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Balloons and Airships in the United States Army, 1861-1913

BALLOONS IN THE CIVIL WAR

Military Aviation in the United States began in the early days of the Civil War when the Army for the first time employed balloons for military purposes. Balloons had been used for reconnaissance by the French Army as early as 1794 and they were primarily utilized by American balloonists for the same purpose. On 19 April 1861, four days after Lincoln's initial call for troops, two members of the Rhode Island 1st Regiment (State Militia), James Allen, a veteran New England balloonist, and Dr. William H. Helme, a dentist and balloonist, carried two of Allen's balloons from Providence, Rhode Island, to Washington. There, on 9 June, they made the United States Army's first trial captive balloon ascent. The newspapers reported that on the following day one balloon was moved with the Rhode Island regiment to Harper's Ferry where for a week it continued ascents, but no official confirmation of this report has been found.

There is no further mention in the records of Dr. Helme's activities as an aeronaut, but it is known that Allen left the army after the accidental loss of both of his balloons in July 1861 at Falls Church, Virginia. He reentered the service in March 1862, and remained until June 1863. Despite the fact that his initial aeronautical attempts were considered failures, he twice served during the latter period as acting head of the balloon corps, a position which he held when the corps was disbanded in June 1863.

Another balloonist, John Wise of Pennsylvania, had also been contacted by the army soon after the outbreak of hostilities. On 12 June 1861, Maj. Hartman Bathe, acting chief of the Topographic Engineers, requested Wise to submit an estimate of the cost of constructing and operating a small balloon. Wise offered to build a balloon for \$300 and volunteered his services free of charge. At the end of the month Major Bathe (probably after consulting with another officer of the Topographic Engineers, Capt. A. W. Whipple, under whose jurisdiction the aeronauts were later placed) wired Wise for prices on a larger, 20,000 cubic-foot, silk balloon. Wise offered to have the larger balloon ready in two weeks for \$850.

By early July he had been taken into the government service as a military balloonist and had been ordered to construct a large balloon.

On 21 July the balloon, the army's first, was completed, delivered to Washington, and detailed to be used for observation in the Battle of Manassas, then in progress. A ground crew walked the balloon, already inflated, up Pennsylvania Avenue to Georgetown, up the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, and across the Potomac to Fairfax Road, where Maj. Albert J. Myer, Chief Signal Officer, fastened it to a wagon and the trip was continued. As the party neared its objective, Major Myer became impatient to reach the scene of the battle; against the better judgment of Wise, he ordered the driver to whip up the horses. Almost immediately the balloon was snagged in the upper branches of the roadside trees; when Myer tried to force it free, great holes were torn in the bag. Actually, this was not the tragedy it then appeared to be, for had the balloon arrived in time to be of use, the Confederates very likely would have captured it.

Wise quickly repaired the balloon and on 24 July made ascensions at Arlington, Virginia. Two days later, while the balloon was being towed to Ball's Crossroads, it was blown against telegraph wires, which cut the towropes, and the balloon floated away toward the Confederate lines. To prevent its capture by the enemy, Union troops shot it down near the Lee mansion at Arlington.

Neither the Allen nor the Wise balloon was satisfactory, mainly because each had to be filled with coal gas from the city mains and towed inflated to the area in which it was to operate. Wise had designed a portable hydrogen generator, which would permit inflation in the field and would widen the area of operations; he now urged the army to construct such a unit. But the army blamed him for the two disasters to his balloon and abruptly terminated his connection with its aeronautics. Wise returned to his home in Lancaster, raised a cavalry troop, and rejoined the army, but after several months of service his health failed and he was compelled to retire from active duty.