

SIROCCO AREA LIGHTING



MANUFACTURER: Airstar
ORIGIN: France
COST: \$1500.00 approx

Area lighting at rescue incidents is normally provided by banks of halogen flood lights mounted on large vehicles or by smaller spot lights on smaller response vehicles. These are an excellent light source providing enough output to blind a stadium of people. But the very strength of that light can be detrimental to the needs of rescuers at a scene because it can be blinding and will cast a very stark shadow - it is quite simply too bright. Photographers, Film-makers and TV production companies know this which is why you will never get the immediate area to be filmed bathed stark halogen light. It's all about imitating natural light and that requires a bright but diffuse white light bathing an area and causing much less distinct shadows. In 1994 frenchman Pierre Chabert produced the first commercial balloon light - nothing new in the concept since chinese lanterns etc have been around for centuries but Pierre was the first to put a package together which combined extremely bright light source with a cooling and diffusing

capability in one. Quite literally a bulb in a balloon.

What's good for the film industry is, in this case very good for the rescue industry. We too need as close to daylight conditions as possible when working at an incident, to be able to turn around to a colleague or beckon towards a truck without being blinded and to lean over a casualty without plunging them into darkness or causing their face to appear a strange colour thus obscuring one of the most important vital signs of trauma.

Airstar produce a wide range of 'balloons' in a range of shapes and sizes but they break down into two categories - small air inflated balloons which are mounted on a stand or vehicle and helium filled floating balloons that are tethered and suspended high above the scene. The latter are the size of weather balloons and are tethered and cabled to a generator/power source on the ground. Obviously these are dependent on relatively good weather but they are surprisingly resilient. Expensive to put because of the helium

Airstar provided 50 units for use at the World Trade Centre bombing. The larger models were slung from hydraulic platform cages to provide instant height.






CONSTRUCTION

A ripstop nylon outer cover is produced in two halves of an ellipse. The bottom half is translucent or, more accurately opaque white to allow light to pass through and diffuse. This is the same principle as a photographers flash diffuser or grease proof paper! The top half is coloured, in this case rescue orange, with a silver coating on the inside to reflect light downward and restrict light blinding helicopters and aircraft crew above. A zip along the 'equator' of the balloon provides access to the bulb and protective mount inside and speeds up the deflation process. At the bottom of the ellipse is a metal mount to which a rugged support stand can be connected and through which an electric cable runs to power the bulb and a continuously running air pump. The air pump inflates the balloon, maintains inflation and helps cool the bulb. The bulb (in this case) is a standard Philips 2000w Halogen about 12" long. This is spring mounted within a protective cage which protects the bulb from impact and the outer case from melting if it were to come into contact with the bulb.

The Sirocco (or the very similar Lunix) are available as standard 240v (110v) mains plug-in or with 3-phase generator plugs and use a standard film industry angled clamp to mount on to a vehicle or stand. Sirocco is supplied in a cylindrical carrying case.

IN ACTION

Once switched on the Sirocco inflates then illuminates within 45 seconds. There is a constant hum as the air pump maintains inflation. The manufacturers state that Sirocco will resist wind speeds of up to 68mph. We've never tested it in such high winds but have noticed that it has a significant wind resistance 'footprint' but it's ability to withstand wind is going to depend on your mount or stand. We've certainly not had a problem under normal circumstances. The light emitted is simply immense, the quoted figures are

illumination over 10,000 sq feet. Difficult to quantify how much of that is useable light but the area surrounding any typical two-car vehicle accident will be fully illuminated with one balloon. And the light within that perimeter will be diffuse and resemble daylight. There aren't the very stark shadows of the vehicle floodlights and whilst the balloon is very bright to look at it does not burn square lamp mounts onto your retina. The stand we purchased with Sirocco is supplied by Airstar and is incredibly sturdy - that means it's incredibly heavy and we can literally park a truck on its feet to stabilise the balloon! Once switched off the light should be left for a few minutes to cool before the zip is opened and the whole lot folded umbrella-style into the case. It is available in at least 3 sizes the smallest of which can be carried as a back pack with a 12v battery and is shown (unilluminated) in the title picture. The most powerful is a 4000w version illuminating a 45,000sq.ft area but it takes 5 minutes to inflate. The angled clamp allows the balloon to be tilted for directional light but we find it most useful high above the centre of the scene (by high we mean 10-20ft). An excellent stand-alone light source for emergency services and of use to fire, police, ambulance, SAR and USAR agencies. 

FOR:

Diffuse light casting much less shadow. Light, compact and easy to put up. Your barbeques will be the envy of the division

AGAINST:

Initially expensive (but worth it!) Be careful in high winds Fabric outer can be torn (but easily repaired)

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(could be two or three hundred pounds/dollars to inflate) these will only be used at major incidents requiring a very bright moon-light rather than sunlight. However, nothing else in the world will do this job at the moment which is why you'll often see these things at large music festivals or sports meetings. Smaller versions were seen by the world as giant jellyfish at the Sydney Olympics opening ceremony.

But initial cost, operating cost and bulk will probably mean that you'll see very few Airstar Helium balloons at an incident. The smaller, air filled models typified by the Sirocco however are an entirely different proposition. These are small enough, bright enough, transportable enough and certainly efficient enough to be worth considering by every single emergency services agency in the world! I can't remember a time that we've reviewed such a generically useful item of equipment. We were so impressed with the model we were reviewing we actually bought the thing!

