

MEMORIAL

Thomas Mark Gabel

(1947-1995)

by Betsy Kleiss



There is a planned memorial flight for Tom Gabel's family on Saturday morning, April 15th in Morris, Illinois. Pilots will meet at the Morris, Illinois Holiday Inn (I-80 and Route 47) at 6:00 a.m. There will be a post flight gathering to be held at 9:00 a.m. at the Eagles Hall to eulogize

Tom. Jim and Marion Smith met Tom Gabel in Africa last November. He pointed at the Flying Tomato on Jim's shirt and said that he sold Joe and Ralph their first balloon and taught them how to fly. Tom Gabel passed away on March 9th from complications related to Malaria.

Following is a portion of the article printed in the March 16th Morris News.

The family of Thomas Mark Gabel, 48, received word that he died from complications related to malaria near Nairobi, Kenya, East Africa, on March 9, 1995.

Tom was on his third tour of duty with TransWorld Safaris, LTD., where he was a hot air balloon pilot carrying passengers over the Masai Mara Game Preserve.

Born January 14, 1947, he was the son of Elizabeth (Nichols) and Fred C. Gabel of Morris, Illinois. He received his education at Immaculate Conception and Center Schools and graduated from Morris Community High School with the Class of 1965. He attended Joliet Junior College, Western Illinois University and Aptos College, Aptos, California.

In 1970 Tom saw a hot air balloon in the skies over Corpus Christi, Texas. He followed the balloon until it landed, whereupon he introduced himself to the pilot expressing his wonder and curiosity.

This chance encounter and subsequent training was the beginning of a long and successful professional career in the sport of hot air ballooning.

He returned to Illinois later that year and became the first hot air balloon pilot licensed in the State of Illinois, 10th in the United States, and 409th in the world. As a pioneer in the "Golden Age of Ballooning," he trained many of the top balloon

pilots of the day. Tom began racing competitively nation-wide, achieving many titles including, Midwest Champion at Wisconsin Dells in 1976, a record shattering National Championship at Indianola, Iowa, the 7-Up Championship in 1974; and the International Balloon Fiesta in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 1975.

In 1978, Tom was a member of the team representing the United States at the World Balloon Championships in Sweden where they won first place.

Gabel established an NTSB (National Transportation Safety Board) designated repair station, while promoting and organizing competitive balloon races throughout the US.

In 1977 he moved to Lookout Mountain, Tennessee, where he was corporate aeronaut for Rock City Gardens. He represented the famous tourist attraction piloting the "Rainbow" balloon in promotions in 16 states.

He piloted "Rainbow" the length of the Great Smoky Mountains, with its normal heavy cloud cover, to become the first person to accomplish that solo flight.

Tom was featured in the premiere issue of "Quest" magazine for his outstanding achievements in ballooning.

He organized the Kool Pro Tour in 1979, the first professional national competition in ballooning; top professional pilots competed for prize money while exposing ballooning to an even wider audience and further legitimizing the sport.

In 1992 Tom joined TransWorld Safaris, LTD., at the Mara Serena Lodge near Nairobi, Kenya, East Africa. In May and June of 1994, he served as operations manager for Hod-Hod Solomon Balloon Company in Luxor, Egypt, flying sightseeing excursions over the Valley of the Kings.

He then returned to fly the "big winds" of Kenya until the day of his death on March 9, 1995. (His last flight was on March 8th).

Tom was regarded by many as one of the foremost precision pilots in the world. He touched many lives with the "magic" of the sport.

"Ballooning is my love and my life," Tom claimed. He logged over 4,000 hours in the air in his lifetime.

Funeral arrangements include a memorial mass ascension by the Kenya balloonists over the Masai Mara National Park with Tom's son and daughter. Tom's ashes will be spread over the game preserve he loved to fly over.