Allison propfan clear for flight

Ground testing of the Allison/Pratt & Whitney 578-DX propfan engine was completed last week, clearing the way for flight tests on the McDonnell Douglas MD-80 demonstrator early next year.

Almost 2,500hr of running at Allison's Indianapolis facility led to the successful preliminary flight rating test (PFRT), described by the team as a "key hurdle" to flight testing. The PFRT demonstrated the dynamic and structural integrity of the propfan blades, and included the equivalent of 23 flight cycles on the demonstrator aircraft.

The MD-80 is currently flying at Mojave with the General Electric GE36 unducted fan engine, which was reinstalled on the aircraft three weeks ago after being disassembled for inspection at GE.

At the time of writing, McDonnell Douglas has still not decided whether it will fly the aircraft to the Farnborough Air Show. "We're looking at the idea very strongly," says a spokesman. A 4hr flight is required to qualify the engine before the transatlantic journey. Weather will also have to be within visual flight rules minima for the entire route.

If it makes the trip, the demonstrator will fly daily at the show, essentially continuing the flight test programme. McDonnell Douglas says it has no plans to carry passengers routinely on the aircraft, although it "still has to decide" on whether it will fly potential customers.

A swapping the GE engine for the PWA 578-DX will involve changes to the pylon assembly, and some modification of the flight controls. The Allison engine is rated at 21,000lb thrust—slightly less than that of the GE36, which produces around 25,000lb. The 578-DX contra-rotating propulsor is also gear-driven, whereas the GE36 has direct drive. PWA managing director Al Novick says that the gear system has accumulated 750hr of operation.

757 Combi flies

Boeing's new 757-200 Combi makes its first take-off. Destined for delivery to Royal Nepal Airlines in September, it will be able to carry two cargo pallets in the forward section and up to 148 passengers. Royal Nepal already operates an all-passenger 757-200 as part of its Asian Fleet. Both the -200 and the -200 Combi are powered by Rolls-Royce RB.211-535E4 engines.

MDC task force reviews defence consultants

McDonnell Douglas is reviewing its use of former US Defence Department officials as consultants, in the wake of the ongoing Federal investigation into the Pentagon arms procurement scandal.

The St Louis-based corporation, which is the nation's largest defence contractor, is one of several targeted by investigators searching for details of illegal payments allegedly made to Pentagon procurement officials in return for classified information.

In particular, Federal officials are investigating McDonnell's dealings with Melvyn Paisley, former assistant secretary of the US Navy for engineering, research, and systems.

Paisley is alleged to have helped to steer the $4.4 billion development contract for the Navy's Advanced Tactical Aircraft (ATA) to the McDonnell Douglas/General Dynamics team, and later to have improperly provided McDonnell Douglas with classified information on overseas sales of the F-18 and on other projects, while working for the company as an independent consultant.

Paisley, who spent 28 years in the Navy before taking up his Pentagon post in 1981, started his own consultancy business after resigning in 1987, and McDonnell Douglas was one of several defence contractors which employed him.

After investigators searched McDonnell's St Louis headquarters in June, the company terminated its agreement with Paisley, 20 months before it was due to expire. McDonnell chairman and chief executive John McDonnell has now appointed a task force to "assess MDC policies, procedures, and practices for hiring and supervising consultants for business development, in particular those who had high-ranking Government positions".

McDonnell says that Paisley was hired because "We believed that he could contribute to our planning and development of domestic and international marketing strategies. He was to help MDC and our components by assessing our advanced technologies, and offering suggestions on how they should be applied to the marketplace."

McDonnell denies that Paisley could have had "any impact" on the Navy's award of the ATA development contract while in the Pentagon.

McDonnell adds that the company wants to "make sure that we are operating in accordance with clear, widely understood policies, and to determine whether we should build in additional guidelines. We want to leave no doubt that MDC believes in and acts in accordance with the highest ethical standards."

Flight conflicts reduce

Both the UK and USA report evidence of reducing collision risk in their skies.

In the UK, the Civil Aviation Authority has published its report, for the last four months of 1987, of all the filed airmiss reports involving commercial air transport aircraft, as assessed by the independent joint airmiss working group (Jawg).

The complete figures for 1987 show that, despite the increase in air traffic, the actual number of commercial air transport airmiss incidents reported by pilots was 55, compared with 61 in 1986. Those subsequently assessed by the Jawg as involving some degree of risk numbered 11 in 1987, compared with 12 the previous year.

The rate of risk-bearing airmisses per 100,000hr flown involving commercial air transport aircraft in 1987 was the lowest ever recorded, at 2.2, compared with 2.7 for 1986. This continues a gentle downward trend.

US reports are not to identical criteria, but they, too, indicate a reducing rate for the filing of near-mid-air-collision reports. During the January-June period this year reports from pilots dropped by 27 per cent compared with the same period in 1987, and operational errors by controllers were also down by 18 per cent.