

Chapter 2

Learning the Ropes

So here I was in late 1958, a balloon freak who'd actually flown in a gas bag for almost eight hours. Most "sensible" people might then be content with such an experience. It was a flight longer than most contemporary beginning gas-balloon sport flyers had achieved.

But if I wanted to *live* ballooning rather than be a passive participant, I would have to get a (government) balloonist's license which would permit me to act as pilot, fly my own balloon, etc. A few inquiries soon showed that to achieve that goal would be a lengthy and complicated business. At that time it was necessary to get about 30 hours of balloon flying as a passenger, at least, logged in my newly acquired pilot's logbook. Also, I would have to make a solo flight of about an hour or so, fly at 10,000 feet for some time and pass a fairly stiff written examination as well as a physical checkup.

So I joined the Balloon Club of America, near Philadelphia, the only other gas-balloon club being in Akron. It was no

more than three hours' drive from my home in Chevy Chase, Maryland. I was to do most of my flying for several years with that group.

After a couple of Saturday visits to Philadelphia, I got to know Anthony (Tony) Fairbanks, a leader of the club. He was a gentle, amiable man in his early sixties when I first met him. He would think nothing of arising at 3 A.M., climbing into his ancient car parked outside his comfortable home in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, and driving off, dragging a dilapidated trailer with 500 pounds of balloon and gear.

I was to visit with Tony and go with him on his predawn sorties dozens of times in the years between my first flight and 1970. With my wife and daughter "chickening" out, my seven-year-old son Andy and I began our Friday night journeys to Swarthmore in the spring of 1960. We would either stay at Tony's house or a nearby hotel. Then, at the crack of dawn, we would follow Tony, plus several other Philadelphia balloon freaks, out to "Wings Field," near Bluebell, Pennsylvania, northwest of Philadelphia.

This private airfield provided a quiet, bucolic base from which to launch gas balloons. It was out of the way of the main air traffic stream and supplied with natural gas which we tapped from an underground pipe, obligingly laid to a corner of the field by the local gas company in the days when gas was plentiful and relatively cheap. To fill the small 35-foot-diameter balloons then cost less than \$200.

Thus we would gather, shivering, on the cold, dewy grass of the field, where we were soon warmed by hauling and manhandling the heavy 35-foot balloon bag, the 200-pound five-foot wicker basket, and all the rest of the rigging. Then some of us began the arduous job of filling each of from 50 to 100 canvas bags with about 30 pounds of sand from a pile that had been dumped on the field's edge the day before.

The weather was usually clear and calm since Tony had checked the weather forecasts a day or two before flight time. He never hesitated to call the meeting off if he had any doubts, especially about wind speed. Any wind predicted over eight miles per hour was cause for a scrub. Around 6 A.M. or so, the sun would ascend over the horizon, further warming us and casting long, sharp shadows of the people and the balloon. And people really began to appear after sunrise, mostly to gawk, get in the way or kibitz.

The club got a little income from membership contributions, donations and fees for flying at an occasional county fair. It owned several gas balloons which had been bought either as "war surplus" from navy supplies in Lakehurst, or were hand-me-downs from an earlier day when a few individuals still had their personal balloons. Out of the four or five club balloons, only two or three were used regularly since the old bags constantly needed patching and recoating with rubber and aluminum paint; it was all the club could do to keep two or three in service.

The big 55-foot-diameter bag mentioned above was capable of carrying five medium-sized people even when filled with natural gas, whose lift of 35 pounds per 1000 cubic feet is about half that of hydrogen or helium. The smaller, 40-foot-diameter, 35,000-cubic-foot balloons could barely lift more than one person, using natural gas and allowing a margin of about 150 pounds of sand for ballast, as altitude and obstacle-avoidance control when landing.

So it was mostly with the big bag that I flew, and we had some hilarious experiences as well as a few hair-raising ones. Almost every flight, whether an hour or a day in duration, had "thrills and spills" and is worthy of a story. I shall recount a "typical" sample six-hour flight experience.

The day promised to be clear and cool on a Saturday

morning in early May 1961. My young son Andy and I had driven up to Tony's house, stayed there and then gone out to Wings Field around 5 A.M. A few club members followed us in their cars or met us at the field. On the way we had been warily eyed by some vigilant state troopers who must have concluded that Tony's ancient heap pulling a trailer bigger than itself was no menace and could, at worst, only slow down to a dead stop because of a breakdown.

A light fog hung over the dawn-brightening meadows as we unloaded the trailer and spread out the bundled-up bag on the wet grass. Then there were empty sandbags to be lined up in neat ranks next to the sand pile, suggestively and prominently arranged so that the expected boy scout troop would get the hint and start filling.

With the bag laid out flat in a silvery disk 55 feet across, we unrolled and untangled the huge hemp rope net and carefully spread it across the bag. The net would drape over the balloon when it was inflated, and the rigging and basket would be suspended from it: an ancient but effective arrangement. Now and then Tony would holler at someone walking on the bag wearing hard shoes rather than sneakers. Enough twigs, stones and thorns lay around to puncture or scratch the envelope without somebody's big feet creating *real* damage.

Before the 20-pound wooden valve was installed in the balloon's bottom, someone would have to crawl into the balloon envelope. Once in there, looking for all the world like a mole just below the ground, hampered by the clinging fabric folds smelling of rubber and gas, the dauntless aeronaut, predictably free of claustrophobia, would search for the bottom appendix hole. Into that he would insert a 50-foot-long yellow valve rope and a red-colored rip-panel rope. The rope would be fastened to a triangular or rectangular patch at the

top of the balloon. This patch, glued or sewed into the envelope, could be ripped open to vent all the lifting gas at once if one wanted to deflate the balloon rapidly, in a high wind, on landing. The valve rope would be fastened to the bottom of wooden "butterfly wings," valves normally held closed by rubber cords.

At any rate, Tony and I crawled around in the envelope with me holding a rather ineffectual flashlight, and we attached the valve assembly and rip rope. Tony said that, as senior aeronaut, he had first rights to mucking about in there, accompanied by one of the would-be-aeronaut lady club members, who, however, to his chagrin did not show up that morning.

After a while, rather stupefied, we crawled out into the welcome fresh air and light. Then after checking all the ropes, nets and inserting the wooden valve assembly and fastening it to the envelope, Tony walked over to the gas company man who had by now arrived with his truck. That worthy got his instructions and opened a normally locked gas valve set in the ground.

A thunderous roar then engulfed us, probably waking up the neighborhood for miles around, as the gas rushed through a long canvas sleeve or tube into the balloon. This six-inch-diameter tube had been inserted into the bottom appendix underneath the envelope by some helpers as Tony and I were coming out of the valve hole like submariners out of their conning tower.

Fortunately this went on around 6 A.M. on a Saturday, before most respectable people were up. Otherwise, if they were cooking breakfast on a gas stove, the flame would have been pretty puny from the low gas pressure.

We had little time to stand around and watch the middle of the envelope begin to rise like a bubble on cooking por-

ridge. By now about 20 or so club members and boy scouts had shown up and we started the boys on filling sandbags, which we carried, as fast as they were filled, around the periphery of the net. The bags had hooks which were slipped into or around the net's edge. As the balloon inflated, it naturally wanted to go somewhere, like up, and had to be restrained by the bags which were hooked progressively down the net as this rose with the balloon. It needed a stout physique and leather lungs to keep the helpers at sandbag hooking and rehooking and the boys at filling. Gas ballooning is like boat sailing—you're practically exhausted by all that preparatory work before moving off.

Near 7 A.M. the big bag was full of gas, hanging over our heads and bobbing slowly back and forth in the light breeze. Tony seemed to be tying a knot or rope to something every minute. About ten of us carried the stout wicker basket, six-foot square, below the raised bag and fastened it with ropes and wooden toggles to the load ring, which in turn was fastened to the ends of the net.

It was getting time to think of the flying arrangements. Who would be in the basket and who would have the unenviable job of following us in Tony's car and trailer to pick us up on landing for a return to Wings Field? Tony had places for me and Andy who, only weighing about 90 pounds then, would take about "half a place," although I wondered about that as I watched him eat a hamburger and some doughnuts.

We then had room for two or two-and-a-half passengers, and Tony offered these places to a couple of deserving male club members and a short gray-haired woman in a safari jacket and slacks, one of the members' mother. She looked rather dubious about this venture but was finally persuaded to stay in the basket after being bodily lifted into it by several men. There we were then, five of us wedged into the

La Coquette, near Washington.

Anthony M.
Fairbanks
April 19, 1979



less-than-commodious basket, like New York City subway riders, even to our holding on to the load ring above us with one hand.

Tony had his club helpers hanging on to the basket which was loaded down not only with us passengers, but also about 20 filled sandbags on the floor, and others hanging outside the basket. Despite the discomfort they create, a few bags are always left on the basket's floor. At least the aeronaut is

then assured that they won't rip loose during a rough landing, thus lightening the balloon for a subsequent fast rise.

"O.K.—hands off," Tony commanded. Nothing happened. The balloon's load was too heavy. Tony then lifted out three bags of sand to the ground crew, who were once again hanging on to the basket. "Let go." Nothing. He repeated the routine. After about eight bags were removed, we got a sudden feeling of gentle floating. We were just slightly buoyant. "Walk her toward the field," Tony yelled, and the ground crew and assorted visitors lifted or pushed the now-floating basket away from nearby telephone and power lines. It is considered bad form to take off with a big bag full of inflammable gas, touch a power line and blow the passengers and spectators into the hereafter, leaving aside the embarrassment of shutting down a whole county's power and a subsequent lawsuit against our estates.

A couple of minutes later we were near the middle of the still-deserted airfield. "Everybody let go," Tony ordered through a megaphone which hung outside the basket.

They did—and up and up we went, accompanied by cheers and car horns honking, cameras clicking and goodbye and good-luck waves and shouts. We cleared all towers, poles and lines by a comfortable margin as Tony leveled off the balloon at around 1500 feet by a little valving.

As the airfield receded into the distance, we moved slowly toward Philadelphia in the light wind. I couldn't help marveling at the primitive equipment on board compared to the radios, altimeters, compasses and so on which Winzen used. Tony kept tapping like a woodpecker on an ancient altimeter to loosen its needle. One passenger tried using a rather erratic walkie-talkie to contact the ground-following crew, consisting of Tony's son and several other "clubbers" following in their own cars.

We kept ourselves busy by helping out with such small tasks as dropping a pinch of sand now and then or pulling briefly on the valve rope as the balloon rose a little too high because of "superheating" of its gas by the sun. Since I was accumulating time and experience toward my balloon license, Tony kept me particularly busy.

I kept tapping the "vertimeter" which indicated, or so we hoped, a rising or sinking of the balloon. Despite the tapping, its needle tended to stick; the altimeter would show the vertical movement more or less *after* it had taken place. Yet a careful aeronaut needs a quick and infallible rise/sink indicator. Tony showed us a rather primitive but tried and proven method: He would drop bits of toilet paper overboard. If these sank quickly, our balloon was rising. If they rose, we were sinking. If they hung around the basket for awhile, we were reasonably steady. Sometimes the bits of tissue floated right back into the basket.

That's why aeronauts have always been wary of spitting, hawking or peeing out of the basket unless they *knew* they were rising.

At around 11 A.M. we were drifting over the northern suburbs of Philadelphia, away from the city center but toward the Delaware River. Suddenly peace and quiet was shattered by an eardrum-splitting roar. The fact that any of us didn't get a cardiac arrest was a tribute to our constitutions.

The roar came from a small plane, seemingly appearing from nowhere and whistling by us, no further than a couple hundred feet or so away. It receded into the distance, followed by our curses, and then apparently believing that we felt too secure and peaceful, the engine jockey wheeled his red-and-white striped contraption around, coming at us again.

I felt the need for a machine gun so badly that I could taste it!

While the idiot now circled around us, waving, we replied with less polite gestures, our woman passenger included. Somehow, a large fraction of our population believes it un-American to be away, even for a few moments, from a noisy combustion engine, whether it's an airplane, lawnmower, power chainsaw, snowmobile or beach buggy.

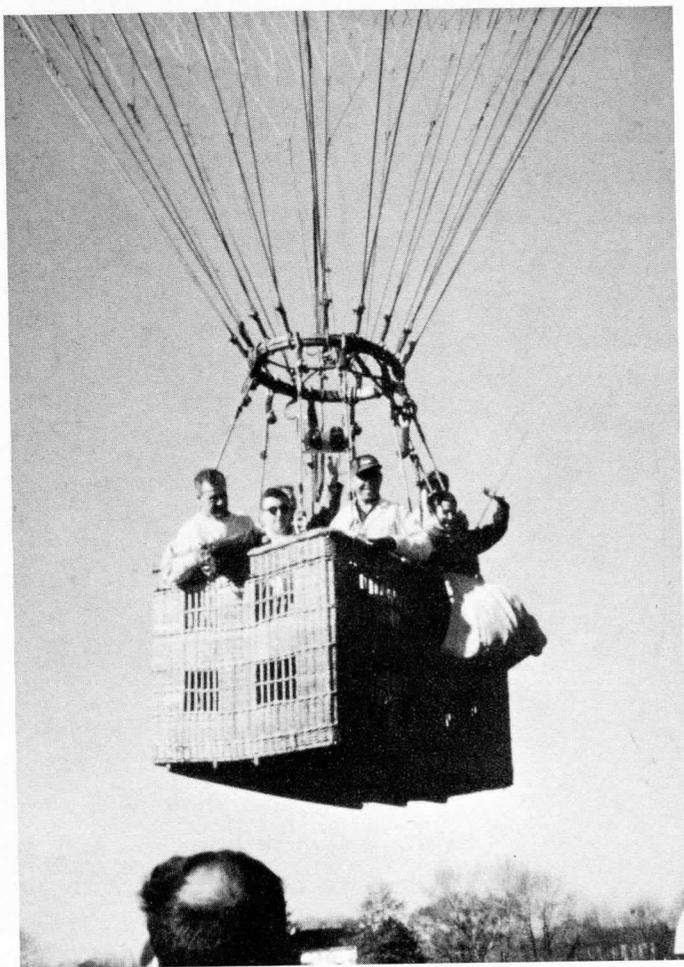
Tony was just trying to get the airplane's registration number when its jockey, probably getting dizzy, thought better of it and flew away. During the uproar we hadn't been watching the gauges carefully. So, getting back to them we noticed that we had drifted down to about 300 feet.

On a hot, clear day, with little expectation of a sudden descent because of cloud-shadow cooling of the gas, 300 feet is an agreeable altitude for a short cross-country hop. Certainly that's a lower altitude than even the most stunt-happy plane pilot will fool around in, so we would at least be rid of that nuisance.

Floating that low, we could now really see and hear what the groundlings had to offer. We also located our ground crew. It had been a bit of a game for us to try to identify which car or cars were following us and where they were. They, in turn, had to stop now and then and look up to find us or ask nearby people if they'd seen us.

Our drivers waved to us—the only communication or signaling left inasmuch as the walkie-talkie had quit. By now quite a cavalcade of curious drivers was following our crew. Other cars were converging on a nearby crossroad from every direction, creating a heart-rending traffic jam. Even a fire engine was caught in the jam, and the frustrated firemen turned their heads in unison as we sailed overhead toward an adjacent golf course.

A few hundred yards across the course a little group of Saturday morning golfers, blissfully unaware of the traffic jam



Typical takeoff, near Philadelphia.

or the thing overhead, were intently watching a buddy preparing to swing. "Fore!" Tony yelled through the megaphone. What a reaction that caused! The man chopped his club, one fellow pulled off his hat, and they all gazed open-mouthed at us as we drifted out of firing range. Had a rifle been handy, I'm sure we would have been an immediate target for the golfers.

It was getting near noon and Tony decided to land. He had previously agreed to swap the woman passenger for the mother of another club member who felt his ma needed a new experience. Since she was part of the following crowd, I presumed we would land somewhere near the followers.

However, their cars were no longer evident, though this didn't seem to bother Tony. We were far enough away from Philadelphia's suburban sprawl so that he had a choice of nice flat landing fields with not too many adjacent power lines. The golf course would have been splendid, but we feared a lynching from the maddened golfers whose game we had so rudely interrupted and who would, to boot, have been trampled by the hundreds of the curious populace who were expecting us to land.

The gentle wind wafted us toward a flat field covered, I thought, with grass. Tony valved for a couple of seconds. We sank—200 feet—150 feet—100 feet.

“Drag rope out,” he yelled. “Stand by with ballast.”

Trees and telephone wire came at us. A quarter bag of sand dropped—a little more—and, seeming to miss the wires by miles, we hit the field with a resounding thud, bounced a couple of times and came to rest.

There was no danger of any dragging or sudden takeoff. Several dozen people had already grabbed the drag rope on Tony's command as we came down, and now they hung on to the basket and ropes. It was a curious sensation to be standing in the basket almost nose to nose with curious hangers-on who would reach into the basket, holler questions and grab anything not nailed down for souvenirs.

This crowd was, as usual, good-natured and inquisitive, wondering whether we were “space” fliers or adventurers. I couldn't help reflecting on the experiences of aeronauts of the early 19th Century who, on landing, were often surrounded by

superstitious, menacing crowds armed with pitchforks ready to "do in" the aeronauts and destroy their balloon.

Suddenly the noise died down. Coming through the crowd like an ice breaker through floes was a huge white-bearded man in farmer's coveralls. Behind him was another similar man, only slightly smaller, carrying a shotgun.

"What is dis here thing and what are youse doing on my land?" the leading great bearded man thundered at us in a thick German accent.

"We're exchanging passengers," one of our crew blurted out quaveringly.

"So dot means that you bring dis here contraption on my land, and dis here crowd is killing my wheat field," the giant rumbled through his beard.

His companion gestured menacingly with the shotgun, and I realized that things were about to get out of hand. We had obviously landed in Pennsylvania Dutch country and not in "grass" as I, a city slicker, thought. And since these sturdy "Dutch" individualists couldn't shoot the whole crowd, they might obviously, at least, blast into the bag full of cooking gas, resulting in a thunderous earth-shaking ka-whomppp! a purple mushroom cloud and an explosion of red-yellow flames licking the cloudless tranquil sky.

With the bemused, but still nosy crowd clinging to the basket, I told my colleagues to be quiet and let me handle the two bellicose farmers.

Hopping over the edge, I asked the two overalled rustics to follow me while I tried to assume a mysterious demeanor. I noticed then that our ground crew had arrived, driving over the already-trampled spring wheat.

"Well, gentlemen," I began, looking a little furtively from behind their pickup truck, "I'm a scientist from Washington."

While I let this sink into their agricultural-subsidy-conditioned minds, I fished out a glossy, colorful NASA ID card, picture and all.

Addressing myself to the big farmer I went on, "We are on a special aeronautical mission, and Washington is behind this." Washington was, of course, behind me, at a distance of about 180 miles. Noting that he was beginning to be impressed, I continued smoothly: "We had to make an urgent landing with our *aerostat* [I pointed at the balloon for emphasis—thank God it had "USA" and the flag on it]—and we have orders to take on another aeronaut."

Encouraged by the increasingly respectful mien of the farmers, I opened my mouth for more bologna, only to be stopped by my rustic's exclamation, "Well that's all well and good, but who's going to pay for dis here wheat?" He swept one huge arm by me in an arc around the crowded field.

I watched the progress of the passenger exchange out of the corner of my eye as our first woman passenger, wearing slacks, neatly climbed out of the basket. The new woman passenger, an older lady, rather plump and wearing skirts, had to be lifted and pushed over the rim, with a somewhat startling display of her lower regions.

Deciding it was now or never, I pulled my pilot's flight logbook out of my jump-suit pocket and then, looking the man straight in the eye, I said firmly: "May we have your name and address?" The man seemed taken aback but obliged. I jotted it down and then thanked him. I told him: "Washington will have to be informed. They'll no doubt be interested."

Then, pushing my luck, I asked if he and his companions would "help us" with crowds so that I could reenter the basket. Bellowing to the crowd of several hundred farmers to make way, the formidable pair bulldozed their way to the

balloon which, I noticed, seemed ready to take off again as Tony helped me into the basket.

He started to ask how I made out, but I shushed him, furtively giving him the thumbs-up sign. He needed no further encouragement, yelling at the crowd to back off and to let go of the basket.

I quickly shook hands with the farmer and said loudly that I thanked him for his cooperation and above all for giving me his name and address.

Suddenly up we went as I waved cheerfully to our farmers who gaped at us, forgetting about their menacing gun. I told my companions to sit or stand on sandbags in case the farmers gave us a send-off blast. As we drifted over the trees nearby, we saw our two adversaries shooing the crowd off the field, while our ground crews had made themselves scarce and were driving almost below us in a cloud of dust.

As we took off Tony admitted that it was amusing to have the *farmer's* address, while he didn't have *ours*! However, he agreed that the club should contact the farmer both as a matter of courtesy and common sense, since a lawsuit might bring in the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), and they could then tighten up on balloon flying regulations. The club's insurance with Lloyd's of London would probably pay at least a token claim for some but probably not for all the crop damage since they could reasonably argue that the non-balloon crowd did the trampling.

We did write but nothing came of it.

Shortly after reascending Tony pointed out that our bag was getting flabby. Our various ups and downs and the excess valving had reduced the gas volume.

So now we had a reduced lift. Tony then told our new passenger that her ride would soon have to terminate, when he found a suitable landing spot.

She asked: "Will it be an easy landing?"

Tony grinned and replied: "All landings are easy—more or less."

It was around mid-day, and the sun's heat intensified and beat on the balloon. We got more "superheat" than we bargained for. The bag became less flabby, and up we went to a couple of thousand feet. It was just as well, since we were over an urban area again, with few landing places evident. Since we had broken out lunch and were talking animatedly with Tony and the others about ballooning, I hadn't glanced over the side. Then I did. We were over the Delaware River, drifting across into New Jersey.

Although Tony had discussed the possibility of crossing the Delaware, we, and presumably the follower crew, had discounted the possibility. Now we could, by the way, see the four cars and trailer just crossing the Delaware Bridge just as we reached the other side.

Having been ground crew several times myself, I could sympathize with their plight—weaving circuitously through tortuous streets and sometimes back alleys, all the while trying to keep the balloon in view. This means stopping occasionally, asking people and even standing on the cars' roofs for a better look. Several times I've had the police roar up and ask what I was doing. Fortunately, they often got reports of balloon sightings on their radios so that it was sometimes possible to enlist their aid in location, rather than getting a ticket for speeding or going the wrong way up a one-way street.

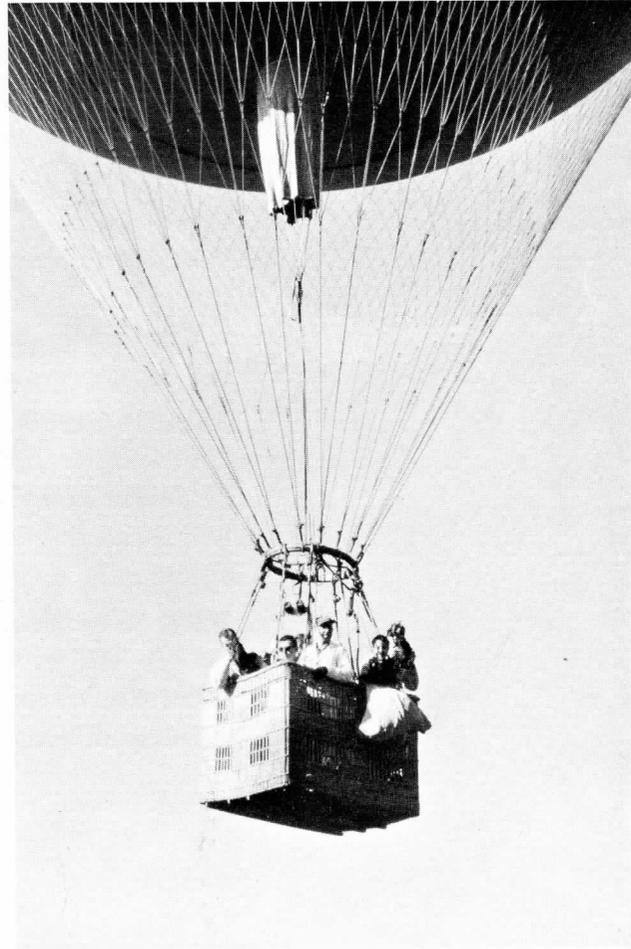
We were now drifting southeast and had descended to about 1000 feet. We were over scattered New Jersey suburbia, with a few green open fields appearing here and there. Noting that our pursuers obviously had us in view, Tony decided to land again—the gas superheat was cooling off and

the balloon would soon start sinking. We could hear the flabby bottom of the old bag rustling and flapping.

Once more I stood by with sand as we got the drag rope ready. I looked ahead, puzzled. "Where are you trying to land, Tony?" I asked, not seeing any big fields approaching.

"Right in that little patch of trees," he said.

I knew Tony to be a superb aeronaut—one of the world's best. But I really thought that the bright sunlight had got to him. What he was aiming at, and what we were unerringly sinking down towards, was a tiny copse of scrubby trees. The patch, apparently no bigger than an average suburban lot, was located in the middle of a development, surrounded on all sides by small tract homes, clapboard bungalows and



Six balloonists on an early morning flight.

suburbia's landscape of freeways, shopping centers and station wagons.

Realizing that this was no time to ask why we couldn't have gone on, I dumped the drag rope down into the tiny patch of oaks. Our woman passenger's eyes bulged as the trees shot up at us.

"Hang on, flex your knees," Tony shouted. And crash! We hit the treetops accompanied by the fluttering and croaking of hundreds of outraged birds. Several of our feathered rivals—some cawing blackbirds and an angry flapping jay—got into the basket and rigging. We stuck in the trees like a boat at sea, swaying back and forth as the wind was trying to pull us out again.

"Grab hold of the rope," Tony yelled down to a couple of men who stood gaping in one of the abutting backyards.

As they reached for the thin rope which Tony threw out at them, he shouted that they should tie it around "that tree." In their excitement they wrapped it around a slender sapling planted in the yard's center, instead of an older, sturdier tree nearby.

And suddenly a wind gust jerked us out of the "landing site."

Up we went—and so did the young, green sapling, ripped out of the ground with bushels of dirt raining down on our two misguided helpers. Our ground crew was hanging onto the drag rope, pulling us slowly back into the trees, accompanied by a whooping, hollering crowd.

But the real shouting came from a plump woman in her backyard, hair in curlers, barefoot and wearing only a short house robe. She yelled, "What the hell have you done to my tree?"

Before we could answer, that dangling uprooted sapling fell with a "plop" right in front of her, with branches whip-

ping about her. This being more than she could cope with, she beat a hasty retreat into her house.

The ground gang, now helped by the locals, pulled us across the trees to the little access road where we quickly sank to the ground. Our shaken female passenger was more than willing to leave, making a less than dignified exit from the basket. One of our followers got her quickly into the only car that had ventured to the landing site. She waved a hasty goodbye.

Telling our faithful followers that we'd be up another hour or so, Tony cut loose the thin rope still tangled with the tree. The outraged woman, robbed of her tree, was threatening to call the police, and the souvenir-hunting crowd, out of pawing, grabbing curiosity, was ready to mob the balloon basket so we decided to rise above all that.

We started to pull in the drag rope and Tony suddenly yelled, "Let go!" All the sweaty faces crowding around the basket and hanging on backed off precipitously. After all, you never can tell with something as strange as our contraption.

And up we shot, clear of the towering, leafy oak trees, now lighter by 100-plus pounds, covered with twigs, bark, leaves and more than a few bird droppings.

There was pandemonium below.

Traffic jams, crowds trampling across hedges and lawns, kids hollering and the red, rotating, flashing lights of police cars converging on the scene. We were gratified to see our slippery ground crew once again getting away in the confusion and following us.

As I leaned over the edge to pull up the ground rope, I saw something fluttering on its end. As that came up to the basket, sure enough, there was a piece of washline with a

woman's white lace petticoat, and a blue-striped beach towel came along, entangled in the frayed end of the rope.

Tony, seeing this, remarked drily, "We can add these to the club's clothes collection for our winter club benefit garage sale."

We were amused by the circus-tent dimension of the petticoat and speculated on the awesome vastness of the woman it had covered. The beach towel displayed in faded red letters: "Tides Inn, Daytona Beach." We didn't feel so guilty about that item.

As we leveled off, Tony explained why he set us down in the minijungle, instead of waiting. First of all, he liked to land in trees and shrubs when the balloon is flabby and hard to control. The trees act like a spring mattress and cushion the impact if you don't mind the branches and the scraping and the thrashing birds. I pointed out that I considered it most ungracious to interrupt birds' breeding season. They had been waiting all winter for a chance to mate, and here they were being violently ejected from their perches by some unheralded silent sky monster.

We had now moved on, away from the housing developments, over typical New Jersey pine forest, stretching endlessly, it seemed, toward the horizon and the ocean.

Looking down into the trees, I observed in a little clearing at the end of a dirt road a convertible car with its top down. There, stretched out on the back seat, was a naked couple pursuing the ancient and honorable pastime of mating. The man's white backside contrasted vividly with the red leather upholstery.

The young woman spotted us and began pointing heavenward. Feeling mischievous and a little envious, I grabbed the megaphone and yelled down from our 200-foot 15-story altitude, "Stop that!"

The young woman was trying to disentangle herself in a panic, and as we drifted off we could see her swain frantically pulling his drawers on.

We laughingly drifted away.

It was midafternoon. The time had come for the end of the journey. The bag was getting ever flabbier, we were getting tired from standing up, and our ground crew, now reduced to the car-and-trailer and one other car, would also be exhausted. This time Tony would not attempt a tree landing. From our balloon's shadow across or along the few roads, we estimated our speed at about five to eight miles per hour, slow enough for a quiet landing.

There was a break in the forest ahead, with a clearing full of small scrub and grass, and surely uninhabited—we had seen no woodsmen or farmers. While aeronauts often miss their chosen landing site because of sudden capricious wind changes, Tony seemed to have an unerring instinct for the right spot, and once again—plop!—down we plunked gently into the vegetation, which we immediately clutched and clung to.

The ground gang showed up, having easily (for once) gotten to our landing, and tied ropes to this and that, while Tony hung onto the valve rope to deflate the balloon. We were so busy stowing things away in the basket that we didn't notice the crowd of, mostly, kids which was appearing out of the "woodwork." Yet we hadn't seen anybody from the air. I'm convinced that rural America, and especially the forests, is full of another uncounted, and normally invisible, population which appears only, and magically, when a balloon lands. Most of the kids seem pretty nice and usually helpful, although every now and then a souvenir snatcher has to have his knuckles rapped.

We told them to hang onto the grab ropes at the side of

the basket, and several even tried to climb inside—a practice which must be firmly discouraged. In our case, the balloon was half empty and ready to fall over on its side. There was enough lift to take off again but with no more than a little kid or two in the basket.

We sweated and labored in the hot midafternoon sun to pull the balloon down and away from the basket. It sank to the ground like a gray, tired, wrinkled elephant, with the cooking gas coming out of the valve which had been tied open.

Tony got out our big red-and-white “No Smoking” sign and ordered several smoking adults away from the billowing bag. Tony’s son roped in a policeman, who suddenly appeared, to help with keeping the smokers at a distance. That large, strapping peace officer was happy to be doing something official, and in a basso profundo directed the smokers away.

While he himself was sucking on a big cigar.

With the bag’s air-gas mixture at its most inflammable and explosive, I grabbed Andy and edged away. If we were going to get ours, it would be more dignified to have it happen to father and son in midair than ignominiously on the ground. Luckily the cop soon quenched his stogie when reminded of his possible demise.

Andy, then a bright blond boy who had been quite unobtrusive and quiet during the flight, now livened up and helped to marshal some children for “bag rolling.” The kids are lined up and told to lie on the bag in a row and roll across it to squeeze out the last of the gas. Perhaps not the safest exercise—but there are too many kinds around anyway. At any rate, bag rolling gave them something important to do. We would often reward them with little balloon souvenirs and, above all, our autographs, which they collected avidly on

any old scrap. I have often ruminated on the hundreds of grubby pieces of paper with "Kurt Stehling, Balloonist," on them which puzzled mothers found lying about the house.

The bag, now flat, needed packing up after the net had been stripped off. The several hundred pounds of fabric were rolled up like a bandage and then came the gut-straining task of lifting the bag into the trailer, which was rarely parked close by. Fences, trees and other obstacles, even a small river on one flight, usually intervened. That day, even with few obstacles, it was still about 50 yards away. When onlookers saw what had to be carried, their enthusiasm cooled, although a few could usually be counted on to help. Heave ho! And off a dozen of us went, trundling and rolling the fabric mass carefully, to prevent rips, into the trailer. And that venerable gadget creaked, groaned and tilted in seeming reluctance to accept its burden.

Then we rolled up the net and miscellaneous ropes and dumped this conglomerate into the basket, now cleared of everything except the drag and landing ropes and emptied canvas sandbags. The basket and its load were also pretty heavy, and it took eight sturdy men, with Andy giving token help, to carry it to the trailer and slide it into the vacant rear end.

That proved to be too much for that tired charabanc. Its trailer hitch arm, connected to the car, ripped loose and the thing tilted downwards, almost smashing my insteps. The rolled-up bag and ropes came sliding down and out.

And so the trailer hitch was wrecked. We'd have to lift everything out again and then try to fix the thing, or give up and sleep near it to await another trailer from Philadelphia. Nobody wanted to go through that.

But ingenuity and adaptability saved the day. One of the men in the crowd appeared with a powerful screw jack which

he'd kept in his car's trunk. We got the idea at once. Jacking up the trailer's rear, and by dint of jury-rigging and improvising, we managed to fasten the hitch bar back on to the trailer with spit, baling wire, nails, metal strip and the like. We were proud of our handiwork, which in fact looked no worse than the rest of the trailer.

Finally, everything packed, kids patted on the head, "thank yous" shouted and the cop's hand shaken, we climbed, hot and tired, into Tony's car and another one. We pulled out of the rutted, bumpy area cautiously, any minute expecting to see our 600-pound appendage fall off.

But it held. And soon we tooled along the paved New Jersey highway, across the bridge to Philadelphia, and then back to Wings Field. By 6 P.M. all loose ends were tied together, the last goodbyes said, the last pictures snapped as Andy and I climbed tiredly into my car for the return trip to Washington.

Yes, we were tuckered out, but we had the exhilaration of knowing that very few people across the country hit the sack that night with a day of such excitement behind them.