

## USAF Arms F-16, A-10 With Laser-Guided Rockets

*Aviation Week*

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The rollout of laser-guided rockets to operational theaters in Iraq and Afghanistan is continuing, with BAE Systems confirming on June 8 that the U.S. Air Force has fielded its mid-body guidance kits for the 2.75-in. (70mm) rounds on the Lockheed Martin F-16 and Fairchild Republic A-10.

The Marine Corps recently began carrying the Advanced Precision Kill Weapon System (APKWS) on its Boeing AV-8B Harrier II, but the F-16 and A-10 deployments mark the first time the weapons have been sent into combat zones by the Air Force.

The BAE-developed guidance kit was first tested on the AV-8B, F-16 and A-10 during flight demonstrations in May 2013, the company said. It is already widely used on Navy and Marine Corps helicopters such as the Bell AH-1Z Viper, and was acquired last year by the Army for the Boeing AH-64 Apache gunship.

By adding laser guidance, the long-used "Hydra" rocket transforms from an area assault weapon into a precision-guided munition capable of destroying soft targets like hostile boats, vehicles and exposed enemy combatants without expending more expensive guided bombs and missiles, like the Lockheed AGM-114 Hellfire or future Joint Air-to-Ground Missile.

The Air Force's fielding of APKWS traces back to an "urgent operational need" reprogramming request made in November 2015 for 1,920 guidance kits meant for the F-16 and A-10 platforms. That request was supported by Congress.

According to BAE, the Army and Air Force are taking weapons from the existing Navy inventory for immediate deployment, and contracting negotiations are underway with the maritime service to replenish stockpiles and meet growing operational requirements.

"The Navy and Air Force deserve immense credit for streamlining the acquisition process by leveraging an existing Navy program of record to meet the needs of all our military services," according to BAE's director of precision guidance solutions, David Harrold. "We are confident that the addition of this highly accurate, low-collateral-damage weapon system will be a game-changer for F-16 and A-10 users in the U.S. Air Force and around the world."

The weapon will likely be used in combat against the Islamic State group and other extremist elements being targeted in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and elsewhere.

The lead organization for the Air Force procurement is the program executive office for weapons at Eglin AFB in Florida to meet an Air Combat Command requirement. Weapons PEO Brig. Gen. Shaun Morris says the fixed-wing APKWS procurement has beaten so-called "should-schedule" time lines. "[It] has been a true display of joint service and contractor teamwork," he says.

The most popular warhead for APKWS-enabled rockets is the blast-fragmentation type, but the U.S. military also purchases a penetrating version.