

★ News

Davison Army Airfield hosts demonstration flight

By Kafia Hosh
Staff writer

A new, multipurpose cargo plane was showcased by Global Military Aircraft Systems May 11 to compete for a \$1 billion aviation contract with the U.S. Army.

GMAS unveiled the C-27J Spartan at Davison Army Airfield, which is touted as the most versatile, medium-sized cargo aircraft of its kind.

The group is a joint venture of Finmeccanica's Alenia North America, Inc., a leading aerospace manufacturer, and defense contractor, L-3 Integrated systems, a subsidiary of L-3 Communications.

The two companies joined forces to create the C-27J in an effort to meet the aviation needs of the Army's Future Cargo Aircraft program.

The FCA initiative is slated to reorganize the current Army aircraft fleet, and includes plans to obtain 33 cargo planes that will replace the existing stock of C-23 Sherpas.

During the tour, Operational Support Airlift Agency personnel, as well as the defense attaches from the Greek, Italian, Dutch and Polish embassies received a detailed walk-through of the plane's components before embarking on a test flight.

The C-27J is an Italian-manufactured aircraft, equipped with a Lockheed Martin adapted cockpit and two state-of-the-art engines designed by Rolls Royce.

It can carry up to 68 passengers and hold more than 25,000 pounds of bulk cargo equipment, including several types of armored vehicles and a 1 OH-58 helicopter.

The aircraft's doors are larger than those of existing cargo planes used by the Army, easing a Soldier's entry and exit from the plane.

"They allow paratroopers ... to jump outside without having to bend," said Gianluca Evangelisti, Chief Test Pilot for Alenia Aeronautica.

The C-27J also has a reverse system propeller, which further enhances an aviator's ability to operate the aircraft.

"It's not just a question of pilot skill" anymore with a high performance system, said Evangelisti.



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The aircraft comes with 16 windows and its four main wheels are all designed with a shock absorber, and anti-skid adapter for safer landings.

The C-27J's unique features include its extraordinarily rapid take off and landing capabilities, reaching 10,000 feet in just three minutes and descending from that altitude in two and a half minutes.

In addition, the aircraft can maintain sea-level pressure at nearly 14,000 feet.

It can also double as a medical evacuation unit, with its oxygen supply, and 12 power centers reserved for medical equipment.

During two test flights, military aviators were encouraged to operate the C-27J for a more hands-on experience.

Chief Warrant Officer 4 Bill Petrak was impressed with the aircraft's sophisticated cockpit when he took the plane over mid flight.

"You were able to get inside and understand where everything is," he said. "It handled very nicely."

The C-27J demonstration at Davison Army Airfield launched the GMAS tour of the aircraft that will display it to a string of east coast military installations before taking it to the Paris Air Show later this year.

With the Army's plans to update its aviation resources and procure new cargo planes, it will soon decide which manufacturers to purchase aircrafts from.

GMAS is selling their C-27J on the premise that it is the perfect fit for the Army's need of a medium-sized cargo aircraft during wartime.

For instance, the plane's rapid take off speed can help troops escape dangerous situations, according to L3 Communications business director Adrian Erckenbrack.

If used in a mountainous region such as Afghanistan, the C-27J has the capabilities to lift from plateaus more feasibly compared to other cargo planes.

"The engines are so powerful that it takes off" quickly, thereby reducing "exposure of your troops to a hostile environment," said Erckenbrack.

The ramp on the C-27J can configure rather rapidly as well, saving time on its ability to load equipment and cargo onto the plane.

Currently, the Army is utilizing its C-23 aircrafts for cargo transport during war missions.

However, Soldiers also have to rely on Chinook helicopters that have limited speed and room for equipment.

"It's a helicopter, so it's a lot slower," said Capt. Brian Chesser, the OSAA Headquarters Headquarters Company commander.

"You don't have the range that a cargo" plane does, he said.

Erckenbrack recalled a conversation he had with a captain stationed in Iraq, who used a helicopter during a cargo transport from Baghdad to Mosul.

The task took the Soldier eight hours to complete, which would not have been the case if he was operating a C-27J with its powerful engines and ability to reach higher altitudes.

"In that same time frame, you can fly four missions with this aircraft," said Erckenbrack.

GMAS officials hope to win the bid for an aviation contract with the U.S. Army, despite competition from other companies that have produced a similar cargo plane.

Raytheon Co. and the North American branch of EADS, Europe's largest defense contractor, recently teamed up to produce a military cargo aircraft of their own.

Giuseppe Giordo, President and Chief Executive Officer of Alenia North America, Inc. dismissed the competition, saying the C-27J was specifically fashioned to cater to the Army's needs.

"They are trying to Americanize a product that is not American," said Giordo.

The C-27J "has been designed from the beginning for military use," added L-3 Integrated Systems President Bob Drewes.

The aircraft has made an impression on several nations already. The Greek military received its set of the cargo planes, and the Italian Air Force has agreed to purchase a fleet.

Bulgaria is currently under contract to obtain C-27Js as well.

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