

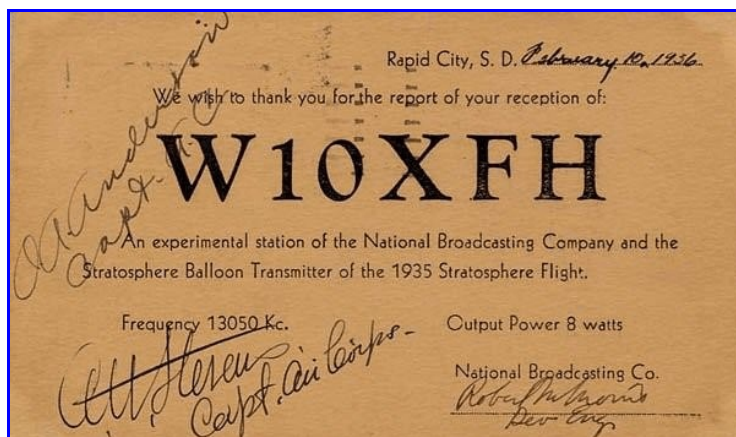
In 1934 and 35 there were some exciting firsts in Stratospheric Balloon's. The race was on between the USSR and the USA to obtain the highest flight record. The National Geographic Society co-sponsored the Explorer, a manned high altitude balloon capable of stratospheric flight. Crew members, Army Captain's Albert Stevens, Orvil Anderson and Major Wm. Kepner were selected to fly the Explorer. Kepner and Anderson, experienced balloonists were in charge of



locating a suitable launch site. Ideally a crater or canyon in a clear grassy valley encircled with rocky edges high enough to shield the tall balloon from any wind. The canyon, located near Rapid City South Dakota. City officials fascinated by the expected publicity campaign, agreed to build a road and electric line. Anderson directed construction of a temporary village, housing over a hundred personnel, with the help of S.D, National Guard and the 4th Cavalry Regiment.

The central pad 200 feet in diameter was cushioned with sawdust to protect the fabric of the balloon as it was spread on the ground prior to inflation. Preparations made for flight, regularly reports by the national press, Explorer lifted off at 0645 28 July 1934 an event broadcast live over the radio and watched by 30,000 spectators on the site. (Shown the Explorer II gondola second flight 1935) They would be first observe the Earth's curvature.

After 7 hours in flight the pilots noticed holes torn in the bottom of the gas bag, quickly losing gas, the balloon plunged into an uncontrolled dive, its bag disintegrating as the balloon picked up vertical speed. At 5 thousand feet the remaining hydrogen exploded, sending the gondola in a free fall. According to officials the pilots managed to bail out after the explosion. Kepner at a bare 500 feet altitude, later it turned out that the Explorer missed a world record by 624 feet. The accident was linked to folds in the balloon's fabric that put it under extreme stress as the balloon expanded in the stratosphere.



The NGS and Air Corps vowed to launch a new balloon in June 1935, but the new helium filled Explorer II was not ready until November.

Watched by 20,000 spectators, Explorer II lifted off at 0800 11 November 1935 and reached a new record height of 72,395 feet. Capt. Anderson Pilot and Capt. Stevens UIC, were the crew of the November record setting flight. This crew was the last High altitude flight of the

1930s. The sealed gondola kept the crew from freezing and their blood from boiling due to the low air temperatures. Their record would stand for the next 21 years. Credit Linda Voss partial scripting, also CPRV Society QSL Gallery QSL card. September 25-26 2010 will mark the 75th Anniversary of Explorer. See nwplace.com