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A French Daredevil
Hopes to Live to Tell
Tale of 25-Mile Jump

Since 1988, Michel Fournier Has Strived to Parachute From Edge of Outer Space

By DANIEL MICHAELS
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BENDEJUN, France -- No human being has fallen farther than Joe Kittinger, but people keep trying.

On Aug. 16, 1960, the U.S. Air Force test pilot floated in his 20-story-tall helium balloon to the edge of space, more than 19 miles up, higher than any man had ever gone. Clad in a space suit, he stood at the edge of his open-air gondola and said to himself: "Lord, take care of me now." Then he jumped.

He quickly accelerated to 714 miles an hour -- becoming the first person to break the sound barrier without a vehicle -- before a small parachute opened to stabilize his fall. Four minutes later, a bigger parachute opened, and soon after that he was safely back on Earth. His historic jump showed that, if necessary, future pilots or astronauts could survive ejecting at the top of the atmosphere.

Now a Frenchman named Michel Fournier aims to top the feat. In 1988, two years after the U.S. Space Shuttle Challenger exploded on ascent 11 miles up, managers of Europe's space program selected the paratrooper as one of three people to leap from 25 miles up. Scientists wanted to see whether an ejection higher than Col. Kittinger's jump is survivable. After doing initial tests with lifelike dummies, Europe abandoned its ambitions for manned spaceflight and scrubbed the jump.

Mr. Fournier wasn't so easily grounded, and in 1992 he retired to pursue the plunge solo. He has since amassed \$12 million in gear -- and impoverished himself. He sold his house, antique furniture and gun

[Michel Fournier in his jumpsuit.]

collection to buy the mothballed European jump equipment and a massive balloon capable of rising higher than planes can fly. He cajoled sponsors to pitch in high-tech gear, including a pressure suit and life-support system that took nearly three years to develop.

"He is further along than anyone in 46 years," says Col. Kittinger, who at age 77 gets frequent calls from people interested in breaking his record. But the tireless prep work may not be enough, Col. Kittinger notes: "The poor guy has been plagued by a string of bad luck."

Unfriendly French regulators, high winds, a key assistant's heart trouble and a ripped balloon have conspired to keep Mr. Fournier grounded for six years. Yet the 61-year-old marathoner and champion pistol marksman, who has more than 8,500 sky dives behind him and holds the French record for highest jump (more than 39,000 feet), remains focused on his pursuit.

Michel Fournier in his jumpsuit.

"It is my passion," he says sitting in the kitchen of a rundown house near the French Riviera that he rents on the cheap from his lawyer.

Belly-flopping from the edge of space isn't just an incredibly long parachute ride. At that altitude, conditions quickly turn deadly. Above 40,000 feet, the atmosphere is so thin that unprotected people lose consciousness in around 12 seconds. Even with an air supply, nitrogen bubbles may form in the blood and soft tissue if the jumper hasn't prepared by inhaling pure oxygen for several hours. If the jumper is unprotected above 50,000 feet or so, saliva boils off the tongue, and body parts begin swelling painfully. Lungs may hemorrhage as they and the skull fill with liquid.

On Col. Kittinger's ascent to his record leap, his right glove broke, causing his exposed hand to balloon. A Soviet officer died two years later from pressure sickness in a similar attempt when his face mask cracked. An American sky diver died from decompression trying to beat the record in 1966.

Col. Kittinger is a hard act to follow. After breaking more ballooning records, he signed up for active duty in Vietnam, flying 483 missions before getting shot down in 1972. He says that during 11 months in the "Hanoi Hilton" prison, he stayed sane by plotting a balloon journey. In 1984, at age 56, he set a new record by ballooning across the Atlantic solo.

Now semiretired in Florida, he takes children for barnstorming rides in his 1920s open-cockpit biplane. He says he told Mr. Fournier the same thing he tells everyone who wants to outdo his record jump: "Space is hostile."

To prepare, Mr. Fournier has checked his equipment by spending hours locked in a pressure chamber at near-vacuum conditions. In another test, he donned his three-layer suit, which consists of a thermal skin that can keep him warm for 10 minutes at minus 150 degrees Fahrenheit. Over that he put on a pressure suit shielded by a windproof shell that remains pliable at low temperature. Then he stood in a wind tunnel as minus 22 degree air blasted him at 100 mph, producing an effective temperature of -238 degrees.

Mr. Fournier undergoes batteries of medical tests and avoids salt and sugar, in part because nitrogen bubbles form quickly in fat cells. He wakes daily around 5 a.m. for two hours of jogging in the ravines near his house, followed by an hour-long workout and yoga.

Then the harder part begins: working the phone. Mr. Fournier is scrounging for the last \$150,000 he needs to fly his team of about 50 experts and technicians to the jump site in Saskatchewan, feed them and put them up

in hotel rooms.

"It's nothing," he says of the sum. But aside from his jump equipment in storage, "I don't have one kopek left," he laughs. "I sold everything."

Mr. Fournier recalls that when he retired as colonel to pursue his dream, friends told him he was crazy. But contacts from his stint in the space project proved valuable. Mr. Fournier has befriended dozens of astronauts, engineers, doctors and technicians from as far away as Brazil. They contribute research, time and equipment.

Mr. Fournier was ready to jump in France in 2000, when French authorities grew worried about safety on the ground and refused permission. Through connections, Mr. Fournier met authorities in Canada, who welcomed the jump. But the move increased his costs.

In August 2002, Mr. Fournier's team assembled at the tiny airport of North Battleford, Saskatchewan. After three weeks of preparations and waiting for winds to calm, technicians began inflating the 614-foot-tall balloon early one September morning. As the one-ton plastic bag filled with helium, a hose snapped off. By the time repairs had been made, winds had picked up and didn't abate.

The next spring, a planned jump got postponed after the launch director suffered a heart attack. The team finally returned in August 2003.

Long before dawn on a breezeless morning, doctors taped electrodes on Mr. Fournier's body to monitor his vital signs, and technicians helped him don the 130-pound suit and life-support gear. At 3:30 a.m., a forklift truck hoisted him into his pressurized gondola, which looks like a cylindrical telephone booth covered in silver quilting. Mr. Fournier sat inside, breathing pure oxygen.

As the balloon started swelling and crews untethered the top, it tore. Mr. Fournier recalls that his only thought was of where to raise more money for another attempt.

Today, Mr. Fournier is back working his network to fund a jump as early as May. Examining a piece of the ripped balloon he keeps under his couch, he is certain he will eventually make the jump.

Col. Kittinger figures the Frenchman has a pretty good chance. "There are lots of wannabes," Col. Kittinger says. "But there aren't many Michel Fourniers."

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