

PROCUREMENT STEPHEN TRIMBLE WASHINGTON DC

USAF reveals secret Iraqi deployment to foil IEDs

Varied mix of light manned surveillance aircraft used to detect explosives

A senior US Air Force official has revealed that a secretive acquisition “construct” called Liberty Ship is responsible for the proliferation of a motley mix of manned surveillance aircraft deployed to Iraq to thwart improvised explosive devices.

Light, manned surveillance aircraft code-named Constant Hawk, Angel Fire and Highlighter have been cited in public reports as critical to the effort by coalition forces to detect IEDs and trace the insurgents who planted them.

Each of these surveillance systems has been acquired under the Liberty Ship umbrella, according to Gen Norton Schwartz, nominee for chief of staff of the USAF.

The disclosure adds an important clue in the largely behind the scenes squabble between the previous leadership of the USAF and

defence secretary Bob Gates over the aerial service’s willingness to support the need for full motion video.

Army and US Marine Corps commanders, impatient with the USAF’s deployment of sufficient unmanned air vehicles, launched the Constant Hawk and Angel Fire programmes. Instead of waiting for the USAF’s promised wide area airborne surveillance (WAAS) system, Constant Hawk and Angel Fire fielded larger manned aircraft with less sophisticated sensors to meet the most urgent operational needs. The programmes offered a wide field of view and the ability to manipulate and store the streaming video.

Schwartz’s written testimony for his nomination hearing on 24 July discloses that such programmes were procured under the

Liberty Ship system, which appears to be similar to the USAF’s own Big Safari office that rapidly acquires signals intelligence technology.

According to a May report by the Senate Armed Services Committee, the USAF’s WAAS system is years from becoming operational – perhaps a key point in Gates’ criticism of the failures of the previous USAF’s leadership, which he dismissed for unrelated nuclear security embarrassments.

Schwartz, however, pledged in his testimony that surveillance capabilities will occupy his “personal attention from day one”. He also pledged to accelerate deployment of the WAAS system, which is expected to be integrated on the General Atomics MQ-9 Reaper, the AAI MQ-1C Sky Warrior and perhaps the AAI RQ-7 Shadow. ■