

Balloonmeister Info:

Balloon festivals have a person who serves as the flight director for the event. This person is called the Balloonmeister. It is the responsibility of the balloonmeister to make sure that all of the balloonists are aware of the topographical features and other hazards in the area of the flight, and to ensure that a proper weather briefing is given prior to launch. The balloonmeister is also responsible for safe flight operations. At festivals involving competition, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) requires a waiver, and this document indicates who will be the balloonmeister. At these competitive events, in addition to the previously mentioned duties, the Balloonmeister is also responsible for ensuring that all pilots comply with all Federal Aviation Administration Regulations, provisions of the waiver, and rules of the event.

The term "Balloonmeister" was first used over two hundred years ago in Germany. At that time it was a name created to describe the person who inflated the gas balloons with hydrogen. Although few modern-day balloonists fly gas balloons---and even fewer fly hydrogen filled balloons (helium is most popular today), both persons to serve as Balloonmeister at the Mountaineer Balloon Festival are experienced gas balloon pilots, and FAA Pilot Examiners for both gas balloons as well as hot air balloons.



Bob Sparks (left) and Van F. Anderson (right) prepare for a hydrogen-filled gas balloon flight in the Poconos on a cold November morning in 1988.

In 1984, Bob Sparks of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania was the Balloonmeister for the first Mountaineer Balloon Festival. Bob's ballooning history includes setting nine world aviation records in different sizes and types of balloons--five of which he designed and built himself. In 1973 Bob attempted to cross the Atlantic in the Yankee Zephyr from Bar Harbor, Maine, but severe weather forced him down near Newfoundland where he was rescued by a Canadian icebreaker. Two years later, he launched from Mashpee, Massachusetts in Odyssey, but bad luck was again on board. He was rescued by a helicopter after a gas leak forced him to ditch in the Atlantic. Bob was the MBF Balloonmeister for five years.

In 1989, Van F. Anderson became the balloonmeister for the Morgantown festival, and has continued in that role since that time. Van was the founder of the Mountaineer Balloon Festival, and was a student of Bob. In addition to learning how to fly balloons from Sparks, Van also adopted the Sparks philosophy of ballooning. This included a firm rule to make every flight enjoyable, and to avoid flying in hazardous weather. From this philosophy

comes the adage: "It's better to be on the ground wishing you were in the air, than to be in the air wishing you were on the ground".

Pictures in this section show Bob and Van in a hydrogen-filled gas balloon. This flight took place during a fall weekend in the Poconos in 1988. The balloon shown is the Private Eye, initially built in 1936 by Good Year for the US Army signal Corps. It was once owned by Bob Sparks, but the current owner is Scott Kelley of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Scott, like Van, is a former student of Bob's, and an FAA Pilot Examiner for both gas and hot air balloons. At 60 plus years of age, the Private Eye is currently the oldest airworthy gas balloon in the world.

