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The Eskimos all agreed that it's a cold day in the Arctic when the barren tundra yields a Japanese balloon. But only recently the U. S. Air Force recovered just such an object, still intact, after exposure for more than a decade to the rugged Yukon climate.

Flying low between barter Island and Fort Yukon, Don Hulshizer, Chief Bush pilot for Wein Alaska Airlines, Fairbanks, Alaska, spotted a dull white object on the ground near the Scheenjok River. He decreased altitude in an attempt at identification, but because of the rough terrain he was unable to distinguish the object clearly.

Surmising that the find was either a parachute or part of a downed aircraft, Hulshizer contacted Air Intelligence officers at Ladd Air Force Base near Fairbanks, Alaska. Attempts by L-20 and SA-16 search craft to relocate the strange object at first proved unavailing due to the thick carpet of tundra-brush and undergrowth. The best chance for its recovery lay in a helicopter operation. The 7th Air Rescue Squadron at Ladd supplied an H-5 helicopter as well as an SA-16 aircraft to fly protective cover on the 230 mile trip. Alaska's rugged terrain requires that a helicopter be accompanied by a guiding or mother aircraft whenever it is forced to venture more than 25 miles from its home base.

Since the maximum range of the H-5 is approximately 150 miles, under Arctic conditions, the searchers made a refueling stop at Fort Yukon and then proceed north to the site. Aboard the helicopter assigned to recover the object was Lieutenant Harold L. Hale of Pueblo, Colorado, an Intelligence Technician with the 5004th Air Intelligence Service Squadron at Ladd AFB.

One at the site, the H-5 found landing impossible. Hovering a few feet above the target, Lieutenant Hale managed to jump safely to the ground. The dense underbrush and marshy tundra made walking extremely difficult and Hale only had 30 minutes in which to investigate and recover the strange looking object. Night was falling fast in the Far Arctic reaches. The 30 minutes gave the helicopter pilot time to set down a safe distance away, conserve fuel and then return to the site to pick up Hale.

"After coming upon the wreckage, I didn't actually know what I saw", Hale reported. "At first I thought it was a parachute. But after discovering that the 'chute' was made of a kind of rice paper and the gondola contained some bamboo parts, I knew that whatever the object might be, we could be reasonably sure that it was of Japanese origin."

He bundled up the rice paper balloon and stuffed it under a tree so that it would not be reported again as an unidentified object. "gathering up about 120 pounds of the remains of the strange product in my arms, I stumbled across the slimy tundra to reach the helicopter which was hovering just inches off the deck."

The odd find was loaded aboard and transported back to Ladd Air Force Base where personnel of the 5004th Air Intelligence detachment made a thorough study and investigation of the Japanese balloon-carried bomb.

It was determined that the airborne device was similar to Japanese balloons found floating over the western regions of the U.S. during the latter part of World War II. It had apparently blown across the Territory and finally came to rest at this spot, north of Ft. Yukon, where it had remained undetected for the past nine or 10 years.

Lauding the cooperation and flying proficiency of the 74th Air Rescue Squadron, Hale said, without the use of the 'copter, the only other way of recovering the balloon would have been by river boat, a slow and long drawn out process. Instead of one man and one day's operation, it would have taken five men and five weeks to execute a ground search and recovery. It would have required a month to go up the river and back, and a week to stumble through the three miles of brush from river bank to the site and return." He also held high praise for the skill and proficiency of the 'copter pilot, lieutenant Louis H. Wells of Quitman, Georgia.

The 300 pound weapon consisted of two principal parts, a metal gondola suspended by shroud lines, and a gas-filled balloon. The balloon itself measured approximately 32 feet in diameter and was constructed of rice paper, so durable that it could not be torn apart by two men pulling it ten years after it had been launched. The gondola consisted of chandelier-type frame from which were suspended more than 30 paper sandbags used as ballast. The gondola also contained a bomb hook supporting a Jap 5KG Thermite Incendiary bomb, measuring 16 inches in length. It was found that the bomb was still highly explosive and dangerous even after exposure to the rugged Arctic weather for nearly a decade.

Once balloons were launched from Japanese bases, the prevailing winds carried them for great distances. When the floating weapon reached a certain pressure altitude, gas would commence escaping from an outlet valve causing the device to descend until one of the five-pound sandbags was automatically kicked off by an electrical charge. The release of the ballast decreased the weight of the device and the balloon would once again begin ascent and its forward movement. It would continue to rise until it reached a pre-established altitude, whereupon it would descend, kick off more ballast, and repeat the process until finally all ballast had been spent and the bomb released. Then the balloon would again rise and after a predetermined time it would completely and ingeniously destroy itself by means of a self-contained detonator