Salomon August Andrée Biography

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Biography

The Swedish engineer and Arctic balloonist Salomon August Andrée (1854-1897) attempted the first balloon flight to the North Pole in 1897, but the three-man team perished.

Salomon August Andrée was born in Grenna, Sweden, on Oct. 18, 1854, the son of an apothecary. He obtained an engineering degree from the Royal Institute of Technology in 1873. After working in industry, he visited the United States in 1876, supporting himself as a janitor at the Swedish exhibit of the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. During his short stay he became interested in ballooning and talked with the American balloonist John Wise of Philadelphia. In 1882-1883, after 2 years as assistant professor at a technical school, he wintered with the International Polar Scientific Program as aeroelectrical observer at the Swedish Spitsbergen Station. He then became first engineer in the Swedish Patent Office.

Andrée's ballooning began in 1893; after a grant to purchase a French balloon, he made a total of nine ascents. In 1895 the Swedish Academy of Sciences accepted Andrée's proposal to use a balloon to reach the North Pole. The balloon, called the *Ornen* (Eagle), was one of the largest ever produced. Made by Lachambre of Paris, it had a volume of 170,000 cubic feet, to be filled with hydrogen, and was constructed of varnished silk with rubberized seams. A cylindrical wicker car hung on suspension ropes. Danes Island (80°N, 11°E) in the Spitsbergen archipelago was selected as the launch location, but the winds proved unfavorable in the summer of 1896. On July 11, 1897, Andrée and two companions began the ascent, heading northeastward. Except for a few inconsequential carrier pigeon messages and marker buoys, no further word or sign was ever received form the party.

In the summer of 1930 a Norwegian scientific expedition accidentally discovered the Andrée campsite on White Island (81°N, 33°E). The bodies were returned to Sweden for heroes' funerals, together with diaries, photographic film, and camp remains. Mystery continued to surround the causes of the men's death, because ample food and fuel were found. However, in 1952 a Danish doctor proved that the deaths were caused by trichinosis contracted from polar bear meat. Although the team did not reach the North Pole, or even get near it, the expedition of the *Ornen* was a pioneering use of aviation in polar exploration.