

U.S. Army Ballooning: The Early Years

(Excerpt from Camp John Wise Aerostation)

In 1907, because of constant nagging by civilian and military aeronautic experts, government leaders, and various aero clubs; the Army issued and re-issued specifications for an aeroplane and airship. During the summer of 1908, the aviation trials were held at Fort Meyer, Virginia. The secretive Wright Flyer proved its mettle: making a very public demonstration of its capabilities. However, with its crash; subsequent death of Lt. Selfridge; and serious injury to Wilbur Wright, the Army backed off from buying that technology: until it could be further proven. The Wright brothers had to wait until the following year to sell their aeroplane to the Army. It was Capt. Baldwin's hydrogen filled airship (which had flown its trials several days before the Wrights' aeroplane), that met the Army's specifications; and became the first powered aircraft purchased by the Army: the SC-1. (Signal Corps-1)



Baldwin Airship: SC-1 being moved at Fort Meyer.



Baldwin Airship, SC-1: in flight over Fort Meyer.

After Fort Meyer trials, the Baldwin Airship was assigned to the Signal Corps Balloon School at Fort Omaha, which was commanded by Capt. DeForest Chandler. The balloon facility had been used, off and on, since 1905, and was the only place that had a good hydrogen generator, working compressor and a large balloon hangar. The airship was flown to Fort Omaha by Lt. Benjamin Foulois, along with several other officers. The airship had a capacity of 20,000 cubic feet of hydrogen, was about 100 feet long, could lift about 450 pounds; and had a diameter of 22 feet. The engine was built by Glenn Curtiss and was mounted in a 90' long "car"; suspended below the balloon's envelope; and propelled by a 10' diameter blade. The Balloon School flew the SC-1 until sometime in 1911, when it was no longer serviceable. The school continued to train officers and enlisted men in free balloons; along with French and English kite balloons; and a German "Drachen" balloon, until the school was abandoned in October 1913. The serviceable balloon equipment was sent to Fort Leavenworth for storage. Fort Omaha's Balloon School turned into a government weather station.