

A GAME OF DRONES

They're everywhere, from Afghanistan to Auchterarder

You know a technology has become truly pervasive when it makes a fuss in Auchterarder. Last Friday, residents of the douce Perthshire town reported to the police that a flying drone had been seen moving "close to people and buildings".

A Police Scotland representative noted the current popularity of drones "to film or take photographs", but urged users "to adhere to existing aviation laws and regulations."

So nimbyists can now add the buzzing, camera-bearing, mini-

copter – along with the quad bike, the T in the Park raver, or the planet-saving wind farm – to the list of items they don't want in their backyard.

But drones – or unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), in official language – are beginning to make their impression on all of our hearths, everywhere. We know them first, and terrifyingly, from the modern battlefield.

These drones are odd, bulbous-nosed, strangely-winged aircraft, bearing cameras and missiles.

They are remotely directed by their human operators in Nevada (and now, recently, Lincolnshire), missioned to

conduct "counter-terrorist" activities in the Middle East and Africa. Which means targeting and killing individuals or sites deemed to be a threat to US or UK national security.

Their buzzsaw noise may twitch the curtains in Auchterarder High Street. But in areas of Pakistan, Yemen, Afghanistan and Somalia, a generation has grown up knowing that the sound of a drone presages death from above.

Afghan women are now weaving motifs of drone planes into their traditional carpets. Pashtun women, composing

their traditional "landays" (folk poems), cannot escape the subject. One mother, Chadana, recently wrote: "Nabi was shot down by a drone/May God destroy your sons, America, you murdered my own."

Over here, we are familiar with the official spokesman who says "precision-targeting" the baddies, taking out from on high the "nodes in their terror network", is far preferable to losing soldiers' lives on the battlefield, blundering and bludgeoning towards the same end. We also know the on-the-ground reports that tell another story – of imprecision and collateral damage on children and families, and the spirit of revenge that recruits even more to the anti-Western cause.

Yet even as the term "drone" cannot shake off the dust of war, or the calculus of blood and retribution, we seem to be on the cusp of a new aerial popular culture, of which the disorder in Auchterarder is only a couthy sign.

The same news report notes that father-of-two Nigel Wilson, 42, from Bingham, Nottinghamshire, pleaded guilty last month to nine counts of flying his camera drone over the grounds of Premiership and Champions League games with Arsenal and Liverpool, or London landmarks like Westminster and the Victoria Memorial.

Wilson then uploaded the videos to his YouTube channel, appealing for subscribers. He practised his drone-flying skills in his back garden (though not well enough to prevent his device frightening the police horses at Anfield). Part of Wilson's £1,800 fine was because he "lost sight" of his own device, which goes against Civil Aviation Authority regulations.

There are Silicon Valley moguls, like the venture capitalist and internet pioneer Marc Andreessen, who would hear this story and



start jumping up and down in fury. Look at the appetite for expertise, the entrepreneurship, the sheer enthusiasm of this civilian. Using new technology to push forward the frontiers of entertainment. Don't let regulation stand in the way of the next wave.

Surveying the bewildering array of everyday uses for off-the-shelf drones, it's hard not to grant that there is something elemental – what Keynes would call "animal spirits" – being tapped into here. Remember Icarus, anyone?

And as the Scottish band put it, we were indeed promised jetpacks, if not flying cars. In lieu of that future, we have given ourselves flying eyes.

And how they fly. Camera drones slowly scroll over the tip of Dubai's Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world. Geeks will thrill at the forest race that allows drone pilots – with their video-specs and hand-held controllers – to recreate the high-speed chase through the Enderian trees in Return of the Jedi.

There is also an extraordinary device called a Lily. You throw it in the air to make it fly, and it then follows a homing device on



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Drones are a way of life in many countries including Afghanistan where women are now weaving motifs of drone planes into their traditional carpets

your wrist, recording your every move at a respectful distance. Cue lots of white-water rapids videos – but also imagine new kinds of documentary in the hands of film-makers.

However, it's in whose hands civilian drones are placed, and what regulatory visions for their usage we decide upon, that are the vital questions. Yes, it's initially funny to watch some guy scarify kids and joggers in a park with a quadcopter dressed up as a Halloween ghoul. And who could fault the cheekiness of anti-spying protesters last month, dropping leaflets over a US surveillance centre from their drone?

But the bigger corporate plans give off the stench of hubris. Any urban dweller knows, intuitively,



In Scotland, we know this struggle very well. Many have been arguing against Trident for decades

that Amazon's grand UAV plan (an aerial delivery service, flying drone-assembly kits straight to your home) will ultimately crash into the tarmac.

We can just about cope with the rush and clash of car culture. But add to our street lives another layer of noise and dangerous space (this time, somewhere close above our heads)? And with all that driven by pure commercial competition, according to US (or City of London) shareholder imperatives? I don't think that's the spirit of the age.

I can imagine drones being folded into other coming automations we're grappling with. Try and find the clip of UAVs building a rope bridge by themselves, strong enough for a human to walk across. In 10 or 20 years time, I predict the average building site will be emanating the whirr of blades, not the whistles of wolves.

There is already a strong narrative around the use of civilian drones in gathering environmental and farming data, or assisting disaster relief. We often get the 19th-century Luddites wrong: their response to their own era of radical innovation was that it should always pass the test of "benefitting the commonality". I think we have a deep feeling

for this, and that it will apply to civilian drones, as it did with computers and IVF.

But before we gaily skip off into the future, we must be ready for what the legacy of military drones attacks could be, over here as well as over there. In 2009, the Scottish-born disaster expert Vinay Gupta anticipated that what he called the "combat robotics" of the West against the rest could have a terrible blowback.

"The natural counter move to being faced with a robotic military is to strike at vulnerable civilian targets behind it," wrote Gupta, in order "to make it completely clear that whatever political decision is being implemented, using combat robots is not going to cost only the blood of the oppressed ... Creating soldiers which cannot be killed simply forces those who oppose empire to hit civilian targets".

You don't need a drone to execute this kind of revenge logic. But I wouldn't discount their usage either. We are back to the age-old struggle, as to whether we attach the means of our technological invention to the wrong ends – and whether those ends are most wrong when military-based or influenced.

In Scotland, we know this struggle very well. Many have been arguing against Trident, and for a more peace and productivity-oriented use of the engineering and scientific skills they demand, for decades.

But talking and acting peacefully is our ultimate and lasting security, in a tense, networked world where war could easily be as pervasive as work or love. A world where the eye of a drone can potentially level at you through your Perthshire window. Let's start to think about how we ensure it's either pest, prankster or paparazzi, and not something much worse.

Pat Kane is a musician and writer (www.patkane.today)

Spellbinding bagpiper's trophies are up for auction

Haul amassed over five decades

BY MARTIN HANNAN

HE was the greatest competitive bagpiper of all time, a student of a teaching lineage stretching back to the legendary MacCrimmons of Skye.

His left arm almost crippled during wartime service in Italy, he survived to set astonishing and probably unsurpassable records at the great piping contests – no fewer than 15 gold medals in the senior piobaireachd at The Argyllshire Gathering in Oban came his way.

Now the unique collection of trophies and medals of the late Donald MacPherson, one of Scotland's best-known and most successful pipers, is set to go on sale next Tuesday in Edinburgh.

The impressive haul amassed over five decades has been put up for sale by MacPherson's family and is estimated to be worth between £12,000 and £18,000.

Trevor Kyle, director of auctioneers Lyon & Turnbull, said: "Donald MacPherson was as close to a musical legend and gifted musician as you can get.

"At his first appearance at The Argyllshire Gathering in 1948, he won the Gold Medal for piobaireachd, a Holy Grail for pipers that can only be won by the most skilful piper."

In 1954, he won the other most highly sought-after Gold Medal for piobaireachd, which is presented at the Northern Meeting in Inverness. He won the Gold Medal and Clasp at Inverness at the same event, the first piper in history to do so.

Kyle added: "The winning of this unique double announced the arrival of a unique talent who had an effortless ability to produce an extraordinary rich and spellbinding tone from this often notoriously temperamental instrument."

Among the medals in the collection are The Argyllshire Gathering Open Competition for Piobaireachd, won by MacPherson in 1955, 1956, and 1962, and also The Argyllshire Gathering Trophy in Piobaireachd,



Medals: Donald MacPherson

presented by John Graham Campbell of Shirvan, which he won in 1954.

MacPherson went on to win the Clasp at Inverness for former gold medallists on nine occasions – the most first places in that event ever accumulated by one piper. At The Argyllshire Gathering he holds the record for most wins in the Senior Piobaireachd winning that competition on no fewer than 15 occasions, with many of the medals for sale in the collection.

Born and educated in Glasgow, his father Iain taught the young MacPherson to pipe. Iain MacPherson himself had been taught by Pipe Major John MacDougall Gillies, one of the great players of the early 20th century who could trace his piping to the MacCrimmons of Skye.

After leaving school, he trained as an engineer serving his time with the West of Scotland Engineering Company in Finnieston.

When war broke out he volunteered for aircrew in the RAF and trained in England and South Africa. Later he was stationed in Egypt and Italy.

His last competitive victory was in 1990 at Oban where he played a memorable rendition of Lady MacDonald's Lament at the age of 68.

MacPherson was awarded the British Empire Medal for services to piping and was also piper to the Lord Provost of Glasgow. Kyle said: "The family has decided to sell the collection as one lot, in the hope it will be bought by an institution that will make it available to the public."