



Drone Exploring: Career Spotlights

Military Operations — Post

Overview: This session takes a serious look at military and defense-related drone (UAS) careers, including enlisted operator roles, officer pilot pathways, and civilian defense contractor engineering positions. Explorers learn about the training pathways (enlistment, ROTC or service academy, or engineering degree), realistic pay across these pathways, and practice planning a mock reconnaissance mission with a clear chain-of-command reporting structure.

OBJECTIVES

- Understand the career pathways within military and defense-related drone (UAS) work: enlisted, officer, and civilian contractor roles.
- Learn the training pathways for each: enlistment and MOS and AFSC training, ROTC or service academy for officers, and engineering degrees for contractor roles.
- Identify realistic pay ranges across enlisted, officer, and civilian defense contractor UAS roles.
- Practice planning a mock reconnaissance mission with a clear chain-of-command reporting structure.

SUPPLIES

- Laptop and projector to show basic information on military UAS roles (unclassified, publicly available sources only)
- Printed handouts: Career Pathways in Military/Defense UAS and Reconnaissance Mission Planning Worksheet
- Whiteboard or flip chart and markers

ADVISOR NOTES

- This session is career-focused and should stay limited to publicly available, unclassified information about roles, training pathways, and pay. Never discuss specific tactics, weapons systems capabilities, or classified operations.
- Present enlisted, officer, and civilian contractor pathways as three distinct and valid ways into this field, each with different education and commitment requirements.
- Encourage Explorers who are 16 or older and interested in military service to speak with a recruiter or ROTC or JROTC representative for accurate, current, personalized information.
- Consider inviting a guest speaker who is a veteran, current service member (with command approval), ROTC or JROTC instructor, or defense contractor engineer to share their career path. See Optional Extensions.
- If no guest speaker is available, Advisors can run the entire session using this outline, the Career Pathways handout, and the resource links below.

SESSION OUTLINE

- **Welcome and Icebreaker** (10 min)
 - “What interests you more: operating equipment in the field, leading a team, or engineering the technology itself?”
- **Structure Moment: Enlisted, Officer, and Contractor Pathways** (10–15 min)
 - Enlisted UAS operator roles (such as Army Tactical UAS Operator or Air Force Remotely Piloted Aircraft Sensor Operator) typically require basic training plus specialized technical school.
 - Officer pilot roles typically require a 4-year degree plus officer training (ROTC, service academy, or officer candidate school) and additional flight training.
 - Civilian defense contractor roles (supporting companies like General Atomics, L3Harris, or Northrop Grumman) typically require an engineering or technical degree.
- **Mini-Lesson: Careers in Military and Defense UAS** (15–20 min)
 - Roles: enlisted UAS operator or sensor operator, officer UAS pilot, defense contractor field service representative or engineer.

- Typical pay: Enlisted roles include base pay plus potential enlistment bonuses (\$15,000-\$30,000 for some specialties) and special duty and hazardous duty incentive pay; officer pilots earn officer base pay plus flight pay, growing from roughly \$38,500/year at entry to \$55,000-\$90,000+/year as a Captain; civilian defense contractor UAS roles average around \$80,000/year, with specialized roles exceeding \$100,000-\$215,000/year.
- **Activity: Plan a Reconnaissance Mission (20–25 min)**
 - Using the Reconnaissance Mission Planning Worksheet, small groups plan a mock reconnaissance mission, including objective, reporting structure, and how information flows up the chain of command.
- **Wrap-Up Discussion (10 min)**
 - Groups present their mission plans.
 - Discuss the concrete next steps (talking to a recruiter, researching ROTC or JROTC, or researching engineering programs) for each pathway.

REFLECTION SECTION

Advisor Note: Some sample questions are below. They are designed to help the participants apply what they have learned to their own interests. You are welcome to use these questions or develop your own.

Focusing Questions

- What surprised you about the differences between the enlisted, officer, and contractor pathways?
- Which pathway (enlisted, officer, contractor engineer) sounds most interesting to you, and why?

Analysis Questions

- Why might someone choose an enlisted path versus an officer or engineering path into this field?
- How does a clear chain of command help a reconnaissance mission run smoothly?

Generalization Questions

- How is choosing between different educational and career pathways here like other career decisions you'll make?
- What other careers offer multiple distinct pathways (enlisted or technical, officer or leadership, and engineering) like this one does?

Challenge: This week, research one of the three pathways (enlisted, officer, or defense contractor engineering) in more depth and identify the first concrete step someone would take.

OPTIONAL EXTENSIONS

Guest Speaker: Invite a veteran, current service member (with appropriate command approval), ROTC or JROTC instructor, or defense contractor engineer to share their career path and take questions, in person or by video call.

Advisor-Led Option: If no guest speaker is available, Advisors can run the full session using this outline, the Career Pathways handout, and the resource links below. No outside expert is required.

Resource Links: official U.S. military branch career websites (publicly available role descriptions); ROTC and JROTC program information; FAA Part 107 overview ([faa.gov/uas/commercial_operators](https://www.faa.gov/uas/commercial_operators)) for related civilian drone skills.

Extension Project: Explorers who are interested in the civilian or contractor pathway and are 16 or older can begin studying for the FAA Part 107 knowledge test as a complementary credential.

Handout: Career Pathways in Military / Defense UAS

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This field offers three distinct pathways:

Enlisted Pathway

Basic training plus specialized technical school (such as Army 15W or Air Force 1U0X1); may include enlistment bonuses of \$15,000-\$30,000 for some specialties, plus special duty or hazardous duty pay.

Officer Pathway

4-year degree plus ROTC, service academy, or officer candidate school, plus flight training; pay grows from roughly \$38,500/year at entry (O-1) to \$55,000-\$90,000+/year as a Captain (O-3), plus flight pay.

Civilian Defense Contractor Pathway

Engineering or technical degree; supports companies developing and maintaining military UAS systems; average pay around \$80,000/year, with specialized roles exceeding \$100,000-\$215,000/year.

Getting Started

Talking with a recruiter, ROTC or JROTC instructor, or researching engineering programs are concrete first steps for each respective pathway.

Handout: Reconnaissance Mission Planning Worksheet

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Use this worksheet to plan your mock reconnaissance mission.

Planning Item	Your Plan	Notes
Mission objective		
Team roles (pilot, sensor operator, command)		
Reporting structure and chain of command		
Information to gather		
Debrief plan		