

October 18, 1861 (Doc. 123)

123. TO GEORGE BRINTON McCLELLAN

Smithsonian Institution,
October 18th, 1861.

To General M^cClellan.

Dear Sir:

Mr. Helme of Rhode Island¹ has presented to me a proposition relative to the use of balloons for military purposes which appears of importance, and which I therefore take the liberty of commending to your attention.

It is well known that a large amount of time, expensive materials, and bulky apparatus are required to inflate an ordinary balloon—at a distance from City gas works. To obviate these difficulties Mr. Helme proposes to revive the use of the original balloon of Mongolfier,² namely, the fire balloon, and for this purpose has made a series of experiments. A fire balloon of sufficient size according to the statements given in works on the subject, as well as ↑from↓ the experiments of Mr. Helme, can be inflated in the course of 15 or 20 minutes, in any place, at an expense for fuel too trifling to be of any consideration.

The only apparent objection to the use of this kind of balloon, is the danger from fire, but the risk on this account has frequently been encountered for mere amusement, and therefore may be hazarded for an important purpose. Besides this Mr. Helme is enabled by the advance of science to greatly diminish the danger to which the first balloonists were exposed, by the use of a fuel which gives off no sparks, and of a material not readily inflammable. Furthermore—Mr. Helme is willing himself to encounter the risk of ascension, and to demonstrate the practicability of the proposition, at an expense to the government not exceeding 500 dollars. He comes to me highly recommended as a man of high character, having considerable experience as an amateur aeronaut.³

I am, Very Resp^t
Your obed^t serv^t
Joseph Henry
Secretary S.I.

Papers of Col. John N. Macomb, Records of the Office of the Chief of Engineers, RG 77, National Archives.

In William Hinwood's hand, with Henry's signature.

1. William H. Helme, a dentist from Providence, had made a number of balloon flights and had helped initiate aerial photography prior to the war. He was at this time a volunteer infantryman with a regiment from Rhode Island.

F. Stansbury Haydon, *Military Ballooning during the Early Civil War* (1941; Baltimore and London, 2000), pp. 34, 42.

2. The brothers Michel Joseph de Montgolfier (1740–1810) and Étienne Jacques de

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Montgolfier (1745-1799) were early French pioneers of ballooning, launching the first successful hot-air balloon in 1783. Their balloon was powered by heat from a fire. *DSB*.

3. The following day, John Hay, one of Lincoln's personal secretaries, wrote a letter introducing Helme to McClellan and mentioning Henry's endorsement of Helme's plan. McClel-

lan gave his approval, and Helme would conduct one unsuccessful test in November and two successful ones in December, using alcohol for fuel. Apparently there were no subsequent tests. Hay to McClellan, October 19, 1861, in same location; Tom D. Crouch, *The Eagle Aloft: Two Centuries of the Balloon in America* (Washington, 1983), p. 368.

124. TO HARRIET HENRY

Washington October 22, 1861

Dearest . . . There is considerable anxiety in the city as to the battle which is going on at Leesburg,¹ which you know is a place about twenty-five miles up the Potomac. The intelligence this morning was that General Baker of the U.S. Senate from California was killed at the head of his regiment,² and that Col. Ward of New York had lost one of his legs.³ Senator Baker . . . has had a short career. It would have been better had he continued to attend to his senatorial duties and left the war to those who were more in the line of its operations. . . . It is thought by some of the knowing ones that this engagement will bring on a general battle. There is a considerable dissatisfaction beginning to be felt in the North and West in reference to the tardiness of action on the part of the army. But the North have constantly underrated the power of the South and have thought that the rebellion could be put down as easy as the old Whiskey insurrection was quelled.⁴ What a precarious position is that of the head of an army, today exalted to the skies for what he is expected to do and tomorrow sunk to the depths of contempt for not doing what was impossible to do. . . . I am now very busy in bringing up my correspondence and getting the business of the year settled preparatory to the meeting of Congress and the session of the Board of Regents. The Institution continues to be visited by many soldiers and strangers.⁵ We are about to bring over a large amount of new material from the Patent Office, but I do not well know where to stow them.⁶

Mary Henry Copy, Family Correspondence, Henry Papers, Smithsonian Archives.

1. The battle of Ball's Bluff, or Leesburg, Virginia, was fought the previous day, on October 21. Long, *Civil War Day by Day*, p. 129.

2. Edward Dickinson Baker (1811-1861), who lived in California during the 1850s, had become a Republican senator from Oregon in 1860. Formerly a lawyer and politician from

Springfield, Illinois, he was a close friend of President Lincoln's. *ANB*.

On September 21, 1861, Baker had been appointed a major general of volunteers. The following month, as part of an attempt to dislodge rebels holding Leesburg, Brigadier General Charles P. Stone assigned Baker to use a