Marines to Operate Armed Reaper UAS in 'Coming Months'



An MQ-9 Reaper taxis on the flightline prior to take off on Ali Al Salem Air Base, Kuwait, June 10, 2020. U.S. Air Force / Senior Airman Kevin Tanenbaum

ARLINGTON, Va. – The Marine Corps plans to deploy armed MQ-9 Reaper unmanned aerial vehicles in the "coming months," the Navy's program executive officer for Unmanned and Strike Weapons (PEO-UMW) said.

"The MQ-9 Reaper provides increased lethality to the Marine Air-Ground Task Force by providing persistent ISR [intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance] and strike capability which the Marine Corps has not previously possessed in an unmanned system," said Rear Adm. Brian Corey, program executive officer – Unmanned and Strike Weapons, speaking Sept. 9 at the Unmanned Systems Defense, Protection, Security virual conference sponsored by the Association of Unmanned Vehicle Systems International.

The MQ-9 Reaper is a medium-altitude, long-endurance unmanned aerial vehicle used for surveillance and strike operations. The Reaper is a battle-proven development of the RQ-1 Predator, upgraded for longer endurance, a heavier payload, and the ability to launch heavier precision munitions in a benign aerial environment.

"Last year, in response to an Urgent Needs Statement from the U.S. Marine Corps, we helped them acquire an MQ-9 Reaper and operated it outside the continental United States in support of forces forward for persistent ISR," Corey said. "We've recently transitioned to add a persistent strike capability which the Marines will operate in the coming months which will give them a capability that they have not had from unmanned

systems.”

The Naval Air Systems Command ordered the two Reapers from General Atomics Aeronautical Systems Inc. (GA-ASI), of Poway, California, with a $26.9 million firm-fixed-price contract, according to the June 22 Defense Department announcement. The contract also provides for one dual-control mobile ground-control station, one modular data center and one mobile ground-control station

The Marine Corps selected the Reaper in 2018 to fill an urgent needs request for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) in support of forward operations in Southwest Asia. GA-ASI has provided ISR services since September 2018 through contractor-owned/contractor-operated (COCO) Reapers and their teams to support Marine Corp forces in Afghanistan. Marine UAV squadrons (VMUs) have been learning to operate the Reaper in preparation for the Corps’ procurement of government-owned/government operated MQ-9s. On March 20, 2020, a Marine crew of VMU-1 controlled a COCO Reaper for the first time on an operational mission in support of forward-deployed ground forces.

Corey said the operation of the MQ-9 will help the Marine Corps learn how to operate a Group 5 UAS and inform its future MUX program.