The Good Old Days

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On balloons and bureaucracy

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In the recent past the writer was involved in a problem which was difficult to solve because it clearly did not fall within existing CIA regulations and, therefore, was subject to various interpretations. While exploring means to achieve a solution through the uncharted channels and shoals of shifting bureaucracy, and exercising a branch chief's prerogatives, the writer was told that his solution, while acceptable, was not technically (bureaucratically) correct. After full responsibility was willingly assumed, the writer was told, "OK, you are on your own." Subsequent developments are not important; however, after hearing that he was "on his own," the writer paused to reflect upon the last time he had heard these words during his CIA career. It was in October 1951, and it happened as follows.

Readers will recall that the US was locked in a bitter, hot war with North Korea in 1951, while the cold war in Europe remained a chilling threat to our security. OPC (Office Policy Coordination), one of the two principal action arms of the CIA, was attempting at the time to infiltrate CIA agents into Eastern Europe to contact possible resistance groups or elements, to establish resistance and stay-behind cells, and to collect intelligence regarding Soviet capabilities and intentions. The border control procedures of the East European countries were highly effective and almost impossible to penetrate. Hence, the mortality rate of CIA agents dispatched behind the iron curtain via land, sea and air was very high. We need not dwell at length on the reasons for the great success

of the Satellite services in apprehending CIA agents or neutralizing CIA agent operations, but something obviously had to be done to improve our penetration capabilities.

Now, in 1951 the US Navy was conducting weather surveys via the use of huge plastic balloons filled with helium. These fragile-appearing transparent bags, made from polyethylene and carrying sensitive equipment, could attain heights between 100,000 and 120,000 feet, depending upon the weight of the instruments and the volume of helium. xxxx xxxx xxxxx of Minneapolis - St. Paul was the prime contractor for the weather studies and manufactured the plastic bags at its plant in Minneapolis.) The US Navy had also begun to experiment with smaller plastic bags which could carry one or two men.

At that time CIA had a small Research and Development Section located in one of the temporary wooden buildings around the Mall. One section chief was a Navy Commander who had acquired a film made by the US Navy which ` demonstrated the feasibility of plastic balloons for manned flights. The writer's branch chief saw the film and decided to explore the feasibility of using plastic balloons as a vehicle for dispatching agents behind the iron curtain. With such impressive credentials as the ability to speak an East European language and being in good health and also single, the writer accepted with alacrity when asked if he were interested in acquiring "balloon training" which could be passed on to agent candidates.

The training was scheduled and conducted under US Navy auspices at the xxxxxxx xxxxx xxxxx Minneapolis - St. Paul. The Navy was most hospitable and provided cover for the writer as a civilian employee. The xxxxx xxxxx xxxxxxxxx project engineer was cleared by CIA and was made fully witting of the training desired by the writer. Appropriate arrangements were then made for the writer to report xxxxx xxxxxx xxxxx Minneapolis.

The writer drove his car from Washington, D.C. to Minneapolis over a weekend and reported for duty to the project engineer. On arrival he was greeted with the news that until further notice the Navy had prohibited the use of helium for any further manned balloon flights as the result of wide publicity generated by press and photo coverage of the landing of a manned balloon near Manitowac, Wisconsin. The project engineer opined that he was certain the Navy ban on the use of helium would be lifted in a short time, and suggested that the writer observe the

manufacturing, equipping, and launching of the weather balloons (similar to manned balloons) in the interim. After several weeks of this onerous duty, interspersed with frequent telephonic exhortations to Washington to intercede with the Navy and have the ban lifted so that training could begin, the writer requested a forthright appraisal of the situation by the project engineer. The latter quite candidly said he had no idea when manned balloon flights would be approved by the Navy, but in any event if the writer wished to fly it could easily be arranged by substituting hydrogen (readily available commercially) for helium. When asked if he believed a hydrogen balloon were safe, the project engineer said he thought no hazard was involved. Plans were then made to dispatch the writer at night, and over a weekend, so that the writer's absence from the xxxx xxxx xxx Special Balloon Section would not be noted.

To complete plans for the launch, the writer phoned his branch chief in Washington for approval. During a conversation in double talk, the writer was asked whether he thought the flight were feasible. The writer gave assurances that it was feasible and that no security problems should ensue. The branch chief stated, "OK, you are on your own." In clear text this meant that if the writer were involved in a flap he could expect little assistance. Thus, the way was cleared for the writer's first balloon flight.

Before dusk on a cool Friday in that October the project engineer, his secretary and the writer drove to the airport where the cylinders of hydrogen were stored. (The Nary weather reconnaissance balloons were launched from the same airport.) The writer slipped into a fleece-lined jacket, pants, boots and helmet; the secretary removed the plastic bag from a box; the project engineer hooked up the hydrogen cylinders to a central pipe which controlled the flow of hydrogen. The twenty five cylinders of hydrogen went to work; the balloon rapidly expanded, became taut. The writer was given a last-minute review of launch and descent procedures, put on a Mae West life preserver, slipped two roast-beef sandwiches into his pockets, and strapped on the parachute harness. Lift-off occurred at approximately 1800 hours.[1] The ascent was so gradual and silent that the writer had little sensation of leaving the ground. According to the weather charts, strong winds beginning at 11,000 feet would carry the balloon on a slightly curving trajectory east of Minneapolis, across Wisconsin and Lake Michigan (therefore the Mae West), and touchdown was expected to be somewhere in northern Michigan. Unfortunately the balloon would go no higher than 8,000 feet, according to the altimeter, and constantly lost altitude. In fact, after

studying the altimeter closely following the dumping of several cups of sand to increase altitude, the writer realized the slight, persistent hiss he heard was the sound of escaping hydrogen. To complicate matters, the balloon was in a circular course directly above Minneapolis - St. Paul. What a beautiful sensation! Beneath my feet were the criss-crossed, lighted streets filled with countless, honking automobiles. Certainly no place to attempt a landing in a leaky balloon! By valving gas a controlled descent was made to approximately 4,000 feet where a strong breeze was picked up which carried the balloon past the city limits. Soon the runway lights and flashing beacons of Chamberlain Airport passed underneath. It appeared that, finally, we were underway.

An ear shattering roar broke the silence of the night. It sounded just like an airplane throttling down on its final approach—and the lights of Chamberlain Airport were still visible. What to do? I tried turning around in the parachute harness to ascertain the source of the roar. I was not able to do more than turn my head 90 degrees to the side. I was flying backwards because the parachute, which was draped along the side of the balloon, acted like a sail rather than a rudder. Also, according to the flight rules of the Federal Aviation Authority, a balloon was to carry a blinking red light 50 (or was it 150) feet below it, and the flight plan had to be cleared in advance with the FAA. Because the flight was without official Navy sanction, FAA had not been apprised, nor were any lights carried. I did not know whether to jettison the balloon (an emergency release would separate the passenger and chute from the balloon) or go higher or descend. As the roar increased I decided to wait and see if the plane would turn on its landing lights so that I might get a bearing or heading. Then, after a long suspense, I spotted the source of the noise—The Rock Island Express, a fast diesel train, had made a stop outside of St. Paul, and as it picked up speed the roar was amplified upward by the earth. I had hardly put this episode behind me when heavy rain began beating on my balloon. Due to its pear-like shape, rain rushed down the sides of the balloon. I felt myself, as it were, sitting under the end of a gushing funnel. Naturally, this dousing added weight to the balloon; again, altitude was rapidly lost. Sand ballast was discharged; up we went.

Around midnight I discovered that about 10 pounds of sand remained as ballast. (The flight began with 40 pounds of sand carried in 2 canvas sacks.) I spotted an open com field and headed downward. The 150-foot drag line was dropped (the bottom 50 feet were of heavy rubber hose, 100 of parachute cord.) The balloon dropped steadily. The rubber hose

touched the earth and 1 landed hard on my feet. Because I was riding backwards, I had found it most difficult to estimate the moment of impact. Therefore, I pulled the rip cord as soon as I hit the ground to tear a large hole in one of the balloon panels to release the hydrogen. However, my reactions were too slow and the balloon, suddenly free of 200 pounds of weight, plus or minus a pound, shot back upwards, carrying its passenger about 10 feet in the air. The ripped panel finally did its work; the balloon collapsed to earth. I was dazed on impact and recovered from impact only slowly and painfully. Fortunately, all was well. 1 cached the balloon gear and hiked several miles to Red Wing, Minnesota, where I spent the rest of the night in a motel. I phoned the project engineer to advise him of my location. The next morning I returned myself and my gear to Minneapolis without incident.[2]

About two weeks later I made another night flight. This outing was pure joy. The balloon did not leak; the parachute had been arranged to face the passenger rather than behind him; no rain beat down. Just before dawn I landed on the outskirts of Rochester, Minnesota. Once again the gear was cached and retrieved without incident.

After completing two night flights without incident under somewhat clandestine circumstances, the writer believed he had exhausted his credit with Lady Luck and he also felt confident he could train any agent candidate to ascend and descent safely in a hydrogen-filled plastic balloon. He returned to Washington and subsequently went overseas per plan.

In retrospect, it is doubted that under CIA's current management philosophy a flight under similar conditions would be feasible today. It is appreciated that since 1951 the US Government has grown and with this growth it has instituted various levels of budgetary reviews of CIA activities. Congress likewise is more interested in CIA operations. CIA regulations and operating procedures now require various clearances, approvals, etc., and considerable effort, time, and planning are devoted to the purely bureaucratic aspects of any operation. There is little doubt that such scrutiny tends to inhibit freedom of action. However, whether under these circumstances today's breed of "managers" and "administrators" make CIA a more effective organization makes for interesting discussion. How many times have you recently been told, "OK, you're on your own."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1 It should be noted that the balloon carried no basket or other comfortable seating arrangement. The writer sat on a board and the parachute harness suspended the passenger directly beneath the bag. An altimeter, compass, and two bags of sand were strapped to the parachute shrouds.

2 It should also be mentioned that hanging beneath a free-air balloon in a parachute harness on a cold, wet night in October made it impossible to respond to normal urgings of the body. The plethora of zippers in the fleece-lined flying suit proved to be of no assistance, and a mental note was made not to consume any liquids prior to any subsequent flights.

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