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Unmanned Aerial Systems: A Historical Perspective

John David Blom

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In the Long War, formerly called the Global War on Terror, the armed forces of the United States have utilized unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) extensively to support combat, security, and stability operations. The concept of unmanned flight is nothing new to the military. Experiments with pilotless aircraft began at the end of World War I. The historical development of these aircraft and the Army's long use of aerial platforms for reconnaissance provide valuable insight into the future possibilities and potential pitfalls of UAVs. Mr. John Blom's study describes the way that aircraft have been integrated into ground units since World War I. Mr. Blom traces this integration through World War II and the creation of an independent Air Force. In the ninety years since World War I, the quantity of aircraft organic to ground units has constantly expanded. In this period, many of the same debates between the Army and Air Force that continue today over UAVs first appeared. This study addresses past and current systems, and does not address systems under development. The technological development of UAVs possesses as deep a history as the Army's use of aircraft for aerial reconnaissance. Mr. Blom details the long development of UAVs that has led the military to where it is today. Understanding this past may provide clues into where this technology may be going, and what problems could lie ahead. We at the Combat Studies Institute (CSI) believe in our mission to support the warfighter with historical research relevant to their current tasks. Unmanned Aerial Systems: A Historical Perspective continues this long tradition in providing insight to a vital asset on the modern battlefield and assists commanders and staffs in its employment. Nothing is more important than protecting the lives of those who willingly risk them. Achieving a better understanding of the past can only assist in the execution of present and future missions.

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