NATO, EDF Advance Next-Gen Rotorcraft Projects

On Nov. 29–30, representatives from six NATO countries formed the Acquisition Support Partnership (ASP) of the Next Generation Rotorcraft Capability (NGRC) initiative, a project to define the requirements of a next-generation medium-lift helicopter. The agreement between the six countries — France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK — allowed for the formation of a program office dedicated to the NGRC, which as of late January was partially activated, according to FlightGlobal. Canada, currently an observer nation, is expected to join the Partnership in early 2023. The NATO Support and Procurement Agency (NSPA), the project manager for the concept definition stage, expects to begin issuing contracts for work on the concept stage in mid-2023. NSPA is also the agency for the NH90 (shown), which is one of the helicopters the NGRC will replace.

Meanwhile, Airbus and Leonardo Helicopters have launched a study of next-generation rotorcraft, a project funded by the European Defence Fund (EDF). A meeting in late January involved representatives from the two European-based helicopter manufacturers and those from their 19-member team of industrial partners. It was the first meeting of the 42-month-long European Next Generation Rotorcraft Technologies (ENGRT) project, which aims to study the operational rotorcraft needs of European armed forces beyond 2030 and define the key technologies and propulsion systems underpinning future military rotorcraft. The EDF is providing up to €40M ($43M) for the ENGRT project, which is expected to complement NATO’s work on the NGRC.

Hochul Vetoes Bill Restricting Helicopters

On Dec. 15, New York Governor Kathy Hochul vetoed a bill restricting helicopter flights in New York City. The legislation targeted the West 30th Street Heliport on the Hudson River and would have banned non-essential flights from operating from the location. The bill would also have allowed individuals to sue helicopter operators for an “unreasonable level of sustained noise.” In response, Hochul argued that that bill would have impinged on the federal government's authority to regulate aviation. "Certain elements of this legislation run counter to the federal scheme regulating New York’s airports and airspace,” said Governor Hochul in a written statement accompanying the decision. The bill was the result of a grassroots effort known as “Stop the Chop” that aims to ban non-essential helicopter flights from the New York Metropolitan Area.

Helicopter Firm to Use KULR Vibe

KULR Technology Group announced on Dec. 21 that it will provide a US-based commercial helicopter operator with the KULR VIBE, a vibration reduction solution. KULR, which is headquartered in San Diego, California, and specializes in energy management solutions, said in a press release that the contract with the unnamed client, reportedly one of the world’s largest civilian helicopter operators, is a six-figure annual subscription agreement. According to the company, the KULR VIBE suite of artificial intelligence (AI)-driven products and services can help customers identify areas in their helicopter fleet that are suffering from excess vibrations, which if left unresolved can lead to increased maintenance and downtime. KULR formally launched VIBE in October 2022 and has previously helped the US Marine Corps resolve the causes of excess vibrations in some of its rotorcraft.

Airbus Racer Powers On

On Dec. 21, the European Union’s Clean Aviation initiative — formerly known as Clean Sky 2 — announced that the Airbus Racer had conducted a successful power-on test to evaluate the aircraft’s systems. The test occurred at the Airbus Helicopters facility in Marignane, France. “The POWER ON is a significant technical milestone which validates the readiness of the aircraft’s core avionic systems, software integration compatibility, and electrical harnesses,” said Tomasz Krysinski, head of research and innovation at Airbus.
Helicopters, in a statement. The milestone was an important step towards conducting the maiden flight of the aircraft this year, added Krysinski. Developed to meet the EU’s Clean Sky 2 sustainability goals and requirements, the high-speed Racer is expected to have fewer noise and carbon emissions, and use less fuel than the typical helicopter in its class.

**Canada Awards Contract for Cormorants**

On Dec. 22, Canada awarded Leonardo a CAN$1B ($744M) contract to upgrade the Royal Canadian Air Force’s (RCAF’s) fleet of AW101 Cormorant search-and-rescue (SAR) helicopters. The contract covers the upgrade of 13 existing CH-149 Cormorants, the Canadian version of the AW101 Merlin, as well as the procurement of three additional airframes. Leonardo’s Yeovil-based UK division negotiated the contract and will build the three helicopters. The Leonardo-led Team Cormorant includes IMP Aerospace and Defence, which will perform most of the upgrades at its facility in Halifax, as well as GE Canada and Collins Aerospace Canada. The upgrades will bring the Cormorants, which Canada introduced in 2001, up to the standards of the latest version of the aircraft, the Norwegian SAR AW101-612, and will include a suite of new features and technologies, such as a glass cockpit, and enhanced navigation and communication packages. Canada also awarded Montreal-based CAE a contract for training systems.

**Navy Approves Full-Rate Production of CH-53K**

On Dec. 23, the US Navy announced that the Sikorsky CH-53K King Stallion has transitioned from low-rate initial production (LRIP) to full-rate production (FRP) following a review by Acting Assistant Secretary of the Navy Frederick J. Stefany. The decision clears the way for the Navy to increase procurement quantities of the heavy-lift helicopter, which is slated to replace the Marine Corps’ fleet of CH-53E Super Stallions. To that end, on Jan. 30, the Navy awarded Sikorsky a $34M contract modification to begin expanding the production line to eventually accommodate an annual production quantity of 24 CH-53K aircraft. The CH-53K achieved initial operational capability in April 2022 and is expected to achieve full operational capability in fiscal year 2029 (see “CH-53K Enters Service,” Vertiflite, May/June 2023).

**Navy Exercises Option on TH-73A**

The US Navy ordered 26 more Leonardo TH-73A helicopters from AgustaWestland Philadelphia Corp., a division of Leonardo Helicopters. In a Lot IV contract modification issued on Dec. 23, the Navy awarded AgustaWestland a $110M contract for the aircraft and related data in support of the Advanced Helicopter Training System program. The aircraft
are expected to be delivered by 2024. The TH-73A “Thrasher,” a variant of Leonardo’s AW119 light single, will be used to train pilots from the Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard, replacing the existing fleet of Bell TH-57B/C Sea Rangers. After the Navy took delivery of the first TH-73A in 2021, an initial class of aviators began training on the TH-73A in September 2022 (see “Rotorcraft News,” *Vertiflite*, Nov/Dec 2022).

**Sikorsky, Boeing Challenge FLRAA Decision**

On Dec. 28, Sikorsky, a Lockheed Martin company, and Boeing filed a formal protest of the US Army’s decision to award the contract for the Future Long Range Assault Aircraft (FLRAA) to Bell Textron. The Sikorsky and Boeing team have asked the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to review the decision, arguing in a press release that the “data and discussions lead us to believe the proposals were not consistently evaluated.” According to the Lexington Institute’s Dr. Loren Thompson, who wrote a commentary for Forbes summarizing the details of the protest, Lockheed “contends that the Army preferred from the start to select a tiltrotor design, and bent the rules to favor that outcome; applied selection criteria subjectively and unfairly; discriminated on the basis of selection criteria not stated in the solicitation; and did not apply the standards for a best-value selection correctly.”

The GAO has until April 7 to rule on the challenge, which has resulted in the postponement of an Army contract to Bell for preliminary design work. The Army selected Bell for the FLRAA program on Dec. 6, choosing its V-280 Valor tiltrotor over the Sikorsky-Boeing offering of the coaxial rotor Defiant X to replace the Army’s fleet of Black Hawk helicopters (see “FLRAA Tilts to Bell,” *Vertiflite*, Jan/Feb 2023). The initial FLRAA award to Bell was valued at $232M, but total program estimates of around $70B will make it one of the largest military helicopter programs ever.

In addition to the pending challenge before the GAO, US lawmakers from Connecticut have pressured the Army to release more information regarding its decision to award the contract to Texas-based Bell. On Jan. 12, Connecticut’s congressional delegation requested a briefing on the decision from Army Secretary Christine Wormuth, though the Army declined, citing the ongoing GAO review.

**Kaman Ends Run of K-MAX**

On Jan. 18, Kaman Aerospace announced that it was ending production of its K-MAX heavy-lift helicopter. After launching a review of the company’s businesses in December 2022, Kaman determined the K-MAX program suffered from “low demand and variation in annual deliveries,” according to a company press release. Kaman first began manufacturing the K-MAX in 1991 and produced 38 helicopters by 2003. The company restarted production in 2016 after it received additional orders for more than 10 aircraft, ultimately producing another 22 helicopters. With its distinctive intermeshing rotors, the K-MAX has seen duty in a variety of military and civil roles, including serving as an uncrewed cargo delivery platform for the Marine Corps in Afghanistan (designated the CQ-24). Kaman will continue supporting the existing K-MAX fleet by providing repair services, spare parts and operator training.

**Leonardo Selects Safran to Power AW09**

Leonardo Helicopters selected the Safran Helicopter Engines Arriel 2K engine to power its AW09 single-engine helicopter, the two companies announced on Jan. 26. Formerly known as the Kopter SH09 — and, previously, as the Mareno Swiss Helicopter SKYe SH09 — the AW09 is currently under development by Leonardo and its Swiss subsidiary Kopter Group. The selection of the Arriel 2K marks a change from its predecessor, which was powered by a Honeywell HTS900-2 turbine engine. The Arriel 2K is the latest member of the Arriel family and is reportedly in the 1,000 shp (745 kW) class, though the company has yet to release the full specifications.
According to Leonardo, the Arriel 2K is already installed on the Pre-Series 4 (PS4, shown), the company’s latest AW09 prototype, and is set to undergo flight tests at Kopter’s facility in Mollis, Switzerland. Tests involving the final prototype of the AW09, the PS5, are planned for later this year.

**Enstrom’s 480B Takes Flight**

Enstrom announced on Jan. 30 that it completed the flight of a new 480B helicopter, the first since Enstrom resumed production after reopening last year. The aircraft is the 255th of the 480-series and 1,317th helicopter built the company. “This was a critical milestone in our plan to not just bring back Enstrom, but to start to reinvent ourselves and the way we operate,” said Enstrom Chief Operating Officer Adam Richardson in a statement. The flight occurred weeks after Enstrom announced in December that the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) had granted it a new production certificate, allowing the Menominee, Michigan-based company to resume the manufacture and delivery of new helicopters. After Enstrom declared bankruptcy in January 2022, it was acquired by Charles Surack, founder of Surack Enterprises, the following May (see “Surack Buys Enstrom,” Vertiflite, July/Aug 2022).

**India’s Prime Minister Inaugurates New HAL Facility**

On Feb. 6, India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi (photo, center) inaugurated a new Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) helicopter manufacturing facility. The facility, construction on which began in 2016, is situated on a 615-acre (249-hectare) campus in southwest India’s Karnataka state in Tumakuru, approximately 40-miles (60-km) northwest of Bengaluru. The factory is the largest of its kind in India and in Asia, according to a statement from the Prime Minister’s office. “This facility will enable India to meet its entire requirement of helicopters indigenously and will attain the distinction of enabling self-reliance in helicopter design, development and manufacture in India,” added the statement from the Prime Minister’s Office. It is expected to initially produce the HAL Light Utility Helicopter (LUH), though it could be expanded to produce the Light Combat Helicopters and Indian Multirole Helicopters. HAL expects to produce more than 1,000 helicopters at the facility over the next 20 years.

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