

Bubbles in the Sky: The Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta

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During The Flu of 2020, most of my flying ground to a halt. The fact that around 800 professional pilots found themselves unemployed with the demise of SAA and Comair didn't help. A part-time guy in a long queue faces bleak prospects, to say the least. I continued to fly with an aeroplane student and with my partners in the motor glider, as well as an occasional jet flight, but the flying was definitely not enough to provide a regular fix.

I used the opportunity to focus on a project that I'd started before The Flu: learning to fly hot air balloons. As the lockdowns started easing, my instructor Flip Steyn's son Andries was keen to start his training, and Flip generously offered me rates that bordered on a subsidy to join Andries in the training process. Over a period of a few months, we regularly ventured to Bill Harrop's Original Balloon Safaries. For someone who is decidedly not a morning person, the sessions that involved getting up around 03:00 weren't exactly a walk in the park, but I loved the opportunity to learn something about a completely new aspect of aviation. I narrowly missed the opportunity to fly in the South African national championships in July 2021, and my flying basically ground to a halt. For almost a year, my balloon flying consisted only of four flights with Andries.

I kept working on ways to advance my experience. The Association (BAFSA) had a balloon available, but it was far from home. There were other balloons too, but they all suffered from a combination of busy owners, difficult insurance and long distances to be travelled. My balloon project was going to falter if I didn't have easy access to a balloon, so I wondered if buying one was feasible. I was pleasantly surprised that balloons were less expensive than I thought, and I started looking for an affordable ride.

Around May 2022, I found what I was looking for. Paul Mulder had a Cameron N-105 available at a reasonable price and in better than reasonable condition. I jumped at the chance, ignoring the loud protests from my sensible side. Andries and Flip helped me to evaluate the balloon. It provided the 500th unique registration number in my logbook; quite a momentous occasion! I struck a deal with Paul. Then followed a flurry of activity. I had a lot of learning to do. I had to find and master a bewildering array of items: a suitable trailer, a fan, lots of equipment to handle propane and a plethora of little pieces of kit.

As winter approached, I ventured out unsupervised for the first time. I did my first flight in the Steyns' familiar back yard, then settled on the Bronkhorstspruit area east of Pretoria. It is a

manageable drive, with few enough people and fences that would hamper operations. From July to



My new balloon on its evaluation flight

September, I tried to fly every Wednesday morning. I managed to accumulate about 25 hours of command experience, halfway towards my goal of becoming a balloon instructor. Meanwhile, the world's biggest balloon gathering was approaching, and I was very, very tempted. I was desperately tired, not having taken a break since The Flu, and relished the idea of a break.

Planning the Trip

The Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta is the world's biggest balloon get-together. It takes place around October every year. This year was going to be its 50th anniversary. Some years have seen over 600 balloons in attendance, with more than 400 being airborne at the same time. It would not be a cheap undertaking, but I was very keen to go there and learn some new tricks.

My plan was to arrive early and to add hot air balloons to my US Airline Transport Pilot certificate. The requirements are fairly simple, as the FAA¹ recognises the value of experience in other categories. My challenge would be to reach the required standard in time. When time came to buy plane tickets, my command experience was still in the single digits. I negotiated with a flight school owner in Albuquerque who had reacted positively when I first approached him in 2021. This time, he was less helpful. I started looking for other options. Flip told me about Beth Wright-Smith, who had been helpful during their previous visits. I contacted Beth, and she quickly proved to be the right choice. Her school, Airborne Heat², is the only approved flight school in Albuquerque, and she appears to be the only active examiner. Her responses were precise and to the point. However, the picture wasn't all rosy. I'd already missed the deadline to register to fly in the Fiesta. Logistics would be an even bigger problem.

I also investigated the legendary subsidies for Fiesta attendance that I'd heard of. Unfortunately, these seem to have fallen by the wayside, so I was going to have to pay my own way.

Albuquerque is a relatively small city; about half a million people. The Fiesta draws lots of visitors. Depending on whom you believe, the number is somewhere between 150 000 and 950 000. Either way, accommodation is at a massive premium during the Fiesta. Beth assured me that it was much too late to start looking. She was right. What accommodation I could find was exorbitantly expensive; from \$ 40 per night for a campsite and from \$ 100 per night for basic accommodation. Nothing was available nearby, making my original plan of commuting by bicycle infeasible. I was going to have to get a rental car, and I was going to have to accept the risk of venturing out with no advance accommodation arrangements. I was a little apprehensive, as I didn't know whether I could sleep in the wild without being disturbed by a state trooper, or a coyote. One piece of useful information came from Doug Grant³: Most Walmarts will tolerate vagrancy in their parking lots, subject to some advance grovelling. At least there would be an option if all else failed.

As the time approached, things became more and more complex. My boss was adamant that I had to minimise the amount of time away, so I had to time my arrival for less than a week before the Fiesta. Beth would be out of town flying Smokey, a famous special-shape balloon, and would only be able to test me on Thursday morning, following her return and before getting entangled in Fiesta arrangements. Time would be tight. I organised the flights and a rental car. The rest would pretty much have to be improvised after arrival.

¹ Federal Aviation Administration of the USA.

² <https://www.airborneheat.com/>

³ Amateur radio callsign K1DG.

I had a secondary purpose too. I'd visited 34 states of the US, and this trip would offer me the opportunity to see a few more. New Mexico was one; the other obvious choice was Utah, specifically because I wanted to see Four Corners and nearby Monument Valley. Other options were not so easy. Oklahoma would be the easiest, with Kansas a more remote possibility. I wanted to spend at least one night in each of them, and was hoping to fly and to operate on amateur radio from at least several of them. However, I dared not allow these side trips to jeopardise the primary purpose: to learn about hot air balloons and to see the world's premier balloon event.

I also tried to contact Bruce Draper⁴, a long-time ham radio acquaintance in Albuquerque. I received no response, but later heard that Bruce had had a massive health setback, and would not be home. I did exchange some emails with Dennis Ashworth⁵ and Paula High-Young⁶. Dennis was planning to be at the Fiesta in his RV, and Paula is a local balloon pilot. She tried hard to help me find accommodation, without success.

Welcome to Albuquerque

I bought a ticket on British Airways. They offered the best combination of price and transit time, and my previous experience with BA hadn't been too shabby. Unfortunately, there was a factor I didn't appreciate: Their flights to the US are in a code-share agreement with American Airlines. And so I obliviously walked into a trap. My flight to London was uneventful. My flight on AA to Dallas was more than an hour late, leaving much less than an hour to make the transfer. Fortunately, I had no check-in baggage. On arrival, I ran at speed across the terminals to my gate. I arrived about 10 minutes before departure. Passengers were still boarding, but they had already booked me on a later flight. I begged and groveled, to no avail. Customer pleas make no impression on AA. I watched them push back, then sat and waited several hours for the next flight.

I arrived in Albuquerque around 21:00, rather than the planned 16:00. I collected the rental car, then set out to the nearest Walmart to get a local phone and Internet access. Walmart was closed, an hour before the advertised closing time. I set off to two other locations; same result. Apparently, the idea of 24-hour shopping hasn't made it to Albuquerque, despite what the Websites claimed. My South African phone also didn't work. The SIM was simply not registering on the local networks. I now faced a conundrum: I had no phone and no Internet access, and I didn't know what time I had to report for my flight training the next morning. I found the only restaurant that was still open⁷ and ordered a greasy omelette at an exorbitant price—a sneaky way of being allowed to use the restroom and the free WiFi. I cleaned up as best I could and checked my email to see what time I had to meet my instructor. Unfortunately, he hadn't answered my question, only stating that he'd be awake from 05:00. I had no choice but to be at our meeting point at 05:00, just to be on the safe side.

Accordingly, I found my way to the right place using a crude map drawn on a stained napkin, and settled into my rental car after midnight for some sleep. Against the background of 40 hours on the road, it wasn't hard to fall asleep, but I probably would have slept better if I'd been able to buy some bedding or warm clothing. It was bitterly cold.

I was up and about at 05:00. The first vehicle arrived around 06:10. It wasn't my instructor. More and more vehicles arrived, including several with balloons. The fourth one was my instructor. Randy

⁴ Callsign AA5B.

⁵ Callsign K7FL.

⁶ Callsign KZ5YL.

⁷ Denny's, where you're out of luck if you don't crave dead animals.

Rogers is an old hand in the Albuquerque area. Mike Suarez would help us for this session. We soon set off to find a launch site. It was a routine day in Albuquerque; I counted only 19 balloons in the air. My previous best had been 11, in the national championships several years ago. I was a little vague, having had under five hours of sleep after two days of travel.

The balloon was a new Cameron C-100; somewhat lighter and much more responsive than mine. I had some trouble adapting to its behaviour. The wind wasn't exactly calm, and we landed on a golf course after about an hour in the air.

I used the day for some shopping, including a sleeping bag and some groceries. I also managed to get a local phone number and Internet access for my tablet. Things were now slightly more organised.

I hadn't received an email response from Bruce, so I phoned the Draper home and asked if I would be welcome. Bruce agreed to see me, for a very short period. We had a lot to chat about for an hour or so before I set off again. Bruce and I both needed rest.



Beth's C-100
(Mike Suarez/Airborne Heat photo)

I managed to get a good night's rest, despite Walmart parking lots being much noisier than Panda Express parking lots. The weather forecast wasn't favourable, and reality was worse. When I woke up on Sunday morning, the trees in my windshield were swaying vigorously to and fro. The wind was well outside comfortable balloon flying limits—gusting up to 30 knots according to the weather report. A truck from Texas with a balloon in tow arrived in the parking lot. A large cowboy hat covered the woman driving the truck. We struck up a conversation. Neither of us was keen to face this weather, but both of us were under time pressure. She wanted to get current before the Fiesta started. After a short negotiation, Randy and I agreed that we were not going to fly.

The decision was the right one, but it didn't exactly alleviate the time pressure. Legally, we had to do a minimum of two flights in preparation for the test on Thursday. We might have needed more, if I wasn't up to standard from the start. There was precious little time to waste.

I stopped by at the Draper home again. Dorothy and Bryn were both there, and we enjoyed a few hours of banter before I headed off again.

During the day, I found a campsite with four nights of vacant space. I jumped at the chance. Even at an astronomical \$ 38 a night, I would welcome the opportunity to stretch out at night and use a real bathroom. Reality was somewhat less pleasing. Being right next to the Interstate 25, the campsite had a sound track that sounded like something from *The Fast and the Furious*—right through the night. Getting up at 05:30 to go flying was almost a relief. At least I managed to take a swim and to clean up properly before heading off to fly again in the morning. I'd been trying to organise a swim all week. As it turns out, all the public swimming pools in town seem to only open for a few hours in the early afternoon. They're definitely not aimed at the working man!

Monday morning was still somewhat too windy for comfort. We took a while to get going, and by the time we launched, no other balloons were in the sky. I'm used to being the only balloon in the sky, but in Albuquerque it's not a good sign. We zoomed southbound, entering the Sunport airspace as we crossed the I-40. At the speed we were going, I missed the first landing spot. We eventually

landed near an erosion control dam, leaving long gouge marks behind us. We had travelled 27 km from the launch point, with a maximum groundspeed of 31 km/h. The flight was a little unsatisfactory, as the wind's demands didn't leave much room to cover all the items in the syllabus.

That afternoon, I took the opportunity to visit the National Museum of Nuclear Science and History. New Mexico was the home of the Manhattan Project and many other breakthroughs in nuclear technology. I'd read the history before, but I enjoyed seeing the artifacts. Somehow, it is just so much more real than pictures on the Internet.

Tuesday morning, we discovered some scorching on the cap line while preparing for launch. I must have scorched it during the previous day's flight, although neither Randy nor I had noticed anything unusual. With only two days left to complete the training, I was gravely disappointed. Things were not looking good. At the very least, we would have to skip a day while a replacement line was sourced.

I went to see the Anderson Abruzzo International Balloon Museum, right next to the Fiesta Park. They were not collecting entry fees. I spent several hours walking through the museum at my leisure and then traversing the Park. Things were still pretty quiet. I had no doubt that the situation would soon drastically change.

I spent the afternoon shopping for groceries. I bought a lavish amount of ice cream, as I'd discovered that Bruce and I shared an affinity for it. I delivered the ice cream and spent a bit of time visiting with the family.

That evening, I received an email from Beth. Randy had expressed misgivings about completing the flight training in time, and she enquired whether I wanted to continue. I indicated that I did; I wanted to learn as much as I could, and accepted that there was a likelihood of failing to get the FAA certificate.

Fortunately, Beth pulled a rabbit from the hat and had the balloon ready to fly. Wednesday's flight was relatively civil. We drifted northbound, and reached a mere 19 km/h—almost like the doldrums relative to the previous days. We completed our exercises, and I landed almost where I said I would. Randy and I sat down to complete the paperwork over breakfast. We had some trouble with the paperwork⁸, but by early afternoon Randy sent me off to meet Beth for the oral. She had just returned from California, and after more wrestling with the paperwork, we finally started the oral exam. I left around sunset to complete some homework. I finally emailed the homework around 21:00 and lay listening to the I-25.

I reported for duty at 06:30 sharp. After reviewing the choice of launch point, we set off and got airborne relatively quickly. One thing did keep me busy—the “passenger” was not very cooperative, and we had a hard time getting her on board. She seemed to be satisfied with the way she'd been handled, and we drifted off toward the northwest. The wind was much lighter than previous days. I initially struggled to control the altitude; Beth weighs half as much as Randy does. It got better as we progressed, but I struggled to stay within the prescribed tolerances. We landed near a solar farm. I was relieved when Beth announced that I had passed. She must have been in a generous mood.

⁸ The FAA's IACRA is not always your friend.



A brand-new commercial pilot, very relieved and very wet (Airborne Heat photo)

After packing up, we proceeded to a city park. Here, after being entertained by tall tales about balloon flights, I was subjected to a ritual that involved standing on my knees and drinking from a cup without the use of hands. The crew was in festive spirits. I managed to not spill anything on myself, but I still got soaked as various liquids were decanted onto me from behind. As a very relieved man I didn't even mind.

With the training complete, I set off to explore the countryside for a day or two. I had to be back on Friday night to commence my duties as part of a balloon crew. Beth had organised that I would help Jeff Duff with one of their balloons, with a possibility of hitching a ride in the Fiesta. I headed northwest toward Four Corners, the only place in the USA where four states meet⁹. I spent the night in Utah, gawking at Monument Valley. Many major cowboy movies were shot in this valley, and the stark sandstone structures are what most people visualise when they think about the Wild West. I didn't get to traverse the scenic trail, as the Navajo Nation refused to allow me to pay the \$ 8 admission fee in cash. As I still didn't have access to my South African mobile number, I didn't want to risk using my credit card in their iffy-

looking terminal. So I just turned around and drove back, having come over 12 000 km to see Monument Valley at a distance.

All my efforts to send prank emails and text messages from four states in quick succession came to naught. There was no mobile phone signal in the area; neither my phone nor my tablet had any luck.

I tried hard to locate a flight school where I could rent a plane. I'd never flown in Utah or Colorado, and I was hoping to take a quick flight into both those states. The first school that I was able to find was the Road Runner Flight School at the Four Corners Regional Airport in Farmington NM. Unfortunately, they were fully booked. I spent a few minutes chatting to one of the Mikes before continuing toward Albuquerque. I had a lot of fun listening to NPR and some classical music stations. I also found it interesting that I could hear several Christian radio stations everywhere in New Mexico.

The Fiesta starts

Saturday morning started early. Part of my agenda was to minimise expenses, so to avoid the \$ 20 parking fee, I parked some distance away for my overnight stay. I started walking around 05:00. It was a brisk 15-minute walk, followed by a not-so-brisk 25 minute wait to get through the security checkpoint. Jeff had given me a crew badge and an access card, so I managed to collect breakfast before heading out onto the field.

I had to meet Jeff and his crew at 06:15. Jeff was scheduled to fly one of the 13 balloons to commemorate the first Fiesta half a century before, representing pilot Don Piccard. They were stuck in traffic, so we met a little later than planned. However, there was much to see.

The first thing I saw was an animated show projected onto a large screen to the west of the field. I wondered how they could have erected such a tall screen there, as the balloons would soon be

⁹ Arizona, Utah, Colorado and New Mexico.

taking off and having a huge obstruction there would not be a great idea. Only towards the end of the ten-minute show did I realise what was going on: The show consisted of around 300 small multirotors, all controlled by a central computer. There is no business like show business!

The Dawn Patrol took off soon after the light show finished. A dozen balloons firing their burners against the night sky presented quite a sight. Over 600 balloons had been registered for the Fiesta, and all of them seemed hell-bent on getting airborne together at dawn. Wave after wave took off, including perhaps 40 large passenger balloons from Rainbow Riders. It was an overwhelming sight. The Albuquerque Box was in full swing, with balloons initially departing southbound and then heading north as they climbed.



I enjoyed rigging the balloon, as a large crew and good equipment made it quick and easy. I envied them the ability to get airborne in 15 minutes; a far cry from the hour or more we usually need.

After the flight, I met Steve London¹⁰ at Bruce's place. Steve had driven up from southwestern New Mexico. My last visit with Steve was in 1995, when he still lived in Denver. The three of us spent a great afternoon, chatting about radios and other stuff. Bruce held out well, and invited us to stay over for the night. Steve declined, heading back for the four-hour drive back home.

Dawn Patrol: A dozen balloons in the night sky



Smokey... and Beth in the basket below

¹⁰ Callsign N2IC.

Sunday morning, Jeff made my day by handing over my temporary pilot certificate, including commercial privileges on balloons, courtesy of Beth. I noticed Smokey after helping to get Jeff airborne. I ambled over to chat to Beth and Brittany, and to take a good look at the inside of a special-shape balloon.

After Jeff had landed, we collected him from a city park. In about a hectare of green grass, perhaps 60 balloons landed in the hour we spent there. The atmosphere was unbelievably festive. The sky was filled with balloons. Every landing balloon was welcomed by a group of bystanders that would grab the basket and bring it to a standstill. Where several balloons were in close proximity, one would be scurried off to another part of the park to be disassembled. Most crews were able to pack up and go within 15 minutes or so.

Back at the Fiesta Park, I met Dennis for lunch. We spent a delightful couple of hours catching up. The last opportunity had been on a tiny island off the coast of Libya in 1999¹¹. Dennis and his wife were in an RV lot not far from where I spent my overnight stays.



Balloons, anyone?

After lunch, I phoned Bill Mader¹². I'd been exchanging emails with him with a view to operating a radio in New Mexico. Bill agreed that I could come over for a few hours. I was hoping to make some contacts into California for the annual QSO Party. I was hoping that New Mexico would attract sufficient attention to allow for some high-speed operating. When I arrived, he had configured his station for me, and I sat down with a glass of cold water. Unfortunately, things were rather slow. I managed to make a few dozen contacts, but conditions were not great and activity was not all that

¹¹ IH9P, CQ World Wide DX Phone Contest.

¹² Callsign K8TE, ARRL section manager for New Mexico.

high. Bill consulted the RBN¹³ to see what propagation was doing, and it became evident that there had been an ionospheric disruption and that not much was going to happen beyond that point. We chatted for a while, discovering that we shared an Air Force background. At least one of my main objectives had been met: I had operated radio from the fifth FCC¹⁴ district for the first time.

After crewing for Jeff in the evening glow, I found a laundromat to recycle some of my laundry. I was fascinated by the assortment of people in there. It must have been a rough part of town. I settled down for the night in my customary parking spot.

The daily pilot briefings were a lot of fun. Each day, they presented two of the “balloonmeisters” who had directed the Fiesta in years past. The daily weather briefing was met with great anticipation. A huge tropical storm had destroyed parts of Florida and was heading up the east coast, preventing the cell of lousy weather from leaving the Albuquerque area. Many sessions had to be cancelled. Daily prizes were handed out to pilots, ground crew and landowners. Each prize consisted of several items. The entire crowd would meet the announcements with alternate “oohh” and “aaah” responses. There was clearly no lack of enthusiasm.

Another feature of the Fiesta is the Zebras. These officials, clad in black and white stripes, were responsible for coordinating activities on the ground. No-one is allowed to fire up a burner or inflate a balloon or launch without their say-so. They are constantly in touch with the organisers, and patrol the flight line to ensure that everything happens in an orderly and safe manner. Some take their roles seriously, with a variety of outfits, including wigs, in a black and white theme.

Monday’s briefing contained bad news: The day’s competition flying would be cancelled. Several special-shape balloons got airborne. I ambled around in the Park to look at all the second hand stuff for sale. Unfortunately, there was nothing useful enough to cart halfway around the world. I did get to meet Paul Smith, the head honcho of the Fiesta and Beth’s husband. I also met the guy who maintains HotAir, the navigation software that I use in my balloon. He gave me a nice sticker that will probably end up somewhere on my truck. I left for a lunch date with Paula. She introduced me to some of the local cuisine. It was exceptionally nice, as I listened to her tales of decades of balloon flying in the vicinity. She is a writer, balloon pilot and radio amateur—a combination that felt rather familiar.

The afternoon was spent with Bruce and two of his friends: Todd and Gary¹⁵. Todd was in the middle of a very busy week as a volunteer at the daily Fiesta breakfasts.

The late-afternoon departure of the annual America’s Challenge Gas Balloon Race was postponed due to nasty weather on the east coast. I was very disappointed, as I wanted to take the opportunity to get acquainted with this class of balloons.

With the weekend behind us and an ominous weather forecast, I asked Jeff on Monday whether he could spare me for two days. I would work on Tuesday morning, then do my side trip into Oklahoma and Kansas in time to be back for Friday morning. Jeff agreed. I did some pensive staring at my tablet’s screen and sent off an email to Ralph Compton¹⁶. I’d noticed on the Internet that he was a keen radio amateur and pilot, and was hoping that I might be able to visit him in Oklahoma. There

¹³ Reverse Beacon Network, a propagation analysis tool.

¹⁴ Federal Communications Commission of the USA.

¹⁵ Callsign K5TQ.

¹⁶ Callsign K5XIT.

are very, very few radio amateurs in western Oklahoma. It is not exactly a hub of commerce and industry, and it seemed like neither amateur radio nor aviation was big in those parts.

Surprise-surprise, Tuesday was windy and cloudy. After launch, Jeff headed south at alarming speed. We drove after him, trying to anticipate where he might land. After he'd overshot several potential landing sites because of the high speed, he finally landed on a small island at an I-25 onramp. With a large crew and good equipment, we again quickly packed up the balloon. It was time for me to head east.

I drove into increasingly hostile weather. The Sandia mountains were covered in rough cloud, which I had to drive through on the I-25. As I passed through Moriarty, I noticed a large sign advertising a soaring museum. I missed the offramp, and kept going. I was tempted to turn back, but decided that it was more important to get to my destination. After many hours of driving, the accumulated lack of sleep started taking its toll. I realised that I ran a risk of driving off the road, so I pulled off under some shady trees in a town called Logan and caught some sleep. I woke up after about 40 minutes, refreshed. A policeman



Stormy weather ahead

stopped next to me and got out of his vehicle. He started asking some pointed questions. Apparently, someone had complained that I was parked in "suspicious circumstances" on "private property". Despite having been outside the fence just off the highway, I apologised profusely, and explained the purpose of my stop. The cop seemed satisfied, and I went on my merry way. I envied the local who had complained. Clearly, his or her life contains very little threat.

Passing through Boise City, Oklahoma, I found Ralph's house and knocked on the door. Just as I despaired of getting any reaction, Ralph opened the door. I introduced myself and chatted for a while. Ralph soon realised that we had a lot to talk about and invited me to stay over. I indicated that I needed to get to Kansas, but agreed that I would return the following afternoon and stay for the night.

It was dark as I entered Kansas near the town of Elkhart, relying on the GPS to take me to the Cimarron National Grassland. I arrived in front of an office that was very much closed. Some research on the Internet revealed that the campsite was north of the town, but the exact location was by no means clear. I spent some time traversing several Forest Service roads (more like vague tracks) before finally finding the campsite, right beside the river. I followed the instructions, picking a campsite right on the water's edge, paying the \$ 7 fee and pitching my tent. I intended to sleep under the stars, but I wanted the tent handy in case of rain. I had just pitched my tent when a couple in a panel van arrived. They boorishly demanded that I vacate the site, as it was "theirs". I pointed out that the Park's website specifically indicated that there was no prior reservation. They just got even louder and more boorish. I shrugged and moved my tent to the adjacent site.

In the event, I didn't need the tent. I slept and woke refreshed. I made my way to the Point of Rocks, the prime landmark on the Santa Fe Trail. Wagon wheel tracks can still be seen in the ground, more than a century after the trail was abandoned. I cruised back to the airport to see if I could fly. Sure enough, a small hangar featured a phone number. I phoned Bill Cotter and made an appointment to fly his Hawk XP with him. For reasons unclear, he point-blank refused to fly to adjacent airports, but I

suppose flying in Kansas was better than nothing. The downside was that I had to wait several hours. I took the opportunity to visit the Morton County Museum, getting a fascinating glimpse into frontier life over almost two centuries. About an hour before our appointment, Bill phoned me to cancel. I suppose he wasn't all that hungry. I phoned several other airports in the vicinity, but nothing was available within driving distance.



Ralph Compton at his house

I headed over to Ralph's office, stopping at the Boise City airport along the way. There was no sign of life, with several hangars appearing abandoned. Ralph and I chatted for a while before heading off to a local restaurant for an early dinner. We did indeed have a lot to chat about. I had the impression that Ralph enjoyed the company, as the bride of his youth, Mary Ann, had recently been admitted to a care facility in Kansas. We chatted late into the night, exchanging tall stories of ham radio and aviation. Ralph has clearly been around the track a few times. Just before bed-time, I spent a few minutes on the air. At least Oklahoma was in the bag, too.

Just before dozing off, I sent an email to enquire about a Friday meeting that had been touted before departure. I was hoping that it wouldn't happen, as it would involve a lot of reading and an all-night session.

I woke up an hour too early, as my fancy phone's alarm clock had adjusted itself to the new time zone during the night. Ralph cooked up a hearty breakfast while I made some phone calls to find a place to fly close by. Ralph's own aircraft was available and he was keen to fly, but the airport was closed for a week or two due to an upgrade to the facilities. I took some pictures and headed back to Albuquerque.

Back in town, I spent some time looking for a spark igniter that I'd seen the previous week in Beth's balloon. It resembles a pistol, and when you pull the trigger, it spews a cloud of sparks. It's great as an emergency tool in a balloon, and also for satisfying any latent desire to be a cowboy. Four shops related the same story: They always carry them in stock, but somehow they'd suddenly sold out in the previous week. The fifth shop had several in stock. I helped them to also suddenly sell out.

I dropped in on Bruce. Unexpectedly, the house was a hive of activity. Their eldest daughter Allison was there with her husband and three children. John is a professionally-qualified trumpeter, and we chatted about music. During the evening, my phone went berserk. It was an evacuation warning from the Fiesta Park. The reason was not specified, but it sounded serious—at least a nuclear explosion? I wondered where they got my phone number from. I received an email telling me that the meeting was indeed happening. Argh. I excused myself and made my way to a restaurant where I could sit and read. After several hours of reading, I tried to start my car. It was dead as a dodo. It seemed to be a battery problem. I made some frantic phone calls to Sixt. They promised to send help, but the help never arrived. I finally managed to talk some passers-by into jump-starting me and set off to the airport, to return the car if necessary. The long drive seemed to solve the problem, but I still needed to figure out a way to attend an all-night meeting without getting into trouble with the battery again. I caught a shop three minutes before closing and bought myself a power bank. I sat

down to complete my reading and joined the online meeting half an hour after midnight. I was able to snatch about an hour's sleep before reporting for duty at the Fiesta again.

Friday morning was a fly-in event. At breakfast, I heard Mike chatting to someone in fluent Spanish. I was surprised, as he neither looked nor sounded Hispanic. It turned out that he was the regular local contact for the Mexican team, including this year. He told me about plans to fly a remote-control balloon inside a real one—an interesting idea indeed.

Both Jeff and Ryan opted to start south of the Field. This time, I worked for Ryan. We launched quickly and watched as Ryan flew north towards the field. After helping him pack up, I went to have a look at the remote-control balloons. Most of them are home-built, complete with burners, baskets and envelopes, at about one-third scale. There were several dozen in attendance, and the commentators claimed that they were trying to break a world record for the number of “globitos” in one place.

Saturday's morning session was again cancelled due to lousy weather. Many participants elected to burn off excess fuel in the Park before venturing back home again. It was quite a sight, with dozens of burners lighting up below an overcast sky. It was raining lightly, and the burner heat was very welcome. I told Jeff's crew that there was going to be an emotional moment, as they would be playing the anthem at 07:00, followed by a fly-by. They all duly got out of the van and stood up for the anthem. Personally, I was far more emotional about the fly-by. In Albuquerque, the “chile capital of the world”, one often hears the phrase “red or green?”. As the six aircraft approached in formation, they each showed red and green lights on their wingtips. As they got closer, half of them showed only red, and the other half showed only green. Showbiz at its best! One of my fellow crew members explained that those aircraft always had those lights. Really?

After fond goodbyes with Jeff's crew, I stopped by at the Fiesta shop to collect a commemorative book before heading off to greet the Drapers one last time. I refuelled the rental car, handed it back and joined the queue to board.

American Airlines again exceeded my most extreme expectations of abuse. They confiscated my hand baggage due to lack of storage space. They absolutely insisted on checking it in, all the way to Johannesburg. I had 40 hours of travel and two long transfers ahead of me, and my carry-on bag was unlocked. I cringed at the thought of an unlocked bag going into Johannesburg, but all my pleas fell on deaf ears—as seems to be the way of AA. What a rude bunch!

In Phoenix, I tried my best to have my hand baggage redirected to Heathrow. AA was not interested. I had a more sympathetic response from the British Airways staff, but by the time their counter opened, it was too late. They did promise to try their best to let my carry-on bag appear on the conveyor at Heathrow.

At Heathrow, I realised that there was a problem: the baggage collection was after immigration. As I was scheduled to remain in transit, I did not have a visa. BA staff directed me to the immigration counter. I was not hopeful, but still ventured to the counter and spun my long story. To my amazement, they issued a one-day visa free of charge. I spent several hours vainly trying to find my baggage. I was told that the baggage was indeed in London, but that it was already in the containers bound for Johannesburg. I was tempted to venture into London, but the time was just too short. In the end, the flight was delayed by over an hour. Had I known that, I would probably have hit the town.

After the second overnight flight in a row, I arrived in Johannesburg in the early morning. My baggage was not on the carousel. Enquiries revealed that it had not been seen since Phoenix. Louw collected me from the Gautrain station to help me collect my car from the mechanic's place. To my amazement, the car was not ready. Louw and I used the opportunity to catch up over lunch. I was back in the office before mid-day.

My baggage arrived on Thursday, three days after me. My body clock arrived a week late. I spent several nights staring at the ceiling, wide-eyed.

Wrapping up

My biggest disappointment was the cancellation of the gas balloon race. This class of balloons fascinates me, and I was hoping to get some exposure for the first time. Unfortunately, a series of postponements led to the final cancellation around mid-week. Apparently, the concern was that the major storm on the east coast would threaten the participants towards the end of the race.

I marvelled at the whole organisation of the Fiesta. Apart from a core of full-time employees, most of the workers were volunteers. I chatted to ground crew, golf cart drivers, ticket sellers, shop assistants and zebras. Most of them take off a week from work every year to make the Fiesta work. It is a true community project.

In retrospect, I am happy that I missed the registration deadline. At my limited level of experience, I am still too prone to being distracted in flight. I am not convinced that I would have coped well enough with the distractions of a busy urban environment, competitive pressure, hostile weather and 400 balloons around me. As it was, I learned a lot, had a grand-stand seat, got free access to the Park and enjoyed the company of the chase crew. Quinn and Jenny ran a tight ship, and Alex, Chelsea and Leena made great company.

It's now almost two weeks later. I'm still trying to catch up on everything that happened in my absence. I've finally managed to do three balloon flights, putting the new tricks I learned to good use. However, very few days have been flyable, with most days being much too windy.

Sad news arrived this week. On Tuesday, Bruce died after seven months of ill health. I am very pleased that I was able to get to know him and the family after we'd been distant acquaintances for decades.

What happens next? I guess it's "nose to the grindstone" for a while. Dick Norton and his group arrive in a few weeks, for which I need to get ready. In the mean time, it's been windy most days, and it has been hard to find days that are flyable. Nevertheless, I remain on schedule to complete the 50 hours of pilot-in-command time by year-end. Once that goal is out of the way, maybe I'll start thinking about more projects. Come to think of it, I've been stuck at 98 countries visited—the second worst place to get stuck—since before The Flu. Maybe it's time to do something about it!