

REAPERS

and the RPA Resurgence

By Will Skowronski

The MQ-9 can perform strike, coordination and reconnaissance against high-value targets.

Unmanned aircraft have been taking to the skies for more than 100 years. For almost as long, militaries have tried to use them to gain advantage over their enemies. But until the recent advent of the ability to control aircraft from a remote location, they've played a minor role on the battlefield.

Today, the Air Force's remotely piloted aircraft can loiter for hours, provide constant surveillance, and strike targets with precision across the globe. They're highly sought after tools, and for years the service has been unable to meet the demand despite exhausting the airmen who handle them.

But the Air Force's plan to stabilize the RPA community is underway, and the service is set to stem the widening shortage of RPA pilots this year.

"The RPA get-well plan has been going as well as we hoped it would," Gen. Mark A. Welsh III, then the Air Force Chief of Staff, told reporters in June.

For the first time, Welsh said, the service produced more than 300 RPA pilots in a year, with 334 being trained this year. In prior years, the service produced 188 a year and lost about 240. In Fiscal 2017, 384 airmen are expected to become RPA pilots. The increases, he said, mean the existing shortage of 250 pilots will be halved by the end of this year and gone by the end of next.

"We've been chasing that requirements rabbit since 2008," he later told *Air Force Magazine*. "And we have now stabilized it."

A skyrocketing demand forced the RPA enterprise to expand at an "unprecedented rate" over the past 10 years, Air

An MQ-9 Reaper performs aerial maneuvers over Creech AFB, Nev., in June 2015. The Reaper is heavier and more powerful than its predecessor, the MQ-1 Predator.



USAF photo by A1C Christian Clausen



USAF photo



USAF photo by TSgt, Ricky Best



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Combat Command chief Gen. Herbert J. “Hawk” Carlisle told lawmakers in March. The airmen who fly, operate, and maintain the RPAs were strained.

In 2007, the service’s RPAs had seven combat air patrols, but were flying 65 by 2015. Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter approved a reduction to 60 to help with the service’s manning challenges. Between Aug. 8, 2014, and June 24, 2016, alone, coalition MQ-1 Predators and MQ-9 Reapers flew more than 9,100 sorties for Operation Inherent Resolve, employing nearly 3,400 precision weapons in over 1,800 strikes, an OIR spokesman told *Air Force Magazine*.

The RPA community’s 1,300 pilots now make up the largest group of pilots in the Air Force, Gen. David L. Goldfein, now Air Force Chief of Staff, told lawmakers during his Senate nomination hearing in June. The next largest group is the service’s 800 C-17 pilots.

/1/ A1C Ashley Kellar, a 432nd Aircraft Communications Maintenance Squadron radio frequencies transmission technician, checks communications equipment. /2/ The Reaper’s armament includes a combination of AGM-114 Hellfire missiles, GBU-12 Paveway IIs, and GBU-38 Joint Direct Attack Munitions. The enhanced GBU-49, pictured here, is a 500-pound bomb with both laser- and GPS-aided guidance. /3/ A pilot and sensor operator make up the Reaper’s crew. Here, a student pilot undergoes training at Hancock Field, N.Y. /4/ As its name suggests, the Reaper is a capable strike aircraft. Here, the MQ-9’s multispectral targeting system and armament stand out against the desert backdrop.

USAF photo by SrA. Cory D. Payne

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USAF photo by MSgt. Dennis J. Henry Jr.

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USAF photo by SrA. Cory D. Payne

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USAF photo by A1C Emily A. Kenney

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USAF photo by A1C Leah Ferrante

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USAF photo by A1C Emily A. Kenney

“So the RPA is part of the fabric of the Air Force,” Goldfein said.

To make the increasing growth sustainable, the service is overhauling the RPA force. ACC is calling for an additional \$3 billion in funding over the next five years to double the number of pilots and sensor operators and to acquire 75 more MQ-9 Reapers. If approved, 3,000 airmen and 17 squadrons would be added to the service’s RPA community. Ultimately, the service plans to take 140 actions to improve RPA operations. (See “Don’t Fear the Reaper,” February 2016, p. 18.)

In other words, the number of pilots isn’t the only concern moving forward. While more pilots will alleviate some of the strain on the operators, only structural changes to the RPA enterprise will sustain the force.

The service needs to create a battle rhythm that is acceptable to the operators and their families, create an environment that makes the airmen want to stay with the RPA force, and give them the resources to get the job done, Welsh said in June.

“The first step is to make sure that everybody in the community realizes how terribly important they are to the joint fight and to the United States Air Force,” he said.

“There’re no easy fixes, there’re no magic answers, it’s just hard work,” he added. “Now the institution kind of needs to go around [the RPA community] and give it the stability and the direction it needs over time and the support it needs over time, and that’s what we’re trying to do now.”

/1/ An MQ-9 Reaper performs a low pass during a first-ever air show demonstration at Cannon AFB, N.M., in May 2016. /2/ SrA. Daniel Hawley, a crew chief with the 49th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, checks the multispectral targeting system. /3/ Two crew chiefs assigned to the 49th AMXS inspect the aircraft. /4/ The MQ-9 touts a wingspan of 66 feet. The aircraft is 36 feet long and 12.5 feet high. /5/ A Reaper sits waiting for its wings in a hangar at Holloman AFB, N.M.

Some of the changes are underway. In April, the service announced MQ-1 Predator units would be redesignated as attack squadrons and RPA aircrews would be able to log combat time while flying aircraft in a hostile airspace regardless of where they were controlling them from. The redesignation anticipates the service's phase out of the Predator in favor of the larger and more powerful MQ-9 Reaper.

"Aerial warfare continues to evolve. Our great RPA airmen are leading that change. They are in the fight every day," Welsh said in a news release announcing the changes. "These policy changes recognize the burdens they bear in providing combat effects for joint warfighters around the world."

The service is calling on enlisted personnel to change their role within the RPA force. Enlisted airmen will begin training to fly the unarmed RQ-4 Global Hawk this September, Carlisle said in June. Career enlisted aviators will make up the first two enlisted pilot initial classes during a beta phase

/1/ A1C Matthew Lopez, a 62nd Expeditionary Reconnaissance Squadron munitions systems technician, unpacks a GPS guided GBU-49 at Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan, in August 2015. /2/ Airmen prepare an MQ-9 Reaper for a mission over Afghanistan in August 2013. /3/ An airman secures a radio antenna prior to a sortie from Kandahar in December 2015. /4/ An airman assigned to the 451st Expeditionary Aircraft Maintenance Squadron directs a Reaper prior to launch.



USAF photo by TSgt. Joseph Swafford



USAF photo by TSgt. Robert Cloys.



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USAF photo by SRA. Jack Sanders
USAF photo by SSgt. Whitney Amstutz

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before the training is opened to more enlisted airmen. The service expects to eventually have 100 enlisted RQ-4 pilots.

“There’s absolutely no doubt in my mind, and I know this for a fact because I’ve been around the Air Force for 38 years now, ... our enlisted force can do absolutely anything in our Air Force,” Carlisle said. “This is one extension of that. This is taking advantage of our talent. This is giving us more flexibility in the future as we move forward.”

There is no plan to have enlisted airmen fly the armed MQ-1 Predator or MQ-9 Reaper, but Carlisle hinted the enlisted mis-

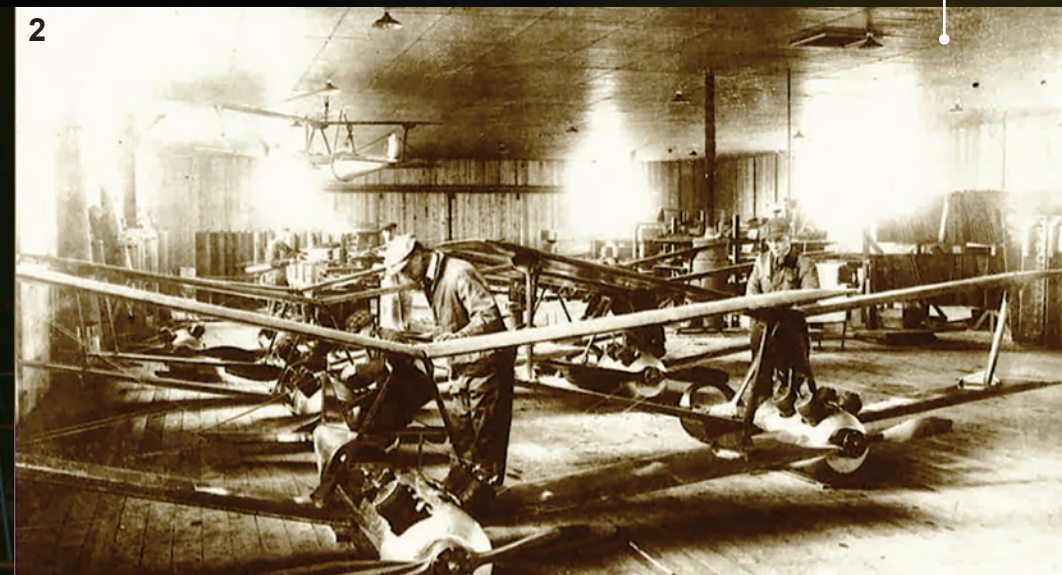
sion could broaden in the future. “And we’ll see where that goes,” he said, “it will probably lead to more.”

Welsh said now that the service seems to have the pilot equation figured out, it will need to evaluate whether there are viable career fields for maintainers within the RPA community. He said he didn’t know the answer, but the community itself will help figure it out, noting “they didn’t get a lot of help” from the beginning “because nobody else knew how to do it.”

Down the line, the service also hopes to open operations groups at bases other than Creech AFB, Nev., including

Beale AFB, Calif., Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz., JB Langley-Eustis, Va., and locations abroad. While speaking with reporters in June, Welsh noted the new locations could mean shorter commutes, allowing the airmen more time with their families. The end result of this multipronged relief effort “is RPAs delivering exactly what our combatant commanders are asking for now and in the future,” Carlisle told lawmakers in March. “No breaks, no reductions, just theater level airpower from this enterprise.”

1/ In May 1896, Samuel Pierpoint Langley’s Aerodrome No. 5 unpowered aircraft proved mechanical flight was possible. It is on display at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum. 2/ Workers assemble the Liberty Eagle Aircraft—better known as the Kettering “Bug”—in 1918. The US Army intended to use the unmanned aircraft as an aerial torpedo and ordered 25. 3/ A Predator surrogate air vehicle, General Atomics’ GNAT 750, at NAS Fallon, Nev.



Smithsonian photo

USAF photo

USN photo