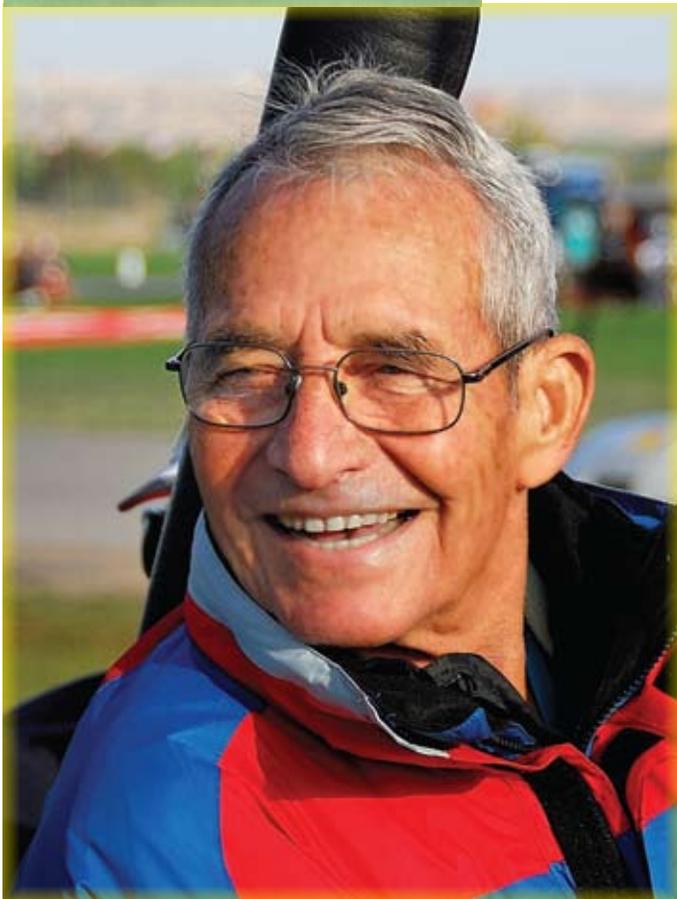




A. Mario Toscano

# Sid Cutter:

by Kim Vesely



*Yesterday Tom McConnell sent out a sad-but-true e-mail regarding Sid's condition. Since then our phones and e-mails have been swamped. You can't even imagine how much every call or message has meant to Sid . . . Sid is failing pretty fast, but . . . he has really lived his life and it has been wonderful. He hasn't wanted to see anyone or have anyone visit him. He has been saying there is nothing left on his bucket list and has been very gracefully accepting the future . . . until this morning. And now, I quote, "Hell, if people want to see me so bad, let's have a party!"*

*---Jewel Cutter, April 15, 2011*

**A**nd so the incredible, pioneering ballooning life of Sid Cutter ended, as it began, with a party. In between? What a flight it was!

In 40 years in ballooning, Sid flew in and created events throughout the United States and across the world. He won two U.S. National Championships (1978 and 1986), finished second in the world championships in frigid Uppsala, Sweden in 2009, and somewhere in there managed to ditch in the Bermuda Triangle in a balloon called the Jolly Roger (no kidding). One of his proudest achievements was designing and building two of the largest thermal airships ever constructed as advertising vehicles for Anheuser Busch -- promptly dubbed by local wags the "Good Beer Blimps."

Sid taught dozens of balloonists and as an FAA Designated Examiner risked life and limb giving check rides to hundreds more (including this author). His company, World Balloon Championships (later just World Balloon) spread the magic of balloon flight around the globe through commercial contracts with Anheuser Busch, Sears, PSA Airlines, Swatch Watch, AirStep Shoes, Westinghouse Elevator, Labatt Beer, Parkay, Breyers Ice Cream, Black Angus restaurants, Maxwell House Coffee and Pepsi. Somewhere in there he founded the world's largest balloon club, and, oh yeah, something called the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta.

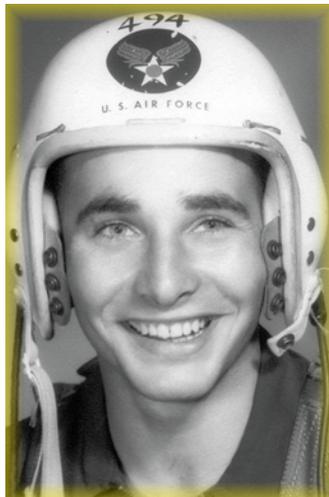


# Best of the Best!

In his lifetime he amassed a distinguished list of honors including the Montgolfier Diploma for service to ballooning, and – on his 75th birthday – the Wright Brother’s Master Pilot Award, recognizing pilots who have demonstrated professionalism, skill and aviation expertise by maintaining safe operations for 50 or more years. Sid has been inducted into the Albuquerque Sports Hall of Fame, the New Mexico Tourism Hall of Fame, the Balloon Federation of America Hall of Fame, the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta Hall of Fame and most recently the FAI International Hall of Fame. In 2002 Sid was one of the Olympic Torchbearers representing Albuquerque and ballooning.

Long before balloons came into the picture, Sidney Dillon Cutter was a distinguished aviator. His mother and father, “Wild Bill” and Virginia Dillon Cutter (daughter of New Mexico Governor R.C. Dillon), were legendary pilots in their own right long before their sons’ adventures aloft began. Some of Sid’s earliest memories were of learning to fly airplanes while sitting in his daddy’s lap. At 18 he had already earned his commercial and flight instructor ratings. He then moved on to the U.S. Air Force and added single-engine jets, large cargo aircraft, and helicopters to his repertoire.

Upon retiring from the Air Force, Sid came back to New Mexico and became president of the family business, Cutter Flying Service, a post he held from 1963 to 1974. He might have stayed



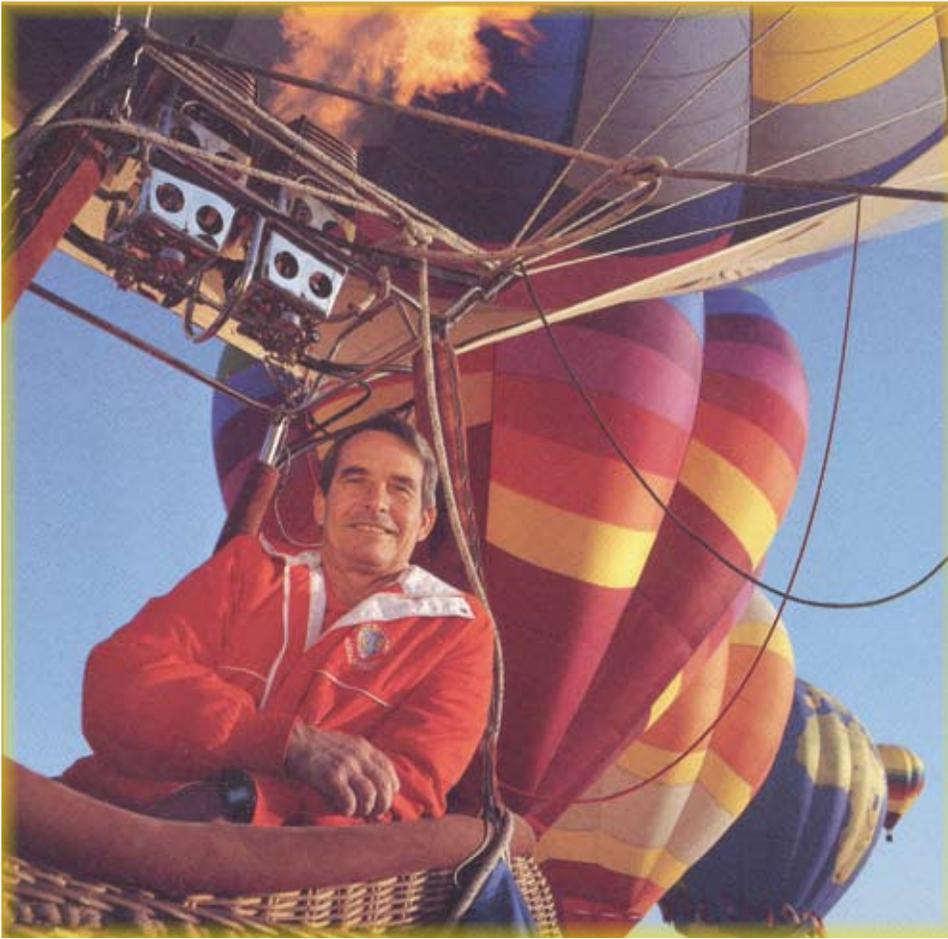
*By age 18 Sid had already earned his private, commercial and CFI fixed wing ratings. Then came service in the U.S. Air Force where he added single engine jets, large cargo aircraft and a helicopter rating. Retiring from the Air Force he returned to Albuquerque to take control of the family business, Cutter Flying Service.*

longer, were it not for that little party centerpiece he acquired for a party celebrating Cutter Flying’s 43rd anniversary and his mother’s birthday.

By now the story has pretty much passed into legend: how Sid, needing something big enough to have a visual impact in an airplane hanger, came up with the idea of using a balloon. Having ascertained it would be just about as cheap to buy a balloon as rent one, he flew to Sioux Falls to pick up a Raven system and dodged tornadoes to get it back to Albuquerque in time for the celebration. He had no intention of ever flying the thing – “it looked like a rather dangerous flying machine to me,” he allowed – but the next morning, he and brother Bill inflated the balloon and Sid took his mother for a tether ride. Virginia got out, Bill

got in, the tether somehow came undone, and the brothers were airborne. Sid had had a balloon rating since 1962 – in those days fixed-wing pilots could write in to the FAA and get a balloon endorsement just for the asking – but there’s nothing like suddenly being aloft to give some urgency to figuring out how to land. Felicitously, it was a gorgeous ballooning morning and by the end of the flight Sid was hooked. It was a flight that was to change the course of Sid’s life. For the next 25 years, he devoted his life to ballooning.

In the next months as Sid flew his new toy over Albuquerque, others watched, chased, and followed. In November of 1971, suddenly balloon-less (brother Bill had taken the balloon to Phoenix) Sid persuaded eight friends to buy shares in a balloon and found an organi-



*Despite his many accomplishments in aviation, there can be no doubt that Sid's lasting legacy will be the world class event he founded, the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta.*

*Below: At the 2002 Balloon Fiesta Sid showed his competitive style with a Top 5 finish overall.*

zation known as the Albuquerque Aerostat Ascension Association. This club, better known as AAAA or "Quad-A," is now the world's largest balloon club. Then, the next year in just 10 days, Sid put together a balloon rally to celebrate the 50th anniversary of an Albuquerque radio station. Thirteen balloons flew from a shopping center, 20,000 people showed up, and the participants – particularly then-BFA president Don Kersten – were so impressed they invited Sid to host the First World Hot Air Balloon Championships in 1973. Thus was born what is now the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta, now in its 40th year.

Sid retired from flying balloons several years ago and spent eight happy years fishing and boating in the Northwest. But he always came back to Albuquerque in October to visit with old friends and occasionally sneak in a Balloon Fiesta flight. Shortly after the 2009 Balloon Fiesta, Sid was diagnosed with stomach cancer. His valiant battle ended on May 21 – but not before one more legendary party.

In response to what she called, "the new bucket list," Sid's devoted wife Jewel invited all of Sid's many



One of the important parts of Sid's legacy is the quality of the Balloon Fiesta. In the beginning, our first challenge was to win the right to host the first ever World Championship for hot air balloons. We knew that it would bring lots of attention to Albuquerque and New Mexico if we could, but only if there was participation by balloonists from many nations. Sid knew that it had to be a first class event. Ed Yost, a universally accepted expert on all things ballooning, was recruited as event director.

Contestants were given airfare, freight for their balloons, cars, hotels, banquets, expense money and other significant gifts. A silver trophy was created and replica cuff links, money clips and lapel pins were created. Sid did all he could to establish Albuquerque as the undisputed Ballooning Capital of the World. Because of that early vision, Albuquerque continues to hold that title and the international attention that it brings. He was a first class guy who has left us a remarkable gift.

*Tom Rutherford*

friends to have “one more laugh and beer with Sid” at their Albuquerque home on Easter Sunday afternoon. Hundreds of people, including many who traveled long distances on short notice, came to hug Sid and say “thank you” for his remarkable contributions. The attendees included a huge contingent of former World Balloon employees who came to honor their former boss. Some even could still fit into the trademark orange shirts and white pants worn around the globe by World Balloon pilots.

In Longview, TX, Sid’s long-time friend Bill Bussey encouraged

balloonists who could not attend the celebration to release a balloon in Sid’s honor, announcing to heaven above that he soon will arrive. Friends of Sid all over the world sent balloons aloft and toasted Sid. It was a truly remarkable “living reception” honoring a truly remarkable man who truly made a difference for his community and the untold thousands of people whose lives were changed through their involvement with ballooning and the Albuquerque Balloon Fiesta. The Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta has dedicated their 40th event to Sid, their founder and

inspiration. Sid is survived by Jewel, brother Bill, and numerous family members.

Leonardo da Vinci said: “For once you have tasted flight, you will walk the earth with your eyes turned skywards, for there you have been and there you will long to return.” He could not have known that 500 years later a humble, visionary man would devote his life to painting the skies with all the colors of the rainbow, and send spirits soaring in a way he could never have imagined.



*“Hell, if people want to see me so bad, let’s have a party!” Sid Cutter*



*Top: A final class picture for Sid, Jewel and World Balloons employees.  
Inset: Sid is greeted by Neida Courtney-Bueno (Balloonmeistern for the upcoming 40th Balloon Fiesta) and her son Adrian.  
Right: a launch of yellow pibals to announce to the heavens that Sid would soon be on his way.  
Photos by Kim Vesely*