

Alan Noble's Interview

Alan Noble, my name is Jennifer d'Alton. I'm a director of the British Balloon Museum and Library, and I'm so pleased your internet is allowing us to have this conversation so I can find out about the so many incredible things you've done, sending men around the world, across the Atlantic, etc, etc. So good afternoon.

Alan Noble

Good afternoon.

Jennifer

Tell me, when did you first see a balloon?

Alan Noble

My first visit to the world of ballooning followed an air show at the former US Air Force Base Greenham Common in Newbury. And I stress followed, because there were no balloons at the Air Show. But as he finished in the early evening, the crowd turned to go back to the car park, and there flying over Newbury, half a mile, maybe a mile, away, were two balloons, which was so rare 50 odd years ago. One of them was brightly coloured, the other one said 'Chessington Zoo open every day of the Year'.

And I looked at it and I thought, 'now that is advertising,' and it was important to me, because I had my own advertising agency in Reading.

It was a Sunday, and the following morning, I rang up one of my clients, guy called Eddie, the advertising manager of Motorway Tyres, who lives in Newbury. I said, 'Eddie, did you see the balloons last night?' And he said, 'Yes, can you get me one?'

Excellent. I'd really no interest in ballooning, because I had a fear of heights, but the cash register chimed in my brain, and I thought, there'll be commission here. So I contacted the two manufacturers, Thunder in London and Cameron in Bristol, and in those days, they didn't just invite you to the factory, they brought you a balloon to go for a balloon flight.

Wow.

And first one to arrive was Tom Donnelly from Thunder, and it was a lovely morning in Marsh Benham, Bradford's farm, David Liddiard's place. And when I arrived, the balloon was already inflated, and with some trepidation, I got in the basket.

I was not really happy, but the cash register kept chinking away, and we took off, and we flew quite high. And from astonishment, I had no fear, because I was more taken by discovering how many houses had swimming pools in their back gardens and all sorts of things that I'd never seen before. And a little bit later, we came down, flew along a meadow, touching the grass, but not the ground, climbed over some trees at the end, so I could actually pick a leaf and then had a small drag landing in the meadow behind which had been cut.

And I was hooked. I wanted to do this. The problem was that the next balloon flight Eddie was going to take, and he might decide that he wanted to balloon, but I needn't have worried. I think it was three days later, back in March, when Tom Sage arrived.

It had been raining. The ground was wet, the clouds were low. Eddie stood there in his Burberry Mac and trilby hat, his wife beside him, and when the balloon was inflated, he climbed in quietly, and the retrieve vehicle, and my vehicle and Eddie's wife's vehicle set off along the A4 road, because the balloon was heading west, quite low because of the clouds. And then the clouds opened again and it started to rain, and Tom Sage put the balloon down quite quickly in a field just off the side of the road, and we all turned on to a side road.

The Retrieve crew got out and went into the field. I decided I'd stay dry in my car. So does Eddie's wife behind me in hers. And a few minutes later, Eddie appeared at the gate there was water dripping off the brim of his Trilby. I thought, 'Oh no, there goes my balloon'.

I opened the car window and was assailed by a terrible smell the field had been sprayed with manure. Eddie bent down and looked at me, and he said, 'I'll buy it, but you'll have to fly it.'

J

Really. Wow.

A

He then went and got in his wife's car, and I could see her shouting at him because he was soaking wet and stinking. But I got my balloon, and in fact, I went up to Litchfield Street in London to see it being cut by some chap called Robin Batchelor. I'm sure I've heard of him before somewhere, and it was fine. Motorway were pleased by the balloon. We took it to lots of shows and places where they had depots.

They even bought a second one, first one was a 77, the second one a 56, and I got a local crew together and we had great fun.

Another of my clients, Zanussi, the Appliance of Science, had recently opened an office in Reading and their MD, George Dorman, called me in and said 'you're in this Ballooning lark aren't you?'

And I said, Yes. He said, 'Is there anything better that we could do?' He said, 'You know, we just need to go a step further'

I said, 'Well, they've just developed a hot air airship.'

'Oh Good' He said, 'We'll buy one of those'. just like that.

J

Oh, my God.

A

At the beginning, I went to Cameron's and ordered it, and had great fun flying it around. Even took it to Spain once, to a factory in Spain and to the world championships at Castle Howard in 1977, not to enter, of course, but to fly the media. We flew a number of cameramen, and the footage afterwards was quite brilliant. And the BBAC kindly gave me the video.

Jennifer d'Alton

How wonderful.

Alan Noble

Zanussi got very involved in ballooning, and they sponsored the gas balloon flight of Donald Cameron and a Russian airline, man called Genardi, who launched from the hangers at Cardington, flew across the North Sea beach in Latvia. It turns out Don likes landing on beaches and more about that later.

Jennifer d'Alton

What was that? What was the name?

Alan Noble

It was a just called the Zanussi balloon. And right, he had a banner on it, and it caught the attention of something called the Lenin Komsomol, which was the young conservative, sorry communists of the Soviet Union and Don and I were invited to Moscow to meet the boss, who wanted to know if we could perhaps introduce ballooning to the Soviet Union.

So I organised a balloon meeting Vilnius, capital of Lithuania. It was terrific.

The only problem was that our retrieve vehicles were army trucks, and when the balloons carefully landed on the tracks between the crops, the army drivers simply drove over the crops and flattened them, picked up the balloons, drove back over the crops, and the farm would meet at the gate and wave

Anyway we were then asked to organize a balloon meet in Leningrad, now reamed St Petersburg, and we launched from a palace that was being renovated, all good stuff, except we flew over an airfield that wasn't on the maps, and it was stuffed with military aircraft, and so I said to everyone, 'climb, Please climb, go high.' And they all did, except for one balloon, which went down and flew right along the runway. I thought, we will be arrested, but no, nothing happened.

Something did happen, because two weeks later, Flight magazine in the UK published a four page supplement about this mysterious prototype Russian military aircraft. Photographs by one Pete Bish¹

'Naughty boy!'

Yeah, but we were still invited back to organise a balloon meet in Moscow. We inflated in Red Square, so it was good. And by this time, Zanussi were getting even more interested, and when Don Cameron wanted to fly the Atlantic, they agreed to sponsor him, and he was going to fly with Major Chris Davey, ex Militaryman, and we decided to launch from Newfoundland.

That's Newfoundland.

Understand, not Newfoundland, as the mayor pointed out, and that was great.

Now at the same time Richard Branson and Per Lindstrand, were also planning to fly the Atlantic, and I got a call from Richard and he said, 'Look, can we talk about turning it into a race, it will be much more publicity for both sponsors?' Yes, why not

'Come and have dinner with us at my house just outside Oxford.'

Jennifer d'Alton

You went to dinner with Richard Branson?

Alan Noble

We went to dinner at Richard Branson's house just outside Oxford. Don and I arrived, we went in, had a cup of coffee.

I sat down in a chair that had been hacked a tree stump.

Richard's young daughter sat on a delicate French side table with Cabriolet legs next to me, and Richard said, 'Well, come and join us at our launch site, and we can have a race together. '

The problem was that their launch site was a couple of 100 miles inland in the US. And Don's balloon had been designed to fly the shortest possible route from the most eastern part of the United States. Well, of Americas to Europe. So he said to Richard, 'awfully sorry, but we can't come to Sugarloaf where you are, but come and join us in Newfoundland', at which point Per Lindstrand, who was sitting across the room shook his head.

There was silence until Richard stood up, held his hand and said, 'well, thanks for coming'.

Don and I went outside and Don said, 'I thought we were invited to dinner?'

Anyway, the day came and I launched them from Newfoundland. Sadly, there were problems, and the balloon had to land just off the French coast in the Bay of Biscay, and that's when my picture appeared on the front page of The Sunday Times, hand over face, 'We must battle on against the odds' just looking at it on my wall! *(Alan has a wall in his study covered with photographs and press releases.)*

And of course, Richard and Per went on to do the flight and complete it.

It's the only time they ever beat us.

Now, all this caught the attention of Alan, a Dutch balloonist who was also the chairman of a company that imported Chrysler cars into Holland, Belgium and Germany, and he came to Bristol, and he said, 'Could you organize a race across the Atlantic?' We said, 'Yes, why not? We know how to do it.'

So he spoke to Chrysler, Chrysler show interest. We put together a budget. They accepted it. I went back to the states to find a launch site. Newfoundland wasn't big enough for what we were going to do.

I wanted to launch from Boston, but air traffic there weren't happy, because the balloons taken off in the morning might interfere with the transatlantic flights coming in. They suggested we went up to Bangor in Maine, where they had a big, almost disused airfield. This was where the Atlantic planes, when they were propeller driven, used to land to refuel before carrying on. It was pretty much deserted, so I went there. The airfield was great, but it was wide open and breezy, and the mayor, who I met, was very helpful, took me to a place called Bass Park, where there was a large grandstand on one side and it was open to the world on the other sides.

And he said, you can use Bass Park, great. So we agree. We have five teams who would launch from Bass Park,

Jennifer d'Alton

five teams?

Alan Noble

Five teams. Five teams. I'll come back to those in a moment that while there's all this was going on, I had also organized a world altitude record attempt for Julian Nott which taking place in the States. And we were at the launch site for a few days, and I had to fly down to a place called Liberal Lee, Kansas to arrange for the helium to go to Bass Park for the Atlantic race.

While I was away for the day, Julian took off, set the record and landed. So I actually missed the flight that I'd organized. But anyway, it was good!

Oh my goodness.

The day came when all the teams flew to the states, and good old Richard Branson, he gave us all free flights on Virgin,

Jennifer d'Alton

really, no dinner.

Alan Noble

It was fine. There was it didn't take anything out of it. Didn't want but whiskey on the balloons. It was just very generous, because there were quite a lot of people and so we all ended up in Bangor in Maine for six weeks because the weather didn't play ball, and the budget started to drain because we were paying for the team's hotel and meals, not their drinks, but their accommodation.

However, the people were lovely that they put in all sorts of events for us, and Chrysler gave all the teams transport so they could get about. We had picnics and all sorts of things.

And then the day came when the Met man said, the weather's going to be okay tomorrow. And for six weeks, the locals hadn't be able to use Bass park because it had five helium tankers parked in it and a lot of covered up ballooning equipment. And the launch day was the 16th of September. I remember it well because it was my birthday. Yeah, and the balloons inflated and took off with five minute intervals.

First one away was the American balloon and the HR I don't show anything up here. It was flown by Troy Bradley and a very famous American balloonist who later died, Richard Abruzzo

Jennifer d'Alton

yes, of course, yes, yeah.

Alan Noble

Second balloon away was Don Cameron and Rob Bayly in the British Balloon, and again, the national anthem sound and off they went.

Third away was the Dutch balloon with Evert Louwman and Gerhard Hoogelslag, who was the Cameron dealer in Holland. Right.

Fourth balloon away was Wim Verstaeten and Bertrand Piccard. This was a Belgium balloon, but it also had a Swiss pilot on board.

And then finally, Erich Krafft and the former racing driver Jochen Mass took off in the German balloon. Now that was the good news.

The bad news was when I got back to the hotel to pay the final bill, it was 20% higher because the day before, Britain had devalued the pound. Aaghwell, but there was still enough money left for me to fly on Concord back to UK

Jennifer d'Alton

Alan, really!

Alan Noble

I knew the pilot, and I was invited into the cockpit, and I tried to talk to the balloons on the radio while we're flying over them, but they didn't hear me.

Oh, that's not quite true. They told me afterwards that the sonic boom almost knocked the balloons out of the air as we went over.

J

Yeah, really,

A

Yes, so they did hear me, but the wrong way.

J

Wow,

A

Yeah. We got back to the control centre, which was in Holland, and sadly, the German balloon landed on the Atlantic, and Erich and Jochen were picked up by an oil tanker and got off it two weeks later in Galveston, Texas.

Next problem was the Dutch balloon, they actually got across the Atlantic and were over the English channel, but they were assailed by really bad weather and they had to land in the channel.

First balloon Piccard and Wim Verstaeten starting in the Belgian Swiss balloon. They won the race. Then Don Cameron and Rob Bailey landed on the beach, of course, in Portugal. Meanwhile, the Americans flew on out of Europe into North Africa. They landed safely, but we had a terrible job getting them out.

Oh dear.

So it was great fun, but it had a knock on effect, because Bertrand Piccard, the Swiss pilot, was a friend of the Schneider family, who owned Breitling watches. And Bertrand came to see Don and I in Bristol, and he said, 'If we built a bigger roziere balloon -this is a helium balloon that also uses hot air at night-Could it fly around the world?'

And Don said, Mmmmm, Yes, of course, you just got to make it big enough, expensive though.

And so we worked out a budget, and Breitling agreed to pay.

The only problem was the balloon had to launch from Switzerland, and, of course, in Switzerland, the place to land launch balloons is Chateau d'Oex. Now, the jet streams didn't blow over Switzerland, and it meant that the meteorologist had to find a course down south to Africa, pick up some tropical jetstream and then go eastwards, yeah.

Well, the day came after I spent about two months in Chateau d'Oex, when the balloon was inflated, I cut it free and slashed it with A Swiss Army knife. Of course, yes, and Bertrand and Wim took off.

Now it was a disaster because but the Atlantic balloons had used titanium cylinders for the propane. They were light, but very expensive, and we decided that we wouldn't burn propane for the burner at night

preparing around the world flight, because the weight of the tanks would increase the size of the balloon enormously, and the cost of something like 30 titanium huge fuel cylinders will be eye watering.

We thought we'd burn kerosene, a rubber bag under the floor of the gondola. Great idea, and we tested the kerosene burner in an altitude chamber. Worked

fine. Unfortunately, the balloon landed after 24 hours in the Mediterranean just off the French coast, the kerosene had leaked. It had become a medical hazard and a fire hazard, and so the flight was a disaster.

Breitling kindly rented a plane for me, and I flew down to where the balloon had landed or nearby, picked up the crew, and we flew back to Geneva. And I thought, well, that's the end of that. But it wasn't, sometime later, I was invited to go to the Breitling factory in Switzerland.

Jennifer d'Alton

Were you?

Alan Noble

And I was around. By that time, I was wearing a Breitling watch,

Jennifer d'Alton

Thank heavens for that.

Alan Noble

Well, when we had the press conference to announce the first Breitling. I opened news on the flight, I was sitting facing the media wearing an Omega watch this, it was spotted, and it was quickly swapped for a Breitling watch. I opened the box, brand new and as the press conference started, the watch started to go beep-beep, beep-beep.

No idea what to do, but somebody leaned over, pressed a button, and it stopped anyway. So now I was in the factory where this watch had been made going round. And then I met with Theo Schreiber, and he said, 'We'll sponsor another one. We really want to do this.'

And Breitling was very involved in aviation. He had all sorts of biplanes and goodness knows what. And so following year, found ourselves backing in Chateau d'Oex again, once again, I cut the balloon free with my swiss army knife, as you do, and it went off right down to North Africa. And it picked up a tropical jet stream went eastwards without any problems whatsoever?

It was absolutely great. We almost had a problem over in Iran, where the Iranians said, Please land for identification purposes. But the Americans persuaded them otherwise, and the balloon carried on.

But despite discussions with air traffic controllers everywhere, and it all been extremely helpful, the Chinese weren't.

They would not give permission for the balloon to enter Chinese airspace, and that meant we had to find landing in Burma in Myanmar, and we knew how long the balloon was going to take to get there. And so once again, Breitling chartered a nice jet, and we flew out to Yangon in the airfield there, booked into the hotel across the Bucha from the airfield.

I hired a helicopter from a Canadian company, and then I then got a visit from a rather gruff military man who said we couldn't hire an aircraft from the helicoptering Canadian company, we had to use one of their military helicopters, and the charge would be \$5,000 .

I didn't mind that, because that was less than the Canadians wanted. So the next day, we knew the balloon was going to land, we went to the airfield, got on board this ancient machine, I think it was a helicopter and strapped ourselves in, My door was left open, and we flew up and it wasn't very long before we came across the balloon, which was sitting on the ground, fully inflated, and we landed close by, and I went across and Wim and Piccard were standing there. And he said, 'Alan, we have a problem'.

'Yes?'

'the RIP line does not work. We can't deflate the balloon?'

Well, there was a simple solution. I got the military, who had accompanied us, to fire their guns at it, and they did, but being incompetent, a lot of the guns jammed. Some of them didn't work at all, but eventually the balloon descended to the ground. The locals had turned up in force, and we told the translator, tell the locals that they can have the silver fabric, you know it might be useful being waterproof. They set about cutting it up immediately,

J

Really?

A

but the strangest thing was to see men walking off with the solar panels on their heads that had been on the balloon. And I thought to myself, yeah, do they know what they're for, or are they just going to nail them to their sheds to collect water? We flew in the helicopter back to Yangon, and the fun hadn't finished, because when we landed, this army captain said to me, '\$10,000'.

and I said, no \$5,000.

'\$10,000'

No, I've only got \$5,000

'You're all under arrest. '

We were all put in a large room and there were two armed guards placed at the door.

And after a while, Bertrand Piccard said, 'I was not part of this agreement. I'm going to leave'.

And he walked out, and he wasn't stopped. And I thought, I'll try that. So I did, walked out, went to the hotel across the road, rang the British Embassy. They sent a rather large and fearsome lady, and the rest of the captives were released. I'm told that the captain was arrested. True or not. I don't know. What I didn't know was I still had \$5,000 in my pocket.

J

A brilliant story.

A

Anyway, we got back to the UK, and I got a phone call from Mr. Schreiber at Breitling. Would I please go and meet him at Geneva airport?

That's all, no explanation to why, although I had hopes, and he'd hired a room in the airport, and I got off the flight from London, went and met him, and he said, Alan we will fund one last attempt, but only if you can assure me that you have permission from the Chinese to fly through their airspace, right?

Okay, so I flew to Beijing, and with the help of British embassy, I had a meeting with some senior air traffic controllers, and I said, Look, guys, we're not trying to spy on you photographs, and you can come to launch and Check for yourself. And they laughed.

'What's so funny?'

Everybody has photographs from the satellites. We're not worried about your balloon taking photographs. The problem is that while English may be the language of the air around the world, it isn't in China. Chinese air traffic controllers do not speak English, and therefore we would have no control or knowledge over where you were, and it could be dangerous, right?' 'However,' they said, 'there is a route that airlines from the west are allowed to take to come into Beijing. You must have flown it yourself yesterday,' They drew a line along the map.

I can't remember what degree of latitude it was and they said, 'If you fly below this line, you can go through our airspace, because the controllers there speak English, because they deal with the Jets all the time.'

Fine. So back to Switzerland, talk to the great meteorologists we have. And I said, look, it's not just a question now of getting a balloon to North Africa, it's getting it to fly further south than it did before. And they said, Well, you can do anything with the weather, as long as you're prepared to wait.

So we built another balloon. Now WimVerstaetenby this time who had been with Bertrand on the two previous flights was not well, and so I proposed a British balloon pilot to accompany Bertrand, who was extremely experienced and was also a British Airways Flight Engineer so he knew his stuff.

J

Yeah,

A

Sadly, he and Bertrand, after a while, just did not gel. Nothing nasty or bad about it. It just didn't work. And Bertrand said, I'm sorry. I can't, I can't go with him.

This got me in a difficult position, because technically, I was the reserve pilot. I actually had a roziere licence. But if I went, who was going to do the work, I was used to doing on the ground. Not only that, I'm a bit of a coward anyway.

So step forward, a member of our Brighton team with Cameron, Brian Jones, very experienced British balloonist, got on well with Bertrand. Fine fixed, and so off we went for a third time to Chateau d'Oex. Then again, we spent quite some time eating and drinking while waiting for the weather. And eventually it came along. I uh, once again, my Swiss army knife cut the balloon free, and once again, as he drifted up into the sky, I thought to myself, am I kidding to these two guys. I thought it every time I release the balloon.

Anyway, off the way down to North Africa, Southerly route, they flew right along the line demarcated by the Chinese. It was brilliant.

Out across the Pacific. Now, by this time, we were using the heavy titanium cylinders again, and from inside the pressurized gondola the crew could release them when they were empty, and they would fall into the sea. And there was a valve which allowed them to take on sea water and sink. Trouble was flying over the Pacific. When one was released, it didn't fall.

Well, it did fall eventually, that was over a beach in Mexico.

J

Oh, my goodness!

A

Oh yes, we were terrified. But fortunately, there was no-one there. And I suppose later, somebody had a bit of a gold mine when they found this very expensive titanium cylinder, wondering where the hell it could come from.

The balloon went on across the Atlantic and finished it's around the world, flight over North Africa, where it had gone down to from Switzerland. But after the problems we'd had, getting the Americans and their balloon, after the Atlantic race, and the balloon had fuel, decided we let it fly on to Egypt

And in fact, we said, Go along by the pyramids. Once again, we got into our luxury jet, took off, flew to Cairo, stayed overnight in a hotel, got up the next morning, got back on the plane and flew down over Sahara to where the balloon was. It was still flying. It wasn't anywhere near the pyramids, though. And we flew round it and I went into the cockpit and spoke to the crew as they approached the landing point, and they banged into the ground and bounced up. And I said to them, six out of ten for that one. And after slightly rude reply, they finally landed and I was pleased to see that the balloon deflated.

So we flew around, Bertrand, and Brian came out and waved, and we went off to a nearby desert airfield, one I say nearby. It was probably 100 miles away when we landed.

I had a couple of four by fours, and I set off back across the Sahara, which is not all soft sand, a lot of is very sharp bits of rock, and there were crevices and all sorts. It was a nightmare. And after we driven for about two hours, I got a call to say the crew have been picked up by the Egyptian military and they're being flown back to the airfield. So we went back to the airfield, met the guys, shaking of hands and everything else.

Got back on the plane, flew back to Cairo, where we stayed overnight and got cleaned up, and Brian and Bertrand had their first shower in I think it was 21 days, and their first decent meal as well. Yeah, we took off, and we flew back to Geneva Airport, where a press conference had been arranged.

Ah, so Don, Bertrand, Brian and I sat at the table to meet the media, and lo and behold, who was with the media? Richard Branson,

J

No

A

He tried to join the press conference. Breitling wouldn't let him. So we had our press conference. We answered the question, everything else, and after it was over, we got together for a photo opportunity. Who rushed onto the stage with his arms round the pilots, Richard Branson! Now you look at these two ways, you can think this is a very sporting gesture by the man we'd beaten because he made two or three attempts and failed to fly around the world. Or is it for publicity?

I'll leave you to make your own minds up. But anyway, it was, it was great. And we got a visit from the Queen afterwards at Camerons,

J

Really, that's when she came. Was it okay?

A

And then I was asked by Steve Fossett if I could arrange for him to fly solo around the world. And he actually had five failed attempts. And I went to various places, finding launch sites, Olympic Stadium in Seoul in South Korea and all sorts.

Eventually, he took off from Northern in Spain, in Australia, and made it around the world. Great so we now had two world records.

J

It's amazing. But going back to the first one, there are also records how high they went over the Sahara, but also that the balloon achieved 142 miles an hour!

A

Yes, amazing in the jet stream, of course.

J

Yeah, incredible.

A

Yes. They had a wonderful gondola. They had a comfortable bed, microwave oven, lots of bottled water, a toilet that was disposable in the right places. And, yeah, it was, it was good, but it was pretty cold on board. There was a heater, but apparently, didn't work terribly well.

But that wasn't the end of the world around the world projects because a Russian explorer, I 'm not sure what to call him, really. He's a Russian Orthodox priest, and he rowed the Atlantic, all sorts of things. Called Fedor Konyukhov, and his latest trip was to row from the tip of South America to Australia, which he did,

and when he landed, he was met by a well known American aeronaut and magazine editor called Dick Smith.

Dick had been pretty much an adventurer himself, and he edited the Australian version of National Geographic. And when Fedor met Dick Smith, Dick Smith said to him, 'Well, what are you going to do next?'

Fedor said, 'Ah, you are a balloonist. I would like to fly around the world in a balloon'. And Dick said, 'You better call Alan Noble at Cameron balloons.'

And his son, Oscar did, and they came to Cameron, and it all worked out well. And I went back to Northam in Australia and arranged for them to launch from there, and the equipment was sent out and Fedor did.

And of course, the reason, or one of the reasons, why places like Northam are great for going around the world are

[a] it's shorter than going round near the equator, but still meets the requirements.

[b] the only countries you have to worry about flying over are New Zealand, and possibly some part of Argentina. And of course, neither of them were problems, so Fedor took off. And where is the first balloon flight had taken I think it was 21 days. He did it in, well less and low level.

J

He did it in how long?

A

12 days might have been, 13 this day too. Very short period. But again, it's a shorter route. But what was really amazing was when he returned over Australia, he flew almost back over his launch site and landed just a few miles further east.

Good Heavens

To be picked up by Dick Smith in his helicopter. Amazing. Yeah, so and it, it wasn't going to end there. I mean, in the meantime, in my spare time, I'd organized another altitude record flight, hot air balloon flight in for VJ Singhania, an Indian, which was very successful. And Fedor, then decided that he wanted to set to set a new world altitude record. And so we built his balloon.

He came to Bristol, where we test inflated it in the hangars. And then Mr. Putin invaded Ukraine, and you couldn't send aeronautical equipment to Russia and so it never happened.

But that hasn't stopped Fedor planning. When all this is over, he wants to be the first person to fly around the world twice, non stop, right? Round the world once and then round again.

J

My goodness,

A

Will it happen? I don't know.

J

so where's the where's the balloon, still at Cameron's?

A

I guess. So. I mean, it's about four years ago now. Yeah, it's certainly not in Russia, and it will be difficult for it to launch from elsewhere, because it's sponsored by the Russian gas company,

J

Alan, that is amazing. But when you were just when you were living growing up in Burnley, you become a reporter, yes, obviously. How a lot of the marketing thing happened. Did you ever with your father being in the Air Force? Did you ever think you might fly?

A

No, I'm actually afraid of heights. So I mean, my life has been interesting from the start of my working life, because you mentioned I was a reporter. I went to Burnley grammar school. I got my O levels and was going to go on and do A levels, but there was an advertisement in the local evening paper for a trainee journalist.

And I thought, oh, that could be fun. So I applied, and I went to meet the editor, who said to me, 'Well, you've got all the English results you need. Why do you want to be reporter?'

And I said, 'it sounds quite interesting. You know, it is different,' I said. 'And not only that, my uncle was editor of the News Chronicle, which was a national newspaper in those days, and his son, my cousin is the Chief sub editor of the Daily Mirror, and the editor said, I know him. He's a friend of mine,'

No

And he sat back in his chair, and he looked at me, and he said, 'journalism runs in your family. You've got the job. And the first thing that happened was, as a very junior reporter, we heard there being a murder in Burnley,

J

A murder?

A

Yeah, a murder. And the man had a very unusual name, and I said I went to school with a boy of that name. So together with a senior reporter, I was sent off to this man's home to talk to his now widow, and we knocked on the door and she answered it, hello. Oh, we're sorry to hear about the death of your husband. 'Oh, is he dead?'

A

yes.

'Oh, dear,'

'Who did it? She said

Now we hadn't mentioned murder. It turned out it was her boyfriend, who had done it.

Wow,

They both went to prison.

J

Oh my goodness,

Soyes, and from there I went on into press relations to start with, and then into advertising and press relations. I ended up on Tomorrow's World on BBC, because the company I was with invented a laser device to fit on the guns of tanks so they could do battle with each other, and we did it for Tomorrow's World down at the Bovington army camp, and then television again, on the Bruce Forsyth show, where we had two people inflate a small balloon and pack it away, And then members of the audience or people competing had to pack it away.

So that was fun as well. It's it's been an interesting life.

J

Fascinating little bits. How did Don approach you and say, come and work for Cameron balloons?

A

Yes and no, I was working with Mike Kendrick. I had my advertising business, and Mike Kendrick had his ballooning company up in Shropshire, and he was building 400 racing cars and importing Japanese tyres. And he said, 'Hey, look, mate, come and join us. You can be managing director.'

So why not? You know, ballooning, motor racing, yeah, and in fact, we got to go to the Monaco Grand Prix with our Formula 3 car and in the pit lane, and our badges still worked for the Formula One race the following day, not into the pit lane, but we could go round the circuit. And while the Formula One race was taking place, I was walking through the famous tunnel in Monaco with the cars zipping past me.

J

I was lucky enough to talk to Mike, and when you go on to our website, you'll find him and his adventures are on there too. So you're joining a very elite crowd.

A

Yeah, it's then there is this little story I mentioned to you previously about David Attenborough.

David Attenborough's team contacted Camerons to say, could we take him to 18,000 feet to collect aerial plankton? yes. Why not?

Well, it had to be somewhere where the air is very clean, and we'd like to do it in Scotland.

Well, of course, that pleased Don going back to his home country. Yeah. So he set off in a truck with a big trailer and two balloons and a crew. I went to Heathrow airport, met David, and we flew up to Perth together, where I hired a car. We drove up into the highlands to a hotel, arriving quite late, and the restaurant was closed, but not for David Attenborough.

It reopened miraculously, and he and I sat in solitary splendour and had an excellent meal, met the chef, met the hotel manager. But that was the good part, because the next morning, when we were all preparing to go flying, the fog had descended, and we were in a sort of Valley, and the hotel night manager said, this time of year, it's often full of mist in the Valley at this time of day. Oh, so we had to up sticks and move to another hotel. But the following morning, bright and early, off we went. Don's big balloon was inflated. My small balloon was inflated because I was carrying a cameraman. It was agreed that I would take off before Don and then he would come up past us. Fine. All went well. We took off. Don's rose slowly,

and went past us and started drift away as he was in a stronger wind. And then the cameraman collapsed on the floor of the basket.

J

What, he collapsed!?

A

He collapsed on the floor of the basket. I radioed my ground crew. They called an ambulance. We landed. Shortly afterwards, the ambulance turned up pretty quickly, considering we're in the Highlands. He was carried off.

He appeared back at the hotel later, but apparently had some sort of motion sickness or air sickness. But no, yeah, anyway, so I jumped into my retrieve vehicle and we set off after Donald and David in their balloon. And Don managed to land on a bit of a hillside, but the farmer was very helpful.

He got a tractor and trailer out, and we trundled up to the hillside, but there had been a bit of a disaster. Everyone was fine. The balloon was fine, but the vacuum to collect the samples had been underneath the basket when it landed and was crushed.

J

You're joking.

A

Alan Noble

It was all a complete waste of time. But David Attenborough is a very nice man to meet.

J

I bet he was. How fascinating, though. That poor camera man, thank goodness. Yeah.

So have you got your own balloon?

A

Not now. I had one for many, many years. In fact, my balloon was sponsored by a company in Bath who sold office equipment. And then a man called Andrew Holly turned up at Cameron balloons and spoke to me, he said, I'd like to get into ballooning. How can I do that? So I put him in touch with the guy who was my

sponsor and was also a balloon pilot, very good one, and he taught Andrew Holly to fly.

J

amazing, isn't it?

A

Yep, what comes round goes round.

J

So do you miss being at Cameron?

A

Well, being retired is pretty good. I mean, I've been retired now for eight years.

J

Really is it that long?

A

Yes, but in you've got to remember the first four or five years, we were doing ballooning projects, so I spent nearly as much time in Cameron as I did before, yeah, except I didn't have all the minor things to worry about. Do I miss it now? Well, I go in occasionally. A lot of the people who were there when I was there are still there. People work at Cameron's for a lifetime. They do. It's a very happy place to work. And do I miss it? Yes.

Do I have my own balloon anymore? No, because I decided I wouldn't trust myself as a pilot, and the last balloon flight I made was immediate over the Valley of the Kings, wow, but I was a passenger in a rides balloon. The pilot did offer to let me fly the balloon, but with 20 people on board, I said, No, it's all right. Thank you.

J

The different worlds, I think

A

absolutely, absolutely,

J

well, I can't. Thank you enough, Alan, I think your stories are amazing. Have you written a book, by the way?

A

No, funnily enough, it was Andrew Holly who said, Look, with your life, including being on stage with The Beatles, which I didn't mention earlier,

J

You can't just say that. And let me say bye, bye!!!.

A

Well, it was, it was when I was the trainee journalist, the young journalist, youngest guy in the office, and I got the pop scene job. We had a place called the Imperial in little town called Nelson in Lancashire, but it attracted a huge number of pop stars, all the stars of the 60s were there, and because of my press pass, I was able to go backstage, and I met so many of them.

My photographer who came with me, had a beauty queen for a girlfriend, and I won't say which pop group it was, but their small faced leader made a pass backstage at this girl, and my photographer picked him up by his tie, held him against the wall and said, if you do that again, you won't be going on for your second act and he put him down.

But for the Beatles, the security was immense. Normally, a lot of people were backstage. They weren't there. It was very quiet, but the noise was out front, and after a while my photographer and I were called on stage, and I stood close to Ringo Starr while he played the drums, photographer and a couple of other guys were in front of me, towards front of the stage, and we carried a lot of fainted young ladies across the stage back to Saint John Ambulance. I have to say, a lot of them were knickerless, because they thrown them on stage previously. It was completely littered.

J

You had to be careful how you carried them?

A

No and after the first show, The Beatles went into a specially built room backstage for supper, and they invited my cameraman and I to join them, and we were all locked into this room. Nobody else would get in. And somewhere, I have a sheet signed by all the Beatles, we had supper with them.

And they were really, really nice blokes, no show, nothing they wanted to know as much about us as we wanted to know about them and well,

J Oh, wow,

Thank you, Alan, the lovely way to sign off.

A

Thankyou Jenny bye bye,