

# Donald L. Piccard

## Inducted into the U. S. Ballooning Hall of Fame on July 27, 2014

By the Balloon Federation of America at the  
National Balloon Museum, Indianola, Iowa



First eight gore and original bulbous balloon AX-3 balloon by Piccard in 1965



Don Piccard as airship rigger in the Navy in 1944



Don Piccard in 2011 in Albuquerque

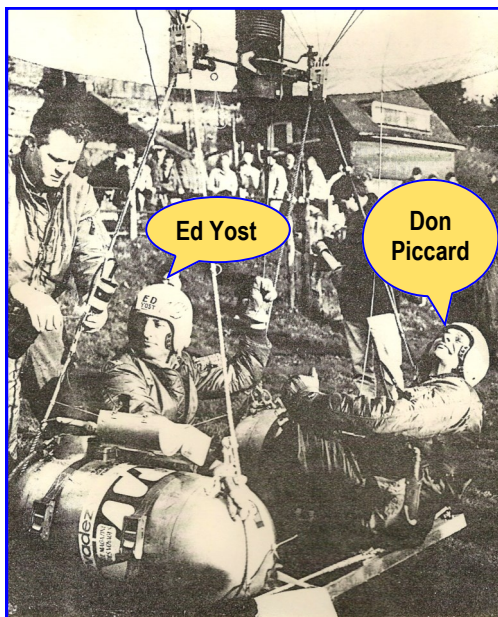
- Photo by Cindy Petrehn



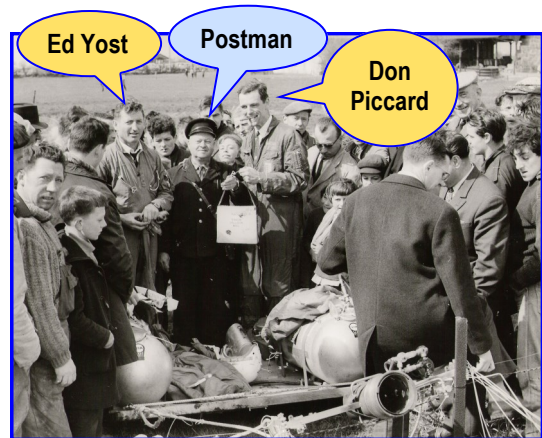
Piccard's "JONATHAN" balloon.  
This was the first AX-1 in 1971



"The Channel Champ" in flight" on April 23, 1963  
This historic flight brought world-wide attention to the new modern hot air balloon



Ed Yost & Don Piccard sitting on the stone board "gondola" of "The Channel Champ" before the flight over the English Channel



After they landed in France Don presented a bag of balloon mail to a French Postman



Don Piccard's WWII "WARBIRD" a former U.S. Navy training balloon



Don flying a hydrogen gas filled Japanese FUGO balloon on Feb. 16, 1947 ▶

◀ "PRINCESS EMILY"  
Sweden's first registered balloon was built by Don Piccard



Early Don Piccard Balloons plastic BODY HELMET (basket) could carry up to 3 persons

# DONALD L. PICCARD

## 1445 East River Road, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Donald Louis Piccard was born January 13, 1926 in Lausanne, Switzerland and became a naturalized U. S. citizen in 1931.. He represents the third generation of Piccards whose lives have centered on research and/or sport ballooning. He is the son of Jean Felix Piccard and Jeannette Piccard both of whom were famous names in gas ballooning. His father was a chemist and balloonist and his mother was a balloonist and Episcopalian priest and the first woman to fly to the edge of space. Don's father was the twin brother of Auguste Piccard who was the first person to reach the stratosphere in a balloon. Don had his first balloon ride in a gas balloon at the age of 7 in 1933 with his mother. It would seem inevitable that Don would pick up the interest in ballooning as well. Don has been married twice with 3 daughters and 3 step children, two of which are commercial pilots and are certificated in gas and hot air balloons. His wife Wilma is also a certified balloon pilot.

**Education:** Don attended the University of Minnesota, Swathmore College and the University of Delaware.

**Military Service:** He served as a balloon and airship rigger in the U. S. Navy during World War II; and later served as a Boatswain Mate 3rd Class at the U. S. Navy Airship Pilot Training School where he was instructor in Airship Construction and Design, Free Balloon Construction and Design and Free Balloon Flight at the Naval Air Station in Lakehurst, New Jersey.

**Profession:** Don's professional life included being a salesman, professional balloonist, commercial balloon pilot and balloon manufacturer.

**Memberships:** Founding member of the Balloon Club of America, a gas balloon club; founding member and first president of the Aero Club of Minnesota; founding member of the Balloon Federation of America.

**Ballooning Career:** Piccard made his **first solo gas balloon flight** in 1947, and received his FAA Balloon Pilot Certificate in February of 1947, making him the first to receive such a certification. He received his FAI-ACA Balloon License #1097 August 7, 1950. Don, Peter Wood and others, co-founded the Balloon Club of America in 1952 when ballooning was done with gas balloons. They had their first flight in November 1952 in Brookhaven, PA (*picture at right*). He was also a founder with Ed Yost of Skypower, Inc. which built classic gas balloons with modern materials, and where he designed sport gas balloons. In 1958 Don served as designer and test pilot for the world's first multi balloon ("Pleiades") manned balloon flight using plastic material for each balloon cell. These multiple balloons were dubbed "Milk Bottle" balloons and in this flight were filled with Philadelphia city gas (methane).



In 1959 Don recreated the balloon flight of August 17, 1859 which carried the first air mail. The original flight carried 123 pieces of mail of which only one is known to still exist. To celebrate the centennial of that historic flight the U. S. Post Office issued a seven-cent air mail stamp and Don carried the prescribed 123 pieces of mail from Lafayette to Crawfordsville, Indiana. One of those, signed by the Mayor of Lafayette, the governor of Indiana, the Post Master General and President Eisenhower, now resides in the Smithsonian in its lighter-than-air section.

Don Piccard has been called the **Father of Modern Hot Air Ballooning** due to his extensive activities in organizing ballooning events, promoting ballooning and manufacturing them, while Ed Yost is considered the **Father of the Modern Hot Air Balloon** since he invented the modern hot air balloon and propane burner in 1960 at Raven Industries in South Dakota. In 1962 Don joined Raven and became the key person at Raven for promoting hot air ballooning as a sport. In 1963 he and Yost made the first successful crossing of the English Channel in a hot air balloon. (*See more about that below.*)

Don organized the World's first sanctioned hot air balloon event at the St. Paul (Minnesota) Winter Carnival in 1962. This first competition with the new hot air balloons was sanctioned by the Winter Carnival and held on Don's father's (Jean Piccard) birthday, January 28, 1962 from the frozen White Bear Lake. A place to land was mutually agreed upon by the four pilots competing. The pilots were: Ed Yost, Dick Keuser, Tracy Barnes and Don Piccard. The Winter Carnival Association offered engraved brass plaques. Ed's balloon had a U. S. Navy I.D. and the other 3 were sponsored by Red Owl Groceries, Hamm's Beer and Holiday-Erickson Petroleum. The sponsors presented a 12 inch diameter sterling silver Revere bowl, "**The Jean Piccard Trophy for Thermal Balloons**" to the winner, Tracy Barnes, thus establishing a high level of prestige for the new sport. Then, in 1963 Don organized the first U. S. National Hot Air Balloon Championship in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and served as "Clerk of Course" for that event.

With the help of famed French balloonist Charles Dollfus, Piccard arranged for the **first flight of a hot air balloon across the English Channel** from Rye, England, to Gravelines, France on April 23, 1963. Ed Yost and Don Piccard were on board for this historical flight. It was the first time a hot air balloon had crossed the English Channel. They ascended to 13,500 feet to obtain a wind blowing the right direction, a flight of 3 hours and 17 minutes. This flight introduced the modern hot air balloon to the world, a significant step in making sport ballooning popular. The picture at right shows where they landed with the balloon draped over a fence. Ed is standing by the gondola and Don is near the left edge of the picture, with his hands raised over his head in



(continued on next page)



a gesture indicating a successful flight. (See also pictures on page 1.) The actual stone board gondola and the envelope along with pictures of this flight are on display at the National Balloon Museum. A video of the flight filmed and narrated by Don Piccard can be viewed in the Museum Theater.

Don's extensive activities to promote ballooning, such as organizing and participating in many ballooning events and making record setting and historic flights, was given more impetus when he became a hot air balloon manufacturer himself in 1964. He left Raven Industries that year and moved to Southern California where he formed Don Piccard Balloons, Inc. and began manufacturing hot air balloons. He added load tapes to his balloon envelopes which enabled him to develop the "**Bulbous Gore**" balloon design, use lighter weight fabrics and other innovations used by all balloon makers today. (See page 1 of this document for pictures.) It was a Piccard balloon that helped promote sport ballooning in the United Kingdom. There, at the Dunstable Gliding Club in 1966, a Piccard balloon named Red Dragon, was flown demonstrating the high quality of Piccard's hot air balloons, thus helping to make sport ballooning more popular.

In 1967 Don had another great opportunity to promote sport ballooning by appearing on national television on the **Tonight Show** with host **Johnny Carson**. Before the show Don took Johnny out for a balloon ride. Johnny helped him unload the balloon and basket from his trailer and they together assembled the gear and inflated the balloon. While they were doing that Don explained how everything works. When everything was ready they put on their helmets and took off over a small lake where they did a splash and dash dipping the bottom of the basket in the lake; and then they glided out over the countryside, eventually landing in a desert area among the cactus. Don was then interviewed on the Tonight Show and the video of the balloon ride preparations and flight was broadcast as part of the show thus exposing modern hot air ballooning to millions of viewers.



Don and Johnny  
During the interview

▲ Johnny (left) &  
Don (right) in the  
basket over the lake

In April of 1972 Don won the first Albuquerque International Coyote Road Runner Balloon Race in Albuquerque, New Mexico. In that race balloonists, referred to as a "Pack of Coyotes", chased a balloon called the "Road Runner" piloted by Sid Cutter. Other pilots in the pack were Dennis Floden, Bill Cutter, Gene Dennis, Don Kersten, Oscar Kratz, Bill Murtorff, Karl Stefan, Brent Stockwell, Carter Twedt, Matt Wiederkehr and Don's wife, Wilma. Don won the race by landing just 184 feet from the "Road Runner" and Wilma came in second, landing 206 feet away. The picture at left shows that race getting underway. It was not long before this annual event became known as the "International Balloon Fiesta".

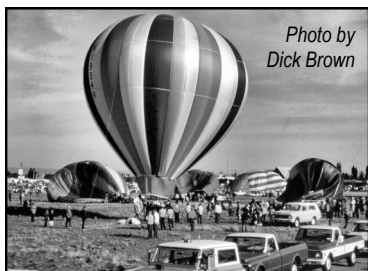


Photo by  
Dick Brown

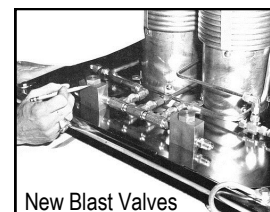


Wilma & Don  
Piccard

Don became the first Life Member of the Balloon Federation of America, a move which started the BFA bank account. In the late 1970's and early 1980's Don served as a volunteer editor for the Balloon Federation of America's monthly newsletter to members, and later as a contributing editor to *Balloon Life* magazine. Stories about his ballooning activities have appeared in many periodicals and news papers as well. In addition, more recently, he has been a frequent contributor of technical and historical information regarding ballooning on the Internet.

After Don was no longer building hot air balloons he collaborated with Dick Roberts who was then making Piccard Balloons and developed "**Solo Systems**" which was a small balloon suitable for one person. Both basket and envelope were small and were called **ultralights** which meant they did not require a pilot's license to fly.

Don's invention and use of load tapes in the balloons he manufactured are his most important contribution to ballooning safety, one which was adopted by other manufacturers as well. These tapes prevent catastrophic failures in balloon structures. His bulbous core invention provided an unique balloon shape and makes putting commercial graphics on balloons more difficult, a feature appreciated by spectators who like to see the simple unadorned colorful shapes of balloons. Some of his other innovations ("Firsts") for ballooning are: Velcro cuff deflation port ("Belly Button Rip Panel"), quick fill sport gas balloon ("Natural Shape"), the hot air balloon skirt, Kevlar suspension tapes, great circle Velcro rip panel seams, the tubular gore and others. He also pioneered the use of blast valves for propane burners in his balloon systems.



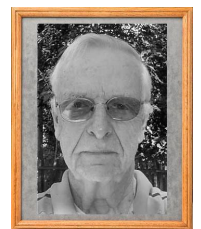
New Blast Valves

Don is currently head of XAP, the "eXtreme Altitude Project" which is seeking a sponsor to fund the first expedition to linger in the mesosphere, above the stratosphere, below orbital space.

*We are grateful to the following sources for information and/or images included in this document: Don Piccard Balloons website, Who's Who of Ballooning, Don & Wilma Piccard, Ed Yost, Debbie Spaeth, Dick Brown, Cindy Petrehn, BFA Ballooning Journal, Balloon Life Magazine and the National Balloon Museum archives.*

## Timeline of Don Piccard's Ballooning Accomplishments, Honors and Awards

- 1933 - First time Don flew in a balloon as a passenger in a gas balloon with his mother Jeannette Piccard
- 1944 -1946 - Served as a balloon and airship rigger in the U. S. Navy during World War II
- 1947 - Made first solo flight using a modified Fugo Japanese bomb gas balloon in Minneapolis, Minnesota January 16. The 2 hour flight earned him his pilot's certificate, the only one in the U. S. at that time
- 1947 - Was the first to fly "side inflated" gas balloon
- 1951 - Served as a Boatswain Mate 3rd Class at the U. S. Navy Airship Pilot Training School where he was instructor in Airship Construction and Design, Free Balloon Construction and Design and Free Balloon Flight at the Naval Air Station in Lakehurst, New Jersey
- 1952 - Co-founded the Balloon Club of America along with 3 others.
- 1952 - Don and Tony Fairbanks, both members of the newly founded Balloon Club of America, assembled a gas balloon from spare military parts to make the Club's first maiden flight on November 29, 1952
- 1950's- Don worked with G. T. Schjeldahl Co. on high altitude research balloons including ECHO balloons.
- 1957 - Don experimented with Pleiades-Type cluster gas filled balloons, making the first flight in 1958.
- 1959 - August 27, 1959 Don flew basket (*pictured at right*) at a Centennial Commemoration of Jon Wise's Jupiter balloon flight carrying air mail from Lafayette to Crawfordsville, Indiana. This was the first air mail stamped letters (123 of them) which had passed through a Post Office
- 1960 - Don was the first to fly a Mylar envelope balloon.
- 1960 - He established new FAI altitude record in class 1-1 (now AA-1) and rising to 3,740 feet
- 1961 - On July 19, 1961 Piccard launched from the Fairbault, Minnesota airport and rose to an altitude of 34,642 feet, a world record altitude for class A-4 (now AA-4) gas balloons
- 1962 - Don established a world altitude record in the A-2 (now AA-2) rising to a height of 17,746 feet
- 1962 - First to organize a FAI-Sanctioned International Hot Air Balloon race
- 1962 - Don joined Raven Industries as manager of the sport balloon program where Ed Yost had developed the modern hot air balloon and burner in 1960. There Don did much to promote hot air ballooning. From that point on, his widespread promotion of hot air ballooning earned him the title of "Father of Modern Hot Air Ballooning", while Ed Yost, was known as the inventor/"Father of the Hot Air Balloon"
- 1962 - At the St. Paul Winter Carnival Don organized the first hot air balloon event hosting 4 balloons
- 1962 - Awarded the FAI Montgolfier Diploma and Lighter Than Air Society Achievement Award
- 1963 - Flew the first "Load Taped" hot air balloon on January 13
- 1963 - Don organized and served as "Clerk of Course" for the FAI world's first National Balloon Contest which was held in Kalamazoo, Michigan
- 1963 - On April 23, 1963 Don and Ed Yost were the first to cross the English Channel in a hot air balloon. Flying from England to France, with a Raven-made hot air balloon, later named "The Channel Champ"
- 1963 - Set FAI Distance Record in an AX-4 balloon
- 1964 - Don moved to Southern California and formed Don Piccard Balloons, Inc. and began to manufacture hot air balloons. He developed load tapes, the "Bulbous Gore" balloon design and lighter weight fabrics and other innovations used by all balloon makers today. The load tapes were a very important development for balloon flying safety
- 1965 - Don flew a Piccard Balloon to a new AX-6 world altitude record of 15,689 feet
- 1965 - Competed in the U. S. National Hot Air Balloon Championship in Reno, Nevada
- 1968-70 - Served as member of the Balloon Federation of America Contest Committee
- 1970 - Became first Life Member of the Balloon Federation of America
- 1970-72 - Member of the FAA Liaison Committee for the Balloon Federation of America
- 1972 - First winner of the Albuquerque Road Runner Race, later named "International Balloon Fiesta"
- 1972 - Played leadership role in organizing the U. S. Hot Air Balloon Championship in Indianola, Iowa
- 1973 - Participated in the first Brazilian Hot Air Balloon Rally
- 1973 - Established FAI-Distance record in an AX-3 class balloon
- 1979 - Competed in the Gordon Bennett Balloon Race in Long Beach, California
- 1980-84 - Newsletter Editor for Balloon Federation of America "Pilot News"
- 1998 - Piccard received the Elder Statesman of Aviation Award from the National Aeronautic Association for 50 years of achievements contributing to the development and acceptance of ballooning as a sport, resulting in modern hot air ballooning competition
- 2002 - Inducted into the International Ballooning Hall of Fame by the F. A. I.
- 2008 - Inducted into the Minnesota Aviation Hall of Fame
- 2014 - Inducted into the U. S. Ballooning Hall of Fame at the National Balloon Museum



Minnesota Aviation  
Hall of Fame Award