

Lockheed Pitches HH-60U 'Ghost Hawk' As Huey Replacement

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Lockheed is pitching Sikorsky HH-60U variants for the U.S. Air Force's missile field security and Washington-based continuity of government missions: Lockheed Martin

Lockheed Martin has unveiled a surprise play for the U.S. Air Force's UH-1N Huey Replacement program, offering the secretive Sikorsky HH-60U "Ghost Hawk," which the service has been flying since 2011 for special search-and-rescue missions.

Lockheed Martin, which bought Sikorsky in 2015, has previously discussed the UH-60M as a replacement for the 1970-vintage UH-1N, touting it as a relatively low-cost, off-the-shelf model already in production for the U.S. Army. But in a Feb. 28 statement, Lockheed says it will offer the U-model, a highly-modified version of the UH-60M. The HH-60U is an attractive offer, since the Air Force already owns three aircraft and it is 85% common with the in-development UH-60W Combat Rescue Helicopter. Called the "Ghost Hawk" or "Jedi rides" by observers, the U-model has been spotted flying toward Groom Lake, Nevada, equipped with an electro-optical sensor turret and electrical rescue hoist. It appears to have entered service in 2010 or 2011, and is used for high-risk search-and-rescue missions, flown by regular and special mission aviators.

If selected, the HH-60U would perform all of the missions currently assigned to the "Twin Huey." That includes patrolling the Air Force's intercontinental ballistic missile fields as the service transitions from the Minuteman III to the new Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent ICBM, and providing general transport to government officials around Washington, or evacuating them in a crisis such as nuclear war.

Assigned to Air Force Global Strike Command, the UH-1N does not have the range, speed or carrying capacity required for the missions it is assigned and is aging out. The service

previously tried to replace the Huey through the Common Vertical Lift Support Platform program, which was canceled in 2013 due to funding constraints. The acquisition program re-emerged as the "Huey Replacement," seeking 84 aircraft for all missions.

Last year the service was considering buying UH-60M Black Hawks directly off the hot Army production line to satisfy the ICBM security mission. But instead it opted for a full-and-open competition for a single fleet since there are viable alternatives on the market. It also received pressure from Congress.

Commonality is going to be Lockheed's cry throughout the pending competition. The service has operated the Sikorsky HH-60G Pave Hawk since 1982 for combat search-and-rescue missions, and is now replacing those with 112 HH-60Ws that will enter service in 2019.

"Sikorsky's HH-60U Black Hawk offers a proven, capable helicopter that is already in the Air Force's inventory to meet the critical needs of the UH-1N Huey Replacement program," says Samir Mehta, head of Sikorsky Defense Systems & Services. "It is a low-risk solution that will enable the service to support two vital national defense missions while realizing the long-term cost savings of the Black Hawk platform."

The company will likely face competition from Bell Helicopter, which could offer a modified version of the U.S. Marine Corps UH-1Y Venom. Boeing could partner with Leonardo to offer the AW139, already made in Philadelphia. Airbus has previously touted the Army UH-72A Lakota, but it is too small to meet the carrying requirement. The Air Force wants an aircraft that can carry nine fully-loaded personnel for field security around the 450 missile silos and eight passengers for the so-called "continuity of government" mission at Andrews AFB, Maryland.

The Air Force wanted to launch the competition in February, but delayed the request for proposals release to give time to update its acquisition strategy. It is adding a small pre-Milestone C development phase to allow time for helicopter modifications and integration of mission-specific equipment.

The requirement increased from 72 helicopters to 84 in December. The service will release another draft RFP in April, with the final version expected this summer. A contract will be awarded in fiscal 2018, and delivery of the first operational helicopter is due by fiscal 2021 or 2022.