

MARCUS JACKSON

IT'S NOT SO BAD 1,500 FEET UP

Columnist leaves comfort zone for 'a peaceful, scenic ride'



DANVILLE
— If you're reading this, I didn't die.

That's not to say that there weren't some precious moments

when my feet were still on the ground and my knees weren't knocking against one another that I questioned why in the world I'd leave the comfort of land to fly 1,500 feet above Vermilion County in a basket being lifted into the sky by a giant balloon filled with hot air.

Loyal readers, and even those of you who have to read me because I'm forced to you regularly, know a few things about me. I hate



Hannah Auten/The News-Gazette



At news-gazette.com

VIDEO: Take a ride with Marcus Jackson and Co. at Friday's Balloons Over Vermilion.

running, I love baseball and I believe Eastern Illinois University to be the Harvard of

the Midwest. Here's something new: I can comfortably fly around the world in

planes all day, but put me up at high altitudes in the open air and I freak out. So much so that my hair would fall out if I had any left.

So why did I agree to hop into Walt Rudy's Big Bundle of Joy for an 8-mile, hour-long jaunt from Kennekuk Park to the heart of Danville in the wee hours of Friday morning?

I'll get back to you when I find the answer.

What I learned about hot air ballooning as the Balloons Over Vermilion event began on Friday is that once you get moving, it's a peaceful, scenic ride, especially with a pilot like Walt and his partner on Friday, Lynee Bixler.

Please see JACKSON, B-3

JACKSON

Continued from B-1

Also, it takes a lot of work, and manpower, to get those things up in the air.

News-Gazette intern Hannah Auten and I piled into Rudy's van with 10 others and made the trek from Carlton Farms in Danville to Kennekuk, where his crew of 10, including three children — Sydney, 14, Tristen, 10, and Heather, 7 — all took part in helping the adults with various stages of laying out the balloon, starting gas-powered industrial fans that filled it with air and preparing the basket for the morning flight.

The kids were a part of what's called the balloon crew and included some friends that Rudy and his wife, Deb, the crew chief, made during their time in central Illinois. Walt Rudy is a native of Rantoul and has lived in northeast Ohio for the last 15 years.

Deb's son Ben Smith, father of Sydney and Heather, plays a part on the crew. Danville residents and friends of the Rudys — Paul and Julianne Haynes, Tristen's grandparents, and Judi Summer — all help out, too.

The friendliness of Rudy and Biller calmed the nerves a bit, but a couple of minutes into the flight, about 200 feet off the ground, Rudy turns to Biller and says "Did you bring the instruction manual for this thing?"

"Um, no," Biller responded, "how are we supposed to land?"

Bixler is also a pilot who will be one of about 30 folks from around the country flying balloons this weekend at Balloons Over Vermilion. She lived in Danville for a stretch, taking her first balloon ride about 28 years ago, and now lives in northeast Ohio, too.

"Ballooning is pretty big in Ohio and when I moved back there, I started crewing," said Bixler, who said she flies 20-25 times a year. "I've had my license now for about 18 years."

All balloonists are licensed pilots and it usually takes about a year of written and oral tests in addition to flight training and a practicum to become a balloonist.

"All surgeons are doctors but not all doctors are surgeons," Rudy said. "I tell people all balloonists are pilots, but not all pilots are balloonists."

Rudy flies more often. He's a commercial pilot and flies individuals, shaped balloons and balloons featuring corporate banners.

After brushing up against the tops of some trees "you can do that to slow you down a bit if you need to," Bixler explains, we're 1,000 feet up and at about 8 mph, the nerves have subsided. That frees Rudy, who's pulling at a pair of levers overhead releasing the hot air into the multi-colored balloon, to make some more jokes.

"How long have you been flying for, Walt?"

"Counting today," he asks while counting the fingers on his gloved hand, "just a few days."

The Rantoul High graduate has been flying for 33 years.

"How long do these three propane tanks on board last for, Walt?"

"My calculations say we've got about another two minutes," he said.

In actuality, a one-hour flight leaves about a 50 percent reserve of the 45 gallons on board.

In a van below, the members of the ground crew wind through the roads in the farmland of Vermilion County, following the balloon while being ready to pounce once we land to help get the balloon out of the air and pack everything away.

Also below, deer are scurrying through the cornfields, dogs are barking at the half dozen balloons in the sky above, cows are mooing and chickens running wild on the farms, all while residents run into their yards, camera in hand to snap photos of the balloons.

Rudy's balloon, which is primarily yellow at the top with orange, red, blue and green mixed in, is especially picturesque both in color and size. It measures 105,000 cubic feet.

"That means you can fit 105,000 basketballs inside the balloon," Rudy says. "I can carry myself and up to four adult passengers."

After reaching nearly 1,500 feet and flying over farmland, plenty of trees and Harrison Park Golf Course, it's time to find a

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landing spot. Rudy spots an open field near Danville High School, but as he begins negotiating the landing, the sprinklers come on.

"Water isn't good for balloons," he says.

After a few more minutes, he spots a baseball field and turns his attention to that spot.

"We're going to land right up against that fence," he says.

A few minutes later, we're cruising into the outfield fence at a baseball field on the intersection of Cleveland and Bowman avenues. Center field, to be exact, a place I'm much more comfortable, not to mention on the ground.

The members of the crew jump out of the van and run toward us, Ben Smith pulling at a large cord directing the balloon down to the ground.

Once the balloon is flat on the ground, the crew members wrap it up, pack it into a bag and into the van. The basket is hoisted onto a lift behind the van and the 12 of us pile back into the vehicle headed back to Carlton Farms.

It was an enjoyable ride, one that didn't kill me. Maybe one day, I'll do it again, though the next pilot would be hard-pressed to top the experience provided by Rudy and Bixler.

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