

Letting it all hang out at OCC

"Only one person was ever killed doing this," he says as a word of comfort as he shows you the knots.

By DAN MCCOY

Swing back, then step down, he says. But it's 20 feet to the sidewalk below, about 10 steps, straight down.

First, lean back, let the rope attached to your waist take up the strain. As you swing out over the wall, you totter back and the support disappears. That's when you take the first step backwards.

How does one who lives a fairly mundane, white-collar life, find himself stepping off the top of a high concrete wall on the campus of a suburban college?

Gripping the other end of the rope was part of the answer.

Bob Spiker is a reserve Army Special Forces expert who counts among his skills the ability to jump out of airplanes wearing a parachute, and the ability to jump off the top of high cliffs swinging down a nylon rope.

This expertise was the main thing keeping the tottering reporter from breaking his neck.

Spiker teaches a course at the Farmington YMCA on rappelling Saturday mornings.

"Rappelling" is the art of swinging down a rope, descending a vertical cliff or wall by letting the rope slide, then braking.

I HAD SEEN it a lot in the movies. James Bond rappelled quietly into a lot of sticky situations. So did Gregory Peck in the "Guns of Navarone." The Green Berets are notorious for their rappelling.

The thing probably lies in the realm of fantasy fulfillment, but when Spiker invited me to try it out, I couldn't turn him down.

Most of the time, the guys in the movies were sneaking around, wearing shoe polish on their faces and rappelling at night.

It seemed traditional, so I wore a Navy sweater and hat, but left off the shoe polish.

Spiker showed up at the top of the

wall by the receiving dock at OCC.

The university is one of the few places in Farmington which have approached the 2½ story limit on an unbroken wall — the biggest "cliff" in town.

A COUPLE of basic knots are used to fashion a rope harness around the waist and legs. It feels sort of like a rope diaper, but it is guaranteed to hold securely.

A metal ring clips to the rope sling, and the 60-foot rappelling rope slips through the ring.

The rope feeds through one hand which is held behind your back. Moving the hand in and out controls how fast the rope slips.

"Try it out down here, first," Spiker said. Leaning back, your feet rest comfortably against the vertical face. Push out, and jump, and you swing out and back. Fun.

SPIKER TALKS about "fun" a lot.

He and his partner, Dave Dean, possess a variety of outdoor skills. Aside from the rope tricks, Spiker knows rock climbing, survival, parachute jumping, and how to slide down a mountain face first on a rope, holding a gun in one free hand.

He learned most of this in the service, and still belongs to a reserve unit.

Strenuous outdoor sports lure more and more average people to try rock climbing and related sports every year, and Spiker has built up a small but growing clientele of followers anxious to learn.

"Most of them seem to be high school age," he said.

"We teach a lot of Scouts, but the Saturday classes are usually teenagers."

"I think they just want to try something like this, maybe test them-

selves. We get girls who feel they are doing something the boys do — they feel liberated, I guess.

"Only one person was ever killed doing this," he says as a word of comfort as he shows you the knots.

THAT UNFORTUNATE individual was someone stepping out of a helicopter who forgot to tie the rope onto something.

He demonstrated a couple of times. He effortlessly swings out, holding on with one hand. Taking a big bounce, he slides almost the full distance to the ground before braking.

He says you can rappel about 120 feet, the maximum length of a standard rope, taking the distance in 30-foot "bounces."

Then there are variations.

A "helicopter rappel" is a "free" swinging descent without a wall. He went over the edge of a balcony on the campus, and landed after swinging wildly through space. I declined an offer to try it.

THAT FIRST step is the tough one. As the support disappears for a moment, you drop down before the rope catches your weight again.

Trying to loosen a tight grip on the only thing holding you up in the air is nearly impossible.

The best I could manage was a couple of pitiful bounces, never leaving the comforting, solid wall for more than a foot or so.

After a couple of tries, the fantasy caught up.

Prison breaks, cat burglary, John Wayne movies, anybody who needs a rappeller, I'm ready.

Anybody who just wants to try it out, in the hands of a skilled professional, should contact the Farmington YMCA.

GOING DOWN

The first step is definitely the worst. (Photos by Fran Evert)

BUCKLING UP

Instructor Bob Spiker (left) demonstrates the technique of tying the ropes.

ON THE GROUND

You start small, then work your way up

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