

November 29, 2012

First X-47B UCAS catapult launch makes naval aviation history



Launching crew prepares the X-47B Unmanned Combat Air System (UCAS) for its first land-based catapult launch Nov. 29 from Patuxent River, Md. (U.S. Navy photo)

NAVAL AIR SYSTEMS COMMAND, PATUXENT RIVER, Md. – The X-47B Unmanned Combat Air System (UCAS) demonstrator successfully completed its inaugural land-based catapult launch here Nov. 29, marking the start of a new era for naval aviation.

"Carrier-based unmanned aircraft will change the concept of operations for the carrier-controlled airspace," said [Rear Adm. Mat Winter](#), the program executive officer for Unmanned Aviation and Strike Weapons. "The N-UCAS program's goal is to demonstrate integration of an unmanned aircraft into a carrier environment and reduce technical risk associated with developing potential future unmanned, carrier-compatible systems."

The Navy's first-ever steam catapult launch of the pilotless X-47B ensures the vehicle can structurally handle the rigors of the unique and stringent aircraft carrier environment.

"The X-47B shore-based catapult launch we witnessed here today will leave a mark in history," said [Vice Adm. David Dunaway](#), NAVAIR commander. "We are working toward the future integration of unmanned aircraft on the carrier

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deck, something we didn't envision 60 years ago when the steam catapult was first built here."

Since the birth of naval aviation, engineers have relied on experienced test pilots to help evaluate aircraft flying qualities and structural suitability. Today, the Navy UCAS integrated test team relied solely on data from a pre-programmed automated X-47B aircraft to achieve these data points.

"This test, in addition to the extensive modeling and simulation done prior to today, gives us great confidence in the X-47B's ability to operate on the flight deck," said [Capt. Jaime Engdahl](#), the Navy UCAS program manager.

The combined Navy and Northrop Grumman team will continue ground-based catapult verification and final flight software validation at Pax River before embarking on USS Harry S. Truman (CVN 75) later this month for its initial sea trials.

The Navy will use the X-47B to demonstrate the first carrier-based launches and recoveries by an autonomous, unmanned aircraft in 2013.

"We are breaking new ground with the development of a carrier-based system that enables launch and recovery support of an unmanned platform off a carrier flight deck," Engdahl said. "Every test we are conducting at Pax River and at sea is a historic milestone for naval aviation."

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The X-47B prepares for its inaugural catapult shot Nov. 29 at Patuxent River, Md. The Navy's first-ever steam catapult launch of the pilotless X-47B ensures the vehicle can structurally handle the rigors of the unique and stringent aircraft carrier environment. (Photo courtesy of Northrop Grumman)