

An Ingenious Civil War Kite-Flying Scheme

Editor's note: Terry Foenander of Toowoomba, Australia, spends a lot of his free time in libraries perusing and copying interesting—"and mainly obscure," in his words—articles from American newspapers from the Civil War period. He plans to incorporate his choicest finds into a forthcoming book. One of these nuggets concerned kites and is reproduced here with his kind permission. The article is from the March 13, 1864 issue of the New York Herald.

Kite Flying by Rebel Prisoners Is New Method of Communication

The Chicago Tribune of Sunday last, in an article on the Confederate prisoners at Camp Douglas, near that city, mentions the following incident:

"Early last week several of the rebels were seized with a mania for kite flying. Pine sticks, paper, paste and twine were in requisition, and soon a half-score of six-cornered kites were ready to take a sail. Flying kites is a harmless amusement, and the colonel commanding, remembering how in his boyhood he used to stand on the village common and gaze at his own kite as it wandered heavenwards, was not disposed to deprive the poor fellows, shut in from the world, seeing nothing beautiful unless it is above them, of any enjoyment they might derive from such a recreation.

"So towards evening of the first day the rebel kites were permitted to rise. Away off southward and upward they floated till they were mere specks in the sky. Federal and rebel enjoyed the sight for half an hour, and then the kites were 'wound down.' The next evening the kites flew again, but unfortunately the strings of two or three broke, and they went tumbling on toward the south. No suspicion yet. The next evening the kites again floated, and the strings again broke.

"'Something strange in that,' thought the colonel aloud to his officers. 'When the next string breaks order a soldier to follow the kite and we'll see what ails the cord.' Soon a string snapped; away went the kite and away went the soldier after it. It dropped in a field a mile and a half away, and the soldier found it, and in its paper tail he also found a letter addressed to a certain Chicago

copperhead.

"What the contents of the letter were, or to whom it was directed, we are not informed. But it is known that it furnished the government with the clue to a plot. The envelope contained two letters, neither of which criminated the person to whom it was directed. One note simply requested him to mail the inclosed letter to Hon. Mr. So and so, Louisville, Kentucky, and promised him the everlasting remembrance and gratitude of the 'oppressed Southern people.' But neither he nor the Kentucky man will ever receive the notes—the latter will receive something else before long.

"It is supposed that some person was stationed at a convenient point, from which, after nightfall, he could readily reach the runaway kite and secure the letter.

"It was a pretty plot, indeed. But the rebels will have to devise a more ingenious postal scheme than this. The only effect of the discovery has been naturally to increase the vigilance of the garrison." 🌿

The kite is flying in the sky
But it is in the the hands of the people of the earth.
So we too should go up,
But we should keep our passions on the earth
And let our spirits soar.

—Dasopant (1551-1615), from the
Marathi "The Grantharaja"