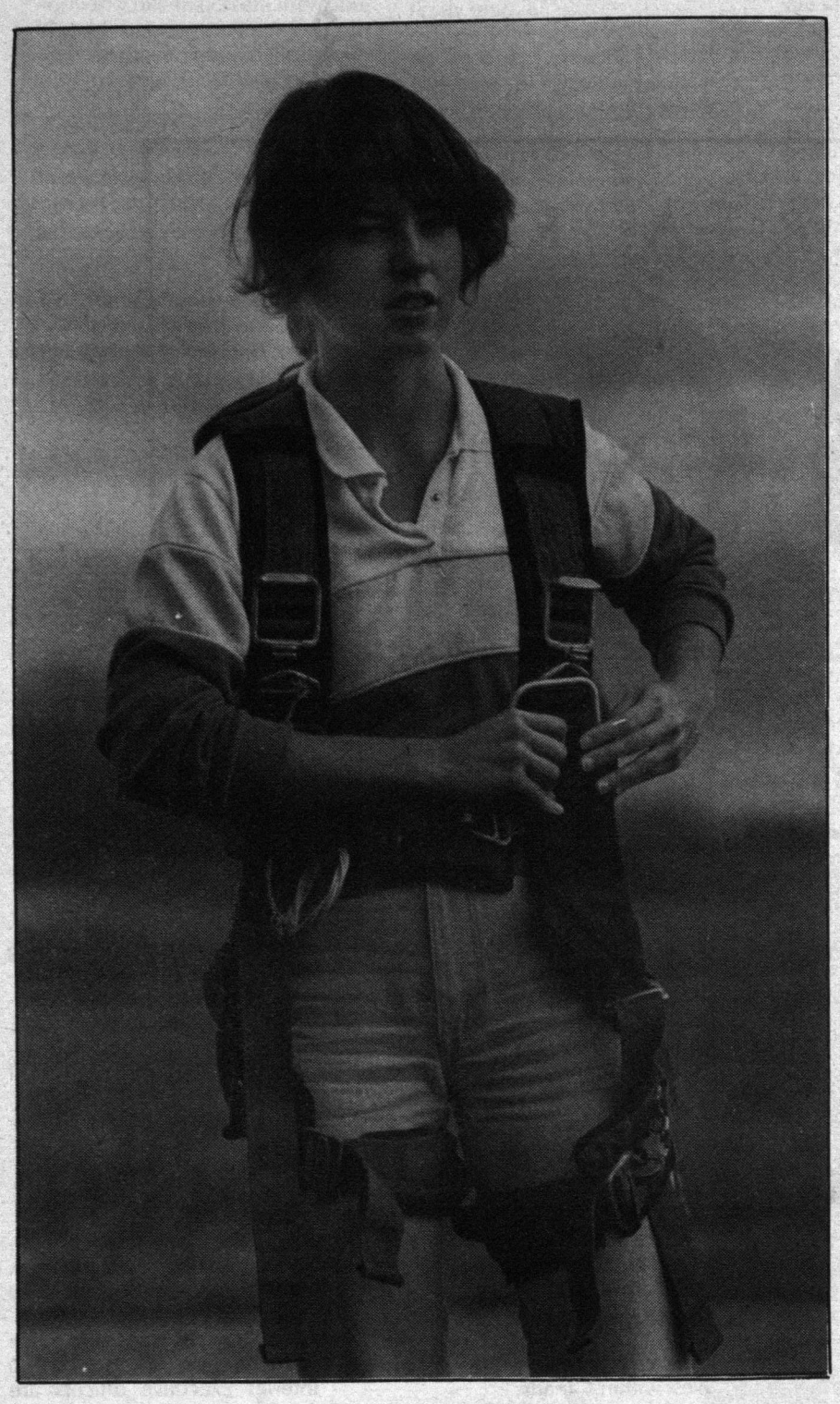
It's a bird, it's a plane,



Intrepid reporter contemplates the jump.

As the airplane climbed higher and higher and I watched the ground falling fast below me, I couldn't help but wonder, "Why am I doing this?"

"Ready?" asked the jumpmaster.

"Ready," I squeaked.

The jumpmaster opened the door. A blast of wind assaulted the plane's tiny cabin. It was time for me to jump.

Skydiving is something I've always had a fascination for. Yet, it wasn't until I met someone who jumps out of planes on a regular basis, that I began to consider taking the plunge myself. His enthusiasm for the sport finally convinced me. I joined up.

The next step was training. A student's first jump is preceded by five to seven hours of instruction. Gone are the days when people would train for weeks, perfecting landing rolls and jumping off towers. Nowadays, the training and the first jump usually takes place in the same day.

So, one Saturday morning, seven other first-jump students and I ventured out to the Drop Zone at Barrhead to commence our training.

Our instructor Lyal, began by showing us the type of parachute we would use and explaining how it worked. So far, so good.

Then he described the steps involved in making the first jump. It begins something like this. After suiting up, four or five jumpers board a Cessna 182 or 185, along with a jumpmaster. The plane reaches 3,000 feet in about ten minutes. At altitude, the pilot directs the plane to the exit point and reduces power. The jumpmaster signals the first jumper to get ready. From a kneeling position by the open door, the jumper steps out onto the plane's wheel (or a step below the door) and takes hold of the strut attached to the wing. Hanging from the strut, he maintains eye-contact with the jumpmaster until given the signal to go. "And don't forget to give him a big smile!" Lyal added.

We practiced aircraft exits on the ground in the remains of a dilapidated old plane — which, Lyal joked, had just been flown last week.

After mastering exits, Lyal explained the rest of the jump. At the jumpmaster's signal, the jumper releases the strut, throwing his body into a spread-eagle arched position. He counts "Arch-thousand, two-thousand, three-thousand, four-thousand, five-thousand, check-thousand, check-canopy."

For the student's first few jumps the main parachute is activated by the jumpmaster. He does this by releasing into the air a miniature parachute called the pilot chute. The pilot chute is attached to the top of the main canopy, and when it inflates, it pulls the main parachute out. With subsequent jumps the student learns to deploy the pilot chute himself.

At "check-thousand" the jumper checks behind him to see that the parachute is deploying, and at "check-canopy" he checks to see if the parachute has opened properly.

The key word here is "if". Malfunctions are rare but can occur. In the event of a malfunction, a skydiver deploys his reserve parachute. Our instructor distinguished between serious malfunctions and the minor problems that the jumper can correct without deploying his reserve chute. Use of the reserves is unnecessary when the malfunction can be corrected with a simpler procedure. Yet, we were instructed that, if ever in doubt, we must pull the reserve ripcord immediately.

...nothing to fear but fear itself

Skydiving is a safer sport than is commonly believed. "Statistically, you're in greater danger driving to the Drop Zone than you are making your jump," says Elliot Loh, president of the U of A Skydivers. "When accidents happen, its usually with experienced skydivers who are fooling around and doing things they know they shouldn't do. I've never heard of any accidents due to sheer equipment failure."

The odds of both parachutes failing are astronomical. Although main parachutes can be packed in under ten minutes, reserve parachutes take hours to pack by a professional rigger who is licensed to do so. The reserves are repacked every 120 days whether they have been used or not.

As a final measure, all student gear is equipped with an automatic activation device. It is activated when the skydiver is falling faster than a certain speed at a predetermined altitude.

Accidents have decreased significantly since the introduction of Ram Air (square) parachutes in 1980.

Hee-hee, you're kidding - right?