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Reaper UAV now in Afghanistan

Air Force Print News | October 12, 2007

WASHINGTON -- The Air Force announced Oct. 11 that the MQ-9 Reaper, the service's new hunter-killer unmanned aerial vehicle, is now flying operational missions in Afghanistan. The Reaper has completed 12 missions since its inaugural flight there Sept. 25, averaging about one sortie per day.

Capable of striking enemy targets with on-board weapons, the Reaper has conducted close-air support and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance missions.

Operational use of Reaper's advanced capabilities marks a step forward in the evolution of unmanned aerial systems. Air Force quality assurance evaluators gave a "thumbs up" to the aircraft's debut performance and have been pleased with its operation ever since.

"The Reaper is a significant evolution in capability for the Air Force," said Gen. T. Michael Moseley, Air Force chief of staff. "We've taken these aircraft from performing mainly as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance platforms to carrying out true hunter-killer missions."

The Reaper is larger and more heavily-armed than the MQ-1 Predator. In addition to its traditional ISR capabilities, it is designed to attack time-sensitive targets with persistence and precision, and destroy or disable those targets. To date, Reaper operators have not been called upon to drop their weapons on enemy positions.

Like the Predator, the Reaper is launched, recovered and maintained at deployed locations, while being remotely operated by pilots and sensor operators at Creech Air Force Base, Nev. That is where the resemblance ends. The MQ-9 has nearly nine times the range, can fly twice as high and carries more munitions.

"It's a tremendous increase in our capability that will allow us to keep UAVs over the airspace of Afghanistan and Iraq in the future for a very long time," said Lt. Gen. Gary North, commander of U.S. Central Command Air Forces, who said the Reaper was a perfect complement to the Air Force's existing manned airborne platforms. "This is just another evolutionary step where technology is helping commanders on the battlefield to integrate great effects from the air into the ground commander's scheme of maneuver."

General North added that he expects the Reaper to bring a significant impact to military operations throughout the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility.

"The enemy knows we track them and they know that if and when they commit acts against their people and government, we will take action against them," General North said. "The Reaper is an incredible weapon in our quiver."

Approved by Air Combat Command in 2004, the Air Force currently has nine Reapers in its inventory.

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