

Balloonists ride winds of history

By John Daniszewski,
Los Angeles Times

CAIRO, Egypt — Balloonists Bertrand Piccard and Brian Jones in their shimmering silver Breitling Orbiter 3 descended safely Sunday in a remote Egyptian oasis, completing the dream of becoming the first balloonists ever to circle the globe and the longest nonstop flight ever without refueling.

Their 9-ton, helium-and-hot-air craft, nearly as tall as a 20-story building, achieved the goal of circumnavigation that had eluded balloonists in at least 17 attempts since 1981.

The landing after nearly 20 days aloft was in the Dakhla Oasis, 350 miles southwest of Cairo, shortly after 1 a.m. EST, flight controllers said. Touchdown was north of Mut, the capital of the oasis that was once an outpost of ancient Rome.

They were an unlikely pair. Piccard, a 41-year-old Swiss psychiatrist with a penchant for hypnosis, is the son and grandson of aeronautical and nautical pioneers, and aimed to add his own world record to his family's impressive list of accomplishments.

Jones, 51, a British grandfather of three and a balloon-flying instructor,

is a man described by his wife as "not an adventurer." He joined the expedition only at the last minute in December, when a spot opened up for him.

The powerful jet stream sped the Orbiter across North Africa at 125 mph at an altitude of 36,100 feet. The balloonists began their descent after crossing the Egyptian border from Libyan airspace. The race to circle the globe intensified two years ago, when U.S. brewer Anheuser-Busch offered a \$1 million prize for the first team of balloonists to circle the Earth by the end of the 20th century.

Having transcended political barriers, zigzagged around storms and found a providential breeze through a Central American calm, the Orbiter clinched the around-the-world record at 4:54 a.m. EST Saturday, when it crossed the "finish line" of 9 degrees 27 minutes west longitude over Mauritania.

By then the pilots had flown 19 days, 1 hour and 49 minutes, and had covered more than 26,000 miles, each taking six-hour shifts at the controls. "I am with the angels and just completely happy," Piccard exulted. "Just a fabulous way to finish." Jones added.

Asked if they had had any chance for celebration inside their cramped,

pressurized capsule, Jones said: "I think what I am going to do is phone back the control room in a minute and tell my wife I love her, and then have a cup of tea like any good Englishman."

Piccard burst into tears Friday, when it became clear from meteorological reports that they would be able to complete the circuit of the Earth. "We can hardly believe our dream has finally come true. We almost got lost in the global problems and then the slow winds of the Pacific and the bad heading over the Gulf of Mexico," the two pilots said in a message to their control room. "But each time, with God's help and the great teamwork, the balloon got back on course for success. We are the privileged two of a wonderful and efficient team that we would like to thank with all of our hearts."

Their feat left better-known balloonists graciously envious. Richard Branson, the celebrity businessman who founded Virgin Records and Virgin Atlantic Airways and who has made three failed balloon attempts to circle the Earth, called their trip "one of the greatest achievements."

"They have had to put up with the elements. They have had to put up with technological problems. And

they have had to put up with themselves," he said. "They've done all three magnificently."

American millionaire Steve Fossett, who had teamed with Branson in a failed attempt in December, credited Jones and Piccard with winning "one of the greatest competitions in aviation history."

"We've done it," said flight director Alan Noble, who sprayed champagne on meteorologists and reporters gathered at the flight control center at the airport in Geneva. It was Piccard's third attempt to circle the globe in a Breitling Orbiter in three years.

The first in 1997 ended in disaster almost as soon as it began, with a helium leak that forced him to splash down in the Mediterranean. The second bid got farther, from Switzerland to Myanmar in Southeast Asia last year.

Unlike those problem-plagued flights, Orbiter 3's journey seemed remarkably charmed. Part of its success undoubtedly was because of Piccard's personal diplomacy, winning permission from authorities in Beijing to use a corridor of Chinese airspace for a faster, more direct route to the Pacific.

That permission, which was

extended to all balloonists, was almost withdrawn after the Branson-Fossett team in December strayed out of the defined corridor and then declined a Chinese request to land.

Piccard and Jones lifted off March 1 from Chateau d'Oex in the Swiss Alps, flying south and west to Morocco before catching a jet stream that sent them soaring across North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, India, China and onto the Pacific, which they crossed in six days.

East of Central America, the balloonists lost their favorable winds and became stalled between Mexico and the Caribbean, threatening the entire enterprise. It was the voyage's most pessimistic moment, until the pilots caught an air current that nudged the craft back on course across the Atlantic.

It was not only the longest balloon flight ever, but the longest nonstop flight by any aircraft without refueling, said a statement by the Orbiter's sponsor, Breitling. The Swiss maker of watches and precision equipment has never revealed how much it has spent on the around-the-world quest.

The Orbiter beat the previous flight record of 17 days, 18 hours and 25 minutes aloft, which was set two weeks ago by British pilots Andy

Elson and Colin Prescott before their balloon came down in the Pacific.

Piccard, whose bald and boyish countenance has captured the Swiss imagination, follows in a line of adventurers. His father, Jacques, now 76, in 1960 set the record for the deepest ocean descent by reaching a depth of 35,797 feet in a bathyscaphe. The deep-oceangoing craft was invented by Bertrand Piccard's grandfather, physicist Auguste Piccard.

Along with U.S. Navy Lt. Don Walsh, Jacques Piccard descended into the Mariana Trench in the Pacific, the lowest point on the Earth's surface. Auguste Piccard was the father of pressurized flight. In 1931, he rose more than 51,000 feet into the stratosphere in an airtight cabin attached to a balloon, the first human ever to fly so high.

Jones, a former Royal Air Force pilot, began ballooning in 1986 and became involved in the Orbiter project in 1997. He was only named to join the flight with Piccard on Dec. 9, after a disagreement over flight tactics between Piccard and the previously scheduled British pilot, Tony Brown, prompted Brown to step aside.

Bomb in Caucasus market kills at least 60, injures 100

By Robyn Dixon,
Los Angeles Times

MOSCOW — Hellish scenes unfolded Friday in the heart of the northern Caucasus, Russia's most volatile region, when a bomb exploded in the middle of an outdoor market, killing at least 60 people and injuring more than 100.

As Russian television showed horrific images of bloodied victims being wheeled on vegetable carts from the market in the city of Vladikavkaz, the blast sent shock waves all the way to the Kremlin, underscoring Russia's impotence to rein in violence and terror in the region.

Security officials in Vladikavkaz, the capital of North Ossetia, immediately ruled out gang warfare between rival mafia groups, claiming that the bomb was beyond the scale of local racketeers and must have been planted by outside terrorists. However, there were no leads on who was responsible.

"It was an awful sight. The devastation and death created something like a circle of hell about 30 meters (100 feet) in diameter," said local journalist Igor V. Lyanov, who was at the scene after the explosion.

"People were really terrified. In the first few minutes after the explosion, many people rushed for the gates to get away from the scene as soon as possible," he said, adding that many survivors feared being called as witnesses.

The northern Caucasus has been riven by ethnic hatred, mafia violence, assassinations, kidnappings and warfare since the fall of the Soviet Union. Vladikavkaz is about 40 miles southeast of Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, where Russia waged war against guerrilla separatists from 1994 until 1996.

Lyanov described grisly tableaux after the bomb exploded about 11:30 on a busy market morning. "There were puddles of blood everywhere, limbs and unrecognizable chunks of human flesh scattered about, with shreds of bloodied, dirtied clothing meshed with the debris of market stalls," he said. The area was also strewn with twisted metal from shattered stalls and vehicles.

Police on the scene said it was difficult to know exactly how many people had been killed because bodies were shattered by the power of the blast. The corridors of hospitals were crammed with carts bearing the injured and dead, as more and more victims arrived.

"It is like being at war. It seems like we're on the front line here," said Lana Guzyeva, assistant to the chief doctor at the city's largest hospital. "The injured keep arriving, and most of them are very critical cases. Some don't have legs and arms. Some have broken skulls and terrible torn wounds all over their bodies."

Police estimated that the bomb

was equivalent to between 15 and 22 pounds of TNT. A brick wall of the market's central trading hall, about 50 feet high, was flattened by the blast.

In a two-story haberdashery opposite the market, all the windows were shattered. Shop owner Tamerlan Gudiyevev said he feared his business would be ruined.

"Who will want to come and do business and invest in the city where innocent people are slaughtered by the dozen in broad daylight?" Gudiyevev asked. "I fear that war has come to our threshold. I am scared witless. I want to run away from this dead marketplace and this dead shop."

As dozens of police, rescue workers and security officials combed the wreckage, thick crowds of people surrounded the market, some of them weeping, concerned about missing relatives. Rescuers used market pushcarts to ferry the injured to ambulances and later used the same carts to clear the debris.

The northern Caucasus region is highly unstable. Deep tensions have run between North Ossetia and neighboring Ingushetia since a brief war between them in 1992, but the mistrust and hatred go back centuries.

Friday's attack came as Russia and Chechnya were negotiating a meeting between Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny M. Primakov and the Chechen president, Aslan Maskhadov, after the kidnapping of a Russian Interior Ministry official, Maj. Gen. Gennady Shpigun, at the door of his plane in Grozny two weeks ago. There were reports that the meeting would take place within days.

Chechnya, devastated by war, is disintegrating as competing warlords, each with his own private army, vie for control. Since the Chechen war ended, the northern Caucasus has slipped further out of the grip of the central authorities, who have proved powerless to stop a wave of kidnappings and violence in Chechnya, the neighboring republic of Dagestan and across the region.

Russian forces are stationed throughout the northern Caucasus but not in Chechnya, from which they were withdrawn in 1966 after the war ended. All over Russia, markets like the one in Vladikavkaz are controlled by mafia racketeers, and violence is not uncommon. However, local authorities discounted any suggestion of gangland violence in Friday's attack, asserting that terrorists from outside North Ossetia were involved.

Speaking haltingly in a televised address, President Boris N. Yeltsin vowed after the bombing to wage a ruthless fight against terrorism. "I am deeply shaken by this barbaric act, which has killed and injured dozens of people. I think it is an attempt to destabilize the situation in the northern Caucasus and to sow hostility and hatred," Yeltsin said in a telegram he sent offering condolences to North Ossetian President Alexander Dzasokhov.

Conservatives shield Bush's abortion stand from right wing

By Thomas B. Edsall,
The Washington Post

Key leaders of the conservative establishment have begun an aggressive defense of George W. Bush's abortion stand in an effort to blunt attacks on the Texas governor's presidential campaign from the Republican Party's right wing.

Just as such candidates as conservative activist Gary Bauer, publishing heir Malcolm S. "Steve" Forbes and television commentator Patrick J. Buchanan are beginning to gear up to use abortion to slow the momentum behind Bush, such anti-abortion luminaries as Christian Coalition chairman Pat Robertson and David N. O'Steen, executive director of the National Right to Life Committee, have stepped in to defend Bush's abortion position.

"Governor Bush has a pro-life record and has taken a pro-life position," O'Steen said in a statement calling on other GOP candidates and abortion opponents to "refrain from attacking pro-life presidential candidates." Robertson, appearing on CNN's Larry King show, said he "totally" agrees with Bush's approach to abortion; that until the composition

of the Supreme Court changes, "we might as well take the incremental approach."

The abortion issue is a critical hurdle facing all the Republican presidential candidates. Among GOP activists who dominate caucuses in Iowa and other states and who play a large role in party primaries everywhere, opposition to abortion is much higher than it is among general election voters.

As a result, those seeking the nomination must negotiate a minefield in which it is virtually mandatory to oppose abortion to win. However, in preparation for the general election campaign, many strategists say it is essential for the nominee to avoid taking rigid stands that could prove fatal with more centrist voters.

A key stumbling block has been the question whether a candidate would demand that judicial appointees explicitly oppose abortion, a commitment many anti-abortion groups want candidates to make. Bush has not made that commitment. His policy as governor, according to campaign aides, is to appoint "judges who share his philosophy that judges should interpret the law and not

legislate from the bench."

A statement released by Bush's exploratory committee said that his "consistent position on abortion is he is pro-life with the exception of rape, incest and the life of the mother." But the statement continued, the Roe vs. Wade decision legalizing abortion "will not be overturned until hearts are changed. Until then, we should focus on ways to reduce abortion."

On another key issue, whether the Republican Party's official platform position on abortion, which supports a human life amendment, should be retained, the Bush statement was vague: "The Republican Party should maintain its pro-life tenor."

While Bush and his supporters have been taking steps to moot the abortion issue, the early jockeying over abortion has revealed weaknesses in Elizabeth Dole's consideration of a presidential candidacy.

In the crucial week after Dole announced formation of her exploratory committee, not only has she been unwilling, or unprepared, to spell out a position on this issue so crucial to GOP presidential politics, no one on her staff has been available to explain the factors guiding her thinking.

Snowstorm stalls search in Yosemite case

By Eric Bailey,
Los Angeles Times

LONG BARN, Calif. — Attempts to crack the case of three Yosemite sightseers who vanished a month ago slowed Saturday as a snowstorm stalled a search of rugged terrain where their burned out car and two charred bodies were found.

Investigators continued to gather evidence from the car, but called off an extensive hunt after three inches of snow fell on the Tuolumne County forest where the vehicle was torched and abandoned.

Law enforcement officials said it will be at least Monday before they can identify the bodies discovered in the trunk of the red Pontiac Grand Prix. An FBI official said the wait was

caused because dental records for the three females, Carol Sund, 42, her 15-year-old daughter Juliana and Silvia Pelosso, 16, a family friend from Argentina, had to be flown in from the agency's crime lab outside Washington.

Those records will be required to identify the bodies, which were burned beyond recognition. But authorities believe they are two of the missing trio.

"To find the car was both a relief and a very sad thing for us," said James M. Maddock, the FBI's top agent on the case. "Obviously everybody held out the hope, no matter how remote, that we would be able to find somebody alive. There is relief in the sense that it brings closure for the families and also brings us an

opportunity to identify the people who are responsible for this."

Authorities said they conducted an extensive sweep after the rental car was discovered Thursday, but have so far failed to find a third victim. With snow on the ground Saturday, they were concerned that searchers might inadvertently trample any potential evidence, thus the decision to delay the hunt.

Investigators completed their study of the car Saturday, and it was moved in the afternoon. A team of FBI fingerprint experts plan to go over the car again in the coming days. Forensic experts found numerous personal items in and around the car, Sheriff Richard L. Rogers said, but he declined to say what they were.

Tips have poured in at a rate of

about 300 a day since the discovery of the car. Penny Mann, who owns a gift shop in nearby Twain Harte, said the trio walked into her store on Feb. 16 and browsed. "I saw that photo in the newspaper and I told my husband, 'That's her. That's the woman I saw,'" Mann said Saturday. She tried to report the sighting to the FBI, but couldn't get through the hot line, which was continuously busy. She eventually gave up, but last Sunday tried again and succeeded in making a report to the FBI.

Officials say the last confirmed sighting of the Eureka woman and her two young companions was the evening of Feb. 15 in a restaurant at the lodge where they were staying outside Yosemite.

Secret Mickey Mouse talks in Washington this week

By Al Kamen,
The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — What was Walt Disney Chairman Michael Eisner doing on Capitol Hill Tuesday that was so hush-hush his office refused to even confirm he was in Washington?

Readers have sent in several sightings so far. Eisner and Disney officials were seen briefing lawmakers on high-tech and other issues. Eisner spent some time chatting with Rep. Thomas M. Davis III, R-Va., a sensible thing to do since

Davis is co-chairman of the House Information Technology Working Group, and Eisner is much interested in such matters.

Other readers reported Eisner was at the White House in a one-on-one with Vice President Gore in the afternoon, no staff allowed, complaining about National Telecommunications and Information Administration chief Larry Irving's letter to the Federal Communications Commission last month.

Seems Irving's letter, reflecting administration policy, urged keeping

in place the regulatory framework on broadcast television networks. The Disney folks apparently don't like the restrictions on things like ownership of local stations and such (Disney owns ABC-TV), pointing out that Internet and cable competitors don't have to jump similar regulatory hoops.

Eisner, who recently co-hosted a fund-raiser for Gore rival former senator Bill Bradley, D-N.J., in Los Angeles, might have been trying to let Gore and the administration know there are alternatives to Gore-ism.

Later Tuesday, Eisner was in the

banquet room at the Rayburn House Office Building, as the featured speaker at the monthly John Quincy Adams Society dinner. The society, founded by moderate Republican Rep. Amo Houghton, N.Y., had about 15 lawmakers and dozens of other folks there to hear Eisner's chat about telecommunications and the entertainment industry.

All this so far seems pretty straightforward for the head of a megacompany, hardly worth a Mickey Mouse demand for secrecy.