

Description of Event

The accident flight began as a two-balloon launch from Stoney Run County Park, south of Winfield, IN. This is a launch site we have used numerous times in the past which provides good screening from any winds during setup and launch. Weather was VFR, high scattered clouds, good visibility, and winds NNE 5-7 knots with expected decrease in wind speed toward sunset. Potential for thermals was evaluated and deemed sufficiently low for planned flight profile.

The planned flight path was over a mostly agricultural area with a few scattered homes. The terrain was mostly flat with a gentle grade sloping toward the Kankakee River to the south

This was the second flight with a new envelope/used bottom end combination that I had taken delivery of a few weeks prior. The first flight showed no areas of concerns. I took two of my experienced crew members along as passengers, henceforth referred to as passenger 1 and passenger 2. The flight was planned for approximately one hour with a projected landing near IN State Route 2. Balloon crews gathered approximately 5:00 for initial group briefing and then split up for individual briefings. The second balloon involved in the group launch was piloted by a private pilot who was conducting his first flight of the season solo to update his takeoff and landing currency. His flight profile was slightly different than mine with a slightly more southerly track, and he terminated his flight prior to the accident event.

Assembly and preflight proceeded slightly slower than normal on account of this being a new balloon system to me. My balloon launched shortly before 6:00 pm, and after a few minutes of flying at or below 500 feet while looking for a possibly touch-and-go opportunity, we began a climb to cruise altitude. Cruise altitude varied from approximately 1600 MSL to 2300 MSL as we sought favorable winds.

Approximately 45-50 minutes after takeoff, I briefed passengers for landing and started the descent. Since this balloon had dual turning vents, I maintained the “down” side forward. (The “down” side is a reference to the side of the basket that is placed on the ground during assembly and, if possible, for the laydown after landing.) This orientation keeps the passengers forward where they more easily brace for landing. It also keeps the fuel lines in the back and away from potential collision hazards.

The initial target landing location was a farm complex located on the north side of Indiana St Rte 2 approximately 4000 feet east of the intersection with Interstate 65. This approach involved a crossing of some tall electric transmission lines to the northeast of the farm which would have required a slight steeper than normal descent to the first landing target. After a brief conversation with the ground crew and evaluating the direction of flight and descent path, I opted to abandon this landing site in favor of an attempted landing across the street in an open area near the back of Hebron Animal Hospital on the south side of Rte

2. The ground crew repositioned to this area to assist with the landing. The power lines along Rte 2 were noted, but I judged sufficient clearance existed for approach to new landing site. During the transition from the initial landing site to the second landing site, the balloon did not go below the level of the power lines. The maneuvering just involved changes in the descent path to accommodate the new landing target zone.

From some point on the final approach to sometime after the power line impact, my memories are discontinuous due to the trauma suffered in the accidents. The following are more a series of brief “snapshots” of recollections during those lost minutes.

I recall being on a stable descent path toward the grassy area behind the Hebron Animal Hospital with sufficient room to clear all obstacles including the power lines.

I next recall realizing the balloon’s descent path was now directed into power lines on north side of Rte 2. I recall applying full burner.

I now believe the balloon was caught in a downdraft/windshear event possibly caused by nearby thermal activity. The descent profile was normal and well within the capabilities of the balloon absent some external destabilizing event. I have executed approaches like this many times in the past without any issue.

The ground crew consisting of my wife, another experienced crew member and his wife had just arrived in the empty parking lot behind the Hebron Animal Hospital to view the balloon’s approach. None of them realized anything was wrong until moments before the impact. The ground crew heard me shout “Get down! Get down!” Two of the ground crew immediately dialed 911, time stamp of 6:53. The distance from takeoff to the power line impact was approximately 6 statute miles.

I recall the initial impact and a “popping” sound which was likely the first arcing event. This is likely the event which created a strong thermal flash and resulting heat damage and severed one of the basket support cables.

I recall seeing the balloon hung up by the top electric wire across the leather bolster area along top edge of basket. The balloon was straining to rise upward with positive buoyancy. Hot air balloons typically have a 5-10 second delay between heat application and change in flight path depending on balloon size and loading. Enough heat had already been applied to the envelope prior to the impact to provide significant positive lift.

I recall reaching up to check if the burner was electrified by touching it with the back of my hand, and then applying more heat to see if we could break free of the wires.

I recall receiving an electric shock from a second arcing event. It is likely this event was caused by the top wire breaking under the strain of the balloon. (Later I would learn that the top two of four wires on the electric distribution pole were severed.)

Once the power line broke loose and the balloon was free, it began a strong climb and drifted with the prevailing wind. The ground crew did not see anyone in basket and could not establish communication with me. The crew got back in the chase vehicle and began to follow balloon as it flew on. Thinking the balloon would be coming down along I-65, the ground crew took the southbound exit to I-65. This would ultimately force them to drive several miles to the next exit so they could double back. By the time they reached the final landing site, the balloon occupants were already being loaded onto waiting ambulances.

Meanwhile up in the balloon, my next memory is being on the floor of the basket looking up but being unable to move. After some time, I slowly regained feeling and movement in one arm and leg (which later turned out to be ones without injuries). I was able to get sufficiently upright to actuate the burner to keep the balloon airborne. Both passengers were on the floor. Passenger 1 was verbally responsive but unable to move. Passenger 2's eyes were open, head moving about, but unresponsive. Although I did not realize it at the time, one of my four main basket support cables had been severed.

I could not find the handheld radio, but my cell phone was still on my belt. I called my wife/crew chief to report everyone was alive but injured and asked if anyone has called 911. I stated my intention to land on other side of I-65 and hung up. I later determined from the time stamps on the phone calls that the time from impact (first 911 call) and my first call to the crew after the power line impact was approximately 2-3 minutes.

I began to regain function of the other leg and arm and started attending to the passengers while seeking a suitable landing location. I used the fire extinguisher to douse a smoldering area of wicker on the exterior of basket. I then used two bottles of water on Passenger 2 to extinguish her smoldering hair and rinse her back (The back of passenger 2's shirt had melted entirely away exposing her skin). I engaged with passenger 2 to try to keep her conscious. I was able to get Passenger 1 into a standing position and directed her to keep talking to Passenger 2. I located the handheld radio on the floor and confirmed with the ground crew my intentions to land west of I-65.

I began looking for a suitable place to land. This is an area I was very familiar with, and I decided to land in one of the numerous agricultural fields along Mississippi Street (a north-south road immediately to the west of I-65). I see numerous emergency vehicles are already proceeding down Mississippi Street keeping up with balloon's southerly track.

I selected a newly planted field that had obvious road access to Mississippi Street. I touched down just prior to the field access road and dragged approximately another 100 feet into the field as I deflated the envelope. The distance from the power line engagement to final landing was approximately two miles.

First responders arrived at basket even before envelope was completely deflated. I directed Passenger 1 to exit the basket. I secured and vented the fuel system. I exited the basket and crawled away from the area to allow emergency personnel to attend to Passenger 2.

Both passengers were eventually airlifted to Chicago area hospitals. I requested transport to nearby Franciscan Hospital. I was eventually transferred to Loyola Hospital's burn ICU by ambulance.

The aircraft was left in the field until the next day until FAA personnel had a chance to inspect the aircraft which was then released to my crew. The FAA retains possession of the Digitoal aircraft instrument.

A separate photo narrative is attached describing various sites and items of interest.