

# The 'Galloping' Third Balloon Company AEF in WWI

by Lorne Bohn

**W**HEN THE AMERICAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCE entered the war on 6 April 1917, American forces became part of the larger British or French Armies. A unified Allied command in the west was created in April 1918, headed by Marshal Foch. Under him were the national commanders; Sir Douglas Haig for Britain, King Albert I for Belgium, and General 'Black Jack' Pershing for the United States. A major reason why this key position in the AEF was given to Pershing was that he had the most tactical experience and had been successful in the Mexican campaign. When war was declared, the American army was very small and only had 9,000 Regular troops, including 53,000 soldiers and 27,000 National Guardsmen. This army lacked any operational experience but the mobilisation to hunt the Mexican revolutionary bandit Pancho Villa, in 1912, did provide the mechanism to train soldiers, which enabled it to grow quickly. By the time Pershing and his staff arrived in France, in June 1917, they had just over 14,000 men. By March 1918 they had 318,000 troops and by the following October the AEF had grown to 1,867,623, over 300,000 more than the BEF.

In WWI, the balloon companies were key in gathering information about the enemy. There were some sixty-nine balloon companies in the AEF. The Third Balloon Company AEF was formed at the United States Balloon School in Omaha, Nebraska on 13 September 1917 and designated Company C, Second Balloon Squadron. Under the leadership of Captain John A. Paegelow of the Philippine Scouts, they trained for overseas service between 13 September and 26 November, 1917.

A first Balloon Company had been at the front since February and the second since April. Six other companies, including the Third, had been in operation for less than a month. On 16 August, seven of the balloon companies were either reassigned from Services of Supply or were en-route to the front and had no front-line experience.

When he enlisted, Private Paul E. Norris of La Plata, Maryland, began his Army life as a member of the 32nd Company. His most interesting experiences were in the Third

Balloon Company, which he recorded in a diary. Norris was the youngest of five sons. His brothers Eugene, Matthew, Robert and Joseph and his father Julian Norris and mother Helen are all mentioned in his diary. He was 20 years old when he began his military service on 1 September 1917, at the Aviation School at Kelly Field, Texas.

Paul Norris was posted to the 2nd Balloon Detachment on 18 March 1918, Company C, and to the 2nd Balloon Squadron on 15 May. He was shipped overseas on 23 April 1918, was

*John A. Paegelow was born in Germany on 9 May 1870. He enlisted as a Private in C Company, 16th US Infantry on 7 January 1897. When he was discharged, he was a Battalion Sergeant-Major. He received a commission on 1 July 1901 and on 2 November 1917 he received his Free Balloon Pilot's Licence No.97. On 12 November 1917 he was rated Junior Military Aeronaut. He was an aeroplane pilot and instructor and Who's Who in Ballooning notes that he 'Reportedly spent ONE day on the front lines during combat'. By the end of The War he had obtained the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel, Air Service and received The Distinguished Service Medal (June 1919). He was nominated for and decorated with the French award, Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur (22 May 1919). He died in California on 23 November 1944.*

The US Balloon School, Kelley Field, San Antonio, Texas.

