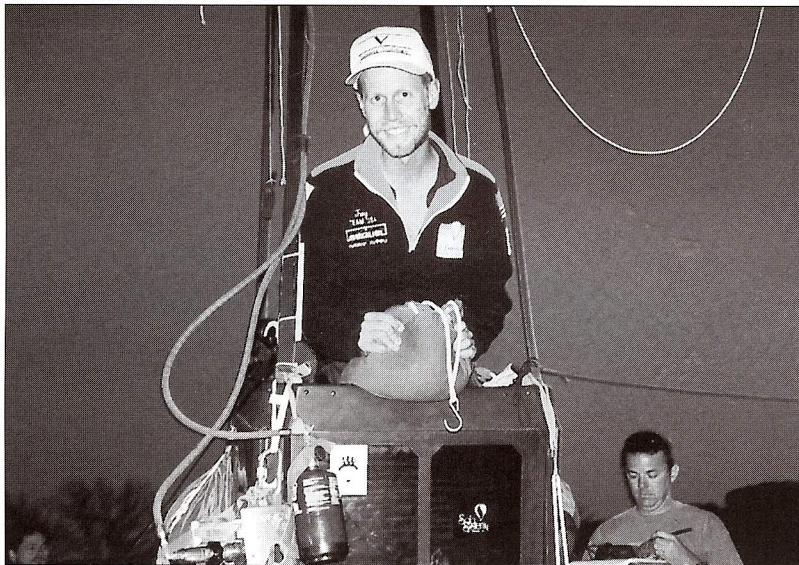


OPERATION SKYSPAN

HOLDING THE RECORD WAS NOT ENOUGH. THIS ALBUQUERQUE PILOT HAD TO BETTER IT, AND CLAIM SOME NEW WORLD RECORDS AS WELL.

STORY BY TROY BRADLEY

PHOTOS BY TAMI STEVENSON BRADLEY



Ready to launch. Troy Bradley prepares to earn a wall full of records in his home-built rozier. Looking on is official observer Johnny Petrehn.

I spend more time than my wife would like, or than I should admit, looking at the record books. It fascinates me to look at all the ballooning records and think about how they could be improved upon.

One particular record that I knew I could better was my own AM-1 duration record. In 1994, I flew my little home-built rozier 198 miles in 10 hours, establishing the distance and duration records for the AM-1 category.

That flight went well. I had to land simply due to the lack of adequate fuel to make it through the night. The record still stood in 1999, but I knew I could do better. How much better I wasn't sure, but believed 24 hours was achievable.

That would beat my record and those held by Dr. Nick Saum. Nick flew an AM-2 for 17.7 hours and 342 miles back in 1990, setting the AM-2

through AM-6 distance and duration records.

The key to meeting my 24-hour goal would be to launch in the evening, whereas in '94 I had launched in the morning.

The first step was to pull out the balloon to check the integrity of the fabric and heat-sealed seams, since it had been in the bag for over five years. Despite its extended hibernation, the envelope was in excellent shape.

With all the equipment in order and the sanctioning paperwork in place, the next step was to watch the weather for suitable conditions. Lou Billones, one of the premier aviation weather forecasters, provided the weather support for the attempt. Lou felt confident that he could give our team 36 hours notice for launch.

Early in the planning phases of the project, I evaluated several potential launch sites. The

prime considerations were geographic location, local balloonists for support, and availability of helium.

With a low elevation, a number of helpful, experienced aeronauts, and a willing helium supplier, Ozark, Missouri, was our chosen launch site.

The National Aeronautic Association granted me a 90-day sanction to make the attempt. The sanction began right after K.A.I.B.F. ended and Lou identified a suitable weather pattern early in the sanction window. On Tuesday morning, October 19, after reviewing the weather situation with Lou, we decided to make the attempt the following evening.

Along with my chase crew, my in-laws Jim and Jan Johnson, we packed the balloon and gear into a GMC Yukon that would serve as our chase vehicle. No need for a trailer, the balloon is so small it actually fits behind the pas-

senger seats. The three of us departed Albuquerque a little before noon, which put us into Springfield, Missouri, around midnight.

Rick and Karen Hughlett graciously offered us a place to stay for the night. Their hospitality was wonderful and I slept much more comfortably than I would have in any hotel—an important detail since sleep was a luxury I wouldn't enjoy for awhile after that.

The next morning, Karen cooked us a wonderful breakfast while we watched a video of Rick's first gas flight a few weeks before. After breakfast, I consulted with Lou to get the latest weather updates. He was sure it was still a "go" for that night.

Next, I called Johnny Petrehn in Kansas City, the flight's official observer, and told him that we were going to fly. My original observer had a last minute conflict that wouldn't allow him to oversee



For the inflation, Troy used bottles of helium like the kind found in gift and novelty shops. The balloon was too small to require a large truck for delivery.

the flight. Johnny, on extremely short notice, came to the rescue and agreed to take the position of official observer.

With a definite “go” status, we headed for the launch site. This was a magnificent acreage atop a grassy knoll surrounded by mature oak and cedar trees, overlooking the gently meandering Finley River. This beautiful setting also serves as Jim Herschend’s front yard and balloon port. Jim had enthusiastically prepared for our arrival, mowing the grass and getting all the helium tanks arranged in the area we would use for filling.

The setting was aesthetically pleasing, but the winds were a little strong and local flight service said the surface wind would continue. Lou disagreed and told us that, by mid- to late-afternoon, the conditions would be suitable for inflation.

After some discussion, we decided not to chance missing a flight opportunity. We decided to relocate the equipment to a field owned by one of Jim’s neighbors that sat a little lower and would provide more shelter. We packed up the balloon and helium tanks and headed down the hill.

All the moving was for naught—Lou was right, the wind died. The inflation went smoothly and we were ready to launch on schedule. We moved the balloon to the center of the field, where I crammed myself into the 2½' x 2½' gondola, and ascended into the twilight of a multi-hued Missouri sunset.

With 13 hours of darkness ahead of me, I had to break the AM-1 record just to avoid landing in the dark.

My initial ascent went from gentle 50 FPM to a rapid 600 FPM after I dumped half a bag of ballast to clear one last tree in the field. I leveled out at 5,100 MSL and was traveling easterly at 14 MPH.

Since this was a duration record, my speed shouldn’t have been a concern. However, within four hours I had picked up to 24 MPH and called my wife, Tami, to find out the distance for Nick’s AM-2 record.

I was certain that Tami, six months pregnant, would be happy to hear from me. I think I woke her at the wrong time in her sleep cycle—interrupting her slumber to research another record was not high on her to-do list right then.

She did find the record book, however, told me that Nick flew 342 miles, and promptly returned to the warmth of our bed.

If I could maintain this speed I would land the next evening with both the distance and duration records. It looked good on paper, but the wind fluctuated in speed and direction through the night.

The momentary excitement of believing I could get all of AM-1 through AM-6 records was enough to keep us all going through the night. By daybreak I had broken both the AM-1 distance and duration records, and was in Tennessee.

I was now on the hunt for the AM-2 duration record. The chase crew caught up with me around this time and kept me in sight for most of the day. It was painstakingly slow during the day, achieving no more than 5 MPH on occasion.

I had to keep reminding myself; all we cared about was duration. It is difficult to stay alert on such a monotonous flight, however; and I kept thinking about capturing the distance records, too.

Still I pushed slowly east. By midday I had superceded the AM-2 duration record by the required 1 percent, and we were all ecstatic.

In the scorching heat of the day, the concern of thermal activity was ever present, but the goal of 24 hours was still on my mind. The balloon was flying well, and I felt it was still an achievable goal.

Late that afternoon, as the gas began to cool and contract, I was on a roller coaster ride. The balloon would make rapid descents, putting me within feet of the treetops, and subsequent ascents back to altitude. With very little ballast or fuel to control these altitude excursions, I wasn’t having a lot of fun. Finally, near sunset the balloon settled into a level flight.

It was once again decision time: land or continue flying. My speed had picked back up to 15-20 MPH and I knew in a few hours I could exceed Nick’s 342-mile distance record. At this point I was not completely coherent, having been awake for over 36 hours.

After I had committed to flying into the darkness, Johnny pointed out that I would have the Smokey Mountains to deal with if I continued my present track. This was an important consideration, since my little balloon wouldn’t be able to achieve a safe altitude to cross the range. I chose to fly long enough to capture the other records, then land with the help of the moonlight.

A couple of weeks earlier in the Gordon Bennett, I had done a night landing in the Arkansas forest during a thunderstorm. With that experience on my mind, I wasn’t looking forward to another night landing, but there appeared to be a lot of open space below me and the moon was brightly illuminating the terrain.

After traveling 353 miles, I made my approach to land. At 100 feet above the ground I was still cruising along at 16 MPH. I saw a large field ahead and as soon as I was sure there

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with

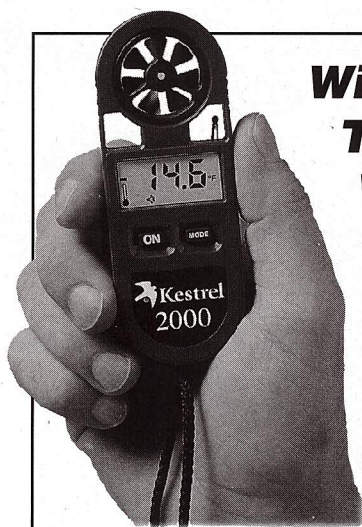
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Over the trees and into the record books! Troy Bradley launches his homebuilt Pandammonia from Ozark, Missouri.

were no power lines, I deployed my trail rope. It snagged in a tree, and as I was continuing forward and downward, all of a sudden all motion stopped.

On the surface, the winds were less than 2 MPH. It was a hell of a shear. To my amazement, I was now tethered to the top of a tree, instead of in the field I was shooting for 100 feet further downwind.

The crew did an amazing job of honing in on my newly found perch, navigating the unmarked country roads and arriving minutes after my touchdown. Johnny negotiated his way through the brush to verify my landing site. Then he freed the trail rope from the branches, and walked me into the open space, where we were able to deflate the envelope.

I flew 353.33 miles in 27.42 hours. The flight was more of a success than any of us could have hoped for. My team and I broke 14 National and 12 World records. We improved the records by stunning margins:

AM-1 Distance—79%

AM-1 Duration—174%

AM-2-AM-6 Distance—3%

AM-2-AM-6 Duration—55%

In March of this year, I went with my wife, our two-month old daughter, Savannah, and my in-laws to a ceremony at the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum to accept the awards for this flight. The NAA also recognized the flight as one of the "Most Memorable Records" of 1999. This "solo record" flight was a culmination of many volunteers support and effort. My sincerest thanks go out to all of the people who assisted in making it happen.

We also broke the National AM-7 distance and duration records. This was special for me, because it meant that I currently hold, or have in the past held, every national distance, duration, and altitude record for all sizes of Rozier balloons (AM-1-15).

I only lack the AM-7 world distance and duration records. My wife knows where my thoughts are now; you can't just leave two records dangling!



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