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Civil Air Patrol buying a 'better set of eyeballs'

Air Force auxiliary names contractors for new Searchers' Edge Program

MAXWELL AFB, Ala. — Civil Air Patrol, the civilian auxiliary of the U.S. Air Force, has selected two contractors to provide hyperspectral imaging sensors and a visual computing network for its missions.

CAP will have these new capabilities, known as the CAP Searchers' Edge Program, in operation by late 2004 or early 2005.

Funding for the new equipment is coming from the Air Force, which has moved CAP under its Homeland Security Directorate and has been stepping up security missions for the all-volunteer, 64,000-member auxiliary.

CAP selected Innovative Technical Solutions (Tradename: NovaSol), a small Honolulu, Hawaii-based company, and The Boeing Company Autometrics Division as its contractors for Searchers' Edge. NovaSol will provide 15 hyperspectral imaging systems to be used on CAP aircraft. Boeing Autometrics will provide the software to support a visual computing network.

According to Col. Drew Alexa, head of CAP's Advanced Technologies Group, hyperspectral imaging technology allows a sensor on a moving aircraft to detect objects on the ground by picking up light reflected from those objects. The imaging equipment can detect both man-made and natural objects that have a known spectral "signature," or can be used to survey a scene to determine what is out of place. This form of imaging can discriminate among materials based on physical properties, depending on how light is reflected or emitted from the object. It can detect man-made objects such as a crashed aircraft and can even search for specific types of material such as marijuana plants, if the item's signature is programmed into the imaging equipment.

A visual computing network (VCN) gives users a three-dimensional view of satellite images, making mission planning, rehearsal and performance more effective. The VCN can be used by both ground and air crews, and Alexa says both the VCN and hyperspectral imaging can enhance the auxiliary's already-efficient reconnaissance operations. "Traditionally we have flown 'low and slow' to physically eyeball the objects of our reconnaissance," Alexa said. "Hyperspectral imaging will just multiply our effectiveness by providing us with a better set of eyeballs."

"All branches of the military are interested in this technology," Alexa said. "What we're looking at first is a fairly basic form of HSI, which is effective only under conditions when light can be detected from the object of the search." That means HSI as used by CAP will work only in daylight and will not be able to pinpoint objects under the ground, underwater or buried in snow.

According to CAP Executive Director, Al Allenback, "These technologies will increase CAP's effectiveness in search and rescue, disaster relief, counterdrug, and homeland security missions. Hyperspectral imaging will allow CAP aircraft to identify an object on the ground as small as three feet in size from half a mile in the air, even if it's hidden from view by trees or bushes. With this new capability, CAP is rapidly positioning itself to become a leader in aerial imaging technology, which will be one of the most effective weapons in our nation's war on terrorism."

"This technology demonstrates CAP's commitment to the homeland security arena," said CAP National Commander Maj. Gen. Richard Bowling. "To support these purchases, we continue to look for the best possible aircraft. Currently we're purchasing Gippsland GA-8 Airvans and Cessna 182s for our aircraft fleet. With the increased capacity in these aircraft, we can carry more equipment and personnel."

The \$4.2 million contract awarded to NovaSol requires the company to build and submit a hyperspectral imaging test unit to CAP prior to going into full production on the remaining 14 systems. CAP anticipates delivery of the test unit by February 2004.

The Boeing contract for \$684,000 requires Autometrics to load software into 55 CAP-furnished laptop computers.

Civil Air Patrol, the official Air Force Auxiliary, is a nonprofit organization. It performs 95% of continental U.S. inland search and rescue missions as tasked by the Air Force Rescue Coordination Center. Volunteers also perform homeland security, disaster relief and counterdrug missions at the request of federal, state and local agencies. The members take a leading role in aerospace education and serve as mentors to the almost 27,000 young people currently participating in CAP cadet programs. CAP has been performing missions for America for more than 60 years.

On the Web: <http://www.cap.gov>

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