

Monday 7 July 2003

Today is our big day; we will fly our zeppelin in the RoboCup Real Rescue competition. We have to go into a rescue arena and search and identify victims; in fact they are plastic dolls that can move their arms and fingers, and make sounds indicating that they need help. But our helium still has not arrived. At 11 AM we started to get a little nervous; Arnoud has already made a dozen calls to Air Liquid, the company that promised to deliver. I used my intuition about how things work in Italy and suggested to Arnoud that we find a senior person that speaks Italian and can put some weight behind our request. We tracked down one of the main organizers but he was giving a presentation, so we could not disturb him. After some more search we ended up talking to Andrew, a Brit who is one of the local organizers and he invited us into his office at the Fiera. He got on the phone with the proper person (that he had done business with before) and explained that our zeppelins would be on television, and that it was of the utmost importance to get the helium to the PadovaFiere pronto. A large helium tank was rolled into our booth 15 minutes later.



We started to get ready for our first mission. Arnoud filled one the zeppelins with helium and I attached the stickers with the UvA logo and the DECIS logo on the sides. Arnoud decided that it needed a little bit more helium and blew it up. We had two more zeppelins and quickly prepared another one. In the mean time quite a large crowd was forming in our booth because a lot of people wanted to see what we were up to with this floating cigar.

We got the signal from the referees that we had to get ready and put all our stuff on a cart. After some delay we got the permission to set up next to the rescue arenas. Our 100 meter journey with the floating zeppelin resulted in lots of attention; cameras flashing all around. We connected everything and switched on all systems: no video signal. Only 5 minutes before our mission and we could not get the thing to work. Arnoud tried everything he could think of and at some point it just worked. Only one minute before the launch and we took the fish line of the zeppelin and I positioned it close to the entrance of the arena. Three, two, one, go! I released it and before we knew it, it had climbed to an altitude of 5 meters, 10 meters, and all the way up to the ceiling of the Fiera. In the frenzy of getting the video connection to work, we had forgotten to check the payloads ...

After collecting our zeppelin, we were allowed to fly another mission half an hour later. This time the zeppelin was perfectly balanced and Arnoud skilfully steered it into the arena. His task was to look at the monitor and navigate through the maze. I was sitting next to him, drawing a map of the area that we observed, and in case we found a victim, I had to fill out victim sheets; jotting down the assessed state of the victim. We never got around to describing victims because the television signal was quite bad (also a problem for other rescue teams, we discovered later).

In the first attempt the zeppelin got stuck in a corner (same dimensions as the zeppelin) and we had to ask for a restart. Next time around, Arnoud was able to navigate it a little further into the arena but was caught by the tape used to fix the nets. Arnoud was able to free the zeppelin from the sticky tape, but the time was up. Although we had seen most of our targets through the walls, we couldn't come close to them, so we officially had not discovered any victims. After two tries, our results can be summarized in two words: zero points.

Later that evening we had the yellow arena for ourselves, and tried to navigate through the maze with direct sight. Although sometimes difficult (for sure the tight corner where we got stuck the first time), we were able to fly through the complete maze. The best way is a sort of crawling, staying low to the ground. The ground helps to keep the zeppelin at the same height, and the walls are there flat and solid, which helps to bounce through the corridors. At higher levels the obstacles were more difficult to predict. One dangerous obstacle we found at the end of the flight. The back of the arena was a wooden wall of 3 meters height, a little before the concrete wall of the conference hall. We found out that this wooden wall was constructed because the air inlet of the climate system was behind it. Our zeppelin was sucked into the space between the walls, and could only be saved after finding a 3 meters high trap.