

## **Nigel Tasker**

My name is Jennifer d'Alton. I'm a director of the British Balloon Museum and Library, and I'm really excited that I have come to 'Mr. Competition' man. He used to be run the BBAC. He's the Vice President of the British Balloon Museum and Library. Nigel Tasker, good afternoon, Nigel,

### **Nigel Tasker**

hello, Jenny. It's nice to be with you.

### **Jennifer**

Nigel, we all know that you are really the person who instigated competitions. But how did you first get into ballooning? When did you see your first balloon?

### **Nigel Tasker**

Well, my introduction to ballooning, I had a printing company in Bristol, and one day, a tall gentleman came in and asked me to do a photocopy. It was 10p then, and I think it's still 10p, remarkable bargain.

Anyway, he gave me this document, and I copied it and handed it back. And as I did so, it said, pilots licence airships and balloons. And this was my very first meeting with Don Cameron, who moved on to greater things. Anyway, we I got talking to him. We became friendly.

I used to go out with his Don, his wife, Kim, and their very young daughter, who's now the Queen of Cameron balloons, yes, Hannah, yes. And we used to go out doing demonstration flights, going to flower shows and gymkhanas and various things. And as well as that, just doing it for fun out in the evenings.

I think those were the golden days. The farmer had never seen a balloon before, usually. And, you know, I remember happily that we would just finish up in finish up in the field. All the kids would tumble out of bed at, you know, seven o'clock on a summer's evening, and they'd all come rushing out in their pyjamas, and we, we'd solemnly let them go up and down on the trail rope. There's an old -there's an old artefact,

**Jennifer**

yes,

**Nigel Tasker**

In the evening, and then, you know, pull it down, and everybody would help wrap the balloon up. And, you know, you very often invited in for a coffee or something. So those are the days. And, well, I'm talking, I got my first, I got my first balloon within a couple of years, Oberon . People might remember Oberon as the as the Martini balloon? Yes, yellow and yellow and red, yeah? Well, they were Kodak colours.

The way we got hold of this was we did a David and Penny Braun, who were friends, friends locally? Yeah, we put up a syndicate proposal to Kodak to buy us a balloon, and we would then do demonstrations.

It was very early time when it was permitted to put an -well, not an advertisement, but an owner's name on the balloon. So we had some banners made KODAK. And briefly we flopped about, not very successfully, trying to do demonstration inflations from little from little shows. We only got, got off the ground two or three times, and then I got together with Kodak, said, right, you want to put together a proper program for next season so that you get value for this. And we're, we're plugging the name and so on and so on. And they said, well, well. We're, well, I'm not sure we really want to do this much more.

So they briefly, they bow bowed out, left us with a balloon -free. Wow. So that was the best sponsorship deal ever.

**Jennifer**

Brilliant.

**Nigel Tasker**

Flew that and then a couple of couple of years, couple of years later. Mumble, mumble, yes. Well, Oberon first flew in October 72 and I bought a little, little two man balloon called Harlequin. Oh, yeah, Piers, um, first flight, June 74 and I flew very happily all over the place in one or other of those. Enjoyed myself a lot. I suppose I think I've lost my log book must be somewhere. But anyway, I did, I suppose about 630 hours. I think it came to.

**Jennifer**

So actually, who taught you to fly? Don ?

## **Nigel Tasker**

Yes, and it was the, it was the usual experience. I, I was helping Don to crew, yeah, and then you, after you'd helped a few times, he said, Well, you know, it's your turn too, hop in for the flight, and off we went. And then do you want to have a go on the burner? And so, which I did? And yes, I said I'd like to qualify, and I, I did qualify using Don's demonstrator balloon.

## **Jennifer**

And who checked you out? Don did,

## **Nigel Tasker**

yes, yeah, yes. So I I checked out and did my first solo, When was it? When did I do my first solo? I made a note of this, knowing I was confronting you.

## **Nigel Tasker**

7:28

my like, yeah, I call it my people. I got my first solo in April, 1972 right? And had a lot of happy times we yeah, we seem to make several joint ventures over to France. Yes, the and the whole attitude of landowners in France was totally different.

You nobody had any respect for the farmers fields. If you, if you flew, did a low flight, you would be followed, not only by children on foot, motorcycles and two CV cars bouncing across the ploughed fields. And they never, they never seem to mind a bit in terms of landowner relations, it was beautiful.

## **Jennifer**

And they used to offer you a bottle of glass of wine at the end.

## **Nigel Tasker**

8:27

Yeah. They used to offer us the wine. Yes, that was those great it was great fun. I did a, I did a nice tour around in northern France with the London Balloon group. Chris Kirby and Co. I was lucky to get a turnover job. Somebody didn't want to do it. This was the Evening Standard. Oh, yeah. And they they wanted to do wining and flying in and dining in France.

So what's not to like, we made up. We made up a little party. Took the two balloons and the reporter and the photographer and our reporter, Oliver Pritchett I think,

was the reporter and so 'Oliver's adventures in France', daily reported in the evening, standard for all about eight days while we were filing these and sending the photographs back. Must have been my carrier pigeon, I suppose, in those days, anyway, that that was that was a memorable day, memorable week.

In fact, I did another swap job. Nobody wanted to do it, and spent a week in Greece buying their balloon. And I'm probably the only one of the. People that's flown alongside the Parthenon. There's camera clicking, wow,

**Jennifer**

We've never flown in Greece. What were the landowners like there?

**Nigel Tasker**

They did have, they had this setup, which we were doing for some sponsor who never appeared on scene, but he was very anxious that we should promote his whatever it was, Greek, something or other. And so we had to have an amplifier on board. And so the his representative, young, young chap came he, he came on board each flight, and as we flew over the astonished populace of Athens, we he would, he would be on his loud speaker. Everything was he wanted the damn great acid filled lead battery on board. And I said, No, I'm sorry if you've seen a balloon landing on the stony hillside, the last thing you want tumbling around your head is a battery full of sulphuric acid. I said, get a dry you can get a dry battery. You know, he couldn't. He turned up the following morning with this lead acid battery. And I said, 'well, very sorry. I'm going to have to put this over the side just before we land'.

And I did, bang, splat,

oh my god.

But anyway, I wasn't going anywhere with an acid filled battery after in the middle of the landing. Anyway, he learned the lesson.

**Jennifer**

So, but you said you owned a printing press in Bristol. Were you? Were you still running that while you were ballooning? And yes,

**Nigel Tasker**

yes, it was. It was not an average. It was in the early days of desktop publishing and offset LithO printing, where you did not require highly skilled men driving big presses. They were much smaller. The girls could run them very well with a bit of

training, and I had a very competent foreman, so there was no reason why I couldn't go away for a few days. Perfect.

**Jennifer**

12:30

Yeah, and did you do the Irish meet?

**Nigel Tasker**

I did the Irish meet, and that leads on for next bit of our tale really, because I was over in Ballymahon, where Noel Lewis decided he was for this purely social meet and he would, he would set up a task for the following morning.

But the moment he set a task, everybody started taking it seriously, which is not, which wasn't the plan at all. And so when they got back, it just all it resulted in was arguments. No, you didn't I was over. No, no, I was much closer. No, well, you shouldn't have flown over that carrier. This, all this, all happened, and Noel was obviously a bit lost and confused with all this. I said, look Noel tomorrow morning, would you like me just to set a little task and tell them, give them a couple of rules just to so they're all working on the same basis his own? Would you so? So I did, and that was the first task I ever set, and that they were reasonably, reasonably happy. And we, did that a couple more times during the week, and the following year, we were we were confronted by running a national championship select.

Selecting the team for World Championships had been on very informal basis, a bit bit like electing a pope, I suppose. You know, the great and the good got together and decided who was good enough and great enough to be in the team to go to Albuquerque, or, Oh yeah, wherever, for a world championship. Anyway, the BBAC decided that this wasn't really very satisfaction method, and we ought to have some proper competition. And so Martin Maroney, now, I think now, in Australia, I heard he emigrated with his money last time.

He asked me if I'd I'd be the task setter and run the competition for for a nationals in 1977 we did this up at Castle Howard under the sponsorship of Prize Yogurt in. Lot of yogurt was thrown about as a result.

Anyway, that was surprising how many committee meetings were needed in those days thereafter, it was streamlined and quite easy and simple to do anyway, that's where I that's where I started doing it seriously. I sat down and wrote up a set of rules, designed some tasks, and I'm very pleased to say that some of these rules have survived to this day.

**Jennifer**

They have which ones in particular Do you think

**Nigel Tasker**

“the earth shall be flat?”

**Jennifer**

I beg your pardon, the earth....

**Nigel Tasker**

shall be flat.

**Jennifer**

Go on. Then explain.

**Nigel Tasker**

Well, you you cannot claim a difference in distance because it's upper slope, right? Or in long distances. You can't ask, you can't start complaining that. Ah, well, I didn't allow for the curvature of the earth. So the earth shall be flat, and measurements based on the Ordnance Survey declared for the championship shall prevail. I so the earth shall be flat, and it still is. I'm pleased to say,

**Jennifer**

16:30

Did you ever actually fly in any of the competitions that you set?

**Nigel Tasker**

No, oh, I think I did once I flew as the Hare balloon. Ah, and we set up. We we like to picture us launch. So I was the Hare, and instead of the usual layout, because we were on an airfield somewhere in the Midlands, I made them all lay out in the big circle. And then, then they all, then they were all allowed to inflate. Then I inflated in Harlequin and flew away so I could take a photograph of all of them in a big circle, standing in a big circle. And I think it was, I think it was Ian Jacobs that just couldn't get ready in time. So I've got 22 balloons standing up and one laying flat.

**JENNIFER**

Actually, it's Ian Jacobs. I've just asked if he'll be the speaker at the next luncheon, because he's suddenly coming up with all the stories. So he will remember things like that.

**Nigel Tasker**

Oh, well, I will, I will. I will bring out, I will dig out my photograph of that of his disgrace. It under his T shirt, if it is Ian, I think it was brilliant.

**Jennifer**

So you moved on. You're still book binding and printing then are you?

**Nigel Tasker**

Yes, it was in about 85 I went over from printing into book binding. Yeah. There's a guy down in centre of Bristol had been running this old book binders, founded, actually in 1860. So he sold the company to me and the Royal Bank of Scotland, and I became a book binder. Wow. Not that different. Um, you're, you know, you've got to make paper do, do as you want. Yeah,

**Jennifer**

I think Richard understands that, yes, yeah. So you would, you went on flying,

**Nigel Tasker**

18:54

yeah, I did well. I had really directing and running competitions at home, more or less put a stop to fun flying. The balloons were weren't young anymore. Oberon was very, very porous. Yeah, and they, they lived behind some cupboards in my office, both the envelopes but the baskets had gone. I had one burner left and so on. So eventually I sold, I sold them both to Piers Glydon, the webmaster, and he, he got a little use out of them. And then eventually they had to be scrapped. If I'd be more if I'd been more aware of the balloon museum. I might have asked, certainly, Harlequin because it's quite- it makes a pretty show.

**Jennifer**

It is pretty. I saw a picture of it when Piers last flew it, I think. And you noticed it in Trailrope, I think, yes,

**Nigel Tasker**

yeah. And I did have one, one very last flight, because Piers rang me one day and said, you might be interested to come to Ashton Court at dawn tomorrow morning. So great. So I did, turned up, and as I drove into Ashton park there, there was Harlequin inflated against the trees.

Oh, lovely, tear, tears running down my face. I rushed over and I then, I then performed my last flight. Oh, I flew this. They're all gathered round. They said, Go on, climb in.

As I climbed in, felt very much at home. They said, Go on, take off. Can't. No insurance, nothing, I said, but I, I have got about 2000 hours of supervisory experience watching me do this. I do a training flight. I just, I just went, Oh, a little hop down to the down near the house and landed. That was my last flight about three and a half minutes. I think

**Jennifer**

That was very special, though it was. It was, yeah, very special. So during all this time you were married? Had you got children?

**Nigel**

Yes, I'm. I married in 1979 about then, about

**Nigel Tasker**

21:30

then in 79 we had, we had two, two boys, fairly, fairly close together after that, now in their 40s, of course, and have gone away.

One is in Oslo, Married a lovely girl Brazilian and settling there. My other son, Robin, is over in the United States, where he has paid an obscene amount of money, working for the World Bank and taking cover from Trump's maniac excesses.

**Jennifer**

And Caroline, did you get all of them up in a balloon?

**Nigel Tasker**

22:14

No, no, I'm ashamed to say I never took the whole family up. Well, Oberon was more or less passed it and a 42. Is really only one and a half.

## **Jennifer**

So did you in the basket, when you first started with Oberon? Did you fly your parents? Was your mother wanting a flight? And your father, ?

## **Nigel Tasker**

Oh they, they were no longer with us at that time, all right,

## **Jennifer**

but I bet you, you never thought you were going to be a balloon pilot when you left school.

## **Nigel Tasker**

I didn't No

funny how the world can change, or it's

It's just chance, you know, I've seen reports of ballooning taking place, but just, you know, actually, to meet the, meet the manufacturer Right, right in front of my counter in the office, yeah, and he only lived two minutes away in Cotham. So that was easy. And I go around, and Kim made me very welcome. She was great cook and a host. And that's, that's where it all grew

## **Jennifer**

Amazing, isn't it? And so you've got all this ballooning behind you. Did you? Did you?

## **Nigel Tasker**

Well, my flying was behind me. That's I hadn't actually flown for many years before that final flight, but I was, I was now getting seriously into competitions around the world. I did the Nationals 1977 that was the first serious one up in Castle Howard at York. And then we had, we put it, put in the bid, and we got the World Championships the following year, which is 77, yes. So I did that. And then I was in the next one.

I went to a Virtual Sailor, and they asked me to go over as a jury member, something and nothing, job. And then 1783 came on the horizon. And of course, France said, right, 200 years, yeah, we must. We've really got to have the World Championships in France, please. And the CIA agreed, and they and they went away to organize this, um, but I, I've never quite got to the bottom of what happened. But anyway, they were, they were finding it extraordinarily difficult to to

cope with the necessary organization on the competition side. And in brief, we, I was appointed Director, and we imported the complete operational staff from UK, really, yeah, Neil Robertson, Mary Claude Cousin, Les Purfield, all these experience, the experienced people, and I think Norman Pritchard came along, you know, for stiffen the observer core and, well, I like to think we ran a successful championships.

## **JENNIFER**

I think you did. Have you read about it all the comp, when you go to a balloon meet and you're running the competitions, have you had any absolutely brilliant results. Any exciting things that you really that was the best ever. I think,

## **Nigel Tasker**

26:31

No, I've never gone home feeling though that was a, you know, that was a disaster. Sometimes we've been pretty well washed out with weather that you can't control, but in trying to design a championship you know to be serious, I think it should test the basic skills of flying a balloon.

That is, you should be able to read the weather from smoke and tree tops and other balloons if they're about, map reading. And at the same the same skill you you've got to use all that, and you've got to control the balloon and not smash it and not smash into obstructions or break your passengers up. So and the other principles, I don't want anything to be done, which will mean that it becomes the preserve of the wealthy.

Oh, yeah, you can't, okay, you can't stop them having matching Range Rovers and trailers and all that. But I like to think that when they when they took off, they were all equal, you know, and anybody could win. So that's I think that from what I see in it. Now, although I haven't been around, I read, I read lots coming, and it does seem to me that balloon flying soon is going to have a little, a little darkened cabin in the basket where the where the pilot in command is, he's crouched over his computer screen with all sorts of GPS feeds and everything coming into him. And the man outside is the lookout and watches for other aircraft and approaching power lines. And so the purity seems to have gone from it.

## **Jennifer**

28:40

Do you think that Don Cameron is now going to produce balloons with sat nav?

**Nigel Tasker**

Well, everybody's got Sat Nav in their pocket. You and I have Yes, haven't we?

We don't know how to use it, but yes,

**Nigel Tasker**

there was a period when we thought, well, radios were very expensive. Yeah. I thought, No, we we don't want to give an advantage to people that can afford to put out a few 100 pounds on a radio. Well, we got these little sporting groups for university who are coming and, you know, to saving money by camping in the balloon field. Yeah, you know for who, it's a stretch. So let's take a take those advantages away.

**Jennifer**

There were some really good meets and there are some really good meets now we haven't

**Nigel Tasker**

I'm sure there are. I'm sure there are. Yeah, I suppose the one the one that stand stands out in my mind was, forgive us. It was sponsored by John Player, and that was Nottingham in 1979 so it was, it was early on. It was we were taking off from a park in the city.

And. And the only space they had for briefings was a tiny little pavilion and and so it was pilot, co- pilot and observer, no room for anybody else. So it was very cramped, very cramped in. We had a lot of very we had a lot of very witty, humorous pilots and hangers on in those days and briefings were riot. You could barely get a, you could barely get a serious instruction out for the what for the wisecracks I just said, I just remember that so affectionately, early days and the pilots, that the pilots, then they did actually appreciate what the official did.

Yeah, you know, I used to get some I used to get some great little presents at the end of the week, showing that they they, they realized that the officials did work, and it was always a team, thinking of Les Purfield, who was my assistant Director for many, many years, and then, rather took over when I dropped out and made his name in Japan, particularly, I think he directed several, several over there, Marie Claude Kouzins, who developed this amazing esprit observer, or In her observer tours, because most of them are girls, and you, you, you dare not ill-treat an

observer. An observer is very common to see you and that, that, again, is something i Something we introduced, I give credit to Martin Moroney who, you know, he seeded the idea in the early days you your crew had to include an observer who would then be allocated to other balloons, and they joined that balloon at the briefing, went on the flight, were on the retrieve and came back and did the debriefing in the operations room,

32:31

and then rotating down the list from one task to the next. It. I think the observers really enjoyed it. They were very much a part of the competition, yeah, and

### **Nigel Tasker**

it okay, it was an expense, but pilots took that in. It was something they did. And it was that person went back and, you know, spent the evening with them and help fuel out or do whatever. But this, this little band of observers, was such good fun that a lot of people took it up independently. They didn't come with the crew. Norman Prichard was a golden example of the well equipped observer, you've seen that cartoon expert or photograph, and people, yes, people used to do that, and they, they got a reputation abroad, yeah, so that Somebody arranging, arranging of championships, the euros, or whatever they would they would be on the on the phone said, Look, can you, can you give us? Can you give us a few observers? And they used to do this. He used to, yeah, give us our travel and hotel, and over we come, Wow, and so. And they were, of course, truly independent. Yes, they seem now to want to get rid of observers. I think they have, in fact, have a lot of competitions. I think that is a loss, yeah, because it was, it was a skill and social. Socially, it was brilliant.

### **Jennifer**

34:20

I know that Rita Boyle was an observer, and she was telling John Baker's Wife loads and loads of stories. So I'm going to have to ring her up and talk to her, ask her to tell us loads Yes, worries, yes,

### **JENNIFER**

No, they they were amazing some that I remember some of Norman's stories as well. And if you're listening to this and you're nothing to do with ballooning, Norman Pritchard, who's no longer with us, was absolutely brilliant at a lot of things. Oh, well, he was quite a raconteur anyway. Wasn't Yes,

**Jennifer**

he was yes. I was. Are you? Nigel? I can, I can, actually, thank you very much for spending all this time

**Nigel Tasker**

Well, I could. I could. Round I could. Round one today is

I've, well, mean, what? What I didn't get on to was the fact that, sort of, in domestic organization of the BBAC

**Jennifer**

Go on, then

**Nigel Tasker**

I was trying to find some dates that I can't see any anyway, sort of in the 70s, 80s, we were the BBAC was in rather deep water. Financially, it hadn't been very well managed, I just say that, and I took over as a treasurer, and just tried as far as possible just to turn the taps off everywhere, yeah. And made it very difficult to get money out of me for anything. And we gradually got, we got it back on the road, yeah, and it, well, it's, I think it's still working well. Now, seems to be very good hands at the moment. And then I had a few years after that, as chairman, rewrote the Constitution, which needed a bit of tidying up. And then I forget, who was it? Norman Apsey took over from me, I think, or did I take over from him? I've forgotten records will tell if there are any,

**Jennifer,**

I've got all the records.

**Nigel Tasker**

I can see the aerostats behind you

**Jennifer**

you. Yes, I've got loads of them, loads more on the floor as well.

**Nigel Tasker**

yeah. Well, from my own satisfaction, I'd like to, I threw all mine away, and I'm purging at the moment.

**Jennifer**

Oh, you've gone!

37:19

What's happened?

*Nigel's internet went down.*