



HOT AIR BALLOON TEAM: LIGHTER-THAN-AIR RECRUITING

By Charlie Zdravesky

Historically, Naval Aviation's ranks have been filled with innovative, daring people. Maybe the element of exploring unknown territory is the attraction. Whatever accounts for its magnetism, Naval Aviation continues to draw creative individuals.

Naval Aviator Captain Ronald H. Caldwell, Commander, Naval Weapons Evaluation Facility (NWEF), Kirtland AFB, Albuquerque, N.M., took his first hot air balloon ride in January 1975. This experience sparked an idea: the Navy could use a hot air balloon in its promotional programs. He envisioned that a hot air balloon team would be an effective method of attracting favorable Navy interest at air shows, fairs and other large gatherings.

That October, Caldwell attended the Albuquerque International

Balloon Fiesta. Along with personnel from the Navy League, Naval Reserve and the local Navy Recruiting District, Caldwell's command raised money to buy a large blue and gold banner proclaiming "Go Navy," which was attached to one of the balloons in the event. Following this "preflight" of the idea, Caldwell's untiring efforts, along with a written endorsement from Commander, Navy Recruiting Command, prompted the Chief of Naval Operations to approve the Navy Hot Air Balloon and supporting team in July 1976.

Nicknamed the "Adventurers," the team made its maiden flight in February 1977. Just months after he saw his dream come true, Cdr. Caldwell retired. Other NWEF COs followed in his footsteps, becoming the leader of the Balloon Team; some were authorized to wear the

in a "caretaker status," but by 1987 funding was reestablished. The colorful balloon had proven to be one of the most popular crowd pleasers in the recruiting command's inventory. For its second decade, the Navy balloon's red, white and blue design was changed to feature the word "NAVY" in gold letters on a blue background.

When NWEF was slated for disestablishment in 1992 and began shutting down flight operations, the balloon team entered a state of flux—in need of funding and a new home. Eventually, the team was transferred to China Lake, Calif., and became an all-volunteer operation. In early 1997, the balloon team was still making appearances. Unfortunately, in June funding ran out and, after 20 years of touring, the team's equipment was placed in storage at NAS Jacksonville, Fla.

Thanks to the creative efforts of Naval Aviation personnel, the story doesn't end there. In October 1998 the Navy Hot Air Balloon Team came out of hiatus and once again flew at the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta. Now being flown by the Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps unit at the University of Mexico, headed by Capt. Timothy L. Thorsen, the Navy's floating billboard is back in front of the public as a reminder of the Navy's valuable presence around the world. 



Charles Nagorski

Left, officer candidate Julie Voss waits for her chance to travel the New Mexico skies. Above, Navy balloonists watch their compatriots while preparing the Navy balloon for launch.

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