

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-162](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of the Navy has committed to rapidly grow its unmanned systems portfolio. It currently has at least 24 types of systems and has budgeted nearly \$10 billion for their development and procurement for fiscal years 2018-2022. Personnel who launch, navigate, and recover the systems are integral to effective operations. Senate Report 114-255 included a provision for GAO to review the Navy's and the Marine Corps' strategies for unmanned system operators. GAO examined, among other things, the extent to which the Navy and the Marine Corps have (1) evaluated workforce alternatives (such as the use of civilians and contractors) for unmanned system operators and (2) developed and updated personnel requirements and related policies and goals for selected unmanned systems. GAO compared documentation on unmanned systems with DOD policies and conducted discussion groups with unmanned system operators.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making ten recommendations, including that the Navy and the Marine Corps clarify policies to identify circumstances in which civilians and contractors may serve in operational roles and apply the policies to future evaluations; update personnel requirements for one UAS; and evaluate and update policies and goals to inform future personnel requirements. DOD concurred with eight recommendations and partially concurred with two. As discussed in the report, GAO continues to believe that all ten are warranted.

View [GAO-18-162](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov.

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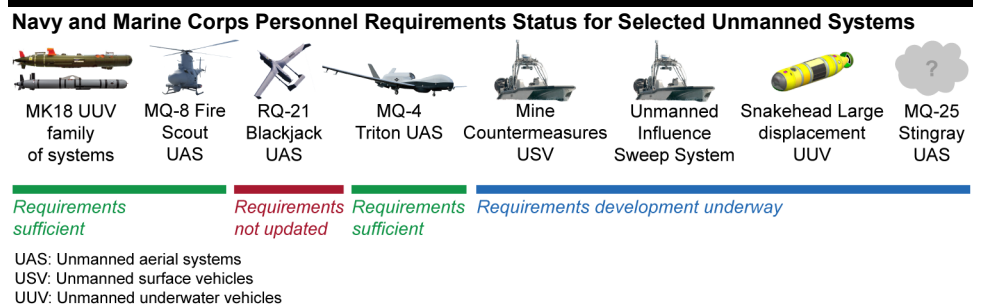
MILITARY PERSONNEL

Actions Needed to Better Position the Navy and the Marine Corps to Support Expanding Unmanned Systems Operations

What GAO Found

The Navy and the Marine Corps are rapidly growing their portfolios of unmanned aerial systems (UAS) and unmanned maritime systems and have opted to use military personnel as operators without evaluating alternatives, such as federal civilian employees and private sector contractors. Service officials stated that civilians or contractors are not viable alternatives and policies are unclear about when and how to use them. However, a June 2016 Department of Defense-commissioned study found that alternative staffing strategies could meet the UAS mission more cost-effectively. Military personnel may be the most appropriate option for unmanned systems, but without clarifying policies to identify circumstances in which civilians and contractors may serve in operational roles, the services could continue to make workforce decisions that do not consider all available resources.

The Navy and the Marine Corps have sufficient personnel requirements or efforts underway to develop personnel requirements for seven unmanned systems that GAO reviewed (see fig.), but requirements for one system (i.e., the RQ-21 Blackjack UAS) have not been updated. That system's requirements have not been updated because service entities disagree about whether they are sufficient. Since 2015, units have deployed with about two to three times the personnel that headquarters and command officials expected they would need. Marine Corps officials stated that the Blackjack's personnel requirements were based on an outdated concept of operations and are insufficient for supporting workloads. Without updating the personnel requirements for the Blackjack UAS, the services will lack current information about the number of personnel needed.



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information. | GAO-18-162

The Department of the Navy has taken positive steps but has not fully evaluated and updated aviation policies that affect personnel requirements for certain UAS and lacks clear goals for informing future requirements for all of its UASs. GAO found that the policies do not fully account for differences between UASs of varying sizes and capabilities. These policies require, for example, that the Blackjack UAS be held to the same maintenance standards designed for larger aircraft and UAS, which in turn affects personnel requirements. Until the Department of the Navy evaluates and updates such policies and clarifies related goals, the services will be hampered in developing and updating future requirements as unmanned system inventories grow and operations expand.