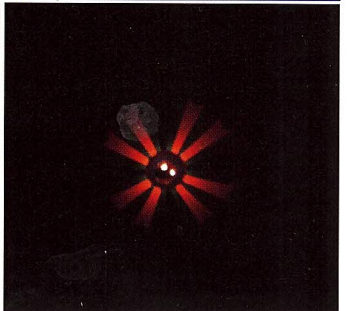
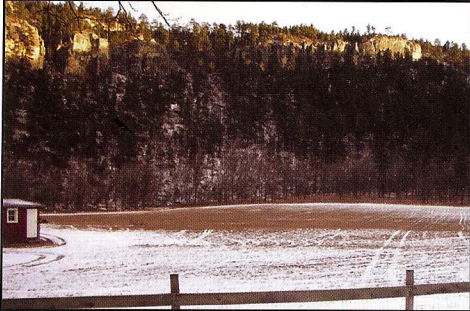
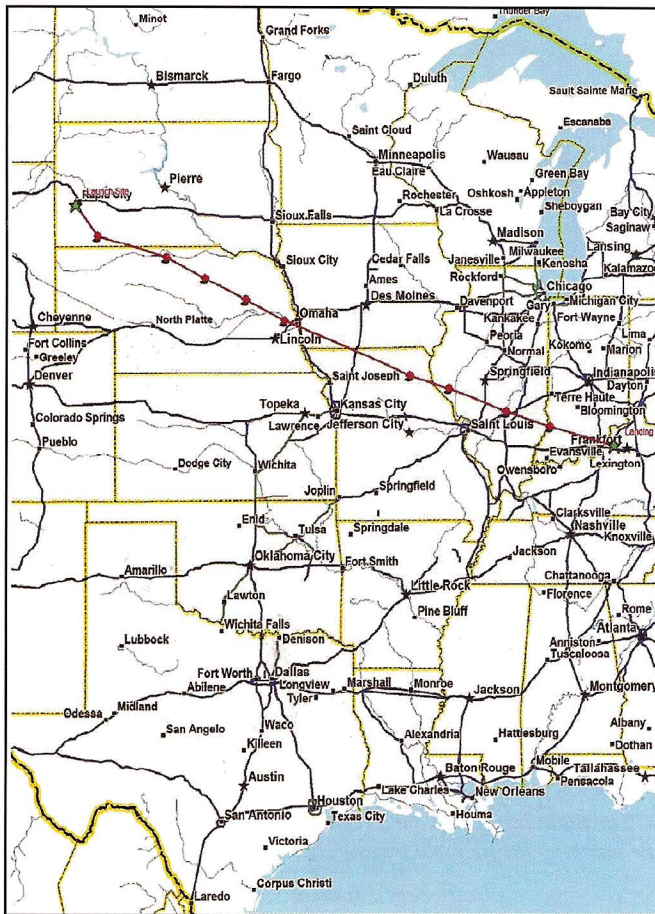


Savannah



Troy Bradley Launches from the Famous StratoBowl; Becomes the First to set World Records in Gas, Hot Air, and Rozier Balloons!

by Troy Bradley
Photos by Bob Healy and George Tomlovick



January 19, 2000, 2324
MST: My wife Tami and I are blessed with the birth of our first child, Savannah Noel Bradley, and I am thinking to myself how lucky I am to have such a beautiful daughter.

January 19, 2003, 2324
MST: I am 1,000 feet in the air looking down on the Stratobowl, at the beginning of my latest record endeavor, and I am thinking to myself this had better work, or my wife will never forgive me for missing Savannah's third birthday.

It all began this past summer as I was going to a funeral in Colorado. The morning I was leaving, I was on the internet and saw an ad for a 1997 Aerostar AX-9. I called Lou Billones and asked if he would be interested in providing meteorological support for an attempt on the AX-9 distance record. He said would be thrilled to help. The balloon was only 20 minutes from my sister's house in Loveland, so I decided to check it out after the funeral. My wife should never

let me go out of town by myself. After a little negotiating and a trip to pick up a U-Haul trailer, I was on my way back to Albuquerque with a new toy. The balloon was in great shape, the perfect candidate to go after the AX-9 distance record.

Since this was an impromptu idea and I had never attempted a hot air record, I had a lot of work to do prior to the opening of an attempt window. Intuitively, I knew the current record was breakable but wasn't sure how, so I began researching every hot air distance flight of significance from long jump flights to past record flights. The most incredible hot air balloon distance flight, to date, was Bruce Comstock's 645 mile long jump. Out of all the flights I looked at, Bruce's, by a great margin, had the best fuel economy: nearly 18 mpg. I called Bruce to discuss the details of his flight and to get his guidance on my upcoming attempt. I have always had an immense amount of respect for Bruce and his approach to problem solving. Back after he

won his unprecedented 6th U.S. National Championship, I asked him what his secret to consistency was. He told me never blame the weather. If someone got to the target and you didn't it was your fault, not the weather. Analysis is the key to never making the same mistake twice. Good advice, not just for ballooning! For my upcoming flight the weather and fuel consumption would be the keys to success, and Bruce openly shared his observations on both areas.

For working out carrying all of the extra fuel tanks I worked with Matt Guthrie of SuperiAire Technologies, along with Mark West and Martin Harmes at Aerostar International. On short notice they were able to put together a system for securing all of the additional tanks, and filing the necessary documentation with the FAA. Aerostar also provided me with a set of new Zone Five Turbo burners, which worked flawlessly throughout my flight. While at Aerostar in early January it looked as though we might have a weather window. We spent one day in Pierre scouting launch sites, and one day at the Stratobowl discussing the flight with the property owners Pat and George Tomlovick. The weather didn't cooperate, but we spent a wonderful morning visiting with the Tomlovicks discussing the Stratobowl's rich ballooning history. Unable to make an attempt, we headed back to Albuquerque to wait for the right weather system.

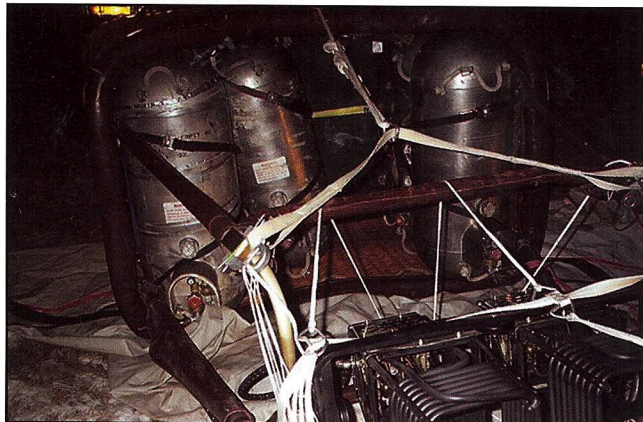
Almost immediately, we began watching another promising system develop. However, logistics with my observer, crew, and daughter's birthday made us decide on Friday morning, January 17, to wait for the next system. Then Saturday morning I saw a posting on the balloon server announcing Andy Cayton was leaving Georgia to launch the Savannah Six, an AX-6 double-walled balloon, from the Dakotas. I immediately phoned Lou to ask if we were missing a prime opportunity. This took Lou by surprise.

Since I had told him to stand down, he had not checked the weather yet. He told me to give him an hour and he would get back to me. In less than an hour he called back and said there was a good shot launching Sunday night, from the Stratobowl. The countdown was on; 36 hours till launch. Within the next 6 hours I arranged new crew, a new observer, had an abbreviated birthday celebration, and we were on the road north.

My crew Bob Healy, Jan Stevenson, Jim Dutrow, and I arrived at the Stratobowl Sunday afternoon. We were met by an enthusiastic group of highly experienced Rapid City balloonists, willing to do whatever it took to get me in the air that night. Scott and Peggy Nash had spearheaded the effort on assembling the launch crew.

That evening I received the news Andy Cayton lifted off, near Mitchell, South Dakota, several hundred miles east of us. He was on his way and, based upon my anticipated flight duration capabilities, we still had several hours until launch. I knew Andy and his team had spent a great deal of time preparing for their flight and had a high probability of success. However, I wouldn't let Andy's launch change our well thought out game plan. So I laid down on George and Pat's couch for a couple of hours to get a little rest. I was awakened by their very friendly dog, Nena, cuddling up and licking my face. After playing with my furry alarm clock for a few minutes, I got up, changed into my cold weather gear, had some dinner, and headed out to the launch field.

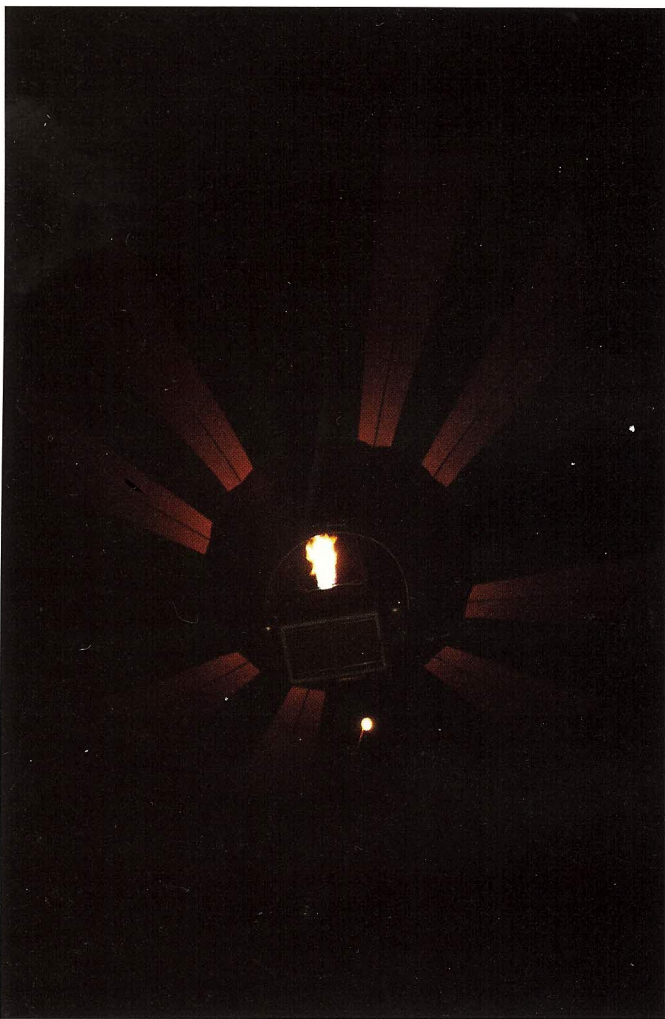
Out in the field the crew had everything ready to go. The inflation was routine and boring, making it difficult to imagine the wind speeds were so fast not very far above our heads. With a final check of all systems, I lifted off before midnight, hoping to add to the list of records launched from this historic site. At 8,000 MSL, I called Lou to report I was already doing 64 mph. He said



Top: It was still daylight when Troy and crew begin to unload the balloon in the snowy expanse of South Dakota's Stratobowl.

Center: With hopes of a flight of more than 1,000 miles distance, fuel was packed wherever possible, leaving little room for the pilot.

Bottom: Bradley makes a final check of all the equipment just moments before launch.



*Above: Troy Bradley lifts off into the midnight sky.
Below: Prior to the launch Bradley visits with friends, family and crew.
Front row (left to right): Jan Stevenson (Mother-in-Law, Crew), Pat Tomlovick (Owner of the Stratobowl), Peggy Nash (Rapid City balloonist, Crew).
Back Row: Jim Dutrow (Grandfather, Crew), Bradley, George Tomlovick (Owner), Scott Nash (Local balloonist, Crew)
Photo was taken by Bob Healy (Crew)*



that was great but I needed to get above 13,000 MSL to get the much colder air temperatures. So I continued my climb and spent most of the night looking for the fastest speeds and coldest temperatures. One of the highlights of the night was crossing right over Lou's house on the south end of Omaha. The other highlight was the phone call I received that Andy had safely landed near St. Louis. Although he was flying an AX-6, he was after the same record I was. By daybreak, I was over the Iowa/Missouri border racing along at 85 mph. A solid deck of clouds had formed below me prior to sunrise, and would be there throughout the balance of the flight. Enjoying the views and constantly picking up even greater speeds, I was feeling overjoyed when I surpassed Kris Anderson's 1981 flight of 707 miles, in a balloon identical to the one I was flying.

In Illinois, as the clouds pushed me up to nearly 18,000 MSL, I decided to drop below the clouds rather than risk entering Class A airspace without a waiver. Surprisingly, below the clouds I hit my maximum speed of 103 mph. With the speed still intact at the lower altitude, I felt confident in reaching my goal of a 1,000+ mile flight. Over Indiana, I began my descent, short of the 1,000 mile mark, assuming I would have enough wind pushing me east to still reach my goal. At 4,000 MSL, I slowed to a mere 20 mph. With very little fuel remaining, I chose to go back up to 8,000 MSL where my speed popped back up to 50+ mph, enough to push me into Kentucky east of Louisville. As I approached Louisville, I was pleasantly surprised to hear on ATIS that the surface winds were calm. Based on our flight plan, I assumed the landing conditions would be less than ten, but to hear calm really excited me. When I did make my final approach, it was in an area local balloonists fly regularly.

A little over 14 hours after the flight began I landed north of Shelbyville, Kentucky, in per-

fect ballooning weather. Within half an hour, Barbara and Bob Michael (my aunt and uncle who live in Louisville), Brian Beazly, Bill Smith, and Jerry Copas arrived at the landing site to help pack up and drink a little champagne. My GPS read 1019.1 statute miles from the Stratobowl, 128 miles further than anyone had ever flown a hot air balloon solo, setting one world record and seven national distance records. In the process, I also accomplished being the first pilot to set world records in the gas, Rozier, and hot air categories.

My chase crew did a remarkable job, arriving in Louisville seven hours after I landed. The next morning after a little breakfast and retrieving the balloon from Brian Beazly's shop, we were back on the road to Albuquerque. The chase crew, door to door, drove 3,800 miles in 90 hours, definitely one of the greatest chases of all time.

Savannah still tells me, "Daddy, member when I missed you while you were breaking a record for me on my birthday." Having my beautiful three year old daughter recognize the record means more to me than any plaque from the NAA or FAI. Someday the record will be broken, but my memory of Savannah's third birthday will always stand.

As of this writing, Andy Cayton has not attempted another flight. I know he and his team will regroup, refigure, and possibly rewrite the record books again. I look forward to following his attempt next year. With a name like Savannah, it has to be successful!

