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# ASM

By Steve Swann

## the birth of a magazine

Editor of ASM in the 1970s, Steve looks at how the magazine evolved and the parachuting pioneers who helped fill its pages back in the day.

1966

AUSTRALIAN SKYDIVER

1969

AUSTRALIAN SKYDIVER

1970

AUSTRALIAN SKYDIVER

1972

AUSTRALIAN SKYDIVER

1973

Producing Australia's skydiving publications has always been a labour of love for those doing the editing and publishing. But in the 1960s, when our sport was born, the emphasis was very much on the "labour". It was before email, before the web – personal computers weren't on the technological horizon as Australia's first skydivers taught themselves to fall stable and land in the same paddock as the target. Desktop publishing? Not even a distant dream and digital photography was just a wild fantasy. Electric typewriters were still to make it into the mainstream when Australia's first skydiving publication was launched.

Back in the 1960s and 70s, the skydiving community was very small and widespread. But it had the same hunger for news and information about the sport – new gear, new techniques, competition results, gossip and photos – as every generation since.

That early challenge was met by jumpers themselves, with no financial support from the APF or anyone else for that matter – and we used stone-age tools, in comparison to today's technology.

It's great to see ASM flourishing now – a far cry from the all black-and-white magazine I produced with Bernie Keenan's help in the 1970s, typesetting it on an electric golfball typewriter in my lunch hours, shooting half tone film negatives on the sly in my employer's printing camera room and pasting the whole thing up after hours back in the office, the old-fashioned way with waxed galley proofs.

And then handwriting (with the help of my wife Jill) 400 addresses – the sum total of our subscriber base in those days – before stuffing envelopes and humping the whole lot off to the local post office.

### A Child of the 60s

Australian Skydiver magazine has been meeting the needs of jumpers for 45 years. It was born in Queensland, grew up in South Australia and has flourished in maturity back in Queensland.

The magazine's first appearances were under the masthead of the "Northern Star Digest", published by the Northern Star School of Parachuting, based at Archerfield airport near Brisbane. It first came out around the beginning of 1965. The earliest and only copy I have is dated May-June 1965 and was numbered as Edition 3, edited by Brian Mitchell. This was no slick, four-colour, coffee table affair. It was a basic as it gets – 28 pages of A4, printed on one side of the sheet only by Gestetner machine, an archaic, low-cost office printing press (a forerunner of the photocopier) that worked by forcing ink through a stencil onto paper.

Stencils were cut on an ordinary old-fashioned typewriter and then fixed to the machine's drum, which was rotated by hand. Talk about a labour of love!

In that issue, South Australian contributor Trevor Burns (D67 and soon-to-be editor and publisher of the fledgling magazine) wrote a piece arguing the case against opening at 3,000 ft, as opposed to the 2,200 ft laid down in the APF's Op Regs – a popular argument among many of those who resisted the idea of the young APF setting the rules. An early example of Trevor's commitment to the APF.

Within 12 months the "Northern Star Digest" had morphed into "Australian Skydiver", edited and produced by Murray Cosson (E15). It was still a rudimentary production (no photos, no colour) and even the date of the edition was hand-written onto the plain black and white pre-printed cover which enclosed the hand-stapled document. Murray's editorial column in July 1966 noted that the edition had actually been put together by Trevor Burns, who was taking over from then on. The magazine now moved to SA, where it stayed for the next 10 years.





**Jumping, booze and drugs:  
was it really a problem?**

The 1974 Nationals generated what was ASM's biggest ever news story – but unfortunately we weren't reporting on dazzling competition performances or new sporting records. The festering issue of alcohol and marijuana mixing with skydiving shot to the surface with the tragic deaths of two jumpers who, having adjourned with most others to the pub after the competition was called during the afternoon, decided to do a night jump at 1.45 am the following morning.

With the clandestine assistance of a few who lined the runway at Rylestone, NSW, with some car headlights and the help of an experienced jumper who also owned and piloted the Piper Navajo, they decided a 3-man from 5,000 ft might be a good idea.

They got out as planned but the third man wisely decided to dump immediately. The other two linked up. They went all the way in without ever breaking off. The fatalities occurred in late December 1974, already a shocker of a year with 9 deaths and were at first reported in the daily media as "just another" couple of skydiving fatalities. But the proverbial hit the fan in mid February 1975 when Parliamentarian Ian McPhee, apparently tipped off by disgruntled constituents who were also jumpers, raised the toxic subject of jumping, booze and drugs in Federal Parliament. It was a public relations disaster for the sport. Both the APF and the Department of Transport's inspector of parachuting were pilloried for supposedly not being able to control the allegedly rampant problem. (DoT was the forerunner of CASA).

The front page headlines in major daily newspapers and five pages in Hansard (the official parliamentary record) were an absolute low point for the sport.

ASM went in boots and all in its April 1975 edition, reproducing all the Hansard transcripts and lengthy reports from APF president Claude Gillard and director of safety, Grahame Hill. It wasn't pretty – our layout and headlines were "in your face". But this was something the sport had to confront head on. And quickly. One element of that report was the reprinting of Grahame Hill's January 20, 1975 letter to APF safety officers, written in the immediate wake of the incident:

*"If we look at the past year's statistics in their worst form (as the press and DoT would), this is what we could come up with: If we say we have 700 active parachutists jumping each year (experienced only). We had 9 deaths in 1974. That makes it one jumper in 70 will 'go in' if we have another year like 1974,"* Grahame warned.

It was a sobering assessment and a useful base from which to measure the sport's progress ever since, both in self-discipline and attitudes to safety – not to mention technology and improved gear.

Apart from the obvious and painful truth that booze and drugs really were an issue (albeit not that widespread) this tragic episode crystallised the entire debate, both within the skydiving community and in broader aviation and bureaucratic circles, about whether parachutists could be trusted to regulate themselves and whether the APF was the body to do it – whether, in fact, the APF was worth supporting at all.

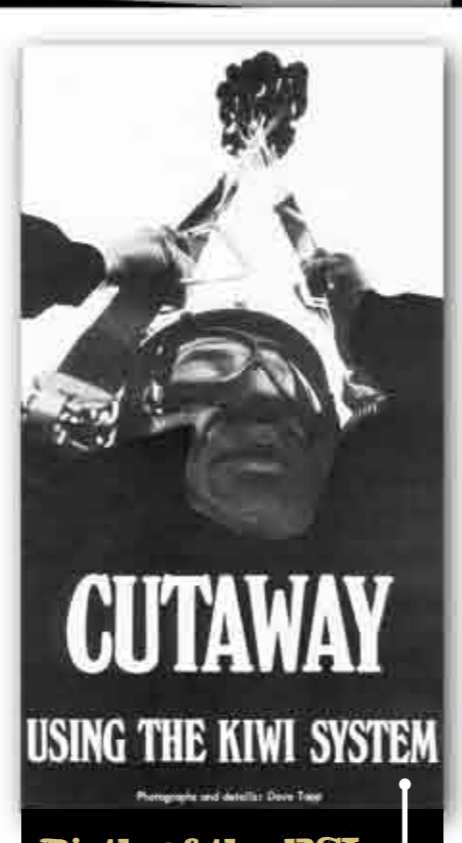
As my editorial introduction to our series of articles noted: *"It goes further than just the exercise of what some believe to be repressive laws which prohibit the use of certain drugs.*

*It comes down finally to a question of safety and our fitness to control and discipline ourselves. If parachutists cannot demonstrate self-discipline, then there are agencies which will do it for us – and not as nicely."*

ASM was firmly in the APF camp on this occasion, as it always was.



**Is it really a problem?**



**Birth of the RSL**

Long before the invention of the 3-ring circus and ram air parachutes, innovative jumpers and riggers were tackling the question of how to get reserves out more quickly and reliably, particularly for students. This feature spread from ASM in the 1970s explored the latest New Zealand variations of the proven Steven's cutaway system, the original RSL.

**Handing It On**

By 1976 pressure of everyday work and the need to devote more voluntary time to student training in our own club (the SASPC), meant Bernie and I, who had recently gained our senior instructor ratings, reluctantly decided to pass the magazine on.

Claude Gillard, who's company Southern Cross Parachutes had been underwriting the publication's costs since Trev Burns had moved on, bravely cranked out an edition or two before the magazine finally moved back to Queensland under the stewardship of Dave McEvoy in late 1976 and it hasn't looked back since!



**Cutaway**

The opening page of a 3-page photo spread in 1973. Mike Richards mounted a motor-drive camera on his chest to capture the full sequence. This shot captures the moment of cutaway. The ring-pull section of the old capewell mechanism has disengaged but the male fitting has not yet pulled free, leaving the risers hanging by a thread. A fellow Canberra jumper caught the main as it collapsed and brought it down between his legs – possibly Australia's earliest recorded case of CRW?

