

Submarine War in the Mediterranean during WWI : Kite Balloon Station N° 6 Bizerta, Tunisia

By Marc PARREN

Germany introduced a policy of unrestricted submarine warfare early 1917. This policy in effect set in place a blockade of Great Britain and her European allies, to be applied to belligerent and neutral shipping alike. The German government argued that such a policy was implemented only as an aggressive form of defense. Kite balloons were used as a means in anti-submarine warfare. The kite balloons were cigar-formed shaped (almost like zeppelins) with beneath the balloon a basket in which observers were positioned. These balloons would be connected to a towing ship by winch and hence the expression kite balloon. The balloons would form a convoy escort or being patrols and used to spot submarines over a larger distance. When searching for periscopes or for submarines, the area to be covered is much greater from a kite balloon than from the bridge of a ship. They were meant (1) to sight submarines, (2) to limit the submarine's freedom of action and prevent them manoeuvring on the surface for position, or following up convoy, (3) to deter submarines from attacking and alternatively; (4) to limit the submarine's freedom of manoeuvre submerged (e.g. showing periscope, proceeding at speed etc., during attack, (5) to warn convoy of approaching torpedoes, and (6) to assist in towing vessel to deliver an immediate and effective counter attack should submarine succeed in firing her torpedo or be sighted submerged.

Kite balloons were used in Great Britain and at the Western Front but even less known is that they were also applied in the Mediterranean. In November 1917, the decision was taken to locate the first Mediterranean Kite Balloon Station at Malta, and the second at Alexandria. The third Station was erected at Brindisi for use with the destroyers on the Otranto barrage patrol. Subsequent stations were erected at **Bizerta**, Corfu, Gibraltar and Port Said. In each Kite Balloon Station there were approximately 25 officers and 150 ratings to be stationed. Each Station was provided with 6 balloons. Beginning of July a start was finally made in using balloons to escort convoys. As from early 1918 the Kite Balloon Stations formed part of the R.A.F. There were Balloon Sections with the land forces in the Mediterranean cq. Middle East such as in Egypt, Palestina, Salonika and Mesopotamia, as well as Kite Balloon Sections with naval forces with as its headquarters the Seaplane Base in Malta. An overview of the Sea Section Kite Balloon Bases in the Mediterranean with their staffing is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Officers on stations of the Mediterranean Sea Section Kite Balloon Bases as per 30th September 1918.

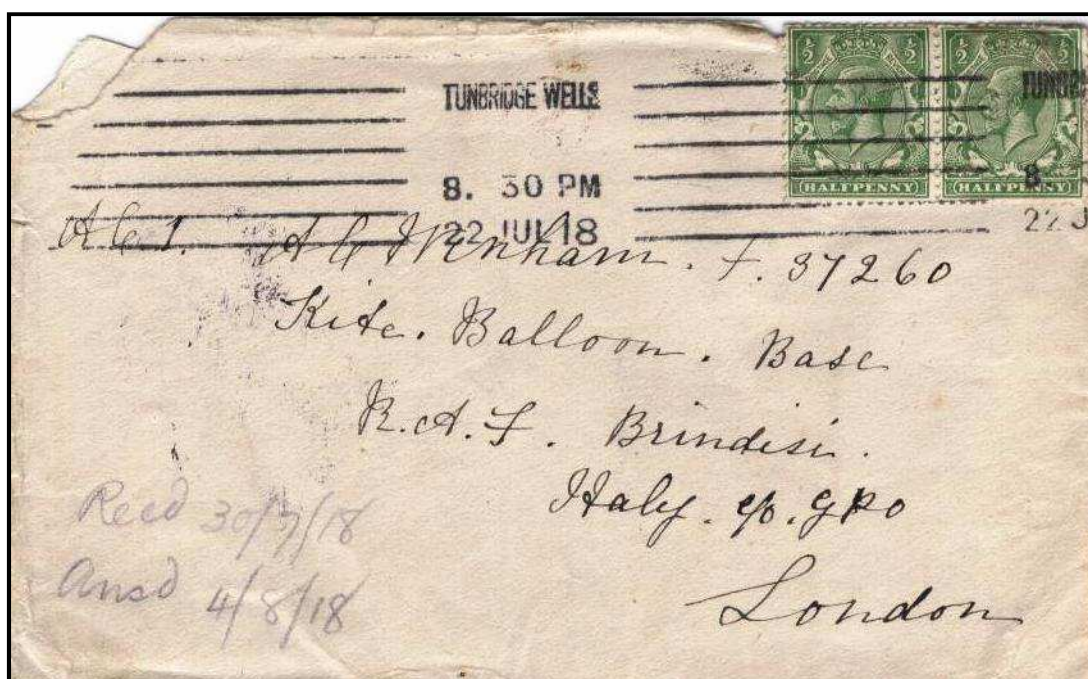
Balloon Base	Flying Officers	Gas Officers	Stores Officers	Paymasters	Surgeons
N° 1. Malta	22	1	1	1	
N° 2. Alexandria	23	1		1	
N° 3. Brindisi	22	1	1	1	
N° 4. Corfu	23	1	1	1	1
N° 5. Gibraltar	20	1	1	1	1
N° 6. Bizerta	14	1	1	1	1
N° 22. Port Said	8			1	
Total	132	6	5	7	3

The Kite Balloon Bases at Brindisi (Fig. 1) and Corfu were to render offensive patrol operations on the Otranto Barrage, while the remaining ones were to supply balloon escorts to convoys.

Figure 1a. Incoming cover to No. 3 Kite Balloon Base (Brindisi) posted 22nd July 1918 Tunbridge Wells, marked received 30 July and answered 4 August.

Figure 1b. Unclear backstamp 25 or 28 July 'Naval Air Service M..., London' on incoming cover from Tunbridge Wells.

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Arrangements were concluded with the French authorities in April for the **Bizerta Kite Balloon Station** to be established. Next Flight Lieut. E.E. Barnett (soon promoted to Captain), three junior officers and 70 ratings left the U.K. for Bizerta on the 16th April where they arrived on the 21st April and proceeded with the erection of the Kite Balloon station as they first established a tent hut camp. The Stores Officer 2nd Lieut. A.J. Miller left the U.K. for Bizerta via Toulon on the 24th April. Finally, the stores and main balloon gear arrived at Bizerta on board the *SS Denbighshire* on the 18th May. As for the gear each balloon had its own serial number and there existed several balloon types.

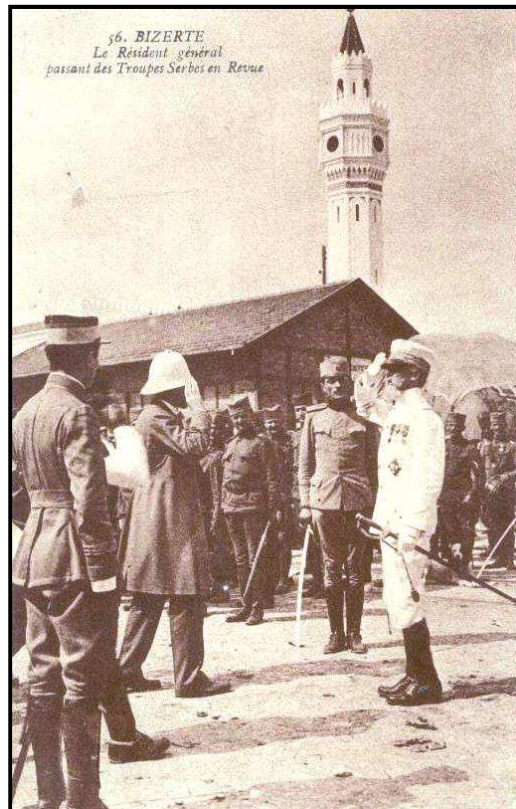
Table 2 shows the advance party for No. 6 Balloon Base (Bizerta), R.A.F. as it consisted of the following officers:

Officer	Function
Captain J. De Francia	Commander
Captain Barnett	Adjutant
Lieut. Bell	Assistant to Adjutant
Lieut. Smith	Maintenance and Construction
Sub. Lieut. Macintyre, R.N.V.R.	i/c Shed Erecting
Asst. Paymaster Gash, R.N.R.	Victualling and Pay
2 nd Lieut. Miller	Stores Officer
Surgeon Jones, R.N.	Medical officer

Mid-June the Governor of Bizerta, Admiral Guepratte, held a review of about 2,500 troops and presented a number of decorations to French officers and others, including the British D.S.O. to a French Colonel.

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Figure 2. French General-Resident Gabriel Alapetite and Admiral Guepratte during a parade at Bizerta



The British Kite Balloon Station supplied a Guard of Honour consisting of one officer and 24 men. Admiral Guepratte thanked the British writing them a letter which reads ‘General Bailloud, in charge of the forces here, who assisted at the review of the troops today, wishes to express his great satisfaction for the manly bearing and smartness of the troops who took part. The Vice Admiral and Governor, in showing his flattering appreciation for the knowledge of all concerned, adds his own personal felicitations. He has been particularly pleased to be able to incorporate on this great occasion a detachment of the valiant English troops whose splendid valour he has learnt to appreciate through having fought with them in the Dardanelles. Their presence here by the side of the valiant representatives of the Serbian Army, among the French troops both naval and military, is a new proof of the ever present collaboration of the Allies with a view to final victory.’

The first correspondence that has been seen by the author from Bizerta Kite Balloon Station is dated 18th May the same day the *HMS Denbighshire* arrived at Bizerta and most likely it took the first mail back home. This is also the first day of use reported for the single line censorship mark ‘CEN-6-SOR’ in which the number 6 most likely refers to No. 6 Kite Balloon Base. However, censorship marks of the same type with other numbers are not known in the Mediterranean. Similar types with letters instead of a number are known though. That also makes us to believe that the origin of this censorship mark may lay in the U.K. However, why other kite balloon stations were not provided with such censorship marks and identifying numbers or were provided so but did not make use of this censorship mark is not known.

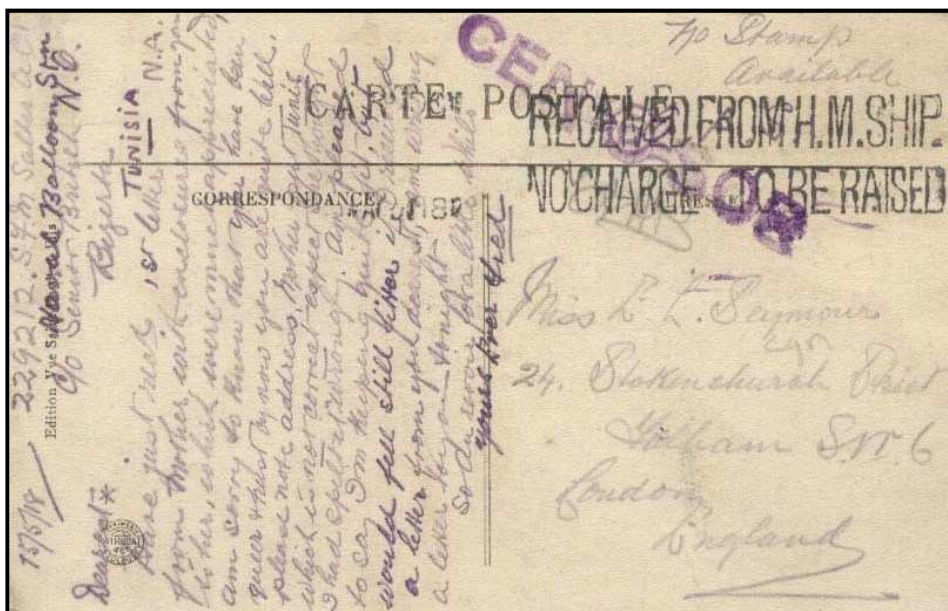
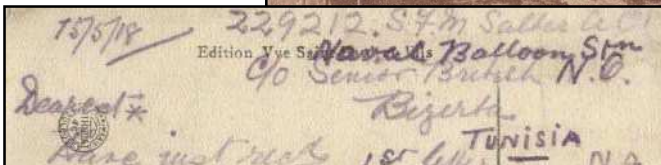
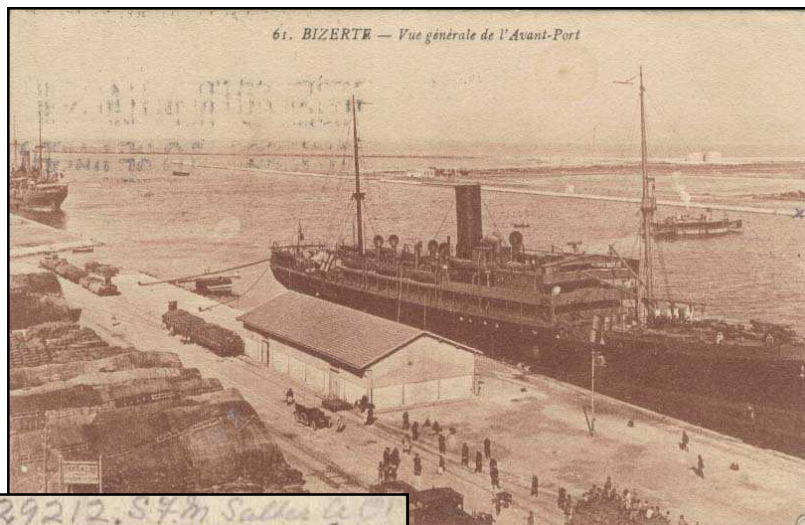
The first viewcard written the 18th May that we have at hand is written by Sydney Frederick Magnus SALTER with number 229212 at the ‘Naval Balloon Station, Bizerta, Tunisia’ and addressed to his girlfriend in London (Fig. 1a). He mentions that he just received the first letter written by his mother which was most likely delivered by the *HMS Denbighshire* as well. This viewcard written by pencil also had a small cross placed at the front of the viewcard depicting the harbour of Bizerte which most

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likely indicates the side where the British Kite Balloon Base was constructed (Fig. 1b). Fred Salter was born on 13th May 1886 in Hendon, England and was in his civilian life a motor driver. On the 14th May 1917 he joined the R.N.A.S. a branch of the Navy under number F29212 as Aircraftsman II, and was promoted to Aircraftsman I half a year later. During this period he was transferred for a while to France before he finally was transferred to the R.A.F. on the 1st April 1918, where he joined the Kite Balloon Training Centre at Roehampton. The 16th April he joined the advance party for Bizerta where he was to stay until 20th February 1919.

Figure 3a. Unfranked On Active Service viewcard sent from No. 6 Kite Balloon Base (Bizerta) and censored by the single line censorship mark 'CEN-6-SOR' with 'London, MAY 31 18, RECEIVED FROM H.M. SHIP / NO CHARGE TO BE RAISED' (Type N14) arrival mark.

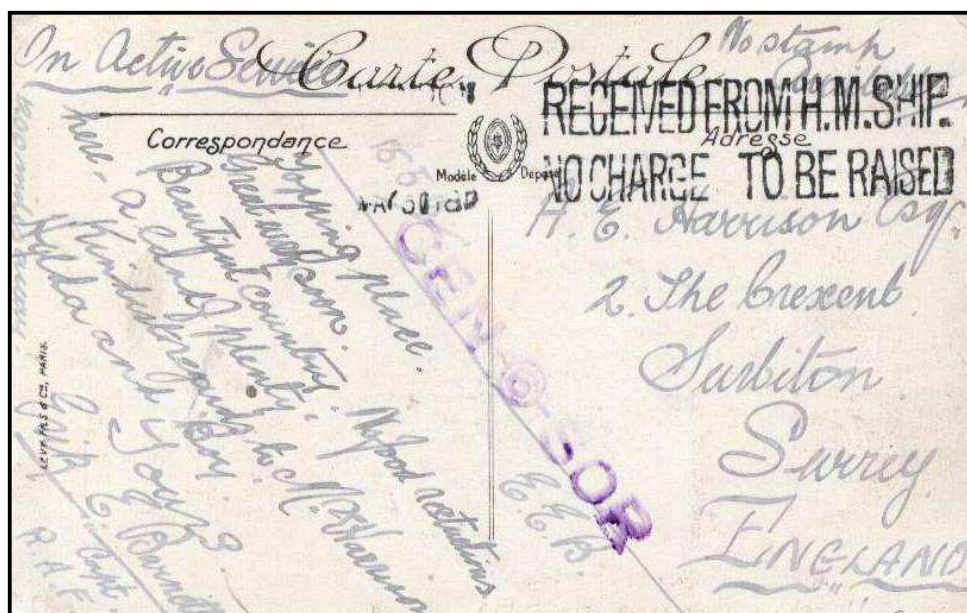
Figure 3b. Viewcard side showing the Bizerta entrance harbour with a small pencil cross at right side most likely indicating the side where the British Kite Balloon Base was constructed.



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The same day the second in command Captain Erik E. Barrett sent a viewcard to an acquaintance in England (Fig. 4). He was very positive about his new location as it was a land of plenty, with no food restrictions! Erik Barnett from London was born on 2nd July 1896 and joined the R.N.A.S. under number 919 and became a Temporary Reserve Flt. S. Lieut. on the 15th January 1916 when he started his training at the Kite Balloon School Roehampton, after which he joined the No. 9 Kite Balloon Station on the 17th April 1916. On 4th March 1917 he was transferred to No. 13 Kite Balloon Station before being promoted to Flt. Lieut. on the 1st October 1917. In April 1918 he was back at the Kite Balloon School Roehampton and selected to go to Bizerta. The 16th April he led the advance party for Bizerta and was appointed Temporary Captain on the 20th April and confirmed in rank Capt. (Flying) only on the 31st December 1918 after being discharged as surplus to RAF requirements two weeks earlier. In November 1918 the Bey of Tunis conferred him the title of Officer in the Order of Nichan Iftikhar (Order of Glory).

Figure 4. Unfranked On Active Service viewcard sent from No. 6 Kite Balloon Base (Bizerta) and self-censored by Captain Erik E. Barrett's initials and the single line censorship mark 'CEN-6-SOR' applied with 'London, MAY 31 18, RECEIVED FROM H.M. SHIP / NO CHARGE TO BE RAISED' (Type N14) arrival mark.



By the end of June 1918 four sheds had been erected and one balloon had been inflated at the French Airship Station for practice purposes. At the time the Station was ready to take part in balloon escorts, but the Station was not yet at full strength as for personnel. The first balloon escort related to Bizerta arrived on the 4th July from Gibraltar with *HMS Chrysanthemum* and left again the following day for return to Gibraltar.

Close collaboration existed with the French Airship Station at Bizerta which is apparent as when silicol and caustic soda arrived it was transported forthwith to the French Station. The French Airship Station was also the place they inflated the balloons with gas. The balloons had next to be towed back to the British camp. By the end of June four escort stations in the Mediterranean - Alexandria, Bizerta, Gibraltar and Malta - were ready to participate in balloon escorts but were not yet at full strength in the matter of personnel. The Draft Team for Bizerta left England on 14th June overland to Toulon and consisted of 42 ratings under the command of 2nd Lt. A.C.E. Smith. In Toulon they were to sail by French courier to Bizerta who crossed over every Saturday. This draft was essential to start balloon work.

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To give you an idea of the balloon escort activity next an extract of a report describing the activities for the second half of July. ‘*HMS Calendine* and *HMS Chrysanthemum* with balloons made several trips each between Gibraltar and Bizerta. *HMS Marguerita* left Malta on 10th July for Gibraltar with a convoy, the balloon arriving safely and observation work carried out continuously during the day. She subsequently, with balloon, proceeded to Bizerta returning thence to Gibraltar. The balloon escorts should now continue regularly. [...] On the 24th July *HMS Pentstemon* carried out kite balloon trials and left on the 25th for Bizerta and is now on her way back with balloon, and it is proposed that she shall take a balloon on escort to Milo. *HMS Magnolia* has been fitted and carried out balloon trials on the 30th instant and it is proposed that she will leave with convoy and balloon for Bizerta on 1st August, and thence on escort to Alexandria on which she will then be based. [...] No submarines have yet been sighted from the balloons and no attacks have been made upon any convoy in which a balloon has been carried so no statement can yet be made as to the extent to which the balloon will prove a protection.’

During August two interesting events occurred which might prove that submarines avoided convoys escorted by balloons. ‘On 10th August, after the greater part of the convoy from Bizerta, escorted by *HMS Snapdragon* had arrived at Grand Harbour Malta, a few ships without *HMS Snapdragon* proceeded further to Marsa Scirocco. At the south eastern corner of the Island, passing through the swept channel. One of these ships was sunk en route. Evidence is, however, somewhat conflicting whether it was sunk by mine or torpedo. On 12th August the convoy from Milo, escorted by *HMS Pentstemon* with balloon, handed over at the appointed rendez-vous the Italian bound portion of the convoy to its Italian escort. After the Italian bound portion “had proceeded about ten to fifteen miles from *HMS Pentstemon* one of the trawlers was torpedoed. This was sighted by the balloon and *HMS Pentstemon* proceeded towards the spot with a view to giving such assistance as might be possible, but no further attack was made.” In the early days the convoy escort work with balloons as for Bizerta concentrated on the shipping line Gibraltar – Bizerta - Alexandria, but as from September escort work was also carried out on the Bizerta – Malta – Milo line as well as is evident from Table 3.

Table 3. Balloon escort on the Bizerta – Malta – Milo line during first half September 1918.

Date	Escort ship	direction	harbour	direction	harbour
01.09.18	<i>HMS Pentstemon</i>	arrives	Malta	from	Taranto
03.09.18	<i>HMS Snapdragon</i>	leaves	Malta	for	Bizerta
04.09.18	<i>HMS Pentstemon</i>	leaves	Malta	for	Patras
08.09.18	<i>HMS Pentstemon</i>	arrives	Malta	from	Patras
09.09.18	<i>HMS Snapdragon</i>	arrives	Malta	from	Bizerta
10.09.18	<i>HMS Pentstemon</i>	leaves	Malta	for	Milo
12.09.18	<i>HMS Clematis</i>	arrives	Malta	from	Milo

By early August three new bases of four kite balloon sheds each were under construction at Port Said, Milo and Genoa. However, already at the end of that month ‘in view of the urgent necessity for economy’ it was decided to abolish Kite Balloons for the Navy, except as far as they were necessary to complete minesweeping carried out in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea.

On the 12th November all kite balloon operations in the Mediterranean ceased, as all hostilities ceased first with Turkey on 31st October, then with Austro-Hungary on 3rd November and finally Germany on 11th November, with the exception of mine-sweeping. Accordingly it was decided not to despatch the

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advance Maltese working party for the Kite Balloon Station to be based at Milo and to suspend all further construction work on any other Kite Balloon Stations. Only the Kite Balloon Stations at Alexandria, Gibraltar and Malta were to be maintained at sufficient strength to provide one working balloon from each station for minesweeping purposes. It was also decided not to alter any more sloops or other vessels for the purpose of towing kite balloons. Straight away it was also decided to demobilise the Adriatic stations by (i) despatching all serviceable balloons from both Brindisi and Corfu to Gibraltar, (ii) personnel from Brindisi and Corfu were to be drafted to Taranto to await disposal, and (iii) Brindisi gear to be despatched to Taranto, while the Corfu gear to Malta. The only Kite Balloon section engaged on active work until the end of the year, was that transferred from Brindisi to Mudros, where extensive mine-sweeping operations were carried out in the Dardanelles. The Brindisi contingent arrived at Mudros on 25th October and a balloon was inflated and sent by sea by 2nd November, while a second balloon proceeded to sea on the 6th November.

The dismantlement of the Bizerta Balloon Base followed when on the 14th December the order came to transfer two balloon sheds to the War Office. The disposal of the remainder of the station was cabled only two days later, when two sheds were handed over to the military for storage.

Source : National Archives, Kew, U.K. Files : AIR 1/445/15/303/26, AIR 79/2062