

Balloon Operations on the Peninsula in 1862

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The tactic of using balloons to spy on the enemy forces originated in 1861, with famous aeronaut Thaddeus Lowe joining up with the Union forces to relay crucial information about the Confederate forces. Lowe used his balloon flying skills to assist generals in keeping an eye on the enemy, drawing maps, and creating strategy.ⁱ This technique brought a strong advantage to the Union, and although the Confederacy tried to use their own balloons, they were not as successful. During the first two years of the war, Lowe worked with many generals. They all used the balloon tactics differently; some utilized the information heavily and some did not care for the balloons or the civilians helping to operate them.

Thaddeus Lowe was born in New Hampshire in 1832, moving to Massachusetts with his older brother when he was fourteen.ⁱⁱ It was here that he learned a trade, boot making, and began to study science on his own, since he only attended school a very few months out of every year. His first flying experiment was done using a caged cat and a kite, where the kite caught wind off of the Atlantic Ocean and flew up to a thousand feet. It was after this experiment that Lowe decided he himself wanted to fly in the air, and he began saving his money and learning more about aviation.ⁱⁱⁱ He gained a name for himself by offering balloon rides, and eventually set his sights on crossing the Atlantic Ocean. He was never able to achieve

this goal, as the Civil War started before he could leave, and he then decided to lend his services to the army.

At first, Lowe had trouble convincing the army that they could use aerial support, but he quickly thought of a way to sway them in his favor. He set up a telegraph wire that could instantly relay information from his balloon to the generals below, and even all the way back to Washington. Lowe brought his balloon *Enterprise* to Washington to demonstrate the altitude and view the balloon could achieve.^{iv} He gained the support of President Lincoln, which helped Lowe in his endeavor to create the balloon corps as an official branch of the army. Lowe was not the first to propose this idea, however, as two other aeronauts by the names of John Wise and John La Mountain were competing to try to get the Federal army to see the practicality of balloons. Wise was the first to build a balloon specifically for military use, while La Mountain was the first to arrive on the peninsula in July 1861 and offer his balloon services.^v In August of 1861, La Mountain made his first balloon flight from the deck of a Union gunboat named *Fanny*, which was the first aircraft carrier.^{vi} La Mountain was able to report on numbers of troops in Confederate camps, but had to leave Ft. Monroe when he had used up all of his hydrogen gas making materials and needed more supplies.^{vii} La Mountain ended up suffering serious burns while trying to experiment with hydrogen, so his service to the Army ended early in 1862.^{viii} As stated before, Lowe was already famous for his ballooning, so he was the one to catch President Lincoln's attention and was given command of the balloon initiative.

Lowe eventually gathered a total of 7 balloons that he used during his time in the army. He was able to fill his balloons with hydrogen that he created in mobile generators, which created hydrogen by dousing water and iron filings with sulfuric acid.^{ix} Lowe used a barge,

called the *George Washington Park Custis* to transport his balloons and launch from the water. While often credited with being the first aircraft carrier, it was in fact the second.^x The two balloons that Lowe used primarily on the peninsula in 1862 were the *Intrepid* and the *Constitution*. The *Intrepid* was based in Yorktown, where it became a “familiar sight” in the air. The *Constitution’s* camp was at Warwick Court House.^{xi} The Confederacy was frightened by these balloon sightings, and they knew that the Union was able to spy on them and their movements. Many soldiers wrote about how they had to deliberately hide from the balloons.^{xii} At one point, the Confederates tried to launch their own balloon but their efforts fell far short of the Union success. John Bryan, a Captain in the Confederate Army, volunteered to test the Confederate balloon that was made out of cotton as opposed to Lowe’s silk balloons.^{xiii} They attempted to use hot air to fill their balloons instead of hydrogen like Lowe used, so they were more limited in their time in the air and usefulness.^{xiv} The Confederate’s attempts at flight were minimal, and their journeys to the sky were scrapped after their first balloon crashed with Bryan in it and the next was lost when the boat it was on ran aground and both boat and balloon were captured by the Union.^{xv}

The Union Army generals used Lowe’s talents and information differently. Some gave it significant value and used it to plan strategy. Others didn’t want Lowe going up into the air for various personal reasons. George B. McClellan, sometimes referred to as “Little Mac,”^{xvi} was a general who thought highly of Lowe and his ballooning, and he credited Lowe many times with helping the Union win the war. McClellan liked to employ siege tactics, where he kept the Confederate forces trapped in their defensive lines until they ran out of supplies. Lowe was

pivotal in these sieges because he was able to see if the enemy was preparing an attack, receiving supplies, or if they were retreating.

The Confederate forces struggled to deal with Lowe's balloons. Almost every time a balloon was launched, it would be shot at by rifles and artillery, but it was always too far away or the shots were inaccurate. They sometimes grazed the basket or the lines connecting the balloon to the ground, but never enough to do any significant damage. Lowe wrote that they eventually came to expect to be fired at while launching the balloon, but they were not too worried about being shot down. The Confederates had to adapt to the balloons being in the air by either concealing their movements or creating misleading movements and troop placements.

The value of balloons for aerial observation of enemy activity was proven even though some army commanders did not utilize this new technology. The balloon corps was disbanded, from lack of funding and support, in the early summer of 1863.^{xvii}

These early balloon flights spawned man's quest for flight. From our Civil War balloons came zeppelins, airplanes, satellites, drones, and other aerial methods of observing the enemy plans that Lowe and his contemporaries could not imagine.

ⁱ Quarstein, John V, *Hampton and Newport News in the Civil War: War Comes to the Peninsula*, (Lynchburg, Virginia: H. E. Howard, Inc, 1998), p. 147.

ⁱⁱ Jarrow, Gail, *Lincoln's Flying Spies: Thaddeus Lowe and the Civil War Balloon Corps*, (Honesdale, PA: Calkins Creek, 2010), p. 11.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jarrow, Gail, *Lincoln's Flying Spies: Thaddeus Lowe and the Civil War Balloon Corps*, (Honesdale, PA: Calkins Creek, 2010), p. 11.

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- ^{iv} Dougherty, Kevin, *The Peninsula Campaign of 1862: A Military Analysis*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), p. 10.
- ^v Dougherty, Kevin, *The Peninsula Campaign of 1862: A Military Analysis*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), p. 10.
- ^{vi} St. John Erickson, Mark, "Union Eye in the Sky over Hampton Roads," July 23, 2016, (<http://www.dailypress.com/features/history/dp-nws-civil-war-balloon-at-fort-monroe-20160724-story.html>).
- ^{vii} Quarstein, John V, *The Civil War on the Virginia Peninsula*, (Dover, NH: Arcadia, 1997), p. 50.
- ^{viii} Dougherty, Kevin, *The Peninsula Campaign of 1862: A Military Analysis*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), p. 60.
- ^{ix} Dougherty, Kevin, *The Peninsula Campaign of 1862: A Military Analysis*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), p. 10.
- ^x Quarstein, John V, *Yorktown's Civil War Siege: Drums Along the Warwick*, (Charleston: The History Press, 2012), p. 119.
- ^{xi} Quarstein, John V, *Yorktown's Civil War Siege: Drums Along the Warwick*, (Charleston: The History Press, 2012), p. 119-120.
- ^{xii} Jarrow, Gail, *Lincoln's Flying Spies: Thaddeus Lowe and the Civil War Balloon Corps*, (Honesdale, PA: Calkins Creek, 2010), p. 80.
- ^{xiii} Jarrow, Gail, *Lincoln's Flying Spies: Thaddeus Lowe and the Civil War Balloon Corps*, (Honesdale, PA: Calkins Creek, 2010), p. 60.
- ^{xiv} Quarstein, John V, *Yorktown's Civil War Siege: Drums Along the Warwick*, (Charleston: The History Press, 2012), p. 122.
- ^{xv} Jarrow, Gail, *Lincoln's Flying Spies: Thaddeus Lowe and the Civil War Balloon Corps*, (Honesdale, PA: Calkins Creek, 2010), p. 61.
- ^{xvi} Quarstein, John V, *Hampton and Newport News in the Civil War: War Comes to the Peninsula*, (Lynchburg, Virginia: H. E. Howard, Inc, 1998), p. 127.
- ^{xvii} Jarrow, Gail, *Lincoln's Flying Spies: Thaddeus Lowe and the Civil War Balloon Corps*, (Honesdale, PA: Calkins Creek, 2010), p. 85.