

Improved Gray Eagle Flights To Begin This Week

Aviation Week

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The company-sponsored Improved Gray Eagle first flew in 2013. (General Atomics)

General Atomics Aeronautical Systems will resume flight testing of its Improved Gray Eagle (IGE) this week, with first flight of the company's second aircraft expected on Oct. 28.

The company-developed unmanned aerial vehicle incorporates several engineering change proposals into the already-adopted MQ-1C Gray Eagle type that extends its endurance from 25 hr. to 40 hr. and increases the maximum gross takeoff weight from 3,600 lb. to 4,200 lb.

The first prototype flew in 2013, but was lost in a flight training mishap in 2015. That did not stop the U.S. Army from ordering 19 examples in June that year for its Aerial Intelligence Brigade and 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment for delivery by September 2018.

Speaking at an Association for Unmanned Vehicle Systems International conference in Washington on Oct. 26, Donald Cattell, General Atomics' vice-president of U.S. Army programs, said the second example of the series is ready to fly and will liftoff on Oct. 28. The aircraft is assembled at the company's Predator plant in Poway, California, and will complement the more than 140 armed MQ-1C Gray Eagles that have already been delivered to the Army since the program began in 2005.

Gray Eagle is operated at the Army division level for reconnaissance, surveillance and target acquisitions and it is currently equipped with standard Hellfire missiles for strikes on opportune targets.

The aircraft is being linked to the Boeing AH-64E Apache through the Army's manned-unmanned teaming, or MUM-T, initiative that allowed for the retirement of the OH-58 Kiowa armed aerial scout helicopter.

The Army is most of the way through standing up 15 Gray Eagle companies, and is now seeking upgrades and new weapons options such as the Small Diameter Bomb, Griffin Missile and Joint Air-to-Ground Missile, and the IGE has greater payload capacity to carry more stores.

The Army has been authorized to buy 36 of the extended-range IGEs out of its program of record for 167 baseline MQ-1C variants. General Atomics has said in the past that it is "fairly confident" the IGE order will eventually increase from 36 to 48.

Meanwhile, the company is gearing up to fly its internally developed "Improved Avenger" aircraft and Certifiable Predator B, a company spokeswoman says. The company's MQ-9-based extended-range "Long Wing" Predator B aircraft type performed its main flight on Feb. 18.