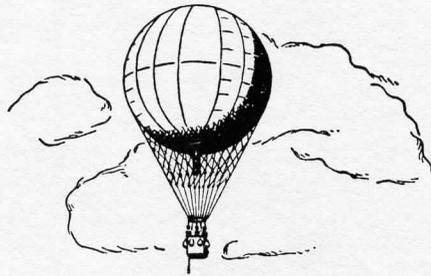
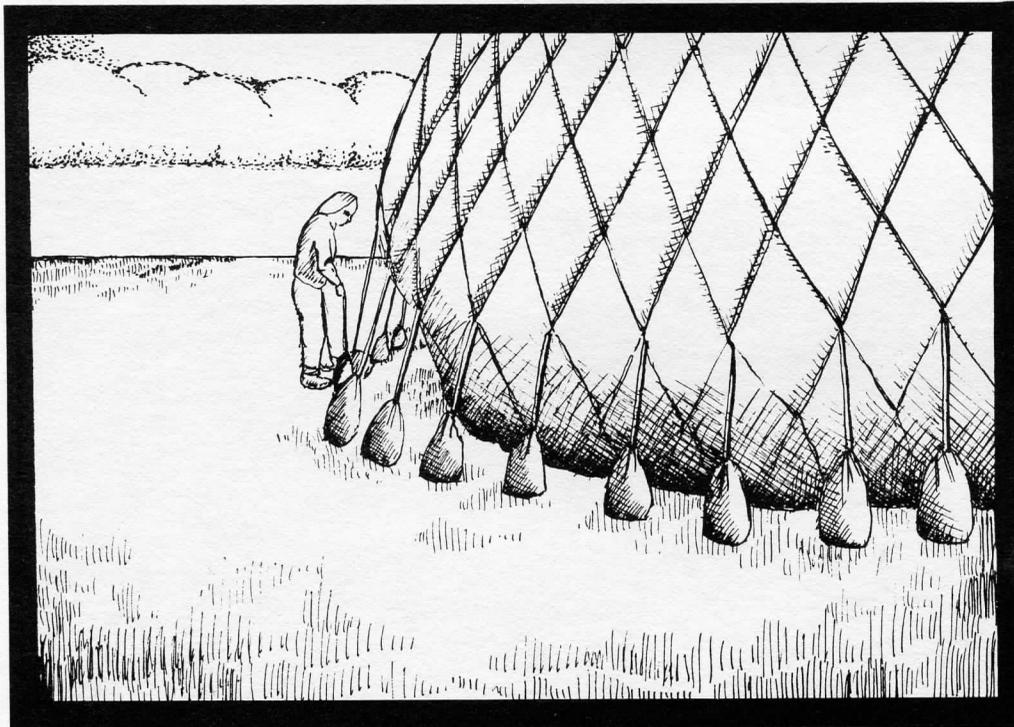


## II



# BALLOON CLUB OF AMERICA:

1952-1978



Working the net.



Jan 20, 1950



**T**HE BALLOON CLUB OF AMERICA began in 1952 when the Douglas Leigh Company of New York donated parts of eleven balloons to Tony Fairbanks and Don Piccard. These balloons were part of a large supply of surplus material which Mr. Leigh's company had purchased from the government at the end of World War II. The photo above shows members of the club inspecting the recently-arrived equipment. From left to right, Jerry Burns, Don Piccard, and Francis Shields. Other early members of the Balloon Club of America were Pete Wood, Eleanor Vadala, and Connie Wolf.

The photo at left shows the first inflation of the Balloon Club of America in Brookhaven, Pennsylvania. On November 29, 1952, Don Piccard and Tony Fairbanks flew the 80,000-cubic-foot balloon (N9071H) on a four-hour flight and landed in Hammonton, New Jersey.



*Photo by Robert Halmi*



Above, in 1950, Tony Fairbanks lands his rare Buhl "Bull Pup" airplane—a mid-wing single place airplane with a three-cylinder, forty-five horsepower Czekely engine—at the Swarthmore Elementary School. This was the first all metal frame airplane made. Only one hundred of these were constructed.

In the photo at left, taken in Brookhaven, Pennsylvania, Francis Shields (left) and Don Piccard (right) are studying maps. In these early days feed sacks were used for sandbags.



Photo by Robert Halmi



*Photo by Robert Halmi*

Above, the ground crew has arrived ahead of the balloon to assist the balloon pilot by grabbing the drag rope when the balloon is landing.

At left, Tony Fairbanks stands on the basket before lifting off on one of the early morning flights of the Balloon Club of America. In 1954 the club began flying from the Valley Forge Airport in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. Several years later, when this airport was turned into a golf course, the club moved once more to its final gas balloon airport, Wings Field, in Blue Bell near Ambler, Pennsylvania.

# ARGOSY

The Complete Man's Magazine • April 25c

The *Vice*

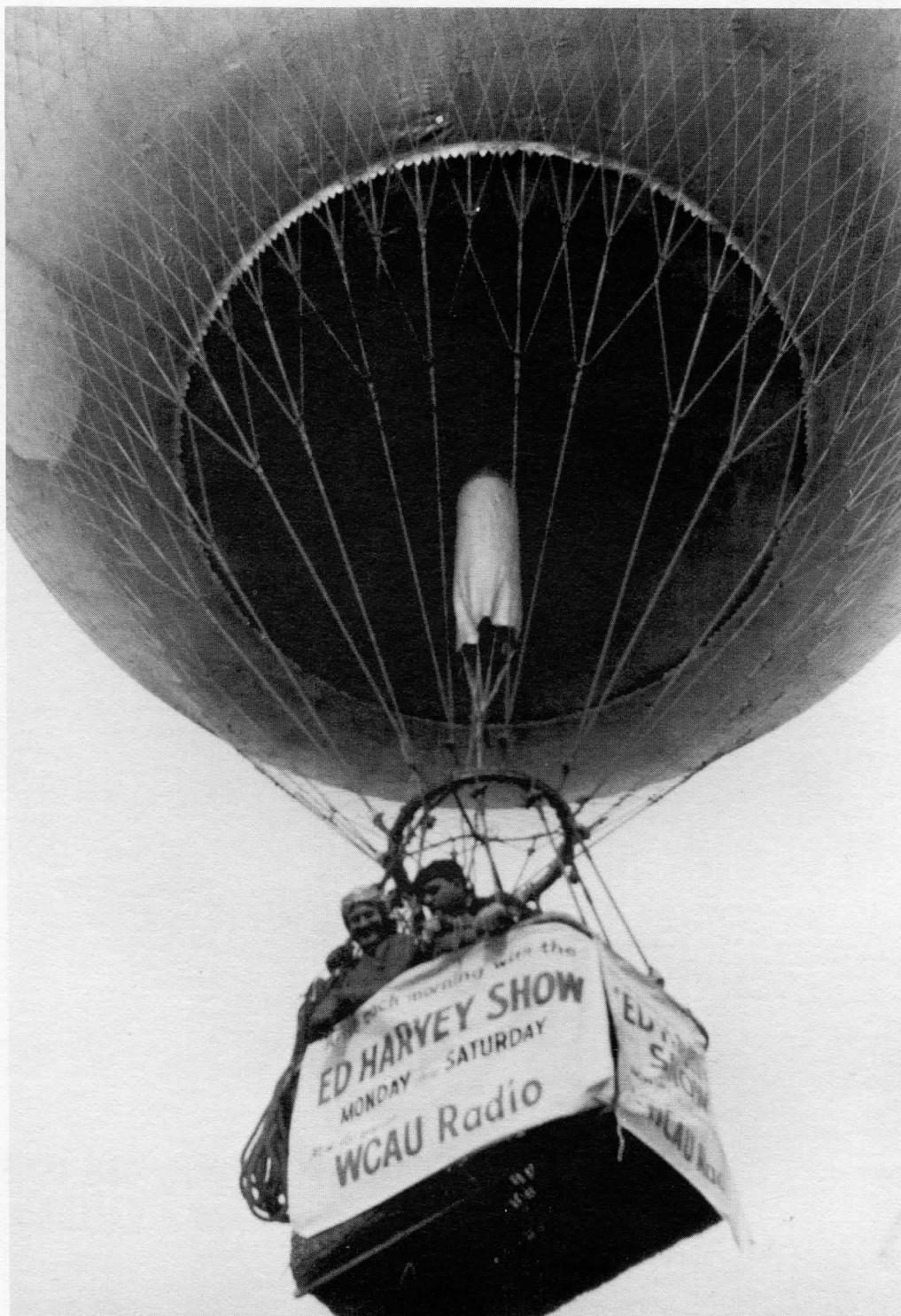
The Law Ignores

DIET WITH BEER!



Want to get away  
from it all?

See Page 32



Above, Ed Harvey, a local radio personality from Philadelphia's station WCAU, experiencing the trials and tribulations of ballooning. Francis Shields piloted the balloon from Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, with a landing in Hope, New Jersey. (November, 1959)

At left, an artist's concept of free ballooning at its best. *Argosy* published a photo story about the Balloon Club of America's activities in April, 1954. Reprinted by permission of *Argosy* magazine.

# LIFE

The Day When Independence  
Was Really Declared

THE GLORIOUS ~~4<sup>TH</sup>~~  
2<sup>ND</sup>

WHAT TO DO  
ABOUT  
THE ECONOMY

A Letter from  
David  
Rockefeller  
to the  
President  
and J.F.K.'s  
Reply

ALSO THIS WEEK  
Benny Goodman  
Swings  
Through Russia

For Snorkelers:  
An Underwater  
National Park



**HIGH OLD TIME  
IN A BALLOON**

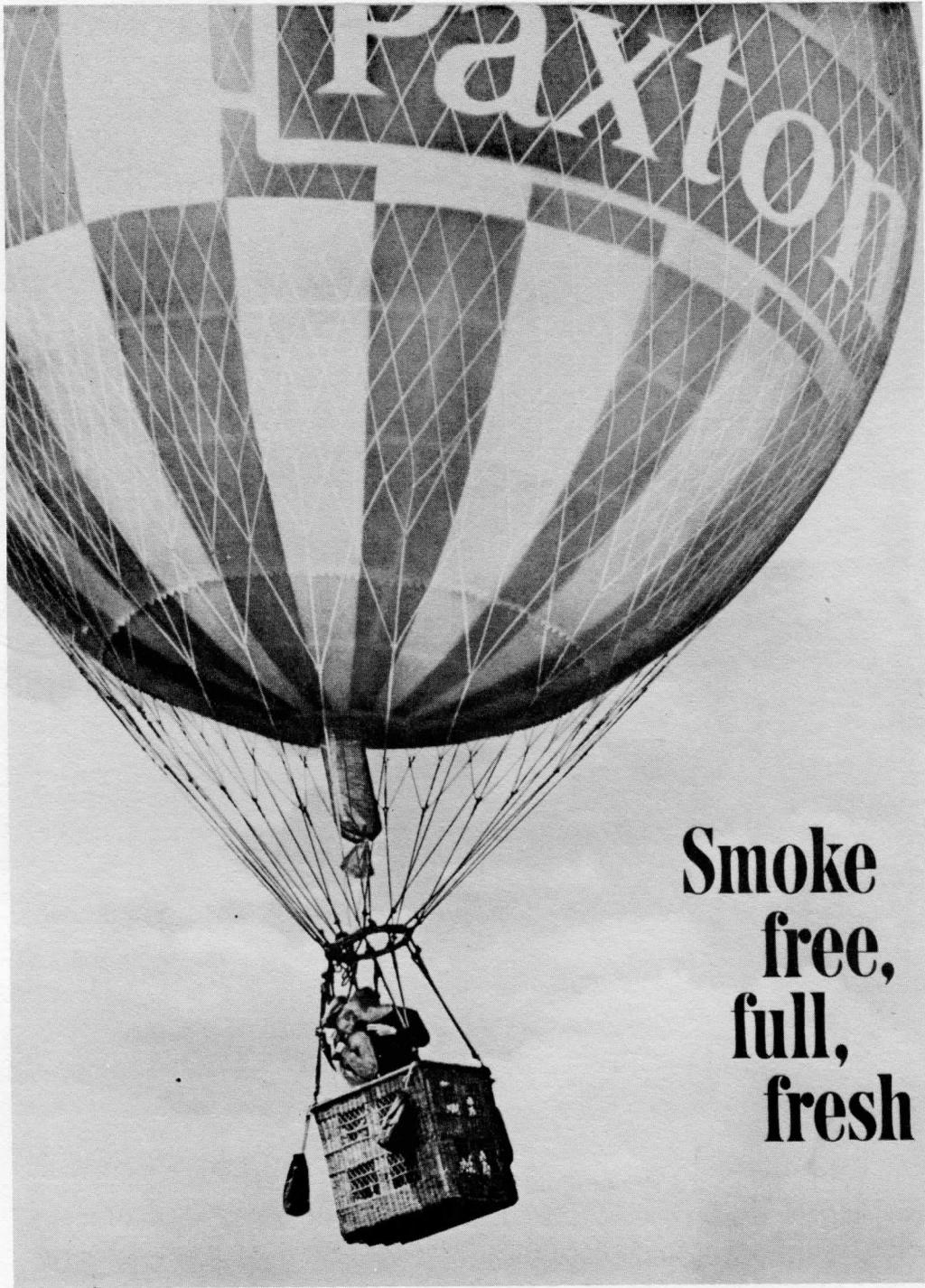
JULY 6 • 1962 • 20¢



Photo by Robert Halmi

Above, Don Piccard standing on top of the load ring. He is carefully arranging the red rip panel line so that it will be out of the way until it is needed at the end of the balloon flight. The red rope instantly pops the rip panel loose and allows the gas to escape.

In July, 1962, *Life* magazine wrote a cover story on the Balloon Club of America. They photographed our 80,000-cubic-foot balloon on a two-hour flight from Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, to Centre Square, New Jersey. Photo at left reprinted by permission of Robert Halmi, photographer, and *Life* magazine, © 1962, Time Inc.



**Smoke  
free,  
full,  
fresh**



In the photo above, Francis Shields prepares for lift-off. The sandbags are removed one by one until the balloon begins to float gently upward. The final command of the pilot to the crew is always, "hands off." His passengers are Eleanor Vadala (left) and Kate Ornsen.

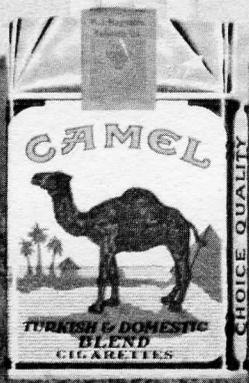
At left, for this 1964 advertisement, the Balloon Club of America painted one of their 19,000-cubic-foot balloons. Reprinted by permission of Philip Morris.



# Camel

every inch a  
real smoke

Get the clean-cut taste of rich tobaccos. Get with Camel. The Camel blend has never been equalled for rich taste... easygoing mildness. Camel—every inch a real smoke... comfortably smooth, too!



*Russell Youngblood*

Balloon Club of America...  
Jet Pilot,  
Capt., U.S.A.F.

The best tobacco makes the best smoke!

R. J. REYNOLDS  
TOBACCO COMPANY  
WINSTON-SALEM, N. C.

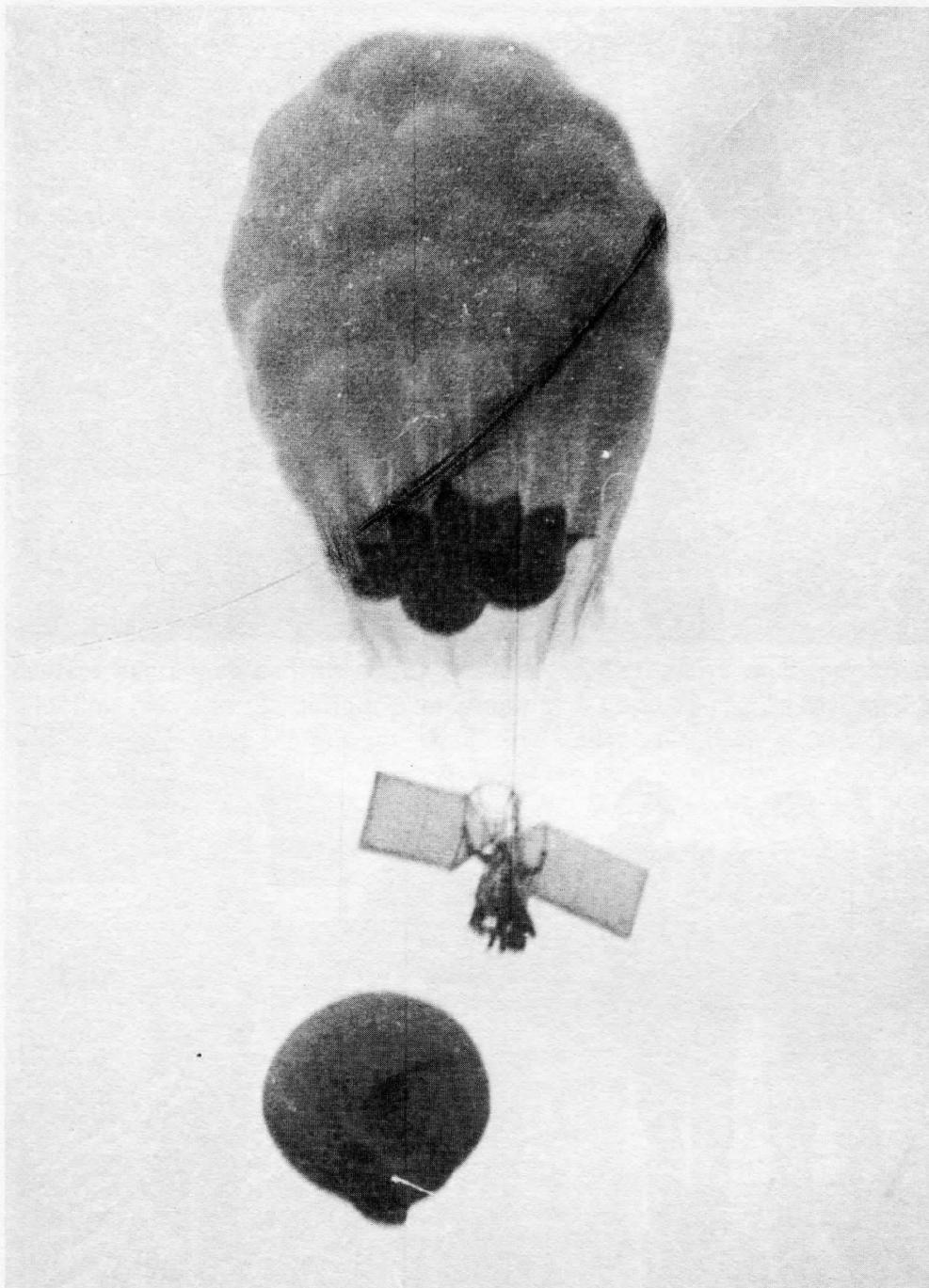


Above, on August 17, 1959, Don Piccard flew his small (5600-cubic-foot) nylon/neoprene envelope from LaFayette, Indiana. The name of the balloon is the *Jupiter*. Don Piccard later moved to California and became one of the early builders of hot air balloons.

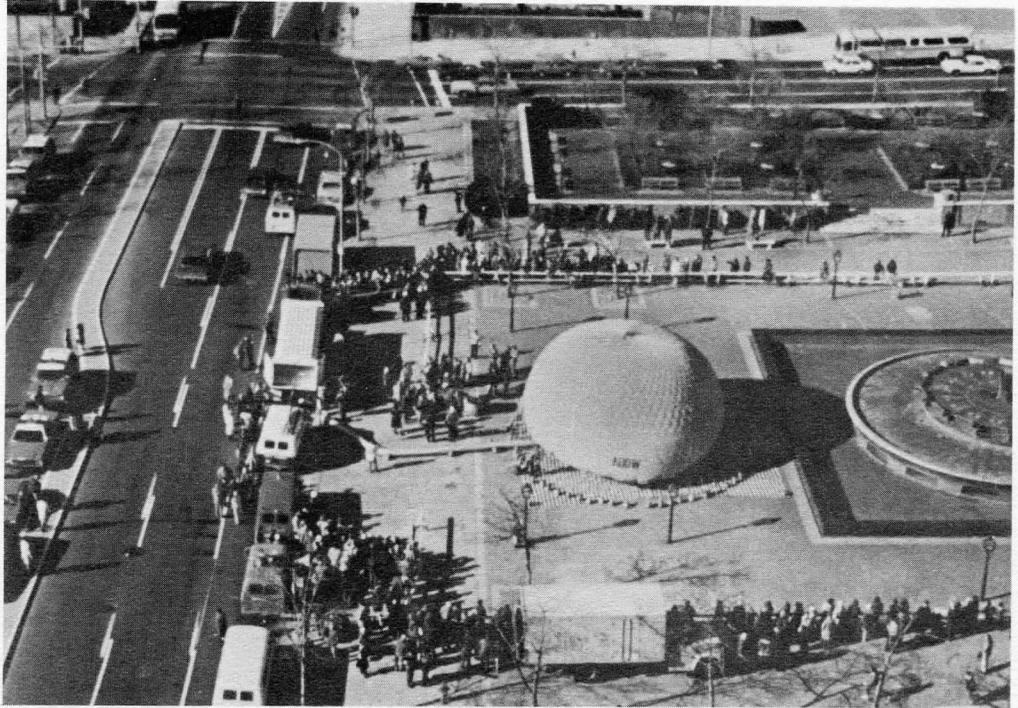
In the photo at left, in 1963, the Balloon Club of America used their famous *La Coquette* balloon to make an ad for Camel cigarettes. The jet pilot in the ad is Russell Youngblood. Reprinted by permission of R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company.



The balloon arch at the 1967 St. Albans Fair in Vermont was the largest ever made in the United States. It was made of 100,000 balloons and was 100 feet high and 100 feet wide. It was made by the St. Albans Fair Association.



For several years, Garrett Cashman flew weather balloons tied under a nylon net. He sat in a bosun's chair suspended from the balloons. Cashman carried sand to drop if he wanted to gain altitude and a long pole with a nail at the end if he wanted to burst a balloon to descend. He would fly at about three thousand feet above the ground. The photographs above and at left were taken in 1955, when he asked the Balloon Club members what he would have to do to get a license to fly his seventy weather balloons.



Connie Wolf of Blue Bell, Pennsylvania, was an early member of the Balloon Club of America. She flew frequently in the club balloons and went to Augsburg, Germany, to purchase her own orange (N10W) balloon. On November 20, 1961, Connie established duration, distance, and altitude records for her size of balloon by flying from Big Springs, Texas, to Boley, Oklahoma. She was in the air for over forty hours, traveled 364 miles, and reached an altitude of 13,600 feet. Tony Fairbanks helped with her inflation and drove a chase vehicle for Connie's record flight.

The photos at left were taken on January 10, 1976. Connie Wolf flew her balloon from Independence Square in downtown Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to honor the 183rd anniversary of Jean Blanchard's first balloon flight in the United States, which also took place in Philadelphia. For Connie's solo flight from Independence Square, the temperature was a very cold eight degrees Fahrenheit and the winds were recorded at twelve miles per hour. The four pilots in the bottom photograph and Tony Fairbanks managed to launch Connie between gusts of wind. She landed on a farm in New Jersey.

In the bottom photo, from left to right, the four pilot members of the Balloon Club of America are Ted Stecher, Mike Fairbanks, Stewart Lewis, and Jerry Spaulding.



Photo by August C. Hohnke



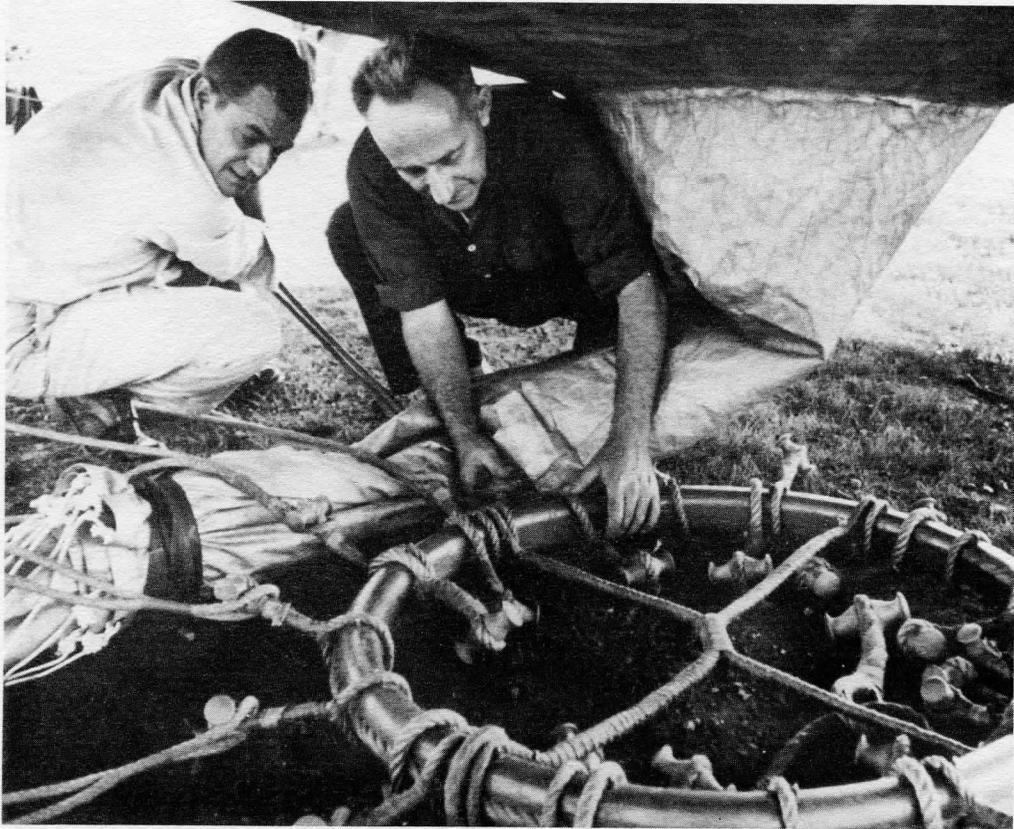
*Photo by August C. Hohnke*

Above, Connie Wolf standing on her basket as she gets ready for lifting off.

At left, Connie's 25,000-cubic-foot balloon.



*Photo by Robert Halmi*



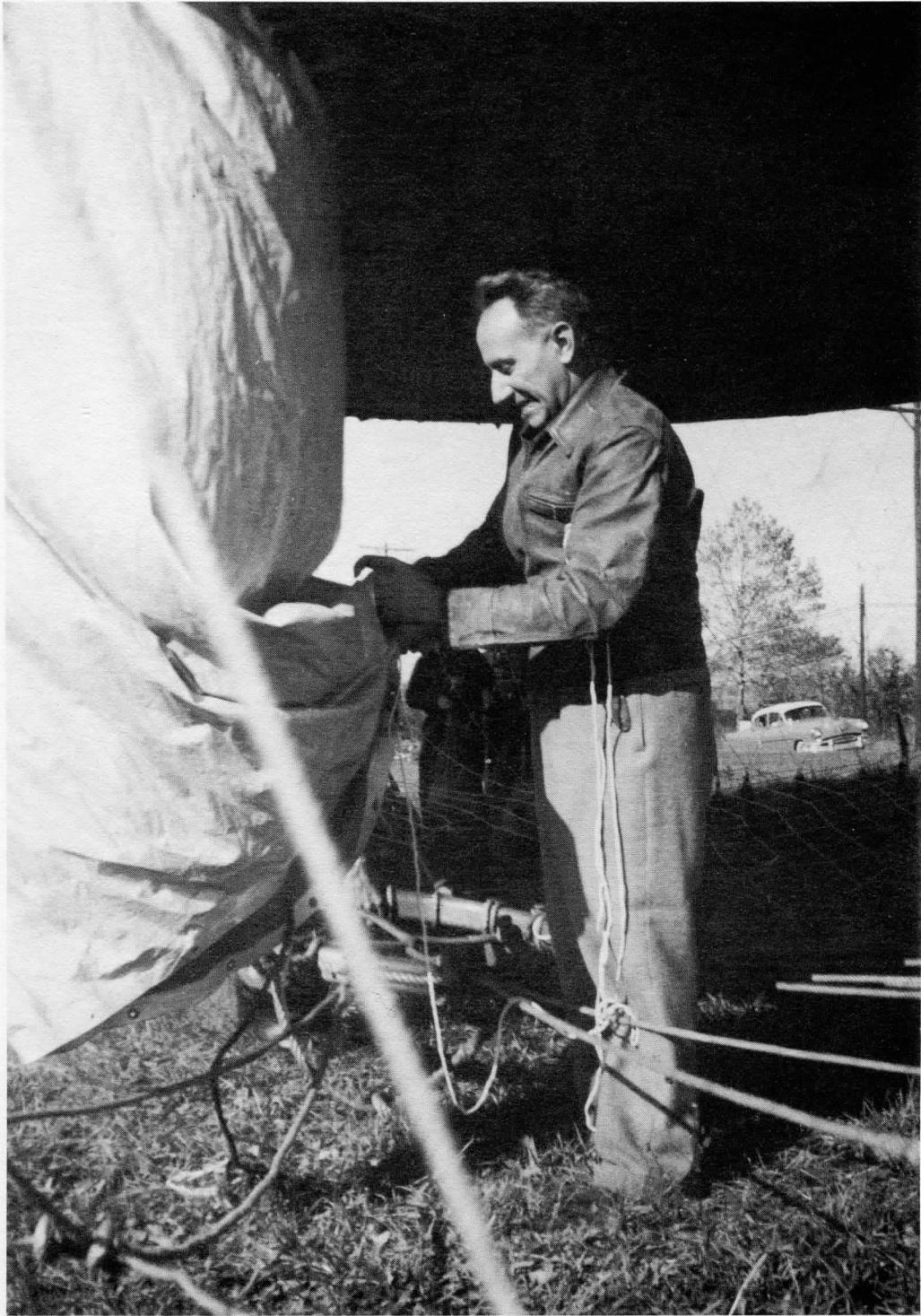
*Photo by Robert Halmi*

Pete Pellegrino (left) and Tony Fairbanks (right) attach the sixteen footropes from the net to the thick wooden load ring. The inflation sleeve, attached to the balloon appendix, is seen from the left side of the photo.

In the photo at left, Francis Shields and Tony Fairbanks (right) are pulling the footropes into the load ring. These photos were taken at Valley Forge Airport in the early sixties.



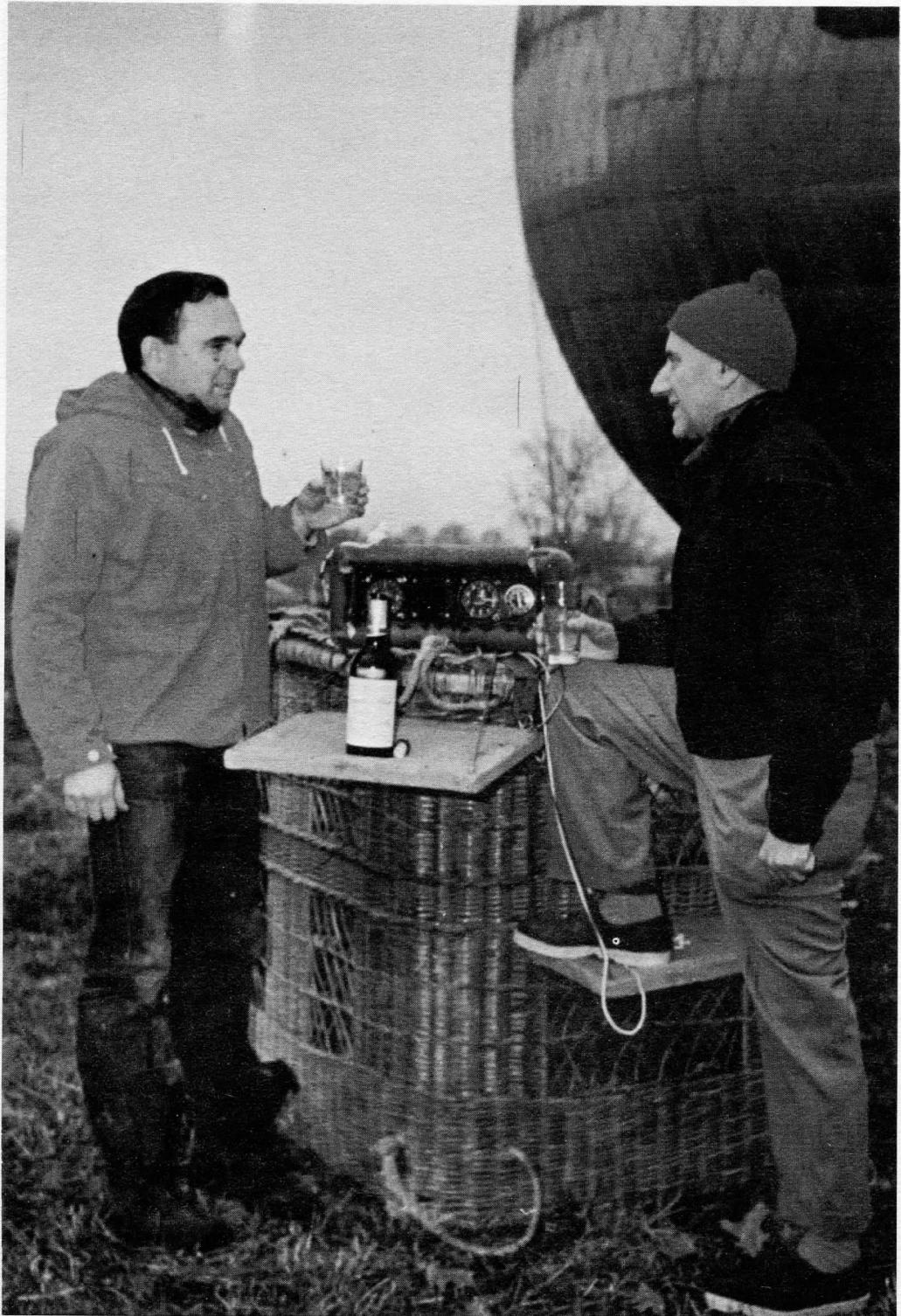
*Photo by Robert Halmi*



*Photo by Robert Halmi*

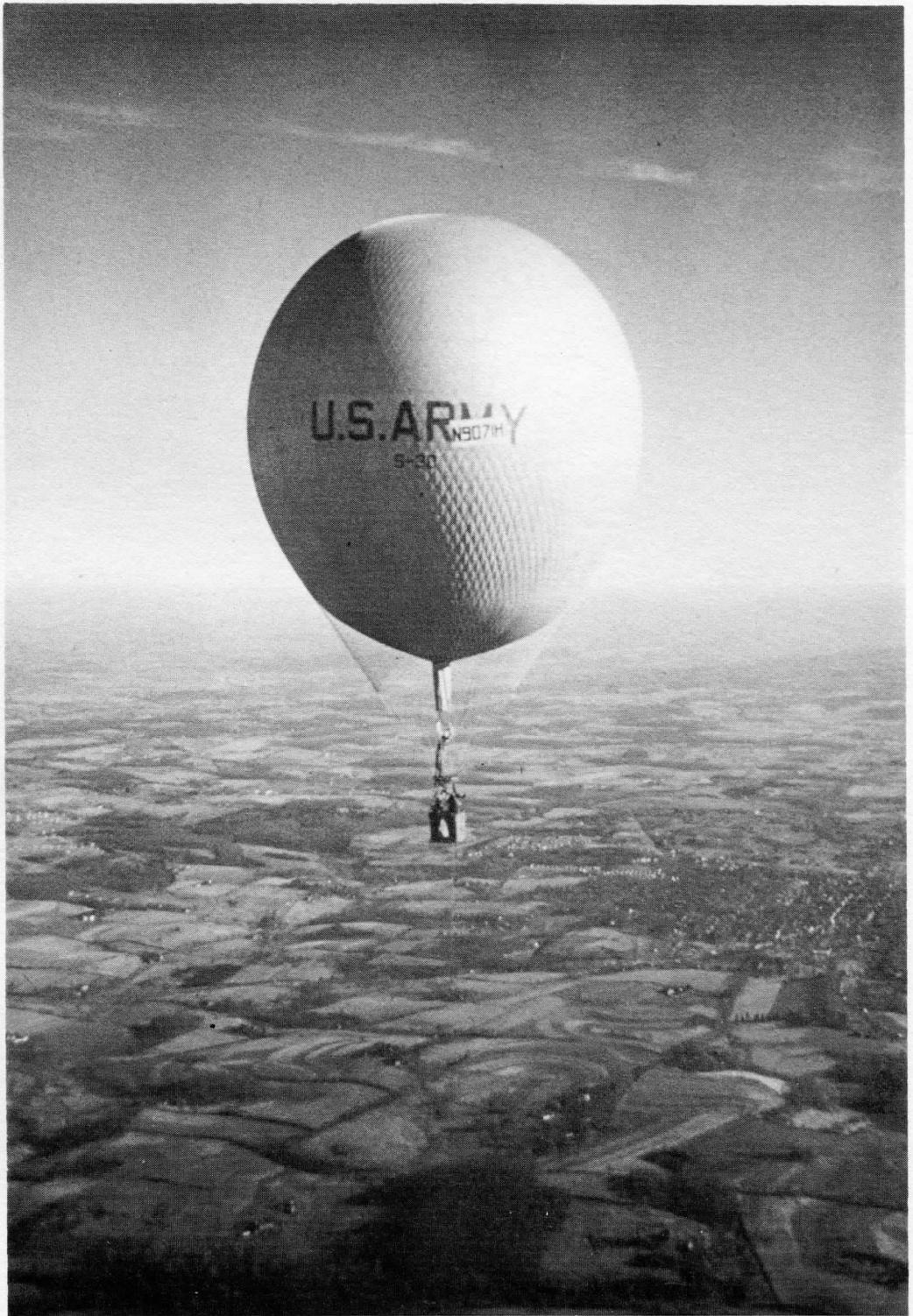
Tony Fairbanks has disconnected the inflation sleeve and is tying off the appendix. Clothesline is tied around the open appendix and is released just before lift-off. The appendix at the bottom of a gas balloon remains open during the flight to allow for the expansion of the gas as the balloon gains altitude.

At left, Tony Fairbanks and Francis Shields are lowering the sandbags "down one diamond."



Francis Shields (left) and Tony Fairbanks (right) making a full page advertisement for Canadian Club whiskey, titled "He Forgot to Let Go." The rescue was staged with the balloon on a tether line; but, an unexpected gust of wind carried the balloon over one hundred feet into the air with Francis hanging below (see photo at right). Bob Halmi took these photographs in 1958.





*Photo by Robert Halimi*



*Photo by Robert Hahni*

Releasing a few handfuls of sand, balloon and crew ascend over the countryside. At this early hour there is almost absolute silence with occasional sounds from barking dogs, church bells, or a train puffing along the tracks.

As the early morning dew dries on the net, the basket drops slightly, causing concern among the passengers. When the passengers move around, a friendly creak from the basket and rigging can be heard that indicates all is well.

In October, 1971, Tony Fairbanks and his daughter Jean flew from Wings Field near Ambler, Pennsylvania, over the Delaware River to what would be a shocking experience. Connie Wolf had asked the Fairbankses to join her in flying the N10W. She wanted to treat her friend Brian Aherne, stage and screen star, to a gas balloon ride.

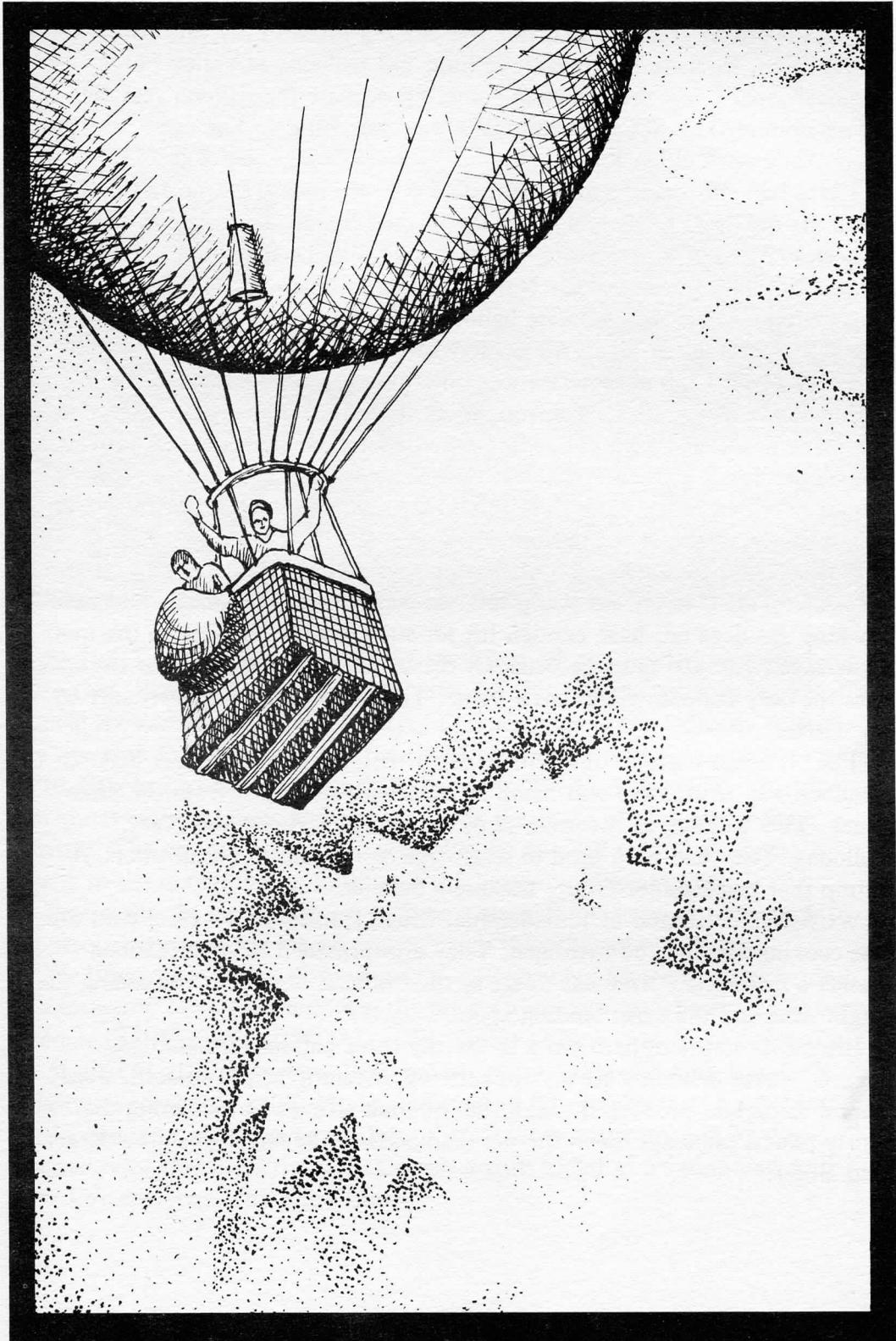
The balloon approached the huge Fort Dix Military Complex. Connie looked at the aviation map in an attempt to determine what the dark red blotch was on the map. Closer examination revealed that the balloon would shortly fly along a street road with a radio-controlled missile firing range on the left side of the street. The balloon was moving slowly forward at the complete mercy of the wind.

A sharp "bang, pow, boom" broke the still air. Flashes of bright light flashed across the earth below the balloon. The balloon crew could now easily see the emplacements and bunkers on the ground. The balloon shook with every "bang."

Silence replaced the blasts. Connie leaned over the side of the basket and blew a tin whistle in a wasted effort to attract attention.

Tony remarked, "If they shoot us down we had better crash on the right side of the road so we can prove that we were outside of the restricted airspace."

As if in response to Connie's whistle, the rocket attack began a second time. The balloon slowly continued eastward, now safely away from Fort Dix.



I was eighteen years old and this was the big event in my life. After weeks of planning, we were inflating three huge gas balloons at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. Large crowds were gathering because the balloon race was being promoted on WCAU radio. The date was June 4. The event was the 1960 National Balloon Races.

Three balloons may seem inadequate for a race today, but on the field were the only two balloon clubs in the United States. The Balloon Club of America (BCA) of Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, had been flying gas balloons since 1952. Our guest was the National Lighter-Than-Air (NLTA), incorporated in 1956 as a separate balloon flying organization affiliated with the Wingfoot Lighter-Than-Air Society of Akron, Ohio.

The Balloon Club of America was inflating an 80,000-cubic-foot balloon (Balloon #1) with cooking gas from an underground pipe connection. This is the same gas used for house heating. We had an arrangement that provided for servicing the pipe connection if we bought enough gas for six or more flights every year. We were thus able to fly this large balloon, with five or six in the crew, for only \$150 per inflation.

Our second balloon was the small 19,000-cubic-foot (Balloon #3), *La Coquette*. This balloon was being inflated from a hydrogen truck because cooking gas does not have enough lift for such a small balloon, so the more expensive hydrogen must be used. Of the balloons on the field, *La Coquette* was the only balloon which has a name. The other two are known only by their size.

The National Lighter-Than-Air brought their 35,000-cubic-foot balloon (Balloon #2), which was also being inflated with hydrogen from the same truck. This balloon, as the other two, were surplus Army and Navy balloons. They had been used to teach free ballooning to blimp pilots. A blimp that had a motor failure became a balloon.

WCAU radio station of Philadelphia, which sponsored the race, paid for the cooking gas and the hydrogen. They also provided for each balloon basket a disc jockey who was to act as the "official observer," recording the flight time and the exact landing spot.

It took six hours of hard work to get the three balloons inflated and rigged. These moments are always exciting, listening to the smooth, steady sound of the gas pushing through the inflation sleeves and lowering the thirty-pound sandbags down the net diamonds as the envelopes grow larger and larger.



At 1:00 in the afternoon, *La Coquette* lifted off and headed in a northern direction. Peter Pellegrino was the pilot for this famous balloon, used in the movie *Around the World in 80 Days*. This was one of the balloons acquired by our club in 1952, later painted by Mike Todd Productions for the movie. With Pete in *La Coquette* was Ed Harvey from WCAU radio. They flew for thirty-eight minutes and landed inside the fence of Graterford State Prison. The warden was rather upset but he allowed several prisoners to assist in the deflation and folding of the heavy balloon envelope.

Pete made the right decision to have a short flight because of a quickly approaching rainstorm which was to catch the other two balloons.

We lifted off in the 80,000-cubic-foot-balloon about fifteen minutes behind *La Coquette*. Tony Fairbanks was the pilot. Other crew members were Eleanor Vadala, Bill Branson of WCAU radio, Augie O'Neil, and Mike Fairbanks.

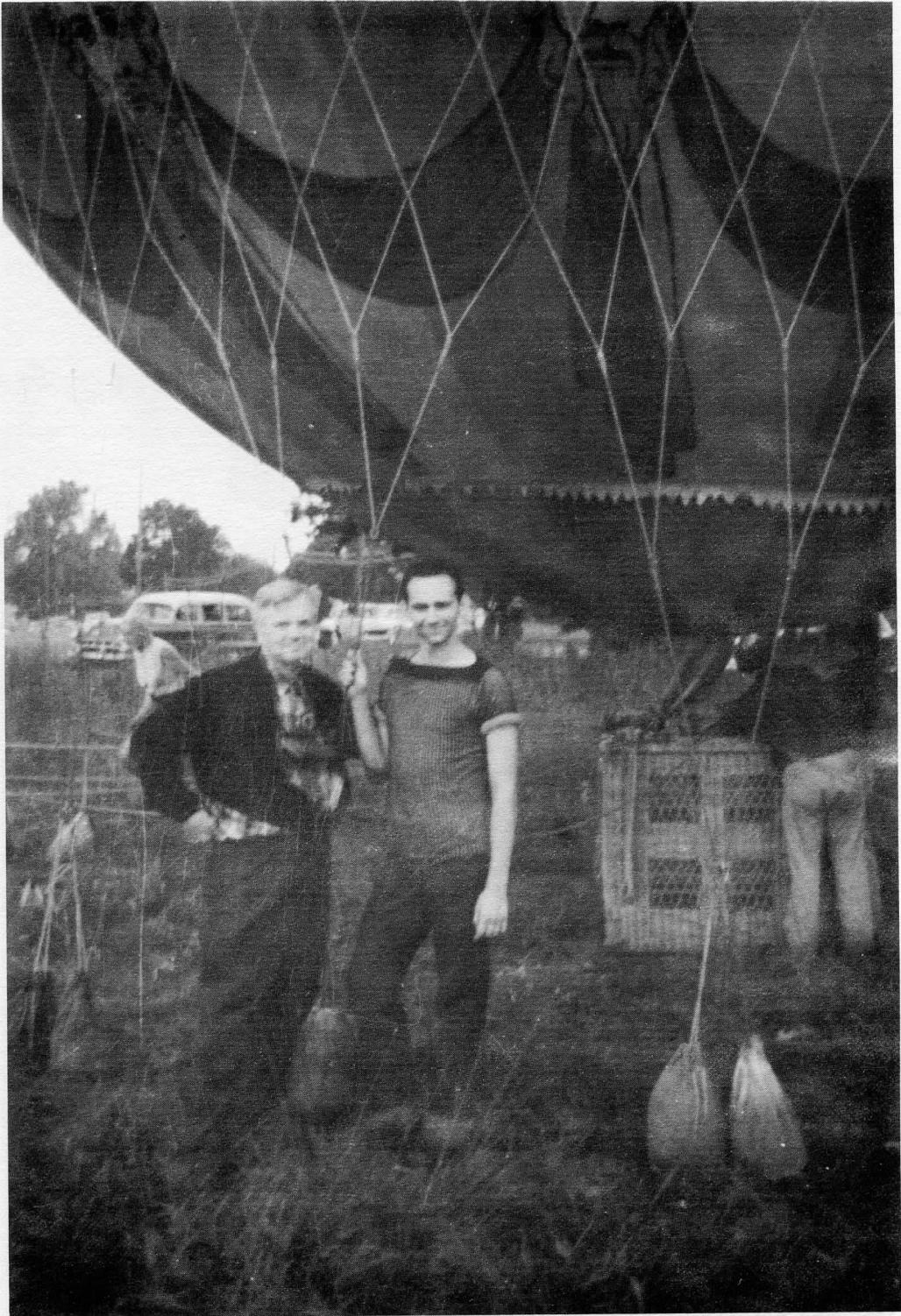
Augie O'Neil, age seventy-five, was an active balloonist with hundreds of flights as an airship pilot. He began working for Goodyear as a mechanic in 1915 and later obtained an airship pilot's license authenticated by the signature of Orville Wright. Augie was a true friend of aviation and well liked by everyone who knew him.



Our balloon flew after *La Coquette* at about two thousand feet above the ground. We released paper airplanes from the basket with instructions for the finder to call WCAU radio with messages from the balloon. People on the ground chased after the airplanes but no one called the radio station.

Behind us we could see the NLTA lift upward to join us in the sky. To our front *La Coquette* was slowly descending as if to locate a field for landing. The reason was obvious. The air temperature was becoming cool; a mist that was blocking the entire sky was moving toward us from the right; and inside the mist a large cumulus cloud was forming.

Tony pulled sharply on the hemp rope which opened the wishbone valve. Gas spilled out the top of the balloon and we descended to nine hundred feet above the ground. Ten pounds of sand were dropped to check our descent, as we were now flying directly along a string of high tension towers. We quickly lost interest in what the other balloons were doing and every person on board was looking directly forward to see where the towers were located. After thirty minutes the towers seemed to turn off to the left. Tony again valved gas and the balloon slowly settled onto a large open plowed field.



Augie O'Neil (left) and a young Mike Fairbanks (right), standing in front of *La Coquette*, June 4, 1960.



June, 1960. Tony Fairbanks standing on the basket with his son Michael on the load ring, attaching the sign to the club's 80,000-cubic-foot balloon.

Before we managed to deflate the balloon, the rain began to fall. Our balloon had traveled fifteen miles and landed near Harleysville, Pennsylvania. We had much difficulty deflating and folding a wet balloon envelope but we did not really care. We were happy to be safely on the ground.

The NLTA balloon was piloted by Jim Contos and Roger Wolcott. Their official observer was Douglas Arthur (WCAU). Francis Shields, a member of our club, was flying with the NLTA. They wisely had a short flight and landed without difficulty on a field near Perkiomen Valley Airport.

Tony Fairbanks, the appointed Race Judge, declared that our 80,000 had won the race because we had traveled more miles than the other balloons. This was the method used in determining winners during previous national air races. Tony flew in the 1936 Denver Mile High Air Races and placed second. In that race, he flew a gas balloon over one hundred miles.

The *La Coquette* crew protested the decision because they had traveled almost the same number of miles. The NLTA crew protested because they felt it was unfair to have the Race Judge fly as a command pilot. My dad, being a fair man, found both protests valid and declared every pilot and crew member who flew in each of the three balloons the official National Balloon Champion of 1960. There are therefore eight national balloon champions for 1960.

The race was typical of the events held by the Balloon Club of America. It was completely unorganized and informal. No one knew what was "going on" but everyone had a good time. The persons who join the BCA are very competent pilots but the pure enjoyment of floating in the sky seems to be more important than the urge for competition.

The gas balloon race was the last of its kind in the United States. Future national balloon races would contain scores of hot air balloons, which were still unknown in the year 1960. These nylon bags may be pretty to the eye and almost effortless to inflate but hot air balloons do not inspire the same warm feeling a pilot has while flying gas balloons. It will be a sad day when this country has seen its final gas balloon flight.



Fred Dolder, a Swiss balloonist, flying with the Balloon Club of America on November 7, 1965. Francis Shields was the pilot and flew the 80,000-cubic-foot balloon from Wings Field, Pennsylvania, to Lakewood, New Jersey. Now eighty years old, Dolder has made 515 gas balloon flights, including over 40 flights across the European Alps. He organized the International High-Alpine Dolder Ballooning Week in 1962, which features gas balloon flights over the Alps each June. He has also raised over two million dollars for children's welfare by carrying commemorative envelopes in his balloon.



*Photo by Robert Halmi*

**QST<sup>H</sup>** 

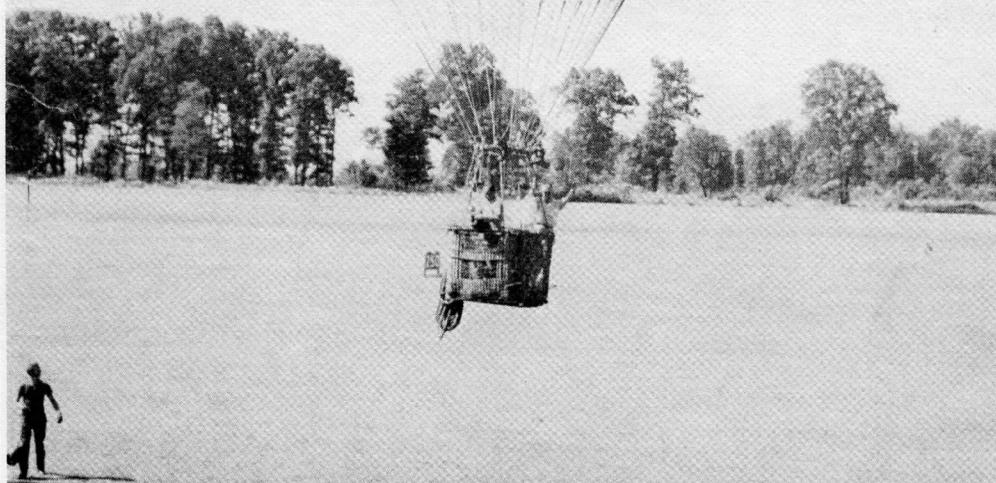
October 1959

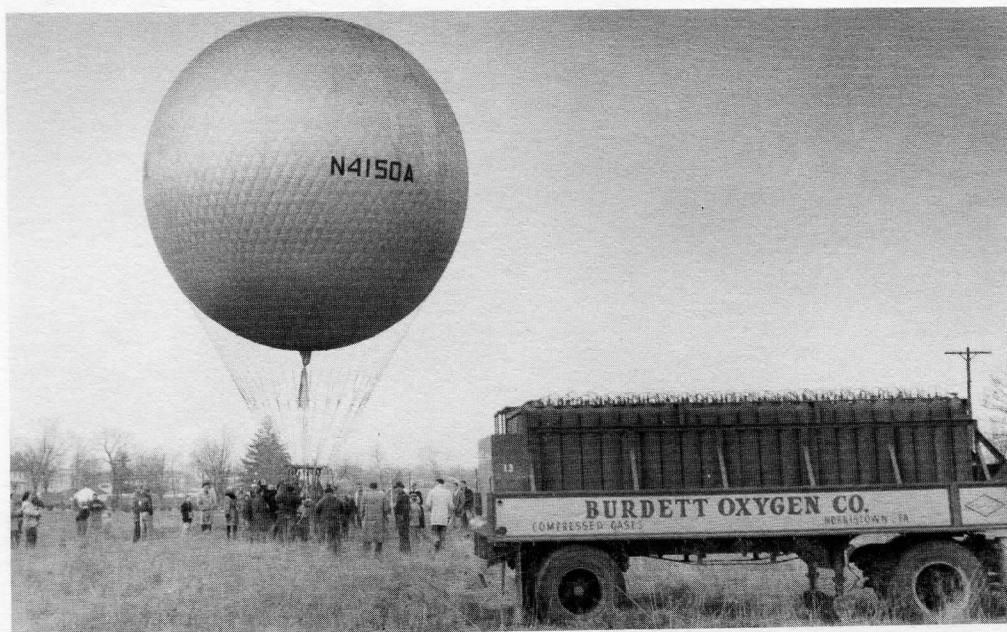
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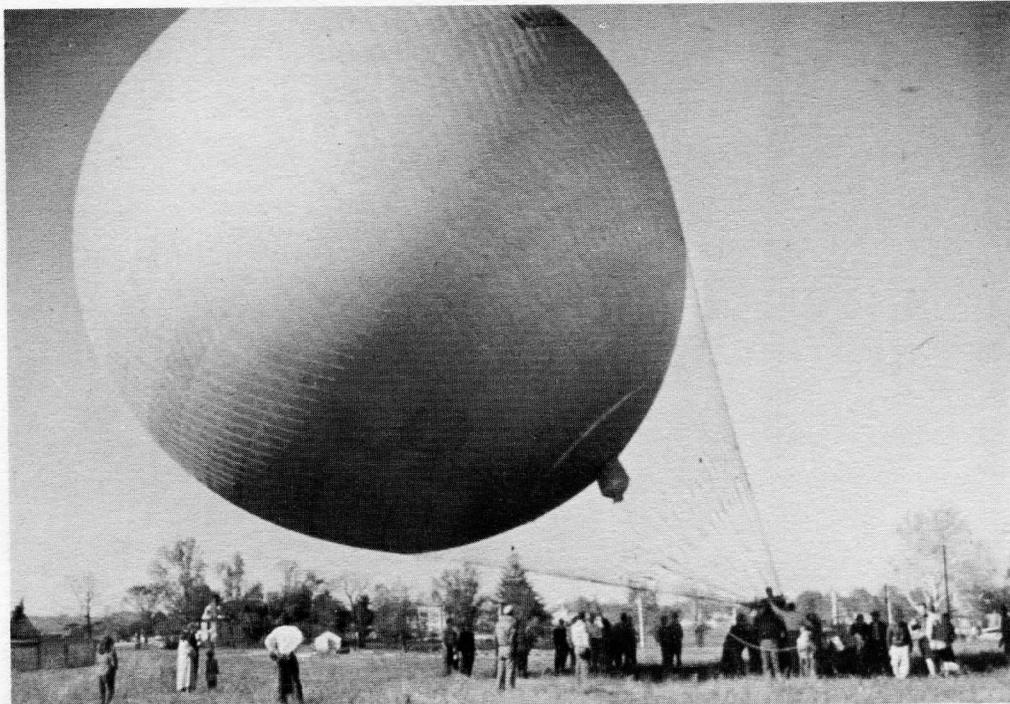
**amateur  
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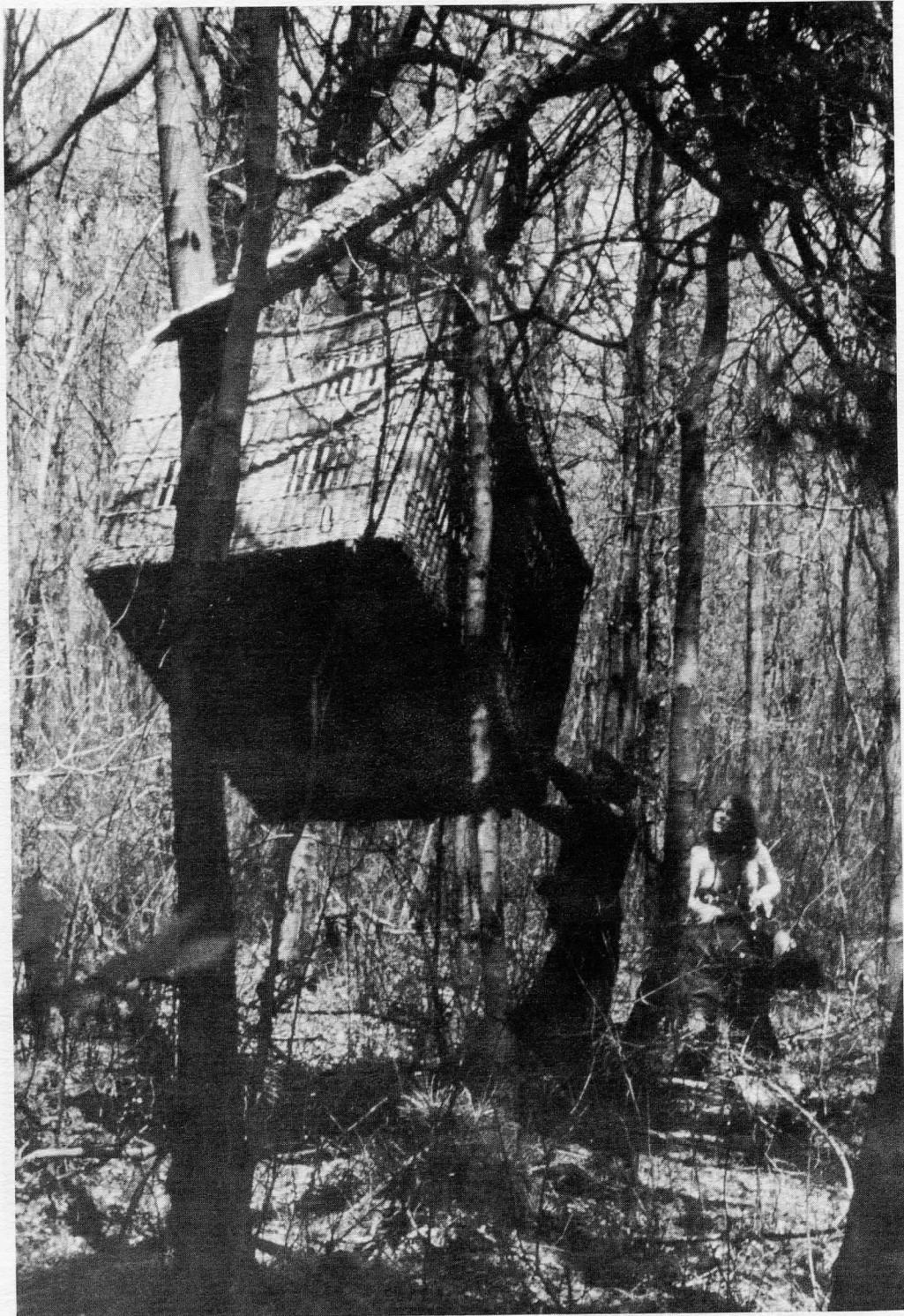
Above, a hydrogen truck has inflated the Club's 19,000-cubic-foot balloon.

In 1959 an amateur radio station was established in the basket of one of the Balloon Club of America's large balloons. This was a first and rated a cover story in the amateur radio magazine, *QST* (see photo at left). The "ham" operator in the balloon basket was in communication with the ground crew and the chase vehicles arrived on the landing site shortly before the balloon itself. Cover reproduced by permission of *QST*.



The large 80,000-cubic-foot balloon at Wings Field, Pennsylvania, being inflated with cooking gas on a day when it is too windy to safely fly. The load ring was tied to an automobile until a short break in the wind allowed Tony Fairbanks to lift off for a nice flight into New Jersey. Also on this flight in 1969 was Edmund Fairbanks, who had flown gas balloons with his brother Tony in the thirties. The strong winds and depletion of sand forced a landing in the pine barrens of New Jersey. Sharp tree branches cut the cotton net covering the balloon, and the basket and passengers were locked firmly between tree branches as the envelope itself soared skyward, to be last seen heading out far over the Atlantic Ocean. Tony and crew spent two hours walking out of the unpopulated pine barrens. They were met by their very worried chase crew members. (April 26, 1969)

At right, the wicker basket was later walked out of the woods. The Balloon Club of America has one other large 80,000-cubic-foot balloon.





September 23, 1956. Francis Shields and Pete Pellegrino lifting off from the very spot on Roosevelt Field, Long Island, where Charles Lindbergh took off on his record flight to France. The old U.S. Army balloon pontoons are attached to the basket in case of a water landing. The balloon flew for one hour and landed in Nassau County Park. Shortly after the flight, a massive shopping center was constructed on this field.





The author, Mike Fairbanks, in 1971, taking a solo flight in a 35,000-cubic-foot gas balloon as a requirement for his pilot's license. The balloon was filled with cooking gas and carried only seven sandbags. He flew from Wings Field Airport in Blue Bell, Pennsylvania, and landed twenty-five miles away in Morton, Pennsylvania, on a small field less than one mile from his home. His father, Tony Fairbanks, made his own first solo flight in 1935 and it was also in a 35,000-cubic-foot gas balloon. In the background the club's large 80,000-cubic-foot balloon is being inflated with cooking gas. In the photo at right, Mike Fairbanks lifts off in his solo flight.





*Photo by Dan Boyles*