

WASHINGTON

Congress wants accident-prone 'Widowmaker' spy plane phased out

Knight-Ridder Newspapers

WASHINGTON — Congress has told the Pentagon to investigate ways of phasing out an accident-prone Army spy aircraft nicknamed the "Widowmaker" and to consider replacements for its mission.

Members of Congress "are concerned that the OV-1 aircraft is experiencing a high accident rate, due in part to the aircraft's age, and believe that alternatives to the OV-1 should be considered," reads the recently completed report of the 1988-89 Defense Authorization Act.

To make sure the Defense Department completes the study, congressional members wrote that they "expect" to hear the

results before the Army begins to use \$6 million to improve radar on the OV-1, or Mohawk — about half the total allotted to the Mohawk program for next year.

Congressional staff members said Friday that the new attention given the OV-1 was spurred by a long-term investigation into the aircraft by the Macon (Ga.) Telegraph and Knight-Ridder Newspapers.

More of the Mohawks have crashed since the Vietnam War — 32 — than were shot down in combat during that war — 28. The aircraft has an accident rate nearly double the Marine Corps average and quadruple the recent average rate for the Air Force. Since 1972, Mohawk crashes have claimed 32 lives.

Congress, in effect, is now legally telling the Army — in language attached to a defense bill — to complete a study of the aircraft that the Army itself began after the latest crash, in May, of an OV-1.

Two Georgia Army National Guard crew members were killed when their twin-turboprop Mohawk crashed south of Miami while training to intercept drug runners.

The Mohawk — which first got its "Widowmaker" nickname during the Vietnam War — has one of the strangest evolutions of any American fighting plane.

The plane was developed in the late 1950s by the Navy, but was used only by the Army. Because of dissatisfaction with the protec-

tion the Air Force was providing ground troops, the Army wanted its own "close support" plane armed with rockets and machine guns. But subsequently, the Mohawk was limited to surveillance work.

The engines used in the Mohawk were originally developed for helicopters. Almost immediately after the aircraft was selected by the Pentagon, the entire tail section had to be redesigned because the original tail would not adequately control the plane, according to documents obtained by Knight-Ridder and interviews with those who worked on the design.

And although the aircraft is considered a

"hot" and demanding plane, only one of the Mohawk's two crew members normally has any controls to fly it. The other crew member works the radar, photographic or infrared surveillance gear.

Still, many Mohawk crew members have developed a deep attachment to the aircraft, often based on their experiences in Vietnam. They tend to agree with the Army that pilots' mistakes are to blame for the high number of fatal crashes.

"Even those guys that were killed in that aircraft, they loved that sucker," said Mel Macie of Mineral Wells, Texas, a Vietnam crew member.