

My name is Robin Batchelor, and I've been gainfully employed as a balloon pilot for 50 years. I've logged about 4000 hours in my logbook, and it all started back in 1970 when I saw a photograph on the front page of the weekend supplement magazine of Don Cameron, famous balloon builder. Beside the balloon, I never seen a balloon before. The only aviation I had was when I built more airplanes as a boy, and I was captured by this idea of going up in the sky in a hot air balloon in that basket. So I tracked him down I telephoned him. Said, I'd like to come and learn more. He was in Bristol, I was in London, I think. And he said, Oh yes, come on down. And he would regularly have symposiums in Cirencester. And so I went down to Cirencester. Early one morning we arrived at this field in the early morning dew, getting soaking wet shoes. And there was Don Cameron and Tom Sage laying out one of the first balloons that he built, Golden Daffodil in this dewy grass. And it was, extraordinary, a huge amount of colourful fabric, new people all involved in this strange business called hot air ballooning. As I got to know, Don there were various other people there all having shown interest in the idea of balloon. And I think I first went up in the balloon that day only, on a tether. I confess, I can't remember everything, but I remember having to sit and guard the balloon when we landed while we while they went off and found the Retrieve crew. And I was sitting there thinking, this is fantastic. I've got to do more of this. And one of the other people at that gathering was a chap called Tom Donnelly, and he was collecting his first balloon. He'd commissioned a balloon with, and it was Golf Alpha Zulu Echo Romeo, all brown, mischievously nicknamed 'Shy To' t, and Tom Donnelly was collecting it. And we got talking, and he realized that I could back a trailer, I could read a map, I could drive a car, and he persuaded me to help him retrieve the balloon when he flew them.

So I was quite happy. I didn't take any time to agree. And it was very interesting to remember how this, this episode in ballooning, really got into my heart. And so subsequent months, I used to chase off to Tom in his balloon, and I learned all about it, helping inflate it, pack it away, put it in the trailer, and learning all about the whole process of ballooning, ringing the Met Office, reading maps. And I enjoyed the map reading, because as a boy down in Kent I was one was four children. We did a lot of youth hostelling. We cycled all over the south of England on bicycles. It was quite safe back then, and I loved learning to read the Ordnance survey map. And so, sort of having planted this big, healthy seed in my mind I began to, sort of say, I want to do more this ballooning. And so Tom said to me, I decided to set up a company in London to build balloons. I want you to come and help me. And so I left my job in computers, and I joined Thunder Balloons, and we were their first competitor to Camerons down in Bristol. So when Tom asked me to leave my job in computers and help him start the company Thunder Balloons, to build balloons, I didn't need asking twice. And so he and Dick Wirth were both architectural students up in Edinburgh, both artistic people and both passionate about hot air ballooning, and I now got several months experience helping Tom and beginning to really decide, you know, ballooning is what I wanted to do. So having left my job operating computers, we started building balloons in London, and my job was to cut out the fabric panels, and each customer would decide on the colour scheme, and we then order the different colours fabric. Sometimes they had graphics, but mostly the early ones simply had the necessary Registration which the Civil Aviation Authority insisted on, and I would apply the registration numbers to the fabric, but to cut out all the many, many panels to make up each gore, which then got sewn together to make a complete balloon. These seamstresses were wizards, I'll tell you. I learned it was very important to cut very accurately around the patterns, because then you don't get any puckering around the appearance of the balloon fabric. We were trying to be better than Cameron's remember, and so I was cutting out fabric. I would cut the wires to the precise lengths according to each size of the balloon, 56 or 77 or 84 and swage loops at the end of each wire through which the carabiners fitted. The burners were made by a chap who also made stainless steel trolleys for hospitals somewhere in East London. And so I'd go and collect the burners, and I would fit the valves, I would fit the hoses

and make sure they were gas proof with PTFE tape. Baskets were built by And traditionally, were built by the blind workshops Down East Kent Road, the Old Kent Road. And I loved my visits down there. I used to take the thunder van, a Volkswagen van with lovely graphics. Tom being a very artistic chap, he would take Thunder Balloons on the side of the van. I used to enjoy driving that around. I loved meeting these blind workers who made the baskets for us, and I loved my visits down there. And their patron was Hughey Green, a presenter on television, and he also ran a program called Opportunity Knocks. And one day, when he was visiting the nine workshops, I think Mr. Green, you've got to read this geezer called Robin. He comes down and picks up these balloon baskets. But he's a real riot. You ought to have him on your program. And subsequently, he invited me on to Opportunity Knocks. This is about 1971 and I had to introduce the Wood Green operatic society who were going to sing a medley from the Merry Widow, and we'll come back to that in a moment. And so I would then take the baskets to a lock up in Ealing when Dick Wirth had his flat and I would then swage loops onto the end of the baskets, the end of the wires that were fitted into the baskets, and pick up the aluminum Worthington tanks and fit valves into the tanks, again, making them gas proof and put covers on squashable covers so that you bruise yourself when you landed. And I really enjoyed learning the practical use of every aspect of balloon manufacture.

The office was a lively place. London echoed to the sound of Capital Radio at the time, and the lovely, confirmed bachelor called Kenneth Simmons was the was the backer the financial backer of Thunder Balloons. Interesting businessman who lived in London, always very smartly dressed, and he would have his office and carry on his businesses, I think, had a fish and chip shop in Brighton. He had something to do with a the film company - a lovely, lovely man, and occasionally bellow out from his little office TURN THAT RADIO DOWN. But otherwise, it was a very happy place, and we met extraordinary people. And so I started to gain my experience flying balloons, because Tom and Dick could occasionally say, let's jump in a car and go down to Marsh Benham in Newbury, where everybody seemed to congregate to fly balloons in those days, and we would fly. And I gained experience bit by bit, and ultimately got my license and as we gained more fame, if you like, you know, we got more contracts to build balloons. One of the balloons we needed to build was for Prize Yoghurt, the St Ivel Prize Yoghurt down in Wiltshire, and I realized that they needed a pilot to fly it. This was the moment. I decided it's probably time to stop building balloons and start flying license by now. So I persuaded them to employ me as their balloon pilot. And that's really when I really started to learn.

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I was given jobs to fly at agricultural shows all over the British Isles, starting in May and going back home in September. And it was fantastic experience. And I clocked up hundreds of hours in that balloon. And it was a real education. We met some good people. There were a few other commercial pilots also flying advertising balloons in these shows. So I learned from them, and it was a lot of fun. We were young, we were energetic. We would try not to fall asleep at the wheel, because we were driving so much all over the British Isles with our balloons, either in a trailer or in a van. And it was during this time that another important person arrived in my life called Colin Prescott. He would go back to that television program, Opportunity Knocks, and he was with a very good friend of his, and they suddenly saw me on the television screen talking about ballooning. And Colin, meanwhile, was living in London, a very successful marketing executive, young guy, but also had an unusual approach to life. And he immediately started to form the idea of setting up a company, an advertising company, to fly balloons to advertise whatever was on the side of the balloon. So he contacted me, we discussed it, and that was it. We started the hot air balloon company in 1976 based in London. And that was the most monumental decision of my life, that we at the hot air balloon company became the first successful company to fly commercial balloons, and we spearheaded a wonderful

movement. I mean, laying of the laying aside false modesty. We really were doing with the first to do a lot of things. So we built up a number of very good relationships with good companies. Prize Yoghurt was the first one. And then fights for fertilizer, I think it was. And then the tree board, not tree ball mints, it was chocolates and Terry's, all gold chocolates and others. And so we were really building quickly. The companies were very, very pleased with the value for money. We met more pilots. We really started to build momentum. And I was having enormous fun being paid to do what you love, to do, real luckiest people in the world, Unknown Speaker 12:00 the third shareholder of the hot air balloon company was Julian Knott, very well known pilot in the ballooning world whose approach was very scientific. He broke the world altitude record several times successfully, and he had a scientific approach to ballooning and later in the evolution of the Hot Air Balloon company, he flew an interesting flight with a paraffin powered burner rather than propane, and they flew a long, long, flight from Edinburgh all the way down to Colchester, all night. They were hoping to fly across the North Sea. Sadly, they were unlucky, but Julian's approach was scientific, rather than a daily sold up and down the motorway flying in agricultural shows. We were We were very lucky in having Tessa Tennant join us as the Managing Director, she kept on crazy pilots in control another pilot for Ian ash pole. He was a very important pilot. He was a real showman as well, and loved parachuting, which was useful later on in commercials. Joe Philp was a wonderful man. He broke a world altitude record once, and was this real old school gentleman and a lovely alternative to most of we crazy balloonists. And so we built up a lovely - we were all good at what we did. Colin was very good at marketing. Tessa understood the admin and marketing as well. And so we were perfect mix of young, enthusiastic people. We're now seeing computer power really evolving in leaps and bounds, and so the manufacturers could be much bolder in what they could offer the customers. So we now can see the advent of special shape balloons. First one we had in the Hot Air Balloon company was also a light bulb balloon. But they became more and more bizarre, like Rupert the bear, an enormous, great big, tall balloon Thomas tank engine, a huge, great big steam engine, cars for Audi and Jaguar and a very well known character called Malcolm Forbes really celebrated his love for ballooning, and he commissioned the replica of his chateau in France at Balleroy, an enormous Harley Davidson motorcycle. There was just no end to the imagination. The manufacturer manufacturers could safely build almost anything, and so the active commercial pilots were evolving their experience and their skills to safely fly these balloons By Jove, you needed strength. They were huge and heavy, but we were young, and we had enthusiasm and paint to do what we love to do. In the early days, I remember going to a show, and I had to, first of all, have a marketing hat on where I go into the press tent and try and persuade journalists come and fly with me and write a story. But we were so lucky now in having a lovely office back in London at the Hot Air Balloon company, all we had to do was go out and fly. And so my experience was evolving, and I enjoy competition flying that was a very, very useful experience, and I was fairly good. I never became British Champion but I came second and third.

And in the winter months, we had no flying to do, and so I suddenly realized that I could earn money over the winter by flying at a wonderful tented safari camp in the Maasai Mara in Kenya. And by now the camp, the manufacturers are building bigger and bigger balloons which could fly perfectly safely. So there was a time when I remember the first 105 sized balloon. I thought, Good Heavens, I'm never going to be able to fly that, , I found myself flying a 400 sized balloon in Africa carried 16 people. So of course, one of the skills you develop as a balloon pilot is to learn how to give a good briefing to your passengers. We've never seen a balloon before. For safety, you really made sure they understood how to hold on when you land, to grow past bend the knees. And that really was important out in Africa. And of course, I found myself, to be honest, I found myself getting a bit complacent with all the regular flying, and I needed a challenge, and so certainly, flying the 400 in Africa fitted that bill perfectly. And of course, film work I've loved the film work I've been very lucky

to be involved with. And right back in 1979 Colin Prescott had managed to persuade the production company to change their script from the novel *Green Ice*, the baddies stealing Emeralds from the top floor of a bank, and we used little one man balloons that instead balloons were building up in a tree called the cloud Hopper, and I fell in love with these talk about showmanship. You don't have a basket. You sit in a harness with a little tank of propane between your shoulder blades, a burner above your head, and off you go with good style pair of shoes with your legs dangling down. And of course, we're now beginning to make sure that the television cameras pointed our way, rather than to the competitors. So that first film *Green Ice*, we filmed on the top of the Citi Bank building in Mexico City. And the next film we made was *Superman three*. I enjoyed doing a balloon sequence for the feature film of *enduring love*, the well known psychological thriller written by Ian McEwan. It had a dramatic opening sequence, but we did it, and it was great fun thinking of ways of achieving what the director asked for. Of course, a memorable film was *The Aeronauts*, which used a full size replica of a 19th century gas balloon flown by James Glaisher and Henry Coxwell, to famously fly up to something like 30,000 feet before they understood they needed oxygen. So they were real scientific pioneers, and they very authentically told the story, although they substituted poor old Henry Coxwell with the actress Felicity Jones and the actor was Eddie Redmayne. Really a lot of fun, lot of hard work, but we were very lucky in the UK climate to find a huge helium filled balloon six times and endless commercials carried on. The most memorable one was when I had to fly over the Eiger, and pretend come very close onto the north face of the Eiger. And the well known actor, Stephen Fry had to be Phileas Fogg. And so He plucked an extra strong mint out of his Batman's bowler hat and sucked the mint into breathed hot air up into the balloon and just missed him on face of the Eiger, the extra strong mints commercial.

So I was at the Norfolk show, along with other pilots as well. We'd all finished the flight for the basket balloons back in the trailers for breakfast. Rang the office and said, Oh yeah, we had a great flight. And they said to me, Birdman, leave the balloon up there and get a train back to London, because you're off to the Alps. I said, Oh, really? They said, Yeah, it's some it's a job to fly over the Eiger for extra strong bits. Yeah. Okay, so I went down to London, got a few bits and pieces together. Alan Hoey would be my crew, and I never flown the Alps. And obviously I was mindful that I had to bring up the RAF said, I've got to find the Alps over the iGo, which is about 15,000 feet. So what? What advice do you have? He said, Oh, well, it's easy on man. If you go above 10,000 feet, read oxygen. And when you're fine, you look at your nails, if they go blue, breathe oxygen. Do simple arithmetic. If you find it difficult, breathe oxygen. Good luck, old man. Put the phone down. Oxygen for get it. Flew out there. The balloon was already out there. But what I didn't know, another pilot, gray mouse, been there for a week. Very wisely, said, Forget it. I'm not doing that. It's not too dangerous. They didn't tell me until afterwards. So I got there. We arrived at this lovely helicopter pilot. It was the head honcho rescue helicopter of the valley. We were in Grindelwald, right at the foot of the Eiger Jungfrau, and he had this lovely red twin squirrel helicopter. And this was the police. And I talked to various people said, Well, look, if we took if we launch from here, we need them in to go this direction, fly over the north face of the Eiger and what they wanted for the commercial was for the balloon to visibly start descending so it's out of control towards the north face of the Eiger. We would be dressed in Victorian gentleman's clothes, IP failures. Unknown Speaker 21:47 I have a top hat and in the room. Unknown Speaker 21:53 And then when they when they said you could burn again in the studio, pluck a pepper, suck it, blow the hot air into the balloon, and we go just avoid disaster. And so the helicopter pilot offered to take me up to the top of the eye and test the bit. This was probably the first day when sat down and talked seriously about him. And, you know, I'd not been out there long enough to acclimatize myself. I was young and healthy, but it was

interesting where we just flew straight up in this twin squirrel helicopter, and he would hover whenever he saw climbers on the Iger that day. He said, those two climbers, they start 10 o'clock this morning. Those two climbers, they start eight o'clock this morning. Those two climbers, they start six o'clock this morning. He knew everybody. I like this guy. I trust him, and I'll be ready. We went to the very top, and he hovered and said, Well, it's about 18 knots, exactly the direction we needed. So I thought, wow, Christ, looks like it's on. And on the way back down, I remember being aware that we're supposed to breathe oxygen when over you're above 10,000 feet. Of course, we didn't breathe oxygen that day. He didn't say anything about it, I didn't, and I remember being aware of all my veins. It was a strange feeling.

Of course, if I question, you would probably realize I was suffering from lack of oxygen. Anyway, we got down, okay, and I said, Well, look, guys, the wind is actually perfect. Looks like we're on. And the local information was the wind would come down the valley in the morning, then at midday would stop, and then in the afternoon the valley, the wind would go back up the valley. So like we were taking off at midday, which is what we did. So they gave us these Victorian clothes. I had a long victory top hat. And then someone came up with a great big Penny farming made of wood, light wood, sprayed matte black, which folded in half. He shoved that in the box and said, You know what we'll do is a radio to you and the appointed time dropped quickly towards the north face of the Eigen and when we tell you, we'll tell you to throw your foot over the side, and we'll tell you to throw the penny farther inside, very, very flat, widely. And this all happened, and as we climbed up, once we got the balloon inflated. DL. John Medlock, my crew. He said, I'm just going to go and top up this inflation tank, because you might need it. Decision saved my life. Worthingtons might last half an hour. So he chopped up the tank pretty in there, there were just four Worthington tanks in this 105 got to Unknown Speaker 25:07 about 8000 feet, four nines, those six, five nines, 45 six nines, 54 Unknown Speaker 25:19 years everything seemed to be good. Taking pictures this fabulous Winter Wonderland all around and then 10,000 feet, 12,000 feet, five nines, six nines of 15. I was off with the cuckoos, and I never did with any oxygen. I just felt fine. Alan said he felt fine taking pictures of the mountains. Then the radio person's life, okay, Robin, when I say that, I'll start descending. So, good descent. When I say, 123, throws a frock coat on the side. Unknown Speaker 26:00 Did the filming. They said, Okay, we've got the footage. You can fly and land. I turned the burner on, rounded out, and we were high gatenight and the pilot. So by now, I was looking for somewhere to land, which is very, very short of fuel, and there's a glacier sort of in line. I thought, what the land and the pilot said, do not land on that glass full of cremas. Land on the first one, which might go straight down, Unknown Speaker 26:36 and pilot light went out, all I had was one of those clickers. So I'm sat on the side of the basket telling Alan to get in the knees, bent position for a hard leg. Click, click, click, click, taking pictures on these mountain tops. But of course, the glass is like concrete, and we came down, Unknown Speaker 26:59 so immediately we tipped over sideways and skated down this glacier which just went into infinity. And I thought, well, we're not gonna ever stop. Alan at the head, butted the tank. His face was covered in blood. So I thought, well, hold on. Hold on, tight and I hold on and find the hanky. Eventually we stopped. Somehow, a solid ice. So I bandaged and started to warm gingerly, back up this solid ice to pick up the radio and the flask and the maps the oxygen come out of the basket, and suddenly I heard these two voices say, Stop, do not move. Come Unknown Speaker 27:47 on. I was on the top of the eye, and then I heard voices. These two German, young German climbers watched me. They were roped together, terribly gingerly. Came up to me, said no, and they tipped him back to basket.

Unknown Speaker 28:09 I got the radio, we're alive. Can you come and get out of these? Head Unknown Speaker 28:19 open so they landed there insurance leaves at the top of the ball out.

They mustn't worry. Unknown Speaker 28:28 So helicopter landed, and one of these large, well fed marketing executives from west wall of London somewhere. He stepped out of the helicopter for that on his face. A, because it's like an ice rink, but B, because we were at 15,000 feet, he hadn't acclimatize. And so we lack of oxygen is a terribly serious thing. So Alan got in the helicopter and they took him back down to gGindlevald Hospital. But on the way down, he said later, he said I was thinking three nines aren't 81 at all. So that chapter in my book will be called the nine times table.