DOCUMENT RESUME

03398 - [A2573712] (Restricted/C[redacted])

The Navy's Multimission Carrier Airwing--Can the Mission Be Accomplished with Fewer Resources? LCD-77-409; B-133118. September 12, 1977.

Report to the Congress; by Elmer B. Staats, Comptroller General.

Issue Area: Military Preparedness Plans: Logistic Support Planning for Major Equipment (801).
Contact: Logistics and Communications Div.
Budget Function: National Defense: Department of Defense - Military (except procurement & contracts) (051).
Organization Concerned: Department of the Navy.
Congressional Relevance: House Committee on Armed Services; Senate Committee on Armed Services; Congress.

In response to budget constraints, the Navy reduced the number of aircraft carriers from 24 in the mid-1960s to 13 today. While the carriers today are fewer in number, they have more sophisticated weapon systems and other technological advances which partly offset the numerical difference. This technology upgrading is a continuous process and can be illustrated by the introduction of F-14 aircraft, which replaced the F-4s. Findings/Conclusions: To cope with the reduction in carriers and to satisfy their mission requirements, the Navy combined the formerly separate attack and antisubmarine capabilities onto single carrier decks, thereby making carrier airwings multimission in nature. Recommendations: The Congress and the Secretary of Defense should direct the Secretary of the Navy to reassess the total aircraft requirements for multimission aircraft carriers and to determine the minimum number of aircraft required for each carrier and how to best satisfy the mission with the least resources. The Congress should also consider the following two issues: (1) in view of the alternatives available to the Navy to provide the flexibility to adjust the carrier deckload, should the additional aircraft comprising the flexibility component be procured? and (2) if the Congress should decide that each of the multimission aircraft carriers should have its own unique airwing including the flexibility component, then Congress should defer appropriating funds for aircraft in excess of the basic sea control airwing requirements until the Navy demonstrates that it can efficiently and effectively operate the entire multimission airwing from the carriers under simulated combat conditions. (Author/SC)

COMPTROLLER GENERAL'S REPORT TO THE CONGRESS

THE NAVY'S MULTIMISSION CARRIER AIRWING--CAN THE MISSION BE ACCOMPLISHED WITH FEWER RESOURCES?

D I G E S T

In response to budget constraints, the Navy reduced the number of aircraft carriers from 24 in the mid-1960s to 13 today. While the carriers today are fewer in number, it should be recognized that they have more sophisticated weapon systems and other technological advances which partly offset the numercial difference. This technology upgrading is a continuous process and can be illustrated by the introduction of F-14 aircraft, which replaced the F-4s.

Flexibility components and alternatives

To cope with the reduction in carriers and to satisfy their mission requirements, the Navy combined the formerly separate attack and antisubmarine capabilities onto single carrier decks, thereby making carrier airwings multimission in nature. Of the Navy's 13 carriers, the Congress has approved 12 for the multimission airwings to provide the flexibility to adjust the carrier deckload from one required for sea control including power projection ashore to one optimized for power projection. GAO believes that the flexibility components making each carrier self-sufficient for either mission may not be necessary because the Navy has options available to provide the flexibility to optimize carrier deckloads for power projection ashore without furnishing flexibility components for each multimission carrier. (See pp. 5, 9, 13, 16, 18, and 19.)

GAO believes the Navy should have an adequate number of aircraft to enable it to accomplish either sea control or power projection. However, it may not be necessary for each multimission carrier airwing to have shore-based reserve aircraft to provide the flexibility for adjusting the carrier aircraft

mix. Other aircraft source options are available to the Navy to provide the desired flexibility, such as:

--Aircraft could be exchanged between two or more deployed carriers. (See pp. 10, 30, 38, and 39.)

--Aircraft assigned to carriers undergoing extensive overhaul could be used to provide the flexibility to adjust the deckload of deployed carriers. (See pp. 11, 31, 38, and 39.)

--Carrier deployable aircraft operated by the Marine Corps could be used to adjust the deckload of deployed carriers. (See pp. 11, 31 to 33, 38, and 39.)

--The Navy and Marine Corps Reserve airwings could provide the needed flexibility during emergencies. (See pp. 11, 33, 34, 38, and 39.)

--The Navy could establish a pool of aircraft specifically for adjusting carrier deckloads. Such a pool would require less aircraft than providing each carrier with its own flexibility component. (See pp. 11, 34, 38, and 39.)

--Highly capable training aircraft could be used to provide flexibility to adjust carrier deckloads in emergencies. (See pp. 12, 35, 38, and 39.)

Extent and cost of flexibility components

GAO estimates that the flexibility components for the 12 multimission carrier airwings will be over 70 aircraft. Another 30 or more aircraft will operate in support of training and overhaul replacement associated with the 70 aircraft contained in the flexibility components. (See pp. 13, 27, and 28.)

GAO recognizes the importance of mission requirements. Costs alone should not be the overriding criteria in evaluating the extent to which military hardware should be procured and operated. However, the cost to provide and operate more aircraft than absolutely necessary

is expensive. For example, an A-7E light attack aircraft, one of the more economical planes of the multimission airwing, costs about $7 million to procure. The same plane costs about $874,000 a year to operate. (See pp. 36 to 37.)

In view of the various alternatives available to the Navy which may provide an adequate number of aircraft needed to furnish the flexibility to adjust the multimission carrier deckloads, GAO believes that the Navy's practice of assigning land-based flexibility components to each of the multimission carrier airwings should be reevaluated. (See pp. 12, 37, and 38.)

The Navy's mission and related carrier operations

The Navy's current role of providing sea control and power projection ashore remains the same as it was a decade ago. It is generally recognized that the United States depends on the sea lanes for trade, including the import of raw materials, and the resupply of any potential war effort in overseas areas. (See pp. 5, 16 to 17.)

Formerly the Navy operated two distinct kinds of carriers--one configured for the attack role and the other configured for antisubmarine warfare. Due to the smaller number of carriers operated, this is no longer possible, and the carriers and airwings were integrated for 12 of the 13 carriers containing both capabilities. (See pp. 1 to 3.) In fusing the two capabilities into single airwings, the Navy encountered a problem--how to meet the various threat situations and mission objectives with the limited platform space available.

The basic difference between an airwing configured for sea control and one optimized for power projection is the number of antisubmarine and fighter and attack aircraft carried. If there is a submarine threat, most or all of the antisubmarine aircraft assigned to an airwing are loaded and generally some attack and fighter aircraft are left behind. The airwing configured for sea control retains most of its fighter and attack capability and can project substantial power ashore or against other targets.

However, when sea control is not seriously challenged, as was the case in Vietnam, and the carrier deckload is optimized for power projection ashore, then the antisubmarine aircraft are exchanged for the attack and fighter aircraft previously left behind. (See pp. 6 to 10, 18, and 19.)

In essence, each of the multimission carrier airwings is provided several attack aircraft as a land-based reserve to provide the flexibility to adjust the deckload of deployed carriers from sea control to the mode optimized for projecting power ashore. (See pp. 6 to 10, 18, and 19.)

Sea control is the Navy's primary mission and is required in the worst case scenario: a NATO war involving the Soviet Union. The Navy has identified the airwing size required to conduct continuous operations for the sea control mission. For conflicts of lesser intensity not involving the Soviet Union when power projection ashore is expected to be the carriers' primary function, it is unlikely that all carriers will be deployed simultaneously and various alternatives appear to exist to optimize the deployed carrier deckloads for this power projection ashore mode of operation. GAO believes that airwing resource requirements should be determined for the worst case situation, because the carrier airwing configured for sea control can fulfill the collateral mission of power projection. (See pp. 5, 7, 8, 17 to 18.)

Navy's comments and our analysis

The Department of the Navy contends that the GAO analysis presents a fair assessment of the structure of Navy airwings embarked on carriers in a peacetime situation. For various reasons the Navy does not agree that the options suggested could serve the flexibility requirements in a war involving the Soviet Union because all carriers would be deployed. However, based on GAO's analysis of available information, the carrier airwing flexibility could be provided by the alternatives suggested and GAO does not consider the Navy's answer responsive to the alternatives. Not all carriers could be deployed immediately nor would it necessarily be prudent to have all assets on board in such a

conflict. In conflicts of lesser intensity, GAO believes that the options presented are viable alternatives for carrier airwing adjustments and the Navy should reevaluate the size and composition of its multimission carrier airwings in view of the sizeable savings available in operating costs and future procurements. Such savings could be applied to other areas to improve the Navy's readiness position. (See pp. 12, 40 to 44.)

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE CONGRESS AND THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

GAO believes that the following two issues warrant consideration by the Congress. First, in view of the alternatives available to the Navy to provide the flexibility to adjust the carrier deckload, should the additional aircraft comprising the flexibility component be procured? Secondly, should the Congress decide that notwithstanding the alternatives, each of the multimission aircraft carriers should have its own unique airwing including the flexibility component, then the Congress should defer appropriating funds for aircraft in excess of the basic sea control airwing requirements until the Navy demonstrates to its own and Congress' satisfaction that it can efficiently and effectively operate the entire multimission airwing from the carriers under simulated combat conditions.

GAO is recommending to the Congress and the Secretary of Defense that they have the Secretary of the Navy reassess the total aircraft requirements for multimission aircraft carriers and determine the minimum number of aircraft required for each carrier and how to best satisfy the mission with the least resources.