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The Reaper comes to Syracuse's Hancock Field

by Rick Moriarty/The Post-Standard

Friday June 26, 2009, 5:46 PM

Warfare of the 21st century has come to Hancock Field.

No, nobody is dropping bombs at Hancock Field, the Air National Guard base at Hancock Airport. But members of the guard's 174th Fighter Wing will pilot the Air Force's newest and deadliest unmanned aerial vehicle, the MQ-9 Reaper, from the base starting in November.

On Friday, the unit showed off the first Reaper to arrive at Hancock and the first to be stationed at an Air National Guard base.

The successor to the MQ-1 Predator, which has been used extensively in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Reaper is much bigger than the F-16 fighter jets it is replacing at the base.

It is 36 feet long and has a wingspan of 66 feet, more than twice the F-16's 32-foot wingspan. The plane is so wide that it had to be placed in a hangar at an angle so it would fit.

The Reaper can carry about 3,000 pounds of ordnance -- a mix of laser- and GPS-guided bombs and laser-guided missiles. That's almost as much bombs and missiles that an F-16 can carry when fully loaded with fuel.

Yet the Reaper, which is made mostly of composite materials, weighs less than half as much as an F-16 and can loiter over targets for up to 20 hours, said Col. Kevin Bradley, wing commander of the 174th Fighter Wing. The plane can fly at an altitude of up to 50,000 feet and has a range of 3,682 miles.

Sixty pilots stationed at Hancock will remotely fly the 14 Reapers that the fighter wing will receive from the Air Force.

The pilots will operate the rear-propeller-powered planes from control stations at the base. Cameras and sensors on the planes will allow the pilots to control them using video screens, computer keyboards and control sticks that look remarkably similar to the joysticks that video gamers attach to their PC's.

A second crew member will sit to the right of the pilot and operate the plane's sensors and weapons. At three work stations behind the crew, intelligence officers will provide data to support the missions.

Except during training, the planes will be deployed in places such as Iraq or Afghanistan. Pilots sitting at "ground control" stations at Hancock will communicate with the planes through a worldwide network of encrypted fiber optic and satellite links.

There is about a 1.5-second delay between a pilot's control inputs at Hancock and its effects on the plane, so a second team of pilots will be stationed in mobile control units at the overseas airfields where the planes are deployed to handle takeoffs and landings, Bradley said. Once the planes are in the air, pilots at Hancock will take over, he said.

In November, the fighter wing will begin operating Reapers deployed overseas. Plans are to begin flying training missions in Central New York starting in October 2010.

Initially, the training missions will start and end at Wheeler-Sack Army Airfield at Ft. Drum in Watertown, though they will be controlled by pilots at Hancock. Eventually, the unit hopes to fly them out of Hancock Field, but it first must get permission from the Federal Aviation Administration to operate them from Hancock, a combined civilian and military airport, and in civilian air space between Hancock and Fort Drum.

Fort Drum has a bombing range the unit will use while training with the Reaper.

The fighter wing also will operate a Reaper maintenance training facility at Hancock for up to 200 Air Force, Air Force Reserve and Air National Guard personnel a year.

Guard officials said 12 of the 174th's 30 F-16 pilots will switch to flying Reapers, and the rest will be reassigned to Air Guard units elsewhere that will continue to fly the F-16. The 174th will continue to fly the F-16 until March 2010, so it will operate both planes for five months.

The fighter wing is recruiting to fill the remaining 48 Reaper pilot positions.

Bradley said the fighter wing's operations and maintenance staffing will shrink from 500 people to 437, a loss of 63 positions, with the switch to the Reaper. That's because the Reaper, despite all its sophisticated sensors and communications equipment, is a simpler plane that is easier to maintain than the F-16, he said.

He said the staff reduction will be made by not replacing people who leave. So everyone who works for the fighter wing who wants to stay on can do so, he said.