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Tesla and the Military

Nikola Tesla was born in 1856 in Lika. His father was Reverend Milutin Tesla, a very well respected man. More than just being well respected, Milutin was also a man of peace. He raised Tesla to despise war and the killing it brought. This would seem to contrast with the Tesla who, in later life would develop a precursor to the torpedo and a weapon that was referred to as a death ray. How could this be? The answer lies in the fact that Tesla was interested in stopping wars quickly. His “death-ray” was in fact developed as a weapon of peace. Tesla was a man who would much rather have had peace than war, who was nonetheless involved with the military on several occasions.

On February 15, 1898 the USS Maine was sunk in Havana harbor in Cuba. This event spurred the US to anger and prompted the Spanish American war. Prior to this time, Tesla had developed a means of remotely controlling a small boat or submarine. Tesla had been doing research on radio waves, and had managed to build a small boat, which he could remotely control with a great degree of accuracy. To do this Tesla built an array of tuned circuits hooked up to a transmitting array. He built two of these, one on the boat, which was linked to the controls of the boat, and on to a set of controls, which he designed. The control device would transmit radio data to the boat that would respond by following Tesla’s commands. Not only could Tesla control the boats movements, he had also added a number of lights to the boat which he could also control. He used these lights during demonstrations of the boat. When asked a math question, Tesla would make the lights on the boat flash a number of times equal to that answer to the question.

While this boat was a neat attraction to show off to crowds at that year’s world fair, it lacked any real practical purpose. Tesla proposed to build a remote controlled version of him. However, he had problems arranging for funding for his teleautomated devices. A solution was suggested to Tesla by the *New York Times*, Tesla could build another of these

remotely operated boats and fill it with dynamite. The small boat could then be steered remotely towards a large ship. The small boat could then be detonated sinking, or at least severely damaging the ship. This was suggested partly for the reason that Thomas Edison had earlier developed an electrically powered torpedo that had to be tethered to the ship that launched it.

While Tesla's boat would have made an excellent torpedo, the department of war thought that it was too flimsy. They were afraid that the small little craft would either sink on its own, and thus fail to make it all the way to the target, or that the signals would too easily be blocked. In fact, neither of these concerns was actually well founded.

At the time, no one in the world had developed any radio transmitters. This would make it extremely difficult to interfere with the transmissions that Tesla's boat relied upon. In addition, even if another radio transmitter existed in the world, the odds that it would be both on a Spanish ship, and capable of blocking Tesla's transmissions, are extremely low. The second concern about the weapon was that it was too fragile. This is also not true. The boat itself was made of metal, making the exterior of it very hard. The interior was also very well built, but this would hardly have been a concern. Since the weapon was battery powered, it required no air to operate. This means that the boat could have remained submerged for the entire process.

The ironic part of the story is that in 1917, the US war department again began to work on a system of remotely operated torpedoes. This was just a few years after Tesla's patent on his system of remote operation expired. If the war department had decided to buy into Tesla's invention, they could have been many years more advanced than any other armed forces anywhere in the world.

After his defeat with teleautomation, Tesla moved much of his work to his research on remote power sending. His goal was to provide free power to the entire world, without any wire! His plan was to build a large Tesla coil in a tower in northern New York. The tower would use the Earth and the Earth's atmosphere to send power to any correctly con-

figured electrical device. As part of his research towards this end, Tesla did large amounts of research on extremely high voltage electricity, and the means by which it could be sent over distances.

An offshoot of his power distribution system was a device that has been named the “Death Ray.” Tesla described the device to the *New York Times* as utilizing a principle of physics that, “no one has ever dreamed about.” These are impressive words coming from a man who had been called crazy for his innovative ideas many times before.

Little is known today about the so-called death ray. It is thought to be some sort of particle accelerator of huge power. Tesla claimed that it was capable of destroying engine blocks over a great distance. The weapon was supposedly a development stemming from his magnifying transformer, but to achieve what Tesla claimed it could do, it would have to be a powerful transformer indeed. Tesla tried unsuccessfully to give the weapon to the US government as a purely defensive weapon. According to Tesla, a few stations strategically located around the US could defend the entire country from essentially any threat.

There is a theory that Tesla did in fact test his weapon on the night of June 29, 1908, the exact same night as the Tunguska blast in northern Russia. Tesla said that he was planning to send some sort of message to the Peary expedition who was attempting to reach the North Pole at that time. The theory goes that Tesla aimed his weapon in the vicinity of the Peary party but missed by just a little bit. Instead he caused a 15-megaton blast in Siberia. While this theory does not have a lot of scientific support behind it, it is interesting because the Peary expedition is only two degrees off from being in a perfectly straight line stretching from Tesla's laboratory in New York and the location on the blast in Russia. It is, however, currently thought in most mainstream scientific circles that the blast was caused by a comet that blew up in the atmosphere.

During World War Two, Tesla again tried to sell his death ray to several different governments. The English were interested at first, but eventually turned him down. When it seemed that Serbia was about to be invaded by the Nazi's Tesla tried to give his home-

land the weapons they needed to stay off an invasion, but it was all for not because before Tesla could even begin to install the system, Belgrade was bombed by the Nazi's, and fell soon after. It would have changed the course of the entire war if the Nazi's had in fact been stopped there. If the weapon worked as well as Tesla claimed, and it was first demonstrated in Serbia, it is quite likely that many other governments would jump to get involved in the program.

While Tesla's death ray was never used in any war, or even seen by any government, that may be for the best. If the weapon really was capable of what Tesla claimed it was, then it could have easily be turned into a very strong offensive weapon. Even the risk of this being true was too much for the FBI. Two days after Tesla's death in 1943, the FBI raided his residence in the Hotel New Yorker. Tesla's notes were believed to contain a description for the construction of the death ray.

One of the primary reasons, as stated in the internal FBI documents for the raid was that the FBI was concerned that Tesla's nephew, Sava Kosanovic, would give the notes to the Soviets. The concern about this was so great that no one was allowed to access Tesla's notes at all until many years later. Concern was increased dramatically when the FBI agent in charge was killed in an airplane explosion over the Atlantic Ocean. As a result of this the FBI initiated a huge search all over New York for any papers Tesla might have written. To this day, many of Tesla's paper are still missing.

Officially, much of Tesla's work was simply lost. He was known to keep much of his knowledge stored solely in his brain. In the 1980's however, many people were convinced that quite that opposite of this to be true. US satellite photos of northern Russia showed that the Soviets were developing what might well be a form of particle beam weapon. The system they were building did somewhat resemble the weapon that Tesla described so many years earlier. These leads to suspicion that perhaps some of Tesla's notes were in fact recovered by the Russians after his death. We may never know for certain, but fear stemming from this development lead to Reagan calling for the Strategic

Defense Initiative (SDI) or “Star Wars” as it was called.

While Tesla was himself a very peaceful man, he thought that if he could build a good enough defensive weapon, then he could end all wars. We will doubtless never know whether or not he was right, but he did so many other things for which we are very thankful, that there is no doubt that he was one of the most amazing men to ever walk the face of the Earth.

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