

Jennifer d'Alton interviews Crispin Williams.

So Sara said, This is what you're going to do and she planted the seed of you both ballooning. Or did you just saying 'I'll just do it' to shut her up?

Well, we thought it'd be a long way away. But shortly after that, as Sara recounted, our little aeroplane got blown upside down.

Oh, yes. God you must have been so worried

That's that's true. I was in Singapore at the time. Yeah, and I think Sara managed to phone, Yes, she sort of phoned me up. It was very difficult then to make long distance calls, but she phoned me up cos I was staying in a hotel and said 'other people's wives phone up and say that the car's been damaged. Well, in this case, it's the aircraft.

Fortunately, she and Hugh John, who was with her, were OK. Well, I don't know. We had fairly exciting times then, so this was just another little bit of a saga,

But you lost your little Auster.

So we lost the Auster, yes, and then we looked for another aeroplane, but we couldn't find one in our price bracket that we thought we could run. And so I joined a group flying this aircraft called the Thruxton Jackaroo, and we flew around in that a bit.

That was a sort of four seat Tiger Moth. It was about as fast as a sponge, but it was a lot of fun.

And it was when walking back from one of these flights, walking up the field, that this American came down, bounding down the other way to speak to the guys with and to ask him to print some commemorative covers. And I looked over the printer's shoulder, being a nosy guy, and there was a picture of the Bristol box kite, which is an airplane based at Old Warden, and a balloon. And so after this conversation had finished, and they made a deal on doing some covers.

I then chatted this fellow, who was Jesse, Jesse Manning, and he was the founder of this balloon group that we subsequently joined.

Why was he in England?

He was American forces, and he was based at Chicksands which was a, I think it's actually a submarine base in the middle of the UK, where they had long range communications with submarines. So he was there, and I think he was a telephone operator or something like that, but he'd come from Albuquerque, and

he had developed this love of ballooning, and so he decided that he would form this balloon group, so it's completely him and lots of locals he encouraged to join.

So he told you about the group, did you actually go and see his balloon then?

No, no, he had no balloon. He and this group had ordered a balloon from Camerons, and it was going to be delivered in three weeks' time, and the club was selling shares in the balloon, and he said they got two shares left, and they were £75 each. So I rushed home, no mobile phones then, and told Sara, and she said, we're having them, and that was it. So we paid the money up the next day, we still have the check, because checks used to be returned then and the balloon arrived, I think, three and a half weeks later to Old Warden.

Had Jesse Manning ever flown a balloon in Albuquerque, or is this all of you learning at once?

We all learnt all we all learnt together. No, he, he'd been in a balloon once, I think, as a passenger, but that was it. And nobody there. None of our group had ever flown before. So it was, it was the blind leading the blind.

Excellent stuff. And this is on an open day, so you've got members of the public.

Yeah, we had the balloon in in a corner of old Warden, and all our members. Then we must have been 80 something like that, large number of people, and we sat around. We couldn't do anything until the air show finished. And then we start. Inflated the balloon, and there was another balloon there, the Eight of Hearts balloon, and they inflated and flew first, and then we took off behind them, or our balloon took off behind them.

So who I mean? You had to learn how to retrieve and as you say, No. Mobile phones then.

It was, yeah, telephoning base people.

It was completely basic, right? We knew nothing about ballooning. We were as though we looked at some ballooning magazines, but it was as though you took a dozen people off the street and said, Okay, you're going to be balloonists now. And that's what we did.

And the balloon took off. Jesse Manning, Don Cameron flew it because he was the big expert. Don Cameron, Jesse Manning and a couple of others, and they flew off. And when, when they flew off, I hopped into our little Thruxton Jackaroo and flew a television guy around the balloon.

Oh, wonderful.

And took video, you know, one hand flying with the other hand. And so that was fantastic. And then I've come back and landed, and I knew where the balloon was, and Sarah goes, rushed off to find it, and it had gone. We didn't understand that. When you pack them up, they put them back in the bag again. Didn't even know that.

So we couldn't find it. We came back again. Nobody returned. All these people had vanished, and the reason none of them came back was that we had no retrieve vehicle. We didn't know you needed a retrieve vehicle. We were that ignorant.

So Don hopped out. They had a glass of bubbly. He hopped in his car with Tom Sage and vanished. And they stood at the side of the field going, how do we get back? And so the balloon spent two days in the field, the public. And where from the public were based, the Greyhound bought a van, and we put the balloon in the van, and now we started and from there we learned it was on a steep learning curve, wonderful.

A balloon sitting a field for two days. Really, incredible. So when did you start getting serious and learning? How did you learn?

Really, really quickly. We all - Don Cameron gone home. Jesse Manning phoned Don up the next day and said, I think we know we sought out how we're going to get the balloon back. Are you going to come up and teach us to fly? And Don said, no, no, it's much too far away, but I'll give you a name. They gave us the name of Chris Chappell, who was then lived 25 miles away, and said, I'm sure that he'll help you. And we decided that he would, and he did. He he flew every day, every evening that was flying, flyable, and twice every day, at the weekend, we gave him no choice.

So then you you've got, you also still doing your fellows and RAF stuff.

Well, it was easier that it would be on an RAF station, because I was working a regular, pretty regular, nine to five job, essentially with with a fair amount of free time. And so it was easy for me to make plans during the day, and then we'd tell no on hard phones. We'd telephone for around people. We got so many enthusiasts. We've got a dozen or 14 who are bought into the balloon. But we had a lot of social members, and they all wanted to fly, because part of their deal for paying, I forget, 10 pounds or something, was that they would get a flight in the balloon. So we were never, ever short of crew, brilliant. And we frequently have 20 turn up. Was quite normal.

Did Sara fly? Did she learned to fly at the same time as you

Well, doing it together. It was all in a very compressed time, as we slowly wore him out, but as soon as he was finished, he would push off, as indeed he did and and we would have to fly. And this was a real pressure, because we knew that we had to qualify quickly. Somebody had to I was mad keen. Everybody else was mad keen. Mike Drinkwater was also mad keen. So we decided the best way to do it, for really convenience, was to divide the club in half. And he would look after half. I would look after half. We did alternate days, so and morning. I'd do perhaps Saturday morning and Sunday morning, and he'd do Sunday evening or Saturday evening, Sunday evening, and we would organize the balloon if it would rush around and it would fly at every available opportunity, but it gave everybody a bit of a break apart from Christian.

He loved ballooning and he loved flying. VIPs. Would tell you all about his latest VIPs.

10.43; We all need a VIP. Absolutely. Um, so going on from there, you can't have been at RAF Thurlleigh for long. You moved on, and Sara seemed to have been flying balloons? Was it Stars and Bars all over the country?

Well, it was Stars and Bars was our group balloon, although by the time we left, we had, I think, five balloons. So developed, well, we did over 100 hours in the first year and qualified six pilots. So the enthusiasm was unbounded. But we then moved for a short time to Norwich, and then I went to Cranwell, and so we knew we were going away, so we had to buy a balloon.

So we went out and we found one balloon that we liked very much, but then I flew with him, and the guy enjoyed the flight said, No, don't think I'll sell it, after all.

So we ended up with Sloe gin. We call it Sloe gin. It was previously called Diaphanous, but we couldn't deal with that .

Sloe gin as in the drink,

Sloe gin as in the drink, yes, but, but a gin is it is a genie that's supposed to steal your heart.

Yeah, that was the link.

So we bought this balloon, we bought a really strange trailer, and we headed off early In the 70s, still no mobile phones or anything sensible like that. And and we, we, we were wanderers, really. We're living up in Doncaster. We had some very good contact balloonists in York. So we used to fly up there a bit, or they'd come down to us. And we just flew whenever we could right? Well,

how long all the ballooning your girls are growing up all the time? Were they helping, your two daughters?

Well they always came with us. They were helping or not. Emma was very big and involved to start with, and then she sort of backed off as she got older. And then she came back really into ballooning when she was about 16, because by that time, she was off at school, boarding school, and she found out that other people didn't. So I remember very clearly her coming out with us once, I think we were in Germany, and she said, I'm going to learn to fly. Now. Will you teach No, that was it. So she then got deeply involved with it.

Amy did some flying a little bit after that. But she, she was particularly interested in cloud hoppers. So she did quite a little bit of flying on tether on Cloud hoppers. And we built a basket with a low burner frame so she could fly that as well. And she was very nearly sent on solo by Gerry Turnbull, well, because he was an examiner then, and we'd been doing, or she'd been doing some tethering with him supervising, and he said, I think it's about time we sent you off solo. It's a shame it's quite so late in the evening.

So she missed that opportunity, and then never went solo, unfortunately, or hasn't it yet?

So you were out in Germany. Did you take your balloon out there?

Yes, we took the balloon as well.

We did quite a bit of ballooning in Germany with quite a lot of German pilots, by this time, we've got a license. So Sara was off instructing as well. Wow. Remember her coming back one evening, she phoned me up at home and said, come and pick me up. And this wretched fellow who got himself completely lost, and then he'd huffed off with his friends, and she was stranded, so I had to go and pick her up. But we had lots of adventures out there. We had lots of ballooning friends in Germany, including Mussi Buchemeyer, who ran his Gaver fluid company down in Aachen. We were based at Rhine, so we were close by. We did quite a lot

They were a wonderful crowd of young men and women, just they were lovely.

They're a different group of people, balloonists. There's something that links everybody together. I think, yeah. So you're What did you do then? Because by then you must be coming to the end of your RAF time, weren't you?

Yeah, yes. But by that time, we'd done a lot of competition flying. I'd won the Nationals a couple of times. I got the English Rose balloon, which we flew quite a lot. Yeah.

How did you get the English Rose balloon? Isn't there a story there?

Oh, there is a bit of a story. Yes, because we had the British team select, and then the first nationals, our first national championships, and Don Cameron had sold this balloon to English Rose kitchens, and he was flying it for them at the nationals. The world champions were going to be championships were going to be later in that year, and if he qualified for the team, then he'd have flown it in that event. But unfortunately, he didn't qualify. I think he came fifth or sixth, and one too far for down the too far down the list. So they wanted somebody else to fly it. And Don suggested that I took on the contract. So we did. And English Rose were lovely, nice people, but we didn't get a free kitchen. Oh,

That's a shame. Yes, so and you had English Rose, did you have something to do with Leeds Holbrook? No,

Yes, yes, we, we've got, where was this? Where are we that was, that was a little bit later after we come back from Germany, and we were like, I may have got that one a little bit back front, but we were that was when we were Living in Doncaster,

Clark, ... and Sara prompt me-I can't remember. Anyway, the third person, John Hallam got together with the Leeds and Holbeck building society. They decided they want a balloon, and so Sara, John and Adrian then flew this balloon for Leeds and Holbeck balloons building society and that, of course, went round lots of shows and lots of events that they wanted to go to, mostly based in the Midlands, but some other places as well.

Were you left at home with the girls, or did you go with them?

No, if I was there, I'd go as well, but the girls were always out with friends. The girls had a strange upbringing, and we've always tended to do this as a as a family pastime.

It's quite difficult to get them up in the morning, isn't it?

Sometimes you it's so you've got so what happened when you left Doncaster area? Where did you go then?

Where'd it go after that, we are going to have to do this by sequence. We were in Doncaster We were in Bedford. I'd really done the Conningsby time. Then I went down Bedford. Where did we go after Bedford? Do we go to Germany? Farnborough. Farnborough fits in some way.

I went down to Farnborough and was working for the Institute of aviation medicine as their air crew specialist. And that was a fairly fallow time for

ballooning. I think I flew a couple of times down there. Nearly flew into London Control Zone. But really it wasn't a balloon friendly area, so we didn't do much balloon there, and ballooning was at weekends at home.

Another tour on phantom second tour on phantoms, this time from Wattisham, and we moved down to just outside RAF Wattisham and lived there, and then we did lots more ballooning with a new group of friends

And with a new group of friends. And that was that was fabulous, because we we met some people who literally lived down the road, and their two families, and our family got together, and we went all over the place. And then we got another balloon for now go and and Sara. And in fact, mostly it was Sara and June Edwards and Maggie Scott who took this balloon around the country and had an unreasonable amount of fun.

But going back to you, are you as an awful lot of ballooning in years? You've just got any incredibly exciting times or like flying the channel or going across the North Sea?

I mean, the museum has benefited by having from you, an embarrassment of trophies. An embarrassment of trophies, just so many. Yes, you must have had some really exciting competitions.

Well, the most exciting one was with Christopher Davey, and we flew across the North Sea in the most ridiculous of flights. He and Don Cameron had taken over the Heineken balloon, possibly Jim Howard as well, when the Heineken contract came to an end, and so they had this balloon literally lying around. And Christopher David persuaded the Crest Hotel do was to do an epic flight.

He previously almost flown the Atlantic Don Cameron, and they got almost within sight of France. It's a sadness that they didn't get across, because then we would have two knights of the realm. They would have got knight if the Queen spoke to them from Concord as she was flying over there, but flying to the United States, and she said to one of her equerries, if those brave young men get to France, we must knight them. Wow. Fortunately, they didn't get quite get there. It's a shame.

But so he was good at long distance flying. He he persuaded the Crest hotels that this is what they need to do. He had experience flying the Heineken balloon and and so he sold, sold them a deal which lasted for a couple of years. And this, we flew this big Heineken balloon, the last time it flew as Heineken.

That was a real laugh. And then he took HAD, Once he got the contract, he got his army lads to take all the artwork, Heineken artwork off, and put the Crest hotel artwork on.

And then we organized ourselves for this flight. And the total amount the Crest hotels paid was 5000 pounds. So there was no money in it, really. But it was an adventure. We so we had this old balloon. It was really quite old. It was all made out of regular nylon. It was porous. It was a bit of a sadness. But we decided we're going to fly the North Sea in big isn't it? I mean, as you do, need to do it. And he, he found a, he found a basket that used to belong to ICI and so off we set, on this North Sea adventure .

Where did you take off?

We took off from just outside Hull, where the new bridge goes over the river was just being put in there. So we took off from the Crest hotel.

There was a bit of a shambolic take off, because we inflated it the first time, only to find that we were getting blown down the field because we hadn't fixed it to anything, because we didn't realize that's what you had to do with a big balloon. And we got no fuel on board, so the balloon was very light, and all these soldiers couldn't hold on to us, so we collapsed the balloon, and Christopher and I and everybody else went off for dinner, as you do, leaving the army to move it downhill. So they picked it all up, moved it downhill, no mean feat into a more sheltered area. And once we'd had dinner, we inflated it again, really, yes, and this time we succeeded. We got it standing up. Still wasn't fixed on to anything. And then, with the balloon standing up, quite squishy and soft, we then attached all these fuel cylinders around the outside. And these, these were the big red fuel tanks it into propane tanks or you use for your heating at home. So we hung those around the outside, about 38 of them and then took off into the night, as you do it.

Good Heavens!

Yes, so and we were well fed before we took off. This is part of the the Crest hotels event, they carried down a vast amount of food in boxes, because Christopher's a great trade. He loves eating his great pleasure. And we'd sat previously and discussed what would eat on this flight in a sort of jokey way that got a bit out of control. They took it semi seriously. So we had a box of 50 avocados and an immense amount of other stuff, smoked salmon and 10 loaves of bread.

So we were in this long basket. He was at one end, I was at the other end. We couldn't reach each other. The food was all packed in the middle. So this was an unexpected load of probably a quarter of a ton of food, which any sane person would say, No, no, we won't take that. But we didn't.

So it was all piled on board, brought down the hill by the chef at the White House.

I hope there were photographs.

Well, if there are, I haven't got them. I've got a photograph of the balloon as it vanished into the distance, because we weren't terribly well organized, and we took off, and we consumed an enormous amount of propane, very, very fast. We didn't think that. We thought to start with that we wouldn't actually make it into daylight. So we went up to eight and a half thousand feet, and we flew down the UK, going south east in a sort of uncontrolled fashion, but it was a nice, clear night, so we could see the coastline and we could see what we were doing, and that got us over the sea. And heard from the Civil Aviation Authority to drop, would you believe it, these red fuel tanks,

Yeah, well, we had had written permission from them. We had to draw them, drop them, usually a clear rain range procedure. So you had to come down make sure there's nobody underneath you, and then you could drop them. And these, these cylinders each, I don't know, two and a half feet wide.

Were in two banks all the way around the basket. So as we consume the fuel, Christopher was in charge of the burning, I would climb out and sit on them in a row of tanks and reconnect the fuel hoses to the ones the next tank along. And then when we decided to drop these tanks, we used a pair of bolt croppers and simply cut the wire and it vanished. So we dropped about 20 of these in the North Sea,

So it was going up and down. Every time one drops, the balloon go up a little bit, got a bit of free lift.

So we drop all these and then we came in across the Netherlands. And just as we got to the Netherlands, it started to cloud over underneath us. We saw the coast to start with, and then we could just see the light through the cloud.

And on we blundered, and we talked to the civilian air traffic controllers, not to the military, because the civilians were in charge of that bit of airspace, and they let us through everything. That was absolutely great. And then we got down towards Luxembourg.

We're now getting planning for where we're going to land. And that was really difficult. To break the record, you have to exceed the record by 2% and we worked out that at sunset we would be at the record, or just over it, so that's when we were going to come down.

But we didn't know from where we were, what the cloud base was, and it's pretty hilly. So I was in charge of radio. So I talked to the American air base at Bitburg, and an air traffic control within the American Air Force is not quite as well disciplined as is within the Royal Air Force.

So they didn't really, they couldn't really help me. Have they got a weather forecast?

No, we haven't got a weather forecast. However, he said, I've got two aircraft taking off, a couple of phantoms going back to the UK. I'll get them to call back the cloud base as they go into it, essentially.

So that's what they did, and they came back with a cloud base. And the cloud base of Bitberg was 300 feet, which is fine, except the hills were going into a more than 300 feet higher than Bitburg, my God. So we then had a really difficult decision, what do we do? Do we do the prudent thing and come down a little bit early, having broken the record, and come down in the semi darkness anywhere where we were, but we knew, in that case that the cloud went to the ground. That was a difficult decision, and we decided not to do that. We thought that was a little foolish.

But we were crossing the Moselle Valley. We were at right angles the Moselle Valley, so we decided that what we'd do would come down in the valley, which, with luck, wouldn't be full of cloud.

So we entered the cloud about 6000 feet. We knew the cloud base was pretty well, probably about 1000 feet above sea level. And we went slowly down planned rate of descent, three or 400 feet, a minute down in this great big balloon. And we were very fortunate. We we came out in the center of the Moselle Valley, where it was about three miles wide, left to right as we travelled on. So we got the planning of the descent absolutely Right, so we broke out of the cloud.

32.22 Christopher was really impressed, because he thought this was all down to my navigation skills.

Well, of course it was,

That and a big bucket full of good fortune. So we came out, we broke out there, and that's fine. Now we realized we had to find a landing site, and as in all valleys, the wind blows up it or down it, one way or the other. And we hope that we'd turn right and our distance would increase, our distance from our take up place. But unfortunately, it turned left and so it decreased. It was just sods law.

But the really, really strange thing is, as we broke out of cloud, Sara was doing the retrieve, along with a few others, was sitting there in the car, and the balloon arrived

Absolutely, truly miraculous. She'd had no radio as before. She crossed the channel and done two press conferences and said, I think we go to the Moselle Valley. And there we were, my God, so that was we were, we didn't know, so I was then there, because we hadn't got an air band radio that we could talk to her on.

So there, there, Sarah and Debbie are now driving up, up the valley, following us. And we came down low. Looked for somewhere to land, but the Moselle Valley is well known for having vineyards in it, that everywhere was vineyard. And we were discussing, can we we're going to have to land in these vines?

I don't really think we can do that with which we realized that we were actually flying straight towards rock face, because the valley is quite fairly wide, but there are a number of big protuberances that come out into it. So we, we flew up to this we couldn't find anywhere to land before.

So it's 1000 feet up into the cloud. We'll go up into the cloud, we'll we'll wait for five minutes, and then we'll come down again, and hopefully we'll have missed it.

So that's what we did. We went into the cloud, climbed up, went up 1000 feet, sat there, talking quietly between ourselves, and said, Okay, now it's time to come down. We let it cool, we came back down again, and there, smack in front of us was the rock face. We thought there's no wind of the cloud. Oh, but fortunately, that wasn't the case.

What had happened was that as we went into the cloud, the balloon had rotated 180 degrees, and when we came down, we were looking at the rock face on the other side. But we did decide then that this was about the time we put it on the ground. Came down low and this basket, this basket was very light, the whole balloon very light we thrown all these cylinders away. This was a one end of the basket like the other. And we discussed it.

We decided whoever was closer to the ground as we approached it was first pilot, and the other guy would do what he was told. This is what we did. So I were coming down, looked as though I was going to do the landing. I was getting ready for it, chatting to Christopher over my shoulder, when the balloon turned round, absolutely he was in charge now, and it's blowing, I don't know, 10 or 15 knots, so it's quite a breeze, quite fast. Yeah, and he'd seen a little clearing. Could have put it in the clearing. But unfortunately, God said, No, you're not going to land there. You're going to land a little bit earlier.

So the basket touched the ground at the where there were some 15 foot high, Poles supporting the vines. The basket stopped dead. The envelope went on. The basket went vertical, so I'm now 12 feet off the ground, holding on like crazy, but now horizontal, and we'd try to open, but they wouldn't open because the balloon was so soft.

So I was holding off the rope handle. I tied my line onto that, and was about to do something when, when one of these red cylinders, which was the force of the basket tipping over, had been flicked up in the air. One of these wretched cylinders, came down and hit me on the chest and knock me straight down through the other end of the basket, out. And then I was run over by this basket, and the remaining cylinders. Oh, my God, I was unconscious there.

The balloon vanished, and I picked myself up, came round, picked myself up, looked and here's Christopher Davie, now a couple of kilometers further away, and the balloon coming down quickly because I've tied off the rip line. It has opened as the balloon extended as we landed, and I can see him plummeting to the ground. So I rushed out of the road, stopped the passing German and said, Go to that.

Do in this car. Christopher Davie lands real jumble in the yet another vineyard. He thinks that he's killed me because the last time he saw me, it was me landing on the ground with this big steel cylinder on top of me unconscious.

So he stops a German and drives around the other way. So he gets to my where I was, and I'm not there. I get to where he was and he isn't there. So I can only assume that he's fallen out.

Oh, anyway, and then Sara's there, so we're all flummoxed as Christopher hit the ground, he looked to his left and he saw Sara. So this is the last person I want to see, because I think I've killed her husband.

Anyway, we put all we've put all this, made it safe, made the balloon safe. And we, as well as Sara and a few others. We had quite a few crew down there, and this is a chief of the police from the local area. And he speaks to Christopher, who speaks good German, and explains that what, or ask what the hell we're doing there, basically, and that they'd had no work.

This is, this is a sort of un-German thing to do. So he proceeded to arrest us, and we were sorry, and I were arrested, taken off to the prison, Sara and the others, packed up the balloon. And so that was a good thing. We've got out of the packing up, and we were taken off to prison. So we're sitting in the prison.

We're in our immersion suits or we're looking all really strange. And Christopher's talking to this chief of police would call a criminal rat, which seems a little strange, and he got us.

First of all, we started off with a cell, and we got a cup of coffee and things, and then we're taking up being interviewed by him criminal rat desk. When there's a bang on the door and another policeman sticks his head through, and then he's followed by John Suchet from News at 10.

So John such a walks in with a with a cameraman with a camera on his shoulder, and they've been following us, and they'd spoken to us from an airplane when we were just approaching Luxembourg. So we had seen them before.

We'd told them roughly where we thought we're going to land, and then they'd legged it over there somehow they found out where we were. So John such a comes in, and he now he's interviewing the policeman. He was interviewing us, at which stage the police went. Too difficult. This is too difficult.

So John Suchet got us out of prison. Wonderful. So that was wonderful. And our boat had now been packed away, and it was on the back of a trailer behind a tractor, and we all went down to the town, and we must say, we had a damn good party. Really, really good party.

But you didn't break the record.

We failed to break the record by about one kilometer, really, but there we are. We had had the most enormous adventure, really, all of us, incredible adventure. And then the next day, we recovered fairly slowly, but I think we're downstairs having breakfast. When this farmer came in, he was the guy who owned the vineyard that we'd landed in.

He felt much better when we told him we were heavily insured. This is fantastic.

Now they all the sponsors have arrived, so they want to go down to the vineyards it was going on. So they bought pretty well his whole crop in bottles, and they sold it, made an enormous profit out of it. He got a bit of insurance money and everything. Everybody was happy, yeah, really happy, until we got home.

What happened there?

Well, I think two weeks after, we got back, I was at work down on the squadron flying as normal, when I was summoned in by my boss, who said, we've had a complaint from the Germans that you, when you're flying your balloon, violated their airspace and so on. We said, no, no, we put in a flight plan. It was all filed correctly with their traffic control and produced a copy of it that afternoon, and so

that then scuttles up the hierarchy within the Royal Air Force, and then it scuttles down the other side. It turns out that this flight plan was correctly filed. It had passed all the way on and but it hadn't been passed on to Germany.

They didn't know?

They were one of the recipients. And the other problem was, anyway, the Germans were then happy, because they accepted that somewhere there'd been a breakdown in communication. But when we've been flying over the Netherlands, we've been over, flown around us and gone back down again, and I said to Christopher, there's a story there. And it turned out there was a story on the military radar, it tracks everything that you can see and or things they can't see, but the radar can see, but often they've switched a thing called an MTI moving target indicator. What they do is they put in the wind speed to and by doing that, they can take out any cloud so the screen looks clearer. That's absolutely fine. But in addition to taking out the cloud, it takes out anything that's moving at the same speed as the cloud, oh, like a balloon, yes.

So these guys have been sitting there on their night watch with the radar station, and they didn't see us coming at all. They changed shift just as we were possibly ahead.

Bad, I didn't know further, quick retaliation alert people. They threw the fighters up to find out what was going on.

What kind of fighters?

Oh, they, they were only little, I forget, though probably Mirages, couple of small ones and they were happy because they got a flight out of it. But this one, of course, rebounded around the Dutch Air Force and wanted to know why the standard operating procedures allowed these balloons to be wiped out.

I mean, heavens, the Russians might have invaded in 500 balloons, and they wouldn't have been seen. Just think about it. So we believe there's a two star general who suddenly became a civilian, and the procedure changed.

So that was about it that we thought that this has to be the end of the story. This is it. Yeah, and it was almost the end, but Chris, being the guy that he is, had, as well as getting permission to drop the cylinders into the North Sea, he had contacted the Royal Navy, and they've done a search exercise a couple of mine sweepers to try and recover, and they recovered, none of them. So he put an insurance claim in for the cost of these fuel cylinders lost in the North Sea, unable to be found by the Royal Navy.

And I remember laughing at Christopher, that's wonderful. Don't get anywhere with that. And two months later, they paid up for the loss of these cylinders, because it was the best insurance story that they'd heard that year.

Oops.

And apparently, Lloyds have this. They at their annual gathering, they give an award for the most extraordinary insurance claim, and this one won it, so he got his money back. Oh, do you mind if I have a look in a log book?

Quite incredible, but that was it? No, I'll do it the other way. I truly can't remember, but I will find out.

Was it called Crest warrior?

It was Crest warrior, yeah.

Then Nick Purvis gave me a box with a whole load of stuff about press coverage.

Oh, well, yeah, yes. Get there in a moment. We're very close. It was 1980. November, 1980 so the nights were drawing in.

They were indeed, yes.

Which will have been December, and they just got this insurance claim for cylinders,

Talking of incredibly risky things, I believe I found in your book that you and Peter Mason took off. Oh, what was that? That was ghastly by the sound of it,

That was another occasion. We nearly killed ourselves through stupidity. Yes, that's absolutely true. We flew out of Chateau d'Oex. And the big problem with flying in the Alps is you can get some really screaming winds. Yeah, we'd have the weather briefing where all the balloons were standing in the launch field, and the Met man came round to each balloon in turn and said, be warned. You're flying towards the Moselle Valley. Not, towards the Rhone Valley, and the mistral is blowing really.

We think that in the centre of the Rhone Valley, it's probably going to be doing 60 miles an hour.

So we looked off our maps, and our map, our route was going to take us straight across the Rhone Valley. Well, what we'll do is we'll fly across, get the other side. Seemed like a good plan, so off, off we blundered.

We'd flown for an hour or so, and then we decided, actually, perhaps we'd come down early. And we tried to come down earlier, but there was everything was covered in cloud.

We were coming down earlier, and then we gave up and we flew on. And the big problem with the Mistral and big, strong winds like that is that they're not just on the surface up to a couple of 1000 feet, they tend to affect the wind at all heights. So we're flying at 20,000 feet, and the wind was slowly turning us round so we could see that we were going to end up in the Rhone Valley. And we thought, no, we've got to try and avoid that.

We'll come down early and try to get into one of the valleys. So we came down early, and unfortunately we weren't on a valley, so we were on fairly high ground, and we were going fast. We were probably doing 35 knots, something like that. And looked at we looked ahead, and there was a farm water tank, probably 12 feet square, okay, just water, except the water was being in spume.

Oh, and we looked at that, we went light, seriously windy. Yes, we won't land here.

So the plan was to overshoot, and I was flying at that stage, although it was his balloon, and we started to climb away, and as we were at probably 300 feet then so start to climb away, the balloon collapsed because of the wind speed, really, and God had decided we were landing, simple as that above us was a balloon, which is literally half empty. We came down. the basket went into woods. I mean, but went in, but going into woods, doing 30 miles an hour plus is quite shocking.

So we were thrashed by the branches. Envelope was probably just above them the trees, but we were thrashed by the branches and particularly, I don't think he gone very far and he was flipped over the side.

No,

Yeah, from I would guess 25 feet or so, but not 25 feet, jumping 25 feet uncontrolled, and I didn't realize that, because I'm busy trying to get it on the ground. And then I realized we were very light, and I looked around, I looked for him, and the silly thing is that I look not where, just where you should be, but I even looked behind the fuel cylinders in the corner quickly, and he's not there.

So I carried on pulling the rip line and landed just beyond the woods. Fortunately, in thick scrub, and the thick scrub slowed the balloon down. The balloon Collapsed. I tied the rip line around the mouth so it couldn't be inflated and walk back down the debris trail to find him. I found him in woods.

His face was a mess, his one arm was twisted in the position it shouldn't be, and one of his legs was in the position it also shouldn't be.

Did we have mobile phones?

No, we didn't have mobile did we have mobile phones? I don't think we had a mobile phone that worked. yeah. And anyway, a car stopped, two people came in, and they contacted the ambulance and the fire brigade. So that's good and but it's cold. This is middle of winter. Peter is getting cold.

I took my jacket off, put it on him. But you need more than that, which is why now I always fly with two of space blankets in my basket.

So at least I learned something from it. And so we're there. We've been in the woods for probably 10 minutes or so when another balloon arrives into the valley. Saw him coming down same practice. I came down low, but this one hit a field, dragged, hit a house, up the house down the other side, cross up another house into a tree. So he had a dramatic landing as well. Same thing, wind continuing. We're there for half an hour. And also, and then the fire brigade arrived.

They they cut away into the woods, but they didn't want to move him, except that moved Peter, but he went into deep shock, being very cold. And they said, No, we're going to have to do it. Brought a stretcher in. But then was the worst part of the whole thing. They said, We can't put him on the stretcher like that, because his legs sticking out the side.

So they got hold of his leg and straightened it. Did well. That solved his problem of consciousness and pain, because he instantly went out. And now we found out whether they've been with us for some time, in the fire engine just been waiting for an ambulance. And that's because when you put an casualty on board a fire engine in France, you can't do more than 10 kilometers an hour, it's the law.

So we then went off very, very slowly down at the hospital, Peter's taken in. He's still alive, thank God, but he's bad. He's got a smashed elbow, he's got a dislocated knee and tendons. He's got two cracked ribs, and his face is a mess. I'm I'm much better off. I just got a face. It's a bit of a mess, and lots of aches so but there are other people there. We now realize there are lots of other people in this drama. So there are other people coming in, and that's why we didn't get an ambulance, because they were overloaded.

They run out of ambulances. So I'm standing in there after half an hour or so, waiting for the crew to arrive, and Nicole, Paulo's wife. 'good to see you, what

are you doing here?' And she said, 'Paulo is injured'. 'Oh, my God. Where is he?' She said, you're leaning on his gurney. And he was here with his face all wrapped up, and I hadn't realized who it was.

Oh my god, he was the guy who hit the house, went up, hit the other house, and so he was in that one much more dramatic.

And we were just so lucky. Nobody was killed in this.

What happened to your balloon? I mean, you went back to find Peter, you left it there?

Yeah, the balloon crew arrived and they packed it away. There was it was undamaged, apart from the basket, which had a corner smashed in, which had taken out this my shoulder, which still hasn't really recovered. But apart from that, the envelope was undamaged. No problem at all. The only problem was that 10 feet beyond the top of the balloon, there was a 200 foot drop. So we were at the end of this little ridge line. And had we gone another, well, couple 100 feet, we would have dropped like a stone into the valley, because the balloon had no lift in it. So we were just, once again, incredibly fortunate,

Quite incredible, seriously,

Nobody was seriously injured, apart from Peter, was probably about the worst of these breaks and sprains. The guy who won the event, we came second, the guy, the guy who won it, had a bit more experience. He was German.

He flew out into the centre of the Rhone Valley, came down knowing he was going to get 50 knots or so, looked for the biggest field he could find, which was a field of lavender, and landed in that and he dragged to the other end of the field, which is probably half a mile.

So the presentations, there's him standing there. He's first his face. He's rubbed his face pretty well, rubbed his face off on the lavender field, because lavender in the middle of winter isn't very friendly, mostly shop. So he's a real mess. He's he's all plastered up. I'm there.

His co pilot was okay. I'm there.

Peter isn't. He's got another week in hospital, and the person who came third comes on crutches. So, but so we were a load of old crocks, but we were just so fortunate, and we're so fortunate in ballooning, that the frequency of people being seriously injured or killed in balloons is low, really low, and we're just so lucky.

Well, maybe it was a good job that you didn't tell Shirley Bassey about your accident. I believe that the story was in Radio Times?

That's right, yes,

That was when we first on the understanding it was a 65 Yeah, oh, that's what was registered there. That's absolutely fine.

So we went off to the Shirley Bassey show. Lots of balloons once a bag in in old Warden, in the little woods on the north side of Old Warden. And that was absolutely fine.

Hottest day of the year. Lot of it was pre film.

They put the basket on the top of a Land Rover with the basket rigged, and borrowed a basket from Mike Drinkwater, who then had the OutSpan Oranges balloon. So we borrowed that, and that was good, because the burner frame could be a bit but then they filmed her singing in the basket. That was really good. And then she was put back in a caravan, got the balloons all ready, and with the balloon standing up, they then open. They knew she'd be terrified of it.

They opened the door and out she came and and she said, I'm not going to do this. But they said, Yes, you are. By which time you got I

Shirley Bassey, a camera man and me, so the three of us in this little 65 and she was still terrified. Her knuckles were properly white, and we took off, and we climbed 2000 feet the balloon wouldn't go above 2000 feet, even with both burners turned on. The reason for that, we subsequently found, is it wasn't a 65 it was a 56 so it was tiny with a heavy basket, hottest day of the year. Anyway, we got to 2000 feet, and we got speakers on the outside of the basket, and the camera man said,

Okay, Shirley, we're going to start recording in 10 seconds.

And I've never seen anyone so professional from being frightened, really looking frightened, to being completely professional, relaxed and singing perfectly in 10 seconds, an extraordinary transition.

But she sung on a clear day, and she sung the first part of it, by which time we've descended quite low. So it's lots of burning. We climbed up. We did this in in bites, in the song in bites and that was absolutely fine. We flew across to the north of Bedford from old Warden, and then landed fairly smooth, but so first landing, and she got a cut on the back of one, I think, back of one of her hands, oh, and she was looking at this, oh, I'm injured. I'm injured.

When a voice from beside my head said, Are you alright, my dear? And it was a nurse who looked after the man who lived in the house whose grounds we'd

landed here, yes. And she said, Oh, do you come with me dear? And off they went,

No. So what are the chances of that.

And it is a really good event. I think we flew four balloons, but it was just seriously hot to find out about the balloon, because I thought there was something wrong with it. And it was, as we chased the paper trail, we found out that it was actually a 56 although it's still registered with the CAA as a 65 even now, even now years later, yeah, because it's too hard to change. Yeah.

So in all your flying and you've had some pretty incredible record breaking. And if anybody who's listening doesn't know they really ought to buy Crispin's book Both Feet off the Ground, because there's some amazing stories in there. Past page 100 it's no no billions before then. After that, that, did you ever fly your parents, you haven't mentioned it?

Well, my father was long deceased before we got into aviation. He died when I was 12, so not him. I flew my mother quite a few times. She was quite determined.

She was we got her in the balloon quite often, lost last time in Germany, and she used to get very impatient with my brother. I remember one occasion with we got her, my mother probably then in her late 60s, on the crown line, along with my brother. And something must have happened, and they fell over. So they're both lying on the ground. They're being dragged along the ground. And Richard was complaining, I think we ought to let go. My mother said, for goodness sake, don't be so stupid. Hold on. She was of that generation.

Yes, I have one of those. And I think, did I think we flew Sara's mother?

Yeah, her father had also died early, and in fact, it was from his will that we had enough money to buy the airplane to start with.

So he had a responsibility for all the aviation we've done.

His fault is it that you're so famous? You two are amazing.

I think I've actually kept you for about an hour. I can't believe it. I can't thank you enough Crispin and for your Echo Lady, who's someone who tried to keep quiet, you were very good. Thank you so much.

That's really been fun. You're very good at teasing things out of people.

So thank you very much indeed, and I hope that we meet again soon, anything else in this book I'm going to have to ring up and do another recording with you.
Crispin

Well, you're always welcome. We have to meet again because I have a book for you.