

Historic balloon flight ends off Mexican coast

February 1 2015, by Susan Montoya Bryan



This image from video shows the recovery boat collecting the balloon envelope 4 miles offshore in Baja California about 300 miles north of the popular beach destination of Cabo San Lucas Saturday Jan. 31, 2015. The Two Eagles pilots Troy Bradley and Leonid Tiukhtyaev have been picked up by the fishing boat and taken to shore. They are fine, but are being checked out onshore by paramedics as a precaution. The recovery team is working with Mexican authorities on retrieving the capsule and equipment from the landing location in the water. (AP Photo/Richard Berry)

Troy Bradley might have been exhausted and a bit dehydrated, but the words printed on his T-shirt said it all: "Failure is not an option."

The accomplished Albuquerque pilot had set his sights long ago on flying farther and longer in a gas balloon than anyone in history. He and co-pilot Leonid Tiukhtyaev of Russia staked their claim to those records during a nearly seven-day trip across the Pacific Ocean in a helium-filled balloon.

Their adventure ended just after sunrise Saturday when they touched down in the water a few miles (kilometers) off the coast of Mexico's Baja California, 300 miles (480 kilometers) north of the popular beach destination of Cabo San Lucas.

They had hoped for a picture-perfect landing on the beach, but winds parallel to the coast forced the pilots to drop their trailing ropes into the ocean to slow the balloon for a controlled water landing.

Hundreds of miles away at mission control in Albuquerque, cheers erupted. The team declared success once they knew the pilots had been picked up by a fishing boat. Mexican authorities helped to secure the balloon and capsule along with all the equipment aboard to document the historic flight.

"I can say on behalf of the entire mission control center, that we are all very excited and relieved," mission control director Steve Shope said.

Bradley and Tiukhtyaev lifted off from Japan last Sunday. By Friday, they beat the 137-hour duration record set in 1978 by the Double Eagle crew of Ben Abruzzo, Maxie Anderson and Larry Newman in the first balloon flight across the Atlantic. They also easily exceeded the distance record of 5,209 miles (8,383 kilometers) set by the Double Eagle V team during the first trans-Pacific flight in 1981.



This Jan. 8, 2015 photo provided by Tami Bradley-Two Eagles Balloon Team, shows pilots from left, Troy Bradley of Albuquerque, N.M., and Leonid Tiukhtyaev of Russia, before they lift off in a gas balloon in Saga, Japan. The Two Eagles pilots have traveled farther and longer in a gas balloon than anyone in history in a bid to remove the qualifiers that have complicated a century of record keeping in long-distance ballooning. Now they're aiming for a safe landing on the beaches of Baja California. (AP Photo/Tami Bradley-Two Eagles Balloon Team)

By the time they landed, the Two Eagle pilots had traveled 6,646 miles (10,695 kilometers) over six days, 16 hours and 38 minutes.

"These are significant improvements over the existing records," Shope said. "We didn't break them by just a little bit. They were broken by a significant amount."

The official distance and time must be confirmed by the Federation Aeronautique Internationale, a process that could take weeks or months.

"There will be no disputing whatsoever that they connected the dots," said Sam Parks, president of the Southwestern region of the Balloon Federation of America. He pointed to the tracking systems used and the witnesses who watched the launch and the landing.

"We are so proud of what Troy and Leonid have done. They have certainly set the bar high for all of us," Parks said.

Bradley had been planning the trans-Pacific flight for 15 years. He already holds numerous ballooning records, and his list of heroes includes Abruzzo and Anderson.



This Jan. 27, 2015 photo provided by the Two Eagles Balloon Team shows the

sunrise as the helium-filled ballloon carrying Troy Bradley of Albuquerque and Leonid Tiukhtyaev of Russia crosses the Pacific Ocean after taking off from Saga, Japan. The two pilots landed safely off the coast of Mexico early Saturday, Jan. 31, 2015 after an audacious, nearly 7,000-mile-long trip across the Pacific Ocean that shattered two long-standing records for ballooning. The pilots landed 4 miles offshore in Baja California about 300 miles north of the popular beach destination of Cabo San Lucas. (AP Photo/Two Eagles Balloon Team)

"For Troy, it's also his way of paying homage to those who came before him by attempting to go after their records," his wife, Tami Bradley, said.

Tiukhtyaev holds his own records and has participated in many long-distance gas balloon races in the United States and Europe.

Tiukhtyaev said they sent out an SOS after landing Saturday and the fishing boat picked them up. They were both dehydrated, he said.



In this Jan. 26, 2015 photo provided by the Two Eagles Balloon Team, the helium-filled balloon carrying Troy Bradley of Albuquerque and Leonid Tiukhtyaev of Russia passes over Mt. Fuji after taking off from Saga, Japan. The two pilots landed safely off the coast of Mexico early Saturday, Jan. 31, 2015 after an audacious, nearly 7,000-mile-long trip across the Pacific Ocean that shattered two long-standing records for ballooning. The pilots landed 4 miles offshore in Baja California about 300 miles north of the popular beach destination of Cabo San Lucas. (AP Photo/Two Eagles Balloon Team)

The pilots were said to be in good spirits but it was a grueling ordeal given the number of days they spent in the cramped capsule. At high altitudes, they had to wear oxygen masks and bundle up against chilly temperatures. They had sleeping bags, a small onboard heater and a simple toilet.

Family members joked Saturday that the pilots were unshaven and in need of a shower.

The original route took the pilots on a path from Japan, across the Pacific Ocean and toward the Pacific Northwest before they encountered a wall of high pressure. They then made a sweeping right turn and headed south along the California coast for the Mexico landing.



Tami Bradley and her daughter Savannah pose for a picture in Albuquerque, N.M., after celebrating word that pilot Troy Bradley was safe and in a fishing boat headed to the Baja California shore following the water landing of the Two Eagles Balloon on Saturday, Jan. 31, 2015. The balloon surpassed a pair of major distance and duration ballooning records while during a six-day journey across the Pacific Ocean. (AP Photo/Susan Montoya Bryan)



Visitors to the Anderson Abruzzo International Balloon Museum in Albuquerque, N.M., are directed to the mission control center for the Two Eagles Balloon flight on Friday, Jan. 30, 2015. The balloon has surpassed world records for distance and duration during its trip across the Pacific Ocean. It was scheduled to land on Mexico's Baja California peninsula on Saturday, Jan. 31, 2015. (AP Photo/Susan Montoya Bryan)



Members of the Two Eagles Balloon team mission control located in Albuquerque, N.M., discuss the balloon's route as landing preparations are made Friday, Jan. 30, 2015. The balloon has surpassed world records for distance and duration during its trip across the Pacific Ocean. It was scheduled to land on Mexico's Baja California peninsula on Saturday, Jan. 31, 2015. (AP Photo/Susan Montoya Bryan)



Irina Tiukhtyaev, center, and Margarita Shmidt, right, the wife and daughter of Russian balloon pilot Leonid Tiukhtyaev, discuss the landing of the Two Eagles Balloon after monitoring the final moments of the flight at mission control in Albuquerque, N.M., on Saturday, Jan. 31, 2015. Tiukhtyaev and fellow pilot Troy Bradley landed after crossing the Pacific Ocean and surpassing a pair of major ballooning records. (AP Photo/Susan Montoya Bryan)



The Two Eagles Balloon mission control team gets ready to pop the cork on a bottle of champagne in Albuquerque, N.M, following the successful landing of the helium-filled balloon just off the coast of Baja California on Saturday, Jan. 31, 2015. Two pilots, Troy Bradley of Albuquerque and Leonid Tiukhtyaev of Russia, in a helium-filled balloon landed safely off the coast of Mexico early Saturday after an audacious, nearly 7,000-mile (11,265-kilometer)-long trip across the Pacific Ocean that shattered two long-standing records for ballooning. (AP Photo/Susan Montoya Bryan)



Two Eagles Balloon mission control director Steve Shope discusses the landing of the helium-filled balloon after it crossed the Pacific Ocean en route to surpassing two major ballooning records for distance and duration during a news conference in Albuquerque, N.M., on Saturday, Jan. 31, 2015. Shope said the balloon touched down in the water about 4 miles off the coast of Baja California on Saturday morning. (AP Photo/Susan Montoya Bryan)



This Jan. 26, 2015 photo provided by the Two Eagles Balloon Team shows a view upward of the helium-filled balloon carrying Troy Bradley of Albuquerque and Leonid Tiukhtyaev of Russia as it crosses the Pacific Ocean after taking off from Saga, Japan. The two pilots landed safely off the coast of Mexico early Saturday, Jan. 31, 2015 after an audacious, nearly 7,000-mile-long trip across the Pacific Ocean that shattered two long-standing records for ballooning. The pilots landed 4 miles offshore in Baja California about 300 miles north of the popular beach destination of Cabo San Lucas. (AP Photo/Two Eagles Balloon Team)



In this Jan. 26, 2015 photo provided by the Two Eagles Balloon Team, the helium-filled balloon carrying Troy Bradley of Albuquerque and Leonid Tiukhtyaev of Russia crosses the Pacific Ocean after taking off from Saga, Japan. The two pilots landed safely off the coast of Mexico early Saturday, Jan. 31, 2015, after an audacious, nearly 7,000-mile-long trip across the Pacific Ocean that shattered two long-standing records for ballooning. The pilots landed 4 miles offshore in Baja California about 300 miles north of the popular beach destination of Cabo San Lucas. (AP Photo/Two Eagles Balloon Team)

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