

Mankind's oldest dream

by Kim St. Clair

A small group of people assemble themselves in various stages of repose at the top of a hill, their monstrous kites positioned nose-down nearby. The wind has dropped so the bunch must lay about and talk — about competitions, about past flights, about the latest high-performance kite. Never is there mention of casualties; maybe of crash landings in rose patches, but never of broken limbs and death. They're aware of the dangers of the sport and they know how to avoid most accidents.

Slow days like this one are tolerated because of the good ones; when the wind is right, the lift is strong, and a good flyer can soar about a 200 foot hill for half

and hour or more. That's when it all comes together because, as Terry Jones (owner of Birdman Enterprises, Edmonton's only kite manufacturer) puts it, "Once you get into hang-gliding the thrill of it is — well, it's as good as sex."

A nineteen foot long cylindrical package (a rolled up hang-glider) strapped to the roof of a car is still a pretty uncommon sight. It draws all the stares of admiration that a ski rack did ten years ago, although according to Terry, the ego-tripping involved is not the same.

Most flyers are not into the sport he professes, because of the wide-eyes groupies and after hours party talk, but for the sheer joy of flying. In fact, many of them are annoyed by the crowds that gather on roads and at ski resorts, yelling and honking horns while the flyers wait for better wind direction.

At times like this they just continue talking. They might discuss the advantages of using a prone harness, which lets the flyer hang horizontally beneath the spread of the sail. "There's no problem pulling out of a dive when flying prone" says one. "You come down from your flight at twenty, thirty miles an hour, skimming the ground so close that the tall grass brushes against your belly. You push out the bar, the nose shoots up, the sail flares out, you kick off your harness and touch down, standing still."

Talk turns to the competition at Westcastle ski resort a few weeks ago, where one of the flyers was doing wing-overs — cranking his kite into a wing dive, swooping down and straightening out again to dive down off the other wing. A difficult manoeuvre, one that most flyers couldn't pull off.

But it isn't hard to learn the basics of flying a kite, Terry Jones insists. "You learn to fly quite quickly and anyone with a little sense can keep at it without getting hurt. Most accidents occur in bad weather conditions and there have been virtually none in Edmonton at all."

Birdman has sold 200 kites (not all in Edmonton) and has taught nearly 700 students to fly, yet the first accident in three years of instruction occurred three weeks ago when a kid took off without first checking with the instructor. He flew into a tree and broke an arm.

Other than that, there's nothing worse than scratches, bruises, and twisted ankles — in

Edmonton. This is because Edmonton's hills are small, and in good weather, offer little danger.

Statistics are less impressive in other areas of Alberta, though. Accident rates are highest in the foothills and at the mountain ski resorts, but to date, no one has been killed in the province.

Terry believes that much of the layman's fear of hang-gliding is unfounded, but concedes that hang-gliding may never catch on as a fad simply because the danger does exist. He sold a kite to a 67-year-old man once, and many go to 30-45 year-olds, but the majority of flyers are in their early twenties. The first people to catch on to hang-gliding are the daredevils; the adventure seekers. Ego-trippers come next, but these seldom stick to it. What Alberta has now is a troop of hard-core enthusiasts, a rather small circle of devotees who fly just for the sake of flying.

For instance, at the recent provincial hang-gliding competition at Canyon Ski resort in Red Deer, competitors, unhappy with wind direction at the designated flying area, just got up and left for another site. Terry was there, and he was the first to move to the other side of the valley. "To hell with the competition," he said. "I'm going to go do some flying."

And so, much to the consternation of those trying to judge the event, flyers plunked a few cases of beer on the river ice and ignored the competition.

serves as a meeting place for flyers. A telephone list is posted on the wall, and there's usually someone available to go off on an outing with.

Lessons are given for beginners; in fact, Birdman won't sell a kite to a novice unless he takes lessons first. This, Terry explains, is both for the sake of safety and to keep inexperienced flyers from giving hang-gliding a bad name.

For \$50, students get ground school instruction and two 4-hour sessions on the hill. Trainer kites are provided, and damages to them are covered by the company.

Flying is allowed off only four hills in Edmonton — Canard Park, Winterburn, Government Hill and Whitemud Skihill. Other sites used are at Namao, Pigeon Lake, and Hinton, which has a 1,400 foot high, mile long hill which is excellent for prolonged soaring.

After lessons are over, a novice is faced with costs of between \$500 and \$750 for a standard, mothshaped Rogallo glider. (Birdman designs and makes 12 different models, including tow gliders for water launching.) High performance kites, which can glide on half the wind a Rogallo can, go for \$800 to \$1,150.

A bit extravagant for most people? Perhaps so, and perhaps the risk is just enough to keep most from flocking to kite shops in droves. But there are 20 manufacturers in Canada now, a



photo Brent Hallert

The casual kind of camaraderie that exists among Alberta kite-flyers is not hard to break into, says Terry. In Edmonton, Birdman's kite shop on Argyle Rd. (soon moving to a larger shop a few blocks away)

substantial increase over recent years. And most of the 3000 flyers in Canada are going to stick with it, Terry believes, because man has at last realized the purest form possible of an age-old dream.



photo Kim St Clair

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instruction; which limits climbing instruction to all but the well-to-do in our society.

In Britain it's different. The government sponsors outdoor recreation centers where young people can go for lessons in climbing techniques for only a modest fee. The army runs climbing schools for regular personnel as well as summer militia and reserves. The result is a great deal of Britons climb —

and climb well (in spite of the rabbit-tiger bickering.).

But things are changing on the Canadian climbing scene, especially in Alberta, which has some of the finest mountains in the world practically at its doorstep. The provincial government has opened an adult outdoor recreation center near Hinton, Alberta, where canoeing, back-packing and mountaineering courses are taught during the summer months. The climbing courses are for two and four day periods and the cost is a minimal charge of \$8 per day. Further information can be obtained by writing Blue Lake Centre, Box 850, HINTON, Alberta, T0E 1B0.

The Alpine Club of Canada runs a basic course in rock climbing and snow and ice. This consists of a lecture series and three practical sessions. Information from Rick Checkland (fourth-year Zoology student who co-ordinates the introductory program) can be had by phoning 436-1059.

The North-West Mountaineers (affiliated with the Canadian Youth Hostels Association) is a group which runs a number of informal outings throughout the summer and, various rock and snow and ice schools in conjunction with Hans Schwartz of Jasper.

Further info is available at the Hostel shop on 109th St. or from David Pors (the Mountaineers' president and third-year zoology student on campus) at 489-5247.



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