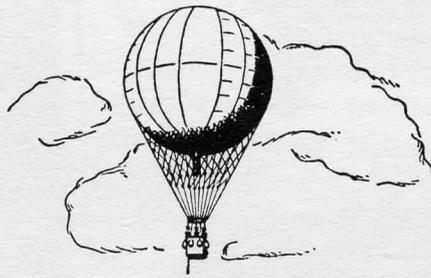


V



**FIVE TIMES OVER THE ALPS
BY BALLOON**





Photo by August C. Hohnke

THE GREATEST THRILL MAN HAS YET to experience on this earth is a balloon flight over the European Alpine Mountains—to hang on the tip of air currents and watch the awesome panorama of mountain peaks, glaciers, and snowfields moving thousands of feet below.

There are only a handful of balloon pilots in the world who meet the rigid experience and skill requirements to qualify as an Alpine balloonist.

Other American pilots who have flown over the Alps are content with their one flight. Tony Fairbanks has flown over the European Alpine Mountains five times. Notwithstanding considerable expense and risk he is drawn toward the Alps like a fish on a hook. He is ever eager to return to fly the Alps, one more time.

Fred Dolder, of Switzerland, flew over the Alps in the years 1957 and 1961 before organizing the International High-Alpine Dolder Ballooning Week. Each June since 1962, gas balloons have taken off to fly over the Alps under the direction of Fred Dolder.

The balloons fly from the small Swiss village of Mürren, resting on a mountain ledge, 5,415 feet above sea level and 2,336 feet above the Lauterbrunnen Valley floor. The surrounding peaks tower at 9,000 to 12,000 feet above sea level.

The rest of the year Mürren is a ski resort. To get there, a person must take the nearly perpendicular ride on a funicular which travels on tracks and steel cables up the side of the mountain. Then a trolley car must be boarded for the last three-mile ride to Mürren.

The hydrogen cylinders and balloon equipment must also make this difficult journey. Some of the balloons lift off from the town of Stechelberg on the valley floor.

In the photo at left, Milford Vanik (left) and Tony Fairbanks (right) meet in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, to study maps of their intended balloon trip over the Alpine Mountains. This will be their first balloon flight together in almost forty years.



Above, Tony Fairbanks (left), Milford Vanik (sitting on the massive drag rope), and one of their passengers, Richard Werchan, observe the beginning of the inflation of their balloon, June, 1978. The inflation sleeve going from the hydrogen cylinders to the balloon is in the background.

At right, Tony and Milford beside their basket at a final weather briefing before lift-off.





When the weather is favorable, two or three balloons lift off together to fly over the Alps. Above and right, two balloons are ready to go on the first flights of the June, 1978, High Alpine Dolder Ballooning Week.





Above, Tony and Milford lift off and look back at the limp inflation sleeve and the empty hydrogen cylinders below. June, 1978.

At right, passing over the mountain ledge, the view of Stechelberg on the valley floor.

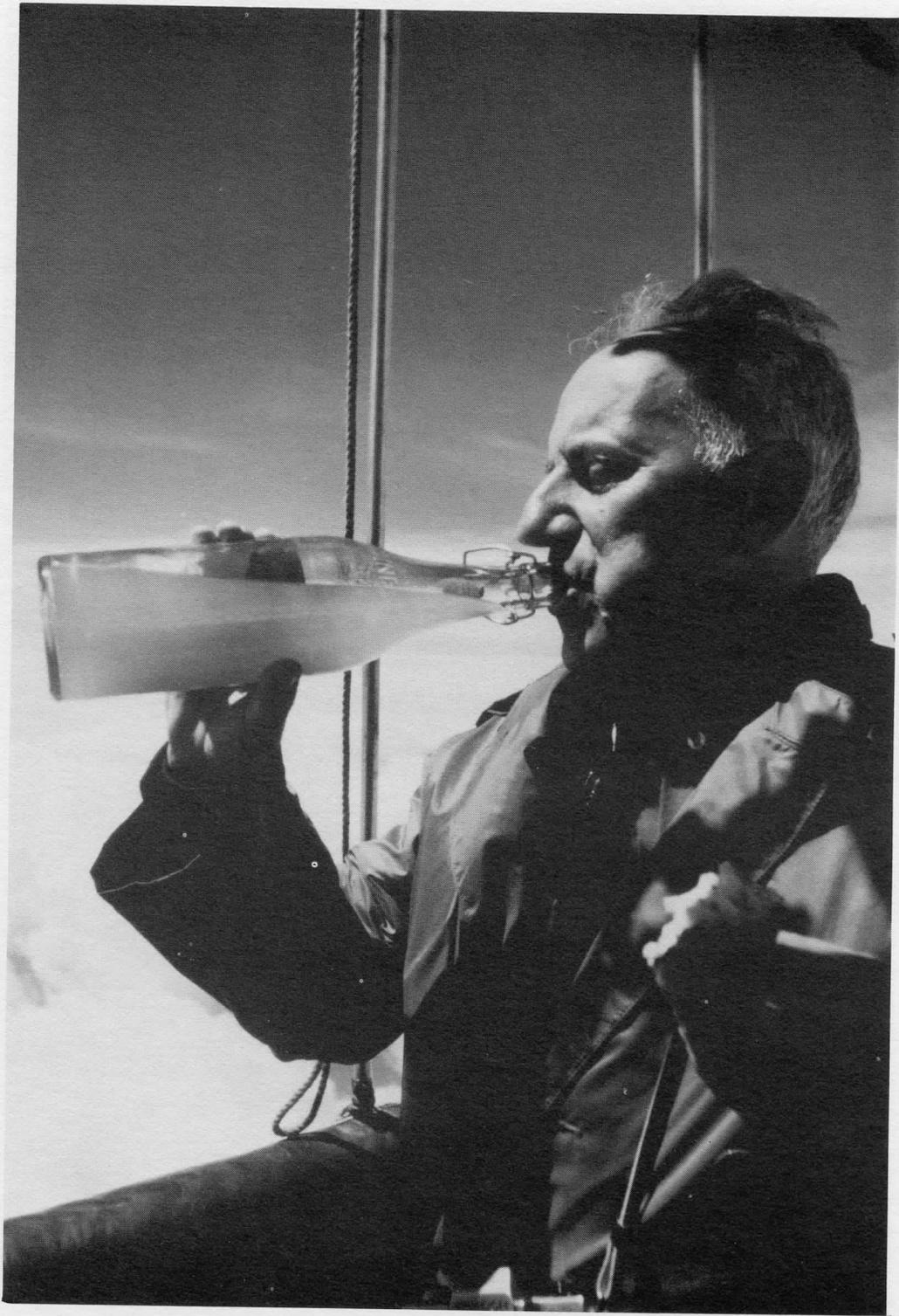




Photo by Bill Graham

Above, Tony Fairbanks flying over the Alpine Mountains. Photo taken from an airplane of the balloon, the *Circus Knie*, 1971.

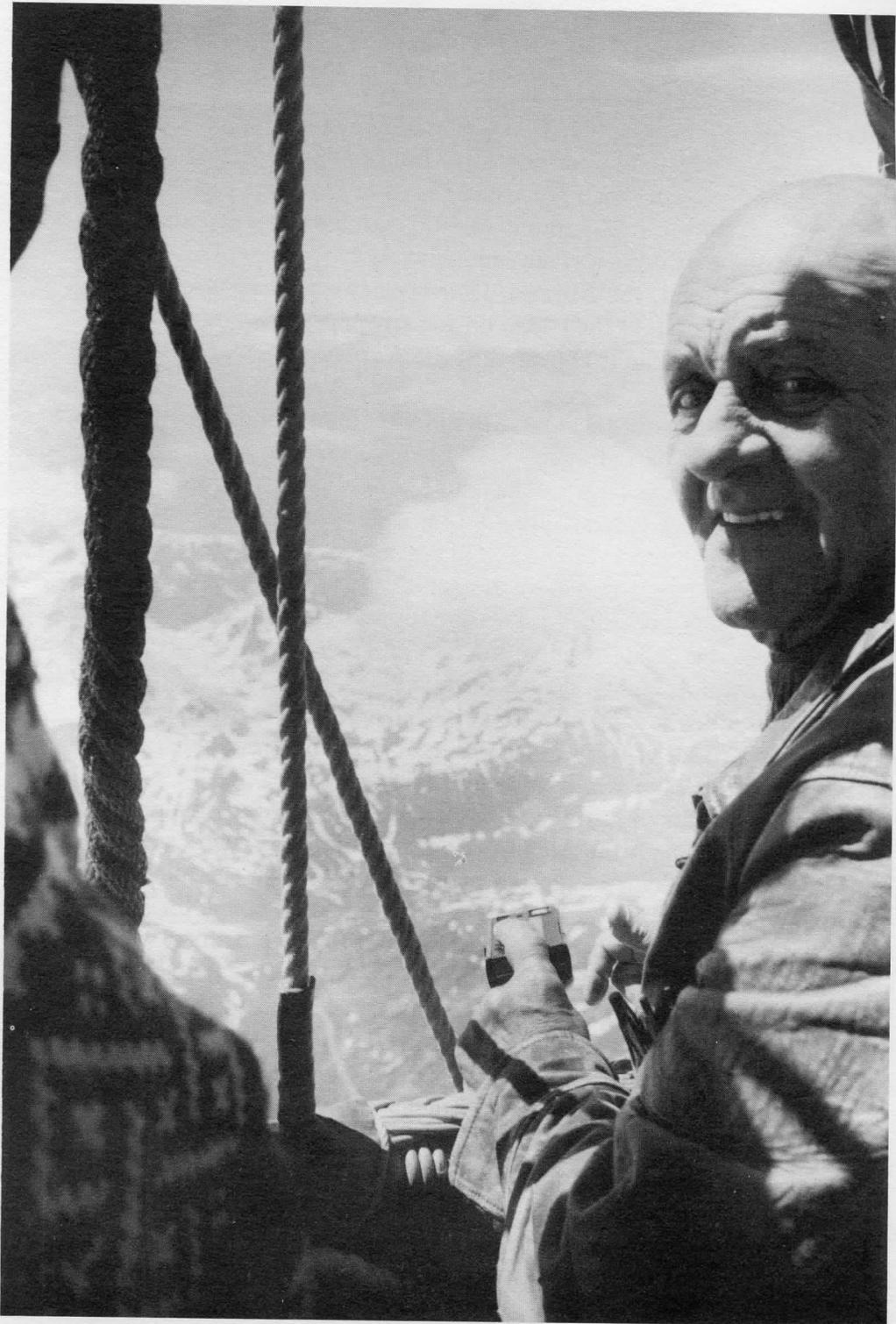
At right, on his 1971 crossing, Tony Fairbanks pauses for a drink of orange soda. Other Balloon Club of America members who have piloted gas balloons over the Alpine Mountains are Connie Wolf in 1962, Pete Pellegrino in 1966, and Francis Shields in 1967.











Milford Vanik on top of the world in Tony Fairbanks's 1978 crossing of the Alpine Mountains.

Tony's first flight over the Alps was as a copilot in the large 80,000-cubic-foot *Zurich* balloon. The pilot was Emil Imhof, a Swiss balloonist. This was the very same balloon that Fred Dolder used to make his first of many crossings of the Alpine Mountains in 1957. On his other four flights over the Alps, Tony Fairbanks was the command pilot.

On the 1971 flight, the *National Observer* newspaper sponsored Tony. The *Circus Knie* carried their logo on the envelope and reports on the preparation and the flight appeared in the *National Observer* for several weeks.

The 1972 flight with the *Basel* balloon was Tony's shortest and had an unhappy ending. The radio that the balloons are required to carry ordered all three balloons in the air to land immediately because of an electrical storm. Tony made a successful landing in a Swiss valley but as he began to pull the rip panel, which releases all the gas, the balloon burst into flame and the envelope was completely destroyed.

The 1978 flight with his old friend, Milford Vanik, was the 184th lift-off of balloons in the Dolder Ballooning Week. Tony remembers it as the best of all of his Alpine flights. The *Zurich* balloon, with a total of five people, traveled 120 miles to land on the flat farmland of northern Italy. After traveling at a speed of forty miles per hour over the mountains, they touched down in calm winds and clear skies.

Tony's wife, Mary Louise, and Christine, Fred Dolder's daughter, traveled alone through the Alps in the chase vehicle. They headed in the direction of the balloon's expected path. When through the mountains and in Italy, Mrs. Fairbanks and Miss Dolder stopped to phone for word of a landing. After a short wait, they were notified that the balloon was down and pilot and crew comfortably waiting at the villa of an Italian count. The balloon had crossed the Alps in four and a half hours but the chase vehicle arrived at midnight, after an eight hour drive.

Ideal weather conditions are required for the balloons to take off from Mürren. The conditions are: no or little air movement at the place of take-off; clear range of vision (a cloudless sky over the Alps); no thunderstorm threatening in probable landing areas (depending upon the direction of the wind); high-altitude currents of air of at least twelve miles per hour.



Tony Fairbanks's five flights in the High Alpine Dolder Ballooning Week.

Year	Balloon	Duration	Landing	Flight Number
1968	<i>Zürich</i>	3 hours	Unteriberg, Switzerland	54
1969	<i>Mürren</i>	5 hours	Salussola, Italy	60
1971	<i>Circus Knie</i>	3½ hours	Dasio, Italy	79
1972	<i>Basel</i>	1½ hours	Meiringen, Switzerland	105
1978	<i>Zürich</i>	4½ hours	Alessandria, Italy	184



Above, each pilot of a balloon over the Alps receives the traditional Alpine plate. The instrument in the lower left of the photograph is a recording barograph. On it are recorded the upward and downward motions of the balloon for the length of the flight.

At right, the *Circus Knie* of the 1971 flight across the Alps flies over the Jungfrau Mountain, 13,642 feet above sea level.

To fly in the International High-Alpine Dolder Ballooning Week is the dream of every balloon pilot in the world. The spirit of this event is captured in the words of Fred Dolder: "Due to the fact that this event does not comprise any races with emphasis on duration, distance or altitude, purely personal or national ambitions do not play a foremost role, and all can enjoy a congenial atmosphere of true sportsmanship. May this spirit continue to prevail."

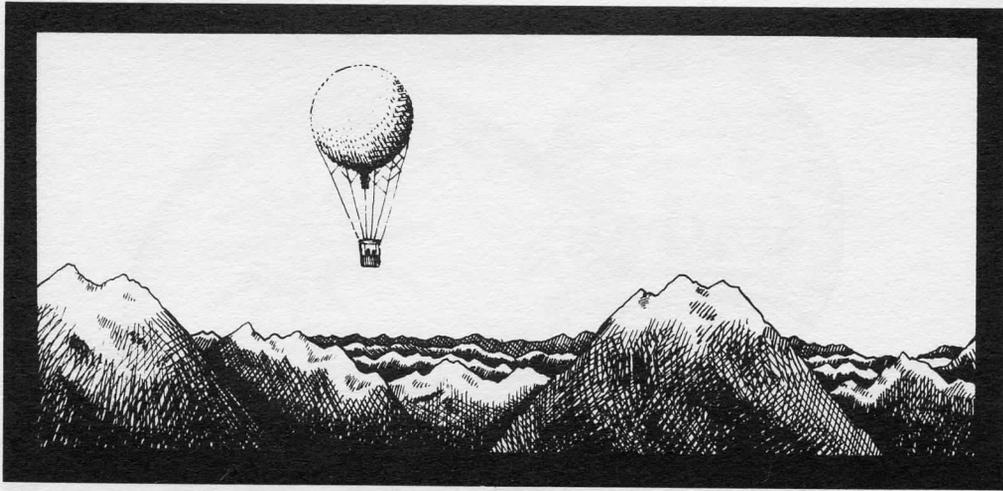


Photo by Bill Graham



Photo by Richard Werchan

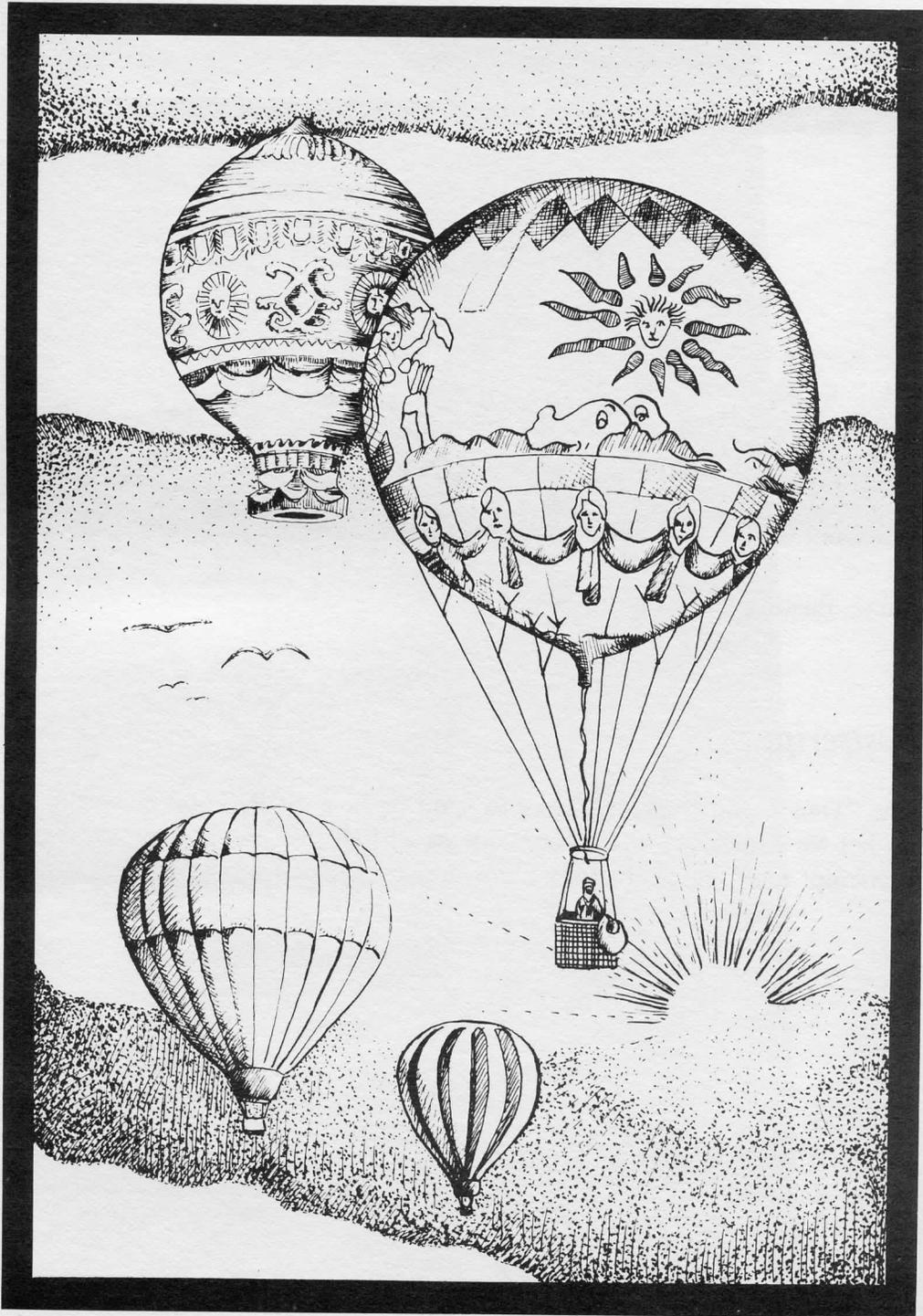
Tony Fairbanks releasing gas through the valve at the top of the balloon *Zurich* after having landed near Alessandria, Italy, with his friend Milford Vanik, June, 1978.



Alone, floating on top of the world.

Postscript

As “Down One Diamond” goes to print in June 1979, Tony Fairbanks has left for Mürren, Switzerland, with an all-Balloon-Club-of-America crew to attempt his sixth gas balloon flight over the Swiss Alpine Mountains. . .



A modern-day fantasy.