

Historic trans-Atlantic flight planned for new Royal Air Force aircraft

A new Remotely Piloted Air System (RPAS) ordered for the Royal Air Force will fly non-stop from the United States to RAF Fairford in the UK on 11 July.

The UK is the lead customer for the next-generation aircraft which will be known as the Protector RG Mk.1 when it enters service in the early 2020s. Operated at all times by a fully qualified pilot, Protector is the World's first RPAS to be designed, built and certified against stringent NATO and UK Safety Certification standards equivalent to manned aircraft.

The flight from North Dakota to Gloucestershire is likely to take over 20 hours and will be the first across the Atlantic by a Medium Altitude RPAS and the first time one has entered UK airspace under beyond line-of-sight communication control.

The Minister for Defence Procurement, Guto Bebb MP commented: *‘Protector’s first arrival in the UK is an exciting milestone in our mission to get the most advanced equipment to combat the intensifying threats that we face. With almost double the endurance of its predecessor and armed with the latest missiles and surveillance technology, this unmanned aircraft will not only give us a decisive advantage on the battlefield but will help us reach new heights to keep Britain safe at home and overseas.’*

Air Vice-Marshal Rochelle, Chief of Staff Capability added: *‘The first trans-Atlantic flight of the Protector reinforces the Royal Air Force as being at the forefront of cutting edge technology. Offering over 40 hours’ endurance Protector will provide the RAF with unrivalled intelligence gathering possibilities. The decision to expand our Remotely Piloted Air System (RPAS) fleet with this world leading aircraft will offer a game changing leap in capability and marks the next step in our modernisation in our 100th year.’*

Protector is capable of supporting an array of homeland defence tasks, including Military Aid to Civil Authorities – for example search and rescue, disaster monitoring or flood prevention activities.

For the first flight across the Atlantic to succeed, the RAF has provided guidance, advice and supervision of UK airspace procedures.

It is understood that the aircraft will be placed on static display at the Royal International Air Tattoo, (to be held at RAF Fairford, Gloucestershire, see here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQumd3GXsWo>) demonstrating a key

component of the future of next generation RAF air power and UK leadership in this field.

In Autumn 2015, the then Prime Minister David Cameron announced that the RAF would ‘*at least double its existing UK RPAS fleet*’, and later announced its ten existing Reaper aircraft would be replaced with new MQ-9B Protector aircraft to enhance the UK’s global ISTAR capability.

The MQ-9 Reaper currently provides the UK’s Medium Altitude Long Endurance RPAS capability with persistent wide-area surveillance and precision strike capability. The Protector RG Mk.1 will replace Reaper with enhanced armed surveillance abilities, including extended range, increased payload and planned integration of UK weapons.

It has been reported that the Auto-Land system has already completed more than 90,000 landings without incident. The aircraft can be landed safely, night or day, and in a variety of weather.

Next month the aircraft flying to the UK will be a civil-registered developmental aircraft. While known as Protector in RAF service the aircraft is also called SkyGuardian by manufacturer General Atomics Aeronautical Systems Inc.

Picture captions

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An artist’s impression of the Protector, a new Remotely Piloted Air System (RPAS) ordered for the Royal Air Force, which will fly non-stop from the United States to RAF Fairford in the UK on 11 July.

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A developmental version of the Protector, new Remotely Piloted Air System (RPAS) ordered for the Royal Air Force, which will fly non-stop from the United States to RAF Fairford in the UK on 11 July.

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