

call came – he was down, and he was OK. He gave us his GPS coordinates – we were within 10 miles and should arrive soon. Or so we thought.

The roads in rural Arkansas do not run into the swamp. The last road ended in a trail about 1.5 miles from where we thought Andy was. We could not drive in, as the fields were soft, soggy mud. I volunteered to walk in, while Stuart and Bill went to look for help. All this on the assumption Andy was where we thought he was – we had no visual confirmation of him or landmarks.

They call this mud “Gumbo.” You sink knee deep with each step and it seeps into your boots and gets between your toes. Wearing a bright yellow Fiesta jacket, I hoped I was visible to deer hunters as I worked my way through the woods. Finally the trees gave way and opened into large soaked fields – in the middle of which lay the balloon, and a mud covered pilot.

After a good drag landing, the basket was filled with mud. Hoses were completely caked over, and the instruments functional yet filthy. The envelope was lying well spread out, and did not appear too bad. Stuart and Bill had found the landowner, and soon appeared in a 4 wheel drive truck, which became buried in the gumbo about 300 yards from the balloon.

Packing the balloon was difficult – with two walls it is already heavy and wet and muddy it was even more challenging. The farmer called in a huge tractor, which in turn pulled the truck in the back of which we loaded the balloon system. This comical caravan made two trips to completely remove all the equipment back to the road, after which we could load it into our retrieval vehicle.

After having the landing site certified, we made our way back to Atlanta to rendezvous with the launch team and celebrate.



*Success! (or) Here's Mud in Your Eye!*



## The Weather...

by Don Day

Patience. Just one word sums up one of the hardest aspects of forecasting the weather on a record attempt. Being able to wait for and sometimes pass up good “weather windows” can be difficult for both the pilot and forecaster. For Andy to break the record he needed a weather pattern that happens only a few times a winter season.

Andy needed strong upper level winds, few clouds, no precipitation, good inflation conditions and manageable landing weather. That is a tall order for the weatherman! Strong jet stream winds can sometimes mean a windy inflation, possible turbulence and a fast landing. However, only a strong jet stream could take Andy the 1000+ miles he wanted.

During January and February the jet stream pattern became blocked in the North Atlantic, allowing a strong jet stream wind to develop in a northwest to southeast orientation across central Canada and into the central United States. As storms developed across Canada and dropped southeast into the United States favorable upper level winds for Andy's attempt developed.

One favorable weather window developed in early February. Computer projections of a launch out of Minot, ND showed a possible distance of over 1000 miles with Andy heading east-southeast into Kentucky or Ohio. However, in just one day the once promising weather window withered away as distance projections dropped to 800 miles. Another possible window appeared to be opening in mid February, however, clouds and precipitation would be a concern.

With February coming to a rapid close I was concerned about the blocked jet stream breaking down in the Atlantic which would mean that Andy's odds of getting his attempt completed in 2005 would be difficult as the favorable jet stream position would fade and the typical stormy month of March was right around the corner.

As luck would have it, the North Atlantic block would extend well into March. A strong cold front was forecast to push through the Dakotas and into the Midwest on February 27 and 28. A strong jet stream wind and a sinking air mass behind the cold front would bring good inflation weather free of clouds with strong winds aloft. What appeared to be a nearly perfect weather pattern for Andy's attempt got even better when another jet stream wind was forecast to develop across the southeast United States from Kansas to Georgia.

We had two strong jet streams to work with. The first jet stream would transport Andy in a southeast heading across North Dakota and into South Dakota with wind speeds increasing as he headed further south. The timing of Andy's launch would be critical. He needed to be able to get across the Dakotas and to Interstate 80 in Nebraska a few hours before sunrise so he could catch the next jet stream shooting its way across Kansas, Missouri and Arkansas. If Andy launched too early, he may have been directed a little too far to the southwest to catch the next jet stream. If Andy launched too late, the strong winds aloft over the Dakotas would diminish and he would have not been able to hitch a ride on the secondary jet stream.

In addition to getting Savannah Six and crew ready to go at the right time, Andy had to keep a very consistent altitude and heading to take advantage of the two jet stream pattern and accomplish his goal. Andy's determination and flying skills combined with a rare instance of Mother Nature's cooperation resulted in success.

