

## Navy Charts Bold Course with Carrier Drones to Bolster Air Wing

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The UK Ministry of Defence has confirmed an accelerated programme to integrate unmanned aerial systems into the Royal Navy's carrier operations, marking a significant step towards a modernised “hybrid carrier air wing.” This approach, blending manned and unmanned aircraft, is set to enhance operational flexibility and improve cost-efficiency in future naval deployments.

In response to a parliamentary inquiry, Defence Minister Lord Coaker confirmed that the Royal Navy is advancing Operation Highmast, a long-term plan to deploy various uncrewed platforms alongside traditional aircraft. Rotary-wing Malloy T-150 drones are already active aboard HMS Prince of Wales for logistics missions, while Peregrine systems are operating in the Gulf region. These developments form the foundation for the broader integration of strike-capable drones in the coming years.

Trials with short take-off and landing drones such as the General Atomics Mojave and W Autonomous Systems' HCMC platform have demonstrated that Queen Elizabeth-class carriers are well suited to support unmanned operations. Project Vixen, the Navy's central unmanned aviation initiative, continues to explore concepts for future flight decks that go beyond F-35B-only operations.

Additionally, Puma drones have been used in conjunction with Merlin helicopters during maritime patrols. In one trial, a Puma operated as a remote sensor, allowing the Merlin's radar to remain off, preserving stealth while enhancing situational awareness. This reflects the growing importance of unmanned systems in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance missions.

As outlined in the 2025 Strategic Defence Review, the UK intends to develop hybrid air wings incorporating F-35B jets, loyal wingmen, reconnaissance drones, and even swarming munitions. Future upgrades could include deck-launched long-range missiles, allowing the carrier strike group to project power with greater precision and from safer distances.

From a centre-right perspective, these investments represent smart defence modernisation. Unmanned systems reduce risks to personnel, lower operating costs, and allow manned platforms to focus on high-end combat roles. They also reinforce the UK's sovereign defence industry, with firms such as BAE Systems now owning Malloy Aeronautics and developing modular drones capable of rapid reconfiguration for combat, cargo, or surveillance.

In summary, the UK is moving steadily toward a future-proof naval air capability. By embracing unmanned technology, the Royal Navy is positioning itself to meet the challenges of modern warfare while safeguarding economic and strategic interests.