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## **SLOVAK AIR FORCE TODAY**

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Today Slovak Air Force tries to be an updated air force with the aim to be fully compatible with western air forces in the Nato-structure. Although not a member of this organisation yet it hopes to enter the Nato in future after political agreements. Slovakia is integrated in the Partnership for Peace (PfP) exercises and is eager to learn expertise from the other participants, especially the western counterparts in Europe like in the recently Cooperative Key exercises at St. Dizier air base in France. This exercise comprised actions like medical evacuation and CSAR (Combat Search and Rescue) under cooperation of United Nations flag in peacekeeping operations. Already before the Slovak air Force was requested to join UN-operations and stationed 2 Mi-17 helicopters in Banja Luka, Bosnia until replaced by a Czech unit.

The inventory of the Slovak Air Force consist of aircraft made in Russia or former Czechoslovakia. Also the structure of the air force inherited at the time the Czech Republic and Slovakia split up in 1993 was of the typical Russian Air Regiments. Slovakia then faced a modernisation period with transfer of squadrons, disbandment of squadrons and withdrawal of some aircraft from active duty.

The structure was transformed to western-style Air Wings and aircraft were to be integrated in western Air Operationalability Procedures. Therefore money was reserved to change and improve the avionics of the planes to western standards (for example from Glonass satellite navigation to GPS). This proces is still under progress, yet not fully implemented and compatability is still limited (aircraft are partly Nato-standards and partly ICAO-standards) but this aspect will get the attention it needs in future. Military personnel involved were to change their tactics in air operations to comply with Nato partners.

At the moment the so-called model 2010 provides still conscripts (mainly ground personnel) in the air force for 4-9 months but from 2006 only professionals will equip the units and recrutement will be an even more important matter. The personnel is highly motivated to serve in international actions, our spokesman for example served as an exchangeofficer for 8 months in the R.A.F. and answered our questions in perfect English. Several squadron rotations of Nato air forces took place and Dutch F-16's, German Tornado's and R.A.F. Harriers found their way to Sliac air base which is the main fighter base of the Slovak Air Force. Sliac air base also hosted Cooperative Chance in 1998, a PfP-exercise with participants from Norway, France, Hungary ,the Netherlands, U.K. and U.S.

### **Sliac**

Sliac Air base (in the middle of the country) is the 1 st Air Force Base ( 1e Letecka Zakladna) originally named "the base of the three oaks" and occupied by the Soviet Army as a helicopter and transport base from 1968 till 1988 , it was given back to Czechoslovakia and became in 1993 the main air force base of the Slovakian Air Force until today with the Air Force Headquarters in nearby Svolen situated. Recently the base was honoured with the title "Major Otto Smik"which was a squadronleader of Czechoslovakian elements in the R.A.F. in world war 2, a hero who died in the battle of Brittain. On Sliac the Fighter Squadrons and the Technical Squadrons are linked. Each Fighter Squadron has its own Technical

Squadron for maintenance. There are 3 squadrons within the 1 st Fighter Wing (1 stihacie letecke kridlo)

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|--|------------------------|
| - the 1 st Fighter Squadron ( 1 stihacia letka)  | Mig-29A/UB             |
| - the 2 nd Training Squadron ( 2 stihacia letka) | Mig-21MF/UM and L-39ZA |
| - the 3 rd Command Squadron (3 letka)            | L-410 UVP-T / MI-17    |

Primarily task of the 1 st Air Base is to guard the airspace of the Slovak Republic in order to intervene against air intruders. There is an Air Force Quick Alert System appointed for continuous watching of the airspace. On quick alert are Mig-21MF interceptors of the 2 nd Training Squadron. A few of this aircraft (6 Mig-21MF en 2 Mig-21UM) stayed in service in upgraded versions in both silvergrey and brownish camouflaged colourscheme while several other Mig-21 aircraft lost their active duty and are in open storage on the base now.

Besides the quick alert status the Mig-21MF pilots perform the next missions to train their skills;

- attacks on air targets under all weather conditions at day and night.
- air fight with low-level flying target by single or two planes.
- low-level navigation flights.

Secondly important tasks of the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Base are PfP and Mil-to-Mil activities, pilots and groundpersonnel training and Search and Rescue (S.A.R.).

The 1 st Fighter squadron is assigned to PfP exercises and UN peackeeping operations and flies the Mig-29A and UB versions. Initially the Slovak Air Force received 9 Mig-29A and 1 Mig-29UB out of the Czechoslovakian inventory in 1993 and received later on from Russia (to pay their debts) in 2 batches new deliveries of 12 Mig-29A and 2 Mig-29UB. The following types of missions are trained to keep the pilots skilled for their tasks.

- manoeuvrable air fight of single or two airplanes
- attacks on ground targets by single airplane or by formation of two airplanes
- interact in peacekeepingconditions.

The main mission of the 3<sup>rd</sup> command squadron in peacetime are transport of cargo and personnel, training of airborne troops, supplying the units in the field by equipment and food, ambulance services and helping at natural disasters

At present time the most important mission is Search and Rescue (S.A.R.) service (only for military services in general and airplaneaccidents and people involved, cases with lost mountaineers for example are to be carried out by public civillian organisations).

Both L-410 UVP (turbolet) and Mi-17 can be temporarily assigned to UN-missions.

The airbase has good relationship with Nato-countries, MIL-to-Mil partnercountries and the National Guard of Indiana.

## Conversion

The trainingscourse for fighterpilots is taking place at the Air Force Academy (Vojenska Letecka Akademia) in Kosice on the L-39C and L-39V Albatross (after initially training on the Zlin 142 and L-29) where also the aerobatic team "Biele Albatrossy" is based.

However advanced training and conversion is a task for the 2 nd trainingsquadron at Sliac. The unit also flies with the L-39ZA for this purpose and conversion can be followed directly on the Mig-21 or Mig-29 which is to be said that it is even easier to learn the Fulcrum to fly than the Fishbed. On the airbase are also Simulator facilities.

Sliac Air base is situated in a valley surrounded by mountains of 1500-2000 m high. It gives air cadets an ideal training course for navigation with challenging situations.

### Malacky/Kuchyna

The secondly important base of the Slovak air force is Malacky/Kuchyna Air Base (2<sup>nd</sup> Air Base /2<sup>e</sup> Letecká Základňa) where the 2<sup>nd</sup> Fighter-Bomber Wing/2<sup>stihacie bombardovacie letecké kridlo</sup> is based. The base houses a Su-22 Fitter squadron (1<sup>stihacie bombardovacia letka</sup>), a Su-25 Frogfoot squadron (3<sup>bitevna letka</sup>), a L-29 Delphin unit attached to both squadrons and the transport squadron (2<sup>dopravná letka</sup>). Today the Su-22 and Su-25 squadrons are on standby situation only and the pilots are taking their flying hours on the L-29 Delphin.

This because of those elements in the air force are under discussion for further existence while L-29 produce cheap flying hours. The Su-25 (11 Su-25K and 1 Su-25UBK) originally were attached to CAS (Close Air Support) as their task and the remaining Su-22 (of which 11 out of 20 were sold to Angola and 1 became museum exhibit) were reconnaissance assets including photorecce with the second task SEAD (Suppression of Enemy Air Defence, conducting hits on targets). Photorecce and Elint capacities were provided by an external pod (KKR-3 pod). The transport squadron consists of An-26 in camouflaged and An-24 in elegant blue/white/red colour scheme (like the L-39 of the Biele Albatrossy aerobatic team) and some L-410 turbolet transport aircraft. On the air base is also an Mi-17 stationed for SAR.

### Shooting Range

Of main importance for the Slovak Air Force and also Western Countries is the huge 300 square km training area of 5 shooting ranges. Range A for infantry, range B special for aircraft shooting exercises and range C-F for artillery. Range B is 50 km long and only 8 km situated from Malacky Air Base. It is a very good low-level flying area by absence of villages, however the mountainous area of the Male Karpaty is in the neighbourhood (on 754 m. high Vysoka Mountain nearby the base is still a Junkers Ju-52 wreckage from World War 2). Already several deployments of which often American units came here to have shooting practice. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Air Base expects to lose the Su-22 and Su-25 squadrons with the main task in the future the housing of the transport squadron and continuing the long tradition of training base (field marshal Rommel trained his African Corps here) where nearly every type of the previous Czechoslovakian Air Force saw shooting action twice or three times a year.

### Presov

Presov is the 3<sup>rd</sup> Air Base (3<sup>letecká základňa</sup>) and home base of 3<sup>rd</sup> Helicopter Wing/3<sup>vtulníkové letecké kridlo</sup> which consists of 2<sup>helicopter attack squadrons</sup> and 1<sup>helicopter transport squadron</sup>.

- 1 Bitevna vrtulníková letka flying Mi-24V
- 2 Bitevna vrtulníková letka flying Mi-24D / Mi-24DU
- 3 Dopravná vrtulníková letka with Mi-2 and Mi-17

The 18 Mi-24 serves as gunships in the attack role and the Mi-24V (10) is an upgraded version of the Mi-24D (8) with modernized equipment and capacity for more capable anti-tank rockets of later design (AT-6 Spiral) instead of the old radioguided AT-2 Swatter. One unarmed Mi-24DU is operated for training and conversion. The Mi-17 is a general workhorse for transport duties and the Mi-2 is mainly in use for liaison tasks. Both Mi-24 and Mi-17 can be used in the CSAR role and the Mi-17 can be armed with rocket pods. A few Mi-17 are converted to AEW and ELINT versions and one Mi-17 is on alert status for SAR missions.

Other airbases in Slovakia are Trencin Air base nowadays not active anymore but a maintenance unit: the Letecke Opravovne Trencin (LOT) is still in use and Bratislava-Ivanka where the police squadron is based and a few aircraft assigned to governemental duties.

## **Future**

For the coming future the Slovak Air Force studies to buy a new fighter in the class of L-159 or Bae Hawk and hopes to replace the Mig-21, Su-25 and Su-22 with this fighter in multirole tasks. The concept of swingrole of the Dutch Air Force has much interest.

The Mig-29 resembles the most valuable asset in the Air Force and will see more upgrades in future. In that way the Slovak Air Force envy the Poland Air Force very much being a Nato-member yet this country will receive Mig-29 from the Luftwaffe for the amount of 1 euro (!) each.

Slovakia should have liked such a benefit very much too. Also the Nato-summit in Prague in november 2002 will define more specific the status of Slovakia as a conceptmember.

Our spokesman ended the interview with the slogan: "twice better to see than to read" and invites the reader to come to Slovakia to see how beautifull the country really is.

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**Kees Otten & Wim Das**

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