

Nini Boesman, Balloon Pilot Extraordinaire, Passes Away at 92

By Maureen Lynch

Anyone who has ever collected or even scrutinized balloon mail at an exhibit or a dealer's bourse has doubtless seen covers flown by the Boesmans. Nini and her husband Jan flew together, and also on their own, sharing some bordstempels (personal postmark of a pilot or balloon certifying the cover was carried by that pilot or balloon), while utilizing individual ones for other flights as appropriate. But Nini stood out in an aviation community largely run by men in her generation. She stood out because she was fearless and a top notch pilot. Jan Boesman stood out for his devotion to and promotion of flown mail (by balloon and other means) covers, and both balloonists were popular, congenial personalities. But Nini was recognized as a superb pilot, and earned the respect of the ballooning fraternity in Europe.

Over a career of many decades, Nini flew in countries scattered over the globe, She worked to document those covers flown in all their travels, forming the nucleus of a reference book which came to be known as the World Post Balloon Catalog. Produced by Jan Boesman, it lists many prominent flights and known covers carried, organized alphabetically by country. Throughout, the Boesmans' contributions are seen. Even after Jan passed away, Nini stayed active in flying, and took over additional responsibilities in their regional balloon club in the Hague, so as to foster the growth of the sport.

But let us start at the beginning – Nini Visscher met Jan Boesman in 1936, when she was 18. Two years later, she made her first balloon flight with him. It lasted all of 10 minutes, but led to greater things – they married May 18, 1946, commencing their honeymoon with a balloon flight – complete with Charles Dollfus as pilot! In one interview, Nini said she had made five flights before WW II broke out. Nini earned her pilot's rating two years later – the first woman in the Netherlands to hold a gas pilot's rating. It took her far – over the course of her life, she made no fewer than 9 Alpine crossings by balloon; five landings were in Italy, the first one in 1962. Murren, Switzerland was a favorite launch site (a small town tucked against the side of the Alpine mountains). An annual gas balloon meet launches from there, The Dolder Balloon Week. "Absolute silence and you could smell the snow," she described the first flight.

Nini flew in numerous countries – for decades, when it was not easy to arrange for hydrogen or any other LTA gas to be delivered in quantity to allow for inflation of a gas balloon. In 1970 she flew in India, in conjunction with the FAI Conference held in New Delhi. Neil Armstrong was at the event, to receive the first FAI gold medal. He gladly accepted an invitation to fly with the Boesmans in a gas balloon, but upon close inspection of the aircraft, he stated that not for a million dollars would he get in the basket!

Vishwa Gupta, the Indian delegate to the conference and an avid glider pilot, took his place with alacrity. So enthused was he from the 6-hour flight, Gupta came to the United States to get instruction sufficient to earn his balloon rating, and take up the sport in India.

Nini flew in isolated areas, she flew alone and with passengers, and she was a regular fixture at many European gas events. She flew in the 1983 Gordon Bennett race from Paris (in this event, Maxie Anderson and co-pilot Don Ida were killed in a balloon accident). She also flew regularly from St. Niklaas, in its annual balloon event (begun to celebrate the end of WWI in 1949) every September.

Nini was awarded the FAI's Montgolfier Diplome in 1963 for gas flying accomplishment – that same year, she was nominated for the Harmon Trophy. Other awards and recognitions were presented to her, as she moved around the globe always flying in new places.

When husband Jan passed away in 1976, Nini took over much of the administrative work and provided the guidance for the Hague Balloon Club and the small but growing balloon pilot community in the Netherlands. She continued to fly and promote gas flying, and mentoring new pilots coming into the sport. She even found time for two newcomers to St. Niklaas in 1986, Chris Lynch and me, to give us advice on flying out of the city square and procedures once away from town.

Balloon post distinctions

Nini and Jan Boesman had some bordsdtempels in common, but also each had their own bordstempel. If they wished to make an event larger, or to get in more time for their respective log books(!) they would fly 2 separate balloons at an event. They used different colored ink for the on-board cancels as well, and for most events Jon was known to make up custom cancels for the individual flight. Generally, Nini left the details of the mail cover processing to Jan, although making sure her flown covers were marked with her bordstempel. There are both known in large and small sizes, depending on the cover they were applied to; also some are theirs alone, and some are theirs as pilots of the Hague Balloon Club. In some instances the bordstempel is for the balloon they flew rather than the pilot, and it is common to find either Nini or Jon's signature on the covers.

It is noteworthy to point out that on early covers – up to about 1949 from the examples we have seen – Nini signed her name some of the time with a hyphenated last name, Boesman-Visscher. After several years the Visscher was dropped, but it gives evidence of her strong sense of identity. Also the fact that on these flights, though there were 2-4 pilots in the basket, she was the designated pilot of that flight.

By the time 1998 came, Nini decided it was best to hang up her instruments while she was ahead of the game; after 50 years of piloting balloons, she acknowledged the milestone and took her clean flying record of over 1000 flights, and retired from active gas ballooning. She was still to make the occasional excursion in the company of friends, however. Honors continued to accrue, as well; in 1991, she and husband Jan (posthumously) were inducted into the Soukup and Thomas Balloon and Airship Museum's Hall of Fame. Traveling to Mitchell, S.D. for the honor, she was presented the award by Jacques Soukup, who at the time was President of the FAI's CIA Committee (Committee International Aerostatique).

Nini passed away after a short illness, on June 2. Her life left a strong mark on the field of aviation, and a large footprint on such a small sporting community as ballooning. Her accomplishments did not come in one burst of activity, but accrued over decades of action and involvement, and steady promotion of the sport she loved so well. And it is thanks to her and spouse Jon that we have such a wealth of balloon post covers, flown around the world. Their flights enriched the collections and exhibits of airmail collectors worldwide, and each cover represents a story - not just a bag of mail.

She was a superb pilot, a brave woman, and a good friend to many. We will miss her, and remember her.