

Nick Purvis Transcript. 30th September 2024

Jennifer d'Alton

My name is Jennifer d'Alton. I'm a director of the British Balloon Museum and Library, and I'm thrilled today to be at Cameron balloons, and I'm talking to Nick Purvis, Sales director, who's got a myriad of stories, to tell us.

So, Nick, thank you for spending time with us. Tell me about your Australian ballooning.

Nick Purvis

I was involved with people like John Mansell, James Joyner, Malcolm Campbell, over there when John ran - God, was it 'The balloon company?' No, it wasn't. Gosh, I'm trying to think of what the name of the company was. The Balloon stable was John Mansell's company, and I. -Well, turn the clock back a bit, I was at university studying aeronautics, and I read in Flight, an article about the Cameron Balloon symposiums held in Cirencester.

Well, Cirencester wasn't million miles from where I lived, and so my cousin, and a couple of friends, we made up a party and persuaded Mr. Sage that, in fact, we didn't need the accommodation bit because we could just drive 20 minutes up to Cirencester.

And he reluctantly agreed that we could just come for the balloon lectures. And typical of the time, my girlfriend and my cousin went for a flight, but the weekend was a bit of a blowout, but we got sort of tempted by this whole idea of ballooning.

And Tom Sage said to me, Well, I tell you what, I know you didn't get a flight, but you're not that far from Bristol, so why don't you come and help me crew?

So I then started crewing on Golly.

Jennifer d'Alton

Did you?

Nick Purvis

Yeah, when Tom was parading Golly around the countryside for Neil Robertson, I mean, it was great balloon to crew for, because it was only a solo balloon, and Tom, in his inimitable manner, was just good company. And yeah, we went to quite some places, doing the shows. And of course, Golly was a fantastic attraction, and everyone came streaming out to see it, because there were no special shapes in those days, and as I say, it was easy and fun to operate.

So that was my introduction. And then eventually, Tom said, Well, it's about time we got your flight.

And I came down to Bristol to help him and Chris a crew on a balloon at a school fete, I think it was north of Bristol, and it was a howling gale. And Tom said, Yeah, I think we can do if you're up for this, we'll do it.

So I scrambled into Chocolate Ripple, and we careered off towards sort of Badminton, just landing just north of the M4 at a hell of a rate of knots, went through a hedge and into the next field, a massive drag.

And I thought it's great. You know, this was having sort of played rugby at Uni and stuff like that. This is great.

Then I got introduced to the back of syndicate, hence James and Malcolm and Gerald, and I joined that syndicate for the princely sum of a couple of hundred pounds. And, I took my turn to fly, being taught by Gerald and Malcolm and James. So, yeah, that was, that was my start.

Jennifer d'Alton

When? When was it that 1979?

Nick Purvis

No, it must have been about 70 because I wasn't working for Cameron balloons. I was working for an Australian defence contractor at the time, so I was living over in Australia prior to joining Cameron balloons. In actual fact, I flew my first I met up with some Australian balloonists at Canberra and flew my first P1 flight, having convinced the Australian authorities I had my licence. But in those days, you didn't need a licence in Australia. And the guy believed me.

So I went and took a balloon flight just out on the countryside in Canberra with a guy called John Abel who was very trusting to let me fly his balloon.

Jennifer d'Alton

Other balloonists who were in Australia at that time were I think Chris Dewhurst went there, Brian Smith was there. Can you remember any others that you might have met?

Nick Purvis

Well, there was no I'm dreadful at names, but I can picture this, the Thunder and Colt dealer there at the time.

It will come back to me, John Wallington was his name. Went around, ran Thunder and Colt in the US, then bought the company. I was speaking to him the other day, no, it will come back to me. It will come back to me.

Jennifer d'Alton

When did you join ,or who persuaded you to join Cameron's?

Nick Purvis

So I came back to the UK, from Australia to the UK office, no Australians or training aids, just out there Hartley Whitney, and started to help Don. When Don started his Atlantic project, I started to help him get things like some comms together and get some sponsorship for that, because we were in the same kind of industry, working in the defence industries, it gives you lots of contacts, and then Don said, why don't you come and help me?

So I went over to Canada and helped prep the launch and helped him working up on the setup of the Atlantic trip, there's an EC trip, met Jim and Alan, shared a room with Jim in St John's. I think that's as far as we go with that story. But no, it's great. It was great. Unfortunately, I had to go back to work just before Don took off, but they ran with Martin Harris, the Met guy who ran the Bracknell Control Centre, and was involved with that. And actually it was just after that that I went out to Australia, because I missed the celebrations and all the parties. But yeah, I was involved in that project. So this is all late 70s

Jennifer d'Alton

We saw Martin Harris at the British Balloon Museum luncheon on Sunday. He looks absolutely fantastic.

Nick Purvis

Brilliant. Is he OK?

Jennifer d'Alton

He really is.

Nick Purvis

And of course it's having no children, you see,

Jennifer d'Alton

I put, I put him on the same table as Don and Rob Bayly, of course, yeah, yeah, who else, oh Mike and Debbie Scholes?.

Nick Purvis

Oh, brilliant Yeah, that's great.

Jennifer d'Alton

I think it went very well, fantastic. I haven't had an interview with them yet. I think that, yeah, Martin was so keen on you guys, especially the first one, the first transatlantic trip he did with, you and Alan and Jim and Don and Robert. Wasn't Chris Davey there as well?

Nick Purvis

Yeah, Chris, of course, was very much part of that.

Jennifer d'Alton

Yeah, so then you came back here and joined Camerons full time. Yeah?

Nick Purvis

I think, yeah, as I say, I was working with John Mansell at Cape doing crewing and stuff. And then I think my name came up, and Don sent me a very nice letter saying, Would you like to join Cameron balloons? We're looking for an assistant Production Manager for Ian Kerr right, which was my first role, yeah, so helping Ian, who was such a brilliant, or is such a brilliant part of Cameron balloons legacy? Yeah, he's, you know, so so bright and so particular about getting things done properly.

And then, yeah, so worked under Ian's wing rigging, doing well, everything you can imagine in a small company when we were based up in in the church hall in Cotham then, yes, of course,

Jennifer d'Alton

Then you moved to here, this enormous building,

Nick Purvis

Yeah, it was a complete shock. Yeah. I mean, the best thing that's happened in the way. I mean, we'd never have been able to grow in the way we have.

Jennifer d'Alton

Perfect no paper bags to be seen. Brilliant building.

Nick Purvis

No, it's lovely. It's got a great atmosphere. And being where it is, of course, means that people go shopping during the day that good go to the bank, I was going to say, but if you can find one, and you know, we're right in the middle of Metropolis, the downside is that we're running out of space, and it will be lovely to have a

property on nice open ground where we could go inflating out the back then we probably lose our most important asset, and that's the staff.

Jennifer d'Alton

Oh three, three people I've talked to so far worked here for over 30 years.

Nick Purvis

Yeah, incredible, and that's been a fantastic asset for us, because you know that knowledge which you can't write down, you can't put in a manual or anything, that knowledge that the girls have is fantastic.

Brilliant, absolutely brilliant.

Jennifer d'Alton

So what did your family think? You've had four girls, a wife, and you're spending your life ballooning around the world.

Nick Purvis

It was my father who, to a great extent, I had a brother who was very successful in architecture, and I remember when my parents had Christmas parties and they'd say, "oh yes. And can I introduce you to Nick Oh and Paul. He Paul works for HOK architects up in London, big American company." And he said, 'blah, blah'

And, you know, to be honest, I joined ballooning because working in mainstream Defence Industries was a bit static at the time. I wanted to get into aviation, and this was my gap year, coming to Cameron balloons, and I thought, I've got nothing to lose. You know, got no family. I'm married. Let's go and do something a bit different, a bit of a hobby. And stayed here ever since.

Jennifer d'Alton

How did you meet your wife? Is she a balloonist?

Nick Purvis

No, well, I say no, I met her to balloon meet

So she'd just gone along with some guys from Hampshire to go ballooning. Never been ballooning before, and I met her there. And eventually, actually, after, well, just before our fourth child, she said, 'ballooning anyone can do it. It's not that difficult'.

So she got a licence, six months pregnant, and got RT license, did all the solos and everything, and said, 'There you are. So you know it can be this easy'.

Never flew since as a P1 Should I say? Well, of course, having four girls actually, you know, is a full time job in itself. But she just wanted to show that it could be done. And

Jennifer d'Alton

She did it and she did it. That's absolutely excellent.

And you've kept in touch with so many people. It's a big family, Ballooning we found that.

Nick Purvis

Yes, and I mean, this is one of the lovely sides, and working in the industry as we are, one of the these tricky sides, and that is your customers are your friends. And we have a very close relationship with so many of

our customers, and yet the hard commercial business of running a balloon company, selling a product makes that relationship sometimes difficult.

Jennifer d'Alton

I can see that *'I'm your best friend. Give me a 50% discount'*. Doesn't really work.

Nick Purvis

Well. No,

Jennifer d'Alton

It must be fun. I know so many people who know you and Alan when he was working here, and Jim, so many

Nick Purvis

It's a very different industry to most others. You know the fact that you're you have a much closer relationship with your customers. My daughters have been to stay with some of our customers.

We've had their daughters and children to stay. And you know, it's been absolutely wonderful like that. And, yeah, I think that's probably one of the biggest joys of the business.

Jennifer d'Alton

Is there any particular flight, any challenge that you would like to do? Would you like to fly the Atlantic or the Baltic or the Indian Ocean?

Nick Purvis

Yes, I think one of the things that always holds you back is your responsibilities as a parent or something of that nature. I mean, I've flown the Alps. I've flown the channel. When I say to people about challenge yourself, it doesn't matter whether it's the Atlantic or anything, just try and do something that you wouldn't normally do.

So, you know, doing the long jump, for example, just challenges you. It's a great competition to do it, to do, do the channel, do an Alpine flight. Just keep pushing yourself a bit. Well, it doesn't matter whether it's ballooning or anything else for that, just if you enjoy, you know, doing something and with ballooning, you can always better yourself. And you can do things better. And gaining that confidence that you can go out and make a decision on a flight that, no, you know, don't think it's suitable, not that the weather's unsuitable for flying, but it's not, I don't feel that it's suitable for me at this time.

Yeah, the next day you go out, you go, yeah, I'm up for this. And other people are going, not so sure, you know, but it's, it's that that's an interesting point that I've found over the years.

Jennifer d'Alton

No more challenges this year, maybe.

Nick Purvis

I mean, you know, we did a hopper test flight the other day, actually was my last flight, and if I'd known the weather was like what it ended up to be, I wouldn't have flown this brand new prototype hopper that we did because, yeah, it was a challenge. But I wasn't worried about the challenge. I just worried about screwing up or damaging somebody's brand new balloon. But yes, as you say, I didn't. I never liked the idea of flying a hopper. You know, I go up to a few 100 feet, and that was fine, no problem. I go to two or three thousand feet and so. It's a bit uncomfortable. But no, I'm all right.

Jennifer d'Alton

When was your first Hopper flight ?

Nick Purvis

I said probably around 2004 2005, I never flew the air chair? Didn't know, right? But I were only in Cardington hangar when we had, I think it was the balloon that Crispin and Chris Davey flew across the North Sea. I was involved in that project, and we had a hopper out there to give this proportion of sizes, just for the bit of the press launch.

Jennifer d'Alton

I think I flew in that with Crispin in Chateau d'Oex in that same one.

Nick Purvis

So Heineken, wasn't it? Yeah,

Jennifer d'Alton

He landed, Richard got out, and I got in. And then they said, Don't go above a certain height. And we could see the Dutch Malteser balloon going concave, but they flew too high. Oh, right. We got caught and went down in wood. And it was very steep. Crispin said, 'when we land, unbuckle, take that rope roll over and tie it around the tree', because otherwise we'd have just slid down and down.

It was terribly exciting. I thought, Oh, I know I'm safe, because he used to be SAS. Fancy flying across the Baltic in one of those. Wow. How long did they take? Can you remember?

Nick Purvis

To be honest, I can't. No, I'm not very familiar with that project

Jennifer d'Alton

What about Don and his Russian trip? Were you involved in that?

Nick Purvis

Only on the peripheral, he did that. One of the things with these projects is they do take a lot of time, and of course, we've still got a factory to run.

So there were some things like Don's attempt at hot air balloon trip across the Atlantic, and things where we just had to say, Don, let's form a team to go and do it, and the rest of us will try and keep the day job going, because that's what we're here to do, service the customers. And these things, although really good, high profile projects, can't distract , we can't say to a customer, sorry, we can't deliver your balloon today because we're busy flying across the Atlantic or something. They're not really interested. They want the balloons delivered.

Jennifer d'Alton

So would you change anything in in your you've done so many things in your life. You've done incredible things. You've achieved so much.

Nick Purvis

Might say that, but I think so. Surviving is as an achievement, I think, in these days, especially as we speak. But would I change anything?

I think there's plenty of things we'd like to do, or we would have wished to do, but we're fairly conservative company, and we don't take the sort of risks that some other entrepreneurs take, which gives them that success. And maybe we should have been just a bit more adventurous in terms of the business, as opposed to the flying, because now we're in quite an inefficient property, you know, a big an investment in a more modern workspace.

I mean, the whole employment and manufacturing business in the UK, as we know from all sorts of other companies, is one of the biggest challenges. And I'm not going to get political and talk about Brexit, but all of these hurdles that we have to put up with make you think that actually we need to go and do things slightly differently, but they're quite risky, and Don is quite sensible in the sense that he's not going to put this business at risk, in the hope that we might be able to turn ourselves from sort of a million couple of million pound turnover to a multi million pound turnover, because for anything else, this industry can't sustain that.

Maybe if we were that way inclined, we wouldn't be making balloons at all, but we have a hell of a high skill base and experience with what we can do. So there are many other things to do than make balloons, but we're a balloon manufacturer we're balloonists at heart, and that's the market that we're going to service.

Jennifer d'Alton

Nick, thank you very much. I've taken up loads of your time. You should be ready as America's waking up to talk to you now. Thank you very much indeed.

Nick Purvis

Pleasure.