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INTERNATIONAL

US Air Force joins airship demonstration race with Blue Devil 2

By Stephen Trimble

An \$86.2 million contract award last month reveals the US Air Force will seek to prove if airships can replace fixed-wing aircraft on some surveillance missions over Afghanistan.

About nine months after the US Army launched its long-endurance multi-intelligence vehicle (LEMV) programme, the air force awarded defence technology start-up MAV6 a contract, Blue Devil Block 2.

MAV6 chief executive David Deptula confirms an airship will be deployed to Afghanistan in January to demonstrate a lighter-than-air vehicle with a multi-intelligence payload.

That timing coincides with the army's plans to demonstrate the LEMV airship under a \$517 million contract awarded to [Northrop Grumman](#) Hybrid Air Vehicles last June.

Deptula, who retired three months ago as the air force's deputy chief of staff for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, says the Blue Devil concept pre-dates the launch of the army programme.

Deptula does not consider Blue Devil and LEMV as competitive programmes, but as complementary systems.

Unlike the heavy-lift capability provided by LEMV's all-new hybrid airship, Blue Devil relies on conventional airship vehicle designs, Deptula says. The TCOM-built airship is nearly 113m (370ft) long, with a payload compartment measuring 7m long by 3m wide by 2.1m high, he says.

Although named Blue Devil Block 2, the airship demonstration bears little resemblance to the previously unpublicised Block 1 effort.

Deptula describes Block 1 as the air force's follow-on to the US Marine Corps' Angel Fire programme, which integrated a wide-area airborne surveillance payload with instant playback capability with a [Beechcraft C-12 Huron](#) airframe.

Besides changing from a fixed-wing C-12 to an airship, the Block 2 programme also includes a sensor upgrade.

The air force will integrate both the Sierra Nevada Gorgon Stare and BAE Systems/[Lockheed Martin](#) autonomous real-time ground ubiquitous surveillance imaging system as wide-area airborne surveillance sensors. A pallet with a ground moving target indicator payload will also be integrated, along with signals intelligence sensors, Deptula says.

MAV6's concept envisages the Blue Devil Block 2 as the mothership of a vast surveillance network, co-ordinating with other airships and the [General Atomics](#) MQ-9 Reaper unmanned air system with Gorgon Stare to provide unblinking coverage over a huge area, Deptula says.

The [USAF](#) fielded the first Gorgon Stare payload earlier this year on the MQ-9 fleet. Each payload includes 10 camera apertures, increasing surveillance by an order of magnitude over the single aperture of the MQ-9's multi-spectral targeting system camera.