

Colin Prescott Transcript 1

Speaker 1 (78%), Speaker 2 (22%),

My name is Jennifer d'Alton, director of the British Balloon Museum. And I'm so excited that I've actually got through to talk to Colin Prescott, who is so well known in the ballooning world. And he started the hot air balloon company of Flying Pictures.

Colin, you were born in Buckinghamshire. You've got two siblings, Jeremy, and Caroline. Did they ever fly with you?

Yes, they did. On several occasions, I think with some enthusiasm.

Before you got into ballooning, you did a lot of travelling, you went to Nepal with a lion tamer and a BBC racing commentator. Did you ever keep in touch with them?

No, not one of them. For some I've lost touch with a whole lot. It was a long time ago. And it was one of those strange advertisements that appeared in The Times, and I just joined a sort of motley crew of people, and we all met at Kings Cross and, and embarked on two land rovers overland, it was quite exciting.

Did you meet any lions that needed taming?

No, no lions that needed training at all. But yes, he was Dutch in fact, I remember, but I've not kept in touch with any of them. Nor have I ever heard from any of them ever since I don't think.

You've still got some photographs that you took?

Yes, indeed. Yes. I have. Not so much of them, but of what we saw. Yes. And mainly people.

But your ballooning interest started through beagling.

Yes, that's right. My father was a keen Beagler. And I rather reluctantly went out with him one day. And he had a friend who had a friend who was Safia Tarzi and we just got talking.

She'd never been out beagling before, and she said she had a hot-air balloon, and I understood that she was a princess from Afghanistan where there isn't a royal family now but if there had been, she would have been a princess.

And in those days, of course, Princesses and hot air balloons were both stuff of fairy tales. So there we are, she said she would take me for a ride. That's how it started.

I actually remember Safia Tarzi and ended up with one of her black and white fur capes, because she knew my mother.

Yes, of course. Yes. Well, her balloon was black and white. And she did everything black and white.

Anyway, so you started ballooning, or you started being interested then what happened? Something about the Birdman and Hughey Green?

Well, yes, I thought that I was working for advertising agencies at the time. I was, had been quite successful, I think. And I, I thought myself, I could easily find a sponsor for this, and so I sort of set about trying to organise a company and think the whole thing through and by a strange coincidence, I was watching the television, because I wasn't very well I seem to remember, and a program called Opportunity Knocks was on which was hosted by Hughie Green.

And he introduced this some balloonist called Robin Batchelor, and Robin Batchelor, who later became known as the Birdman for reasons I can't remember.

But I've always called him Birdman since, still very much in touch with him. And I met him for a drink, just to pick his brains. And because I didn't know anybody, and ballooning, and Safia had disappeared off to France, I think. And I thought he's just the right kind of character to front something so I explained to him the business idea, and said, Would you like to join me? And he said he would. And that's how it all started.

But then very sadly, of course, Safia was killed only a few weeks later, so I never saw her again. But I did embark on this business. And that first summer suddenly we had something like, I think it was eight or nine sponsors all with balloons so I had to leave my job because it was getting far too busy and terrifying. And I've never worked for anybody since.

What was your first extreme job for a sponsor with a balloon?

I can't remember what the first one was. But Julian Nott was a third person who then joined us quite soon afterwards. And he was a scientist, and a bright guy.

He had lots of clever ideas and was very keen on breaking records. And we needed to do something different for the sponsors all the time, we had to keep thinking of ideas.

So he undertook I think, what was the world record for 56,000 cubic foot balloon. Nothing particularly special these days at all for getting interest. But in those days, balloons were very few and far between. And as long as you organized PR properly, it worked. So it started off that that way.

And you eventually worked out that you might like to fly across the North Sea.

Yes, that was with Julian. And it failed. We ended up in a Scottish oak. We had, we were too heavily laden and we couldn't get it off the ground and it just heaved itself up. But a gust of wind kept bringing it down again, bounced across a field ended high up in an oak tree. And the fire brigade had to get us out.

You also had the first cross channel, race, but it was only your select few sponsors.

Yes, that's right. So our sponsors and their balloons. And again, we did a lot of PR around the event. And it got a lot of attraction that appeared on News at Ten and the national news. And it worked.

And Joe Philp joined you?

He joined us as a pilot. Yes. I remember saying to him, Look, we're doing these things, would you be interested in flying for us? And he said, Well, actually I would, then he gave up his job. And as he did it for the rest of his life, I think more or less than til he retired.

You've had some superb sponsors. You've had some crazy ideas. You've got an incredible team with you Ian Ashpole tightrope walking, and Robin flying off the top of buildings in Mexico. A lot of stuff in the Grand Canyon's and all of your dressing up in drag for some reason or not.

These were all for movies, of course. And I was very, very keen to get into action with balloons that needed balloons for their scripts. So that all started actually with a commercial for I think it was a Lipton tea that's right in the middle east or something. And I happen to know the advertising creative director of the agency that was making this commercial.

And I said, I thought he ought to take me with him to California where they were shooting it. So it started that way. So I then got a bit of credibility

through that. And then came another script, which I was aware of happening at the studios.

And it involved parachutist landing on a skyscraper. For two, it was a heist movie to rob the Emeralds that were all in the top floor. And I tried to contact the producer, I managed to get to the associate producer, not to the very top. And he said, I said, I've got an idea for you, which is little one-man balloons, which we've just launched, because Smirnoff sponsored one. And eventually, they said, Sorry, don't do it.

And then I found out that this producer was in California, trying to sign up Steve McQueen for the film what was it called? Green Ice, years go by I keep forgetting these things. Green Ice. That's right. And he was in California, and he was just waiting for Steve McQueen to sign up.

But what he didn't know and what none of us knew was that Steve McQueen had cancer. So I thought while he's hanging around, why don't I jump on a plane and see if I can get hold of him. And I remember flying off from Heathrow and thinking I'm a complete idiot.

I mean, this is absolutely absurd, but got there, plucked up the courage to call him up. Got him. And I said, I'm in California at the moment. And I was just wondering, have you got time for me to pitch a little idea. And he said, "sure. What are you doing for lunch tomorrow?"

He was bored I think sitting out there. So I went, I went to the Beverly Wilshire Hotel, where I met him. And he was having drinks with Michael Caine. He introduced me to Michael Caine. And we had a bit of a chat. And then we went in for lunch. And so he said, What are you doing in California? So I said, Well I've come to see you Jack. He said Don't be ridiculous I said, Yeah, I couldn't get hold of you in England. And they wouldn't let me through, you know, your gatekeepers forbidding it.

So anyway, outlined my idea. And said, you could replace the parachutist with something perhaps different or more exciting, which is three cloud hoppers, which one man harness balloons. And he was intrigued. And he said, let me get back to you. And he did get back to me the next morning. And he said, 'Look, Could Have you got time to go on to Mexico, where we're going to shoot this movie?' So I said, 'Well, yes. Okay.' So he said, 'we'll pay all your expenses and all the rest of it.' So I said, 'fine. So I flew on to Mexico and met the production designer and the production manager who were on site, at Citi

Bank, in the middle of Reforma, which is a noticeably big, wide street in Mexico City.

I outlined the idea to them and as far as they were concerned that they've been instructed, this was the new sequence. So I flew back to England, and it all started.

Who made the balloons?

Per Lindstrand in Shropshire made them.

And how did you choose your pilots?

Well, they were Robin Batchelor-the Birdman. And Ian Ashpole. And we took one spare who was Graham Elson. And who were basically what I consider the main pilots that we had. And I remember when we got out there, we went to the top of the Citibank skyscraper building. And I can't remember which one was on, but I think it was Ashpole. I think he just said, "you said we could do **what?!?**"

Anyway, I figured that if I said we could do **what**, I would have to be one of them. And that's how it started. And in fact, the team that actually did the stunt because it was only one night and which we'd rehearsed for weeks out south of Mexico City. And came up there but Ian Ashpole was sick on the evening. So Graham Elson stepped in. And Graham, Robin and I performed brilliantly. Well, the producer was incredibly happy.

Only one take?

Aaagh yes, well, it was a dead dodgy stunt. Honestly, we had to do a follow up on one line, one balloon at a time in quite strong winds at three o'clock in the morning, and then got winched back in again. That was the trick.

So in other words, it was three balloons arriving at the skyscraper. So it was done in reverse. But Graham Elson had some problems with this burner and we just got him back in time and it could have been very dodgy. We'd never ever have got permission to do this nowadays, health and safety and all that.

So you've had some incredibly creative ideas. One of the ones was your flying circus with the Sainsbury's fruit.

Sainsbury's sponsored all that. They particularly wanted to promote fresh fruit. So I came up with the idea of a flying circus have with balloons made of fruit, fruit and veg, I think it was Yeah. And that was a big contract, which we took on tour.

They were very colourful balloons.

They were they were great, brilliant, followed up not long after by the city of Vienna, which contacted me saying they had got an artist and they wanted to take a tour of balloons in extraordinary shapes on tour around America and Europe, which we also did. So funny how things roll on one to the other.

What kind of extraordinary shapes

I think one was a jellyfish. One was a sort of half-moon with three eyes. One was a sort of Darth Vader looking type thing. But they were, it was to promote Vienna as a city of art.

And PerLindstrand made all the balloons.

Yes, he did.

Wow.

You must have had quite a close relationship with the Lindstrand Balloons?

We saw a lot of them. Um, I think we were noticeably big customers, and quite important ones.

Some of the stunt seems a bit silly with some of the ideas you came up with, with the Ian Ashpole. Lying in a hammock between balloons, or tightrope walking, and did you just happen to come up with it sort of while you were having your cocoa last thing at night? Or is this just?

Yes, basically? Yes, at odd times. Certainly Sainsburys flying circus came to me while I was just lying in bed. Yeah, I mean, but I kept trying to think of what can we do next? We got to keep it all going.

I met, on a commercial for Fanta in France, which I was flying balloons for, a helicopter pilot called Mark Wolff. And in those days, of course, all you had was an answering machine. And he used to go off.

He was he was the person of choice from the film industry for flying helicopters for stunts and for aerial filming. And during that commercial, as a helicopter pilot on the commercial for Fanta. And I got chatting with him. And he's, I said to him, Look, if you're away so much, who looks after your diary? And he said, Well, I haven't really gotten any body, but I've got enough work anyway.

So I said, why don't I look after your diary for you and charge you for it.

I thought maybe I'd find out what was going on in the film industry and find other little avenues to explore. And after a few weeks when he was going off on a James Bond film, I called him up and I said, Look, I'm getting a lot of inquiries here. We surely we should offer something else. And so we ended up in partnership.

And that was important because we were then able to offer even more of a full film, a full service to the movie industry. And one thing led to another and we did quite a lot of films. Until basically all the fashion of the balloons ran out a few years later.

Mark, what's happened to him? I can't find him anywhere.

He's, he's retired and living in Teddington, he now volunteers for the RNLI. I see him quite often. We retired at the same time. And I think in all honesty, he became miserable. Because unlike me, who's quite happy to move on. He was so used to being away and being in demand all the time. But he really had to give up he was he was I mean, he's older than me. And he shouldn't really be doing stumps in helicopters at the age of seventy-six.

He certainly did incredible stunts from what I've read even lifting a balloon which had crashed into a tree lifting it out of a tree.

Yes, he did that.

But when it came to going around the world without Mark, what did you and Andy, I mean, the two of you particularly mad so? Well,

Andy Elson. Andy called me I've never met Andy before. I knew him by reputation. An engineer, very clever engineer. Innovative, and difficult. But I thought it was worth talking to anyway, we had a long chat and he, he rang me because he wanted to find a sponsor. He thought round the world was just about do-able. And he'd already made one flight, with Breitling. And I said I would only do it on one condition, and that's that I go too and he said, All right.

Wow. What on earth did your wife think of that?

I remember going along in the car and I said I've had this call from Andy Elson. I explained it all. And she went a bit white and she said If you're not thinking of doing it, and I said, Well, look, I am. And I suppose she couldn't really stop me from that. She was anxious.

I'm not surprised. And how did she? How difficult was it to find Cable and Wireless to sponsor you?

Difficult because we're talking quantum sums of money more than I'd ever raised before. But with a great deal of help from someone called Karen Earl, who's a sponsorship agent. We were in touch with Cable and Wireless and we made a presentation, and they took a long time about it, but they eventually said, Okay.

And Andy certainly had a lot to do with creating your capsule.

He certainly did. He built it. Yes.

Amazing to think that the two of you lived in there.

Yes it was near just under 18 days. Yes. Yes. But we got on very well. I mean, we got on very well on the flight. And we had a few crosswords before that. That was interesting. But there we go.

But so once we were on board, we both had one thing in mind, and it worked very well.

Who is your Metman? Was it Martin?

Martin Harris was the Metman, yes. Yes, he was, he was. He was a clever man. He really knew his subject. And he did a lot of preparation. The only slight problem I think, with him was that he got nervous about us during the flight. And we were getting sort of funny reports, we weren't quite sure where they're completely accurate.

But anyway, it was not his fault that The Around The World didn't succeed, it was more someone else's fault. But at the end, we weren't getting the forecast we thought we should be doing.

And the China wouldn't let you fly through that airspace?

Oh, we had very carefully negotiated permission to fly through southern China, with restrictions, but that's where the Jetstream blows. And Richard Branson, and Steve Fossett and Per Lindstrand, had all taken off before us.

And we were completely bemused by why they were taken off because it was going to take them north into China where they had no permission to fly. So they were going to be down before China as far as we were concerned.

But of course, what they actually did was they went into China and said, Sorry, we can't land and flew out on the other side, which made the Chinese absolutely furious, and informed us that if any other English attempt ever does that, again, we will shoot you down.

And this was all relayed to us by the British ambassador in Peking, which is now Beijing, of course. And he just said, Please do not misunderstand, they are really serious.

So we took another month and a half, which was an expensive, boring business, to re-engineer, Andy's capsule, and the balloon, to be able to lift another three tons of weight of fuel, to give us much longer to fly out of the jet stream in order to try and avoid China altogether, into which we could not fly.

And when we did, we went backwards for four days deep into the Sahara. Before we actually got a gentler wind. We never did get into the jet stream ever, all the way across the Sahara, and across into Saudi Arabia and into the Far East, and Thailand, Vietnam, up through the Straits of Formosa and over Japan.

And when we finally got close to China, we were I think, within seventy-five metres of their border at one point, which was pretty terrifying. We were getting strange messages over the radio, which we couldn't understand. And unfortunately, by the time we did get up past Taiwan, and over Hong Kong, and across the sea, to Japan and over with we'd gone for 18 days, and we couldn't forecast the weather that far ahead, and the thunderstorms were approaching and we had to ditch into the Pacific.

You don't just ditch, what actually happened? How did you do that kind of thing?

Well, we I was flying through the night, Andy woke up in the morning. And he didn't like the look at what the weather was like and I didn't like what the weather looked like. And I said I think we should I think we should ditch it. Anyway, we had a chat about it. And he agreed.

And so we informed our mission control back in Euston, not Houston. And they said, we said we had already told the emergency services in Japan that we were ditching. They had asked us if we wanted helicopter rescue, I had said negative, but we would like shipping to be advised because we thought we could get down safely on the surface.

But Mission Control weren't having it at all. And they contacted the Japanese and just said send helicopters. So when we actually did get it down on the surface and opened the hatch, it was like Vietnam, that side.

What the Japanese had actually decided to do was to make it a major military exercise and scramble everybody and everything. So it was fairly luxurious rescue.

And you were obviously in wet suits. What happened to the capsule? Was it sunk somewhere in the sea, or did they sink or rescue it?

Yes, in Marianas Trench, which is I think is the deepest place on earth. And we never saw any part of it again.

So and when you first got out or onto terra firma, and obviously talk to Carrie and Suzy, what was the first food that you really, really wanted? Were you yearning for a Mars bar? Or?

I think it was Sushi? Sushi? Yes, well, we hadn't - we didn't eat too badly. We had four days of fresh fruit and vegetables after which we didn't of course, we've had a sort of makeshift kettle, which is your hot water. So we had just add hot water, foods, sachets, but it sustained us.

That's all right. Yes. And we're Cable and Wireless pleased.

Cable and Wireless were absolutely thrilled. I think they did a complete audit. And they had, I think the project cost them between one and two million. And they audited that they had got \$21 million of publicity out of it.

Well done.

The other thing was, of course, we arrived in Japan, of course, after being in the Pacific off their shores. And Cable and Wireless had just launched the first ever hostile takeover bid in Japan. So it was incredibly fortuitous. And the pictures of the of us in the sea, were on the front page of the biggest selling newspaper in the world, which is, which is a Japanese paper. And it was the first time they'd ever had a picture on the front page.

Good heavens.

So that's life.

So when you got home, did you think you ought to do it again? And really go for it?

Sort of, but it was not many weeks before Breitling did it. So that was the end of that.

So what was your next? I mean, you can't just stop at something exotic like that. You've got to do something wilder and more wonderful. What was after that?

Well, oh, I've always been fascinated by the story of the three astronauts, 3 billion a suit flown to 112,000 feet in spacesuits. And I said to Andy, I'd always

said to him, I think we want to have a go at that one. And he was very keen. So we went for that.

But that was not a success?

No, we took much longer to be organised than we meant, and when we finally did get to the launch, unfortunately, the balloon split, it was an absolutely massive balloon. So we never did manage to take off.

Whatever, that's when you'd been, you been training to be cosmo - to be cosmonauts.

But yes, we did. We went we went to Moscow and trained as cosmonauts in pressure chambers, which simulated pumping all the air out and therefore going to 132,000 feet which is our target or twenty-five miles.

And, and that was that was interesting. Certainly, they took it very, very seriously in Moscow, which they always had. And I remember going into the chamber in my spacesuit, and there was something like eight paramedics on the outside throughout the entire exercise.

All speaking perfect English.

No. But we had a mission controller who did.

So when you didn't do that, what did you do after that?

I didn't, can you remind me? I don't know.

I have got your book here.

I do after that. I think, you know, this was about 2003 or four. We'd been suffering a bit in 2001. We had foot and mouth disease, and the balloons. The balloons couldn't fly all summer. So we lost most of our clients. And it was really hard getting them back. And we did but we never did anything more with quite a lot of them. And 2000 2003 Which, which coincided with the space project. We started recognising that maybe this was all going a little bit out of fashion. It never did recover. So we had to move on and concentrate on aerial filming and stunts for the movies, with Mark.

There was one thing you did do which I hadn't read about in the newspapers you flew from Alderney which isn't easy.

Yes, that's where that's where Suzie was brought up. Alderney in the Channel Islands. And I flew home from there one year it's the only time that balloon has ever been inflated on Alderney. It's only two and a half miles long by one

and a half miles wide. That was a wonderful day took me five hours to get to Blandford Forum with a southerly wind, of course.

And whowas with you? Did Suzie come with you?

No, I went on my own. I didn't think I wanted to take anybody else across the across the English Channel, an exceedingly long part of the English Channel.

Yes,it is. But to get all the permissions as well, that was..

It's quite a lot ofthat was a bit tedious, Channel Islands control are not the easiest people but they did give permission. But when I was airborne, I thought I'd like to fly home to near Winchester, which I could do, I reckon from eight to ten thousand feet, something like that. And they said not abovetwo thousand feet. So I kept pushing for higher. They kept refusing.

And then by the time I was halfway across the channel when I was when I was transferred to Portland control. They were absolutely fantastic and said you can go at any height you like.

But unfortunately, it was too late at that stage. And I remember flying over Poole Harbor and carrying on from there into Dorset. So it was a bit of a tedious journey.

But you beat the ferry Ibet.

Yeah, We beat the ferry, certainly.

And we met Pollyanna at the lunch and have any of the children gone on to want to fly.

Well actually Pollyanna who's my youngest was the keenest and she really did want to fly balloons. And I started training her but unfortunately, in 2006 I suddenly out of the blue developed type one diabetes. And they didn't even know I was ill. I just wentfor my six months pilot medical and they withdrew all my licenses on the spot, for life. I wasn't able to help it.

I bet you weren't very happy then.

You kind of move on. towards I'm not quite sure what to do.

Thank you so much Colin Prescot. You've been wonderful. Thank you very much indeed.

Great pleasure.