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Who killed James Bond?

Is this the end for MGM and its
most famous moneymaker?

By Matthew Garrahan

GHOSTS OF THE SAHARA The desert's forgotten people
JON SNOW borrows Boris's bike

First person
Jonathan R. Trappe
“I flew across the Channel
using toy balloons”



Pilot and adventurer Jonathan R. Trappe: “I was nearly overcome by emotion when I left the ground”



PEOPLE WERE AMAZED WHEN, IN MAY, I BECAME THE FIRST PERSON TO FLY ACROSS THE ENGLISH

CHANNEL under a large cluster of toy balloons. They compared me to the old guy in the movie *Up*. But this was real – there were dangers to address and it took many months to prepare.

I first became interested in this form of flight the way most people do. When you see a balloon as a child, you start to wonder, “If I just got enough of these, couldn’t I go into the sky?” You’re usually told by sensible adults that this is not possible. I’m 37 now, but when I lift off in a chair attached to a towering cluster of helium-filled balloons, I see true amazement and wonder in the eyes of children and their parents.

I’m American, and work as a technical projects manager for Accenture in Raleigh, North Carolina, but I wanted to fly the Channel because it is iconic – a classic challenge that has called to aviators for generations.

We had to persuade governmental agencies that flying toy balloons from England to France could be done safely and legally. It took years to get the full co-operation of both the US and UK aviation authorities. It would be a lot easier to do this illegally, but I am committed to safety.

The sport is not as solitary as it looks. There must have been 20 people on the airfield at Kent Gliding Club helping us that dawn in May, then another 80 specialists around the world, from our meteorologist in Wyoming to the ham radio specialists who helped us stay in touch.

The balloons are bigger, stronger versions of what you might see at a party. The wind was strong, so after filling them from helium tanks we had to tie them all over the field before bringing the cluster together for takeoff.

My crew chief is also my girlfriend, Nidia Ruiz Ramirez. As soon as I left she made for France by Eurotunnel. I’m a trained pilot. I’ve flown many times. Nevertheless, I was nearly overcome by emotion when I left the ground. Once I was free of the earth, I no longer battled the winds. When you are in the air in a balloon, the wind could be blowing at 50mph but it feels the same as 2mph. You move with the wind in silence, in tranquillity. All other aircraft make a terrible noise.

There are currents of wind at different altitudes. Balloonists steer by climbing and descending, and selecting the most favourable current. I descended by popping balloons with a knife or cutting them free, and climbed by throwing off some of my ballast water.

I was supposed to be chased by a helicopter, in case I went into “the drink”. Survival time after sudden immersion at that time of year is one or two minutes. But after two miles the helicopter was low on fuel, so it turned back to Gatwick.

Then it really was silent. There I was, all support craft and radio contact gone. My crew was in the tunnel. I was out of reach of air traffic control. I couldn’t even hear the waves until I descended to 1,000ft. I was out in the open sky – I could feel it on my skin and in my lungs.

Making landfall over the lighthouse at Dunkirk was an extraordinary feeling. Once over France, I initiated a sharp descent to avoid entering a restricted airspace at the border with Belgium. Just above the surface, I dropped ballast to reduce my speed of descent, and to clear some power lines, before releasing another batch of balloons and landing in a cabbage field a mile short of the border with Belgium. Nidia was there within five minutes. So were the police, but they were friendly.

I did not have a big sponsor. This adventure cost me many thousands of dollars. But I believe in this form of travel. With the right sponsors, I will be able to fly the Pacific.

For now, I have something to keep me warm when I’m old, and annoy grandchildren with. They’ll say: “Yes grandpa, you told us the story of the Channel already. Lots of times.”

As told to Cole Morrison.