

Bird of a different feather



An MV-22 Osprey belonging to Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 263 waits for members of the 7th Iraqi Infantry Division and Marines with Military in Transition Team 0720 to load up after an operation. U.S. MARINE CORPS PHOTO

Marines praise how Osprey aircraft performed in combat in Iraq

By JACK SATTERFIELD

The Bell Boeing V-22 tiltrotor aircraft—with its speed, maneuverability and multimission capability—has come into its own as the tactical transport of choice in Iraq. With a flawless combat deployment under its belt and a second tour of duty performing at comparable levels, the Osprey is proving in the heat of battle what the U.S. Marines have argued all along: This aircraft will transform U.S. military operations.

That's good news for Boeing and its Osprey partner, Bell Helicopter Textron in Fort Worth, Texas. In fact, following 25 years of development and years of controversy surrounding the aircraft's performance, their vision and investment paid off in March with a five-year procurement program for 167 Ospreys.

The first V-22 fleet operations began in 2006 when Squadron VMM-263, nicknamed the Thunder Chickens, was the first to convert from CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters to the V-22. The Marines certified the squadron operationally ready in 2007; squadron members boarded an amphibious assault ship last September with 10 aircraft, and combat flying commenced in October.

VMM-263's Ospreys supported Marines throughout Al Anbar Province, covering most of western Iraq. Two additional Ospreys were added midway through the tour with continued smooth operations, underscoring the V-22's safety, reliability and mission suitability.

The Osprey proved that in combat it's definitely a bird of a different feather. V-22s take off, land and hover like helicopters, but fly most missions as speedy turboprop aircraft. In other words, once airborne, its engine nacelles can be rotated forward to convert the aircraft to a turboprop airplane capable of high-speed, high-altitude flight. The V-22 can cruise at about 275 miles per hour (440 kilometers per hour) in airplane mode.

During its Iraq deployment VMM-263 completed nearly 1,500 combat sorties, many involving several aircraft, logging almost 3,600 flight

Osprey's score points

Here are some of the capabilities of the V-22 Osprey tiltrotor aircraft:

- Increased speed: It's twice as fast as a helicopter
- Much longer range, resulting in greater mission versatility than a helicopter
- Multimission capability:
 - Amphibious assault
 - Transport
 - Combat support
 - Search-and-rescue
 - Long-range special-operations infiltration and exfiltration
 - Medevac

hours. It had a 69 percent mission-capable rate (a measure of aircraft availability for flights). In fact, the squadron completed every mission assigned without delay. Not a single squadron member or aircraft suffered a scratch in the six-month deployment. Insurgents targeted Ospreys twice, but crews flew quickly out of harm's way.

"I'm proud of the aircraft's performance," said Lt. Col. Paul Rock, VMM-263's first commanding officer. "This aircraft can scream across the ground. There's nothing in the [helicopter] inventory that can keep up with the Osprey. I'm very satisfied at how well it performed."

"The commandant [Marine Gen. James T. Conway] clearly made the right decision to send this airplane into combat so that our warriors forward could have the best assault support aircraft ever made for war-fighting purposes," said Lt. Gen. George Trautman, deputy commandant for Aviation. "But, I don't want anybody to think that this is the end of a journey. We're going to continue to learn lessons, improve, and work hard to exploit the capabilities of this airplane. I anticipate in the coming years and decades, as Air Force Special Operations Command and others see the utility of this aircraft, it's just going to become more and more valuable across the board."

In April, with the completion of their deployment, VMM-263 turned over its combat assignment and its Ospreys to VMM-162 (known as the Golden Eagles). The 200 men and women of VMM-263 continue to laud the aircraft, as they have from the start. But now, following a successful deployment, they can also boast: "The Eagles have landed, but we Chickens were there first!" ■

john.r.satterfield@boeing.com