

Across the country by balloon

Dick Smith is always looking for the next challenge, the next adventure. He had ridden in a hot-air balloon a few times and had found the experience thrilling. He decided that he would like to be the first person to fly a hot-air balloon across Australia.

At the time there was only one manufacturer of hot-air balloons in the country. This was Phil Kavanagh, a former hot-air ballooning champion. He offered to build Dick Smith a balloon that would do the job. Ballooning can be a dangerous sport so it was essential that the very best equipment be used. Kavanagh was an experienced hot-air balloon builder, but the type of balloon needed for a flight of this magnitude had never been made in Australia before. Dick Smith, who has always said that he minimised risk wherever he could, went to England for his balloon. At the time he said, 'I

would have preferred to buy an Australian balloon but I value my life.'

The challenge to a race

Phil Kavanagh challenged Dick Smith to a race across the continent. This made the challenge ahead doubly interesting to Dick. He agreed to the race.

A man in England named Don Cameron had taken Pilâtre de Rozier's basic idea of a balloon powered by hot air and gas (see box) and built a modern balloon. This type of balloon is called a Roziere. Don Cameron proved in 1978 that it was suitable for marathon flights when



Envy

'...I knew that the risk was really great of me, the tall poppy, being torn down. That's going to happen one day. It must do because the tall poppy syndrome is really a jealousy thing and I was jealous of other successful people. So I can understand that. It's envy. And it's a human characteristic.'

Balloon flight

People have always been fascinated by the idea of flight. Before the Wright brothers made the first powered flight in 1903 in the United States of America, the closest people had come to prolonged flight was in machines which resembled gliders or in balloons. These machines were at the mercy of the wind. The first person to leave the ground in a hot-air balloon and see the earth below as a bird might see it was Pilâtre de Rozier. In 1783 in a balloon made from linen and paper and fuelled by hot air generated by a fierce fire of wool and straw, he managed to coax his

he and Chris Davey, his co-pilot, flew a Roziere from Newfoundland, in Canada, to France. Dick Smith believed that the Cameron Roziere was his best chance of successfully crossing Australia. His belief was confirmed when he visited the starting point, in the USA, of the Chrysler Transatlantic Challenge balloon race in 1992. He looked at the Roziere balloons there and knew that he had found his craft.

The balloon

The Roziere balloon has two compartments. At the top of the balloon there is a helium-filled gas compartment and under that there is a section which traps hot air. The hot air warms the helium and this gives the balloon the ability to fly at an even altitude because the helium can be kept at a fairly constant

balloon into the air, to the astonishment of onlookers.

De Rozier's flight was a success and he was determined to prove that hot-air balloons could become a means of long-distance travel. He died two years after his first flight while attempting to cross the English Channel — the body of water between England and France. The balloon he had invented for this attempt was a new type, constructed so that it used both hot air and gas — in this case hydrogen. It was a beautiful machine, intricately decorated and called Tour de Calais.

temperature. Ordinary hot-air balloons aren't suitable for long flights because they would require too many heavy gas cylinders to keep the burners going. A Roziere doesn't need as many cylinders because the helium can be heated by sunlight.

The main problem with hot-air balloons is that they are difficult to control. They cannot be steered because they depend entirely on the movement of the wind. So how does a balloon get from A to B safely? The pilots, or aeronauts as they are called, have to know a lot about air currents and how altitude affects wind direction. Using information from the Bureau of Meteorology the aeronauts can roughly chart a course. The Bureau of Meteorology established a control centre at the Australian

Geographic headquarters in Terrey Hills so Dick Smith and his competitor could have access to the latest information about the weather and wind patterns, no matter where they were in Australia.

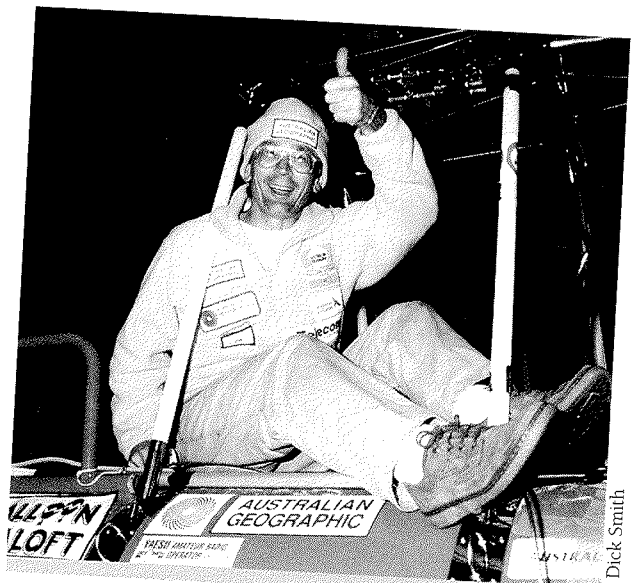
What was the basket of earlier hot-air balloons is a high tech capsule, or gondola, under the Roziere balloon. It is large enough for two people and is fitted with satellite navigation and communication systems. There is room for food and water and, because a marathon flight might take several days, there is even a portable toilet. In case the capsule comes down over water, it is equipped with hollow keels which fill with water to help right it and balance it.

The race begins

With the balloon ready and the weather conditions favourable, Dick Smith and his co-aeronaut, John Wallington, took off from Carnarvon in Western Australia. They were aware that there had been six previous attempts to accomplish a hot-air balloon flight across Australia, the last in 1984. All had failed. Dick Smith admired the people who had made these attempts and was inspired by their example.

The race began and soon the balloons were travelling at heights of up to 18 000 feet (about 6000 metres). (Feet, not metres, is the unit of measurement used for altitude in aviation.) Dick's racing competitor, Phil Kavanagh, landed 3000 kilometres from his take off point without completing the race, so if Dick Smith's balloon could go the whole distance, not only would he win the race, but he and his co-pilot would become the first people to accomplish this feat. Forty hours after take-off, on 17 June 1993, Dick Smith landed in northern New South Wales.

He had done it!



Dick Smith in his hot-air balloon just after landing to complete the first balloon flight across Australia.