

Chronicles of Richie - Age: 17 - 1988

Greenham Common Airbase

At the time, I worked for a hampshire-based company selling computer parts cheaply, and at volume. A Sales Distribution point for Intel parts, Compaq machines, We had some Amstrad PC's, in fact I had the only PC1640 dual 5 and a quarter inch floppy unit with an EGA graphics card that I had scrouged the parts bin for and built with help. This was not mine.



My job was to keep the Sales Team running. My wage was £5000 a year. I started after a failed attempt at A levels. My boss was an amazing scottish lady whom I shall call Lorraine. I've lost touch with her, but I can hear every word she ever said to me with the right context.

Lorraine let me run a bit wild. I could pretty much do exactly as I wanted, as long as I kept the Sales Team happy. I quickly learnt with that each regional team in the office of Sales Droids were fighting constantly for bigger deals and numbers. I networked, chatted to people and learnt how to help them efficiently. I was too good at my job. I spent the rest of my day annoying the tech team, asking annoying questions. Sometimes I would cycle to the local courier to drop off a package on my way home, and met some interesting people there too. I was extremely naive, and didn't understand anything but to work, get paid, and rent a small room with enough room for my cheap 6" Colour Portable TV. I had a small stereo, music, a couple of posters of Carol Decker from T'Pau on my walls to liven things up.

When I wasn't working, I slept, or talked to the other people living in the house on a council estate somewhere not too distant from the London commuter line. I kept myself to myself, and played with my CB, or listened to music in my room, or watched TV. No video, basic one-room living. I washed my clothes every week because I had to in order not to smell.

I listened and learnt. I was an active English Civil War Society member, and loved it. Pike drill. Such precision, and chaos as a rank of amateurs attempted to carry out precision maneuvers with 18ft long pikes! Basing castle was nearby, and i sat round the fire learning to drink, listen and singing the traditional songs.

I was free. I was enjoying life, and I had never felt like this before.

One day, an email went round asking for volunteers to help with the company Balloon team. It was branded with our logo, and we had a qualified pilot in the Sales Team. I can't remember his name, so I will call him Steve.

On this particular day after I had been in the crew for a few weeks, the pilot quietly informed us that the team would be needed tonight. The weather forecast looked favourable, so we were going to nip up to a field near Newbury and launch.

The excitement built throughout the day, and eventually we drove to the field in 2-3 cars. I always went with Dave in his new Saab, cos he was a crazy idiot behind the wheel and didn't care how many people he upset on the way. I liked his music too. I always had to sit in the back on his leather seats with another person, but it was only a 30 minute drive, and the reward if we could launch...

We unloaded, got the envelope ready, kicked the fan going, and waited whilst the balloon began to inflate. Steve, the Pilot, was calm, but it looked like we could go. We prepped the basket, and attached it. I was a passenger on this flight, as last time I had got bored in the car doing ground crew. We had no radios, or mobile phones either!

Steve said we could go, and so the passengers joined him in the basket. There were 3 of us I think. Dave the Salesdroid, me, and Steve the Pilot. I think someone backed out at the last second, but that might have been another flight. We were short one person, but launched anyway.

Pretty early on in my flying career, I had learnt that the first metre was the worst. The next one was even worse. Then the 3rd metre happens very quickly, and the 4th and 5th whizz by with remarkable speed. By the time the 10th metre happens, my breathing is back under control, my panic has subsided and I can wave with one hand.

We rose. The noise of the burner means conversation is impossible. We talk to the ground crew as we rise. It always fascinates me how noise travels perfectly straight up! A conversation at 500 feet above the ground is not only possible, but essential. Steve told the ground crew which way he thought the Balloon was going to head, and off we raced into the atmosphere.

We knew something was not quite right at about 1000ft. Steve went quiet. Dave was jabbering away, and I was keeping one hand on the edge at all times. It was amazing. I could see for miles! Forests, and buildings and such an array of wildlife and nature. Steve had stopped the burners now, and all was quite. We chatted, and saw things, pointing them out to each other. The perspective difference is amazing.

Steve suddenly stopped talking, and started frantically checking things. I noticed, and asked what was wrong. Dave jabbered. Steve told me he was checking some things and to leave him be a while, so I did.

Next thing I remember about that trip in detail is that we tried to make an emergency landing. And missed.

Landing a Balloon sounds easy. It isn't sometimes. Or it is. You do not get to choose! This emergency landing required us to get as close as possible to the canopy, and hope that the wind carried us nearer to that field over there. Which one? That one. Ok Steve.

Silence descended as Steve skillfully burnt fuel to keep us scraping the occasional slightly taller tree. You could cut the atmosphere with a knife (or a Balloon in this case).

“That One!”, Steve shouted. We pulled the emergency release and plummeted gracefully towards the small piece of green below. It looks suspiciously small to me, but I was not in control. I let my opinion be known, and Steve agreed at the last moment, firing full on both burners. The basket hit a few fresh green leaves and twigs, and we held on. It lasted less than you could blink and then we were racing into the sky again.

“OK” said Steve. “We appear to be heading directly toward Greenham Common Airbase. We are not allowed to fly over there below (I think) 5,000ft.”

I said “Why can’t we go above 5,000ft?”, shortcutting a previous discussion about our max ceiling height of approximately 5,000ft I think. A long time ago!

“Well, technically, we can. But we might need oxygen. We are trained not to unless we have to.” said Steve.

Steve decided the safest course of action was to do nothing. So we maintained a level altitude, and blew where the wind took us. Right over the runway and ICBM (I assume) silos of Greenham Common Airbase. We watched. We pointed. We admired the scenery. We noticed that a lot of green body shaped things with black rifles were chaotically milling around in an unprofessional way.

“Uh oh” said Steve. “What?” said Dave and I. “I think I am about to lose my pilots licence” said Steve. “Uh oh” said Dave and I. “Ah well”, said Steve, “We can’t change our heading. We could change our height, but we will probably have to talk to them. We will stay at 500ft. Let me do the talking.” “OK” said tweedle-dee and tweedle-dumb.

We heard a guy on a megaphone. “Hey! You guys up there in the Balloon. If you land here, you will be shot!”

Steve said “oh shit.” Dave said “Can I tell them to fuck off yet?” with a stupid grin on his face. I said “No Dave. Shutup.”

Steve explained to the guy on the ground that we tried to land, but failed, and would they possibly mind awfully if we kind of flew over a bit. The guy on the ground didn’t seem happy still. Dave was still giggling, and asking if he could tell them to fuck off. It. Was. Surreal.

An agreement was reached. Steve would maintain course if he could. The soldiers agreed to not shoot at us. Dave agreed eventually not to tell them to fuck off, after both Steve and I told him we would throw him out if he opened his gob again. Well, Steve told him he would chuck Dave out if he didn’t shut up, and I agreed to help Steve if Dave didn’t shut up. Dave did as he was told for once.

We flew over most of the airstrip, over the trees, and found a field we could land in. The ground crew had gone the wrong way, and we had to put the Balloon away ourselves and wait for the trailer to arrive. The lovely couple who owned the farmhouse gave us tea and coffee and squash to calm our nerves, and we went to the pub!

Then home.

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