UK TO DOUBLE DRONE FLEET, MOVE CONTROL FROM NEVADA TO ENGLAND

While David Petraeus continues stewing over whether his request to expand the CIA's fleet of drones will be honored, The Guardian announced yesterday that the UK will double its drone fleet and move control of its drones from Nevada to England.

It will come as a surprise to most that the UK already has a fleet of five drones. They are operated out of Creech Air Force Base in Nevada. From the article in The Guardian:

> The UK's existing five Reaper drones, which are used to target suspected insurgents in Helmand, have been operated from Creech air force base in Nevada because Britain has not had the capability to fly them from here.
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> /snip/
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> The most recent figures from the Ministry of Defence show that, by the end of September, the UK's five Reapers in Afghanistan had flown 39,628 hours and fired 334 laser-guided Hellfire missiles and bombs at suspected insurgents.

The blog Drone Wars UK has collected the public reports it could find of the missiles fired by the UK's fleet of drones. Skimming the list of entries, it appears that so far, the bulk of UK drone strikes have been aimed at presumed insurgents in the process of engaging with coalition troops in Afghanistan.

For information on how these attacks have turned out, we go back to The Guardian:

> The MoD insists only four Afghan civilians have been killed in its strikes since 2008 and says it does everything it can to minimise civilian casualties, including aborting missions at the last moment.
>
> However, it also says it has no idea how many insurgents have died because of the "immense difficulty and risks" of verifying who has been hit.

It would seem that in learning from the US how to operate drones, the UK also has learned from the US how to declare with certainty that exceedingly few civilians have been killed, but at the same time admit that it's just too darned difficult to count all those bad guys we splat. The public is asked to simultaneously trust the military that civilians aren't killed but we must accept that verifying just who has been killed is not possible.

It seems that the UK has built its own ~~video game room~~ drone control facility:

> Pilots based at RAF Waddington in Lincolnshire will fly the recently bought American-made UAVs at a hi-tech hub built on the site in the past 18 months.

The most recent post currently at Drone Wars UK has conveniently provided a map for the location of this facility, presumably to aid protesters who may wish to be there on Friday when the new RAF squadron ("XIII") is officially commissioned.

With a fleet of ten drones and the ability to control them anywhere in the world from the facility in Lincolnshire, how long will it take for mission creep to set in? After all, NATO says that it will have withdrawn from Afghanistan by the end of 2014. Where will these drones go then? As the article in The Guardian points out, there are not many areas within the

UK where drones can be allowed to fly under current regulations. The allure of developing their own "hit list" must be overwhelming to the folks at 10 Downing Street about now.

Oh, and one last thought. The next James Bond film is set to release in about two and a half weeks. It's title? That would be "Skyfall". That is most likely just a coincidence, but seems entirely fitting as further advertisement of the fact that the UK is now announcing its drone capability and independence.