

TAKING THE PLUNGE

It seemed like a good idea at the time, jumping out of a plane, 3500 ft up, but then came the moment of truth.

My vertigo is quite specific. While loving to sip cognacs languidly and gaze down at cloud formations from the relative safety of an airline cabin, I have long harbored a lurking terror of falling from a great height. I'm not sure why, having, for example, no childhood memories of being dangled by Jesuits over a balcony by my ankles. But my motto has always been – enjoy the view and stay well away from the edge.

Chris Miller, by contrast, has plunged to earth nearly 1,000 times from around 13,000ft. This 38 year old prophet of skydiving seems at home in his extra terrestrial jumpsuit and was bitten by the craze after doing a charity jump to buy a guide dog 10 years ago. He recently opened a Manchester Parachute School for first-timers.

“Your body is programmed to be in contact with the earth”, he tells potential panickers. “You must develop the mental strength to deal with this”.

For me, the prospect of attending the Stockport-based school was almost as traumatic as the drop itself. I arrived inauspiciously and a touch inebriated, vainly trying to enter the fourth floor converted office space via the fire escape. My confidence had been boosted somewhat by a bar stool chat with Charlene, a former model who now works for the Child Support Agency.

She said she'd made a parachute jump – with “no problems” – and had flown with the Red Arrows. But she was most keen to publicize her latest feat – taking her top off on a Friday night in Idols bar.

Sitting with nine fellow students and hearing Chris speak of “nuisance factors” and “malfunctions”, I swiftly sobered up, recalling the Gulf War term “collateral damage” – a euphemism for “civilian deaths”.

It became clear, however, that Chris's training programme is laudably thorough. We were readied for every eventuality and reassured that

this really is quite a safe sport, with a lower injury rate than, say rugby.

By the end of the second night's training, I was almost optimistic and seduced by videos of skydivers dancing with the clouds.

But some nagging worries remained. It was a more complex business than I had expected. We were to use highly maneuverable, rectangular parachutes and would be expected to steer ourselves to a precise landing area.

"Do you want to be a pilot or a passenger of your parachutes?" Chris had asked, rhetorically. But though I might become an expert at leaving a mock plane at three feet, I could still freeze on the big day. "Can't you give me a push?", I inquired.

The other students seemed relaxed about the challenge. Only Paula Pearce, a 28 year old community health worker from Chorlton, and our lone woman, would admit to any misgivings. Her husband, Richard, had kindly paid for her jump as a birthday present.

Yet, in the end, she made one of the most confident of leaps and landed, correctly, on her feet.

The common response from this class of mostly twentysomethings was: "I've always wanted to do this – and before I get too old".

Darren Stevens, a van driver from Dukinfield, had been roped in when dropping chairs off to the school.

"Chris just wanted to get some of his money back", he mused. His mate, Mike Hardy, an aircraft refurbisher, said he might follow this jump by leaping off a mountain.

I prepared for the appointment with fear by taking a glance through history. It was a mixed story. The Chinese emperor, Shun, survived a leap from a high tower, 3,500 years ago, by flapping two large reed hats. But the legendary English king, Bladud, broke his neck when he tried to similarly impress his subjects.

This year is the bicentennial of the first parachute jump, made by Andre Guernerin, from a balloon over Paris.

However, when Englishman Robert Coding came up with an “improved” inverted cone shaped contraption in 1837, he plunged to his death in front of a brass band. There was no band when we arrived, early on a Saturday, at the Target Parachute Club, a collection of prefabs, caravans, and light aircraft at Hibaldstow, near Scunthorpe.

At first, I fervently hoped that we would not be forced by poor weather to consider staying there overnight. But I soon sensed the charm of a place which attracts up to 50 devoted gravity defiers each weekend, together with assorted novices.

Annette Houlker, a friendly 35 year old from Darwen, was dividing the day between playing with her 16 month old son, Ben, and skydiving. A former British girls record holder, Annette carried on jumping until she was six and a half months pregnant arguing that the risks were minimal.

“You gain confidence through knowledge of what you are doing and of your equipment”, she said. What was the joy of it all?

“It can’t be explained, only experienced”, she replied. “We are not fanatics, just focused”. She and her husband line chimneys for a living.

We were treated to several sublime displays by skydivers, who made our impending jump seem tame. They appeared as dots in the sky, hurtling in free fall at about 120mph before releasing their canopies and gliding skillfully to earth. And all we had to do was get out of the plane and remember our drills.

Our static line parachutes would almost certainly inflate within four seconds. In an emergency, reserve chutes could be activated. That’s all we had to do.

At about 2.30, we dropped our gear and were driven in an open truck to a tiny plane. Once I was squeezed inside, up and away, and

inches from an open exit, the drills, and the count which we were supposed to yell out on leaving the aircraft, faded from my mind. I was struggling to defy an instinct which screamed at me not to jump into a void.

I was to go second, following someone who was grinning broadly in anticipation. Chris gave me some encouraging words. My barber, Lew, had advised me to think of a joke, so I recalled Bernard Manning's recent calamitous fall from his stage.

"Right, in the door....." Number one had already gone, no doubt still smiling deliriously. I shuffled to the brink and on hearing the word "Go!", slithered out, twisting inelegantly downwards, until I was abruptly caught, and felt suspended in mid-air. Serenity.

A voice resounded from the one way intercom inside my helmet.

"Right, John, you've got a good canopy, a good canopy".

I looked up. It looked good. Calmly, I viewed the patchwork fields and matchbox buildings below. Glowing in the sun's warm embrace and relishing the wind, I grasped my steering toggles. Without navigational directions from the ground, I might have drifted anywhere, but was too elated to care.

I was in heaven and whooped with delight – before falling, softly, into a ploughed field.

* **Manchester Parachute School: Tel 0161 7986895.**