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Shipboard Landing: Geneva Sees Baby Steps To New Capabilities in Upcoming Tests

A Carrolton, Tx., UAV avionics developer – Geneva Aerospace – says it will soon begin a series of auto-take off and auto-land tests aimed at establishing workable technologies for UAVs operating from smaller US Navy ships.

The trials, scheduled to begin this March or April and run for at least three months, will use an autonomously guided version of the popular Long-Eze light aircraft called a Berkut.

A flight with a Long-Eze – certificated by FAA in the Experimental category - this past October at Yuma Proving Grounds, Az., established workability of a special flight control package and gave the green light to start.

That flight was the first for this type of aircraft to be operated in pilotless form. Long-Eze and Long-Eze-derived aircraft are proving popular with UAV developers. Last year Gaithersburg, Md.-based Proxy Aviation announced plans to build a constellation of this type. But tests there have used pilots so far.

Dave Duggan, VP for Business Development at Geneva says maritime operations – including UAVs that land and take off from the water itself – are one of the targets for his company's efforts, although there is a need across all UAV types.

'They share the common feature of needing great precision and accuracy to go right,' he said.

The company's particular proficiency in the field derives from missile flight control development. The engineers who founded Geneva in 1997 come from this background, he explained.

Duggan also said there is an identified need among various DoD services for inexpensive 'gap filler' UAVs that can perform missions at more affordable costs than the major systems now on offer.

His company's trials are backed by DoD sponsorship, though he is currently prohibited from identifying the actual services involved.

Accurate UAV guidance around Navy ships 'is a big deal' he said. Only one other provider – Sierra Nevada Corp – is currently in the field, but Duggan expects it to be a highly competitive environment.

'But we have cost on our side: we have affordable COTS solutions to the problems,' which he said stem from combinations of ship dynamics, the electro-magnetic spectrum around ships, and the need for extremely accurate trajectory control.

Duggan says he is 'not in competition in any way' with the Northrop Grumman development team working on the X-47 – a possible US Navy UCAS.

'However, what we're developing would have the potential to provide the kind of guidance needed in that situation.'

-David S. Harvey