

Naval Unmanned Helicopters Get Second Life



PORTFOLIO ACQUISITION EXECUTIVE AVIATION, PATUXENT RIVER, Md. – In a prime demonstration of joint force agility and resource optimization, the Navy and Army partnered to rapidly repurpose divested MQ-8C Fire Scout unmanned helicopters, transforming excess inventory into dynamic test assets.

At the direction of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, the Navy began divesting the MQ-8C Fire Scout platform in February 2024, with a final sundown scheduled by the end of fiscal year 2026. However, a rapid joint initiative has given these advanced unmanned aerial systems a second life and accelerated critical testing for the Army.

The Multi-Mission Tactical UAS Program Office was roughly 60% complete with the overall divestment process of transferring aircraft, mobile control systems and support equipment to the

309th Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Group in Tucson, Arizona, when a request for information arrived from the Army to discuss a potential handover of the assets.

In November 2024, the program office received a request to evaluate whether the MQ-8C Fire Scout, which was nearing its sundown, could serve as a captive carry testbed for the U.S. Army Redstone Test Center, a subordinate organization under the U.S. Army Test and Evaluation Command at Redstone Arsenal, Alabama.

By December, cooperating teams scheduled a site visit to Point Mugu, California, to evaluate the MQ-8C and its mission control systems.

A month later, the test center submitted a formal request to the Navy for four MQ-8C aircraft, two mobile mission control systems, spare engines and associated support equipment for site standup at Redstone Arsenal.

The request was approved in May 2025. By July, all four aircraft, both control systems and dual site support equipment were successfully delivered to Redstone Arsenal to facilitate test center operational plans.

The program office also collaborated with Naval Supply Systems Command to secure vital communications security assets – including radios, transponders and modems – that had already been returned to common stock earlier in the divestment process. Following a year of collaborative negotiations, the final assets arrived at Redstone Arsenal this July.

“Considering where we started – having zero experience with these systems – it’s quite remarkable what has been accomplished,” said Army Chief Warrant Officer 4 Taylor Kiel, test director and experimental test pilot with the test center’s Aviation Flight Test Directorate. “We are certainly thankful for the many people across various organizations that helped us along the way.”

In August, the center successfully completed ground testing and launched flight tests at Dugway Proving Ground, Utah, and Redstone Arsenal, building aircrew confidence and providing hands-on maintenance experience. This collaborative effort saved the Army just over \$70 million in procurement costs, with additional cost savings in research, development, test and evaluation, flight hours, data collection, contracts, asset sourcing and manpower.

“Our priority is delivering lethal and ready capabilities to the warfighters,” said Marine Corps Col. Leigh Irwin, program office manager. “Repurposing these MQ-8C assets from storage to active testing is a major acquisition win for both services, demonstrating how we can supercharge existing capabilities and increase acquisition velocity to support joint operations.”

Completing this transition and initiating flight tests within 14 months stands as a testament to the rapid acquisition timeline and the resilience of the MQ-8C platform, and it represents a remarkable joint achievement by the program office, the Navy and the Army in support of the warfighter, Irwin said.

By Megan Wasel, Portfolio Acquisition Executive Aviation, Oct. 23, 2026