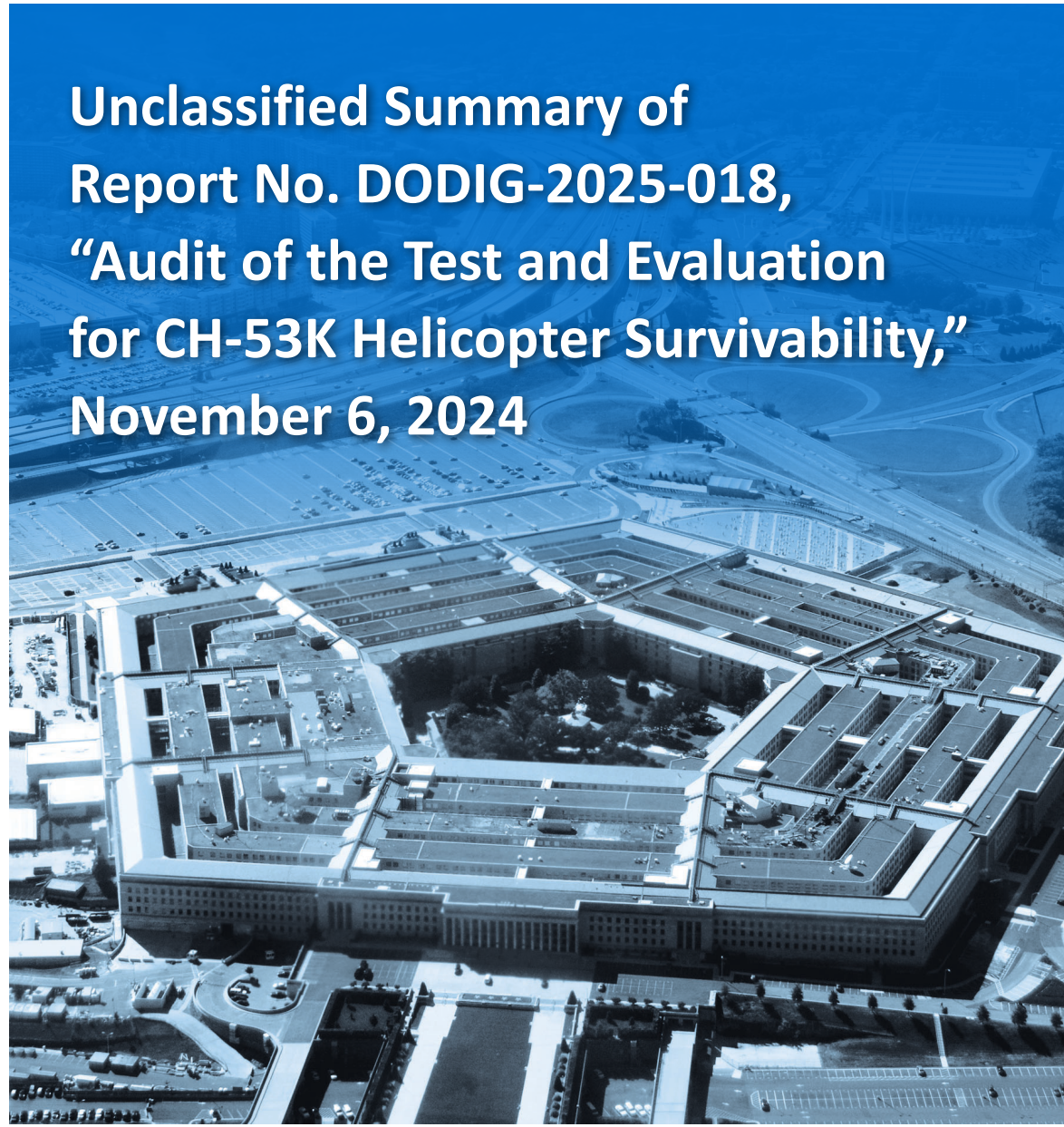




INSPECTOR GENERAL

U.S. Department of Defense

DECEMBER 3, 2024



Unclassified Summary of Report No. DODIG-2025-018, “Audit of the Test and Evaluation for CH-53K Helicopter Survivability,” November 6, 2024

INDEPENDENCE ★ INTEGRITY ★ EXCELLENCE ★ TRANSPARENCY

On November 6, 2024, the DoD Office of Inspector General issued audit report DODIG-2025-018, “Audit of the Test and Evaluation for CH-53K Helicopter Survivability.” Due to the extent of the controlled unclassified information contained in the original audit report, it was not released publicly. In the interest of transparency, we prepared this summary report to release the unclassified finding identified during the audit.

Objective

The objective of this audit was to assess the Department of the Navy's (DoN) test and evaluation of the CH-53K helicopter's survivability against munitions. Survivability is the capability of a system and its crew to avoid or withstand a hostile environment without experiencing an end to its mission.

Background

The CH-53K heavy-lift helicopter is replacing the current, aging CH-53E. The primary mission of the CH-53K is to transport heavy equipment, personnel, and supplies from ship to shore. The CH-53K is designed to provide many improvements over the CH-53E, including survivability. The Figure shows the CH-53K helicopter lifting an F-35C Lightning II fighter jet.



Figure. CH-53K Helicopter Lifting an F-35C Lightning II Fighter Jet
Source: The DoN.

The CH-53K is a Major Defense Acquisition Program with a budget of \$26.6 billion for procurement and \$8.1 billion for research, development, test, and evaluation. As of June 2024, 14 CH-53K helicopters have been produced and delivered. The DoN plans to procure an additional 182 helicopters, with an average acquisition cost of \$135.8 million per unit. The CH-53K has an expected service life of 30 to 40 years, and the DoN has estimated it will cost \$63 billion to operate and sustain the CH-53K fleet.

Live-Fire Testing Evaluates System Survivability

The purpose of live-fire test and evaluation (LFT&E) is to evaluate the survivability of a system to determine whether any design issues need to be corrected before that system enters full-rate production and becomes operational. Section 4172, title 10, United States Code, states that programs may not enter full-rate production until realistic survivability testing of the system is completed, and the Director, Operational Test and Evaluation (DOT&E) submits an independent report to the Secretary of Defense, who is required to provide Congress the LFT&E results. Realistic survivability testing includes testing system vulnerabilities by firing munitions likely to be encountered in combat at a fully equipped system.

Methodology to Assess Survivability

To answer the audit objective, we reviewed CH-53K program documents dated between September 2004 and December 2023. To learn about the roles and responsibilities for planning, managing, executing, and overseeing CH-53K survivability testing, we visited and interviewed officials at the DOT&E; DoN Acquisition Test and Evaluation Requirements Branch; Navy's Operational Test and Evaluation Force; Naval Air Systems Command; Headquarters Marine Corps; and Heavy Lift Helicopters Program Office. We met with an action officer from the Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Navy (Research, Development, and Acquisition) who oversaw the DoN's Air and Ground weapon system portfolio. We discussed CH-53K survivability test results, follow-on efforts, and any concerns officials had with the CH-53K's test and evaluation. Additionally, we obtained and reviewed information relevant to CH-53K survivability testing, including the test plan and strategy, test reports, threat assessment, combat data, and program cost estimates.

Audit Finding Is Not Releasable to the Public

Most of the information in our finding is not releasable to the public because the information was identified by the DoN as Controlled Unclassified Information. The finding of our audit related to the DoN's planning and execution of the CH-53K LFT&E strategy that was approved by the DOT&E and agreed to by DoN officials. Controlled Unclassified Information is Government-created or owned unclassified information that allows for, or requires, safeguarding and dissemination controls in accordance with laws, regulations, or Government-wide policies. Therefore, we are unable to publish a full or redacted version of our report.

Our Recommendations

We made four recommendations to improve the planning and execution of LFT&E to the DOT&E; Assistant Secretary of the Navy (Research, Development, and Acquisition); Marine Corps Deputy Commandant for Aviation; and Program Manager, Heavy Lift Helicopters Program Office. The recommendations related to reevaluating the scope and cost of CH-53K live-fire testing, making appropriate decisions based on that reevaluation, and implementing controls to ensure future acquisition programs comply with live-fire testing requirements.

The Program Manager, Heavy Lift Helicopters Program Office, and the Acting DOT&E, agreed with two recommendations. The Assistant Secretary of the Navy (Research, Development, and Acquisition) and the Marine Corps Deputy Commandant for Aviation disagreed with one recommendation, but their comments addressed the intent of the recommendation. Therefore, these three recommendations are resolved but remain open.

The Acting DOT&E, neither agreed nor disagreed with one recommendation, and they did not propose actions that would fully address the intent of the recommendation. Therefore, the recommendation is unresolved and remains open. We requested additional comments on the unresolved recommendation by December 6, 2024.



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