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Military-style drones heading for the home front

September 12, 2012 | By Tamara Dietrich, tdietrich@dailypress.com | 757-247-7892

Steve Sliwa's war stories usually begin around 2,000 feet in the air and from the bird's eye view of the ScanEagle unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) he helped develop.

When pirates kidnapped an American sea captain off the coast of Somalia in 2009, it was a small, virtually silent ScanEagle that monitored the pirates' movements from above, Sliwa said. Including the moment when one pirate leveled an AK-47 at the captain, spurring U.S. Navy snipers to open fire to rescue him.
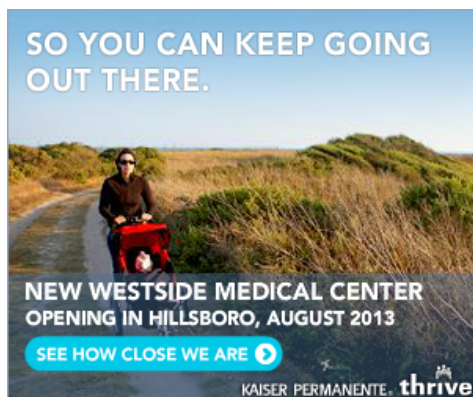
Then there was the day a woman banged on the door of his Insitu office building in Washington state, demanding an audience with the president of the company. Sliwa nervously obliged her.

The woman explained she was the mother of a U.S. Marine whose unit had been saved by intelligence gathered by a ScanEagle, he said.

"She said, 'Start lining up,'" Sliwa recounted. "'I need people to hug, and I need to hug them now.'"

These are among countless success stories of the military applications of UAVs — also known as unmanned aerial drones. But with the war in Iraq over and combat in Afghanistan winding down, scores of companies that develop and manufacture UAVs are looking to promote their commercial applications, as well.

"To save some lives and contribute to good things here," Sliwa said.

Sliwa sold his company to The Boeing Company in 2008. A former deputy chief of the guidance and controls division at NASA Langley Research Center in Hampton, Sliwa returned Tuesday to deliver a lecture on "Aeronautical Entrepreneuring with UAVs." In a meeting beforehand, he outlined what those commercial applications might be.

UAVs come in nearly every size, Sliwa said, from 6 ounces and the size of a postage stamp to a 30,000-pound behemoth that can fly up to 60,000 feet.

His ScanEagle has a wingspan of 10 feet, weighs about 40 pounds and can climb to about 20,000 feet, he said, but its

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operational range is between 1,500 and 3,000 feet.

He envisions UAVs on the home front aiding search-and-rescue efforts, resource and wildlife management, spotting wildfires, monitoring oil pipelines, even locating herds of cattle on the open range. The future is wide open, he said.

"We're the Wild, Wild West," said Sliwa.

Civil libertarians and politicians across the spectrum agree, but aren't as sanguine.

Their concern is that the use of domestic drones is still so unregulated that police agencies or governments could use them to monitor the movements of law-abiding citizens without their consent or knowledge.

In July, a Republican delegate from Woodstock, with support from the ACLU of Virginia, announced he'll propose legislation in the 2013 General Assembly to regulate UAVs in the commonwealth.

Del. C. Todd Gilbert explained at the time that "the use of drones by police and other government agencies should be strictly controlled by state laws that protect the privacy and civil rights of all Virginia residents."

Gilbert's proposal is to ban all government use of drones except in a specific instance of criminal wrongdoing, and only with a warrant based on probable cause; in an emergency situation where lives are at risk; or for non-law enforcement purposes by non-law enforcement agencies, such as geological inspections or environmental surveys.

Gilbert would also require that legislative bodies set and adopt policies and procedures for the use of drones, and only in open meetings.

Claire Gastanaga, executive director of the ACLU of Virginia, said Gilbert and others are trying to be proactive.

"We want democratic control of this type of technology," Gastanaga said Tuesday. "Police agencies out there are getting ready to buy drones without any kind of public discussion about whether tax dollars should be spent that way, or whether citizens in that locality want it used."

If the legislation passes, said Gastanaga, it would be the first of its kind in the country.

The Federal Aviation Administration has oversight of UAVs, but is under pressure from Congress and the industry to make it easier for police departments to use domestic drone technology, the ACLU says.

Sliwa said UAVs don't collect information that can't already be gathered using existing technology, from radar to aircraft surveillance to security cameras.

He's less convinced that police departments would or could use UAVs in populated areas, he said, if only for public safety concerns.

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