

Sumter to Appomattox



American Civil War Round Table of Australia (New South Wales Chapter)

www.americancivilwar.asn.au

Patron: Prof the Hon Bob Carr

Number 107 July - August 2021

President's Message

Dear Friends,

Our 7 June 2021 meeting felt like the type of very friendly and companionable in-person meeting that is a characteristic of our group. As I feared, however, we have indeed incurred a collapse of our COVID defences. It was not an invasion from the South, North or West this time but rather an expeditionary force from over the ocean. It got past our quarantine defences and now we have to revert to Zoom meetings and we have had to postpone the visit of Bob Carr until October. However, we must stand ready to change our plans again if COVID successfully resists our current defensive campaign.

Our decision to revisit our series of presentations made the WEA course entitled "Origins of the American Civil War – How did it come to this?" turned out to be sound. Thank you to John Morrison and Peter Zacharatos for their presentations on "Bleeding Kansas – Fake news" and John Brown. They were well received and provoked an interesting across the floor discussion.

I am looking forward to Bruce McLennan at our next meeting (by way of Zoom) reprising one of his presentations in that excellent series of presentations.

I very much prefer our in-person meetings but, if necessary, we could indefinitely keep our group together by means of Zoom and will do what is necessary in that regard.

Please stay safe and well.

Ian McIntyre

Our Next Meeting

Via Zoom: Monday 9 August 2021

Log on 6.45 for 7pm

The Enlightenment and The American Civil War

Presented by Bruce A McLennan

Without the Enlightenment the Civil War would not have happened.

So fundamental were the cultural shifts in the European sphere during the 1700s that we see the tectonic plates of the old and new worlds creating volcanoes like the Civil War in America, the French Revolution, the 1848 revolutions and even events continuing today.

These then very new ideas found their way into the US Constitution but implementation was incomplete – and, it could be said, still is.

On our **Website** you will always find the date of our next meeting. Our Facebook page is also easily accessed from our website www.americancivilwar.asn.au

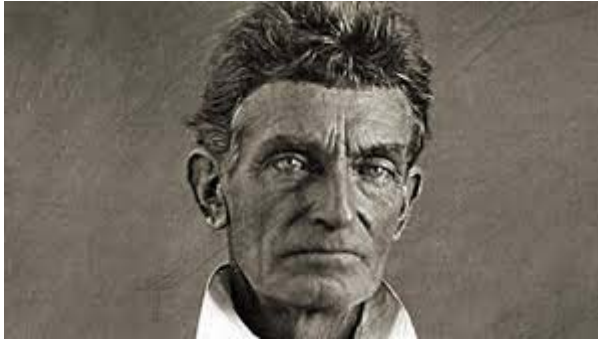
This publication is the official newsletter of the American Civil War Round Table of Australia (NSW Chapter). All inquiries regarding the newsletter should be addressed to the Secretary of the Chapter by phone on 0411 745 704 or e-mail: secretary@americancivilwar.asn.au

Our Last Meeting

The 10-minute slot

John Brown – The Meteor of the War

Peter Zacharatos



In the “10-minute slot”, Peter Zacharatos provided a very comprehensive overview of John Brown’s life, influences, beliefs and actions and the consequences that followed from these. He also examined Brown’s post-mortem symbolic status.

In Brown’s youth, abolitionism was not the most popular position, even in the North because of the fear that mismanagement of the end to slavery would lead to “the Great Servile Uprising”, which would tear the country apart. However, as a strict Calvinist, Brown believed he was predestined to bring an end to slavery.

In the 1850s, events led to Brown becoming more radical with the opening of Kansas and consequent conflict between pro- and anti-slavery groups. Events in that state included the sacking of Lawrence, Kansas, by pro-slavery raiders in 1855, and then the murder of five pro-slavery men by a group of abolitionists led by Brown. In 1857, he began raising funds to bring on his anti-slavery war to the South.

In 1859, to pursue the “Great Servile Uprising”, he rented the Kennedy farmhouse out of Harpers Ferry and began training his 21-man army, including five black recruits. This led to the infamous – and consequential action – of the raiding of the Federal Arsenal at midnight on 16 October 1859.

After the initial capture of the arsenal, little went well. Local slaves did not join the rebellion and three people were killed. Ten raiders were killed and seven others, including a wounded Brown, were captured by US Marines led by Lt. Robert E. Lee.

Tips to improve your video call

- You will receive a meeting code number
- Check mic and camera working
- Light from a lamp on your face
- Avoid lights, white walls behind you
- Don’t point camera at the ceiling
- Sit close to camera to improve sound
- Let others finish speaking

As a result, Brown was tried and convicted of murder, conspiracy to incite a slave uprising and treason against the Commonwealth of Virginia and was hanged.

There were many consequences of these events. John Stauffer, Harvard historian, claimed “the impact of Harpers Ferry literally transformed the nation”. The American people were traumatized. In the South, a fear of massive slave rebellions led to local militias and, in the North, many were radicalized with the hope of violent confrontation over slavery. This led to a seemingly unbridgeable chasm and the splintering of the Democratic Party and the scrambling of the leadership of the Republicans, enabling Republican Abraham Lincoln to defeat two Democrats and a third-party candidate in 1860.

According to historian David Reynolds, John Brown had helped disrupt the party system, leading to Lincoln’s victory, leading then to 11 states seceding from the Union, resulting in the Civil War. This was why poet Herman Melville referred to Brown as “the Meteor of the War”.

With these events in mind, Peter claimed that, even though Brown can be seen as a religious zealot or terrorist, he was right. Slavery could only be ended through bloodshed. Opinions over time shifted towards abolitionism, especially after Northern armies had invaded the South and had seen the horrific effects of slavery. The large numbers of contraband slaves following Northern armies also forced politicians and generals to take the cause more seriously.

Brown had predicted that blacks would take up arms against the South, which did occur, helping to swing the tide. By mid-war, abolitionism had become a practical necessity, not just a moral imperative. This was the legacy of John Brown according to Peter. Brown’s cause had become indivisible from that of the union.

Presentation

Origins of the American Civil War

John Morrison

In a presentation originally prepared for a WEA course, John Morrison provided a clear and comprehensive introduction to the causes of the Civil War.

He began with discussion of the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, when the western half of the Mississippi River basin was purchased from France, thus doubling the size of the United States and materially strengthening the country. This was the impetus for westward expansion.



Another factor was the Missouri Compromise of 1820. That state had applied for statehood in 1817, resulting in an attempt to introduce an anti-slavery amendment into legislation. However, this led to a debate over slavery and the government's right to restrict the practice. The situation re Missouri was not resolved.

Further disputes over slavery and attempts to resolve these occurred in the following years up to 1850 with five bills attempting to resolve disputes in new territories. California was admitted as a free state, but Utah and New Mexico were permitted to decide for themselves. A new Texas-New Mexico border was also defined.



As well, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 made it easier for runaways to be recovered. This led to the first really serious debate about the government's right to control slavery.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which was sponsored by Democratic Senator Stephen A.

Douglas, repealed the Missouri Compromise. Under the principle of popular sovereignty, citizens would determine whether slavery should be permitted or not.

The idea of popular sovereignty led, in 1856, to the three significant events known as '7 days in May'. On 22 May, Senator Charles Sumner was caned by Congressman Preston Brooks; the day before, on 21 May, there had been a pro-slavery raid in Lawrence, Kansas; on 24-25 May, John Brown retaliated at Potawatomie Creek.

The events known as "Bleeding Kansas", which related to the question "Would Kansas enter the Union as a slave or free state?", began in 1854 and continued until 1861. It involved electoral fraud, raids, assaults and retributive murders carried out in Kansas and neighbouring Missouri. The decision regarding "popular sovereignty" was meant to be decided by popular vote involving the territory's settlers, rather than the outsiders who had flooded in and influenced the vote, which resulted in Kansas entering the Union as a free state in 1861.

Returning to the first of the three events that occurred in May 1856, The Sacking of Lawrence involved pro-slavery activists attacking and ransacking Lawrence, Kansas, a town founded by anti-slavery settlers from Massachusetts who had wished Kansas to be a 'free state'. This event fuelled the "Bleeding Kansas" conflict. While only one person died accidentally, pro-slavery raiders prevented production of the free-state newspapers, which meant that there was a lack of Lawrence-based news until another newspaper was restarted.

The second event, the caning of Senator Charles Sumner by Senator Preston Brooks, occurred on the following day, 22 May. On 19 May, Sumner had denounced the Missouri Compromise, the Kansas-Nebraska Act and popular sovereignty, and had singled out three Southern Senators for criticism. He had referred to the South as "an immoral place" for allowing slavery. He also mocked South Carolina and referred negatively to a relative of Brooks.



Brooks struck Sumner several times across the head with a heavy cane as he sat at his desk, which caused permanent injuries. Brooks was subsequently arrested but quickly released. He resigned but was re-elected in a show of support, which included being sent replacement canes. These events outraged the North.

During this time, having lost the vote in Congress, fanatical "Free Staters" in Kansas began using what today is termed "fake news" to whip up support for their cause. They bought a newspaper printing press to spread their own version of the story, which included painting 'local' Missouri men as 'border ruffians' and 'pukes' by incoming northern settlers. Some events were also over-dramatised and these greatly exaggerated events were written into history by the two-day above-mentioned biased speech of Charles Sumner in the Senate on May 19-20.

The third event in May occurred on 24-25 May when John Brown and his sons attacked proslavery settlers in the Pottawatomie Massacre. In June, he and his band then went on to defeat proslavery forcers at the Battle of Black Jack and afterwards began planning to initiate a comprehensive slave revolt. Already notorious, and following on from Lawrence and the caning of Brooks, Brown decided on violence as a means to quell the proslavery faction.

Three years later, in October 1859, the Harpers Ferry Raid occurred when Brown and his band overran the federal arsenal. Brown was wounded and captured and ten of his men, including two sons, were killed. He was found guilty of treason and murder and hanged.



Before his execution, Brown handed his guard a note: "*I, John Brown, am now certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood*". This was a prophetic statement. Despite the raid having been unsuccessful, a number of consequences followed: it inflamed sectional tensions and

raised the stakes for the 1860 Presidential election; it made accommodation between North and South almost impossible; it was "the match that lit the fuse...".

Initial reports in Southern newspapers stated that it was an isolated incident by a mad fanatic but, when it became apparent that he had received assistance from Northern abolitionists, Southern attitudes hardened so that North and South drew further apart. Brown had been an inspiration for Northerners and Abolitionists to strive to abolish 'the peculiar institution'. At the same time, many Southerners believed that abolitionists wanted to commit genocide on slave owners. It can be argued that Civil War then became inevitable.

Civil War Profile

Thanks to Dan Howard

Thaddeus Lowe (1832 – 1913)

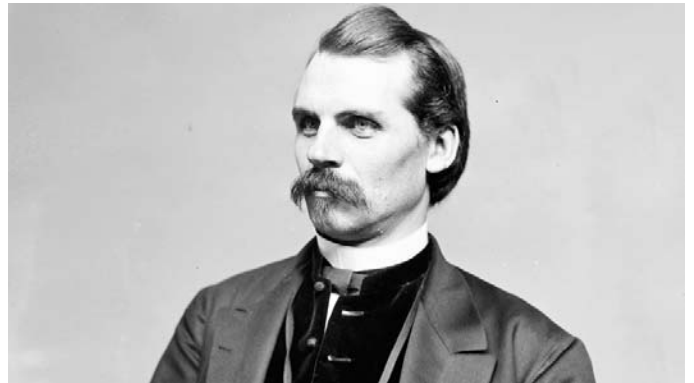


Photo of Lowe by Matthew Brady

Thaddeus Lowe was born in Coos County New Hampshire of Pilgrim descent and was brought up on a farm. Highly intelligent, he had limited formal education but, reminiscent of Lincoln, he became very well self-educated and read whatever he could get his hands on at night by the fire.

At age 18 he attended a lecture on lighter-than-air gasses taught by a chemistry professor named Drinkelhoff, who was so impressed by Lowe's enthusiasm that he engaged him as his assistant on a lecture circuit for two years. Thus, Lowe gained practical expertise and by the late 1850's, styling himself as 'Professor', he had become one of the leading balloon builders in the United States, making a living by giving demonstrations and rides at venues such as county fairs.

Balloons still remained something of a novelty since the Montgolfier brothers made the first manned balloon flight November 1783 and the

military use of balloons had been negligible until the American Civil War. Before the Civil War, Lowe and a handful of other 'aeronauts' had, as a main goal, the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean in a balloon. To this end, Lowe built an enormous balloon called the 'City of New York' (see the contemporary artist's illustration of this below).

On a test flight on 20th April 1861, he rose in this balloon from Cincinnati to test the viability of harnessing the high altitude east-blowing winds but unexpectedly got caught in a south moving wind stream and travelled 1,000 miles in nine hours (a phenomenal speed for the times). Unfortunately, Lowe came to earth at Unionville, South Carolina, less than a week after Fort Sumter was fired upon, and he was thrown in gaol on suspicion of being a spy! However, a number of prominent citizens vouched for him and he was released.



On the train trip back North to Ohio, Lowe observed massive war preparations under way in the South and determined to offer his services to helping the Union. He had friends in high places in Washington, and on 11 June 1861, met with Abraham Lincoln, who was very interested in the potential of using balloons for the war effort.

A demonstration was arranged for 19th June when Lowe made an ascent of 500 feet in a tethered balloon near the Mall and later in the grounds of the White House. From the balloon's

wicker gondola he had a telegraph operator send a historic telegram to Lincoln, as well as to the War Department in Arlington and Philadelphia. The telegram read: *'The city with its girdle of encampments, presents a superb scene. I have pleasure in sending you this first dispatch ever telegraphed from an aerial station, and in acknowledging indebtedness for your encouragement for the opportunity of demonstrating the availability of the science of aeronautics in the military service of the country.'*

In the leadup to Bull Run, another aeronaut – and competitor of Lowe named John Wise had been engaged as a civilian to assist the army, but his balloons met with unfortunate complications – one was punctured by trees whilst being transported in an inflated state, and after it was repaired several days later, its ropes became tangled in telegraph wires on the way to Ball's Crossroads, severing the ropes thereby causing the unpowered balloon to escape aloft. It had to be brought down by several volleys of friendly musket fire – the only balloon ever to be downed by gunfire in the Civil War.

Immediately after Bull Run, the citizens of Washington were in great fear of being swept upon by Confederate forces still in the area. Lowe decided to take his untethered balloon three miles high aloft to make a reconnaissance. He ascertained that the Confederates were still encamped at Manassas, but he couldn't relay this information until the next day, since a strong wind blew him well beyond Union lines before he could descend. As he passed over Alexandria, Union pickets, thinking he was a spy, fired upon him.

When he ultimately landed in no man's land he was eventually found by members of the 31st New York Volunteers, but he had so badly injured his ankle in the landing that they had to abandon him with the balloon to hide from the Confederates until nightfall. Upon hearing of her husband's plight, his beautiful and resourceful actress wife, Leontine, disguised herself as an old hag and, boldly driving a buckboard through the danger zone and managed to rescue Thaddeus and his balloon.

The next day Lowe met again with Lincoln, who took him directly to the office of General Winfield Scott, where Lincoln ordered Scott to see to the formation of a Balloon Corps, with Lowe as Chief Aeronaut. This was a civilian, not a military, appointment, which created difficulties for Lowe later on because it did not embed him in the structure of the military and left his deployments up to the various generals he was assigned to. Not all of them understood the enormous potential of balloon surveillance and many of

them were less than enthusiastic about their use. Even worse, as a civilian, Lowe was in real danger of being shot as a spy if captured.



Leontine Lowe

In the aftermath of Bull Run, Lowe made numerous ascensions over the Potomac River and was able to provide reassuring reconnaissance to Washington that the Confederates were not making any movement against the city.

Now with the financial backing of the US Government, Lowe was able to construct a balloon, and General McClellan then asked Lowe to construct another six for his Peninsular Campaign. Lowe eventually engaged an additional nine aeronauts and, depending to whose command he was deployed from time to time, soldiers from such commands were seconded to the balloon corps to manage the tethers, to transport and inflate the balloons and to maintain them.

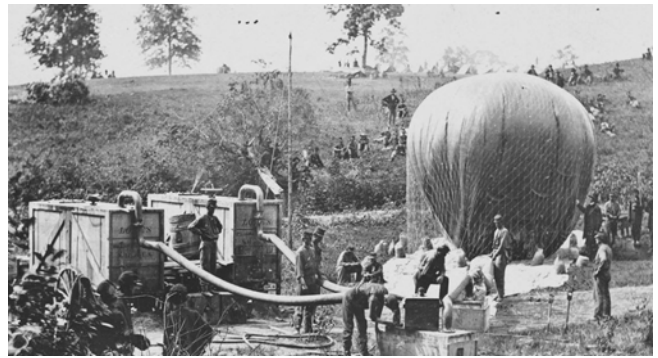
Lowe named his balloons to reflect the values of the Union, such as the 'Constitution' and the 'Intrepid' and he would endeavour (subject to the winds) to ensure that the names were prominently displayed on the face of the balloon facing the enemy.

Lowe's balloons were stronger than most, being made of thousands of square feet of double-layered silk, with four coats of varnish to make them airtight. Importantly, Lowe also obtained the support of the Washington Navy Yard to construct a number of portable hydrogen generators that could fit on a standard army wagon, which could be transported to the field and inflated there, instead of being transported

whilst inflated, which was cumbersome and fraught with risk.

The generators made hydrogen through the careful mixing of iron shavings and sulfuric acid inside a copper-lined box. The hydrogen was then pumped into the balloon's silk envelope through a series of tubes and coolers. The quantities of ingredients required were staggering. For a single inflation, some thirty-three hundred pounds of iron filings were carefully mixed in the portable tanks with sixteen hundred pounds of sulphuric acid added slowly to prevent too much gas pressure.

The resulting pure hydrogen was fed through a hand pump into the envelope of the balloon. Although highly flammable, there was no instance of one of Lowe's balloons exploding.



Lowe's balloon 'Intrepid' being inflated at Gaines Mills – note the mobile gas generators on the wagons.

For signalling, Lowe could use telegraphy if the balloon was tethered to the ground and he also used signal flags, weighted messages, flares and voice communications to relay the information gathered whilst aloft.



Cap insignia of the Union Signal Corps

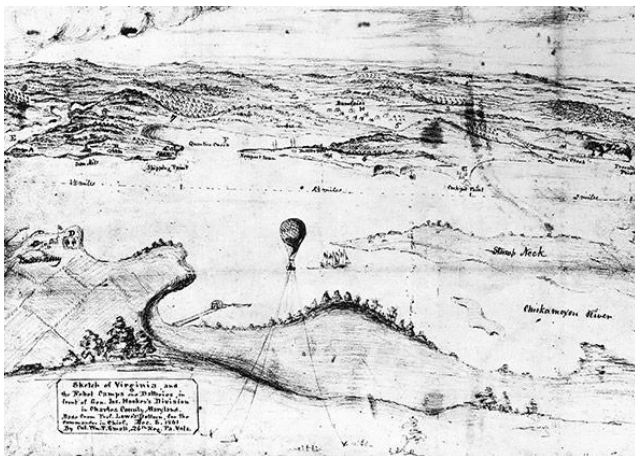
In another historic innovation in late 1861, Lowe supervised the modification of a naval coal barge, the *George Washington Parke Custis*, into a 'balloon boat' that could fairly be described as the world's first aircraft carrier. Towed by a

steam tug, the barge had a modified deck equipped with one of Lowe's portable hydrogen generators and a shed for the aeronaut. This could be quickly towed to various points of the Potomac from which Lowe made observations.

The Confederacy, meanwhile, began to shape its operations in response to balloon deployments. As military historian Joseph Scott has noted: *"General Joseph E. Johnston lamented that the 'infernal balloon' was making it difficult to deceive the Union commanders. As the Confederate army began to withdraw from the area around Manassas Junction, Virginia, to defend Richmond in early 1862, Johnston believed he had limited time to reposition his forces because of frequent Union balloon flights. Initially, the terrain masked the intense activity at the Manassas railhead from the balloonists' view. As the Confederacy began burning those items they could not take with them, the Union's aerial observers reported the inordinately heavy smoke, and a brigade commander ascended in a balloon and reported that the Confederates were evacuating their positions."* Scott laments that McClelland failed to act on this intelligence, and thereby missed a significant opportunity to attack the Confederates as they were withdrawing.

In a remarkable demonstration of the potential of balloons in warfare, on 24 September 1861, above Fort Corcoran in Virginia, in a tethered balloon equipped with a telegraph, Lowe created military history by becoming the first person to direct artillery fire from the air against Confederate positions around Falls Church three miles away. This innovation was way ahead of its time as aerial artillery ranging did not become common until well into World War One.

Here is an example of an intelligence sketch (now in the Library of Congress) made by a Union Officer from a Lowe Balloon in 1861 of 'rebel camps and batteries in Virginia in front of General Hooker's Division in Charles County, Maryland':



In the final months of 1861, the Balloon Corps accurately assessed the massive defensive preparations in the vicinity of Richmond being carried out by Robert E. Lee, and the overly cautious McClellan cited their reports in his pleas to Washington for more reinforcements. During April 1862, Lowe was often aloft mapping targets for the planned artillery barrage ahead of the proposed assault on Yorktown and he detected the Confederate evacuation of Yorktown which rendered an attack unnecessary.

Lowe and his associate, the aeronaut James Allen, were able to observe the battle of Seven Pines (Fair Oaks 31 May–1 June 1862) and sent many accurate reports of troop movements. One of McClellan's officers later stated *"It may safely be claimed that the Union Army was saved from destruction at the Battle of Fair Oaks... by the frequent and accurate reports of Professor Lowe"*.



Lowe ascending in his balloon at Fair Oaks – note the Stars and Stripes on the gondola

Lowe frequently ascended with army officers, often of high rank, who brought a military eye to observations from the balloons. One Captain G.A. Custer was a reluctant example, who nevertheless made a number of ascensions. Another famous passenger was General Fitz-John Porter, who on one occasion found himself alone in a runaway balloon after a damaged tether rope broke (he landed safely some time later on a Union tent!).

On the evening of 26 June 1862, Lowe's Balloon Corps was the first to report the dire situation

facing General Porter's forces at Gaines' Mill that evening, enabling him to move to a more effective defensive position to slow Lee's advance.

The Balloon Corps was utilised in the Fredericksburg campaign in 1862 and in the Chancellorsville campaign in 1863 where they observed and reported Lee's withdrawal of the majority of his troops from Fredericksburg to the west towards Chancellorsville. Lee's intention was to attack Hooker's main force, but Hooker elatedly misinterpreted this intelligence from Lowe as a retreat by Lee!

Unfortunately, Hooker placed the Balloon Corps under the command of Captain Cyrus Comstock, who did not get on with Lowe, lacked vision and regarded the whole balloon enterprise as mostly useless. Comstock even reduced Lowe's pay, and in May 1863, Lowe (who had managed to contract malaria and who by now was fed up with the military's treatment of him) resigned. Although other aeronauts, the Allen brothers, took over Lowe's work for a time, by August 1863, the Balloon Corps had ceased to exist.

Lee's famous artillery commander, Colonel E. Porter Alexander later was to write: "*I have never understood why the enemy abandoned the use of military balloons in 1863, after having used them extensively up to that time. Even if the observers never saw anything, they would have been worth all the cost for the annoyance and delays they caused us in trying to keep our movements out of their sights.*"

The Confederacy dabbled in balloons, but never had sufficient supplies of iron and acid to produce sufficient hydrogen to regularly deploy them. Nor did they have mobile generators like Lowe's.

After the war Lowe purchased a farm near Valley Forge and settled down with his family. His fame and techniques of reconnaissance had become known internationally, and he was approached by Britain, France and Brazil to establish Balloon Corps for them – offers which he declined as he had had enough of war. However, he recruited the Allen brothers to establish the Brazilian Balloon Corps and sent them one of his balloons. Lowe also was sought out by the German Count, Ferdinand Von Zeppelin (the inventor of the dirigible), to whom he passed on knowledge of his techniques.

Lowe registered numerous patents around gas processes and made a fortune after perfecting an ice compression machine that revolutionised the cold storage industry. In 1887, Lowe moved to Pasadena California where he built a house reputed to be the largest in the country at the

time. He started a water-gas company, founded the Citizens Bank of Los Angeles, established several ice plants, and bought a Pasadena opera house. He also was prominent in the development of a scenic mountain railway in the San Gabriel Mountains (the Mount Lowe Railway) and an astronomical observatory at Echo Mountain. Unfortunately, his railway venture failed and natural disasters including fire and flood destroyed his Echo Mountain assets.

Thaddeus Lowe lived to age 80 and died whilst residing at his daughter's home in Pasadena. His wife Leontine died the following year. They are buried next to each other in Altadena, California. They were survived by two sons and the daughter.

Lowe is a member of the US Army Intelligence Hall of Fame. He is an outstanding example of the self-made American inventor/adventurer and his contributions to aviation reconnaissance were immense. He was clearly a man of great courage and restless intellect, and a true patriot to the Union.

References: *War in the Sky: Balloons* being Chapter 5 in Charles Ross, *Trial by Fire: Science, Technology and the Civil War*; P & W McClure, *'A Mountainous Tragedy Starring Thaddeus Lowe* (2018); Joseph C Scott, *'The Infernal Balloon: Union Aeronautics during the American Civil War'* Army History, No. 93 (Fall 2014), pp. 6-27; Wikipedia entry for Thaddeus Lowe

Call for short talks

Our short ten-minute presentations on a particular battle or person have been a great success in revealing the depth of talent within our group.

Remember that we are a group of friends and a friendly audience. I know there are several amongst us who have not yet broken cover but who would be interesting and insightful presenters.

Please do not hesitate to volunteer to myself or John Morrison on a topic of your choice, be it short or long.

Ian McIntyre