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Navy grounds helicopter drones after two crashes in a week

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The U.S. Navy has grounded a fleet of helicopter drones after two of the aircraft crashed overseas within a week.

The robotic spy chopper used by the Navy, known as a MQ-8B Fire Scout, was developed by Northrop Grumman Corp. engineers in Rancho Bernardo. It was first deployed to war zones in Afghanistan and Libya last year.

In the first incident, the Navy said a Fire Scout crashed off the coast of Africa on March 30 after it was unable to land on the Navy frigate Simpson at the end of a surveillance mission.

“After multiple approaches and exhaustive troubleshooting by operators, the aircraft was positioned a safe distance from USS Simpson and the flight was terminated,” the Navy said in a statement. “Subsequently, Simpson crew performed a nighttime recovery of the aircraft.”

On Friday, another Fire Scout crashed in Afghanistan. The Navy said the cause of that crash had not been determined.

There were no injuries or damage to other aircraft as a result of the crashes, the Navy said.

“In light of the recent mishaps, the Navy has temporarily suspended Fire Scout flight operations for 14 air vehicles in inventory while system performance and operational procedures are reviewed,” the Navy said.

The grounding order was first reported by the aviation website FlightGlobal.com.

The Fire Scout, which is remotely controlled by a pilot on a ship, has experienced problems in the past.

In a test flight in August 2010 from Naval Air Station Patuxent River in Maryland, operators lost contact with a Fire Scout that wandered into restricted airspace near Washington, D.C. Navy operators were ultimately able to get control of the drone and later blamed a software problem.

Last June, one of the robotic choppers was being flown by the Navy in NATO's support mission of the Libyan rebels when it was shot down.

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