Airborne Laser Named In Popular Science 'Best of What's New'

The U.S. Air Force Airborne Laser system, which will put a laser weapon on board a 747 aircraft, today was named in Popular Science magazine's annual "Best of What's New" awards program. The ABL program was one of 100 products and technologies selected by the magazine's editorial staff.

The magazine cited Team ABL - the Air Force, Boeing, TRW and Lockheed Martin - for proving the viability of ABL during tests this year.

TRW demonstrated the module that generates the laser could be built at "flight-weight"; during tests it generated 110 percent of full power.

Lockheed Martin demonstrated its beam control system on a full optical layout and Boeing conducted successful wind tunnel tests, validating that the nose design minimizes the optical distortion of the chemical laser beam as it leaves the aircraft.

The Department of Defense awarded a contract to Team ABL in November 1996 to develop a system that would detect and track a theater ballistic missile in its boost stage. The system then would accurately point and fire the chemical oxygen iodine laser with such energy that the missile will be destroyed near their launch areas.

In the two years since that contract award, the program has proceeded with program definition and risk reduction, staying on time and on budget. In June, the Air Force gave the ABL program the "green light" to proceed into the next phase of the program and begin finalizing the system's design.

The ultimate test of the program's technical progress - a missile shoot-down - is scheduled for 2002.

The Air Force has plans for a fleet of seven ABL aircraft - modified 747-400F freighters - that would be rapidly deployable around the world. Recent assessments of the theater ballistic missile threat show that at least 30 nations have more than 10,000 of these missiles in their arsenal.

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For further information:
Milt Furness
(253) 773-2816