BELL HELICOPTER, BAE SYSTEMS POSITION AH-1Z FOR POTENTIAL TIGER REPLACEMENT?

News / Manufacturer

Bell Helicopter and BAE Systems Australia have signed a teaming agreement that positions them to offer the AH-1Z Viper as a potential early replacement for the Army's Tiger Armed Reconnaissance Helicopter (ARH).

Signed at the Singapore Airshow on Tuesday, the agreement would see BAE Systems Australia provide maintenance and support services for the AH-1Z in Australia.

"Under the teaming agreement, BAE Systems will play a significant role in providing support for Bell Helicopter AH-1Z Viper attack rotorcraft. This will include overseeing helicopter maintenance and sustainment, and supporting training for future customers," the companies said in a joint statement.

"This relationship aligns our interests and pursuits as we work together to pursue opportunities to strengthen and support the capability and posture of the Australian Defence Force," Lisa Atherton, executive vice president of Military Business for Bell Helicopter, said in the statement.

Noted Steve Drury, BAE Systems Australia aerospace director: "We are looking forward to working closely on opportunities with Bell Helicopter as its sustainment and support partner in Australia."

There is currently no formal project to replace the Army's 22 Tiger ARH helicopters, which first

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entered service in 2005 and were acquired under the AIR 87 project at a cost of $2 billion. But the Tiger, which has been beset by sustainment issues that have limited its flying rate of effort, has yet to achieve Final Operational Capability (which was originally planned for June 2009 and had been rescheduled to January 2016), while issues connecting its Eurogrid datalink to other ADF assets and networks have limited its operational utility and seen the acquisition of an interim datalink capability.

The latest ANAO Major Projects Report into defence acquisition programs notes that: “the ARH Tiger Helicopters project faces significant capability risks and issues in relation to delivering the required Rate of Effort (flying hours), and technological obsolescence caused by delays in delivery, which impact future use.”

The teaming indicates Bell and BAE are positioning themselves should a planned mid-life upgrade project for the Tiger – AIR 87 Phase 3 Armed Reconnaissance Helicopter Capability Assurance Program (ARH CAP) – morph instead into a replacement for the Franco-German helicopter. According to the last Defence Capability Plan – which was published in 2012 and is finally due to be replaced by the new Integrated Investment Program, which is expected to be released alongside the forthcoming Defence White Paper by the end of next month – AIR 87 Phase 3 has a provisional budget of $1-2 billion.

That budget range would not be far off the costs of a Viper acquisition – in September 2012 the US Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) announced the approval of a possible sale of 36 AH-1Z Vipers to South Korea in a US$2.6 billion package that also included Sidewinder and Hellfire missiles and spare engines (South Korea instead acquired the Boeing AH-64E Apache), while last April the sale of 15 Vipers plus Hellfire missiles and spare engines to Pakistan was valued at US$952 million.

But a new acquisition would also need to budget for facilities upgrades and training systems such as simulators and training aids.

There is some irony in positioning the AH-1Z as a Tiger replacement, as the Viper was overlooked in preference for the Tiger during the original AIR 87 evaluation process in 1999. Like the Tiger the Viper too suffered from development delays and was not declared “operationally effective and suitable” until October 2010, with Initial Operating Capability (IOC) following in February 2011 (Tiger IOC was achieved in April 2010).

However, since then the Viper has matured in service, would be available as a relatively low-risk and possibly rapid – should the US Marine Corps be willing to give up production slots – acquisition under the US Foreign Military Sales program, and offers a fully-marinised platform designed to operate off the US Navy’s amphibious assault ships.

Bell was quietly pitching the Viper’s ship operating capabilities at the Avalon Airshow in February 2015.

“The AH-1Z has been built to be resistant to corrosion; its engines are the same as those fitted to the MH-60R maritime helicopter; it has folding blades; there are heavy-duty tie-down points; and its systems are shielded so as to be ‘ship-safe’,” Bob Carrese, regional vice-president for Asia-Pacific, told Jane’s Defence Weekly.

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“The AH-1Z is already doing all of the missions that the ADF is doing, and more. It can carry 16 Hellfire plus two Sidewinder, and has the cost-per-flight-hour figures that the ADF has been looking for.”

The AH-1Z – dubbed the Zulu Cobra – is a development of the earlier AH-1W, and is one of two elements of the USMC’s H-1 upgrade program along with the UH-1Y, which is a development of the UH-1N. Both aircraft feature General Electric T700 engines and composite four-blade main rotors, plus new sensors and avionics. The USMC is acquiring 189 Vipers (37 rebuilt from AH-1Ws, the rest new-build machines) for delivery through until 2022.

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