



# Gas Division Newsletter

Official Publication of  
the BFA Gas Division

Volume 10, Issue 2

October 2009

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## 53rd Coupe Aéronautique Gordon Bennett by Peter Cuneo

The 53<sup>rd</sup> Coupe Aéronautique Gordon Bennett gas balloon distance competition launched from the Sports Complex of Geneva, Switzerland at about 2300hrs local on Saturday, September 5, 2009 (2100hrs UTC). Sixteen hydrogen gas balloon teams from eight nations, launched and headed in a southerly direction toward the Rhone River valley. In pre-flight briefings, race officials had noted that VFR flight after sunset was not allowed in any part of Italy including Corsica, Sicily and Sardinia. It was also noted that all of Africa was out-of-bounds. During the first night, balloons reached speeds up to 105 kilometers per hour, driven by the fabled Mistral winds that flow down the Rhone valley during periods of high pressure in Europe. It was very fortunate that no balloons were

forced to land during this period.

Most balloons exited land during the next day and headed south across the Mediterranean as the pack started to spread out. All three German balloons landed on islands (two on Menorca—the small island next to Majorca, and one on Sardinia), while three balloons headed towards Algeria and disqualification. The main pack turned to the west and flew into eastern Spain on the second day.

Weather and time started to take its toll as several teams were forced to land. At this point, USA #2 had a sizeable lead, having gone the furthest south before coming back to land, however they were forced to either land on the third evening or go

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back out over water and hope to reach the rocky coast of Gibraltar. They wisely chose to land.

It was now between the Swiss #1 and France #1, with the Swiss in the lead. They also ran out of land in southern Portugal after covering a total of 1,570 km. The patient French team of Sebastien Rolland and Vincent Leys managed a few more kilometers, 1,587 km, before landing very near the Atlantic coast in southwest Portugal to gain victory. Vincent has now been a member of five Gordon Bennett winning teams; the first four with his brother,



The awards ceremony. From left, 2nd place winners Kurt Frieden and Pascal Witpraechtger, winners Sebastien Rolland and Vincent Leys, 3rd place winners Cheryl White and Mark Sullivan.

photo from the winning team

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## Editors' Column

The 2009 Gordon Bennett race was quite an event. Three balloons flew across the Mediterranean Sea landing in Algeria, three other balloons landed on small islands in the Mediterranean, the English all female team broke the duration record, and when it looked like a U.S. team had it won, the French team came from behind to claim La Victoire.

We have articles from the winning team, the third and fourth place U.S. teams, the Finish team that flew to Algeria, the record breaking women and the German team that landed on Sardinia. Our congratulations to all the teams in the race and to the race organizers for an excellently organized and handled race.

Now on to the America's Challenge race, where the weather gods were not in agreement on the winds for inflation and launch. This year's race was cancelled after all the balloons had inflated and launch had been put on hold for over two hours. The casualties were the loss of the helium and hydrogen fills, two balloon baskets, all the hard work by the organizers, planners, command center personnel, launch directors, workers and, last but not least, all the efforts of the pilots and their teams for the race.

Finally, please consider Tomas Hora's sincere invitation to all U.S. pilots to participate in the Stuttgart Linde Open, March 5-7, 2010 (see page 22 for info). It should be a great event.

*Peter & Barbara*



One of the editors, Peter, in a field in France being consoled by two beautiful French women after placing last in the GB race.

photo by Barbara Fricke

*continued from page 1*

Jean Francois Leys. They once again proved that the winner is not he who gets there first, but rather he who gets there best.

For three balloons, the retrieve from Algeria proved to be complicated as the northern coast is fairly untamed territory. The Algerian authorities moved in to protect the six pilots from "civil unrest" and general lawlessness. The balloonists were delayed (detained?) for two days while various embassies were contacted. Much hardship was endured by all, owing to a prohibition on the sale of beer during the holy feast of Ramadan! Eventually all teams returned to Geneva for the "Survivors' Banquet". The return of the balloon systems from Africa has proved to be more difficult. At last report, a single mass shipment to Germany was in the works. Final redistribution to Austria, Finland and Belgium should follow.

Several additional highlights included:

- 1) New women's world duration records for the British team of Janet Folkes and Ann Rich;
- 2) Swiss Christian Stoll's twenty-first entry into the race, more than any other competitor ever;
- 3) Third and fourth places for USA #2 and #3 respectively;
- 4) Perhaps the first ever crossing of the Mediterranean by a free gas balloon...and it was accomplished by three teams, Finland, Belgium and Austria;
- 5) The first ever entry into the Gordon Bennett by a Finish team;
- 6) The winning French team came very close to setting a world duration record for this class of balloon.

Pre-flight preparations were marred by tragedy when Great Britain #3 landed in the Alps a week before the race while on a training flight. Pilot Serge Cuhat lost his footing while stepping out of the basket and fell to his death. His loss was memorialized by France #2 who was selected to fly his balloon in his honor.

The competition was very successfully organized by Event Director Markus Haggene, Deputy Director Stefan Handl, Launchmaster Sabrina Handl and General Coordinator Christian Colquhoun.

For more details go to:

[http://www.geneva.gordon-bennett.ch/index\\_e.html](http://www.geneva.gordon-bennett.ch/index_e.html)  
and  
<http://www.satpro.org/gordon2009/index.php> ■

## Voyage to the End of Europe by Sebastien Rolland

Saturday, September 5<sup>th</sup> 2009, 22:42 local time, Vessy plain in Geneva: cheers, then a brief silence. The French anthem resounds, “Lâchez tout” (“hands off!”). The *Golden Eyes* is thrusting up from the podium, stately, self confident. The envelope tracked by the beam light is illuminating the sky of Geneva before disappearing into the dark. On board concentration hides emotion. Since this morning we are IN the race.

The strategy has been established together with our control room firmly managed by Christophe Houver, and Sébastien Fabre, amateur meteorologist. They, as well, turned “ON” from Saturday morning to find our airway to the end of Europe, whatever the duration, altitude and difficulty, as long as it is logical for the balloon. Since Italy did not open their airspace to night VFR, we point “him” out to south Portugal as the destination. We know that it will be long, very long, and that makes us confident in front of the excellent set of pilots taking part to the race because the *Golden Eyes*, fondly called “Petit Prince”, equipped with “his” net and “his” feather light basket, utmost Garrecht avionics and inhabited by two determined pilots physically and mentally prepared to travel for 100 hours, is an exceptional balloon, already four times winner of the Coupe Aéronautique Gordon Bennett.

For the first night we are advised to fly low, close to the earth’s contours. Fortunately I know quite well the local terrain, the full moon shows us the mountains’ outline, and we have our night vision equipment. Christophe is very steady from the beginning “be stingy with sand, you will need it”. We are flying very close to the mountains, sometimes only 150 ft over the summit, at 25kts. After every mountain we get waves, descending over 600ft/min. We get used to it and don’t throw ballast, but stay on our guard. During every descent we even look backward to check if there was a hill, we try to understand the balloon’s behavior. We are going along the Rhône valley, as are all com-



Vincent Leys and Sebastien Rolland during flight.

photo by Sebastien Rolland

petitors, at top speed 45kts, low level, by night. It is impressive and beautiful flying over the cities of Grenoble, Valence, Montélimar, the outline of the Alps in the background. The balloons are dispersing. We are slightly ahead on our route, which does not bother us since we understood we must reach Spain before there’s no wind, but we are much too far to the left. A call to order from our control room tells us

that more westward flying is available a bit higher.

At 05:10 UTC it is dawn behind the Alps as we are crossing the Mediterranean coastline heading south. We open out the chart of southwestern Europe on which we can see in detail the whole remainder of our flight. It is much better than a GPS screen! We analyze it and see that Valencia is a good place to go back to the continent because it is situated between two major mountains and it should be possible afterward to fly lower in the valleys toward Seville and avoid strong turbulences over the mountains. We call our control room: same conclusion. The synergy is perfect. After finding a route until Valencia and checking that a route from Valencia to Cape St. Vincent should still exist, we receive our waypoints by SMS on our satellite phone. During Sunday daytime the balloon is capricious, always going too much to the left, and has tendency to go up and down due to slight instability but we have to let “him” do this because we must be the stingiest with ballast. Instability is due to rather fresh air over the 75°F sea water, then overnight we accumulate a lot of condensate on our envelope, until raining in the basket. Thought we have to deal with it and avoid climbing in order not to drift too much to the south, we could miss our return to the European continent. It was a tough Sunday, carefully piloting the balloon to search for as much right as possible, sometimes at 140 ft above sea. The job paid off, as on Monday morning we got closer to the Spanish coast, heading straight to Valencia. It would take an-



other half day to reach the coastline and almost ten hours to cross the Valencia TMA. Both balloons that flew near us last night are now more south, after flying a little bit higher.

In the afternoon I'm reviewing the situation with the control room: 11 balloons are flying, three are close to the Algerian coast and only two are in a good place to win. First, we worry about the three "Algerian" balloons and think of the extra work for flight director Markus Haggney and his team. We just hope that we can meet the pilots back in Geneva. We also want to know who are the well positioned competitors. No answer from the control room. Everybody is concentrated on our main objective: to reach the end. Fortunately our mental state is good, we are rested, have enough food and drink, and we take oxygen whenever flying over 7,000 ft. In our mind, we are just starting the race now, here in Valencia with eight balloons. The balloon flies well, still carrying 1,000 lbs of ballast and we are ready to fly until the 4<sup>th</sup> day, if not the 5<sup>th</sup>. Meanwhile the meteorological situation is not the easiest for the control room: we see cumulonimbus and rain nearby at noon just before reaching the coastline and we are now in a low for the next days, a situation favorable to thunderstorms, with very weak wind, and we still have 500 nautical miles to go.

The new waypoints are coming. After some hesitation between the north, south and middle routes, our strategy now seems to be definitively chosen. The weather is clear, the storms will stay 100 miles in front of us, and some wind is coming, finally. We are entering our third night airborne. We sleep a lot, maybe because we are satisfied with our situation and because the balloon is following the waypoints. Though during this night, strategies of different teams diverged: one Swiss and one American balloons are flying ahead at top speed, drift 285°, 21 to 26 kts. Another American balloon is unexpectedly coming back quickly from the Balears Islands, they are far ahead. We feel it even easier to crawl along at a snail's pace. We help the Swiss balloon with ATC, out of range of Valencia Control and given a wrong frequency to Madrid. This confirms that they are already much more to the north than we plan to go, as we should never enter the Madrid FIR.



Arriving at Valencia, Spain.  
photo by Sebastien Rolland

On Tuesday morning we are flying over the region of Ciudad Real, from where we have radio contact with our chase crew. They are very happy, and seem to appreciate as much as we do the Spanish landscapes: deserts, olive trees fields, haciendas, lakes. Every morning we have an excellent breakfast: chocolate, muesli, marmalade, waffles. This third day was not an issue for us, except some fears when we approached towering cumulus, but the observation of their movement with the compass and from the satellite, via the control room, indicated "no risk". The balloon remained perfectly steady next to these giants, whereas entering into them would have led to early termination of our flight due to severe turbulence and heavy consumption of ballast to try to control the descent. Probably the famous "invisible hand" interceded for our balloon here. In fact two hours earlier we had descended close to the ground to search for more right drift, but we were unable to maintain the balloon in the thermals. If we would have succeeded, probably we would have crossed into the area of turbulence.

At 12,000 ft, we are heading toward the Guadalquivir Valley and Vincent remembers this place that he flew over in 2003 with his brother Jean-François during that Gordon Bennett race. This is the place where Luc Trulleman asked them to descend and catch an easterly wind. We are in a similar situation. Our control room wants us to stay by Seville in the evening and wait for the east wind, but we are ahead of schedule. What to do as we are now flying at 20 kts toward the ocean that we'll reach before sunset, without being sure that we can come back to land during night? We try a descent, early but precisely on the 18:00 UTC waypoint. Vincent has skills to maintain the balloon at low levels

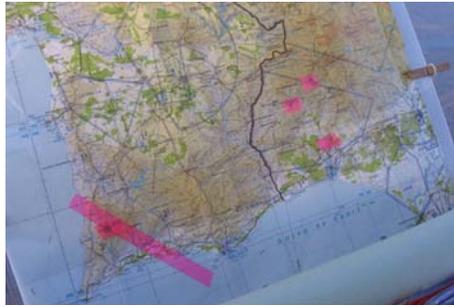
without consuming too much precious ballast. But close to the ground we turn right by 120°, sucked by an active cumulonimbus, we can see thunder in the distance and rain on the hills only five miles away. Another cumulonimbus is located to the west, though the situation is under control according to our met man. We are stuck in the same place for two hours, between ground level and 3,000 ft, waiting for the east wind that should push us during the whole night to the finish at Cape St. Vincent.



photo by Sebastien Rolland

Early in the night we learn that Mark Sullivan and Cheryl White, USA #2 have landed in Faro and only the balloon, Swiss #1 of Kurt Frieden and Pascal Witpraechtger can reach Cape St. Vincent, but we are expecting the news of their landing before nightfall. The news will never come: they are flying through the 4<sup>th</sup> night, but we estimate that they will reach the coastline before dawn, meaning that they are going for a night landing. This situation is annoying us a lot, first because the Swiss team can go to the “end of the end” and we already imagine some landing scenario close to the lighthouse of Cape St. Vincent, second we have not found the forecasted east wind yet. It seems that the weather models are false and this is worrying us. No winner can be declared before all have landed, and we have enough ballast left for the night and next day. We will wait for the wind for four hours, staying between the ground and 5,000 ft, meanwhile enjoying the view of Seville and some fireworks. At 20:25 UTC we reach eight knots, in the right direction: heading 273°. At this crucial moment of the flight, Christophe confirms to us that the Swiss balloon will land at Cape St. Vincent, that the race will go until the “end of the end” and that from now on we have to follow precisely the waypoints.

Christophe’s intuition and his critical assessment of the model is the ultimate key to our success: “the forecasted wind MUST be, if you don’t get it at 5,000 ft it must be higher. Try at 8,000-10,000 ft. Now YOU have the shovel in your hands”. For Vincent and me there is no doubt: very slowly we are searching for this wind that must be somewhere. At midnight we are heading 240° 8 knots at 5,500 ft, then around 0500, 267° 12 knots at 7,760 ft. The Swiss balloon seems to have landed in the north of what is now the “small winning triangle” area. We watch our target: the Cape at 252°. We must not go too much to the right to avoid passing north of the Swiss balloon. We aim for as much left as possible, the borderline being the south coast of Portugal, but we need more speed as well to arrive before next night. The *Petit Prince* will help us: with solar heating, he will go up, there is almost no gravity resistance left on him. He finds the good wind, between 250° and 256°, straight to the Cape, at more than 15 knots. We even need to restraint him from going too high with the help of the valve. Now he is going fast. Only one idea: to cross the finish line that we’ve drawn



The winning line on the map.

photo by Sebastien Rolland

on our paper chart from the position of Swiss #1. We won’t have time to appreciate it during the flight, as we’ll be busy descending to avoid a bath in the Atlantic Ocean that we can already see behind the hills.

Descending... quickly because a low level sounding indicates strong winds, east south-easterly 42 knots, and at noon in the south of Portugal thermal activity must be intense, but nothing if there were not the local orographic effect speeding up the wind near the ground.

We don’t want to drift either to the sea, or to the wrong side of the finish line. We put on helmets and restraint harnesses linked to the basket. While doing this we were descending at only 400 ft/min and now we are flying over sea again, off Portimão. Fortunately the surface wind is blowing toward the land. We must increase our descent rate. The balloon, almost empty of gas, reacts like a 14,000 cubic foot system and we should have enough ballast to stop our descent and choose our point of impact.

We are crossing Lagos beach, then the city: 30 knots is the last look at the GPS. Vincent is still valving, and I’m having sand bags ready. The descent is stopped with about 90 lbs of ballast. “Buildings cleared”. “Behind, our landing field”. Valving. It’s going fast. “Straight forward, a power line”. “One bag over, another one”. “Cleared”. Valving. Waow! Gust to the left. “Another power line”. “One bag, half”. Gust to the right. “Power line straight ahead”. “Cleared”. Power line 600 ft ahead. Valving, guiderope, rip panel. Dragging. Dog house. We can’t see outside. The basket is dragging again, the guide rope had no time to rotate the balloon. He’s stopping after a while. We are lifting the basket to look outside. The power line looks close. The balloon still a little bit inflated wants to pull even more, but he’s cooling down and stops completely. Victory! It is exactly 10:00 UTC, noon in Geneva.

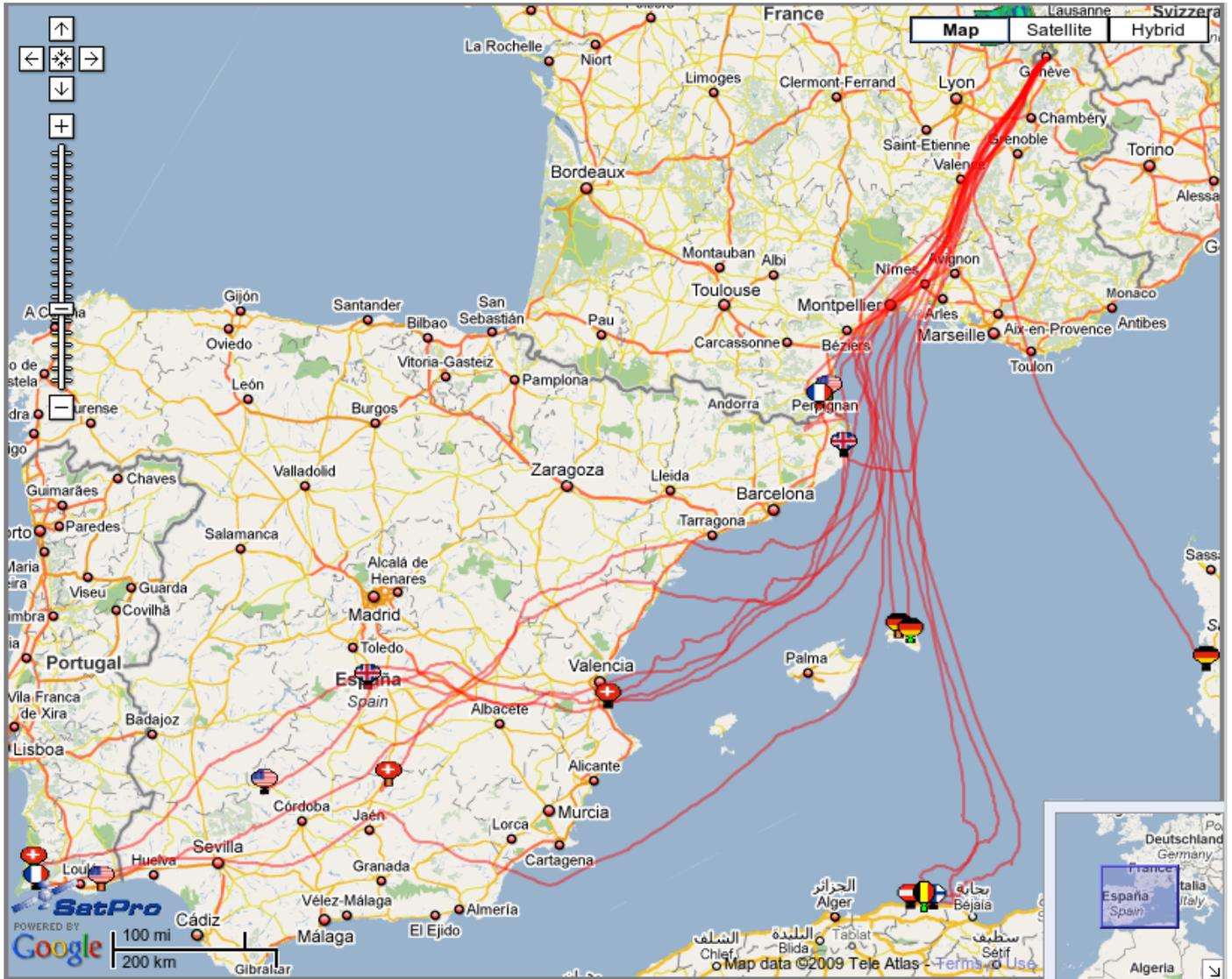
Witnesses, excited, are coming from the airfield of Lagos. Among them is Helena, balloonist. She has followed the race for the last four days on the internet and suddenly saw the balloon through her window. Tears of joy. ■



photo copyrighted by Paul Mohony



### Tracks of all flights in the 53rd Coupe Aéronautique Gordon Bennett Competition (top); Landing sites of the top five finishers in Portugal (bottom)



**2009 Coupe Aeronautique Gordon Bennett**

		Launch Site:		Vessy Sports Center		Geneva		Switzerland	
		Coordinates:		N 046.1852333		E 006.1652333			
Launch	Finish	Country	Pilot	Co-Pilot	Distance	Latitude	Longitude	Location	Time
5	 1	FRA 1	Sebastien ROLLAND	Vincent LEYS	1588 km	N 037° 7.740'	W 008° 41.400'	Portugal (NW Lagos)	85:18
16	 2	SUI 1	Kurt FRIEDEN	Pascal WITPRAECHTIGER	1572 km	N 037° 20.593'	W 008° 41.433'	Portugal (NW Marmelete)	
4	 3	USA 2	Mark SULLIVAN	Cheri WHITE	1530 km	N 037° 06.717'	W 007° 44.117'	Portugal (NE Faro)	71:20
15	 4	USA 3	Andy CAYTON	Sam CANDERS	1296 km	N 038° 13.182'	W 005° 21.666'	Spain (NW Cordoba)	
12	 5	SUI 2	Christian STOLL	Walter MATTENBERGER	1180 km	N 038° 19.849'	W 003° 30.945'	Spain ( Santa Elena)	
13	 6	GBR 2	Janet FOLKES	Ann RICH	1106 km	N 039° 25.890'	W 003° 49.278'	Spain (La Alberca)	
7	 7	SUI 3	Max KREBS	Walter VOLLENWEIDER	936 km	N 039° 12.803'	W 000° 16.615'	Spain (S Valencia)	
14	 8	GER 3	Josef (Bepperl) HOEHL	Georg SELMAIER	752 km	N 039° 38.467'	E 008° 28.555'	Italy (Island of Sardinia)	21:00
9	 9	GER 1	Wilhelm EIMERS	Ulrich SEEL	712 km	N 039° 57.030'	E 004° 09.611'	Spain (Island of Menorca)	
2	 10	GER 2	Tomas HORA	Volker LOESCHHORN	710 km	N 040° 0.652'	E 003° 56.932'	Spain (Island of Menorca)	
8	 11	GBR 1	David HEMPELMAN-ADAMS	Simon CAREY	522 km	N 042° 0.667'	E 003° 10.483'	Spain (l'Estartit)	
11	 12	FRA 2	Thierry VILLEY-DESMESERETS	Benoit PELARD	484 km	N 042° 31.100'	E 002° 47.795'	France (SW Perpignan)	
10	 13	USA 1	Barbara FRICKE	Peter CUNEO	470 km	N 042° 37.676'	E 002° 56.069'	France (SE Perpignan)	33:00
6	 *	AUT 1	Gerald STURZLINGER	Nikolaus BINDER	1044 km	N 036° 53.692'	E 004° 08.911'	Algeria/Africa (N Tizi Ouzou)	
3	 *	BEL 1	Ronny VAN HAVERE	Luc VAN GEYTE	1043 km	N 036° 53.700'	E 004° 20.833'	Algeria/Africa (N Tizi Ouzou)	
1	 *	FIN 1	Olli LUOMA	Ben MATTSSON	1041 km	N 036° 53.492'	E 004° 26.796'	Algeria,Africa (N Tizi Ouzou)	42:00
* No results because pilots landed outside competition area.									



## The Flight of a Lifetime by Cheri White



Mark Sullivan and Cheri White ready for launch.  
photo from Cheri White

Where does one begin to tell the story of the most amazing, challenging and awe inspiring flights of one's life? As I sit in my home in Austin, Texas with my children sound asleep in their beds, I ponder whether it was all a dream. Yet I close my eyes and I am immediately back in the basket on the second night listening to the roar of the Mediterranean Sea below me and watching the lights of Mallorca fade into the distance with the full moon and stars lighting my way. Mark is asleep and I breathe in the smell of the sea below me and I am at peace! Of course that peace is shattered the next day as we mentally prepare ourselves for a possible ditch into the Strait of Gibraltar. But I am ahead of the story, so from the beginning...

After a disappointing cancellation of our flight at the Gordon Bennett in Belgium in 2007, Mark and I decided to start training for another chance. Mark lost a lot of weight and started climbing the mountain in Albuquerque every other day to get in shape. I continued my yoga, cardio and weight workouts. We were rewarded with a first place finish in the America's Challenge with a 68 ½ hour flight from Albuquerque to Iowa. Our USA spot for Geneva was attained.

We shipped *Delta Goodie*, the balloon of Harris Goodwin, to Europe and arranged to have our German crew chief Franz-Joseph Schreuer chase us. We were invited to fly in a special event celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the balloon club of Münster, Germany the week before the Gordon Bennett. This was a perfect opportunity for a nice warm-up flight. Franz-Joseph flew with us and we landed in the morning, after eight hours of flight, just south of Berlin.

For the rest of the week we started studying trajectories and weather and then made the journey to Geneva. Although it was raining in Geneva when we arrived, the weather forecasts for a Saturday launch were very favorable. When it was confirmed that the trajectories would take us out to sea, I made a beeline for my friend and fellow competitor Tomas Hora to quiz him on what to expect while flying over the sea. He calmed my nerves

when he explained that it would be very easy during the day with no thermals to contend with. Mark and I then went to work with Randy Lefevre, our meteorologist, to make our plan. We would aim for the most southern tip of Portugal, after passing over Mallorca.

Saturday morning we were up early buying groceries for the flight before heading to the field to fill sandbags and set up the balloon. We bought turkey, cheese, bread, fruit, cookies, chocolate, a couple of sports drinks and lots of water. On every one of our gas flights, we always have too much food and end up using the remaining food as ballast or eating it on the drive back after landing. Unfortunately, this would be the one year that we did not bring enough food and the last day I was starving for real food and had only cookies and chocolate left in our food bag.

Our inflation did not go well. The first time the envelope was released the parachute top did not seat due to a sudden gust of wind and we lost all of our hydrogen and had to start again. Then as we were refilling, the hose from the truck to our balloon was blown in two with a very scary and frightful sound. None of the pilots had seen this before and they were all taking pictures of it. Luckily no one was hurt. Then when the balloon was released for the second time, a big gust of wind hit it again. Luckily Willie Eimers and his crew were nearby and helped us get control of the balloon. After one last briefing and a call to Randy to confirm our plan, we were ready to launch.

We were the fourth balloon off and enjoyed a very beautiful view of the city of Geneva in the full moonlight. A big outdoor concert was in progress beside our hotel and we listened to the music as we floated along. We flew at altitudes between 3,000 and 4,500 feet thru the night. In our weather briefings with the Swiss meteorologist before the flight, there had been a lot of talk and nervousness about the Mistral winds thru the Rhone Valley of France. If the winds developed there would be little chance to land before being spit out to sea. At the last briefings he had said

that he did not think they would affect us. At 3am, when I was flying along at 30 to 35 mph, I looked down and was suddenly going 60 mph with a big hill covered with wind turbines in front of me. I ballasted to go above it and woke up Mark. We heard the Finnish team on the radio celebrating the fact that they were going 102 kph (63 mph). We knew we needed a little speed in order to get out of France before the winds curled to take us back to Geneva but decided to stay a little higher and slow down a bit. I was fast asleep when we left France and went out over the Mediterranean, but Mark says it was a beautiful sight.

The next morning was easy going as the balloon flew at a pretty steady 5,000 feet. We enjoyed the views of the sea and passing cruise ships. We were in contact with



photo by Cheri White

Tomas Hora, out in front of us. Tomas was getting nervous about finding a wind to take him back towards land so we worked together relaying altitudes, direction and speed. At this point we were very confident that our plan was working and that we would make landfall the next day around Alacant, Spain. We knew the Finnish, Belgium and Austrian teams had been too fast and were now down near Africa. Willie came on the radio to tell us that he had talked to the Swiss meteo and that the turn would come to take us to land. Tomas had decided to land on the island of Menorca. Willie and Tomas started talking a lot in German. At the time I was wishing I could understand German but I just assumed Willie was helping Tomas land. We found out later that Willie had decided to land on the island as well. It was luck that we did not know this as it could have put a little doubt into our plan. As we were flying towards Mallorca, I saw someone shining a mirror at our balloon. Mark tried to call Tomas on the radio and heard a voice say "Mark this is your friend Ricardo Aracil, a Spanish pilot and I am here below you at the lighthouse and can help you land". "Can you see my green car?" Now that is a small world! We talked to him awhile but our focus was on Portugal. After watching a glorious sunset, Mark went to sleep and I was at peace watching fireworks on Mallorca and listening to the constant roar of the sea.

The next morning things grew tense as the turn we had been waiting for and expecting did not materialize. Our flight path was taking us straight towards the Strait of Gibraltar where we knew the winds speeds would be incredibly fast. After a few frantic calls to

Randy and then headquarters to get the phone number for the Spanish search and rescue, we started mentally preparing for a ditch in the sea that afternoon. I made mental notes of where the life raft and survival suits were as we put our passports and EBIRB in the one waterproof bag we had on board. Mark was mentally rehearsing a water landing and safe exit from the balloon. Randy was running models and trying to find us a wind to take us to land. The sun was blazing down on us and cooking us like eggs in a frying pan. I had a sheet that I hung up on one side of the basket and then watched as the balloon rotated. I would then move the sheet only to have the basket rotate again. It became an ugly game as we tried to keep ourselves protected from the fierce sun. Of course, no one could sleep now.

Later that day, we formulated a plan to reach land. We would maintain our present altitude and fly to within thirty miles of the Spanish coast to get far enough west for the Spanish land mass to block the southerly winds at altitude. Around 3pm, after passing directly south of Cartagena, Randy had us ascend very slowly looking for a turn with the caveat that if we went too high we would go south to Africa. We found the turn at 6,000 feet and big smiles came on our faces. We called Randy but he told us not to breathe or change altitude or do anything until we were over land and to call him then. Landfall came at Vera, Spain to our great relief. We had flown over the sea almost 35 hours.



Landfall at Vera, Spain.

photo by Cheri White

We now refocused on the race and our plan for Portugal. Unfortunately, we entered Spain right where the Sierra Nevada mountain range starts. Randy had wanted us to fly an altitude of 5,000 feet straight west to Portugal. Because the mountains were 4,000 to 9,000 feet it was very tough trying to fly low in between the multiple peaks. It was late in the day and clouds were developing all around us. Thermals started bouncing us down close to the ground and then back up again. Mark fought the thermals using four bags of ballast. We finally decided to go higher and try to get to the next valley to take us towards Seville. Night came and Mark went to sleep. FYI, I love to fly at night and let Mark sleep as much as possible. He has more experience and



it is important that he is well rested to fight thermals, set the altitude in the mornings and afternoons and to land. We made it to the valley and all was smooth sailing. We were now tracking towards Seville at an average of 20 mph. At one point I looked down and saw a light from an isolated hill shining on us. I later found out that it was our crew. I guess I should turn on the radio more often! Then we hit a huge imaginary wall. The balloon came to a sudden stop then did a huge loop. The last reports showed faster speeds at lower altitudes so I decided to valve down to find the wind. As we went lower, we came to a dead stop. It was time to ride the elevator up to higher altitudes and higher wind. It worked and we were back on our way.

The next morning, we found that our tracker had stopped working. After a call to headquarters we were instructed to climb up the basket to the tracker hanging on the load ring and reset it. I tried but standing on the side of the basket in midair while exhausted is not a good idea. Mark then tried with me holding onto his belt and leg. It worked but we did request that in the future trackers be attached on a lanyard to hang below the basket! We then flew over Seville and straight up the runway. ATC was wonderful throughout Europe and were all very accommodating for us.

Mark was now flying the balloon just like a hot air balloon. There was a ton of steerage and we thought we could drive it straight to Portugal. However right around 4pm, we were hit with thermals. The first thermal took us up to around 5,600 ft and the second took us to around 9,000 feet costing another four bags of ballast. In hindsight the thermals worked in our favor taking us a little north and giving us more speed so that we could aim for further down the coast in Portugal. The landscape now was incredible. We flew over millions of olive trees, big estates on the hillsides, wineries, a big futuristic solar power station and of course, the ominous Mediterranean Sea was always to our south.

We started thinking about our landing site. I had been to Sagres, Portugal in the 80's after graduating from law school and knew the coastline to be huge cliffs with small beaches tucked in here and

there. We knew that sunset was approaching and that we needed to fly as far down the coastline as possible. We took out our night vision viewer to prepare for a night landing and called Mark's son, Bryan to start looking at Google Earth for good places to land at night. The ATC at Faro was working with us by getting all the landing planes to report winds at 3,000 and 4,000 ft. Our plan changed at sunset when the land cooled and the sea breeze took effect sending all wind out to sea. We quickly descended and found a tiny spot beside the olive trees for a stand up landing without the use of our trail rope. Luckily we had landed with a little daylight left as power lines were strung in complete chaos and would have been hard to see or anticipate at night. We had flown 1,528 km in 71 hours and 20 minutes.

Our crew was close in the town of Travira. Along the way, they had picked up two other pilots from Seville, Graeme Pusey and his wife Annete and Arturo Chamorro. They brought champagne and food and helped us pack up. Our crew had picked up some McDonald's salads for us. So after a long hot shower, champagne and a wonderful salad it was time for a long rest in a real bed. After three days and nights living in a small basket, these simple things brought so much relief!

On the way back to Geneva, we stopped at the beach town of Stiges, south of Barcelona. The only thing the crew and I could think about was swimming in the Mediterranean Sea. It had been such a long hot flight and chase, that the cool water of the sea felt wonderful. Another of Mark's Spanish pilot friends,

Angel Aguirre, met us for dinner that night. We had tapas and paella and shared adventures of flying balloons over the Amazon and Africa.

Back in Geneva, we attended a wonderful awards brunch and were honored to represent the USA with a third place finish. We shared stories and laughter with the other pilots. It was truly a once in a lifetime flight that I will carry with me for the rest of my days.

Of course, big hugs and special thanks to all involved with our

flight, the race and all of you who were glued to the internet cheering and praying for us. Our beloved meteorologist, John Ground was flying in our hearts as well. Love to all! Congratulations also to the French and Swiss teams. It was truly a great race! ■



Solar power station.

photo by Cheri White

## The First Finnish Gordon Bennett Team

by Olli Luoma

Two years ago Ben Mattsson and I started our gas balloon education. Our clear target was to participate in the Coupe Gordon Bennett in 2009 and be the first Finnish team ever. We got good training and told our teachers Tomas Hora and Volker Löschor (team Germany #2) of our ambition. Ben

bought a new balloon and the other needed equipment. Then we managed to fly several times and were qualified to be Team Finland to GB 2009.

We hoped that the 2009 competition would be organized by Stuttgart Club so that the launch area would be familiar to us. However, the CIA awarded the competition to Geneva. We looked at maps, a bit concerned. If the wind is from southwest as it mostly is, there are no problems. There is the whole of Europe to fly and we could even try to reach Finland. All other wind directions looked not so good for us. Before the competition we got more and more worried when all the tracks led to the Mediterranean Sea.

The atmosphere in Geneva was tense. I think the HQ of the competition was under great pressure. All the tracks still showed a route to Mediterranean. Launch was scheduled for Saturday evening but there was a possibility to postpone it until Sunday evening. In the lottery, we got launch number one. We were not so happy about that. We decided to make a final "Go – no Go" decision on Saturday morning after the briefing. Our decision was "Go".

Saturday was spent getting ready for our flight. We never left the launch field all day. When the evening came we were ready to take off as #1. Last thing to do was to go and get some food and drink for the flight. Great thanks to German Team #2 again for their help. When launch time came closer, we were really surprised that we were not nervous, we were ready for the flight.

For the first time, the people gathered to witness



Ben Mattsson checking in with race officials, Stefan and Sabrina Handl, and Nicole Haggeneý. photo from Olli

a GB launch could hear the Finnish national anthem when *Finn Pearl* took off as #1. That was great moment. Full moon, Alps and cheering crowd, that is something you can't forget! Very soon after us there were other balloons following. Blinking strobes were seen and race had begun. Our speed was good and so also was the direction. We stayed rather low and headed

to the southwest. At the briefings we were told that there will be Mistral winds in the Rhone valley. We were told that they would be weak and only at low level. When we reached the valley we found out that meteo had wrong information. The Mistral was also at higher altitudes and our speed was 102 km/hr. I don't have courage to say that was a weak Mistral, but the winds were rather stable. The map moved fast below us and when the sun rose we were already over the Mediterranean Sea.

Above the sea, our direction was straight to Africa. During the day we contacted Finland by satellite phone and they didn't give us encouraging figures. If the flying altitude is very low, it might turn the next morning to west so that we could reach Gibraltar. All other levels would direct us to Africa. That afternoon we passed east of Mallorca and Menorca. We heard the Austrian team ask the Menorca ATC for the Algerian ATC frequency. At that point there were also other teams on Menorca's frequency and they asked what this was all about. We crossed our fingers when we heard that two German teams aimed to land on Menorca. Now was the worst thermal time and the ground winds reached 20 knots. Afterwards, we were very happy to hear that everything was okay with fellow teams.

Our journey continued to the African coast. The sun went down and we were still over the sea. During the night, we alternated two hours sleeping and flying. The night passed peacefully. On my watch, I saw a far away thunderstorm. It was beautiful, but at the same time I carefully checked where we were going and how those thunder clouds were moving. Morning rose and



we saw the Belgium team nearby. That morning we found out that our solar panel wasn't working. That meant we would have electricity for the day but would be out of it that night. The decision was clear, we would have to land in Algeria. After that decision, I made a phone call to my colleague in Finland who knows our minister of foreign affairs to see if he could do something since we would land in Algeria without visas.



Approaching the Algerian coast.

photo by Olli Luoma

Europe and enduring a rough landing on the African coast might be the cause.

That night we were taken to the police station, where there was plenty of food for us. It was Ramadan when the religious tradition is to fast during the day and eat only after nightfall. On our way to hotel, we met the Belgian team. They had landed one hour after us rather nearby. We also learned that the Austrian team had landed safely in a village nearby.

During the day we approached the African coast. We had several contacts with Austrian and Belgian teams who were also on the same course. We also got information from Geneva HQ that Algeria was on alert for our approach. From the Austrian team we got the advice to contact the police immediately after landing so they could protect us. By afternoon we were just four to five kilometers off the coast when the wind stopped and changed course out to sea again. We tried to change altitude and all three teams shared wind speeds and altitudes. We alarmed the local coast guard to secure our landing if we had to land at sea. As we dropped to just above sea level, the wind started to drift us not directly towards the coast but so that we would reach it. Since we couldn't choose our landing spot, we took what we got. Ben made an exceptionally good landing over coastal rocks, at a speed of around 30 km/hr. The landing was a bit rough but there we were, on the coast of Algeria. The equipment was mostly undamaged and most important of course, we were uninjured.

In Algeria we all were treated well and secured. On Wednesday, we met the local media and explained our trip. In the evening we packed our balloons. The Austrian team organized the equipment for transport back to Europe. Next day, we travelled to the capital, Alger, in a police convoy and there our embassies took care of us. We landed in Algeria on Monday evening and we were back in Europe (Marseille) on Thursday evening. I can only thank the Algerian police and officials for their wonderful work. Their cooperation with our embassies was seamless, and things could not have ended better.



The landing.

photo from Olli Luoma

Just half an hour after our landing, the coast guard officers and other rescue people reached our landing site. After finding out that we were uninjured, we were taken into police hospitality which was more than good. First we were taken to the hospital and given an examination to ensure that we were okay. They were a bit concerned about our blood pressure which was high! Our opinion was that spending 42 hours in a small basket, missing

This was our first Gordon Bennett race. It was a great experience and will not be the last Gordon Bennett with Finnish participation. ■

## Confession of a GB Novice

by Ann Rich

I had unfinished business with the Gordon Bennett Race, having made my first attempt to compete in Brussels in 2007. The race was cancelled, and I thought that my GB opportunity was gone forever. We did go to Stuttgart that year for a compensation flight. Loved it...but it was not the Gordon Bennett.

Fast forward two years and after Janet's co-pilot dropped out, I get the call and I am in, as long as I can be back for my kids' birthdays in mid-September.

I took the lazy route into Geneva, while Janet drove through Germany collecting the balloon (D-OWNT) en route. We met at breakfast on Friday, September 4<sup>th</sup> to pool our resources, and meet the rest of our team. Naturally, we had all been watching the met for weeks, and by the time we got to Geneva it seemed certain that we were heading south for a trip over the Mediterranean - good job we had that life raft and life preservers. The choices seemed to be; go high and head for Italy, associated islands, and if really brave shoot for the southern tip of Greece; or stay low and slower and aim for Spain and Portugal. The only option for the hydrophobic was to land on the French coast, or just possibly hide out in a mountain valley for two days and then pick up a northerly route away from Switzerland. Neither of the latter options was very competitive, and both were challenging, so it was not surprising that everyone eventually opted for the Mediterranean.

There were lots of briefings: Friday afternoon, then 10am, 3pm and 8pm on Saturday. Cranking up the pressure. Determining the launch order (we were lucky 13), confirming that the met situation was consistent, declaring the rules in the event of flight over Italy at night (don't do it, so that spelled the end of any bold and brave plans to find Greece), announcing the launch would indeed go ahead. All fascinating, but...shouldn't we be sleeping?

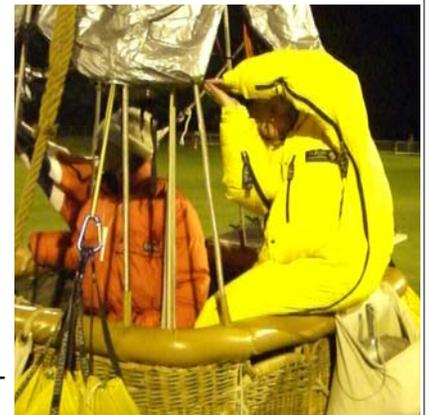


Janet Folkes and Ann Rich in basket during inflation.  
photo from Ann Rich

Out on the field, the crew got the balloon filled, and filed far too many derogatory comments about what went into the basket: the duvet was worth every gram, it was a tiny tube of toothpaste, and if the pilot wants to take a large BBC camera she is entitled.

The sun sank. It was getting cool. The final briefing confirmed we were going that night, so that really set the teeth chattering. We dressed for action and in a borrowed,

yellow, down suit, like an overstuffed baby's romper, I looked like a mighty banana. Waiting to launch was probably the most nerve-wracking part of the trip. Our turn. Bumped up the steps, radio check, hasty good wishes, a cheering crowd, "God Save the Queen" - we were rising: 23:08 local time, 21:08 UTC. Janet had left me with the launch instructions ("Watch the false lift, do NOT let us sink, don't ballast too much") while she had a sand bag ready and open. Grip scoop in hopper of sand, wave madly, still going skywards. Lights overboard, transponder antenna out, transponder on, radio contact with Geneva airport only a couple of km away, sprinkle a little sand to keep the gentle upward trajectory, scan the sky for the lights of the other balloons ahead - Wow! Heart rate coming down, balloon leveling out, so quiet (give or take the radio).



Ready for launch.

photo from Ann Rich

We'd done it, race on.

Our plan was to take the comparatively safe route, not get too low in the Rhone valley during the night where an unstable and fast Mistral was predicted at lower levels, but take the



slightly higher, slower and more westerly route to the French coast. Then it was out over the Mediterranean, assured that we would make landfall over the Spanish coast somewhere around Valencia, and then if we stayed low and had the endurance we could trundle gently across Spain to Portugal. Our meteorologist/ops centre had been refining this plan with us over the past few days. For that first night we were expected to be around Montpellier on the south coast of France by dawn. With daylight would come the chance to cop out and land should we feel the need.

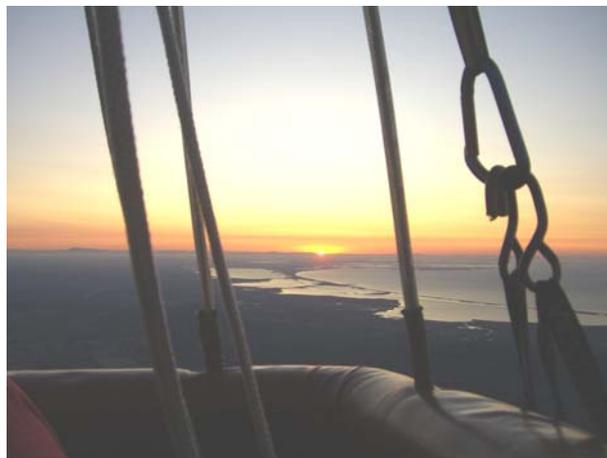
I was still pumped full of adrenalin but Janet has done this many times before, so with exhortations not to hit anything and to wake her if I was worried, she curled up in the duvet and went to sleep. Very pragmatic, very trusting. Left alone to come to terms with the balloon I started to get the “feel” of her, to know what was the equilibrium wave, and when something had disturbed that and I needed to do something (ballast). With eyes accustomed to the night, and the light of a full moon and a clear sky, identifying the terrain was not a problem. As the instruments and the clues outside the basket started to fall into place and form a natural scan pattern and coherent picture, I could start to relax and enjoy myself. We were under Lyon control, who regularly called round all balloons (having lost 3 by both radio and transponder), and heard one balloon asking permission to ascend to 10,000 ft (heading high and by deduction for Italy), but everyone else was tracking down the Rhone valley. We were not travelling particularly fast, generally going at somewhere around 20 knots. Flying up a valley, just below the ridge in the wee small hours, we picked up speed towards the head of the valley and were spat out the top at just over 30 knots. I think that was the top speed for the whole flight.

Janet took over at 4am and woke me as the sky started to lighten in the east. As the light increased we could make out where we were for real, rather than on the disembodied screen of the GPS. Hmm, watery stuff ahead was the Med., and that town down there, well it was Montpellier! First big decision – the water or no? We were travelling slowly and at a shallow angle to the coastline so we had time to think, chat with met/ops center (“We’ll bring you in over Valencia tomorrow evening”), breakfast on bread and cheese, and watch the Swiss take the plunge. We followed, leaving land where the canal empties into the sea at Beziers.

It was a beautiful day and pretty uneventful – just getting further and further from shore. Tried our solar panels (not big enough to be really effective) but made the mistake of not shading myself enough. No real sleep since Friday night, plus too much sun = headache and queasy – not debilitating, just uncomfortable. Once the sun had set, I drank some water, dressed up, and was sent to bed! Five hours later I had recovered completely from what was the worst physical part of my own personal flight. Lesson learned – use the sun shields and don’t skimp on the sleep. The rest of the night was magical. There was still an almost full moon, a hemisphere of stars above, and the twinkling lights of the Spanish coast far off in the distance (about 50 miles away). The sea was dark beneath, and very calm. The occasional cruise ship steamed by down below, moving passengers from the Balearic Islands, and the small isolated lights must have been fishing boats. It was silent. No radio chatter, no engines, no burners, no sounds of life from below, only the occasional creak if I moved around the basket, the odd tiny grunt from Janet, and the rustle of the biscuit wrappers when I needed a snack. It was wonderful just to hang there, in seeming suspended animation – the motion was very gentle and only the GPS told me that we were moving steadily, if slowly southwest, riding the subtle waves of a balloon at peace with its environment. So this is why people fly gas balloons!

Another sunrise, and in the low sun angles and haze of the early morning, after the coastal lights had been turned off, we lost sight of land. A slightly lonely feeling. We were not travelling very fast. After a talk to our ops centre we learned that other balloons were getting a better speed lower down; we vented, just a little.

There was a somewhat faster layer, but the balloon did not want to stay there. The amplitude of its wave increased, especially in the downward arc, and all of a sudden we were hurtling towards the sea surface. A bit of rapid ballasting saw



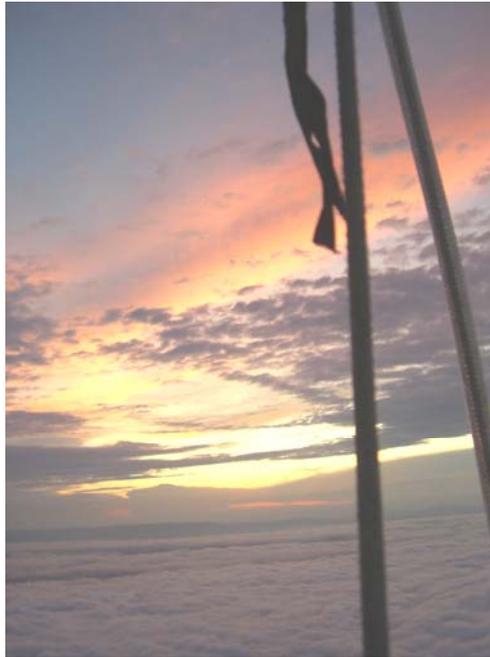
Sunrise

photo by Ann Rich

us round out at something less than 100 ft above the waves. So, all that stuff about the balloon wanting to be at float or on the ground is right then!

Then came a frustrating afternoon. Distances at sea, as any sailor will know, are deceptive, and while we knew that we were very gradually gaining on land the coastline was falling away from us in the same direction that we were travelling, and we were slowing up. It seemed to be two hours to land for much of the day, and we were now expecting to find the coast between Valencia and Barcelona, late afternoon. Inexorably, but agonizingly slowly, we crept up on solid land and it was with great joy and celebratory chocolate that we made landfall at about 4pm. Just an inkling there of how the ancient mariners must have felt when they found solid ground. Behind the beaches was a town backed by a motorway, and then tree-cultivated slopes (olives or figs, I guess) leading to the foothills of the mountains behind. Now we had to decide whether to land in daylight, or continue through another night over high terrain. With proximity to the coast, our mobile phones had become active again and it was with much pleasure that we could talk more freely with our support teams. The retrieve had found an idyllic spot somewhere in the hills outside Barcelona and the ops centre had been endeavoring to ensure our trajectory first to dry land, and then for the continuing hours.

Our meteorology gurus promised us a slow night over the mountains, but if we were at the right height we would travel southwest and could track across Spain for as long as we could keep going, heading for Portugal, though that would require a fourth night in the basket. First though, we had to get inland since initially the southwest track would be too much to the south and would take us out to sea again. NOOOO! The sun was going down, the balloon was cooling, the wind direction was light and variable, everything from tracking east of north (back to sea) to south (back to sea). We wanted west! We had agreed that if we got carried seaward of the motorway we had already crossed we would try to land, having no desire at all for



Nothing but water.

photo by Ann Rich

another watery night, however magical the first one had been. However, we were soon settled at a comfortable altitude, moving inland, the sky now clear above us, the sun setting, and the nasty cumulonimbus in the distance flattening out: it was time for supper. Out with the hot packs (chicken stew and dumplings), which we ate to the sound of cow bells from the valleys below. We shared the sleep and the flying, tracking sedately across moonlit, rocky hilltops and valleys hiding beneath low clouds. When dawn came we were pretty much on course, just going rather slowly. We could see one balloon behind us, and knew via news from the ground that there were still six teams with a chance – including us. Just keep going.

We also received a message from a friend in Germany (confirmed later by race control) to tell us that if we flew past 11:56 local time we would break the Women's World Duration Record in class – better carry on then! This was something neither of us had known about, never mind contemplated as a goal – we were just flying the race. But since a record was there to be beaten, go for it.

Given the brilliant blue of the sky it was not surprising that we had drifted up to over 10,000 ft, so we decided to check the oxygen while we were not in real need and give our hemoglobin a treat. All working, but never necessary after that. Thus we passed a busy but fairly uneventful morning until 11:56, when congratulatory texts starting to come our way, until the cheep of the phones was drowned by a mighty roar. Long nose pointing straight at us from below, and closing with great speed, was a military jet (later identified as an F-18). First thought was that we had somehow strayed into a restricted zone and were in big trouble, but the jet looped above us and then down and in front again, flying laps around the basket. We picked our chins up off the floor, waved madly, dived for the cameras and shook the Union Jack over the side of the basket – they were friendly and congratulating us!

Once we had recovered from all the excitement we had to start planning for the remainder of our flight. The options were to land that afternoon/evening, while we still had big friendly fields underneath, or to continue through the night over another area of hills and



emerge (with luck) to land in the early morning. We knew that unless we were excessively lucky (i.e. did not need ballast until the next morning, and that was almost impossible with cooling and terrain to come) we would have to land in the morning and would not make it to Portugal or win the race (one of the U.S. teams was already safely to the SW tip of Spain). Nevertheless, there was the personal challenge of a fourth night, and putting our new world record further out for any challenger. Definitely tempting, but...let's see how the afternoon goes. We had to get information/clearance for a big danger zone in our path, but ATC were too busy to help – eventually learned it was inactive at night, and not a problem to us. We also wanted to be as sure as we could be, that dawn would be calm with light winds on the surface, no weather to worry about, and we should be in an area where there was possibility of a safe landing. This confirmation eventually came through. Then there was the issue of ballast. During the several hours spent getting these data we had been struggling with maintaining an altitude that gave us a good direction and speed, and had used more ballast than we would have wished. We were down to a fairly skimpy 80kg of sand, and lots of environmentally unfriendly, but nonetheless life saving things-to-be-jettisoned-in-emergency (spare food, empty plastic bottles, the wooden map board, and as a last resort dead batteries, oh, and the camera). Just about enough. We both wanted to try a fourth night, but with some trepidation. I got the final decision because “I had family”. We were flying through the night.

So we unpacked the ready-for-landing basket, got out all our toys and comforts again, and started to think about dinner. Unfortunately as the sun travelled towards the horizon so did the balloon, still cooling and with hills approaching we had to go up. Used more ballast – more than Janet was happy with, and at the last comfortable opportunity she vetoed the fourth night. In the final minutes of daylight we landed in one of the last fields before the hills. Over the power wires, over the railway, let go the trail rope (didn't seem to make too much difference) and cruise in along a huge long cut field. Four legged things at the far end well out of our sphere of influence, and there were people waving as we passed overhead – assumed it was friendly!

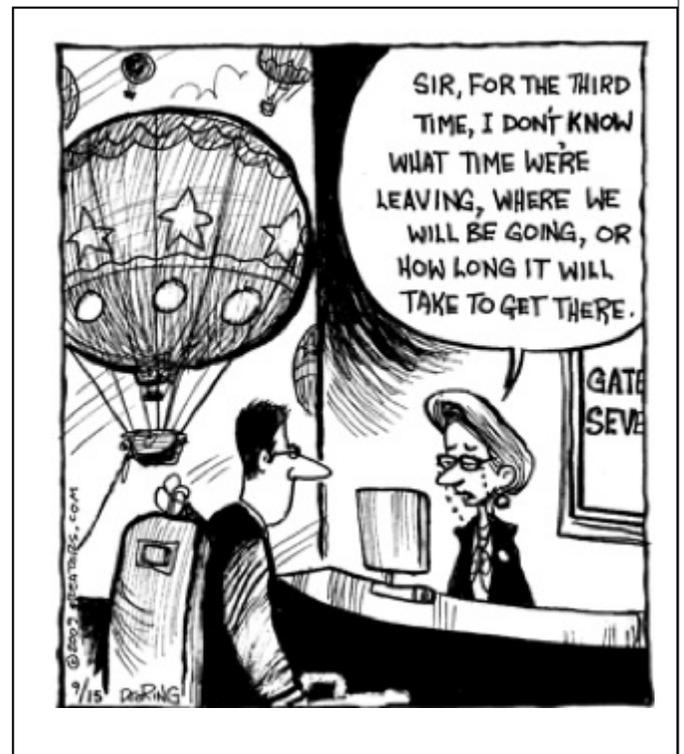
We were down and safe, if in a complete jumble because the decision was so swift that only the absolute necessities had been stowed. We had a stand up land-

ing but immediately deflated so the basket tipped over and there was a fine mixture of clothing, food, water bottles, navigation equipment and a liberal dose of sand decorating the bottom side. We staggered out (I didn't realize my legs would be so affected) to greet the whole of the farmer's family, barreling towards us in two jeeps. The four legged things, they told us, were bulls (oops!) but would not approach the farmer's jeep, or so he said. We hid the Union Jack and its red stripes, just in case. Race over. ■



Sign at landing site photo by Ann Rich

New Women's World Duration Record (broken at 0956 UTC, 8/9/09): 69 hours 22 minutes



## From the Shadow of Mount Blanc to the Sun of Sardinia

by Josef (Bepperl) Hoehl

Since February of this year, Georg Sellmaier and I knew that we would enter this year's Gordon Bennett and since then we were working to prepare, lose weight and get in condition. During the week before the flight, we studied the weather and trajectories, so we were prepared for the likely flight directions.

We arrived at 9am at the hotel Ramada Encore in Geneva and got into our rooms at 2pm. In between, we registered at the GB headquarters. The opening briefing was at 3pm, with first information and weather data. The decision was made for a Saturday evening start at about 10pm and the countdown began. The opening dinner was at 6pm and the first on-field briefing was at the Vessy Sport Center, the starting field, at 10am Saturday morning. While Georg and I joined the briefing, the crew filled 50 small sandbags with 10 kg sand and 60 big ones with 18 kg. After the briefing, we began to prepare the envelope for filling. We had got start number 14 from the lucky girls, Nicole Haggenny and Sabrina Handl, both part of the organization team and headquarters for the race in Geneva with their husbands Markus Haggenny and Stefan Handl. Stefan is my former co-pilot.

While we watched the American team of Andy Cayton and Sam Canders preparing, we gave them a hand helping with preparation of the envelope by a filling cover, so that they didn't have to sit on the valve! The U.S. boys were fascinated by our help. Then Georg and I slept in the trailer for about five hours to be in good shape for the fill and the flight. The spectators' interest was great over the whole day, with an air show of helicopters, hot air balloons, airplanes, etc. The short briefings at 2:30pm and 8pm did not bring new meteorological information or trajectories, but heard that it was forbidden to fly in Italian airspace VFR at night!! This destroyed our plans, to fly to Greece or the Greek Islands! Also we got the information, that landing in Africa, including Algeria, would lead to disqualification and no result!

The start came up punctual at 10:15pm and every three to five minutes under the national hymns, the balloons were sent into the full moon, night sky. It is an amazing moment, to leave in that way. But as soon as we are in the air, the work begins on board. Transponder code and frequency for Geneva ATC are running and two minutes after takeoff the initial call with the starting time had to be given to the controller. We had to switch over to radar control and after one hour we switch over to Lyon radar. The country around the Rhone and Isere rivers with their mountains and the famous Mistral winds need highest concentration! While enormous lee winds roll behind the summits, clearly the information for Mistral winds given was not accurate. We have contact over the second radio with Tomas Hora, the second German team, which was very helpful, because he started third. The bright night gave us the possibility to see teams/balloons before us and also the two behind us. They were flying a bit lower than us and we drifted a little bit more left in the direction south. We see the ghostly summit of Mont Blanc and cross the Rhone and Isere.

Near Grenoble, we decide after a view of the ICAO map to ask the controller to climb up to flight level 100 and 120 (12,000 ft), because the mountains left of Grenoble have min. FL 110 and we are happy to surmount them without difficulties. All the other teams stay low and are brought by the Mistral more west and enter the Rhone valley with speeds of over 100km/hr (63 mph) not high over the ground! Their way leads to the Mediterranean Sea near Perpignan to the direction of Baleares/Spain.

Around 4am, Lyon gives us to Marseilles Control and we break up with Tomas, because of lost radio contact, the distance is too great from now on. At 6am, the daylight came up and we have the first view of the Mediterranean Sea to the south. At sunrise, around 7am, we have red profiles of Mont Blanc (4,807m), the Barre des Ecrins (4,102m) and the Dauphine (3,440m). We fly a planned heading of 140° to 165° towards the harbor of Toulon, cross the gigantic valley of the Durance and see the gorges of



Sunrise with mountains outlined. photo by Josef Hoehl



Verdon. Fantastic is the view in front to the Cote d' Azur and the harbor from Toulon to Marseilles. We get permission to go over the sea and cross directly over the harbor of Toulon, where the French Fleet is at home. After one hour over water, we also have a tremendous view back to the European continent, than the ocean fog takes away land sight.



Coast of Corsica and northern Sardinia.

photo by Josef Hoehl

Lonely, we fly on, without any view of ships and we are told to report every 30 minutes to Marseilles Control. After seven hours out at the sea, four hours before landing in Sardinia, we see the ferry from Barcelona to Porto Torres and a tanker under us and on the GPS we see the coast of Corsica and the northern part of Sardinia. When the eastern coordinate finally jumped over 8°, we know, that we will reach the coast of Sardinia. From 46 bags of sand and 25 liters of water ballast, which we had taken with us, we still had 20 bags and five liters left. Including emergency ballast, we are sure, we could have reached the Greece Peleponnes. But the forbidden VFR flight by night in Italy stops this race. After three hours of flight parallel to the beach, we approach sunset. After we leave FL 127, descending at 5 m/sec, we land very safely, at around 8pm, about 100m away from the coastal highway of the Arbus region. We are in a steep valley of the coastal mountains of Cape Frasca near Porto Palma on the Island of Sardinia. Two farmers are fortuitously our witnesses and help us get all our stuff out of the basket and lay the envelope across the basket as it is very quickly becoming dark.

A wonderful full moon night in the cleared

basket ground with the smell of rosemary and thyme gave this adventure, in defiance of many mosquito bites, a glorious highlight. By cell phone we report our landing three minutes later to our chase crew on the ferry from Genoa to Porto Torres and to the headquarters in Geneva as we were told. The song of mosquito hunting swallows lulled us to sleep.

Georg starts early in the morning, to collect the tow-rope, bags, etc. and then we sit on the edge of our basket and enjoy our great breakfast. I see about 1.5 km in the distance, the house and tractor of the farmer who helped us. Georg tells me to go over and again ask for help. The farmer's mother gives me a warm welcome. We call over the valley to Georg to come and we go to her son Giacomo, who is feeding the animals (180 geese, 80 sheep, 16 pigs, 2 cows, 6 dogs and 2 cats). Then he promises me that he would help us at 10:30am with the tractor. Punctually, he comes from his work with the animals. I help him to prepare their feed with unguent and then we drive with the four wheel drive tractor and the trailer from top of the valley down the 45° steep hill to the basket and envelope.

At first we put the basket on the trailer and then with hard work, we bring the envelope to the trailer with the valve on top. Then Giacomo drives down to the bottom of the valley and on up the other side to the street and parks in a lot. We call our chase crew by cell phone. Matthias tells me that they are only 2.5 km away from us by GPS and they reached us five minutes. Matthias backs our trailer up to the other trailer. After 15 minutes, everything is packed, we say goodbye and thank Giacomo, who will not take any money for the help, but is very glad, when I give him my



Landing site on the island of Sardinia.

photo by Josef Hoehl

Swiss knife, which he saw in action on the landing spot the evening before. He also got a balloon post from us.

Now we go on to the southern tip of Sardinia, where we spend two nights in an apartment house. While swimming in the 30°C warm water of the Mediterranean Sea, we relax from the flight and get the balloon post ready. This we give to the post office in San Luri, region of Arbus, on the way back to Porto Torres and spend a night in the university town of Sassari.

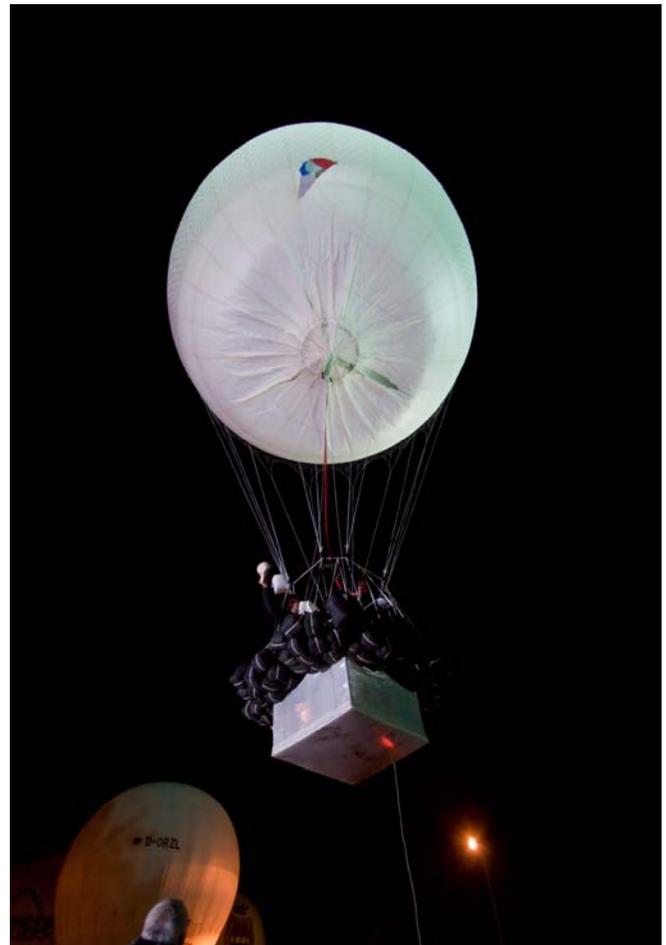
With the night ferry to Genoa, Italy we leave Sardinia and after landing in the morning, we drive through the Mont Blanc tunnel back to Geneva. In fantastic light we see the Mont Blanc summit after crossing through the tunnel.

At 3pm we come back to Vessy Sport Center and the place we started. We prepare the envelope in 15 minutes to bring it back to Augsburg. Then we go back to the hotel Ramada for debriefing and a fantastic dinner in downtown Geneva at the waterfront of Lake Lemman.

The group debriefing was at 10am and the awards ceremony followed afterwards at noon for all of the teams and organizers. Everyone was there, except the British team of Hempelman-Adams/Carey, last year's winner.

We were glad to be best German team with 8th place and thank everybody who was helping us and crossing their fingers for us. ■

**More photos from the 2009 GB competition**



Launch of France #1

photo from Sebastien Rolland



Launch field for Gordon Bennett photo from Olli Luoma



Ben Mattsson, Ronny Van Havere and Luc Van Geyte, enjoying a meal in Algeria photo by Olli Luoma



## Diary of a Gordon Bennett Flight by Sam Candors

6 Sept 2009, 300pm

Well...I guess this could be going better...we are stuck offshore of Spain, slowly drifting away into the Mediterranean...but it could be going worse. It's the Mediterranean and it's a gorgeous day and the view is amazing.

Our meteorologist tells us we should start driving west at some point. If not, we will shoot for Mallorca or another one of the Spanish isles. Maybe we'll continue to Africa. At this pace we will hit land by tomorrow evening. It's not a big deal, we have plenty of ballast and could probably stay airborne for another 48 to 60 hours.

We are not alone. From our offshore perch I have watched the Swiss balloon dance with the Spanish cliffs, and a few other teams drift even further offshore. I can't even see the three teams that made a break for Italy, but the dance has ended for the Swiss balloon and he has begun to chase us offshore.

So, what to do in the meantime?... I'm rocking out to Dylan on my iPhone, listening to the radios and reflecting on life, and life's not bad.

7 Sept 2009, 230pm

This has been an interesting day. We had to go low to try to get out of a north wind driving us towards Africa. We were cruising nicely at 1,000 feet to the west when the bottom fell out and we started to descend. We ended up dumping about two 30 pounds sacks of sand and avoided a swim by about 100 feet. (You would be surprised the amount of noise the ocean makes, it sounds like a waterfall.) As a result, we ended up popping up to over 4,000 feet with a southwestern track. The balloon is content here and she will keep us over the water some more (yay...) and hopefully put us over the Spanish coast tonight. The ballast situation looks good and we shouldn't have a problem flying through the night and into the day tomorrow. I'm looking forward to the change of scenery, the Mediterranean isn't so appealing any more.

7 Sept 2009

We are picking up speed and tracking towards northeastern Spain at over 20 mph. We are hoping to turn more south later tonight to catch Team USA #2 and to get ahead of those other guys. We are staying level at around 4,000 feet and should have plenty of ballast (knock on wood) to fly through the day. Hopefully we can get to Portugal... Beautiful night with a full moon...sweet dreams.



Smiling Sam aloft

photo by Andy Cayton

8 Sept 2009

We are waiting for the sun to rise. Little chilly last night but better than baking over the water with basket temperatures over 100° F. Hoping for clear skies this morning. The sun heats the balloon to give you some free lift without throwing sand.

Last night was pretty neat. The balloon settled in around 500 feet above the ground with a full moon behind us lighting our way while we cruised west at nearly 30 mph. We passed over a small town that was having a celebration. Once we got about 10 miles away they started a fireworks display. It was great.

A quick comment on green energy. It is obviously on the rise over here. During that same jaunt I spotted some "balloon mixers" (wind turbines) that

weren't on our charts and most were unlit. That is the reason for our sudden climb and track sending us towards Madrid. Really sad because the track and speed was perfect and we were closing on the Swiss.

This is a great race. People in the gas ballooning arena will be talking about this one for a while. The flights to Africa are amazing...too bad they are disqualified for landing outside the game map. Plus, that many balloons out over the Med like that for soooo long....incredible. That's not an easy thing to commit yourself to.

#### 8 Sept 2009, 434am

We are hoping the other teams land soon! The sun is up and we are cruising at 12,500 feet at over 16 mph heading towards the Strait of Gibraltar. This puts us in a great position. If we can hold it, we could be at the coast by around midnight to early in the morning tomorrow.

The balloon is flying great and we are letting it do what she wants. Looks like we'll try to sneak in a nap.

#### 8 Sept 2009

Sorry guys, we had a good run, but some thunderstorms got in our way. We came down to avoid them and started tracking north and losing ground. Ballast was very low and we had to land. The winds were brisk and the landing was anything but graceful but I was happy to be out of the menacing sky.

We are camping out tonight due to the remote location of the balloon and we'll make the recovery tomorrow.

It was a great race and I hope you all enjoyed it as much as I did!

#### 9 Sept 2009

Someone wanted a few more details on the final hours of the flight, so here you go:

We were tracking to the southwest for the same little corner of Portugal where everyone else was heading when the balloon slowly started to drift down from 10,000 feet. We decided to let it to try to save our precious ballast and let the balloon do what it wanted. Well, there ended up being a lot of

convective heating due to the hot sun heating the mountain desert landscape. We got caught in an up-draft that shot us up to over 15,000 feet (from about 500) in under two minutes. We put on our oxygen and the balloon settled there. The track was still good but that same convective activity was creating cumulonimbus clouds and thunderstorms all around us. We could hear the thunder and watched this one cell build less than 2 miles from us. We decided to descend under a smaller cloud to track away from the cell.

When we got under the bases of the clouds, we started tracking north and we were very low on ballast and caught in the storm's outflow and the speed and descent started to build. We were descending so fast that the scoops of sand we threw out of the basket flew upwards. I ended up throwing a battery, empty sacks of sand and was about to chuck the heavy oxygen bottle when we stabilized. By now the balloon was not flying full at all...definitely not the perfect round shape we had when we took off. We were slowly descending and had to land. The winds were very brisk, probably over 20 mph and we had zero options for selecting our landing site; the balloon was coming down and we were out of sand.

We threw out a drag line of 150 feet to slow us down and still were descending. I threw out my favorite LL Bean Backpack from high school filled with most of my cold weather clothing to arrest the descent. We bounced off a few trees that slowed us down before smashing into one final tree that stopped the balloon and basket. The basket was literally inches off the ground and the balloon was thrashing above us in the high winds. I ended up opening the top to let out the gas and she deflated over the trees.

It was close to sunset and we collected most of our things and got in contact with the chase crew. They were able to drive within two miles of our spot and I hiked out to meet them. We ended up walking back to the balloon, secured our equipment and decided to walk back to the van and camp out and wait for the sun to rise so we could find our way back to the balloon.

The other two crew members were back at the van and had a fire burning. We had some food, champagne and then I had the best night of sleep in my life!

This morning we got the balloon packed up and are driving back towards Geneva. First priority is a nice hotel with a hot shower! ■



**BFA OFFICERS & BOARD MEMBERS**

**CHAIRMAN**

Bert Padelt - term expires: 2012  
[bestavi@aol.com](mailto:bestavi@aol.com)

**VICE-CHAIRMAN**

Peter Cuneo – term expires 2011  
[petercuneo@msn.com](mailto:petercuneo@msn.com)

**SECRETARY**

Richard Abruzzo - term expires: 2010  
[groms@sandiapeak.com](mailto:groms@sandiapeak.com)

**TREASURER**

Brian Critelli – term expires 2009\*  
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**DIRECTORS**

Troy Bradley - term expires: 2011  
[tbradley@highfiber.com](mailto:tbradley@highfiber.com)

Andy Cayton - term expires: 2010  
[feather@comcast.net](mailto:feather@comcast.net)

**BFA BOARD LIAISON**

Jim Thompson

\*Brian Critelli and David Bair tied in the election this year. A run off elections is being held.

**GAS ON THE WEB**

[http://www.ballon.eu/dm\\_gasballon\\_2009\\_teilnehmer.html](http://www.ballon.eu/dm_gasballon_2009_teilnehmer.html)

German Gas balloon Championships

[http://www.rferl.org/content/Widow\\_Of\\_Slain\\_Balloonist\\_Still\\_Seeking\\_Answers\\_From\\_Belarus/1760608.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Widow_Of_Slain_Balloonist_Still_Seeking_Answers_From_Belarus/1760608.html)

Alan Fraenckel’s widow confronts Belarus

<http://skywizard.blogspot.com>

Tomas Hora’s GB 2009 blog website

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/manchester/hi/people\\_and\\_places/newsid\\_8248000/8248335.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/manchester/hi/people_and_places/newsid_8248000/8248335.stm)

Dr. Ann Webb GB 2009 article

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WOiagF2I8M>

Janet Folks and Ann Webb Gordon Bennett 2009 video

<http://share.findmespot.com/shared/faces/viewspots.jsp?glId=0YorTLMd0tQmT3n0gFWgKeadEiXAb7G62>

Hempelmann-Adams AAI & AA2 duration records.

<http://www.bangordailynews.com/detail/119580.html>

GB articles from Sam Canders’ hometown paper

**Gas Division Report**

**Editors Note:** The Gas Division Board of Directors has met and determined that the ordered list of U.S. qualifiers for the 54<sup>th</sup> Coupe Aéronautique Gordon Bennett to be held in Great Britain in September 2010 is:

- 1) Barbara Fricke, 2) Mark Sullivan, 3) Andy Cayton, 4) Troy Bradley, 5) Phil MacNutt, 6) J. Michael Wallace, 7) Louis Vitanza and 8) Richard Abruzzo.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Stuttgart Linde Open Invite**

If you are feeling a distinct lack of recent gas balloon elevations or if your low gas indicator is flashing bright red, please read the following . Both Tomas Hora (tomas.Hora@airwizard.de) and Wolfgang Hirsch (slo2010@ballonsportgruppe-stuttgart.de) have sent personal invitations to all U.S. gas balloon pilots to participate in the 2nd Stuttgart Linde Open, March 5-7, 2010. Last year’s inaugural event was a big success and my guess is that 2010 will be even better and I am sure the hospitality and the flying will be top notch. More info is available at: [http://www.ballon-stuttgart.de/SLO\\_2010\\_Package\\_EN.pdf](http://www.ballon-stuttgart.de/SLO_2010_Package_EN.pdf) or by contacting Tomas directly.