



## Riding the wind

Meet the man who plans to cross the English Channel with a bunch of balloons.

SATURDAY EXTRA

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# SaturdayExtra

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## Taking flight

Jonathan Trappe plans an extraordinary adventure in June, when he will attempt to cross the English Channel via cluster balloon.

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Contributed photo by Arnold Greenwell

Pilot Jonathan Trappe and The Spirit Cluster launch at the Wings of Carolina Flying Club at Raleigh Executive Airport in Sanford.

# BALLOONIST HOLDS ONTO CHILDLIKE DREAM

By **Chick Jacobs**

Staff writer

## SANFORD

**W**hen Jonathan Trappe flies, he goes solo. But he never flies alone.

Whether gliding two miles above the Earth in a high-tech gondola, or just watching the world go by in a purloined desk chair from work, the rail-thin 37-year-old carries a world of dreamers in his hip pocket.

“What child hasn’t dreamed of hanging onto a cluster of balloons and floating off into the sky?” Trappe mused.

The rest of us let go of those

balloons, those dreams, as we grew older, perhaps glimpsing them becoming distant dots as we got on with the business of life.

Jonathan Trappe didn’t. Using a blend of wonder and a healthy dose of technical project manager, he has become perhaps the world’s foremost spokesman for cluster ballooning.

Granted, there’s not much competition for that position. There are maybe a dozen cluster balloonists in the world, he says, and generally the only time you hear about the group is when something goes wrong.

Because, he notes, when

## WANT TO LEARN MORE?

■ Jonathan Trappe’s exploits are chronicled at [www.clusterballoon.com](http://www.clusterballoon.com).

things go wrong, they really go wrong.

“When everything is working, the only person who knows you’re up there is you,” Trappe says.

Well, you, your flight crew, the authorities and the occasional airplane pilot who has to pinch himself.

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# Balloons: In June, Trappe will try to make the first cluster flight over the English Channel

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Trappe is a stickler for safety, both for himself and the unsuspecting public below. When he takes off, everything is done by the book.

Even if he's writing the book as he goes.

"I take safety very seriously," he says. It's about the only time that his smile slips from his face. "It's never acceptable to put others in any danger."

You get the idea. This isn't your "grab a lawn chair, bungee chords and some Army surplus weather balloons" yokel on a lark. Trappe is cautious, meticulous in planning and exacting in execution. His passion is an unusual melding of a level-headed, soft-spoken fellow with an eye for details and a mind that wanders among the clouds.

Cluster ballooning is just what the name implies. A collection of gas-filled balloons (usually helium) are attached to a harness, which holds a passenger. When enough balloons are connected, they begin floating.

Some balloonists dangle from a parasailing sort of setup. Some nestle in oversized chairs. Trappe uses a wrap-around harness that looks sort of like a car's child seat.

Like the standard huge single-balloon pilot, they ride the wind in silence. Their climbing and falling through the air depends on a system of ballast and gas.

Technically, they are considered experimental



Contributed photo; staff photos by Raul R. Rubiera

Jonathan Trappe takes a picture of the view from 4,000 feet above the Sanford airport. At right, staff photographer Raul R. Rubiera shot photos of Trappe discussing the mechanics of his balloon cluster. Top right, Trappe displays the two different types of balloons he uses. Right center, Trappe uses a water ballast when he is ballooning. At bottom right, John Hunter, left, from the Wings of Carolina Flying Club and Nidia Raul-Ramirez, Trappe's crew chief and girlfriend, hold up the harness attached to the chair, which Trappe will use this summer to attempt a crossing of the English Channel.

aircraft. Since everyone comes up with their own system, there's no defined parameters for flight.

"If you can imagine how to do it, then you can do it," Trappe said.

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The first question Trappe usually fields, after the inevitable query about his sanity, is if his passion for floating flight was fueled by the Disney/Pixar movie "Up."

It wasn't. He was airborne long before grumpy Carl Fredrickson took flight on the big screen. In fact, Trappe helped Pixar build a balloon-bouyant armchair to use during the film's publicity tour.

Trappe's introduction to

his passion was far more mundane: an article in the Wall Street Journal about an oddball endeavor called "cluster ballooning." It included the now-legendary misadventure of "Lawnchair" Larry Walters, who in 1982 ended up crashing a balloon-festooned lawn chair into some power wires in southern California, blacking out thousands of homes.

Trappe admired the idea, if not the daredevilry. If such a flight could be made safe, it would be worth the effort.

He began planning his first flight at work, borrowing his desk chair for the event. For months, he and a group of friends took over the living room

and back porch of his ever-patient girlfriend (and subsequent flight crew chief) Nidia Raul-Ramirez, tinkering with balloons, pulleys, rock climbing gear and "what if" scenarios.

Trappe also earned his FAA certification and learned to fly hot air balloons. "Every little bit of knowledge might come in handy," he said.

Finally, after figuring everything from lift per balloon (15 pounds) to ballast (he chose water over sand, figuring if he landed in parched country "you can't drink sand") and enduring some "substantial, nontrivial fears," he was ready.

On a muggy summer

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# Balloons

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morning in 2008, about 20 volunteers helped Jonathan Trappe launch the self-christened “Chairway to Heaven.” Four hours and 50 miles later, the contraption and Trappe set back down in a farmer’s muddy field.

The chair, now retired from flying, was cleaned off and taken back to his work desk at Accenture in Raleigh. He still uses it.

“It’s just as well it was retired,” he said. “It’s a very comfortable chair ... for about the first hour.”

Trappe’s latest flight, on April 10, was by far the most ambitious. The flight set a world record for length of time in the air, and was the first documented overnight flight.

It also included an additional element of potential danger. The winds aloft, which dictate the craft’s direction, could easily steer him into the congested flight paths of RDU or glide him into restricted air space over Fort Bragg.

“It just so happens they were holding live fire exercises at Bragg on that day,” Trappe said. “The

## YOU DON’T TRAVEL LIGHT

Despite what you might think, packing for a flight suspending by dozens of balloons can be pretty complicated. Here’s Jonathan Frappe’s carry-on luggage for his flights:

- Altimeter
- Oxygen canister (required for flights above 12,000 feet)
- Cold-weather clothing, including gloves and thermal socks (temperatures are much colder aloft)
- Sunglasses
- Sunscreen (UV rays are much stronger above the clouds)
- GPS tracking system
- Battery-powered beacon and flight lights
- LED light (for night reading
- of maps)
- Motorcycle battery
- Backup motorcycle battery, in case the first one gives out
- Aviator maps
- Kneeboard for maps
- Scanner for ground crew
- Scanner for aircraft
- Ballast bags, each holding three gallons of water. (Why water, not sand? Because you can’t drink sand.)
- Camera
- Flight bag to hold small stuff
- Sandwiches (peanut butter and jelly are traditional)
- Passport, pilot license and craft certification (in case of wary officials)
- Credit card
- Cash (in case credit cards aren’t accepted wherever he lands)
- Cutting tool for emergency descent
- Parachute (in case cutting tool was required)

restricted airspace around Pope was closed up to 29,000 feet. I didn’t think they’d actually view me as a target, but with all the activity down there, it wouldn’t be a good day to float through.”

Instead, Trappe calculated the currents, reading them like an experienced riverboat pilot reads a riverbank. He’d hitch a ride on one level, drifting away from the firepower of Bragg, then climb above the traffic of RDU.

“The low-level winds

would have pushed us in the right direction,” he added. But flying a cluster of balloons at about 1,000 feet at night isn’t really a good idea. Too many things like TV towers are waiting out therein the dark.”

Trappe took off next to the Wings of Carolina Flying Club building at the airport. Several of the group’s pilots helped fill the 50-plus balloons and dragged their kids along in the pre-dawn chill.

“I’m sure they were thinking that they’d never

get a chance to see a guy float away in a bunch of balloons,” Trappe said. “One of the neatest things was, as I was floating up, I could hear one little girl yelling ‘Bye-bye!’ Here I was, hundreds of feet in the air, and her voice was floating up to me. She kept yelling as I floated away.”

Day turned to evening as Trappe watched the world silently glide below him.

“Up there, there’s no sound. No propellers, no engines. There’s no sound of wind, like in a glider.

You are on the wind. It’s truly silent.”

During the night, in a slow mosey less than a mile above the greater Raleigh area, Trappe broke the silence, chatting with the RDU control tower, some local Ham radio operators, even a 737 pilot who sailed below him.

“The controller at RDU, he was just awesome to work with,” Trappe said. “He told me there was no traffic within 80 miles. I literally had the sky to myself.”

He cruised southeast through the night, gliding over Selma just before daybreak. Then, with the coastline closing in and unpleasant memories of fellow cluster balloonists who unwisely ventured over water, Trappe shifted course once more, landing near the Wayne-Wilson county line. His support crew and a few unimpressed cows were there to greet him.

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Trappe’s next flight will likely gain more attention — and carry an entirely different collection of memories.

In early June, he will attempt to make the first cluster flight over the English Channel. The time,

and the history, with a generation of airborne vets in the region wasn’t lost on him.

“Early June flying over the English Channel to France means an awful lot to a bunch of people,” he said. “If things worked out so I could make the flight on June 6, wouldn’t that be amazing?”

“Of course, if I ended up flying over Normandy, I’d be way off course!”

Instead, he plans to take the most direct route the winds will allow, flying over as little ocean as possible.

“Way too many things could happen,” he said. “That time of year, I’ll have up to 16 hours of light, but I don’t want to use them all.”

The logistics of flying from one country to another are complicated, especially if you don’t know quite where you’re landing. But, Trappe said, it’s one more dream.

“It’s such a narrow ribbon of water, but so iconic. It has called to aviators for centuries.”

And he’ll have the dreams of the world as carry-on luggage.

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