

Combat veterans refresh unmanned aircraft skills

U.S. Army

FORT BRAGG, N.C. (Feb. 12, 2013) -- Infantry Capt. Joseph Driskell ended his recent deployment to Afghanistan using unmanned aerial vehicles differently than when he began. One thing he realized that unmanned aerial vehicle, or UAV, training is critical.

"It's like anything. It takes practice," he said.

Five months after his battalion of paratroopers redeployed from restive Ghazni Province, its UAV operators began retraining on their piloting skills in one of western Fort Bragg's many wide-open parachute drop zones during a week-long refresher course.

Staff Sgt. Angel Colon, the head UAV trainer for the 82nd Airborne Division's 1st Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, said that, while the smaller Raven UAV used in the training was not the aircraft flown in Afghanistan, the basic system was virtually the same as the larger hand-launched Puma that he and his fellow operators flew in support of ground troops in Afghanistan.

"The Puma has a longer range and better camera, but if you can fly the Raven, you can fly the Puma," he said.

Operating the hand-launched UAVs is often an additional duty, as it was for Spc. Philip Piaget, a mortarman who flew a Puma for Driskell almost daily in Afghanistan, so training between deployments is important for retaining operator skills, said Piaget.

The Crestview, Fla., native said that operating a UAV in support of his fellow infantrymen made him an important asset to the company. Driskell, his company commander, readily agreed.

Unlike the larger UAVs, the Puma was a company asset and as such, was entirely in Driskell's control. Because of that, he was able to get real-time data from exactly where he wanted it, Driskell said.

Sometimes a low-flying UAV could be used to deceive an enemy into thinking Driskell's forces were interested in one area when they were heading to another.

"Sometimes they sound like lawnmowers in the sky, right?" Driskell asked. "We use the noise as a tactical advantage."

More importantly, the video feed from the UAV allowed Driskell to become proactive rather than reactive.

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"If I could see enemy setting into fighting positions, if I could see their weapons systems and see them start to perform hostile intent, then I could go ahead and start to bring in [air support], artillery or indirect fire, and set up my own ambushes against their lines of retreat," he said.

"We started off the deployment with us getting shot at to identify hostile intent/hostile act. Having systems like this alleviates the fact that we have to react. I could see things ahead of time and be offensive," he said.

To get the most out of UAVs, Driskell suggested that company commanders begin forging strong working relationships with their UAV operators during pre-deployment training.

"It takes 30-45 days to get good at it," he said. "Pick a guy who has retainability and the aptitude to fly," he said.

One of the chief advantages of the smaller UAVs is they are piloted by Soldiers who are very familiar with the area of operation as well as the patterns of life there. That knowledge helps a platoon leader or company commander tremendously as he strives to abide by the rules of engagement, said Driskell.

"The last thing I want to do is shoot the wrong person," he said.

UAV operators are required to re-certify annually.

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