



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on January 24, 2011

Air Force to Deploy Giant Blimp in Afghanistan

Nothing says 21st century technology like ... a blimp. According to a story published by [wired.com](#) this fall, the Pentagon plans to deploy a “giant spy blimp” floating 20,000 feet above the ground that will house a supercomputer capable of monitoring the flow of all data and communication for miles around.



While not yet a done deal, the airship, said to be seven times the size of the Goodyear Blimp, is the result of a \$211 million program called “[Blue Devil](#).”

The Air Force reportedly has yet to decide on the precise payload of the floating brain. The options are limited by the volume of data that would be collected and stored in the onboard computers.

Such surveillance is already conducted by a squadron of various planes and other flying machines; however, the idea is that this one craft, Blue Devil, will coordinate and consolidate those mission-critical activities into one enormous central control unit.

The computer brain that crunches the data collected by Blue Devil will then be parceled out to the appropriate data-gathering device: camera, microphone, remote listening apparatus, etc. and more precisely direct each where to train its electronic eyes. This crucial data, once sifted and sorted, will be sent to human intelligence agents (ground troops, for example) in as little as 15 seconds. Well, that is the goal.

“It could change the nature of overhead surveillance,” says Lt. General David A. Deptula, former Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance.

In 2009, the initial build-up to Blue Devil began with the [shipment of four modified executive airplanes](#) to Afghanistan, each equipped with an impressive battery of surveillance equipment.

The construction of the blimp itself will be the next phase of the Blue Devil project. Reports indicate that the ship will be lighter than traditional aircraft and will be longer than a football field, seven times the size of the Goodyear Blimp at 1.4 million cubic feet.

The Air Force is hopeful that the enormity of the airship (referred to on some [websites](#) as the MAV6) will provide for enough fuel and helium to keep the thing aloft for as long as a week at a time and at almost four miles in altitude.

One hurdle developers and the Pentagon hope will be overcome by the deployment of Blue Devil is the unprecedented human resources required to interpret the data currently being gathered by drones and the like. According to [military sources](#), 19 analysts watch the feed sent in by a single Predator drone. This number will increase geometrically as the software that runs the cameras used by the Predators is updated with the latest monitoring technology known as [wide area airborne surveillance](#) (WAAS).



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An article published in the [Washington Times](#) quoted General James Cartwright, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as saying that the Pentagon would need 20,000 analysts to process the visual footage collected by a single drone loaded with the WAAS sensors. These highly sensitive sensors use a dozen different cameras to record footage of areas up to 2.5 miles around.

While overwhelming, that dizzying amount of data is nothing in comparison to the output of the next generation of WAAS-equipped drones that will reportedly employ 96 cameras to film the target areas.

This is where the genius and might of Blue Devil will be most useful. The plan is to install the equivalent of 2,000 servers in the onboard supercomputer. The device will collect and process the data, including the appending of crucial identifying tags such as location and time of collection of the corresponding data. This data will be stored on a hard drive and will be accessible by ground troops who can search the tags for the information necessary to the accomplishment of their particular mission.

There is still a staggering amount of work to be done before Blue Devil or anything like it is made operational. Test flights and trial runs of the communication scheme must be performed and performed exceptionally well before the Pentagon would sign off on field deployment. Additionally, there are the protocols that must be worked out. The hacking of the supercomputer and the manipulation of such a gigantic cache of critical intelligence could convert Blue Devil into a weapon of mass confusion for American armed forces in Afghanistan.



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