Navy Unveils Squadron of Manned, Unmanned Craft

JULIE WATSON, Associated Press

The Navy on Thursday inaugurated its first squadron with both manned and unmanned aircraft.

Military officials launched the effort by reactivating the Helicopter Maritime Strike Squadron 35, known as the "Magicians" or HSL-35, which served for 19 years before being deactivated in 1992.

"The HSL-35 points to the future of naval aviation," Vice Admiral David H. Buss, commander of naval air forces, told the crowd attending the ceremony at Naval Air Station North Island on Coronado, near San Diego.

The squadron is expected to have eight manned helicopters and 10 of the Fire Scout MQ-8B, an unmanned helicopter that tracks targets and eventually will be armed, said Cmdr. Christopher S. Hewlett, who is the squadron's commanding officer.

The squadron will operate the Fire Scouts from the Navy's new littoral combat ships in the Pacific in about a year.

The new high-speed vessels, which can go into shallow waters and cross into areas that few ships can, will be greatly enhanced by the squadron, Buss said.

He called the manned and unmanned helicopters in one squadron the "perfect marriage."

The Fire Scout, made by Northrop Grumman Corp., will operate autonomously from ships and can fly over dangerous areas and allow service members on board the ship to see what is happening in real time. For instance, the Fire Scout can hover over an enemy target, maintaining contact, which will allow crews to fly back to a ship if needed to rearm and gather more troops, officials said.

Most Navy drones now are operated by contractors overseen by military personnel. The squadron's operators will undergo training for the Fire Scout next month.

Buss said the squadron will be help the Navy embark on operating manned and unmanned systems together. The Navy is still hammering out many of the details of the squadron, including whether only officers or enlisted personnel will be allowed to operate the unmanned aircraft.

"We'll learn as we go," Buss said.

The move comes 100 years after the first Navy air detachment formed 100 years ago. The Navy is the latest branch to formally integrate drone technology into its operations.

The Army and Air Force both have established drone squadrons.

Drones have become a game changer in modern warfare, allowing the military to penetrate areas that may be too risky for troops and giving forces greater flexibility because operators can be swapped out easily at their desks versus bringing back and entire crew on manned aircraft.

But their increasing use has sparked debate. Air strikes by drones have produced a backlash in places like Yemen and Pakistan, where civilian deaths from drones are breeding resentment and sometimes undermining U.S. efforts to turn the public against militants.

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