



Heavy Duty:

The AW139 Boost To Air Corps Effectiveness

The arrival of the Augusta Westland 139 (AW139) represents another development in this era of new aircraft and new technology to the Air Corps. SIGNAL reports.

Pictures by Anna Nowakowska & Air Corps.

“It has been a huge boost to those of us involved in No.3 Operations Wing; the fact that the process is well underway now and the fact that we have these aircraft in service is a satisfying achievement. The primary focus for the unit will be the delivery of air support to the Army in addition to other designated roles such as air ambulance and VIP transport,” says Commandant Padraig Conneely.

The Air Corps is now midway through the helicopter replacement project with two Eurocopter 135s (EC135P2) and two Augusta Westland 139s (AW139) in service at present. This helicopter fleet will be enlarged during 2007 and 2008 with an additional four AW139 utility aircraft that will complete the helicopter replacement project; the first two 139's arrived in November 2006 following the culmination of an intensive project management and training



Above: Comdt Padraig Conneely.

phase. The third aircraft arrived just at time of going to press, the fourth will arrive in May 2007 and the final two craft are due for delivery in 2008. In tandem with this replacement programme, the existing Dauphin and Gazelle helicopters have been withdrawn from service and sold off as part of the policy to revert to two helicopter types in the Air Corps.

New Era

The two EC135s have now completed just over a year in service in the Air Corps and the benefits of newer materials, technology and a modern maintenance philosophy are self-evident and the Air Corps is looking forward to replicating this operational success with the AW139.

This helicopter is capable of being fitted out to allow it operate in a variety of roles, including a ten-seat military troop role, a four, eight or twelve-seat utility configuration, a six-seat VIP configuration (for



ministerial transport) or a specialised air ambulance configuration consisting of a dedicated stretcher with up to seven utility seats for medical staff and aircrew. Both Comdt Conneely and Comdt Sean Clancy are very satisfied with the potential of the AW139, and to reach this potential the Defence Forces is pioneering new methods of utilising the craft. "We have tested and Agusta Westland has certified the aircraft to be armed with general purpose machine guns and we are also developing fast roping capabilities with the aircraft. Both of these are a first with the AW139 and we're excited by the potential that the craft offers," says Comdt Clancy. He adds that other aspects of the AW139 are still being flight tested and are expected to be confirmed in the coming months.

In Operation

"As mentioned earlier, the development of Army aviation support is now the core mission for No 3 Operations Wing and officers in the Army now know that they have the 139 at their disposal which was not the case in the past with the Alouette, Gazelle and

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The AW139 in action during Army training exercises.

Dauphin," adds Commandant Clancy. This will provide obvious benefits to the conduct of military training and operations at home and will give another dimension to field exercises. "In the recent past this was partly attributable to the search and rescue role assigned by Government, Naval Service interaction in the form of fishery protection and drug interdiction and the fact that the Dauphin helicopters didn't really have the capabilities that were envisaged when they were purchased. So, after several decades of relative stagnation in support of Army training and operations at home, we can now provide more interaction with the Army in these activities with this new aircraft" adds Comdt Conneely.

The acquisition and deployment of the AW139s is part of an ongoing process of change in the Air Corps and the broader range of roles and the broader range of agencies with which the Corps will be working will help personnel gain a better insight into the capabilities of the aircraft.

It is expected that a Lifeport air ambulance kit will be delivered in mid-2007 and when fitted in the AW 139 this will provide a longer range and bigger cabin for air ambulance missions. This system comes with Federal Aviation Authority (FAA) Supplemental Type Certification and will become the primary air ambulance system within the State for longer-range inter-hospital transfers or those where a larger medical team are required to travel. The Air Corps is also evaluating a medical evacuation medevac 4-person system designed to remove injured personnel quickly from an incident site to hospital. The system is currently in the design phase and will be considered in late 2007 as an expansion of the current service.

Support Issues.

The AW139, as a new aircraft is obviously far more maintenance friendly with a greater number of flight hours between scheduled inspections. The Air Corps has agreed plans to ensure the availability of spare parts when needed with minimal strain on administrative resources in Baldonnell.

Agusta Westland has entered a support contract that provides for a guaranteed supply of specified spare parts based on an hourly fee per flight hour. This concept of spare parts support is considered essential in order to provide for a guarantee that spares will be available as required



and allows the Air Corps to reduce the level of investment in spares holding on site. In previous years the Air Corps had to invest in significant levels of stock holding because of the non-availability of such packages and in turn, because of the range of aircraft in service, this resulted in the need for considerable warehousing and administration support in Baldonnel.

In respect to the AW139 support package, a consignment agreement has also been entered that places essential spares on site in Baldonnel. These spares are selected in conjunction with Agusta Westland based on the latest reliability analysis for in-service aircraft and are intended to minimise aircraft on ground (AOG) situations. As in-service experience is achieved, spares can be added or withdrawn from this holding in order to provide maximum cover.



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In addition, the common engine supplier for both helicopter types, Pratt and Whitney Canada, has entered into a support ‘Fleet Management Plan’ which covers the engines for all major shop and overhaul visits. The administration of this contract is based in Southampton where spares, technical support and field service representatives are based. This proximity allows for speedy responses in ‘aircraft on ground’ (AOG) situations and when technical support is required on site.

With the acquisition of the EC135’s and the AW139’s, Number 3 Operations Wing is now radically transformed compared its prospects five years ago when the Sikorsky S92 procurement project collapsed and not long after that the provision of SAR was withdrawn from the Air Corps by Government. “The unit is now in a far healthier state than it was three to four years ago. We are now far more focused and far more effective in how we conduct our work with the

Comdt Sean Clancy
(above)



Army and other external agencies,” adds Commandant Conneely. Sean Clancy feels that to be part of procurement process such as this is quite special because it may happen only once every twenty years. “There is a sense of achievement, undoubtedly, although there is still a lot of hard work ahead. Some officers in the Air Corps can go through their whole career without being part of a process like this; so it’s a very positive time.”

The purchase of these new helicopters has already achieved significant increase in operational capability and a considerable improvement in aircraft availability while reducing the overall maintenance effort. The Air Corps is now in a position to continue with the tradition of helicopter support that has served the Defence Forces and the State with great distinction since the introduction of the Alouette helicopter fleet in 1963.