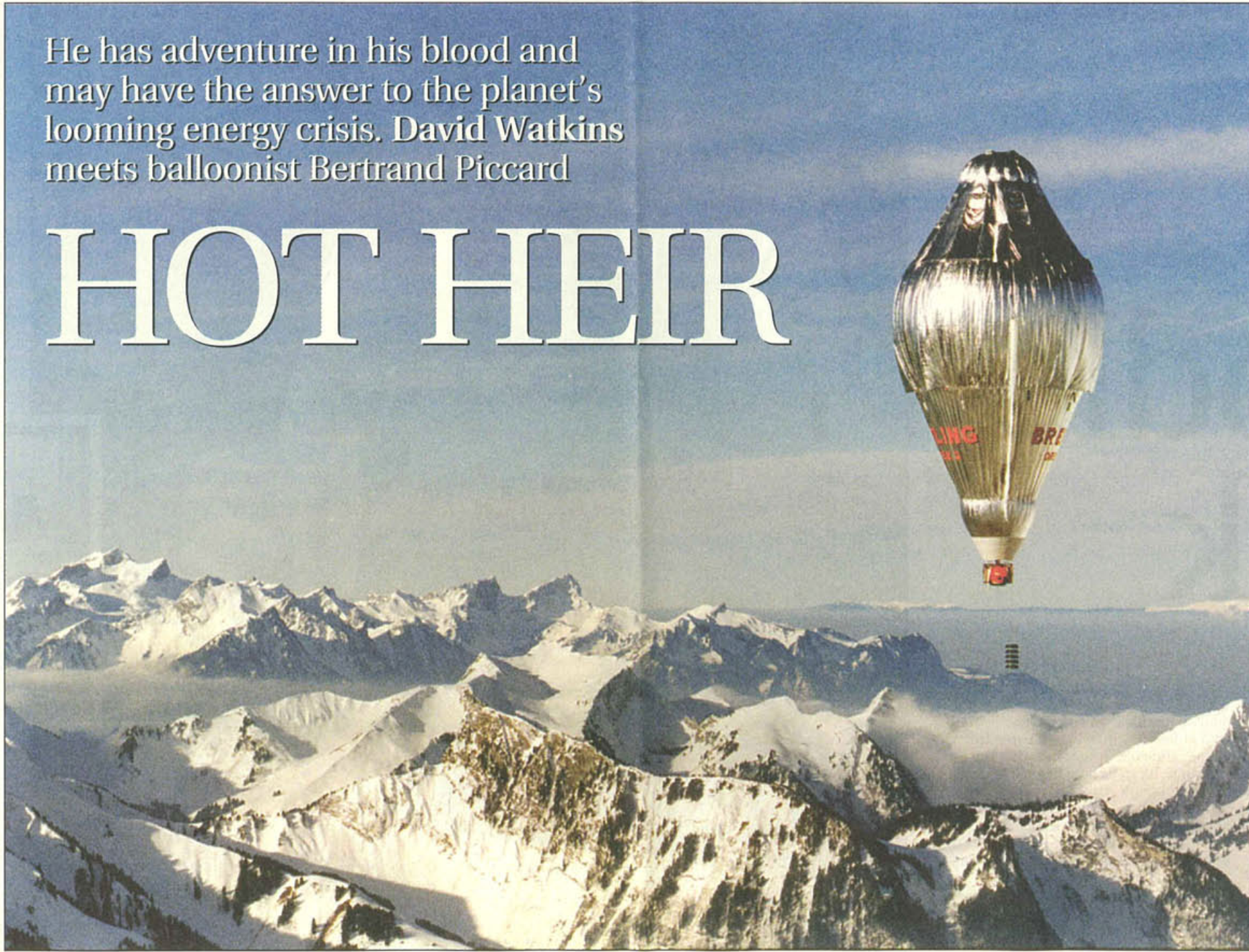


He has adventure in his blood and may have the answer to the planet's looming energy crisis. David Watkins meets balloonist Bertrand Piccard

HOT HEIR



IF THE NAME Bertrand Piccard sounds like the stuff of science fiction, that's because it is. Well, partly. For *Star Trek* geeks at least, the surname has been immortalised in the captain of the Starship Enterprise: it was the exploits of Piccard's grandfather, Auguste, that led writer Gene Roddenberry to name his character Jean-Luc. Nerds the world over have him to thank, therefore, for their spiritual captain.

And yet to this day, the Swiss family is still having a seismic effect on the reality we all inhabit – an effect to rival the likes of astronaut Neil Armstrong or the imagination of Jules Verne.

The combined achievements of three generations of Piccards, are worthy of a movie. Grandfather Auguste brought mankind a step closer to space in the 1930s by taking a hot air balloon 10,000 feet higher than collective human imagination had previously conceived and inventing the pressurised cockpit in the process; his son Jean went the opposite direction – a Jacques Cousteau of his day who revolutionised submarines, taking them to previously unfathomable depths with the Ben Franklin in 1960.

In short, they have enabled us to change the way we perceive and explore our planet – which all sounds awfully *Star Trek*. But with your grandfather exploring the space above and father adventuring into the depths below, it leaves quite a legacy for a child growing up, to

contend with. For young Bertrand, family dinners would frequently include guests ranging from astronauts to deep-sea divers. And so Piccard decided that if he was going to drift in life, he'd do it purposefully, and make the first round-the-world flight in a hot air balloon. In doing so he'd be travelling the only direction his family hadn't yet put a stamp on: horizontal.

When his Breitling Orbiter balloon scuffed down in the Egyptian desert on March 21, 1999, after 20 days in the air, Piccard also found himself with a metaphor. He'd just spent 20 days being blown forward in the breeze across a world that, in all directions environmental

and spiritual, seemed to be going backwards.

"If you're in a balloon you're put in the wrong direction, you change your altitude to find better wind, better direction," says the explorer during an interview at the Swiss Consulate in Wan Chai. "It's the same in life – when we're pushed in a bad direction we need to change our altitude in our minds, in our vision of the world and our vision of other people. In life we're like the balloon, in that we have to drop ballast to climb. We have to drop certainties, paradigms, definitions, habits, dogmas, all these things that keep us prisoners of the wrong direction. You have to be ready to change your mind, your patterns of thinking and behaviour. If you are ready to change that then you will meet your opportunities. If not, you will miss them."

Yes – Piccard, 46, is also a qualified psychiatrist, making him an explorer of metaphysical mindscapes as well as physical environments. In French, he's known as Le Savanturier. And his next mission is to apply this philosophy to the environment.

"Aviation reflects the society we live in. In the 1960s the goal was to go the highest and be the fastest. Now our society has other needs. It's useless to go supersonic if we know that in 10 years the price of oil will be so high that it won't be affordable. Now aviation has another role – showing the public the way to go."

It turns out, however, that being the first to fly non-stop around the world in a balloon may not be Piccard's greatest contribution to his

family's legacy. He now aims to provide the public the very example he speaks of with his invention – a contraption that sounds like it has been dreamed up by Roddenberry.

The design of the US\$45 million Solar Impulse plane (a price which, if anything, illustrates how far solar power has to go before it can be fully embraced) is set to be unveiled next Monday. It will be a giant, with a wingspan of 80 metres and a team of 60 people working around the clock to put the plan into action.

Piccard intends first to build it, and then fly it around the world – becoming the first to do so in a solar-powered craft. "You need to show the people that renewable energy is not a step backwards, but rather a jump in to the future. If you can go around the world in a solar-powered aeroplane you can make incredible things – it means you can make anything with renewable energy."

"And you can make sustainable development trendy. At the moment it's something people believe is expensive, a threat to their mobility and lifestyle. It should not be that – otherwise it will never work. Nobody is going to spend money on the environment; nobody's going to leave his car in the garage."

Especially in a place such as this – although surprisingly he doesn't view Hong Kong as being particularly wasteful. He does, however, see a potential catastrophe looming on the horizon. "It will be in great danger if there is an energy crisis. It's not sustainable. If tomorrow the price of oil doubles, half the people here will go bankrupt. What

frightens me is that they're not aware of that. You know that oil will exist for a long time – when we die there will still be oil, but it will be so expensive that most people won't be able to afford it. The price will climb and climb in an exponential way. It will be too expensive to maintain buildings, to drive cars. The only way to be sustainable is to be ready with new technology that can take over. It's not just solar energy that can save the world."

The solar-powered flight is another chapter in Piccard's unfolding contribution to a family legacy that might have overshadowed someone less afraid to take risks. The balloon flight was a continual flirtation

with the unknown – Piccard recounts tales of having parachutes ready to bail out in storms, and the vastness of the Pacific Ocean when travelling across it at 25km/h, and it is this readiness to dismiss fear that characterises his achievements.

"I was always very curious about how people could make a better use of their inner resources, their potential to fulfil their life a little more. People are not using their potential. They're afraid of the unknown, they're afraid of changing. They stay in a safety area instead of being stimulated by the unknown."

Such big ideas were shaped as a child, when Piccard met a pantheon of astronauts, explorers and ad-

ventures merely by sitting around the family dinner table. It helps that he found himself in a position of privilege from day one.

"I met almost all the Apollo astronauts. Alan Shepard, John Glenn, Jim Lovell from Apollo 13. Divers, explorers, scientists. You meet people like that as a kid and you know what it is you want to do in life."

His three young daughters may yet add to that legacy.

"I don't want to push them in any special direction that I would be interested in, they have to find their own way. In the future exploration and adventure will be a spiritual, environmental, political field. The world needs that. The outer world has been conquered, now we have to explore the inner world. We're about one per cent into mapping ourselves. We're so far away from understanding the deepest spiritual experiences, quality of life, respect for others and nature. Industry doesn't pollute – we pollute because we buy its products."

"If you want to change the world it has to be financially profitable, you have to have a win-win situation. And yet fear, not money, is the problem. People who are ready to change, and who are ready to adapt to life, ready to get rid of the certainties – they potentially make better businessmen, and there is money in saving the environment. Just telling people that they have to love nature? Unfortunately it will never work."

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Bertrand Piccard (far left with co-pilot Brian Jones) at the end of their record-breaking flight; and (above) a view of the Matterhorn from the Breitling Orbiter capsule

PEOPLE

Here's to you, Mrs Robinson

Oscar and Tony awards winner Anne Bancroft, the husky-voiced actress immortalised as Helen Keller's teacher in *The Miracle Worker* and the seductive Mrs Robinson in the 1967 film *The Graduate*, has died of uterine cancer. She was 73.

Theatre on Broadway, where Bancroft delivered back-to-back Tony-winning performances in the late 1950s – opposite Henry Fonda in *Two for the Seesaw* with Patty Duke in *Miracle Worker* – planned to dim their marquees in her honour.

Bancroft (right) was a versatile actress whose career spanned five decades. She earned five Academy Award nominations, including an Oscar for *Miracle Worker*.

But she may be best remembered for the flash of stockings leg and cold, calculated seduction of her daughter's boyfriend in *The Graduate*. The movie spawned the classic Simon and Garfunkel soundtrack hit *Mrs Robinson* and earned Bancroft her third Academy Award nomination. *Reuters*



Moore finds film festival

Director Michael Moore is setting up a film festival in Traverse City, a lakeside tourist town in his native Michigan, that will feature free outdoor showings of classic movies on an inflatable screen.

Among the films being considered are *Jaws*, *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Casablanca*.

But no *Fahrenheit 9/11* – or any of the other opinionated movies the liberal activist has made, such as *Bowling for Columbine*.

The Traverse City Film Festival Committee, with Moore as chairman, received permission from city officials to use a park on

Lake Michigan's Grand Traverse Bay for viewings, scheduled for July 28-31. Other films will be shown indoors.

Moore assured local authorities that the festival, which will comprise about 30 movies, will be nonpartisan and dedicated solely to promoting art and culture.

Moore, a Flint native whose documentary *Roger and Me* chronicled his home town's economic collapse during car industry downsizing in the 1980s, divides his time between New York and rural Antrim County near Traverse City. AP

Kilmer does West End

Hollywood actor Val Kilmer has made his West End debut, in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.

The 45-year-old is an experienced stage actor, but his role at the Playhouse Theatre is his first in Britain, BBCi reported.

He plays Frank, a character created by John Garfield in the classic 1946 film, and later revived by Jack Nicholson. Kilmer has starred in a number of films

including *Top Gun*, *The Saint* and *Batman Forever*.

He's the latest high-profile US actor to tread the boards on the London stage. *Friends* star David Schwimmer, 38, is appearing in Neil LaBute's comedy *Some Girl(s)* opposite Saffron Burrows. Kevin Spacey, Kim Cattrall, Holly Hunter and Joshua Jackson are among the US actors who've recently appeared in West End shows.

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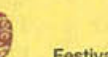
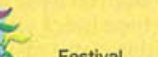
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