

Larry Walters

(Lawrence Richard Walters)

Apr 19, 1949 (Los Angeles, CA) – Oct 6, 1993 (Angeles NF, CA)

LARRY SET THE STANDARD in lawn chair aviation, and in so doing, achieved more than the fifteen minutes of fame that artist Andy Warhol suggested as a person's lifetime entitlement.¹

That's because, in 1982, Larry slipped those surly bonds of earth while belted to the frame of a standard aluminum Sears & Roebuck lawn chair.² And by so doing, he became the first (and only) lawn chair pilot in the history of aviation to wave at the pilot of a commercial airliner from an altitude of 16,000 feet.

Larry's fame is now nearing its fourth decade.

He had always dreamed of flying and, as a youngster imagined himself a fighter pilot. He was also practical enough, at least in his youth, to know that the thick glasses he wore to keep from running into things, made his dream of becoming a fighter pilot an impossible one.

When visiting an Army Surplus store at the age of thirteen, he saw a bunch of weather balloons hanging from the ceiling. He would later recall that he knew then, that balloons similar to those would someday play into his future.

Larry became a truck driver, an occupation rarely associated with pilot training, but like the impractical pursuit of Don Quixote, he may have believed that "even if you can't be immortal, you should still live as if you deserve to be."³

Using an aluminum lawn chair christened *Inspiration I*, with lift to be provided by forty-five, eight-foot Army-surplus weather balloons inflated with helium, Larry Walters had the basics for a quixotic quest of his own.

Within days, a lawn chair with him aboard would take to the sky, and Larry Walters' name would become one with Orville Wright, Charles Lindbergh, and Neil Armstrong, each of whom – it could be said – flew into American aviation history.

In addition to the lawn chair, balloons, and helium, he also bought a surplus military parachute just in case of ... well, you know, just in case he needed one.

He also had a dozen plastic gallon-size milk containers filled with water for ballast.

Add to that, a Citizens Band radio, a camera, an altimeter so he'd know when he reached his desired altitude of 1,000 feet, and a pellet gun for controlling his rate of descent when it came time to land. Larry had thought of everything.

He even packed a couple of sandwiches, had a package of his favorite store-bought cookies, and of course, a six-pack of his favorite liquid refreshment, all approved items for a standard lawn chair launch.

On July 2, 1982, all systems were "go," and destiny awaited the thirty-three-year-old truck-driver-pilot.

His plan was....

Okay, so there wasn't a plan.

After all, an unpowered lawn chair with lift provided by weather balloons would be at the mercy of the prevailing winds. Walters decided there was no need to waste time planning for something he couldn't control, and he could live with that.

A friend double-tethered the lawn chair to the bumper of a car with a couple of lengths of rope, and everyone pitched in to inflate the forty-five balloons.

Larry, now belted into the chair, awaited the moment when the friend who had anchored the chair to the bumper, would sever one, pause briefly, and then sever the second rope, and *Inspiration I* would begin its grand graceful flight skyward.

"Countdown minus ten . . . nine . . . eight . . . seven . . . six," yelled Larry, and the friend severed the first tether rope, and then before Larry could say "five," he had liftoff!

So what happened to the "brief pause" before cutting the second tether rope?

The second rope was no match for the unexpected lift generated by forty-five, eight-foot helium-filled balloons, and the instant the first rope was cut, the second rope snapped like a worn-out shoelace, catapulting everything, including Lawnchair Larry, toward the heavens at the blurring rate of 1,000 feet per minute.

And to Larry, everything was a blur as well.

That's because the powerful force that had snapped the second tether rope had also ripped the thick glasses from his face.

At that moment, Larry would have traded anything – including his six-pack – for a 98-cent eyeglass strap like the kind worn by basketball players. But it was too late for that now! He was gaining way too much altitude, then magically, the upward ascent became a slow horizontal flight.

When his eyes were finally able to focus on the altimeter, it showed him at 16,000 feet, well beyond his planned altitude of 1,000 feet, and he was immediately aware of two things: (1) he was very cold, and (2) he and the lawn chair weren't drifting east toward the desert as he had expected.

Instead, he was heading toward the Long Beach and Los Angeles International airports, both 20-plus miles to the west.

That's when two airline pilots (TWA & Delta) saw Larry at the same time. Both pilots radioed the tower that a guy in a lawn chair at 16,000 feet had just smiled and waved at them.

Larry, now over the city of Long Beach, was approaching the primary runway corridor of the airport.

He knew it wouldn't be in his best interest to float across the flight path of either inbound or outbound traffic, so he started shooting at the balloons with the pellet gun, popping about seven of them before he spotted a golf course below.

As he leaned over to evaluate the golf course as a potential landing site, the pellet gun slid from his lap and tumbled to earth.

Descending slowly now, a local citizens-band group known as REACT, was able to receive Larry on his hand-held citizens-band radio. Here's a snippet of the conversation:

REACT: What information do you wish to tell [the airport] at this time regarding your location and difficulty.

LARRY: Ah, the difficulty is that this was an unauthorized balloon launch, and uh, I know I'm in federal airspace, and I'm sure my ground crew has alerted the proper authorities. But, call them and tell them I'm okay.

REACT: What color is the balloon?

LARRY: The balloons are beige. I'm in a bright blue sky, which would [make the balloons] very highly visible.

REACT: The balloon size?

LARRY: Size, ah, approximately seven feet in diameter, each. And I probably have about thirty-five left.

REACT: You have a cluster of thirty-five balloons?

Larry had almost touched down when the drooping tether cables and the lines of the busted balloons tangled with a power line that fortunately, the utility company had just shut down.

The entanglement jerked Larry and his lawn chair to a sudden, inglorious stop. He had barely set foot on terra firma when the Long Beach Police Department took him, his lawn chair, and what was left of his six-pack into custody.

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) was neither impressed with his flight nor with the airworthiness of his lawn chair and handed him four federal citations.

Larry was fined the low sum of \$1,500, with the FAA telling him they would have revoked his pilot's license if he had one.

Eleven years after his famous flight, Larry Walters, who loved the outdoors, walked into the Angeles National Forest and put a bullet through his heart. He left no suicide note.

-
1. In 1968, Andy Warhol, American pop artist, famously said, "In the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes."
 2. The phrase, "slipped the surly bonds of earth" is from the first line of *High Flight*, a poem written by John Gillespie Magee, Jr.
 3. Cervantes, Miguel de, *Don Quixote*, first published in 1605. A second section of the book was added in 1615. Widely available.

**

That chair should be in the Smithsonian.
Larry Walters (1949–1993) lawn chair pilot