In New Mexico Desert, Drone Pilots Learn The New Art Of War

By Tabassum Zakaria

The tide of war may be receding, as President Barack Obama is fond of saying, but U.S. military demand for unmanned drones and their remote pilots is growing.

Here in the New Mexico desert, the U.S. Air Force has ramped up training of drone operators - even as the nation increasingly debates their use and U.S. forces prepare to leave Afghanistan.

"Every combatant commander in the world is asking for these things. Down in Southcom, Africom, Pacom, they're all asking for these assets, so it is in very high demand," said Lt. Col. Mike Weaver, 16th Training Squadron commander at Holloman Air Force Base, referring to the military's Southern, Africa and Pacific commands.

Weaver is an example of a fighter jet pilot turned pilot of Remotely Piloted Aircraft, or RPA, as the Air Force insists on calling drones. He flew F-15 fighter jets over Iraq and, after those squadrons were drawn down, trained on drones and flew them over Afghanistan.

"With the growth of the RPAs being what it is, a fast-growing industry in the Air Force really, you've got pilots coming from all different walks of life to fill the shoes," Weaver, clad in a green flight suit, said in his office here.

The use of drones to target and kill individuals has become increasingly controversial, and lawmakers have questioned Obama's legal justifications for using them to kill militants overseas who are U.S. citizens.

Obama has promised more transparency and, officials say, he and CIA Director John Brennan are deciding whether to remove the spy agency from the drone business and leave it to the Pentagon.

"Things are moving in that direction - moving more of these (CIA) operations to the military," a U.S. official told Reuters.

On Tuesday, a Senate Judiciary subcommittee will hold a rare public hearing on the administration's drone policy.

The Holloman base is a 90-minute drive from El Paso, Texas, through desert and low-lying scrub, on a road where a handful of vehicles would be considered rush hour.

In this sparsely populated expanse near Alamogordo and the dunes of the White Sands Missile Range, the military has expanded training over the last four years on the MQ-1 Predator and MQ-9 Reaper aircraft made by General Atomics.

At the Holloman "schoolhouse," there will be 678 pilot and sensor operator students for fiscal year 2013 that started in October, up from 136 in 2009, when training was done solely on the Reaper. About two years ago, the Air Force established a special category, 18x, for drone pilots who came into training having never flown a manned military aircraft.

Right up front, Weaver explains why pilots bristle at the use of the word drone, which in the Air Force refers to targets that pilots practice shooting down. "We do not like the name 'drones' because it has the connotation that it is this autonomous machine out there operating."

Drone pilots make up less than 10 percent of Air Force pilots, but the service says in recent years it has trained more pilots to fly drones than fighters and bombers combined - 350 drone pilots in fiscal year 2011 compared with a total of 250 fighter and bomber pilots.
RPA pilots have similar physical requirements as military pilots of manned aircraft and go through an initial flight training course on small civilian aircraft in Pueblo, Colorado, a Holloman spokeswoman said.

At the end of 2012 there were 1,280 active duty Air Force pilots flying drones, compared with 300 in December 2007. Other military services also fly a variety of unmanned aircraft.

Previously, "the top dogs went to F-15s, and that has since changed because there is no air war," Weaver said. "The fighter track is just not as popular as it used to be."

An 18x student gets over a year of training before flying a mission overseas, compared to two years training to become a fighter pilot. For already established military pilots the drone training is about 6 months, but it is not necessarily easier for them. "We've had guys with pilot wings wash out of this," Weaver said.

The Pentagon earlier this month scrapped a proposed new medal to honor drone pilots and cyber warriors after an uproar over a decision to rank it above some medals given to service members wounded or killed in battle.

Personnel who remotely fly the CIA's drones and press the trigger on the weapons also come from the military, but they operate under the authorities that govern the spy agency's covert operations, sources said on condition of anonymity.

Supporters of moving the program to the military say the CIA would then fully focus on intelligence gathering and analysis.

Any shift would occur gradually, to iron out issues such as whether the CIA should continue conducting drone strikes in the tribal areas of Pakistan, which is not a declared war zone.

The military uses drones for missions such as providing air cover for ground troops, striking enemy snipers, or detecting homemade bombs. Fresh footprints or other disturbances in remote areas can be detected by comparing images captured by drones.

Until 2009 all U.S. military drone operations were conducted from Creech Air Force Base in Nevada, but now they have spread to Cannon, Ellsworth, and Whiteman Air Force bases, located in New Mexico, South Dakota and Missouri, respectively. The aircraft take off from bases in the regions where they operate.

Training at Holloman started in 2009. Italian and British militaries send students to the training center, and the French and Germans have also shown an interest.

It takes a two-member crew to operate a drone: a pilot, who is an officer, flies the plane and launches the missile, and a sensor operator, who is enlisted, directs the camera equipment. Crews work in shifts because the drones can fly for 14-24 hours.

The lethally named Predator and Reaper aircraft look like silver-hooded flying reptiles with a sensor sphere under the "head" that operates as the eyes.

The "cockpit" from which the aircraft is flown is in a tan trailer with no windows and two giant air-conditioning hoses pumping air to cool the computers. On the Holloman base, the trailers are behind their own fenced area with razor wire and access restricted by a combination lock.

Inside the trailer, two chairs face about a dozen screens in total, including some that can tap into top information classified as secret and top secret. The feel is of an isolation chamber, with no outside distractions.

"This is a sterile cockpit environment," Weaver says. There is even a special knock if someone wants to enter.
A pilot who previously flew manned jets said she wished the drones offered a broader view, like the cockpit of a manned plane so the surrounding area could be seen. "Now I look at the ground all the time," she said, requesting her name not be used.

Weaver said the job is definitely not like playing video games. "You see (targets) running and you can hear them sometimes, the fear in their voice. It's not a video game."