

Hovercrafts at the 1998 Kodak Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta

At 7 AM, October 3, 1998, the 27th annual Kodak Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta began with approximately 870 Hot Air Balloons, from all over the world registered for the 9-day event. As this event unfolded, at China Beach, on the West Side of the Rio Grande River less than 2 miles from Balloon Fiesta Park, another group of people met to prepare for the day. This group, known as the “Dragonslayers,” has provided Hovercraft rescue and assistance to the balloonists who choose to attempt a “Splash and Dash” maneuver in the Rio Grande River for the past 9 years, making this the 10th annual meeting of this group.

The “Splash and Dash” is an attempt at close maneuvering a Hot Air Balloon, a normally non-maneuverable object, into wind patterns allowing it to touch down on the river and then return to altitude. This is further complicated by heavy tree growth on either side of the river, and a change in wind patterns at the river surface. This challenge is intensified by the fact that normal winds during this maneuver are from the West (across the river), narrowing the landing zone to less than 50 feet. If the Balloonist tangles in the trees or lands in a position that prevents a safe return to altitude, it becomes necessary to remove the balloon from this area by deflating it and physically carrying it out, a significant feat as the balloon and equipment weigh over 1000 pounds. Adding to the fact that the balloons are normally in the middle of the river, on an island, the Rio Grande River and surrounding “Bosque” area are dedicated wilderness areas, and vehicles are not allowed into the area to remove the balloons.

The Rio Grande River, as it passes through Albuquerque, is a sand-bottomed wide expanse, with water levels no deeper than 3 feet, crisscrossed with multiple sandbars and shallows. These conditions make normal watercraft ineffective, and create the perfect medium for Hovercraft operation.

The “Dragonslayers” group was formed to provide this service by Dan Morris, New Mexico S.C.A.T., and was comprised of an all volunteer group of area Fire and Rescue personnel, giving them advanced training in a less hostile environment than they are normally expected to operate. Two members of the original group, Dan Morris and Bill Taylor (both of Albuquerque), still participate annually. Since its humble beginning the group has expanded to a point that it now has members located in Alabama, Arizona, California, Colorado, Missouri, New Mexico, Texas, Utah, and Washington State. Visitors to the group have traveled from as far away as Florida and Montreal, Canada.

During the past 10 years, the “Dragonslayers” have assisted Balloonists with anything from taking pictures while the balloon basket is sitting in the river, trading out and transporting balloon passengers to and from the beach, to actually removing 48 balloons from harm’s way by either refueling and re-inflating the balloon (the thrust prop on a Hovercraft is a very efficient cold inflation fan) so that it can fly out, or assisting in deflating and dismantling the balloon, then carrying it (by Hovercraft) to the nearest access point for the “chase” crew. The “Dragonslayers” remain an all-volunteer group, receiving no compensation for their activities.

The 1998 Fiesta started with beautiful weather, temperatures in the low 40s at 7 AM (low 30s on the river), and rising to the low to mid 60s (upper 70s on the river) by 11 AM, the time that most balloons are down for the day. The winds were light (balloons will not launch in winds greater than 12 knots) and favored flights taking the balloons to the river. Albuquerque is famous for a phenomenon called the “Box,” a combination of geographic features and weather patterns that enable pilots to control and even retrace their routes. This condition, when in effect, makes the “Splash and Dash” very appealing to the Balloon pilots.

On China Beach, the hovercrafters were starting to climb out of their vehicles, sipping coffee, and asking why we couldn’t do this in the middle of the day. The group met at the middle of the beach for the Safety Meeting (an annual event), and discussion of the changes in beach and river conditions. On hand for the opening day was 6 Hovercraft, all from the local area. Once formalities were over, everyone started preparing their crafts for the day, doing initial cruises, and starting to give rides. By 8 AM, there were reports that the Balloons were on the water near the Alameda Drain (an area approximately 3 miles north of the beach). Many of the craft were already in the area, but as soon as the report came in, everyone else headed that way. All activity centered in that area for the rest of the day, the only time a craft came back to

the beach was for passenger changes (always more people than craft), or for additional fuel. The Fiesta is reportedly the most photographed event in the world with attendance of over 1,500,000 visitors to Balloon Fiesta Park during the 9 day event. Luckily they haven't found out that the "Best Seat in the House" is on the river. The river cleared by 11 AM, and all craft returned to China Beach with stories of the 100 or so balloons that made it to the river, and of the ones that tried but didn't make it. Activities then changed to trailering and wrapping up for the day.

The description above is repeated daily for the entire Fiesta. As most of us like to eat and have shelter, it is almost impossible for everyone to be on the beach every day; however, some are and some "fly" in the morning and work in the afternoon (rough life, huh!). We averaged 5 craft per day for the week and had as few as 2 and as many as 7 on any given day. The weather cooperated with Fiesta Coordinators very well this year, causing cancellation of scheduled events on 2 days, but still allowing the Balloonists to take off on a "Pilot's Choice" due to wind conditions. There were balloons on the water for 8 of the 9 days of the event. On Sunday, the last day of the event, prevailing winds were from the North carrying the balloons to the South and away from the river.

The Fiesta is strictly a balloon event, with all attention going to the balloons. The Hovercrafts, being there in a support roll, do not receive the attention normally given at the Hover-Ins. Operations are centered and restricted to this role, and no other water events are scheduled. This situation leaves afternoons "free" to do craft maintenance, take naps, talk hovercrafting, watch videos, or take in the local sights.

As mentioned before, the "Dragonslayers" are an all volunteer group. In order to minimize expenses, out of town members and guests are lodged by local members, and meals are potluck (oh darn, another barbecue). Get togethers are held most every night to make sure that no one goes hungry, and there always seems to be enough left-overs to take care of the next day's lunch. Coffee appears to run freely at the beach, and if someone doesn't show up with breakfast for the group, Mickey D's is only a few minutes away.

Members present for the 1998 Fiesta were; Bill Taylor, Dan Morris, Josee Hamelin, Sara Watson, Branin Porch, Norm and Carla Lincoln, Gary Scaramella, Annette Murrin all from Albuquerque, NM; John Carter and Dave Bachman from Los Alamos, NM, Bob Carter from St. Louis, MO, and Pat Murphy from Foley, AL. Guests included John's mom (Elsie) and sister (Libby) from Orlando, FL, and a friend of Josee's (Micheline) from Montreal, Canada, along with several friends and family from the surrounding area.

Special items to note from this year's event were: the presentation of Letters of Appreciation to Josee Hamelin, Carla Lincoln, and Norm Lincoln by LAMESA (Los Alamos Mobile Emergency Services...John Carter & David Bachman) for their assistance in a search for a lost individual on the Rio Grande at Espanola, NM in May. The notification of intent by Dan Morris to present a painting (picturing Hovercrafts on the river extracting a balloon), painted by Bill Taylor's mother and belonging to the "Dragonslayers" group, to the City of Albuquerque Division of Open Space for display in the foyer of their office complex. The picture will remain the property of the "Dragonslayers."

Balloon Fiesta is an open event. We welcome anyone who would like to be a part of this "special" event. Next year's Fiesta is scheduled from October 2nd through October 10th. We hope that your schedules can somehow be adjusted, making it possible for you to join us.

More pictures and information about Balloon Fiesta can be had on John Carter's HoverNuts web page at <http://www.losalamos.com/hovernut>, and the official Balloon Fiesta site at: <http://www.aibf.org>.

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