FAA Pays General Atomics $1.5 Million to Fly Newest Military Killer/Surveillance Drone in U.S. Domestic Airspace

*by **Barry Summers**, published on **CovertAction Magazine**, May 17, 2022*

April 1st was a good news/bad news kind of day for U.S. military drone-maker General Atomics. First, it was reported that the government of Australia had revealed that they were canceling the planned purchase of 12 MQ-9B SkyGuardian drones, made by General Atomics (GA). Since the deal would have been worth a cool ***one billion dollars*** to GA, this was definitely the bad news.

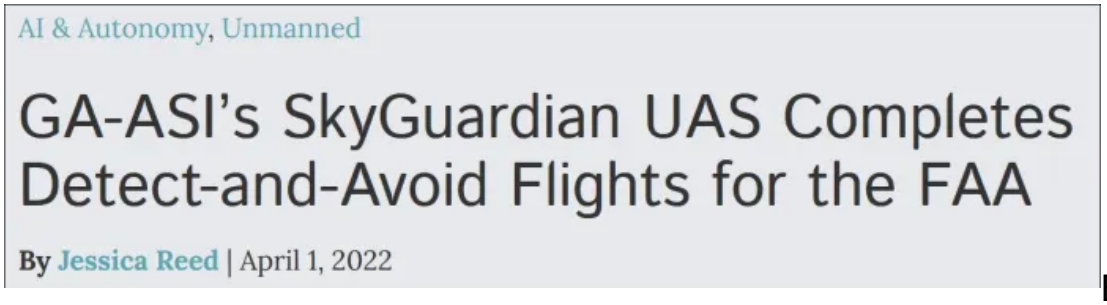


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"Basically we have a five-and-a-half billion dollar budget provision, including about $3 billion spent to date, and potential costs within that envelope. So taxpayers will be up for five-and-a-half billion dollars and submarines that don't exist?" asked Sen. Penny Wong.

By COLIN CLARK on April 01, 2022 at 10:22 AM

Luckily, GA had a good news story in the works. And as luck would have it, it would run on the same day as the bad news story.



AI & Autonomy, Unmanned

GA-ASI's SkyGuardian UAS Completes Detect-and-Avoid Flights for the FAA

By Jessica Reed | April 1, 2022

Back in January, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) handed GA $1.5 million to fly the 79-ft. 12,000 lbs SkyGuardian over North Dakota for 10 hours. (GA apparently didn't feel the need for a press release and the resulting news article until the

day *before* some bad news from down under was in the pipeline.)

The stated purpose of the FAA grant to GA was "to research Detect and Avoid (DAA) capabilities." (DAA, the ability for an unmanned aircraft to 'detect' another aircraft, and 'avoid' it, is the Holy Grail of drone integration. "*Integration*" is the process of removing restrictions against drones operating in domestic U.S. airspace.)

That's right—the FAA was PAYING a U.S. arms manufacturer $1.5 million in public monies to demonstrate their newest military surveillance drone over domestic U.S. territory.

If this is all a surprise to you, you're not alone. The program to integrate military drones into U.S. domestic airspace has been operating for 10 years. It involves various federal agencies—DoD, FAA, NASA, Commerce, Energy, DHS, etc. But it hasn't been reported on in any major news venue since the day before the bill creating it was signed into law in 2012 by then-President Barack Obama.


Los Angeles Times

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Pentagon working with FAA to open U.S. airspace to combat drones

BY W.J. HENNIGAN, LOS ANGELES TIMES
FEB. 13, 2012 12 AM PT

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Of course, the military has been preparing to operate their drones in U.S. domestic airspace since long before that. Here, a U.S. Air Force officer briefs FAA officials on the plans to fly Reaper drones in-and-out of Hancock Field in Syracuse, all the way back in January of 2010.



Ground-Based Sense-and-Avoid (GBSAA) Workshop discussing the future of the 174th's MQ-9 Reapers flying out of Hancock Field

Lt. Col. Scott Brenton, 174FW F-16 pilot, leads a workshop with members of the FAA and other agencies at Hancock Field in Syracuse N.Y. on 27 January 2010. The Ground-Based Sense-and-Avoid (GBSAA) Workshop was held to discuss the future of the 174th's MQ-9 Reapers flying out of Hancock Field. (US Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Lee O. Tucker/Released)

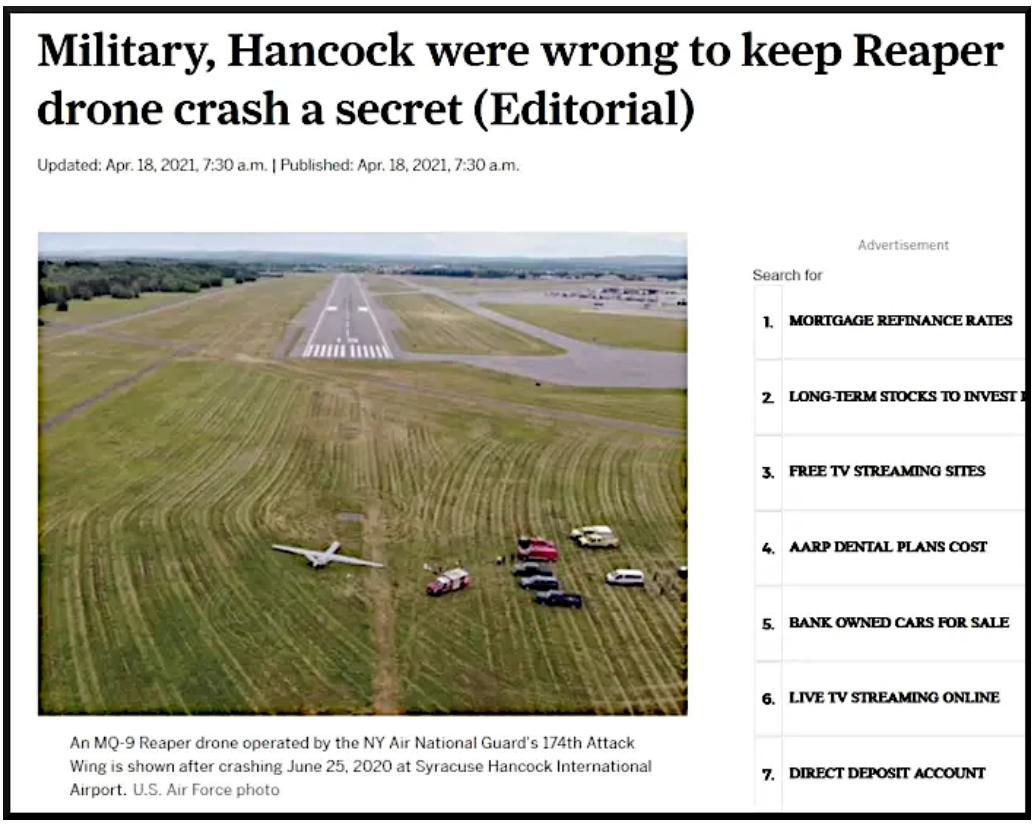
[Source: 174attackwing.ang.af.mil]

And then, wouldn't you know, when the FAA designated six drone integration test sites around the country in 2014 (supposedly after a rigorous competition), one of them was based in New York state. And that USAF officer from 2010 was put on staff to direct the very operation that he had described nine years earlier. Here's a screengrab of his 2019 presentation on the operation (which has since disappeared from the NUAIR website.)



[Source: nuair.com]

Less than a year after THAT "*Success Story*" of Reapers flying over populated areas of New York, one of them crashed upon takeoff at the Syracuse-Hancock Int. Airport. The drone with up to two tons of aviation fuel went down mere seconds from a densely-populated residential and commercial part of Syracuse. It took almost a year before the Air Force released that information to the public.



Military, Hancock were wrong to keep Reaper drone crash a secret (Editorial)

Updated: Apr. 18, 2021, 7:30 a.m. | Published: Apr. 18, 2021, 7:30 a.m.

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An MQ-9 Reaper drone operated by the NY Air National Guard's 174th Attack Wing is shown after crashing June 25, 2020 at Syracuse Hancock International Airport. U.S. Air Force photo

[Source: syracuse.com]

Why would they be so secretive about one of their drones nearly causing a catastrophe in a U.S. city? Maybe because it was the second Reaper crash in as many days. One had gone down somewhere in Africa just the day before, because of a maintenance problem GA had known about for months but hadn't fixed.

More likely, it might have been because at the time, GA was trying to fly the Reaper's big brother, the new MQ-9B SkyGuardian, over the City of San Diego, supposedly to demonstrate the commercial applications of large military-grade drones. Three weeks before the Syracuse crash, the Voice of San Diego had announced that they were suing the FAA and GA over the secrecy surrounding ***that*** attempt.



[Source: voiceofsandiego.org]

That proposed flight was eventually rejected by the professionals at FAA, but FAA leadership still fought tooth and nail in court to not reveal the reasons why. Whatever the reason, that rejection turns out to have been well-justified. GA was forced to take a consolation flight over the desert, and because the project was supported by NASA, they had to issue a report. That report clearly shows that the crucial DAA system (which Australia had said was the basis for choosing the MQ-9B), had failed repeatedly during the flight.

> During the 9.5 hour flight, there were a few instances where the DAA traffic display experienced a brief (30-40 second) loss of data, then returned to normal operation. During these drops, TCAS alerts on the pilot's Head-up Display, including resolution advisories (RAs), remained operational. GA-ASI's investigation into the root cause concluded that these events were related to a brief data bandwidth conflict on the SATCOM downlink between the DAS-4 camera system and the DAA system, which has since been corrected by updating payload configuration settings to ensure DAA system messages remain prioritized during any unexpected data conflict situations. Section 2.1.4 below provides an overview of these observations and the results of the investigation.

Don't bother looking for that overview. Somehow, it never made it into the report…

With all that failure, General Atomics and the federal government are still moving ahead with plans to open U.S. domestic airspace to routine operation of military

surveillance drones. In fact, GA is already previewing the opportunity (to commercial AND government customers) to ***lease*** their drones for surveillance flights in domestic or international airspace. They're even considering a "*"pay by the hour" scenario*".

The Leasing page on the General Atomics website ends with this odd signoff: "*-ISR/24/7/365-*".

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