



NORTHROP GRUMMAN

Joint STARS at risk

A key U.S. Air Force ISR asset is in danger of dying of neglect, retired **Lt. Gen. Thomas G. McInerney** says.

In April, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates chastised the Air Force for not doing enough to provide more ISR capabilities to the fight in Iraq and Afghanistan. It struck me and many others as a sharp, caustic attack on our Air Force men and women.

The reality is a different story, in terms of what is being done and what needs to be done.

The military services have been responding to the war fighters' request for more ISR forces. The Air Force deployed its Global Hawk high-altitude, multisensor drone years before it was considered operationally ready. Global Hawk continues to perform as a mainstay of our ISR resources in-theater. More recently, the Air Force has accelerated the stand up of Predator UAV combat air patrols by two years, and actually increased the number of patrols beyond that required by the Defense Department.

But mention of unmanned systems doesn't cover the full spectrum of ISR capability that is available. Another ISR asset that is in great demand — and needs the resource support — is the Air Force's E-8C Surveillance Target Attack Radar System, or Joint STARS, radar aircraft. The current force of 17 ground-surveillance aircraft was originally designed to look beyond the Army's front lines and track enemy armor units, but the aircraft have been adapted to

the pressing need in Southwest Asia.

If the Air Force does not modernize Joint STARS, the nation will be setting itself up for another ISR shortage years from now. As a small, unique fleet, the Joint STARS sensor suffers from a dwindling supplier base. The costs of maintaining the current sensors until they are replaced are prohibitive — estimated at more than \$1 billion — and will only preserve late 1980s-era technology well into the next decade, when a technology refresh becomes essential.

Former Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. T. Michael "Buzz" Moseley, before his departure, identified the rising cost of maintenance support as one of his top domestic concerns because it absorbs a larger percentage of the budget each year — with no new gains in capability in return. The Joint STARS airframes have been thoroughly evaluated and judged viable well beyond 2050. However, by 2015, the Air Force expects that the current Joint STARS aircraft will be grounded because the service will not be able to find companies to manufacture the one-of-a-kind parts needed to sustain the radars and engines.

There's an opportunity to avert that crisis, preserve our investments and support our soldiers and Marines in combat at the same time. The Air Force should follow through on modernizing Joint STARS with the Multi-Platform Radar Technology Insertion Program, or MP-RTIP, sensor and new engines.

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A small MP-RTIP radar is already in a flight-test program with the Global Hawk unmanned aircraft. The version designed for Joint STARS would be much larger for wide-area surveillance. It would provide a greater degree of discrimination of what it sees, including an ability to recognize and monitor the types of vehicles — tractors, buses, and small cars and trucks — that are used by insurgent forces.

Such instant information would dramatically increase the ground troops' knowledge of what is around them. And a single improved Joint STARS would support not just one battalion, but as many as 10 battalions simultaneously.

For the Air Force to provide this capability, Congress must approve the Joint STARS MP-RTIP development dollars requested by the

Without engine and radar upgrades, the U.S. fleet of E-8C Joint STARS aircraft could be grounded by 2015.

Air Force in the current war on terrorism supplemental bill, as well as ensure the fiscal 2009 budget contains funding to the amount cited by the Air Force as an urgent priority for 2009. Congressional support will allow the Air Force to field the improved ground monitoring and tracking capability 15 to 20 years before a replacement for Joint STARS could be available.

The Air Force needs to show its support for this core ISR asset as well by including funding in its 2010 budget request.

Joint STARS has been the keystone of U.S. battlefield surveillance operations since its beginning. Joint STARS was introduced into combat with dramatic results in Desert Storm. Since 9/11, Joint STARS has been almost continuously at war.

Recently, Gates decried the services' propensity to overlook lessons being learned every day in fighting smaller, irregular forces in order to focus on the next major conventional conflict — what he termed "next-waritis." If we are learning anything from the daily employment of Joint STARS, it is that few ISR systems are as well-suited to combating the insurgent foe. With MP-RTIP, that capability would improve exponentially.

In Iraq today, Joint STARS is a critical element of Army attack helicopter operations and is credited with saving lives on the ground daily. But failure to keep its most critical components — radar and engines — upgraded will deny the nation a return on its tax investment of several billion dollars in the airframe and early radar development.

Supporting MP-RTIP and engine upgrade funding for Joint STARS in the war on terrorism supplemental, 2009 budget and future years plan is the right thing to do. It protects the taxpayer's investment, but more importantly, it provides our troops with the ISR capability they need. ■

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