

# JAMES TEMPLER

## AND THE BIRTH OF BRITISH MILITARY AVIATION

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**I**N 1862, THE BRITISH ARMY began to seriously examine the potential use of balloons in modern warfare. Initially, studies sought to overcome the shortcomings that had been highlighted during conflicts such as the American Civil War. Only later were efforts made to turn the balloon into a practical and reliable tool for use by army commanders.

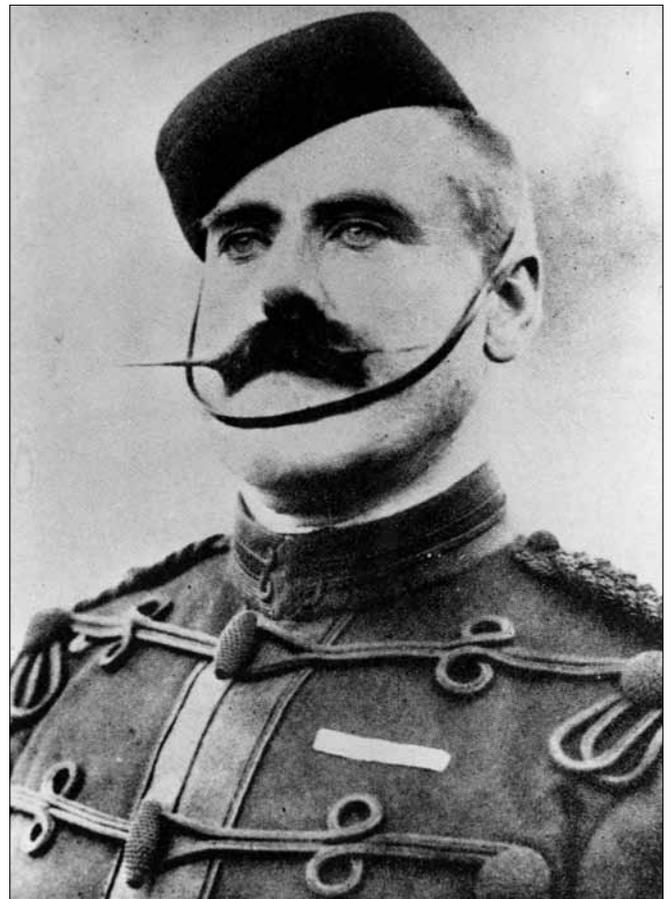
From this small beginning, British military aviation was born. The first serious demonstration of British air power came during the Second South African War when military balloons were deployed in 1900 against the Boers. It had taken nearly 40 years for military ballooning to evolve from a virtual standing start to a point where balloon units became an accepted part of the Army's establishment, during times of peace and war. They were 40 years of hard work, personal sacrifice and fighting against tight budgetary restrictions. There was a constant battle with senior officers who felt that balloons offered little to a commander that other arms, notably the cavalry, did not already provide. British military ballooning reached its zenith during the Boer War when the potential value of air power became more widely recognised. Military aviation evolved around the technology of the day. Having initially focused on balloons, in the early years of the 20th century, development began to concentrate on newer technologies: airships and aeroplanes. The pace of development was such that, by 1912, the Royal Flying Corps was formed with aeroplanes at its backbone.

This article explores the evolution of military ballooning within the British Army. It focuses on the prominent role of James L.B. Templer in establishing air power as an essential, albeit small, force component during both wartime operations and peacetime exercises. Because of the importance of the work done by Templer, he may arguably be described as the *father of British military aviation*.

### JAMES L.B. TEMPLER

For 30 years, one man, James Lethbridge Brooke Templer, dedicated his life to the development of ballooning within the British Army. He strove continuously to solve a myriad of technical issues and battled against endless political problems, resistance to change, hostility from within the establishment and a constant shortage of funds. He was a man of many talents; a practical man who made things happen. Templer laid out a scientific foundation for ballooning development and took the lead in the task of making balloon units an accepted part of the Army's establishment.

Templer was born on 27 May 1846, the son of John Templer, Master in HM Court of Exchequer. He was educated at Harrow and Trinity College, Cambridge. He became a Clerk to the Court of Queen's Bench and later a tea broker and inventor. Templer was an enthusiastic and skilled sports balloonist, the owner of his own balloon, *Crusader*, and a well-known and respected figure within the small ballooning fraternity. In 1869, he joined the Volunteers (forerunners of today's TA), being appointed ensign in the 18th Middlesex Rifle Volunteer Corps. In 1870, he transferred to the Militia, becoming a lieutenant in the 2nd or Edmonton Royal Rifle Regiment of Middlesex Militia (this later became the 7th Battalion Kings Royal Rifle Corps). The Militia offered a route to full-time



service with the Army, service for which Templer now longed. In 1878, he was invited to assist in the experiments in military ballooning being carried out by Royal Engineers (RE). He finally retired from the Army in 1908, having seen these small-scale experiments devolve into the deployment of four Balloon Sections during the Second Boer War and the flight of *Nulli Secundus*. Templer died on 2 January 1924, at Lewes.

### THE EVOLUTION OF MILITARY BALLOONING WITHIN THE BRITISH ARMY

The development of British military ballooning may be broken down into three phases:

**Phase 1, 1862–1878:** The initial proposals to the War Office to evaluate the potential value of balloons to the Army, through to the establishment of the Balloon Committee and the conduct of experiments/studies into various aspects of ballooning.

**Phase 2, 1878–1899:** The appointment of Templer, the design and manufacture of balloons, the construction of ballooning, transport and gas production equipment, the training of RE soldiers in ballooning, the emergence of the Balloon Factory and the operational deployment of balloon sections to Bechuanaland and the Sudan.

**Phase 3, 1899–1906:** Ballooning operations in the Second Boer War and China, post-war reorganisations based on the lessons learned, the emergence of the airships and Templer's final retirement.

#### Phase 1: 1862 – 1878

In 1862, three papers promoting the adoption of military ballooning by the British Army were read at the Royal Engineers School of Military Engineering. They were written independently by Lt G.E. Grover RE and Capt F.E.B. Beaumont RE. During the American Civil War, Beaumont was attached to a Balloon Corps, commanded by Thaddeus Lowe, which formed part of the Federal Army under General M'Clellan. The corps comprised two 'aeronauts', 50 soldiers and two balloons. Their tethered balloons provided a constant stream of observation reports throughout the