

AG LIFTS OFF

for transcontinental challenge

TEXT BY DICK SMITH

ON MONDAY 31 MAY a team of AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC aeronauts will be on standby at Carnarvon in Western Australia, hoping for perfect weather for Australia's first transcontinental balloon flight. The attempt will be made in a balloon with a proven long-distance safety record, and will be backed by the amazing resources of the Australian Bureau of Meteorology.

I hope to be one of the two aeronauts on board. When we finally take off after a wait of hours or even days, our gondola will be dwarfed by a combined hot-air/helium Roziere balloon with a volume of 2970 cubic metres, designed and built by English ballooning legend Don Cameron.

We will hope for a flight of two to three days, but will be prepared to be aloft much longer. Propane gas tanks clustered around the gondola will fuel twin burners and a small generator that powers equipment and even heats coffee. To succeed we will have to cross the Great Dividing Range, but we could land anywhere.

I've always been fascinated by stories about people like Frenchman Pilâtre de Rozier who, in 1783, made the world's first manned ascent in a paper and linen balloon buoyed by hot air from a straw and wool fire.

Just two years later, De Rozier was killed trying to cross the English Channel, ironically, in a revolutionary balloon that, thanks to Don, has made long-distance ballooning far safer. The type of balloon he invented

still bears his name, although it is customarily spelt Roziere.

De Rozier's balloon, which used hot air to warm a gas-filled compartment, was largely forgotten until Don realised that with new technology it would suit marathon flights.

Proof came in 1978 when Don and Chris Davey flew a prototype from Newfoundland, Canada, to within 160 kilometres of the French coast, and in 1987 a Dutch team crossed from Canada to Holland in another Cam-

eron Roziere. This type of balloon sounded perfect for a trans-Australia flight, and my hunch was confirmed when I examined five Roziers during a visit to the starting point in the United States of last year's successful Chrysler Transatlantic Challenge balloon race.

There have been six previous attempts to cross Australia by balloon, but when I tried to find out more, I was amazed at how little I could learn. The media had hardly mentioned the

Ballooning is regulated by the Civil Aviation Authority and administered by the Australian Ballooning Federation. My experience as a pilot stood me in good stead last year when I spent a week training for my balloon licence with instructor Roger Meadmore (above). The balloon chosen for our attempt is similar to the Cameron Roziere (opposite) used in last year's Chrysler Transatlantic Challenge.

attempts, no doubt because nothing went badly wrong.

The most remarkable flight, by Englishman Julian Nott and Queenslander Peter "Spider" Anderson, who flew from the RAAF's Pearce base north of Perth in 1984, ended near Broken Hill but generated sparse press interest. They had covered 1500 nautical miles (1 nm equals 1.852 kilometres) in 34 hours, a tremendous achievement. Surely they deserved better.

Overseas it's a different story. Don and Chris's Atlantic attempt in 1978 was headline news in Great Britain, and there were updates on every television news bulletin. Where would they land? Would they succeed?

When their balloon made an emergency landing in the Bay of Biscay, near the port of Brest, it was the top news item on television.

I realised that Julian and Spider, like Don and Chris, were part of an ongoing adventure and one in which we could all share. They met with mixed fortunes: their course took them

out to sea, but they didn't give up, because the Bureau of Meteorology predicted that eventually they would make it back across the coast. And the forecasters served them well.

Since then forecasting has become even better, something that will be immensely important for our attempt. We will draw on a wealth of information to find the most favourable winds and pick the best moment for take-off. But no matter how well we are prepared, our exact landing place is anybody's guess - we may go 30 nm or 2000 nm. Whatever happens, we will have the best available resources both in the air and on the ground to put success within reach.

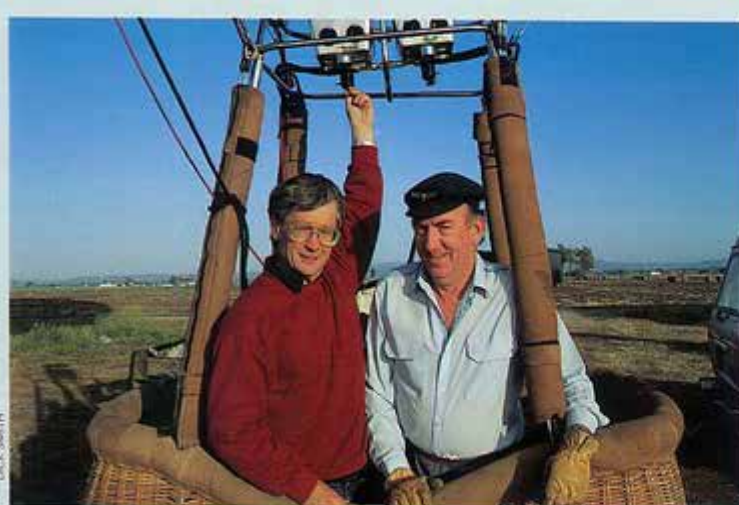
Craft with a racing pedigree

The AG Cameron Roziere balloon is similar to five state-of-the-art craft that took part in last year's Chrysler Transatlantic Challenge.

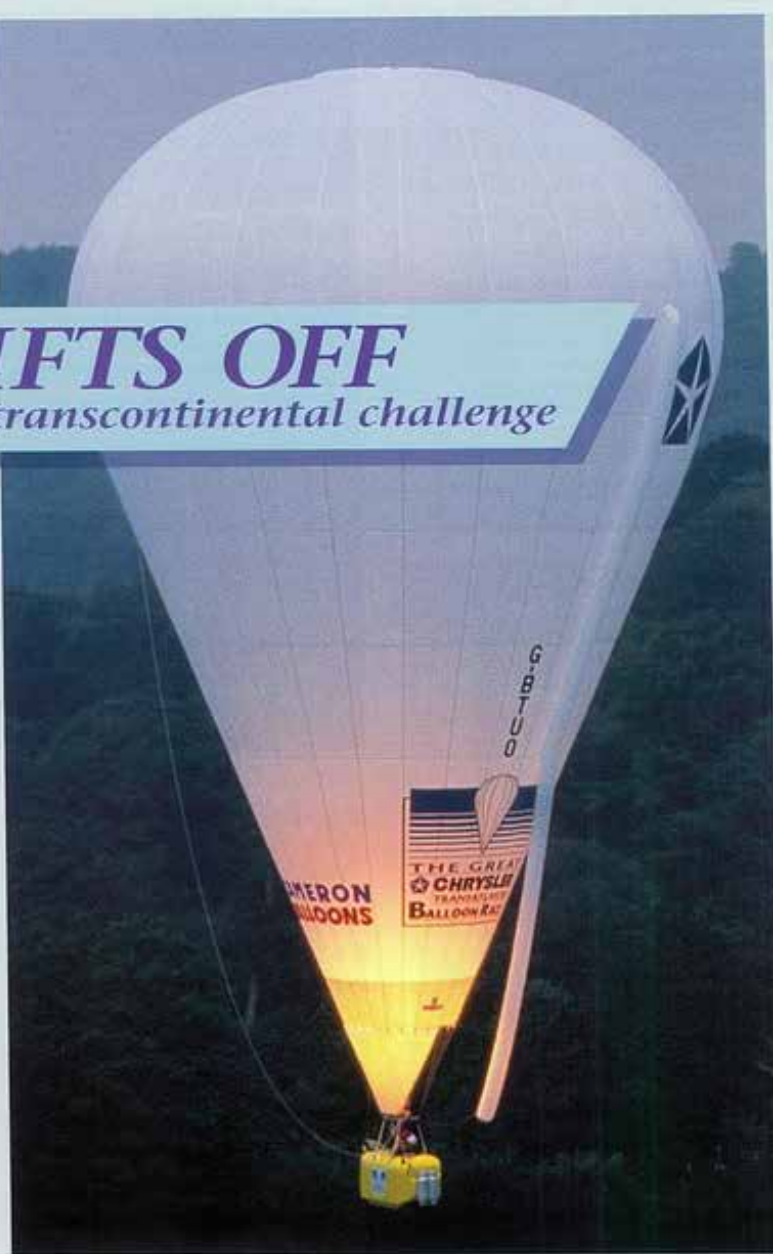
It has a helium gas compartment warmed by sunlight during the day and from beneath by a cone of hot air at night. Several other unusual features improve safety. If the helium leaks away, the lower section of the gas compartment collapses neatly upwards so the craft converts to a hot-air balloon.

Free planning chart

Our detailed AG Transcontinental Balloon Attempt planning chart comes free with this issue. It's packed with information you can use to predict and plan the flight. Don't miss it.



DICK SMITH



COURTESY CAMERON BALLOONS

In an extreme emergency, the bottom of the hot-air cone is pulled off and the balloon becomes a parachute.

The gondola itself, built of lightweight Kevlar and carbon fibre, doubles as a survival capsule in the event of a water landing. It is self-righting, and has hollow keels that fill with water to improve stability. The gondola has storage space for food and water and carries a portable toilet.

The craft is equipped with state-of-the-art satellite navigation and communication systems, and before the flight begins the crew will undergo rigorous preparation.

Best forecast lands a prize

Predict where the AG balloon will land and win a deluxe edition of *The Australian Encyclopaedia*, worth \$795. The closest estimate wins. To enter, just put your name and address and prediction in degrees and minutes of latitude and longitude on the back of an envelope. Our special balloon flight poster that comes free with this issue will help you with your estimate.

Post your prediction to arrive no later than Friday 21 May 1993 to: Australian Geographic Balloon Competition, PO Box 321, Terrey Hills 2084. Include an estimate of how many hours and minutes you think the flight will last. If there's a tie, the entrant with the closest time will win.

