

DRONE PILOTS TO CONTROL FOUR PLANES AT ONCE: WHAT COULD POSSIBLY GO WRONG?

[youtube]<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FK4nh5I0jpE>[/youtube]

So soon on the heels of this week's disclosure that seventeen percent of US drone pilots show signs of clinical distress and the debacle of the RQ-170 Sentinel drone being recovered and put on display by Iran, today's latest announcement on drones reads like a piece from The Onion or Andy Borowitz. In what appears to be all seriousness, the US is looking into the possibility of single drone operators controlling as many as four drones at one time:

Western militaries are experimenting with having future drone pilots command up to four aircraft at once, adding new potential challenges even as a top-secret U.S. drone's crash in Iran exposed the risks of flying unmanned aircraft thousands of miles away.

And why would such a foolish move be necessary?

Why, it all comes down to insatiable demand for drone use and a military that wants to cut back on costs:

To save money and make unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) less reliant on massive ground support crews, weapons manufacturers are working with military officials to develop more autonomous control systems and improve networking among planes.

At the moment, it can take hundreds of support staff on the ground to run a single drone for 24 hours, adding cost

and complications at a time when budget-cutters are looking for billions of dollars of program cuts.

But new high-tech networking systems and ground stations in development would let a single pilot fly four drones, possibly even from different manufacturers, dramatically reducing the ground staff now needed for each plane.

Early work on such systems has been going on for some time, but heavy demand for more drones and mounting budget pressures are now bringing them closer to operational use.

If the US does institute such a foolish practice, let's just hope none of the stressed out operators decide to channel their inner Charlie Callas.