

Story by Jen Deselms
Photos by Paul Vonderlage



Photographer Paul Vonderlage gets his picture taken by reporter Jen Deselms as he lands in the landing area south of the airstrip.



Jen Deselms gets her equipment checked a final time before the critical moment by Greg Lamb, instructor and one of the owners of the skydiving center.



David Rabe, instructor and one of the owners of the skydiving center, releases his grip from the strut to glide a quarter of a mile to the ground.

Skydiver can't forget parachute and guts

DN reporter braves the fear

It's better to go like this than in some senseless tragedy. I mean I'd rather burn in at 200 miles per hour and have some laughs than to eat it in a car accident."

—Truman Sparks in "Fandango" These words and the hilariously dangerous skydiving scene from "Fandango" kept popping to my mind, giving me a false sense of bravado. But then I discovered being brave wasn't really enough for skydiving — I needed to know what I was doing.

I walked to the plane with the pack on my back feeling like the hunchback of Notre Dame. At the plane, Crete Skydiving Center instructor Greg Lamb doublechecked my equipment and hooked the static line on my parachute to a ring inside the plane. The static line, which pulls tight when the jumper leaves the plane, automatically releases the main parachute.

Inside the plane, I began to feel nervous. On the way up, Greg pointed out the increasing altitudes until we reached 3,000 feet. Then he opened the door and threw out a roll of paper to check the drift of the wind. With the door open, it got a little chilly, and I got tense. Paul Vonderlage, Daily Nebraskan photographer, was sitting in the back with his camera, and I knew he thought my anxiety was funny.

When we got to where I was going to jump, Greg told us to put our feet out and stop. I scooted to the doorway and tried to put my feet out on the step. It was easy on the ground, but up here the wind was pushing my feet away from the step. I put my feet on the step, but then I remembered being told to stay

before I was ready. Get all the way out, Greg said. With my feet on the step and my hands on the strut, I edged my way out. When I had my hands out as far as they would go, I took my feet off the step and hung from the strut. The wind blew my body into a more horizontal position so hanging on was as easy as Paul, on his second jump, and the instructors had told me.

I looked back at Greg for the last instruction. Look up, he said. I looked up at the red dot on the underside of the wing and paused — I'm not sure for how long, maybe a second, and I don't know why. Fear?

After what seemed like a long time, I said, "Dot," let go, arched my body and started counting.

It's hard to remember exactly what I was thinking because everything was going so fast. The first thing that was clear to me as I watched the red dot get farther away was that my stomach was up in my chest somewhere. I didn't feel as if I was going to throw up, but it reminded me of the first time I went on the Screamroller as a child. Intense fun.

All of this took just a couple of seconds. By the time I counted to two, I could feel the chute leaving the pack, and I looked back for it even though I was supposed to wait several more seconds. Then I remembered I was still supposed to be counting and got back into my arch.

The next thing I knew, I was sitting under an open chute. It was easy

peaceful, like sitting on a swing in your backyard but with a better view. I sat there for a second or two kind of dazed. Then I put my hands in the steering toggles and started turning, looking for the airport.

It was quiet. All I could hear was the wind. It was eerie, so I started talking to myself, saying dumb things like: "You did it, Jen, now just guide it near the airport."

The time seemed to drag yet go fast because soon I was worrying about landing on the cement runway. I really had nothing to fear because I was still a lot higher than I thought. When I got to what I thought was 15 feet from the ground, (it turned out to be higher), I pulled both the toggles down as far as I could to slow down. I looked down, and the ground seemed to be coming at me extremely fast; yet logically, I knew I was slowing down. My feet touched down in a muddy cornfield, and I did my landing roll. I got up from the corn and collected my chute, feeling pretty impressed with myself. Another student congratulated me, and I couldn't help but grin.

Paul went up next. He landed in about the same spot, but with a lot more grace and style. He touched down lightly and didn't have to roll around in the mud.

Weeks earlier I agreed to do a story on skydiving, disregarding the horror stories and attacks on my sanity by family and friends.

"Did you hear about the guys who

went off course and landed in a garbage dump and broke their legs?" "A couple of guys got off course and drifted through a trap shooting club..." By lesson time I had tired of my father's question: "Why would anyone want to jump out of a perfectly good airplane?"

For training the night before the jump, Paul and I went to the home of instructors Greg and Steve Lamb.

The brothers are among five owners of the skydiving center. All the owners have other jobs, and the brothers say they don't expect to make a lot of money from the center but want to come out enough ahead to

pay for the costs of their sport. Lessons at the center in Crete, one of two in the Lincoln area, cost \$90 for the first lesson with lower rates for groups and \$30 for later static-line jumps.

The training lasted several hours that night, and afterward I began to wonder if I would remember all the steps.

The next morning I gained confidence from several training exercises that covered every step.

At home, I called my parents. My mom answered the phone and asked how the jump went.

"It was great."
"Oh no," she said.



Steve Lamb, also one of the owners and instructors at the skydiving center, carefully inspects his parachute for his next jump.