

Giles Camplin

My name is Jennifer d'Alton. I'm a director of the British Balloon Museum and Library, and I'm extremely honoured that today, Dr Giles Camplin, who is vice chairman of the Airship Association, editor of the Airship Heritage Trust journal dirigible - jolly good one too, and a director of the British Balloon Museum and Library.

And he's been doing ballooning things and airship things and writing books, and is, well I find him a most fascinating man.

I hope my husband's not watching or listening rather. Giles, thank you so much for spending time with me.

G

Well, pleasure. Okay, just a small correction. I've given up being the vice chairman of the Airship Association. I'm still a council member. But yes, I decided I'd have enough for that.

JD

Fair enough. So Giles, you saw your first balloon and it was Jambo. I believe?

G

It was, yes, with Anthony Smith, yes, I was working on a local newspaper in Farnham in Surrey, and my friend the photographer, took a photograph of an airship that was being built in a sandpit locally, and it was a hot air airship, and it was called WASP, Warm AirShip Project. Wasp and I made a mistake going around to see them, and that was 1966.

JD

Wow.

G

And it turned out that the Wasp was a second project of Anthony Smith, who founded a bristling airship club, and I'd actually seen him on television, because he'd done two or three television films.

I don't think you want me to tell you his story, do you from the beginning?

JD

Well, I know where he was born. I know where you were born.

G

Well, he was he had this balloon out in Africa, which and he called it Jambo, which is the Swahili for Hello. And it was a bright orange balloon with silver stripes at the bottom.

He made a film, several, several black and white films for the BBC. And I'd seen these films, so I was quite honoured to meet him when I went along to see them. But he decided that ballooning was fun, but you get blown along by the wind. And he thought it would be much better from a filming point of view, if you could go back to your take-off place, because it would simplify life enormously.

And so he'd come up with an idea, because the Americans had just started the concept of the hot air balloon.

Ed Yost started in 1957 and Anthony had seen that and realized that that also meant being blown downwind.

And he had this great idea of, couldn't you make an airship that would be heated by hot air?

'So I don't have all the problems of hydrogen gas, but I can get back and carry a pilot and the camera crew and fly about filming game animals or something, and then I can fly back to where I took off from, so I only need one base see.'

So he thought that was a good idea.

So he found a young engineer in Farnham, chap called Malcolm Brighton, who said he could build it for him.

And they started work.

And they wanted to sheltered place. And they'd realized that in the First World War, airships had operated out of sand pits and quarries and things, so they went to local sand pit at Runfold and started working on the airship.

And that's when I joined them.

I was working as a journalist at the time, but Anthony said he was going to be flying his balloon, Jambo at some events in England, and there was one coming up. I think it was Easter time and would I like to go along? So I went along to Birmingham Tulip Festival.

JD

Birmingham. What?

G

Birmingham Tulip Festival?

JD

Wow, okay,

G

in 1966 in the summer. Oh, it's Easter time. Sorry. And I saw my first hydrogen balloon inflation, and then chased after them, and had my first adventure.

It went on from there.

JD

That's amazing. The paper you worked for, wasn't it owned by your father?

G

The newspaper? Yes, he was the branch editor. He ran the Alton branch of the Farnham Herald.

And the Farnham Herald was established, well established in Farnham and had been there for a long time, and I was indentured for a seven-year apprenticeship as a journalist,

JD

Right?

G

I bit later that year, I broke my indenture and went off, ran away with the balloonies. Very difficult to do, very unheard of, and upset a lot of people.

JD

yes, including your parents.

G

I went off and started earning money as balloon crew.

One of the first things we did was that Malcolm Brighton had decided he wanted to get a balloon licence.

I mean, ballooning had basically died out after the war, and there was only one or two pilots with gas balloon pilot licences, and one was Gerry Turnbull, Wing Commander Gerry Turnbull.

They were based at parachute training school in Abingdon, and when Anthony turned up and said, 'I want to buy a gas balloon and take it to Africa and I want a pilot's licence,'

The civil servants were in a bit of a panic, because there was a category for balloon pilot, the British pilot. Balloon pilot's licence existed from the war time when there was spy balloons and all sorts of things.

So they couldn't tell him to go away. But what they had to do was several flights under tuition, and then a flight witnessed by an examiner.

The problem was that the examiner that they had had, died, so it was a bit difficult for them.

So Anthony went off to Holland, and he bought a balloon from Albert Van der Bendem in Brussels, and he got a licence by flying in Holland.

He's told all this story in his books.

His main book is 'Throw Out Two Hands,' which tells the whole story. And then he wrote 'The Dangerous Sort' which tells them as well, yes,

So Anthony ended up with this balloon, and he got to these people who had seen the television film, and they said, Can you bring it along to things?

So we went to the Birmingham Tulip Festival.

We went to Shrewsbury Town show.

So I started being a balloon chaser.

And then, because Anthony had these contacts on the continent, he was getting invited to go over to take part in gas balloon races over in various countries, in Holland and Belgium, because there's a lot of gas ballooning going on Germany and France and Switzerland, and Antony became the 'Brit' entry in in these international races.

And the BBC liked the film he'd done, and so they started getting involved.

They said, 'Let's organise the International Balloon Race here and in Stanton Harcourt'.

So they did a Balloon Race, and they brought all the balloonists over, and so that went out on television as well, and I saw that as well.

But that set more people off, and one person who was interested, was Sheila Delaney the playwright?

Sheila Delaney had written a play called Charlie Bubbles, and it was about a playboy, and she'd finished the story of Charlie Bubbles, with him, sort of getting into his fast car and driving off suicidally into the Peak District as a sort of, you know, where he disappeared into, whether he did himself in or not, it was left open.

Anyway, she was going to various meetings about getting a film made of this idea.

And she was driving home, she saw a balloon, which must have been Jambo, because there weren't any others.

Anyway, at the film company meeting, she said to them, "I want Charlie Bubbles to fly away in a balloon at the end".

And they said, "Oh, I don't know how we can do that".

But they managed to get in touch with us. And we then ended up taking Jambo to Edale in Derbyshire and inflating it. And we met Albert Finney and all the other ones who were in it. The names will come to me in a minute.

Lisa Minelli, Billie Whitelaw, Colin Sallis, Yootha Joyce and Colin Blakely amongst others.

Anyway, we made two flights, free flights, two free flights.

We did a lot of it sort of moored and tethered and air inflated and all sorts of things like that. And the film called for Albert Finney - Charlie Bubbles to be the pilot.

So on the first flight, obviously Anthony as the Registered pilot, had to be in the balloon, and Malcolm was getting his hours for his licence, so he had to be in the balloon. And Albert wanted a cameraman in the balloon to get him flying from the air. So there were four people, which was okay for Jambo, 27,000 cubic feet of hydrogen.

And so I've got the date somewhere. I can't remember exactly when, but they took off and flew in Edale with Anthony and Malcolm and the cameraman, Peter Suschitzky curled up in the bottom of the basket and Albert doing what Anthony told him, throwing out sand, and Anthony peering through a screwdriver hole in the wicker work.

And so I, I then retrieved them, and they were very pleased at all that. And a few days later, they decided they wanted to do another one.

By this time, Malcolm had gotten enough hours, and so I'd been doing various bits and pieces for quite several inflations. And so they said, Would you like a flight?

And so my first flight in Jambo was curled up in the bottom of the basket with Anthony Smith and Peter Suschitzky, while Albert stood on the sandbox and pretended to be the pilot. And when we got up to about three thousand feet, he said, You can stand up now. So that was my first balloon flight, and we flew over Buxton to Lake Rudyard, and that was the start of it all.

JD

So that is quite amazing, because to do your licence and to be doing filming and being curled up in the bottom of a basket like a dog. It's sort of Yeah. Was the film a great success? I mean, I've heard of it, but possibly....?

G

Yes. So my first flight was on the 24th of the 10th for Earth 66 and I went from Edale to Lake Rudyard in Jambo. And Jambo was G-AVAT. Golf, Alpha Victor Alpha Tango.

JD

Of course it was, I should have known that, it means I wrote it down. I recognized it. Yes, yeah.

G

So that that was my first flight, and then we went did a whole lot of other crazy stunts and things, but we were going to these balloon races in the continent. Do you want me to just keep going?

JD

Why not? Yes. Okay, so

G

Malcolm had by this time got his enough hours to get his British Gas balloon licence, and the civil servants had by this time persuaded Wing Commander Gerry Turnbull to be the examiner.

So Gerry said, yes, he would do a checkout flight for Malcolm.

And Malcolm being a bit of an entrepreneur, said, Well, I want to get I don't want to have to fork out for this full of hydrogen and all the rest of it.

So I'm going to get it sponsored and paid for.

JD

Wow.

G

And Gerry said, Well, my, my price for checking you out would be that my daughter, Christine gets a flight. And Malcolm said, okay, okay, yes, we can, we can accommodate that.

And then he, he got in touch with a local journalist, and he said, Will you, you know, write the story and then, you know, we can split the proceeds and all that sort of stuff. And this, this was a guy called Max Reinsch, and Max turned out to be a bit of a rogue, and Malcolm fell out with him. And I had to take the envelope of used fivers round to Max to pay him off.

And Malcolm then got in with another local journalist who was a chap called Doddy Hay. Doddy Hay came with his wife Jenny, who was photographer, and Doddy Hay wrote articles for the People newspaper and various things like that.

Anyway, he sold the story, provided he and Jenny could fly.

Doddy did a lot of parachuting. He once landed on the roof of Cardington shed, well with a parachute, and as it was so windy, he had to run along the top, jump off the end to get back down safely.

Yes. Anyway, that was Doddy and Jenny.

So in February 1967 we all went down to Rye in Sussex.

Yes. And after a lot of doing roam with the weather and all the rest of it, you do need rather strange weather to fly the channel.

JD

I know, we found that.

G

You need a northerly wind. It's very easy to take off and you'll find yourself circling in the North Sea or going off down to the Bay of Biscay. So it's quite a narrow angle.

But anyway, we got the wind, okay, and so we did this cross-channel flight, and I followed the balloon.

And because Malcolm had previously worked for the RFD company, who made rescue equipment, and one of the things they made was Inshore Rescue boats, Malcolm was able to borrow one of the RNLI Inshore Rescue boats.

So Mike Davis from the company and I went across the channel in a rubber boat. So I know what the immigrants go through and the balloon actually didn't go straight to Calais. Didn't go the shortest way, it actually started going too far south. I came ashore at the Le Touquet and on a huge, huge beach, and they landed safely.

And Malcolm said to Mike and me, you know, what we'll do is we'll pack the balloon up and it was actually Burke Plage, which is a bit south of Le Touquet so we go into Le Touquet so if you take the boat into the harbour, we'll pick you up, and we'll go to the hotel.

So Mike and I set off in the boat, but we couldn't find any way into Le Touquet harbour because the tide was out, and we went miles up the coast and couldn't find it.

And we didn't have a map or anything. We had our passports, but we didn't we know where we were going, and we didn't have any radios or anything like that. So in the end, we reckon that Le Touquet must be where the big lighthouse was, but there was no way into a harbour that we could see and it was getting dark, so we beached the boat. Let's say this is a hell of a long story.

JD

It's short.

G

Mike and I spent the night in February on the sand dunes comedy frost, sleeping under this rubber mattress that was so wet.

JD

Not even a bottle of brandy to keep you warm.

G

And we went in the next morning and handed ourselves into the gendarmes, and we're reunited. But what had happened while we were away, was that the customs had all turned up and impounded the balloon, because you can't fly aircraft into France without permission.

So Malcolm and all the rest of them all got, you know, arrested and taken and grilled and the rest of it.

And so it was quite late at night by the time the customs got fed up with them, threw them out, but they kept the balloon. Anyway we were all reunited and went back to the UK.

We had to tell Anthony that his balloon was now property of the Customs in France.

But anyway, so that that was the cross-channel thing. So Malcolm now had his licence, and Anthony was getting more invitations.

And so in the May of 67- the cross channel was February 67 - so in the May of sixty-seven we all trooped over to dinner in northern France and inflated the balloon there.

Halfway through the inflation, a thunderstorm came through, and Jambo was in a bad place, and it got wind funnelled onto it, and it got blown across the take-off field and we had to deflate before it had finished the inflation, but one of the other balloonists was Gerry Turnbull, who, by this time, having sort of teamed up with us, had become one of the team and was getting invitations to join the international crowd as well.

And so Gerry re-inflated it. We sort of went to help him finish off, and to my amazement, and he said to me, would I like a flight.

JD

with Gerry?

G

So I got a second flight in France with Gerry on the 15th of, 16th of May from Dinon. And we had a lovely flight and it was a fantastic landing, because it was you know, good trotting speed wind. And that was Omega one which was his balloon, which is, yes, G-ATXR. Alpha Tango X ray, Romeo.

We saw this road, this very flat part of France, lots and lots of big, huge fields. And there was a road on a sort of raised up bank, you know, one of those really straight French roads.

So we skimmed across this road into an enormous, ploughed field, absolutely immense ploughed field. And we were skimming along, and in the gas balloon, we dropped the trail rope, which slows your descent and also slows your forward speed as it drags over the ground and the rope went across the road and into the field.

And a car, a Citroen car, one of those Deux Chevaux Citroen things, bounced off the road and drove into the field and out of it, got a rather portly, middle-aged man wearing a long coat and a trilby hat, and he stood and waved to us, and Gerry shouted out, "Grab the Trailrope".

And so this this gentleman then ran after the end of the receding trail rope across the ploughed field, nice city shoes, and by this time, we were only about ten feet off the ground and moving at sort of gentle bicycle speed over the field.

Anyway, he managed to catch up with the end of the rope, and he grabbed hold of it and took the strain. Well, of course, the momentum of the balloon pulled him over.

But he didn't let go. He hung on. He lost his hat to back some time, for I don't know, several one hundred yards across a ploughed field till he came to a barbed wire fence.

And by this time, Gerry pulled the top of the balloon out, the RIP panel, so we came down and bumped onto the ground.

This gentleman came up to us gasping for breath. His car was in the field, still with the engine running. His hat was somewhere else. His coat was covered in mud. And he was chuffed to bits, no, absolutely delighted.

Yes, he was so pleased that he, you know, managed to save us, and he got a big story to tell, yes, *'you'll never guess what happened to me on the way home'*, you know, so that was a very memorable landing that we had.

Then it went on from there, because the next event was that having made our presence known to the film industry, other people began to contact Malcolm, who by this time, had set up MA Brighton and put some advertisements out for balloons that we could offer.

And the film company turned up, who were called Warfield productions, and they has the film rights to all of Ian Fleming's books.

So they've been making James Bond movies, and the year before, one of their competitors had put out *Those Magnificent Men in their Flying Machines*.

Oh, yes, which had done extraordinarily well. And so one of the books that Ian Fleming wrote was a children's story about a flying car, which was called *Chitty. Chitty, Bang, Bang*.

But it was a rather short story, but, Warfield thought, well, this could make a film, but it needs something a bit bigger. So they employed the whole team, and they thought, Well, suppose the inventor of the car, his grandpa, is kidnapped and taken away to Germany, or not Germany to *Vulgaria* by the evil Baron Bomb Burst.

So we need an airship.

And so this designer designed this airship, which had a point at each end, because he'd seen some historical ones that had that. And he asked all sorts of people, could they build it?

Dunlop and RFD and various people and they all said, no, couldn't do it.

And Malcolm said,

"Yes, I can do it."

So there we were, in the spring of 1967 building an airship with no experience whatsoever, and we managed to build the airship for the film *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.

This is my first visit up to Cardington, which Anthony had discovered when he built WASP.

He'd actually discovered this, these large airship sheds at Cardington in Bedfordshire, which were left over from the 1930s 1920s British airship project, Imperial airship project.

And so we went to Cardington 1967,

Well, we assembled the airship in Cardington, yes, June and July, and we actually flew it inside the shed when no one was looking.

Well, what we did was we had the ground crew running along the sides with slack ropes so they weren't doing any work, you see.

And we would do these little hops up and down, because we wanted to know if the elevators worked and everything, you know, I mean, it was all brand new.

It was all prototype everywhere.

And it's a hell of a long story, all that building of it, and it had to be painted, and the painters turned up from Pinewood.

And then, then, by this time, the film companies moved out of Pinewood studios, and they got Dick Van Dyke to play the inventor, and Lionel Jeffries to be his granddad, and Sally Anne Howe to be the woman in the love of his life and all that. And so they would move to Turville in Buckinghamshire, which, if you ever see the Vicar of Dibley, the opening shots show this little village in the valley that is Turville. So that's where they wanted us to be.

So we took the airship there, and they stationed us in this nice, long, thin field at the bottom, and we re-inflated the airship, and they wanted us to fly over the windmill, which is on top of the ridge, looking down on Turville, Cobstone windmill is still there today, and that that was where Dick Van Dyke had his workshop, allegedly.

So our task was to fly the airship over the windmill so that it could look as if we were kidnapping grandpa.

And so it was August, I think it's August the ninth. Yeah, August the ninth.

We had the airship there, and we were doing basically what we'd done inside Cardington shed, which was get the ground crew to slack off their ropes and run along holding slack ropes. And we, Malcolm sat in the front seat as the pilot, and I was sitting on the back seat as the engineer in this wooden gondola, powered by a VW engine driving two propellers on outriggers and so we were we're getting our confidence up doing these hops down the field, a couple one hundred yards down the field, and the ground crew were getting a bit puffed, and so Malcolm said,

Well, why don't all of you, apart from a couple, go to the far end and just catch us, so that we don't go through the barbed wire fence, you know, because the airships working. I mean we, you know, we take off and we come down and land.

We've been doing it four or five times now, you know, and we did it in the shed. So you know it is not problem.

So they all went and stood down the end. It was a nice early, early summer morning mist, and, you know, not, no wind to speak of.

So Malcolm and I set off down this field, and we ascended gently, and we just went on ascending. And so when we got to the ground crew at the other end and shouted 'Grab the ropes', they said, 'We can't reach them' because we were about 150 feet up in the air, because this thing had a curve on the front, and it just lifted, it just flew up, and it overrode the elevators. I mean, the ground engineer had been

doing work on the ropes without realising anyway, so we went over their heads at 150 feet, and Malcolm said, Let's do a circuit. And I said, Fine.

And so he put the rudder over, and the rudder worked perfectly.

And we got round in a circle over Turville, turned right, went round, and we lined up again to come down the runway again towards the ground crew, and this time we went over their heads at 1500 feet!

What?

And by this time, we were up above the shelter of the valley, and there was a little breeze that took us over the windmill, which was where we were supposed to go. But it was early in the morning. There wasn't anybody there, so we then were stuck with what do we do?

Because we've got to get down on the ground, the only thing we can do is to valve some gas and get rid of some lift.

So we throttle back the engines and Malcolm valved some gas.

Well airships are a bit more complicated than balloons, because it needed pressure to keep its shape.

Yes, you see it had to have pressure.

Now the way you do that with an airship is that you have an airbag inside, which is called a ballinet, and you pressurize the airbag, and then as the gas expands, you let the air out, so you're not actually letting in, losing any lift.

When you come back down again, you have a pump that pumps air back in again, so you keep the pressure. Well, we got up to 1500 feet, drifted over the ridge and valved some gas, and that meant we'd lost pressure.

So we were suddenly aware that the tail fins were dangling down behind us. Oh, so Malcolm said, quick start the ballinet pump, see. So I had to climb up into the keel to do that.

So I started that, and it was pumping away, and we suddenly realized that we were now drifting sideways towards the pine tree plantation. And so Malcolm slammed open the throttle so the engine revved.

Both the fan belts broke, so the propellers idled, and with the engine screaming, we settled into the top of the pine trees!

And there we sat until the ground crew came and rescued us, joking, and then we managed to get it out of the pine trees and park it in a field where it was had to be deflated because of a storm a few days later.

Now, the film company had been terrified of using hydrogen, and they had actually paid £12,000 for a helium truck to come from Texas, They parked it in the field where we'd started from, which is what we'd use to fill it from. And it sunk up to its axles, being this huge American Truck.

Anyway, it goes on and on this story, but so that was it. I then refused to fly in it again because it was not controllable.

And Malcolm made several flights.

Anthony then had loads of goes. And it actually flew 11 hours. And they got in Derek Pigott, who was a famous glider pilot, and even he couldn't make it work very well.

So it never actually did what it was supposed to do, but they managed to get enough film to fudge it and hanging the gondola on cranes and all the rest of it.

JD

Fantastic. So, I mean, that wasn't, but you've been in other films too, haven't you?

G

But that was the airship, Chitty. Chitty, bang, bang, which was G-AVSL. Alpha Victor, Sierra Lima, right.

And then I went on and did loads of others. And I mean, I didn't bother to get a licence for years.

I became a professional ground crew. Malcolm Brighton went off and sadly disappeared into the Atlantic Ocean in 1970 trying to fly the Free Life across. And by this time, hot air ballooning had happened.

One of the things we did in 1967 was start the British Balloon and Airship Club going flying from Dunstable Downs, yes, we had the first meeting there.

And hot air ballooning became all the rage, and various clubs started doing it.

And one of the people who suddenly realized that there was potential for advertising of this was Esso, the balloon oil company, and they got Don Cameron to build a balloon again.

I'm sure you know the Don Cameron story of how he, I mean, we, we flew him in Jambo, yes, from Dursley, and then we, Malcolm, built him and Gerry, you know, had a group, a hot air balloon, but we didn't put any load tapes on it, so it split. And, yes, Don was so angry he went off and bought a sewing machine and has gone on to win the Queen's award for industry.

But anyway, so Esso ordered a gas balloon, a hot air balloon from Cameron, and one of the London gliding club people got his licence, a chap called Peter Langford, and he was living in South London, and I was living in South London, and he knew that I'd been doing a bit of crewing for Malcolm and all sorts of stuff.

So I he enlisted me as his professional ground crew, and I then had a summer with Peter, travelling to all the agricultural shows, flying the Esso balloon, retrieving it.

And then I went out to Africa and did a lot of flying out there with Alan Root.

And then I decided to get my licence. And so I I got my licence, but I did a lot of balloon flying out in in Africa, we did a balloon Safari film for Anglia television, because Alan Root used to make wildlife films, and he realized that he could actually use a balloon as an Aerial flying camera platform, just as Anthony had done in Jambo.

But it's better to fly in a balloon, because you're not doing 100 miles an hour, which you are in a light aircraft, you know, or 80 miles an hour, whatever it is. So he came here and got his licence, and the group of us went out and taught him to fly, and then he decided he was going to make a film for as Christmas Special, which was called the Balloon Safari. And we went and filmed at various locations.

And he thought, well, if you're going to fly a balloon with a camera in it, the best thing to film it from is another balloon.

So we had two identical balloons, so whichever one flew near the interesting bit, the other one filmed it.

So we basically did what someone described as 101 things you shouldn't do with an air balloon, we sank it in a lake, and we did all the rest of it anyway, and inspired by that we flew over Mount Kilimanjaro, and it just goes on and on.

You know, there's loads of films and crazy stuff.

And then I came back here in 1980s with various other advertising ones, with G PIPE for Erin Moore tobacco, yes, we sold lots of tobacco with Martin Hutchins. yes. And, and then we, I then was enlisted by Mike Moore to go around with the BP barrel and Sky Sales, and we went to all the agricultural shows for two or three years.

Yes in 1982 we went all over the place.

JD

So can I just stop you for a minute, it seems, yes, you were a golden retriever from sort of 66 Until when did you get your licence?

G

I actually didn't get my licence until Mike Moore checked me out in September 82

JD

That's a long time to be a golden retriever.

G

Well, it was, but I didn't ,you know it the thing about you've got your licence, you have to worry about fuel supply and where you're going to land and or get on the radio.

If you're a passenger, you just stand there.

So if you're the retriever, you have lots of fun chasing about on the ground. I'm trying to get there. And of course, in the early days, we didn't have any aids There was no radio or phones or like that. So you, you had to orienteer, it was orienteering in a vehicle and it was great fun.

Yes, it was, it was real skill to do it.

And all these old ballooning things like 'right with height', which you probably know, if you stand on the take-off site, and you watch where the test balloon's going, and if they go high, you just draw a line the way the wind's going.

And if they're going high, you can reckon they're going to land to the right of that line. And if they're flying low, they're going to be left of that line, stuff like that. And it was all good fun.

And so I never really had a need to fly, you know, and I got the occasional flight. People say you want to ride and have a ride. I just relax and enjoy it.

JD

You also get to talk to all the landowners, which I found fascinating as a retriever.

G

Well, yes, there's all sorts of landowner stories.

JD

Have you got a really, really bad landowner story?

G

Well, there's one. It's interesting one.

I flew with a lovely lady from Surrey when I had my balloon down in Surrey, and we flew out to this farm, and we landed, and the farmer turned up with a whole lot of children, and he was quite happy, and the ground crew were negotiating how to get into the field.

And I said, would the kids like a ride, you see?

And so they all got in the basket. We let them up and down on the rope a few times, and then we deflated the balloon, and I went up the top end to start rolling it up in the bag.

And I got back to find the passenger talking to the farmer, and I heard him say, what are all these red circles on the map?

And she said, Oh, they're angry farmers. And he said, Oh, I know them. He said, How do I get one of these red circles and I'll go, no, no, wait a minute. Hold on. you don't need a red circle. He was feeling left out because all his mates had,

JD

Oh, and have you had any really fantastic times, you've landed and they've rushed out with champagne?

G

Oh, well, yes. I mean, Jambo landed on the lawn of a stately home, and it was all boarded up.

All the windows were boarded up.

And after a bit I were aware of this figure walking towards us, and it was a butler with full tailcoat, and he had a silver tray with Sherry glasses.

He said, his Lordship's not here, but I'm sure he'd like to welcome you.

And we had a glass of sherry on the lawn.

JD

Oh, that's so civilized, isn't it?

Did you ever fly your mother and father?

G

I flew my Dad. Yes, I flew my Dad once.

My Mum didn't really want to do it.

I flew in other members of the family. Yes, near in Surrey. In Surrey had to be a bit careful, because you you've got the Heathrow zone.

You're sort of between Heathrow and Gatwick, and you can't go too high and things like that. But I flew a friend of mine who was a caretaker at a local school, which was a private school. It had huge playing fields.

Mike Moore said, could he, could he come and fly the BP barrel because he got a whole lot of passengers, and he wanted to fly.

It was a big balloon, and he had a few passengers that wanted to fly in our area, and they'd been down to Bristol two or three times. And he sort of thought it was only fair that he came and flew. Could I find anywhere?

So I said to Nick, can we use the playing fields? And Nick said, Sure, yes, you know Nick, then, I mean, he got permission from the headmaster, and it was, I think it was school holidays.

Anyway, we inflated the balloon early in the morning.

The headmaster came out in his dressing gown, and Nick was there, and he'd never flown in anything.

Nick, he'd never been in an aircraft.

And Mike had some spare spaces in the sea in the basket, you see. So we stood the balloon up, and everything like ready to take off. And he said to Nick, hop in. And Nick went, Oh, no, oh, I've got to mend my motorbike.

And Mike said, Okay.

And the balloon flew away. And Nick went, 'I could have done my motorbike tomorrow. The balloon's gone anyway'.

So I flew Nick in my balloon a bit later on, took off.

We got above the rooftops of the houses, and I said, 'You're alright?'. And he said, 'Oh, I don't like it'. He said, 'I don't like it when it does this.'

And he started jumping up and down, and it made the basket bounce. And I said, 'Well, don't do it.'

Then, after that, we were fine, yes.

And the other nice, like more story, is that we because there's a lovely sort of serendipity about ballooning.

You know, you fly into people's lives and change it, like the French guy who grabbed a trail rope, and it's, it's unknown and unpredictable, and that's what I like about it.

And Mike had got a group of passengers up near Leeds, and he said, I'll - we'll go up. So he and I went, drove up to Leeds, and this woman had got this playing field, and we went on to playing field and looked at the wind, and it was straight towards Leeds zone.

We thought, you only going to get a 10-minute flight. So we said, well, let's, you know, let's wing it. We'll do what competition balloonists do? You go out and find a launch site and fly from there.

So we drove off upwind, and we saw this big open space on the Ordnance Survey map, and we drove up to the entrance, and it was a big house, and it had big grounds.

It was a Leonard Cheshire home for disabled pilots and old, elderly pilots, and fixed wing pilots. So we, we drove in with our big rig, Land Rover and trailer, and I hopped out and ran up the steps.

Now these are elderly blokes sitting in wheelchairs. And I said, who's in charge? And they said, 'Oh, you need matron, matron from down the end.'

So I trotted down the corridor and knocked on the door and "Hello, Matron, and you don't know me from a bar of soap but can we fly a balloon from your grounds," and she said "Oh"

"we are just going to inflate it and fly away, nothing damaging."

And she said, Oh, I have to – have to have to talk to the governors, you know. so just give me a minute. So she phoned up, and I went away. She came back said, “yes, okay, yes, you can do it.”

And so we laid the balloon out in front of the Leonard Cheshire home, and they wheeled all these elderly pilots out. The whole load of them came out. Poor old guys with Zimmer frames and a lot of them were Polish Second World War pilots, because there's been a lot of Polish guys, and they loved it, they thought was wonderful.

We inflated this great big balloon, and I said, to Mike said, Well, see if there's anyone matron would like to fly.

You know, see if she wants a ride. And so I trotted up the steps and said, and she said, “Oh no, I don't think so.”

And I said, Well, is there anybody, you know, you'd like to nominate someone. She said, “Well, Roland, down there is helping you with the basket, you see. And there was this sort of Indian chap who was leaning on the basket.”

And so I went back down and said,

“Roland, you know, Matron says you can fly if you'd like to.” Well, I think, I think he thought it was sort of going up on a rope and coming back down again, you see, anyway, so Roland hops into the basket, and away they flew.

And of course, all the pilots go,” there's Roland. He's flown off. Look at that.”

He's he was a hero, instantly with the whole of them at the Cheshire home. But there's more to the story, because they flew to Leeds and landed in the grounds of a hospital, where Roland used to be a porter!

JD

Oh, my goodness,

G

So he was a hero there! Hello, Roland. What are you doing here? I just landed in the balloon in the car park, you know? I mean, it was just that guy's life was just completely changed.

JD

It was such amazing. It was lovely, brilliant. I wish we could find him now.

G

Yes, I know, but there's, there's a lot of people like that over the years who we've, we've flown and it was all good fun.

JD

Yes, and the best country to fly in. Do you think is it UK?

G

I don't know.

Have you got well, you see, we did the Andre Heller flying sculptures, of course, I've seen and landed balloons in all of European countries. We did twenty cities in Europe in 1986 that was for the city of Vienna.

Vienna got a bit fed up with everybody, singing the Blue Danube, and having Mozart balls, and they wanted something to project Vienna as a modern artistic city, brilliant. And so they got in touch with this guy called Andre Heller, who's

enormously famous in the German speaking world, who'd done all sorts of circuses and firework displays and sort of artists.

And they said, Andre, we want you to come up with an idea to promote Vienna to the world, what have you got? And he said, I see a flying sculpture. It's an ephemeral work. It goes past. And if you see it, you remember it forever, and if you miss it, it's gone.

And they said, Wow, Andres, that's fantastic. How are you going to do that? And he said, Well, I'm going to get these huge blocks of polystyrene and paint them and carve them into weird shapes in them, then we'll get one thousand feet of cable and a helicopter can fly them over this over the cities you see.

And the helicopter pilot said, I don't think so. No way we're doing that.

And they said, Oh, now what?

He said, Get a balloon.

So he then came to ballooning world and say, Where can I get weird, special, shaped hot air balloons?

And everybody said, Cameron. He's been building bottles and stuff, you know, for years.

And so Don then was approached by Andre, who turned up with this entourage of people and sketched what he wanted, and Don said, Oh, yes, I think we can probably do that. When do you need them by?

So Don said, yes, we've got the kit, you know, we've got the computer assisted design and drawings and all the rest of it.

We can, we can work these. Andre sketch these three ideas that he wanted done.

And Don said, yes, we could. We could do those. When do you want them by?

And Heller said, I must have them by the beginning of August.

And Don said, oh, and I can't do that. Too much other stuff on I can't possibly do it.

And Heller, went storming out, took his entourage and went up to Per Lindstrand.

And Per said,

Oh, yes, I can do that. When do you want them by?

And he said, the first August. No problem.

Well, the first of August came, the end of August came, 'beginning of September came, and Don's tearing his hair out, going, I could have done it anyway.

By that time, the balloons were built, we did a test flight up there in Oswestry in the pouring rain.

And then we brought them down to London, and we flew the three balloons from Battersea Park, and I flew with Dave Partridge in the Moon Kindermond, the children's Moon, which was like a slice of lemon.

It had six eyes and a curly tongue, and it was a nightmare to fly because the bottom part of the lemon slice hung down below the basket, so you couldn't see that segments the balloon happened to go that way.

You couldn't see where you're going.

And the others were a big green fish, which Paul Frewer flew. And then there was the Dream station, which was a red, sort of jelly shaped and it was covered in multi-

coloured spikes. It's called the Dream Station. Tom Holt Wilson flew that, and they then got Flying Pictures.

I was working for Flying Pictures to operate them, and Sean Byrne was the project manager, and I was ground crew chief, and we had 10 of us, and we had a Winnebago truck, and we took these balloons from having flown Battersea, flown over London, we went to Scandinavia.

Oslo, Stockholm, Copenhagen, and then we went down.

Did Italy, Rome, Naples, Bologna, back around Barcelona, Madrid, I remember them all now. Anyway, we ended up in Belgium.

We couldn't do Paris. It was too complicated.

But what we had to do was to go into town and get all the permissions.

Yeah, so you had the mayor, the police, the air traffic control, you know, everybody, and then find permission from the parks take off from and the idea was there'd be no pre publicity, and these three things would appear in the air over the city at rush hour in the morning.

And it worked fantastically. I mean, everybody saw these weird things flying and thought the aliens had landed.

You know, it was just the police and us, and we then got out of town and went off to do the next one, leaving the Vienna Tourist Board to pick up all the television interviews and all the credit and everything.

And we ended up in Brussels, where being very bureaucratic, we were refused permission to fly.

So we were able to do a tether by the Atomium. But I have an enduring memory of Brussels, which is, I don't know if you ever remember, or if anyone ever remembers a television series called *The Rise and Fall of Reginald Perrin*.

JD

Ofcourse, yes, yes.

G

Well, Reggie. Reggie Perrin was a lovely guy, and he used to have a boss, and Reggie was always getting into troubles.

And his boss was called CJ, yes, yeah. And CJ would give him lectures about things which were always along the lines of "I didn't get to where I am today by doing .." whatever it was that Reggie just done, you know, 'by being late on the bus' or something like that.

But when we went to Brussels, we were in a campsite, and I went into the gents, and I went into a cubicle, and I sat down and written on the back of the toilet door was "I didn't get where I am today by writing graffiti on the back of Belgian toilet doors", which is always true.

JD

Was it Leonard? Was it Leonard Rossiter?

G

Leonard Rossiter was Perrin?

JD

Yes, yes. I like that, I think I kind of have to tell my grandsons to write that on loo doors.

G

I thought that was perfect. Summed up the whole project, claiming, anyway, so that was that. But they, Vienna, were so chuffed.

They said 150 million people saw it. And on that basis, they then got us to do 30 American cities the following year, really, oh, I'd never been to America, and I then did 30 cities on one tour.

JD

My God were you married at the time, yes.

G

I was actually yes, my first wife, Amanda, yeah.

We went to Yeah, she came out and had a flight over Cincinnati.

But yeah, we did Baltimore, New York, and went up to Canada, Toronto, and then all stations across the north.

We got to Salt Lake City, and we were approached by the US Air Force, who were having a centenary, or some not centenary, but some anniversary.

And they said, Can you bring the flying sculptures to our celebrations in Montgomery, Alabama?

And we said, Well, yeah, but we're in Salt Lake City, you know?

And they said, right, can you get to Sacramento? Because we'll have a Hercules there to take you so, so we got to Sacramento, and there was this Hercules aircraft, and they said,

We can't take the fuel.

We had to empty, 12 large stainless-steel tanks. Just vented them into the night, oh, I know,

We were going in a Hercules and there we were sitting on these canvas seats with only a honey bucket for a toilet, and we flew through monument over Monument Valley.

Well, the pilots for the American tour, one of them was Tom Donnelly. Tommo went up to the captain and said,

Can we have a closer look at Monument Valley?

And they said, I suppose. And they got on the radio, and they got permission to go down low.

We went through Monument Valley below the tops of the ridges.

I mean, the plane swinging from one side to the other, with a crew rushing over and taking photographs. Oh, it was fantastic through monument valley. Anyway, we got to Montgomery, Alabama and we did the morning flight for them, and they were all chuffed to bits.

And they said,

What can we do in return? And we said, well, actually, it happens to be the balloon Meet in Albuquerque.

And so they said,

Okay, we'll take you to Albuquerque.

So we flew into Albuquerque in a Hercules, and Albuquerque provided three pickup trucks, and we did the early morning, you know, the dawn chorus at Albuquerque, because the thing was, we had to be in the air with nothing else watching. So we flew the dawn patrol at Albuquerque, and then we got back in the Hercules. They put us back to Salt Lake City, and we carried on with California and Texas and all the rest of it, and ended up in St Louis, Missouri, I think the final one.

JD

Oh, Vienna must have been chuffed to pieces.

G

Oh, they were absolutely because we, you know, every time we did it, I mean, it's all sorts of wonderful stories.

There's a 90-year-old nun who got up in the morning and opened the curtains and saw this black balloon, flying this black, spiky balloon, and thought it was the devil incarnate arriving so poor woman, yes. and we but they had all sorts of adventures. I mean, Paul Frewer landed on a roof of the supermarket.

That was quite a good one to get it back from Paul Frewer was the pilot. He flew the fish.

Yeah, we flew from Florence, and he did a splash and dash in the river of Florence. Yeah, and I don't know if you know that the Lindstrand baskets, at that time, Thunder & Colt baskets, they had a solid plywood floor.

Oh, so he landed in the in the river and picked up quite a lot of water, and then flew on.

And it was rush hour, and he then climbed quite high and flew on across the road. And I can still see this man sitting in his car looking completely puzzled as this very small shower of rain crossed in front of him and splashed on his windscreen and didn't affect any other cars.

Of course, he couldn't see the balloon up above him because it was, you know, quite a lot higher up. But, yeah, lovely. I was on my rain shower, that was quite good fun. Oh, there's loads and loads of stories.

JD

I mean, are you still flying? Do you still have a balloon? No,

G

I fly around the bar now. Yeah, no, I do lectures about it.

JD

And when was your last flight?

G

Then my last flight was in Cargo Lifter, because I went over to Germany, I was head hunted to go to cargo lifter.

I haven't actually got that many compared to some of the other people.

I've only got one logbook.

And you might not want to know about this one. I was asked by the British Balloon Museum to take a balloon to St Niklaas for a tether.

Okay, in St Niklaas, it was known as the black doll. Here, we called it the Robertson's Golly.

JD

Oh, oh, yes, brilliant. I love that balloon. It's a bugger to fly, though.

G

So we, I think it was the world's first special shape was, yeah, yeah. So we gathered that St Niklaas in 2006 that was my last tether.

Where's that one?

Oh yeah. Cargo Lifter. Oh yes. I flew the Cargo Lifter Lindstrand 90 from Cargo Lifters base in East Germany, with a couple of passengers. That was my last flight, whereas as pilot, and that was in 2000.

JD

so what's it like? Cargo Lifter? It's so different.

G

It was just a balloon. It was just a cargo lifter hot air balloon. They just got a hot air balloon, the sky ship and a hot air balloon, just to publicise, publicise the company,

JD

Right? And what about airships?

G

Well, the idea was to build a cargo carrying airship. Yeah, and they wanted to build a cargo carrying airship which was 240 feet, 240 metres long, which is the same size, the same size as Canary Wharf tower, to carry cargo, and they wanted me to go and do the ground handling, and they said,

You must sell your house and come and live in Germany. I said, I'll come and live in Germany, but I shan't sell my house till this thing works.

And it didn't work.

They built an enormous hangar 30 miles south of Berlin, and so I went and became an East German.

Lived there for five years and it never got off the drawing board. This, this thing. It kept changing.

I kept saying, What do you want me to ground handle?

And they never actually answered the question.

And in the end, they went bust.

They had 300 million euros and went bust and never built anything.

But I was there for three years with them, and I thought,

Well, how am I going to do this ground handling of this thing, which is, you know, biggest things ever flown, probably, well, the big the big ships of the 1930s the big, rigid ships that flew were the same size.

So I thought, well, I'll do some research. So I started doing historical research into the ground handling of the big ships. And found there was very little written down.

But I started doing historical research and bringing it back to Germany. And on the basis of that, someone said,

You ought to do some academic work.

And having started with three GCE 'O' levels, I went to see a friend, Roger Wootton, who was a balloon pilot from the British Balloon Club, who I knew from Leatherhead, and he was at the Dean of City University in London.

And I said, you know, can I do academic work?

And he said, probably do an M Phil, which is a takes one year. And so I went to Cargo Lifter and said, I've got this offer to do an MPhil, and someone had to pay for it, you know.

But at City University, I get a qualification, and they said, Oh yes, we like our staff to have qualifications. Yes, yes, we will pay.

And so Cargo Lifter paid for my MPhil, and at the end of it, I had so much stuff that Roger said, you probably go on and do a PhD. That's minimum three years, maximum seven.

. And I went to Cargo Lifter and said, I got this offer, and they said, Oh, we've looked in the small print. We don't have to pay for this sort of thing.

That's when I knew they were in financial trouble. And in 2002 they went bust. And I was doing all this research.

So I stayed in Germany, getting unemployment benefit, working on my thesis, and I came back to England, 2004 and finished my thesis, 2007 and got a PhD in Engineering history, uh, specifically on the ground, handling of large airships, which I found was fascinating fun, because there's very little research on it.

JD

It's a great book, by the way.

G

Well, then people kept saying, you've got to do the book. Well, in 2007 you had to order 500 copies from a printer and keep them in your garage and mail them to people who wanted them here and there.

And I thought, you are only my mother's going to buy it, you know? I mean, So in 2017 the world had changed, and I topped and tailed it and sent it off to one of these print on demand firms.

And sure enough, it's flown off the shelves at about one copy a year, you know. So it's got about a dozen. About a dozen people have got it, but that's a dozen more than had it if I hadn't done it, you know. So, yeah, yeah.

JD

25 pounds a copy. I seem to remember.

G

you can get it cheaper. I've never understood how they Yeah, work it and get it on Amazon for less than that.

JD

Ground handling large airships as Cinderella profession.

G

Well, that's the thing that everybody overlooked it.

This was the thing I kept finding at Cargo Lifter, that they all focused on the flying. That's the exciting, fun bit.

So they draw this airship flying and design all the engines and the pilots controls and all the rest of it, and then they call in the ground crew and say, right now, the first thing we want to do is, is to you've got to do the ground handling.

We want to bring it down to ground and more it.

And I started doing this, and I thought, this is, this is backwards, because I've now got to conjure up a mooring mast out of thin air.

And then they said, then we want to take it into the hangar. Well, now I've got to build a shed out of thin air. Then this is Mary Poppins type engineering Ching. And as I said, and I thought, that's not the way the world works. In order for this thing to fly, it has to take off.

In order for it to take off, it has to come from a mooring. In order for it to get on a mooring, it has to come out of a shed.

In order for it to get in a shed, has to be assembled. So the first brown handling procedure is assemble it in a shed. Yes.

So by the time I've got a ground crew now to assemble it in a shed, I've already got a mooring mask that can bring it out of the shed and let it launch, so I don't have to do any Mary Poppins engineering.

So I was forever explaining to people that you need to take a holistic view of it. So that's really what the book's all about, that you need to try to re think it, that none of them do it.

They all start because that's the exciting bit, the flying bit. But it's not going to work unless you've got the ground handling sorted out first. And when you think about it, you can inflate an airship inside a shed and bring it out as a shed before it's even got any engines on it.

The Ground Handling crew need to know how to ground, to handle the ropes, and all the rest of it.

And I mean, rope technology is another whole thing. I've got loads of stories about. I'm a member of the International guild of Notch Tyres. Actually, I think my memberships lapsed now, but, but that's, there's a whole lot of stories about that, because what?

What knot do you use to tie an airship down?

I mean, you don't want ones. Barnes Wallace said the most important thing is to have a designer who knows what you're doing.

And I disagreed with him.

I said, No, if I'm standing out on the field with an airship. I don't want a designer who knows how to deal with it. I want someone who knows how to tie a knot in the rain at night that I can untie again tomorrow, and that brings up a whole this, I don't know, get into my thesis now, a whole can of worms, because there are three parts to a project.

There's the hardware, the software, and then there's the skill. And people forget the skill. I call it. It has been called the wetware.

And I give an example.

Here's a piano hardware, here's music software, here's me, you can't pick out Jingle Bells.

And here's Lang, Lang, who can fill the Albert Hall and play Beethoven from memory, right?

With the skill of how to tie the knot. You can moor a giant airship if you haven't got the skill. Okay, you know it was tied down, but if you don't know what the knot was, and I found out what the knot was, because I went to Cardington and met the old men who'd flown the big ships, and I know that the knot they used was called the rolling hitch.

JD

The rolling hitch,

G

I became proficient at tying the rolling hitch, and I wrote some articles about it for various magazines, because in America they thought Charles Rosendahl was a leading light promoting airships and a man came up and said that he had been taught to do the Rosendahl bend.

Well, he published this article, and Rosendahl actually answered and said he didn't know anything about it.

And I looked at it and I thought, you can't tie an airship down with that.

You've got to slack the rope off before you can untie it, but the rolling hitch you can untie when it's under full load.

So I wrote some articles debunking the zeppelin bend, the Rosendahl bend, you need to consider why you would use a bend when you what you need is a hitch.

JD

I'd never thought of that.

G

Yes, see, but not a bend is for tying two ropes together, and a hitch is for tying a rope to a bar or a brown anchor or something fixed. So there's a lot to it.

JD

I'm going to have to practice my rolling hitch.

G

This is why it's a Cinderella, because people walk straight past it, they totally ignore it, and then they suddenly say, oh, we need the ground handling.

Doesn't work like that. And I mean, I just so many things with Cargo Lifter that was so funny.

I mean, they suddenly said, we have to get rules and regulations, so we need to go to the authorities.

And the authorities jumped up the transport airship regulations, which were basically the rules for jumbo jets, with jumbo jet crossed out and airship put in. And there was a whole lot of stuff that was complete nonsense.

And it says things like, the touchdown point must be determined when the aircraft is fifty meters above the ground.

Seems fair enough.

And I said, Okay, where on the airship is this fifty meters being measured from?

And I got five different answers within the company because different departments were using a different data point. The centre of buoyancy, the nose of the airship,

the pilot's head, tip of the undercarriage, or the lowest point when the airships pitched.

They're all different. Oh, my God. But the point I wanted to make to the ground, to the regulators, was that the Cargo Lifters.

The airship was huge.

The pilot's head was fifty meters off the ground when it's moored inside the shed.

So the rules are nonsense. Yes, this is the trouble.

They just keep on coming up with this nonsense, because they don't think seriously about and all I've done, with no engineering experience at all, is just ask a few questions and think seriously about it, and it's led me into wonderful, exciting places. So much fun.

JD

You're lucky, aren't you?

G

I am incredibly lucky. Yes, yes.

JD

I think as I'm about to run out of time, I'm going to have to say, Yes, well, I probably come back to you for a part two moment. Dr Giles Camplin, thank you so much.

The rolling hitch.

Oh, I shall never forget that.