

# Taking a balloon over Mt. Vernon

*Balloon ride provides  
a new perspective  
of the skies*

**BY EMILY ROTH**

SENTINEL NEWS STAFF

MT. VERNON — Waking to a chilly 27 degree morning under a dark sky on Sunday initially prompted me to burrow back into bed under a warm covering of blankets. For a few moments I lay still, wondering why I had set my alarm for 6 a.m. on a day off from work.

The answer was far more enticing than the temperature was discouraging: a hot air balloon ride over Mt. Vernon. The ride was in conjunction with Balloons Over Mt. Vernon, a festival celebrating not only balloons, but aviation of all forms at the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport over the weekend. I had never ridden in a balloon, and I was ready for an adventure.

Like anything worth doing, ballooning requires behind the scenes work before becoming part of the familiar floating visual. The balloon crew as well as pilot Kevin Witzel unfurled the balloon "Nothin' But a Breeze" on the grass between the airport terminal and flightline. With basket assembled and balloon — called the "envelope" by the ballooning community — inflated with propane, it was takeoff time.

The basket housed two passengers and one pilot. Though I knew liftoff was imminent, I was not prepared for the sensation of leaving the ground. It

was nothing like traveling in a plane, as my experience in taking off felt as though I was standing with someone pushing me vertically from the ground up.

As we sailed over the airport and Mt. Vernon itself, Witzel took the time to answer any questions. He explained that flight is extremely dependent on wind, as pilots control a balloon's movements up or down. To travel in any other direction, pilots find a stream of wind to carry passengers through the air.

From overhead we not only saw houses, but a speeding train, a flock of geese, and deer leaping across a field. A falcon was also spotted flying alongside us, but from a distance, as if assessing where this new colorful bird came from and what it wanted.

What struck me the most about the ride was not the stillness as I had heard many remark about, but the sense of experiencing the sky itself. The life of a human being is on the earth. Decisions rendered, daily occurrences lived, and memories with friends and family are made with two feet on the ground. In a balloon, a person exists in the air rather than simply traveling through it. It was as if experiencing piece of the world that most don't see, and until Sunday, was completely out of reach.

To give his passengers a souvenir of the ride, Witzel steered the balloon toward a tree, where myself and the other passenger were encouraged to reach out and grasp a handful of leaves. According to Witzel, this is a tradition for first-time flyers.

Throughout the flight, the

ground crew kept an eye on "Nothin' But a Breeze," following the balloon by truck as it flew further away from its starting point. Whenever the crew lost sight of the balloon through the trees, they radioed Witzel through a walkie-talkie. Pilot and crew kept a line of communication, making certain that the balloon was safe and had a clear path for landing.

Witzel gently lowered the balloon just above a pond, whose warm water propelled the basket to a soft patch of grass. After the crew helped guide the balloon away from the water, crew, pilot, and passengers alike helped to carefully pack each component back into the truck and attached trailer.

The final component of packing up was rolling the envelope into its containing bag, where the group then sat simultaneously to release the air that had once helped keep the balloon afloat.

Passengers once again traveled by ground as the truck made its way back to the airport headquarters. The ride gave me time to reflect on my experience, and remember how the open air felt to the touch. It was an experience unlike anything I had previously known, and my warmest gratitude goes to Kevin and Jennifer Witzel, Chris Collins, the crew of "Nothin' But a Breeze," and all those responsible for ensuring a successful Balloons Over Mt. Vernon event.

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Sentinel Photo/EMILY ROTH

**READY FOR LIFTOFF** — Pilots and crews work to inflate their balloons at the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport on Sunday during Balloons Over Mt. Vernon. Sunday weather allowed balloonists to travel across the skies.

**OVER MT. VERNON**  
— Balloons took off from the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport Sunday morning, giving Mt. Vernon residents a visual of colorful balloons in the air. Balloons Over Mt. Vernon, which celebrated balloons and aviation, lasted Friday through Sunday.



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