

The AM3 Rozier Distance and Duration Records:

A Bittersweet Record Flight



by Troy Bradley

Dedicated to the Memory of Tom Boylan and Bradley Brookhart

On Tuesday night, November 6th, I was getting ready to leave the following morning for Chihuahua, Mexico. My crew and I were heading south for flying balloons and drinking cervezas (not at the same time) at the third annual Festival del Globos event. Checking my email one last time before heading to bed, I had a message from Lou Billones titled "Get Ready". Lou identified a weather pattern between November 13th – 15th, to try and extend my current Rozier AM3 duration record and recapture the AM3 distance record. This far out I wasn't convinced the pattern would actually develop as forecast, but I was ready to fly if it did. During many of my record attempts, I have seen

patterns fail to materialize and change drastically, foiling our plans.

Throughout our stay in Mexico, Lou updated me regularly with positive forecasts continuing daily. We were beginning to lock in on Wednesday night for a launch, so on Sunday we headed home. By Tuesday morning, we were back on the road for Greeley, Colorado, the chosen launch site. Greeley is situated north of Denver's Class B airspace, and provides a great launch location for a long cross country run. More importantly, there are a number of balloonists willing to help with my record endeavor. Tim and Vikki Cole were gracious enough to lend us their backyard for a launch site. Tim also acted as my official observer for the record

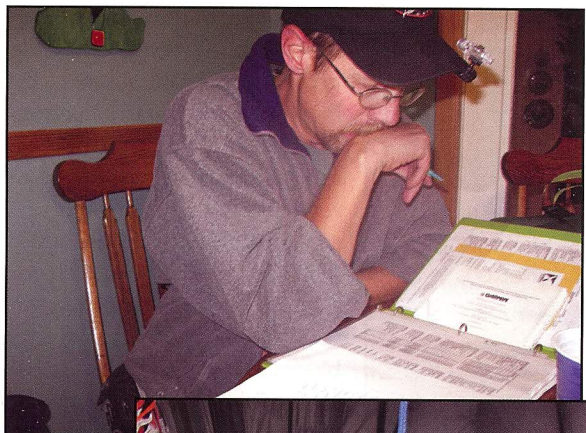
attempt.

With the superb weather pattern we had for our flight, Dr. Tom Boylan decided it provided a wonderful opportunity for a gas balloon training flight at the same time. He lined up two students, Brad Brookhart and Doug Champlin, to fly with him. Both Brad and Doug were hot air balloon pilots, with the desire to remove the "with airborne heater" limitation from their certificates. Doug made one gas flight with me in March and this was Brad's first gas flight.

Wednesday morning began with Lou's reassurance that everything was still a go. The helium truck and all of my crew arrived early in the afternoon. The atmosphere during the day was relaxed as we had plenty of time to rig the balloons for a take

off between 2000 MST and 2200 MST. It was a pleasure not to feel rushed and have plenty of time to visit with friends and family before heading off on my solo journey. As the sun went down, the temperature and the wind dropped dramatically. Chilly and cloudless, it was a beautiful night for a launch.

My balloon was inflated first and Tom's second. We were ready to fly early in the launch window, but I chose to not take-off until my grandparents and sister arrived. They were delayed by doctor's appointments and work schedules. It was important to me that they be present. Back in 1992 they all spent weeks in Bangor, Maine waiting for my transatlantic launch, and were forced to return home before takeoff.



Checking the weather and lift calculations prior to launch, then a final pre-flight check of the burner.

Photos by Tami Bradley

Everyone made it this time. After photos, hugs, kisses, and well wishes I launched around 2200 MST. Everything went smoothly with a nice weigh off and immediate ascent to altitude. After launch, as I was deploying my position lights, I could see the small crowd, and hear their cheers. It was an awesome way to start flight. My initial tracks took me easterly, then southeasterly gently sliding the balloon around the outside of Denver's Class B airspace.

Immediately after takeoff my chase crew packed the

van to begin their adventure eastward. My chase crew consisted of my wife, Tami, my crew chief Kristina Vincenty, and possibly the youngest record chase crew ever, my children Savannah (7) and Bobby (5). I have to hand it to Tami and Kristina for taking on the challenge of chasing and child care simultaneously. They would never be able to answer the ageless travel question, "Are we there yet?"

By sunrise the next morning I was still in sight of the Rocky Mountains. Not the scenery I hoped to

have. Early in the flight my speeds were frustratingly slow. It took me over 13 hours to travel my first 100 miles from the launch field. One rare treat during the day was the luck of spotting the other balloon in flight. The speeds did gradually increase through the daylight hours and I crossed into Nebraska before going into my 2nd night near North Platte.

It was a beautiful sunset and I was ready for a second night of no sleep. Throughout the night I had a comfortable track to the east at reasonable speeds. As I approached Omaha, the batteries died in both GPSs and the phone, the pilot light tank ran out, the remote for operating the blast valve broke, and I had a drop in speed. So I was changing batteries and propane tanks, speaking with Offutt AFB's Control Tower, manually operating the blast valve, and swearing at the sudden increase in my workload. The early morning hours meant there was no air traffic, but when I did finally rouse an Air Traffic Controller at Offutt AFB. My dialogue with the controller was entertaining. When I informed him of my intention to over fly their Class C airspace, he said I could cross at any altitude and asked that I just not touch their runways. I don't think he completely understood my aircraft or flight intentions. I continued to monitor the frequency, and let him go back to sleep. It was over Omaha that I broke the duration record I set in 1999.

By sunrise I found myself near Atlantic, Iowa. As the envelope superheated I ascended catching faster winds to the east. Upon reaching altitude, Lou recommended I go a little lower to catch a more favorable wind to

the northeast. I noted that those winds did exist when I was climbing earlier. When I reached up to activate my valve, to descend back down to the altitudes Lou was suggesting, I was surprised to find the valve didn't work. I was unable to see the cause of the malfunction. The possible reasons that my valve was inoperable were quickly assessed. Either the valve was frozen shut or the line was caught on something. If it were icing, which I didn't expect with the lack of moisture and the current temperatures, the solution would be to allow it to warm up or pull real hard. Many conversations with Tami and Bert Padelt led me to believe the valve line was wrapped around something (possibly the deflation line) and Bert advised me not to try and pull it hard. With everything else operating fine, it was best to let it ride. However, this was very concerning as my track took me toward Lake Michigan with no hope of descending prior to the afternoon cooling. All of my calculations indicated I would be descending with room to spare provided my speed remained the same or decreased throughout the day. As Murphy's Law would have it, my speed continued to increase. The upside was tacking on more miles and that morning I surpassed the distance record of 572 miles.

With both records in the bag and no valve to work with, my focus shifted to a safe landing. The winds were quite strong below me, gusting from 18 to 25 knots. All forecasts indicated the farther north and the closer to sunset I could get, the lower the wind speeds would be. With Chicago and Lake Michigan looming in the distance my stress level was a little on the



Above - Sunset from the balloon on the second night.

Below - Crossing Saylorville Lake in Iowa, about the time I broke the distance record.

In-flight photos by Troy Bradley



high side. Tami contacted Matt Guthrie, who did a great job of making contacting the Coast Guard alerting them to our situation. If I did make the lake, they were ready to rescue me.

Sunset was around 1633 CST (local time) and I anticipated the gas would begin to cool and contract hours before that. As I suspected about 2 hours before sunset-I began a nice descent. Great! However, rather than continuing all the way down, the balloon leveled out around 5,000 AGL. Damn! With a little over an hour until sunset, I finally began to descend again. Not only was the sun at a lower angle, there were clouds reducing any solar input. I assumed I would begin to plummet toward earth, but instead I had the most gradual, seemingly controlled, approach one could imagine. In that last hour my variometer indicated a drop of 10 to 170 fpm. Great! Not only was I descending, as predicted, my speed was also decreasing. Really (insert colorful adjective here) Great!! I was running out of sunlight, my valve was inoperable, and yet I felt totally at peace with the situation. I was as prepared as I could be for the upcoming return to earth; I relaxed taking some pictures and enjoying the scenery. With a northwesterly heading on the deck, I crossed I-39, and was headed for a perfect field to terminate my flight. As I approached the landowners were outside their house, motioning for me to land in their field. I didn't tell them, I was landing regardless of their desires. Sunset was moments away. I was only doing about 6 or 7 knots and had plenty of field to get into. Unfortunately, my trajectory put me near the downwind end of the field. I

let the balloon make ground contact and gently rebound into some trees. I was now happily 15 feet up in a tree in Pleasant Springs, Wisconsin. From below my new perch, I was greeted by two gentlemen, Jeff Potter and Brenton Voeck. I threw them the trail rope and they pulled me back into the field where I deflated the balloon. Several others showed up within minutes, including two balloonists Mike Shrum and Rick Konitzer. We packed the balloon into a trailer belonging to the landowner and moved it to his house to meet up with my chase crew.

Sadly, when I contacted Tim upon landing he informed that the other balloon struck power lines earlier in the day. Tom and Brad were killed when the basket was severed from the

envelope. Miraculously, Doug survived the 50 foot fall. I traveled 824 miles in 41 hours, shattering both the distance and duration records, yet I felt no desire to celebrate, as I mourned the terrible tragedy that occurred earlier in the day.

My children saw the damage and despair caused by the accident, and yet Bobby, my five year old, said, "it was the funnest, farest, bestest chase we have ever been on." It pays to listen to the wisdom that comes from the young and innocent; focus on the upside. I think the peace I felt in the latter part of my flight was thanks to someone watching over me. Thanks Tom and Brad. Godspeed to you guys!



*On the ground safely. You can just make out the trees that helped snag the balloon. Troy's crew kept the news of the tragic deaths of Boylan and Brookhart until after he had landed safely.
Photo by Tami Bradley*

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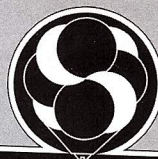


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