

*The
Little-Known
Story
of the
Confederate
Air
Service*

BALLOONS OVER DIXIE

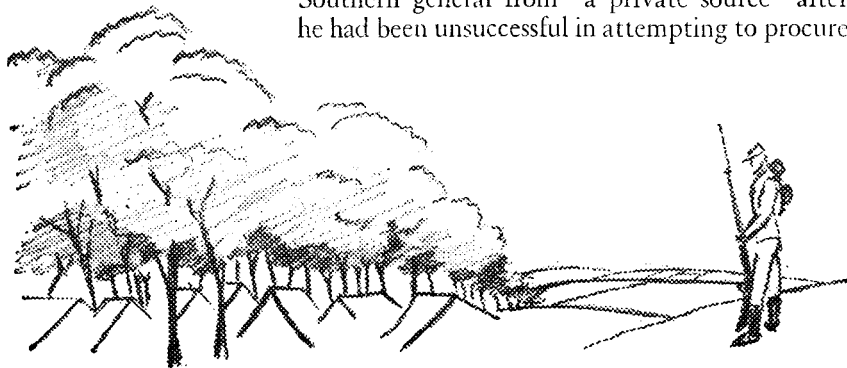
By Daniel Francis Clancy

THE MOST romantic branch of the most romanticized military force in United States history was the Confederate Air Service. Perhaps the most select organization of adventurers in American military annals, the CAS had only four or five balloons during the entire war.

Altitude then was as awesome a thing as atomic power today, and rising away from mother earth at the rate of a few score feet a minute was as valiant as piloting the supersonic planes of the present — more so, really, because almost no one else had ever done it.

It could well be said of Confederate “pilots” that never had so few dared so much for so many.

The first Confederate balloon, obtained by the Southern general from “a private source” after he had been unsuccessful in attempting to procure



one through Richmond authorities, might be called Beauregard's Balloon. Defective construction is said to have prevented successful operation of this balloon in 1861. There are reports, however, that it was raised over a battlefield in September of that year.

General J. B. Magruder had little success with a balloon in the spring of 1862. Pilot of the Magruder Balloon was Captain John Randolph Bryan. Captain Bryan, aide-de-camp to General Magruder and therefore readily available, was drafted for the air service.

In those days there was no pilot instruction, soloing, training flights, and will-he-or-won't-he-win-his-wings suspense. Some general tagged you, and you were it — an expert pilot.

With more of a horror of heights than a yearning for the Wild Blue Yonder, Captain Bryan inadvertently soon became celebrated as "Balloon Bryan" and this reluctant Rebel Rickenbacker ended up in history as a sort of "ace of aces" of the Confederate Air Service. Later in life he wrote a chapter, "Balloons Used for Scout Duty," in the Southern Historical Society Papers now at Richmond.

Balloon Bryan made his last trip in Magruder's Balloon in early May 1862. When a soldier became entangled in the rope holding the balloon to earth, the rope was cut, and Captain Bryan and his balloon bounded into the air, drifted over

the Union lines, and were then blown back over the Southern lines near Yorktown. Confederate troops, seeing the balloon coming from the north, opened fire — but Bryan landed safely.

Shooting at Union balloons was a favorite Southern sport. There is one story about the crew of a Confederate field piece using larger and larger amounts of powder, and elevating their gun more and more in an endeavor to reach a Northern balloon — until finally they blew up their own gun.

THE BEST balloon story out of the War Between the States seems to be untrue — or, perhaps, we should say romanticized. This is the tale of the so-called Silk Dress Balloon which, some historians have said, was made from patched-together silk dresses gathered from all over the Confederacy. The story of this multicolored ship made from the dresses of Southern belles is appealing, but a majority of the reliable writers on the war say the craft wasn't made from donated dresses at all — although even these historians refer to the ship as the "Silk Dress" Balloon.

It seems that the Silk Dress Balloon was actually built in the spring of 1862 by Captain Langdon Cheves, Jr., of Savannah, Georgia, at his own expense in the Chatham Armory in Savannah. It was made not of silk dresses but of new silk imported for the purpose. One account states that the balloon was constructed of strips

of silk varnished with gutta-percha car springs dissolved in naphtha, and that it had a capacity of about 7,500 cubic feet. The Southerners had no hydrogen, and were forced to use inferior city coal gas, inflating the balloon at Richmond and towing it to the fighting front with a freight car. Although the poor gas and long distance to the front lines restricted the balloon's altitude and made ascents difficult, this was the Confederacy's most effective balloon.

The Silk Dress Balloon made daily ascensions between June 27 and July 4, 1862. Its reconnaissance on the Richmond front was considered highly useful.

THE Confederacy's main use of balloons was apparently for observation. The North, however, is known to have made some use of balloons for artillery spotting, and many maps were sketched aloft by Union draftsmen. The North, with hydrogen, had balloons which could lift three men to more than 1,000 feet in the air.

Although the bearded balloonists in both Blue and Gray were brave aeronauts, none was shot down during the entire War Between the States. The only Confederate victory over enemy air power was capture of a Union balloon inflator on the ground. The Union captured one Confederate balloon.

On July 1, 1862, the Silk Dress Balloon was tied to the deck of a small armed tug, the *Teaser*, and

made daily ascensions through July 4th. On Independence Day the *Teaser* ran aground on a falling tide in the James River, below Malvern Hill. The Federal gunboat *Maritanza* captured both the Southern boat and balloon, although the Confederate crew escaped. There, it seems, "Confederate military aeronautics ceased."

One Confederate history, however, says that the balloon lost on July 4 was soon replaced by another "similarly made of vari-colored silk." However, there is some confusion as to whether General Magruder had one or two balloons, since some historians refer to "a balloon made of cotton bags and filled with hot air" which quickly came to grief.

There doesn't appear to have been anyone who could be called commander of the Confederate Air Service. This was likely due to the fact that the Confederacy never seems to have had more than one balloon at a time, and often not that — beset, as the South was, by boycott and poverty. One ground general or another is spoken of as being in charge of the Confederacy's few balloons — such as E. Porter Alexander, Chief of Ordnance of the Army of Northern Virginia, "in charge of" the balloon at the battle of Gaines' Mill, June 27, 1862. This was doubtlessly the Silk Dress Balloon.

But with the close of the Civil War, the balloon service disbanded, and with that a colorful chapter in early aeronautical history ended.

SAINT LOUIS

ST. LOUIS is my home town. Not quite literally because I saw my first light of day in Hamilton, Ohio. But I was merely taken there for the purpose of being born in the same house in which my mother came into this life, and as soon as possible thereafter, returned to the Missouri metropolis.

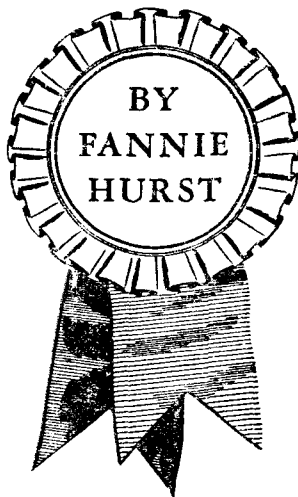
So actually, St. Louis is the scene of my earliest recollections.

One of these is walking along a high bluff with my hand in my father's, and pausing with him to look out over the wide Mississippi River as it flowed, slow-moving as molasses, past our city.

"There goes one of the greatest rivers in the world," he said. "Pretty muddy looking, isn't she, to be so important?"

I remember her mud because it made our levees so oozy. On steamboat rides to Keokuk, Cape Girardeau, or Memphis, we churned it up in clouds.

One of St. Louis' more famous daughters gives her impressions of her old home town



During my childhood, Mississippi mud vitiated our drinking water. Most households used small filters, attachable to the kitchen faucet. I used to beg for the privilege of cleaning ours. The filter stone lifted out of its metal container, covered with a heavy coating of thick yellowish slime which washed off as you held it beneath the faucet and ran thick as gravy into the sink.

It was a thankful job in a way, because then you reinserted a clean filter ready to

absorb its next load.

Today, of course, due to modern processes, the great city of 800,000 population, boasts immaculate and sparkling drinking water.

So does it boast all of the accoutrements and glamorous advantages of a progressive metropolis, fit to rank among the leading cities of the nation.

Situated on the west bank of the Mississippi River, on flat far-flung terrain of rich agricultural yield, she