

# The Practical Training of Kite Balloon Observers

by Peter C Ford

Jeff Jefford's articles [Jefford 1998 - *see bibliography*] on the observer in the British Air Services gives an excellent account of the development of the role of the kite balloon observers, and the division of training into naval and army schools. The change from ad-hoc experimentation in the early days into formalised courses with a specific syllabus can be seen as the war progressed and the service expanded.

## Early Balloon Training

The British Army adopted the use of balloons following their use in the Franco Prussian War of 1870. A Balloon Company was formed by the Royal Engineers in 1879, and subsequently saw service in Bechuanaland, the Sudan and during the Boer War. These expeditions proved that balloons had a use. In the early years of the 20th Century Colonel Templar laid the scientific foundations of the service, developing balloon handling routines, the use of hydrogen in cylinders, and the training of observers in balloon free flight. Unfortunately he does not appear to have left a written record of his achievements.

These spherical balloons were of little use in winds above 20mph, and for this kites were employed. Initially observers sat in seats, but following a number of accidents balloon cars were used in their place. Kites

could operate up to 1500ft in winds of 50mph, and used similar operating equipment to the balloons.

Francis Campbell (Peter) Westland joined the Balloon Factory at Aldershot in May 1905. He records his training after going up in a balloon as consisting of climbing out of the car into the balloon net while aloft, learning to ride the transport horses and making free balloon flights. He observed that 'Balloons were looked down upon by the others, as the last formed unit and as a "scientific" toy, amusing no doubt to those in them but no earthly use...' [Westland]. This view no doubt was a contributory factor in their general neglect.

In 1909 the Imperial Defence Committee reported that captive balloons and kites had been part of the regular equipment of armies for some years, but neither had much use in Naval conditions. As a consequence all aerial attention was concentrated on the development of an aircraft based reconnaissance service, possibly with support from airships. At the outbreak of war almost everyone appears to have forgotten the possibility of using balloons for observational purposes.

## Development of the Kite Balloon Service

The early development of the kite balloon service can be credited to Captain Edward M. Maitland of the

*Observers fitting their primitive parachute harness.*

*:IWM Q33760*

