

Israeli-built drone impresses

Unmanned aircraft shows its worth in rescue exercise

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An Israeli-made unmanned aircraft wowed several Red Deer-area pilots during its first mock search and rescue operation in Canada.

Several members of the Red Deer chapter of the [Civil Air Search and Rescue Association](#) were among a select group who witnessed the July 10 demonstration in Southern Alberta.

[Bob Jablonski](#), provincial vice-president of the association, was amazed by the demo.

The drone is a pilotless airplane directed by remote control from the ground.

"It flew a certain pattern and with its sensors it was able to pick up the wrecked aircraft," said [Jablonski](#), husband of [Red Deer North MLA Mary Anne Jablonski](#).

Search and rescue officials initially tasked the [MDA Heron](#) drone to perform a wide-area search.

The drone uses infrared and optical cameras to search for missing aircraft. One ground operator is the cameraman while the other operator controls the plane.

"We had an old wrecked [Cessna](#) that we brought in from Saskatchewan and set it out," said [Jablonski](#), who worked with Saskatchewan members of the search and rescue association on the project.

[Calgary Northeast Conservative MP Art Hanger](#) played the role of a plane crash survivor.

Once the drone's operators identified the crash site, they relayed the information to an association aircraft, which dropped a survival kit.

After the drop, the drone was used to direct a ground search and rescue team.

The ground team reached the crash site and [Hanger](#) was safely "rescued."

The [MDA Heron](#) continued to circle above, providing real-time surveillance and monitoring of the entire operation.

The mock crash site occurred several kilometres from Canadian Forces Base Suffield near Medicine Hat.

The [Discovery Channel](#) filmed the exercise.

Members of [Israel Aerospace Industries](#), the drone's manufacturer, were on hand.

The drone is being marketed to Ottawa for military operations overseas.

"Trials have been done at the (Suffield) base since January," Jablonski said. "They are operating around the world."

MDA, an information systems company from British Columbia, is also promoting the drones for civil operations, such as search and rescue, environmental monitoring and fighting forest fires.

"This would be good for search and rescue operations, particularly in the north where there are vast uninhabited areas," Jablonski said.

He added the drone would be "a lot cheaper" to run than the military Hercules aircraft.

The military calls civilian volunteers with the association to search initially, and then the Hercules is called in.

"This drone takes less crew, less support than to run the Hercules aircraft," Jablonski said. "It becomes an extra tool."

Jablonski said this unmanned aircraft can stay airborne for more than 30 hours at a time.

"The wingspan is about 52 feet and the plane can go as high as 25,000 feet," he said. "So it can loiter over an area for a long period of time, and it's got day and night capability."

The drone is easily transportable in a trailer since its wings can be taken apart.

Jablonski said the only area where the drone may have trouble is in mountainous areas, where a lot of contours exist.

The price tag isn't cheap, at about \$2.5 million, he added.

Still, Jablonski hopes rescuers like him will have access to these drones some day.

"I definitely see it having a future in rescue operations in Canada," Jablonski said.

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Figure:

From left, pilot [Bob Jablonski](#), navigator [Deb Switzer](#) and spotters [Dave Munro](#) and [Ken Labron](#) took part in a demonstration exercise to show the capabilities of remote-controlled aircraft in search and rescue operations.

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