
Defense Report

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Apache Helicopter and Abrams Tank Criticized—Army Secretary Delivers Rebuttal

One of the fastest growing cottage industries in Washington is that of taking pot-shots at some of the Army's latest weapons and equipment. That is especially true of the M1 Abrams tank and the Apache attack helicopter.

In the case of the tank, the two most often repeated criticisms center on high fuel consumption and an imagined inability of soldier-mechanics to keep it operating in the harsh environment of the Arabian Desert. Army leaders readily admit that the M1's 1500-horsepower turbine engine makes it comparatively fuel-hungry, but that same engine gives the M1 its great speed and remarkable agility even in the roughest terrain. Those factors, along with its special armor, compartmented fuel and ammunition storage and automatic fire suppression systems provide Abrams crews with the greatest possible levels of protection of any tank in the world.

Army Secretary Michael Stone responds to the maintainability of the M1 by citing one Army report of an operational trial of the M1 in a desert environment. It reads: "the Abrams travelled 392 kilometers as part of the long distance run. All the driving was at high speeds over extremely difficult terrain. High temperature was 112 degrees; low 79 degrees. The vehicle performed superbly in extremely difficult terrain. All systems operated satisfactorily."

Much of the carping about the Apache helicopter is based on a September 1990 General Accounting Office report which used old data obtained shortly after severe freak windstorms in Texas (May, 1989) and South Carolina (June, 1989) had damaged a large number of Apaches. Naturally, the readiness rate for this fleet was down, but repair to the damaged aircraft and replenishment of the spare parts pool have since added to a steadily increasing readiness rate.

Again Army Secretary Stone helped spike the criticism when on October 15th, he reported the Apache readiness rate to be "within one percent of 85 percent," a rate that "consistently exceeded" Army expectations. His information was not based on some stacked-deck reports of a few Monday morning experts who can't seem to see beyond the Washington beltway. Maybe they ought to be required to talk to the troops who fly, fight and maintain these systems before they try to shoot them down.

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