



Sentinel Photo/LEAH WILLIAMS

**IN FLIGHT** — Tethered hot air balloon rides provided a spectacular aerial view of the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport Thursday evening as well as a scenic look at sunset.

## Media flight presents incredible opportunity

*Tethered balloon flight  
takes to the sky*

**BY LEAH WILLIAMS**  
SENTINEL NEWS STAFF

**MT. VERNON** — From the moment the preparations begin, there is a pit in the stomach that is best described as nervous anticipation.

Once you are airborne, those worries, concerns and last minute jitters melt away as you absorb the sights around you.

The aerial view. The soft rustling of the nylon fabric in the wind. You watch in awe of the world standing still. It is not something you will soon forget.

The return of Balloons Over Mt. Vernon to the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport brought in a dozen pilots and flight enthusiasts to the airport.

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Sentinel Photo/LEAH WILLIAMS

**INCREDIBLE FEELING** — Pilot Kurt Vitense of St. Louis looks down from his balloon Eden Thursday evening during a tethered flight at the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport. Vitense said he has been a balloon pilot for two years and tries to fly every chance he gets.



Sentinel Photo/LEAH WILLIAMS

**GETTING READY** — The balloon crew gets Eden ready for a tethered flight Thursday evening at the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport. The balloon was anchored in its flight by ropes strapped three vehicles on the airport grounds.

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# Flight:

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The activities for the weekend continue Saturday on into the evening, while a balloon fun flight is scheduled for 6:30 a.m. Sunday.

## MEET THE PILOT

Kurt Vitense of St. Louis and his wife Kim brought their balloon Eden, which was being set up for a tethered flight during media flight Thursday.

Vitense has worked as a corporate commercial pilot for more than 25 years before deciding he wanted to fly hot air balloons.

"It's something that I've always wanted to do," he said. "And now that we have kids who are grown, it seemed like the perfect time."

Vitense has taken his hobby to serious heights. Vitense logged in several flights in the St. Louis area during December and January, a time when many decide to hibernate on the ground.

"I try to get up every chance I can," he said. "I absolutely love it."

Being a hot air balloon pilot means mastering some skills to determine the ideal weather conditions.

"You have to be kind of like a mini meteorologist," he said. "You are watching wind patterns and keeping a close eye on the weather at all times."

While his wife Kim has only taken one ride to date, Vitense said his spouse plays a vital role in the hobby as a dedicated and capable part of the balloon crew.

"As you can see, this is not a one-person job," he said. "She does an incredible job helping out."

The hot air balloon was christened Eden earlier this year to honor a new addition to the Vitense family. Eden — the couple's first granddaughter — was born about six weeks ago, and the pilot thought the name would be a perfect homage.

"I know there are balloons that have names, and I had just gotten this balloon last summer," Vitense said. "The Garden of Eden is green, and my balloon is green. It's our first granddaughter, and I asked others and they seem to think it was a perfect name."

## INDESCRIBABLE EXPERIENCE

When asked what is his favorite part about flying a hot air balloon, Vitense pauses for a moment and explains that the sensation is something that has to be experienced.

"There's nothing like it," he said. "You get to defy gravity and see the incredible scenery."

Everyone who you ask who has ever been up, up and away in a hot air balloon has similar descrip-



Sentinel Photo/LEAH WILLIAMS

**UP UP AND AWAY — Trenton Ray, 8, grabs the hand of his father Jason Thursday evening before taking a tethered flight aboard Eden at the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport. It was Trenton's first flight in a hot air balloon.**

tions.

Trenton Ray, 8, went on his first flight in a hot air balloon Thursday along with his father Jason, who volunteers to help out balloon crews at the airport. When asked how he liked the flight, he smiled a large smile, put his arms above his head and said enthusiastically: "Yeah!"

Don Lewis, who has

helped out at the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport for years, said he has been on two free flights, and hardly anything can compare to the feeling in flight.

"The best way to describe it is you feel like you are standing still and the rest of the world is moving below you," he said. "There's nothing like it."

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