

# ***St. John's W04 and the Galivanting Gondola***

The St. John's, Newfoundland Weather Office affair with the "Amazing Amphibious Dutch Gondola" has now been officially recognized. OIC Harold Janes recently received a large plaque certifying that his office had made an important contribution to achieving several transatlantic balloon records. Captain Hans Brink had made balloon flights in 1985 and 1986 from St. John's to Schiphol Airport in the Netherlands. This was when Janes had provided Brink and his two flight companions (his wife and Evert Louwman) with weather forecasting support right across the Atlantic.

The recognition certificate came with copies of four plaques Brink had received from the Federation Aeronautique Internationale and the Dutch Aeronautical Association spelling out various speed, distance and altitude records.

A detailed article by Janes appeared in the Christmas 1986 Zephyr in which he recounted the exploits of the FLYING DUTCHMAN and the DUTCH VIKING and mentioned the support the weather office was able to provide to ensure the speed and safety of the two historic balloon trips.



***OIC Harold Janes (right) receiving certificates of recognition from Henk Brinks for assisting him with weather forecasts for his historic Newfoundland-Netherlands balloon flights.***

The article was written too early to mention another unique transatlantic voyage made by the same gondola, this time in the form of a boat that Brink and Louwman had constructed and sailed across the stormy Atlantic from St. John's Harbor to England in the summer of 1988. Once again St. John's weather office was asked to supply weather information for the first few hundred kilometres of the sea journey.

But even this is not the end of the saga. Janes says he has heard that Brink has recently set off on yet another epic journey . . . this time a land trip across Europe and part of Asia.

Janes explains that this time Brink managed to transform the six metre long by two metre high fibreglass gondola (which had originally begun its career as a lifeboat) into a car or jeep. By doing this, he had created the world's first globe-trotting, land-sea-air-gondola.

# St. John's Weather Office advises historic Dutch balloon flight

by Harold J. Janes

Our involvement with the Dutch Balloonists began in the fall of 1984 when Arie Steenhuizen, meteorologist at Schiphol Airport, Amsterdam, visited our office to determine what meteorological support for the flight would be available. All they needed was good lift-off weather from St. John's with winds less than 5 knots — no severe weather across the Atlantic; a 35-knot tailwind in as straight a line as possible and good landing weather in Europe between Bordeaux, France and Hamburg, Germany. Our reply was: simple — no problem.

The above conditions occur infrequently, with the highest probability in August. Crew persons Henk Brink, Evelien Brink and Evert Louwman arrived in St. John's on July 10, 1985 with a single strategy: wait for the right weather conditions. A detailed daily weather briefing was provided by the St. John's Weather Office for the crew covering all aspects of weather across the ocean. We do many transatlantic briefings for small aircraft but a balloon flight takes more care, remembering of course, that the balloon has no directional or speed control and only limited vertical movement. The only weather data not available at St. John's was the 700-mb Analysis (Oceanic Strip Map) which was provided by Gander twice daily on the fax circuit.

The Balloon Foundation had set up a command post at Schiphol which, among other things, would monitor weather patterns across the Atlantic. When the situation seemed viable, they would alert the Balloonists and contact the St. John's Weather Office for discussion.

Although the synoptic situation might dictate a favourable pattern, they realized that our knowledge of local effects around Newfoundland and the western Atlantic would be indispensable. This proved correct. Twice when Schiphol indicated a "go" situation, we convinced the crew of the **Flying Dutchman** to delay. Captain Brink said at the time it was the right decision, but he told me this year in retrospect, it would have been disastrous had they gone with Schiphol.

The ideal weather pattern eventually arrived on August 24, and after discussion with Schiphol early that morning, we decided that all meteorological parameters would be met, even the light winds at St. John's! Balloon inflation requires less than 5 knots of wind and that evening it was dead calm and after a final weather briefing it was inflation and lift-off. It appeared to be a perfect weather situation but due to a faulty valve, our three balloonists ditched in the ocean at about 30°W.

Part two of the adventure began in April, 1986, when Captain Henk Brink came to St. John's to present our office with a certificate for helping the **Flying Dutchman** establish a World Record for Altitude (4410 m) and two National Records for Distance and Duration. He added they would be re-attempting an Atlantic crossing this summer in a new balloon The **Dutch Viking** and with a new crew member, Wilhem Hageman replacing Evert

Louwman. Captain Brink thanked us for our support the previous year, and emphasized more than ever that our expertise was absolutely essential to a successful flight. He added that it would be in the best interest of the Foundation for me to visit the Command Post at Schiphol Airport and meet the meteorologists involved. On May 21, I arrived in Amsterdam and met Captain Brink and four Dutch meteorologists to discuss problems and exchange information.

The Dutch had a sophisticated computer set-up which plotted the balloon's trajectory 72 hours in advance. They arranged that when their computer showed an acceptable trajectory, they would contact me for discussion; especially on lift-off weather. The crew and the balloon arrived in St. John's late in July and after the initial round of media interviews, settled down to await "ideal weather". Because balloon flight is so weather-dependent, the St. John's Weather Office, in general and myself, in particular, were highly visible to the media and constantly gave interviews and provided information to radio, TV and press including the Dutch daily newspaper, **Algemeen Dagblad**. In addition, a half-hour documentary on the flight was shown on T.V. which included the final weather briefing.



**The Dutch Viking just prior to lift-off at St. John's, Newfoundland. Crew, left to right: Willem Hageman, Henk Brink and Evelien Brink.**

For most of August, wind patterns across the Atlantic were terrible, and offered no promise at all. The local weather was good, however, especially the winds. The mean wind speed for August was 15.2 km/h, compared to a normal of 21.2 km/h. On many calm evenings I feared that when the transatlantic flow became good, local winds would increase to an unacceptable level. Balloon inflation is a critical part of the flight. Once the command is given to inflate, there is no turning back. If the winds exceed 10 knots, the whole flight has to be scrapped. With four years of work put into this venture, Captain Brink was justifiably concerned with local wind effects and relied heavily on our judgement.

Finally, toward the end of August, the Spectrals indicated a straightening of the transatlantic flow at 700 and 500 mb and we got the call from Schiphol to go on 72 hour alert. This meant that Captain Brink would keep in

close contact with the weather office for any sign of change. If, at 48 hours, the situation still looked good, the ground crew would go on alert and at 24 hours, final preparations would begin.

I discussed the situation with Schiphol at 5 p.m. on Friday, August 29 and agreed on lift-off time for Saturday evening, August 30. Jules Roodenbug said he would call me again at 5 a.m., our time, Saturday morning to confirm. It looked very good then; the flow across the Atlantic was almost a straight line at 500 and 700 mb with a speed of 35 knots. Also, a large high pressure system, covering most of the USA, was ridging into our area behind a cold front that had passed through St. John's overnight. After a call to Don Cameron in Gander for confirmation, we decided it was a "go"! I left the office and briefed the crew at their quarters in Pleasantville, deciding for a midnight lift-off. I suggested that I keep an eye on the weather during the day and arranged for a final briefing for the crew at 5 o'clock that afternoon.

During the day I noticed a heavy band of cirrus with some stratocumulus beneath it approaching from the east. Satellite photos showed that the cold front that had gone through the night before was returning. This meant that the balloon's track would be closer to the front than previously thought and it could present a problem. At the 5 p.m. briefing, Captain Brink said the cirrus shield would actually help by modifying the expansion and contraction of the helium caused by the sun. The new progs showed that the zonal flow would persist across the Atlantic at 700 and 500 mb with no significant weather. A large ridge of high pressure was also pushing into Western Europe on the surface. The winds at St. John's Airport had remained steady at 10 knots and were less than that at Fieldian Grounds where the launch would take place. The decision was made to inflate.

Despite the 1985 **Flying Dutchman's** ditching in the Atlantic the **Dutch Viking** tried again in 1986 with improved valves, better equipment and a wealth of experience. All they needed for success was good weather. Suddenly, Captain Brink became concerned because the wind had increased to about 10 knots. A quick call to the weather office found that the winds there were still at 5 knots. The Fieldian Grounds were at the eastern end of Kenmount Valley and cool air was funnelling through. How long would it last? I felt it would be short-lived but no chances could be taken at this stage. The crew suited up and final checks were made. By eleven o'clock, the wind had decreased to 5 knots and the tension was relieved but lift-off was imminent in the next hour.

Before they climbed into the capsule for the last time, the crew said goodbye to all their supporters in St. John's. As Captain Brink poured water over the side from a container, the balloon and capsule rose slowly and majestically into the night. The **Dutch Viking**

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drifted slowly in a northeasterly direction over St. John's and out to sea towards Europe. The rest is history. The **Dutch Viking** landed in Holland 51 hours later setting such records as the fastest transatlantic balloon crossing; the first Europeans to cross the Atlantic in a Balloon, and concerning Evelien Brink, the first woman to cross the Atlantic in a balloon.

On Tuesday, September 2, Command Post at Schiphol called the St. John's Weather Office to offer congratulations on a job well done. On Tuesday night, Captain Brink called me at home to express his appreciation and told me "I couldn't have done it without you".

We, at the St. John's Weather Office, were happy to be able to contribute to the success of such an historic event as a transatlantic balloon flight. We were really part of the adventure, and we demonstrated the kind of service and expertise that has come to be expected from Environment Canada.

**Mr. Janes is OIC, St. John's.**