# Navy’s Future Carrier Air Wing Could Reach 40% Unmanned Aircraft, Use Manned/Unmanned Teaming, Admiral Says



Boeing conducts MQ-25 deck handling demonstration at its facility in St. Louis, Missouri, in 2018. *U.S. Navy / Boeing*

ARLINGTON, Va. — The Navy’s forthcoming fielding of its first carrier-based unmanned aircraft could presage a much larger UAS presence in the future carrier air wing, a senior admiral said, and may include manned/unmanned teaming.

The MQ-25A Stingray UAS now being tested by Boeing and the Navy is designed to be a tanker for aerial refueling of other carrier-based aircraft such as the F-35C Lightning II and F/A-18E/F Super Hornet strike fighters; EA-18G Growler electronic attach aircraft; E-2D Advanced Hawkeye battle management aircraft; and CMV-22B Osprey carrier on-board delivery aircraft.

“The MQ-25 has great promise for us,” said Vice Adm. James Kilby, deputy chief of naval operations for Warfighting Requirements and Capabilities, testifying March 18 before the Seapower and Projection Forces Subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee. “Our initial focus is to introduce this platform and get it introduced into the air wing where it can serve its role initially in tanking and limited ISR [intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance]. But what we are focusing on is launching, landing, moving it around on the deck, bringing it up, taking it down to the hangar bay, how do we position those assets, how can we support the air wing.

“So, step one: get the fighters out of the business of refueling fighters and use the MQ-25 to do that, initially close aboard the carrier but eventually at range,” Kilby said. “But there is some payload capacity in that vehicle that we think has great promise for us. So, I think initially we would transition to ISR but in an air wing of the future view … we think we could get upwards of 40% of the aircraft in an air wing that are unmanned and then transition beyond that.”

Kilby said the logical step would be, “crawl, walk run, figure how to handle it within the air wing, let’s move to ISR, maybe electronic attack, strike, and then other things as complexity grows across that mission set. The MQ-25 most certainly will provide promise to us because perhaps it would exceed the endurance of a maned aircraft.”

The admiral pointed out that while there will be a control center on each aircraft carrier for unmanned aircraft, the Navy’s aspiration is for manned unmanned teaming in the future so that manned aircraft could control unmanned aircraft.