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Airbus is capitalising on the greater productivity of its Guppy replacement

MAX KINGSLEY-JONES/LONDON

ON 24 OCTOBER 1997, Airbus Industrie retired the last Boeing Super Guppy from service, bringing to an end some 26 years of the outsized cargo turboprop's operations ferrying subassemblies between the consortium's European plants. At its peak, the fleet of converted Boeing 377/C-97s totalled four aircraft, but in January 1996, replacement of the ageing freighters began with the introduction of a faster, larger and more efficient machine, the A300-600-based Beluga.

Originally conceived for the transportation of US space programme components, the Super Guppies were created through the cannibalisation of ancient Boeing Stratocruisers/Stratofighters. Airbus acquired its first two airframes in the early 1970s, and later commissioned the "creation" of two more aircraft which entered service during the 1980s. By the end of that decade, with the Airbus production rates gathering considerable pace, it was becoming clear that a modern replacement was needed.

Airbus selected a design based on the General Electric CF6-80C2-powered A300-600 airframe, which is officially designated the A300-600ST (Super Transporter). The programme was launched in August 1991, and is managed by a Toulouse based 50/50 joint venture set up by Aerospatiale and Daimler-Benz Aerospace - Super Airbus Transport International (SATIC).

Dubbed the Beluga because of its whale-like appearance, Airbus now has three aircraft flying. A fourth is to enter service in June. An option on a fifth Beluga has been firmed up for delivery in 2001 to cope with future capacity needs and to be used as a back-up when needed.

BULBOUS DECK

The Beluga is equipped with a bulbous 7m (internal) diameter upper deck cargo compartment, a relocated flightdeck below the main deck, and an upward opening cargo door. The aircraft also features an A340 tailfin and large tailplane endplates to provide improved stability. The modification work is carried out at Toulouse with components supplied from the Airbus assembly line. Each airframe takes around three years to be created.

During the Super Guppy era, operations were focused purely on the subassembly ferry work, but in parallel with the introduction of the

more productive Beluga, a new division was set up to operate the aircraft - Airbus Transport International (ATI). As well as flying the aircraft on the regular subassembly delivery flights, the new division was also tasked with generating revenue from commercial cargo charters. ATI was awarded its air operator's certificate from the French civil aviation authority in November 1996, and flew its first third party contract flight shortly afterwards. The target for the new division is to generate up to \$15 million-worth of revenue each year using spare capacity on the Beluga fleet.

Louis Germain, vice-president of Airbus' transport directorate, was appointed as ATI's chairman, while Arnaud Martin is director of business development. ATI leases the Belugas to Airbus for the subassembly transport duties, while its personnel, maintenance, technical and administrative support, is subcontracted to Airbus. Some 40-45 flight operations and technical staff are seconded to the division.

Germain says that between 1995, when the Beluga was certificated, and 2000, the volume of parts carried for Airbus Industrie will have tripled. In 1997 alone, the Beluga fleet accumu-



Fish in a barrel: the ageing, propeller-driven Guppy fleet has made way for the A300-based Belugas