

Celia Kunert Transcript

My name is Jennifer d'Alton, I am a Director of the British Balloon Museum and Library and I'm really excited to at last, thanks to zoom, be talking to Celia Kunert about her amazing life in ballooning and helping balloonists, so, good morning, Celia.

Good morning, Jenni

Tell me how did you get into ballooning? You don't just sort of find it in Woolworths. What do you do, what did you do?

Well, I had a stroke of good luck in so much as I started working in the control tower at Heathrow back in 1971. I was there at the same time was Pete Bish. He'd been working there a bit longer than me. And we got chatting, and he said, he had just joined a group of people who were going to buy a hot air balloon, which they did in December 1971.

Anyway, of course, as soon as they got the balloon, the 10 people who originally joined the - what was then the Dante group - were all scrambling to fly in this thing.

So in January, there was a flight set up with Alec Jenkinson, because no one had got a licence. So it was set up with Alec as the PU T. And Peter Langford was going to be the P1, the pilot in command.

So Pete said, Well, why don't you come along and have a look?

So anyway, we went down to Marsh Benham, and they were getting the balloon ready, and we ended up doing the retrieve for Alec, and Peter Langford. And then afterwards, we thought, oh, we'll just pop along to the pub.

But Peter Langford, being Peter, does things properly. And he said, No, no, we'll go to the Chequers in Newbury. So that's what we did.

We had cucumber sandwiches, and it was a grand day out. And so I thought, you know, this is really good.

So I kept going along and crewing. And eventually, in June that year, I finally got a flight.

And I flew with Don Cameron no less, who was checking out another one of our Dante members, John Emery, and I went along as a passenger.

And we sort of went on from there.

But shortly after that, I mean, everyone was as keen as mustard to fly this thing. And on one of the next flights, I think that was Alec again, he came into land and managed to drape the envelope over a barbed wire fence and made lots of little holes in it.

And of course, everyone was mortified.

So. What should we do?

They knew that I had a sewing machine, my mother was a dressmaker.

And so I got my sewing machine, and they got the balloon and dragged it up about I don't know how many flights of stairs to the top floor of a flat where Phil Dunnington's parents lived.

I don't know why we decided to go there but that's what we did.

And we had a sort of production line going with some people cutting out little round patches, and others sticking these little round patches onto the balloon fabric with I mean it wasn't balloon fabric glue, just the kind of glue you buy in Smith's and nothing special.

And then I was sitting there with a machine and I just did a row of stitching around the little circle probably about you 2 inches in diameter, something like that.

And we did this for every single hole we could find.

And those patches stayed on that balloon for quite a few years before some CofA inspectors said, you really ought to get these done properly.

But of course, by then, Pete and I decided there was a market for this kind of thing. And we'd formed Zebedee balloon service, which is still going now.

Zebedee goes back to then does it.

It does. Yes. Yes. We formed it as a partnership back in 1972. I think it says that on our headed note paper, actually, Yes. And the rest, as they say, is history.

For flights in those days when you went flying, nobody had any mobile phones or cell phones or whatever, so in those days you had a telephone number somewhere? Yes. In Jo Liddiard, or someone else to say where you were?

Pete's mother?

Yes. Because she was usually at home and, and she was quite good.

She got her pen and paper ready. And whoever got to the telephone box first, either the balloon crew or us. She wrote down where we were and then somehow linked the two. And it worked quite well. Actually.

It did, didn't it? Yeah. I remember those days.

Yes, I'm sure you do. Yeah,

So you weren't a pilot, then? Did you want to be a pilot?

Yes, it's only took me 10 years. I don't know how, well I can look it up. I've got my books here. I've got quite a lot of hours by then, it far exceeded what I needed.

And in 1981, we went to one of the Irish Meets. And I went with Pete and Elaine and can't think who else was with us. But anyway, and I did quite a lot of flying.

And then that year, I was ready for my checkout, which was done by Mike Moore, who kept sort of saying, you know, you're relying a lot on your crew. Because of course I've got half the Dante group crewing for me and they all knew what to do, I hardly had to say anything.

It was all sort of - I was a bit of a 'white gloves pilot' at that point.

Anyway off we went just the two of us, Mike and I, and he turned the burner off a few times, I knew how to relight it, thankfully that worked too, right.

I mean, it was very old technology then I can't remember which balloon it was. It could have been the second British Airways one actually by then because we did get other balloons in quick succession.

Once we got going as a group and I certainly did my solo in one of those small BA balloons a 56 with Phil Dunnington supervising somewhere around Oxford and I didn't really like flying solo .

I don't think anyone does especially to start with and once I landed I thought I'm definitely not going anywhere else I pulled the RIP like mad and the whole thing pancaked down on top of me so I was in amongst all these yards of fabric trying to get out.

Fortunately the burner didn't burn the balloon. So it all ended happily. And I think I've still got the champagne cork somewhere

Of course you have, you have to have that don't you.
So the Dante Group is about 10 or 12 then

It was 10 people originally who put 100 pounds in each. So that was 1000 and BOAC as they were then put the other 500 in because several of the group members worked for BOAC at the time and managed to get them to do a part sponsorship.

And we just went on from there really, we were carried on when they became British Airways Each time British Airways updated the colour scheme, of course, we had to have a new balloon. And each time they bought us the envelope.

Although it was always registered to Dante, so that was quite reasonably clever trick.

We went all over the world with BA for one reason or another, to promote a new service that they were opening to some far flung place.

So they did let us go to balloon meets and things that we wanted to go to. Because we in different countries, and they just produced the tickets. And in those days, we didn't have to send the balloon cargo, we just put the basket on one shopping trolley, you know, luggage trolley at the airport, the envelope and bits on the other one and just wheeled into the terminal. Went to the outer gauge baggage and the handlers there got used to us and said, 'Oh, where are you going this time?'

And they just wheeled it off. And it turned up at the other end. Which is ideal, because you know, if you send things cargo, chances are you never see them again. I

I remember watching Mike Drye, almost manhandling the basket by himself onto a trolley at Heathrow. 'Just gonna go and put this on the plane.'

Yes, that's right.

Yeah. So but, the BBAC, when that started, did you get involved with it then?

Not right at the beginning, at the beginning.

It was a bit like becoming Membership Secretary of the museum.

Really it was, you know, they needed someone as the membership secretary. And Pete said, 'Oh, you could do that.'

Good old Pete. And yeah, so I, I took it over.

And I did that for 10 years. I think it was, a long time. Yeah. Yeah.

But of course, it wasn't computerized. In those days.

I had a box of of address cards for people. And because it started off as a book, which I've still got the original BBAC membership book with Tom Sage's number one.

Yeah.

And but I thought this card system was better because it was easier to keep things in order than to just write them in a book virtually so that was my idea of computerization at the time. But because it's all very different now.

Very different. I remember my father taking over the membership of the BBM&I, and he just discovered computers. And he had to have it absolutely right. And no one was allowed to talk. He had to get everything triplicate on his live sheet.

He did a great job, I have to say, having taken over from him. It was amazing. And he still knew a lot more about mail merge than I'll ever know.

I struggle still struggle with it a bit but I didn't know anything about it at the time and I just went down to his place in Wales and he put me up for the night and gave me a hand over and a book and a box full of stuff and said off you go!

He loved it when computers were invented it was his nemesis.

Yeah.

Going back to the beginning your mother was a dressmaker you got it. Did you ever fly her?

I didn't but she flew with Joe Philp in Dream Machine. And and my father flew with Franco Segri! Would you believe it, in that thing with the registration upside down, from one of the Icicle Meets because although mum only came once and she only flew that that once, because she well she was only 77 When she died, and she was quite old when she had me, she was 43 when she had me so, you know.

That was all a long time ago and Dad was similarly, an older father.

But I mean, he loved ballooning. And he used to come along a lot to Balloon Meets and things. And he was always up for helping out and flying if possible. As you as I say, from Icicle with Franco Segri and David Liddiard

What a combination. Yeah,

No photos though..

People don't take photos, they just do just work when you go ballooning you have to put this thing together. You can't say pose?

Well, no. And I mean, it was, you know, in the days where you had a proper camera with a film in it.

You know, you didn't know what you were taking really, you just used to take some and you didn't want to take too many because you didn't want to use up all the film, then you had to trot off to Boots and send it away to get processed.

And, you know, it was so so different.

Now you can just get your phone out of your pocket. Click and it's done.

Yeah. Amazing.

Yeah. Zebedee has now been going for eight million years?

It feels like that. Yes.

Thirty years? Forty years?

1972

52 years?

Yeah.

That's a lot. Isn't it? Over half a century you have been mending balloons?

Yeah. Yeah,

I mean, to start with, I used to do the sewing. Elaine, fortunately, is a great seamstress. She makes her own clothes, that kind of thing, Pete's wife.

And she also did lots of the sewing.

To start with I took the sewing machine up to one of the meets up at Castle Howard. The Saru balloon group took it up in their van, because they felt that they might need it.

And I have I've got a picture of Robin Batchelor standing there looking at us unpicking Prize Yoghurt.

I think it was prior to doing a few repairs in the on site

On site. Wow

That worked quite well.

But then, you know, we, Elaine, and I didn't really want to continue with the sewing.

So in 1999, we employed Claire, who's still working for us now.

And she is absolutely brilliant. Better than I'll ever be.

So but you also, it's not just mending balloons Zebedee, it's everything else that goes with it.

Yeah, yeah, I mean, we did a lot of buying and selling for people on a sort of commission basis to start with.

But really, that got more and more difficult as the years went on, particularly with the advent of EASA because there's so much paperwork now.

And you know, all the i's have to be dotted and the T's crossed.

And it's all very well to say, well, it should be like that it should be regulated.

But I don't think any of that was really done as a reaction to any safety issues. It was just trying to push balloons into the same square hole as Airbus, Boeing and everyone else. Yeah. That made things very difficult.

And because half the time people would leave stuff with us, and it wasn't ready to sell.

No, we had to get it up to scratch.

And then you've got to find someone to do the work. And it just got increasingly more difficult over the years.

So we've more or less, more or less given that side of it up now. But we still have our shop in the barn. And we still sell all the ballooning bits and pieces. You know, larger stuff like envelope bags and burner bags and all the sort of things that Claire makes and books and spares and all that stuff. We still do that side of it. And of course we've got the Zebedee list. Our little Exchange and Mart publication.

Very, very important.

I mean you when you got your licence, going back to fly. Did you have any really awful flights that you wish you'd never actually taken off in the first place. Oh,

I don't know, really. There were a few times when I thought I need to get this thing on the ground type of thing. You know, you take off and the forecast says the winds going to do this. And when it comes to it that it picks up and but I can't think of any real horror stories.

What about brilliant ones, you must have had some brilliant flights landing and they rushed out giving you champagne and things.

Well, my best flight ever was when we took one of the BA balloons to China. And we ended up flying over the Great Wall.

And we went out to the wall, we went out to the Great Wall to do tethers at about five o'clock one morning, it was a balloon meet organized by a Japanese group of pilots.

And they had got permission to do one flight from the wall.

And anyway, this particular morning, we'd been there a few days. I think we had flown once before that.

And anyway, we were all bussed out to the wall at Beigou and inflated our balloons.

I can't remember how many balloons were there, but quite a few. And they said, Okay, you know, you can bob up and down on the tether until half past seven.

But at half past seven, the tourist buses arrive because we were actually in the carpark and so you must bring the balloons down then and pack them away.

Anyway, of course, before it got quite to half past seven, people were thinking, 'Well, you know, the winds in the right direction', because we were just given a a corridor, quite a narrow corridor down which we had to fly, which is no mean feat when you can't steer the thing really.

And but it was looking good.

And at this moment, they came round and said 'Look, you've either got to go. Or you've got to deflate'.

Rog and I was standing in the basket. He hadn't got his licence then but I'd got mine. And we kind of looked at each other.

Our crew were somewhere taking photos don't know where they were.

And we said, right, let's go for it. So we threw the tether ropes off, burned like hell. And off we went.

And there were a few open mouths on the ground, particularly from the Cathay pilots, because we had said to them before, we weren't going to fly.

And one of them yelled up, you said you weren't gonna fly.

And then it was too late. Because it was gone half past seven And that was that.

And, and so then we found ourselves that I don't know how high we were, we were quite high because one of the problems flying out there was that the fuel that they gave us wasn't pure propane, as we were used to. It was a propane butane mix. And the burner really didn't like it. It was a very sooty flame.

And it kept whistling to itself and making weird noises.

And I thought, oh gosh, this thing's gonna stop in a minute.

So I kept doing little burns just to make sure it was still good.

So we ended up being quite high but then you know when you suddenly look round and see the Great Wall of China sneaking off into the distance I never seen anything quite like it. I can still see it in my mind's eye now. But it was amazing.

And anyway we flew down this narrow corridor as luck would have it where there was nowhere to land, it was a gorge really. And it was very wooded and there was virtually nowhere to land if you had to.

And we flew and flew on for about an hour, it must have been half an hour forty minutes something like that, before the ground sort of gave way to a flat area and bit of grass and it And we said, Right, okay, we've survived this far, let's get this thing on the ground.

So we selected our landing spot, and ended up just jumping over a great big crater on the ground that was half full of water, which we later found out was where the local army had dropped a bomb at some point.

And we landed in the Army tank range, which we had been told not to do.

And we thought, oh, you know, we're here now, we survived. Wonderful.

And then we look round and there's this little platoon of about a dozen Chinese soldiers marching over the horizon towards us with guns.

We thought, oh, okay, how's this gonna go?

So, fortunately, we had been given a letter in I don't know if it's Cantonese, or, or what, but in local language that they could all understand.

To explain who we were and what we were doing. So we whipped out this letter and gave it to the man in charge, and he had a read and looked around. And okay, he got a measure of this, he knew what was going on.

So he dispatched Rog off with one of his men on the back of a motorbike and left me with the rest of them. And I sort of said, well, you know, pack the balloon up, kind of gesticulating and, and they said, no, no, no, you know, stand aside.

And they, they packed the balloon up for me, put it in the bag, put the envelope in the bag, tied it up nicely, and presented at my feet, and all saluted.

Wow.

And then, because I had no idea where Roger was, anyway, he was taken back to the guardhouse and offered some tea, which he didn't really like the look off but and then gradually worked out that they were thinking they had to get a vehicle to come and get us. They hadn't realized that we had our own retrieve somewhere out there. Anyway, after a little while, our retrieve that was Mike Drye, and his wife Viv turned up in our vehicle.

And, of course, it all became clear then so they trundled off with this lot came and picked us up.

Great Adventure. Yeah,

It was yes. Yeah, it was. It was quite amazing.

So we found a local restaurant met up with all the others and celebrated with some who had flown and commiserated with the others who hadn't.

And sitting outside this restaurant on the corner of a busy junction. I don't know, because we weren't in Beijing, we were in a place called Chang ping, which was very communist at that point.

They weren't really familiar with Westerners let alone Western balloonists. And so we were a bit of a curiosity.

And yeah, so we celebrated our, our victory and that was it. We did fly again from there, we flew from the bus station, I think it was, but we didn't go back up to the wall again. So I think it has been done again since then. But not very much. Got that there. Yeah, can't be that many people and it did get in British Airways Highlife.

That must have tickled them.

But they never really capitalized on the publicity side of things. Sometimes the outstations did, but I don't know, I suppose it didn't really cost them much to have us as publicity.

We did to start with, we did quite a bit in the UK, which we weren't very keen on.

They had this thing called the Flying Circus. And we were part of that.

But it was just tethers in the UK, which were pretty boring.

But once we got abroad was a different story. And we went all over the world.

We were so lucky.

We went to places that we wouldn't normally have visited. I mean, I went as far as Tasmania, I think was the furthest I did.

But you know, others went all over the place of South Africa. We went several times.

Which was, of all the countries you've flown in, which must be brilliant. Have you got a favourite?

Yeah, South Africa. Really? Yeah, well, I've got an affection for South Africa anyway, because I've got family out there.

But it's just a lovely place to fly. And we went to several of the nationals that they held out there at the time.

And the local guys didn't really know what to make of us.

I mean, Terry Adams was out there at the time when we first started well, in fact, the whole way through thinking about it, Terry was always there.

And I had been out to visit my relations out there and had flown with him in his Western balloon that he had up there with him years before, and we continue going out to the balloon meets, John and Jane Crawford came with us most of the time, but we took other people with us as well with the BA balloon, and they, they thought we were going to be very competitive and all the rest of it. And then when they realized that we were just a lot of part timers who were just having a bit of a laugh.

They got to like us. So I still keep in touch with some of them now.

There was a couple out there, Mike and

Jeanette van Ginkel.

Yes, yeah, I remember meeting them. They he drove his Rolls Royce all the way through England, didn't he?

That's right. Yes, he did.

Because he got stuck going up the mountain to see my parents in Pembrokeshire. The cattle grids weren't quite wide enough for Rolls Royce's.

Yeah. I flew with Mike in Turkey around.

Yeah. Yeah. many people from all around the world. I think it's a wonderful sport to be involved with.

Yes, it is. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I mean when we were in it . Now, it was either Zimbabwe or Zambia, one of the two where we did get stoned by the locals.

We had landed.

I think it was Zambia. Because Rog was flying with a local radio man who did his radio broadcast from the basket as they were going along.

And when he landed, we weren't actually there to start with as a retrieve.

The BA lady drove us as a retrieve. And when we got there were lots of local people and they started throwing stones. So we had to pack up pretty sharpish and go, we drove away, they were still throwing stones at us.

That's Incredible!

Obviously they thought we were dangerous in some way, shape, or form.

Yeah, well, yeah.

So is there's anything you'd like to do balloon wise, you haven't done yet. And we are not into your You enjoy it. But you're not into record breaking as far as I can see.

No, we haven't. Nobody in the group has really been interested in the competition side of things. To be honest. It doesn't really do it for us. We are now I mean, I don't really P1 anymore, but, but I go flying with Pete regularly.

And I take it in turns with our crew to fly, which I still love.

Yeah. So I mean, I did have my own balloon out in South Africa at one point.

I took a British balloon out.

Did you?

Yeah. Yeah. Once.

Once, it became more difficult to get tickets from British Airways to take their balloon. I thought, well, you know, I don't really want to stop flying out there, because we had got to know everyone then. And so I bought a balloon, a second-hand one, of course, through Zebedee, and shipped it out there.

And it lived at my cousin's in Johannesburg.

And Crispin Williams used to go out in those days, and he used to do the CofA for me each year, because that was on the British register.

And yeah, and we did that for several years.

We flew that and then got to the stage where, you know, 'we'd been there, done that, got the Tshirt, so I sold it to a local guy who was getting going out there ballooning And he actually

unpicked the whole balloon. And he redid all the fabric. Because by then it was getting a little bit of an old lady.

Wow. So labour of love.

Well, yeah. But he made a lovely job of it. And it's now - it was it was pink and all sorts of funny colours when I had it. But now it's black and yellow. Stripes, horizontal stripes, and he calls it Bumblebee. We called it Lulu. Mainly because the person we bought it from was Lulu, a woman called Lulu Hutley if you remember that name, but anyway, no, it was her balloon. And so we decided we would call it Lulu.

Makes sense

Lulu.

Well, I you've got many more having fun times because you've got your own balloon the pair of you haven't you and Rog?

Yeah, we have. We don't fly that much. But we've have still got it.

Yeah. I can't thank you enough for spending all this time despite zoom messing us around.
Yeah,

yeah. It almost stopped us to start with, but we got there in the endt there in the end. I hope that's okay.

It is and thank you. Celia it is absolutely wonderful.
Celia Kunert, star of flying around the world.