
Transformation of an Air Force

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In the enlarging group of NATO members several air forces joined the alliance with a pre-period first for preparing and to settle structures equal to NATO. This process caused in different cases some heavy changes. Complete command structures were reorganised and many aircraft were put out of service. Changes not only inflicted organising structures but also the outfit of the airplanes with new colours and squadron identifications many times adopting the low visibility style well known from the USAF.

Hungary as example

To have a good image of this kind of changes we take a good look at the actual situation of the Hungary Air Force. Once a member of the Warsaw Pact Treaty, today Hungary is already NATO-member for some time and adopted a new style. The philosophy of large amounts of aircraft was left and it has become a smaller air force but with high quality and good effectiveness. Today it is still possible to have a look how much of the inventory was put aside at Papa Air base where almost hundred aircraft of 3 different types (Mig-21/23, Su-7) are standing on the concrete of the dispersals like relics. They became useless and are not fitting in today's operations.

Search for a compatible fighter

The central issue in the renewing of the force is a search for a new generation fighter. The innovations of weapon systems and avionics came so rapidly in time the last decade that this question is an issue for almost every European Air Force trying to achieve today's demanding standards in air warfare capacities. Choices could be made between mid life updates of the existing fighter force or put aircraft out of service when technical state is too outdated or near the maximum of mainframe flying hours and acquire a new generation fighters. Hungary chose in the ultimate search finally for SAAB and the Gripen being offered an attractive lease concept in the same way it was offered to the Czech Republic. Both countries made a contract for 14 fighters including 2 trainer versions in a lease agreement for 10 years. Not a large amount of fighters but for those who can recognize the real value of the Gripen concerning the performances the fighter reveals a five times increased firepower compared with the retired types as Mig-21/23 or Su-7. An extra effective potential is the possibility to operate integrated by data-link increasing the firepower even more. Because of the limited number Hungary can invest in the pilots itself by creating more flying hours for them and thereby increasing their qualities. Primary education and training for the Gripen begins in Sweden with simulators, but Hungary will adopt this the training task and transition soon when the Gripens will be delivered between March 2006 and December 2007. They will become in service at the 59th Air Base at Keckskemet along the Mig-29's of the Puma and Dongo squadrons primarily in the Air Defence role.

The Mig-29's will eventually gradually go out of service and the pilots will when commonly used to the digital Gripen not real missing the analogue Mig-29. The multi role ability of the Gripen allows the air force command to operate the aircraft also in the attack or reconnaissance role.

What changed in the training courses?

The answer must be; a strong point of NATO are the many partners and there abilities. It is very clear to achieve modern air warfare, pilots must have a solid training course first. Some partners already found there way to Canada as a supplier of this with good experiences and results so it is not very strange for Hungary to find the solution here. Primary training in Hungary is concentrated at Szolnok Air base. Facilities including defence university Zrinyi Miklos, facultaty for aircraft technics Bolyai Janos, the non-comissioned officers (NCO's) school and the elementary flying training course. This last course uses Romanian built Yak-52 trainers applying very cheap flying hours. In 2002 the Flying Training Department was founded at Szolnok to prepare cadets for the NATO Flying Training In Canada program (NFTC) where they can reach the quality of fighter or helicopter pilot according to NATO standards within two years.

The FTD evaluates the returning pilots and helps them with there connecting career. It is a one time chance in Canada, when expressing pour capacity a pilot must return to Hungary. In Canada every aspect of the art of flying can be trained such like advanced elementary training with the CT-156 Harvard 2, helicopter training with the CH-136 Kiowa/CH-139 Jet Ranger 3 and a course for transport plane pilot with the Beechcraft King Air C90 applied by CFFTS (Canadian Forces Flying Training School) in Portage de la Prairie. The jet pilots exercise at Cold Lake Air Base on the CT-155 de Canadian name for the BAe Hawk 115. On this aircraft, nicknamed "Electric Hawk" you can find precisely the avionics like HUD (Head Up Display) and HOTAS (Hands-on-throttle and stick) controls which must be learned for the Gripen. After Basic Fighter Manoeuvres (BFM) course the pilot continues with Air Combat Manoeuvres (ACM) and later on conversion on the Gripen in Hungary can be done quickly. No sad feelings to the L-29 or Mi-2 after the experience with the modern Canadian trainers.

Helicopters are important

Helicopters do have always an important role within an air force while they are multi-operational and therefore multi-task able. Like in other NATO countries Hungary contributes to multi lateral operations under UN command. Beside this there is a growing need for requesting the Air Force to assist in civil tasks like relieving the problems caused by disasters but also an stand-alert for anti-terrorist actions. The helicopters are concentrated at Szolnok Air Base too with the 86 the Szolnok Helicopter Regiment with device "Honestas Virtus Rectitudo".

Mi-17 or Blackhawk?

In the helicopter group exists much experience like SAR-operations, para-dropping or

helicopter attack. Within the comparatively large helicopter fleet several older examples found their way to the concrete definitive or have little flying hours. The Mi-8T operates predominantly in the SAR or transport role. The more advanced Mi-17 Hip-E with the Izotov TV-3-117MT engines operates in heavier tasks like helicopter attack or Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR). Compared to Western helicopters the Mi-17 has good performances and earned much credits in Hungary. The helicopter is reliable, efficient, favourable to pilots and for many Hungarian pilots first choice for a replacement of older types. Like our accompanying officer Captain Tama Bali said; "the Mi-17 that's what you can call a good and powerful helicopter with very good engines" while showing real impressed feelings. A nasty problem is way the Russians deliver their stuff with all kind of problems. This is probably caused by jealousy having Hungary lost to the West. Helicopters sometimes were grounded for years while waiting for spare parts. Next to this politicians argue not realistic to the people in the field (politicians easily put unarmed helicopters in the CSAR-zone, this is van the military really dislike) but those politicians happen to be the people who make decisions. Every time rumours are passing about an large number (60 pieces is mentioned) American Blackhawks but no one seems to know if this is really true.

Canon fleet

Like in air forces of other new NATO members the Mi-24V is the main attack helicopter. For this type there is no special designed Western competitor (combination attack and troop transport helicopter) and so this type is welcomed in the NATO inventory. The older D-versions will leave active duty gradually an acquired ex-DDR examples will be one by one converted to the Mi-24P version depending the funding of this process. This Mi-24P version has an improved canon and battle capacity. The later versions of the Mi-24 are planned to serve until 2020. The Antonov An-26 transport aircraft is another successful type for the Hungarians. Today are 5 examples in service and one was recently delivered from the Antonov's factory in the Ukraine.

A future prospect as a modern NATO-member

Hungary want reflects its ability to be on the same level like other members of the alliance. Exercise are very like we know, recently expressed with "Blazing Hill 2005". In this exercise the scenario was a transport aircraft crashed in mountainous area with several casualties. Both military and civil helicopters joined rescue operations together with other involved organisations and authorities. Logistics and aid were on a good level and showed that the qualities of the involved people were as expected. For the Gripen pilots is there maybe a good opportunity to let cooperation grow with the other Gripen User in central Europe, the Czech Republic. Retrospective Hungary showed how to phase out a big but outdated force and transform in a smaller but competitive organisation with limited budget but complying to National an NATO requirements. More than that is not necessary.

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