing light and lifted the receiver.

"Good afternoon," I said, without meaning it much, "can I help you in some small way?"

Little did I know that this call was to change my life: opportunity was calling, long distance yet. Funny, but Fate didn't sound at all like that spectral faceless geezer with the shroud and sickle. This Grim Reaper was rather one of those ingratiating smoothies who try to sell you aluminum siding over the phone on Sunday mornings, complete with well-rehearsed nonchalance.

Yet when he told me of a skydiving charter he was organizing from the University, my suspicions vanished somewhat.

"But I've never done it before," I protested, "let alone with a busfull of strangers." The tempter calmly assured me that it was done all the time, that there was nothing to fear.

"Except fear itself?" I wondered.

We met at sunup the next morning in front of the York Athletic Complex—a structure which, containing neither pub nor cinema, was unknown to me. In all there were about 13 more or less willing novices gathered under a foreboding grey sky when presently Rick, the Parachute School's representative, proceeded to give us a pep talk in the jovial manner of a game show host warming up his contestants.

I examined him closely as he chatted, watching for the sign which would give him away as an agent of the evil empire. I was hoping to catch something on the order of a 666 tattoo under the dark brown locks on his forehead, or a half dozen serpentine tongues. Somewhat to my disappointment I discovered absolutely nothing sinister or untoward in his character.

Why, then, all these suspicions? Did all frustrated screenwriters undergo hangovers like this? Then again, I had heard that the devil is a master of disguise. The Bible had said so—or was it in *The Exorcist*? I couldn't recall. All I knew was that the school bus they had arrived in conjured long-suppressed memories of interminable biology field trips in junior high—*not*, I might add, memories which I was pleased to be reminded of.

We were transported to a town called Arthur, about a half hour's drive north of Guelph. Our training and first jump were to take place at the Parachute School of Toronto, and upon our arrival my brooding paranoia began to be replaced by a healthier, happier attitude towards risking my life. The staff at the school were friendly and welcoming, and inspired in all of us the kind of confidence one needs to jump from a light plane half a mile in the sky. (In fact, they've inspired over 10,000 virgins to take the plunge.)

Our instructor, a young man from Denmark named Lars, told us he had made over 400 jumps himself, all by

the tender age of 21. By 10:30 that morning I determined to make that jump if it was the last thing I did. By 11:00 I had abandoned all my theories that the school was a front for either a coven of witches or the International Terrorist Conspiracy. The caffeine had kicked in. I was saved.

Throughout the morning and afternoon we trained: how to leave the plane, how to steer, how to land, what to expect, and what to do if you're about to land on a barn, the highway, hydro lines, or other dangerous spots. We learned emergency procedures in case of partial or total malfunction of the main 'chute. We also learned that skydiving is one of the safest, most wholesome examples of good clean fun to be had anywhere (despite the faintly militaristic atmosphere of the drills).

In fact, the only clouds hanging over our preparation were the ones over the town and surrounding area: it had rained the day before and was threatening to do so again. The school's runways, while Government Licensed, are not tarmac. This particular Thursday in late March they were nothing but a soggy mess which prevented any takeoffs.

Not so much an anticlimax as a plot twist, this development in our story meant that we would be issued cards indicating that we had completed our training, and could return another day and go directly up to make the big dive. We were left all psyched up and nowhere to go. The long-awaited First Time would just have to wait longer.

Several months elapsed before I returned to the school. This was for a variety of reasons: graduation, work, the lack of a car, and some dwindling in my steely resolve to go through with the damned thing after all. Eventually, by the middle of the summer, a weekend and a car presented themselves, and I was left with no excuses not to cash in my rain cheque.

In the throbbing summer's sun, the journey and the school were both more enjoyable. The front yard of the school was now filled with cars and campers—some fanatics take their vacations there, doing nothing but jumping—and the hill in front of the drop zone was littered with spectators, friends and next of kin to the jumpers. The sky was erupting with brightly-coloured parachutes dropping onto a small circle of dirt near the barn, which I decided to aim for.

Little did I know that these chutes were the square, highly manoeuvrable professional models, and were being manipulated by a local team practicing for the Ontario championships, and that a novice like myself couldn't even see this spot from the air, let alone hit it. So much to learn. So little time.

In the "Manifest Room" I added my name to the list of those waiting to jump. The school was doing a booming trade that Saturday, though neither Rick, the entrepreneur, nor any of the original York group were there. Lars, the instructor was, though, and he took me through a brief refresher course on landing and emergency procedures in case my memory had dimmed in the time elapsed since March. (It had.)

Eventually my name was called, with those of four