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Air Force OA-X Light Attack Aircraft/SOCOM Armed Overwatch Program

On October 24, 2019, the U.S. Air Force issued a final request for proposals declaring its intent to acquire a new type of aircraft. The OA-X light attack aircraft is a small, two-seat turboprop airplane designed for operation in relatively permissive environments. The start of a formal program followed a series of Air Force “experiments” to determine the utility of such an aircraft.

After the Air Force experiments ended, the program passed to U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) as the “Armed Overwatch” program, with a goal of acquiring 75 aircraft for a somewhat different mission. In November, 2021, SOCOM issued its own request for proposals, with a different set of competitors.

Why Light Attack?

During 2018, then-Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson often expressed the purpose of a new light attack aircraft as giving the Air Force an ability to free up more sophisticated and expensive assets for other tasks, citing the example of using high-end F-22 jets to destroy a drug laboratory in Afghanistan as an inefficient use of resources. Per-hour operating costs for light attack aircraft are typically about 2%-4% those of advanced fighters.

She and other officials also noted that the 2018 National Defense Strategy put a greater emphasis on potential conflicts against capably armed nation-states, further stressing a need to minimize the use of high-end assets in other types of conflict. (For more on that document, see CRS Insight IN10855, *The 2018 National Defense Strategy*, by Kathleen J. McInnis.)

Conversely, former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates had criticized the Air Force as focusing excessively on the kind of high-end, near-peer conflicts envisioned in that strategy; the light attack aircraft can be seen as making the Air Force more relevant to low-end and counterinsurgency warfare.

History

In January, 2016, LtGen James Holmes (then Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff for Strategic Plans and Requirements) told CRS the Air Force was considering starting two programs related to ground-attack operations. One, called OA-X, would examine existing, “off-the-shelf” light attack aircraft to add a low-end capability for use in relatively permissive air environments such as Afghanistan and Iraq. The other, “AX-2,” would develop a replacement for the existing A-10 Thunderbolt II. The Air Force subsequently publicized these concepts, although they were not included in the fiscal 2017 budget submission.

On July 31, 2017, the Air Force began what it called the Capability Assessment of Non-Developmental Light Attack Platforms, an “experiment” to determine the utility of an OA-X, its ability to operate with coalition partners, and to evaluate initial candidate aircraft. The first phase included the Sierra Nevada/Embraer A-29, Textron/Beechcraft AT-6B, and Air Tractor/L3 OA-802 turboprops, variants of which are in service with other countries, and the developmental Textron Scorpion jet. First-phase operations continued through August 2017.

Figure 1. Sierra Nevada/Embraer A-29



Source: U.S. Department of Defense.

Note: Shown in Afghan service.

Figure 2. Textron/Beechcraft AT-6



Source: U.S. Air Force photo by Ethan D. Wagner.

Figure 3. Air Tractor/L3 OA-802



Source: L-3.

Figure 4. Textron Scorpion

Source: Darin LaCrone/Textron Airland.

The experiment's second phase began May 7, 2018, with the A-29 and AT-6B continuing in the program. The flying portion of the program concluded in June 2018.

A presolicitation notice issued August 6, 2018, limited participation in the proposed contract to Sierra Nevada and Textron; did not specify a number of aircraft to be acquired (Air Force estimates have varied from 20 to "a couple of squadrons" to 300) nor a target unit price; and predicted a formal solicitation in December 2018, with contract award in the fourth quarter of 2019.

The October 24, 2019, request for proposals split the proposed buy between A-29 and AT-6, with two to three each. In response, two AT-6s and three A-29s were delivered to the Air Force. The AT-6s are based at Moody AFB, GA, for testing and development of operational tactics; Air Force Special Operations Command has the A-29s in an instructor pilot program for air advisers at Hurlburt Field, FL. The Air Force has not yet discussed why the buy was split between the two aircraft.

After initially considering five aircraft, SOCOM's November 2021 request for proposals included the AT-6 and AT-802U from the Air Force experiments, and the Sierra Nevada/PZL Mielec MC-145. The aircraft selected will replace SOCOM's Sierra Nevada/Pilatus U-28s. The FY2022 budget submission requested \$170 million for six armed overwatch aircraft.

Figure 5. Sierra Nevada/PZL Mielec MC-145B

Source: Sierra Nevada photo.

Congressional Action

The Administration's FY2020 request for Aircraft Procurement, Air Force included \$35 million for light attack aircraft. Although the Administration did not request any funding specific to the OA-X experiment or subsequent procurement in the FY2017-FY2019 budget submissions, the John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 as enacted (P.L. 115-232) included \$300 million to procure a fleet of OA-X planes and long-lead materials. Neither the act nor its accompanying report specified a quantity of aircraft.

The Administration's FY2021 budget request proposed \$101 million to begin purchasing armed overwatch aircraft. Congress, in Section 163 of the report accompanying the William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 (H.Rept. 116-617), denied that request and prohibited funds from being used to acquire armed overwatch aircraft through FY2023.

Section 162 of the report accompanying the Senate Armed Services Committee version of the FY2022 National Defense Authorization Act limited expenditures for armed overwatch pending the receipt of reports required in the FY2021 NDAA.

Potential Issues for Congress

Questions to consider in evaluating the OA-X/Armed Overwatch program might include the following:

- What is the value of adding this capability to the Air Force or SOCOM?
- Might this mission be better accomplished through other means, such as remotely piloted aircraft ("drones")?
- Does having such aircraft in U.S. service assist in training and operating with partner nations? If so, what is the value of that to the United States?
- Should the U.S. government be involved in promoting sales of similar aircraft to other nations, and if so, how?
- Is a procurement restricted to a few specified competitors fair and appropriate?
- Is it efficient or operationally preferable to operate more than one type of light attack aircraft?
- Is the use of "experiments" rather than a formal selection process a useful innovation in streamlining acquisition, a circumvention of rules, or might it be described some other way? Does that judgment change when (as in this case) the procurement is intended for an off-the-shelf, rather than developmental, acquisition?
- The Air Force has publicly stated it is experiencing a shortage of trained pilots. Would creation of a light attack fleet exacerbate that shortage or assist in the training and absorption of new pilots?

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