EDWARDS AIR FORCE BASE, Calif. - This birthplace for the U.S. military modern age of aviation has seen its share of aircraft on the cutting edge of technology with one goal in mind: to give the ground commander an uneven edge over potential and existing threats.

U.S. Air Force Brig. Gen., Charles "Chuck" Yeager first broke the sound barrier in 1947 over the dry lakebed of then-Muroc Army Air Base in the Bell X-1 aircraft at 768 mph. Although not nearly as fast, a relatively new Army aircraft, the MQ-1C Gray Eagle Unmanned Aerial System, has taken its place in aviation testing history having just completed a rigorous initial operation test and evaluation at the same dusty, dry lakebed.

The U.S. Army Operational Test Command concluded an initial test at the end of August on the Gray Eagle over the skies of Edwards Air Force Base and the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, Calif.

The Aviation Test Directorate was responsible for the test, which was designed to meet the defense secretary's requirement for increased intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance support to forces, according to Col. Eduardo Gutierrez, Aviation Test Directorate director.

Designated the MQ (Defense Department designation for multi-role, unmanned aircraft system) 1C (the "1" referring to the aircraft being the first of the series of remotely piloted aircraft systems), the extended range multi-purpose aircraft may soon be fielded across the Army, providing greater flexibility with the added lethality of being able to carry laser guided munitions to support troops on the ground, he said.

"The (initial test) data collected will go forward to validate the system for full-rate production decision," Gutierrez said. "We should finish our report next week and submit it to the Army Evaluation Center so they can determine if the system meets critical operational issues and criteria thresholds."

The MQ-1C Gray Eagle conducts reconnaissance, surveillance, security, attack and mission control in support of division and brigade operations throughout the full spectrum of Army operations, according to Lt. Col. Michael Gill, unmanned division chief of the aviation directorate.

Most unmanned system's with these types of capabilities currently reside within corps or echelon above corps units and are allocated across a theater, he said.

"The Gray Eagle, once fielded within the Army as a program of record, will be the first (unmanned system) of this capability to reside within mission command of a division," he said.

"The aircraft company will be part of the combat aviation brigade for the division and will support forces within the divisional area of operations. This is a huge leap for (an unmanned system) of this caliber to go from an operational to a tactical platform."