



Are RPA Pilots the New Normal?

By Aaron M. U. Church, Associate Editor

The remotely piloted aircraft career field, which cut its teeth controlling Predators and Reapers in the skies over Iraq and Afghanistan, is finally settling into normal operations.

Remotely piloted aircraft have spawned a new breed of professional aviator that the Air Force says is here to stay. The next challenge is to cement a viable career path for the young pilots who cut their teeth guiding these vehicles over Afghanistan.

When airplanes were still strange new weapons in World War I, a group of pilots came back from Europe who “understood airplanes,” said Col. William M. Tart, RPA Capabilities Division director on the Air Staff. “Those are the people who started the airlines; those are the people who started the Air Corps Tactical School.”

Airmen coming back from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya are a new generation “with great ideas” and experience “that will propel the future of RPA” given the right opportunities, said Tart.

Building a new career field—and in many ways a new weapon—in constant combat hasn’t been easy. Airmen who had never flown before trained from scratch to fly RPAs in the Air Force’s new training pipeline, alone a major success.

They have been flying missions “delivering combat effects right out of the gate,” said Col. James Jinnette, Combat Air Forces Division chief at the Pentagon.

Combatant commanders have been exceedingly pleased.



USAF photo by 2nd Lt. Logan Clark



USAF photo by SrA. Jack Sanders

In Afghanistan, the RPA aviators are “proving their value and they’re proving the quality of the training that they’re getting,” said Jinnette.

Like all new ventures, there are issues to address, notably manpower shortages and advancement and promotion opportunities in a career field still arguably under construction. “We’ve identified shortcomings and challenges to work on and we’re getting after them. That’s the bottom line up front,” said Jinnette.

The job of flying remotely piloted aircraft came of age amidst two wars with a voracious appetite for RPA eyes on the battlefield. When war began over Afghanistan, RPA pilot was not a formalized career, and no standardized pipeline existed to train pilots.

“When this RPA enterprise began, it was a novelty. It was something different and

Left: An 18X student with the 6th Reconnaissance Squadron at Holloman AFB, N.M., trains on an MQ-1 Predator simulator. USAF guidance frequently prohibits the release of RPA pilots’ and sensor operators’ names due to operational security. Above: SSgt. Tyler Groff, a crew chief with the 451st Expeditionary Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, checks the propeller of an MQ-9 Reaper before a flight at Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan.

not understood, because it didn’t really exist yet,” said Jinnette. “In the decade of war we’ve had since then, it has become more recognized as a platform that has immense value and capability in combat operations.”

So much so, it has grown up in constant surge mode while undermanned and in the thick of combat. Demand grew so quickly that the Air Force initially pulled pilots and combat systems officers from the cockpits of fighters and tankers alike

to man a joystick. With a mandate to mount 65 combat air patrols—that many simultaneous orbits flying around-the-clock—by 2013, the old feeder system proved insufficient.

Even today, “at the most, we end up filling 66 percent of all combatant commanders’ [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance] requirements,” said Tart.

To give Air Education and Training Command breathing room to stand up an RPA pilot training program, the Air



USAF photo

Force took officers straight from undergraduate pilot training to temporarily fly RPAs before continuing to their assigned conventional aircraft. “Since 2009, we’ve gone from 12 squadrons to 22 squadrons. No other community is doing that kind of growth,” said Tart.

When it became clear RPAs weren’t a fad, officials knew they needed a more efficient and permanent way to source pilots. The brand-new 18X Air Force specialty code was born and AETC set to work building a pipeline to train operators from zero. “It’s more expensive to send someone through UPT and then over to the RPAs,” explained RPA Specialty Manager Lt. Col. Theodore J. Shultz. “It’s much faster and cheaper to create straight-up RPA pilots.”

This is exactly what the Air Force is now doing. With the undergraduate RPA training pipeline, and now the MQ-1 Predator/MQ-9 Reaper formal training unit up and running at Holloman AFB, N.M., “we’ve put out about 168 brand-new 18X [personnel] per year” not only to backfill those departing but also to begin alleviating the burden on airmen, said Shultz.

By the time the first class of pilots trained from scratch in the new pipeline graduated from Holloman as qualified Predator and Reaper pilots in 2012, the Air Force had snatched 245 UPT-direct pilots to fill the void. The service has already offered roughly two-thirds of

them their promised opportunity for a manned cockpit, backfilled by 18X airmen graduating from the schoolhouse at Holloman.

“There is a lot of still priming-the-pump, if you will, to grow the career field and play catch-up from the many years of surge,” however, said Shultz. The goal, after more than a decade of operations, is to finally “normalize” the career field with the dedicated structures, personnel, and training of a normal Air Force mission. “Understand that we never got to a full crew complement across the enterprise,” said Tart. Despite the war winding down in Afghanistan, “there’s no lessening in the demand.” Right now, “we’re not even up to the full 65 CAPs’ complement of guys” yet, he said.

Normalizing

The Air Force is working several manpower studies to evaluate the long-term need, but to fully man the current CAP mandate takes 1,600 Active Duty RPA pilots, according to Shultz. “A lot of that growth is in the staff, ... normalizing the [USAF] Weapons School and FTUs and some of the other non-direct operational units,” he said.

The pool stands at 1,300 pilots, about 30 percent of them organically trained 18X. The rest are reclassified or cross-trained pilots or aircrew. “There is still growth to be done to reach that final enterprise size,” said Shultz, noting that

it will probably take seven to eight years to reach. Even without enough bodies, the Air Force expects to finally hit 65 CAPs in May, according to Tart.

With today’s manpower, “the people who are flying those continue to operate in what is effectively a surge mode,” said Jinnette. What surge mode means is that the Air Force cannot spare RPA pilots for the kind of training and professional development “we would like them to take if they were in another career field or on another aircraft,” said Jinnette. In most cases, RPA pilots can’t take normal leave to recharge. “It takes more [manpower] than we have available per CAP to get the mission done. ... What’s going to give is personnel development and leave,” he explained.

Officers need more than just flying to be competitive for promotion and command slots, and more than combat hours to remain proficient aviators. “That’s stunted right now because of the surge mode that we’re still in,” said Jinnette. As quickly as demand wanes in Afghanistan, combatant commanders are jostling to snap up CAPs. “People want these things in the [Mediterranean], they want them in the Pacific, they want them in the Persian Gulf,” and pretty much everywhere US forces are engaged.

Paradoxically, the surge that complicates attaining equilibrium is “part of what’s driving our normalization,” said Jinnette. “We’ve now accepted that the



Left: An MQ-1 Predator flies over Creech AFB, Nev., in 2011. Below: Airmen move a Reaper at Kandahar in preparation for an Operation Enduring Freedom mission in 2013. The Predator/Reaper training unit at Holloman is putting out some 168 new 18X personnel per year.

demand is not going to go away just because of any change in Afghanistan.” This is solidifying the importance of RPAs and guaranteeing a long-term place for them in the Air Force.

One of the first actions taken to “normalize” the RPA enterprise was to recode flying and staff billets as 18X, effectively preventing non-RPA pilots with conventional flying experience from filling the RPA slots. This includes flying slots in operational units clear up to the division chief level on the Air Staff. “Those billets are now hard-coded to be RPA-expertise

required,” said Shultz. This aimed not only at professionalizing the enterprise but also opening suitable advancement opportunities for RPA operators.

Building Viable Careers

Congress and academics alike have criticized the inadequate opportunities and low promotion rates within the RPA force. Both are areas the Air Force is working to improve.

Lawmakers inserted language into the Fiscal 2013 defense authorization legislation tasking the Air Force to study and report on the cause for RPA officers’ “persistently lower average” career development and promotion rates.

Lt. Col. Lawrence Spinetta, then an Air University fellow, penned an equally critical assessment in a 2013 *Air & Space Power Journal* article, citing a slew of factors inhibiting RPA officers’ progression and command opportunities.

Neither is a simple problem, but “if I were to say it properly, the career path is in definition,” said Tart. “All the leadership understands that RPAs are a major aspect of the future” and are working within manpower and budgetary constraints to resolve these issues. “We see it as a normalized career field that needs to be more normalized. ... It’s not there yet, but we’re working that way,” said Jinnette.

By the time the Air Force reported to Congress in summer 2013, promotion

rates were already beginning to pick up, according to Shultz.

New RPA tracks at the Weapons School at Nellis AFB, Nev., and the USAF Test Pilot School (TPS) at Edwards AFB, Calif.—combined with other normalizing efforts—have helped.

Pilots who’ve graduated from the Weapons School or TPS are “looked at differently” by promotion boards, compared to those who haven’t, said Tart. Before RPA tracks existed at these schools “you never had that check mark on your block.” Now that there’s a formal training unit at Holloman, pilots can up their competitiveness by instructing, too. Until recently, “you didn’t have all the benefits of a normalized career field from which to have an officer who looks good on paper,” said Jinnette. It’s getting to the point where “now it’s a system” to advance and promote within the RPA career track, which is already pushing up officers’ promotion rates to major and beyond.

A Chance To Command

Manning and operations tempos still make it difficult to send pilots away for activities such as Squadron Officer School, needed to move up the chain. Even when fully manned, though, Tart pointed out that the Air Force isn’t about “having a lot of fat so that people can résumé-build.” Pursuing an advanced degree on top of a day job isn’t easy for any officer, RPA pilot or not, he said.



USAF photo by SrA. Jack Sanders



An MQ-1 Predator armed with Hellfire missiles flies a combat mission over southern Afghanistan

The upside is that RPA operators on the whole are young. The bulk fall in rank between second lieutenant and captain; this gives leaders a chance to build the pathway out ahead of them as they progress.

“I’m the only colonel 18X, and then the next 18X is a major,” stated Tart.

The enterprise is new enough that last summer it produced its first RPA-qualified wing commander: Col. James Cluff, a former fighter pilot-cum RPA operator. He commanded an RPA squadron at Creech AFB, Nev., and now heads the 432nd Wing there.

“Those are the successes” that build momentum and pave the way for young officers coming up behind them, Tart said.

RPAs are quickly becoming one of the Air Force’s largest flying communities. As Spinetta, now 69th Reconnaissance Group commander at Grand Forks AFB, N.D., noted, a single wing manages the bulk of regular Air Force RPA forces. The remaining operational and training squadrons are nestled under non-RPA wings dominated by fighters, bombers, or special operations. The result is a career bottleneck at the wing command level, severely limiting RPA pilots’ chances to lead a major command, joint-service combatant command, or even the Air Force later down the road.

“Every Chief of Staff during the last 50 years commanded a wing” as part of his career development, wrote Spinetta.

While the Air Force is concerned about the issue, it’s not unique to RPAs, said Jinnette. “If you look at some of our big-wing ISR, you’ll see very limited wings associated with a lot of people,”

he said. “It’s not like this is a special boutique problem.”

The Air Force is at least looking at all options, up to and including force structure changes, to breach barriers. With billions of dollars cut from the defense budget, Jinnette said the real problem is money. “The idea of growing the number of units to allow command opportunities is something that has to be carefully considered. ... There’s an overhead cost,” he said. “It might make more sense to support the warfighter and have more units in different places. ... I don’t want it to sound at all like we’re moving out that way, but we’re not ignoring it.”

Getting back to RPA officers’ average age, though, creating staff and squadron level billets is more pressing—and arguably easier at present. “We’ve got to work on the squadron commander piece and the ops group piece ... before we can really get there,” said Tart.

Most RPA pilots right now are looking at what it takes to make captain or major, to command a squadron, or serve on a major command staff. All this will prepare them for higher level command when leaders are able to create billets down the road, said Tart. “Finding guys who can fit that mold to be a squadron commander” and helping them along is the task at hand, he said. Whether 18X, or officers who chose to permanently cross over, Shultz said, “we’ll continue to proactively return and look for opportunities” to make certain that billets exist “once they do reach those ranks.”

Jinnette said the Air Force has made great strides normalizing the RPA career field. “If you think about 20 different

lines of effort that we’re getting at, one is staff, one is command opportunities: ... There’s a whole list of things we all have to dial up,” he said.

Happy Ending

Clearly, airmen do see a rewarding future in the RPA business. Of the 245 pilots pulled directly from flight school, 37 percent turned down a guaranteed fighter, bomber, or airlifter slot to continue flying RPAs, noted Shultz. Tart highlighted a young UPT-direct pilot he’d known during his time as operations group commander at Creech as an example.

“She was the No. 1 lieutenant out of 200 pilots” at UPT, he said. After her three-year assignment was up, she said, “Absolutely, I want to stay here and do this,” recalled Tart. “She went on to Weapons School,” became an RPA instructor, and will be “a future leader in RPA for sure,” he said. “The current ops group commander at Holloman was a squadron commander at Creech,” he added.

“I would not say that it’s all solved and it’s all good, but we know what we’re getting after and we’re starting to develop lines of effort as a service to resolve those,” said Jinnette.

He noted that the RPA community has had to answer critics before, such as when it set up a schoolhouse to quickly train operators without sending them through traditional flight training. The Air Force views this as a monumental success that many initially doubted was possible. ■