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 nimbys can now add the buzzing, camera-bearing, mini-copter – along with the quad bike, the Tin 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 hearts, 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 Endorian 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...
Haul amassed over five decades

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

By Martin Hannan

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 Pibrochreachd 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 lain taught the young MacPherson to pipe. Ian MacPherson himself had been taught by Pipe Major John MacDougall Gillesie, one of the great players of the early 20th century 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 Pibrochreachd, won by MacPherson in 1955, 1956, and 1962, and also The Argyllshire Gathering Trophy in Pibrochreachd, an extraordinary rich and spellbinding tone from this often notoriously temperamental instrument.

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