



The MV-22 Osprey: *Growing Pains or Growing Old?*

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The MV-22 Osprey was designed almost two decades ago to replace the older rotary wing aircraft of the United States Armed Forces; but almost immediately, there was trouble. The aircraft came in over cost, rising from \$38 million per plane in 1986 to \$93 million per plane today. This is not uncommon in unique new technologies. During its first combat experience, it faced problems with sand ruining its engines and parts wearing out faster than expected, resulting in cannibalization of parts and a lower mission capable rate (62% as opposed to the promised 82%). In addition, 30 people have lost their lives in a MV-22 during the course of research and development. During a 23rd June (House Oversight and Government Reform) hearing discussing the viability of the Osprey, Chairman Edolphus Towns (D-NY) said, “It has problems in hot weather; it has problems in cold weather; it has problems with sand; it has problems with high altitude; and it has restricted maneuverability. The list of what the Osprey can’t do is longer than the list of what it can do...It’s time to put the Osprey out of its misery.” With all due respect, Mr. Chairman, hold the phone.

While it is true the Osprey has come in over cost, has had some problems with its parts, and has had a lower showing in Iraq than we would have liked, it is premature to assume that this aircraft is a failure—far from it. According to LtGen Trautman, “The Osprey can carry three times as many Marines five times farther and two times faster than a helicopter.” In addition to these benefits, the MV-22 can fly at heights of 10,000 feet, which it does routinely. This is higher than a helicopter can fly and puts the MV-22 safely out of range of small arms fire. Finally, the MV-22 is more maneuverable and more durable than a helicopter, reducing the chance that it will be shot down while delivering precious troops and supplies to any area. When

you combine these facts with the fact that the MV-22 was designed specifically to replace aging rotary wing aircraft, it is easy to see why the MV-22 should be kept around.

However, the concerns of the Chairman are not without merit; but they need to be put to rest. First, I will address the concern that the Osprey cannot operate well in extreme heat. In the same House Oversight hearing, Colonel Heckl of the USMC stated that, during his six-month tour as commander of an Osprey Squadron in Iraq, his MV-22s flew in 120 degree heat constantly. If 120 degrees does not qualify as extreme heat, I don’t know what does. Second is the belief that the Osprey will have trouble operating in a cold environment. The Osprey’s Ice Protection System has had several faults; but when it is repaired, this issue will no longer apply. Third, I will address the concern that the Osprey has had problems operating in a sandy environment. This is hardly a fair assessment, as many other aircraft (including all helicopters) have had problems in a similar environment. Fourth, the belief that the Osprey will have problems in high altitudes is seemingly unfounded because the Osprey routinely flies at 10,000 ft. In addition, if it did have difficulty in the mountainous region of Afghanistan, all rotary wing aircraft have problems in that area. In fact, the ability of the Osprey to convert into a fixed wing aircraft will give it a leg up over the standard helicopters used to transport troops in Afghanistan. In response to the question of the maneuverability of the aircraft, tests have shown that the MV-22 is as maneuverable, if not more maneuverable, than a helicopter. Colonel Heckl said that the safety of the Osprey was such that his squad would fly into high threat areas with MV-22s. He cited the difficulty of infrared missiles in tracking the aircraft and the large amounts of survival equipment aboard the aircraft as key

instruments in measuring the survivability of the MV-22.

With all of that being said, there is still the concern of the Osprey being over-priced and under-performing. These two issues can both be addressed in the same way: Somebody made a poor estimate. Congress got involved in the development process several times. When the Osprey was introduced almost two decades ago, it was a new concept; and as such, new progress had to be made in order to make the aircraft feasible. As unforeseen challenges appeared and were overcome, the price of the aircraft rose to keep pace with the corrections needed to keep the aircraft viable. As the Osprey continues to get combat experience, it is likely that more unforeseen problems will emerge and be overcome. This is common when introducing new equipment. This has the potential to raise the cost of the aircraft again, but that is no reason to scrap the program. After all, the Osprey is hardly the first piece of military equipment ever to suffer a setback. Just look at the M-16, the rifle most commonly used by our Armed Services.

Although the Osprey has been over cost and initially under performed in the Iraq theater, it is far too early to deem the program a failure. The Osprey promises to be an excellent and highly capable military workhorse once it has left its growing pains behind, and scrapping the program now when those kinks are getting worked out makes no sense. All military services will benefit from this new technology that has had growing pains like all previous new military technology. If the MV-22 was scrapped, it would raise the question of how our Congressmen can order the Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Army to use inferior, older rotary wing aircraft which are more likely to get shot down when they claim that even one American casualty is one too many. ↴