



**The Degawa Cluster**  
 by Jonathan Trappe  
 photos from Jonathan Trappe

An unexpected email reached me while I was in station in the Philippines, in sunny Manila. A Japanese television travelogue specializing in unique adventures was interested in cluster ballooning! Outstanding; it so happens I am interested in the same thing.

The time-frame was short, and it was only because of Sam Parks and the ballooning community in Statesville NC that we were able to even dream of a flight. We had to find reliable people, and a solid community to support the flight; it takes a lot to get this strange aircraft off the ground! The Sam Parks Gasballon Startzplatz was perfect—a balloon port that is giving the Willie Eimers launch site in Gladbeck Germany a run for its money! (Now we just need a hydrogen pipeline.)

The cluster flight was to be pilot+1, which is very rare for a gas cluster—which in itself is a pretty darn scarce aircraft. Can anybody tell me how many flights there have been with two people? There was the Trappe/Bradley flying house in 2011 for National Geographic. Then Steve Davis and Mike Howard flew kinda together in 2001, to 17,900 MSL (according to this publication) or 18,300 MSL (according to Guinness.) Any others?

Since this was for a travelogue, we wanted to make sure to showcase the rich history and tradition of ballooning in the Statesville community where we would be flying. This naturally led us to the FireFly factory in Statesville, and a FireFly basket as the gondola of choice. The team at FireFly came through with a beautiful 4.0 basket, stripped of tanks and hoses—ready for gas ballooning.

The additional person onboard was to be a Japanese television personality by the name of Degawa Tetsuro, a



person known to 90% of the people in Japan-- or so they tell me. Not quite the Tom Cruise of Japan, though when we called him that, he kept repeating it throughout his entire visit to North Carolina. (“Toma Crruisa!” as he pointed to himself. I’m not kidding.) For the planned flight, the TV crew desperately wanted us to go “above the clouds” and continually asked how high we needed to go to reach that. I explained so many times, in so many ways—including

the example where the clouds are touching the ground. They countered, “that’s not really clouds—that’s fog.” So it goes!

We were so thankful for the opportunity. I think most gas balloonists know the current situation with helium. I look at old issues of this publication with pangs in my heart: pilots complaining about a \$1,000 gas balloon fill.....for a 35,000 cu/ft balloon. As I write this, market rates are more like \$1.00 per cubic foot --- so call it \$35k to fly a standard gas balloon with helium now. Thank goodness for the Padelt and Wörner hydrogen systems!





Only time will tell if someone someday will look back at this quote of \$1 per cubic foot...longingly.

For the flight, we had an extended team come together in the dead of night. I've never seen more calm wind conditions, for which we were thankful. Dead calm, and the balloons were amazing, scattered around the airfield; solid dead of night, nightlights—and the balloons taut on their lines, not wavering!

Now, the temperature was a bit challenging. It dropped to 24°F during the fill, which seems to be the coldest night of the year. We had die-hard balloonists out there at 2am, 3am—in sub-freezing temperatures—filling balloons! I am very aware of their dedication; thank you.

During the fill, a thin layer of ice crystals formed



on the balloons, as they were inflated across the airfield. This concerned me; we've never flown when the cells were this cold. Would the balloons become brittle in the cold? When we assembled the cluster, the balloons banged into each other, shearing off some of the ice and creating a very localized snowfall. They did not, however, pop or shatter.

I was also wondering what would happen when the sunrise came, and the ice melted off. As the balloons got lighter with melting ice, the climb could get out of control. I kept this close at mind when regulating the initial portion of the flight.

The sun did return, and the television talent, Degawa, came on board, decked out in a giant orange arctic suit—something that was actually pretty appropriate, based on the -2°F we would see at altitude! With the sunrise, we also entered into the sky!

The Firefly 4.0 basket was bristling with eight cameras, rigged to capture the flight. We were also accompanied in the air by a hot-air balloon piloted by Sam Parks, which carried the co-host for the TV show, and a camera crew. A helicopter had also been secured for the occasion; it landed in Sam's Balloonport, officially making it a heliport as well.

Sometimes I wonder how I got here. Really? Two film crews, a team of 10 or 12 from Japan, a helicopter, and me flying toy balloons to 14,000 feet with a Japanese comedian. ("Toma Cruisa!") Really? How did this all come to pass?!

But we did fly. The television persona of Degawa is essentially someone who is sent on these adventures by his producers, but he doesn't go willingly! He pretends to be afraid, and on the border of refusing to participate. On another episode, they went diving beneath the ice to see narwhales. In the air, he didn't have to pretend much; he was genuinely a little concerned! Very concerned, actually. Ok, he was pretty terrified.

At one point, I tried to demonstrate that the gondola was sturdy, and would securely hold us. I did this by jumping up and down in the basket. This was done at about 10,000 feet. This, it turns out, was a bad idea. I acknowledge this. Degawa was concerned before, terrified during, and a shaken after. Note to self: Do not jump up and down to demonstrate how strong the basket is—at least, not at altitude with a terrified Japanese man on board.

An hour and 20 minutes later had us lining up with a huge field with nice access...which I missed. A turn on the surface had me heading to a clearing surrounded by trees. I had to ballast a couple bags to keep out of



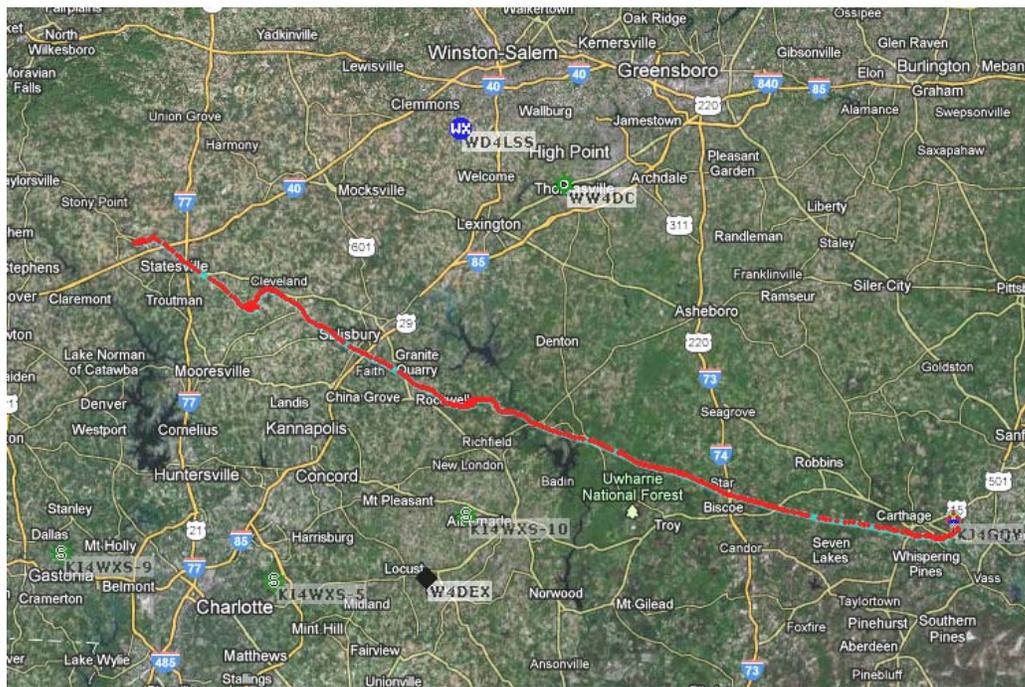
the trees, and I hope the helicopter captured the footage—should be cool watching the bags of sand drop out and disperse in the air.

After that small amount of maneuvering we came to an incredibly gentle landing! Some very surprised farmers came out to greet us, and they were even more surprised when a pickup truck full of 12 Japanese TV crew arrived on the scene! It was then that I had a great gas-ballooning moment. I swapped out Degawa for my longtime companion and frequent Crew Chief, Nidia Ramirez. The problem was we were about two or three bags light, and we didn't have spare ballast. So, the surprised farmers took empty sand bags, marched down to the river bed, and filled up bags for us with sand. With that, we were weighed off, and into the skies again!

Another question for you: do you know of a prior female gas cluster balloonist? Nidia may be the first. She and I flew for another seven hours, up to 18,000 feet, on a seriously cold day. We're from Texas, -2°F for hours freaks us out. *[Editors' Note: Beth Wright Smith flew under cluster balloons during the "Up" promotions.]*

We crossed the state, over a hundred miles together, and our approach towards Camp Lejeune and Pope Air Force Base signaled it was time to land. Technically we could have maneuvered around and over the area legally, but we were fatigued and thermals had died down enough for us to come back to the surface. As we came in for a landing, we stunned an oncoming car, then touched down on the road; we were at full stop with the corner of the basket still on the pavement. Dozens of balloons went skyward, and we were done!

Thank you again to Sam Parks, FireFly Balloons, and the ballooning community in Statesville, NC for allowing it all to happen!



*[The program will air on NTV, in Japan—and probably also at a future Carolinas Balloon Association event.]*