

On a prayer and a wing...

By **FREEMAN GREGORY**

Staff Writer

My mother's Sunday school class prayed for me last Sunday.

They weren't afraid I was going to fall from grace. They were praying because I was about to fall from an airplane.

I kneeled with cramped legs in the small Cessna and held a little prayer service of my own as it climbed to 3,000 feet — the altitude from which I was supposed to skydive.

Earlier in the week, I had made the mistake of saying I wouldn't mind making a jump for a story. My editor called the bluff.

Staff photographer Henry Bargas and I traveled to the airport located on the Crane flatlands and took part in an intensive one-day skydiving course. Jumpmasters Brent Berry and Mary Butcher taught school.

We were scheduled to go up about 5:30 p.m., but wind conditions changed late in the evening and one jumper landed unharmed in nearby power lines, briefly causing our jump to be canceled.

After a day of mental preparation, we were both disappointed and relieved when the jump was scratched. But then conditions improved and we went up, even as dark was falling.

Another jumper accompanied us and leaped first. I watched while he overshot the airfield and landed across Highway 385.

"Get out of the plane," Berry said. I swung my legs out of the open door-

way and reached for the strut.

"Get ready," he said.

I stood and swung my left foot out to the edge of the jump step. Then I placed my other hand on the strut and hung my right leg off into space.

"Go!"

I faced forward, shrugged my shoulders and let go of the strut. The roar of the Texas wind was deafening.

Then the parachute deployed and there was no sound at all. Very briefly, I thought I had died. I could hear neither the airplane nor the wind.

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The sun had passed three-quarters of the way beneath the horizon and washed the approaching cloud cover with pink and dark blue pastels.

I was alone and suddenly it was magnificent. I was a floating adrenalin factory.

The ride lasted about three minutes and I watched the ground rush toward me. I landed with a jolt and rolled, just as Butcher had taught us. Bargas followed me down, landing 100 yards closer to the airport than I.

We were hailed by friends and members of the Crane Jump Club, who said we accomplished something great. Maybe we did. But the ground felt good afterward. Very good.

