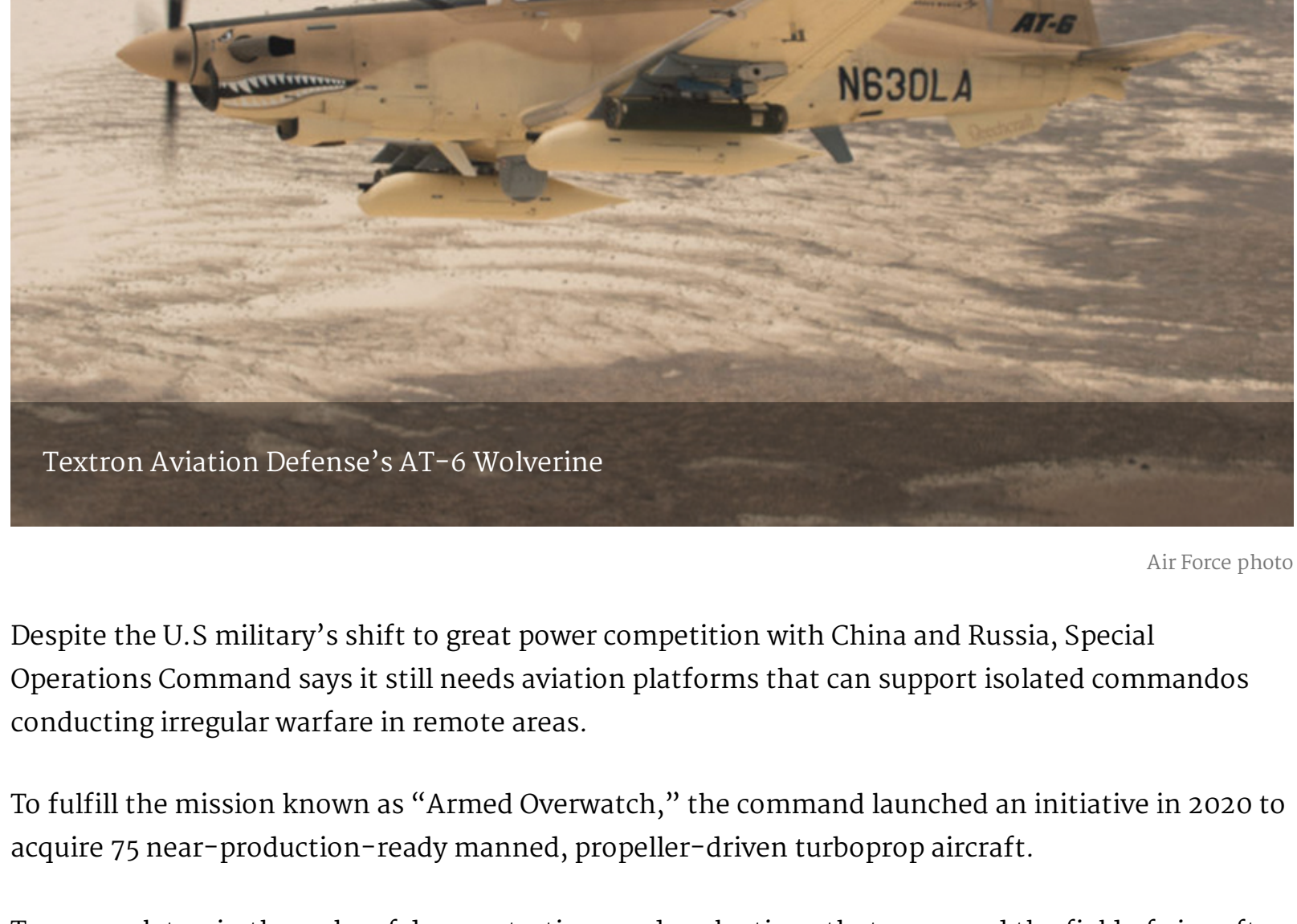


AVIATION

Armed Overwatch Program Nears Source Selection (UPDATED)

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By Jan Tegler



Textron Aviation Defense's AT-6 Wolverine Air Force photo

Despite the U.S military's shift to great power competition with China and Russia, Special Operations Command says it still needs aviation platforms that can support isolated commandos conducting irregular warfare in remote areas.

To fulfill the mission known as "Armed Overwatch," the command launched an initiative in 2020 to acquire 75 near-production-ready manned, propeller-driven turboprop aircraft.

Two years later, in the wake of demonstrations and evaluations that narrowed the field of aircraft competing for the program to three — L3 Harris' AT-802U Sky Warden, Textron Aviation Defense's AT-6 Wolverine and Sierra Nevada Corp.'s MC-145B Coyote — the command is on the verge of selecting one of the aircraft.

However, the vagaries of the defense budget have called the timing of the program into question. Enactment of the fiscal year 2022 defense budget arrived months late on March 10. With it came congressional approval of Special Operations Command's request for \$170 million to buy six aircraft.

The appropriation marks the start of Armed Overwatch as a program of record, according to Ken McGraw, a public affairs officer at the command.

Eighteen days later, the Biden administration introduced the Defense Department's fiscal year 2023 budget proposal debuted with a request for \$246 million to purchase nine additional Armed Overwatch aircraft as well as required support equipment, and training and mission-planning devices, pending congressional approval.

That puts the three companies vying for Armed Overwatch and the command itself in a waiting game. Asked when the first six aircraft will actually be purchased, McGraw said they will be bought "after source selection is complete."

He declined to share details on when this will happen, stating only that "USSOCOM plans to award a production contract before the end of this fiscal year."

Thus, with just six months remaining in fiscal 2022, it remains unknown which aircraft will be chosen.

Also unknown is how a congressionally directed independent assessment of Armed Overwatch from the Pentagon's Office of Cost Assessment and Program Evaluation, due along with the 2023 budget request, may impact how many aircraft are ultimately purchased.

Armed Overwatch aircraft would replace the 28 U-28A Draco intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance aircraft now in-service with three operational squadrons in Air Force Special Operations Command, as well as eight trainers.

The aging Dracos have been worked hard supporting special operations teams since they began flying in 2006. Armed Overwatch aircraft are intended to perform a similar intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance role as the U-28, adding strike capability to perform close-air support for special operators.

With the ability to employ munitions including air-to-surface missiles, precision-guided rockets and bombs, and .50 caliber guns, Armed Overwatch aircraft would "collapse the stack" of aircraft including AC-130J/Ws, A-10s, F-16s and other tactical jets plus unmanned aircraft that provide surveillance and close air support today "into a smaller number of platforms," according to Air Force Special Operations Command commander Lt. Gen. James Slife.

In a February 2021 Aerospace Nation podcast with retired Lt. Gen David Deptula, dean of the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies, Slife loosely described the requirements for Armed Overwatch aircraft.

"What I would envision is a light footprint, a multi-role capability that has the ability to provide the intelligence needed to remain aware of the threat, and to take action where necessary ... without drawing a lot of attention to our host nations that may be hosting those operations," he said. "That is what the future looks like in my mind, and so, you know, the Armed Overwatch platform would be ideally suited for that type of an operational environment."

Special Operations Command has been tight-lipped about its source selection process and specified that contractors forward all questions from the media to them, effectively shutting down communication with two of three companies.

But they come in two general configurations. Textron's AT-6E and the AT-802U — an armed conversion of Air Tractor's AT-802 crop duster — are low-wing, single engine turboprops. The two aircraft can be disassembled to fit into a C-17 for transport to a deployment location then reassembled there.

Luke Savoie, L3 Harris' president of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance said, "Being able to disassemble our [AT-802U] aircraft in under six hours, reassemble it in 12 hours and provide a capability overhead an airfield or in a region is incredibly important."

A Textron Aviation Defense spokesperson wouldn't comment on how rapidly the AT-6E can be disassembled or reassembled. She noted that the airplane "is capable of quick disassembly and reassembly. In fact, we are using this method for shipping aircraft on another contract, so it is not a challenge."

Both two-seaters carry a variety of ordnance and reconfigurable sensors, communications and data links as well as advanced targeting systems. They can operate from unprepared runways, and be rapidly rearmed and refueled by small ground-based support teams, he said in an interview.

Sierra Nevada's MC-145 is a high-wing, twin-engine aircraft derived from the short takeoff and landing, light cargo and passenger-carrying Polish PZL M28 Skytruck, a type already in use with AFSOC as the C-145A Combat Coyote. The MC-145 can self-deploy, carrying its own support team, special operators or casualties — in addition to its aircrew.

An airborne-operable rear cargo door offers the flexibility to deploy paratroops or palletized munitions including extended range Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff missiles. The Coyote can carry weapons on four wing hardpoints externally like the AT-6E and AT-802 or internally including glide munitions, up to eight common launch tubes or a "Coyote" unmanned air system. Like its single-engine competitors, it can carry a variety of sensors, data-links and communication payloads.

Maj. Alex Biegalski, a former U-28 pilot with 2,000 combat hours, who now flies MQ-9 Reapers for the New York Air National Guard in Syracuse, said MC-145's signature is another feature that differentiates it.

A mantra for special operations forces is to "be discreet when you go to remote places," he explained.

A civilian-painted U-28 can discreetly land in Somalia in the middle of Africa. "It might look a little weird but it looks like a civilian plane. People step off it wearing civilian clothes," he said.

"When you take an AT-6 with a bunch of bombs and other stuff on it, it looks like an AT-6 with a bunch of bombs on it," he said. "There's no paint job you can put on it that doesn't make it look like a military airplane. You have to wear a flight suit, a harness, etc. So the signature with that isn't great."

The MC-145 looks much like "a cargo aircraft," he added, allowing it to blend in better than rivals. Though AT-802U might be able to be disguised as an agricultural aircraft, Biegalski said that both low-wing planes are more obtrusive and "SOF teams aren't going to want to be near it because they don't want to be associated with it."

A Textron Aviation Defense spokesperson said AT-6E is "small, nimble and easy to cover if required." The larger, crop-duster derived AT-802U would be challenging to conceal. "Giant, armed agricultural equipment are a lot harder to hide and pretending that type of equipment belongs in the middle of nowhere is likewise rather difficult," she said.

Queried on what role the competing airplanes' respective signatures might play in selecting aircraft for Armed Overwatch, a SOCOM spokesman responded that "signature is always important."

Maintenance and sustainment networks to support deployed Armed Overwatch aircraft will also warrant consideration. In press releases and briefing materials, Textron stresses that AT-6 has "an established global logistics infrastructure" and "85 percent parts commonality with the T-6."

Textron has operated two Wolverines for eight years and has "maintained them with a two-person team," a Textron Aviation Defense spokesperson explained. The company has a global network of service centers and deploys "mobile service units in support of our customers worldwide," she added.

Savoie said, "Air Tractor is the number one turboprop maker in the world by volume," adding that the airplane's existing international network supporting its aerial application aircraft in areas like Africa and Middle East is well placed to support AT-802U.

As mentioned, the MC-145 is capable of hauling some of the personnel and equipment needed to sustain it — as well as the C-145A from which it is derived — and is already operating with Air Force Special Operations Command in far-flung locations.

According to SOCOM, some of the first six aircraft to be purchased will be used for training purposes, not operational missions. But the command also said Air Force Special Operations Command will ultimately determine how the first aircraft are used.

Lt. Col. Frank Hartnett, Air Force Special Operations Command director of public affairs, said, "It's too early to have the details on how these initial aircraft would be used in what specific roles."

The same applies to the nine additional aircraft Special Operations Command requested. As new aircraft "are brought online, it can be expected operational test and evaluation efforts and training plan efforts will need to be supported" as the new weapons system "begins the path to operational capability," Hartnett said.

This means it will be a while before the Armed Overwatch mission gets off the ground.

Biegalski said the condition of the U-28 fleet suggests that both commands need to put operational Armed Overwatch aircraft into service soon.

"For the past 16 years, U-28s have been flying 24/7 combat operations in multiple theaters plus thousands of home station training missions," he said.

It's an assessment Lt. Gen. Slife agreed with, in comments to *Air Force Magazine* in 2020. The U-28 has service life issues on the "visible fiscal horizon," resulting from the number of hours it has been flying and the cycles of takeoffs and landings "because of how heavily we've operated those airplanes over the last 15 years or so,"

"What we're trying to do is time this in a way that does not result in a decrease in capacity on the battlefield as we transition crews from the U-28 to the prospective armed overwatch," he said.

Hartnett said AFSOC is "properly managing the maintenance and longevity" of the U-28, explaining that during depot-level maintenance inspections at 25,000 flight hours a wing replacement is done that "extends the overall service life to 50,000 total airframe hours."

Correction: A previous version of this story said the Beechcraft AT-6E was an armed version of the T-6 Texan II. It is a different aircraft, according to a company spokesperson.

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