# HELiDATA
# News & Classified

*Incorporating*
*Helicopter* INTERNATIONAL *and* MILITARY HELICOPTER NEWS



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At a pre-Heli Expo briefing in mid February **Airbus Helicopters** announced that the company is **seeing** an **uplift in demand for** its **H175** super medium helicopter due to the resurgence of the oil and gas offshore market, but also influenced by issues affecting the availability of parts for the rival Sikorsky S-92A. Currently Airbus has 56 H175s in service with operators worldwide, with total fleet hours now standing at over 210,000 since the type entered service in 2014. The availability rate is now standing above 95 percent.

Just over 70 percent of the fleet is working in the energy market and the company has been steadily improving the aircraft's reliability through a maturity plan, to reduce the number of unscheduled maintenance events. At the end of last year for example, the time between overhaul on the main gearbox was increased from 1,600 flight hours to 2,400, and the company is now aiming to reduce the hours taken for a 400 hour inspection by 25 percent and to halve the hours for an 800 hour inspection. Airbus is currently also working with the US Federal Aviation Administration and Transport Canada to gain certification approval for the H175, expected in 2025 and 2026 respectively. This follows the grant of certification from China last year. Further flight trials to expand the certification performance are also underway. In 2023 a hot and high demonstration was undertaken in Saudi


*Continued*

Arabia, in temperatures reaching 45 degree C, and this winter two H175s have been involved in a de-icing test programme, with one aircraft in northern Canada and the other in Norway. These tests are expected to be completed this April.

Securing the supply chain is also affecting H175 production, in part due to the reliance on the company's Chinese partners. The lead time on a base offshore oil and gas configured aircraft is currently 12 months, with up to 24 months for a search and rescue configuration. Despite this Airbus is still looking at entering new market sectors, including the business and VP transport sector, where the cabin space, low noise and low vibration levels are seen as good selling points. The company is also becoming interested in the military transport opportunities for the helicopter.

In this respect Airbus is already competing for the UK New Medium Helicopter Programme, primarily to replace the Aerospatiale SA330 Puma in the late 2020s.

**NASA**'s Jet Propulsion Laboratory finally **retired** the Mars helicopter **Ingenuity** after it damaged one of its rotors during its last landing on 25 January. Over almost a three year period Ingenuity performed 72 flights surveying the terrain around the parent Perseverance rover's path and clocking up more than two hours in the air. The original objective had been to carry out only five flights over 30 days, to test the feasibility of flying in the planet's extremely thin atmosphere.

The cost to build Ingenuity was $80 million but the success of the mission has led NASA to integrate similar vehicles into its design for a Mars Sample Return mission.

**Leonardo** Helicopters expects **to fly** its Next Generation Civil Tiltrotor (**NGCTR**) demonstrator within the next three-four months, following recent progress on the final assembly at the company's Cascina Costa facility outside Milan, Italy. The aircraft, which has been partially funded by the European Union Clean Sky 2 programme since the project was launched in 2014, was originally expected to begin flight trials in 2020 but delays to the programme have seen the date pushed back several times. However the wing and vee tail assembly were joined to the fuselage in January, followed by installation of the nacelle structures at the wing tips, the transmission assemblies and now the engines. With 95 percent of the sub-assemblies and systems available for the build, final assembly is expected to be completed by the beginning of March.

In parallel with the build programme Leonardo and its partners are carrying out static and rig testing of key components. Aeroelastic wind tunnel tests of a wing section, with the nacelle and proprotor, and of the vee tail have been completed by the German and Dutch aerospace research centres respectively. At the same time static testing of the whole wing is underway in Italy and transmission testing is about to begin at Leonardo's Yeovil site in the UK, in a purpose-built rig. This will assess the transmission tilting mechanism and carry out endurance tests ahead of securing a permit to fly from the aviation authorities. The proposed flight control system is also being rig tested at the present time and should be ready in line with the first flight schedule. Some 30 hours of endurance runs will be required before approval for the first flight is given, with another 20 hours to follow.

Gianfranco Cito, Leonardo chief test pilot on the AW606 tiltrotor programme, is lined up for the NGCTR first flight and has already been training for the honour. Cito will begin the flight testing with a hover and move from vertical flight to transition and then wing-borne flight towards the 500km/h (186mph) maximum speed. Over the next two years the demonstrator is expected to log around 200 flight hours on the test programme. The aircraft is fitted with a single Martin-Baker ejection seat in the cockpit, which replaces the two pilot seats in the donor AW609 fuselage. This has required minimal change other than the seat modifications for its new role, mainly concentrating on those needed for the fly-by-wire control system.

The advanced wing is being developed by a consortium led by the CIRA Italian research agency and incorporates several key features to increase efficiency. These include a low thickness relative to its chord and a large flaperon that rotates to reduce the wing area threatened by rotor downwash when in the hover. While the demonstrator is using General Electric CT7 turbine engines, the fact that they remain horizontal in the design means that other more powerful powerplants could be used in the future.

Certainly the NGCTR demonstrator is planned to be followed by a more definitive tiltrotor, capable of carrying 25 passengers and at about 11 tonnes all-up weight. However Leonardo is currently reluctant to comment on the future, noting that it depends on the market need.

A statement from Joint Administration specialists in Bristol has confirmed previous rumours that **Specialist Aviation Services** (SAS) **entered** into **Administration** on 31 January, shortly before the business and certain assets of the operator were sold to GAMA Aviation (UK) Ltd. This was with the intention that a substantive part of the business of SAS should continue to trade through the buyer.

As part of the terms of the sale, the Joint Administrators sold such right, title and interest in the company held in equipment, contracts (customer and supplier) and stock of SAS, noting that third party rights might subsist over the same. The sale also provided for the transfer of substantially all of the SAS employees. However the Joint Administrators have noted that SAS is now unable to fulfil the contracts or other arrangements it was party to when it entered administration and no obligation will be incurred in respect of these after the date of administration. Under insolvency legislation customers or claimants are now not able to enforce any finance agreements, reservation of title claims or security held over the company's assets without the consent of the Administrators or that of the Court. Claimants who considered they held title to goods, for example leased or hired equipment were given seven days to provide proof of ownership, with a detailed description of the items concerned, with early settlement values.

SAS previously had over 30 years experience operating aircraft and providing bespoke support solutions for customers' special operations in particular targeting air ambulance, law enforcement and offshore operators. However this pre-pack arrangement with GAMA and "undisclosed manoeuvres" carried out in the days prior to the appointment of the administrators may result in damage to GAMA's standing and reputation in the close knit rotary-wing sector, as happened with the similar buy out of Twyford Moors Helicopters by Leeds Helicopters in the 1970s.

eVTOL developers **Archer Aviation and Joby Aviation** are both getting **close to** US Federal Aviation Administration (**FAA**) **commercial certification** for their aircraft, following the receipt of Pt. 145 Repair Station Certificates announced on 8th February. The certificate allows the two companies to carry out maintenance, repair and overhaul services on traditional aircraft and key avionics components and to expand those services in the future to eVTOL machines. It will also allow the companies to establish training and employment opportunities for engineers and technicians wanting to establish a career in eVTOL commercial operations.

Joby Aviation is developing an eVTOL to carry a pilot and four passengers at speeds up to 322km/h (200mph), replacing an hour-long commute by car in urban areas with a 10-15 minute flight to the same destination. The day after the announcement Joby also confirmed that the FAA had accepted the certification plan for their propulsion system, which includes the electric power unit, variable pitch actuation, coolant pump, nacelles and associated electrical wiring. This clears the way for completion of the certification programme for all of the structural, mechanical and electric systems of the aircraft, according to Joby President, Didier Papadopoulos, leaving only a final document under FAA review. At the same time the company is moving to the fourth of five phases in the type certification process, which entails the detailed testing and analysis of the aircraft's systems and components.

Archer Aviation meanwhile has announced that its first three conforming Midnight aircraft are in build, with the first due to enter final assembly in the coming weeks. The initial fleet of piloted aircraft will begin flight testing later this year and allow for credit flight testing with the FAA after the company completes its own flight trials phase. Archer believes the key to achieving FAA type certification is flying a conforming aircraft and is confident it will be the first in the sector to reach that milestone.

## Commercial - INTERNATIONAL

**Robinson** Helicopters has received approval from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) for a **new tail configuration for** its **R44 aircraft**, mirroring the new configuration approved for the R66 Turbine, announced last September. The new design includes a symmetrical horizontal stabiliser and tailcone and is now standard on all newly manufactured R44s registered with the FAA.

The company is currently working with other civil airworthiness authorities worldwide to secure foreign validation of the new configuration and, as these approvals are obtained, foreign registered R44s will be delivered with the new tail modifications as standard. Robinson is also now offering a retrofit kit for the modification to all R44 owners. This allows for the installation of the new symmetrical stabiliser on the existing tailcones in the field, without the need for a complete tailcone replacement. This kit (part number KI-285-2) was originally priced at $7,050 but is now available at a discounted price of $3,600 until the end of December this year. It can be purchased via Robinson dealers, service centres, or direct from the manufacturer.

Robinson continues to invest in engineering improvements that make its helicopters more accessible and easier to fly, and previously has introduced crash-resistant fuel tanks, cockpit video cameras, autopilot systems and NVG compatible cockpits, among other technological enhancements.

## Regional News

- OFFSHORE WORLDWIDE

A ballot conducted among **UK Bristow** Helicopter **members** of the British Airlines Pilots Association (BALPA) **voted** in favour **for industrial action** on 7 February in a dispute over pay. The union claimed a 96.31 percent YES vote on a 92.74 percent turnout and urged the company to improve their previous pay offer and "to get back to the bargaining table".

BALPA did not reveal the actual numbers of Bristow employees who voted in the dispute, and a company spokesperson said that, despite it having tabled an improved offer in a bid to avoid strike action, staff were not given an opportunity to vote on that offer before being balloted to participate in the strike action. In addition to providing search and rescue cover from 10 bases around the UK for His Majesty's Coastguard, employing around 360 people, including pilots, winch operators and paramedics, some of whom are claimed to have voted in favour of the strike action, beginning on 3rd March to 5th March, with further three-day strikes taking place throughout March.

Omni Helicopters Guyana Inc (**OHGI**) has **completed** its first **12 months** of operations **in partnership with Roraima Airways**, which has been providing local knowledge to maximise safety and operational efficiency. Headquartered in Georgetown, Guyana OHGI is an affiliate of Omni Helicopters International and is strategically based to efficiently service the region, operating the Sikorsky S-92 helicopter for transport and rescue missions under contract to Exxon Mobil Guyana.

As a majority Guyanese-owned company OHGI has been especially keen to foster and develop local talent and expertise and throughout the past year has participated in various social initiatives, including scholarship programmes and on-the-job training for students at a local aeronautical engineering school. Through 2023 the company transported over 50,000 passengers with an average of 200 flights per month, operating from Eugene F Corrcia International Airport with a fleet of six modern helicopters. The company now employs over 80 staff, with the majority being Guyanese nationals and has recently announced the selection and training of a team of six local nationals to service as Rear Crew, supporting mission requirements for its established offshore and onshore Search and Rescue service.

At a celebratory event on 24 January, held at the ExxonMobil Guyana passenger terminal, the Omni management received a Supplier-of-the-Year award for 2023.

## Accident Spot

**February**

**1 Boeing CH-47F** of Nebraska Army National Guard damaged in emergency landing at Greenlief training site, Hastings, Nebraska during a training sortie

**1 Mil Mi-8AMTSh** of Russian Air Force reported written off after crashing in mountainous terrain during a mission in Syria.

**3 Bell 407GX** 1957 (cons. number 54472) of Mexican Air Force suffered minor damage when it struck a flag during a low level formation fly over at a local airshow.

**3 Sikorsky S-70i** EM-708 (cons. number 70-3995) of Turkish Police written off in crash at Kartal, Gaziantep Province whilst en route from Hatay airport to Gaziantep airport. 2 pilots died and sole passenger injured.

**6 Sikorsky CH-53E** serial 164366 (cons. number 65-595) of HMH 361 Squadron, 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing went missing over rugged terrain during a flight from Creech Air Force Base in Nevada to Miramar Naval Air Station in California. Heavy cloud and snow showers frustrated initial search efforts but wreckage of the aircraft was eventually discovered the following morning near Pine Valley, California. All five crew members died in the crash.

**6 Robinson R44II** N4054Y (cons number 13525) of Maloney Leasing substantially damaged when it ditched into lake in Tombigee State Park, Mississippi during approach to local private site, following flight from Tupelo Regional Airport. The aircraft sank in the water, but the pilot managed to escape and swim ashore with no injuries.

**6 Robinson R44II** CC-PHP (cons. number 11776) destroyed in crash into Lake Ranco, Ranco Province, Chile whilst en route with 4 occupants aboard. The pilot died in the accident but his three passengers were rescued.

**7 Mil Mi-171** of the Algerian Air Force crashed during a night training exercise near El Menia airport in Algeria and was written off. 3 crew members on board all died in the accident.

**8 Eurocopter EC155B1**, F-HEGT (cons. number 6978) of the Securite Civile with seven occupants on board collided with a Nord 1203 light aircraft over Montmelian, France and force landed in a field with minor damage apparent. The Nord 1203 also landed safely with strike damage to one wing.

**9 Eurocopter EC130B4** N130CZ (cons. number 4060) of Orbic Air LLC crashed near Halloran Springs, California at an elevation of 914m (3,000ft) AMSL, whilst on route at night from Palm Springs International Airport to Boulder City, Nevada. The helicopter was following the I-15 Mojave Freeway and flight data showed it was in a gradual descent with increasing ground speed until it impacted the terrain at a nose low and right bank angle. The aircraft cane down in open scrubland, breaking up on impact with a substantial 91m (300ft) debris field. Witnesses reported that it was raining with poor visibility at the time of the crash (about 22.00 hours). 6 fatal. A 7th person due to take the flight opted out in view of the night time weather conditions.

**9 Robinson R44 Astro** PP-MPR (cons. number 0731) of Rotorfly Taxi Aéreo substantially damaged in crash whilst landing at Nova Caraiva Heliport in Porto Seguro, Brazil. The helicopter came to rest on its port side with main rotor blades partially detached and severe impact damage to the nose section and cockpit shell. The four occupants escaped with only minor injuries.

# Defence - INTERNATIONAL

Both Turkish Aerospace Industries (**TAI**) **and Leonardo sign**ed new memorandums of understanding **with Saudi partners** on 4 February, to explore the potential for the local assembly of helicopters for the domestic market in the Kingdom. TAI signed its agreement with Saudi Arabia's National Company for Mechanical Systems (NCMS), focusing on the T-625 Gokbey utility helicopter which is currently under development, whilst Leonardo is discussing the local assembly of various helicopter types with the Saudi Ministry of Investment and the General Authority for Military Industries.

Previously Airbus Helicopters signed a similar agreement in June last year with Scopa, a Saudi defence company establishing partnerships with Western defence companies. This agreement focused on an advanced industrial cooperation programme for future military helicopters in Saudi Arabia, but has yet to result in any local production. Creating helicopter assembly would support the country's plans to diversify the economy away from oil, as laid out in the government's Vision 2030 aims, whilst localising 50 percent of spending on defence equipment and creating new skilled jobs. Saudi input is expected to include components, subsystems and avionics manufacturing, and final assembly in due course.

Saudi Arabia already operates a large fleet of helicopters in its military armed forces and various government agencies, many of which will need replacing in the coming years. Key decisions on where the collaborations and investments will be focused are expected to be decided later this year.

The **Qatar** Emiri Air Force sent one of its NH Industries **NH90NFH** helicopters **to** the recent **World Defence Show** in Riyadh at the beginning of February, marking the type's debut at the event. The NFH serves with No.8 ASV Sqdn. based at Doha and is one of 12 aircraft ordered in 2018, together with six options.

Also on display was a Saudi Arabian State Security Airbus H145 T-2 helicopter in the characteristic blue/grey livery of the national security body. This was formed in 2017 by merging several existing agencies and as such is the successor to the General Civil Defence Agency.

The **Australian Defence Force** (ADF) is to **lease** five brand new **Airbus H135** helicopters **from** the **UK military,** to be utilised for crew training at Oakey in Queensland, to meet an accelerated demand for pilots to fly the Sikorsky UH-60M Black Hawk helicopters being delivered to the Australian Army, and for light transport duties. The lease period is currently set at five years.

The helicopters were originally ordered by the UK Ministry of Defence to replace ageing Aerospatiale Gazelles, used in Northern Ireland for surveillance and support operations with the British Army in the province but, between being ordered and their delivery, the situation changed when the security situation improved and the role was transferred to the Northern Ireland police authority. Instead the H135s were delivered from the Donauwörth production line to the Airbus Helicopters UK facility in Oxford between April and September 2022 with UK civil registrations. Subsequently between mid January and mid March 2023 they were ferried to RAF Shawbury in Shropshire for storage, still retaining their civil markings. Since then they have been maintained with only the minimum delivery flying hours recorded. The following H135s are involved: G-CMIR (cons. number 2175), G-CMIS (2179), G-CMIT (2181), G-CMIU (2184) and G-CMIV (2188).

The five helicopters are now being readied for shipment to Oakey, where they are expected to begin training operations by June this year. The ADF also uses 15 EC135T2+ helicopters for joint Army/Navy training at HMAS *Albatross* in Nowra, New South Wales under a joint programme set up in 2018.

**Enstrom** Helicopters has **sign**ed new firm purchase agreements **with** the **Peruvian government to supply** four **280FX** training helicopters for military use. Two of the aircraft are for the Peruvian Army, which has previously purchased the F28F model for its training fleet, whilst two will enter service with the Air Force, which placed two in service in 2020 and two more in 2022.

The new orders followed a competitive evaluation in Peru's demanding hot/high environment, where the 280FX performed the best. The latest aircraft also include Aspen EAS systems, Garmin avionics and turbocharged 225hp Lycoming engines. Enstrom was assisted in facilitating the sale by the Panamerican Aviation Sales Corporation, which has a long history of sales in South America, but was partnering with Enstrom for the first time.

In an unheralded announcement released late on 8th February, senior US Army officials revealed the **cancellation** of the Future Attack and Reconnaissance Aircraft (**FARA**) **programme**, as part of an overhaul of its long term aircraft plans. In addition Sikorsky UH-60V production will end in FY2025 and the 3,000shp General Electric T901 Improved Turbine Engine Programme (ITEP) will remain in a development phase beyond 2024 rather than being put into near term production, to ensure it can be integrated into a future UH-60 and the Boeing AH-64 variants.

The decision, which follows a long history of planning for replacement scout/reconnaissance helicopters dating back to the late 1960s, has been influenced by the current conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine, where unmanned drones and satellite imagery have demonstrated the approaching obsolescence of manned helicopters in the role. Instead the Army will redirect funds to sign a multi-year production deal with Sikorsky for more UH-60M Black Hawks and with Boeing to begin full production of the Boeing CH-47F Block II Chinook. The Army will also continue development of the Future Long-Range Assault Aircraft (FLRAA), which will see the Bell V-280 Valor enter production, and use some of the savings from the FARA cancellation to develop and purchase future tactical and aerial reconnaissance unmanned systems, that might be air launched from growth Apache, Black Hawk and other aircraft to scan ahead of the attack forces.

The armed scout saga began with the ambitious but ultimately doomed Lockheed AH-56 Cheyenne helicopter programme (*pictured above*), intended to replace the original Bell OH-58 Kiowa. That was followed by the Sikorsky-Boeing RAH-66 Comanche $9 billion programme launch in 1983, until that too was cancelled in 2004, and then a reset with the Bell ARH-70 Arapaho, which also fell victim to delays and cost over runs. Next the Army drew up a plan to modify off-the-peg commercial helicopters as the Advanced Aerial Scout, which didn't get off the ground at all.

Finally Sikorsky and Bell competed for the FARA programme, offering the Raider X2 and Invictus prototypes respectively, which were largely completed late last year ready for flight, but were then delayed due to the unavailability of the selected T901 ITEP powerplant. The FARA prototypes had been allocated $458 million for competitive testing but this funding will now stop at the end of fiscal 2024 and the $5 billion allocated for the next five years redirected into the replacement programmes. However the entire strategy is subject to Congressional approval and some members have already criticised the Army's decision, especially those in areas affected negatively by the revised programme.



## Defence - INTERNATIONAL

The US Defence Security Cooperation Agency (**DSCA**) **recommended** to Congress on 26 January the transfer of eight **more** Sikorsky UH-60 **Black Hawk helicopters to Croatia** in a deal valued at $500 million If the Foreign Military Sale agreement is signed the aircraft would add to the four UH-60Ms transferred to Croatia in 2022, two of which were actually donated to the country alongside a number of Bell OH-58 Kiowas helicopters.

Included in the Croatian request are 19 General Electric T700-701D engines, 20 AN/ARC-231A VHF/UHF/ LUS sitcom radios, 10 AN-AAR-57 Counter Missile Warning Systems, 20 H-746 GPS with Inertial Navigation, and 18 M240H machine guns. Also included are a range of other avionics, ballistic armour protection, Fast Rope Insertion and Extraction Systems, External Rescue Hoists, Martin Baker Crew Chief/Gunner seats with crush worthy floor protection, Extenal Stores Support Systems, and Aircrew, Maintenance and Avionics Trainer units. The previous Black Hawk UH-60M sale was valued at $115 million, including related equipment and services.

The new batch of Black Hawks would replace the Soviet era Mil Mi-8 and Mi-17 transport helicopters currently in Croatian service. 12 Mi-8MTV-1 and two Mi-8T helicopters were already being prepared for transportation to Ukraine at the end of January, with Croatian markings being removed and any necessary repairs being carried out. Delivery is expected to take place via Poland, with half of the aircraft being flown to their destination and the remainder being partially disassembled and transported overland. These transfers will leave ten Mil Mi-17iSH in Croatian service, which are also likely to be transferred to Ukraine over the next several months as more Black Hawks enter service.


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