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# Enlisted Airmen Will Now Get To Fly Drones

A pilot shortage is forcing the U.S. Air Force to loosen the rules on who gets to operate a UAV.



U.S. Air Force

By Eric Tegler Dec 21, 2015



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For the first time since World War II, the Air Force will use enlisted airmen as pilots. Rather than climbing into cockpits, though, they'll be seated at workstations in places like Beale Air Force Base north of Sacramento, CA.

American drone pilots don't face the physical danger of flying into hostile territory, but taking out enemy targets while remotely piloting a Predator is a stressful and grueling gig. Drone pilots often log as much as three times as many hours as pilots of manned aircraft, and keeping them motivated and in the Air Force is difficult. How difficult? In fiscal year 2014, the USAF trained 180 drone pilots—but 240 veteran pilots left the field.

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To stem such loss, the Air Force is reportedly offering serving drone pilots a \$125,000 signing bonus for an additional five-year commitment. Meanwhile, the demand for drone operations, whether for intelligence-gathering or airstrikes—is expanding remarkably. During one week in September 2014 alone, the Air Force's RQ-4 Global Hawk ISR UAVs flew 680 hours. As of early 2014, the USAF had approximately 9,800 UAVs of various types and was flying drones 24/7.

The crushing demand has forced the Air Force to open the remote piloted aircraft (RPA) field to enlisted airmen.

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BUT 240 VETERAN PILOTS LEFT THE FIELD.**



"Emerging requirements and combatant commander demands will only increase: therefore, we will position the service to provide warfighters and our nation the capability they deserve today and in the future," Secretary of the Air Force Deborah Lee James said of the decision.

James and Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Mark Welsh have instructed Air Combat Command to develop a plan over the next six months for enlisted RPA duties, training and pay, and integration with officer pilots. The Air Force points to its recent experience integrating enlisted personnel into space operations as precedent for the move to use non-commissioned drone pilots.



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For the moment, those enlisted pilots won't have their fingers on any triggers. They'll begin training on and piloting the RQ-4 Global Hawk, an unarmed reconnaissance and surveillance UAV which can survey as many as 40,000 squares miles of terrain in a day. The high-altitude Global Hawk is easier to operate than its strike counterparts like the Predator or Reaper. Rather than being hand-flown via a joystick, it is largely flown via computer control.

"Remotely piloted aircraft that require more monitoring than actual hands on, such as the Global Hawk, should be considered as viable for operation by enlisted personnel," said retired Air Force Gen. David A. Deptula, who was deputy chief of staff for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance from 2006 to 2010.

There are at least two Global Hawks in the air at all times providing indispensable ISR information about ISIS and threats in Syria, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. The demand for Global Hawk remote pilots and their workload at out-of-the way-places like Grand Forks Air Force Base in North Dakota is staggering, and according to pilots, isolating.

At least they'll have the company of the officers who now pilot the Global Hawk. It remains to be seen if opening the RPA specialty to enlisted airmen will have an effect on recruiting officers for the job but the Air Force has little choice. As Secretary James said, the demand for drone pilots will only increase.

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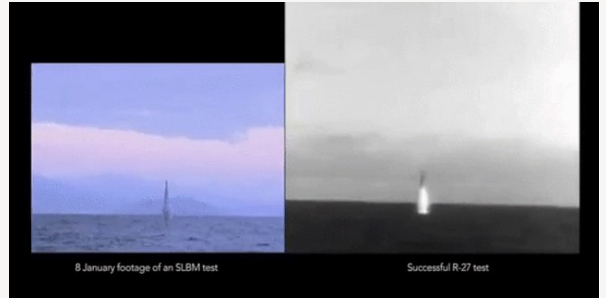


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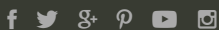


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