Royal Navy's Peregrine drone makes operational debut in Gulf security mission

The Royal Navy has successfully deployed its new mini-helicopter drone, Peregrine, on operations in the Middle East. The uncrewed aircraft has been used in counter-narcotics missions, marking a significant advancement in maritime surveillance capabilities.

Peregrine, measuring just three metres (10ft) in length, can operate for up to five hours and conduct missions well beyond the horizon. It is the first remotely piloted helicopter in Royal Navy service, offering real-time reconnaissance and intelligence gathering.

The drone has been launched from the flight deck of HMS Lancaster, a Type 23 frigate currently stationed in the Middle East for long-term maritime security operations. The warship is patrolling the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Oman, targeting smuggling routes such as the notorious 'Hash Highway'.

Capable of operating both day and night, Peregrine provides live radar data and high-resolution imagery to the ship's operations room. This enhances Lancaster's ability to detect and intercept illicit activity at sea without deploying crewed assets unnecessarily.

"Being part of the team that used Peregrine in our counter-narcotics operations was a fascinating experience," said AB(AWW) Bradley Morris. "The clarity of the images we obtained from miles away was impressive and highlighted the advanced capabilities we have at our disposal."

The introduction of the drone allows Lancaster's Wildcat helicopter to be preserved for high-intensity missions, such as direct interdictions and strike operations. It also enables new tactics, with both crewed and uncrewed aircraft operating together to maximise effectiveness.

Commander Sam Stephens, HMS Lancaster's commanding officer, described Peregrine's operational use as "a key milestone in the evolution of the Royal Navy's uncrewed capability." He emphasised that the aircraft's deployment is just the beginning of a larger transformation in naval aviation.

"This is just the start, as we continue to unlock the game-changing capability with every flight, gaining the advantage over smugglers and adversaries alike," Commander Stephens stated. The combination of advanced surveillance and strike potential is expected to improve the Royal Navy's ability to respond to emerging threats.

Lt Cdr Rob Guest, overseeing the Wildcat and Peregrine operations on Lancaster, highlighted the synergy between the two aircraft. "Combining the maritime expertise of the Wildcat Flight with the development and integration of uncrewed air systems has been a crucial catalyst," he said. "It provides the Command team with additional assets that complement the existing capabilities."

Peregrine is remotely piloted from on board HMS Lancaster, requiring trained personnel to operate the drone throughout its missions. The aircraft is based on the civilian Schiebel S-100 model but has been adapted with UK military technology, including radar and an infrared/electro-optical camera for night and low-visibility operations.

During its first operational sorties, Peregrine successfully located and monitored multiple board-and-search missions. The drone played a vital role in tracking suspect vessels, allowing Royal Marines to seize illegal narcotics and other contraband.

Beyond Peregrine, HMS Lancaster has also received significant technological upgrades, including a new counter-drone system. This addition is particularly crucial given the increasing threat of aerial attacks by Houthi rebels in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.

Following a period of maintenance in Bahrain, Lancaster has also enhanced its weapon systems and sensors. This includes the complex replacement of one of its diesel generators, requiring a major engineering effort to remove the old unit and install a new one.