



**Pollard, Richard**

**Notable – Accomplishments/Contributions**



**Dick Pollard**

1945-1964



Dick with his "Balloon Unit" VW chase van

From childhood balloon nut to teen national  
champion,  
professional pilot to one of the sport's first  
casualties,

Dick Pollard played a part in modern ballooning's origins  
*From Learning "On Paper" to Paper Taking Flight*



Dick with 'Apollo 8', his first fully original design, Lincoln NE (Here's a [Photo taken inside "Apollo 10"](#))



**W**hen Dick Pollard was 14, he read a book about Zeppelins. From that point on, it was a foregone conclusion: The son of an Air Force bomber pilot was *going* to fly lighter-than-air craft. In 1961, soon after his interest was first



Dick entered an extensive LTA exhibit in his high-school science fair

piqued, Dick began experimenting with his own model balloons (left), which he fashioned from tissue paper. He termed these the "Apollo" balloons, short for "A Pollard Original" (note that the name far predated NASA's Apollo series spacecraft). Pollard created [meticulous plans for his creations](#) (more: [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)), which bear a striking resemblance to today's hot-air balloon envelopes, and for [full-size balloon gondolas](#). Inflations of his steadily more ambitious creations drew increasing attention, perhaps due in part to the interest in aviation in the military community where the Pollards lived. Dick's paper balloons were a hit with his three siblings - younger brothers - and with the neighborhood kids. Less enthralled were the military police at Lincoln (Nebraska) Air Force Base, who twice arrested Dick for flying his craft from the family's on-base residence (in retrospect, this was nearly inevitable in the early days of the Cold War). These flights, and the collars by MPs, even garnered local media attention, like this newspaper article: ([page 1](#) [page 2](#)).

### *Meeting a Mentor*

It was an exciting time to be an LTA nut. Ed Yost and Don Piccard were developing [the first modern hot-air balloons](#), and young Dick would have learned of the new form of aerostation at the peak of his interest in lighter-than-air flight. Dick was an insatiable reader on the subject, seeking out everything he could find on balloons, blimps and any variants on the theme. In July 1962, he traveled to Sioux Falls, South Dakota to meet Don Piccard, with whom he had been corresponding, and tour Raven Industries, just beginning to commercialize hot-air ballooning with its "Vulcoon" line of

sport balloons. Pollard joined Raven personnel in chasing one such craft on a 90-minute flight, and stayed with the Piccards, talking ballooning with Don into the night. Here's his letter home, reporting on this visit and a trip to Minneapolis to meet General Mills' newly-minted balloon-division chief [Karl Stefan](#) ([Page 1](#), [Page 2](#), [Page 3](#), [Page 4](#)). As a result of these contacts, at the age of 17, Dick was presented with an amazing opportunity: Ballooning lessons with Don Piccard himself. Pollard, of course, leapt at the chance, and with Piccard's assistance, was soon the proud owner of a second-hand balloon.

### *The Cave Balloon*



Pollard in the process of becoming National Champion, Kalamazoo, MI, 1963



The balloon had an explosive-activated 'pop top' like the earliest Ravens (no larger image available)

The balloon was in itself something of a curiosity. A one-off, builder Don Piccard explains today, "it was silicone coated lightweight nylon taffeta, which explains the shape under stretch. As you can see, it had no load tapes. The white material at the base of the balloon is heavier nylon to distribute the load onto the thin silicon fabric. (It still tore at a load point and a flight at Seven Pines had to be aborted - embarrassing, in front of Admiral Rosendahl and General Kepner!)" It had come to fame as the first hot-air balloon to fly underground - in a Missouri cave, in an effort to determine the air temperature near the ceiling. The balloon's purpose having been fulfilled, it was available to young Pollard at a deep discount. Just a week after acquiring the balloon, on August 18, 1963, Dick participated in his first competitive event, the first U.S. National Championship in Kalamazoo, Michigan. His longtime interest in aerostation paid off in real skill - he placed first in the distance competition, and second in the spot-landing contest. Pollard, still just 18, was National Champion; his name the first engraved on the Edward J. Hill Memorial Trophy (here's the [new champion, showing off the trophy](#), and here he is [with Don Piccard, showing all his ballooning awards after the championships](#)). As usual, the press took notice.



Here is a [front-page article on the victory](#) from Pollard's new hometown, Littleton, Colorado.

### *Enter the Benefactor*

Anyone involved in aviation in Colorado in the early-to-mid sixties would likely have known of [Jack Lowe](#). A Regional Vice President of the National Aeronautic Association, Lowe was a wealthy man who had dedicated his life to aeronautics. Though suffering from cerebral palsy since birth, he maintained a love of flight that transcended his disability. Pollard had two connections to Lowe: The first was his parents, who were friends with Dorothy Gaffey, Lowe's nurse. But it's Don Piccard who recalls introducing them. "They made a wonderful team," says Piccard; "it was great for both of them." Dick's brother Roger remembers that Lowe was a great supporter of Dick's during this period.



### *From a Hobby to a Business*



American Youth magazine featured Pollard, then 18, and his Vulcoon ([Page 2](#))



Buoyed by his success in the Nationals, Dick began to view ballooning as more than just a pastime; even a passionate one. Dick's title of champion, together with the growing profile of ballooning in general, brought additional attention. Dick was profiled in American

Youth magazine (left), and the press continued to show interest in his budding career. Here, for example, is a [Denver Post article \(sans photo\) on the young champion](#), and here a dapper young Pollard [returns to Nebraska a newsmaker, pictured with his friend and mentor, Don Piccard](#). Here, the press report on something of a non-event: [Pollard's draping his balloon over a Denver-area house \(same occasion, different article\)](#). When the possibility of making money with ballooning became clear, Dick formulated a plan: he would try to make enough money with the balloon to put himself through

Don Piccard gives Jack Lowe



a demonstration flight in  
the  
S-45 demonstrator,  
which  
Lowe purchased for  
Pollard  
soon afterward

college. He became active in the ballooning community, and his correspondence took on a professional tone. An example is this [March 1964 letter to Don Piccard \(Page 2\)](#), discussing Pollard's efforts to bring the Nationals to Colorado. Jack Lowe bought Pollard the Raven S-45 demonstrator (left), which Don Piccard had been flying to drum up Raven sales (note original white skirt, later replaced with snappy striped version). Though also a one-off, the S-45 was more of a standard production envelope, giving Pollard greater lift, though with the greater inertia attending its increased mass over the "cave balloon." It was soon appearing at public events like [this Denver night game, July 4, 1964 \(another shot, same evening\)](#), above the wicker basket

### *The Accident*

On July 26, 1964, Pollard was participating in a charity race to raise funds for a recreation center for the handicapped in Clayton, California. Dick attended with his 16-year-old brother, Bob, while the remainder of the family vacationed in the midwest. Pollard evidently had problems with the balloon, and started well behind the other competitors. Witnesses reported that the balloon struggled to gain altitude as it approached 150,000-volt power lines, missing four of the wires and striking a fifth. One witness described an explosion; others said Pollard jumped as the basket grazed the wire. Investigation of the accident later revealed that a fitting Pollard had repaired shrank when it encountered the flow of frigid propane, losing its seal. See [handwritten description of Civil Aeronautics Board findings](#). Evidently, the fitting began to leak as Pollard approached the lines, presenting an impossible choice: Shut down the fuel system just when maximum lift was needed, or fire the burners, releasing an explosive cloud of gas in proximity to an open flame. Unable to land, and with insufficient lift to clear the lines, the situation was untenable; the leap earthward must have seemed the only choice. Pollard was breathing when the first people reached him, but was pronounced dead on arrival to the hospital. According to Dick's [obituary](#), the vacationing Pollard family did not learn of his death until reading of it in the papers. Modern ballooning had lost its first champion, and one of its most ardent practitioners.



## *Dick's Ballooning Memorabilia*

Dick collected an impressive array of balloon-related artifacts, remaining always an eager fan of the sport, even as a day-to-day professional aeronaut. His youngest brother, Roger, has been so kind as to allow the best of Dick's collection to be shown here, and hopes these items will soon find a home in the Anderson-Abruzzo Balloon Museum in Albuquerque.



Dick's poster from the 1963 Kalamazoo Air Show, signed by an amazing array of ballooning luminaries ([larger version](#))



Program for the [ill-fated Catalina Channel Balloon Race](#) ([more](#)) ([Page 3](#), [Page 4](#), [Page 6](#)) (Pollard registered, but did not participate)



Brochure for Raven's stratospheric balloons, early 1960s (cover only)



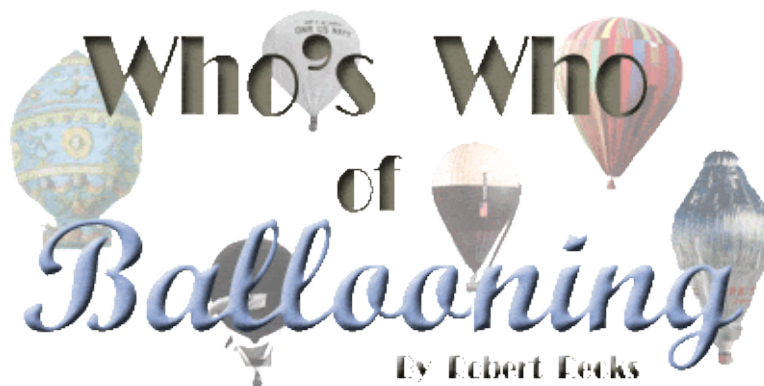
Raven Brochure from 1961 focused on the company's diverse line of products (balloons mentioned on [Page 3](#) and [Page 11](#))



Dick with members of the Wingfoot Lighter-than-Air Society, Akron, OH (Ralph Block in red blazer)



Dick hand-made this Christmas card, poignant in retrospect, 1963



<b>POLLARD, Richard</b>	USA	(1945-1964) K	(HB)
See APPENDIX-B/BH/BI.	Professional balloonist.		

Son of Air Force officer.

b: 7 Jun.1945 Sparta, WI.

d: 26 Jul.1964 Pittsburgh, CA (age 19).

e: Graduated from Bear Creek High school 1963.

f: First B-Ascent (in a RAVEN S40) 14 Aug.1963 at Sioux Falls, SD; First B-Solo 18 Aug.1963 from Kalamazoo B-Race; Extent of previous B-Experience is estimated to be about 30-minutes on a short tether line.

l: FIRST U.S.National Hot-Air B-Champion (Kalamazoo); Interest in LTA sparked by high school research; Built many scale model hot-air balloons at that time; First balloon (S40) was purchased used; Second balloon was a RAVEN S45 (only one ever built); Total time unknown, no personal logbook was ever found.

h: Ed Hill Memorial Trophy, BCA-1963; Many of his flying effects are on display at the Nat.B-Museum. \*\*\*Epic flight 26 Jul.1964 from Clayton (CA) in "S45" for charity event. Launched late due to equipment problems, and apparently struggled to gain altitude before contacting high power lines near Pittsburgh (CA). Reports suggest fuel exploded after grazing the line, and Pollard jumped from the balloon . He still had vital signs, but was pronounced D.O.A. at the hospital.

a: Family residents of Denver, CO area 1992.

r: R.Douglass, D.Piccard, D.Sonnichsen, NBM archives, R. Pollard, AP report.

