

The NH90 transport helicopter has a key role to play in France's helicopter future



After years of depression, the French helicopter industry is suddenly on the up

Helicopters on the rise

FRANCE'S HELICOPTER industry is poised for a comeback after several years of steadily declining fortunes during which, in common with helicopter manufacturers elsewhere, the recession hit civil and military sales particularly hard.

In 1996, however, the industry saw real signs of progress, with orders up by an astonishing 75%. Much of this was because of success in winning export orders, which accounted for no less than 90% of the total – French Government orders having virtually dried up as reduced government spending took effect.

Since 1991, France's helicopter industry has been inextricably linked to that of Germany through the Eurocopter consortium, in which it has a 70% stake. A major milestone in 1997 will see put in place the final elements of the process of creating Eurocopter as the first totally integrated European aeronautics group. This will leave it a fully operational company in its own right rather than as four separate companies operating under French law (Eurocopter SA, Eurocopter France, Eurocopter International and Eurocopter Participations) and Eurocopter Deutschland under German law.

The revised organisation will, according to Eurocopter's French president, Jean-Francois Bigay, be directed strongly towards improving customer service, productivity and efficiency, and will be built around new business centres, responsible for technical, industrial and economic performance, supported by centres of expertise taking care of research and development, oriented towards the business centres. A single management structure will be responsible for both the French and German entities, with

Eurocopter directors exercising their functions across the board. The result, as far as the customer is concerned, will be a more easily identifiable organisation built around the Eurocopter name. The company's headquarters has also been moved, to Marignanne, in the south of France.

Last year's successful results were a breath of fresh air for Eurocopter. Total sales of 228 machines were broken down into 64% military and 36% civil. Of the 10% of domestic orders, only 2.6% came from the French Government, highlighting the export challenge now under way.

EXPORTS UP 10%

The 228 total sales consisted of 109 single-engined and 23 twin-engined Ecureuils, 23 Bo105s, five BK117s, 18 EC135s, 21 Dauphin/Panthers and 29 Cougar/Super Pumas. Orders taken for both new and used machines were worth Fr12 billion (\$2.1 billion), with turnover at a similar level to that of 1995, at Fr9.3 billion. Exports were up by 10% over the previous year. "In the face of shrinking procurement funding everywhere, and the resulting extremely tough competition," says Bigay, "Eurocopter rallied to the challenge with unprecedented determination." In 1996, the alliance succeeded in closing several crucial deals with Spain, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, marking Eurocopter's return to the Middle East market after its expulsion following the Gulf War. The group now says that it has captured roughly 20% of the global military market, not including the USA and CIS, marking a recovery to 1992/3 levels.

Despite the difficult years, Eurocopter, which claims the widest range of helicopters in the

world in the 2.5-10t class, has maintained its continuing development programmes and has succeeded in fielding two new civil helicopters, the four-seat, single-engined EC120, in co-operation with China and Singapore and the seven/eight-seat, twin-powerplant EC135.

During 1996, it also continued development of new versions of existing machines, with particular emphasis on offering customers more flexibility on purchase and operating costs. The Cougar 100 (which will be flown for the first time in the summer) will thus be marketed as a lighter, lower purchase-and-operating cost alternative to the more sophisticated Cougar MkII, while in the civil and public service sectors, the N3 version of the Dauphin and B3 version of the single-engined Ecureuil (due for certification in November) offer improved performance, enabling, says Eurocopter, "an approach to a broader market base". Helicopters in the medium-lift segment have also received upgrades aimed at reducing costs.

The biggest recent event was the market launch of the new EC120 Colibri at the Helicopter Association International (HAI) show in Anaheim, California, in February. With almost 20 machines sold during the show, the new helicopter is off to a good start, and Eurocopter will now embark on a campaign to secure as much as possible of an estimated market sized at between 1,500-2,000 machines. It is the first all-new helicopter in the 1.5t class for many years, and in many cases is competing with helicopters designed 30 years ago.

The three-bladed rotor design uses Eurocopter's Spheriflex all-composite bearingless hub with parabolic-section blade-tip fairings