

ALBANIAN AIRFORCE

Tirana's moving steps

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Once Albania was a country in the cold war doctrine and had fighters in Russian and later Chinese style to conquer intruders, which would come most surely from the west. Today the army of these fighters is so much ageing and outdated that the only possible fate is waiting for the sledgehammer. Today with a complete political changed area in the neighbour countries, Albania is focussing on a small but solid helicopter force western style and tries to lead itself to a NATO membership in order to cover its air defence.

Caverns at Gjadar and Kucove

To visit Albania's caverns and the old Chinese aircraft is an awesome thing to do. Nowhere else in Europe, you can find such huge caverns. Why was it that Albania found itself the necessity to create this? Certainly, it must have cost lots of energy, labour and human sweat. Trying to understand one must study the history of this country. At the time Yugoslavia was ruled by the ambitious president Tito, there was always the fear of being annexed by Tito's republic. Yugoslavia had not always been friendly to its neighbour. Hostile actions within the border area in the past resulted in bombardments and lost of civilian lives amongst them women and children in the field. For Albania, it was necessary to respond to such threats with a sufficient defence. However, Albania was figuring at that time which countries were not friendly, amongst them certainly the West and America and even Russia, but still the most threat came from Yugoslavia. With lesser numbers of arms and limited budget, a strategy was developed to secure the most valuable assets. The authorities choose at that time to construct caverns in the mountains. Long corridors in these caverns could house several airplanes safe from sudden attacks and ready within short time to retaliate.

Chinese aircraft, unique in Europe

Albania started originally with Russian style aircraft but due to good relationships between president Hoxha and Mao Zedong Albania bought in follow up orders again Russian designed but in China licensed produced aircraft. In the years during the 1960/70 Albania acquired more than 100 Shenyang F-5 (Mig-17F), Shenyang FT-5 (Mig-17 UTI), Shenyang F-6 (Mig-19), Shenyang F-7A (Mig-21F-13), Nanchang Y-5 (An-2) Nanchang PT-6 (Yak-18) and Harbin Z-5 (Mi-4). Other aircraft in use were Il-14 transports and the Hong 5 (IL-28) bomber. Most of the aircraft were based at Kucove (2 Mig-15, 1 Mig-17 and two Mig-19 squadrons) and Gjader (originally F-7A for Tirana's air defence, but later some F-6 and FT-5's too) with the utility on both

bases to use caverns. Other Mig's were based at Tirana-Rinas (in the early days conversion on the F-7A but after this two squadrons F-6 in use for years and later a

very short time assistance from 4 F-7) while helicopters were assigned to the helicopter regiment at Farke. Tirana-Rinas was housing the headquarters and the air force workshop while the air force academy was located on Kucove. Planes and squadrons have changed a few times for locations but finally the end of an episode was marked with the grounding of the Mig-21 in 2003 and all Mig's after some crashes in late 2005.

Actions in the air

To mark the time of tension between Yugoslavia and Albania some short notes about 'meetings in the air' were put on paper. Secret services were during the cold war highly active in the border area and Albania had a good knowledge about the potential of Yugoslavia. When Yugoslavian reconnaissance aircraft crossed the border 'by accident' our host of the tour Commandant Hadji was frequently directed on interception mission from Tirana. He often recognized a specific Galeb for espionage and called it 'the regular one'. By no means, there were doubts about the instructions. When the Yugoslav plane would not seize its penetration, it would have been shot down. The Galeb pilot knew that and once discovered he let himself escort back to the border in order to try it again later. A truly game of cat and mice.

A new build up

According to the commander of the Albanian Air force, Brigadier General Astrit Jaupi this is all in the past and today we have a changed situation and must look forward in a new concept. Reforms are his mission. The Albanian Air Force, which is called the FORCAT Ajrore Shqiptare (Fash) has really no other options than to begin again. Off course, it is not possible to replace a complete fighter force with new examples without a gigantic fundraising. In today's objectives, there is not a real need to establish such a force. Yugoslavia has been split up in several republics all with comparatively modest air arms. A position within the NATO family would secure the safety of the Albanian land and air space. Tasks are defined to the really needs and inflicts civilian related matters too. In the Albanian mountainous area's it was always necessary to reach outposts by helicopters since poor infrastructure and rough climates like heavy snowfall could isolate whole districts. One of the major objectives is to create a helicopter force sufficient to conduct the SAR, medevac and surveillance/borderpatrol missions. There were times when some thirty Mi-4's were in use in the 3340 Helicopter Air regiment but after soldier on for a long time some three are only kept in case of national emergencies. Friendly related countries like Italy and Turkey provided some aid. In 2004 Italy donated some ex Italian army Agusta Bell 205 (initially three examples and four more are expected) and Bell 206 (seven examples), a thankful beginning of a new style. In addition to these some 12 ex German Army Bo-105M were opted and will be after complete overhaul at the Donauwerth facility in Germany go to the Fash during 2007 and 2008. The first two are expected very soon after specific clearances are given to enter Albanian and

surrounding airspace by foreign pilots. It is planned that some Bo 105 will see their assemblage completion in Albania. About half of this will supplement the 1st squadron (AB-205) and 2nd squadron (AB-206) at Farke, the others will finally find there destination at Laprake airfield in West Tirana in government use for the

ministry of interior and ministry of health. They will operate alongside two police A-109's and four alouette 3 air ambulances. The structure of the new 'air force' is concentrated at Farke equipping with this three helicopter squadrons only with the minor detail to mention that the AB-205/206 and partly the Bo-105 are commissioned to the army. They have the additional task to provide close air support for Army and Navy. Thoughts about having a fixed wing element again in the air force are for real but there is a truly awareness in the command to be realistic and settle first things first and so it is a matter of secondary importance.

Training of new cadets is essential

Only skilled on fighter aircraft several pilots began an entirely new career. When Italy offered Albania training facilities with the 72 squadron at Frossinone in Italy it was gladly accepted. Four pilots received 72 hours of training each for basic training and later on two pilots achieved the status of instructor on the Bell 206. For the Bell 205 only a few instructors were trained in Italy. Some 25 pilots will receive instruction at Farke and this includes VFR only, not IFR. The Bo 105's will be manned by the more experienced pilots. Two instructors and six pilots will receive some eight flying training hours in Germany after which they can do the job. In 2005 the major average of the pilots was 43 hours, in 2006 some 50 hours and Fash expects to increase the flying hours to 60 for each pilot in 2007. Today there are 19 pilots with approximately 100 flying hours (operational group), 7 pilots with 35 flying hours (staff pilots) and 16 pilots with 15 flying hours (new pilots). The newly acquired A-109 VIP helicopter will be flown by the best of the best only. A major tragedy was the crash of the previous one. Because of the status of 'Air Force One' one must have clearance to approach the helicopter this because of the fear of sabotage. This is not a paranoia left from communist times but indeed a prominent member of the government suffered in a major helicopter accident under suspicious circumstances. Fash will schedule the tasks in future in the helicopter group in training, VIP, Transport and Reconnaissance duties. Helicopters will be specific dedicated to this task in a medium size squadron.

Modernisation of the airfields.

Several airfields have been closed but some energy was put in the major airfields. Kucove according to base commander Colonel Anton Todri faced some upgrades with help of Turkey. The runway was resurfaced and the tower and radar were completely renewed along with a new squadron building, military terminal and transport aircraft handling ramp. There was also familiarisation with ICAO rules. Airfields and heliports receive instruction to communicate in English language and the special A 3021 goal implements identification and communication to NATO compatibility. Some eight GPS systems were acquired. Four Harbin Y-5's will be after modernisation based at Kucove for light transport tasks. Farke will be enlarged to accommodate increasing flight training. Project 408 describes the modernisations like a new lighting system, a new flight tower, operational center, heli hangar and new ramp/landing area. Both Kucove and Farke saw action of NATO aircraft during the Balkan crises in the nineties. Kucove received C-130, C-160 and even Il-76 transport aircraft on its runway while Farke saw action of UAE Super Puma's and Dutch Chinook helicopters, which were actually temporarily based there. Kucove has also facilities for aircraft maintenance. Gjader is a storage field and there are no plans yet

to reactivate this location Rinas / Tirana will stay a civil airport but in times of need it can be inherited in the military structure. Also Rinas saw some heavy foreign military presence during operation Allied Force when Task Force Hawk was deployed here with U.S. Army AH-64A's and UH-60's of the 12th Avn brigade. Thanks to the presence of this former 'enemy', the runway was lengthened to receive the USAF C-17. Rinas can host Nato and PfP contenders on exercise and the Air Units Head Quarters and Air Operations Centre are located here.

Future objectives

Albania will adopt an Air situation Data Exchange system (ASDE) for which contracts are signed already with the NATO. The Fash will get direct support from two bases of the alliance, one from Italy and one from Greece. After 2009 this will get more importance and Greece will play a major role in this project. Albania is eager to create good relationships with the other neighbours Macedonia, Croatia and even Serbia with the wish to have a stabilised military situation in the region. This is a mutual consideration because all those countries suffered from the indignity of civil war. Further plans are in mind but it is today to cost able to focus on fixed wing transport and even fighters and this will have to wait. The foreseeable contribution in NATO and PfP exercises will initially being limited, however Albania should like to have a more complete interaction when they have the appropriate airplanes in future. Albania already joined a PfP exercise in its own country but will join this year PfP exercises in Macedonia and this will be the first appearance of Albanian helicopters abroad. Under guidance of General Jaupi the Fash tries to settle the most important lines in the restructure of the Air force but plan 2010 must realize the establishment of a truly multi role helicopter force. Plans beyond this are not crystallized yet but the logics say that military transport planes and interception fighters will return in Fash service, it is only a matter of time.

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