

FLIGHT OF A LIFETIME!

Launch - 5 September 2009, Geneva, Switzerland



Landing - 8 September 2009, NE of Faro, Portugal - 1530km, 71h20m



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Additional Photos from Mark Sullivan

Where does one begin to tell the story of the most amazing, challenging and awe inspiring flights of one's life? As I sit in my home in Austin, Texas with my children sound asleep in their beds, I ponder whether it was all a dream. Yet I close my eyes and I am immediately back in the basket on the second night listening to the roar of the Mediterranean Sea below me and watching the lights of Mallorca fade into the distance with the full moon and stars lighting my way. Mark is asleep and I breathe in the smell of the Sea below me and I am at peace! Of course that peace is shattered the next day as we mentally prepare ourselves for a possible ditch into the Straits of Gibraltar. But I am ahead of the story so from the beginning...

After a disappointing cancellation of our flight at the Gordon Bennett in Belgium in 2007, Mark and I decided to start training for another chance. Mark lost a lot of weight and started climbing the mountain in Albuquerque every other day to get in shape. I continued my yoga, cardio and weight workouts. We were rewarded with a first place finish in the America's Challenge with a 68 1/2 hour flight from Albuquerque to Iowa. Our USA spot for Geneva was attained.

We shipped Delta Goodie, the balloon of Harris Goodwin to Europe and arranged to have our German crew chief Franz-Joseph Schreuer chase. We were invited to fly in a special flight celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Muenster German balloon club the week before the Gordon Bennett flight. This was a perfect opportunity to have a nice warm-up flight. Franz-Joseph flew with us and we landed 8 hours later in the morning just south of Berlin.

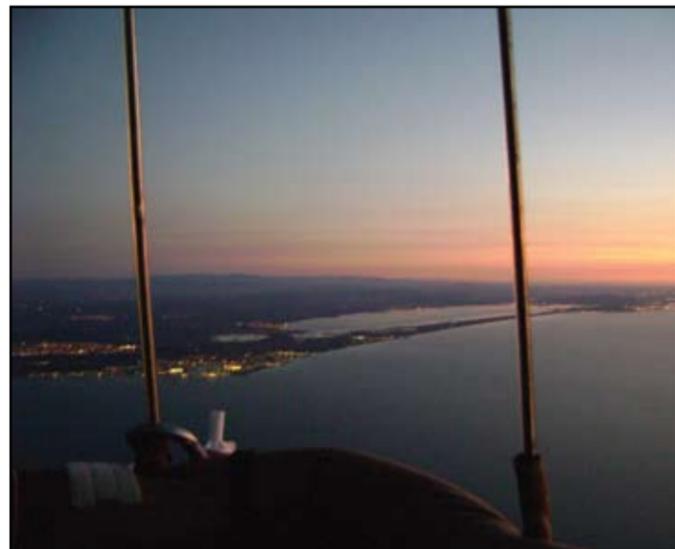
The rest of the week we started studying trajectories and weather and then made the journey to Geneva. Although it was raining in Geneva when we arrived, the weather forecasts for a Saturday launch for very favorable. When it was confirmed that the trajectories would take us out to sea, I made a beeline for my friend and fellow competitor Tomas Hora to quiz him on what to expect while flying over the Sea. He calmed my nerves when he explained that it would be very easy during the day with no thermals to contend with. Mark and I then went to work with Randy Lefevre our meteorologist to make our plan. Our plan was for the most Southern tip of Portugal passing over Mallorca on the way.

Saturday morning we were up early buying groceries for the flight before heading to the field to fill sandbags and set up the balloon. We bought turkey, cheese, bread, fruit, cookies, chocolate, a couple of sports drinks and lots of water. On every single one of our gas flights we always have too much food and end up using the remaining food as ballast or eating on the drive back after landing. Unfortunately, this would be the one year that we did not bring enough food and the last day I was starving for real food and had only cookies and chocolate left in the bag.



Above: BFA members Mark Sullivan and Cheri Edwards White await their turn to launch at the start of the 2009 Gordon Bennett.

Below: Leaving the lights and land of France behind and heading out to sea...



Our inflation did not go well. The first time the envelope was released the parachute top did not seat due to a sudden gust of wind and we lost all of our hydrogen and had to start again. Then as we were refilling, the hose from the truck to our balloon was blown in two with a very scary frightful sound. None of the pilots had seen this before and they were all taking pictures of it. Luckily no one was hurt. Then when the balloon was released for the second time, a big gust of wind hit it again. Luckily Willie Eimers and his crew were nearby and helped us get control of the balloon.

After one last briefing and a call to Randy to confirm our plan, we were ready to launch. We were the fourth balloon off and it was very beautiful flying over the city of Geneva in the full moonlight. A big outdoor concert was happening beside our hotel and we listened to the music as we floated along. We flew at altitudes between 3000 and 4500 feet thru the night. In our weather briefings with the Swiss meteorologist before the flight, there had been a lot of talk and nervousness about the Mistral winds thru the Rhone Valley of France. If the winds developed there would be

little chance to land before being spit out to Sea. His last briefings had said that he did not think they would affect us.

At 3 AM in the morning as I was flying along at 30 to 35 mph I looked down and was suddenly going 60 mph with a big hill covered with wind turbines in front of me. I ballasted to go above it and woke up Mark. We heard the Finnish team on the radio celebrating the fact that they were going 102 kph (63 mph) and pulling ahead of the pack. We knew we needed a little speed in order to get out of France before the winds curled to take us back to Geneva but decided to stay a little higher and slow down a bit. I was fast asleep when we left France and went out over the Mediterranean but Mark says it was a beautiful sight.

The next morning was easy flying as the balloon flew at a pretty steady 5000 feet. We enjoyed the views of the Sea and passing cruise ships. We were in contact with Tomas Hora who was in front of us. Tomas was getting nervous about finding a wind to take him back towards land so we worked together relaying altitudes, direction and speed. At this point we were very confident that our plan was working and that we would make landfall the next day around Alacant, Spain.

We knew the Finnish, Belgium and Austrian teams had been too fast and were now down near Africa. Willie came on the radio to tell us that he had talked to the Swiss Meteo and that the turn would come to take us to land. Tomas had decided to land on the island of Menorca. Willie and Tomas started talking a lot in German. At the time I was wishing I could understand German but I just assumed

Willie was helping Tomas land. We found out later that Willie had decided to land on the island as well. It was luck that we did not know this as it could have put a little doubt into our plan.

As we were flying towards Mallorca, I saw someone shining a mirror at our balloon. Mark tried to call Tomas on the radio and heard a voice say "Mark this is your friend Ricardo Aracil, a Spanish pilot, and I am here below you at the lighthouse and can help you land." "Can you see my green car?" Now that is a small world! We talked to him awhile but our focus was on Portugal. After having watched a glorious sunset, Mark went to sleep and this was when I was at peace watching fireworks on Mallorca and listening to the constant roar of the Sea.

The next morning things grew tense as the turn we had been waiting for and expecting had not materialized. Our flight path was taking us straight towards the Strait of Gibraltar where we knew the winds speeds to be incredibly fast. After a few frantic calls to Randy and then headquarters to get the phone number for the Spanish search and rescue, we started mentally preparing for a ditch in the Sea that afternoon. I made mental notes of where the life raft and survival suits were and put our passports and EPIRB in the one waterproof bag we had on board.

Mark was mentally preparing how to land in the water and safely exit the balloon. Randy was running models trying to find a wind to take us back to land. The sun was blaring down on us and cooking us like eggs in a frying pan. I had a sheet that I would hang up on one side of the basket and then watch as the balloon rotated.

I would then move the sheet only to have the basket rotate again. It became an ugly game as we tried to keep ourselves protected from the fierce sun. Of course, no one could sleep now.

Later that day, we formulated a plan to reach land. We had to maintain our present altitude and fly within thirty miles of the Spanish coast and get far enough west in order for the Spanish land mass to block the southerly winds at altitude. Around 3 PM after passing directly south of Cartagena, Randy had us ascend very slowly looking for a turn with the caveat that if we went too high we would go south to Africa. We found the turn at 6000 feet and big smiles came on our faces. We called Randy but he told us not to breathe or change altitude or do anything until we were over land and to call him then. Land came at Vera, Spain and it was a huge relief. We had flown over the Sea almost 35 hours.

We were now focused back on the race and our plan for Portugal. Unfortunately, we entered Spain right

where the Sierra Nevada mountain range starts. Randy had wanted us to fly an altitude of 5000 feet straight west to Portugal. Because the mountains were 4000 to 9000 feet it was very tough trying to fly low in between the different peaks. It was late in the day and clouds were developing all around us. Then the thermals started carrying us close to the ground and back up. Mark fought the thermals using 4 bags of ballast. We finally decided to go higher and try to get to the next valley to take us back towards Seville.

Night came and Mark went to sleep. FYI, I love to fly at night and let Mark sleep as much as possible. He is the more experienced and it is important that he is well rested to fight thermals, set the altitude in the mornings and afternoons and to land. We made it to the valley and all was smooth sailing. We were now tracking back towards Seville at an average of 20 mph. At one point I looked down and saw a light

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Flying over Mallorca, Spain Sullivan and White were contacted by a Spanish friend who offered to help them land, but the pair decided to fly on intent on reaching Portugal.



The 53rd Coupe Gordon Bennett

The 53rd (2009) Gordon Bennett gas balloon race featured 16 teams from 8 countries. Launching from Switzerland, the famed Mistral winds from the Rhone River Valley spit the balloons out to sea with some reaching speeds of 105kph.

Three teams would fly across the Mediterranean Sea and land in North Africa only to be disqualified (Africa was out of bounds). Three other teams landed on islands. The all female British team set a new women's world duration record. This was the first GB to feature an entry from Finland while for Swiss balloonist Christian Stoll this was his 21st entry into the race, more than anyone else in history. The three US teams finished 3rd, 4th, and 16th.

For much of the event Sullivan and White appeared to be the eventual winners as they went the farthest distance south over the sea before turning west back to land. Unfortunately in the final hours of the flight they were faced with landing or being blown back out to sea. They wisely chose to land only to have the Swiss #1 and France #1 teams pass them by for a very narrow victory. The map above shows the tracks of all 16 teams.

The awards ceremony. From left: 2nd place winners (Swiss #1) Kurt Frieden and Pascal Witpraechtger, winners (France #1) Sebastien Rolland and Vincent Leys, (USA #2) 3rd place winners Cheryl White and Mark Sullivan.





The coast of Spain and a return to dry land...

from an isolated hill shining on us. I later found out that it was our crew. I guess I should turn on the radio more often!

Then we hit a huge imaginary wall. The balloon came to a sudden stop then did a huge circle. The last reports showed faster speeds at lower altitudes so I decided to valve down lower to find the wind. As we went lower, we came to a dead stop. It was time to ride the elevator up to higher altitudes and hopefully wind. It worked and we were back on our way.

We found out the next morning that our tracker had stopped working. After a call to headquarters we were instructed to climb up the basket to the tracker hanging on the load ring and reset it. I tried but being exhausted and standing on the side of the basket is not a good idea. Mark then tried with me holding onto his belt and leg. It worked but we did request that in the future trackers be attached on a lanyard to hang below the basket! We then flew over Seville and straight up the runway. ATC was wonderful to work with

throughout Europe and were all very accommodating for us.

Mark was now flying the balloon just like a hot air balloon. There was a ton of steerage and we thought we could drive it straight to Portugal. However right around 4 PM, we were hit with thermals. The first thermal took us to around 5600 ft and then the second one took us to around 9000 feet. In hindsight the thermals worked in our favor taking us a little north and giving us more speed so that we could make it further down the coast in Portugal.

The landscape was incredible. We flew over millions of olive trees, big estates on the hillsides, wineries, futuristic solar plants and of course, the Mediterranean Sea always to the South.

We started thinking about our landing site. I had been to Sagres, Portugal in the 80's after graduating from law school and knew the coastline to be huge cliffs with small beaches tucked in here and there. We knew that sunset was approaching and that we needed to fly as far down the coastline as possible.

We took out our night vision goggles to prepare for a night landing and called Mark's son, Bryan to start looking at Google Earth for good places to land at night. The ATC at Faro was working hard with us by getting all the landing planes to report winds at 3000 and 4000 ft. Our plan changed at sunset when the land cooled and the sea breeze took effect sending

all wind out to Sea. We quickly descended and found a tiny spot beside the olive trees for a stand up landing without the use of our trail rope. Luckily we had landed with a little daylight left as power lines were strung in complete chaos and would have been hard to see or anticipate at night. We had flown 1528 km in 71 hours and twenty minutes.

Our crew was below us in the town of Travira. Along the way, they had picked up two other pilots from Seville, Graeme Pusey, his wife Annete and Arturo Chamorro. They brought champagne and food and helped us pack up. Our crew had picked up McDonald's salads for us. After a long hot shower, champagne and a wonderful salad it was time for a long rest in a real bed. After three days and nights living in a small basket, these simple things brought so much happiness!

On the way back to Geneva, we stopped at the beach town of Stiges south of Barcelona. The only thing the crew and I could think about was swimming in the Mediterranean Sea. It had been such a long hot flight and chase, that the cool wa-

ter of the Sea felt wonderful. Another of Mark's Spanish pilot friends, Angel Aguirre met us for dinner that night. We had tapas and paella and shared adventures of flying balloons over the Amazon and Africa.

Back in Geneva, we attended a wonderful awards brunch and were honored to represent the USA with a third place finish. We shared stories and laughter with the other pilots. It was truly a once in a lifetime flight that I will carry with me the rest of my days.

Of course, big hugs and special thanks to our families, Randy, Franz-Joseph and his family, crew member Heiner Altena, Markus Haggene and his staff, Goodie, David Saddy for his great texts, fellow competitors, Uwe Schneider for lending us his mode S transponder, Spanish pilots, and all of you that were glued to the internet cheering and praying for us. Our beloved meteorologist John Ground was flying in our hearts as well. Love to all! Congratulations to the French and Swiss teams. It was truly a great race!



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