Predator Missile Launch Test Totally Successful

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WRIGHT-PATTERSON AIR FORCE BASE, Ohio, (AFPN) – Aerospace history was made recently with the successful launch of a live missile from an unmanned aerial vehicle.

The Air Force's Predator Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) program is evolving from a non-lethal, reconnaissance asset, to an armed, highly accurate tank-killer, according to senior program officials from Air Combat Command (ACC) at Langley Air Force Base, Va., and Aeronautical Systems Center here.

"Capping a three-part series of demonstration flight tests on Feb. 21, Predator successfully aimed and launched a 'live' Hellfire-C, laser-guided missile that struck an unmanned, stationary Army tank on the ground at Indian Springs Air Force Auxiliary Airfield near Nellis Air Force Base, Nev.," said Maj. Ray Pry, Predator program manager.

Flown by a pilot and sensor-operator from the 53rd Test and Evaluation Group at Nellis, who were located in a nearby Ground Control Station (GCS), Predator launched the missile using line-of-sight communication, inflicting heavy damage to the tank, Pry said.

The final flight, part of the Phase I feasibility demonstration that began in August, was preceded by two similar, completely successful Hellfire launches, Pry said.

"This first recorded missile launch from a UAV took place on Feb. 16," he said. "Equipped with a single, inert Hellfire-C missile, the Predator, using its line-of-sight communication band and infrared 'Kosovo' laser-ball, aimed and struck the tank-turret about 6 inches to the right of dead-center, spinning the turret around about 30 degrees. It made a big, gray dent in the turret – just beautiful."

Following that first launch, the Predator/Hellfire launch team reviewed telemetry data and camera footage captured by the GCS crew and a helicopter from the Nellis Range, Pry said. "We wanted to be sure that we had captured what we thought we had seen – that the stress and loads were within Predator's limits, and that the guides worked perfectly," he said. "With two shots planned for Feb. 21 using both satellite and LOS [Launcher Operation Station] communications links, we wanted to ensure we could use the satellite link to fire the missile."

With the initial weaponization feasibility tests successfully completed, Gen. John Jumper, ACC commander will review the results to determine when Phase II will begin, said Lt. Col. Tom Carlson, director of ACC's advanced weapons requirements branch.

"Phase II will take the Predator/Hellfire combination to more realistic, operational altitudes and conditions, including the challenge of a moving target," Carlson said. "This will complete the demonstration of the objectives we set down at the beginning of this process, to demo the technology, and prove its operational feasibility."

There are still some challenges ahead, the colonel said. "We need to do some re-engineering on the missile, to take it up to higher altitudes. Once we're given the 'green light' to proceed to Phase II – and all indications are that we will – it will require another symphony of players, brought together by Maj. Pry and his team, to execute the second round of demonstration flights.

"The bottom line is that we are taking a Hellfire missile, normally launched from an Army helicopter with its landing-skids 'in the trees,' or from the deck of a seaborne Navy carrier, flying under 2,000 feet, and asking it to fly at higher altitudes," Carlson said. "The recent Predator launches were done within the normal operating elevations for Hellfire."

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