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Securing the High Ground: The Civil War Roots of Aerial Reconnaissance

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Abstract

In this era of rapidly advancing technology, debate about aerial surveillance abounds. In March of this year, the Pentagon released its 2015 Inspector General report entitled “Evaluation of DoD’s Use of Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS) for Support to Civil Authorities,” which revealed that the Pentagon had flown spy drones over the U.S. for non-military purposes. Historically, the drone had been used primarily by the military in war zones, but with increased availability and applicability here at home, UAS use has expanded to include public agencies, commercial entities, and private citizens. Surveillance by air, however, is not a new concept. The strategy dates back to the French Revolution during which the French Army formed balloon companies to observe the enemy. Nearly 70 years later, during the Civil War, both Union and Confederate armies would experiment with tactical air power through the use of balloons for battlefield reconnaissance. The experiment found little support or practical utility, but the efforts of balloonists John La Mountain and Thaddeus Lowe were pioneering and spurred further innovations. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Hot Air Balloons, Aerial Reconnaissance

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Securing the High Ground: The Civil War Roots of Aerial Reconnaissance

May 30, 2016

By Kaylyn Sawyer '17

In this era of rapidly advancing technology, debate about aerial surveillance abounds. In March of this year, the Pentagon released its 2015 Inspector General report entitled “Evaluation of DoD’s Use of Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS) for Support to Civil Authorities,” which revealed that the Pentagon had flown spy drones over the U.S. for non-military purposes. Historically, the drone had been used primarily by the military in war zones, but with increased availability and applicability here at home, UAS use has expanded to include public agencies, commercial entities, and private citizens. Surveillance by air, however, is not a new concept. The strategy dates back to the French Revolution during which the French Army formed balloon companies to observe the enemy. Nearly 70 years later, during the Civil War, both Union and Confederate armies would experiment with tactical air power through the use of balloons for battlefield reconnaissance. The experiment found little support or practical utility, but the efforts of balloonists John La Mountain and Thaddeus Lowe were pioneering and spurred further innovations.



Lowe observing the battlefield from his balloon “Intrepid.” Photo via the Library of Congress.

Union General Benjamin Butler, commander at Fort Monroe, contacted ballooning pioneer John La Mountain on June 5, 1861 to discuss wartime use of balloons for determining the enemy's position and strength. La Mountain arrived in the Tidewater region of Virginia and made several ascents in his balloon, providing aerial reconnaissance of Confederate forces at Sewell's Point, Norfolk, and Yorktown. His ascent on August 3, 1861 would be historic. On this date, he secured his balloon to the gunboat *Fanny* which then steamed out into the waters opposite Sewell's Point. From an altitude of 2000 feet he observed Confederate positions. For a brief moment, the *Fanny* was an aircraft carrier, arguably the first in the United States and the predecessor to the imposing carriers ported today at Sewell's Point, site of the current Naval Station Norfolk. La Mountain would make one more ascent from the deck of a ship in August 1861, after which he provided General Butler with a report and rough diagram of his observations. He offered a proposal to Butler for continued aerial surveillance operations by balloon, which was forwarded to the War Department. No action was taken.

Meanwhile, rival balloonist Thaddeus Lowe had been working towards the same goal as La Mountain. On June 18, 1861, Lowe successfully soared 500 feet above Washington, telegraphed a message to President Lincoln, and demonstrated the potential of aerial reconnaissance. Thus, the U.S. Army Balloon Corps was established for the purpose of intelligence gathering. Lowe, now Chief Aeronaut of the Army of the Potomac, and his lighter-than-air balloons accompanied General McClellan to the Virginia Peninsula in the spring of 1862 for aerial operations. This innovation in surveillance led the Confederate army to experiment with strategic deception. Unable to effectively shoot the balloons with artillery fire and realizing that such fire exposed their positions to Union spotters, Confederate forces learned to camouflage their encampments and darken their fires to mislead Union aerial observers. They painted logs to look like cannons, creating the impression of increased weapon strength. These "Quaker guns" or "wooden ordnance" foreshadowed a strategy of deception seen again 83 years later with operation Fortitude South, a multifaceted feint including inflatable tanks, plywood artillery, and a fictitious army designed to mislead the Germans about the pending Allied invasion of Normandy. Confederate forces also attempted strategic reconnaissance by balloon on a few occasions during the Seven Days Campaign but lacked adequate resources to continue the experiment.



Thaddeus Lowe's military balloon near Gaines Mill, Virginia. Photo via the Library of Congress.

With tepid support from military leaders, the U.S. Army Balloon Corps disbanded in May 1863. The experiment with aerial reconnaissance during the Civil War illuminated the potential of aerial surveillance as well as its limitations. Technological advances ushered in the widespread use of aerial reconnaissance beginning in World War I and continuing in every conflict since. Balloons floating over Civil War battlefields evolved into the reconnaissance aircraft used by the military today. Contemporary machines such as the remotely piloted MQ-1 Predator surveillance aircraft and high altitude U-2 aircraft can trace their existence to the humble balloon. The Army continues to use lighter-than-air technology for battlefield surveillance in Iraq and Afghanistan via a tethered aerostat equipped with surveillance technology. The contemporary debate over the appropriate use of aerial surveillance will no doubt continue, due in part to the innovations of these early ambitious aeronauts.

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