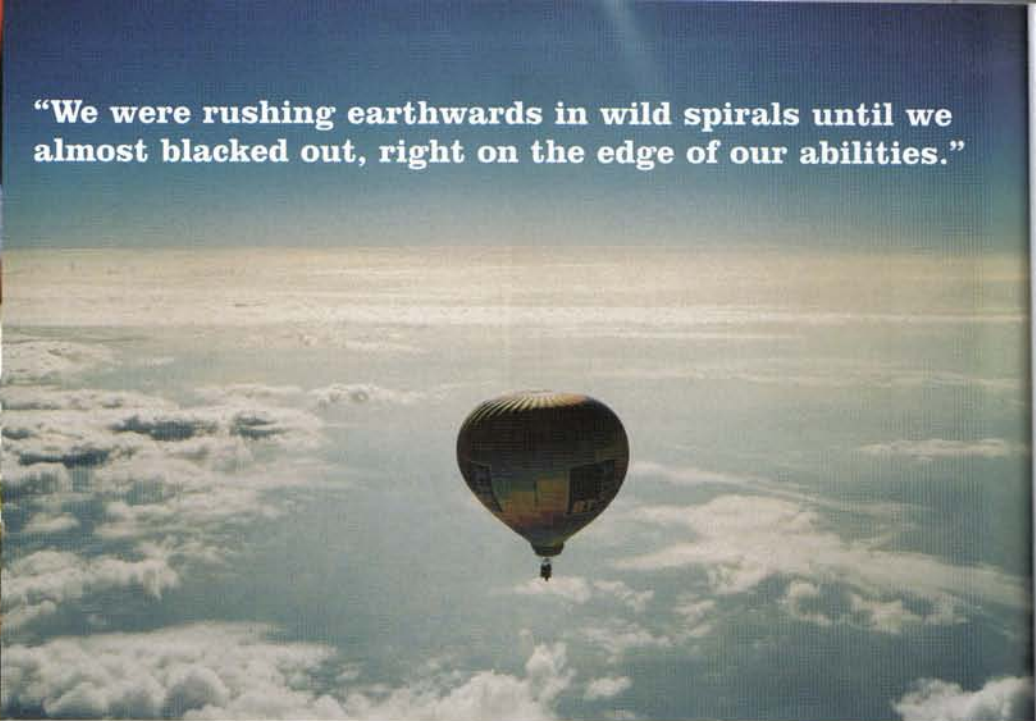




Miha and Primoz prepare for launch near Ljubljana

“We were rushing earthwards in wild spirals until we almost blacked out, right on the edge of our abilities.”



PROJECT STRATOSPHERE: TAKE TWO

Another balloon drop record, only 8,400 metres - but this time on a tandem. Primoz Lajevec watches Miha Repovz pull the release and drop them both into the void, all the while praying nothing goes wrong. It does

Around 8,000m over Slovenia, it became obvious that at least half the task was successfully completed: we were high, very high. Miha and I were hanging below the balloon basket, enjoying the fantastic mid-summer view. We were cocooned in a warm area, some trace of the balloon's heat reaching a few metres underneath the basket.

At 8000m and above this luke-warm shelter started to lose its power and it got colder and colder. It was the time to accept that the environment surrounding us was extremely inhospitable. The air temperature of -35(C would immediately translate to -72.5 the moment we released and factored in the wind chill associated with flying at 60km/h. We knew that if nothing else, this fact alone would immediately bring

us back down to earth.

“Let's go guys, we're at 8400!”

“Are we ready, shall we?”

“Yeah, let's do it!”

Miha pulled the trigger of the twin three-ring circus and we instantly dropped into the icy void. With 100% trust in Miha's piloting skills I had only to watch the lines, how they stretch in that long second of freefall, and how they pull out the shapeless ball - our wing.

In the next few moments, Miha controlled the situation with great skill and helped put the glider together into a slim elliptical shape again, which after no more than 100m bit into the air and started to fly after a mild surge.



The D-bag with Miha and Primoz hanging beneath just before the drop

“Yippee ... well done, old friend!” I couldn't hide my relief when this demanding take-off was successfully accomplished. There we were flying at 8400m! The pleasure of having two thirds of the job done was indescribable. We were shouting with joy, beating each other's hands, knees, legs, helmets, whatever we could reach.

After some rollicking aerobatics, we noted that the agility of the tandem was very good, much better than at lower altitudes. The true airspeed seems to grow with altitude more rapidly than the turn radius does. The result is much higher G-forces. The wing was flying fast as hell and so, so agile, but the 'G' loads were almost unbearable.

We reined in the horses at about 8000m and waited for the balloon, which was descending fast and soon underneath us on its way back to earth. We saw a condensation trail behind it, almost as if it had a jet engine hidden somewhere inside.

Grega (pilot) and Brane (doctor) were waving their hands and shouting something encouraging. Unfortunately we couldn't understand a word, but we



Inflation, of a sort

