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Marines Report Osprey Has Proven Itself in Iraq

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WASHINGTON, May 2, 2008 – The MV-22 Osprey has proven itself in Iraq, and Marine officials are applying the lessons learned in the first operational deployment of the tilt-rotor aircraft to current operations.

“We’re immensely proud of the Marines of Tilt-Rotor Squadron 263, who took on the challenging task of the first combat deployment of the Osprey,” Lt. Gen. George J. Trautman, deputy commandant for Marine Corps aviation, said here today.

The MV-22 takes off and lands as a helicopter, but flies like an airplane.

Trautman, squadron commander Lt. Col. Paul Rock, MV-22 pilot Capt. Sara Faibisoff, and crew chief Sgt. Danny Herrman briefed Pentagon reporters on the squadron’s deployment to Iraq. The unit deployed from Marine Corps Air Station New River, N.C., in September 2007 and returned last week.

Trautman said the decision to send the MV-22 to Iraq was the right one. It gave the Marines and soldiers in Anbar province “the best assault support aircraft” ever made, he said.

The MV-22 handled every mission it was assigned, Rock said. The unit flew more than 2,500 sorties during its seven-month deployment, with each of its aircraft flying an average of 62 hours per month. Rock said before the deployment, officials forecast each MV-22 would fly around 50 hours per month.

The aircraft was easier to maintain than the CH-46 helicopters it replaced. The 46 is 1950s-based technology, and mechanics put in 24 hours of maintenance on those aircraft for every hour in the air. The MV-22 took about 9.5 hours of maintenance for every hour of flight.

The squadron deployed with 10 aircraft. “On any given day, about seven aircraft were mission ready,” Rock said. “That was more than sufficient to meet our daily taskings.”

The biggest surprise for the Marines was the vastly increased payload and greatly increased range the Osprey brings to the mission. Herrman said that, in loading the aircraft, he would often run out of cubic space rather than exceeding the weight the aircraft could handle.

The range and speed of the aircraft also were pleasant surprises. Faibisoff told of flying a medical evacuation mission on Christmas Day. She picked up a Marine with a ruptured appendix in a remote base well south of Al Asad Air Base. The aircraft was able to launch and get the Marine to medical help in 56 minutes -- well within the "golden hour," a rule of thumb that gives an ill or injured person the best chance for survival if treated within the first hour of being stricken.

"We were off deck within 15 minutes of receiving the call and headed for a zone about 90 miles south of Al Asad," she said.

Computer software makes the aircraft easy to fly, and it was able to handle the desert environment, Faibisoff said.

The aircraft flew raid operations and scout missions, and conducted tactical recovery of aircraft and personnel. The squadron also flew alert missions and casualty evacuations.

"The overwhelming majority of what we did was general support -- taking people, gear, combat equipment all over the very large battle space," Rock said.

The combat conditions in Anbar province had improved to such a degree that the aircraft never had to fly into a landing zone while hostilities were under way. Still, Rock said, squadron aircraft came under small-arms fire once and rocket fire once. "Taking advantage of the aircraft's performance (means that) somebody's opportunity to engage us is very short," he said.

The Marine Corps is looking at adding an all-aspect, all-quadrant weapon on the MV-22.

"The system we're looking at now with the [U.S.] Special Operations Command is an all-aspect weapon that would be mounted in the belly of the aircraft," Trautman said. The weapon will fire in any direction and be controlled by a gunner inside the airplane.

Another MV-22 squadron is operating at Al Asad Air Base today. The service will create two more squadrons each year.

"We're on a journey to exploit a new and revolutionary technology," Trautman said. "We're going to continue to learn lessons and we're going to continue to improve and we're going to work hard to exploit the capability this aircraft."