

CANADIAN TOUCH ON SAR MEET

Canadian presence at SAR Meet Leeuwarden.

The Search & Rescue unit on Leeuwarden Air base is formed by the 303 Squadron with three Agusta Bell AB412SP helicopters. They recently had a celebration when 50 years of SAR activities in the Netherlands was reached. This milestone was reason for a party and an exercise. Of course the neighbouring countries were invited. The Dutch rescuers have good relationships with them and this is a 'must' considering the mutual assistance in border area. The Belgian Air Force and German Navy brought in their Sea Kings from 40 Smaldeel Belgian Air Force and MFG-5 German 'Marineflieger' while the United Kingdom was represented with a Sikorsky S-61N of the British Coast Guard. Two other Bell 412 users came to Leeuwarden to join those of 303 Squadron which are nicknamed 'Tweetie' resembling the bright yellow colour. The others were a Bell 412HP of the 15.HRB, Slovenian Air Force and a Bell 412EP of the 424 transport and rescue squadron, Canadian Air force. The latter is locally named CH-146 Griffon and a very unusual appearance in Western Europe.

Game of skills

The SAR meet lasted a few days and there was time enough to practice skills. Any tensing situation you can imagine is for those crews just normal routine, so to meet a new challenge the exercise was set up in a game of skills. Exercises of orientation with (parts) of maps on a cube forced navigators to use their brains while pilot and winch man were tested to let things on the ground happen exactly they should want to have it happen. An object resembling a bomb had to be detonated by a hook geared down by the winch. Other games included to reach a spot just in a specific time slot. No second earlier and no second too late. A co-location on a small airfield near the town of Drachten was involved next to the exercise spots on Leeuwarden. The crews sure did have their fun, in spite of the fact that 100% precision was asked and given by every single crew-member as it is also asked in critical situations in reality when peoples lives are at stake.

Welcome back

The Canadian participation of the Bell 412 Griffon 424 Squadron CAF was an unique occasion. Since the Second World War the squadron didn't visit the Netherlands again until now. The Canadians felt honoured to be the guests of the Dutch squadron and many crew members and other Canadian personnel knew about the liberation of the Netherlands by their fathers, uncles or their friends. The nose-art use to be a tiger with a bomb in the claws which was after the war changed for a life-buoy. One should consider a huge logistic operation to bring in one helicopter over the Atlantic by a wide body. The Bell 412 of the 424 Squadron is stationed at Trenton near Ottawa just above the great lakes. Canada uses four C-17 Globemasters (locally named CC-177) for heavy lift and one of them was in charge for Leeuwarden. The Canadian crew assured me that this is a regular procedure for their SAR force and after all the Dutch celebration was a nice occasion to join.

Canadian SAR

Those who know something about the Geographic's of Canada will confirm the huge distances in the country stretching to the far north were difficult circumstances occur during wintertime but even so very desolated in summer too. The borders of this country are comparable with the borders of the whole of Europe. The area of responsibility of the 424 Squadron is about 10 million square kilometres. The Trenton search and rescue region comprising most of the province of Quebec, all of Ontario, the prairie provinces and the entire arctic. Normally you need a huge fleet of helicopters to cover this area. Canada acts somehow unconventional from our point of view but who looks better sees they invented a smart solution. They have the obligation to assist in any major disaster within the dedicated area such as an aircraft crash with a few hundreds of casualties. They call it a Major Air Disaster or Maj Aid. Immediately after an emergency call, mayday or report of a crash a CC-130 Hercules which is also stationed at Trenton with the same 424 Squadron will get airborne and directed to the disaster area where rescuers will be parachuted to give immediate aid. Another Hercules will follow for more aid. The Hercules can drop a tent or when possible stay on the site itself for 4-5 days by self support. Within hours 20-25 people can be saved by this airplane. In those cases when spots are very far in the wilderness and inaccessible for fixed wing aircraft, the helicopters will have to do the job of evacuating casualties or people in distress. To make this work a Griffon helicopter on stand by will be loaded in a CC-177 of the 429 Squadron at Trenton and brought as near to the location as possible. The Griffon is portable by a Hercules and this could be also an option but is more difficult while it takes more time to load it inside and restore to flying conditions at the spot while some parts have to be removed and refitted again. Within the distances as they sometimes have to go far inside the polar circle is not so much difference with a flight across the Atlantic and so the trip to Leeuwarden was for the crew a good exercise on their practical routine procedures.

Griffon

The Griffon was built in Montreal between 1995 and 1998 and differs slightly from other Bell 412's. The Griffon has a lower landing gear which are normally skis. It has a very good serviceability and is very reliable and equipped with FLIR and GPS and of course a winch. Normally during 06.00-16.00 hours it can be airborne within 30 minutes and when really necessary within four minutes at the home base. The Rescue and Communication Centre (RCC) in Canada directs primary Search and Rescue units including Military, Police and Coast Guards units. The crew is well prepared and are trained in boat work, mountain work and working under snow conditions. The latter causing special landing circumstances they call 'snowboss' but is in our part of the world better known as 'snowblaze' forcing you to stay hovering until the surroundings clears a little bit. Talking to Chris Finnigan, the flight engineer of the Griffon, the most remarkable rescue in his memory was when fisherman drifting on a large piece of ice which broke away didn't want to be rescued having to abandon their cars. Chris said; "So we can save the people, but not the car" and I considered the motto of the squadron born in the old days is 'we chastise those who deserve to be chastised', but this must not be taken too strictly.

European participants

The Dutch Tweeties do meet another profile of rescue actions which are in many cases ships in trouble being the subject. Assisted by Dutch navy Lynx helicopters their skill is to manoeuvre between poles of ships tot pick up people, often in the dark, sometimes in stormy conditions above the North Sea. Secondary roles are SAR activities for the F-16 Squadrons or for training above the Vliehorst a low level shooting range were several NATO aircraft conduct shooting exercises regularly. Also the Bells are used for liaison activities to the 'Wadden' islands for the coast of the Netherlands. These or related tasks are equally the case for the German, Belgian and British Sikorsky helicopters usable above land and sea and capable of picking up more people at once. This is a need when troubles occur in the offshore area. The Slovenian colleague will have to act more in mountainous area and so sometimes need rescuers with experience in mountaineering. Altogether a fine mixture of dedicated people and besides showing skills this kind of meetings are good for creating brotherhood.

Kees Otten en Wim Das
