

Ruth was awarded the Mrs. Harry Bonney Award for her Outstanding Flying Achievements in May 2000. The story of her flight in the prestigious 1999 Gordon Bennett Gas Balloon Race is below.

As pilot of Jazz Bird, a solid red netted gas balloon almost twenty years old, I had flown this lady of the air from Albuquerque, New Mexico to Durham, Oklahoma, covering 602 kilometers in nearly fourteen hours.

Gas ballooning is different from hot air flight. Picture the round balloon filled with helium high above the wicker basket, 30 sandbags hooked around the outside edge of the basket, instruments, radios, cold weather gear, food, water and toilet facilities all packed for the long haul. Because of the nature of gas ballooning, flights can last for days whereas with a hot air balloon which flies on propane, time in the air is usually about two hours.

My biggest challenge for this race was to find a co-pilot; someone with whom I could share the tiny basket for a couple of days. All my competitive flying previously had been done on my own. This would be the first time I had another pilot with me and I finally decided to contact Jenny Houghton, a hot air balloonist and fixed wing pilot as well. "Jenny, would you like to compete in the Gordon Bennett gas balloon race as my copilot?" I asked over the phone. "We'll lift off at night in Albuquerque, New Mexico to the strain of our national anthem and the applause of thousands of spectators", I continued. I never asked her what swayed her to accept but a few weeks later the phone rang. "I'm in", she said. Oz Birds in Jazz Bird were on their way.

Jazz Bird is the name of the Skypower balloon kindly loaned to us by Jim Herschend of Missouri. An all red balloon built in 1979, this lady had brought challenge and joy of various pilots over the years. Oz is slang for Australia and Birds - an appropriate description of the two female pilots.

Lists were prepared and emails ran hot between the two of us and our ballooning friends in the States. Calls for assistance with essential equipment were met with kind support. "We need night lights and a transponder". Mark Sullivan and David Levin, true champions, responded with offering their gear. George Hahn, an Albuquerque balloonist, checked Jazz Bird for gas leaks thoroughly prior to flight.

In the week leading up to launch, Doug Muir and I worked on the electrical system, went shopping for extra winter gear, food, water and toilet facilities. Everything was coming together slowly and I drew on my faith that all would be in place by lift off. Jenny and her partner, Ian Dickson, arrived from Australia on Tuesday night prior to launch. Her first sight of a gas balloon was at Albuquerque airport which featured a display along with all the pilots' names and photographs. We had agreed on responsibilities for the race. Essentially, mine was to fly the balloon; Jenny's to handle the radio skeds.

The day prior to the race, our crew arrived in Albuquerque and we met for the first time. Don Weeks, a Texan from Amarillo with a personality and heart bigger than you could imagine, would be responsible for inflating Jazz Bird. As balloonmeister, he was assisted by his wife, Becky, also a hot air and gas rated balloonist and a crew of twenty other willing hands. Our official observer was Rick Hughlett, from Missouri and his wife, Karen, joined the team as well.

Saturday, October 2nd: 1330hrs: DDay: Over ninety sandbags for Jazz Bird were filled in the heat of the day. Eight huge helium trucks moved into place to commence filling the balloons over a period of several hours. Jenny and I loaded the basket.

Two GPSs, two VHF radios, two cell phones along with enough battery power to last for two nights, a satellite phone, night vision binoculars, headlamps, cold weather gear, food, water for ballast, water to drink and toilet facilities.

The crowd increased as the deadline for lift off was delayed because of high winds. 6 pm became 8pm till finally at 10pm the first balloon was launched. An hour before, I reached for the cell phone to call my sons, Mark and Grant, in Sydney Australia. "I will call you once we have landed, my loves". Our launch position was number 11 and our crew and a huge crowd of well wishes walked us to the launch platform. The Japanese team had just departed and were heading to the east towards the mountains. I felt incredibly calm and focused on my responsibilities as pilot in command. This had been my dream since my first gas balloon flight in Switzerland fourteen years earlier. My heart felt full, my sense of self was quite pronounced, my willingness to face the unknown challenges solid.

Floodlights, cheers from the crowd and officials surrounded us as Don removed the final sandbag to give us sufficient lift to leave the platform. And then we were off! Climbing at 200 to 300 feet a minute, we waved to the crowd below. I tipped a little water out to maintain our climb while Jenny trailed the transponder, night lights and strobes over the basket edge.

"They are playing Waltzing Matilda", Jenny yelled. "What happened to our national anthem?" I stopped ballasting and drank in the scene below. A sense of awe overcame me as I realised we were finally in the night sky, sharing the space with a select group of pilots who also understood the desire to extend their personal horizons. I counted six sets of strobe lights in the distance as Jazz Bird floated towards the mountains.

By now it was necessary to ballast sand to clear the mountains. At 13,900 feet, we had passed over the mountain crest, secured our oxygen masks, glanced at our GPS and glanced again. 33 knots! We had found a fast wind stream and were heading due east. We were not aware that we were leading the pack, but we were! Jazz Bird settled into equilibrium, maintaining her altitude. We went stealth to conserve our batteries for the second night.

Sitting in the corner of the basket I looked up at the stars and was overcome with a sense of sadness that there were insufficient words to describe this moment with my loved ones, that they would miss out on such an experience. I glanced across at Jenny, head bent over the map and acknowledged to myself, that we had worked extremely well as a team. I grabbed the camera and photographed the balloon above in the night sky, our kangaroo and Australian flag attached to the balloon's netting. Then we took shots of each other.

Our track was following the Interstate 40 and from 12,000 feet, the cars and trucks moved like illuminated ants rushing to their destination. At 0410 hrs Sunday, the strobe lights of six gas balloons could be counted south of our position as we drifted over Tulumcari, New Mexico. We radioed our chase crew who had just driven into a service station for gas at Tulumcari.

"Look south at about 10,000 feet and I will flash you six times", I said grabbing the 500,000 candlepower searchlight. "We see you", the guys yelled down the radio. I was overcome with feelings of humility and appreciation. Five men were giving totally of their time, their support to travel all night and through the day to keep up with us and to be there when we would finally land. I sent each of them a silent, deep felt thank you.

To Don Weeks, a larger than life Texan, well experienced with gas ballooning and its necessary chase, rattling off one joke after another to keep the team in fits of laughter.
To Rick Hughlett from Springfield, Missouri whose vehicle they were in, acting as our Official Observer and well experienced also with gas chase.
To Doug Muir from Brisbane, Australia, fixed wing and ultralight pilot.
To Ian Dickson, fixed wing pilot from Euroa, Australia, with his video camera and personal support for Jenny.
To Steve White also from Springfield, Missouri, our stills photographer.

At ten minutes past the hour, we made regular contact with the crew to give our position. Latitude and longitude were read off the GPS, altitude recorded and our projected track were passed on to the crew below who were relaying our information to the command centre back in Albuquerque. Little did we know we were way out in front of all the other balloons. We were maintaining a speed of 34 knots and rushing towards bad weather. As dawn broke, we were over the Texas panhandle, inhospitable, rough terrain. My camera's battery had frozen so no photographs were taken. 0710 hrs we drifted over Dumas, Texas at an altitude of 6145 feet, the lowest during our flight and we were still moving at 34 knots. One hour later as the sun warmed the helium, Jazz Bird climbed to 10,300 feet and our GPS had us over Borger, Texas, with noise from pumping oil wells rising up to greet us.

Breakfast! And Jenny set about preparing Granola in our tin cups. The sun was warming us so off came our headlamps, down jackets and sleeping bags. A little housekeeping was necessary to find a comfortable spot to spread our legs.

Our communications with the crew worked perfectly but it was not the same with our vital weather man. We tried three separate telephone numbers but never made contact. He told us later that he had not been able to get us either so we flew on unaware that an 80 mile long cold front was speeding towards us. We were on a collision course with black clouds and electrical storm activity.

We had now been in our tiny basket floating through the sky for eleven hours when we heard the drone of an aeroplane's engine. Then we saw the Cessna 182. Jim Herschend had invited a television crew to fly in his plane to film us and did five or six passes around Jazz Bird. "Thank you" I yelled into the air, waving enthusiastically. Jenny's smile was as big as mine as we felt the connection with other human beings above the earth, albeit momentarily. In the meantime, the ground crew were singing "Deep in the Heart of Texas" as they crossed the Texas line. After 400 kilometers, they were only 15 kms behind us.

"We're on the bend in the road", Don called down the radio. "Which bend? I can see eleven from this height of 10,000 feet", I replied as I scanned the countryside below. And then I saw them! Our umbilical cord with earth - five wonderful men ready to do what had to be done to contribute to the success of this challenge. We were flying in bright blue sky with scattered clouds as we passed over our chase vehicle parked on a bend in the road.

Thirty minutes later, we were staring at eight-eighths cumulus rolling towards our balloon. Staring at the black pointed edge of a pie shaped category five thunderstorm. My initial reaction was to climb to fly above it but once we assessed the possible dangers should we need to land at night, I decided to descend and reassess the weather at ground level.

I opened the valve in the top of the balloon to allow helium to escape. Jazz Bird began her descent. 400 feet, 500 feet, 600 feet per minute. Don's Texan's voice came over the

radio. "You gals should get that thing on the ground. Quickly! It's black on the ground where we are and it will only get worse". "I've already made that decision, Don", I replied. Leveling out at 2600 feet, Jazz Bird changed direction so I turned to Jenny. "Are we losing ground?" "Yes, we are drifting back to Albuquerque", she advised. "Well, we are landing as soon as we can get down".

The Gordon Bennett was a distance race from Albuquerque and I wanted every meter we could get for our final result. We had crossed the Oklahoma border and were flying above open countryside so the first and second field were bypassed because of power lines and a commitment made to the third field as our final resting place. From the air, I could see no power lines or major obstacles, just rough grass and small bushes. I vented helium and shoveled sand to maintain a smooth approach. Jenny stood by at the back of the basket to drop the landing rope.

The wind gusting from the front was about 15 knots. An old barbed wire fence lay rusted but Jazz Bird's basket clipped the top of a fence post and knocked it over as we sped towards touchdown. I yelled out to Jenny to drop the drop line which acts as a brake on forward momentum.

Normally gas balloons carry one thick drop line but on this balloon it had two separate thin lines. Jenny pulled the pin on one of the lines. As I reached to pull the red rip line to empty the helium, the balloon's forward momentum was still fast. "Did you drop both lines?", I called out. "You did not say drop both lines", Jenny replied as she turned around to set the second rope free. The impact was hard and the balloon dragged in the wind. If both drop lines had hit the ground at the same time, our drag would not have been as far. The normal braking power had been halved.

The balloon skidded over the rough grass while I held the rip line open to spill the remainder of the helium. Then the basket hit it! A berm or large dirt contour covered in grass and weeds. The basket tipped to its right side then doghoused on top of us. I was still holding the rip line firmly as Jenny rolled onto the basket's edge. I looked at her lying on her back with a sandbag on her chest. Because the balloon had rolled, the escape vent for the helium was now facing the ground making it difficult to deflate the balloon's envelope. The wind was gusting and blowing the envelope from side to side. I handed Jenny the rip line and reached up and tipped the basket back off us and climbed out and ran around the envelope to check the vent.

Back to the basket to pull open the valve also to assist with emptying the helium. Finally, Jazz Bird sunk to the ground, totally deflated. Not long after we exited the basket, two trucks drove up. Aussie pilots met Okie farmers in the fields of Oklahoma and exchanged names and addresses. Jenny nursed her ribs.

I felt disappointed we had had to land because of bad weather, we had not gotten to fly our second night and Jenny's injury turned out to be 3 broken ribs. It did not diminish my reaction when I heard later that a British pilot had broken his back, a Swiss pilot lost skin from his face, two American balloons had been torn on landing and a Canadian pilot was traumatised after having spent the night in a gas balloon in a Category Five thunderstorm.

This gas event is the America's Cup of ballooning and is extreme balloon flying. Our crew arrived about twenty minutes after our landing. I thought of my sons, Mark and Grant in Australia, but our cell phone would not raise their numbers and we were nowhere near any other telephones. After much persuasion, Jenny agreed to go to the nearest hospital in a small town called Canadian to check her ribs. Meanwhile, Jazz Bird was packed away ready for her next flight and we drove to meet Jenny. On arrival, she was being

taken by helicopter to a bigger hospital in Amarillo for further tests which eventually proved unnecessary.

Unknown to both of us, information on the progress of our flight was on the internet. Back in Australia, my family, our friends and the ballooning community were following our progress with great excitement. "Australian female pilots lead the race"...."Australian female pilots maintain their lead....."Australian female pilots have landed". So Mark and Grant knew we were down but did not know why and were very concerned for our safety. Great relief when they finally heard from us.

Monday evening we all arrived back in Albuquerque. I was emotionally and physically exhausted and Jenny had to cope with her sore ribs but we joined the social activities through the week and participated in the hot air ballooning so popular, that the Fiesta attracts over 800 balloons each year. The majority of the Gordon Bennett teams had finished in Texas or Oklahoma while the eventual winning team from Belgium funnelled through good weather to reach Amory, Mississippi.

At the formal awards ceremony on October 9, all pilots and crews were acknowledged for their achievements and advised their names would be recorded in aviation history.