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# Are the Marines Faking The Reliability Record of Their \$54 Billion Superplane?

Posted By Dan Lamothe ■ Thursday, October 31, 2013 - 5:42 PM ■ [Share](#)

When Marines landed an MV-22B Osprey in an open field at the Dare County Bombing Range in North Carolina in June, it looked like a routine mission. But a gaffe was made: The Osprey sparked a grassfire and was left parked on it. Initially, Marine Corps officials **said the damage was minor**. Not quite: the fire burnt the fuselage, leaving it a \$79.3 million total loss, according to data released by the Naval Safety Center. Parts were later recovered for use on other aircraft, but that Osprey never flew again, **Foreign Policy** has learned.

The incident is emblematic of the struggles the Marine Corps faces with the revolutionary tilt-rotor aircraft, which takes off like a helicopter but flies with the range and speed of an airplane. While the military continues to add new missions for the Osprey abroad and has interest in selling it to allies, the program remains dogged by its deadly history and bad news -- much of it self-inflicted. The

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upshot: While the aircraft has found a variety of success on the battlefield, Marine Corps officials are still defending its safety and reliability record from skeptics. And not without reason: A couple of the Osprey accidents that the Marines swore were no big deal turn out to be very big indeed.

The latest obstacle to the Osprey's acceptance is a Defense Department Inspector General report that raises concerns about the way in which Osprey units recorded readiness information about the aircraft. The report itself is classified, but the [Pentagon released a summary of it Oct. 23](#). It states that squadron commanders improperly recorded aircraft information 167 of 200 times on aircraft inventory reports, inadequately prepared 112 of 907 works orders reviewed and submitted incomplete or inaccurate readiness reports in six squadrons that were reviewed. That practice, intentional or not, made it difficult for commanders to know if its MV-22 units were ready to perform, investigators found.

"As a result, the [mission capability rates] were unreliable, and senior DoD and Marine Corps officials could have deployed MV-22 squadrons that were not prepared for missions," the inspector general found.

Pentagon investigators attributed the mistakes to Osprey squadron commanders failing to adequately train personnel how to prepare aircraft inventory reports and readiness reports, and to verify the accuracy of the reports.

The readiness rates are not included in the unclassified summary, but have been reported in the past at between 65 and 80 percent. Commanders have acknowledged that is lower than desired, but Marine officials said the details in the IG report do not signify an attempt to make the Osprey look more reliable than really it is. Rather, they said, it is a failure to accurately catalog day-to-day operations.

"These mistakes are not cooking the books," Capt. Richard Ulsh, a Marine Corps spokesman at the Pentagon, told Foreign Policy. "They're not malicious, and they're not deliberate."

In a longer written response to questions, Ulsh defended the Osprey's record of service, including in combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. It also has been used in several high-profile operations in other countries, including the daring 2011 rescue of an Air Force weapons system officer who parachuted into Libya as his F-15E Strike Eagle crashed.

"Naval Aviation relies on multiple data sources and reporting systems for readiness metrics," Ulsh said. "As such, the human interface can create inaccuracies through input error or improper procedures; minimizing such errors and ensuring procedural correctness is paramount and requires constant emphasis and oversight to ensure safety and operational readiness reporting that is useful to commanders.

"At the heart of readiness reporting is safety; operation effectiveness and safety are inseparable," Ulsh's statement said. "Over the course of the past six years, over 18 MV-22 deployments and contingency operations were executed on time with properly trained and equipped combat read Marines and mission capable aircraft."

Nevertheless, the report's release rubs salt in old wounds. Before the aircraft, built jointly by Bell Helicopter and Boeing, first deployed to Iraq in 2007, it was involved in three deadly crashes that killed a combined 30 people from 1991 to 2000. Eight Marines also faced criminal charges in 2001 for [deliberately falsifying Osprey maintenance records](#).

More recently, two Marines were killed and two were critically wounded last year when an [MV-22 crashed in Morocco](#) during a training mission. A CV-22, an Air Force special operation version of the aircraft, also crashed in Afghanistan in April 2010, killing four service members. In both cases, the military cited pilot error as causes, rather than the Osprey's reliability.

In another recent incident, an Osprey [made a "hard landing" near Creech Air Force Base](#) in

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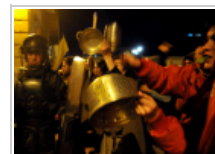
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Nevada on Aug. 26. Marine officials said at the time that it caught fire after personnel exited the aircraft. That Osprey also was considered a full \$79.3 million loss.

It was the Morocco crash, however, that created problems abroad for the U.S. military. Protesters in Okinawa, Japan, used it as fodder to back their opinion that the Marine Corps should not fly it from bases there.

Even the Marine Corps commandant, **Gen. James Amos, ruffled feathers in Japan** in August 2012 when he said the service had avoided any fatal Osprey accidents in the last 10 years. The remarks, made in Okinawa, were criticized as misleading and disrespectful. They came six months after the Morocco crash, which was widely reported in Japan. A Marine spokesman later told Stars and Stripes the commandant was referring to the 10-year period before the deaths in Morocco.

Amid all this, the Corps has continued to replace aging CH-46 helicopters with the Osprey, swapping them out squadron by squadron. It also adopted them as the **centerpiece of a new crisis-response force** it established this year to respond to emergencies involving U.S. interests in Africa. The speed and range of the aircraft, Marine officials say, make it possible for the U.S. to quickly react to crises that are hundreds of miles away.

Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel announced Thursday that **Israel would begin buying V-22s** from the U.S. Japan's government also is reportedly **interested in acquiring the aircraft**.



Senior Airman Andy M. Kin/U.S. Air Force

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## Conversation on FP.com

**gckovach**

I first reported the June Osprey crash on Aug 29 for U-T San Diego, after getting a tip to look for it in the Naval Safety Center reports. Was very surprised the Marines didn't announce a total aircraft loss. Via Gretel C. Kovach <http://m.utsandiego.com/news/2013/Aug/29/osprey-crash-investigation-black-box/>

4 DAYS AGO

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**NoBigGovDuh**

The whole grass fire thing isn't really an Osprey fault, that is more of a human stupidity problem.

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**OG\_Locc**

"It states that squadron commanders improperly recorded aircraft information 167 of 200 times on aircraft inventory reports, inadequately prepared 112 of 907 works orders reviewed and submitted incomplete or inaccurate readiness reports in six squadrons that were reviewed."

That tidbit is 100%, completely, utterly, irrelevant when taken alone.

If it was followed up with, "In comparison to the Super Huey squadrons, which improperly recorded blahblahblah X amount of times.", it would be meaningful.

5 DAYS AGO

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