

# Savannah's Balloon Rally

## My 14th Birthday Solo Flight

by Savannah Bradley



“Can I come down now?” was my initial response after going up on tether in my little brother’s ultralight balloon. If I couldn’t go up for 5 minutes on tether in a balloon alone, how would I ever be able to become a pilot?

My brother, Bobby, and I are 4th generation hot air balloon pilots in our family. My great grandfather, Jim Dutrow was the one who started this tradition. He later taught my dad how to fly, and my dad taught my mom’s dad how to fly; my grandmother and mother round out the family of pilots. This tradition is what brings us together as a family. It is what gives us all the wonderful opportunities to travel and go on all of these spectacular adventures. For example, my brother’s solo flight, two and a half years ago, brought us to Hollywood for a game show on Nickelodeon, and to Mexico for the Leon Balloon

Fiesta. Bobby was even on the news worldwide and now he is preparing for a TEDxTalk in February. All of that just because of one flight.

I never had any interest in being a pilot. I was always the crew chief and I was proud of that. I never really thought of being a pilot, which was always my dad and brother’s job. After my brother’s solo flight a lot of people began to ask me, “When are you going to solo?” My answer was always, “I don’t know,” or, “I’m not going to.” It was never really anything I had thought about, until a year ago. After many months of contemplation I decided that I was going to start flight training.

I was very determined to solo on my 14th birthday. My father offered me the opportunity to train sooner and solo in my brother’s ultralight balloon. But that wasn’t my plan! I wanted to solo in “my” balloon, a Lindstrand 69A. We originally bought this balloon for

my mom to start flying again. She is also an accomplished pilot, but not very active since she is raising my brother and me. After my dad and I did our first flight in this balloon, I immediately fell in love with it.

I worked very hard to get all of the necessary training in before my birthday. I did most of my training as well as took my pre-solo written test during my winter break from school. Everyone was very supportive and they all knew that I could accomplish my goal. Casey Donnelly and my dad, Troy Bradley, were my instructors. I was very comfortable with them, and I always knew that they would help me become a marvelous pilot.

I didn’t think that I had done enough training. After winter break I only had one more chance to get a training flight in before my solo. After that training flight though, I regained my comfort and I knew that I could do it.

I woke up the morning of Jan-



uary 19th with a smile on my face. I was ready. We drove down to Tome Bowl, just south of Albuquerque, where my brother soloed two years ago. I chose that area because I wasn't going to hit anything, which was one thing I was always paranoid about. To my surprise there were about 100 people and 8 other balloons that came out to celebrate with me. Some people began to call it "Savannah's Balloon Rally".

Once we arrived I greeted everyone and talked to the media for a little bit. After that my dad asked if I was ready. In that moment everything stopped, and I couldn't believe that I was actually going to do this.

"Yes," I replied.

We began to set up the balloon. My brother and I went to the top to set all the Velcro. While we were waiting for the balloon to inflate, we drew pictures with our finger tips on the sandy black fabric. As the balloon inflated, more and more I walked around it to make sure it was completely cold packed. Then I went to the basket.

"Ready to inflate?" my dad asked.

"Of course," I told him. I asked Casey if he could burn first for me just in case. After that it was all me, I was in control.

I brought the balloon to its upright position. My next priority was to say goodbye to everyone; even our dog Nickelodeon, and of course my brother, Bobby. Then I realized that in a few short moments I would be free flying with no ropes and I would be completely in control. I thought I would be scared, but I wasn't. Instead, I was full of adrenaline and ready for this moment.

I asked my dad if they could release the safety harness and walk me out of the congestion of balloons and vehicles. He said that was his plan. They walked me away from the other balloons and my dad asked if I was ready. Once clear, I locked on the burner and the next thing I knew no one was holding onto the basket anymore. I was free flying, all alone. As I took off everyone sang "Happy Birthday" to



*Top - Savannah has her crew walk the balloon clear of the congested launch area...*

*Photo by Debbie Young*

*Above - on the ascent - Savannah flies away solo!*

*Photo by Tami Bradley*

*Inset - Solo with a little help from her friends! - photo Debbie Young*

*Opposite page photos by Tami Bradley*



me! I wanted to let them finish the song, but I also had to burn. Now it was time to get down to flying. After that I did exactly what my dad and I had discussed during the briefing. I climbed up to altitude to get the winds I needed to stay clear from the power lines. I had told my brother that, once I got away from all of the commotion, I would throw him my toy skydiver. That was something he promised me he would do for me during his solo, and I thought it would be nice to return the favor.

Twenty minutes into the flight I called my crew on the radio and told them that I thought I should land soon. My dad said that I should keep flying and asked me why I wanted to land so soon.

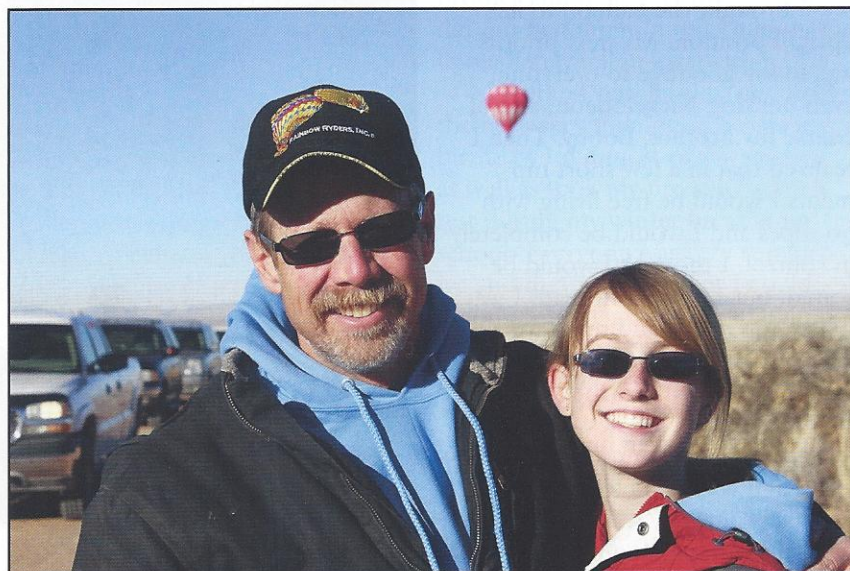
"Because I can't see many good roads after this," I responded.

"Keep going, you'll find something," he said.

I continued flying until I finally found another accessible road. I called the crew and informed them that I would be landing on that road. As I continued to fly the wind got slower and slower, after that I dropped down and got a southeast push instead of southwest. I knew that I was still going to land on that road whatever it took.

Everything was happening at once. I was flying, talking on the radio, checking my GPS, and praying that I would land where I told them I was going to. As I got closer and closer, I told my crew that I would be landing on the farthest east intersection that was on the road. I knew that I had to do a steep decent to get to the intersection; otherwise, I would get an east push and I wouldn't make it. As I came in to land, I freaked out a little about how fast I was descending and I over burned. In that moment I knew that I had to vent or I wouldn't land where I wanted to, so that's what I did. My parents said that they were proud of me because when I vented they knew that I was actually flying instead of "floating".

I landed exactly where I said I was going to. I was so happy! I had done it. I soloed. The best part was



*A spot-on landing and a photo-op with one proud father!*



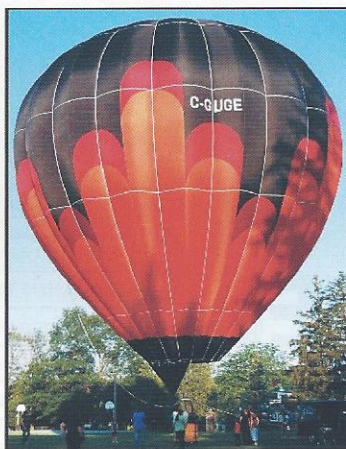
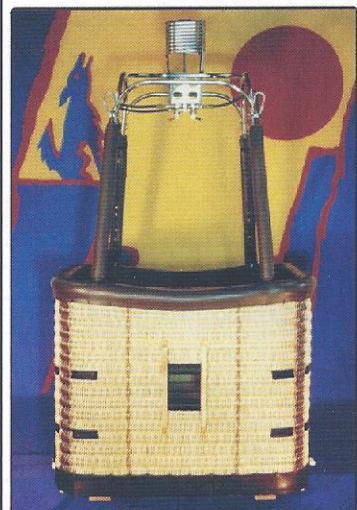
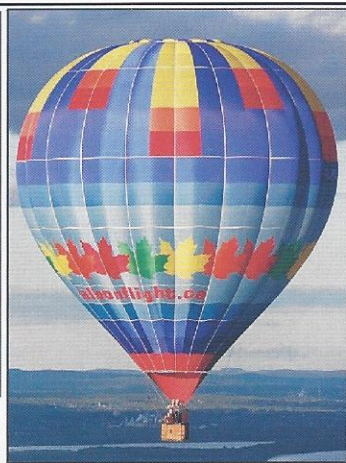
that it just felt like a regular balloon flight. I wasn't nervous when I was in command. My best friend, Gabi Freeland, was the first to greet me after my landing. She gave me such a big hug that I thought I was going to break my back. After that, I told all of my crew that it was time to pack up the balloon, and we all got to work immediately.

When we were done packing up, we went back to the launch site for birthday celebration with cake, silly string, and apple cider. Everyone congratulated me, which was the best feeling in the world. I did it! I soloed on my 14th birthday, something that I had only decided I was going to do a few months before. January 19th, 2014, was by far the best birthday ever!



*When you're 14 champagne is eschewed for the typical post flight dousing in favor of something more age appropriate --- silly string!!!*

*Photo by Ursula Richards.*



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