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Pilotless Spy Plane Plagued by Flaws

By MATT KELLEY

WASHINGTON (AP) -- The unmanned RQ-1 Predator spy plane became a star of the war in Afghanistan in November when one operated by the CIA fired Hellfire missiles that helped destroy an al-Qaida leadership compound near Kabul. President Bush's 2003 budget plan calls for spending \$158 million to buy 22 more Predators and upgrade existing ones.

Yet the Predator has been plagued by so many flaws that one in every eight of the Air Force's inventory crashed during the past six months. In a report issued just before the war began, the head of the Pentagon's testing agency declared the Predator "not operationally effective or suitable."

Predators cannot take off in rain, snow, ice, fog or frost. The planes' video, infrared and radar cameras can provide live images but aren't accurate enough to pinpoint targets.

Pushed from the rear by a propeller, the Predator can fly only about 90 mph and is most effective at about 10,000 feet, within range of most anti-aircraft fire.

Their remote control consoles are so difficult to use that even experienced pilots using the remote units can make serious mistakes. In 2000, one controller -- an instructor pilot -- accidentally wiped out a Predator's onboard computer memory during flight, causing it to crash.

At least seven Predators observing Iraq or Afghanistan have crashed or been shot down in six months, including two in January. That means about one of every eight Predators in the Air Force inventory has been destroyed.

"Most of those losses are explainable, but the ones that are due to pilot error we are not happy with," said Gen. John Jumper, the Air Force chief of staff. He said the Air Force was trying to prevent controller mistakes by improving training and revising procedures.

Designed to gather information without putting U.S. personnel at risk, the Predator gained a boost last February with the firing of the first live laser-guided Hellfire missile. The target was a stationary Army tank, which was destroyed.

Nevertheless, some critics are beginning to question whether the aircraft is worth the cost. One Predator unit, including four planes and a ground control station, costs about \$25 million. Each plane alone costs about \$3.7 million.

"Apparently the generals are finding some value in this, but we wonder whether the Air Force is getting what it paid for," said Eric Miller of the Project on Government Oversight, a watchdog group critical of several Pentagon weapons systems.

"There's a strong argument to be made that if a Predator goes down, you don't lose a pilot," Miller said. "But these things are getting more and more expensive, and they're not really intended to be disposable weapons."

When it's working, the Predator can do what no other spy gadget can: Provide live video, infrared and radar pictures from hundreds of miles away without putting a person into the line of fire.

Predators are built by General Atomics Aeronautical Systems of San Diego. Each one is about half the size of an F-16 fighter, with long, skinny wings and a tail that looks like an upside-down V.

Jumper would not say where the U.S. military is using Predators, other than over Iraq and Afghanistan. "We're prepared to use it anywhere it needs to be used," Jumper said last week in a briefing for foreign journalists.

The Predator is the first gadget developed through a streamlined process that bypasses much of the lengthy testing the Pentagon required in the past. The Air Force first began using Predators in 1995 and has had the latest version since 2000.

"It's definitely still a work in progress," said military analyst John Pike of GlobalSecurity.org, a defense consulting and research firm. "I think the judgment of the Air Force over the last five years is that it's worth trying to fix, as opposed to just giving up on it."

In a September report, the Pentagon's testing chief said many of the Predator's well-known flaws have not been fixed. Instead, users have figured out how to work around the Predator's shortcomings, such as keeping the planes grounded unless the weather is perfect.

"If the Predator system is to be effective and suitable, ... the shortfalls identified in this (report) must be addressed," wrote Thomas Christie, director of operational test and evaluation for the Defense Department.

The Pentagon is developing several types of what the military calls UAVs -- unmanned aerial vehicles. Other than the Predator, the one furthest along in development is the Global Hawk, a high-altitude spy plane.

Bush's budget seeks to build three more Global Hawks next year. Military commanders already have used Global Hawk prototypes over Afghanistan. One of them crashed, which the military blamed on a maintenance problem.

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