Dear CDI Supporters,

This quarter we have seen major projects and inquiries, work we began months and even years ago, pay valuable dividends.

Through hard work, pugnacity, and dedication to our mission, POGO and the CDI team have developed several major stories that are shaping the national security landscape in the United States today.

Dan Grazier’s new investigation into the Air Force’s A-10 vs F-35 flyoff report, the culmination of years of CDI work with members of Congress, whistleblowers, and Pentagon officials, finally came to fruition. After a Freedom of Information Act battle and subsequent litigation, POGO finally got a glimpse into the results of that flyoff.

According to Dan,

The results were apparently not what the Air Force’s leaders expected, because they fought to hide them completely for years. The Pentagon’s testing office only drafted the report in February 2022, nearly three years after the tests concluded, and even now they are refusing to disclose many of the key findings. ... Still, the information they did release does not paint a very positive picture of the F-35’s ability to fill the highly critical role the A-10 has performed capably in the United States’ last three major ground wars.

Elsewhere, POGO investigators René Kladzyk and Jason Paladino have published major, impactful investigations regarding unsafe military family housing and the U.S. military purchasing fuel of Russian origin amidst the continuing war in Ukraine. Their work challenges Congress’s lack of oversight into Pentagon priorities and major national security strategies.

I hope that you will enjoy this edition of Defense Monitor, which spotlights some of the ways CDI and POGO are having a very real impact on the national security strategy of this country. CDI’s mission, to build a far more effective national security policy at a significantly lower cost, has never been more important than it is right now.

Please know that we could do none of this work without you, and I hope that you will continue to support CDI as we push Congress and the Pentagon toward policies that best serve the needs of our nation and the members of our armed services, not the interests of corporations or their shareholders.

Thank you.

Regards,

Geoff Wilson
Pentagon leaders sold the concept of the F-35 to Congress and the American people by saying it would be an affordable replacement for the F-16 in the air supremacy role and the A-10 in the close air support role. Nearly 22 years later, the notion of the F-35 as an affordable replacement for any program has long-since been shattered. Serious questions remain as to whether the unreliable F-35 can be an effective replacement for the successful F-16. As for close air support, questions remain about the F-35’s ability to fill the A-10’s role, and a report detailing the results of comparative tests conducted in 2018 and 2019 between the two programs, obtained with a great deal of effort by the Project On Government Oversight, casts even more doubt on the matter.

POGO received a copy of the “F-35A and A-10C Comparison Test” report through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request and subsequent litigation after the original request in April 2022 went unanswered.

The results were apparently not what the Air Force’s leaders expected, because they fought to hide them completely for years. The Pentagon’s testing office only drafted the report in February 2022, nearly three years after the tests concluded, and even now they are refusing to disclose many of the key findings: The released report is heavily redacted. Still, the information they did release does not paint a very positive picture of the F-35’s ability to fill the highly critical role the A-10 has performed capably in the United States’ last three major ground wars.

From the fragmentary information now available, it is clear the Air Force’s plan to replace the A-10’s capabilities will come up short. Yet Congress is on the cusp of authorizing the retirement of 42 A-10s in the next fiscal year, a decision they are making in an information vacuum since the report has not been widely circulated.

THE TESTS

The tests, which were designed to evaluate the A-10’s and the F-35’s ability to perform all attack aviation roles including close air support, airborne forward air control, and combat search and rescue, took place between April 2018 and March 2019.
after Congress included a provision in the fiscal year 2017 National Defense Authorization Act. They took place over the vehement opposition of Air Force leaders: Then-Air Force Chief of Staff General Mark Welsh called the proposed tests a “silly exercise,” claiming the F-35 was never intended to be a replacement for the A-10.

In fact, the F-35 has always been designated as the replacement for the A-10, as well as for the F-16. Press reports at the time of the original contract award in 2001 made that point clear.

POGO broke the news that the tests were underway in July 2018 after receiving documents detailing how they were being conducted. It became immediately clear that the tests were designed to make the F-35 look as good as possible. At the time, POGO reported on the shortcomings of the testing program.

One especially notable shortcoming was the absence of ground troops during the tests. Because the primary reason for the exercise was to see which aircraft could better support and protect soldiers and Marines, their exclusion suggested that Air Force leaders weren’t interested in a true close air support demonstration. Ground combat is chaotic and fluid, with constantly changing circumstances as the enemy actively works to avoid observation. People designing a real close air support demonstration will attempt to create conditions where ground forces will have to talk pilots on to elusive targets. Based on the instructions from the ground controllers, the pilots will have to identify and track the targets long enough to engage them with either bombs or cannon fire. However, the comparison tests between the A-10 and F-35 were set up in a way that didn’t adequately test the F-35’s ability to perform this vital role.

Another notable shortcoming was the location of the tests: They took place in a desert environment at California’s China Lake Naval Air Weapons Station and Arizona’s Yuma Proving Ground using targets sitting in the open. Anyone with access to Google Earth can easily spot the targets in satellite imagery. The lack of tree cover and camouflage made it easier for the pilots of both aircraft to perform all the missions, but the choice of location was particularly poor to test combat search and rescue capabilities since in real situations the pilots flying would need to locate and protect their downed counterparts until they can be rescued. It’s fairly easy to find a person who is in the open desert. A more realistic test would have been to search for a person as they actively try to evade capture by the enemy in a wooded environment, but that did not happen in this case.

These are hardly the only ways the designers attempted to give the F-35s the best chance possible for success. The F-35 pilots selected to fly the jet in most of the tests were veteran A-10 pilots who had transitioned to the newer platform. The test report pointed out that F-35 pilots at the time did not have any training requirements for the airborne forward air controller or the combat search and rescue role. The former A-10 pilots were chosen to “minimize the impact of this training shortfall on the comparison test.” This statement acknowledges, perhaps unwittingly, the value of having pilots who are specifically trained for the close air support, combat search and rescue, and airborne forward air controller missions.

And it must be pointed out that the Air Force has done little to correct the F-35 pilots’ training shortfalls in the years since the tests. POGO obtained Air Force training memorandums in early 2023, and they showed that there are no close air support or related mission training requirements for any F-35 pilots in 2023 or 2024.

Close air support and combat search and rescue are the most delicate combat roles of military aviation: Pilots need to drop bombs and fire rounds at targets close to friendly troops. With that in mind, it is amazing to learn that the tests used “simulated ordnance” in all but one of the test events. That means no live weapons were dropped for most of the tests. Rather than observing actual hits or misses, officials judged the results based on self-reported outcomes by the pilots and participants on the ground. This created an opportunity for officials to manipulate the results based on desired outcomes and operator bias. According to the report, live ammunition wasn’t used due to “range safety restrictions.”

All of this adds up to an unreliable attack aviation test that wasn’t even really an attack test at all. Without ground troops operating anywhere near the targets, the tests could at best be considered an exercise in battlefield air interdiction, or the use of aviation to disrupt or delay enemy forces before they can engage against friendly units. They certainly didn’t test the F-35’s ability to support troops who are already engaged with the enemy, the primary mission of the A-10. Members of Congress clearly mandated a close air support comparison test, but that is not what they got.
THE RESULTS

Despite the heavy redactions in the released report, it is clear the results of these flawed tests disappointed the powers that be. Had the F-35 come out as the winner, there can be little doubt that a clear, declarative statement to that effect would have prominently appeared in the opening paragraph of the report.

The unredacted text of the report features no such statement.

To the contrary, the report’s authors concede the F-35 did not perform as expected in the A-10’s traditional role. The report states the tests fulfilled the congressional mandate — which is debatable — and then went on to say the tests yielded “important conclusions that should be useful in improving F-35A performance in these mission roles…”

The actual recommendations to improve the F-35A’s effectiveness in the close air support, airborne forward air control, and combat search and rescue roles appear on page 31 of the report. The authors included eight specific recommendations, but Pentagon officials redacted the text based on national security concerns. Notably, the authors did not include any such list of recommendations for the A-10C.

From what can be read in the report, a picture emerges of the F-35A’s shortcomings in the attack role. In one cut-off sentence, the report says “sorties than A-10C sorties would be necessary to attack the same number of targets.” It’s clear from the context of the report that it takes more F-35 sorties than A-10 sorties to attack the same number of targets. Later in the report, the testing officials point out that the “typical loadout of the A-10C enabled more attacks than the typical loadout of the F-35A.”

The original designers of the A-10 understood the importance of a large ammunition capacity for the aircraft they created. They knew the ground forces needed an aircraft that could remain overhead for a significant amount of time with enough bombs and rounds to make repeated attacks. The F-35A’s relatively small bomb load, especially in stealth mode, puts the aircraft at a disadvantage when compared to the A-10’s capabilities, especially in the close air support role. The A-10C can carry 16 GBU-39 small diameter bombs; the F-35 can only carry eight. The A-10’s iconic 30mm GAU-8 cannon system has an ammunition capacity of 1,350 rounds; the F-35A’s smaller 25mm cannon system can carry only 181 rounds. But the F-35A’s gun doesn’t shoot straight, so it hardly matters how much ammunition it carries.

The fact that it takes more F-35 sorties to destroy a target becomes much more significant considering the program’s low readiness rates. The Government Accountability Office published a report in September 2023 detailing the struggles the services have maintaining the F-35. The GAO found that the entire F-35 fleet has a full mission capable rate of less than 50%. So not only does it take more F-35 sorties to fill the role of the A-10, but it is also unlikely that the F-35 fleet would be able to fly often enough to make up for the deficit.

When it came to hitting targets, the pilots flying the A-10s did a better job than their counterparts flying the F-35s did. The report discusses measured location errors, or the distance a GPS-guided weapon impacts from the intended target. “Tactics typically caused A-10C pilots to fly closer to the target than F-35A pilots,” the report states, citing this as an explanation for the difference in bombing accuracy while employing GPS-guided weapons even though few live weapons were actually dropped during the tests. A-10 pilots are able to fly closer to the target because their aircraft is built with armor protection and redundant systems that allow the A-10 to take some hits and still bring the pilot back to safety. The only way for an F-35 pilot to survive is to fly high above the danger and rely on stealth to hide from it. And accuracy certainly matters in close air support when ground troops are involved. In drawing their conclusions, the report concedes that A-10 pilots fly closer to the ground and therefore closer to potential ground fire, which acknowledges the aircraft’s ability to absorb some damage and still fly home — another critical, and mission-specific, role for which it was designed while the F-35 was not.

The report teases an interesting conclusion considering all the hype around the F-35’s celebrated data-sharing capabilities. The pilots flying the A-10s for the tests reported a “significantly lower workload” — meaning they had fewer tasks to complete — while conducting airborne forward air controller missions than the pilots flying the F-35As. During these missions, a pilot flying in one aircraft will locate the target and then relay all the information necessary to a pilot flying in another who will actually take the shot. Boosters of the F-35 program like to talk about how the aircraft’s advanced sensors and ability to instantly share information increase the total force’s ability to gain a common picture of the battlespace. The revelation that it takes more effort for a pilot flying the F-35 to coordinate with
another pilot suggests reality may not be living up to the hype. Unfortunately, the entire section of the testing report after this revelation is redacted, so it is unclear how significant the issue may be.

Many of the pilots involved with the tests drew an interesting conclusion that clearly demonstrates the importance of both the A-10 and mission-specific aircraft in general. Pilots flying in both the F-35 and A-10 in the tests repeatedly said A-10s performing the attack role with F-35s providing cover would be a powerful combination. “This would combine the strengths of both platforms while mitigating their limitations to improve the likelihood of mission success,” the report states.

While there is much we don’t know about the tests due to the lack of available information, the report makes clear the F-35 did not distinguish itself as a vastly superior weapon to fill the A-10’s three roles.

UNDUE SECRECY
Pentagon officials worked hard to suppress the results of the flyoff tests between the F-35 and A-10. POGO filed a Freedom of Information Act request for the report the day after Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall acknowledged its existence during a House Armed Services hearing on April 27, 2022, more than three full years after the tests concluded. POGO’s original FOIA request went unanswered. The Air Force relented in releasing the report only after POGO’s legal team filed a FOIA lawsuit in federal court.

POGO has been following this story for years. Our military advocates, to include the author, lobbied lawmakers for several years to mandate a flyoff test between the F-35 and A-10. Our lobbying work to preserve the fleet until there is a dedicated attack aircraft replacement will continue until the last A-10 is sent to the boneyard, or an adequate replacement is fielded. A-10 advocates flooded Capitol Hill in the spring of 2023 to convince lawmakers to do the right thing for the ground troops who will fight in future conflicts by making sure they have the tools necessary to be successful on the battlefield — which includes effective air support.

The author met with more than 20 congressional offices in 2023 alone to talk specifically about the A-10 and the three missions it performs. In all of those meetings, not a single person said they had seen the flyoff report. Many were unaware that the competitive tests had even taken place. Taxpayers, to say nothing of the troops themselves, should be asking why Air Force leaders have worked to suppress highly relevant information that should shape important decisions being made about the future of U.S. combat operations.

CONCLUSION
Lawmakers should make decisions based on the data and not on the talking points of Air Force leaders. In the case of the A-10, members of Congress are in the process of making an irrevocable mistake based on little more than the clearly biased and incomplete words of Air Force officials. The ability of the F-35 to replace the A-10 has never been demonstrated. Further, Air Force leaders have yet to take even preliminary steps to prepare their F-35 pilots to perform the most important combat role with which they have been entrusted.

Despite the rhetoric about future wars and fancy technology, almost every war comes down to our ground troops fighting the enemy’s ground troops in close proximity. The soldiers and Marines who will fight those wars deserve to have the tools they will need to survive and prevail. Until a dedicated attack aircraft program can take over, the A-10 remains the best available tool to support the troops. As proof of the A-10’s continued relevance, the Air Force sent A-10s from Arizona’s Davis-Monthan Air Force Base to the Middle East within days of the beginning of the war between Israel and Hamas to help deter that conflict from escalating.

At the very least, Congress must immediately delay any more A-10 retirements until members can be better informed about the consequences of doing so, and it must force Department of Defense leaders to reconcile the fact that they are giving up the close air support mission in favor of an aircraft that works less than half the time. The best course of action would be to fully fund the A-10 fleet in order to maintain it long enough for another dedicated attack program to take its place. Funding for such a program could be found in part by reducing the planned F-35 fleet. The troops deserve nothing less.

About the Author: Dan Grazier is the Senior Defense Policy Fellow at the Center for Defense Information at POGO.

YOU CAN READ THIS ARTICLE ON OUR WEBSITE AT: pogo.org/23-flyoff-report
The Brewer family suspected there was mold in their home on Marine Corps Base Hawaii the whole time they lived there. They struggled with persistent leaks and flooding, and noticed recurrent discoloration on the ceiling, but maintenance staff would just clean and paint over it, telling them mold wasn’t a concern. The Brewers started getting mysterious health conditions. Michelle Brewer’s hair began falling out, her skin turned a shade of bluish-gray, and she had heart palpitations. Her husband, Marine Corps Captain Daniele Brewer, struggled with persistent fatigue, and his headaches from past traumatic brain injuries were worse than ever before. Their three daughters all started having skin issues and two had stomach problems. One of their dogs began getting head tremors, the other had rashes. But Michelle had an underlying autoimmune disorder, and she wasn’t sure what to think of the new health challenges for the family. “They said there’s no mold, so I believed them,” she said.

Then, after the family moved out of the home in January 2023, they received a staggering move-out charge: $6,237.09 for “BIO HAZARD CLEANING.” Hunt Military Communities, the housing company at Marine Corps Base Hawaii on Oahu, attributed the charges to damages from their pets. But the Brewers said they were skeptical — not only because they didn’t understand how their dogs could have damaged areas in the house like the stairwell and ceilings, but also because the charges on their move-out invoice were $774.30 more than the charges listed on the invoice from the company hired to do biohazard cleaning. Plus, the cleaning company’s invoice was missing all the odd numbered pages, and the Brewers struggled to get answers or additional information from Hunt. Hunt Companies did not respond to a request for comment. When the Brewers’ shipment of belongings arrived from Hawaii blanketed in mold, it was strangely validating. “I know that might seem kind of crazy,” Daniel said. Coupled with the devastation of losing all their belongings was a sense of relief. There had, in fact, been mold after all.

Military Families Battle Rigged Housing Dispute Process

It’s more than just weapons systems that affect readiness. Congress and the American people often lose track of the domestic military issues here at home that affect the health, safety, and wellbeing of our service members and their families. Our colleague, René Kladzyk, covered one of these critical ongoing fights in her recent investigation.

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The Pentagon is Buying Fuel Made with Russian Oil

The DOD awarded nearly $1B to a Greek refinery that imported Russian oil. It could help fuel Putin’s invasion.

Effective oversight is essential in military affairs. At its most basic level, it is of the utmost importance that tactical, or even operational, means not run counter to strategic ends. Expedience and efficiency mean nothing if they are actively working against the policy being enacted or the changes being made. Our colleague, Jason Paladino, in concert with the Washington Post and Data Desk, uncovered a serious oversight snafu this year after leading an investigation into whether the Pentagon was actively buying U.S. Navy fuel made from Russian oil in Europe, thereby funding Russia while also supporting Ukraine in its war against Russia with tens of billions of dollars.

BY JASON PALADINO

In the early hours of May 31, 2023, a drone slammed into the Afipsky oil refinery in Southern Russia. Videos show an explosion followed by a raging fire. “One of the fuel oil distillation units is on fire. The preliminary cause is the strike of a UAV,” Veniamin Kondratyev, the governor of the region, wrote on Telegram shortly after the explosion. Russian officials have blamed Ukraine for other drone attacks, and Ukraine rarely accepts responsibility for such incidents. The Afipsky refinery is only 50 miles east of one of the most important oil export terminals in Russia, the Black Sea port of Novorossiyisk.

The strike, and others like it, is widely speculated to be an attempt to disrupt the crucial cash cow that largely funds Russia’s military: The export of petroleum.

A Project On Government Oversight (POGO) investigation, based partly on information provided by Data Desk, an investigative group that specializes in analyzing commodities, reveals that months before the attack, petroleum products from the same facility made their way by boat to a Russia-connected Greek oil refinery and Department of Defense (DOD) contractor, were eventually loaded onto a U.S.-flagged ship, and were delivered...
to U.S. military bases in the Mediterranean and elsewhere as naval diesel and jet fuel. POGO shared these findings with the Washington Post, which published its own investigation today.

Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the DOD has awarded contracts worth nearly a billion dollars to Motor Oil Hellas, a Greek oil giant with a history of partnership with Russian firms, including Kremlin-controlled oil company Rosneft, which has been repeatedly sanctioned by the U.S. government.

An analysis of shipping, customs, and contracting data and interviews with experts in oil refining and Russian energy reveal that Motor Oil Hellas began regularly importing Russian fuel oils through Turkey in an arrangement that could be designed to evade the recent European Union (EU) and Group of Seven nations (G7) ban on seaborne imports.

“Motor Oil Hellas does not buy, process or trade Russian oil products. All its imports are certified of non-sanctioned origin,” the company wrote in response to a detailed list of questions laying out POGO’s findings.

POGO’s analysis further reveals a likelihood that the U.S. military and NATO have been fueling their planes and boats with partially Russian-derived petroleum products since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022.

While some shipments to Motor Oil Hellas may be abiding by the evolving landscape of sanctions and embargoes, the dynamic puts the Pentagon in an awkward position: On one hand, the U.S. government is sending billions of dollars of weaponry to Ukraine to defend against Russian President Vladimir Putin’s invasion, and on the other it is likely buying products that contain Russian fossil fuels, the major economic driver of the Russian war machine.

Motor Oil Hellas has fulfilled DOD fuel orders for decades, receiving over $5 billion in contract awards since 2004. But after Putin’s 2022 invasion, the DOD awards spiked, with over half a billion in the fiscal year alone. And a massive new contract awarded in May 2023 totals nearly $479 million for jet fuel and naval distillate. This contract award would bring the total of taxpayer money flowing to the Russia-connected Greek refinery to nearly a billion dollars since Russia’s full-scale invasion.

The Defense Logistics Agency (DLA), the agency within the DOD that manages supply chains, confirmed the new contract award in response to a POGO inquiry and denied any knowledge of wrongdoing by its preferred contractor. “In soliciting and awarding contracts, DLA Energy adheres to the laws and regulations prohibiting or restricting U.S. government agencies from purchasing supplies or services connected to Russia,” Joseph Yoswa, Director of Defense Logistics Agency Public Affairs, wrote in an emailed response.

Since the invasion, the EU, U.S., and other governments have levied sanctions and embargoes on Russian fossil fuel. POGO is focusing mainly on two periods: Before February 2023, when the EU, U.S., and other governments agreed to an embargo and price cap on Russian petroleum products, and the months after the price cap went into place.

SUMMARY OF MAJOR FINDINGS

1. Russian petroleum products continued to flow to a major Department of Defense contractor after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, through a Russia-connected Greek refinery, and continued after the U.S. banned imports of Russian oil.
2. Even after the February 2023 EU and U.S. embargo and price cap, Russian petroleum products still found a way into U.S. military supply chains in two ways. First, Russian crude and fuel oil that previously traveled directly to the Motor Oil Hellas refinery now makes its way through a Turkish port, which effectively laundered its origin and eluded the EU embargo. Second, the refinery shifted to import more Kazakh oil, but the DOD’s supply chain still includes sanctioned Russian companies, pipelines, and ports.
3. The oil embargo and sanctions have fostered a thriving gray market, where shipping companies, charterers, and commodities traders willing to take risks — reputational, legal, and environmental — are rewarded for keeping Russian oil flowing by obscuring its origin. The DOD continues to participate in this supply chain through its massive new contract with Motor Oil Hellas and by using Greek shipping giants that have been considered “sponsors of war” by the Ukrainian government.

About the Author: Jason Paladino is an investigator at POGO.
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Supporter Spotlight

Our enthusiastic community of CDI supporters come from all walks of life and all over the country. We want to share a glimpse into this special community with Defense Monitor readers. We recently caught up with POGO supporter Peter Bien to talk about why CDI’s work is important to him.

How did you first come to learn about CDI?
It was because Admiral Eugene Carroll, one of the CDI founders, was the father of a student of mine, who himself was very gifted in many ways. I invited the admiral to Dartmouth to lecture, and learned from his son that he was even more active and dedicated, it seemed, in his peace work in retirement than he had been previously in his military service.

What part of CDI’s work is most important to you?
CDI’s most important work to me is its effort to diminish financial waste in the military.

What area of CDI’s work do you think is critical for the United States’ future?
Critical to the U.S.’s future is CDI’s exposure of military equipment that is not up to standard.

Why do you give financial support to CDI?
I support CDI financially, at my small level, because I value what CDI attempts to accomplish and I know that this means hiring, and paying, capable workers.

Do you have anything else you would like to share with Defense Monitor readers?
At first I was worried when CDI seemed to disappear into POGO, but now I realize that it does continue with its original objectives. And of course I also approve of POGO’s work and have tried to bring it to the attention of the “War & Peace Studies Program” (which I helped to found) at Dartmouth College.
The Project On Government Oversight (POGO) is a nonpartisan independent watchdog that investigates and exposes waste, corruption, abuse of power, and when the government fails to serve the public or silences those who report wrongdoing. We champion reforms to achieve a more effective, ethical, and accountable federal government that safeguards constitutional principles.

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