



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Apr 09, 2011

Armed and Dangerous—the Gray Eagle goes lethal

By 1st Lt. Jason Sweeney

CAMP TAJI, Iraq – The MQ-1C Gray Eagle looks less like an eagle and more like a giant robotic insect. Its alien-like head and dragonfly form give it a futuristic look.

Appropriate enough since this unmanned aerial system (UAS) is expected to play a big role in the future of Army aviation.

Currently, four Gray Eagles are based in Camp Taji, Iraq. The airframes belong to Quick Reaction Capability 1-Replacement 1 (QRC-1-R1)—a company-size unit attached to the 40th Combat Aviation Brigade (CAB).

QRC-1-R1 falls under the 8th Attack Reconnaissance Battalion, 229th Aviation Regiment, which is the 40th CAB's attack arm. The unit's Gray Eagles perform a role similar to Apache and Kiowa helicopters, providing aerial reconnaissance and surveillance. And after a successful Hellfire missile test shoot in February, the Gray Eagles now give commanders in Iraq a deadly new weapon in the fight against extremists.

In February, the Gray Eagle operators of QRC-1-R1 gave a demonstration of the lethality of their airframe by firing six Hellfire missiles into the abandoned hulks of light military tactical vehicles positioned at Shadow Range in western Iraq. The targets were blasted with six direct hits, providing proof of the accuracy and effectiveness of the Gray Eagle in a combat environment.

When the Gray Eagle fired the final missile during the shoot, it had some help from its little brother, the Shadow UAS, which is a drone far smaller than the Gray Eagle. A Shadow from the 4th Advise and Assist Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division out of Al-Asad was flying nearby and laser designated the target. This was a first for the Army—two unmanned aerial platforms performing a cooperative engagement.

Sgt. Brent Randal is a Gray Eagle operator who participated in the test shoot. "In essence, it's a video game—a very expensive video game," he said of flying the Gray Eagle. "The difference is you actually have guys' lives in your hands, whether it's finding IEDs (improvised explosive devices) on the road or engaging targets in support of ground troops."

QRC-1-R1 operators fly their aircraft from portable shelters. Two operators sit side by side in the air-conditioned shelters monitoring video feeds in real time while following the Gray Eagle on maps on their screens.

"I can click on a point on the map and the aircraft will make a B-line for it," said Chief Warrant Officer Kevin Bearden, QRC-1-R1 standardization officer.

"It thinks for itself," UAS safety officer Chief Warrant Officer James Bouchard said. "It basically flies its own algorithms."

Although the Gray Eagle had previously fired Hellfire missiles in Afghanistan, the February test shoot was the first time weapons had been fired from the airframe in Iraq.

"This gives commanders the confidence that we can successfully engage a target," Bouchard said.

The Gray Eagles have been at Camp Taji since June 2010, but had been flying unarmed. Their high-tech surveillance capabilities have been employed to find weapons caches and IEDs, and they've been used to locate and designate targets for other aircraft, as well as walk ground units in on targets.

Ground units are able to monitor video feeds from the Gray Eagle on laptops in their Humvees. The airframe also serves as a communications platform, boosting the signal strength and range of ground-based radios.

The Gray Eagle is manufactured by General Atomics. It is cheaper to purchase and maintain than a helicopter and it can stay in the air for longer stretches of time. Essentially, the Gray Eagle is the latest version of the Predator series of drones, retooled and upgraded for Army-specific needs.

The Air Force's Predator drones are flown by officers who are usually located back in the USA and connected to the airframes by satellite link. But flying the Army's Gray Eagle is an enlisted Soldier's affair, done in theater and close to the ground troops that the airframe serves.

"The Gray Eagle allows commanders to see through the fog of war and helps them command and control the battle," said Capt. Mike Goodwin, a Black Hawk helicopter pilot and commander of QRC-1-R1. "You don't have to be a certified pilot to fly it. The aircraft is very autonomous."

Goodwin said the Gray Eagle has a big future. The Army is gearing up to supply all its combat aviation brigades with 12 Gray Eagles apiece.

"It's the latest and greatest," Goodwin said.

For more information contact:

jason.b.sweeney@iraq.centcom.mil at the 40th CAB public affairs office

Kimberly Kasitz
Public Relations Manager
General Atomics Aeronautical Systems, Inc.
+1.858.312.2294
kimberly.kasitz@ga-asi.com