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Pilot enjoys exhilaration of lifestyle winging high above country in blimp

By Lisa Vandiver Reporter

After selling insurance, running his own business and experimenting in hotel management, Gerald P. "Mark" Kynett found his niche in life — he became a pilot for the Goodyear blimp "America."

About five years ago, Kynett was one of only 20 blimp pilots in the world. Since then other companies, such as Pepsi, are catching on to the blimp idea and his field is beginning to open up.

The addition of other pilots in the field doesn't bother Kynett because he believes his lifestyle is as exciting and eventful as ever.

Kynett and the other four pilots of the "America" spend six months of the year in Houston and the rest of the year fulfilling other duties on tour around the country.

Although the air base has its own public relations representative, the pilots serve as goodwill ambassadors for the company both in Houston and on tour.

"In Houston, when you're not flying, you're escorting passengers to the ship, making sure everyone is safe on the ground, answering the phone, answering questions and even signing autographs," Kynett says as he jumps into the pilot's seat and begins to turn switches and dials, preparing for lift-off.

While on tour, however, Kynett has a variety of responsibilities.

"On the road you have to get in touch with airport managers, contact the place where you will greet the passengers and set it all up so that it will run smoothly," the pilot says.

Kynett says the weather sometimes causes him to land short of his destination.

But where does a person land a 192-foot-long aircraft on the spur of the moment?

"It's hard for people to imagine how much area we need," Kynett explains, while his hands and feet stay in constant motion operating the vessel. "You have to put up a mast and have enough area for the ship to swing 360 degrees if necessary."

"Sometimes it's hard to know if you're doing the right thing until you actually get there. That's the thing about flying this — it's very unpredictable."

The nice thing about the hectic tour season, he says, is that the pilots' families may accompany them.

"We take the wives and kids most of the time," he says. "Some wives who don't work travel the whole time with us. Others come out when-

you're doing the right thing until you actually get there. That's the thing about flying this — it's very unpredictable."

"Probably the most impressive sight was flying over the Fourth of July celebrations last year at the Statue of Liberty."

— Gerald P. Kynett, Goodyear blimp pilot

Charles Dawson of the Federal Aviation Administration said it takes the average person about two to three years to accumulate the 250 flight hours to get this rating.

Kynett decided to change his career after receiving a bachelor of science degree in aviation technology from Embry Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach, Fla. This is usually a five-year degree program — he finished in two years.

"I went straight through," Kynett explains. "I figured if I was going to do it, I might as well keep on going."

But traveling in the blimp is not always pleasant. Navigating the big ship is based on the wind, he says, so flying it is not always a breeze.

"Landing the ship has to be done directly into the wind," he says. "The whole side of the envelope (the balloon) is like a big sail. You have to make sure you don't get into the wrong position or you could have some trouble — the ship could be tossed side-to-side in the wind."

"It's nothing of major concern, you just learn to handle it with experience. It gets to be pretty exciting and you have to pay special attention during the landing. That's the most critical part."

But, he says, rain also can be a critical factor.

"If we get rained on, we pick up a tremendous amount of weight. It doesn't take too much rain to make us 500 pounds heavier. Once you're airborne, though, it's no problem because the ship can handle up to 7,000 pounds of extra weight."

Kynett's lifestyle hasn't always been so unusual. He decided to change his career when he was 28,

which led to the roundabout way he fulfilled his flying dream.

He was born and raised in Wallingford, Pa., where his father was an investment banker. After high school, he continued his education at Stetson University in De Land, Fla., and later enrolled in flight safety training at Vero Beach, Fla. It was here he received his commercial and instrument ratings in only six months.

Obtaining the 250 hours to complete his blimp qualification was fairly easy, he says, considering the total amount of time they spend in the air.

Although the blimp offers a year-old Kynett many opportunities flying what the military calls a "ber Rocket" with its mammoth measurements — 192 feet long, 50 high and 50 feet wide — limit the energetic pilot in his nautical activities.

"After a couple of years of this, you get a pretty good feel and the initial intimidation of going to fly something that you can't go away," Kynett says. "It's you start wishing that you could do a few more things. You can't do much in something that doesn't have seatbelts."

But the lack of seatbelts limit the excitement that Kynett serves from his perfect aerial view.

"Probably the most impressive sight was flying over the Fourth of July celebrations last year at the Statue of Liberty," he recalls. "There were just thousands and thousands of boats and all these tall ships with flags flying and sails up was just amazing to see all of that activity down there. That was my memorable flight."

The next big trip for Kynett, his hefty lady of the skies, he is to New Orleans for a golf tournament.

For now, this type of life is appealing to the small-statured man who operates the "Queen Mother" of blimps.

"I'm really enjoying what I'm doing now," he says. "I don't know whether I'll make a career out of it or not. There's a good chance because I enjoy the lifestyle and traveling."

"I've done a lot of business around between jobs already — feels real nice to be in one place while I may not be getting doing this but I'm having a lot of fun. As long as I'm enjoying myself I'll probably stick around."

Upon graduation, however, he couldn't find a job.

"One job did come up, though," Kynett recalls. "It would've been flying from Fort Lauderdale to the British West Indies."

He says the job was tempting but the plane had too many maintenance problems.

"I had to say no," he says. "It would've been a real nice job if I didn't have to worry about losing my license or my life."

That's when he found a job working on the ground crew of the "Enterprise," Goodyear's airship based in Florida. Soon, through extensive training, he worked his way up to pilot.

Lawmakers initiate bill for crime victims' rights

AUSTIN (AP) — Legislation to give victims a stronger voice in the criminal justice and parole systems was introduced Wednesday by lawmakers who said they were responding in part to last year's slaying of three Hawkins teen-agers.

"Since we do afford — as it should be — constitutional rights to those people accused of crime, we also have a responsibility as a state to protect and maintain the victims' rights," said Rep. Gerald Yost, R-Longview.

Yost and Sen. Buster Brown, R-Lake Jackson, said they will introduce seven bills designed to make sure crime victims are informed of and able to participate in the criminal justice process.

Among other things, the bills would require that victims be notified of a defendant's release from prison, informed of parole proce-

dures and guaranteed the right to take part in the parole process.

One bill would give the victim the ability to request that the district attorney explain other victims' rights, such as the right to police protection from threats of harm.

"This series of legislation... is designed to give the victims of crime a higher profile and a larger role in the process," Brown said.

The two lawmakers said their bills were based on recommendations made by the We, the People Organization, a victims' advocacy group.

The organization was formed last year after the slayings of the Hawkins teen-agers.

A convicted sex offender, James McFadden, is awaiting trial on capital murder charge in that case.

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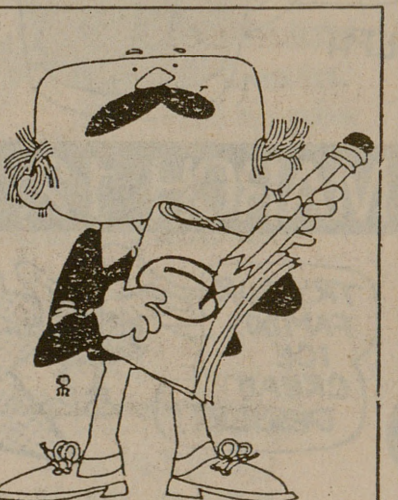
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