

Protecting the Widow Maker: The US Marines Exonerate the Osprey

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The tiltrotor V-22 Osprey has a plagued, bloodied history. But blighted as it is, the aircraft remains a cherished feature of the US Marines, regarded as vital in supporting combat assault, logistics and transport, not to mention playing a role in search-and-rescue missions and delivering equipment for the Navy carrier air wings.

In March this year, V-22 flights were again permitted after a three-month pause following a fatal crash on November 29 of an Air Force CV-22B off Yakushima Island, Japan and the grounding of all V-22S aircraft in early December. Col. Brian Taylor, program manager for the V-22 Joint Program Office, [told](#) a media roundtable two days prior to rescinding the grounding order that a “meticulous and data-driven approach” had been used in investigations.

The approach, however, may well have been less meticulous and data-driven than a matter of desperation and self-interest, not to mention the role the aircraft is intended to play in the lighter, more agile forms of conflict envisaged by the “Force Design 2030” strategy. A feature of that strategy is EABO, known to the military wonks as Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations.

Bryan Clark, senior fellow and director of the Hudson Institute’s Center for Defense Concepts and Technology, [offers](#) a blunt assessment. “There’s not a clear backup for the Marines, there’s not a clear backup for the Air Force, and soon there won’t be a backup for the Navy’s [carrier onboard delivery] mission.”

The Osprey’s failures have also left their spatter in Australia. On August 27, 2023 a V-22B Osprey with 23 US marines crashed to the north of Darwin on Melville Island, leading to three fatalities. Darwin, having become a vital springboard in projecting US power in the Indo-Pacific, hosts an annual Marine Rotational Force, so-called to avoid suspicions of a permanent garrisoning of the city.

The crash also stirred unwanted memories of a [previous](#) Osprey crash in Australia, when a Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 265 failed to safely land on the flight deck of USS *Green Bay* on August 5, 2017. That lethal occasion saw three deaths and 23 injuries.

The Osprey has pride of place in a military force that specialises in lethal aviation mishaps during training and routine operations. Join the US Armed Forces, and you might just get yourself killed by your own machinery and practices. The investigation into the Melville Island crash was instructive to that end, showing the aircraft to be, yet again, an object of pious reverence in US defence circles.

The initial investigation into the crash was initially eclectic: the Northern Territory police, fire and emergency services, along with personnel from the Australian Defence Force and the US Marine Corps. At the time, acting assistant commissioner and incident controller, Matthew Hollamby, [expressed](#) his enthusiasm in carrying out a “thorough investigation”. “We are in the recovery phase and working closely with NT Fire and Rescue Service to assist us with a safe and respectful recovery operation of the three deceased US marines.”

Despite such utterances, it soon became clear that any investigation into the matter would ultimately be pared back. Either the servitors were not considered up to the task, or all too capable in identifying what caused the crash. In September 2023, the local press reported that territory officials were no longer needed, with *NT News* going so far as to [claim](#) that local agencies had been “ousted from the investigation”. The Marines had taken full reins over the matter.

The top brass accordingly got the findings they wanted from the US Marines’ [official report](#), which involved sparing the Osprey and chastising the personnel. There had been no “material or mechanical failure of any component on the aircraft”. The crash had been “caused by a series of poor decisions and/or miscalculations.”

The squadron’s attitude to procedure had also been less than enviable, marked by a “culture that disregarded safety of flight procedures”. There had been a “lack of attention to detail and failure to comply with proper pre-flight procedures”. There had also been a “lackadaisical attitude across the squadron” towards maintenance practices. Command responsibility in not addressing that particular culture was also acknowledged, while the conduct of the Australian Defence Forces and “local nationals” in responding to the crash were deemed “admirable”.

Such reports are hardly intended as ironic, but the executive summary notes how Australian defence protocols were so developed as to enable the Marines to operate with even greater daring than they otherwise would. The ADF’s “casualty evacuation (CASEVAC) and mass casualty (MASSCAS) support structure is allowing Marine units to conduct multi-national military training events in the Northern Territories without sacrificing force requirements. Without these well-established relationships in place this mishap may have been more tragic.”

The findings should have given the then Northern Territory Chief Minister Eva Lawler pause for concern. Squadrons of personnel operating such machinery indifferent to safety would surely stir some searching questions. But NT officials, under the eagle eye of the Canberra military establishment, aim to please, and Lawler proved no different. She [knew](#) “that the US Marines will do the work that’s needed now to make sure that any recommendations out of any inquiry are implemented in full.”

In a [statement](#) of unconvincing worth, the Marines insisted that they remained “unwavering” in their “commitment to the world class training of our aircrews and ensuring their safety”. And that commitment, not to mention the type of training, is precisely what we should be afraid of.

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