

How did you become involved with the aviation industry and flying, and at what age?

I've been an aviation tragic pretty much all my life. My father is ex-Royal New Zealand Air Force so I grew up with aviation around me at an early age. Even after he left the RNZAF we still had friends and family members in and Dad has always been keen on aircraft so there was always plenty of aviation talk at home. It has come and gone from my life, but I've always looked up when I hear an aeroplane.

What got you interested in flying balloons rather than aircraft or helicopters?

I've had a few goes at my fixed wing licence but life gets in the way and it has never been completed. Despite their excitement, the cost of helicopters is formidable. When I ended up working for a commercial hot air balloon company and really enjoyed going up with the other pilots, flying over Melbourne or the Yarra Valley. From there it was only natural to work with the instructor pilots and the company owner to figure out a way to get my licence.

What is your most memorable flight experience that you would like to share?

There have been so many! First flights with family members come to mind and taking friends for a flight; skimming low over fields or going up to over 8,000' and enjoying the view. Perhaps the most magic experience though was my first flight after getting my PPL (Balloons). It had been a few months and I was flying alongside one of our newly minted commercial pilots who was taking a few people for a flight. We launched near Bendigo on a crisp, clear morning with light winds and some mist about. It was fantastic to be in the air on my own as PIC and really enjoying the challenge of staying close to the other balloon and enjoying the view.

What do you find the most enjoyable aspect about flying or floating as a balloon pilot?

Aside from the burners going on, it's an incredibly peaceful and graceful way to fly. It can be relaxing with great views and a lot of fun. It's also a great challenge to read the winds both before and during the flight to predict where you're going to be and, if possible, have some control over where you wind up (that is if you read and ride the winds correctly).

Meet Balloonatic

GRANT MCHERRON



What skill have you gained from ballooning?

Aside from patience, compared to other forms of flight, I have a great appreciation for the winds and flying without motors or thermals, a much greater appreciation of weather patterns, micro conditions and early mornings. I can't just go wherever I want in the air and there's a great challenge to reach one or more target points solely by changing altitude to get winds heading in different directions (if there are any).

Mankind's first form of sustained human flight was via hot air balloon and while a lot of technology has changed since 1783, the way we fly is very similar (eg: changing altitude to

get different directions). It's majestic, peaceful and a lot of fun. Learning to fly a balloon has been very rewarding and I'm continuously challenging myself to improve as I gain more experience. I also like showing fixed wing pilots how we can navigate to various targets despite not having a propeller out the front....

What is your favourite balloon type to pilot and why?

As a private balloon pilot I can fly balloons up to 120,000 cubic foot capacity (air within the envelope), generally referred to as a 120. The balloons you see over the city of Melbourne are typically 240s while out in the country areas you'll find 300s, 350s and

even up to 450s. Most of my training was done on a 77 so I'm very comfortable with a balloon of that size. Typically a 77 will carry a pilot + 1 or 2 pax (depending on fuel load, pilot and pax weight, ambient temperature, etc) while a 105 balloon will carry a pilot plus 2 or 3 passengers (again depending on fuel, weights, etc).

I'm just starting to fly a 105 balloon and am getting the hang of it as a bigger balloon has more inertia and takes a bit longer to respond to putting heat in or venting some heat. To put it in aircraft terms, a 105 is like a Cessna 206, while the 77 is like a Cessna 172 or Piper Warrior, so there's a bit of transition while adjusting to the bigger balloon's handling.

Officially I can just get in a 105 balloon and fly it but I've chosen to do a couple of flights with an experienced pilot on board who can give me pointers and let me know if I'm doing something that could cause problems.

So far, so good and the other pilot has been along to enjoy the ride as its very similar behaviour. I intend to do the same thing when I go to the 120 which is bigger again and can usually carry pilot + 3 or 4 pax. So far I have the most fun with a 77 but I'm getting the hang of the 105 and think I'll probably fly balloons of that size more often as it means I can take a couple of friends with me to enjoy the flight rather than just one.

By Phil Buckley
Photo by Bendan Keegan

How did you find learning to fly balloons and going through the licensing and approval stages?

The hardest part was getting the time for it. I had a go at my fixed wing licence and aside from needing a bit of money, you just went down to the airport and went flying. It was certainly a lot easier than ballooning which requires that we go into the countryside (no flying over the city), arrange accommodation, organise crew to chase us during the flight, a balloon, a vehicle to tow it on the ground, the trailer, fuel, etc and an instructor. I cut a deal with the commercial



ballooning company I work for to offset the cost of my license against my work. Given my instructors were also commercial pilots and I was flat out working, it was rather hard to align the weather, locations, availability and all the usual ballooning related issues mentioned above. Fortunately the Australian Ballooning Federation has a training camp every two years near Mildura, so between two of those sessions and some flying in Benalla, I managed to get enough experience so I could do my solo flights, check-ride and pass my PPL (Balloons).

What is your view of the current aviation industry in Australia? Could it expand further, perhaps bringing more people into the industry?

There's a lot of opportunity in aviation here but not a lot of people taking it up, either due to lack of awareness or the perceived high cost of entry. There's certainly lots of room for more pilots in Australia and Sport Aviation is a great way to get into it, be it ballooning, gliding, ultralights, hang gliders, RA-Aus, etc.

GA is there if you want to get into bigger fixed wing operations or helicopters but if all you want to do is get some altitude, then start out with the sport flying and progress upwards from there if you have bigger or more professional aspirations.

Are the rules and regulations a factor in deciding if you want to fly?

Yes and no. It keeps me favouring RA-Aus over GA for my fixed wing at this stage, if I ever get the funds to return to that license. If rules are a major issue then staying down the smaller, simpler end of aviation is the way to go. With ballooning

we certainly have to pass exams on air law and have regulations on where and how we can fly and how we integrate with other aviators. Of course, we also have exams on meteorology, navigation, radio operation, aerodynamics and operation of balloons and land-holder relations (the latter is important when you consider that we don't usually operate at airports). The biggest issues keeping me on the ground are: A) Time, Money and Weather (common to all aviators) B) Being able to arrange a balloon with crew and vehicle plus have somewhere in the country to stay. Regulations and rules are considered before flying (like any aviator, we don't want to break the rules) but they don't make me think, "Why bother flying?"

How could AOPA and the aviation industry help attract more people to become interested in ballooning or flying?

I think the biggest hurdle that the Australian aviation community as a whole has to deal with, is the closed shop mentality that is often encountered when first approaching many within the community, both for the general public and even other flyers. Far too many fixed wing people look negatively at ballooning, while within the gliding community you often have the 'purists' vs those who have motors on board. The sooner we can change these negative attitudes the better. If we can all acknowledge that we are aviators, then we can openly embrace those who are not and help them to find their aviation niche. If every pilot took a new person up for a flight every month or two, we'd be introducing lots of potential pilots to the game. AOPA is doing a great job once again to help spread the word

And the affiliate membership helps bring in those of us associated with the sport clubs. After all, we're all pilots so whether we're with the gliders or the balloons or RA-Aus, we should all be members of AOPA to help present a united voice when government and commercial changes would impact aviation. While not every change directly impacts each person's slice of the aviation world, eventually one will and so it's important to help protect all of us. Meanwhile, ask yourselves, what have you done to help introduce others to aviation?

What goals have you got for the future with your aviation interests?

I'd like to progress towards holding a Commercial Hot Air Balloon license and do more flying for a living. I'd also like to progress through a number of other licences including gliding, gyrocopter and RA-Aus fixed wing. I love all forms of aviation and would love to try hang gliding and parachuting at least once each. I really enjoy doing aerobatics with friends (even when my stomach occasionally lets me down) and have long drooled over antique biplanes. Hopefully one day I'll have the funds and time available to partake of them all. ■



Indescribable Is this the perfect form of flight?



The opportunity to hover and glide so slowly and beautifully across the landscape, with only the sound of the birds and the occasional 'Pshshshsh' of the burner to break the serenity.

By Kathy Mexted



Greg Maunder Sports Photography



Photo by Evan Schoo



Kathy and Grant in the Balloon

Nothing has prepared me for how much I fall completely in love with my first ballooning experience. Is this the forgotten sibling of flight as we concern ourselves with bigger, faster, noisier?

Fancy-pants paint colours and sleek aerodynamic hardware seem facile against the silky envelope that skips lightly across the frozen vegetation in the early morning departure ground.

Crunchy frost breaks underfoot as my host, Grant McHerron, gently unfurls the bright yellow envelope ready for inflation. Our chariot is VH-BLQ, a Kavanagh Balloons D77 - 77,000 cubic feet capacity (2,190m³).

The ground crew starts a petrol-powered fan to blow cold air into the envelope and Grant, with both hands on the burner, lets fly with some gas. A leaping dragon's breath of flame pierces the pre-dawn light and sends the soft

yellow silky envelope buffeting into life. Within its great golden cavernous interior, Grant is dwarfed on his pre-flight inspection.

The welcome heat radiates enough warmth to silence my chattering teeth and soon the sun's first rays send shards of evangelical light through the tree's naked wintery branches.

Lift-off is nothing short of spectacular and our conversation continues with the ground crew as we ease from the earth to a mere 50 feet and slowly drift east. The surrounding hills cower to the morning sun, which illuminates the fog and frost settled between.

In contrast to a Cessna's 70kt departure,

we ascend at a mere 3kts, forcing my senses to slow, like a galloping horse being reined in.

No need to rush, and no way to do it if we wanted to. We are at the mercy of the wind's gentle speed and direction; aided only by the burner that provides vertical propulsion.

Three knots is perfect for a crisp Sunday morning. All that I am connected to is within my grasp. The basket is only about 1.1 metres square and the envelope reaches 16 metres overhead. Occasionally, as I lean on the basket's tactile cane edge, the tiniest slivered hair of its organic construction flies by.

Below us, uptight fields of cauliflower and broccoli are raked out in ordered rows. A lone gum tree, glowing in the dawn light, slowly passes beneath us offering a unique and silent visual down

into its core. Not even the birds are disturbed. An injection of hot air lifts us above a ridgeline and a direction change. We drift over horse studs, a quarry, winding roads and a railway.

We take time for a chat and do a mid-flight podcast interview. Nothing is a bother. His listeners on the Plane Crazy Down Under podcast show must have wondered at my state, which I kept saying was 'semi-trance-like'.

The You Yangs pop up in the distance, emerging from the mist and giving us another reference. A trotter is being trained below us and I can almost hear the horse's huffing and puffing as it pounds around the track. Ballooning at this pace gives me time to consider the environment through which I'm travelling and I reflect on the origins of the sport. Before the French whacked their great

Tower in Paris, it had been the site of the first proposed balloon launch.

The enthusiasm of the crowds however, meant it had to be moved 4km away and when finally launched, the unmanned craft was chased by enthusiasts on horseback for 21 km. Unfortunately the panic-stricken local peasants at its landing attacked it with pitchforks. But the French persisted and on 19 September 1783, another balloon flight was launched before King Louise IV and Marie Antoinette. Its precious cargo being a sheep named 'Montauciel', and an unnamed duck and rooster. All returned unharmed to earth, as did we.

My ballooning aviatrix predecessors include Sophie Blanchard, the first woman to successfully pilot a hot air balloon. After the death of her husband, she'd take to the skies to escape the

worries of their debts. While she was afraid of horses and loud noises, she described ballooning as an experience that is 'undescribable', despite once almost freezing to death, another time passing out, almost drowning when she crashed into a swamp.

She continued to fly until 1819, when her balloon caught fire during a show. Despite managing to land on a steeply sloped house roof, she fell off and died on the street below.

Parke in NSW was the site for Australia's first hot air balloon flight when Terry McCormack launched on 4 July 1962. But none of that was concerning me.

After an hour and a half, we landed safely at Bacchus Marsh airport, Vic, startling nothing or nobody; not even the cow in the adjacent paddock. How much for a balloon licence? ■