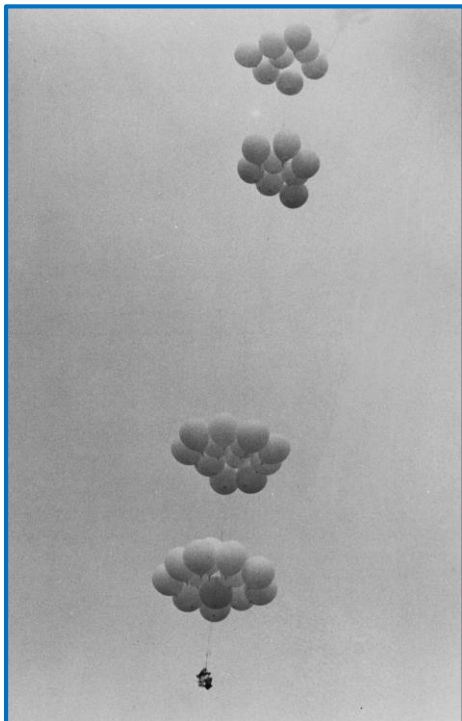


# THE FLYING LAWN CHAIR

It sounds like an unbelievable story, but it is true. And many of you will remember it.

In July 1982, Larry Walters, a 33-year-old truck driver from North Hollywood, California, decided he wanted to see his neighborhood from a new perspective. He went down to the local Army surplus store one morning and bought 45 used weather balloons. That afternoon, he strapped himself into a lawn chair, to which several of his friends tied the now-filled balloons.

Walters took along a six-pack of beer, a peanut-and-butter-and-jelly sandwich, and a BB gun, figuring he could shoot the balloons one at a time when he was ready to land. He assumed the balloons would lift him about 100 feet in the air, and was caught off guard when the chair soared 11,000 feet into the air – smack into the middle of the air traffic pattern at Los Angeles International Airport.



Too frightened to shoot any of the balloons, he stayed airborne for two hours. The Federal Aviation Administration was not amused. The flying lawn chair was spotted by Trans World Airlines and Delta Air Lines pilots at 16,000 feet above sea level. Walters said he was beginning to get numb before he started shooting out balloons. The chair drifted downward, became entangled in power lines, and dangled five feet above the ground, allowing Walters to get out safely.

“Since I was 13 years old, I’ve dreamed of going up into the clear blue sky in a weather balloon,” he said. “By the grace of God, I fulfilled my dream. But I wouldn’t do this again for anything.”

The stunt earned Walters a \$1,500 fine from the FAA, the top prize from the Bonehead Club of Dallas, the altitude record for gas-filled, clustered balloons, and international admiration. Walters abandoned his truck-driving job to go on the lecture circuit. In later years, he hiked the San Gabriel Mountains and did volunteer work for the U.S. Forest Service.

(more)

Sadly, Walters died in October 1993 after hiking to a remote spot in Angeles National Forest and shooting himself in the heart. He was an Army veteran who served in Vietnam, never married and had no children.

His story prompts several observations:

1. In a spirit of adventure, Walters accomplished his childhood dream, even though most people would characterize what he did as a foolhardy stunt.
2. Imagine what the pilots – and perhaps some passengers – in commercial airliners must have thought (after a second look out the window) at a man in a lawn chair flying at 16,000 feet, or 3 miles, in altitude.
3. While we do not understand what drove Walters to take his own life, we do know that he had a desire to help others through his military service and his volunteer work for the Forest Service. And that would be a better characterization of his life.

*Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others* (Philippians 2:4 ESV).

–Beecher Hunter