



# Fire Scout Reliability Gains Generate More Demand



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An MQ-8B Fire Scout unmanned helicopter prepares to land aboard USS Robert G. Bradley (FFG 49) after a routine mission in March 2013. The Fire Scout is supporting the frigate's Mediterranean deployment and recently surpassed its 600th deployed flight hour. The unmanned helicopter exceeded a total of 6,000 flight hours earlier in March. U.S. Navy photo



The more reliable the Navy's MQ-8B Fire Scout becomes, the more theater commanders want it. At the end of March, MQ-8Bs deployed in the Mediterranean on *USS Robert G. Bradley* (FFG 49) racked up their 600th flight hour, exceeding the previous Fire Scout deployment milestone by 100 hours. As of May 8, the total deployed flight hour number had risen to 910.

The MQ-8s on the *Bradley* are providing as much as 12 hours of real time intelligence a day, including full motion video over water and over land for Sixth Fleet and U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) commanders. From anti-piracy missions to monitoring subjects of interest in North Africa without requiring a physical footprint, the Fire Scouts are in high demand on their sixth deployment.

"The aircraft are flying 10 hours a day, easy," Fire Scout program manager Capt. Patrick Smith confirms. "When they're being tasked [heavily] we've seen flight operations as much as 17 hours a day. Our average is probably about 12 hours a day."



An MQ-8B Fire Scout unmanned aerial vehicle takes off during flight operations aboard guided missile frigate USS Simpson (FFG 56) March 6, 2012, in the Gulf of Guinea. Simpson was conducting theater security cooperation and maritime security operations in the U.S. Naval Forces Africa area of responsibility. DoD photo

The operational buzz contrasts sharply with MQ-8 operations this time last year, when aircraft were grounded after datalink/ground control problems resulted in temporary loss of control of two aircraft and other data interruptions. A 2012 Pentagon audit put the Fire Scout mission completion rate at a poor 54 percent during a deployment aboard the *USS Halyburton*.

The mission completion rate for the four MQ-8s operated by Helicopter Sea Combat Squadron 22 (HSC-22) on the *Bradley* is considerably better, according to Smith, who says reports from the *Bradley's* commanding officer and HSC-22 characterize the performance as "stellar." Smith says last year's command and control issues are

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nearly all resolved. The Fire Scout Program Executive Office tracks connectivity between the ship and air vehicle daily, including full motion video data from the MQ-8B's BRITE Star II EO/IR sensor package. Air vehicle to ship/intel center connectivity is in the upper 90<sup>th</sup> percentiles over the current deployment.

"Every time we've done a deployment, and we're on our sixth, we've seen improvement in reliability and maintainability," Smith says. "That's coming from the maturity of the system, improved maintenance training, and becoming more familiar with the system."

Typical operations see Fire Scouts operating at ranges inside 75 nautical miles (nm) from the ship. Staying inside the UAV's range limit (approximately 110 nm) allows for increased time on station. HSC-22 has frequently achieved continuous coverage for theater commanders by using "dual air vehicle operations" to eliminate gaps. Following the initial Fire Scout launch and arrival on station, a second aircraft will launch, transit and arrive as the first MQ-8B reaches its endurance limit.

The *Bradley* will be relieved on-station in late May by the *USS Roberts* (FFG 58) with another quartet of MQ-8Bs operated by HSM-46, Det 9. As with the HSC-22 detachment, the UAVs will have full motion video EO/IR capability. A small detachment in Afghanistan manned by reservists and [Northrop Grumman](#) support personnel is also in the field.

"The fact that we're able to get a large amount of flight hours on this deployment verifies the reliability and maintainability of the aircraft, of the datalink, and the ground control station," Smith says. "It's allowed us to update our training packages and even our modeling of how we provide spares for the aircraft."

Further updates are in the works for the 30-aircraft Fire Scout fleet, with testing and integration going forward at [NAS Patuxent River](#) and [China Lake](#), where the [Advanced Precision Kills Weapons System \(APKWS\)](#) will be tested on the MQ-8B in early June. Demand for the Fire Scout is reflected both by this weapons integration and the Navy's "urgent order" to equip the aircraft with the [Telephonics Corporation's](#) RDR-1700 maritime-surveillance radar system. The MQ-8B has flown previously with a radar as part of a demonstration, but the urgent order directs Northrop Grumman and the program office to deploy the capability by mid-2014.



**An MQ-8B Fire Scout unmanned aerial vehicle is secured inside the guided-missile frigate USS Klakering (FFG 42) as the ship returns from deployment, Dec. 1, 2012. The Fire Scout unmanned helicopter detachment logged more than 500 flight hours in the U.S. Africa Command area of responsibility supporting anti-piracy operations and providing real-time intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance support to combatant commanders. U.S. Navy photo courtesy of Northrop Grumman**

The Navy is standing up its first dedicated unmanned rotorcraft squadron (HSM-35) in San Diego in conjunction with the introduction of [Littoral Combat Ships \(LCS\)](#). A Fleet Introduction Team will be based on [NAS North Island](#) as will HUQ-1 (Unmanned Helicopter Reconnaissance Squadron One) which will become the fleet replacement squadron (FRS) for MQ-8Bs and the forthcoming MQ-8C.

Known as the Endurance Upgrade, the [MQ-8C is a larger follow-on unmanned rotorcraft based on the Bell 407](#). A larger payload, more performance and range (8 hours and 150 nm from ship as opposed to the 8B's three hours and 110 nm) will offer commanders more remote sensing and weapons options. Smith says the Navy's first test aircraft will fly this September.

The 30 MQ-8Cs the Navy plans to buy through 2018 will be destroyer-based, as the larger ships better accommodate their size and deployment schedules. Acquisition of the 8C is not tied to delays with the [Littoral Combat Ship](#) as some have theorized, according to Smith.

Lessons learned from operating the Fire Scout will be applied directly to the MQ-8C, particularly those tied to ship/aviation detachment coordination Smith says.

"The [*Bradley*] has been very flexible with the [MQ-8B] aviation detachments, supporting whatever tasking has been given requiring Fire Scout. The reason we went ahead with this rapid deployment capability was to support the AFRICOM commanders with maritime ISR. We've seen a lot of benefit with the ship-based capability, not having to rely on land based

operations in the theater.”

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