

# UAV pilots, operators qualify for flight pay

Staff report

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Air Force officers trained exclusively to fly unmanned aerial vehicles will get their own career field and be considered “rated officers,” Air Force leaders decided Wednesday. The pilots also will qualify for flight pay.

In addition, top Air Force leaders decided to designate enlisted sensor operators as “career enlisted aviators.” The sensor operators already had their own Air Force Specialty Code.

Both decisions break down barriers that treated airmen flying remote-controlled planes differently than aircrew members of other aircraft.

Pilots trained only to fly MQ-1 Predators, MQ-9 Reapers and RQ-4 Global Hawks were given the AFSC designation 18X.

Officers who join the career field will have a six-year active-duty service commitment and qualify for aircrew incentive pay.

The first class of 18X pilots graduated Sept. 25 from initial qualification training at Creech Air Force Base, Nev., and another class is in the pipeline.

Enlisted airmen working as sensor operators for the Predator and Reaper already have the 1UOX AFSC. Designating them as career enlisted aviators qualifies them for incentives received by other enlisted aviators such as loadmasters and flight engineers. They’ll also wear enlisted aviator wings.

“The Air Force intent is to develop a professional, sustainable population of unmanned aerial system airmen as part of viable career fields that include equitable opportunities for promotion, developmental education, leadership and command,” Maj. Gen. Darrell Jones said in an Air Force statement about the changes.

Air Force personnel officials have worked with career field managers to ensure the changes don’t hurt the pay of airmen entering these new career fields. For example, paying sensor operators as career enlisted aviators makes sure no airman loses money in the transition from selective re-enlistment bonuses to a career enlisted flyer incentive pay compensation package.