August 2004

FORCE STRUCTURE

Department of the Navy's Tactical Aviation Integration Plan Is Reasonable, but Some Factors Could Affect Implementation

GAO Highlights

Highlights of GAO-04-900, a report to the Senate and House Committees on Appropriations and the Senate and House Committees on Armed Services

Why GAO Did This Study

The Fiscal Year 2004 Defense Appropriations Act and the Senate Report for the 2004 National Defense Authorization Act mandated that GAO examine the Navy and Marine Corps' Tactical Aviation Integration Plan. In response to these mandates, this report addresses (1) how Navy and Marine Corps operational concepts, force structure, and procurement costs change; (2) the methodology and assumptions the services used to analyze the potential for integrating the forces; (3) the analytical process the services used to decide which reserve squadrons to decommission; and (4) other factors that might affect implementation of the Plan.

What GAO Recommends

To enhance the potential that the future tactical aviation force will meet the services' mission needs and ensure more transparency in future decommissioning decisions, GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense

- direct that the number of needed backup aircraft be assessed,
- develop guidance and methodology for analyzing future decommissioning decisions, and
- direct that future readiness funding for the future tactical aviation force be analyzed.

In written comments, the Department of Defense generally agreed with the recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-900.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact George Morse at (757) 552-8108 or morseg@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

Concerns about the affordability of their prior tactical aviation procurement plan prompted the Navy and Marine Corps to agree to a new Tactical Aviation Integration Plan. Under this Plan, the two services will perform their missions using fewer units of more capable aircraft and reducing total program aircraft procurement costs by $28 billion over the next 18 years. Operationally, the Navy and Marine Corps will increase the extent to which their tactical aviation units are used as a combined force to accomplish both services' missions. The Plan also reduces the services' tactical aviation force structure by decommissioning five squadrons, thus decreasing the number of Navy and Marine Corps squadrons to 59, and reduces the total number of aircraft they plan to buy from 1,637 to 1,140.

The Department of the Navy based its conclusion that it could meet the Navy and Marine Corps' operational requirements with a smaller force primarily on the findings of a contractor study that evaluated the relative capability of different tactical aviation force structures. GAO's review of the contractor's methodology and assumptions about force structure, budget resources, and management efficiencies suggests that much of the analysis appears reasonable. However, GAO noted some limitations—including the lack of analytical support for reducing the number of backup aircraft—increase the risk that the smaller force will be less effective than expected.

The Navy and Marine Corps each followed a different process in selecting a reserve squadron to decommission. The Marine Corps made a clear and well-documented analysis of the operational, fiscal, logistical, and personnel impacts of different options that appears to provide decision makers with a reasonable basis for selecting the Reserve unit to decommission. By contrast, the Navy selected its reserve squadron without clear criteria or a documented, comprehensive analysis, and thus with less transparency in its process.

Two other factors that might affect successful implementation of the Plan are the potential unavailability of readiness funding and delays in fielding the new force. Although the contractor recommended that the Navy identify future readiness-funding requirements, to date, the Navy has not conducted this analysis. In addition, the Department of the Navy is experiencing engineering and weight problems in developing the Joint Strike Fighter that will cause it to be delayed until 2013, at least 1 year later than had been projected, and other high risks to the program remain. Because these delays will cause the Navy to operate legacy aircraft longer than expected, they might also increase operations and maintenance costs, making an analysis of future readiness funding requirements even more important.