Team ABL Successfully Completes A Major Program Milestone

A trio of aerospace industry leaders -- Boeing, Lockheed Martin and TRW -- working for the U. S. Air Force to produce the revolutionary Airborne Laser (ABL) weapon system, has successfully completed a crucial review process clearing the way for the beginning of detailed design and engineering work.

"This is a major milestone for the Airborne Laser program," said Paul Shennum, Boeing Defense & Space Group vice president and director of the Airborne Laser Joint Program Office. "It is very unusual for a program of this magnitude to be at this stage so early in its life."

The milestone, known as the Program Requirements Review (PRR), is a significant aspect of the $1.1 billion contract awarded to Team ABL on Nov. 12, 1996. Earlier this July, the PRR process brought together more than 90 members of the contractor -- Air Force team for three days of intense study of the ABL program at the Boeing Developmental Center in Seattle.

The Airborne Laser weapon system will comprise a speed-of-light deterrent against theater ballistic missiles such as the Iraqi Scuds launched against U.S.-led coalition forces in Desert Storm. To defend against the growing threat posed by theater ballistic missiles, the U.S. Air Force and Team ABL are developing a revolutionary, highly accurate laser carried aloft in a modified Boeing 747-400F freighter aircraft.

Capable of autonomous operation at altitudes above the clouds, the ABL will acquire and track missiles in the boost phase of flight, and then accurately point and fire the laser with such energy that the missiles will be destroyed over the launch area.

According to Shennum, the PRR's primary objective was straightforward: "Before we could begin preliminary design work, we had to reach agreement with the Air Force on the requirements to which the ABL will be built. I'm happy to say that Team ABL accomplished this less than five months after contract award."

The Air Force review team included not only the System Program Office in charge of developing ABL but also the Air Combat Command, which will operate the weapon system when it enters service in the next century.

"The Program Requirements Review marks the end of the 'start-up' phase of the ABL program," said Col. Michael Booen, who heads the ABL System Program Office. "Based on the results of the PRR, the ABL program is in good shape and ready to proceed with the preliminary design."

Successful completion of the PRR marks Team ABL's second major technical milestone in as many months. In February, TRW -- responsible for the weapon system's laser -- passed a critical design review of its flight-weighted laser module.

Team ABL combines the best talents in the three areas critical to program success: TRW lasers, Lockheed Martin optics and beam control, and Boeing expertise in system integration.

The Air Force envisions a fleet of seven ABL aircraft - rapidly deployable anywhere around the globe -- to provide a strong deterrent to any potential use of theater ballistic missiles. ABL is managed by the Air Force Space and Missile Center's Airborne Laser System Program Office at Kirtland Air Force Base, N.M.

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