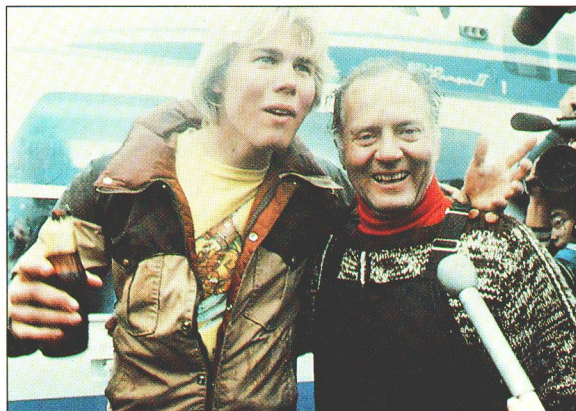


We are gliding silently through the night, the sea like black ink below us. Occasional bursts of our burner illuminate faces lined with fatigue. Troy Bradley and I have traveled over 3,000 miles. We left Bangor, Maine more than five days ago. The other four teams in this first-ever transatlantic balloon race are down, the Belgian and British teams on dry land in Spain and Portugal. Until now we didn't dare think too far ahead. In this game it definitely is not over until it's over.

It is our seventh night, our seventh period of darkness over the Atlantic, and finally we can allow ourselves to relax just a little. To the southeast, we can see the lights of Casablanca partially obscured by low stratus clouds. We are about to break the absolute world duration record set by my father, Ben Abruzzo, with Maxie Anderson and Larry Newman aboard the *Double Eagle II* some fifteen years ago.

It has not been easy. We have flown from 100 feet above the waves to 18,000 feet, constantly seeking trajectories to avoid storms heavily laden with ice and rain. Sadly, these same storms have forced our German and Dutch competitors to ditch at sea. We've had technical difficulties, the most serious of which was the loss of our generator, life support for our navigation and communication instruments. We've also endured illness, myself a fit of vomiting caused by food poisoning and Troy severe chest pains of unknown origin. We know now that nothing can stop us.

As we near the record we monitor our watches. At 137 hours, 6 minutes we realize we've done it. Troy and I have flown our balloon longer than anyone before us. We celebrate with a handshake and a hug. Soon we'll be over Africa and our dream of an Atlantic crossing will be a reality. Tears come to my eyes, the emotion of the moment overpowering me.



TransPac photo

*Above, Richard and Ben Abruzzo shortly after one of Ben's historic balloon flights, the first crossing of the Pacific in 1981. Below, Richard Abruzzo and Troy Bradley at 16,000 feet on the fifth day of their record breaking flight.*



Team USA photo

Memories flood my mind, wonderful memories that have been locked away since that tragic day in 1985 when I lost my parents in a plane crash. I remember when my father and Maxie bought their first hot-air balloon in the early seventies and how the whole family chased them across the New Mexico skies.

I remember when my father taught me to fly, coaching me as I skimmed inches above the ground. And I remember when I first soloed, a crisp October day in 1983. Dad was just observing, not saying much. I made an intermediate landing and Dad jumped out without warning. With the lightened load I soared skyward. I felt at home, very comfortable, Dad

had prepared me well. I flew to the west side of Albuquerque and when the roads ended I brought her down.

The memory most vivid, however, is of that wonderful night in Presque Isle, Maine in 1978 when I watched my father fly into the black of night and the unknown to begin his transatlantic voyage. I was fifteen years old, and as I watched the blinking strobe light beneath the *Double Eagle II* fade away, I quietly wished them farewell. On their first try a year previous I wondered if I would see my father again, but this time I had confidence they would make it.

I now know what it is like to cross the Atlantic in a balloon. I know that it is an experience

which is difficult to convey to others. Our flight lasted 144 hours and 23 minutes, and I have never felt so alive as during that period. High above the ocean, thousands of miles from land, you determine your own destiny. Success, and possibly survival, depend on your skills and decision making.

My father told me stories of adventure and tried his best to describe the beauty of a sunrise or sunset over the Atlantic. Troy and I had our fair share of adventure and witnessed seven sunrises and six sunsets, all of which were spectacular.

What Dad didn't tell me, or what I failed to understand, is how hard it is to make a long-distance balloon flight. How difficult it is to stay sharp day after day with little or no sleep. How, in spite of this tremendous fatigue, you must make monumental decisions every day.

Our flight was successful because we made the best choice every time we were faced with one of those monumental decisions. The fact that we were able to do this is testament to the superior information our meteorologist Bob Rice provided to us and the ability of Troy and myself to operate as a team. There was no captain on this flight, only two young men working together to achieve their common goal.

Our flight only increased the respect I have for those who went before us—those who made it, those who narrowly missed, and those brave souls who died trying.

The Atlantic is a vast and unforgiving ocean that can swallow you up without a trace. My father once said that there is no such thing as luck over the North Atlantic.

Now I know how true that is.

*Richard Abruzzo*

Richard Abruzzo