

# Al Russell gets his highs up 10,000 feet in balloon

by Jennifer Barr  
People go to great heights for pleasure and excitement—even 10,000 feet in the air in a hot air balloon.

Al Russell of the Blue Springs Line, proudly sports an "I'm a balloon nut" pin. He loves ballooning so much he has his own outfit being delivered in mid-April.

There are only 36 balloons in Canada and 40 or 50 licensed pilots. There's some disagreement about numbers of balloon pilots. However, Al has number 41 reserved for his licence when he qualifies.

The Hot Air Balloon Federation of Canada was formed last month, an affiliate of a similar U.S. group—all part of the Initial Balloon Federation centered in France.

Ballooning got its start in France in 1883. Europeans have been enthusiastic ballooners since then but they favor the cumbersome gas balloon usually filled with helium. According to Al Russell, there's only one gas balloon in Canada, the hot air type being considered a sport balloon.

Al would like to see ballooning become more popular. He feels the problem has been a lack of promotion and industry standards. There just aren't enough balloons around to standardize the industry yet.

Would-be balloon pilots go through examinations and qualifications similar to airplane pilots. As well as ground exams, they must fly solo several times and ascend to a height of more than 10,000 feet.

"You just don't look down," comments Al.

Don't upchuck over Acton  
Stomach queasiness is one of the first problems a neophyte balloonist must cope with.

"It takes a strong stomach to take it," says Al. "It takes some getting used to, that first free flight. There's no safety harness or parachute, just a basket between you and the ground."

But it's just like anything else, you do get used to it, he says.  
Al became interested in ballooning last year in Calgary. A businessman manufacturing mobile phones, Al visited a store called Balloon Adventures situated next to his Calgary

business office. Ground-air communications have long been a problem for balloonists who have hitherto used air radio to towers or CB radios.

Al's mobile attaché phone seemed an excellent addition to the communications system and is now being used as a beneficial backup.

According to Al, one thing led to another and he was offered a balloon flight. He went up three to four hundred feet on a tethered flight (tied to the ground by a rope) and was hooked!

Riptop or parachute?  
The actual balloon is usually better than a hundred feet high and made of nylon or dacron. The balloon itself is much like a parachute with an adjustable top, either parachute top or riptop. Removal of the top is necessary to let the hot air out for descent. These tops are manoeuvred by guy ropes. The parachute top can be pulled down inside to let a small volume of air out and then allowed to drift back in place. The riptop-out top (attached by velcro bands) is unreplaceable, meaning landing is mandatory once the top is out.

The balloon also has exhaust side vents for air control with guy ropes attached. They reseal with own pressure.  
The whole light balloon is attached to the basket by a system of webbing sewn into each gore or panel of fabric. The webbing comes to the orpheus, or throat, with steel wire taking the stress, and attached to the basket by quick-release pins.  
The basket is usually made of wicker, a material with excellent flex and strength capable of absorbing considerable shock if landing is rough. Although fiberglass is used in some baskets, Al feels wicker is by far the best. He also likes the nostalgia aspect of using traditional material.

Hot air is driven into the balloon by a burner unit in the basket, fuelled by propane in 20 gallon tanks. The tremendous power and heat produced by the small insignificant burner reminds one of a jet and is capable of lifting a balloon 21 hundred feet a minute.  
Two tanks of fuel is sufficient to take three people for a six hour ride on a 70 degree day roughly 25 to 40 miles at a

thousand feet in the air). The colder it is the less hot air is needed to make the balloon rise.  
The temperature of the burners can reach two thousand degrees and hot air can "shower" onto passengers from the

throat of the balloon. With this in mind, balloonists wear crash helmets and strong gloves. The gloves are needed for handling guy ropes. Balloonists also wear light one piece jet-type flight suits and sturdy sponge soled boots with high ankles to cushion landings.

Landing tricky part  
When taking off a balloonist tries to position himself in front of a tree windbreak. The balloon is unfurled from a very small pack reminiscent of a parachute and allowed to fill with ordinary air before short bursts of hot air are added. Take-off should be slow and controlled but can be a bit of a circus if the wind catches the balloon before balloonists and passengers are ready.

Landing is the tricky part. While it should be a slow gradual hover, settling gently down to earth, Al tells of lively ones while learning the art.  
He remembers dragging through a corn field digging wide furrows in the mud with the basket and gathering corn cobs for supper.

The flight is the poetic part, the exciting miracle of quiet flight. Al says he feels like Superman flying through the air.  
He feels ballooning is more practical than plane flight. He says it uses more common sense and is more simplistic. A balloonist needs to know air currents and weather patterns, being able to manoeuvre the balloon through still air or hot thermals (warm air pockets which send the balloon rocketing skyward only to come down even faster).

It's also a relatively inexpensive sport compared with others requiring a vehicle. An economy model balloon can be had for as little as \$6,000.  
Al's own balloon will be delivered in a few days, having been made in the



Balloonist Al Russell sits on the side of the wicker basket while Canadian Ballooning champion Larry Horak checks adjustments prior to flight.

States by the Raven Balloon Company. Al also is considering becoming a balloon dealer for the Raven company.  
Ballooning is much less dangerous than supposed, according to our expert. Any fatalities resulting from ballooning (only one or two on the continent last year) are usually because of entanglement with hydro wires. Wires are the biggest danger to any balloonist, Al says, and visual alertness is a must at all times.

With increasing leisure time and people exploring diverse ways to spend it, Ballooning may be the next "in" sport.  
In the meantime, don't be surprised if you should look up one day and find a man in a balloon asking permission to land in your garden—it's only your neighbor, Al Russell.

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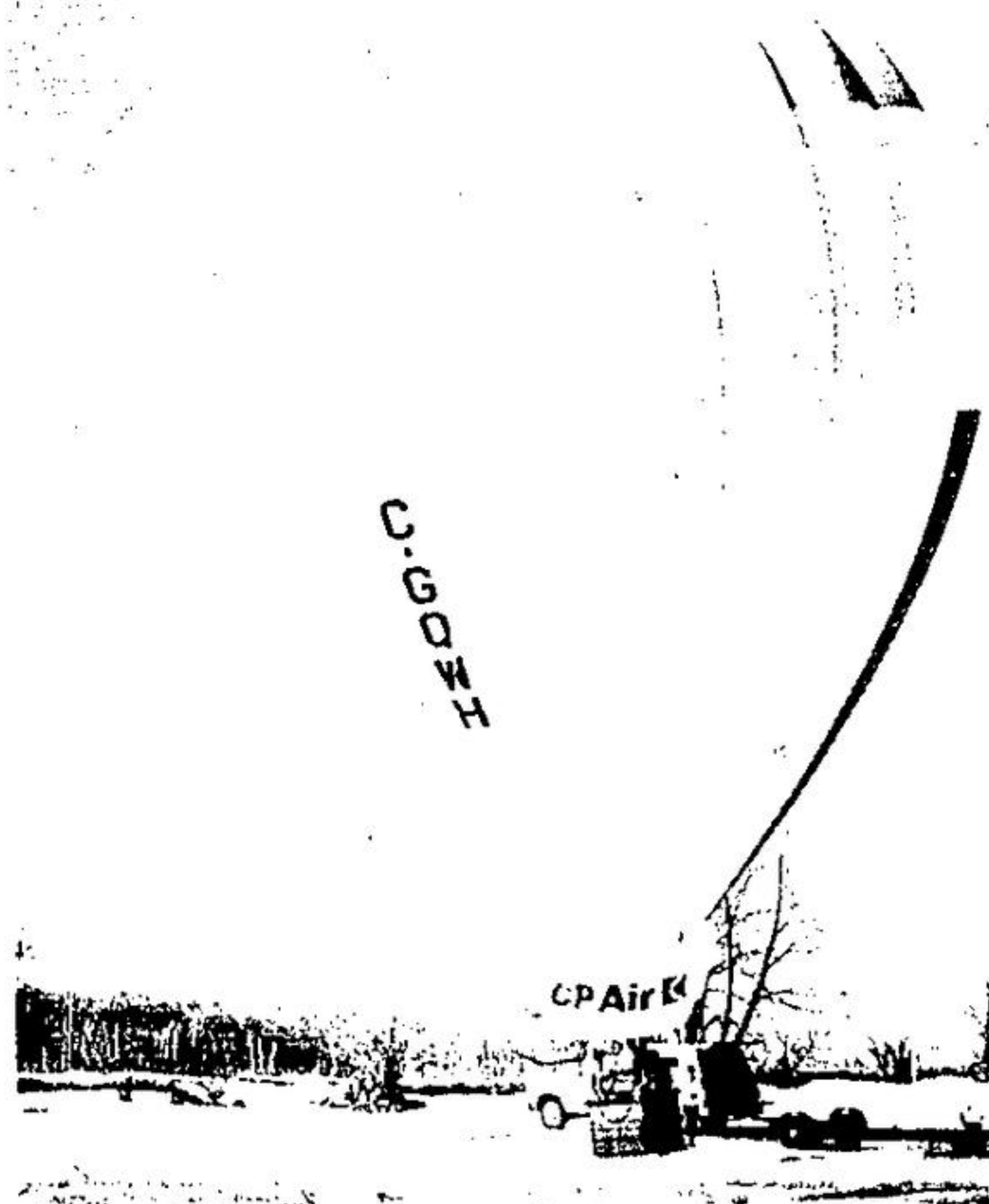
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