

Keith Sproul and His Balloons

By Jennifer Taylor



Wings of Wind (Tetrahedron Balloon),
Red Rock State Park, Gallup,
New Mexico, December 2006

New Jersey-based Keith Sproul became fascinated by the sport of hot air ballooning in a rather unusual way—through his wife Debbie's affection for rabbits. In the mid 1990s, the now infamous Energizer Bunny Hot Hare balloon began making festival rounds. Sproul and his brother, who are identical twins, are married to fraternal twin sisters. The couples ventured to the annual New Jersey Balloon Festival and had the opportunity to crew for the Energizer Bunny balloon, which eventually led to Sproul receiving his hot air balloon pilot license. Appropriately, his first lessons were in the big rabbit that started it all.

Today, Sproul, a computer manager at Rutgers University, is a hot air balloon pilot who is actively involved in several aviation organizations including the Balloon Federation of America (BFA), AOPA, EAA, and he is a Great Eastern Balloon Association (GEBA) member. His burgeoning hobby has continued to expand, encompassing not only piloting the balloons but creating them as well.

Sproul initially began working on building hot air balloons on a small scale with a radio-controlled balloon. He later built a one-person balloon before graduating to the next phase of balloon building. "I love special shapes," Sproul says. "I found out about the tetrahedrons,

which were flown over 2,000 years ago in Peru. I thought they would be easy to make and they have historical significance." Sproul is now known as an expert on making tetrahedron balloons within the ballooning community that boasts an estimated number of 8,000 registered hot air balloon pilots.

In addition to creating hot air balloons, Sproul bought specialty balloons that cause quite a commotion at the festivals he attends each year with Debbie. Along with bringing his tetrahedron "Wings of Wind" balloon, their birthday cake balloon is also a crowd favorite weighing in at 807 pounds with 20 candles that are 12 feet tall with five foot flames and commands a crew of at least 10 people. Sproul is able to take three or four passengers along for rides. He comments, "Specialty balloons have so much inside and weigh more. It has to lift its own weight before it can lift people." Not surprisingly, the special shaped balloon that holds the most interest for Debbie is their Fred B. Rabbit balloon, which is 60 feet tall with 30 foot ears and weighs 300 pounds.

Over time, Sproul's true passion has surfaced for what he refers to as "flying below ground" in gorges, canyons and gaps—not the typical hot air balloon ride. Sproul explains, "I like flying in that type



Wings of Wind (Tetrahedron Balloon) in Meteor
Crater, Winslow, Arizona, February 2008



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Birthday Cake Balloon, Letchworth State Park, New York, May 2006

of a situation where you look up at the ground.” That type of ballooning takes him all over the country. “I fly in Red Rock State Park in Gallup, New Mexico every year. A couple of times I have flown through the Delaware Water Gap where the Delaware River goes into Pennsylvania and New Jersey.”

His favorite experience to date was flying into a meteor crater in Winslow, Arizona that required special permission. Sproul recalls, “I was the second person ever down into the meteor crater.” Future plans include trips to Monument Valley on the border of Arizona and Utah and Valley of the Gods in Utah for more daring flying along with Debbie, who should have her pilot's license in the coming months.

To see Sproul's balloons in person, be sure to attend the Become a Pilot Family Day on June 14, 2008 at the National Air & Space Museum in Chantilly, Virginia. ➔

For more information, visit www.skychariot.com or www.nasm.si.edu/becomeapilot.



Blue/White Tetrahedron, Emmental, Switzerland, March 2007

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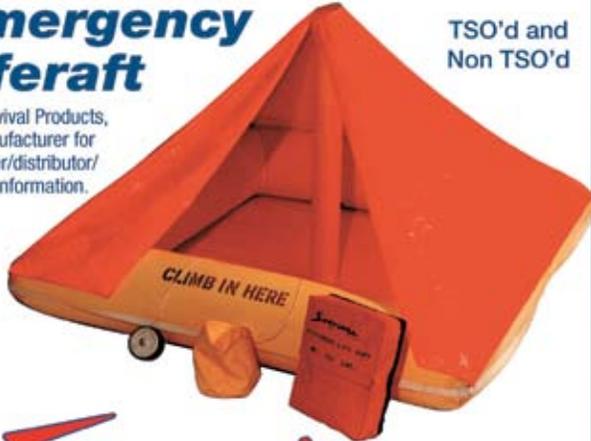
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