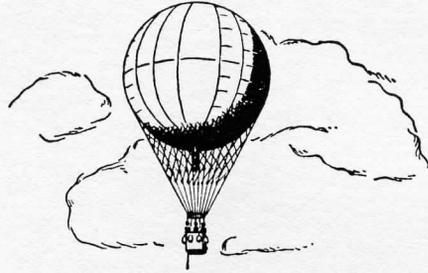


III



THE LA COQUETTE ADVENTURE





JULES VERNE HAD A FOND interest in man-carrying balloons. His first published book, *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, was about a gas balloon journey across Africa. In another story, *The Mysterious Island*, Verne used a gas balloon for Union soldiers to escape from a Confederate prison camp. The soldiers flew in the balloon from the east coast of the United States, and landed on an uncharted island in the Pacific Ocean.

In Jules Verne's original version of *Around the World in Eighty Days*, there is no balloon flight. The use of a balloon was the idea of the movie's producer, Michael Todd. Mr. Todd also named the movie balloon *La Coquette*, which in French means "the flirt."

Mike Todd contacted the Balloon Club of America. At that time, in 1953, it was the only club in the United States which was flying balloons. Francis Shields took a 1928-constructed Naval balloon to Hollywood to have this 19,000-cubic-foot silver balloon transformed into the most famous balloon in the world.

Todd Productions wanted to paint the designs on the envelope with watercolor paint. This would have made the actual painting inexpensive and easy to accomplish, but the club members insisted on the use of oil-based paint. As a result, after twenty-five years *La Coquette* still flies and the design remains identifiable as it was originally painted.

Throughout the year 1955, the balloon was on location in Hollywood for the filming of the movie. Two additional members of the Balloon Club of America, Tony Fairbanks and Connie Wolf, went to California to offer technical assistance.

The photo at left shows Mike Todd standing next to the basket containing David Niven and Cantinflas.



The above photograph shows the balloon hung by a crane over “Alpine” mountains made of papier-mâché. *La Coquette* was never inflated with a lighter than air gas for the filming of the movie. It was pumped full of air with the help of a window fan and suspended from a crane by a rope. The rope was attached directly from the round load ring over the basket, through the center of the balloon, to the top of the crane.

If the balloon were actually flying, then the net from the envelope to the basket would be extremely tight. The movie and all promotional posters and record jackets show very slack ropes leading down to the load ring over the basket.

At right, David Niven (with top hat) during the filming of *Around the World in Eighty Days*.







La Coquette on location at Disneyland in California. This balloon was flown from Disneyland on April 22, 1962, and again on March 26, 1967. The photograph was provided by and is used with permission of Walt Disney Productions. © Walt Disney Productions.

At left, a photograph of the original painting which was completed before the silver 19,000-cubic-foot balloon was itself painted. This was Hollywood's idea of how they wanted the balloon to look for the movie.



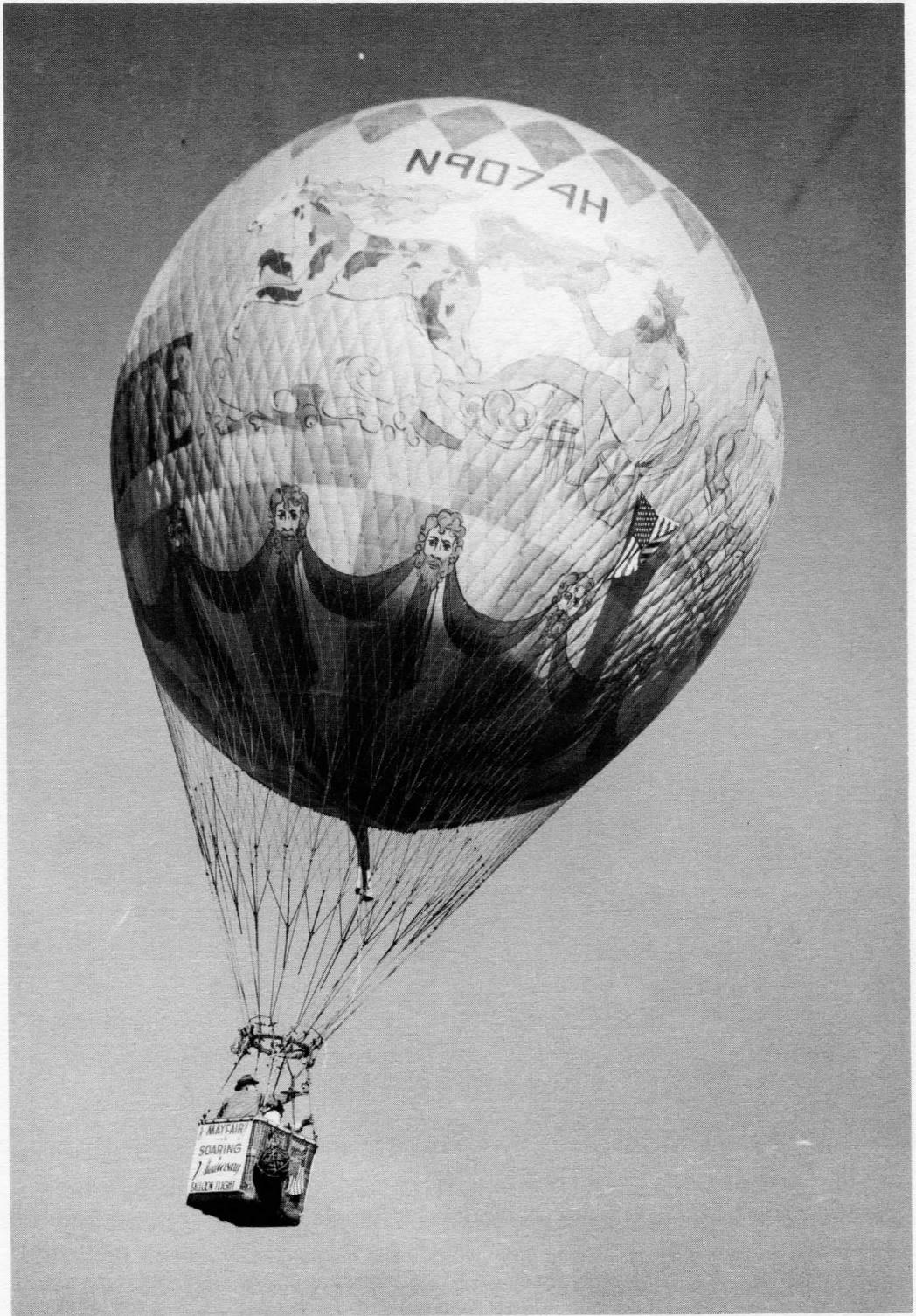
La Coquette was inflated to promote a Milwaukee shopping center. The plan was to take a leisurely flight along the Wisconsin shoreline. In October, 1959, Tony was fifty-two years old and his passenger, a Milwaukee newspaperman, William Normyl, was thirty-one. It was a modern-day adventure, one that Tony hopes never to repeat. (One hundred years ago the most famous American balloonist, John Wise, was lost trying to cross Lake Michigan by balloon.)

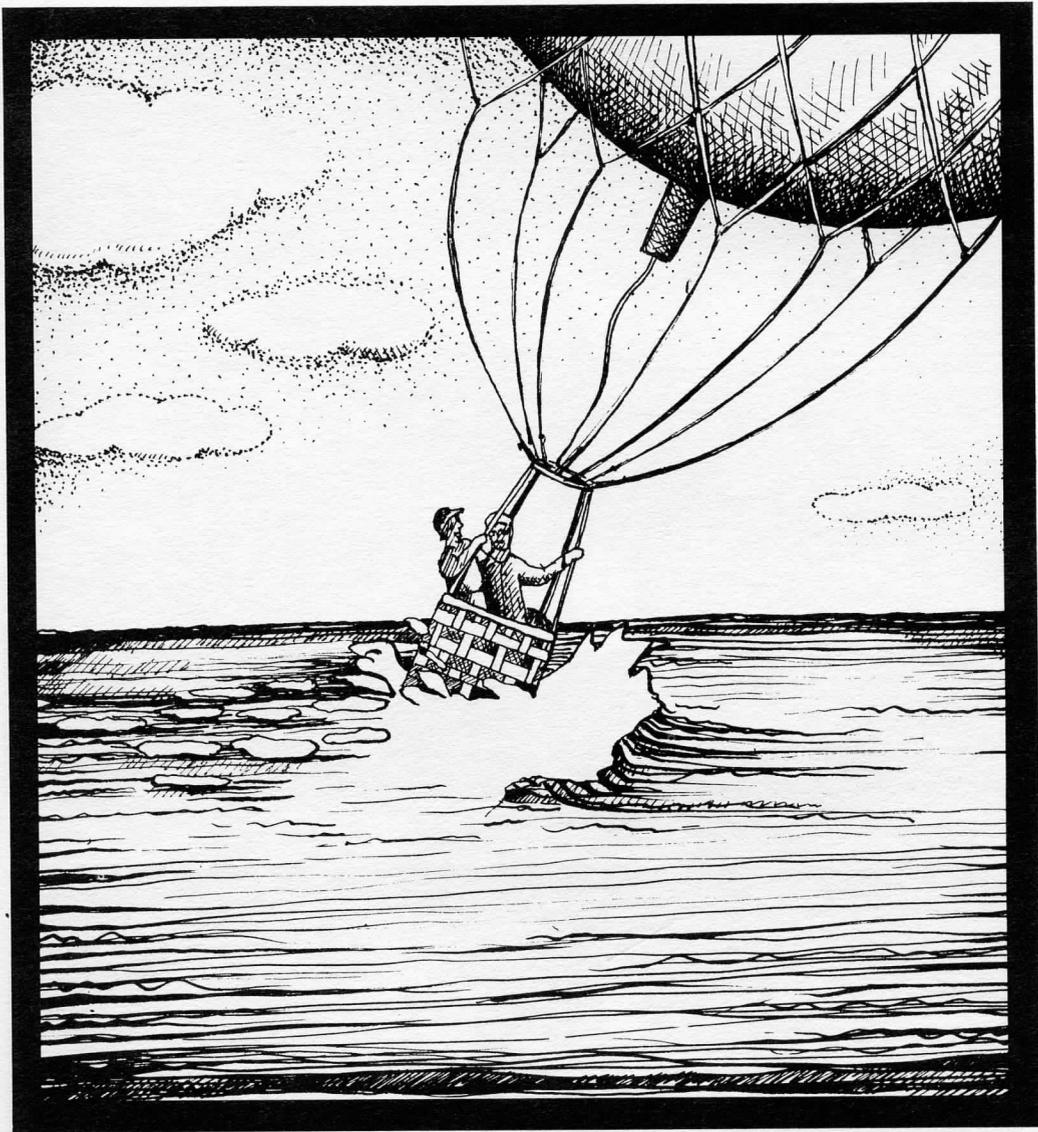
La Coquette rose quickly through the forming clouds. At 3,500 feet above the ground a layer of white clouds blocked out the earth and the direction changed completely as the balloon headed due east over Lake Michigan. *La Coquette* drifted slowly downward. As the balloon reached 1,000 feet the shoreline disappeared and over one hundred miles of water lay ahead of the balloon.



The flight took over seven hours and terminated in the dark night on the shoreline known as Lake Michigan Beach. Halfway into the flight the sun went down and as the hydrogen gas cooled, *La Coquette* descended until the majestic balloon was skimming the very edge of the water.

The hemp drag rope stretched out for 150 feet behind the basket and stabilized up and down motions of the balloon as weight from the wet rope was shifted from the balloon to the water and back to the balloon. Many times the entire basket and passengers were drenched as the basket plunged into the lake. Only once did the waves come over the side of the basket.





Tony saved one thirty-pound bag of sand in case of emergency and took time to question his reporter passenger as to why he was not writing all this down in his notebook.

Not a boat or plane was seen in the entire crossing. In fact, the radio and police reported a missing balloon, but nobody thought it possible that *La Coquette*, having taken off in a direction away from the lake, would now be nearing the distant shore.

La Coquette landed in a small cluster of trees, and the adventure ended with the occupants of a local house telephoning the police to come quickly because two strange men were knocking on their door with a wild story of having landed a balloon in the middle of the night.

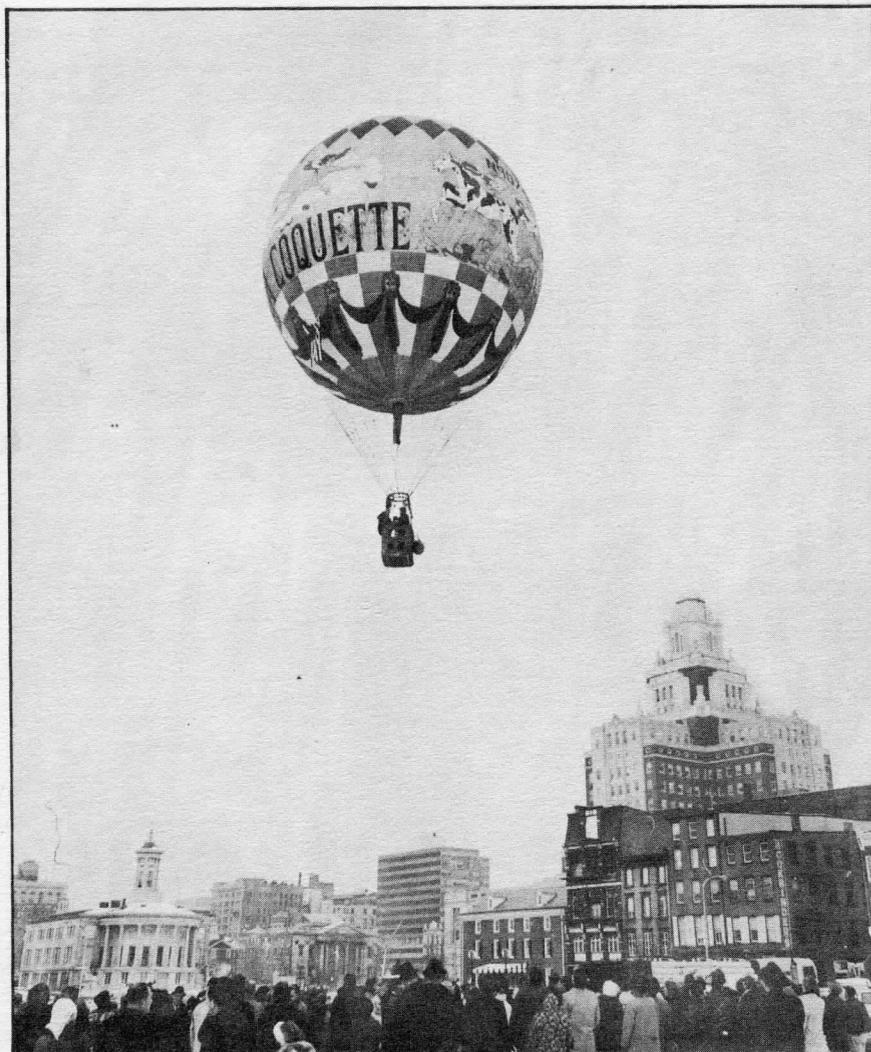




Above, Pete Pellegrino (left) and Francis Shields (right) cleaning and gluing the rip panel into *La Coquette*. The rip panel is pulled from the top of the balloon by the red rope, which goes down to the basket. This allows the entire top of the balloon to open wide to release all the gas in case of a windy landing or the need to avoid a structure on the ground.

At left, Tony Fairbanks, Pete, and Francis fold *La Coquette* for an inflation. The large balloon rolls into a very small ball.

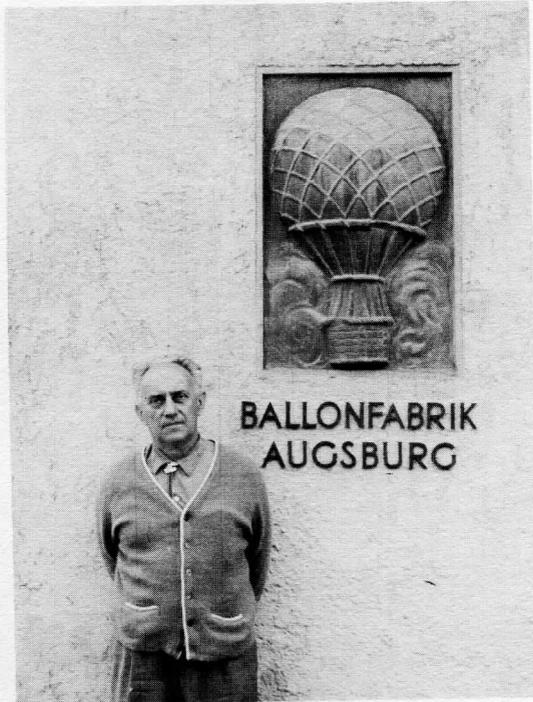
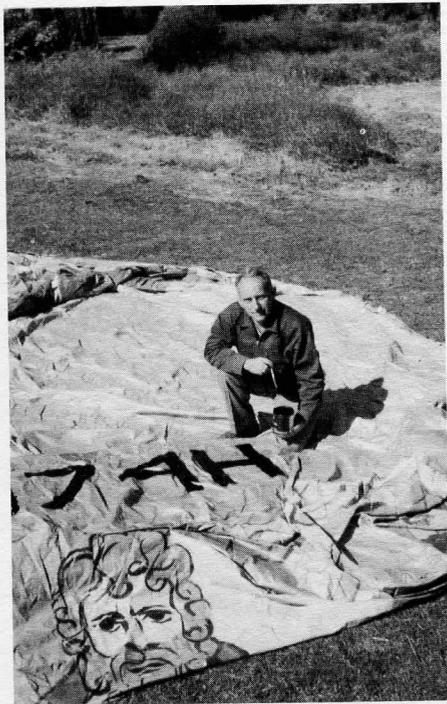
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In the photo at left, *La Coquette* is seen flying from the city of Philadelphia on the cover of the first issue of *Ballooning*, the official journal of the Balloon Federation of America. The journal today is the most widely read magazine on ballooning in the world. Cover of magazine used with permission of the Balloon Federation of America.

Above, Tony painting the U.S. government aircraft registration numbers on *La Coquette*.

In the photo at right, Tony stands in front of the balloon factory in Augsburg where most of the gas balloons flown today are made. This was in 1968, on his way to Mürren to fly a gas balloon over the Swiss Alpine Mountains.





Photo by August C. Hohnke

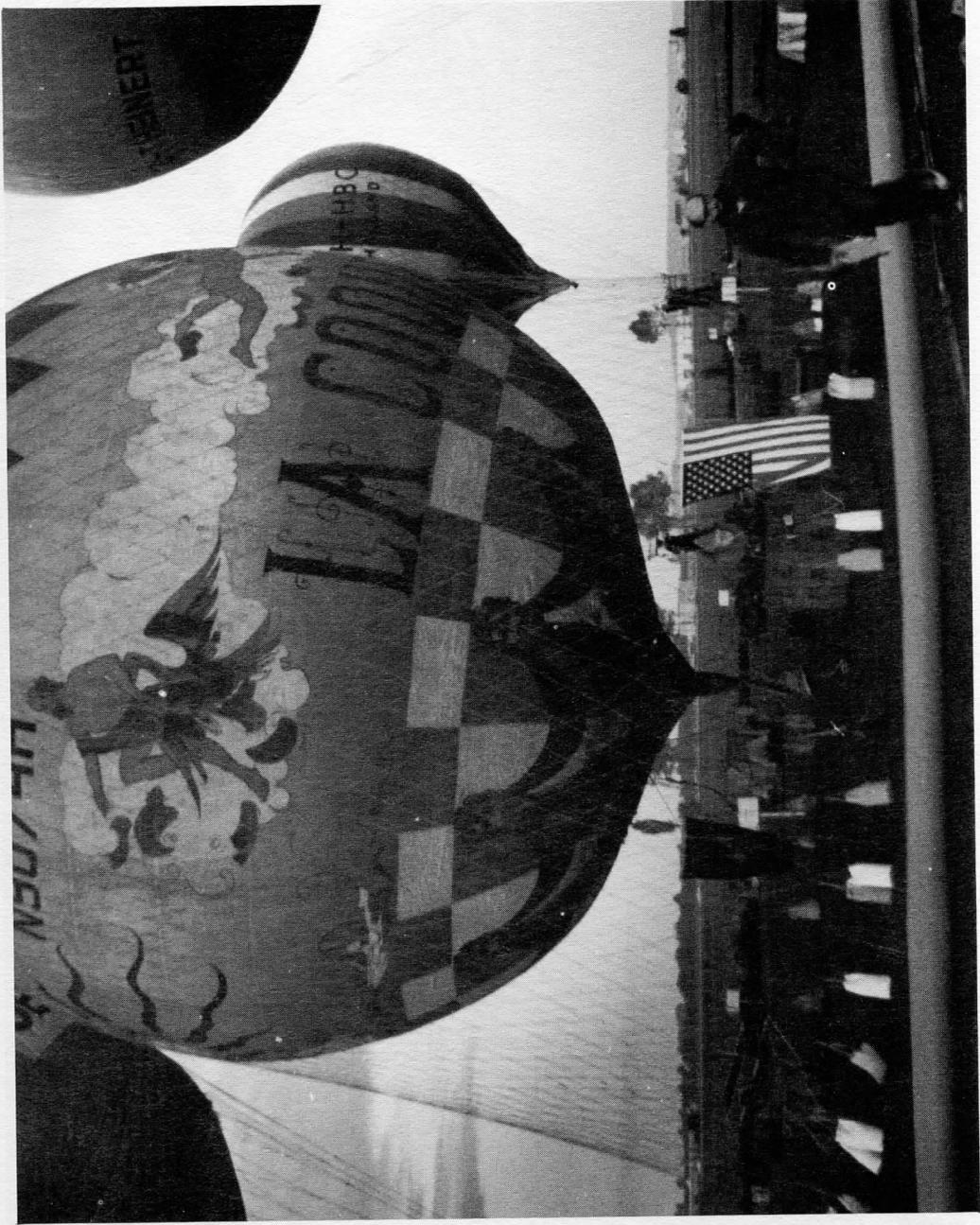
Above, Tony Fairbanks and his son Michael ready *La Coquette* to represent the United States in the First World Gas Balloon Championship in Augsburg, Germany, September, 1976. They are posing in front of the Pennsylvania State Flag, which they carried with them to Germany.

At left, top, ten of the twenty gas balloons are ready to fly from the Via Claudia Augusta Field outside of Augsburg, Germany. Twenty balloons were being flown by thirteen countries.

The photo at left, below, shows *La Coquette* ready to lift off, with the frog flag attached to the basket. The frog flag was presented to the U.S. team by the members of the Balloon Club of America.



Above and right, Augsburg, Germany, 1976.

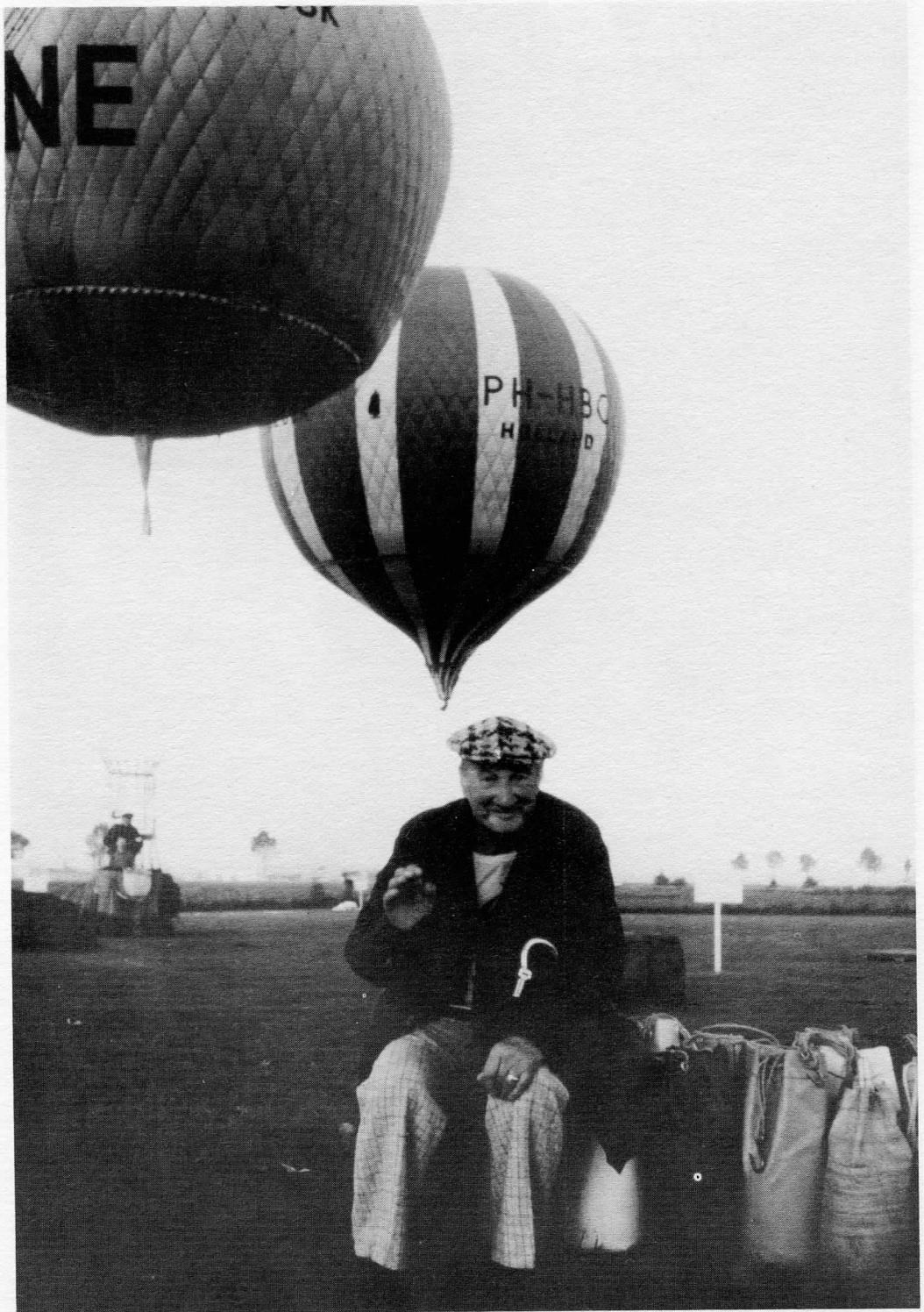




Above, Pete Pellegrino and Tony Fairbanks attach the heavy hemp drag rope to the outside of the basket. September, 1976, Augsburg, Germany.

At right, the gas balloons taking to the skies.







Above, Pete and Tony after a two-hour flight in the first of three flights *La Coquette* made in Augsburg. Pete and Tony flew the first and second day. A target was located on the local maps immediately before lift-off and the balloons were attempting to land as close to the target as possible. On the third day of flying, Tony and his son Mike flew in *La Coquette*.

At left, Charles Dolfuss, a well-known French balloon pilot, watches the balloons being inflated at Augsburg, Germany, in September, 1976.





Above, *La Coquette* is filled with air and hung from the ceiling to promote a Philadelphia bank, December, 1957.

At left, Tony and Mike Fairbanks, upon landing *La Coquette* in Stuben, Germany, in the third flight of the First World Gas Balloon Championship, September, 1976. Tony and Mike would have done better but neither of them remembered to bring along a compass. They were soon lost because they could not find their location in relationship to the identified target location. The winner was the balloon team from Switzerland.



La Coquette (N9074H) has flown over London (June 26, 1957), over Paris (July 11, 1957), in Canada (May, 1958), in Germany, in Holland, and in several states in the United States. The Balloon Club of America flies this beautiful balloon when money is available to purchase the expensive hydrogen gas. To fill *La Coquette* with 19,000 cubic feet of hydrogen in the fifties cost about \$250. For the two times the balloon was flown from the Flying Circus Aerodrome in Bealeton, Virginia, in 1977, the cost was almost \$700 per inflation. Photos above and at right are at The Flying Circus Aerodrome, where the gas balloon was flown during a combined realistic World War I airshow and hot air balloon rally.





Members of the Balloon Club of America have been flying gas balloons in Europe on a regular basis since the founding of the club in 1952. Above, club members lift off in the annual balloon event from the town square in Sint-Niklaas, Belgium, September, 1963.

At right, a lift-off from Zurich, Switzerland, in 1962. Both photos taken by Tony Fairbanks.

