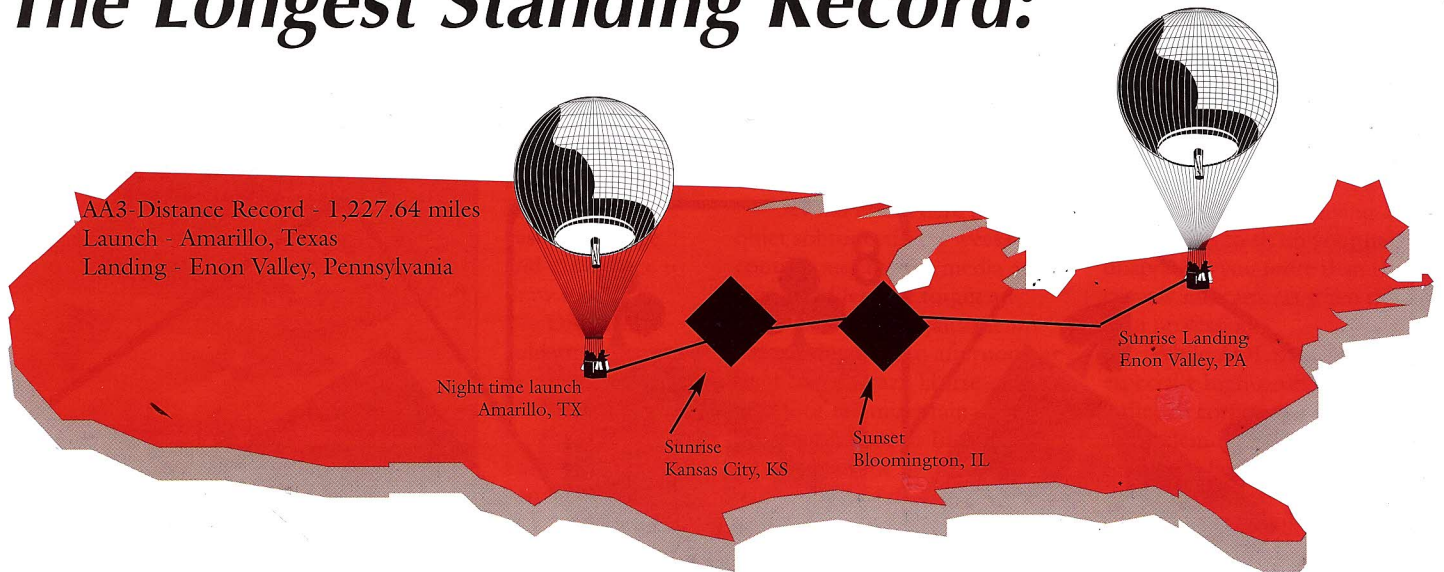


The Longest Standing Record:



Broken!

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Warren Harding was the U.S. President, Douglas Fairbanks and Rudolph Valentino were hot at the box office, the snowmobile was invented, insulin was developed, Charles Lindbergh took his first flight lesson, King Tut's tomb was discovered, Mallory died on Mount Everest, Babe Ruth and Johnny Weissmuller were America's sports heroes, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was officially proclaimed, the Lincoln Memorial was dedicated in Washington, D.C., Germany suffered hyperinflation, Alexander Graham Bell died, Irish revolutionary Michael Collins was assassinated, the BBC was founded, the Woolworth Building was the tallest building in the world, and a Frenchman named George Cormier set a ballooning record. The year was 1922.

As I am often fond of doing, I was glancing through the record books one day when I found it! The oldest aviation

world record still standing, was a balloon record. The record George Cormier set in 1922 was the AA-3 distance record, traveling 499.69 miles. A spectacular flight for that time!

The next logical question was, is it breakable? After some simple lift calculations and weather analysis, it seemed it was in fact a breakable record. Possibly it was just overlooked by others or underestimated by myself. Suddenly it seemed every gas pilot I spoke with had looked at the record at some point in time. In fact, several people said they were looking at it at the same time as I. That was all it took to get me into gear to prepare an attempt!

I began to focus on not just beating the record, but at least doubling it. To my good fortune, I was able to do just that this past January. My feat was not without its trials and tribulations, however. In fact, it became a quest the likes of which I have not experienced in quite some time. The oldest record, you see, was still stand-

ing because it wasn't an easy record to break.

I began seriously working on an attempt in the late summer of 2000. I secured a balloon I helped Nick Saum build back in 1984. We did a test flight in Albuquerque and everything was looking really good.

I had assembled a fairly sophisticated group of people including Ray Bair as my observer and Lou Billones as my meteorologist. We were looking for calm launch conditions, with winds aloft in excess of 45 knots and an anticipated flight duration of 24 hours. I even gave Lou a large window to look for this weather pattern. We could launch anywhere from Amarillo, Texas to Moriarty, New Mexico, to Denver, Colorado.

When the window arrived, we drove to Elizabeth, Colorado, just south of Denver, and prepared for a launch on February 3, 2001. Everything went flawlessly during inflation, launch, and well into the early hours of the evening. But then

things turned. I ended up in snow! I wasn't supposed to be in snow! The added weight on the balloon was causing me to lose altitude and it was clear this record attempt was over.

In the time spent analyzing the situation with Lou, it became clear to me that we were looking for too many different conditions in too wide of an area. Lou characterized his search for the weather window as similar to a RTW attempt! As he said, we were trying to hold on to an angry tiger's tail. Time to rethink.

Now I only wanted the record more. Never before had I made a record attempt launch and not come home with some success. Sure, I might not get everything I was going for, but at least there was usually something in the flight that could be called a success. Not this time.

I wanted to make changes to how we approached this record. First, I started with a new balloon. Though Nick's balloon was an AA-3, it was only 13,000 cubic feet. This



With load tapes singing in the 12-15 knot winds the crew struggles to inflate the 14,000 cu.ft. envelope.

time, I wanted a 14,000 cubic foot balloon that would still qualify as an AA-3 but give me more lift. Second, I decided to narrow my scope with regard to launch location. I chose Amarillo because of its close proximity to my home, availability of helium, relatively low altitude, and a hard-core group of gas balloonists living there who are always willing to help.

Most importantly, we decided to rethink our weather considerations as well. Instead of looking for a tiger's tail this time, Lou and I decided to look for a more stable air mass, consider a flight of up to 48 hours, and hope that by virtue of duration, we would be able to achieve distance. My weather window began after Thanksgiving and ran through the end of February.

I felt confident about the changes we made in the parameters for launching. I felt prepared, since we were still working on the same record from earlier in the year. All signs were favorable that this would work this time.

After September 11, things changed slightly. First, we didn't know when or if we were going to get to fly again. Then there was the issue of Class B airspace. The America's Challenge Command Center experienced more calls from alarmed people than ever before and one balloon was even shot at.

I became extremely nervous

that maybe this was not the time to embark on my elusive record attempt. That is when I decided to add something to the record preparations that I had never done before. I asked Ray Bair to help me again this year, but in a new capacity.

Based on his experience with Fiesta, I asked he and Jerry Brenden to help me set up a manned 24-hour command center to assist me during the flight. We went to the Albuquerque Air Route Traffic Control Center, obtained a discrete transponder code, and were overjoyed at the support we received in our attempt to keep this record flight safe.

Now it was time to wait for the weather. We had assembled an even better team than the previous year from Bert Padelt helping on the new system design, to Peter Naumberg working on a tracking unit, to Rusty Elwell working on helium and a launch site in Amarillo, to Mark Sullivan acting as the official observer and Ray and Jerry in the Command Center. Where was the weather?

We got the answer to that in mid-December. There looked to be a weather window around the 17th of the month, but that didn't pan out. Then, right after Christmas, the weather pattern was shaping up.

From close to a week out, the 27th looked promising. The 27th turned into the 28th, and that turned into the 29th. The

morning of the 29th looked very promising. So, on Friday, December 28th, I packed up the balloon, my family, and my crew, and we headed to Amarillo. Then in the morning, the disappointing news came. The weather was just too risky. It might have worked for our purposes, but it was just too marginal. We called off the attempt and headed home.

After months of preparation, and a previous attempt, it was very difficult to make this decision. However, when it comes to record-breaking weather, you can't afford to accept marginal.

Even though we passed on the 29th slot, the general weather pattern we were focusing on was still there. It looked like we had another week to maybe get in an attempt, then no weather in the foreseeable future. The next window looked to be from Wednesday, January 2, 2002, through Friday, January 4. Lou said sometime Thursday looked most promising. On such short notice, and so soon after the holidays, it was difficult to assemble crew with free time, and helium.

Helium proved to be a concern as the supplier we had lined up didn't have a trailer in town. Several desperate phone calls later we secured another source. Word came around 4 p.m., on Wednesday, that we had everything in line if this weather window on Thursday would hold out. I put all my gear back in the truck and headed out of town.

I didn't get very far. The engine blew in the truck five miles from Albuquerque! After a chilly night of rescue, reorganization, and repacking my gear and the balloon in a

new vehicle, I headed out of town. . . again.

Arriving in Amarillo late that night I was greeted by a very dense freezing fog. I could barely see exit signs on the highway. But the good news was the weather pattern was still showing promise of a launch in less than 24 hours. My chase crew Jan Stevenson and Bob Day, along with my wife, daughter, mother, and several others from Albuquerque, chose to come to Amarillo the following morning if the weather pattern was still holding.

After a short night, I awoke to a positive weather picture. It was still a go-decision, based on the latest data Lou had analyzed. I sprung everyone into action.

Rusty Elwell and Don Weeks notified local crew, filled sand bags, and worked with the helium distributor, Bob Martin fired up his helicopter to fly over from Albuquerque, and my wife scurried to organize the Albuquerque contingent's trip over. It actually went fairly smoothly since we had been through a previous attempt and several false starts.

I arrived at the launch site, Tradewinds Airport, around noon, and all of the crew, helium,



A final check of all equipment before a running weigh off and launch.

and media arrived shortly thereafter. Assembling the balloon was easy with so many experienced gas pilots lending a hand.

Speaking with Lou every couple of hours, he continually assured me the weather pattern was still there. The only concern was the surface wind, which we thought would drop off some in speed but never did. At 1600 local, I made the decision to turn on the gas.

The wind was still 12-15 knots without showing any signs of slowing until after our launch window. Fortunately, several of the crew had been through a 20-knot gas balloon launch in the RE/MAX Cup a few years ago.

The inflation was painfully slow in that we didn't have the right connections to hook up our hose and diffuser to the helium trailer. So we used a hose without a diffuser and had to be extremely careful in not turning on too much pressure. As the load tapes whistled in the brisk wind and the load ring became misshapen from the tension of the tie off line, my mother asked, "Are you sure you really want to do this?" I assured her this was perfect weather for ballooning, at least record ballooning.

A little after 1900 local, with the crew giving me a running weigh off, I launched into the darkness of the night. With

cheers and horns honking from well-wishers I was sure I would get the record this time. The surface conditions had been quite cold with a high wind chill factor, but as I became one with the wind I also began to get warmer.

My initial climb took me up to about 5,600 MSL. I had good speed at that altitude, however Lou said I should go lower to increase my speed through the night. Boy was he right, I crossed over Hutchinson, Kansas doing 43 knots (50 mph) less than 2,000 feet off the deck. This was great for miles, but highly dangerous in the event of an emergency landing.

Through the night my track began turning more northeasterly, and by morning I found myself right in Kansas City's Class B airspace. This is where all of the advance notification and command center work paid off; Kansas City was very gracious in letting me pass through their airspace simply asking I climb a little since I was on the end of an active approach.

While in the Class B airspace I broke the sought after 500

mile mark. With plenty of ballast left and everything working as planned I then set my sights on the AA-4 and AA-5 distance records. Those records stood at 1,128.28 miles, still 600+ miles to go.

With my higher altitude and daybreak I did begin to lose some of my speed and my track became more easterly. I had an uneventful crossing of Missouri and was near Bloomington, Illinois by sunset. With all systems working perfectly and Lou conferring that the weather was still clear, I chose to continue eastward through the night. The only thing he didn't tell me was how damn cold it was going to be.

With my current track, speed, and forecasts, I was looking at a landing somewhere around Reading, Pennsylvania the following late morning to early afternoon period. Everything was working fine and then my track began to turn slightly south of east lining me up perfectly with Washington, D.C.

In 1996, I had flown a gas balloon directly over Washington with no problem, but that was long before the September 11th attacks. Now there was a NOTAM prohibiting flight operations within the D.C. area without specifically authorized permission from the Secret Service. This was a non-negotiable option, if I continued my track towards D.C., I would land well before entering their airspace.

Lou told me to be patient and my track would turn back to more easterly, and it did. At midnight I called my wife, Tami, to be the first to wish her a happy birthday. She appreciated the birthday wish and I appreciated the conversation, since by then exhaustion was beginning to rear its ugly head.

Before daybreak my track began turning too far to the north. Lou informed me to climb, but I didn't find the turn at what I felt was an acceptable altitude and ballast for landing was becoming an issue. The problem of going too far north into the hills was going to be

high surface winds in rough terrain for landing. So Lou and I decided that the best option was to land around sunrise near Pittsburgh.

I began a controlled decent into an area between Youngstown and Pittsburgh, where I eventually found a large cut hay field to terminate the flight. The winds at 200 AGL were over 25 knots, and on the surface a mere 10 knots. My final landing was in Enon Valley, Pennsylvania—unofficially traveling 1,227.64 miles from Amarillo, Texas, bettering the AA-3 record by 727 miles and the AA-4 & 5 records by 100 miles.

Akron balloonists Maury Sullivan and Lynn Eckelberry had been communicating with Lou and Ray about assisting with recovery and showed up shortly after I landed. Jan and Bob arrived shortly after and the five of us packed up the balloon. Serendipitously, not only had we broken three world records we were only 15 miles from Tami's godparents house, where we found good conversation, a tasty meal, and much needed warm beds.

To put this flight into perspective only one winning Gordon Bennett team, flying a considerably larger balloon, has traveled further during the Coupe de Aeronautique. It was a thrill to take such a small aircraft such a long way. This flight is one of my most cherished moments ballooning—breaking the oldest standing aviation record with an outstanding support team that individually and collectively performed beyond my expectations. My sincerest thanks go out to everyone who supported this flight.

Hopefully, in 80 years a pilot not yet born will start an article with: *George W. Bush was the U.S. President, Russell Crowe and Julia Roberts were hot at the box office....*



The final landing site, a cut hay field in the rolling hills of the Pennsylvania, a day and a half after leaving Amarillo, Texas more than 1,200 miles away.

Inset: (l-r) Pilot Troy Bradley, Bob Day and (Bradley's Mother-in-law) Jan Stevenson.

