Of course, the answer is no. The history of unmanned aerial vehicles is almost a hundred years old. And although these UAVs are designed more and more for commercial purposes, their original goal was to gain an advantage in a war, without the risk of losing a valuable pilot. During both World Wars, the Vietnam War, the Cold War, the Yom Kippur War and lately the conflicts in the Middle East, many UAVs have been developed to fulfill that goal. They were not only used as tactical aircraft or flying bombs, but also as reconnaissance aircraft and even as decoys. But not all attempts met with success: in the process of learning this new technology of pilotless flight, many projects failed, were cancelled or were simply shot down.

But after decades of war, we are now finally able to use this technology for peaceful purposes as well. Let us first take a look at the violent history of UAVs.

Using UAVs for combat dates back to as early as 1916, a mere thirteen years after the first successful controlled powered flight. The engineer behind this unpowered aircraft was A.M. Low, who was rather busy developing radar in order to beat the Fokker ‘Eindecker’ monoplane. He tried to incorporate his knowledge of radar into the unpowered aircraft – or rather, the flying torpedo, as it was filled with dynamite – in order to remotely control the aircraft and send it to its target. Other companies, like Sopwith Co., got interested in this idea and developed their own unpowered aircraft. Most of them crashed rather quickly or the aircraft was left abandoned in a shed. The problem with radio-interference seemed to be more difficult than building the actual aircraft itself. In 1918, the concept of using gyroscopes to guide the aircraft was used in the Curtiss-Sperry Flying Bomb. This was successfully tested and the aircraft flew for almost a kilometre.

At Aerospace Engineering, one can hardly miss the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV). Many commercial purposes have been investigated in recent years. Also, unmanned reconnaissance and combat aircraft attract more interest; in hazardous regions, small aircraft can be deployed to do risky, but necessary jobs. And with success. But is the idea of using UAVs in locations where human lives are at stake really that new?

This happened only once though, as all other tests resulted in crashes. However, the company of Sperry was quite successful and its gyroscope division is now part of aerospace giant Lockheed Martin.

It took until 1924 before the radio-interference problem was finally approaching a solution and a properly working remote-controlled UAV was built, which resulted in the Larynx in 1927: an aircraft that could travel for 450km with about 100kg of explosives on board. It was also quite fast for its time: with a top speed of 300km/h it was faster than most manned aircraft in those days. However, in practice it failed miserably (again), as the remote control was replaced by gyroscopes and all targets were missed.

Another remote-controlled aircraft worth mentioning is the Radioplane by the Radioplane Company, which was the most sold (and most shot) remote-controlled aircraft during WWII: 15 000 were bought...
by the US government to train anti-aircraft gunners. A UAV that was also meant to be shot at was the McDonnell Quail. Its purpose was to imitate the radar and heat signature of a B-52 bomber. Although the idea sounded rather well at first, radar improved and the Quail was quickly rendered obsolete.

A rather controversial UAV was introduced by the Germans, also during WWII: the Vergeltungswaffen 1, which translates to ‘reprisal weapon 1’, or V-1 in short. Where the attempts in the 1910s failed, the V1 succeeded, as it really was a flying bomb. The V-1 was equipped with only simple control mechanisms for altitude and speed. It also possessed a counter mechanism, a vane, which measured the distance travelled. Once it flew its preset distance, it would descend upon its intended target, mainly London. Although notorious, the V-1 is a true predecessor of the modern cruise missile and it highly revolutionised the idea of warfare at a distance. The V-1 was a cost-effective way of targeting the Allies.

Although war is generally a bad thing, it does speed up technological progress and some impressive feats in engineering have been made in wartime. During the Cold War, there were some concerns about a secret nuclear test facility in Lop Nor, China. Because it was too far and too risky for a U-2 spy plane, the CIA urged that a drone should be used. Lockheed engineered the D-21, a drone capable of flying at Mach 4. The D-21 was supposed to piggyback on a variant of the Lockheed A-12, the top-secret precursor to the SR-71 Blackbird. It would then launch to a height of thirty kilometres and make pictures of Lop Nor. It would then proceed to fly back to the eastern coast of China and drop its film package by parachute, before plunging into the ocean and self-destruct. The naval vessel below then had to be on the right location at the right time in order to acquire the descending film package. As always, there was a lot of bad luck involved: one parachute failed, one time the Navy messed up and two were lost on radar, never to be seen again. Fifteen years later, a CIA agent received part of a drone as some sort of Christmas gift from a KGB agent.

The American Firebee proved to be a successful UAV for both the Americans in Southeast Asia, as well as for the Israelis during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. While the Americans used it as a slightly stealthy reconnaissance aircraft during 34 000 flights (night or day) from 1964 to 1975, the Israelis found another purpose: decoy. Twelve modified Firebees were sent to Egypt, which then proceeded to fire ground-to-air missiles at the UAVs without any luck. They either missed their target or were destroyed by the Firebees.

In this day and age, the US Air Force possesses more technically advanced UAVs than ever before. For example, the Predator built by General Atomics, which was introduced in 1995, is capable of battlefield reconnaissance and even carrying missiles, while the ‘pilot’ operates the aircraft back in the US. And, as opposed to most of its predecessors, it actually works. Furthermore, the Lockheed Martin’s RQ-170 Sentinel is a stealthy reconnaissance aircraft that was used above Iran in 2011. The story of the Iranians claiming to have captured one of these aircraft through electronic warfare is well known and since then, electronic warfare on aircraft has become much more of an issue. Also, a new UAV of the US Navy was in the news recently. Northrop Grumman has successfully launched the X-47B from an aircraft carrier and its appearance largely resembles the B-2 bomber, also by Northrop Grumman. Meanwhile, Boeing is also building a stealthy flying wing, called the Phantom Ray.

So although, over the decades, peaceful applications have been found for unmanned aerial vehicles, it also seems that they are still becoming increasingly important in warfare.