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BALLOONING IN THE SECOND SEMINOLE WAR

by MICHAEL G. SCHENE*

DURING THE COURSE of the long and seemingly interminable Second Seminole War, various schemes—most of them impractical and expensive, and sometimes barbarous—were advanced to end the bloody and expensive conflict. Robert Gamble, one of Florida's most prominent citizens, suggested that the government offer a bounty of \$1,000 for every Seminole, whether dead or alive. This reward, he prophesized, "would be sufficient to bring men qualified for such enterprise from every part of the United States, even the trappers from the Northwest."¹ The government apparently never gave this proposal very serious consideration. A bizarre scheme that did have official approval, however, was the abortive attempt to use imported bloodhounds to bring the Indians to bay.² Still another plan that received serious consideration by American military authorities was the use of balloons, which were first used in warfare by the French revolutionaries in 1794. Napoleon made the balloon corps a part of the French army, but it did not see much service.

In September 1840, Colonel John H. Sherburne, a self-styled secret agent, wrote Secretary of War Joel R. Poinsett about a plan that he had developed that would "end the war before the expiration of the *present year*." According to Sherburne's scheme, a trained balloonist would accompany the army into the field. When the soldiers encamped each day the balloon would be prepared for a night-time ascension. It would go up about 300-500 feet, and would be secured by a length of rope. Once in

* Mr. Schene is employed by the Florida Bicentennial Commission. He would like to thank Michael Musick of the National Archives for bringing Sherburne's proposal to his attention.

1. Robert Gamble to Sir, June 26, 1841, Quartermaster Consolidated Correspondence File, Records of the Quartermaster General, Record Group 92, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Hereinafter cited as QCCF.
2. John K. Mahon, *History of the Second Seminole War, 1835-1842* (Gainesville, 1967), 265-67.

the air, the balloonist— equipped with binoculars, compass, and field maps— could supposedly observe the Indian fires in the surrounding vicinity, plot their location on his map, and then deliver this information to the commanding general. The latter officer could then dispatch mounted troops— who would surround the Indian camp and “capture [them] without the fear of a shot being exchanged.”³ Sherburne claimed that it would take only fifteen minutes to inflate the balloon, and the necessary gas could be stored in four twenty-gallon copper containers.⁴

Encouraged by Benjamin F. Butler— who had recently served briefly as secretary of war— Sherburne pressed ahead with his scheme and located a used balloon that the owner was willing to sell for \$600. The excited officer had ascertained that this model could be easily carried by a pack animal. His letter containing all of this information was sent to the secretary of war in early November.⁵ After conferring with General Walker K. Armistead, overall commander in Florida, Poinsett notified Sherburne in January 1841 that his plan was not going to be accepted.⁶ Armistead had found the “scheme entirely impracticable.” He felt that the dense woods would make an ascension difficult, if not impossible, and that if indeed the balloonist was able to get aloft that the trees would prevent him observing the Indians, particularly under cover of darkness. Armistead also wondered about the danger of inflating and managing the balloon. No officer, he thought, “would be willing to trust himself in so frail a machine.”⁷

3. John H. Sherburne to J. R. Poinsett, secretary of war, September 8, 1840, Miscellaneous File 284, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, Record Group 94, National Archives. Hereinafter cited as AGO. John H. Sherburne was born in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in 1794 and died some time in the 1850s. As a self-styled secret agent, he brought a party of Cherokee Indians— including John Ross— to Florida in 1837 in an attempt to persuade the Seminoles to cease resistance and move west. Sherburne did not hold a commission in the regular army and extant militia records do not indicate that he held a volunteer commission. For several years Sherburne served as foreign correspondent for the Philadelphia Saturday Courier. He published several works including *Osceola*, *Erratic Poems*, and *Life of John Paul Jones*. James Grant Wilson and John Fiske, eds., *Appletons' Cyclopedia of American Biography*, 7 vols. (New York, 1888), V, 497; John H. Sherburne to General Thomas S. Jesup, March 9, 1852, QCCF.

4. Sherburne to Sir, September 8, 1840; to Poinsett, November 10, 1840, AGO.

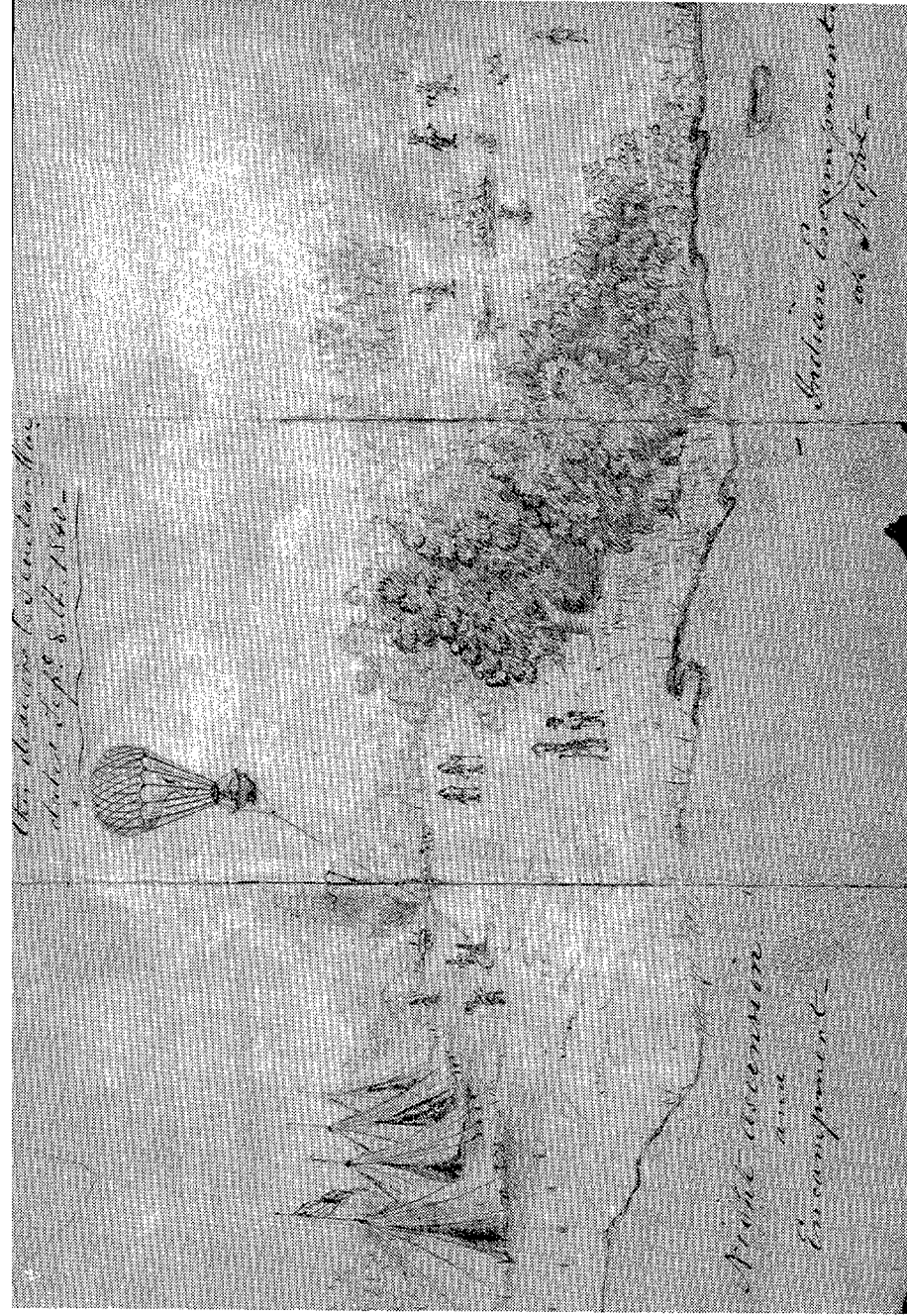
5. Sherburne to Poinsett, November 10, 1840, AGO.

6. Poinsett to Sherburne, January 28, 1841, AGO.

7. Poinsett rejected the scheme because, General Armistead opposed it.

It was not until the Civil War that balloons became an effective military weapon. There was a balloon corps until 1863 in the Union Army, and it was used to direct cannon fire against the Confederate forces. Telegraphic messages could also be sent from the observation balloons.

The latter wrote Poinsett on December 12, 1840, saying that he held no hopes for the plan. General W. K. Armistead to Secretary of War, December 12, 1840, A362, Adjutant General's Office, 1840, Letters Received by the Office of Adjutant General (Main Series, 1822-1860), National Archives, Washington, D.C.



Sketch of Balloon for Seminole War.
"Sketch of Balloon for Seminole War," Miscellaneous File 284, Records of
the Adjutant General's Office, Record Group 94, National Archives,
Washington, D.C.