

Dutch military receives first NFH maritime helicopter

NH90's naval version sees delivery to first customer

08:53 GMT, January 5, 2010 defpro.com | As the Dutch Ministry of Defence (MoD) confirmed shortly before Christmas, the Dutch Armed Forces has taken delivery of the first NATO Frigate Helicopter (NFH), the naval version of NHIndustries' NH90. However, this first helicopter (designated NNLN03), from a total order of 12 NH90 NFH for the Netherlands, is not yet ready to be deployed in operational service, according to Aviation Week & Space Technology. Rather, it will undergo extensive testing and evaluation by the Dutch project office, which will assess whether the helicopter meets its previously agreed requirements.

As the Dutch MoD explains, NNLN03, which was handed over at the AgustaWestland plant in Italy on 23 December 2009, is a temporary so-called Meaningful Operational Capable (MOC) configuration, meaning it does not meet all contractual specifications of the final version. Nevertheless, it can immediately be used for crew training and basic coastal surveillance operations, while NHIndustries works towards completing development of an operationally ready, production standard aircraft.

As soon as the helicopter has been accepted by the Dutch MoD, it will be transferred to the De Kooy Naval Air Station in Den Helder, Netherlands, where the Dutch Defence Helicopter Command will begin the first crew training courses.

To meet Western navies' requirements for frigate-based helicopter operations, NHIndustries re-sized and specifically configured its NH90 multi-mission helicopter design, including total corrosion protection, naval military standards requirements, EMI/EMC qualification, and intrinsic capability to take off and land on ship decks up to a sea state 5. Furthermore, the company seeks to provide high availability, low maintenance requirements and on-the-ship maintenance capabilities. However, according to Forecast International, development of the maritime variant of the NH90 has suffered from a range of technical problems in the past, including difficulties getting the maritime search radar and tactical navigation system to work.

In November 2009, the NFH successfully completed a 3-week ship deck landing trial campaign aboard the Norwegian Coast Guard vessel "Nordkapp". As NHIndustries reported in a press release, the NH90 performed 105 deck landings during very demanding weather conditions in the central Norwegian Fjords beyond the Arctic Polar Circle involving the active participation of Norwegian, French and Italian test pilots.

The certification completed in mid-November by the NATO Helicopter Management Agency (NAHEMA) only applies to the search and rescue (SAR) capability of the NFH. The anti-submarine warfare (ASW) and anti-surface warfare (ASUW) capabilities will be certified in the course of 2010. France, which is the next country awaiting delivery of the NFH, is expecting its first helicopter by March 2010. A total of 8 NFHs are scheduled for delivery to France through 2011. To fill the SAR capability gap, France ordered two Eurocopter EC225 in early December 2009 (see <http://www.defpro.com/news/details/11826/>).

The NFH is expressly designed to perform three primary naval missions profiles, including ASW, ASUW, (including an over-the-horizon targeting capability), as well as SAR missions. Furthermore, the company claims that the NFH will provide additional capabilities such as maritime surveillance/patrol, limited anti-air-warfare (AAW) and logistical transport/utility support. The latter includes vertical



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replenishment (VERTREP), troop transport, casualty evacuation (CASEVAC) and special operations including anti-terrorism, when configured correspondingly.

The NHIndustries consortium that manufactures the NH90 NFH is made up of AgustaWestland (Italy, 32%), Eurocopter (France, 31.25%), Eurocopter Deutschland (Germany, 31.25%) and Stork Fokker Aerospace (The Netherlands, 5.50%). The consortium has received orders from international customers for some 565 NH90 helicopters, including 410 units in tactical transport configurations (TTH), 122 units in NFH configurations and 33 in tactical troop transport configuration (TTT), as well as options for an additional 100 helicopters. Further, the NFH has been ordered by Belgium (4), France (27), Italy (46), the Netherlands (12), Norway (14), Sweden (5), and Spain (14). A final decision by the German Ministry of Defence for an order of 30 NFHs is still pending. However, the German Navy has an urgent requirement for a new maritime helicopter (MH). According to German Federal Office of Defence Technology and Procurement (BWB), a contract might be signed in 2011 (see also <http://www.defpro.com/daily/details/272/>).

By Nicolas von Kospoth, Managing Editor

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