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NAVY

## Navy unveils new program to create drone-like autonomous aircraft

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The U.S. Navy has unveiled a five-year, \$100 million program to create unmanned helicopters capable of resupplying troops and rescuing injured soldiers from the battlefield.

The [Wall Street Journal](#) reports that over the next decade, the military is aiming to create autonomous aircraft that can help soldiers carry out night raids, search oceans for trouble, and select targets for attack.

Rear Adm. Matthew Klunder, the Navy's research chief, has called the advances in autonomous helicopters "truly leap-ahead technology."

"What we're talking about doing with full size helicopters—and we've done it—we're talking about delivering 5,000 pounds of cargo," he told The Journal.

The Navy program has put the system through successful test runs at the Marine Corps Base in Quantico, Va.

Using a special app and a tablet, operators given only a half-hour of training were able to direct small helicopters to land on their own. The helicopters can choose their own routes, pick landing sites and change their destination if they spot unexpected obstacles that emerge at the last minute.

Klunder told Reuters that the main aim of developing autonomous helicopters for resupplying troops is to reduce the need to use ground convoys to deliver food, water, and weapons. Ground convoys are attractive targets for enemy fighters. An Army study of data from 2003 to 2007 showed that one person was killed or wounded for every 24 fuel resupply convoys in Afghanistan and one was killed or wounded for every 29 water resupply convoys.

To some, the foray into autonomous aircraft is a move that conjures images of killer drones, capable of choosing targets and hunting them down without human oversight.

To address those concerns, the Pentagon has devised special guidelines meant to ensure that the military won't allow drones to carry out "kill missions" without human involvement.

Autonomous drones that require less human oversight could also take some strain off the Pentagon as it cuts back the size of the military to deal with budget cuts.

The Pentagon's expanding drone fleet has limited ability to operate autonomously. The Navy's experimental combat drone, the X-47B, landed itself on an aircraft carrier last July. The Army wants to create a robot that can operate on its own in helping soldiers search for suspects.

Development still has a way to go. The new drone capabilities still must face more challenging trials, such as flying at night and in difficult weather. But military officials expressed confidence they could begin using the system in a year.

"As far as innovative projects go, I can't think of one that's more important to the Marine Corps right now—or one that shows as much promise," Brig. Gen. Kevin Killea, commander of the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory and Adm. Klunder's deputy, told The Journal.

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