

July 21, 1863 (Doc. 182)

182. TO EDWIN McMASTERS STANTON

Copy.

Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, D.C. July 21, 1863.

Hon. E. M. Stanton
Secretary of War.
Sir.

M^r Lowe, the aeronaut, has requested me to give to the War Department, some facts respecting the introduction of ballooning operations, connected with the adjustment of his accounts.¹

It will be seen by the records of your Dep^t, that your predecessor, Gen. Cameron, referred the subject of ballooning for military purposes, to me, for investigation, and that after witnessing a number of experiments made by M^r Lowe, I warmly recommend the system for adoption.² No appropriation was made in advance for these experiments. The balloon employed belonged to M^r Lowe. The gas, the hands and materials were procured on my personal responsibility.

The same balloon was inflated and sent over to the first battle of Bull Run and was afterwards used in various reconnoissances for at least a month afterwards.

The whole amount paid by the War Department to cover the expenses incurred under my supervision, was \$250 and did not include any payment for the balloon or the services of the aeronaut.

If M^r Lowe has not been reimbursed for the cost of the first balloon, I think his claim for the amount is a just one.

I have, since the subject was referred to me, taken a deep interest in the application of ballooning to our military purposes, and in connection with this have had much intercourse with M^r Lowe, have formed a very favorable opinion of his skill and knowledge as an aeronaut, & of his trustworthiness as a man.

Although he has had to contend with considerable prejudice, yet I doubt not that he has frequently obtained important information as to the position of the enemy for the use of which, the officers in charge were alone responsible.³

I have the honor to be
your obd^t ser^t
(signed) Joseph Henry
Secretary

August 13, 1863 (Doc. 183)

Copy, Lowe Papers, Library of Congress.

In William Hinwood's hand.

1. In a letter dated July 15, Lowe had asked Henry to provide a statement to persuade the secretary of war "of the truthfulness of my claims." Lowe approached Henry "inasmuch as the first operations of Balloons for Military purposes were under your immediate supervision" and because Henry was "acquainted with the fact that these experiments were made with my own machinery and subsequently used in the field by order of Captain A. W. Whipple, late Gen'l Whipple, now dead and from whom I can get no assistance." Lowe was seeking a total of \$3,000 in reimbursements for various expenses and services. Included in that amount evidently was the cost of the balloon (the *Enterprise*) and equipment he brought to Washington for use in experiments supervised by Henry during the summer of 1861. Lowe to Henry, July 15, 1863, Office of the Secretary, Incoming Correspondence, RU 26, Smithsonian Archives; Lowe to Edwin M. Stanton, June 4, 1863 (with enclosures), *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, 1899), series 3, vol. 3, p. 318 (of pages 252-319).

Lowe had resigned from his civilian position as head of the Balloon Corps in early May, partly due to a disagreement with his supervisor in the Corps of Engineers (which oversaw the Balloon Corps) over a reduction in pay. In early June, he submitted a report to Stanton on the operations of the corps during his tenure. He hired William J. Rhees, chief clerk of the Smithsonian, to help prepare the nearly seventy-page report, consisting of correspondence, telegrams, and dispatches documenting the operations. Heidler, *Encyclopedia of the American Civil War*, 1:167; Tom D. Crouch, *The Eagle Aloft: Two Centuries of the Balloon in America* (Washington, 1983), pp. 406-408, 409-411, 413, 414-415; Lowe to Stanton (cited above), p. 252 (of pages 252-319).

2. See Docs. 114 and 115.

3. While some officers, including Joseph Hooker and George B. McClellan, considered

the intelligence gathered by the Balloon Corps useful, others were more skeptical and proved unhelpful in solving some of the logistical problems the corps faced. In this regard, Lowe was hindered by his civilian status. Because he and his assistants had no military rank, the needs of the corps were a low priority for the officers assigned to oversee its operations. "Consequently," Lowe complained, "I was subject to every young and inexperienced lieutenant or captain who for the time being was placed in charge of the balloon corps." Compounding this problem was Lowe's poor administrative skills and disregard of military procedures, which hardly endeared him to army officials. F. Stansbury Haydon, *Military Ballooning during the Early Civil War* (1941; Baltimore and London, 2000), pp. 302-305 (quotation on p. 303), 346-351, 376-377, 386; Crouch, pp. 406, 413.

Lowe had on many occasions gathered information on enemy positions. In the aftermath of Bull Run, for example, his balloon observations of enemy lines and roads leading to Washington had helped dispel rumors that enemy troops were poised to attack the capital. Also, during the Peninsula campaign, Lowe and his aeronauts often telegraphed information about Confederate positions and even helped direct artillery fire. Although these and other observations never proved decisive on the battlefield, a number of officers "learned to regard the balloons as a valuable part of their intelligence service." Haydon, pp. 212-214, 322-323, 374-375 (quotation).

Lowe's appeal for reimbursement of expenses was for the most part unsuccessful. His poor record keeping prevented him from producing receipts and other proofs of his claims. Henry apparently assigned Rhees to assist Lowe with preparing his claims. In the end, however, Lowe received less than a tenth of the amount he requested. Crouch, pp. 414-415.

The Balloon Corps ceased functioning shortly after Lowe's resignation. Crouch, p. 411.

183. TO ALEXANDER DALLAS BACHE

Washington Aug. 13th 1863

My Dear B.

I received a note from the Secretary of the Treasury,¹ requesting me to call at the Dept. He wished to consult me as to the best method of preventing the counterfitting of the national currency. I advised him to refer