Marines Test Drone Systems During Defense Innovation Unit Challenge

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Marines assigned to I Marine Expeditionary Force partnered with the Defense Innovation Unit and industry leaders during phase two of the DIU's Project GI challenge to evaluate commercial small unmanned aerial systems in realistic operational environments, Aug. 18-29.

The 12-day event brought together Marines assigned to 1st Marine Division – including operators, leaders and subject matter experts – to test vendor-loaned systems across multiple ranges. The training period included four days of Marine-led familiarization, followed by six days of scenario-based demonstrations. Assessments will directly inform War Department procurement decisions and accelerate the integration of resilient, cost-effective small UASs into the joint force.

"The GI challenge puts our Marines at the center of capability development. Their expertise, combined with the innovation of our industry partners, is shaping the next generation of unmanned systems," said Marine Brig. Gen. Michael Nakonieczny, deputy commanding general of I Marine Expeditionary Force. "I MEF is proud to play a leading role in advancing technologies that directly enhance the lethality and survivability of our Marines."

Marines evaluated systems against operational criteria, including setup, deployment time, weatherproofing, payload capacity and performance across varying terrain and climates. Evaluations emphasized how each system affected tactics, techniques and procedures during realistic combat scenarios.

“Robotics are revolutionizing the battlefield, and it’s no secret that first-person-view drones have become one of the most lethal and disruptive weapons worldwide,” said Marine Maj. Steven Atkinson, I Marine Expeditionary Force DIU event lead planner. “Our mission is to ensure America’s warfighters get the very best, battle-tested technology so they can be effective anywhere in the world.”

The challenge represents the second phase of a three-part competitive selection process. Phase one involved an initial screening in which the DIU reviewed vendor proposals and chose the most promising systems for further testing. Phase two brought those selected vendors to Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, California, for hands-on evaluation by the I Marine Expeditionary Force. A final phase three round will determine which systems advance to procurement, with winning platforms expected to be added to DOW’s “Blue UAS Cleared List” – drones compliant with current law and policy, validated as cybersecure and available for DOW purchase and operation – by March 15, 2026.

“Bottom-up refinement is something the Marine Corps has always valued. The ability for dedicated to test, stress and provide input on these products is exactly what was needed for this project and the service,” said Marine 2nd Lt. Kienan Morrissey, an intelligence officer assigned to 3rd Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion who participated in the evaluation of the vendor-loaned small UAS platforms.

Marines stress-tested the systems in contested environment simulations, focusing on modern kill chain operations and first-person view effects capabilities. Vendors were required to provide at least three prototypes for testing, though some platforms received exemptions due to design characteristics or employment concepts.

Following evaluations, Marines conducted detailed debriefs to capture feedback that will guide procurement and influence

future small UAS capability development across DOW. Units within I Marine Expeditionary Force will continue working with selected systems beyond the challenge to provide additional recommendations for improvement.

The DIU’s Project GI challenge represents one of the Marine Corps’ largest field-based industry engagements, focusing on emerging drone technology and directly supporting modernization priorities identified by Marine Corps and Pentagon leaders for operations against peer adversaries.

“Events like these ensure our Marines will have the best available tools at their disposal in the next conflict,” Morrissey said.