

MDA's Heron Dips Toes into UAS Marketplace

By Brett Davis

Canada's MacDonald, Dettwiler and Associates Ltd (MDA) is stepping into the unmanned aircraft systems services business, using its new Israel Aerospace Industries-built Heron to bid for government work and prepare for a move into a broader commercial market.

MDA is a 3,000-employee company based in Richmond, British Columbia in Canada. Perhaps its highest achievement—literally—is building the robotic arm on the International Space Station.

Approximately four years ago, company officials were at an AUVSI Unmanned Systems North America conference and exhibition in Baltimore when they decided to enter the burgeoning unmanned systems business, says David Hargreaves, vice president of MDA's Integrated Information Solutions business.



The MDA/IAI Heron UAS.

"My chief engineer and I were talking about things, and we said, 'if we're going to be in the UAV business, we better find ourselves a UAV and find out how to fly them and do all the things you need to do,'" he tells *Unmanned Systems*.

MDA wanted to get into the UAS business because "the growth numbers are phenomenal."

Integrated Information Solutions does "everything that's not in space," he tells *Unmanned Systems*. "That includes everything from airborne radars to satellite ground segments to UAVs to sonars, a myriad of different things."

The unit makes up about 20 percent of the overall business but the number of people directly involved in the new UAS push is much smaller—approximately 20 people in all.

Hargreaves says the company decided early on that it would not build the actual vehicle, but buy one already developed and focus on finding the markets for the information it could produce. MDA settled on the Heron, built by Israel Aerospace Industries' MALAT division.

"It's used a ton by lots of different users around the world. It has a great payload capacity that can be used in a number of different ways. Israel's been flying these things [UAS] for about 40 years or maybe longer, so the Heron is the culmination of a lot of lessons learned," he says.

MDA's Heron arrived in Canada early this year and the company reported its first flight on March 12 when it took off from Suffield in southern Alberta, where the company's UAS operations are based.



"We have the aircraft, in Suffield, Alberta, about 20 minutes outside of Medicine Hat. There is a Canadian Forces base at Suffield, and we have set up shop on the airbase there," which also features closed airspace. The company has its own hangars and office space.

The first MDA challenge is the Noctua program (Latin for "owl"), whereby the Canadian government would lease a medium-altitude, long-endurance (MALE) vehicle to quickly bolster its military forces in Afghanistan (see the March issue of *Unmanned Systems*). Bidders, including expected rival Elbit Systems (with the Hermes 450), were to submit their offers in late May. (Beyond that, the government is also considering the longer-range Joint Unmanned Surveillance and Target Acquisition System, or JUSTAS.)

Hargreaves didn't want to comment on the Noctua competition, but says MDA is looking beyond it to other markets in Canada and beyond, including for commercial markets. The Heron carries the IAI/MALAT sensor ball, can carry synthetic aperture radar and various other payloads, including specialized sensors tailored for specific applications.

"Today ... we're very focused on Noctua in general, in the last six months and the next six months, but we also have a number of other initiatives which are focused on building our service initiatives that have nothing to do with Noctua, nothing to do with the Canadian government," Hargreaves says. "What we're really interested in is exploring the services business."

This would include studying climate change, search and rescue operations, oil and gas pipeline monitoring, security and forestry. MDA also provides information products for the financial services industry, including land information for the real estate and insurance markets, and unmanned vehicles could have a role to play there.

"The approach we're taking to this is a business approach," he says. "We're not in the business of building technology and figuring out how to sell it. We're really looking at the market and what the market needs."

Brett Davis is editor of Unmanned Systems.

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