

U.K. Looks To Integrate Brimstone On Reaper UAV

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The U.K. Royal Air Force is looking to integrate MBDA's Brimstone air-to-ground missile on its General Atomics MQ-9 Reaper UAV fleet.

The work, which will require trials to be conducted in the U.S., was described during a speech by U.K. Minister for Defense Equipment, Support and Technology Philip Dunne at the McKenna, Long and Aldridge law firm in Washington on April 23. Dunne said that the U.K. is "currently working together through the Big Safari Group in rapid prototyping a U.K. weapon, Brimstone, on a U.S. platform."

U.K. Defense Ministry officials have since confirmed the contents of the speech, which revealed that the U.K. is looking to fit the British-manufactured weapon onto the Reaper. However, because the aircraft was purchased through the Foreign Military Sales system, it is the responsibility of the U.S. Air Force's Big Safari program office to carry out the trials.

"At present we are investigating ways of deploying Brimstone from all RAF attack aircraft, including Reaper, with tests taking place in the U.S.," a Defense Ministry official tells Aviation Week. "As part of our commitment to promote British business abroad, we regularly seek opportunities to demonstrate world-leading British technologies in order to support employment and investment in the U.K."

No timescales have been set for the trials, although sources say the result of any trials are wanted "quickly." The trials will be conducted in the U.S. so they do not effect Reaper operations in Afghanistan, where the U.K. currently has its five Reapers deployed.

RAF Reapers are currently operated in the armed reconnaissance role fitted with Lockheed Martin Hellfire missiles, and 500-lb. GBU-12 Paveway II laser guided bombs.

Brimstone has many of the characteristics of the Hellfire, and is built inside what is virtually the same airframe. With its dual-mode guidance, using both radar and millimetric seeker, the weapon can be used in a fire-and-forget mode with salvoes offering the ability to attack more than one target. The weapon was used to great effect in Libya during Operation Unified Protector, where it was fired from RAF Panavia Tornado GR4s, currently the only aircraft in the U.K. inventory capable of firing the weapon.

The push to fit the weapon to the Reaper again raises the suggestion that the U.K. Defense Ministry increasingly wants to keep its Reaper fleet beyond 2015. The five-strong fleet, soon to increase to 10, was purchased as an urgent operational requirement, and as such is currently only funded until the end of combat operations in Afghanistan in December 2014.

However, senior RAF officers have suggested the systems could be retained, although they could not be flown in the U.K. but would probably be kept in their storage boxes ready for rapid deployment. Pilots would instead simulate missions while take-off and recovery crews would continue training in the U.S.