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BALLOONING OVER THE SWISS ALPS

The first manned vehicle to rise into the air — a balloon — did so in Paris in 1783. Five years later, on 3rd May 1788, the first balloon ascension from Swiss soil was made by the Frenchman Blanchard in Basle. The basic concept of ballooning — with bag, gas, net, basket, valve, and bags of sand as ballast — has remained absolutely unchanged from the time of the earliest pioneers down to the present day. And up to Blériot's famous flight across the English Channel in 1909, the lighter-than-air principle was predominant in aerial navigation; since then, however, it has undergone a steady decline to the point where it has now completely disappeared except for a very small number of ascensions made by sportsmen or scientists. Thus it comes about that in our day no-one gives more than a casual glance to the sky when an airplane roars past overhead, while hundreds or thousands of people will pause and gaze skyward for long minutes to watch the silent onward movement of a great silver sphere. Whereas ballooning was once an apt subject for cartoonists like Balthasar Dunker who developed all kinds of interesting connections between world politics and aerostatic movements, it has now become something capable of inspiring poetic flights of fancy such as the film "Journey by Balloon" by the French author Albert Lamorisse.

During the years when balloon ascensions were "really quite the thing" Swiss pioneers gained a very respectable reputation. Between 1880 and 1931, Eduard Spelterini — whose real name was Eduard Schweizer — made no fewer than five hundred ascensions and carried a total of 1,237 passengers without accident or incident. Although most of his ascensions were made in other countries, the flights he made in, among and over the Swiss Alps were of historic significance. In 1898 he flew from Sion over the Bernese Alps; in 1903 from Zermatt into the Ticino area; in 1910 from Muerren to Turin; in 1912 from Interlaken to Oberammergau; and in 1913 from Kandersteg to Alagna. In addition to his interest in the field of aerial navigation, Spelterini was also a master photographer, and many of the shots he made of the Alps viewed from the air are still among the best today. Another intrepid alpine balloonist was Victor de Beauclair who flew from the Eiger Glacier to Turin and from Linthal to Novara to mention only two of his exploits.

In 1906 the prize originally awarded for automobile racing by the American Gordon-Bennett was extended to include a balloon race starting in Paris. Two years later the prize was won by the Swiss aeronauts Schaeck and Messner with a world record flight of seventy-two hours' duration. And again in 1931, two Swiss by the name of Piccard and Kipfer, sealed into a pressurized gondola, became the first human beings to enter the stratosphere and reached an altitude of over 52,500 feet.

Nowadays ballooning is a sport with active participants limited to a small number of idealists in just a few countries, including Holland, Belgium, Western Germany and Switzerland. Their efforts have been made more difficult by virtue of the fact that almost all the airspace over western Europe is now divided up into airways and air traffic control zones, i.e. almost completely commercialised. For reasons of traffic safety, balloons are only permitted to fly in daylight and in clear weather, never through the clouds or at night. In an easterly direction, their flights are limited by the "iron curtain". As a result of all of these developments, we are undoubtedly safe in assuming that the great pre-1914 world

records in ballooning — of eighty-seven hours flight duration and 1,925 miles distance — may never be beaten.

Nevertheless, balloonists of today can still feel there is one bit of airspace still very much their own, namely the air in and above the Alps. Inasmuch as commercial aircraft only fly over the Alps at very great altitudes and mountains make highly unsuitable landing places for super-jets, some enterprising organisers in the Bernese Oberland hit upon the idea of carrying out a week long "International Alpine Balloon Sports Meeting". The resort village of Muerren has promoted alpine ballooning on a small scale in recent years and so become a natural site for this international meeting — to be held annually in summer.

In a sixty-minute programme "Balloons over the Alps" on 14th January 1964, BBC Television showed the ascent from Muerren — filmed there last August as a joint undertaking for Eurovision. Ten hydrogen balloons assembled, among them "Jambo", in which Anthony Smith and Douglas Botting made their flying safaris over Africa (seen last year in four editions of the BBC "Adventure" series), and the idea was to fly over the Alps. The film of this floating cavalcade included some remarkable shots of spectacular peaks and glaciers. The cameras were located both in the air (one in a balloon, others in an accompanying helicopter and plane) and on the ground in a landrover from which the take-off and general progress was followed. The balloons all landed safely just across the Italian border — "Jambo's" time: five hours. The story of "Balloons over the Alps" was told to viewers by "Jambo's" pilot, Anthony Smith. The film was made by BBC Television under the direction of Brian Branstion, Editor, BBC Travel and Exploration Unit.

The third International Balloon Sports Week will take place at Muerren, Switzerland from 16th to 29th August 1964.

[S.N.T.O.]

