

# Italy navy eyes aircraft options

ANDY NATIVI/GENOA

THE ITALIAN navy is evaluating the options available to boost and enlarge its fixed-wing combat aircraft force as it prepares to complete negotiations to build a second carrier.

Its immediate short-term aim is to find additional Boeing/BAE Systems Aerospace AV-8Bs to equip both carriers. Further ahead, the navy is looking at other possibilities, including the Joint Strike Fighter and a variant of Eurofighter.

The new carrier, tentatively named *Luigi Einaudi*, is due to be laid down next year and enter service by 2006/2007. With a displacement of between 22,000 and 25,000t, and a 220m (720ft) long flightdeck, it should be capable of accepting a wing of 20 helicopters and aircraft.

Following the latest design review, the warship is now to be built as a dedicated carrier rather than the originally envisaged amphibious vessel. The removal of the stern landing dock as well as the vehicle deck and most of the cargo capability will allow more room for aircraft and helicopters. The carrier will have the capability to embark 350 Marines, but only for deployment by helicopter.

The navy's combat aircraft force consists of a single squadron, the Gruaper, with 16 AV-8B Pluses and two TAV-8Bs. The aircraft are

being improved with air-to-ground and air-to-air armaments including the Raytheon AIM-120 AMRAAM, and Boeing JDAM GPS guided bombs, on top of the already available Raytheon Maverick missile and Paveway IIs.

The single squadron will be unable to field detachments on both the current carrier, the *Giuseppe Garibaldi*, and the new warship. The navy had originally hoped to buy a further eight AV-8B Plus aircraft, but the option was not exercised before the line closed due to lack of funding.

Now a fall-back solution is being discussed with the US Marine Corps for the acquisition of four to six remanufactured USMC AV-8B airframes.

With 20-22 aircraft, there should be enough to field two operational detachments of five to six aircraft each, while carrying out training duties ashore and main-

taining a small attrition reserve.

Alongside the AV-8B decision, the navy is also looking for a longer term replacement. The preferred option is the short take-off vertical landing (STOVL) version of the JSF.

The navy is discussing with the country's air force the possibility of financing a 5% stake to participate in the JSF engineering, manufacturing and development phase. The air force's prime interest is the conventional take-off landing variant.

Other fall-back options are being considered – particularly as the *Garibaldi* is due to be replaced around 2015, funding permitting, by a bigger new generation carrier.

Eurofighter has briefed the navy about a low-cost arrestor landing/angled deck variant of the Eurofighter that could operate from the *Einaudi*, at reduced weights and a more radically mod-

ified naval version of the aircraft.

The final fall-back option is the so-called Harrier III programme: a development of the AV-8B Plus that Boeing and BAE Systems are quietly studying. Should the STOVL JSF not happen for any reason, then the US Marine Corps and several other navies will need a replacement.

The investigation centres on what can be achieved with the basic Harrier II design. A modified, lengthened airframe and a more powerful engine, plus new avionics are among the options being studied. If Boeing loses the JSF contest, it is possible that an improvement of the Harrier II could be offered overseas as a low-cost alternative.

Meanwhile, the Italian navy has time to wait and see what happens – its current AV-8B force is still young and the new carrier is not going to be around for at least seven years.

For the *Garibaldi* replacement exploration, talks have already been held with the French and UK navies to find out if a co-operative project can be conceived to develop a new design. If the deck of its future carrier is large enough, the navy's options will expand considerably.

Italy's review of its future naval aircraft needs reflect similar debate within the UK, which is also reviewing the JSF, modified Eurofighter, and Harrier III to equip its next-generation aircraft carriers. □



The navy's short-term aim is to find enough AV-8Bs to equip both carriers

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### ■ EADS US RADAR DEAL

European Aeronautic Defence and Space (EADS) has secured a contract worth \$11.9 million from the US Navy to manufacture electronic components under licence for the Raytheon APG-65 radar fitted to US Navy Boeing F/A-18 Hornets. The production work will be performed by EADS Airborne Systems in Ulm, Germany over a two-year period starting next year.

## Poland proceeds with \$120 million Su-22 upgrade

POLISH DEPUTY defence minister Romauld Szeremietew has announced that the country will go ahead with a planned Israel Aircraft Industries (IAI)-led upgrade of 20 of the air force's Sukhoi Su-22 fighter-bombers (*Flight International*, 16-22 May).

The deal, reportedly worth \$120 million, means it is unlikely that Poland will issue a request for proposals for new supersonic fighters until after parliamentary elections are held early next year.

It is believed that the two sides have virtually agreed the deal but not yet signed the final contract. The Su-22s will be equipped by IAI's Lahav division with an Elta synthetic aperture radar, multi-function colour displays, a wide-angle head-up display and a new mission computer. The work will be undertaken in partnership with Polish industry.

Meanwhile, BAE Systems has placed its largest work package to date in Poland with a deal for PZL-Mielec to produce all tail fins and

flaps for the UK company's Avro RJ regional jets. BAE and its partner Saab are attempting to sell Poland Gripen fighters as a long-term replacement for the country's ageing Soviet-era aircraft.

BAE says the jigs for the Avro RJ components are already being transferred from the UK to Poland, and that the Polish company will begin production in the fourth quarter. "This is by far the biggest package of work we have put into a single factory in central Europe," says BAE. □