

Thrilling Story of the FIRST BALLOON FLIGHT IN INDIA

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THE inauguration of the first Balloon Club in India by the American astronaut, Neil A. Armstrong, on 23 November 1970 was marked by high adventure.

Reports from Rohtak late at night said that the balloon, "Nimbus", which had been released that morning at Safdarjung airport to mark the occasion, had burst at Qila Zafargarh, 20 miles from Rohtak. The three occupants, Dr. Johan Boessman, his wife, Nini, and Mr. Vishwabandhu Gupta had been injured.

The doctor in charge of the casualty ward at the Medical College, Rohtak, said that a team of doctors rushed from the college found that the balloonists had not sustained serious injuries. All of them re-

ceived first aid at the primary health centre in Julana and were now on their way to Delhi in jeeps sent by the Delhi Flying Club.

The free flight of the balloon "Nimbus"-100 feet in diameter and flying the Indian and Dutch national flags was launched by Neil Armstrong at 10:15 a.m. Mrs. Nini Boessman and Dr. Johan Boessman, the celebrated Dutch ballooning pair, were piloting the balloon.

When there was no news about the landing of the balloon till 9 p.m. members of the FAI and the Delhi Gliding Club got worried. They made frantic telephone calls to district headquarters in Haryana and Punjab to find out the whereabouts of the balloon.

The balloon was reported to

have come down near Qila Zafargarh about 4:30 p.m. after flying about 65 miles from Delhi. It was reported to have burst when it came in contact with the ground. Its journey during the inaugural flight was a considerable shift from the planned course. It had been decided after preliminary reconnaissance on Nov. 22 that the course of the balloon flight would be in a north-easterly direction from Safdarjung airport, the launching site. During the morning the wind changed to a north-westerly direction and the balloonists had to take an uncharted course.

The free flight of the balloon started after three captive flights to mark the inauguration of the Balloon Club. The first captive flight took place about 9:25 a.m. when Mrs. Boessman of the Hague Balloon Club, Miss Raj Mitroo and Mr. Vishwa Bandhu Gupta of the Delhi Gliding Club ascended about 100 feet in the balloon.

In the second captive flight the Vice-President of the FAI, Col. G.V. Raja, and some members of the Delhi Gliding Club went up. In the third captive flight some more FAI officials went up, with the woman pilot.

The free flight was marked by loud cheers from a distinguished crowd including the astronauts Armstrong and Charles Conrad Jr., and the cosmonauts, Khouronov and Volinov. Dr. Boessman, wearing a red bowler, beamed with joy in the rattan-basket car of the balloon which carried a

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mustard bag carrying the registration number of NIMBUS listed as an "airship".

Dr. Boessman had acquired an Indian toy bugle which he blew merrily while the balloon gracefully ascended in the sky. People waved "bon voyage" to the first balloon passengers in India.

The release of the balloon was preceded by a daring display of aerobatics by gliders piloted by members of the Delhi Gliding Club. The three gliding pilots participating in the display were Miss Raj Mitroo, instructor pilot R. K. Wasson, and Mr. Prem Bandhu Gupta. A low and fast dip by Wasson over the heads of the astronauts stole the show. The woman pilot, Raj Mitroo, performed some exquisite loops and stalls in her glider.

The Chief guest, Mr. Jagjivan Ram, presented framed certificates bestowing honorary membership of the Delhi Gliding Club on the astronauts and cosmonauts.

Three of the four space heroes later inscribed their autographs on an Indian-made Kartik glider of the Delhi Gliding Club to mark the occasion.

The leader of the Soviet delegation to the FAI presented a light blue pennant of the Soviet Aero Club to the Delhi Gliding Club. It was received by Mr. Jagjivan Ram. On the pennant were pinned the badges of the Aeronautic Association of the USSR and the Central Aeronautic Club. The leader referred to the friendship between India and the Soviet Union

and told the Minister that there were about a quarter million glider aircraft in the Soviet Union.

The Nimbus required about 650 cubic metres of hydrogen to make it airborne. In India the procurement of hydrogen proved difficult. An Indian firm flew hydrogen cylinders from Calcutta to fill up the Nimbus. The inflation of the balloon had started at 2 a.m., on Monday to

enable it to make its ascent in time for the inaugural ceremony.

It carried a lot of weight. The passengers weighed about 220 kg., the mail carried by it about 30 kg. and the sand bags about 100 kg.

The NIMBUS trio, Johan and Nini Boessman and Vishwabandhu Gupta, returned to Delhi safe and without a scratch in the early hours of November 24 to tell the thrilling story of India's first balloon flight.

The Dutch ballooning pair and the first balloon man of India, V. Gupta, were reported injured the night of November 23, in what was said to be a crash landing of the balloon after it was launched from the Delhi Gliding Club.

Gupta said after his return to Delhi: "We were lost but not involved in a crash landing and the only injury I suffered was a severe headache because in our excitement to ascend in the first balloon flight in the country we forgot to carry any food

with us. We were hungry."

This is the story of the Odyssey of "NIMBUS" as it emerged from the accounts given by Nini and Johan Boessman and Vishwabandhu Gupta. NIMBUS was off the ground at Safdarjang airport at about 10:15 a.m. Within 15 minutes it had soared about 1,000 feet above the ground. The passengers of the balloon felt "almost like living in outer space." There was absolute stillness and quiet in the balloon car.

How do you feel being up in the balloon? asked Johan Boessman of Vishwabandhu Gupta. The answer was "For the Hindu and now for the West, the most important thing is Nirvana. My first experience in being in a balloon is like achieving Nirvana."

The balloon passengers had only four bottles of aerated water and a bottle of plain water amongst them. They opened one bottle of the aerated water

and shared sips out of it to celebrate their ascent.

Regulating the course of the balloon was a delicate operation. Nini Boessman used a spoon to throw out small quantities of sand to balance the floating sphere and regulate its sinking rate. The balloon passengers also threw out bits of paper and leaflets to reduce weight. A few grammes of weight could make it go up or down.

Balloon flying had to be "done by ear". One could hear the sounds of the world below very clearly though reduced in volume. The people below could hear them too. In fact the balloonists carried on conversation with school children and peasants as they floated along.

By about 11:15 a.m. "NIMBUS" was floating over Hahadurgarh. Then the wind changed and the balloon began to turn in all directions, gently. From here on the balloonists were "lost." They did not know which

direction their "ship" was taking. A little later Gupta tried to find out from a farmer walking in a field 900 feet below what was the name of the village they were flying over and how far it was from Delhi. The peasant looked around in surprise wondering where the voice came from. Then Gupta said: "Look up Chaudhri Sahib" and the farmer smiled to see the men in the balloon.

The "NIMBUS" passengers began to feel hungry in a couple of hours. Nini had some peppermint drops. That was all the food. She rationed it, one drop for each passenger every three hours. Two drops each was their entire meal during the journey. The only bottle of water was carefully shared.

Floating over farms and village roads and schools, making conversation with the village folk the "NIMBUS" floated on till about 3:40 p.m. When it was over a little village, Gupta shouted down to inquire from a peasant, "Is there a telephone in this village?" The farmer looked up and shouted "yes."

Then the balloon pilots decided to land. Underneath a whole procession of children had begun to trail the course of the balloon. To scare the children as the balloon was coming down to earth Gupta shouted "Get away, this balloon is going to catch fire." The rumor spread faster than the communication from the balloonists with Delhi. News reached New Delhi in the evening that the balloon had crashed, exploded and all three in it were injured. The ambulance was sent from Delhi to track the balloonists. A doctor from the primary health centre in Julana also rushed to the reported scene of accident.

Meanwhile the balloon had safely landed in a sugarcane field. About 200 children made a ring around it as the balloonists deflated and folded the balloon. A villager offered his bullock cart to carry the bal-

loon and its passengers to the Qila Zafargarh railway station, about a mile away. People from nearby villages began to pour in to see the balloon and its passengers. They followed the bullock cart to the railway station. They also mobbed the small waiting room to have a look at the balloonists. The window-panes of the room were smashed in the melee. Nini and Johan came out to give them "darshan." Then the crowd thinned. The doctor from Julana had arrived. He gave them a medical check-up. There was nothing wrong with them. He took them in his jeep to Julana and they had a coffee party. When they returned they found that an ambulance from Safdarjang airport had arrived. They were also told that a helicopter had been ordered to stand by at Safdarjang airport to start off on a rescue mission if needed.

From Qila Zafargarh they started about 11 p.m. with the folded balloon in the ambulance for Delhi, 65 miles away. The basket was left behind because it could not be carried in the jeep. It was brought to Delhi at night by a special jeep and trailer sent from Delhi.

The Boessmans pinned a Balloonists badge on Gupta recognizing him as a man who had traveled in a balloon. A bag of mail carried in the balloon was presented to the postal authorities in Delhi.