

6th BALLOON COMPANY

MISSION

LINEAGE

B Co, 3rd Squadron
6th Balloon Company

STATIONS

Camp Lee, VA
Brooks Field, TX, May 1919

ASSIGNMENTS

COMMANDERS

1LT S. W. Ovitt

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

EMBLEM

MOTTO

NICKNAME

OPERATIONS

Company B, Third Balloon Squadron, later known as the Sixth Balloon Company, was organized at Fort Omaha Balloon School, Fort Omaha, Nebr. 4 Nov 1917. The Co was made up mostly of recruits from Kelly Aviation Field most of whom had enlisted in the Aviation Section of the Signal Corps with anticipation of someday becoming aviators at that time ballooning was in its infancy in the US Army and was somewhat unpopular due to the prevailing ignorance of the important mission of balloons in the present war. But when the men who were to become the balloonists of the sixth company learned that they were to be transferred from the desert of Texas to the more agreeable climate at Omaha, a general expression of joy was prevalent. First Lieut. S. W. Ovitt was Company Commander.

Fort Omaha, commonly termed The Soldiers Home by balloonists is the oldest and best equipped balloon school in the USA. It is situated in the suburbs of Omaha, NE. The rookie balloonists who arrived at the fort on that cold November day soon found themselves quartered in steam heated and electrically lighted barracks with hot and cold water shower bats and modern kitchen equipment. The sixth balloon company was immediately organized with strength of 98 men and all the various departments of the balloon school with their facilities were thrown open for the training of the future balloonists.

The days spent at Fort Omaha were to be few and the task of training and equipping the men for foreign service was taken up at once. Men were chosen to take special courses in the army method of operating telephones, repair and upkeep of motors, maneuvering, rigging and repairing of balloons, preparation and handling of hydrogen, interpreting and drawing maps and all the various branches of ballooning, in the meantime the supply departments were constantly working to supply and equip the company for foreign service.

After an intensive course of instruction the company left Omaha for overseas duty, January 17, 1918. Fourteen days were spent at Garden City, Long Island, during which-time the company had its fill of New England's cold weather. On January 31, 1918, the company boarded the royal mail steamship, H. M. S. Adriatic., at New York.

A four day stop was made at Halifax while awaiting the forming of the convoy and then the long trip, started in earnest. A convoy of 12 transports and the accompanying battleships was assembled while in this harbor. On 6 Feb the convoy steamed out of the harbor for Liverpool.

During the 10 days spent in crossing the Atlantic epidemics of mumps and Spinal Meningitis broke out among the troops and one soldier was buried at sea. Aside from these epidemics and a few days of exceedingly cold weather no great hardships were experience.

Three says out from Liverpool harbor, the convoy was met a fleet of American U-boat destroyers, which accompanied us safely to harbor.

Upon disembarking at the Liverpool harbor the company was traveled by train through central England to a small American Rest Camp just outside of Romsey arriving there on the evening of 16 Feb. Due to the various epidemics which were prevalent among the American troops in England,

the company was placed under quarantine during the time spent at Romsey.

On the morning of 19 Feb, the company traveled by rail to South Hampt where on that night, embarked with 600 other troops on a small cattle boat the Hunslet for France. It was a rough dark night on the channel. The pilot of the entire vessel, through some error which almost proved disastrous to the entire vessel directed the boat into a mined district. But after anxious hours of skilled maneuvering the boat was cleared from the mines and a collision with an ocean liner which was darting headlong for the Hunslet was avoided. The boat anchored in the harbor at La Havre on the morning of 20 Feb. That evening the company was marched to a British Evacuation Camp just outside the city.

On 21 Feb the company traveled by rail to an American Aviation Cadet Camp at St Maxient, arriving on the morning of 23 Feb where the company was quarantined to camp limits unit 27 Feb when it again boarded train from Camp de Souge, a large American camp about 17 kilometers out of Bordeaux. The camp arrived at Camp de Souge on the evening of 28 Feb.

At the time of the arrival of the company the camp was the largest artillery training camps in France for American troops. It is beautifully situated a short distance out of Bordeaux in the warm sandy region of southern France with an 8 mile artillery range and comfortable French billets, capable of accommodating 18,000 troops.

Reorganization of the company according to French military plans was begun following arrival at camp. On the morning of 24 March, 60 men were transferred from the company to the second company to strengthen it for immediate service at the front. On 31 Mar ten more men were transferred to the Fourth Balloon Company, leaving the sixth with 38 men.

During the month of April the company was kept very busy it being a pioneer balloon company at the camp, the task of constructing a balloon camp, flying a balloon for artillery adjustment, together with regular company routine duties, company administration and supplying and equipping the company according to the French table of equipment fell to the 38 men left. In the oftentimes it was necessary to secure details of men from the 146th and 148th Field Artillery Regiments then in training at the camp in order that our balloon might be kept in the air at all times when the visibility would permit adjusting in liaison with these regiments.

During those early days spent at Camp de Souge the 38 men left in the company were rapidly becoming specialists in the various departments of ballooning. Special courses of training were offered to the officers and men of the company. All the officers received training at the Saumer Artillery School. Some of the officers and some of the men received special training in machine gunning at the Cazeaux School of Fire. The telephone department was given special instruction in wireless and telephone operating. The transportation department was gaining first-hand experience in driving, handling and upkeep of motor cars. The chart room department also gained valuable experience in map drawing and map and photographic interpretation.

The shortage of men was somewhat relieved on 3 May when 12 men from the 2nd Motor

Mechanics Regiment were transferred to the company and on 5 May when 22 more were transferred from the 803rd Aero Squadron. On 17 May a full detachment of 98 recruits from Kelley Field Texas were assigned to the company. The sixth balloon company then had a full strength of men.

But work was not destined to become lighter as a result of the increased strength. The newly assigned men had no previous training and the task of teaching them to handle the various departments of a balloon organization fell to the original 38 specialists of the co.

Early in May the balloon camp was selected by the Chief Air Service as the sight for the US Balloon School of the American Expeditionary Forces and the Sixth Balloon Co was to enlarge the camp and prepare it to accommodate the hundreds of officers and men who were to come there for the course of instruction in ballooning. Trees were chopped down, stumps grubbed, roads built, baseball diamonds, tennis courts and a swimming pool was constructed. Under the ever watchful eye of LTC Mygatt, the balloon school commander, evenings and Sundays were employed to advantage in preparing the school to accommodate the students who began to arrive the latter part of May.

In conjunction with constructing the balloon school and handling company routine duties the company operated two balloons and the balloon school motor park during the months of June and July.

As a result of the five months of intensive work and pioneer training at Camp de Souge the company received first-hand experience in all branches of ballooning and when it left the camp by rail for service at the front on 23 Jul, the company took with it excellent recommendations from the balloon school commander and the name of being one of the best trained balloon companies in France.

The days at Domevre were destined to be busy ones. The French Company which we relieved had not built any barracks for the men and officers to sleep in so the task of constructing a temporary camp fell on the sixth balloon company. The balloon was to be in the air from sunrise to sunset at all times when the weather would permit and on each fourth night the balloon was to fly all night.

Some most valuable experience was gained during the month in which the company was operating on the Toul front. The sector was considered a quiet one but planes were then being constructed for the big drive which was soon to take place. The rear of the enemy lines were to be watched at all times for indications of movements more or less than normal. Train movements were to be watched. Various signals, flares, flashes and smoke were to be interpreted. Enemy air activities were to be followed. Changes in the appearance of earthworks were to be reported. During the operations on this front enemy and allied planes were more than normally active as a result of which our lookout squads gained valuable experience in spotting planes and occasionally our machine gunners gained good practice in their line of work.

Preparations for what later proved to be the beginning of the end the St. Mihiel drive, were

carried on and all enemy movements were tabulated. This the Boche endeavored to prevent with shell fire and avion attack.

August 3 Lieutenant Taylor was driven from the basket by avion attack while flying at the advance position.

4 Aug 1918 1Lt E. D. Harris jumped balloon not burned

Lieutenant Duell jumped August 16 under the same conditions. Lieutenant Harris was forced to part company with the basket August 17th in the presence of the French commander of all balloons on that front. Beamingly the commandant commented upon the coolness and devotion to duty of the entire company under fire, saying that the Sixth had no superiors on the western front.

On the morning of the 28th of August misfortune overtook the veteran balloon, "Gertie," who nobly bore three wound stripes on her nose. A brazen Boche in a Fokker triplane, evidently sent out to get it or die, accomplished his mission and managed to get back to his own lines though his plane was riddled by machine-gun fire and shrapnel. Lieutenant Nixon jumped clear of the burning, bag which fell to earth in flames. Balloon 129 burned

On 29 Aug after a day and a night of constant work on the parts of the transportation and balloon departments a new balloon was secured, inflated and made ready for ascension.

Balloon Company No. 2 relieved the Sixth which left the following day under sealed orders arriving beyond the gates of Toul on the Nancy road at daybreak August 30, where other American balloon companies were assembling. Toul was nightly bombed by enemy avions but little damage was done.

On 2 Sep, the company started its own transportation to Villers sur Meuse. Preparations were begun for an anticipated offensive. The sector was studied from maps charts and aerial photos. Special maps and charts were prepared. Transportation was overhauled and put in first class condition. Balloon positions were selected both in the front and rear. The roads over which the balloon was to travel were placarded with such signs as Balloon road, no overhanging wires, and reserved for balloons.

Telephone lines were strung to the most advanced points, maps, photo and all available data of the sector were gathered in the chart room and studied. In a driving rain on the night of September 11 the balloon was inflated in preparation for the first great American offensive of September 12. We were part of the Fifth Corps, First Army, and attached to the 26th (Yankee) Division. Their memorable advance took the Sixth twenty-three kilometers into enemy territory and on the following night we were established in a balloon bed which had been vacated by a Boche balloon company a few hours previous at the edge of Hattonchatte overlooking a vast plain lighted by burning villages within the lines of the retreating Huns.

The advance had taken the company and all its motor transportation over shell-torn defense works, No Man's land, enemy trenches and bottomless mud roads. In order to keep the balloon in the air and flying, more than 2,000 overhead wires and camouflage hangings had been cut, while traveling on the Grande Trauchees de Cologne road through the Montague Forest which was a maze of German camps, hospital and supply bases. The 26th Infantry had formed the junction with the First Division forces who had flanked the salient from beyond Mount Sec, 17,000 of the enemy being cut off in the St. Mihiel pocket.

Following the infantry so closely was a new phase in balloon work and the question on every doughboy's lips was "What in 'ell balloon outfit was that trying to leapfrog us?" But before the Armistice was signed many a doughboy came to know the Sixth and also that if there was a loaf of bread or a can of "willie" in the outfit, half of it was his. A move was made back to a position between Dommartin and St. Remy where effective work was done with the artillery, former German camps being used for company quarters.

On September 20 the company was moving again through mud and rain to Jouy-en-Argonne and a new sector. Telephone communications were laid and after nightfall, September 25, the balloon was inflated near Montzeville in preparation for the great Argonne offensive which began at dawn September 26. Noon of that day found the advance transportation, with balloon flying, within the enemy's old lines and the retreating Huns could be seen with the naked eye, being driven back before the irresistible attack of the 79th Division doughboys. On pushed the infantry, closely followed by the balloon, reporting their advance and regulating artillery fire on concrete machine gun emplacements. We advanced through this land of death, caused by every device known to modern warfare until Malancourt was reached. Here the balloon was bedded down after the dead had been removed, by members of the company, from the place chosen for it. The company's report of the first day of the drive was mimeographed by orders of Lieutenant-Colonel Paegelow and sent to every balloon company on the Front.

A memorandum was received from Major General Kunz expressing his appreciation for the work done on that day by the Sixth and ordering telephone connections made with his special line to the front so that he might get our reports direct. Four separate attacks by enemy avions had proved unsuccessful. Eight thousand rounds of ammunition had been used in barrages thrown against them by the company's machine gun fire. Vigies heads throbbed from eyes strained in their long vigils, but every plane which hove in sight was spotted and named. The night was spent behind remnants of walls, in shell holes and under trucks; in the rain, cold and mud, under continuous shell fire and every man chilled to the bone. Observation being impossible, an advance was made and food was carried from Esnes, as motor-transportation was impossible in the congestion but the mess sergeant and his aides tolerated no obstacles and food was secured when it seemed physically impossible.

Ascensions were made on the 28th from the valley beyond Malancourt. Flanked by artillery on both sides, adjustments began at once on enemy positions and gun emplacements. An attack by an enemy Fokker drove our observers from the basket and burned the balloon, this being the second burned over Lieutenant Nixon. 1Lt G.R. Nixon and 1Lt H.F. Gossett jumped balloon 176

burned

A new balloon and six truck loads of hydrogen gas tanks were secured from Ippecourt thirty kilometers in the rear. For two days they labored through almost impassable traffic and mud. Battle tanks came to the aid of the heavily laden trucks many times when they were helpless, but at nightfall of the second day they pulled in with the gas and preparations were made to inflate a new balloon. The next afternoon enemy batteries located an emergency dressing station composed of an entire field hospital unit which had been filled with seriously wounded before the tents were hardly up. In less than an hour the hospital was no more and the graveyard which sprung up was a monument to Hun atrocities.

The balloon ascended on 28 Sep with Lt Gossett and Lt Nixon in the basket. The valley in which the company was encamped was full of artillery camps and a field hospital was located along the edge of the road in the same valley. The valley was under shell fire from the enemy artillery. The balloon ascended with the particular mission of locating and adjusting fire upon the hostile batteries. Three batteries and a sniper field gun were located and preparations being made for adjustments when an enemy Fokker biplane attacked and burned the balloon the observers jumped and landed safely a considerable distance from the ascension point.

The following two days were busy ones with the company. A truck train with about thirty men returned to Ippicourt to obtain a new balloon with hydrogen. It was necessary to travel 30 kilometers to obtain rations. Supply details were required to travel 30 kilometers for supplies.

In the meantime the company moved its camp out of the valley near Malancourt, where the enemy was constantly shelling into a forest just south of Monfaucon.

The balloon and hydrogen details returned on 31 Sep and the balloon was inflated and made ready to ascend on 1 Oct but due to poor visibility it did not ascend until 2 Oct. On this date the observer made visibility test. He could not see the front lines so the balloon descended and was bedded for the day.

The company acted as stretcher bearers and the medical men worked continually. The balloon was inflated at the edge of the remains of a forest two kilometers southeast of Montfaucon on October 1. Poor visibility prevented action until October 3, except for a short flight the previous day. Intensive shelling of the flying position availed the enemy nothing, the balloon being kept in the air and not a man on duty leaving his post. Maneuvering Officer 2d Lieut. Myers Norton, Chauff. First Class Walter Soper, who drove the winch, and Chauff. John Curry, who operated the balloon mechanism were recommended for a citation.

The balloon ascended on the afternoon of 3 Oct with Lt Taylor in the basket, an ace in a Fokker came over the lines straight for the balloon. 1Lt W. J. R. Taylor jumped, balloon 135 burned, but the machine gun crew of the Sixth jumped into fame by shooting down the plane. The aviator, uninjured, was taken prisoner and the helpless machine guarded by a proud buck from the Sixth. Again the laborious trip to Ippecourt for a new balloon and gas. Having no balloon to protect

didn't keep the machine gunners under cover.

The balloon was in great demand by both artillery units and corps. Intelligence Departments. The enemy was constantly shelling our positions in and around Montfaucon and it was very important that the hostile batteries be located and quieted. Visibility had been generally poor and the Army Corps Intelligence Departments were constantly demanding the location of the infantry lines. The balloon ascended with special mission of obtaining any information of military value and locating the positions of hostile batteries. But observation on this particular afternoon was made extremely difficult. The company was the subject of heavy shell-fire during the entire afternoon which caused the winch to maneuver up and down the field to avoid the sum of dispersion of the enemy shells.

On the morning of October 4 a second enemy Fokker fell to earth from their fire. Flying the bright colors of an ace, he came over in quest of battle, and met more than his match; this being the second plane officially credited to the machine gunners of the Sixth. Later in the day an observation plane came in range of their barrage. It nose-dived, righted, and then volplaned to earth with both observer and pilot dead. No official credit was-given for this last plane.

6 Oct 1918 1Lt W. J. R. Taylor jumped balloon not burned

10 Oct 1918 1Lt W. J. R. Taylor jumped balloon not burned

The company operated its balloon at the position south of Montfaucon from 5-13 Oct adjusting fire for artillery units and gathering information for division and corps intelligence department. The balloon was in constant demand by both branches. Liaison officers and telephone operators were busy at all times arranging for adjustments and furnishing information regarding infantry front lines general impressions and troop movements.

Lieutenant Ovitt, Commanding Officer, Chauffeur First Class Clifford, Sergeant McKinz and Private Chappaz were evacuated with high explosive wounds and gas. Thirty-five other men were sent back with dysentery, colds and other diseases. First Lieut. B. T. Burt was assigned as Company Commander, but was evacuated October 10 and 1st Lieut. Nixon succeeded him. Valuable information was obtained and numerous adjustments of artillery fire were made from this position between October 5 and 13. Repairs on the balloon rigging were made each night by the balloon mechanics and records accurately compiled at the chart room were carried to headquarters by couriers who rode day and night. A five kilometer advance was made on the night of October 13, through Montfaucon to the Ivory Road.

More than 1,000 overhead wires, congested traffic and mud hindered the way. Poor visibility prevented flights and on October 16 the much needed relief came. The position was taken over by Balloon Company 12 and the Sixth moved back to Brabant where it celebrated the signing of the Armistice. From Brabant we moved to Ville-sur-Cousance where we remained until January, when we broke camp again and went to Colombey-les-Belles to await transportation to the States.

Arrival in France 20 Feb 1918
Arrival at the front 28 Jul 1918
Days ascensions made in S.O.S 87
Days ascensions made in Z.O.A 48
Total days ascensions made 135
Number of ascensions made in S.O.S. 605
Number of ascensions made in Z.O.A. 106
Total number of ascensions made 711
Total number of hours in air S.O.S. 428.51
Total number of hours in air Z.O.A. 200.3
Total number of hours in the air 629.25
Artillery adjustments in S.O.S. 54
Artillery adjustments in Z.O.A 7
Total number or artillery adjustments 61
Enemy shells observed 456
Enemy aircraft observed 474
Enemy balloons observed 47
Enemy artillery batteries observed 9
Enemy traffic on road and railroad observed 49
Smoke, fires and flares observed 40
Explosions observed 33
Jumps from basket
Balloons attacked 11
Balloons burned 3
Balloons destroyed
Observers killed
Observers captured

Air Force Order of Battle

Created: 1 Jan 2014

Updated:

Sources

US Army Order of Battle 1919-1941. Steven E. Clay. Combat Studies Institute Press. US Army Combined Arms Center.

Fort Leavenworth, KS. Nd.