

Inside the Army

Tests planned this summer, fall Army's Small 'WASP' Aerostat to Get Communications, Sensors Upgrade

Posted: June 26, 2015

-- *Sebastian Sprenger*

Two companies are collaborating to improve Army aerostats meant for quick transport and deployment on the battlefield with new sensors and communications payloads.

Drone Aviation Corp. of Jacksonville, FL, and L-3 Communication Systems-West, headquartered in Salt Lake City, announced last week they had begun drawing up a technical strategy for integrating the new technologies on the Winch Aerostat Small Plat, or WASP, after receiving a contract from Army prime contractor BAE Systems. The companies also intend to jointly market the new, integrated solution, according to a June 24 statement.

The WASP blimp was originally made by the company Lighter Than Air Systems, which now operates as Drone Aviation Corp. The two aerostats to be upgraded are owned by the Army Space and Missile Defense Command Battle Lab. Soldiers began testing the equipment in 2013 as part of the service's Network Integration Evaluation series of demonstrations.

Upgrades to be installed include an electro-optical and infrared imaging surveillance system that will be connected to an L-3 communications package, according to the statement. A secure, high-definition video feed can then be accessed by ground formations and their equipment, such as the L-3 Remote Operations Video Enhanced Receiver, the statement reads.

The modifications will be delivered to the Army next month, and soldiers will take the system for tests during the Enterprise Challenge 2015 drill this summer and, later, the next NIE event.

The Army has previously deployed aerostats, or blimps, for a variety of missions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Equipped with sensors, such as cameras, they can help soldiers observe the surroundings of their position for enemy advances. Outfitted with communications equipment, aerostats can offer a less expensive alternative for relaying data and voice streams beside using higher-flying aircraft or space-based assets.

Programs centered around smaller platforms have traditionally fared better in the Army than large-scale designs. Officials had to cancel the service's Long-Endurance Multi-Intelligence Vehicle program, a giant hybrid airship packed with surveillance and communications gear, after technical problems became insurmountable. At the time the Army had spent almost \$300 million on the project.

Similarly, the operational testing of two massive missile-tracking blimps located north of Washington has been delayed multiple times because of construction delays and bad weather. The blimps, known as the Joint Land Attack Cruise Missile Defense Elevated Netted Sensor System, or JLENS, represent the last chance for manufacturer Raytheon to show that its system can add any value at all. The Army has determined that the capability is too difficult to deploy in expeditionary operations.

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