



A Grandstand Seat: The American Balloon Service in World War I

Eileen Lebow

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The little-known American Balloon Service worked in combat to help direct artillery fire more accurately and provide essential intelligence on enemy troop movements during World War I. German use of observation balloons to direct artillery fire in August of 1914 forced the Allies to develop a similar force. With the U.S. entry into the war in 1917, the balloon service, starting from scratch, evolved into an effective, disciplined fighting unit, whose achievements are unfortunately overshadowed by those of the flying aces. Reminiscences from balloon veterans form the basis of this book, the first to picture life as a gasbagger in the three major American engagements of the war.

Amazingly, life as an observer suspended in a wicker basket under an elephantine hydrogen balloon proved less deadly than piloting an airplane. From his grandstand seat, the observer kept tabs on the war below him and telephoned vital information to headquarters command. These reports were often the only accurate intelligence available. Balloonists remember the war as a great adventure, one which many of them lived to tell about.

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