

19 soldiers killed in controversial military plane

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On Saturday evening, April 8, an experimental US military plane, the V-22 tilt-rotor Osprey, crashed during a military exercise near Tucson, Arizona killing all 19 Marines aboard.

The plane—built to land like a helicopter and fly like a plane—has been the source of controversy between the Pentagon and Congress since it was proposed 18 years ago. The V-22 was developed as an alternative to the Chinook helicopter used extensively by the military during the Vietnam War.

The crashed plane was one of the first five Ospreys delivered to the Marines only six months ago. The cause of the crash is still unknown and could take months to determine. In the intervening period military officials have decided to ground the craft until the cause of the crash is known.

Already questions have been raised about the future of the V-22 project. The manufacturers of the experimental plane, Boeing Company and Bell Helicopter Textron, won a \$37.3 billion contract to produce 460 of the aircraft despite repeated attempts by the Pentagon to stop the production of the plane. A broad coalition in Congress, including right-wing Republicans and liberal Democrats, were wooed by the plane's manufacturers to provide the funding with the promise of high-tech jobs in 40 different states. Others brought on board to support the project included the United Auto Workers union.

The order called for 360 V-22s to be delivered to the Marines, and 50 each for the Army and Navy, all over the next 10 years at a price tag of \$60 million each.

The “revolutionary concept” of the Osprey, stated former Navy Secretary Sean O’Keefe, entranced Congress but was too hard to realize. “This was within the realm of the believable. But all of the work needed to be done, to this day hasn’t been accomplished.”

Reports state Pentagon officials had repeated disagreements with Congress over the development of the aircraft, citing concerns about safety and the belief that the plane could not provide what it promised. In 1989 Pentagon officials tried to cancel the program, charging that the plane was too expensive and too experimental to ferry 20 to 24 men from a boat to shore. During the next four years the Pentagon tried unsuccessfully to stop the program altogether.

In 1992 O’Keefe testified before the House Armed Services Committee, stating he would not spend the \$790 million Congress authorized to build three Ospreys. “It’s an engineering impossibility,” said O’Keefe. “The V-22 cannot be built to meet the requirements specified.”

A report issued by the General Accounting Office (the investigative arm of Congress) in 1994, called the plane “inadequate and untested.” The Pentagon’s inspector general said the aircraft had gone into development “without proper authorization” and without “formal review,” the result of “highly unusual political factors.”

Another report issued by the Pentagon in 1997 said the plane’s prototypes still were unable to carry passengers or hover over unprepared landing zones, criticizing tests as “extremely superficial.” In 1998 a GAO report concluded, “after 15 years of development effort, the V-22 design has not been stabilized.”

However sections within the military, particularly the Marine Corps, without an alternative to its older helicopters, embraced the manufacturers’ promises that the plane would work wonders, moving men in and out at speeds never before witnessed.

The crash two weeks ago is the second involving multiple deaths on the V-22. On July 20, 1992 seven Marines were killed when an Osprey plunged into the

Potomac River near the Marine base at Quantico, Virginia, outside Washington DC. Another crash involving a V-22 took place at a Boeing test facility near Wilmington, Delaware in 1999, resulting in no fatalities. The report states that the Delaware crash was caused by a mechanical failure that resulted in a fire in the aircraft's wing. The crew and plane were saved by an automatic fire suppression system that extinguished the blaze “thus saving the aircraft from a catastrophic loss,” according to the report.



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