



~ Disclaimer ~

This short dissertation blithely ignores the conventional notion that aircraft have to be powered by engines, have wings and be capable of controlled maneuvering. Likewise, it sets aside any mental images that may be conjured up by assuming that any waterborne naval vessel entitled to be called an aircraft carrier has to possess a propulsion system and be able to support landings and takeoffs of heavier-than-air flying machines.

To do otherwise would be historically inaccurate, and at odds with dictionary definitions of 'aircraft'. Plus, such preconceptions would eliminate the opportunity to share the story of what is sometimes referred to as America's first aircraft carriers. So, for purposes of this treatise, I submit that it's fine to refer to lighter-than-air conveyances as 'aircraft'.

Bill Lee

~ Birthplace of Naval Aviation ~

Virginia, and the Hampton Roads area in particular, rightfully claim this honor. The first successful launch of a mechanically-powered aircraft from a warship took place in 1910, when a flimsy biplane flew off an improvised flight deck temporarily mounted on the foredeck of a Navy cruiser anchored in Hampton Roads.

The first 'true' aircraft carrier commissioned by the US Navy was the USS LANGLEY (CV-1). Originally a coal collier, she was converted at the Norfolk Navy Yard in 1920. And, of course, the first American warship designed and constructed as an aircraft carrier 'from the keel up' was the USS RANGER (CV-4). She was built by Newport News Shipbuilding on the banks of the James River and delivered in 1934.

But decades before those events transpired, the first aircraft carrier sortie...of sorts... occurred. This historic event took place in Hampton Roads on August 3, 1861. Additional military missions of a similar nature took place the next year. Some were conducted by the Union in the upper Chesapeake Bay; others in Hampton Roads by the Confederacy.

~ *Lighter than Air* ~

The first 'aircraft' were large balloons, often called aerostats. Capable of carrying aloft one or more persons in baskets suspended beneath inflatable spheres, they looked much like today's recreational hot air balloons. Usually filled with hot air or coke gas, these rudimentary devices provided man with a means of elevating himself to enjoy a 'bird's eye view' of his surroundings.

Two French brothers created the first practical hot air balloon in 1783 by burning wood to inflate spheres made of cotton or silk which were stretched over large, egg-shaped frameworks. They mistakenly believed it was the smoke they generated, not the hot air, which provided 'lift'.

A public demonstration of their invention was conducted in September, 1783. The very first passengers were a sheep, a duck and a rooster. Unrestrained, their aircraft stayed aloft for eight minutes...until its hot air cooled and they gently descended...unharmred. A month later, one of the brothers made the world's first manned ascent.



What started out as simply a means of amusement soon evolved into military usage for aerial reconnaissance. The first use of balloons for this purpose took place in France in 1794.

During the early part of the 19th century, Americans began using light coke gas to inflate balloons made of silk and other suitable fabrics. When sufficiently sealed, such devices could stay aloft almost indefinitely. Such balloons were mainly used as amusement rides and at first were ignored by the American military.

When the Civil War broke out, both sides began to consider using balloons for observation purposes. Enemy movements and positions were often difficult to ascertain at ground level when masked by rolling terrain and/or dense woods. The Union Army Balloon Corps was established in October of 1861, following a demonstration in the nation's capital that impressed President Lincoln.

The Corps' first assigned task was to aid in mapmaking. Other duties soon followed. In July 1861, an aerial observer employed by the Union Army used a tethered balloon to provide useful intelligence about enemy activity in the vicinity of Fortress Monroe in Hampton Roads. The next month, he made additional observations from a balloon carried close to Sewell's Point by a small ship; arguably the nation's first 'aircraft carrier'.

~ **America's First 'Naval' Aviator** ~

Not all historians agree that **John LaMountain** should be given that title. An experienced balloonist, he was a civilian, whose services were contracted for by the Union Army during the Civil War. Disappointed when Thaddeus Lowe, a rival was named to the position of Chief Aeronaut in the Union Army, he went to work for the Commandant of Fortress Monroe. Using his own balloon, LaMountain made his initial ascent from that citadel on July 31, 1861. Excerpts from his report and an artistic view of Hampton Roads that he likely enjoyed follow.



“Height, 1,400 feet. In the rear of the battery on Sewall’s Point, obscured from the water side by the trees, is a clear tract upon which I counted 52 tents, besides six bush tents in the rear. I could distinctly see Tanner’s Creek, but could not observe any appearance of work progressing in that vicinity. For 20 miles I could not discover any movements thereon. I could not discover any encampments beyond Newport News or in the direction of Yorktown, except about half way from the Bethel church and Yorktown I could see a small cluster of tents.”



His observations were important, for the Confederate forces in and around Hampton proved to be smaller in numbers than originally suspected. The next day, he ascended to a height of 3,000 feet and spied a larger Confederate force on the banks of the James River, eight miles upstream from Newport News Point, including a number of cannon.

Encouraged by those successes, LaMountain moved his balloon and associated apparatus onboard the open stern deck of a small coastal steamer that had been commandeered and lightly armed at the start of the war by the Union Navy.

~ USS FANNY ~

No records apparently exist which reveal the size, civilian origin or presumed namesake of this steamboat, other than that she had a wooden hull, was steam-powered and fitted with a propeller, and armed with two small bore naval cannon. This sketch is only pre-war image of her that could be found.



What is documented, however, is the vessel's use on at least two occasions as a base of operations for LaMountain's aerial scouting ventures. On August 3, 1861, he ascended 2,000 feet while his aerostat was secured to the little vessel's windlass by a light line. The USS FANNY proceeded slowly across Hampton Roads and approached Sewell's Point, then moved toward Craney Island and Pig Point. Following a lengthy aerial reconnaissance, LaMountain was hauled back down to the deck of his 'aircraft carrier'.

His report of that adventure noted that hidden behind trees on Sewell's Point, a considerable amount of work was underway to construct fortifications. He also spied a large number of guns being placed in positions suitable for firing on vessels transiting Hampton Roads and perhaps capable of reaching a Union artillery outpost on the 'Rip Raps' in the middle of the harbor. Without benefit of his aerial observations, those fortifications might not have been detected until after completion and the trees screening them from observation from the harbor had been cut away to clear the field of fire.

La Mountain made another sortie aloft from the deck of the USS FANNY on August 10th. On that second mission he was able to estimate the number of Confederate troops encamped in communities surround Hampton Roads. His hard-to-read, handwritten and signed report, and a map he made of Confederate positions appears on the next page.

Although his reports were considered valuable, internal bickering amongst Union Army generals and pressure from his rival (the recently appointed Chief Aeronaut) soon led to LaMountain's removal from further service.

AERIAL RECONNAISSANCE

AUGUST 10TH 1861

General Order
August 10th 1861

(Copy)
Aug 10th 1861
My dear Sir
I have the honor to report that the
13th of Aug. was the day when a check of altitudes was
taken at 10:00 AM and the results are as follows: the
point is by the lake that you describe as being an
elevation of the town, as may be seen from the
stratigraphic base of the mountain, and the results of your
survey are of the highest accuracy. The results of your
survey are as follows: the point is by the lake that you
describe as being an elevation of the town, as may be seen
from the stratigraphic base of the mountain, and the results
of your survey are of the highest accuracy. The results of
your survey are as follows: the point is by the lake that
you describe as being an elevation of the town, as may be
seen from the stratigraphic base of the mountain, and the
results of your survey are of the highest accuracy. The
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lake that you describe as being an elevation of the town,
as may be seen from the stratigraphic base of the mountain,
and the results of your survey are of the highest accuracy.
The results of your survey are as follows: the point is by
the lake that you describe as being an elevation of the town,
as may be seen from the stratigraphic base of the mountain,
and the results of your survey are of the highest accuracy.

I am a company, but before the first day
of business is a general order from the city
that you give me notice of change - along the
bank below that is better - very soon
will be.
With respect
(Yours truly)
John C. Smith
General



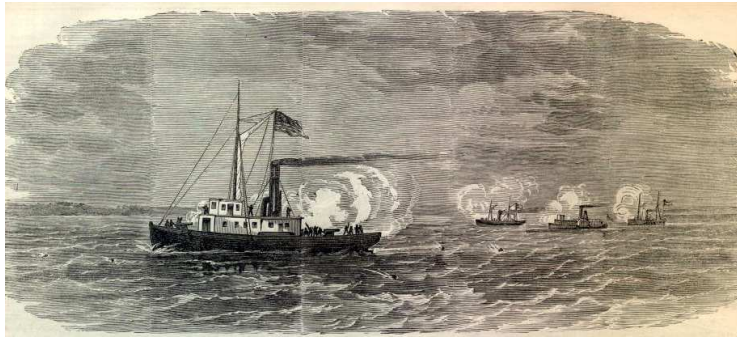
GENERAL ORDER
F. I. ...
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Aerial reconnaissance was first used by the United States Army in 1861. The above is a reproduction of one of the earliest aerial reconnaissance reports. The original is in the Old Records Section of the A.G.O.

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USS FANNY, the vessel used by LaMountain as an aircraft carrier, was captured by the Confederates in late 1861, while operating off the North Carolina coast. Renamed CSS FANNY, she was sunk by Union forces later in the war.



The Union Navy did not utilize observation balloons very often. Such operations were largely relegated to the Union Army on land, with the exception of a few waterborne aerial operations that used a naval vessel as an operating platform.

~ USS GEORGE WASHINGTON PARKE CUSTIS ~

That lengthy and overly impressive name was assigned in 1861 by the Union Navy to an unpowered barge. Built in the 1850's, this civilian coastal craft was 122 feet long and initially used to transport coal between Chesapeake Bay ports.

Purchased in August of 1861 by the Union Navy, it was modified at the Washington Navy Yard to participate in the Civil War as a balloon carrier. It was fitted with a gas-generating apparatus and had an unrestricted flat deck that served well for purposes of inflating and launching observation balloons.

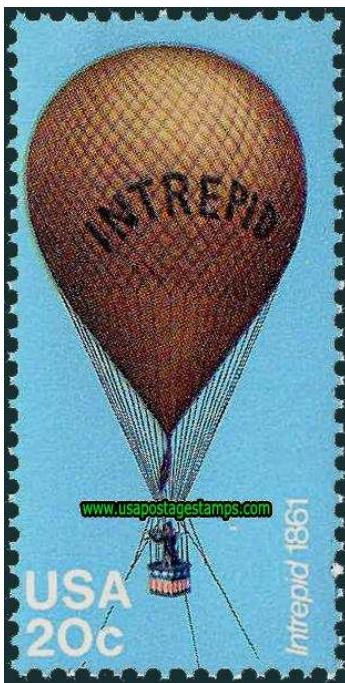


Towed down the Potomas River by a sidewheeler gunboat on November 10, 1861, the converted barge embarked a hydrogen gas-filled observation balloon. The name applied to that aerostat... *WASHINGTON*...was boldly lettered on the device's fabric. The next day, a Union Army General and the Chief Aeronaut went aloft to observe the disposition of Confederate forces about twenty miles south of Washington, DC.

The USS GEORGE WASHINGTON PARKE CUSTIS and another, larger observation balloon...named *INTREPID*...later participated in the Peninsula Campaign. Moved up the James River to within a few miles of Richmond, the Confederate capital city, the converted barge and the *INTREPID* provided invaluable intelligence to Union Army units that had been outflanked by the Confederates and were near defeat.

Interservice rivalry may have been the reason further experiments with waterborne craft as balloon tenders were not pursued by the Union. Instead, the Union Army's Balloon Corps concentrated on developing mobile hydrogen gas generating facilities and a small number of observation balloons.

The image on the right shows two hydrogen-generating carts filling one of the North's balloons in the field. However, the Union Balloon Corps was short-lived, and due to lack of military leaders' support it was disbanded in 1863. Only seven Yankee observation balloons and their supporting apparatus were ever created.



This premature decision...or lack thereof...was subsequently adjudged a mistake by the nation's armed forces. In later conflicts, balloons, huge dirigibles and blimps were put to a variety of uses by America's military. Even today, unmanned helium-filled balloons carrying cameras augment drones over Afganistan's rugged terrain and provide useful observations of insurgents' movements.

In 1983, the contributions made by the Union Balloon Corps during the Civil War were remembered when this postage stamp was issued, highlighting the *INTREPID*.

~ Confederate Balloon Corps ~

The South also briefly tried its hand at ballooning. A Confederate Balloon Corps, much like the one established by the North, was created early in the Civil War. But like its Northern counterpart, that organization was terminated by the summer of 1863 because of a lack of resources.

The Confederacy did not possess, nor could it easily obtain or manufacture the equipment needed to produce hydrogen gas, and largely depended on utilizing captured Yankee equipment to support its operations. The South's first balloon was made of varnished-covered cotton, which proved unsuitable.

A second balloon, believed to have been the last one manufactured by the Confederacy, consisted of colorful swaths of dress-making silk. That inspired an enduring legend that the balloon's fabric was made from ball gowns donated by Southern belles. Not so...

Filled with coke gas at Richmond's municipal gas works, the brightly-colored balloon was tethered to a locomotive, which carried it into position near Yorktown, Virginia. There it was used briefly to spy on nearby Union troop positions and movements.

This same balloon was later transferred to an armed tugboat operating on the James River. The result of that adventure...albeit ever so briefly...was the creation of the first and only Confederate aircraft carrier (i.e., balloon tender).

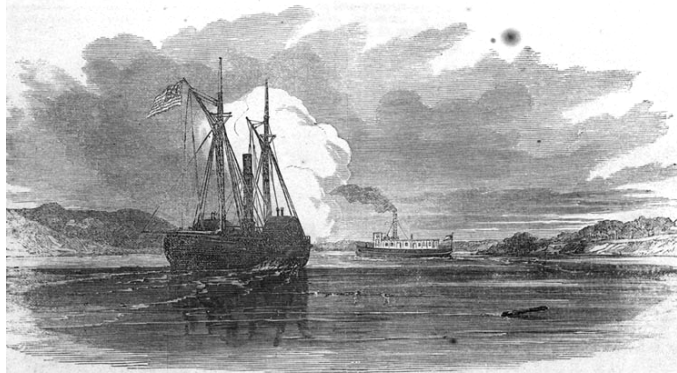
~CSS TEASER ~

A privately owned tugboat named YORKTOWN was purchased by the Commonwealth of Virginia in 1861 during the unsettled period following the start of the Civil War, but before Virginia seceded from the Union.

Once Virginia joined the Confederacy, the tug, a vessel of only 64 tons displacement and a length of 80 feet, became a unit in the South's small navy. Renamed CSS TEASER, she operated for several months as part of the South's James River Squadron. In March of 1862, she played an important role by escorting the ironclad CSS VIRGINIA during the Battle of Hampton Roads.

Shortly thereafter, the TEASER was equipped with the multi-colored balloon previously described. It was then utilized on several occasions to observe Union forces' positions and movements as they advanced on Richmond along the James River waterway.

In addition to her role as a balloon tender, the versatile little vessel was also employed as a minelayer and participated in efforts to block passage by Union warships up the James River. On July 4th of 1862, while operating near Hopewell, Virginia, she was attacked by the USS MARATANZA. The Union warship's third shot destroyed the TEASER's boiler.



Believing she would sink, the TEASER's crew abandoned ship. But the disabled vessel stayed afloat long enough for Union forces to capture and salvage her. They also found the multi-colored and deflated hot air balloon onboard.

Repaired and renamed USS TEASER, she served the Yankee cause in Virginia waters for the remainder of the Civil War. Disarmed and decommissioned at the Washington Navy Yard on June 2, 1865, she was sold to a private owner who restored her original name. The aging tug was used for commercial towing work on the Chesapeake Bay until 1878.

~ Addendum ~

The story of ballooning during the Civil War, both from waterborne platforms and land-based, would hardly be complete without mention of another historic first...and a recent reenactment of that event.

On June 18, 1861, hoping to impress Northern officials with the practicality of using observation balloons for military purposes, Thaddeus Lowe went aloft over Washington, DC. His balloon was inflated on the mall with the capitol's then-incomplete dome in the background; approximately and appropriately here the National Air and Space Museum is now situated.



Lowe, in a suspended wicker basket, then rose 500 feet above the mall; his tethered balloon pulled along by an enthusiastic crowd of men and boys. A telegraph cable was attached to the tow line, and Lowe sent the following message to President Lincoln:

“I have the pleasure of sending you this first dispatch ever telegraphed from an aerial station.”

This was the event that convinced Lincoln that balloons could be valuable military reconnaissance tools. Four months later, he established the Union Army Balloon Corps, with Lowe as its head, over the objections of some Union generals. The organization's short-lived existence was due, in large part, to their continued refusal to consider observation balloons as a useful adjunct to military operations.

150 years later, replicas of Lowe's balloon and gas generating equipment were positioned on the National Mall. Inflation operations were replicated to commemorate this intriguing, but little-known moment in American aviation history. However, as a concession to safety, helium was substituted for the flammable and dangerous hydrogen gas originally used.

