Record Traffic From The Past

by Steve Anderson

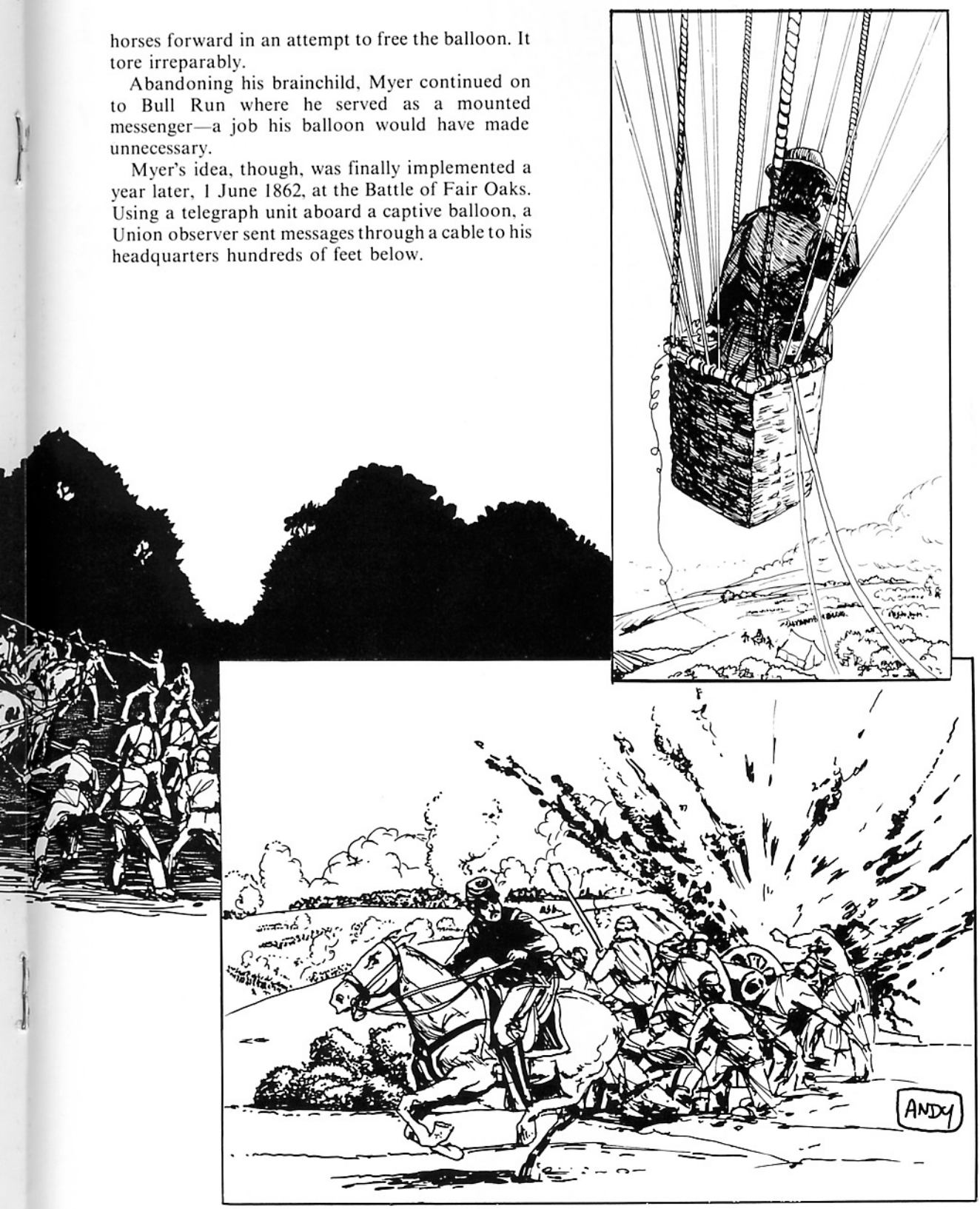
Illuminated by the moonlit summer sky, a bounding spheroid traveled south above a Virginia country road just out of the reach of grasping tree branches and telegraph wires. Men cursed and horses strained against the ropes and guidelines that pulled the sphere southward. They progressed slowly, occasionally having to stop to free the globe or its dangling ropes from a tree or bridge railing.

The objective of this unusual activity was to arrive in time to aid the Union army in battle on 21 July 1861. MAJ Albert J. Myer, chief Signal officer of the U.S. Army, had brilliantly conceived the idea of signaling enemy positions and battle reports via telegraph from an observation balloon rigged with a telegraph unit and 600 feet of double-conductor flexible cable.

Myer, knowing there was no hydrogen gas facility at his destination, had inflated his balloon in Washington and had proceeded to tow it through Virginia.

Myer's party set off after midnight on the 21st and managed with some difficulty to be nearing GEN McDowell's headquarters at Fairfax Courthouse around noon. As Myer hastened it along, the balloon caught fast in the branches of a large tree. Frustrated, he ordered the men and

horses forward in an attempt to free the balloon. It tore irreparably.

Abandoning his brainchild, Myer continued on to Bull Run where he served as a mounted messenger—a job his balloon would have made unnecessary.

Myer's idea, though, was finally implemented a year later, 1 June 1862, at the Battle of Fair Oaks. Using a telegraph unit aboard a captive balloon, a Union observer sent messages through a cable to his headquarters hundreds of feet below.