



PRESS RELEASE

Tellumat
February 10 , 2011
Page 1 of 2

Air Force ponders future of A109 helicopter

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The South African Air Force is investigating the future use of the Agusta A109 light utility helicopter (LUH) it purchased as part of the 1999 Strategic Defence Package (SDP).

The A109 LUH was purchased to replace the elderly Eurocopter SA-316/SA-319 Alouette III helicopter which had been in service since 1962 in the light utility role. Delivery of the 30 A109 helicopters purchased from the Anglo-Italian AgustaWestland helicopter company under Project Flange commenced in 2005 and has been beset with difficulties and delays. An option for a further ten was not exercised.

The SAAF required the type to take pressure off its Denel Oryx medium utility fleet. The Air Force has long had the need for a platform more capable than the Alouette III but less expensive and more efficient than the Oryx for the bulk of taskings. The A109 was expected to fill that niche. The A109 was also expected to allow the SAAF to pass-on its Eurocopter BK-117 helicopter fleet to the South African Police Service Air Wing.

At a press briefing at the Air Force Day Parade held at Swartkop airfield near Centurion on January 28, Lieutenant General Carlo Gagiano, Chief of the Air Force, said the SAAF is still holding on to their BK-117s and that they were looking to define a new role for the A109. "We have quite a large number of these helicopters (the A109) and indeed, we have to define a new role for them because they cannot really do the work of a BK 117," Gagiano confirmed. "The BK 117s are doing a great job in the Eastern Cape," he added.

According to the SAAF, typical missions for the A109 includes training, search and rescue, rope extraction & rappelling, trooping, medical evacuation (casevac), cargo transport, border patrol, peacekeeping, communications and urban operations.

Although the first five A109 aircraft were manufactured in Italy, the balance of the 25 helicopters was assembled by Denel Saab Aerostructures. By 2008 deliveries were four years late, leading to the imposition of a R90 million penalty, the only one imposed under the "arms deal". It has been reported that offsets were tardy and the platform has failed to live up to expectation.

Although one of the stated uses of the new helicopter was for pilot training, the SAAF was experiencing a critical lack of qualified flying instructors soon after the initial aircraft were delivered. As a consequence, in mid-2006 the SAAF outsourced basic helicopter flying training to Starlight Aviation in Durban. At the time, it was rumoured that the A109, with its advanced avionics and equipment, was too complex to convert newly qualified pilots onto helicopters.

The Air Force announced in March 2007 that the A109 had been cleared for command-and-control, casevac, trooping and cargo-slinging duties. The helicopter is capable of being equipped with a search light, FLIR (Forward Looking Infra-Red), external hoist and a cargo-sling. However, operational reports suggest the type is, depending on one's point of view, underpowered or alternatively too heavy with too low a payload to fully fulfil these tasks. The helicopter can neither carry operational loads in high heat conditions nor fly in strong wind. Other reports suggest that a fully-charged battery is required as the helicopter cannot be started manually, but the battery has a habit of going flat. Despite this, the crew love flying the A109.

It had always been the intention of the Air Force to replace the BK-117 helicopter, operated by 15 Squadron at the coast in Durban and Port Elizabeth, with the A109. In January 2008, it was decided to keep the BK-117 in service for a further year, as it had lower operating costs compared with the more advanced A109 LUH.

The UK journal AirForces Monthly noted in September 2008 that the A109 LUH should have been fully operational in both the landward and seaward roles by that January, allowing for the transfer of the BK 117 to the SA Police Service Air Wing. However, airframes fitted in a seaward configuration (with emergency water flotation gear) were then not available. The first aircraft in a seaward configuration



PRESS RELEASE

Tellumat
February 10 , 2011
Page 2 of 2

(serial 4001) became available in May 2008 and underwent an Operational Test & Evaluation (OT&E) phase at 15 Squadron. Clearly, the OT&E did not find the A109 suitable for the seaward role either.

Gagino said that the matter of the retirement of the BK 117 had to be addressed soon. "If we phase the BK 117 out, as the plan is for this year, then we have to put more Oryx in the Eastern Cape because the A109 will not be able to do the work that the BK 117 is currently doing," the Air Force chief continued.

Gagino stressed it was not a mistake to purchase the helicopters – for R2.451 billion, but the Air Force just needed to find the right role for the A109. This could include command and control. A further observation role may be allocated to the A109 since the SANDF has once again taken over responsibility for border protection.

Three of the helicopters have been involved in serious accidents. In the first accident, three crew members were killed in May 2009 when their helicopter crashed into Woodstock Dam, near Bergville in KZN. A further two helicopters were damaged in November and December 2010, fortunately with no loss of life. These two airframes may be rebuilt in due course. The results of the investigation into the cause of the fatal crash has not been made public, while the investigation into the other two crashes is not yet complete. However, it is believed that there was no common cause between the three crashes.

As the cause of the most recent accident in December may have been as a result of mechanical failure, all the A109s were grounded, pending inspection. Gagiano has confirmed that while some of the aircraft are flying again, not all had been checked. In a reply to a Parliamentary question in January this year, Minister of Defence and Military Veterans Lindiwe Sisulu said that 4% of the final associated logistic support for the A109 purchased as part of the SDP was still outstanding. This included the implementation of a few minor engineering changes.

Other South African companies involved in the project include Saab SA, Denel Optronics (now Carl Zeiss Optronics), Tellumat and Waymark.