

Protector Drone Enters RAF Service, Ushering in New Era of Unmanned Operations

June 27, 2025

— Categories: Defense & Security



The Royal Air Force has officially brought the Protector RG Mk1 into operational service, marking a steady step forward in the UK's shift toward modern, unmanned aerial capabilities. Announced on 16 June, the milestone follows extensive testing by the RAF's 56 Test and Evaluation Squadron, with engineering support from 31 Squadron. The new remotely piloted system is set to replace the RAF's current MQ-9A Reaper fleet,

with a full transition expected by the end of the year and full operational capability targeted for 2026.

Protector is the UK's variant of the MQ-9B SkyGuardian, developed by General Atomics. It offers more than 30 hours of endurance, a wingspan of 24 metres, and the ability to carry Paveway IV laser-guided bombs and Brimstone 3 missiles. What makes it especially notable is its certification to operate in all UK airspace, the first aircraft of its kind to achieve this, thanks to a Military Type Certificate issued by the UK Military Aviation Authority in April. This clearance allows the Protector to fly alongside manned aircraft in civilian skies, removing previous operational limits tied to restricted airspace.

So far, ten of the planned 16 Protectors have been delivered, four stationed at RAF Waddington and six still undergoing testing in the United States. The aircraft are remotely operated from Waddington and can reach altitudes up to 40,000 feet, supporting a broad range of missions, from intelligence gathering to precision strikes.

The system's detect-and-avoid technology has been central to enabling safe integration into civilian airspace, offering more flexible deployment and reduced reliance on remote operating zones. Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton described the aircraft's entry into service as a "significant and historic milestone," acknowledging the combined efforts of RAF personnel and industry partners.

The arrival of the Protector reflects not only a technical upgrade but a broader evolution in how the RAF plans and executes missions. As it gradually replaces the Reaper, the RAF is positioning itself to meet

evolving security demands with a more capable, longer-endurance, and regulation-compliant unmanned platform.