

Stacy Davis Reporting
Using Blimps In The War On Terror



Your NewsChannel 3's Stacy Davis

(Elizabeth City, NC, October 5th, 2004, 7:36 a.m.) We use bullets, rockets, high powered jet planes and more in the fight on terrorism. But imagine fighting terrorist with air. Helium that is. Your NewsChannel 3's Stacy Davis has the details in this story from North Carolina.

Thanks to a company in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, there is another way to fight the war on terror. Picture this: You're in the Army, headed to Iraq, and you're told that your assignment is going to be to act as a balloon wrangler. You're going to be in charge of controlling what is basically a balloon. It may sound silly but it is saving lives.

As you drive through Elizabeth City, you'll see a strange towering structure near the Coast Guard Base. It's an old Navy hangar. And out the hangar the newest weapon in fighting the war on terror is being born. It's just a balloon but, strapped to its belly is some of the highest technology around. There are cameras attached to the balloon and it has become the eye in the sky for American troops in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

Tethered on a cable, troops can quietly spot targets on the ground. They can also track them 24 hours a day for days on end. Using the balloons you can see people walking five to six miles away. And vehicles can be spotted up to twelve miles away. The balloon beams the signal back to a base camp so soldiers can see their targets. The balloons also have infrared capability so troops can see if engines are being used on targets they are tracking.

Are the balloons easy targets though? "Most people think of these as party balloons, you pop them, they explode." But these balloons are filled with helium, not hydrogen. And balloons in Iraq have taken bullets but they descend slowly, get patched up, and are sent back up into the sky a few hours later.

The company making the balloons, TCOM is flying high with their success. A spokesperson tells Your NewsChannel 3, "We've been quietly down here for almost 30 years now, founded in 1972 and the future never looked brighter." So far, TCOM has sold thirteen of the balloons for about a half a million dollar each without all of the camera equipment. And about ten more are on order.

Last year, TCOM won a Navy contract for \$84 million for a balloon that is three times bigger than the ones being used in Iraq. It will be used for surveillance over Kuwait. The blimps are being used here at home too. Last week, a large white blimp was hovering over our nations capitol. It was also equipped with infrared cameras and was being tested for use in Homeland Security.

Unlike the blimps being used overseas though, this one carries people. The military says the blimp has an advantage over using planes. Planes can often fly too fast to spot things and helicopters are too loud. Since the blimp flies slow and quiet, they can spot trouble from miles away. Keep you eyes on the sky here in Hampton Roads over the next several weeks, TCOM is expected to do some test flights over the Chesapeake Bay soon.