“Wingsuits” developed for airborne troops

Jason Lomberg, Technical Editor

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Here’s another example of life imitating art—SPELCO [1] (Special Parachute Equipment and Logistics Consortium) is working on a personal glider that looks straight outta Science Fiction. With its glide ratio of 5:1 and self-propulsion system, the “Gryphon [2]” could become an invaluable tool in the future warfighter’s arsenal.

Our Special Forces “operators” receive training in HAHO [3] (High Altitude High Opening) operations. By parachuting from high altitudes, operators can control their descent over a larger area. HAHO is used primarily in covert operations where airplane noise (or the sound of parachutes opening at low altitudes) would be detrimental, or where it’d be too risky for planes to fly low over enemy territory. Yet HAHO, itself, carries innate disadvantages—slow descent and serious health risks (sub-zero temperatures combined with scarce oxygen).

Gryphon is described as a “module upgrade for parachute systems.” With its small turbojet engines for UAV propulsion, and range of over 100 km, the Gryphon could (theoretically) be employed *in lieu* of a parachute. But practically speaking, it would probably serve as a supplement.

The Gryphon has a glide ratio of 5:1, which translates to nearly 40 km from 10,000 m under no wind conditions. The system comes with a heads up display (HUD), along with GPS and an OXYJUMP High Altitude Oxygen System. The maximum jump weight is 225 kg (496 lbs), which is more than enough for an operator plus equipment (average weight [4] for a white male, 20-29, is 168 lbs, and an M4 [5], with 30-round mag, weighs 6.9 lbs).

No matter how it’s utilized, this “modular upgrade” would, for all intents and purposes, eliminate the need for high-altitude jumps. A man-glider obviously presents a host of risks. Last month, a former Swiss military pilot splashed down in the Atlantic after a similar glider failed [6] on him. But deploying the Gryphon in tandem with a parachute would minimize such risks. And I stand 100% behind anything that could make our troops safer.

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