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# Eye in the sky

By Adam Linhardt Key West Citizen

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BRIAN BASHAM/The Citizen Austin Howard, left, and Wayne McAuliffe of Martin UAV move a prototype V-BAT drone that will be operating from the USNS Spearhead while the ship was in port Wednesday afternoon at Mole Pier. The vertical takeoff drone is one of only six in existence and is assisting in the JIATF South mission of detection and monitoring of illicit trafficking.

The 337-foot USNS Spearhead transport ship is back in Truman Harbor through next week preparing for a trip to Latin and South America as well as testing a new asset — a drone that takes off and lands vertically.

The Spearhead visits Key West regularly as it is often tasked with supporting Joint Interagency Task Force South based near Truman Waterfront as well as conducting humanitarian missions to Caribbean nations, but this visit is a little unique.

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Navy Lt. Rick Moore and Martin UAV Vice President for Programs Wayne McAuliffe displayed the Texas-based company's 9-foot tall drone that will be assisting in gathering intelligence while at sea.

"It's a very versatile platform and will help us carry out more missions, such as maritime security and supporting JIATF South," Moore said.

The drone has an 8-foot wingspan and is relatively light at roughly 82 pounds. It only needs a 15-foot by 15-foot space to take off and land, McAuliffe explained. The drone being used by the Spearhead crew is outfitted with cameras and sensors, but the drone can fly up to eight hours with any standard 5-pound payload.

It is not a weapons platform, McAuliffe said.

Moore said the Spearhead will also be visiting several Latin and South American countries as they continue to increase inter-operability with partner nations. The drone testing is a small part of their larger mission.

"We have a medical and construction element and will be drilling some wells for water as well as conducting dive training with our host nations," Moore said.

The Spearhead takes part in the Department of Defense's annual mission called Continuing Promise 2017 that seeks to foster stability and enhance the collective ability of the United States and its partner nations to respond to natural disasters and humanitarian crises.

The Spearhead was last in Key West in February where it was loaded with medical, dental and veterinarian supplies near the Outer Mole Pier bound for Guatemala, Honduras and Colombia.

The ship has a civilian crew of fewer than 30 people. Though the Spearhead crew is mostly civilian, the vessel itself is part of the Military Sealift Command, the portion of the Navy that oversees transport vessels.

There are Naval officers on board who oversee the military element of the ship's mission.

Moore said the Spearhead will likely remain in Key West through next week.

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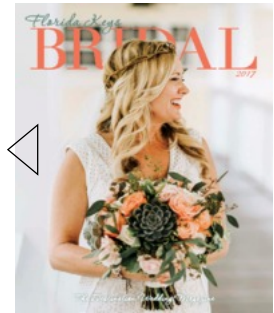
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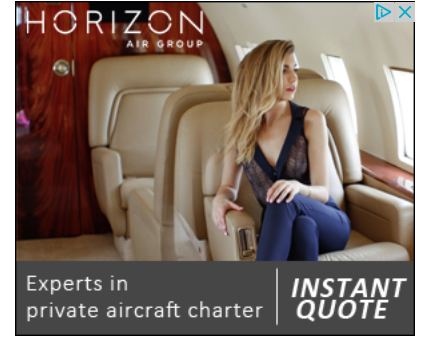






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