

DUTCH Aviation Media

LAST FLIGHT OF THE ROYAL NETHERLANDS AIRFORCE DUTCH MILITARY 'SKYLARKS' ALOUETTES-III



ALOUETTE III A REAL SURVIVOR

'Dutch Alouettes probably last flight at December 15th' The Alouette III served more than 50 years for the Royal Netherlands Air Force (RNLAf) marking the reliability and versatility of the helicopter. The operational capabilities of the 'New helicopter' by the time it was introduced were many times larger than the helicopters up to that point. The machine instantly knew more applications such as Search and Rescue, Tactical Air Rescue, transportation of cargo, passenger transport etc. Once the the Dutch defence was a major user of the type with no less than 77 examples in service of three squadrons (298, 299 en 300Sqn.). The type was called 'Leeuwerik' (Skylark) but everybody knew it and called it the 'Alouette'.

IN SUPPORT OF THE ARMY

From 1964 when the first of this batch arrived at Soesterberg Air Base the type started its operational life with the 'Groep lichte Vliegtuigen' (GPLV, or 'Lightweight airplanes') which was acting in support of the army. The army provided budget, but air force pilots manned the helicopters. One of the major tasks was tactical and comprised observation flights on low level above the battle field, or hiding between the trees on small suitable spots for tanks becoming the eyes for the tank force this way. The Alouette III fitted perfectly in this role which was a product of typical 'cold war' thinking. Also the Alouette III was in addition used in a variety of other tasks, like liaison flights, VIP flights and even medevac and SAR flights. For the last role a few were special converted with a winch in the door and some also with two pylons.

REDUCTION WAS INEVITABLE

During the nineties the terms of warfare were rapidly changing and the Alouette III became obsolete. So far other helicopters came in service from 1990 to obtain the tasks of the Alouette III. Cougars and Chinooks took over most of the tasks and also a Group of Bolkow Bo-105 helicopters was already supplementing the Alouette III. The SAR role was already given many years ago to the Lynx helicopters of the Navy. Older air frames were taken out of service and some 35 remained in 1995. Further reducing three years later left only 9 examples operational. The Bolkow 105 helicopters were much later introduced but left the scene surprisingly much earlier due to defence cut backs. One of the main advantages of the Alouette III was its utmost reliability and somehow pretty comfortable flying characteristics. The Seats are front directed and through the cockpit windows one has a very good view outside. This is why it became a favorite of Queen Beatrix for her VIP transport. It is said that she took much influence on the decision to soldier on with the type.

UN DEPLOYMENT

During the years of service there were modest deployments of a few examples in international crises like Tunisia (1970), Gulf War (Turkey/North Iraq 1991), Former Yugoslavia (Zagreb and Ljubljana 1991), Cambodia (1992-1993) and again in Former Yugoslavia with IFOR (1996). During several operations the Alouettes flew in UN white painted configuration. The Alouette III however saw more special painted versions with the most famous a stuntteam called 'the Grasshoppers' with red, white and blue colours of the Netherlands flag. In the meanwhile the Alouette saw the task playing a role in learning Forward Air Controllers (FAC) how to operate in the field. The former Alouette III tasks on tactical level shifted from Cougar and Chinook also to the Apache and FAC's on the ground.

SWISS UPGRADE

From 2004 some 4 examples stayed for the Royal flight/VIP flight , losing the tactical role and they were upgraded with RUAGG in Switzerland to extend life service. Those examples became blue painted in a very attractive intensity of this colour. Then the type was incorporated in the Defense Helicopter Commando (DHC) at Gilze Rijen. Some 10 pilots and 10 technicians were attached to fly and maintain the Alouette III in this period. Nearly 400.000 hours in total were flown by the Alouettes with only a few accidents caused by mechanical failure.

SIMPLE TECHNIQUE WITH HIGH SATISFACTION

A female pilot stated that during her career she experienced many situations, including odd ones like non-personal flights of saving 'seals' or 'sheep' from islands . Even someone at the end of his life with only one big wish left, to fly ever in a helicopter. Even a female on the edge of giving birth was transported by her to the hospital. Getting a birth announcement a few days later makes it extra worth while and gives such a flight some extra value. She saw several deployments into foreign countries, took part in VIP service for the Queen and attached her soul to the helicopter.

Easy in maintenance, with an engine at the outside, and really nice to fly, very 'stupid proof' and most important; always working when starting the engine. The Alouette III is a simple construction, what is not in it cannot break down. In 2014 it was decided that further costs would not permit to fly until 2020 as the French and Belgians will do. Asking our pilot "what now ?" she replied: "I have flown many missions abroad, recent years service flights and I was the pilot of the Queen. I'll shut down this last period with spending the rest of my career with the management of an office"

The 'goodbye ceremony' was held at December 15th , and the 'probably' in the opening paragraph means that just in case some extraordinary emergency comes up, the Alouettes might be used but even then the 1st of januari 2016 is end of story and the curtain will definitely fall for the Alouette III within the RNLAf. 'Bluebird Closing Down'.

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