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REPORT BY THE  
COMPTROLLER GENERAL  
OF THE UNITED STATES

NAVY NEEDS TO INCREASE  
S-3A READINESS TO ENSURE  
EFFECTIVE USE OF PLANNED  
WEAPON SYSTEM IMPROVEMENTS

D I G E S T

The S-3A is a carrier-based aircraft designed to protect U.S. surface ships from submarine threats. Offensive and defensive antisubmarine warfare has been a primary mission with surveillance of the ocean's surface a secondary mission. However, over the years the S-3A's role has changed significantly. Eliminating the specially dedicated antisubmarine warfare aircraft carriers and introducing the multi-purpose carrier, placed more emphasis on the S-3A's multimission capability.

S-3A WEAPON SYSTEM  
IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM STATUS

To operate effectively in its multimission role and combat the increased threat, the Navy has embarked on a \$1.3 billion weapon system improvement program which will be a major modification to the S-3A. The program is to enhance the S-3A's mission effectiveness through updates and/or additions to acoustic, radar, electronic support measures, electronic countermeasures, and surface attack subsystems. (See pp. 2 and 4.)

GAO reviewed this program to give the Congress a status report on the S-3A improvement program. GAO also looked at issues which may affect the effectiveness of the planned S-3A program. (See p. 2.)

It is too early to determine if the Navy will achieve the desired increase in S-3A mission effectiveness.

The S-3A program office is concerned about the timely delivery and additional funding needed for some of its operational software. Another concern is a recent \$15 million congressional cut in fiscal year 1983 research and development funds. The Navy states that if funds are



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not restored for this fiscal year the improvement program schedule will be lengthened and total development funding will increase. (See p. 6.)

Critical to the success of the S-3A improvement program will be the Navy's ability to improve the aircraft's operational readiness.

NAVY EFFORTS TO IMPROVE READINESS

The Navy, in its efforts to improve operational readiness, has taken several actions. These include establishing the Readiness Improvement Program and the Operational and Safety Improvement Program and instituting certain initiatives sponsored by the Chief of Naval Operations. Navy officials contend that these actions have required considerable leadtimes and all of the expected gains from these programs have not yet been realized. Navy officials predict that completing their readiness programs will provide a steady growth in operational readiness through the 1980s. They claim that readiness gains are already taking place primarily because of improved logistic support. (See pp. 7 and 8.)

Unless the Navy can demonstrate by the limited production decision point that the S-3A's operational readiness goal is achievable, GAO believes the advisability of continuing the weapon systems improvement program should be reassessed. (See p. 10.)

Since introduction to the fleet in 1974, the availability of the S-3A aircraft to perform its missions has been limited. Poor operational readiness has been caused by low equipment reliability and maintainability as well as shortages of trained flight and maintenance personnel. Also, the S-3A has suffered from inadequate spares support. (See p. 6.)

The Navy claims that recent overall operational readiness has improved significantly. Because the Navy changed its readiness reporting methods, GAO cannot say to what extent operational readiness increased. However, failure rates for several mission critical systems are worse than they were in 1978. (See pp. 8 to 10.)

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NEED FOR MORE S-3 AIRCRAFT

The Navy has enough aircraft for current active squadrons, but sufficient numbers of aircraft are not available for attrition and reserve squadrons. Navy officials said this shortage will intensify on introducing two planned aircraft carriers into the fleet. As a result, the Navy must decide in the near future on how to resolve the shortage. The Navy has several options available. (See pp. 11 and 12.)

RECOMMENDATION TO THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense require the Navy to provide assurance that the operational readiness goal will be attained or, if not attainable, that the mission capability can be fulfilled with a lesser performance. Future funding for the improvement program should depend on the above assessment.

AGENCY AND CONTRACTOR COMMENTS

Comments were received from the Department of Defense and were incorporated into the appropriate sections of this report. Defense agrees with the facts, conclusions, and recommendation presented in the report.

The Lockheed California Company, the S-3A prime contractor, supplied comments which also were incorporated into this report as appropriate. Lockheed stressed that carrier-based aircraft have not met or exceeded Navy's readiness goal and that the S-3A has recently been among the top deployed performers based on published Navy data.

Lockheed said the report was factual and agreed with GAO's conclusion that the viability of the S-3B improvement program depends heavily on documented improvements in S-3A mission capability. Lockheed stated that Navy statistical data has shown significant S-3A readiness improvements.

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