



## TWO MEN, ONE TEETER-TOTTER — AND 800 HELIUM BALLOONS

**T**wo o'clock in the morning is an unsociable hour by anyone's standards. On the back of an hour-and-a-half of sleep, plus a trans-Atlantic flight, your mind starts playing games with you. But this was the time we had to get up to meet the 60 or so volunteers from the Albuquerque balloon group who had donated their time to come out and help Steve and me fill over 700 large toy helium balloons, and then connect them to a kind of kiddies teeter-totter so that we could go flying.

The whole challenge had been commissioned by the American TV show 'Ripley's Believe it or Not'. We were given a month to devise, plan and execute a stunt where we would be carried to 18,000 ft by the use of toy helium balloons — not a great deal of time, which was made even more complicated by the fact that Steve lived in Knoxville Tennessee, where he was working hard on planning his wedding, buying a house, and going to school, while I lived in Bristol, England and did very little. (*Question: How did we ever manage without e-mail and the Internet?*)



Test-flight at the 2001 Battle Creek U.S. Team Nationals

The first problem was to build a seat that would carry us both. After coming up with a design, I had a friend build a kiddies teeter-totter contraption out of lightweight aluminum tubing. The design not only allowed Steve and I to balance our weights, but also enabled us to face each other to communicate and film each other.

Fortunately, a trip to Battle Creek at the beginning of July for the Team U.S. Nationals (a great event if you can ever go...but I digress), gave us an opportunity to do a test flight on the teeter-totter, flown under a hot air balloon. It was critical that to be sure that we could operate the two water ballast containers, and get a clean get-away if we needed to sky dive (which we practiced just for fun).

The next problem was finding the balloons. This was done with the help of Jim Howard and Cameron Balloons, U.K. We decided on balloons that had a maximum diameter, when full, of 4 to 5 feet. The calculation was a fairly simple one. Helium will lift approximately 60 pounds per 1,000 cubic ft. Once we knew the weight of the equipment (plus Steve and myself), and determined the expansion rate of the helium and the weight of the balloons, it was just a case of ordering enough balloons to do the job — and adding a few extra just for good measure.

When the balloons arrived we had our first shock, the mouth of a toy helium balloon that size is about 3 inches. Conventional filing tubes were not going to work. After a couple of Saturdays spent brain-storming with Jim Howard, we devised expanders consisting of a three inch plastic drainage tube with a cap and pilot-light end connector at one end where the hoses from the helium tanks would fit.



Note the duo dangling beneath the two balloons.

# Hotline

The filling process started at 3:30 in the morning. There were seven crates, each holding twelve helium tanks (291 cubic feet of helium in each tank), with two take-offs from each crate. The volunteers worked in teams of fours and fives at each station filling the balloons (applying a rather fiddly clip to close off the mouth), and then attaching them to the string in bunches of ten.

The risk we had to take at 3:30 was that the overcast skies would clear by sunrise, otherwise, we would have used up thousands of dollars worth of helium and all the balloons.

During the filling process we had only lost about 30 balloons. There was no mistaking the large bang when a balloon was overfilled. If you weren't awake at the time, you certainly were afterwards.



The teeter-totter. Note the water ballast below the seats.

Three hours later the last of the helium was being put into the remaining balloons. The sky was now a beautiful clear blue. Perfect.

At 6:55 AM, with all the balloons connected and Steve and myself seated on the chair...all looking like something out of a 'Wyle. E. Coyote cartoon'....we cut the ropes and shot into the air at a comfortable rate of 600 fpm. Very quickly the housing development in Los Lunas fell away beneath us.

Our target altitude was 17,999.9 feet. As is well known, airspace above this level is under positive radar control and requires a transponder. The climb up was fairly uneventful, with the climb rate never dropping below 500 fpm. Occasionally a balloon would over-expand and burst — the first one always comes as a shock as you brace yourself and expect a massive explosion! Passing through 3,000 feet, we disconnected our safety lines from the chair so we could make a quick get-away if necessary.

Passing through 12,000 feet we both connected our miniature oxygen systems to breathe through our nasal cannulars. At regular intervals we would ask each other to quote our names and addresses to make sure we were not suffering from the effects of hypoxia. It was only after the flight that I realized neither would have know if the other had been a little "out there", as I think we were both a little euphoric!



Inflated and ready to go!

At 17,500 feet Steve reached for the BB gun and started shooting out some of the balloons. Unfortunately this did little to slow our ascent rate. This called for drastic action. I instructed Steve to cut away all the balloons connected by fishing wire. These were tied to the top of the stack for just this purpose. However, we had no idea if these balloons were flying away as intended. A quick conversation with the helicopter that was filming us confirmed that some of the balloons had separated and flown off. Finally at 18,235 feet the contraption finally started a descent. What's 235 feet amongst friends...65 feet under an altitude bust!!! (Editor's note: in fixed-wing aviation you have to "bust" (i.e. go higher or lower) than your assigned altitude by 300 feet before it is considered an 'altitude bust' — at that point you are "in trouble".

The descent rate was a steady 300 fpm. At 6,000 feet the time had come to make a decision as to whether to land the thing or skydive away with the seat and other hard components. To help make that decision, we decided to release some water to see how much control we had over the descent rate. Steve reached down to open one of the water taps...NOTHING!!!! For a heart-stopping moment it looked like we would be jumping. With knife in hand, Steve lifted his arm with the intention of punching a small hole in the one of the plastic containers. I had visions of 50 pounds of water suddenly being released and us shooting back up into the stratosphere. As calmly as possible, I screamed "Steve...NOOOOOOOO!"



Further investigation revealed the spout had been packed with sand while preparing to launch. After some work, we had it cleared, dumped some water and were under control again.



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It was amazing how controllable the flying machine was. By releasing small amounts of water and shooting balloons in ones and twos, we were able to reduce the descent rate to 100fpm. It was at this point we made the decision to attempt a landing.

The touch-down was very soft. Despite the fact we had traveled almost 5 miles vertically and 3 miles horizontally, we were now on an Indian reservation. Given the fact we still had a full water container, we made the decision to launch again and try to ride what was left of the drainage off the reservation to a nearby road.

For an hour we flew between the ground and 1000 ft looking for the right wind to take us off the reservation. As is typical in Albuquerque at that time of the day the wind was light and variable, so we only made a little progress. We even tried to use the prop wash from the helicopter to push us the right way. Unfortunately, all it

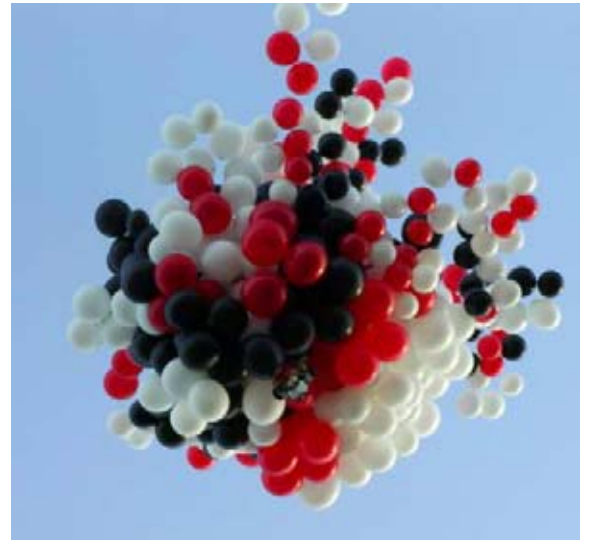
did was push us down and kick up the sand. There was one interesting moment when the BB gun was dragging across the ground and became separated from its string. After a minor panic we scrambled to cut away any balloons that we could reach to get us firmly back on the ground. We then bounced back to where the gun lay and picked it up.

After some time of enjoying our first gas flight, it was apparent we weren't going to make it back to the road. Our ground crew had obtained permission to come in and get us, so we ended up walking the chair and the balloons the last half-mile.

At the road we were greeted by the large crowd of volunteers, spectators, and ambulance chasers — as well as the curious, the concerned, and the local media. With a bottle of champagne in hand, we carried out a ceremonial releasing of the remaining balloons in celebration of our accomplishment, the highest ever flight with the use of toy helium balloons.

There are too many to thank individually, but we do owe a special mention to Pat Owens for organizing the launch site and letting us stay at her beautiful home in Los Lunas, Beth Wright-Smith from World Balloons for helping coordinate the volunteers from Quad "A", all the volunteers for their hard work and for getting up so early, and to our wives for putting up with our eccentricities.

**Editor:** I'm sure many of you remember Mike and Steve as former members of the Cameron U.S. Factory Team, having talked with them on the phone, or having met them at a balloon event somewhere. Mike Howard and his wife, Renee, live in Manchester, England, where Mike is a Dash 8 pilot for British Airways CitiExpress, a new regional commuter arm of British Airways. Steve Davis and his wife Amy live in Knoxville, Tennessee where Steve operates a local ride business and is pursuing a career as an EMT/Paramedic.



Mike and Steve in flight, from below.

## RED, WHITE AND BALLOON

"We call her the "Red, White & Balloon"

That's what John Harris and his family named their newest form of adventure - a Concept 100.

John and his family are new to ballooning. When I asked John what got him started, he graciously shared his story, which is featured below.

I have been fascinated with balloons as long as I can remember. In Nashville, where I'm from originally, we used to have a balloon festival every year to benefit the Ear Foundation. Six years ago I took my children to the festival, where we were wandering around looking at the different balloons and talking to pilots and crew. We were asked if we would like to help crew for one of the balloonists. Of course we jumped at the chance and spent the better part of the day crewing and generally

"...the pilot asked if I would like to fly with him. Needless to say I was thrilled. That was six years ago. I said right then that someday I will have my own balloon"

having fun. Now at this point I should mention my children were with me and were helping to crew — my son Jonathan, who at the time was 8, my daughter Laura 5, and my youngest Jessica 3 years old (who had a broken elbow at the time!). I'm not sure who had the most fun. It was quite a sight watching Jessica with a cast on her arm trying to help carry an envelope bag. Anyway, they invited us back for the next morning's flying (gave us a crew parking pass and everything).

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To make a long story short, early Sunday morning after having set up the balloon the pilot asked if I would like to fly with him. Needless to say I was thrilled. That was six years ago. I said right then and there that someday I will have my own balloon.

Living in or just outside of Chattanooga now we had a very short-lived balloon festival here. Two years ago I went to this festival to crew where I was introduced to Steve Davis who was living in Knoxville. I crewed for Steve and found out that he had worked at Cameron. I told him that I was going to buy a balloon and asked if he would instruct me. Of course he said "yes" (probably thinking he would never hear from me again). Anyway, two years later I was in a position to buy a balloon. I called Steve, we got together and he helped me with all of the



considerations for buying a balloon. In August 2001, I bought my new balloon, took delivery in October, and then went for my second balloon flight! I'm still a student but soloed for the first time in mid-December, and am meeting with Steve in the morning for my second solo flight.



John decided on a Concept 100 for his first balloon, equipped with Sirocco double burners, a 42x58 basket, two 15-gallon stainless steel tanks, and Flytec wireless instruments. Pictured at right with his 14-year old son, Jonathan (who was 8 when he first crewed on a balloon), Bill hails from Soddy Daisy, Tennessee, just outside Chattanooga. Bill says "we typically enjoy contour flying over the hills and ridges found in this part of the country, although we have everything from mountains to lakes, rivers and streams - all within 20 minutes of each other". I last spoke with John in mid-March to get an update on his license – unfortunately, the weather in Tennessee has prevented him from doing his flight test (especially of late with the flooding), but he enthusiastically added that he is ready and waiting for the first opportunity!

## Coming in the next issue of Hotline...

- Meet Dennis Wolfe of Tampa, Florida – with his new-to-him Cameron Z-90 demonstrator.
- Go on the road with the Mr. Potato-Head balloon team.

**I can see clearly now!** For the best photo resolution, be sure to use Acrobat Reader 5.0 – earlier versions will result in a grainy, coarse appearance to all the photos in Hotline. You can get a free update by going to our webpage, [www.cameronballoons.com](http://www.cameronballoons.com), or by going directly to Adobe's website at [www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readermain.html](http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readermain.html).



This picture was taken by Mike Kijak of his balloon "Little Kahuna", an A-140. The picture was taken while flying a Cameron N-90 RE/MAX balloon. Mike is also the RE/MAX pilot for the Northern California program. The event is the Sonoma County Hot Air Balloon Classic, held during the July 4th weekend.

**Hotline**

An e-newsletter for Cameron owners and balloon enthusiasts

**CAMERON  
BALLOONS**

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