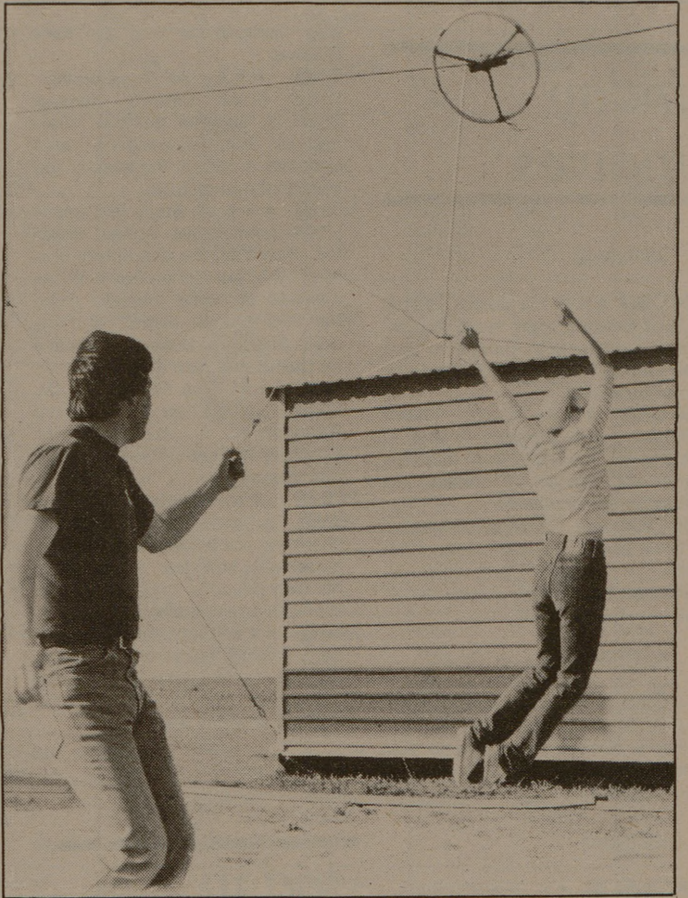


Michelle Datten practices how to land using the "banana" position. (right — top and bottom) Two Aggies and a Teasip suit up to jump. (left)

3...2...1...Jump!



by Robert McGlohon

Battalion Staff

The little Cessna bumps and side-slips its way into the air on the last leg of a month-long journey, the final step to be a 3,000 foot jump — an adventurous end to hasty beginning.

Stopping by the parachute club table at Rudder fountain had been nothing more than impulse. But after asking many questions, my name was on the dotted line. My mind was made up. I was committed.

The response to one of the questions I had asked that day kept repeating itself in my head like a scratchy 45 stuck on repeat.

"How long does a 3,000 foot jump take?"

"Oh, about 23 seconds — but that's only if your 'chute doesn't open."

I didn't back out.

We met early the next Saturday, about 7 a.m., at the McDonald's near Skaggs. It was a small group: Joe O'Leary, the club vice president, a man with 74 jumps under his belt; Ricky Strong, who was going for his second jump; Michelle Datten, a 5-foot 2-inch freshman; and me. Michelle and I were the only first-jumpers.

Two hours later, our little convoy pulled into Manor, a small town off Highway 290 about 15 miles from Austin. Turning right at the town's only light, we followed the signs to the muddy dirt road that led to Bird's Nest Airport, home of the Austin Parachute Center.

My thoughts snap back to the present as the plane hits a rough pocket of air and jumps five feet to the right — or so it seems to me. I gather up the courage to look out the window; it's a sunny blue sky day. The rushing wind mingles the sweet scents of spring with the sharp odor of gasoline, taking me back to early

summer weekends spent mowing lawns.

Below, about 1,000 feet now, the intricate patterns of nature, invisible to man's usual worm's eye view of earth, are starting to take shape. Veins run through the blocked grain fields, as if to carry nature's lifeblood.

In the back of the cramped plane, one of my companions hands the jumpmaster his check book, which has fallen out of his pocket.

We're told not to worry: if it falls, it'll bounce back up. Great. A comedian. Hope he isn't into practical jokes.

My thoughts drift away again as I try to recall my training. It seems such a long time ago.

About 15 of us had been crowded into the small classroom, scattered about on chairs, tables or the floor. Up front, the instructor stood before a blackboard.

For the next hour or two he worked his way through a long and complicated outline, which represented everything a virgin parachutist needs to know. As it turned out, it was a whole lot more than we needed to know. There's actually nothing to parachuting; you need to know how to jump, how to steer and how to land — relatively simple procedures.

Of the three — jumping, steering and landing — only steering was discussed in any detail; the others were physical skills, better learned by practice than talk.

Even steering, the most cerebral of the tasks, isn't especially difficult. Put simply: to turn right, pull on the right steering cord; to turn left, pull on the left steering cord; to go faster, face with the wind; to go slower, face into the wind. Even the Aggies in the class could understand that.

So what did we spend almost two hours learning? What to do

if something went wrong.

What to do in a water landing.

What to do in a power line landing.

In a tree landing.

If the parachute doesn't open.

If the parachute opens wrong.

Our instructor warned us repeatedly that parachuting is not a safe sport.

The pilot interrupts my thoughts by announcing we've reached the halfway mark — 1,500 feet. I check to see if my reserve parachute is covered. If it accidentally escapes, it could pull me through the back of the plane. I try not to think of that but of my training instead.

After the classroom instruction we went to the practice harnesses. There we learned to count and CUS — Check the parachute. Undo the reserve ripcord. Steer.

Two harnesses hung from the ceiling. With the rest of class looking on, we were strung up in pairs and told to yell at the top of our lungs:

One thousand. Two thousand. Three thousand. Four thousand. Five thousand. Six thousand. CUS.

Is the parachute open — correctly? Good.

Now, undo the lanyard tying the reserve ripcord to the main parachute. Great.

Steer that sucker. You've got it.

But that wasn't the end. The rest of that long day was spent in practice. Practice and more practice.

We went through emergency procedures. No parachute — cover, pull and punch. Fouled parachute — cut away. Tree landing — cover face, banana position. Keep your knees together.

We learned how to exit the plane and jump and then prac-

ticed it repeatedly.

We practiced landing by jumping from a trolley over a gravel pit. That was the cut-off point. Do it twice, perfectly, and you passed. If you couldn't land correctly, you failed and your money was refunded. Maybe I should have failed.

All that was a month ago. I sure hope I remember it. We weren't able to jump that day because the wind was too high. Toward the end of the day we suited up — a painful experience. Those rigs are tight. The wind seemed to be dying down. It did, but by then it was too dark.

We're almost there now. I'm running out of time. Quickly, I try to review everything.

The jumpmaster opens the door. I'm to be the first out.

"What are you thinking ab-

out?" he asks.

"My sins," I reply.

O.K. Feet out.

Exit the plane.

I'm standing on the step over the wheel, holding onto the strut of the wing. The wind threatens to blow me from my perch prematurely.

I don't look down.

I look over at the jumpmaster.

He pauses ...

"GO!"

The Texas A&M Sport Parachute Club meets to jump every weekend. The price for the first jump, training included, is \$76. Non-members are welcome. For more information call Joseph A. O'Leary at 696-3173 or Steven Haskett at 779-3775.