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'Eyes in the sky' for homeland security

From blimps to do-it-yourself unmanned vehicles, a trend takes flight

By Brock N. Meeks
 Chief Washington correspondent
 msnbc.com
 updated 9:00 a.m. CT, Sat., Aug 27, 2005

WASHINGTON - Blimps, they're the next big thing in homeland security.

You're laughing.

That's okay, a lot of people do, says George Spyrou, president of Airship Management Services, whose blimps are leased to the likes of Fuji Film and have been used as air surveillance and security platforms by the New York Police Department, the U.S. Secret Service and the Athens police during last year's summer Olympic Games.

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Although blimps have proven their worth in various security environments from the Super Bowl to presidential conventions, the huge airships aren't widely deployed because they suffer from bad public relations.

"It's a perception problem going right back to the Hindenburg disaster when she blew up in 1937," Spyrou said. "The perception is that an airship is unsafe." But that's not true, he says. "They are filled with helium, not hydrogen."



Matthew Cavanaugh / Getty Images

Gliding above Washington, D.C. last year in a Defense Department test, is a 178-foot-long blimp equipped with infrared and optical cameras that transmitted pictures to controllers on the ground.

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Dec. 23: The Guantanamo Bay prison may not close until 2011 because it will take months for the federal government to buy an Illinois prison and upgrade it to hold suspected terrorists. NBC's Jim Miklaszewski reports.



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"And then there's the 'giggle factor.' People think it's just a balloon or it's great over the Super Bowl, but not as a serious tool for homeland security... it's viewed as sort of a slow, you know, balloon."

Those perceptions are no joke to airship manufacturers and to military and federal agencies that have been looking at reviving their use. Airship advocates say they are cheaper than satellites and more feasible as long term surveillance platforms.

Military heritage

Unmanned aerial vehicles, from airships to stationary balloons--called aerostats--have a long history of use by the military. The most well-established lighter-than-air program now in use is a series of aerostats along the southern U.S. border. These 208 foot long balloons resemble mini-blimps without the gondola. Unmanned, they are unblinking eyes-in-the-sky used for drug interdiction. They are able to detect targets out to 230 miles and stay aloft for months.




Brock N. Meeks
Chief Washington correspondent

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The war on terrorism has been a god-send for unmanned aerial vehicle deployment. U.S. troops in Afghanistan and Iraq employ more than 14 types of remote controlled vehicles, from the deadly Predator, which can fire a Hellfire missile, to the four-pound, hand launched Raven used by the Army for over-the-hill recon missions. UAV's in Iraq and Afghanistan have flown more than 100,000 hours.

Now, the Department of Defense plans to spend \$1.7 billion in research and development on 79 projects through 2009 for UAV development, including developing a six-ounce "micro" flying vehicle called WASP. Some of those technologies will eventually transfer to the civil sector, particularly for use in homeland security.

Technology transfers

"DoD is helping civil authorities recognize opportunities to leverage our considerable investment in research, development, test, and evaluation to address critical homeland security technology needs," said Peter Verga, deputy assistant Secretary of Defense for Homeland Security. Among the technology transfers is DoD assistance to the Coast Guard to evaluate "high-altitude, long-endurance lighter than air ships" for conducting wide area surveillance to "detect, identify and track vessels of interest," Verga said.

The Air National Guard has suggested using airships domestically to create 500-mile "buffer zones" offshore. "These approaches to our mainland do not have the level of real-time surveillance we believe is required to detect and interdict threats," Maj. General John Love told a congressional panel last year.

The DoD's Unmanned Aircraft Systems Roadmap, released earlier this month, notes that the Department of Homeland Security is evaluating several UAV, as well for border security, Coast Guard and maritime missions, transportation security and protection of critical infrastructure.



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Meanwhile backers of traditional airships insist that blimps can be deployed more cost effectively and efficiently than some methods currently being used.

"With an airship you can hover and vector people in," said Nicholas Susner, CEO of Science & Technology International, a Hawaii-based defense contractor that has put on several real world airship demonstrations for federal, state and local officials. "A helicopter can only stay on station for a short period of time," Susner noted. "With an airship we can stay on station for 24 hours and not lose sight of something, which is extraordinarily important."

Airships are a "very benign presence," Spyrou said, noting how quiet they are. "People see it but it doesn't really intrude, it's just the Goodyear blimp or the Fuji blimp, it's 'hiding in plain sight' as New York Police Department officials like to say," he said.

Beyond the perception problem, cost is a hurdle, despite the fact that an airship is about 24 times less expensive than operating a helicopter, the current choice of aerial surveillance for state and local law enforcement, according to Susner.

And compared to satellites, which can cost \$150 million or more, Spyrou said his company leases blimps for \$350,000 to \$400,000 per month.

CONTINUED : Super blimps on the drawing board

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One proposed use for the airship is to monitor the millions of cargo containers -- only a fraction are actually inspected -- that arrive at U.S. ports each year. The researchers say their blimp could be outfitted with high tech sensors to scan the containers before they touch land.

Border hawks and cyberbugs

Fed up with federal inaction along the Arizona-Mexico border and fueled by little more than good ol' American ingenuity, Glenn Spenser, president of the American Border Patrol group, a private [watchdog group](#), sought to create an unmanned aerial vehicle that was cost effective, reliable and productive. The result was Border Hawk I, built on little more than a model airplane with 10-foot wingspan and stuffed with off-the-shelf high tech devices and greased with a little homegrown computer programming.

Border Hawk carried a GPS guidance device and was controlled with a joy stick operated from a mobile van that served as the airplane's command center. The plane flew using custom designed software, Spenser said. In addition it had a camera with a custom designed pan and tilt system capable of transmitting real time color and night time imagery up to three miles away. Spenser said the video was recorded on a TiVo device and could be sent out over the Internet and forwarded to the Border Patrol and all at a cost of about \$40,000.

Last year the [U.S. Border Patrol](#) experimented with unmanned aerial vehicles, a project that cost millions and was not slated to be repeated when the government launched its big border crackdown in March. The agency is not using them at the moment.

But Spenser told MSNBC.com that **Border Hawk II** is now in operation. "We're going to be putting everything from Border Hawk I into a Cessna and we're putting a five watt transmitter in that with a 30 mile radius," he said, noting that the transmitter has been cleared with government officials.

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"The idea here is that we want to show the public what our government could be doing," Spenser said of his group's project. "We continue to embarrass [the government] and they should be embarrassed," he said. "We're a little thorn in their side down there because we continue to demonstrate how this job could be done."

Meanwhile, the Charles County Sheriff's office in Maryland has used a small unmanned flying device dubbed the "CyberBug" for crowd control and surveillance.

The **CyberBug** looks like a model airplane married to a kite and is controlled by a joy-stick type device. It can be carried in the truck of a squad car and is launched on its way by literally tossing it into the sky. From there the joystick controller takes over and its camera signal is sent in real-time back to a laptop computer.

The sheriff's office used the device for two 30-minute flights on April 17th to monitor the annual "Blessing of the Bikes" event at the Charles County Fairgrounds, which officials said was attended by some 8,000 people.

"I was quite impressed with how easy it was launch and how well it monitored the area," said Lt. Chris Becker, commander, Homeland



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Security and Intelligence for the Charles County Sheriff's department. "Besides crowd and traffic control, I see law enforcement using the CyberBug in a multitude of applications, especially when it comes to crime fighting and homeland security."

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