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WARTECH

It's a Blimp, It's a Plane, It's...

The Pentagon is calling it Walrus, but Sitting Duckbill Platypus might be a better name.

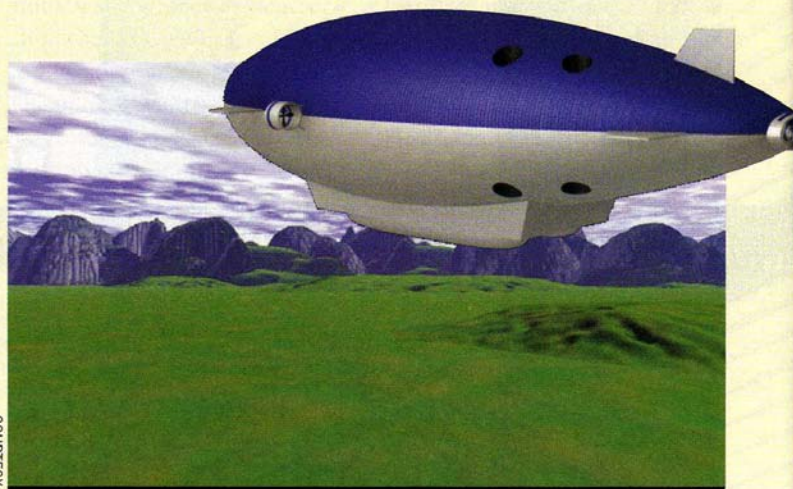
Going to war halfway around the world requires a lot of expensive schlepping, and the U.S. Department of Defense is looking for new ways to move troops and matériel to the fight. To that end, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) doled out \$6 million to two companies in August to design one massive mongrel of a flying machine. Not quite jumbo jet, not quite blimp, the Walrus will stay aloft through a combination of old-fashioned aerodynamics and gas buoyancy.

Lockheed Martin and Aeros Aeronautical Systems will be working on the zeppelin-sized order. DARPA wants the final product to carry 500 tons of war machines 12,000 nautical miles in less than a week. To function in battle zones, Walrus will perform vertical take-offs and landings on rough ground

with obstacles as big as 5-foot boulders. The usefulness of such a vessel for non-military purposes was evident in August as New Orleans sank into chaos after Hurricane Katrina left thousands of people stranded, thirsty, and hungry.

While there were reports of angry residents taking potshots at rescue helicopters in New Orleans, the Walrus will face more significant firepower if it is ever dispatched to a war zone. Edward Pevzner, manager of business development for Aeros, based in Torrance, California, says that even a 1-foot-wide hole in the fabric of a 140-foot-long airship would not bring the thing down in less than an hour. That's plenty of time for the pilot to land safely.

Would a surface-to-air missile pose a threat to the Walrus? Mr. Pevzner says he can't discuss details about his company's plans for the Walrus' design, perhaps to keep good ideas out of the hands of rival Lockheed



COURTESY OF DARPA

Stealthy, it's not. But the Walrus could carry 500 tons of gear 12,000 nautical miles.

Martin. Both companies have 12 months to deliver DARPA their best proposals, at which time DARPA will pick one company to build a Walrus prototype.

If Walrus works for the Pentagon, it should find plenty of demand in the private sector for a bigger cargo carrier. The largest fuel-guzzling Boeing 747 cargo plane can only

carry 400 tons. There has to be demand for an airship that could haul 500 tons directly from a Chinese factory to a Wal-Mart parking lot somewhere in the United States. And unless the Walrus is touching down at the peak of the Christmas shopping season, landing at Wal-Mart should be safer than at Baghdad International Airport. **RH**