

Civil War Hot-Air Balloons

In April and May of 1862, Union and Confederate commanders deployed observation balloons near Yorktown during the Peninsula Campaign. Professor Thaddeus Lowe and Brigadier General Fitz-John Porter gathered intelligence about the Confederate defenses from the hydrogen balloons *Constitution* and *Intrepid*. In response, the Confederates launched a hot-air balloon that observed the Union's siege lines.

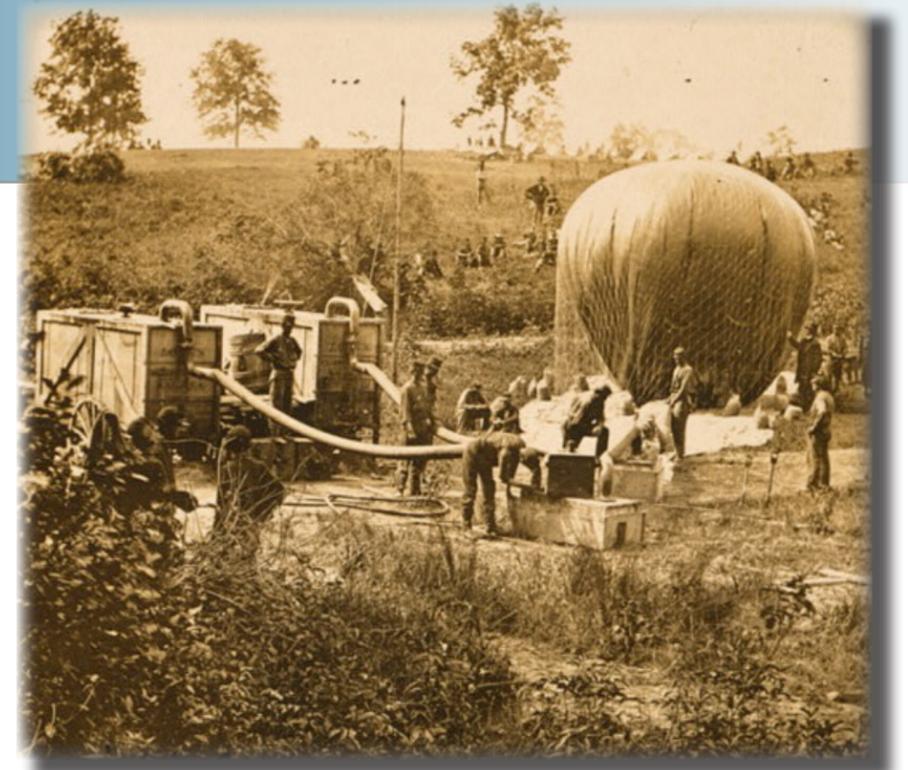


Photo courtesy of Library of Congress.

The Union and Confederate balloons were natural targets for artillery and small arms fire, but neither side scored a direct hit. The gunfire, however, caused uneasiness as Confederate aeronaut John Randolph Bryan noted: *“For some minutes shells and bullets from the shrapnel whistled and sang around me with a most unpleasant music, but my balloon and I escaped.”* Furthermore, Bryan and General Porter had accidental free-flight experiences when their tethered ropes broke and both narrowly escaped serious injury or capture. Neither side adequately supported balloon operations, but this was an important technological development that foreshadowed the rise of air power in the twentieth century.

