

FLEET REVIEW STEPHEN TRIMBLE / WASHINGTON DC & MARIETTA

Early retirement in store for US C-5A transports

Airframes may not survive two detailed examinations of their operational health

Over a third of the US Air Force's fleet of 81 Lockheed C-5A/B strategic transport aircraft face the prospect of early retirement under two major reviews by the service.

Lockheed Martin on 12 December launched flight tests of Block 2.1 software under the C-5 avionics modernisation programme (AMP) cockpit upgrade, around six months behind schedule. The C-5B flight was marred by technical glitches, but an air force official says Lockheed Martin is aware of the fixes needed.

The USAF's Fleet Viability Board will report in March on the opera-

tional health of the 35-year-old C-5A airframes. Air force secretary Jim Roche has said that the C-5A is unlikely to pass the viability board's evaluation.

USAF Air Mobility Command (AMC) has also launched a broader, three-year review of the C-5A fleet that includes from 2005 a complete tear-down inspection of one previously retired aircraft. The Warner-Robins Air Logistics Center, which maintains the fleet, must report any interim findings to the AMC by February to help guide the budget process.

That initial report is focused on

uncovering any maintenance "surprises" in two areas of the aircraft that are often overlooked during depot visits – the contour box beam that supports the C-5's cockpit, and the wing. Any unexpected maintenance issues discovered during the inspection could have lasting consequences for the C-5A fleet, says Al Fatkin, deputy chief of the Strategic Airlift Directorate at Warner-Robins.

The C-5A's wings have not been thoroughly inspected since the fleet was re-winged in the mid-1980s, he says.

The fleet reviews are being launched as the USAF confronts looming budget decisions on its airlift fleet. One option is to expand the C-5 upgrade programme, which includes the AMP's glass cockpit, plus new engines and structural improvements, from the C-5B models to the C-5A fleet.

Another proposal being considered by the USAF is to raise its Boeing C-17 inventory from a planned total of 180 aircraft to 222, although it has recently floated a proposal for an eventual fleet of 305 aircraft. "We're trying to get airlift capability back to the warfighter," says Fatkin. "There are big decisions to make in the short term about the dollars."



The C-5A may not pass the Fleet Viability Board's evaluation

MISSILE DEFENCE

IAI adds ABM capabilities to Barak

Israel Aircraft Industries (IAI) is developing a new ground-based point-defence system based on the Barak shipborne missile that could be capable of intercepting long-range ballistic missiles in their final re-entry phase.

The Barak missile was developed by Rafael, but IAI subsidiary Elta has been responsible for integrating the system for shipborne use by customers India and Singapore.

IAI will not release details of the

advanced variant of the Barak, but it is known that the company has been developing the so-called B-8 version for some time. Sources say that the missile has a much longer range than the current Barak, and better immunity against countermeasures. The company also will not disclose details of any negotiations with potential customers for the ground-based Barak, although it is thought likely that India is already evaluating the system.

In a related development, IAI's Arrow 2 anti-ballistic missile on 16 December intercepted and destroyed a Black Sparrow air-launched target during the sixth test of the complete Arrow 2 system from the Israel air force battery at Palmachim airbase.

Launched from a Boeing F-15 fighter, the Black Sparrow was successfully engaged at the highest altitude yet achieved by the Arrow 2 system during the test.

CHINOOK SAFETY

The UK Ministry of Defence expects to award a contract by late January to protect the Royal Air Force's fleet of Boeing Chinook HC2/2A transport helicopters with Successor Identification Friend or Foe (SIFF) equipment. Thales Avionics of the UK will receive a contract of undisclosed value to integrate the Raytheon-supplied SIFF equipment with the Chinook's existing control display navigation unit. The upgrade will result in the Chinook becoming the RAF's first rotary-winged aircraft to receive the SIFF capability.

EUROFIGHTER TESTS

The Eurofighter development aircraft (DA) fleet has completed a series of firing trials of MBDA's ASRAAM and Raytheon's AIM-9L Sidewinder missiles. Alenia Aeronautica of Italy's DA7 aircraft completed a 10-day series of tests at the Decimomannu air weapons range in Sardinia in early December. Germany, Italy and Spain will eventually field BGT's IRIS-T short-range air-to-air missile with their Eurofighter fleets, while the UK Royal Air Force's Typhoons will deploy the in-service ASRAAM.

APACHE INTEREST

The Israeli air force could equip a further two squadrons with Boeing's AH-64D Apache Longbow attack helicopter, under a possible 10- to 12-aircraft deal with the USA. Boeing officials last month visited Israel and briefed the air force on the lessons learned from US Army operations of the type during the Iraq conflict. "Apache helicopters performed according to expectations," says a senior Israeli air force source. However, "there were problems with some of the flying tactics", he says.

GORSHKOV DEAL

India is close to finalising the sale of the *Admiral Gorshkov* aircraft carrier and MiG-29K fighters, says a Russian defence official. "The contract has been finalised and is expected to be signed in New Delhi in January".