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## **BIERSET HELIDAYS 2007**

### The Biggest European Helicopter Show !

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Good atmosphere at Europe's biggest helicopter show

The Bierset Air show is a well-known event among helicopter pilots. Sure indeed, pilots like to come because of the socializing. Nowhere else, you can find so many air forces present with so many different types of helicopters. However, some civil elements doing sightseeing flights for some people (this year an Enstrom 'club') the event is a mainly military show.

Where did it all begin ?

This year was on 12-13 May the 8<sup>th</sup> edition with some 114 helicopters (a few participants are fixed wing aircraft) on exhibition and 32.000 visiting people to watch the happening which is called today the Belgian holidays. The heli day's of 2007 beats those of 2005 in number of visitors when some 30.000 people visited Bierset marking the growing interest of the public. Belgium was aware of the fact they created themselves a big attraction, which was quite unique in Europe. Then after seven successful years, a pause was reached.

Some other things were on the mind of the command. The helicopters of the Helicopter Wing located on Bierset Air Base with 16, 17 and 18 squadron MRH flying with Agusta A-109BA helicopters in different configurations from attack to medevac helicopter and a liaison flight with SA. 318C Alouette 2 faced at that time again a period with international commitment The A-109's went on mission under UN command with EUFOR in Bosnia-Herzegovina at Tuzla Air Base and later in Mostar under operation 'Althea'. What you always see in peacekeeping, peace-enforcing and human relief missions is the growing relationships between the participating air forces. Between the pilots a truly friendship was developed and cards were exchanged. Then they stayed in touch by computer, mail, some phoning and so on and then it became clear that they wanted to meet each other again. This year when the Belgian Helidays were after a Sabbath revived everyone wanted to come and sharing the company of the others.

Special treats

What is so attractive? This question should be asked to pilots, but they will always give a quite formal answer. So, I asked it to Patrick Wauters who is leading the public relation matters during this air day's. In his opinion, the visiting crews are very content about the organisation. They get a nice and clean hotel and every night there is a party with music on the base. Some bars in the town of Luik (Liege) are sponsoring the event and the bar is open for participating pilots without costs. Crews receives a gift package containing badges, pullovers of sponsors like Sabca or TNT the home carrier of Luik (Liege) Airport, some badges and some famous Belgian

beers, and not to forget pills for headache from a hangover. Next to this, the most important thing of all is the friendship, felt among all the crews and the excellent possibility for networking. You may say that Bierset has a binding function between air forces, especially Nato's outposts. Crews sometimes make the joke when participating should not be granted by their own command, they would plan 'a long nav' in the direction of Belgium.

Permission from high level.

Most of the times the organisation team on Bierset knows the programme in November but nevertheless they have to wait for the permission from the minister of defence who decides every year if the show is on or not. At that moment of decision there is not so much time left and some squadrons are not able to arrange in short time their visit due to obligations elsewhere. Patrick said that anyway with this procedure Bierset can attract more than enough participants. If the permission would come earlier, the show would be buried under its own success with too much requests. Patrick assumes that easily some 350 different helicopter crews would respond on this.

Safety first

Another main point is the safety, which is according the crews very good and this is a major thing to pilots. Some countries have one helicopter on display and one at the static show. Pilots are eager to show the public the manoeuvrability of their helicopter and their skills to fly it. The flying programme is at safe distance from the public and very controlled and attractive to see. Next to individual demonstrations, sometimes teams are present. A really treat is to watch the departure. When the pilots go home on Monday they feel freely to show their skills in a salute to the base and host. While doing this they are creating some spectacular photographing possibilities for the press and personnel on the ground. As press you must watch the helicopters and your limits as well which sometimes appears to be difficult. But: Safety first , a job well done by the organisation !

A long way to go and looking forward to the 9<sup>th</sup> edition

Some crews coming from the east must fly some 5 1/2 hours back to Hungary or Slovenia with a refuelling stop in Roth in Germany. Hungary was present with a Mi-17 and Mi-24 from 86 Szolnok Helicopter base while Slovenia was on the static with a Bell 412 and a Cougar. We have been informed by the crew about the history of the participating Slovenian Bell 412 and this is a different story. Once it was owned by the Pope (!) and fitted with soft leather seats. The pope could sit on two comfortable chairs. The crew felt that the helicopter was a special example because of this. Not without proud it was mentioned but in the meanwhile resenting it like it is a minor detail. The Cougar was quite new and some four years in service. The crew was satisfied about the helicopter. It is the same like having a new car or a new woman, you are eager to fly and welcomes the new experience. With great distances to go it

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is more comfortable to fly with two heli's, but also neighbouring countries like to come with two helicopters and if possible with two different types.

Ireland presented old and new with an Allouette 3 and a brand new AW-139. They could fly from Baldonnel in 3,5 hours with two stops but take 4 hours in a relaxed flight. Then it is like 'having a cup of thee' according one of the pilots. Spain was a big surprise this year with the Patrulla Aspa demo team equipped with four EC-120 Colibri's presenting its skills for the first time in Belgium. A pity for Sunday visitors was the absence of this team displaying only on the Saturday shows leaving afterwards for Metz to another show with the item 'hundred years of helicopter existence' We hope to see them again in the next issue of the Belgian Heliday's making with their contribution the show successful.

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