

10,000 — OR — BUST

□ Skydiving from a mile-and-a-half above the ground has its ups and downs, but mostly down

ALBANY — It all began with a phone call.

I came home from class one afternoon to find my answering machine flashing. I pressed the button, listening to just about the last voice I expected to hear that day.

The message was left by University junior Drew Holmes, an instructor at the Willamette Valley Parachuting Club. He heard I was interested in skydiving, and what he said got me even more interested.

"Ten-thousand feet of pure adrenaline," Holmes said through my machine.

Yet looking down from the plane Saturday, 10,000 feet from the earth, adrenaline was the last thing on my mind. Life itself seemed more important.

But I survived, obviously, or else this story would never be told through my mouth.

Friends who knew I was going skydiving thought I was crazy. Holmes, who has made his fair share of jumps, jokingly told me I was crazy. And by the time I finished my two-hour lesson Saturday morning, I was convinced I was crazy.

It made me wonder what sort of people actually go through with a jump or do it as a hobby or a career. Thrill-seekers? One-timers?

"It's a different breed of people," Holmes said. "Ninety percent of the people — we never see them again. Most people just want to do it once to say, 'I jumped out of an airplane.'"

Club co-owner Mike McGee said the popularity of skydiving is at an all-time



Jake Berg waits in the plane (lower left) before ascending to 10,000 feet and skydiving (above left). The "mad bomber" after touchdown (above).

Story by Jake Berg

Photos by Ginger Sonnie



high because of interest sparked by the movie *Point Break* and two commercials depicting skydiving.

"Skydiving has become less and less of a crazy-person sport," said McGee, who began the skydiving business at the Knox Butte Flying Club in January 1988.

The lesson began with a series of vid-

eotapes outlining the equipment we would be using during our tandem jump, a common way for a person to make his/her first jump. In a tandem jump, which was first used in 1982, an instructor is strapped to the jumper's back to guide the jumper along.

Following the videos, students go through a series of simulated training exercises meticulously designed to help the tandem reach the ground safely.

Students are taught how to exit the plane, and once they've done that, they are told how to fly for the first 5,000 feet of freefall. When the student reaches the 5,000-foot level — the altitude is indicated on an altimeter worn on the student's chest — the student is supposed to pull the ripcord.

"I have a vested interest in reaching the ground with the chute out," instructor Vic Napier told me with a smile.

Sounds easy, right?

I had gone through all the training 10 times in my head, practiced the motions for freefall twice that, and then I began to experience my first feelings of nervous-

ness. I finally realized that I was going to fall one-and-a-half miles from the sky.

Gulp.

I pulled up the blue full-body coveralls (adorned with the appropriate logo "10,000 or Bust") over my shorts and t-shirt, traded my cap for a crash helmet, and placed a pair of wraparound goggles on my face. Someone made the comment that I looked like a "mad bomber."

The "mad" part was sure right.

McGee, my tandem partner, suited me in a four-loop harness that would be used just prior to the jump as our connection. He also took care of the parachute, which would be strapped to his back — and he to me — though I would actually pull the ripcord.

We stepped into the small aircraft — me, McGee, Napier and his student, University senior Pat Malach, and the pilot, of course. I was really going to do this. Wow.

The airplane engine started, and I

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