

USAF to transition to all MQ-9 Reaper force in 2018

airforce-technology.com



The US Air Force (USAF) will completely replace its remotely piloted aircraft, MQ-1 Predator, with the unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) MQ-9 Reaper by early next year.

The MQ-1 Predator, which served the USAF during combats for the past 21 years, will retire from service and will be replaced by the more capable MQ-9 that has served the air force for the last ten years.

The transitioning from the remotely piloted aircraft to the UAV is a result of the USAF efforts to keep up with the continuously evolving battlespace environment.

Better equipped than MQ-1 Predator, the MQ-9 Reaper provides the USAF with an increased speed, high-definition sensors and the capability to carry additional munitions, thereby enabling the UAV to complete a wide range of mission sets that can allow the force to stay prepared during combat.

432nd Operations Group commander colonel Joseph said: "When you ask about readiness, you have to ask ready for what?"

"If we talk about the things we could be ready for and what we should be asking our attack squadrons to do, then transitioning to an all MQ-9 force is imperative for readiness."

In addition to intelligence gathering and real-time reconnaissance missions, the MQ-9 Reaper remotely piloted aircraft will be used for more precise close air support engagements from the attack squadrons.

Joseph added: "The reason that the MQ-9 has turned into a close air support (CAS) platform, and this is the key point, is the fusion of two things.

"The first thing is the technology. We took an airplane and outfitted it with more raw power and capability, but then we did the other half and mated that technology with a professional aircrew."

At present, the 20th Attack Squadron at Whiteman Air Force Base, Missouri, US, is transitioning from its MQ-1 fleet to MQ-9 fleet.

20th Attack Squadron commander lieutenant colonel James said: "Right now the plan is to stop flying the MQ-1 in 2018, and that means we need to get transitioned this year.

"As part of that we are going to stop flying the MQ-1 completely by July 1, 2017.

"We will gradually stand up our number of combat lines on the MQ-9 so by the end of the year we are only an MQ-9 squadron."

Originally, MQ-1 Predator was not designed to carry weapons, thereby resulting in a limited 200lb payload, thereby leading to the demand for additional attack capabilities exceeding the MQ-1 design.

However, the MQ-9 remotely piloted aircraft is equipped with approximately 4,000lb payload, in addition to the capability to carry missiles and bombs.

Image: US Air Force's MQ-9 Reaper remotely piloted aircraft. Photo: courtesy of US Air Force photo by Senior Airman Christian Clausen.