

New Ship-to-Ship Cargo UAS Could Become Program of Record Soon



The Skyways UAV, taking off from aircraft carrier USS Gerald Ford. SKYWAYS

NATIONAL HARBOR, Md. – Naval Air Systems Command is testing out a new unmanned cargo delivery platform that can transport small amounts of cargo between Navy ships, and a NAVAIR official said Wednesday he expects it to become a program of record soon.

A team at NAVAIR was able to take the Skyways unmanned aerial vehicle and demonstrate it aboard the aircraft carrier USS Gerald Ford (CVN-78) after just a few months, and the Navy is highly interested in going beyond that, Tony Schmidt, director of rapid prototyping, experimentation, and demonstration, said at the Navy League's Sea-Air-Space expo in National Harbor, Maryland.

Schmidt said his team was initially approached by Military Sealift Command, who had discovered that about 80% of the parts they were transporting by helicopter were less than 10 pounds.

"So we said let's see if we can use a Group 2 or 3 UAS to transfer parts back and forth," Schmidt said.

Despite having very little money or resources, Schmidt's team met with industry to identify possible solutions and settled on the Skyways UAV. They delivered the prototype in October 2020. Once Rear Adm. John Meier, commander of Naval Air Force Atlantic, caught wind of the program, he asked them to deliver the aircraft for testing aboard CVN-78 just three months later.

Meier said the team missed that deadline by only a week. "Pretty awesome," he said.

Interest in the effort only grew after that. In July, the team took the UAV on a ship-to-ship mission from the USS Bainbridge (DDG-96) to the USNS Joshua Humphreys (T-AO-188). In recent weeks, they've been in conversations with Navy officials and Schmidt said he is "pretty sure it's going to get picked up as a program of record."

While the new program won't necessarily use the Skyways drone, it will take lessons from it. The team is looking at a delta wing design instead of a standard wing size, and they will experiment to see what works best in a carrier environment, as well as determine how to extend the range of the aircraft.