

42 BALLOON COMPANY

MISSION

LINEAGE

42 Balloon Company, 20 Mar 1918

Demobilized, Aug 1919

Inactivated, 23 May 1919

STATIONS

Camp John Wise, TX

Camp Morrison, VA, May 1918

Port of Embarkation Newport News, VA, Jun 1918

Europe, Jun 1918

France, 13 Jul 1918

Camp Lee, VA, May 1919

Brooks Field, TX, May 1919

ASSIGNMENTS

WEAPON SYSTEMS

COMMANDERS

1st Lt Ray W. Thompson

2nd Lt William E. Woodman

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

EMBLEM

MOTTO

OPERATIONS

The experiences of the 42 Balloon Company in operation in France were not the most thrilling, nor yet the most tranquil of any outfit in the field. At no time did the sky appear black with hostile shells aimed with deadly accuracy at our positions, nor did our burning balloons furnish continual spectacles for the bored M.P.s, but before the last show was over every man from the C.O. to the last replacement had learned how to hunt a hole at the sound of an "arrival," and the vigies had learned how to yell out "five Fokkers in the east!" with as much calmness as they fell in for chow.

The 42d Balloon Company was organized on March 15, 1918, at Camp John Wise, San Antonio, Texas, with 2d Lieut. William E. Woodman in command. The trials and tribulations of a company so quickly formed and destined for overseas service within a month of the date of organization will never be forgotten by the nucleus of twenty men who first comprised the company, nor the officers and cadets who were assigned to it. We finally reached our authorized strength on about April 15, and then began the long process of waiting for orders to go overseas. Orders finally arrived the last of April, and on May 2 we left San Antonio, and after a five-day journey arrived at Aeronautical General Supply Depot and Concentration Camp, at Morrison, Va.

The first thing that greeted us upon our arrival, was the sound of picks, shovels and axes vigorously wielded by members of other balloon companies who had been there for two and three months awaiting their overseas orders.

There we waited for two months, doing fatigue work three days a week, and drilling three days a week, at the same time wondering whether France could be quite as muddy as the Virginia soil.

Finally came the long looked for orders, and on the 29th day of June we set out to hike from Morrison to Newport News, a distance of about six miles. It was a steady three-hour hike in a boiling hot sun, but not a single man in the company fell out from exhaustion, although we were all carrying full packs and wearing winter uniforms.

The balloon companies were loaded on the Italian ship America, and that afternoon, about 5 o'clock, we pulled into the harbor. The next day, the 30th of June, our convoy was formed and we pulled out of Hampton Roads. About two days later we joined a convoy coming from New York and added a number of destroyers to the convoy for our protection.

We spent the 4th of July in mid-ocean and had a regular celebration. Promptly at 12 o'clock, noon, every ship in the convoy let loose with its guns and sirens, nor was excitement lacking in our trip over. Three times the destroyers dropped depth bombs, which may or may not have meant the fate of subs who were looking for a fat haul.

The men stood the trip very well, except for some inevitable sea-sickness, and on July 12, about 6 o'clock in the evening, we first sighted land, and pulled into the harbor of Brest that night. The next day, we disembarked and marched to Pontanazen Barracks, where we stayed for ten days.

We then received orders to proceed to Etalans, Department Doubs. There we received the remainder of our equipment, including our transportation, and completed the organization of the company for service at the Front. We worked in cooperation with the Artillery School at Valdahon, and carried on a number of shoots with them.

In the middle of August Lieutenant-Colonel Fravel inspected the company and informed us that we must be ready to go to the Front within two weeks. We left Etalans on the 31st day of August, and arrived in Toul on September 2.

The Forty-second took the field about a week before the commencement of the St. Mihiel operation, taking station at Ville-au-Val, a picturesquely dirty chateau village, not far from Dieulouard, on the east side of the Moselle. We were attached, for duty, to the First Corps, in the area in which the Sad and both Divisions were in the line. Under orders not to operate until the "D" day, we inflated the night of the 10th and the next day Sergeant Fenton added several gray hairs to his head rearranging the rigging, which had apparently been put on hind end foremost at the depot.

The 12th was cloudy with a gale blowing, as the balloon men of the First Army will remember for some time. In an ascension about nine o'clock our balloon suffered a tear in the rudder which kept us down for repairs the rest of the day.

Between the 12th and 22d of September the company operated from Ville-au-Val. Our station being on the extreme, right wing of the attack no appreciable advance was made by the division in front of us. During this period good weather enabled the balloon to make daily ascensions.

Throughout the St. Mihiel drive the 42d Company was fortunate in losing no balloons, though the balloon on our right was twice burned by hostile aircraft. Our good luck can be attributed partly to careful maneuvering and partly to the close attention of an anti-aircraft battery, which seemed at times to be using the big gas bag for target practice. Toward the end of the drive two of our telephone men were gassed while on duty at this battery, the only casualties that the company suffered.

During the time that we were stationed at Ville-au-Val the company was very short of officers, there being only the commanding officer, Lieutenant Thompson, two observers to take turns in the basket, the maneuvering officer, and Lieutenant McAdon, the doctor. Contrary to the tradition of the medical corps, Dr. McAdon acted in the capacity of a line officer, and whenever not distributing pills he could generally be found shouting "Yo heave" to a gang of men pulling a truck out of the mud.

On September 20 the company was detached from the First Corps, and ordered to the vicinity of Verdun, for duty with the Third Army Corps. The order arrived about supper time, and by midnight

the company was on the way. After two days on the road the company arrived at Bois-de-Thierville, about two miles from Verdun, at 11 o'clock in the evening. The rest of the night was spent in pup-tents, by as many of the company as had the ambition to set one up, but from the appearance of things the next morning practically everybody had been satisfied with just crawling into the brush: The next day the company moved into some old French barracks, where we remained until the last week in October, in reserve. During this period the transportation department bore the brunt of the work, while the rest of the company was occupied in building roads, or dodging the wood and water detail. The truck train, however, was out on the road most of the time under orders of the C. A. B., either bringing hydrogen to companies in operation, or balloons and supplies from Colombey-les-Belles to Ippecourt. Before the end of the month the truck drivers were all fully experienced in sitting up all night, living on no meals per day, and dodging shell holes in the road in pitch black darkness.

On the 24th of October the company was sent up to relieve the Third at Montfaucon, which village, the Third's commanding officer had decided was a good site for a balloon company, but not his balloon company. The first day at Montfaucon was a busy one for the riggers. The balloon was twice partially deflated by shell fragments, a new hole being made as fast as the old one would be patched up. The morning of the second day the men broke all records for early rising. Practically every man was up long before reveille digging deeper into the hillside, for the events of the night led the men to believe that sleeping on top of ground was not healthy in that section of France. The next day the company moved to the Bois-de-Montfaucon, a kilometer or two from the village.

During our stay at this position the telephone detail was probably the busiest section of the company. Besides taking over the system left by the Third Company, which included an advance exchange at Cuisy, the lines were extended and a new exchange installed in Nantillois, in preparation for the advance. -Each night the lines would be cut by shelling, and- trouble shooters were out most of the time. On the day previous to the attack the company changed positions to the Bois-de-Beuges, west of Nantillois, with the exception of the transportation detail, which was left at the old station, to repair two unserviceable trucks. From that time until the Armistice was signed the mechanics had plenty to do in keeping the company provided with enough trucks to keep up with the advance of the division in front of us.

The success of the 90th and the Fifth Division along the left bank of the Meuse was so complete that our November 1st position in the Bois-de-Beuges was out of date after about two ascensions, and on the morning of the 4th the company again started to change station. The position picked out for the next ascension, near Villers-Devant-Dun, necessitated the movement of about fifteen kilometers, which the truck train made with little difficulty, but the moving of the balloon, inflated, presented the greatest problem that the maneuvering party had to face during the operations. It became necessary for the balloon to lay over night at Aincreville. The next morning the balloon party reached the new position, and after our first ascension at this point we were reported by a company further back as an enemy balloon.

Unfavorable weather prevented ascensions to any great extent at this position, but the time was well spent by most of the company in improving their living conditions, which were about as bad at this place as could possibly be experienced. What few dugouts there were occupied by the bodies of the

Germans who had built them, and the men also assisted in interring the remains of some of the American doughboys who had taken the hill.

After a few days in this position the news that the signing of the Armistice was imminent reached the company, and the desire for premature celebration, by building bonfires at night, was manifested, but was somewhat curbed by a squadron of German planes which came over and machine-gunned our position and the village, which was occupied by the headquarters of the 90th Division.

The news of the actual signing of the Armistice on November 11 was soon followed by an order directing us to move to Baalon, about three kilometers across the Meuse, where the infantry outposts were located upon the cessation of hostilities. From this point we watched what was possible of the German withdrawal, and practically everyone took time off to be sick or collect souvenirs.

After a week at Baalon the company again returned to its old home at the Bois-de-Thierville, and within a week joined the other balloon companies of the First Army in the camp of Ville-sur-Cousances, where they stayed longer than, most of the men had remained at one post, during their military experience. While at this station, our Commanding Officer Lieut. Ray W. Thompson received the Croix de Guerre awarded by the French for disregard of danger upon the occasion of his balloon being burned during the Chateau-Thierry operations.

Arrival in France 12 Jul 1918

Arrival at the front 2 Sep 1918

Days ascensions made in S.O.S 14

Days ascensions made in Z.O.A 14

Total days ascensions made 28

Number of ascensions made in S.O.S. 55

Number of ascensions made in Z.O.A. 41

Total number of ascensions made 96

Total number of hours in air S.O.S. 47.57

Total number of hours in air Z.O.A. 48.55

Total number of hours in the air 96.52

Artillery adjustments in S.O.S. 5

Artillery adjustments in Z.O.A 1

Total number or artillery adjustments 6

Enemy shells observed 18

Enemy aircraft observed 36

Enemy balloons observed 18

Enemy artillery batteries observed 8

Enemy traffic on road and railroad observed 10

Smoke, fires and flares observed 8

Explosions observed 0

Jumps from basket

Balloons attacked

Balloons burned
Balloons destroyed
Observers killed
Observers captured

DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE ORGANIZATIONAL HISTORIES

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Sources

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