



AUSA BACKGROUND BRIEF



THE ARMY AND THE LIGHT HELICOPTER

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The Army leadership has expressed the high priority need for a light helicopter to increase the effectiveness of landpower forces committed to modern warfare. The roles to be filled by a new light helicopter equate generally to those associated historically with the cavalry—the compelling need for commanders to obtain battlefield intelligence information, to acquire targets for long-range weapons systems, to maintain surveillance of enemy activities, and to raid key enemy installations; also to have quick reacting forces which can engage, disrupt, delay and surprise enemy maneuvers; and to do all of this in all kinds of weather and in all hours of the day or night.

For years the Army has sought ways to satisfy these missions. It augmented its ground cavalry forces with OH-13s, OH-6s, and OH-58s—immediately available helicopters partially adaptable to the role. It engaged in product improvement programs which kept these aircraft alive and usable—and some still being flown are older than the pilots flying them. The Army also projected new designs of helicopters which could fill this role with weapons systems designed for the task.

The latest version of such a system is the light helicopter (LH). To date, developmental programs have foundered before production and procurement could become a reality. Each program succumbed to criticisms and budget parings of naysayers who, in the end, proved to the Defense Department or to Congress that the capability was not worth the expense.

Today, the same naysayers are determined to end the LH program—now armed with additional arguments that peace is at hand and military modernization unnecessary. Some argue that current helicopters are good enough to get the job done in the foreseeable future, implying that we don't need the LH for some time. But they fail to mention that the LH is a long way off. If approved today, it would be five years before production could begin; seven years before achievement of initial operational capability; and 17 years (2007) before production would be complete. It is implausible to suggest that our current helicopter technology can remain effective on the battlefield that long.

The need for capable, competent military forces to protect the interests of the United States continues. It is unconscionable to dispatch U.S. forces into a crisis without the best our nation can provide, from properly trained personnel to the most technologically advanced equipment and munitions. To do so, this nation must maintain a dynamic modernization program that continually introduces new, more capable weaponry which assures us that we will not be outclassed by enemy forces.

As the Army plans for an uncertain and unstable world in the 21st century, it will continue to face a plethora of potential adversaries whose strength and power will improve, not diminish. If we do not replace our rapidly aging and obsolescent fleet of scout and light attack helicopters we almost guarantee that our pilots will be over-matched in the years ahead by the air defense and aviation systems which they are sure to face.

The Army modernization goal is straightforward. Simply stated, it means maintaining a technological and lethal edge over possible enemies as an obligation to America's soldiers and to the American people. Adopting a strategy to achieve this goal has forced the Army into curtailing production and procurement of a number of other systems, to include tanks and current aircraft in order to protect research and development funds for the LH.

In the turbulent world of today, technologically advanced battlefield systems are proliferating. The owners and makers of Soviet design weapons are dumping their most sophisticated equipment on world markets. Increasingly, we are seeing high densities of modern air defense guns and surface-to-air missiles which, thanks to computerized accuracy, are able to engage and destroy multiple targets. In the future, we must anticipate the prospect of air-to-air helicopter combat and even the prospect of directed-energy weapons. In short, in the years ahead we can expect that most anywhere we may be called to protect United States interests, we will face very sophisticated enemy weapons.

The LH will be a critical addition to our combat capability because it will be far more versatile, deployable and lethal than any helicopter flying today. Armed with a complete suite of lethal weapons, the LH will be able to fight anytime, anywhere and, most importantly, during the hours of darkness. It will operate in areas such as the "high/hot" Middle East or Central America where much of the current fleet cannot even get off the ground. It can be embarked and debarked from cargo aircraft in half the time of the aircraft it will replace. With external tanks, it will have the range to self-deploy to Europe or Central America.

LH also will be significantly more survivable than existing aircraft. It will have the edge when maneuvering alone or when integrated with ground elements and, if hit, it will have more ballistic protection and crash-worthiness than the helicopters we fly today. From the soldiers' perspective, the LH will be designed for easy and inexpensive maintenance. Engine maintenance, for example, will be performed using just six standard wrenches and sockets. All components are designed for easy access by soldier mechanics, and the number of moving parts will be only half those in current aircraft.

An incidental, yet important, factor is that without the LH the American helicopter industry is in jeopardy. Under current DoD assumptions, U.S. helicopter manufacturers will be without DoD-funded work by 1993 if the LH program is ended. If none of these companies is engaged in military development and production, a vital technological resource — one that cannot easily be restored if needed in the future — could be lost. Our nation can ill-afford to permit the forfeiture of such a vital industrial capability to foreign competition. The LH represents not only insurance against future threats, but also the opportunity for the U.S. helicopter industry to develop innovative, leap-ahead technology that will help the United States retain its competitive edge in many segments of the world's military and industrial markets.

The Association of the U.S. Army agreed with and applauded the Army's decision to make the light helicopter its number one developmental priority. We believe in the requirement and we believe the current program will produce an aircraft that will satisfy a valid and continuing need. The development and production of this weapons system is vital to soldiers who will be called upon to defend our nation in the future. It is integral to the objective of maintaining a modern Army and to preserving our technological edge.

One thing should be abundantly clear. If the Defense Department or Congress again denies the funding for the latest entry in this quest for a new state-of-the-art helicopter, the Army will be forced to return at another time with another candidate and another program to fill this essential battlefield role. The requirement will not go away, nor will it be satisfied by the type of makeshift means that the Army employed for the past 25 years. We just cannot ask the next generation of Army aviators to fly aircraft older than their fathers and place themselves in jeopardy in the process.

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