

BALLOONS & UNIVERSITIES

Captain Al Atwell, USN (Ret.)

Prior to becoming an officer, I was a Chief Aerographer's Mate stationed with Commander Cochran in the Physics Department at the University of Minnesota. The Office of Naval Research (ONR) out of Washington would approve of what they wanted tested, and it was our job to get the balloons launched and recovered. Cochran would fly an airplane and communicate with me who was driving a radio control vehicle in which I could change the balloons direction by altering its altitude.

3M made polyethylene balloon material that Winzen Research made the balloons from – but a three million cubic foot balloon would weigh a lot so there were limitations. Schjeldahl Company in South Dakota developed a Mylar balloon which enabled us to get up much higher. We got one up to 123,000 feet – a world record at that time. We only launched about one a month, so I had the opportunity to take several physics courses which helped me later in my career.

When I was stationed in London, I also took courses through the University of Maryland - which helped me get sent to George Washington University (GWU) after my tour on USS John W. Weeks (DD-701). At GWU I finished up on summer session and needed 12 semester hours to graduate. The only courses available were in International Law and I took all 4 at the same time – which set me up for the successful tours I later had in WESTPAC where knowledge of law came in very handy!

Editor's Note - Check out the following link for some really cool high altitude balloon information & pictures related to Captain Atwell's experiences.

https://www.space-unit.com/articles/manned_pioneer_flights_in_the_usa.pdf