



**UNITED STATES BALLOONING HALL OF FAME**  
*A Partnership of the Balloon Federation of America  
And the National Balloon Museum*  
**Candidate Information Form**

Date: 4-9-15

Person Submitting Candidate: The Chase Family

Person Submitting Candidate Email: balloonchaseadventures@gmail.com

CANDIDATE NAME: BOB SPARKS

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**A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY**

First balloon flight with Charles E. MacArthur in 1967. Charles E. MacArthur lived in Maine. Lighter-Than-Air Free Balloon certificate obtained in 1970.

For several years in the 1970's flew the LARK cigarette balloon. For the good flying months of the year piloting the LARK balloon in different states and at times participated in balloon festivals.

- Albuquerque International Balloon Festival in 1973.
- 1975 Trans-Atlantic balloon flight in the Yankee Zephyr.
- 1975 Trans-Atlantic balloon flight in the Odyssey.
- Designed, built and installed gas and hot air balloon models in several aviation museums to include Lima, Peru, The Franklin Institute in Philadelphia and the National Aviation Museum in Norway.
- Federal Aviation Administration designated LTA pilot examiner: 1973 through 1990.

- Federal Aviation Designated Safety Counselor (Accident Prevention Counselor) from 1984 through 1989.
- 1975 became the first hot air balloon pilot to cross all five Great Lakes.
- Through the years conducted balloon festivals and presented at safety seminars.
- Through 2011 and for six or seven years a commercial pilot of very large passenger balloons for the United States Hot Air Balloon Team in Bucks County Pennsylvania

## **BOB SPARKS**

Born in southwestern Virginia on February second, 1934, Bob moved to Washington, D.C. immediately after graduation from high school and entered show business as a singer. Then on to New York after getting experience in many of the local nightclubs in D.C. Bob did shows in most major cities in the United States, and after seeing a balloon while doing an outside show at a state fair one evening, decided to seek out a balloon somewhere.

Luckily, he finally ended up meeting Charles E. MacArthur, who lived in Connecticut, and took his first ride with him in 1967. He got his pilot certificate in 1970, and his gas rating in 1971. Bob feels strongly that when he was in his infancy in ballooning that MacArthur instilled in him an attitude toward Lighter-Than-Air that has made his career safe and successful.

As a person without a "normal" job, he could fly almost every day when the weather was friendly for a balloon, and logged more than 200 hours his first year. The procedure in those days was to fly each morning until the wind started blowing, which gave flights of three or four hours quite often. He once had to have a 100 hour inspection only 27 days from the previous inspection by the FAA.

He was fortunate to have friends who made helium available to him at no cost, at any location he chose. This great asset gave chances for a lot of flights with weather balloons, regular toy balloons on strings or in nets, and on one occasion with 15,000 balloons inside a Semco balloon with a pop top. Later he would have helium available for some much longer, difficult flights.

For some years, (1973 through 1990) Bob was a designated LTA Balloon Pilot Examiner, and gave check flights anywhere in the USA, as the regulations were not so stringent at that time. This also gave him the opportunity to fly in just about every make and model balloon on the market. And also, balloons that were not on the market. When someone built a balloon and wanted it test flown, the FSDO would give them the contact number for Bob. There were a lot of people in those years who were discovering hot air balloons and figured they could build one a lot cheaper than buying from companies who were selling them. There were a lot of balloons he test flew that left a lot to be desired.

By 1972 Bob had quite a bit of flight time and experience in both gas and hot air balloons. The balloon world seemed alive with talk of a Trans-Atlantic Balloon Flight. After much consultation with people who would be necessary for a successful flight of this magnitude, he decided to give it a try and started planning for the trip.

In 1972 he set 4 official balloon world records in an AX-7 Semco Challenger. He also captured the AX-8, AX-9, and AX-10 records as he broke those records also.

While attending the first Albuquerque International Balloon Festival, which was held at the Fairgrounds, he met and became friends with several balloonists whose friendship continued through the years. One of his favorite balloonists was Mike Adams, who was there to show his first balloon, and that was the start of a very successful company. He also met Joseph Starkbaum from Austria who came to the event without a balloon, so Bob loaned him a red balloon with white pennants, the color of the Austrian flag. Happily, Joseph went on to be a world champion hot air and gas balloon pilot. At this meet, Bob flew his other balloon which was solid black with a bright aluminum coating inside.

This balloon was flown in 1972 as a solar balloon. This was not intentional, but was a wonderful surprise ending to an interesting flight. On that cold morning, with sunrise, the black balloon absorbed enough heat to fly for twenty five minutes. The coating kept the heat inside. This solar flight was duplicated intentionally the following morning, but only for eleven minutes.

In August 1973, Bob launched from Bar Harbor, Maine and made his first trans-atlantic balloon attempt in the YANKEE ZEPHYR. This was a perfect flight until that night, when over Prince Edward Island, a fierce thunderstorm formed around the balloon, and for five hours carried the ballon at an average speed of 87 miles per hour, well beyond Newfoundland. The Canadian Coast Guard delivered Bob back to St. Johns, Newfoundland that night.

In 1975 he set 5 official balloon world records in an AX-2. This was the first record ever given for an AX-2. When the Certificate came back from the Federation Aeronautique Internationale in France, the strange wording was: AX-2, PICCARD GAS BALLOON. The National Aeronautic Association returned it for a correct certificate. The FAI explanation was that since an AX-2 was too small to carry a person, it must have been a gas balloon, and the only person they knew in the the USA who built gas balloons was Don Piccard. Bob regrets that he returned it. It would have made a great gift for Don Piccard. This was done in a double-wall balloon. It was an interesting test.

In 1975 Bob became the first person to fly a hot air balloon across all the Great Lakes. Superior and Erie were troublesome, but the flights were interesting and informative. To date, this has not been done by another pilot. It is a wonderful challenge.

In 1975 he made his second Trans-Atlantic balloon attempt in the balloon ODYSSEY. Although it would probably have been a successful flight, at the launch, Bob's crew chief had attached himself, by carabiner, to a rope holding the lights, and cut off a special bag of ballast equal to his weight and went along for the ride. He had gimmicked the rip line so Bob could not quickly deflate, but unfortunately had slightly opened the rip panel. The flight was doomed from the start. The Coast Guard requested that Bob keep flying until they could get to him in daylight, so Bob stayed low and slow until the helicopter arrived. However, it was a tense several hours of flying. So the stowaway most likely caused the flight to fail.

He designed, built, and installed gas and hot air balloon models for the National Air and Space museum in Washington, D.C. for it's opening in 1976. From that, he was contracted and did the same for other museums which include Lima, Peru, The Franklin Institute In Philadelphia, Taipei, Taiwan, and the National Aviation Museum in Norway.

He was a Federal Aviation Designated Safety Counselor (Accident Prevention Counselor) from 1984 through 1989.

Throughout all the years in the seventies, eighties, and early nineties he stayed busy enjoying several different phases of ballooning. He conducted several balloon festivals in different states, presented safety seminars, and generally promoted the sport of ballooning in any way he could.

Bob flew commercial balloons for LARK cigarettes, EXXON, etc. year round, as well as promotions for several national companies on individual contracts. Through 2011 and for several years prior, among other LTA activities, Bob flew large passenger balloons (Over 200k ft<sup>2</sup>) for the United States Hot Air Balloon Team in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

In the late eighties, the State Department and the Federal Aviation Administration gave Bob permission to take student balloon pilots to the Soviet Union for their pilot certificates. By taking American commercial pilots to train the students, and then sign them off, Bob could give the student a check flight and issue an American pilot certificate. This had never been done before, and everyone had the pleasure of flying in countries that one could hardly visit as a tourist at that time.

Bob was invited to come to the Soviet Union and work with the Civil Aviation Authorities there to help get the first balloon certificates issued. He also aided with writing what are our FAA Parts 61 and 91. His was also was the final decision on which balloons were to be considered Standard Category. He

flew in each balloon with the head of the Aviation Authority and approved them all. Camerons, Thunder, etc.

This all was made possible by Croatian balloonist, Dragan "Tom" Miklousic, who is known in Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, Bosnia, and several other nearby countries as Mr. Balloon. And rightly so. Tom has done more for ballooning than anyone in that part of the world, and I am happy that we are close friends. His wife, Maria and son, Igor are both commercial pilots. At least one member of the family attends the Albuquerque Balloon festival each year.

During the eighties and early nineties, Bob also owned a balloon factory in Hungary, and half a parachute factory in Russia. The Soviet Union owned the other half the parachute factory. It was hard to get along with their rules, so he sold it back to them.

Bob is still an active pilot and flies 30 or more flights each year for sport and instructing student pilots. As of the end of 2013, he has flown more than 5,700 hours in most models of balloons available. These flights took place in 49 states and more than 30 countries. Bob has never had major damage to persons or property on any flight, nor any FAA actions against him.

It is Bob's advice to each pilot he has trained, given a check flight, or a bi-annual: Even if your pants are on fire, you must fly the balloon.

He now is concentrating on building Airships. He currently has an electric-powered Airship ready for inflation, and is working toward a new rigid Airship. More later on this project. On 4-13-15, Becky Wigeland forwarded an HOF nomination form for Bob Sparks, submitted by Ray & Maureen Chase. That form is attached here. The bio that was included with the Chase's nomination was identical to the one already in the folder for Bob Sparks, so it was not duplicated.