

State and Local

Balloon owner takes staffers up, up and away



By Tom Eikel
Staff Writer

Residents of Bryan-College Station have the opportunity to gain a unique perspective of their community — a view from above.

Harold Cliver, Class of '84 and owner of Rainbow Balloons in Bryan, is in business giving people the chance to experience the thrill of riding in a hot air balloon.

Viewpoint

Cliver phoned *The Battalion* about two weeks ago and offered to take a few staffers for a ride, and I was one of the lucky ones chosen to go.

We met Cliver early one morning at his home in Bryan.

Most balloon flights take place either in the early morning or late evening because wind conditions are more favorable at these times.

A small test balloon filled with helium was released and showed the winds to be light and variable for our flight.

Once we arrived at our launch site, Tanglewood Park in Bryan, Cliver and his crew spread the balloon on the ground. He began inflating it using a gas-powered fan.

The whole balloon setup, Cliver said, cost about \$30,000.

After several minutes, the balloon was full enough so that the burners could be used to finish the job.

Cliver's balloon is equipped with two burners, fueled by two 20-gallon propane tanks. Each burner is capable of producing 12 million British thermal units of heat per hour — enough to heat 100 three-bedroom homes for an hour, he said.

The balloon is made of a special nylon material with a polyurethane coating to keep it from being porous.

After about a minute of using the burners, the balloon was standing upright and ready for takeoff.

Fully inflated, Cliver's balloon

holds 105,400 cubic feet of air.

Climbing into the basket, I suddenly became very concerned about the strength of wicker, but my concerns were needless.

Ballooning is relatively safe.

The chances of being killed in a balloon accident are only 0.004 percent, and roughly 90 percent of all accidents involve collisions with power lines.

Most people have at least a moderate fear of heights, and I am no exception. But less than a minute after leaving the ground, any anxieties I may have had vanished.

The sights were incredible and it was unbelievably quiet at 7,000 feet — quiet, that is, except for the dogs. Every dog, in every backyard, in every neighborhood we drifted over was barking at us.

There was also a group of children in an elementary school playground who waved and called, "Come over here! Come over here!" much to the dismay of their teacher.

When it was all over, we had traveled about five miles in a little less than an hour.

Cliver has been operating his company on a full-time basis since Dec. 1. He says people go up for many different reasons.

"Birthdays, anniversaries — last December I had a guy propose in my balloon; she said yes," Cliver said. "But most do it just because they want to ride in a balloon."

Cliver, who has flown more than 120 hours in this type of balloon, said he charges \$75 per person for a one-hour ride, and that he averages about 40 hours of flight time per month.

"If you want to book a ride during the week, you can pretty much pick your day," Cliver said.

But if you want to ride on a weekend, you had best make your reservations now, he said. Currently, Cliver is booking rides for weekends in April.

Cliver says he plans to have two balloons operating by sometime in April.



Clockwise from upper left:

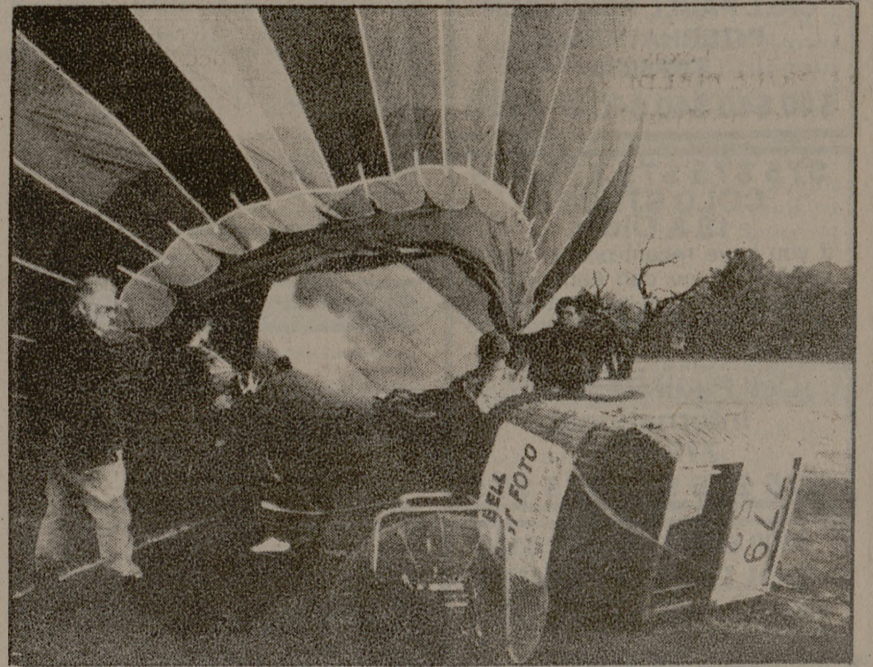
• At upper left, Harold Cliver's hot air balloon tilts as it is inflated. The inflation process is almost complete and the balloon is slowly becoming upright. Cliver, Class of '84, owns Rainbow Balloons in Bryan.

• The Flying Tomato balloon also went floating over Bryan. This picture was taken from Cliver's balloon.

• This photograph shows an aerial view of Texas A&M from the north-northeast corner of campus.

• Cliver's balloon is inflated using a propane gas burner. Cliver, with his back to the camera, operates the burner and adjusts the flame as the balloon fills with hot air. His phone number, 779-2523, is on the bottom of the balloon so that people who see the balloon can contact him to arrange for rides.

All of the photographs were taken by Shelly Schluter.



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