

Predator Reaches 1 Million Flight Hour Milestone

DEFENSE: General Atomics Unit Leads Revolution In Unmanned Aerial War Fighting and Surveillance



General Atomics Aeronautical Systems builds eight Predator-series aircraft and seven ground control stations per month.

By [Brad Graves](#)

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Predator, the unmanned aircraft built by Poway-based General Atomics Aeronautical Systems Inc., passed a significant milestone early this month, reaching a fleet total of 1 million flight hours.

The accounting takes in hours flown on all versions of the aircraft, including the Reaper model, which is four times as heavy as the original Predator. Both versions can loiter over an area for more than 24 hours, controlled by pilots typically stationed thousands of miles away.

In addition to beaming back video and radar images, the drones can carry 100-pound, laser-guided antitank missiles. Reaper, the bigger model, can carry larger complements of missiles and 500-pound bombs.

GA Aeronautical Systems' main customer is the U.S. military, which flew the Predator in the Balkans in the late 1990s. The U.S. Air Force has used the drones extensively in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Other customers include the U.S. Army, the United Kingdom's Royal Air Force, the Italian air force and civilian agencies such as U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

GA Aeronautical Systems couldn't immediately say which aircraft flew the 1 millionth hour, but said the event happened during the weekend of April 3-4.

At any one time, there are 40 Predator aircraft in flight, GA Aeronautical Systems says. Predators fly 30,000 hours per month and logged 295,000 flight hours in 2009, up from 235,000 hours in 2008. So far, Predator aircraft have undertaken 80,000 missions, with 85 percent of those in combat.

400 Aircraft in the Fleet

GA Aeronautical Systems, which recently moved from Rancho Bernardo to Poway, builds eight Predator-series aircraft and seven ground control stations per month. Company officials say it has the capacity to double production if called to do so.

The firm also services the aircraft.

The aircraft builder is a unit of privately held General Atomics and does not disclose revenue.

General Atomics flew its first Predator aircraft in 1994. Its aircraft unit has produced more than 400 aircraft since then.

In other news, the Army says its fleet of unmanned aircraft reached 1 million flight hours this spring. Army aircraft come from a variety of builders — GA Aeronautical Systems included.

Most Army drones are smaller than the Predator. The Shadow, built by AAI Corp., a unit of Textron Inc., has a 20-foot wingspan, compared to the 49 feet of Predator. The Raven, from Monrovia-based AeroVironment Inc., is more like a model aircraft, with a wingspan of 4 feet 6 inches. A soldier can launch the 4-pound plane by hand.

Maj. Gen. James Myles recently praised the unmanned systems industry for developing robotic capabilities without waiting around for the government to issue a formal requirement for them.

Myles, who is commander of the U.S. Army Aviation and Missile Command, made his remarks in mid-March at a Huntsville, Ala., gathering of robotic systems builders.

General Atomics Aeronautical Systems frequently develops its products before the military issues a requirement. A case in point is the jet-powered Predator C, which had its first flight one year ago.

Early this year the U.S. military said it wants to increase the number of Predator missions going on at any one time from 37 now to 50 in 2011, and to 65 by 2015.

Virginia-based Teal Group Corp. estimates the global market for unmanned aircraft will be \$80 billion during the next 10 years.

As seen in San Diego Business Journal

<http://www.sdbj.com/news/2010/apr/19/predator-reaches-1-million-flight-hour-milestone>