

Cloudhopper News

Issue No. 166

March / April 2025

Welcome everyone to your latest Mini Update!

This will seem scant in terms of content. Some of this is attributed to yourselves in respect that nobody sends me content for inclusion.

Here we are in April , some decent weather about for a change and people are beginning to emerge from their winter hibernation. It's a great time to check your kit , treat your inflation fan to some love(oil change and possibly a new Sparkplug) and be ready for when you get going.

As yet no events have really happened . The Easter Black Horse Balloon club fly out was nothing to speak about. I might have gone but for the untimely death of my crew buddy Jim's wife Suzanne, RIP my dear. So, I just didn't feel in the mood to fly.

On a more productive note, **www.buymeacoffee.com/cloudhoppers** is where you have a chance to donate towards the running costs of the site. Thanks in advance and please don't go ballistic , I wouldn't expect anyone to donate more than £12 a year or theoretically a pound an edition. As I said this is voluntary but financial assistance would lead to more options for the growth of the brand. Therefore, I would ask you to feel generous if you can afford to be and support me, and for those who will , many thanks in advance.

So here is what we have for you in edition number 165 of the Newsletter:

- Ed Speak – Reaffirming why I do this
- The Story of the Qatar balloon built during the event.
- Cameron's are at it again, more Hopper sales.

Articles for inclusion are always welcome Anything for future inclusion to the usual email address please.

steve.roake33@gmail.com many thanks in advance. Now please enjoy this edition of the world's only Hopper periodical.



Cloudhopper News

Issue No. 166

March / April 2025

1,Ed Speak-

Good day Peeps. I have to say , upon reflection, I don't have anything to complain about really. Life has this way of reminding you what is important and what actually isn't. My crew buddy Jim has gone through the ringer recently watching his poor wife slowly end her days(sadly died on April 19th), and it reminds us all of a number of things. Firstly, just how much you need great friends in times like this and how things that normally rile us are just items to be ignored in the big scheme of things.

Normally I'd have started my annual flying by now and with a heat wave that ran across the UK , the chances were there to do so, but for me it just wasn't important and upon reflection I believe it was right not to try and fly as opportunities will be there later on when we are all in a better place mentally. In this time of scant content, I do appreciate those who have reached out to me with support . For example, Paul stumpf has sent in the report of his build during the Qatar Balloon festival and whilst it isn't a true hopper per say, I still think it fits this category as the size could make it a one-man balloon. Also, special mention to Jess Siggers at Cameron Balloons, who actively supports my efforts with content that is appropriate as and when she can.

Sometimes you wonder why you do things and question the validity of the thing you are trying to achieve. However, with such great help it is reassuring that others believe in the thing you are trying to create and it reassures you that the efforts are not in vain. However , enough of you comment stating you enjoy the read and that is great, now if you could just add a small token to my buy me a coffee account , that would be lovely and thanks in advance. By supporting my effort, we may be able to expand things here a little bit .

Midlands Balloon festival is just a month away and James McDonald(the organiser,) is talking over 200 envelopes which is great. Let's hope for some more hopppers of note this time around. It also gives me a chance to indulge in my love of camping at the same time.

Whatever you do this season, live life to the max , we are a long time dead, and it isn't a practise so try your very best to maximise the opportunities in front of you .

Cheers to all Steve.



The Story of the Qatar Balloon Festival Build

Paul Stumpf is a highly regarded seasoned builder of craft in our sector of ballooning with multiple projects completed. Indeed, some of his designs have been adopted by other fledgling home builders and so when approached to go to Qatar and build another small balloon, he jumped at the opportunity. Whilst this balloon isn't a true hopper, it qualifies for its size and potential to be a single man balloon and not everyone flies with hopper bottom ends so I thought I would include this interesting tale for you to all enjoy. Thanks to Keith for supplying it to me.

Usually I don't pay much attention to random WhatsApp messages, although I was curious to hear from Mael Gourinel, (who I'd never met), who happened to have the same last name as French balloonist Fred Gourinel, who hosted an amazing ballooning adventure tour in Madagascar that I had attended the year before.

"I am Fred Gourinel's son" the early November message said. "I would like to know if you are available from December 9-22.?"

I replied, "My calendar is open. What are you interested in?" Mael responded, "We have a project in Qatar to build a balloon during the Qatar Balloon Festival. Are you interested?"

After a few more texts to gather intel, I made a phone call to England, where Mael's boss Lee Hooper is based. Lee is the Balloonmeister for the event. He assured me that this was a real project and that a pre-cut 42,000 cu.ft. envelope and all the necessary bits and pieces would be provided. All I would have to do is sew and assemble the envelope. A lower end would also be provided.

Essentially Hassan Al-Mousawi, Director of the Qatar Balloon Festival, was looking for "something new and different" to add to the 5th Edition of the event.

Well, I asked myself, "can I build and rig a 42,000 cu.ft. envelope in 10 days?" I estimated that it would take about 125 hours to sew and rig a 42k balloon envelope. That would equate to roughly 12 hours a day. I certainly didn't relish the idea of flying half way around the World to sit at a sewing machine for 12 hours a day. After a bit more discussion, they agreed to cover the costs of a second person to accompany me. My Repair Station right hand man, Zach Weindel, was up for the challenge. That's more like it. Only six hours a day of sewing! Hopefully we'd have some time for sightseeing, if all went well...famous last words.

Cloudhopper News

Issue No. 166

March / April 2025

Zach and I were very excited to experience Qatar and its culture. Neither of us had ever been to the Middle East. Also, we would be taken flying in various festival balloons, for every flight slot that the weather allowed. There would be no afternoon flights scheduled due to strong winds in the region that time of day. Each evening however, there were balloon glows and other entertainment happening on the field.

Travel went smoothly, albeit an exhausting 24 hours from my home in Vermont. We arrived in Qatar at 2am along with several other travel worn balloonists, cleared customs and were happy to find a hotel shuttle waiting for us. We got checked in and finally settled into our beds around 4:30am.

On our first morning we groggily enjoyed a delicious and delightful breakfast in the sunny, glass walled, rooftop restaurant of the La Maison Hotel in Doha, which was the event's home base for all the balloonists. Oddly, since we were in a Muslim Country, American Christmas music was being piped throughout the hotel and restaurant speaker system - but hey, Christmas was in a couple weeks. I texted Mael to say we were ready to meet, get acquainted and review the balloon making project details.

The first of many bumps in the road. We met Mael in the large hotel Ballroom where pilot registration was taking place. Mael (who's flustered appearance led us to believe that he gotten even less sleep than Zach and I) was busy cutting balloon panels on a makeshift cutting table constructed by sliding a few glass topped catering tables together. "Uh, so the balloon is not all cut out yet" I queried Mael. "I'm SO SORRY" he apologized. "We had a big storm in the UK and lost all power, so we weren't able to get the balloon cut out before leaving for Qatar." It appeared Mael had made some pretty good progress, working solo in the short time he'd been there. Zach and I had a brief huddle. Taking pity, we decided to pitch in to help him finish cutting the balloon panels. The three of us set to work at our cutting operation, as pilots from around the World were trickling in a few feet away, to register for the event. Our activity produced quite a few curious looks, and eventually some of the pilots and crew offered to lend a hand. Special thanks to mother/daughter team Jane and Thandar Glydon, who were super helpful and extra dedicated. By late that evening we had cut everything out except the parachute panels.

Bump in the road number two. The next morning Zach and I boarded a shuttle to the festival venue to scope out where we would be sewing the balloon. We'd been promised an air-conditioned tent with two sewing machines. We arrived



Cloudhopper News

Issue No. 166

March / April 2025

at the venue and spent some time watching the frenetic activities of 50 balloons from all over the World being unpacked in the hot sun and being organized on the tarmac. All tanks were being removed from gondolas as refuelling required them to be out. A very impressive herd of propane tanks was growing larger by the minute.

We saw some white tents set up along one edge of the launch field, so we wandered over to investigate. They were very nice tents, with carpeted floors and air conditioning units. One tent had a glass front facing the field. We correctly figured that this would be our home for the next 10-12 days. The glass would allow spectators to observe us working on the balloon. The plan was for us to be sewing from roughly 3-9pm each day; both during afternoon festival activities and the evening glows. However, there were no sewing machines in the tent. We did some snooping around and discovered one sewing machine with a bunch of other non-balloon making stuff in another tent. We figured (hoped) that all would be sorted out by the organizers, so we headed off to do some sightseeing.

The next morning, we stumbled into the 4am pilot briefing at the hotel, received our assigned balloonist to fly with. Then everyone boarded shuttles for a 20-minute ride to the venue, Katara. The orchestration of 50 balloon crews, vehicles, passengers and shuttles was an impressive display, coordinated by Lee Hooper and his amazing logistics person, Lorna Hankey. Once at the venue, crews retrieved balloons and vehicles. Propane tanks needed to be nitrogen charged, as the pure butane fuel required supplemental pressurization to be suitable as hot air balloon fuel. Then a second pilot briefing was held to announce the launch site location for the morning. The festival venue, Katara, is on the waterfront of the Persian Gulf, which didn't work as a launch location for most wind directions, due to its proximity to the Gulf and the adjacent large urban area of Doha, the capitol city of Qatar.

Soon there were 50 balloon vehicles and some passenger buses zooming toward the morning's chosen launch site. Pilot briefing number three was held on the launch field where final weather and logistical information was explained and the final fly/no fly decision was made. Our balloon departed as the sun rose and we enjoyed a quick drift and bumpy landing in the brand-new UM 120 "Qatar" balloon, with pilot Jeff Ashworth from Albuquerque. (Jeff joined Lee's team of event ride balloon pilots). A quick pack-up, and we were bussed back to Katara and from there, shuttled to the hotel for breakfast and a little nap. Most pilots and crews planned to head out for sightseeing that day, but Zach



Cloudbopper News

Issue No. 166

March / April 2025

and I wanted to get a jump on the sewing, so we headed back to Katara.

Bump in the road number three. Well, the one sewing machine we spotted the day before had been moved into our “balloon factory” tent. The balloon panels and other supplies had not arrived yet. We took a close look at the machine since we had nothing else to do. It had one spool of thread on it and only one of the two double needles was installed. Luckily, I had brought some scrap fabric with me from home in case we needed some material to use for test seams or adjusting sewing machines. The machine was a mess; full of sand, missing some parts and out of adjustment. We swiped a chair from another tent, found the second needle and some bobbins, and began to get the machine set up for a test run. Four hours later, Zach had managed to produce a fairly decent seam. This machine was very temperamental and actually not the correct machine for sewing lightweight balloon fabric.

In a comical and surreal twist of cultures, our tent became a local prayer centre. Many of the balloon crew guys who were hired for the event were Muslim. Muslims are obligated to pray indoors, five times a day, known as Salat, at specific times throughout the day. The first worshiper shyly entered our tent with a rolled mat held under his arm. He began addressing Zach in Arabic, with folded hands in front of his chest, gesturing towards an empty area of our tent. I curiously observed. Zach turned to me and said, “I think he wants to do yoga.” I suppressed blurring out laughter, and whispered, “No, I think he wants to pray.” So, we pointed to the empty tent space and nodded yes. He did indeed proceed to unroll his mat, knelt down and prayed/chanted for a about five minutes. Then he left with a smile and a sign language version of thanks. Well I guess word got around, as he was only the first of a steady stream of worshipers over the following days. As our tent filled with balloon building activities and piles of fabric, we always maintained a small, clear area for prayers. They didn't seem to mind the noise of the sewing machines or our conversations with other visitors to the tent.

As for the second sewing machine – still nowhere to be found. Nor had any fabric or other materials arrived yet. So we called it quits and did some sightseeing around Katara, a stunning coastal tourist area with pristine parks, plazas, shops, restaurants, fountains, museums and more, including a stunning white travertine stone amphitheatre and fountain complex. We spent a couple of hours being tourists, then returned to our tent around the time that the balloonists were arriving for the first evening glow event of the week. Since we



Cloudhopper News

Issue No. 166

March / April 2025

still couldn't start sewing the balloon, we watched the glow and then headed back to the hotel.

Up again at 4am for the second morning flight of the event. A lovely drift across the city of Doha in a UM 250 piloted by one of Lee's pilots from the UK, Matt Rate. He was a consummate professional ride pilot who had been inspired by ballooning as a child, while at a balloon festival with his parents. He seamlessly guided and entertained us over arid urban landscapes, highways, parks and scenic neighbourhoods, with downtown Doha's distinctive skyline on the horizon. Matt quipped, "As a young man, I hadn't really taken ballooning seriously, because cars and girls were a powerful distraction (laughter). But soon, the shine wore off cars and girls, so in my early twenties I decided to pursue becoming a balloon pilot." Our flight altitude was restricted to an 1800-foot ceiling, as we were only a few miles from Qatar's active major jetport. I'll never forget the view of Doha's shimmering skyscrapers reflecting off the Persian Gulf in the bright morning sun. Our landing included the treat of flying over a herd of camels.

Rinse, lather, repeat. We landed, were picked up by the pax bus and back to Katara, and shuffled to the hotel for breakfast. After another delicious breakfast (still serenaded by really bad, a little too loud, American Christmas music, that was now starting to get annoying) Zach and I headed back to Katara to see if anything had improved at the "balloon factory" tent. Sadly, there was still just the same temperamental sewing machine. Panels and materials were promised to be delivered "sometime" that day. Lee assured us that everything would come together. He added that the first couple of days of the festival were always a bit chaotic as everyone got settled into the routines. So, we took the opportunity to visit the Old Port of Doha, where the amazing Souq Waqif market is located. The market sprawling maze of tiny shops and stalls selling everything under the sun. The sights and smells were intoxicating.

We headed back to Katara at 3pm and miracle of miracles, the balloon panels and some materials were there, but only 2 spools of thread. Zach spent another couple of hours tinkering with the machine. We switched off, trying to sew some panel seams on the very temperamental machine (which I had now taken to calling the "POS"). We were very discouraged and started getting really concerned about not being able to pull this balloon building project off. Our first four days hadn't offered us any opportunity for productive balloon construction. At this point it was obvious we could never even come close to finishing a balloon in this situation.



Cloudbopper News

Issue No. 166

March / April 2025

Hassan to the rescue! The next day we were slogging along on the POS, with only one person able to sew at time, and the machine fighting us every step of the way. Early that afternoon the event organizer Hassan Al-Mousawi stopped by to inquire about how things were going. I told him quite frankly that this project was pretty much dead in the water. I could see the surprise, concern and disappointment in his face. He simply asked "what do you need to make it happen?" I responded, "at a minimum we needed two proper sewing machines and more thread." Zach and I said we would text him shortly with a list of brands and model numbers for proper double needle sewing machines, that he could attempt to locate or purchase. Well, to put it mildly, Hassan is a man of action. After a couple false starts reviewing machines by text messages, he decided that he needed me in person, as a professional shopper. Around 4pm on that Saturday afternoon, he arrived at the tent and whisked me away on a shopping spree.

Now I wasn't optimistic that we could get much done this late in the day, on a weekend to boot, but it turns out Saturday is a work day in Qatar and most shops are open into the evenings. Soon we were weaving in and out of busy Doha traffic. Hassan did an amazing job navigating while constantly fielding calls on his cell phone. I just tightened my seat belt. Eventually we ended up on a street where every other storefront was a tailor shop or some other textile related business. Hassan double parked on the busy street in front of a modest, small sewing machine dealer's shop, where we met two attentive shopkeepers. A quick look around the little shop and I spied an almost perfect double needle sewing machine head sitting on a shelf. I told Hassan that this would do nicely, but we needed two of them. Hassan set to work negotiating the purchase. It was an animated discussion in Arabic. It seemed the shopkeeper kept saying "no", but Hassan kept insisting. Since they were conversing in Arabic, I could only guess by tone of voices and facial expressions that they were dickering about the cost. But actually, Hassan was insisting that the two machines would be delivered to our tent, set up and ready to sew that same evening! It turns out that would involve needing to get tables and motors from another warehouse, finding/securing a mechanic who could assemble and set up the machines on a rush schedule, and sorting out the delivery. Long story short, the machines were sitting in our tent, assembled and ready to sew by 11pm that same night!! While Hassan was finalizing the deal, I poked around the shop and found some extra bobbins, needles and sewing machine oil which were added to the haul. But they didn't have any chairs or lamps that we required, and more vitally, the thread that we still desperately needed. So, Hassan and I spent the next couple



Cloudbopper News

Issue No. 166

March / April 2025

of hours searching various places around Doha, but eventually gave up for the night after securing only a single office chair. He dropped me at the hotel and he said that he had one more idea about where we might get the proper thread for the project. We planned for him to pick me up early the next morning to continue our search.

Apparently, Hassan has many connections in Qatar. At 7am on a Sunday, another very windy - no flying morning, we headed about forty minutes outside Doha to "meet a guy". The cityscape turned into suburbs and then industrial zones, and eventually, with dust storms visible on the horizon, we ended up at the security gate of the Qatar Special Forces military training base! Sure enough, Hassan's "guy" was waiting for us. We were escorted through the base, ending up at the military parachute loft for the elite World class, award winning Qatari parachute squad.

The manager at the loft was super helpful and assured us that he had a spool of the elusive Tex 70 bonded polyester thread we needed (a bit of a holy grail in Doha). I thanked him and said, "great, but we need six spools of this thread". There was some foot shuffling and pondering. "Does it all have to be white?" he inquired. I replied, "well, no, actually the colour doesn't really matter." At which point he proceeded to walk around the room, pulling spools of thread right off their own parachute repair sewing machines! I was flabbergasted, as it seemed were pretty much putting them out of business for the time being. He then asked if there was anything else I needed. I had spotted a nice electric hot knife/webbing cutter and asked if they had an extra one. He said no, it was the only one, but I was welcome to take it. I almost fell over! Mission accomplished! We thanked him profusely, and Hassan offered he and his wife a balloon flight during the festival.

We hit the road for one last check that everything we needed was in the balloon building tent. Back at Katara, everything was indeed in order and in our excitement examining the sparkly new sewing machines; Hassan and I totally forgot to get the thread out of the back seat of his car! As he drove away I exclaimed to Zach, "Oh my God, the thread is still in Hassan's car!" We immediately texted Hassan, He promised to get the thread in our hands ASAP. So, having already lost five days of our anticipated balloon building window, we were excited to get sewing!

Sadly, for the Festival, but thankfully for Zach and I, the next day's flight was cancelled due to high winds, so we could put in a full 13-hour day of sewing. Hassan was kind enough to stop by to see that everything was in order and that we were fed, as there weren't any convenient places to eat nearby.



Cloudhopper News

Issue No. 166

March / April 2025



Cloudbopper News

Issue No. 166

March / April 2025

He had a delicious local Qatari meal delivered to us, and followed up later that afternoon with a large pot of his wife's homemade Karak tea to keep us energized with caffeine and sugar. By dinner time, Zach and I had figured out how to navigate Doha's version of Uber Eats. Everywhere we went in Doha there were orange scooters with food boxes on the back, zooming takeout food around the city. We also sourced a few more small items and tools needed for the build at the amazing HyperMart, a 24-hour store that sold everything from perfume to fresh fish, and conveniently located next door to our hotel!

Although everyone was disappointed with only one flyable morning over the next four days, Zach and I were equally relieved that we would have maximum time and energy for sewing. So, we cranked out thirteen hours of sewing each of the non-flying days. By sewing day three, all panels were sewn into gores. On day four, almost all of the 24 gores were joined together with load tapes.

Each afternoon at 3pm, the balloonists would arrive for the glows. Since the shuttle dropped them right outside our tent, we had a flurry of curious cheerleaders visiting and inquiring about what we were making, and our progress. Many of the pilots and crews had never seen a balloon being made and were astonished at what we were attempting to do. I joked with Zach that there might be a balloon building betting pool going on to see if we'd successfully finish this balloon in time! We were interviewed by several different media organizations as well as a nice RT TV spot with the energetic and enthusiastic Regan Tetlow, also emcee for the balloon festival activities.

Friday, day 6 was our deadline. We were getting down to the wire! The new balloon was scheduled to debut that night at the evening glow! In a final flurry of sewing madness, Paul sewed the parachute top while Zach completed all the webbing loops & chute attachments at the top of the balloon. Paul then completed the mouth hem and cable attachment loops as well as measuring and cutting parachute lines and cords. Around 4pm, with the fortuitous assistance of the "Bad Divas" Dutch balloon crew who volunteered to assist Zach with installing the parachute top. Meanwhile Paul attached the flying wires. Since the envelope bag we were promised never appeared, we improvised by jamming the balloon into a double burner bag, zipped shut (barely) at 6pm!

Festival pilot and UK balloonist, Robert Frankham, generously offered to let us use his balloon lower end, with festival basket banner "lucky 13". It was a fittingly Experimental "Wilkinson/Boland" style gondola crafted in the UK. Bobby's crew was awesome and invaluable as we prepared for the maiden inflation at 7pm. The ballooning weather Gods provided a perfect light wind evening, especially



Cloudhopper News

Issue No. 166

March / April 2025

appreciated, as every prior night's glow had been breezy and challenging, or cancelled due to the wind.

At 7:20pm we proudly stood the new balloon up for the first time. We needed to deflate for a quick parachute adjustment, but 20 minutes later the balloon stood up solidly and glowing beautifully at the final mass balloon glow of Qatar Balloon Festival, 5th Edition. Photos were snapped, smiles all around, and Hassan appropriately named the balloon "QBF 5", the first hot air balloon ever made in Qatar! What will become of QBF 5 remains to be seen. I think Lee plans to take it back to the UK for certification. Hopefully, it will grace the skies of Qatar again someday.

Epilogue. On our return trip home, we left Qatar at 2am. Our connecting flight to Boston was in Istanbul, Turkey. We had about a four-hour layover, so we both crashed in a couple chairs near our gate. After what seemed like only a few minutes, I suddenly jolted awake and looked at my phone. We had both slept right through our connection boarding time and arrived just in time to sadly watch as our aircraft pulled out of the gate! In our exhausted stupor, neither of us has set an alarm. After spending about two hours in the Turkish Air customer service area we succeeded in getting re-booked. However, the next available flight was about 22 hours later. It was a lovely airport to spend the night in. We had a few beers to drown the sting of missing our flight and the cost of rebooking. After dinner we found some nice comfy chairs in a quiet area and settled in, WITH BOTH OF OUR ALARMS SET!!

Balloon facts and figures:

Balloon engineering design and colour pattern by Lee Hooper

24 gore Lindstrand-style envelope design

42,000 cubic feet

Construction time: 124-man hours over 6 days (not including cutting time)

3, New Balloons.

You wait long enough and then two new hoppers arrive in quick succession.

Both of the new envelopes are Cameron designed and built. The first is a beautiful stock option which has no current registration but is build number 12759 is a handsome O-31 in an unusual scheme that looks splendid. For basically £10,500 odd, you get a ready to fly fully certified balloon which will grace any festival launch site. My advice, if you are interested, don't hang around as I have the feeling this will sell quickly.



Cloudhopper News

Issue No. 166

March / April 2025



Cloudhopper News

Issue No. 166

March / April 2025

The second hopper envelope is the smaller sized O-26. G-CMYG (c/n 12757) is for an unknown UK client who is scheduled to taking delivery in early May. I would add , thanks very much for allowing us to debut your new purchase in advance of delivery and also thanks to Jess Siggers who facilitated permission, Yankee Golf weighs in at 30kilos.



Cloudhopper News

Issue No. 166

March / April 2025

4, Second Hand

Items of interest are always cropping up . In this particular instance there is one aimed squarely at the US domestic market. Andy Sizemore is offering his kit for sale. The envelope is a 2020 RGAero custom built 38K with just under 20 hours. The bottom end is a Cameron Millennium single-seat with a 15-gal SS tank. The kit comes with carrying bags, original blueprints, spare fabric, various spare parts and accessories, and a custom-built 3hp fan with its own travel box. A Digitool DBI3 instrument is available as well. This is a great turnkey system for someone who has been looking to get their own cloud hopper. Will not separate. Located in southern Indiana.



N7005H has c/n RGX1638-0001

Cloudhopper News

Issue No. 166

March / April 2025

5, Manufacturer / Event News.

Looking forward to being able to clarify where this year's One Man Meet will be staged. As soon as I know details then I will pass them on to you. It has been suggested to me that we could and I stress could be off to the west country for a change.

6, Gallery

This section is your editors' chance to find interesting photographs either from his own collection or from stuff submitted for the newsletter, or alternatively something that featured on the Cloudhoppers Facebook page during the month.



Another nice photo of the Cameron Balloons Stock option. This is available right now and could be yours very swiftly.

Cloudhopper News

Issue No. 166

March / April 2025



N12US is a Lovely new duo posted on Facebook by Mike Emich

Cloudhopper News

Issue No. 166

March / April 2025

And Finally

I don't want to hark on about **buymeacoffee.com/Cloudhoppers** but your support will go a long way to supporting ambitions I have for the site and the Newsletter. Any contribution will be gratefully received and trust me, everything received will go back into the site, so please be generous within limits (no more than £12 for a year), or potentially a pound a copy.

Here we are at the start of May 2025 with the number of people subscribing still increasing in recent weeks, we find subscription to the Facebook page reaching over 4339 and still growing monthly. This is a great achievement with sustained growth as we navigate our 21st year of publicity for Cloudhoppers across the community. All are welcome but, **I would emphasize that content is strictly on hoppers and Duo-chariots and not "general ballooning" and those pesky adverts for constant Tee-Shirts are banned and anyone who "veer's away" from the few rules we have, will be banned and their account will be deleted .**

Please send all submissions for future editions to Steve.roake33@gmail.com

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