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Families of V-22 Victims Settle

posted on: April 20, 2002 | *author:* Bob Cox | *category:* Personal Injury and Product Liability

Families of all but one of the 23 Marines killed two years ago in crashes of the V-22 Osprey have reached out-of-court settlements with Bell Helicopter Textron and Boeing Co.

A New York lawyer representing the families of most of the crash victims confirmed Friday that his clients had agreed to settlements rather than pursue lawsuits against the two companies, which jointly manufacture the V-22.

Fleming said that under the terms of the agreements, neither he nor the family members could disclose the amounts of the settlements.

Fleming said attorneys for the families had recommended that they take the settlement offers rather than take the risk and expense of prolonged jury trials.

But Fleming said the government's own reports on the V-22 support the claim that the aircraft was defective.

"Basically the government said this plane is not ready to haul around troops, and that's what it was being used for," Fleming said.

Cole Portis, the lawyer who has filed the sole lawsuit stemming from the V-22 crashes, said his client could not reach a settlement with the two companies. Portis, a Montgomery, Ala., lawyer representing Karen Runnels, the wife of Staff Sgt. Avely Runnels, said he was confident that he could convince a jury that the Marines

were victims of a defective and untested product.

"There's a lot of information out there [about the V-22] that I think everybody needs to find out," Portis said. "You've got an aircraft that has multiple problems."

Portis filed a lawsuit in state court in Atlanta last week. Runnels was one of four Marines who died in a December 2000 crash in North Carolina.

Spokesmen for Bell and Boeing could not be reached for comment. Both companies have repeatedly declined in the past to comment on the settlement negotiations or possible lawsuits.

The V-22 has been grounded since the December 2000 crash, which followed one in April 2000 in Arizona that killed 19 Marines.

A new, extensive round of flight testing of the novel tilt-rotor aircraft is scheduled to begin in early May. It is supposed to answer many unresolved questions about the V-22.

The V-22, which is capable of taking off and landing like a helicopter and then, by tilting its engines forward, flying like an airplane, was endorsed by two review panels last year after the crashes.

Reports from the panels said the aircraft had been rushed into use by the Marines without adequate testing, but the experts said they were confident all of the problems could be resolved through further testing and engineering.

The Department of Defense has paid more than \$15 billion to Bell and Boeing over the past two decades for development and production of the V-22.

Many of Bell's 5,800 employees at its plants in Fort Worth, Grand Prairie and

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Arlington build components for the V-22. The company performs final assembly at a plant in Amarillo that employs about 250 people.

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