

# 26 BALLOON COMPANY

## MISSION

## LINEAGE

Organized Feb 1918  
26 Balloon Company  
Redesignated Balloon Company No. 26, 13 Sep 1921  
Inactivated, Jan 1922  
Demobilized, 6 Sep 1922  
Reconstituted 26 Balloon Company, 24 Mar 1923  
Demobilized, 1924

## STATIONS

Post Field, OK  
Camp Morrison, VA, Jun 1918  
Port of Embarkation, Newport News, VA, Jul 1918  
Europe, Jul 1918  
Camp Lee, VA, Jun 1919  
Lee Hall, VA, Jul 1919  
Inactive 1922-1924

## ASSIGNMENTS

U.S. Army Balloon School

## WEAPON SYSTEMS

## COMMANDERS

2Lt Robert V. Ignico, Jan 1920  
1Lt William J. Flood, 8 Feb 1921  
1Lt Ira B. Koenig, 18 Feb 1921  
1Lt Dache M. Reeves, 30 Sep 1921

## HONORS

## **Service Streamers**

## **Campaign Streamers**

## **Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers**

## **Decorations**

## **EMBLEM**

## **MOTTO**

## **OPERATIONS**

The 26th is an offspring of old Provisional Co. "A", the daddy of all Uncle Sam's balloon companies, thick itself was created at Fort Omaha, Nebraska, August 14th, 1917. Capt. Harry Vaughn was Co. "A's" skipper when it set sail for Fort Sill, near Lawton, Oklahoma, the following September, and on February 19th, 1918, twin companies were born. They were named the 25th and 26th Balloon Companies, but it was not until April 2nd, 1916, that the 26th, which furnishes the theme for our story was christened.

The 26th was entrusted to 1st Lieut. Joseph Gayus Halsey, of Wilkes-Barre, Pa., Who remained with the company until after its arrival in France. Otto F. Diedrich, was named First Sergeant, and has continued with slight interruption, as top kicker, In addition, Sgt. Diedrich has the rank of M.S.E.

The 26th began to walk much earlier than may other balloon companies, which have come into the world for on February 22nd, 1916, three days after its birth, by way of celebrating George Washington's natal day, the 26th stepped out an the sandy soil of wind swept Oklahoma, bearing proudly a huge sausage balloon of the "B" type, filled to the utmost capacity, but looking no puffier nor more important than the two hundred men in whose care it had been placed. By common consent the Balloon became known as "Old Betsy". Approximately fifteen percent of the men had handled a balloon previously. The remaining one hundred and sixty approached the giant with the same grace with which a new pop take hold of his first born, and incidentally with the same feeling of exhilaration.

Right off the reel "Old Betsy" went into action. She worked faithfully by day, and slept peacefully at night in a brand new hangar. Her crew toiled not one bit the less than "Old Betsy" for while she expanded genially, and raised grandly to superior heights under the glare of the fierce Southern sun, the men who maneuvered. her bore the brunt of preliminary active war duties. Most of them were fresh from civilian fields where the drain in human energy was not so severe yet each day from sun to sunset found them facing biting winds that no warming rays would obliterate, and each night left them drooping lower than the Lily of France before the Americans came. "Old Betsy" did everything that was asked other by observers on artillery fire.

On April 2nd, 1918, the 26th was christened and its baptism was in fire. The company, returning late in the afternoon from the artillery range at up Doniphan was in the act of putting the balloon in the hangar. A high wind was blowing and the balloon rolled like a ship in a storm. Knowing that it was impossible to take the inflated balloon in, as the wind had already torn the toggles away in numerous places, an attempt was made to deflate it by pulling the ripping panel. Deflation in this manner proved too slow, and in an effort to expedite matters the valve was taken from the nose, which was headed into a raging sand storm. POUF! None has ever been able to describe just what happened but that pouf embraces a loud noise, a sheet of flame, a lot of smoke, coincident with the precipitate flight of all hands holding the ropes. It is generally believed that the explosion was due to static electricity. Whatever theory may be correct, or accepted as correct, these facts remain indisputable - the balloon was destroyed, thirty-two men were burned, sixteen of them seriously. The injuries in the main were about the heads, faces, necks and hands and unfortunately some of the men will carry the marks through life.

The burning of the balloon was in the nature of a "Welcome to Our \_\_\_\_\_ city" to 200 recruits fresh from the green fields of Kelly; San Antonio, Texas and marked their introduction into the world of balloon activities.

"So this is the Balloon school?" murmured a rookie.

April 16th, eighty-one of the rookies referred to, were hand-picked from the newly formed 39th Balloon, Company and transferred to the 26th. A like number were transferred from the 26th for replacement. The transfers were made at a time when it was believed and fondly hoped that the 26th would shortly be on its way to an Atlantic port for shipment over there. For more than two months each and every member kept the hope fires burning and on June 16th, the flickered flames were fanned to life when announcement was made that orders to roll out of Fort Sill had been received.

In the meantime, the one casualty the 26th has had since its inception, occurred when Private George Trauger of Stroudsburg, Pa., died at the Post Hospital May 19th. Private Trauger was a rigger in civil life, an athlete, a well-liked man among the men and officers and a good soldier. His body was sent to Stroudsburg for burial.

The 26th's special train pulled out of Fort Sill late in the afternoon of June 18th. It made a bee line for Morrison, Va., stopping only at points to allow the men opportunity to stretch their legs, see important cities and partake of big eats furnished principally by the Red Cross Canteen Workers.

On reaching Morrison, the 26th felt as if it had burned its bridges behind and had done a good job. The company had seen arise, as if by magic from the sun kissed sand dunes of Oklahoma, a Balloon School a model in every respect. From the flat lying ground, peopled by pioneer balloonists, encamped in pyramid or pup tents or makeshift shacks has risen row on row of neatly painted white barracks, equipped to the last minute details for the men who were to

come after and be trained in war work. They were to be pardoned if a tiny glow of pride suffused when they reflected on their part in the up building of the balloon school. The company had helped tutor officers from the all-important work of observation, and perfected themselves in the handling of captive balloons. This was made possible by the weeding out process which includes the transfer from the company of men thought to be more adaptable to other branches of the service, and the initiation of promising men from newly formed balloon companies, the 31st, 32nd and 34th companies were drawn on.

When the 26th landed at Morrison on the afternoon of Jun 31st its roster contained the names of three officer, 200 enlisted men, one medical officer and four enlisted medical men. Whereas at Fort Sill the company had been employed not only with Ballooning work, but in the up building of the new camp they found at Morrison a surcease from the hum drum of stump pulling and ditch digging. This had been done by companies preceding them. Their days were devoted in the main to drawing equipment and a heavy toll on the time of men in the supply room was exacted, not the least of whom was Lieut. Harry G. Montgomery, who has since coming to France, been made commanding officer of another company. Lt Montgomery is worthy of more than passing note in the annals of the 26th, in that he occupied, in the affections of the men, a place unsurpassed by any other two legged member of the company. The men regarded him first as an officer, then as a "regular feller."

Barely any sleep was had between July 7th and 10th, the day set for embarkation. At 1.00 A. M. the men packs on backs, flicked the last specks of dust from their barracks, pussyfooted out to the company street, formed into line, and at a low voiced command, "Squads right," marched off down the road, into the city of Newport News. They started singing when they had gotten beyond the camp lines. Windows were raised in the city as the men, joined by other companies, tramped through the deserted streets. Men, women and children called words of cheer, but steaming cups of coffee at the docks, furnished by Red Cross workers, were even more stimulating.

The Grosser Kurfurst, a former German trans-Atlantic liner, camouflaged and rechristened the "Aeolus" was the means of transportation. It was the largest and fastest of a convoy, bearing approximately 5,000 men, which marked the beginning of the invasion of Uncle Sam's second million there was a fanfare of music as the convoy steamed out past Hampton Roads, but a majority of the men had gone below for sleep and waked out of sight of land.

On the second day out, the 26th was given charge of the important task of lookout duty. They worked in conjunction with the sailors, and before the trip was completed, friendly relations had been established between the "gobs" and at least one company of soldiers. They even borrowed our cooks. which was regarded as some compliment from a sea going outfit.

Weather conditions were almost perfect for the trip, but some suffered from the heaves and several were sent to "Sick Bay", No submarine were sighted. Snappy little destroyers, wheeling and turning like ponies in the heat of a polo match, kept the spoilers of the deep from poling their slimy heads above the waves. No other convoy had a more alert escort.

On the moon-lit night of July 20th, it was generally made known that we would see land in the morning. Hardly a man slept and although the waters there about, were known as the graveyard for many a good ship, the thoughts of the men were more intent on the promised land, of action than on the lurking menace. The moon made reading a paper possible. It was hardly 3:00 O'clock when the first sight of land was obtainable. In a short while beautiful France lay before the eager eyes of the youthful crusaders. Fishing smacks dotted the waves and as the convoy steamed Indian file down the channel into the docks. The men put foot on French soil at Brest, which was later to take its place in history as the landing place of Pres. Wilson and felt literally that they had come in person to square the great debt.

The day was apparently made to order, warm and clear with a view of the sun which hasn't since been surpassed in France. Absence of young men, the presence of women in black, old men wearing military mourning, abundance of kiddies and sprinkling of green coated prisoners would have served, however, to remind of war. There wasn't a man but believed that August 1<sup>st</sup> would find the 26th flying a balloon at the front.

Four miles hike from the docks and the company veered from the road into Pontanezen barracks, built in 1650, but made famous as quarters for Napoleon, barracks for his soldiers, prison for offenders and the background for the execution of undesirables.

Three days were expected to furnish "Rest" that was the prescribed period for other organizations; we got an eleven-day dose. Some of them were tough until the boys made the acquaintance of the Vin Twins, Rouge et Blanco, and the fighting stupp bearing M'sieu Martel's, one to three service stars and had learned that American dough would purchase all most anything except white bread. Any man armed with a loaf of white bread (issued or otherwise), beaucoup francs and keen eyes to spot alert MPs need not confine his eats to gold-fish, corned willy, and beans. He learned to order eggs by the simple expedient of calling for an omelet and French fried potatoes followed as the night the day. In between times, the men busied themselves picking up fragments of French and francs passed from hand to hand as the dice dictated.

Rain, which next to wine, is France's most prolific product, butted in before bed-time, the first night. Hastily gathered bunks were put on stilts. The only guard stationed at night was around the mess tent, which to the corn willy fed seemed a waste of time and human energy.

During the "rest" there was apparently no night, or if there was, no notice was taken of it. The men were on the go continually. They had fatigue trying to save a field of moldy hay, carrying fuel, water, and even digging a ditch near Brest, so that a stevedore camp might have running water. The later element was sadly missing for bathing purposes and for the first time the pinch of dirt, hurt. Baths, "though salty, there had been aboard ship. But now the men were face to face for the first time with the problem of keeping their bodies entirely clean. This was accomplished once by a midnight march to an alleged shower and again by a hike to rarest to the K of C. Hall.

Companies came and companies went, but the 26th and. the rain seemed as if they would remain forever. Finally, word came to pack up, and as customary, two squads of the smallest men were marched off to Brest to load the heavy stuff. This was accomplished in the usual down-pour of rain and early on the morning of August 3rd, the men found themselves ensconced in French cars, labeled "40 Hommes et 8 Cheveaux," which in the States would not be dignified in the Hobo's nomenclature as "Side-door Pullmans". Rip van Winkle couldn't have slept 20 minutes in one and Homer would have been sore put to nod.

After 39 hours of rough riding, Bourdeau was reached. From there trucks convoyed us to the Balloon School at the edge of Camp de Souge and there the boys flapped from 1.00 A. M. until 5.45 A. M. on the softest cement floors they had ever known, reveille marks the beginning of three months life at the Balloon School, which was just one Post Commander after another. We ran the gamut of Lt. Col. Mygatt, Major Boettcher, Lt. Col. Geiger, and Lt. Col Fravel, Pup tents furnished shelter until knockdown barracks were assembled. They served until Spanish Flu made its appearance. Lieut. Isaac L. Dowdey, medical officer, who had been with the boys since Fort Sill days, chucked his coat, scattered the boys around in pup tents, one to each tent, and battled so valiantly against the invader, that not one serious case of the flu developed. This was notable in that many deaths occurred at the neighboring camp, and in every other camp in France.

The prescribed strength of the company, 170 men was attained by the transfer of 30 men to the 101st Balloon Replacement Company on Aug. 10th. Then the company got down to the business of ballooning. They worked from daylight until dark frequently the balloon was put to bed after taps. The 26th flew three balloons for days on a stretch. They found time to send picked men to Casaux for machine gun training, taught twelve men the duties of lookouts, schooled men for the chart room, telephone, radio and winch gave service in the handling of transportation of the post which earned for them the highest commendation to headquarters from each post commander, besides all this, they still found time to police the camp, make it a "Spotless Site," and cut and carried in their own wood.

All officers who came with the company, started to school Aug. 6th, first Lieut. William A. Gray, relieved Lieut. Halsey temporarily, 1Lt Leo M, Murphy took permanent command of the company August 30th.

All that was known of Lieut. Murphy When he came to the company was that he had seen nine months service at the front with both French and American fighters. And beyond admitting these facts little else could be gleaned from the new CO but from First Lieut. Fred S. Grant and Lieut Malcolm A. Sedgwick, it was learned that Lieut. Murphy had every reason to sport both observers wing and his starred Croix de Guerre which he displayed only on state occasions.

Lieut. Murphy was cited and decorated for his participations in the operations in the Toul sector, Apr to Jun and at Chatteau Thierry in July and August.

With the coming of Lieut. Murphey to the 26th, hope ran high of seeing action at the front. Almost every day rumor had the company slated for departure "within a few days". This kept the men on their toes.

It was while at the Balloon School, the 26th maneuvered the balloon to an open field and successfully made the first basket parachute drop attempted in the AEF. It was also at the Balloon School that a unique experiment involving the force of gravity was conducted!

An officer bet that a hen thrown from a height of 700 meters would be killed, a 26th officer took the bet; the loser was to pay for the hen, a biddy procured from the garbage collector. The hen not only fluttered safely to the ground, but then and there laid an egg, cackled and attempted to scuttle past two enlisted men. Chicken and casserole, the next day for two buck privates.

In the early days of November, it became apparent that the end of the war was in view and unless word was soon passed, "Let's go," the 26th would be S. O. L. in the S. O. S. until the command "Home, men" percolated to the nethermost ends of the A. E. F.

On Nov. 9th, word was received to pack up and leave far the front and the men went to it. But the old jinx which had camped on the trail of the 26th, hung on like a cootie to a doughboy. Transportation got balled up, not only as to motors, but also the "Etat" went on the bum. We were stalled.

On the morning of Nov. 11th, the word came that the armistice had been signed and noon day chow immediately lost its flavor. It looked as if all bets were off, until Lieut. Murphy stepped in with the glad news that he had secured cars - not the "40 hommes et 8 chevaux" kind, but rolling palaces of 111 class. How he got them, is a matter between the R. T. O. and Lieut. Murphy's conscience. It was generally surmised, however, that the French railway personnel was wildly intoxicated with joy and other things. Next morning at day break, the company hiked to Bonneau.

At Toul we had coffee, cakes, Red Cross cheer and then a long ride in borrowed trucks. The trail led up a camouflaged road to a height held by the Germans for four and one half years. Encampment was made in a ravine formerly used as a Boche Headquarters. Next day the caravan moved on what apparently started out to be a cook's tour, but the trip terminated suddenly at a neck of the woods where the 26th was unceremoniously dumped and told to tack up the "God Bless Our Home" sign.

Picture any patch in the Florida Everglades or the most dismal swamp in the Mississippi Delta and you have a bird's eye view of our home. There are no "Welcome" mats in front of any of the group of dwellings, probably because excavation would be necessary every day to keep them visible to the naked eye. Yet taking it as a whole, our homes are not entirely free from good cheer. We made lamps from leavings and wicks from our shirt tails. Sometimes the S. O. S. oil didn't have too much water to prevent burning.

Athletics were not neglected. Baseball was played in the States and in the A. E. F. The most notable game on the diamond resulted in the Bucks trimming the NCO's and incidentally breaking them financially. In football, the 26th took a high place, being scored on only once and then the 13th Balloon Company. The game ended 6 to 6 with the ball in the 26<sup>th</sup>'s possession on the 13th's one-yard line.

We are not unmindful that our entrance into the pit was made when the final curtain had been rung down; the principal actors had spoken their lines, and made their exits. The house was dark. Only the props were left to prove that there had been a show. Shell holes, abandoned Boche quarters hastily cast aside paraphernalia offered mute evidence that there had been one. Signs bearing arrows Which pointed to Verdun and St Mihiel a few kilometers away and next the shell torn villages of Hattonville were within almost a stone's throw.

Arrival in France 21 Jul 1918  
Arrival at the front 17 Nov 1918  
Days ascensions made in S.O.S 57  
Days ascensions made in Z.O.A  
Total days ascensions made 57  
Number of ascensions made in S.O.S. 695  
Number of ascensions made in Z.O.A.  
Total number of ascensions made 695  
Total number of hours in air S.O.S. 545.45  
Total number of hours in air Z.O.A.  
Total number of hours in the air 545.45  
Artillery adjustments in S.O.S. 44  
Artillery adjustments in Z.O.A  
Total number or artillery adjustments 44  
Enemy shells observed  
Enemy aircraft observed  
Enemy balloons observed  
Enemy artillery batteries observed  
Enemy traffic on road and railroad observed  
Smoke, fires and flares observed  
Explosions observed  
Jumps from basket  
Balloons attacked  
Balloons burned  
Balloons destroyed  
Observers killed  
Observers captured

Arrived at the port of Newport News, VA, on 28 June 1919 on the S.S. Virginian as Balloon Company No. 26. Transferred to Camp Lee, VA, and arrived there on 29 June 1919. Assigned to

the U.S. Army Balloon School. Redesignated as Balloon Company No. 26 on 13 September 1921. Inactivated in January 1922 at Lee Hall and 20th Balloon Company made Active Associate. Demobilized on 6 September 1922. Reconstituted in the Regular Army as the 26th Balloon Company on 24 March 1923 and 19th Airship Company made Active Associate. Designated mobilization training station was Fort Eustis, VA, 1923-24.

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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.