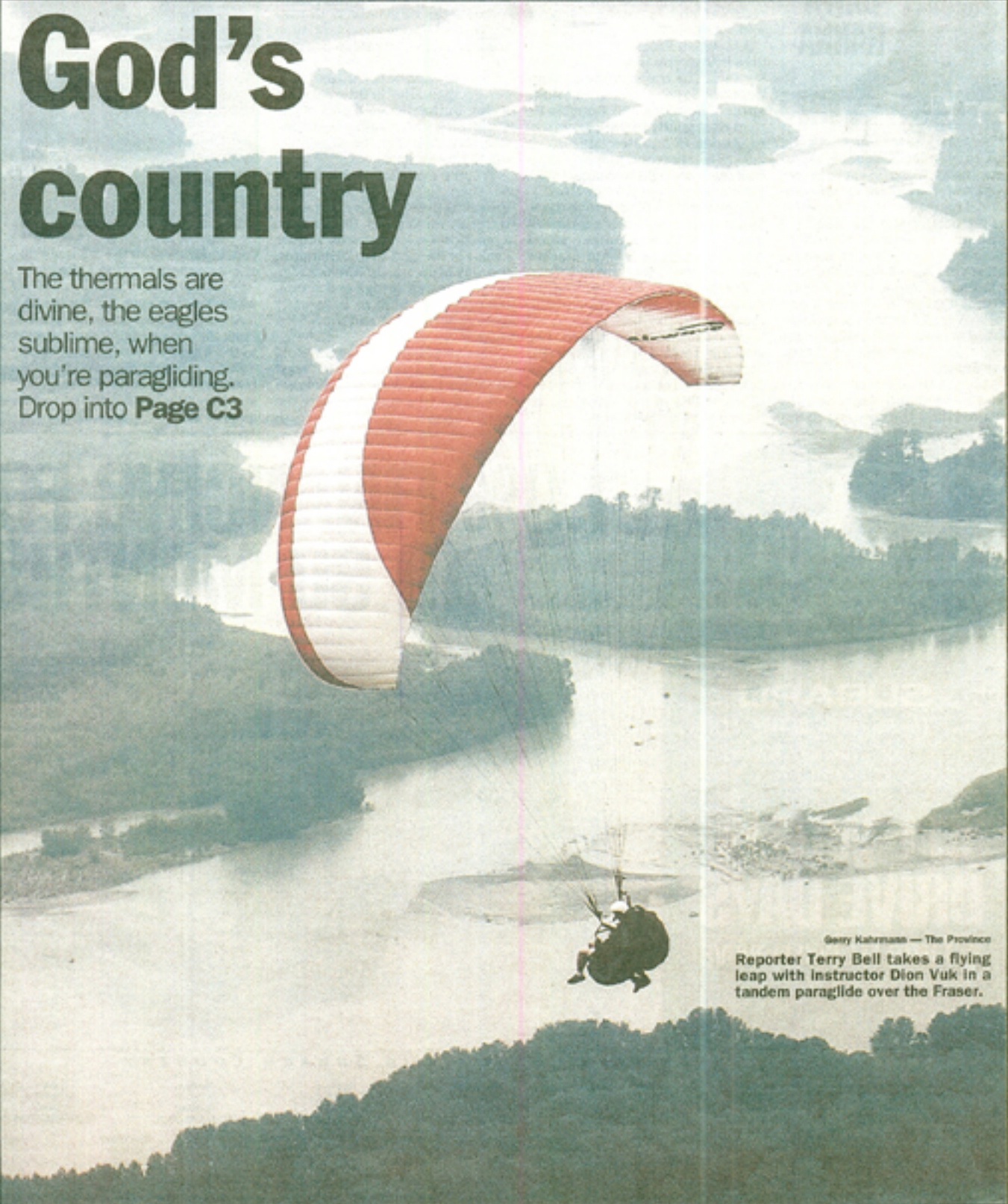


Adventure!

God's country

The thermals are divine, the eagles sublime, when you're paragliding. Drop into **Page C3**



Geary Kahrman — The Province
Reporter Terry Bell takes a flying leap with instructor Dion Vuk in a tandem paraglide over the Fraser.



TRICKY BERTH
Sail early or risk holiday weekend blues **C4-5**



RIDING HIGH
Blink and you'll miss racer Ron Houniet **C6-7**

Eagles share aerial dance

Landings can be a hurdle, especially in a farmer's field

By Terry Bell
Staff Reporter

Trust. Ultimately that's what it comes down to the first time you do something like this.

You sit in what looks like a canvas version of a kid's car seat and float 3,000 feet above the ground. You move in a kind of aerial dance with eagles and hawks. Above you a 15-metre long nylon wing seems to hang by a thread.

It's paragliding, the latest and quite possibly the coolest way man has yet devised to take himself above and beyond.

I didn't have to do much on my initial flight earlier this week at Mt. Woodside, near Harrison Hot Springs. Flight instructor Dion Vuk made sure of that. I just put my head down and charged hard off the side of a mountain till my boots were treading on air, nothing beneath me but forest, rivers and fields and wide open sky.

What you hear up there is silence. Only Vuk asking for a hard lean to the right or the left to help steer.

Off in the distance a hawk floats in a thermal, a rising mass of warm air that is to paragliders what two feet of fresh powder is to a slider.

"When you hit a thermal it's like the hand of God pushing you up into the sky," says Vuk, whose passion now is training pilots to seek God's gentle push.

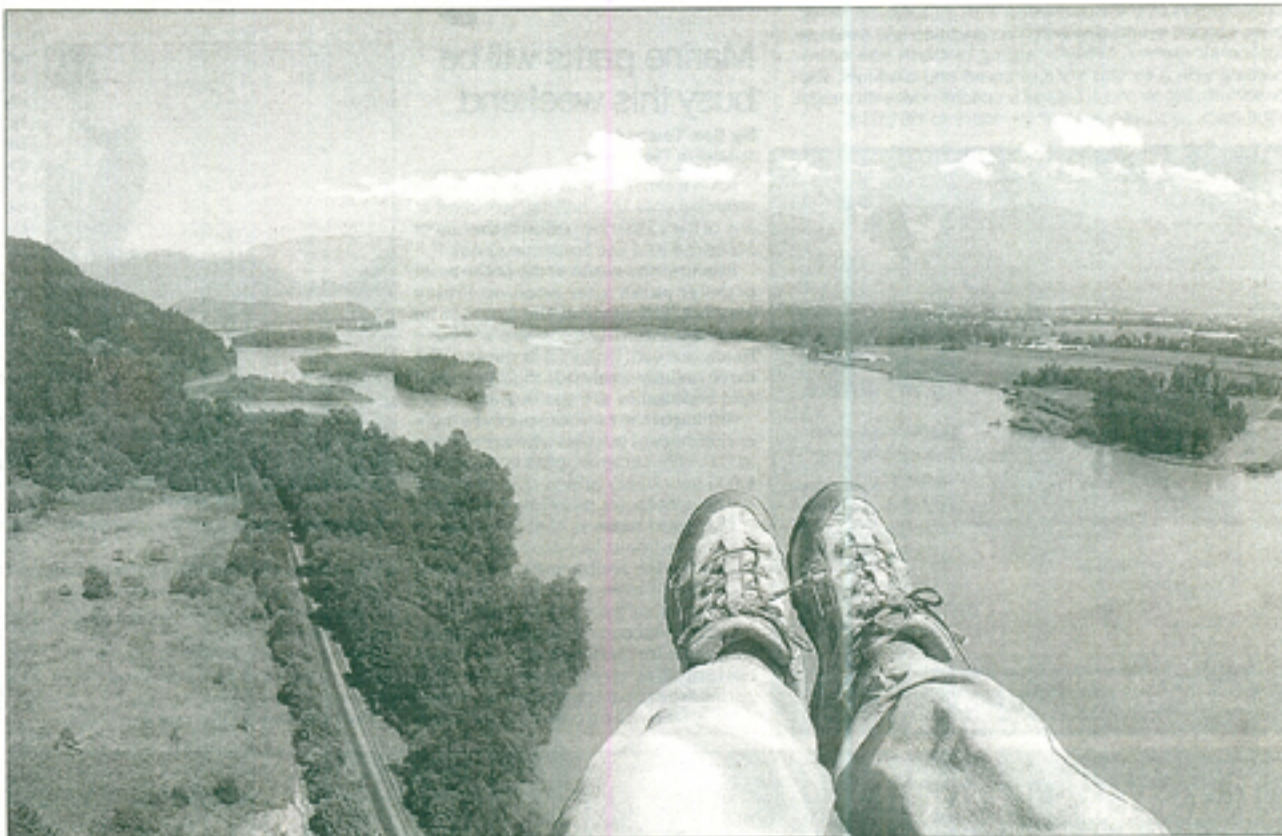
I'm told to lean hard to the right, forcing my body horizontal to the ground below. It's a bit freaky. But by now any previous apprehensions have vanished into air more warm and clear than thin.

We do a spiral. Sometimes experienced pilots can reach 100 kilometres per hour in a spiral.

Down we go. Gently. Till it's time to land with a running stop in a farmer's field — but more on that later. This flight lasted about 15 minutes. It could easily have lasted hours had it not been for our own time constraints.

Vuk has had a flight last eight hours. No movie required.

Born in Zagreb, Croatia, Vuk first dreamed of flying as a kid growing up in Toronto. He was hooked on the space race and NASA and wanted to be an astronaut. When he'd fly a kite, he'd wonder what it would be like if there was a kite so big it could just lift him up into



Gerry Kahrmann — The Province



Photographer Gerry Kahrmann checks his shoelaces before hitting the ground running at a landing spot by the Fraser. Left: Reporter Terry Bell and instructor Dion Vuk (right) prepare for takeoff.

inquotes

"When you hit a thermal it's like the hand of God pushing you up into the sky. This is better than I'd ever dreamed. We're the first generation that can say the sky is our playground and we can play with the birds."

— Instructor, Dion Vuk

into a remote Mexican village, amazing swarms of wide-eyed children.

That, he says, is probably the highlight in eight years of flying.

Of course, limits are tested in this sport. Although paragliding is no where near the pure adrenaline rush of skydiving, limits are pushed.

Vuk soared to 16,000 feet a few years ago in the Rockies above Golden. The world record for the longest flight is well over 400 kilometres, held by Canadian Will Gadd.

A French couple has even paraglided off the highest summit on each of the world's continents. Try packing a hang glider to the top of Mt. Everest!

The sport even has competitions. This weekend at the Bridal Falls Air Races east of Chilliwack, paragliders will spread their colourful wings and transform the sky into a Monet.

But whether competition's your goal or just the sharing of a thermal with an eagle, Vuk likes to teach. He says he can have you ready to solo in eight hours if you're keen and focused. To obtain a pilot's licence you'd need a minimum of 30 supervised flights in addition to passing both a written exam and a flight test.

Equipment costs between \$4,000 and 6,000.

(Details are available at 604 681-4459 or at Vuk's website: iparaglide.com)

Of course, there are risks. A flyer sometimes lands in the trees. A few have even died. One pilot drowned when he landed in a lake and, rather than swimming to shore, tried to drag his paraglider with him.

But that's a fluke. Championing the sport's safety is of huge concern to Vuk and he's prepared for the inevitable questions and assumptions about danger.

In all his flights, Vuk has had to put his hand on the safety parachute just three times. He's never needed to pull the chute on a flight.

Now he's trying to convince B.C.'s ski resorts that paragliding is safe and should be welcomed in the same way it is in Europe.

"There are about 5,000 to 6,000 licensed pilots in North America and there's a huge growth curve," Vuk says. "In Germany they have about 40,000 pilots. European mountains encourage paragliding. North American mountains consider it a liability issue but I'm working on that."

Unfortunately, what ever comes up must, at some time, come down.

So Vuk spots a field suitable for a landing and in we come. I'm told to hit the ground running. Which I do for, oh, maybe one, or two steps before I trip and land in ...

Well, let's just say the problem with a farmer's field is that it is in no way a domain exclusive to the farmer. They are home to cows and we all know what cows do in fields.

"#5% happens," or so the saying goes.

Yeah, but not in the air.

tbell@png.comwest.com