

Navy Looking at Upgrades to RQ-21 UAS



U.S. Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Dominick Rollan and Cpl. Jose Reyes, both with Air Combat Element, Marine Rotational Force – Darwin, place the RQ-21A Blackjack on the launcher in preparation for its first flight in Australia at Bradshaw Field Training Area, Northern Territory, Aug. 8, 2020. The RQ-21 provides the Marine Corps a rapidly deployable surveillance asset able to operate in austere forward environments. U.S. Marine Corps / Cpl. Harrison Rakhshani

ARLINGTON, Va. – The Navy is planning a series of upgrades to the Boeing Insitu-built RQ-21A Blackjack unmanned aerial system, an acquisition official said.

“We’re continuing to look at upgrades for the system,” said Rear Adm. Brian Corey, program executive officer – Unmanned and Strike Weapons, speaking Sept. 9 at the Unmanned Systems Defense, Protection, Security virtual conference sponsored by the Association for Unmanned Vehicle Systems International. “Some of our future initiatives include beyond-line-of-sight capability; a vertical-takeoff-and-landing kit; a bandwidth-efficient common data link, and a portable ground-control station.”

The Blackjack, built by Boeing’s Insitu, is a twin-boom, single-engine, small tactical unmanned aerial vehicle that carries modular payloads mostly for surveillance. It is pneumatically launched and is recovered using a skyhook arrestment system. A single Blackjack system includes five UAVs, two ground control stations, various payloads and a set of launch and recovery systems.

The fielding of the RQ-21A Blackjack unmanned aerial system achieved full operational capability in 2019. All 21 systems for the Marine Corps and 10 for the Navy have been delivered

to fleet and training units.

The Blackjack now equips four Marine UAV squadrons plus a fleet replacement detachment. The Marine Corps deploys the Blackjack with its Marine expeditionary units onboard amphibious warfare ships. The 10 systems for the Navy have been delivered to Navy Special Warfare Command and made two deployments in 2019.

“The RQ-21 has flown over 14,000 hours and has seen some of the highest readiness rates in all of naval aviation,” Corey said.