

July 4, 2007

Dear Congressman Murtha:

Please allow me to add my voice to the many others expressing concern and outright disagreement with the Air Force's decision to buy the H-47 Chinook as the next generation Combat Search and Rescue aircraft. I have had a great deal of experience with AF helicopters, having retired from active duty in that service in May of 2005 after 32 years as an AF helicopter pilot. I had the privilege to fly in Air Rescue for 8 years and in Special Operations, sometimes performing rescue missions, for another 16. I commanded at the Squadron, Group, and Wing levels and served as the Deputy Commanding General at Joint Special Operations Command at Ft. Bragg and as the Vice Commander of Air Force Special Operations Command.

I know a couple of the guys who were on the Selection Board for the CSAR-X and I have talked with them about their thought process. I believe they did their jobs honestly and with a great deal of conscientiousness. I also believe they talked themselves into what they think is the right decision. Still, I disagree, and I believe they got into a "group-think" situation and reached the wrong conclusion on what helicopter the Air Force should acquire.

The basics of Combat Search and Rescue really have not changed over the years, but the agility, speeds required, and defensive capabilities of the helicopter performing the mission have great effect on the probability of mission success. In all of these categories, the smaller helicopter will perform better than an H-47. The middle-sized helicopter have a significantly improved ability to maneuver and get into and out of small clearings, giving them improved survivability over a larger helicopter like the Chinook which can only fit into very large landing zones. The Chinook would have to hover to pick up people using the rescue hoist, increasing time required and exposure to ground fire. Add to this vulnerability the H-47's much greater sound signature, much greater size as a target, much greater heat signature and you have vulnerabilities in any rescue scenario which become big questions as to why the medium-lift or middle sized helicopter is not the selection for the CSAR-X.


The best example of what I mean to explain is in the last real air war which required CSAR of downed aircrew behind enemy lines – Serbia in 1999. The CSAR force included large helicopters, the MH-53, and the MH-60, a light to medium-lift helicopter. The mission commander decided to fly the missions using a mixed formation combining the aircraft. During missions attempting rescue of downed aircrews, the helicopter flight lead decided to hold the H-53 in orbit above the survivor and the H-60 landed on the ground to effect the pick-up due to the small size of the clearing available. Both an F-117 pilot and an F-16 pilot were recovered and returned to their bases before breakfast after their respective night time shoot downs. Both were in dangerous places, near where the jets were shot down. The rescue formations moved quickly into and out of that danger by being able to land near the survivor and then leave quickly after getting him aboard.

I believe the Selection Committee for USAF picked the H-47 Chinook due to that aircraft's performance in Afghanistan. The Chinook, with its two main and horizontally oriented rotors has extra wing surface and giving it an advantage in high-altitude operations which created operating problems galore for the standard helicopters with vertically oriented tail rotors. Still, the Chinook has vulnerability problems, resulting in decisions by its using commands to steer that aircraft away from LZs and operations prone to result in high probability of ground fire, as was so tragically learned in Operation Anaconda in 2002. The Selection Committee was swayed by the fact that the latest version of the Chinook for Special Operations is already developed and they can avoid some costs along with having an aircraft able to operate at extreme altitudes.

Certainly, there may be combat in high altitude regions, and CSAR missions should have the best aircraft available. This is in the realm of the possible in today's environment of Jointness among the Services. To have the Chinook available in such cases takes no more than a printed order. The Air Force should now buy the best aircraft for the world-wide mission and ask for the Joint Commander to loan Chinooks for those few places where only it can operate.

The AF's main concern should be to acquire an aircraft capable of accomplishing the mission in areas of greater danger of ground fire and minimizing the time to accomplish the pick-up while maximizing survivability against the threats. I would prefer that we get the right medium lift aircraft in order to save the person and not the development costs.

I submit my opinion on these matters with great respect to all involved who are also doing their best for an important mission. Let's get it right.


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US Air Force

cc: Defense Appropriations Sub-Committee Members