

Minutes of the Second Ordinary Meeting

Held on Thursday 10th November 2016

'The Transatlantic Balloon Race'

Rob Bayly, Retired BBC Producer and Director, and Balloon Pilot since 1988

Up, up and Away...

... but actually, it was more like "Come Fly With Me" when, in November 2016, Rob Bayly made his second appearance at the LMI (the first was in April 2016), this time to share his experiences co-piloting the British balloon in the first-ever successful transatlantic balloon race in 1992. This fascinating talk, illustrated with the slides Rob had taken on board throughout the race, kept the audience on the edge of their seats throughout.



Rob Bayly with co-pilot Don Cameron above the Atlantic.

Sporting a colourful waistcoat (made by his wife, a fellow balloonist) emblazoned with "His" and "Hers" balloons, Rob's account was compelling from the outset.

He started with a brief history of previous transatlantic balloon flight attempts. In all there have been 20 single attempts, resulting in five fatalities and only five balloons reaching land. From the earliest in 1837 (American crew), to the first British attempt in 1958, all ended in ditchings due to storms. Finally, in 1978 an American crew were the first to successfully make the crossing, landing in France. Nine years later, in 1987, Richard Branson was the first Briton to successfully make the first hot air balloon crossing of the Atlantic.



Mr R Bayly and Mr D Machin

Rob outlined the preparations for the 1992 attempt. Five nations – America, Britain, Belgium, Holland and Germany – competed. They flew in five identical helium/hot air balloons, sponsored by Chrysler at a cost of £250,000 each and, not surprisingly, named Chrysler 1 – 5. Each two-man crew was suspended in a bright yellow capsule designed to float, with the British pair, Rob and Donald Cameron, flying Chrysler 3. Don is a veteran balloonist and the founder of Cameron Balloons based in Bristol, home of the annual international balloon Fiesta. This was Don's second attempt, the first with co-pilot Chris Davey in 1978, failed just short of France.

The balloons were roughly the same size as standard ones but designed to use both hot air and helium gas in order to make the anticipated five-day flight. Normally balloon flights are powered by hot air and only last for around an hour; using helium, which has four times the lift of hot air, was radical and untested.

Training was rigorous, including parachute jumping in the case of fire and the time spent in the hyperbaric chamber at RAF Farnborough's Institute of Aviation Medicine, simulating the effects of hypoxia at high altitudes.

The teams waited five weeks for the good weather forecast they needed. Take-off was from Bangor on the Maine coast, just 50 miles north of Boston. While not the most easterly departure point (on the Nova Scotia coast), the location's proximity to Boston at roughly 50 miles north, ensured vital press coverage. The winning balloon would be the first to cross a metalled road in Europe.

As the sounds of each National Anthem faded the five balloons slowly took off. Chrysler 3 left the Maine coast flying at 9,000 feet and a day later they were all spreading out as they left Nova Scotia to the north. The British team were travelling at 10 to 20mph but needed to speed up if they were to safely complete the mission. Each balloon had short wave radio contact with Chrysler base in Rotterdam and, despite the competitive spirit, crews kept in touch with each other via VHS radio.

Each capsule had gas cylinders strapped around the outside, including oxygen for use above 10,000 feet. In order to find jet stream winds for speed they would could reach altitudes up to 40,000 feet where it would be very cold.

Towards the end of Day 1 Rob and Don had their first shock, a loud bang causing both balloon and capsule to jolt: not a mechanical fault, just Concorde (call sign Speedbird) 10 miles above them passing by!

Day 3, and a quarter the way across, the crews got storm warnings. Two days later and the German team was the first to get into difficulties eventually needing rescue mid-Atlantic. On Day 6 the Belgians were the first to reach Europe crossing the Spanish coast in the early hours and were declared the winners. This wonderful news was short-lived as later that day the Dutch team, heading for Ireland, hit storms off the Scilly Isles and were forced to ditch (and be rescued) just 35 miles off shore.

The British team, while relieved that their teammates were safe, realised that they were now in second place and just 100 miles from the Portuguese coast. But in the early hours of Day 7 their generator packed up necessitating turning off all equipment and just maintaining radio contact with Portuguese Air Traffic Control. Then, as the sun started to heat them, at 9,000 feet above sea level they heard ripping. Fearing the worst they donned survival suits and parachutes. As the descent continued they realised the noise was coming from ice cracking on the top causing the fabric seams to make a popping sound. Continuing their gradual descent it was apparent that the balloon was flying well. They made it to a very narrow shore, touching down with difficulty, as the front rope line hadn't been released in time. The balloon crash landed into the surf and was dragged up onto the beach.

And finally, Chrysler 5, the American team, made the longest flight of all missing Europe completely! They set the absolute duration record of 144 hours and 52 minutes, making a textbook landing in Morocco later on Day 7.

Flying with the prevailing winds from the USA to Europe, there were no fatalities or serious injuries. This was the first race of its kind. It has not been repeated.

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