

Marine Corps Commandant Sheds Light on Reaper UAV Capabilities



By Richard R. Burgess, Senior Editor

ARLINGTON, Va. – The Marine Corps’ MQ-9A ER [extended-range] Reaper unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) are capable of carrying an electronic warfare pod that renders the UAVs “mostly undetectable” to enemy radars, a senior Marine Corps official said.

General Eric M. Smith, commandant of the Marine Corps, speaking July 2 at the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank, discussing the capabilities of a Marine littoral regiment and the forces supporting them – including the Reaper UAVs – pointed out the sensing mission of the regiments in the first island chain in the Pacific.

“What they bring with them is a sensing and making sense capability;” Smith said. “Some of the programs are classified. Some of the pods that go on our MQ-9s are classified. It’s

called a T-SOAR pod, and what it does is it can mimic things that are sent to it that it detects, turn it around, and send it back so that it becomes a black hole. It becomes mostly undetectable.”

“Without crossing classification levels, it has the ability to somewhat disappear off of an enemy radar,” he said later in the webinar, in response to a reporter’s question. “I’ll just leave it at that.”

Although not clear, the commandant may have been referring to the Scalable Open Architecture Reconnaissance (SOAR) pod, which L3Harris describes as a “groundbreaking, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) solution from L3Harris Technologies and General Atomics Aeronautical Systems, Inc. (GA-ASI). SOAR integrates L3Harris’ industry leading full-band signals intelligence (SIGINT) capability with a medium altitude long-endurance GA-ASI Predator B wing-mounted pod to offer unparalleled options for warfighters in the ISR domain. SOAR provides significant mission expansion for Predator B operations against modern threats in new operating domains and a new dimension for remotely piloted aircraft systems.”

The builder of the SOAR pod and the MQ-9, GA-ASI, says on its website that the SOAR pod “provides long-range detection, identification, and location of radar and communication signals of interest. SOAR enables MQ-9 or other aircraft operators to provide standoff surveillance – seeing threats before threats can see the aircraft – and communicate actionable intelligence. The system leverages significant U.S. government technology investments in strategic intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems to provide a low-cost, widely deployable capability for a variety of National Security Council and Combatant Command signals intelligence collection objectives.”

GA-ASI lists key benefits of the 634-pound SOAR pod as:

- Enables long-range persistent surveillance of enemy communications and radar emitters
- Enables cooperative collection and target exploitation capabilities
- Features real time collection and onboard storage for post-mission analysis
- Allows for true multi-intelligence target identification and tracking in real time