

Marine Corps MQ-9 Reapers Enhanced With Advanced Payload Upgrade



An MQ-9 Reaper is upgraded with SkyTower II Pod that will be deployed to Marine Corps' squadron next year to enhance operational capability. (U.S. Navy photo)

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NAS PATUXENT RIVER, Md. – The Navy's MQ-9 Reaper test squadron at Pax River received the first SkyTower II (STII) pod in preparation for the system's initial operational capability (IOC) next year.

Air Test and Evaluation (UX) 24 loaded the new pod onto the aircraft Feb. 25, conducting initial power on checks, the first step into integrating the new capability into the aircraft platform.

“The program is excited to deliver SkyTower II for testing, marking a major milestone in our development journey,” said Capt. Dennis Monagle, Multi-Mission Tactical UAS program manager. “Over the past two years, we’ve partnered with GALT, a small business prime vendor, to rapidly develop this unique capability using middle-tier acquisition, accelerating innovation for the warfighter. With robust system and integration testing now underway, we remain on track to achieve initial operating capability this year, delivering critical capability to the U.S. Marine Corps and the joint forces.”

STII is an airborne network extension pod that enhances cross-domain communication capabilities and links communications between disparate forces. It is required to execute the Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) concept of operations by providing tactically relevant operational communications and data sharing capabilities with many forces in support of the MQ-9 Reapers’ operational mission.

UX-24 also completed a fit check of the MQ-9 in the large anechoic chamber at Pax River in late February. The team conducted a number of tests and hoisted the aircraft for the first time as a risk reduction for upcoming program efforts. The tests proved the ability to safely hang the aircraft while providing power, cooling and satellite link with the aircraft for communications, command and control.

Over the next several months, UX-24 will conduct final test events before delivering the upgraded MQ-9s to the fleet.

“The team has been able to accomplish a lot of work in a very compressed timeline by developing and executing these test plans for the chamber event and STII testing,” said Cmdr. Lauren Lawson, MQ-9 government flight test director. “The dedication shown and technical challenges they’ve overcome to conduct this critical testing to help develop the best product possible to support the Marines is truly commendable.”

VMU-3 is currently flying MQ-9's in theater today and will be the first to deploy with this new system in 2026.

The MQ-9 Reaper provides Marines with a long-range ISR capability in support of maritime domain awareness and expeditionary advanced based operations in contested environments.