

The United States Coast Guard and the Menlo Park Fire Protection District formally agree to the use of drones over the San Francisco Bay in one of the busiest air corridors in the world



Pictured Above – Menlo Park Firefighters use one of their Public Safety Drones to follow behind their Air Boat Water Rescue Crew out onto the San Francisco Bay near the abandoned Dumbarton Railroad Trestle - Credit Menlo Fire Drone Program

Above the San Francisco Bay – After conducting actual water search, rescue and recovery missions over the South Bay for nearly three decades together, the United States Coast Guard (USCG) and the Menlo Park Fire Protection District (Menlo Fire) have partnered together to create the first of its kind formal operating agreement to practically integrate the use of public safety UAS (Unmanned Aerial Systems) or drones over the San Francisco Bay, as part of an integrated and anti-conflict approach to joint aerial aviation operations that safely supports and compliments traditional aircraft, or helicopter operations, with new first responder drones.

The USCG/Menlo Fire agreement clearly lays out operational requirements so that both groups will have a “shared understanding of roles and responsibilities to ensure safe and coordinated aviation operations for the benefit of the overall effectiveness during search and rescue (SAR) operations.

Those operational requirements address emergency aircraft call signs, anti-collision lighting, common communication radio channels, approach, FAA air space requirements and most importantly the altitude or height each aircraft will operate from along with how they can better coordinate and methodically accomplish their important joint SAR efforts together to maximize the benefits of each aerial platform over the expansive navigable waterways.



Pictured Above – Menlo Park Firefighters use one of their Public Safety Drones to guide one of their specialized flat bottomed Air Boats to a victim’s location during a training exercise on the San Francisco Bay near Palo Alto Airport. - **Credit Menlo Fire Drone Program**

Fire Chief Schapelhouman said, *“We’ve established that our search and rescue drones working in conjunction with our water rescue craft, or rescue boats, don’t need to fly above 150 feet elevation, or height, for almost every SAR mission over land or sea. This optimal drone flight height gives us the best birds eye screen view, pictures, video and most importantly strategic situational awareness capabilities that can enhance and better coordinate joint aviation operations where seconds count and minutes matter because that could be the difference between a successful live rescue or tragic recovery”.*



Pictured Above – Menlo Park Firefighters regularly work together with the Coast Guard on search, rescue and recovery operations in the Southern most areas of the San Francisco Bay - **Credit Menlo Fire Drone Program**

Commander Brian Potter of the U.S. Coast Guard added, *“Partnerships like this ensure we remain at the leading edge of integrating unmanned technology into maritime search and rescue. UAS/Drones are a tremendous asset for searching the confined areas around bridges and powerlines and, when combined with manned helicopters, provide a more complete and effective maritime rescue package for the Bay Area public”.*



Pictured Above – Menlo Park Fire Captain Chris Dennebaum fly’s a public safety UAS/Drone over the burnt out areas of Redding while conducting post incident disaster mapping and imaging - Credit Menlo Fire Drone Program

Captain Chris Dennebaum is in charge of the Fire District’s UAS/Drone program and said. *“The Fire District has operated its UAS/Drones since 2014 and has extensive emergency operational experience over major wildland fires in Paradise, Redding, Santa Rosa and Yosemite National Park along with out of state hurricanes, floods and other local significant search, rescue and recovery missions. The District has 20 various drone and camera platforms along with over a dozen pilots with the goal of having up to 20 specially trained operators.”*



Pictured Above – Menlo Park Firefighter/Paramedic Brett Bates, a former Coast Guard Helicopter Rescue Swimmer (Center) escorts two personnel who were picked up from a water craft stranded and in distress on the San Francisco Bay by a Coast Guard Helicopter and delivered to Cooley Landing in East Palo Alto - **Credit Menlo Fire**

Captain Mark Zamparelli is in charge of the Fire District’s Water Rescue Program and said, *“The Fire District currently operates two unique flat bottomed air boats as well as a variety of other water rescue platforms. The air boats are extremely effective in shallow water or on bay mud. The Fire District also has agreements with both the state (Cal-OES) and federal government (FEMA) to provide dynamic maritime or water based search and rescue operations anywhere in the state or nation as part of its Urban Search and Rescue (US&R) all risk threat response profile. Most people don’t realize that the Fire District responds to 12 square miles of area just in Menlo Park which includes 4 square miles of marsh area and eight square miles of tidal bay waters and mud”.*

According to the archives of former Menlo Park City Manager John Johnson, who served from 1952 to 1964, the 1950’s were a special time of growth for the City. After Belle Haven was annexed to the city in 1948, word came to the City of Menlo Park that Redwood City, with its growing port, was going to annex and take all of the bay frontage up to the Dumbarton Bridge. So the City made plans and coordinated with Ideal Cement and Leslie Salt people behind the scenes and eventually annexing all of the frontage marsh and sea area to the exact middle of the San Francisco Bay. That’s why there is a Menlo Park City limit sign mid-span on the Dumbarton Bridge and the end of Cooley Landing in East Palo Alto which is actually in Menlo Park.



Pictured Above – Menlo Park Firefighters regularly train while UAS/Drones fly overhead to watch over their operations so that their use is anticipated, integrated and accepted as normal during emergency operations - **Credit Menlo Fire**

In summary, *“for us, drone technology and their use are accepted and integrated emergency tools that help us safely and effectively better accomplish our primary mission, which is to protect life, property and the environment. I very much appreciate the Coast Guards progressive and aggressive view in adopting this joint agreement that memorializes each other’s important operational air space use requirements and I’m hoping it catches on because the use of drones by responsible and well trained public safety professionals and their agencies can be an important emergency services game changer that assists us in better serving the public while enhancing our first response capabilities, which are so critical”* **Fire Chief Schapelhouman said.**

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