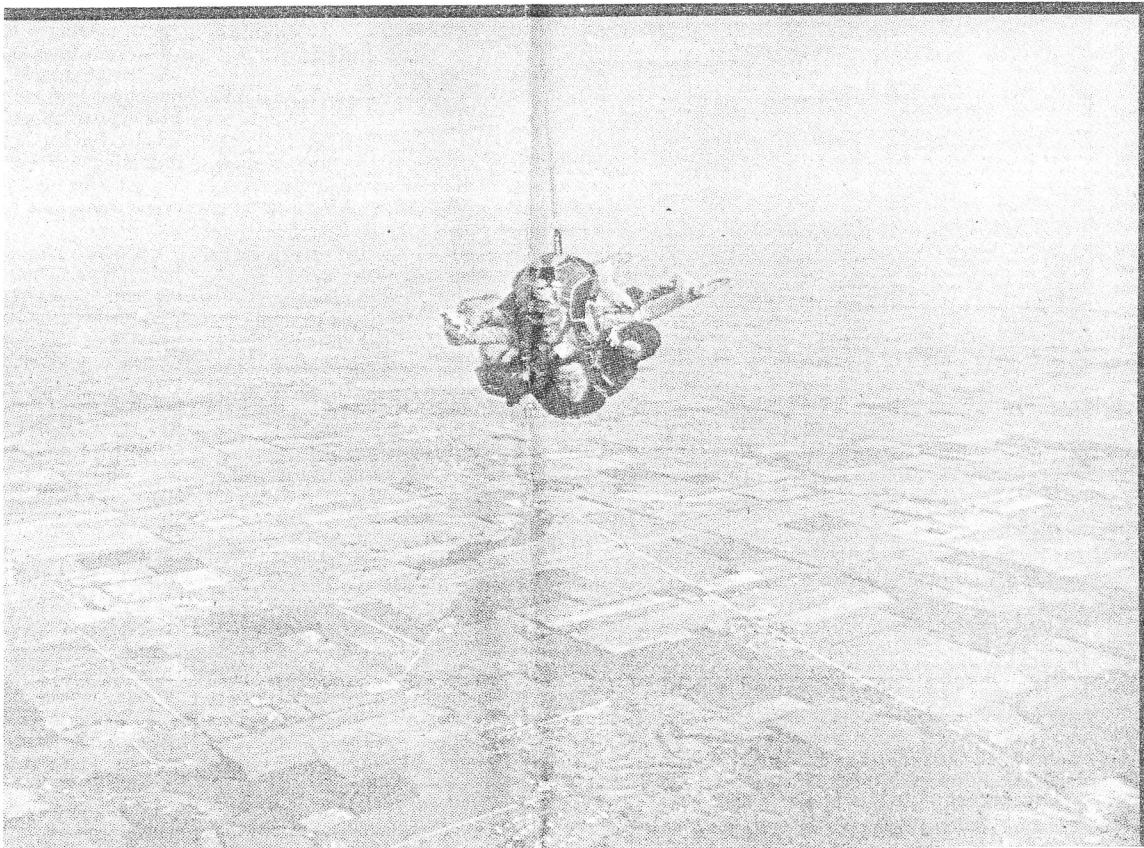


CHUTING THE BREEZE



me Vought talks big and is a "hot dog" skydiver," but "He knows what he's doing," he adds.

It's windy when they throw open the door to sight the landing area. Bill slaps me on the shoulder, gives the frightened rookie the thumbs up, and smiles. He's on the strut. He throws himself backward, and he's gone — no sound at all.

The plane's banking so Jody can watch his student — but everyone's got a parachute on but me. Nothing to hang on to. Hope I don't fall out. I don't.

Jody's pointing at an altimeter strapped to his wrist. Ten thousand feet! He'd told me we were going to only 9,000 feet — as if it makes any difference at this height.

I'm nodding — and then telling him I don't know why I'm up here anyway — let's call it a wrap and go home. Last minute jitters. Maybe my friends had something there — maybe I *am* nuts.

Too late.

He's hooking and strapping me and my harness to him and his. We are attached now at shoulders and legs.

As I crouch in front of him, he plants his right foot out onto the step. My feet follow, then his other foot. We both duck so Jody, leaning forward over me, can fit through the tiny plane door.

His hands are on mine, helping me defy the 70 to 80 mph winds hitting us face-on, and helping me grab the struts.

It's windy. I've never felt wind like this. And cold. And clear — we can see the Fermi nuclear plant in Monroe, the Huron Towers in Ann Arbor, Lake Erie and the city of Toledo.

The farms are green and precisely laid out. It's all so small and pretty and perfect. The sky is blue, no clouds for miles.

NO WARNING! He didn't give me any warning! We're falling — 120 mph toward the earth, nearly two miles below us. I'm screaming in shock. My ears are plugged.

Then I stop. Silence, except for the wind bashing into us. Jody's tapping me on the head, urging me to look at the photographer who jumped out just a second behind us. My brain has