

First and Last

In the 1970s-80s, I had a friend named Norman who, like me, lived in Big-D. That's Dallas, Texas, if you didn't know. He was a serial hobbyist, becoming interested in one hobby at a time, pursuing it to its zenith, then dropping it cold turkey for the next. During the time I knew Norman, he was into astronomy, model trains, and still-photography, which then led naturally to hot air ballooning, a popular subject for photographers.

For years Norman encouraged me to go ballooning with him, but I was only mildly interested. After I talked him into joining my softball team one year, he asked me again, so I felt a bit obligated. I didn't know much about ballooning, but it seemed like a respectable sport, drifting quietly above the hustle and bustle of the world. For me it brought up images of a simpler time when grown men strapped wings on their arms and jumped off cliffs hoping they might fly like birds.

I'm going to tell you what ballooning is really like.

The people drifting in the sky are only a few of the people required for ballooning. For each lucky passenger there are two or three others on the ground – the chase crew. Sometimes they are people like me who think a balloon ride would be novel and adventurous, and then learn that they must first serve on the crew several times before earning the right to fly once. After the balloon is launched, the chase crew follows in the vehicle, keeping the balloon in sight, monitoring handheld radio communications with the pilot, and navigating roads to be in the right place for the recovery.

Serving on Norman's chase crew was a reasonably pleasurable experience, but typically not exciting during the flight itself. Occasionally, the balloon would travel a good ways so the search vehicle was on the move, navigating obscure rural roads, coming to dead-ends, talking to angry farmers, and retracing steps. Other times the balloon would travel so slowly that the crew would stop for ice cream or hang out on the side of the road talking. After the flight, Norman always took the crew out to eat and recount the adventure. As a crew member, the after-flight meal was the main tangible payoff for me.

The first time I crewed for Norman, the noise of the burner burst my bubble about hot air ballooning being a quiet sport. IT IS EAR-SHATTERING! Fueled by propane gas, the burner generates a flame about ten feet long and a roar like a tractor-trailer rig blowing by about two feet away. Norman fired it for a few seconds and then shut it off while warm air began to fill out

the limp envelope of the balloon. Then he fired short bursts over and over, being careful not to burn the envelope. The balloon becomes quite enormous as it inflates, and from the perspective of crew members standing beneath, it's colorful and majestic; that's why it's a popular subject for photographers.

After serving on the crew four or five times, it was my time to fly, fly away in the charming wicker basket under Norman's giant, green- and yellow-striped balloon into the great unknown. Okay, not exactly unknown, but I certainly was looking forward to the in-the-sky adventure, even though it was a hot, humid afternoon in July and a high pressure system had been stuck over Dallas for weeks.

At least it'll be cooler up there, I thought.

As passenger-of-the-day, I stuck close to Norman, pretending I was the co-pilot, having learned a lot from being around him.

The whole crew unloaded the balloon, wicker basket, fuel tanks, and burner from the trailer. Norman and I strapped the tanks in the basket while the crew unfolded the balloon and tethered the rig to the ground so it wouldn't lift off before we were ready. The mouth of the balloon, about eight feet in diameter, was held open to receive the first blasts of hot air. After about fifteen minutes the expanding balloon began to rise up off the ground and the crew held onto the basket while Norman and I crawled in. He checked his fancy, balloonist wrist watch and signaled thumbs-up. The crew let go and our balloon began ascending into the sky. I turned away from the burner and covered my ears just before Norman squeezed the handle and shot a thirty-second hot blast inside the giant envelope.

The world below broadened quickly as we rose higher. People on the ground looked like stick figures, cars like toys, and houses like Monopoly tokens. SWIMMING POOLS! I had no idea so many people around Dallas had swimming pools. Seemed like every other house had one, but not a soul was swimming. They probably thought it was too hot to be outside, I certainly did.

In a few minutes we were up to our flight altitude of two-thousand feet and Norman didn't need to reheat the air often. I had been looking forward to seeing more of the land surrounding Dallas as we drifted effortlessly along, but there was one problem – no wind. Not a whisper. After thirty minutes we were no more than two-hundred yards from where we launched. The crew hadn't even gotten in the car. They looked like ants waving at us and taking pictures.

We drifted a bit eastward and took in the view of a similar set of suburban rooftops and swimming pools without swimmers.

Though we weren't covering much ground, the flight was peaceful and, except for the burner, considerably quieter than earth. Sounds of human activity ceased. Even the freeway seemed to go silent, BUT NOT THE BARKING DOGS! Apparently dogs are attracted to balloons. Why barking travels farther than the roar of eighteen-wheelers is beside me.

A third of a mile above the earth you would think it would be cooler and the breeze would make even a muggy summer day more pleasant. WRONG on both counts! Balloonists don't feel the wind because they move at the same speed as the wind. Duh! And HOT? Definitely! Did I mention bugs? Who would have thought gnats and mosquitoes would be way up there?

Go bite those annoying dogs!

Before our flight, Norman told me all about the forecasts he'd studied for wind direction and speed, and temperature ranges. From crewing with him before, I'd noticed that he made a big deal about where and when he took off, and I thought he was obsessed. But now, as the passenger, I realized why. Once a balloon is launched, the pilot has only two things in his inventory of choices – when to climb and when to descend. The weather determines the rest, so when and where to take off is vitally important.

As a rule, I don't bore easily, but the adventure was becoming a bit of a challenge. I was hot, being eaten alive by bugs, breathing polluted air, and looking at the same rooftops and pools as a half-hour before, while listening to a chorus of a hundred and one barking dogs and occasional ear-shattering blasts from the burner. I had asked Norman all the questions I could think of about ballooning, piloting, and weather. I refrained from asking him where we were going to eat dinner. He was having such a fabulous time I thought that would be rude. We drifted some during the two-hour "flight" but you wouldn't really say we traveled.

My job was to monitor the propane tanks, smile, and not get in the way. When the tanks were finally down to an eighth, I alerted Norman and he began to scout out an open place to land. We had drifted to the outskirts of the suburbs where a good bit of land was still undeveloped. Norman pulled the red nylon strap connected to the crown vent, releasing some hot air and we began to descend slowly. I noticed that we were covering more ground and I gave Norman a questioning look.

“Wind speed is stronger at this elevation,” he said.

It made me wish we had been flying lower all afternoon, then we would have gone somewhere – and given the chase crew something to do.

Hey this is more like it!

He pointed at the trees below. “Ground wind.” I noticed leaves waving, the first evidence of wind I’d seen all day.

Is there anything to be afraid of? The thought flashed through my mind.

Norman had several years’ experience as a pilot and taught safety training for new pilots, so I felt very safe with him.

When we were down to about five-hundred feet, our balloon attracted a crowd in the neighborhood below, and two-hundred and two dogs announced our arrival. Norman surveyed the ground ahead and pointed out our landing area, a large triangle-shaped field, about two-hundred yards across at the wide end, nearest to us, and five hundred yards long, shaped like a giant wedge of apple pie, or key lime pie, whatever. The near side of the landing field was bordered by several new, two-story homes under construction, so we had to pass over them and then quickly descend to the empty grass-covered field. The right boundary was a set of tall metal powerline towers. The left side of the field was bordered by telephone poles and wires. Norman probably would have hoped for a larger area to land, but with our gentle pace the landing area looked quite generous to me.

Just above the homes, the late afternoon wind became markedly stronger and the landing field suddenly looked much shorter. We were too low on fuel to ascend and try to find a better landing place. The basket cleared the new houses and Norman let out more hot air. Our balloon rushed toward the ground and the end of the field where the powerlines on our right and telephone lines on our left converged – the Balloonist’s Triangle?

Hum, that sounds familiar.

I thought we might be in danger, remembering newspaper accounts of fatal balloon accidents, often involving powerlines. Norman’s head was facing up toward the open crown vent, but I caught a glimpse of his face as he looked back toward the approaching end of the triangle. His lips were pressed tightly together and his face was pale – a sure sign that we were in jeopardy because he was consistently unflappable.

“Hold on,” he yelled. “It’s going to be rough.”

Norman held the red line with one hand, gripped the basket with his other, and bent his knees. I did likewise with both hands on the basket as we came closer to the ground.

Crunch, the wicker basket slammed the grassy field. My teeth clicked hard and I fell to the bottom of the basket with Norman on top of me. We both had the smell of fear. The basket bounced once and hit again, *crunch*, and the wind dragged us across the field as I prayed we'd come to a full stop soon.

“Quick,” Norman yelled as he crawled out of the still-moving basket. “Help me!”

We both ran forward and threw our bodies and outstretched arms on the balloon, like kids on a pile of leaves, weighing it down and forcing hot air out of the top and bottom openings. All I could think about was the powerlines. Finally the deflating balloon collapsed to the good green earth and came to a halt.

I rolled over on my back and looked at the clear blue sky and then over at Norman. His eyes were shut. I thought for a moment that he might have been unconscious, but he opened his eyes and crawled off the fabric. We both stood and looked back where we had come across the field. There lay a long, straight trail of torn grass and overturned earth like a plow had furrowed a row. The base of the basket was cracked and the wicker was jammed with clods of dirt and grass. Turning, I saw a gray powerline tower only thirty yards away, close enough to make out the ID number.

Norman spoke to me in a trembling voice, “I’m so sorry. That was by far the most dangerous landing I’ve ever made.”

Before we could talk about it, the chase vehicle bounced across the field followed by an entourage of kids on bicycles and the pack of happy, barking dogs that had followed our landing. The crew and I folded up the balloon and packed everything up for the trip home while Norman answered the kid’s questions – ever the promoter of his beloved hobby.

Later, over Mexican food with the crew, Norman told stories about balloonists who had encountered trees and powerlines, and other close calls. Ballooning is the safest air sport in aviation, but accidents and fatalities do occur.

All-in-all it was a hot and rather dull afternoon until the semi-crash landing during the final forty-five seconds.

I can see why some folks became balloonatics, but decided it was my last ride in a hot air balloon. The next morning I woke up thinking, *Maybe I’ll take up writing.*