

We Were Called Balloon Blowers Once

Another true-life saga by Frenchy Corbeille

In January 1955, after a one-year tour on the island of Adak in the Aleutian Chain, I was assigned to NAS Whidbey Island, WA. I was elevated to the lofty rank of AG3 the day I reported aboard, and naturally enough, I was assigned to the Aerology Division, Air Operations Department, as were all other Aerographer's Mates (AGs). The Air Operations Department was then housed in a World War Two era building of frame and clapboard construction, designed to be quickly built and meagerly functional. So, even though space was provided for the Aerology crew, there was no balloon inflation shelter.

We were scheduled to launch four pilot balloons (PIBALs) daily and mostly used 100-gram balloons. When properly inflated, a 100-gram balloon is somewhere around 40 inches in diameter and can be tracked with a 25-power theodolite many thousands of feet into the atmosphere, or until it enters a cloud layer. Tracking data are then used to compute upper-level winds, information which is helpful to both the weather forecaster and the aviator.

Having no special balloon inflation facility at our disposal, the erstwhile AGs who preceded me had developed a pretty workable scheme which involved running a hose from the helium tank outside through a partially opened window and hooking it up to the inflation equipment inside the office. Then it was a simple matter of having one man on the valve outside and one inside to signal when the balloon was full and tying the stem tightly shut.

To preserve the balloons in storage, they were packed in talcum powder, with a liberal sprinkling internally to prevent the balloon from sticking itself shut. So once inflated and tied off, one then had this rather awkward powdery orb which was in the weather office and needed to be taken outside for release. The doorway out of the Aerology Office was something less than three feet wide, so this 40-inch sphere had to be compressed slightly. This was not as delicate an operation as one might think, because these balloons were pretty 'thick-skinned' critters. Being dimensionally challenged in arm length, it was a bit tricky for me to get my arms around the beast, but I could do it. Then I would back carefully through the doorway out into a 6-foot wide passageway which led to the great outdoors - through a double door.

The last time I was asked to perform this particular task was a memorable one for me, and for at least one other Navy person. Unbeknownst to me, as I was backing out of the Aerology Office, carefully keeping the balloon from scraping on the doorframe, the Air Operations Officer, a Navy Commander whose name I no longer remember, was backing out of his office, while conversing with someone still inside. We emerged about simultaneously and turned together to head down the passageway, he clockwise, I counterclockwise. He had a cigar in his mouth. The resulting explosion was not deafening but the cloud of dust was certainly overwhelming. The Commander's "Aviation Green" uniform now had a very chalky appearance, as did his eyebrows and hairline. His black eyes were fairly snapping fire. I quickly envisioned my new AG3 "crow" flying away with my return to the rank of AGAN! What saved the day, especially for me, was the uncontrolled laughter of my division officer, the late George Berrian, then Lieutenant-Commander Berrian. He could see the whole thing unfolding, but, in his words, it was kind of like watching a freight train de-rail. One could see it happening but was powerless to do much about it, so one might as well enjoy the show. Enjoy it he did. He literally doubled up in mirth, and soon the Air Operations Officer saw a bit of humor in the whole thing himself. At that point I departed the area, with not so much as a "By your leave, Sir". I was transferred to Fleet Weather Central Yokosuka, Japan a few months later.

My fascination with weather balloons was not to end there, however. **Epilogue follows:**

In 1962, while assigned to Heavy Attack Squadron Two, I was aboard the USS Coral Sea, moored to a pier at Cubi Point, RP. The reason I was aboard was because I was LTJG Corbeille then and I was Squadron Duty Officer (SDO); the rest of the squadron was enjoying a squadron picnic at the base recreation facility.

There is no space more dead than a squadron ready room when everybody saves the SDO is at a squadron picnic. With time on my hands and lots of room for stray thoughts, my mind kept playing through some of the Executive Officer's (XO) favorite sayings: "Let's get the **ball pumped up!**", or "Keep the damned **ball pumped up!**" On my way back from noon meal I happened right by the passageway off which was the XO's stateroom; I could see that the door was slightly ajar. I also noted that there was a low-pressure air line in the passageway right outside his door. One thought led to another and in no time at all, I was in the Coral Sea Weather Office requesting a large weather balloon. They gave me a 700-gram size, which is akin to the Graf-Zepelin, or maybe the Goodyear blimp. So, now outfitted with a really nice balloon and a length of inflation hose, along with some string for tying off the inflation nozzle, I returned to the XO's stateroom. After making all necessary connections, I inflated that hummer right there in his room. It completely filled the place! When I got all done and had returned all equipment, I hung a fairly large sign on it that read "Keep this damned ball pumped up!" Then I returned to my duty station in the ready room from where I awaited developments.

The XO, Commander William D. Fries, was one of the first returnees from the picnic and he dutifully checked in with the SDO to inquire whether or not all was well. It was, and he left for his stateroom. In less than a minute he was back, very excited, and says "Come on Frenchy, you gotta see this". So, I accompanied him down his passageway, and even innocently asked him how the hell he got that thing in there. He was more concerned about how to get it out. The ever pragmatic one, I suggested poking a hole in it, an idea he quickly vetoed, because he wanted to save the thing for a souvenir. I almost suggested just getting a brand new one from the weather office, but thought better of it. I told him instead that there must be an inflation spout on the thing somewhere; if it can be inflated, it can be deflated. He got down on the deck and discovered the nozzle (right where I had left it), and proceeded to remove the string. I probably should have told him about the talcum powder, which had, for the most part, settled down near the nozzle. When he got the string off, there was a gout of dust the likes of which are seldom seen. He should have been further from the source. He had snapping black eyes just like the Air Operations Officer at Whidbey Island, all surrounded by a chalky mask. What he said sounded good, but it doesn't look good in print.

What amazed me is that he still had not identified me as the perpetrator of the deed. It was some weeks later, on a Sunday afternoon at sea, standing down from air operations, and again I was SDO. Commander Fries kept looking at me and looking at me, and then suddenly shouted "**YOU DID IT!**". Then he went on to explain his deductive reasoning which involved the fact that I was an Aerographer's Mate when I was an enlisted man, that I would know about weather balloons and where to get one, etc., etc. No one could have taken it all in better stride and just last year he sent me a copy of the official Navy photo he had taken of the balloon in his stateroom.

So, there's the rub - once a balloon blower, always a balloon blower! We just can't get it out of our system.

Freedom Is Not Free

Frenchy Sends with Warm Regards

Submitted by R. Claude "Frenchy" Corbeille, USN RET