

15th BALLOON COMPANY

MISSION

LINEAGE

Balloon Company No. 15 organized, Jan 1918

Redesignated Balloon Company No. 15 (Coast Defense), 13 Sep 1921

Inactivated, 1 Oct 1921

Redesignated 15th Balloon Company, 12 Feb 1923

Demobilized, 1 Oct 1933

STATIONS

Fort Omaha, NE

Camp Morrison, VA, Jul 1918

Port of Embarkation, Newport News, VA, Jul 1918

Europe, Jul 1918

Camp Lee, VA, 29 Jun 1919

Ross Field, CA, 15 Jul 1919

Inactive 1921-1933

ASSIGNMENTS

Army Balloon School

22nd Balloon Group, 8 May 1929

WEAPON SYSTEMS

COMMANDERS

2LT Joseph I. Sullivan, Jan 1920-25 Apr 1921

Cpt Roland W. Wittman 25 Apr 1921-1 Oct 1921

Inactive 1 Oct 1921-1 Oct 1933

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

EMBLEM

MOTTO

OPERATIONS

Early in March, 1918, Uncle Sam herded about 1,000 almost aviators and near soldiers from Kelley Field, into a couple of sections of George W. Pullman's first effort at car building and consigned the outfit to Colonel Hersey, care of Balloon School at Omaha. When this motley assemblage of embryo sandbags arrived at the fort, there was considerable consternation among the officers who had ambitions as to the future. Some groaned in despair and meekly accepted the outfit for better or for worse; while others, it is said, tried to resign their commissions. The almost aviators stuck together like a herd of scared sheep lost in a snow storm, while the top sergeant who had seen about forty years previous service, in a kind and gentle manner peculiar to their species, drove them into a section specially reserved for the common or garden variety of recruit.

A quarantine was promptly slapped on the camp; for in some way the news leaked out that a sister-in-law of one of the men had measles, in Seattle, and another man had dandruff. Every precaution was taken to show the enlisted personnel that they were "in the Army now." An even 200 of the original consignment was lined up, inspected and reinspected for everything from the hoof and mouth disease to the chestnut blight, and with the exception of a few well developed cases of hook worm all seemed physically able to stand the rigors of army life. Several officers stood talking together in low tones and by their hopeless look and the negative shake of their heads, we knew they were to guide the future destiny of the outfit.

The same morning we were called into a formation and told why we were there, in a general way what our duties would be, what was expected of us and that we would be known henceforth and to posterity as the 15th Balloon Company. Similar to many organizations, the 15th Company was only a skeleton company in its earlier days. Four officers and no enlisted men was the first roster of the 15th Balloon Company. Lieut. William G. Hefty was commanding officer; 2d Lieuts. William S. Barker, Eugene F. Daly and James G. Crawford were assistants. It later developed that these officers jumped the fence when they saw their new company doing squads right and were last seen near the Canadian border, still going.

First Lieut. Karl J. Shillar, commanding, and Lieutenants Martin, Patterson, Cummings, Reasoner, Shattuek and Jones were the first officers after the company was formed and to them fell the task of making soldiers, balloon handlers, mechanics, electricians, riggers and chauffeurs out of the material on hand. At this time 1st Lieut. Guy B. Ira with his capable

assistants and 10,000 C. C. pills was assigned to the company.

We were promptly introduced to the fort parade grounds, and there under the able direction of the officers, day after day, we were drilled, cussed, kidded, coerced or shamed into a semblance of a military organization. After we became acquainted with the well known foot movement, so highly recommended by Mr. Moss and the I. D. R., and learned the relation of squads right to the making the world safe for democracy, Colonel Hersey looked us over and decided that we needed a balloon. The famous trade test cards, which greatly facilitate the selection of blacksmiths for cooks, mechanics for clerks, were consulted, and the men were assigned to the various details in connection with balloon work. At this time a balloon company consisted of 200 men and eight officers, later this being changed to 174 men and eight officers.

Of these men, 57 are non-commissioned officers, 52 are privates first class, and the remainder are lucky. As a balloon company is a very mobile unit it must have complete transportation, which requires a force of skilled mechanics and drivers. Another detail in the company handles and maneuvers the balloon. For the defense of the balloon a complete machine gun unit is formed. Aside from the transportation is a small detail which cares for and drives the winch. A most important detail is the chart room group; here all the maps, all intelligence gathered by the observers, all information, in fact all which is vital to the successful operation of the balloon is found. The telephone detail maintains all lines of communication to batteries, headquarters, battery command posts and all about the camp. The radio men keep in communication with the outside world, receive all meteorological reports and communiques. Then there are the headquarters, the supply and kitchen detail which must be in every organization.

Men assigned to these new details entered into their new work with characteristic zeal and energy, each trying to learn his branch of the game and perform his special duties to the best of his ability; we started to learn the balloon game from the ground up. Then, daily under the brisk, resounding commands of "Ease off them handling guides" and "Stretch ground cloth" by "Major" Burke, the balloon sergeant, we learned how to take a balloon from the hangar, give her daily exercise in the clouds and return her for a night's repose. Here we learned that a balloon is more temperamental than a prima donna or a movie actress. Day and night a guard must be kept near her chamber, with one eye on the manometer glass and another on the lookout for any careless wanderer who might sit on a pile of gas cylinders to enjoy a cigarette.

Finally it was rumored that we were going across and for a while it looked as though we were. With mingled feelings of joy and satisfaction, we watched the supply sergeant and his assistants pack and label the big boxes, "A. E. F. via Newport News." When we were lined up for the big, final, once over, a more shined and polished company never graced the parade ground at the fort. The two days previous the company resembled a moving picture of a cleaners and pressers convention and for two months afterward the "Gold Dust Twins" were ashamed to advertise their heretofore much heralded power. Suits that had been carefully laid away, for this occasion, like a bridegroom's pajamas, were hauled out, shoes were shined and equipment cleaned: The nervous company was formed, given a few final instructions about scratching their necks while at attention, and marched to the parade ground for what was to be the last

inspection at Fort Omaha. We went through the inspection with flying colors and with agitated, anxious, impatience, we waited for the official word to leave.

The best laid plans, especially in the Army "gang aft alee." For some reason or other the War Department decided to prolong the war, so our sailing orders were pigeon-holed for a time. That the unlimited "pep" of the company could find an outlet for their enthusiasm and activities we were moved to Florence Field, the new annex to Fort Omaha. In the meantime Lieutenant Kiplinger had replaced Lieutenant Schillar in command of the company, and due to his untiring efforts we had taken our place as a leader and were known and accepted as a model balloon company. Just before we were moved to Florence Field more changes took place in the commissioned personnel. Lieutenants Jones, Shattuck, Reasoner and Lundberg were detached and sent to Columbus for further training in army work. On April 20 Lieut. Albert B. Cole, Jr., was assigned and placed in command, relieving Lieutenant Kiplinger. Under the guidance of Lieutenant Cole we took up our further training at Florence Field.

Being the first company to arrive there, we found plenty to do. In conjunction with flying the balloon and attending to the many duties included, we found time between flights to build a few miles of road bed and to construct habitable camps and quarters for the companies that were to follow. While at Florence Field the company erected the first balloon screen to be seen at Omaha. Truck loads of willow were cut from the Missouri River bottom and woven into a balloon screen which was later copied by the companies arriving at the field. A true testimonial of the industry and skill of the company remained behind when they departed.

On the evening of July the third, about 174 engagements with the fair sex of Omaha were ruthlessly shattered. The cause of this seemingly heartlessness was that the long and eagerly looked for orders had finally arrived and we would soon be flying the old gas bag where it would do some good. A Fourth of July celebration took place in the shape of packing and hustling equipment together for an overseas trip, scribbling hurried letters home, and making sad but short telephone calls throughout Omaha.

In the afternoon of July 5 the company was formed for their departure to the station. Just before leaving Colonel Hersey and Major Rogers spoke a few words, lauding the company for their past record at the post and Florence Field, telling us to keep the good work up and our past would always be pointed to with pride by those who remained behind. With these words they bid us farewell. At the station a large crowd had assembled, for we had made many friends in Omaha. It was with genuine regret we said good-bye to them. A record of our company would be incomplete without mentioning the kindness and the generosity of the people of that city, and memories of what they did for men in the balloon service will always live in every state.

We arrived at Camp Morrison on July 9, and remained at this camp until a supply of Bull Durham, safety razor blades and hobnail shoes could be acquired. On July 16 the men became untangled from, the wrapped leggings which they had been trying to put on for several days. Seizing this opportunity, Lieutenant Cole formed the company and hiked for the boat at

Newport News. On the morning of the 17th, the Pastores weighed anchor, joined the rest of the convoy and about the middle of the afternoon the shores of the good side of the Atlantic slipped out of sight.

Favorable weather made the voyage as pleasant as a holiday excursion; even those whose experience with the ocean was confined to the oil painting of the lighthouse by the sea, which hung in the parlor back home, refused subsistence to the denizens of the briny. Our sailing companions were an outfit of casuals from the tall sticks who had but lately enlisted in the draft. Their being with us probably saved us from being troubled by submarines as the O. D. could not hide their natural color, and if we were sighted, the Germans probably thought it was a boat load of Christmas trees and refused to spend their ammunition. On the 31st of July we landed at St. Nazaire and immediately were sent to the "rest" camp. Here on the second day we had the honor of having our first inspection in the A. E. F., which was by General Pershing. While here our company was cut down to an enlisted strength of 174 men; thirty men who had been with us since the formation of the company were sent to Souge. It took five days at the rest camp to become acclimated to vin rouge and French weather, then orders came to move. This was our first experience on French railroads which were designed to encourage people to stay at home. After two days travel in the "chevaux Pullmans" we pulled into the artillery camp at Haussimont, on the evening of, August 7, 1918. After getting everything in shape for a well earned rest and the sounds of sleep were beginning to be wafted through the billets, the steady hum of a motor accompanied by the sharp call of the bugle brought everyone up standing. We were about to experience our first air raid but all were in doubt just what was the proper procedure in a case of this kind. While nervously trying to decide, about 10,000 of our colored brethren then located there, began passing us at a speed that we envied and immediately tried to duplicate. A few men were turned back by an M. P. the next morning in the neighborhood of Chalons, thirty-five kilometers west of camp.

Every night thereafter, we were paid a visit by these Boche bombers, who had mistaken some French hangars for an orphan asylum and were trying to eliminate it from the war.

At Haussimont the rest of the equipment necessary for the operation of a balloon company was received.

A balloon bed was built about five kilometers-south of our camp on the Mailly road. A wireless station, chart room, balloon guard, and riggers' camp was set up and from this location our first ascension in France was made. While here our observers worked in connection with the French railway artillery and a 14-inch naval gun of the United States, being tried out before going into action. In September the men of the machine gun, telephone, wireless, winch and chart room details were sent to the balloon school at Souge for further instruction and perfection in the duties already assigned to them. These men later joined the company, bringing back the highest marks that could be made at the school.

Early in September more changes in the commissioned personnel occurred. The present Commanding Officer, Lieut. Thomas D. Jordan, relieved Lieut. Albert B. Cole. Lieutenant Jordan

was with the first American balloon squadron that arrived in France, landing in December, 1917. Enriched by many months of actual service at the Front, Lieutenant Jordan was well able to assume command. At this time the company also lost the faithful services of Lieut. Fred R. Patterson and Lieut. Roland R. Cummings, who were detached for service at Souge. Both of these officers having been with the company since it was formed, had helped to guide us through the trials and tribulations which beset the ways of balloon companies. Their leaving was sincerely regretted by all.

To replace the lack of officers caused by their departure, 2d Lieuts. Bruce A. McQueen, Milton D. Sapiro and Felix B. Cutler were assigned to the company. A day later, September 4, Lieut. Roger E. Butcher, F, A, was attached. Lieutenant Sapiro was not to stay long, however, and on the 14th of September he was sent to the First American Army. On September 25 telegraph orders were received ordering the company to Colombey-les-Belles. This sounded like getting to the scene of big doings and no time was lost getting through except when the engineer of the "chevaux flier" stopped for a beer or to greet an old friend.

On September 27 the company arrived at Toul. After a two days' ride in a French train a man would stone his family, and for this reason nearly all men moving to the Front are carried as near as possible on these almost French railroads. Company arrived at Colombey-les-Belles that night, just in time to get into bed without disturbing the slumbers of the cows and poultry.

There billeted in the French bossy's boudoir adjoining the kitchen, we became acquainted with the domestic life of the French people and their animals, domestic and otherwise. At Colombey the company was supposed to receive all needed vehicles of; transportation, but instead it seems we were made victims of the old Army gag, procrastination of responsibility, commonly called "passing the buck." One week later, minus the expected transportation the company left for the Front. On October 6 the company took over a position recently held by a section of the German army that had been persuaded to take up quarters farther north.

Our new position in the Bois de Rampart about two kilometers east of St. Baussant between the villages of Essey and Flirey, had, been held by the Huns from the beginning of the war until driven out by the American army at the drive on St. Mihiel. After disposing of a few Germans that were of no-further use either as soldiers or prisoners, the company began rebuilding demolished dugouts, repairing track on the narrow gauge, and giving the place a general overhauling. The parting Fritz had in his hurry left behind most of his equipment and all the accumulated rubbish and dirt of his four years' sojourn, to be cleaned up by the company.

Fired by the knowledge that from then on we would be putting an occasional wallop of our own, the camp soon took on an appearance that was thoroughly American. A balloon bed was cut in the woods, the balloon inflated, a maneuvering road was built and a chart room put in operation already for business in record time. Telephone connections were strung to the batteries and throughout the camp under fire from the enemy guns. On the third day the balloon ascended for a test flight, with Lieutenant Cole in the basket. It was near dusk and the flight was of short duration, but that night we rested with the knowledge that everything was in

readiness for observation work next day.

Many flights were made during October, but hampered by heavy ground haze and poor visibility, only one adjustment of any importance could be made, that being on a railroad and road crossing between Dampvitoux and Dommartin.

The 15th Balloon company was assigned to the First Army, October 6, 1918. With the formation of the Second Army, it was assigned to the Fourth Army Corps, Second Army. At this time the company worked with the 44th Coast Artillery, 341st and 342d Field Artillery.

On October 28 came our first encounter with the highly advertised Boche avions. On this day Lieutenants Cole and Zavoyksi were making the daily ascension in an attempt to make an adjustment on an important section of road between Dampbitoux and Dommartin. The balloon had stopped at an altitude of 600 meters. White clouds banked high in the northwest and with a slight general haze afforded enemy planes every advantage for attacking the balloon. Seven Fokkers riding high, screened by the clouds and haze, suddenly volplaned from their height straight for the balloon. The leader of the squadron rode well in advance, all were firing as they came. The first sharp crack of their machine guns was the only warning of their approach. Before the first slender trail of tracer smoke from the enemy's guns had marked its course to the balloon, our machine gunners were pouring back a steady stream in return. Lieutenant Cole, who just a few seconds before had given the order for a couple of hundred more meters altitude, decided to return to Mother Earth via parachute. Lieutenant Zavoyksi, without a moment's hesitation, decided to accompany him. Balloon 245 not burned but riddled with 61 holes. Two holes in Lt Zavoyksi's parachute

The appearance of a figure on the edge of the basket brought the same thrill of excitement to the onlookers that is experienced by the spectators at the country fair when the acrobat cuts loose from his hot air balloon. The first figure dropped through space followed closely by the second; the long white parachutes trailed above, opening quickly with the descent. The leader of the enemy squadron encircled the balloon, working his machine gun until he had again turned his plane and joined the remaining six whose advance had been stopped by the effective fire from the ground. Seven sorely puzzled "Dutchmen" made their way back toward the German line and are today probably wondering if they "couldn't hit a balloon" or if a fire proof gas was being used, for above the thinning streams of smoke the old bag tugged on the cable and serenely rode the evening breeze. Both observers landed safely and the balloon was hauled down for an inspection. Sixty-one-bullet holes were found in the fabric and two in Lieutenant Zavoyksi's parachute.

A few days later Balloon 69 on the company's left was brought down in flames, while the 15th Company hauled-down to safety. A moment later Balloon 16, to the right of the company, fell prey to the Boche. Aerial activity was increasing, and the men lived in expectation of bringing down a Fritz.

During their stay at Bois de Rempart the company erected a canteen and barber shop. A small

village of 182 men had sprung up in the wilderness. They lacked only hired help, finger bowls and electricity of having all the comforts of a home.

Rumors of peace were continually in the air, offset by the screech of the 155's and the nightly hum of the enemy-bombing expeditions over nearby towns and camps. The balloon made daily ascensions, but no other adjustments of importance could be made until November 3. On this day Lieutenants Cross and Cutler adjusted with Battery A, 44th Battalion, C. A. C, on the important standard gauge railroad and road crossing northwest of St. Julien.

On the 5th of November, Lieutenants Davis and Butcher were ready to regulate on Hill 242, north of Dampvitoux, which held an enemy observation post and trench mortars. Five gaily painted Fokkers were reported in the north, by the lookouts. The order was immediately given to haul down. Two Fokkers remained high above on guard against the attacks of allied planes, while the remaining three descended to the attack. Suddenly one detached himself from the rest, darted for the balloon, firing as he came. Simultaneously with the opening of the observers' parachutes, the balloon burst into flames, but a high wind carried the parachutes beyond the danger of flying sparks. Fritz had got in his work and was hauling back toward his line through the fire of anti-aircraft battery.

A column of black smoke rising heavenward marked the place where the balloon had fallen. Once more the company handled the situation like veterans. The maneuvering spider had been attached and the blazing balloon was hauled into the wind for many meters. The machine gunners excelled their previous record, firing 1,529 rounds during the action. When later talking it over we found that "Dad" Grosser and his trusty gun held four of the enemy planes at bay in the distance, but having only one barrel to his gun could not keep the other one from the attack. We have "Dad's" own word for this. If he had had a double barrel gun it is quite probable he would have saved the balloon.

A new balloon was in the air the following afternoon and everyone "raring" to go. For many days the Commanding Officer had been trying to gain permission to move the balloon to a position near the Front. This permission was finally granted and when the company was about ready to leave, Lieutenant Jordan informed us that it was all off. A divisional headquarters near the new location didn't want "any damn balloon near them," maintaining that a balloon drew the enemy fire. The company remained in its old position. Poor visibility kept the company from any activity, but information came that a big drive was planned. All anxiously awaited the day ready and eager to fly the balloon, either day or night just so we had a part in the big push was the prevailing sentiment. Then came the information that Germany did not think much of the war and that all hostilities would cease at n o'clock on November 11. The morning of the 11th the balloon was maneuvered to Essey, with Lieutenants Davis and Dunshee as observers.

The grand windup of the big show was somewhat obscured on account of the heavy ground haze; but the grandstand seat of the observers was envied by all. The company remained, in their old position until December 4 when it was moved into the Foret Domaniale de Puvenelle, west of Jezainville. Unsatisfactory quarters and deep mud made this a most undesirable place

to live. The company after a short stay moved into Pont-a-Mousson on December 9. Here the company is comfortably quartered in the vacated home of the French people. Occasionally the balloon is flown for the purpose of instruction but most of the time is devoted to drill and athletics.

While in Pont-a-Mousson a football team was formed and several closely fought games with other companies have been played. Christmas day was featured by a game with the 14th Company; a hard, hotly contested game, played in the mud, resulted in a tie.

Lieutenants Bert Vanderwilt, Donald A. Loyhed, Roscoe Turner and Harry H. Crawford joined the company here, replacing the officers who had been assigned to other organizations.

The 15th Balloon Company is still in Pont-a-Mousson at the date of this writing. We have been here long enough to feel like citizens of the city and some of the men are beginning to take an interest in civic affairs. We are thinking of running Lieutenant Jordan for Mayor and Lieutenant Loyhed for Chief of Police at the coming November election. In the meantime we await the return trip end of our overseas, ticket, which, to all appearances has been filed away in Washington but will undoubtedly come to light in the spring house cleaning. Probably there will be a few pages in history devoted to the achievements of balloon companies.

No record will ever be made of the long, tiresome days and nights; the hardships encountered in traveling over dark, crowded, slippery roads; in keeping the balloon flying under any circumstances, and the other necessary duties faithfully performed, .all that the end might be achieved for which we started. Whether sitting with our grandchildren on our knee or sunning ourselves on the front porch of the Old Soldier's Home, the consciousness of a duty well done will be the reward of the 15th Balloon Company.

Arrival in France 31 Jul 1918

Arrival at the front 1 Oct 1918

Days ascensions made in S.O.S 16

Days ascensions made in Z.O.A 13

Total days ascensions made 29

Number of ascensions made in S.O.S. 23

Number of ascensions made in Z.O.A. 18

Total number of ascensions made 41

Total number of hours in air S.O.S. 59.00

Total number of hours in air Z.O.A. 19.19

Total number of hours in the air 78.19

Artillery adjustments in S.O.S.

Artillery adjustments in Z.O.A 2

Total number or artillery adjustments 2

Enemy shells observed 9

Enemy aircraft observed 156

Enemy balloons observed 33

Enemy artillery batteries observed 1
Enemy traffic on road and railroad observed 0
Smoke, fires and flares observed 1
Explosions observed 0
Jumps from basket 4
Balloons attacked 2
Balloons burned 1
Balloons destroyed
Observers killed
Observers captured

Arrived at the port of Newport News, VA, on 25 June 1919 on the S.S. Virginian as Balloon Company No. 15. Transferred to Camp Lee, VA, and arrived there on 29 June 1919. Transferred on 15 July 1919 to Ross Field, Arcadia, CA, and assigned to the Army Balloon School.

Redesignated as Balloon Company No. 15 (Coast Defense) on 13 September 1921. Inactivated on 1 October 1921 at Ross Field and 13th Balloon Company designated Active Associate. The 12th Airship Company made Active Associate 6 September 1922 in lieu of the 13th Balloon Company.

Redesignated as the 15th Balloon Company on 12 February 1923. Allotted to the Sixth Corps Area on 5 September 1928. Chicago, IL, designated as headquarters on reorganization, but unit never organized at that location.

Designated mobilization training station was Scott Field, IL, 1923-33.

Air Force Order of Battle
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Sources

US Army Order of Battle 1919-1941. Steven E. Clay. Combat Studies Institute Press. US Army Combined Arms Center. Fort Leavenworth, KS. Nd.