Unmanned Missile Carrier a Potential for Aerial Manned/Unmanned Teaming, Admiral Says



The Boeing-owned MQ-25 T1 test asset, a predecessor to the engineering development model aircraft being produced under a 2018 contract award. *THE BOEING CO.*

ARLINGTON, Va. — As the Navy looks forward to fielding its MQ-25A Stingray unmanned carrier-based aerial refueling tanker, it is looking to the future potential of unmanned carrier-based aircraft in other missions, including those involving manned/unmanned teaming and incorporating artificial intelligence. A missile-carrying unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) is within the imaginable possibilities.

Acknowledging the complexity of developing UAVs for aerial warfare, Rear Adm. Gregory Harris, the Navy's director for Air

Warfare, speaking in a March 30 Navy League Special Topic Breakfast webinar, sponsored by General Dynamics, discussed his current thinking regarding said manned/unmanned teaming for tactical combat aircraft.

“Having an unmanned platform out there as an adjunct missile carrier I see as not a step too far too soon,” Harris said. “I could have an unmanned friend – typically I say a flying Dorito chip – but I’m thinking it doesn’t have to be that way. An unmanned system with missiles I can clearly in my mind envision a way to say: ‘Defensive combat spread; shoot on this target, and I will squeeze the trigger,’ or ‘I will just enable that unmanned platform to shoot a designated target.’ That doesn’t stretch beyond the realm of my imagination.”

“When I have that unmanned platform making decisions which target anything it wants to shoot on, that’s where I start to have that scratched both from a policy standpoint,” he said. “What’s the rule of order going to be when Hal is out there executing a strike on itself?” he said, referencing the renegade computer than took over a spaceship in the motion picture 2001: A Space Odyssey. “I jokingly look at all of the movies out there and they typically don’t end well when we do that.

“In the next two or three years we’ll probably have a better idea of whether a replacement for the F/A-18E/F will be manned or unmanned,” Harris said. “I believe it most likely will be manned. I’m open to the other aspects of it. A family of systems definitely will include manned and unmanned systems.”

Harris said the development of the MQ-25 “has been very successful,” noting the Boeing prototype has been flying with its aerial refueling store.

He said the MQ-25 will be able to carry fuel for up to three carrier launch and recovery cycles or be able to pass 14,000

to 16,000 pounds of fuel up to 500 nautical miles on a strike mission. It will have some unspecified intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capability.