



CHAIRMAN OF THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20318-9999

7 February 2012

The Honorable W. Todd Akin
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-2401

Dear Representative Akin:

Thank you for your 17 January letter to the Secretary of Defense concerning U.S. Army aerial medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) policy. I am responding on behalf of the Secretary and following up on the discussion you had with the Director of Army Aviation about DoD MEDEVAC policy.

It is a misperception that delays in evacuation are caused by the policy to mark MEDEVAC aircraft with red crosses. Nor is there a DoD, Army, or theater policy that mandates the use of armed escort aircraft for MEDEVAC aircraft because they are unarmed.

Commanders weigh the risk to patients against the risk to the aircrews in a tactical environment with limited information. Based on the situation, commanders use escort aircraft to improve the chances for both aircrew and patient. Commanders plan to have escort assets available without delay for those circumstances, but no system is flawless. Commanders must then decide whether the MEDEVAC mission has a better chance of success by awaiting escorts or launching without them. With the benefit of hindsight, one might question the circumstances of any mission.

Most combat-related tasks accomplished by escorts cannot be replicated by simply arming the MEDEVAC aircraft with crew-served door machine guns. Consequently, the fact that the aircraft are unarmed is not a significant factor in the decision to have attack helicopters escort a mission. Attack helicopters have day and night optics and enormous firepower to accomplish combat tasks related to high-risk pickup zones.

The reason why only Army aircraft are marked with red crosses is because the Army is the only Service that provides a dedicated MEDEVAC capability for the Department of Defense. A dedicated system for the Joint Force is critically important for current and future operations. In comparison, the Air Force and Navy have provided aircraft and crews originally developed for other combat support roles, such as personnel recovery, to augment the MEDEVAC mission. Having weapons on those aircraft does not preclude employing attack escorts to support. The Marine Corps has integrated Army MEDEVAC into its land-based operations in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2003.

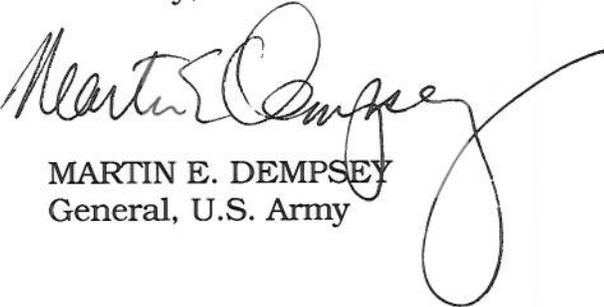
The Army policy is to mark dedicated air ambulances with red crosses, just as all the Services do with ground ambulances. This policy affords protections and obligations under the Geneva Conventions. It also sends a strategic message that these U.S. military assets are engaged in humanitarian operations in accordance with the principles of international law. Arming marked MEDEVAC aircraft, aside from the obvious violations, may decrease theater medical capabilities due to tradeoffs regarding the weight, crew space, training focus, and mission workload.

The specifics of the unfortunate circumstances of Specialist Chazray Clark's death are still being formally reviewed. Until that is complete, we cannot comment with certainty about the facts of the case. When the review is complete, it will be available to you and the Committee.

Current policies pertaining to MEDEVAC aircraft provide the Joint Force with the widest possible flexibility and depth of coverage across the entire spectrum of operations. Although we are heartened by our successes, we continually strive to improve the evacuation system and casualty care. Accordingly, we will direct a U.S. Central Command theater review of existing procedures and guidance regarding the use of escort aircraft on MEDEVAC missions.

Please be assured we place the utmost importance on providing the best possible MEDEVAC system capabilities to our forces. Your continued concern for and support of our men and women in uniform are appreciated.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Martin E. Dempsey", with a large, stylized flourish extending from the end of the signature.

MARTIN E. DEMPSEY
General, U.S. Army