
ITALY - STARFIGHTER / EUROFIGHTER (2004)

Focus on Grazzanise and Grossetto

GRAZZANISE

It's overwhelming quiet at Grazzanise, that is between the concrete shelters. The impression from that moment is dominating. During our visit there were only two F-104 Starfighter-pilots of the 9th Stormo / 10th Gruppo (9th wing/ 10 squadron "Ace of the Aces") present who flew two sorties that day with their F-104S-ASA-M, and next to that some helicopter activity took place with the AB-212's. Most pilots on this moment are either to the United States or to Trapani Airbase in Italy itself for the transition to the F-16 of the 37th Stormo (37 th wing) .As known Italy leased a number of F-16's (30 block 15 F-16A ADF and 4 block 10 F-16B OCU) from USAF as 'gap-filler' during the interim-phase to the Eurofighter 'Typhoon'. This was necessary because of the fact that the deliverance of the Typhoon took too long, and on the other side the F-104 was at the end of it's operational life and the from the Royal Air Force leased TORNADO ADV did not fulfil complete on the needs any more. It is meant to be, that the F-16's return when the Eurofighter is fully operational and completely integrated in the destined squadrons.

F-104S-ASA-M

Pilots who fly the Starfighter love their machine, and that not only because it flies straight so very fast. Jokingly some pilots memorise to the well-known story of hypermodern planes. 'A small piece of digital technique refuses, and the whole machine is lame as a duck' . 'No than the Starfighter ! This machine always flies, even under technical imperfect condition !' And then the story's follow about bird-strikes, and the loss of five! Turbine-blades from the engine which was followed by just a regular, normal routine landing. Nevertheless also the F-104 pilots will have to adjust to modern times. Though F-104's have been going through continuing modernisation and updates, from F-104G via F-104S and F-104S-ASA to F-104S-ASA-M with improved qualities, fly-by-wire techniques (F-16 / Eurofighter) is quite something else! F-104 pilots already started earlier to train in Tucson Arizona ANG with the F-16's to practice and get some experience on this kind of planes and be prepared much faster that way for the transition to the Eurofighter. Chuckling a Starfighterpilot tells us that once just minutes before he started his sortie at Trapani Airbase there were 'lots of problems' with the F-16, but he departed problemless with his F-104S-ASA-M right on time and in the way he wanted it to be ! This can be "any time on Quick Alert" because the 10th squadron has the responsibility for the Air defense over the Adriatic and Thyreen sea's.

SF-260

A very welcome replenishment on the activities during our visit to Grazzanise was the point-duty of the 70th Stormo (70th wing) with the orange Siai Marchetti SF-260AM

trainers. This stationing is a temporarily fact, because their home-base Latina has been closed for half a year due to reparations of the runway. The SF-260AM, so called after his 260 horsepower Lycoming engine is produced in Italy and is also in use by for instance the Belgian Airforce. These machines will be replaced by the Delta-versions SF-260D, which was just ahead on points of the Swiss PC-6 or Texan-2. The SF-260D however has not been digitalised this far as the other two types, nor is it equipped with a turboprop engine though they did experiment with this. Results were not satisfying sufficient. Obviously the most important need with basic-training is flying instruments. The SF-260's of 70 Stormo also operate under 'the wing' of SVBIE = Scuola Volo Basicoe Avanzato (basic and advanced flying-school) The 9^e wing also includes a communications and SAR (search and rescue) squadron, the 609th Liaison & Rescue squadron "Squadriglia" with MB-339 jetplanes for "fast linking" between the various airbases and AB-212 helicopters for SAR-tasks. The old Siai 208M communication-planes were not seen anymore.

FUTURE

Grazzanise's future is uncertain. Probably first some F-16 activities will be transferred to the base, but this will be only a temporarily matter. SAR-flights will also be reorganised in future and it is still the question if the Agusta Bell AB-212's will remain on this base. Possibility is that Grazzanise like Malpensa and Fumicino will be turned into a 3rd international civil airfield though if you take a look at the present facilities and developments of the surrounding agglomeration this option more or less has something of 'wishful thinking'.

GROSSETO

On Grosseto rules the activity concerning the Starfighter ! Within the AMI (Aeronautica Militare / Italian Airforce) we find the 4th Stormo (4th wing) with the 9^e Gruppo (9th Squadron). It's an important Air-defence unit with Quick Reaction Alert (QRA) status integrated in a system of rotation with other Italian Airforce bases. Tasks are executed with the F-104S-ASA-M "All Weather" interceptor but ofcourse former variants of the F-104 were active here as well. Also on this base nothing but love for this F-104 machine. The term 'Widowmaker' was born during the active years of the Dutch and the German Starfighter period. How right or wrong this 'title' is we will leave in the middle. Fact is that once a German officer – when we visited a former Starfighterbase in Germany – launched this 'going' joke:

'If you definitely want to have your own Starfighter, you buy a piece of ground in the neighbourhood of an Airbase. Undoubtedly, on one good day, if you have some patience.....'

But at Grosseto they don't want to hear about this kind of talk ! Next to the 9th Squadron there is also the 20th squadron which took care for many years of the OCU (Operational Conversion Unit) with the device "Unus Sed Leo", there is only one lion. On this base there are several different special coloured airplanes amongst them the last one on occasion of 240300 flightmaintainance-hours to the F-104. Because on Grosseto we also find the 4th Maintenance Group (4 RMV) with a very

large experience in maintaining the F-104 and also we find here the MB-339/AB-212AM combination in the 604^e Squadron with communications/SAR-tasks.

There is activity that morning on the flightline and the runway. Starfighters leave their sun-shelters opposite the maintenance hangar to be 'stripped' from their security-pins a little further on the taxiway. Various sorties are planned that day in the morning and afternoon. A F-104S-ASA-M hits the clouds and this specific characteristic howling sound of the J-79 engine makes you realise that this unique sound will be a nostalgic one in short time. The pilots than will say goodbye to a very beloved plane though this will happen not before the F-16's are fully implemented on Trapani and are thus able to take over the air defence tasks. The real aviation enthusiast won't meet the 'Stave' or 'Tube' (as they nicknamed it in The Netherlands) in active duty anymore, because Italy is the last operator of the F-104 Starfighter in Europe.

EUROFIGHTER

The 4th Stormo is one of the elite-units in the AMI and also because of the experience in the OCU squadron selected to receive as the first the Eurofighter and implement it operational. While the experimental phases now have been finished by the Experimental Test-Wing on Practica di mare, a operational testing-path is started with initial support by Alenia, one of the manufacturers of Eurofighter 'Typhoon' as the plane is called. The presence of the Alenia technicians on the first of april – the day of our visit - was very perceptible, and next to that a lot of dignitary's because the second Typhoon was to be delivered that day to the AMI. On a part of the base next to the operational zone we were the only ones allowed as press to picture the arrival of the IT-002 while the IT-001 in full pontificals was parked in the spotlights in a hangar with a sterility that had more or less something of a surgical room in a hospital. The Typhoon arrived exactly at the planned time, Slowing down by the chute he carried close to the platform where he seemed to shake-off this last moment to let everyone know: 'here I am !'

Both machines are two-seaters which makes the starting of conversion possible. Momentarily four pilots of the AMI are qualified for the Typhoon, and there are 4 to 6 phases of training. While an official event we were only allowed literally to talk two minutes to one of both pilots. The first pilots being considered for the Eurofightertraject were the F-104 exchange pilots who built up their experience in the United States on F-16, in France on the Mirage 2000 and in Canada on the F-18 Hornet in the fly-by-wire techniques. In Canada there is a 18 months taking support-trainingscours via the Harvard 2 (Texan 2) and the Bae, Hawk 115 amongst other places at Cold lake. This concerns a pre-OCU traject and pilots – believe it or not – first have to be certificated before they are actually allowed to enter the hangar and see the Typhoon they're going to fly ! The four graduated pilots on the Eurofighter have a Basic Instructor Profile. This implicates that they all individual have 2000 flying hours on a jet, they had a training of six weeks at Torino in building up simulator-experience and they were classed and classified in all modern avionics of the Eurofighter. The 'Basic Course' as they are going to call it will contain 34 missions to get familiar with the capabilities of the plane, flying two-ship combat formation flights and last but not least the interception phase.

The weaponry training will take place in a later phase, but the implementation will be in full motion at that time already. For the time being the F-104S-ASA-M will fly along for a short time while first the F-16 phase is to be gone through with the air defence tasks. Who ever wants to hear the howling characteristic sound of the F-104 'Stave' has to hurry to Italy, the good-bye party was eind of mai, the last touchdown is expected to happen in October. So it's possible for a very short time still...

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