26 Feb 2016
The Australian, Australia

Author: Chris Griffith • Section: Aviation • Article type : News Item
Classification : National • Audience : 104,774 • Page: 30 • Printed Size: 656.00cm²
Market: National • Country: Australia • ASR: AUD 13,257 • Words: 877
Item ID: 549727121

Israeli army trains drone pilots

EXCLUSIVE

CHRIS GRIFFITH

A local technology start-up is channelling the know-how of the Israel military to lure Australian former defence personnel as pilots for its fleet of commercial drones.

Ninox managing director Marcus Ehrlich said its first group of two pilots and two maintenance staff undergoing training were all ex-Australian Defence Force men. "They're all out of the army drone regiment, which makes them fantastic to train and great utilisers of the system," he said.

So why did they leave? "Their stories are different for different pilots. Some have come to the natural end of their time with the defence force, others are younger and without the deployment they want."

He said the civilian commercial drone industry offered an excellent private civilian avenue for former defence personnel to continue with their skills that the country "had paid a lot of money for them to acquire".

"A lot of these young guys and girls come out and they have nowhere to use these fairly unique skills. I think the more companies like Ninox can expand and provide services, the more places we have for people whose skills would otherwise go to waste."

He said the pilots needed to be trained in the specific drones they were using. That lets them fly beyond the hobbyist limits set by the Civil Aviation Safety Authority. Hobbyist pilots cannot fly less than 5.5km from an airport, more than 120m high, at night, over populous areas, and within 30m of people not associated with flights.

Last year Sydney's Ninox Robotics was the first Australian drone operator to conduct test flights at night. Its fixed-wing unmanned aircraft systems went searching for foxes, goats, camels, rabbits and wild dogs. The drones beamed thermal video in real time back to the pilots in a ground control station.

Now Ninox pilots and technicians are in Israel for one month, honing their flying skills using drones made by Bluebird Aero Systems.

Bluebird operates from Kadima, a small town 35km from Tel Aviv. It makes a variety of drones, including the SpyLite Mini UAV. According to Bluebird's website, it is used for "covert, real time, life-saving intelligence to the Israeli forces performing their missions in the war on terror and supporting the Israeli homeland security situation".

Bluebird's drones were used in Operation Brother's Keeper, launched in response to the 2014 kidnapping of three Israeli teenagers, and Operation Protective Edge, Israel's response to rocket attacks from Gaza in the same year.

The fact drones built for military surveillance are being adapted to commercial use is another example of technology transference from defence to general use.

Ninox chief pilot Colin Smith said he had worked for 37 years in the military and was stationed in Iraq in 2007-08, in the streets of Northern Ireland during the bloody confrontations there, and earlier had fought in the Falklands War in 1982. He was now exiting the military to be a civilian drone pilot.

"The Bluebird instructors are all Israeli defence force and have flown both the SpyLite system and mini UAVs," Mr Smith said. "One of the instructors is ex-air force and has flown Heron UAVs, which Australia's air force is using at the moment."

Ninox has been deploying SpyLites for its commercial drones in Australia. They have a wingspan of 2.75m and can fly for up to four hours at 120km/h.

Mr Smith said commercial drone pilots had to be particularly skilled in reacting when things went wrong.

"Our operation involves flying into paddocks and conducting launch and recovery, and operation and control of the UAV. We'll set up inside a sun shade set-up or in airconditioned trailer," he said.

"You need to know how to monitor your instruments, in terms of airspeed, altitude, map and other system parameters.

"It's similar to being in an aircraft cockpit where you have to do your aircraft checks every 20 or 30 seconds.

"You watch that the system is operating OK and the live video feed. All the guys on our crew are trained in surveillance techniques. After four weeks they'll be qualified on the platform and have a certain amount of hours on the platform."

Mr Smith said training in Israel was more economically viable and easier in terms of airspace clearance and regulations. "It's a lot less complicated than with the Australian airspace," he said.

Mr Ehrlich said Israel's higher rate of "operational tempo" and the maturity of its systems made it a good place to pick up gear and experience for training. "It's quite unique by global standards."

He said Ninox had been inundated with requests for its drones to conduct monitoring work for conservation, agriculture, mining and linear infrastructure monitoring tasks such as inspecting powerlines in the bush.

"We've got well over a dozen (commercial projects) in train, whether they be signed off or going through to final negotiations."

He said Ninox aimed eventually to have a couple of dozen teams across Australia, which it would use as a launching pad for offering UAV services internationally.

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Ninox pilots Colin Smith, Thomas Lincoln, Ed Taunton-Burnet and John Catchpole with a SpyLite Mini drone during training in Tel Aviv

SHLOMO SHOHAM

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> COLIN SMITH, NINOX