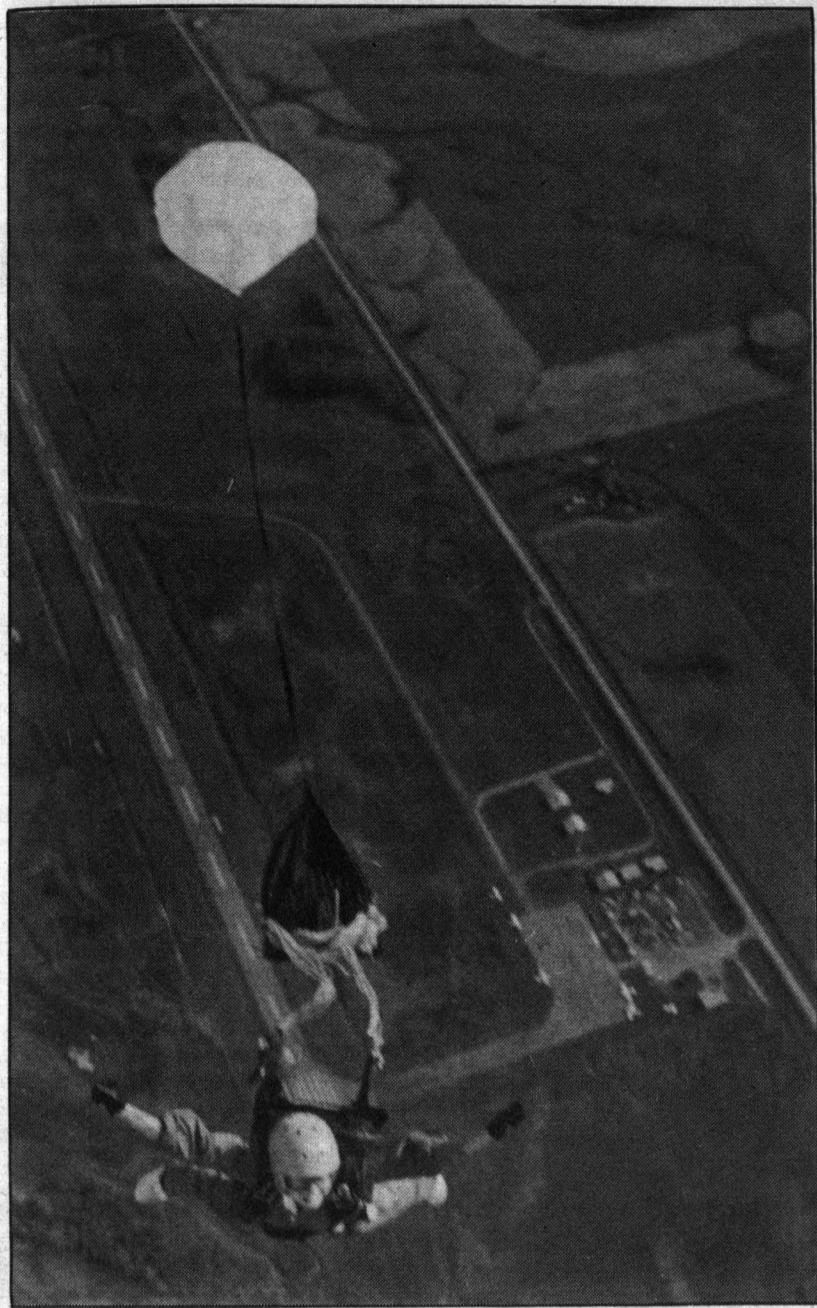


it's a skydiver!



The parachute begins to deploy.

Unlike the previously used round chutes which merely catch air, the square chutes act like a wing, allowing the jumper to virtually fly through the sky. The new canopies allow for greater manoeuvrability and canopy control than ever before. They also make for softer landings.

Canopy control and landing procedures were the next topics on our training agenda. The canopy is steered by two steering handles called toggles. We were told that steering a canopy is as easy as steering a car. To turn the canopy left, the jumper simply pulls down on the left steering toggle and to turn right he pulls down on the right steering toggle. Upon landing, the jumper pulls both toggles down, a little at a time, according to how high he is off the ground.

"I'd stand in line to do it again."

After the first few jumps, the student advances to freefall. In freefall, the student proceeds to progressively higher altitudes which lengthens the time before he deploys his parachute. Eventually he learns freefall skills which allow him to move through the sky and to make formations with other skydivers. This is called relative work.

Experienced skydivers cite freefall and relative work as the most enjoyable aspects of the jump. "Parachuting is fun," says Loh, "but freefall

is a blast!" He offered another reason for continuing in the sport. "It's a great way to take your mind off school for awhile. It's a good break after the end of a hard week."

Finally, we practiced emergency drills — dozens of them. These involved going through the motions of the jump; hanging from an imaginary strut, going into an arch, and rehearsing the count. Then Lyal would call out particular problems and we would respond by demonstrating the correct procedure for each situation.

By the end of the day we were prepared to correct every malfunction imaginable. We joked that we might not know what to do if we had a normal parachute!

It seemed we knew the procedures so well we'd be practicing them in our sleep. This was great for our confidence! "We have nothing to fear but fear itself," said fellow first-jump student Brenda Halland. It was amazing; within the span of a few hours, eight terrified students were transformed into eight fearless flying machines!

All psyched up and ready to go, we waited in anticipation for winds to die down. When they did, there was only enough time for one plane load before sunset. Four of the students, Paul, Masahiko, Steffan, and Stuart, were able to jump. The other students, Laura Gene, Franka, Brenda and I would return on another day.

How did the first four students fare? According to their jumpmaster

Milt, all four had good first jumps and a positive frame of mind.

And what did the students think of it?

"It was great! I loved it!" said Paul. "I'd stand in line to do it again."

The other students shared this sentiment. All four enjoyed their first jumps and wanted to try it again.

Having (almost) conquered my initial fear, I was eager to experience skydiving for myself. Gateway photographer Keith Zukiwski and I drove out to Barrhead the following weekend. It was sunny and calm — a perfect day for the jump.

force of wind pushed me back and down. It was like nothing I had ever felt before. And count? What count? Counting was the last thing from my mind. The next thing I knew I was looking up at a fully opened canopy. As far as I was concerned it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. Talk about relief!

Below me was a spectacular view. It seemed unreal, like a panoramic picture spread out below. Unlike looking down from a tall building, there's no concept of height up there — you have nothing else to compare yourself to. All was silent,



I made it!

Upon arriving, Catherine Berglund, an experienced skydiver, greeted me with a big smile, saying, "You'll jump today. It's guaranteed!"

Sure enough, I soon found myself donning my gear. The weight of the parachute on my back reassured me. It felt very substantial. I climbed into the plane along with my ever-patient photographer, two skydivers and my jumpmaster.

Soon we were in the sky, hovering above the exit point. I waited, desperately trying to calm the butterflies which had taken flight in my stomach. At the signal, I reached out to the strut and eased myself down into a hanging position. At the jumpmaster's "Go!" I fell away from the plane.

I felt an incredible rush as a great

peaceful. The ride ended all too quickly. My landing was surprisingly soft. I must have done something right!

After my jump I was so excited I wanted to tell everyone in sight about it. I remember our instructor's prediction: "After your first jump, you'll want to find a hundred people to tell your story to — that's how many times it'll take before you're tired of telling it." How true it is!

story:
Linda Atchison
photos:
Keith Zukiwski