

Pricey experimental aircraft, called a boondoggle by some, makes two brief flights

by Dean Calbreath

SAN DIEGO, Calif. - After 20 years of testing, an experimental aircraft built using \$63 million in government funding has finally made its first two flights - for a total of about 90 seconds.

DUPONTPLANE - Critics of the DP-2 project say the two short test flights lasting a total of 90 seconds prove nothing about the aircraft's ability to serve as a troop carrier. CNS Photo by Howard Lipin. The duPont Aerospace Co. announced Wednesday that a scaled-down model of its DP-2 Vectored Thrust Aircraft hovered a couple of feet in the air for two 45-second flights while tethered to a takeoff platform Sunday at Gillespie Field in El Cajon, Calif.

It was the first known flight of the DP-2 prototype, which was built with the help of earmarks added to the federal budget by Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-San Diego.

Over the past few months, the DP-2 has been blasted as a government boondoggle, receiving millions of dollars in congressional earmarks with little to show.

Funding for the aircraft was cut after a hearing in June before the House Science and Technology Committee, although Hunter - the company's main champion on Capitol Hill - has said he will try to get the funding restored in next year's budget. Current funding will expire Dec. 31.

"This is very good news for everybody that's interested in vertical takeoff capability," Hunter said Wednesday. "It looks like the company met its goal of staying up for more than 30 seconds."

Critics of the DP-2 - which uses hot exhaust from its engines for a vertical takeoff - say the short flights Sunday prove nothing about the craft's ability to serve as a troop carrier.

"I'm surprised it did as well as it appeared to do, but it doesn't change my technical views one iota," said John Eney, a former head of the aircraft conceptual design group at the Naval Air Systems Command. "It doesn't answer any of the charges that have been leveled for 20 years."

Eney also questioned how groundbreaking the flight was. He said both NASA and the former Soviet Union achieved similar test flights using similar technology more than 40 years ago.

"The X-14 jet that used that kind of technology is in a museum now," Eney said.

Officials at duPont could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

In a news release, the San Diego company called the DP-2 "the world's first turbofan-powered vertical takeoff/short takeoff and landing jet transport aircraft." The company is run by Tony duPont, a scion of a 200-year-old family business dynasty.

Reporters were not invited to the tests, which used a prototype aircraft named DP-1C, roughly half the size of the proposed DP-2. Video clips of the tests were posted online. In the first test, the jet rose awkwardly from the rear first - seemingly balancing for a few seconds on the wheel beneath its nose - and then hovered in the air for 45 seconds, gliding slowly from side to side before jolting abruptly to the ground. In the second test, the takeoff was much smoother and there was less side-to-side movement, but the landing was equally abrupt.

The test pleased onlookers, who applauded the first time the jet touched down. According to the company's news release, the test was conducted under the direction of the Office of Naval Research.

Most of the criticism of the DP-2 has not centered on whether it could fly, although its previous lack of a flying record did test the patience of legislators. More criticism has revolved around what would happen once it is in the air.

A number of Pentagon studies have questioned whether the DP-2 could fulfill its proposed mission of carrying combat troops into battlefields. At a congressional hearing in June, John Kinzer, program officer for air warfare and weapons research at the Office of Naval Research, cited "significant risks" with the DP-2's design, including adverse effects from its jet blasts.

At the same hearing, Eney warned that the DP-2's system, which directs hot jet exhaust toward the ground, could burn troops who were rappelling out of the aircraft, which is one of its intended uses.

In videotaped testimony, Tony duPont denied the accusation.

The studies cited serious safety issues, questioning the stability of the aircraft and charging that the downward thrust of the engines could create potentially deadly dust storms.

"What the video of the test flights on Sunday shows is the aircraft flying in extraordinarily ideal conditions with no blowing dust and no indication of any wind," Eney said. "The airplane that he's promoting for taking troops would have to be able to take people into the desert. If you blast that with your jet engines, you can bury yourself in a dust storm."

The Pentagon also has criticized the DP-2's long-range fueling system and said its stealth capabilities made it only "marginally more survivable" than other aircraft.

Although the Pentagon has criticized the program, Hunter has pushed funding for the DP-2 project for nearly 20 years. Since introducing the initial funding bill for the DP-2 in 1988, Hunter has received \$36,000 in political contributions from duPont. He denies the contributions had anything to do with his support for the project.

Wednesday, he continued to praise the program, noting that the DP-2 is intended to fly more than twice as much as the Harrier jets that are currently used for vertical takeoffs.

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