AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT AUDITOR SLAMS TIGER ATTACK HELICOPTER

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The Australia National Audit Office (ANAO) has issued a report that is highly critical of the army's fleet of 22 Airbus Helicopters Tiger Armed Reconnaissance Helicopter (ARH).

The 64-page report details a range of issues. It identifies 76 "capability deficiencies," of which the Department of Defence (DoD) deems 60 to be "critical."

"The Tiger helicopter fleet has not yet delivered the original capability expected by the Australian Government, and continues to experience higher than expected sustainment costs and lower than expected aircraft availability," says the ANAO.

On the original acquisition of the type, it contends that the Tiger was still an immature platform when it was selected in December 2001, which exposed Canberra to programme risk.

On average, only 3.5 aircraft in the operational fleet of 16 helicopters were available on "any given day in 2015," says ANAO. This is below targeted readiness of 12 aircraft.

It points out substantial delays in the Tiger's meeting key milestones. For example, Initial Operational Release was 40 months late, and a highly-conditional Final Operational Capability arrived 82 months after originally planned.

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One capability that still hasn’t arrived is the ability to operate from warships.

Sustainment costs are also an issue. Initially, between 2004 and 2019 these were pegged at A$571 million ($431 million). This amount was eclipsed in 2014, and costs mounted to A$921 million in 2016. The cost per flight hour in June 2016 was A$30,335, compared with a target of A$20,000.

It does not help that there are only 119 Tiger’s in service with four militaries globally, which means the supply chain is “limited.”

Image result for Airbus Helicopters Tiger Armed Reconnaissance Helicopter

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The ANAO contends that the original sustainment contract negotiations were rushed, resulting in a “flawed outcome.” The DoD also failed to enforce its contractual rights, thus weakening its negotiating position.

The Tiger’s capabilities as a combat platform also drew criticism. The helicopter is unable to communicate effectively with the army’s broader network, reducing its usefulness as a reconnaissance platform.

Weapons availability appears to be a challenge. In addition, there have been two incidents – one in Germany, one in Australia – where 70mm rocket pods were jettisoned with no command from the pilot. The cause of this problem has yet to be identified.

The Tiger’s Roof Mounted Sight (RFS) is also an issue. While the type’s Lockheed Martin AGM-114 Hellfire missile can engage targets out to 8km, per the original requirement, the RFS only has an effective range out to 4km.

“The Tiger may be within the effective range of enemy fire before the Tiger crew can positively

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identify and respond to the threat," says the report.

In response, the DoD agrees with the ANAO, and says it has made "significant progress" in bringing the programme up to speed.

"Defence acknowledges the deficiencies of the Tiger capability highlighted in the report as areas which will require upgrade or modification to remain relevant within the future battle space," it says.

Airbus Helicopters, for its part, acknowledges the challenges with the programme in Australia, and says that it has been "strongly engaged over the last two years" to help fix "all known issues." It believes that the report fails to "appreciate the significant improvements which have been made in the past two years nor the positive trend of all support key performance indicators."

In February, Canberra's defence white paper and accompanying investment plan for the period up to 2026 indicated that the Tiger will be phased out in the mid-2020s, to be replaced by "manned or unmanned systems or a combination of both."

Three months later, in May, Airbus Helicopters defended the programme, stating that improvements to the Tiger mean it will be a viable replacement option to the current fleet.

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