

Berger: Marines Need More MQ-9 Drones for 'Organic ISR'



The Marine Corps' first MQ-9A at an undisclosed location in the Central Command area of responsibility. *U.S. Marine Corps*
WASHINGTON – The U.S. Marine Corps will expand its fleet of MQ-9 Reaper drones to meet growing intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance needs, the commandant said May 10.

“We’re going to move from three squadrons right now to perhaps double that,” Gen. David Berger told an audience at the Modern Day Marine exposition. “And the reason why is the need for organic ISR.”

The MQ-9A Block 5 aircraft can stay aloft for more than 26 hours, attain air speeds of 220 knots and can operate to an altitude of 45,000 feet. Manufactured by General Atomics Aeronautical Systems Inc., the Reaper has a 3,850-pound payload capacity that includes 3,000 pounds of external stores. It provides a long-endurance, persistent surveillance capability with full-motion video and synthetic aperture radar.

Berger said that ISR needs were increasingly critical for Marine Corps units, large and small. “So absolutely, we’re going to expand in Group 5, large-scale, big-wing, medium-altitude, long-endurance, uncrewed aircraft. That’s so we can have, for the naval force, persistent organic ISR access from the MEF [Marine Expeditionary Force] level on down to the squad level,” he said.

Over that last year-and-a-half, the Marines have conducted nine force-on-force exercises at the Marine Air Ground Task Force Training Command and Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center at Twentynine Palms, California, Berger said. All of them showed that “small, distributed lethal teams that can

employ organic ISR, loitering munitions, and weapons like the Javelin and Carl Gustav [recoilless rifle] are much more lethal than larger formations that are using traditional force structures and concepts,” backing up the concepts behind his Force Design 2030 plan to retool the way the Corps fights.

The Marines began leasing two Reapers in 2018 under a company owned/company operated agreement, later acquiring them from GA-ASI in 2021 as the first increment of the Marine Air-Ground Task Force unmanned aircraft expeditionary program of record. The Marines procured 16 more of the aircraft to operate in support of distributed maritime operations and expeditionary base operations, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region.