

Swiss Actions at Axalp

Swiss actions at Axalp

A life-firing exercise in Switzerland is something special. Where else can you find a shooting range in alpine mountainous area? The Ebenfluh shooting range near Axalp is an excellent location for training purposes for the Swiss Air Force. Besides this, there is a unique spectator area for select public. Originally for VIP's and a few journalists but during the years becoming a paradise for photographers, and yes the photographs are awesome !

Show that you are there

Just going in another year, the exercise seems to survive like there are no questions about the costs and the need. Though there are questions, the authorities seem to know how to handle this in the face of the population. Focussing on a replacement of the F-5 tiger the whole question about jet fighters is put on a wider scale. The Schweizer Luftwaffe under command of Luftwaffen kommandant Walter Knutti sees itself for the challenge to sell the how and why to the Swiss people and in the meanwhile informing, advising, arguing and negotiating with Swiss politicians to determine which airplane should be chosen.

A good presentation on why Switzerland needs a new airplane and the question of how many examples seems obligatory. Starting to show that the Swiss Air Force is a capable instrument, they are fully aware that the Axalp firing exercise is a very good advertisement of their skills. Therefore the exercise bears the odd name of 'fliegerdemonstration' like if they do want to point out that it is an event for public in the first place. But the Swiss are very serious, known about their precision and able to conduct such an exercise with public on the spot within their safety margins.

Mighty range

The Ebenfluh Firing Range is at 6.614ft (2.321m). To take you there is possible by foot if you dare to take a walk of 3 hours from Axalp village(starting early morning in the dark) or you must be lucky to be invited and transported by the Swiss Air Force Cougars or Super Puma's from Meiringen. In that case some six minutes flying will do, but you must be selected and invited between approximately 300 VIP's or between some 30 accredited journalists. But it is worth it ! Both F-5E Tiger as F/A-18C were employed and practiced shooting or using flares. The fighters use their nose mounted canons at 20 foot (6m) on wide orange cloth targets. In the centre of the range is a control tower and this point is called 'Ebenfluh'.

From here the targets can be closely watched but for the safety the whole area in the corridor is observed. Spectators are not just only located at Ebenfluh but also on a secondary location called 'Tschingel' on a mountain top with the possibility to photograph with different angle and light conditions. It's a tricky place because behind you, you only find a small fence, and a very steep abyss of a lot of dozens of

meters ! A third spot is located a bit more downwards in the valley and is called 'Brau' and much easier to reach, however not all aircraft do pass here. The two high located observer points and the lower one are connected with a small path. From both directions fighter jets will approach suddenly almost above the pathway coming out of nowhere and pass the range. Aircraft start their sortie from Payerne or Meiringen in the north of the range from direction Brienzensee or from Sion in the South in the Swiss kanton Wallis. Pilots are precisely briefed how to fly and they have to locate the target in a very short moment to make their hit. Procedures are very strict to avoid danger of bullets in wrong directions.

Searching for the right altitude, angle of attack and to aim on the targets brings the aircraft in very attractive positions to photograph. High speed passes with aircraft against a background of rock walls demands skills of the photographer. Not seldom an aircraft proceeds after firing down in the other valley while positioning the cockpit downwards. When having fired the fighterjets optically sometimes almost seem to crash on the mount partitions, but that is face fraud. The alps are further away as they seem. Never the less it's a miracle piece of flying the pilots demonstrate ! After the solo aircraft finish the firings, the Swiss demo team Patrouille de Suisse treats the people with a fly pass.

Those pilots are only involved in aerobatics during the air show season and have to maintain skills in attack like the other pilots. Between the sorties Super-Puma helicopters are busy to transport people up and down, and the older Alouette III really manifests itself still very well for hoisting all kind of material from Meiringen to Ebenfluh and backwards. To mark the safety rules tickets have to be returned when exiting to count the return number of people. It's a tricky trip to Ebenfluh. For instance the morning session on Friday 10th was very succesfull in good weather conditions. However the circumstances in the high mountains can change fast and dramatically.

The afternoon session resulted in a cancellation, while foggy clouds decreased between the alps, and this would make the exercise far too dangerous for the pilots, visitors and material in these proportionally narrow valleys. Having had a three hours walk , to hear that you can start your journey back is no fun, but a calculated risk and a known possibility. Safety first with Swiss Airforce, and even in fast deteriorating circumstances they started to evacuate the initial walkers by helicopter to avoid worse scenario's.

Ofcourse the Axalp exercises do not only implicate the firing of live-ewapons by jets. It's also an exercise for all other aspects such as transporting (evacuating) large numbers of people, economic transports of materials by helicopters, hot-refills (taking fuel while rotors still turn) and even the fire brigade was able to 'rescue' a wounded pilot who made an emergency landing with his F-5 Tiger at Payerne, he had to be liberated from out of his cockpit. As an exercise ofcourse... Next to that guards, police, civil help-lines, for all these participants it is a fine way to discover if all groups are well tuned in to eachother, and to find out where improvements still would be possible to introduce.

Airspace control

After the spectacular appearance of the aircraft on the 'fliegerdemonstration' or flight demonstration the air force will focus their attention on the issue of the replacement again. Switzerland saw retirements of fighter aircraft in the past with the obsolete Hunter and the Mirage III. The fighter element holds itself on strength with 33 F/A-18 Hornets and a decreasing amount of F-5E Tiger II (some 54 examples), while some people asking themselves do we need another fighter aircraft or will be 33 Hornets enough? The answer will be no, according those who understand how valuable the neutral position of Switzerland is. Critics say the Swiss have no natural enemy and it is unlikely that neighbouring countries will invade Swiss territory. On the other hand a country with no backbone in the strike element can encounter difficulties. The control of airspace is a good example. With four Hornets on 14 hours QRA the intruders of airspace can be intercepted within minutes. But how many aircraft do you need to keep the system running? Specialists think this must be at least 66 but more convenient would be 75 aircraft.

The air force compares the 30 years old F-5E with the Ford Capri and the avionics with a computer with floppy disks to mark how advanced the type is in their eyes. The type can not be employed in all-weather conditions or by night and one must consider the capability as outdated. 'Chef der Armee' Roland Nef stated the 295 'live missions' to check aircraft and 23 'hot missions' or interceptions show there is lot of work to do in the air. Guarding airspace has nowadays a more complex character with the possibility of terrorist attacks or traffic of more different forms of small aircraft including UAV or glider aircraft without communication causing danger in the air traffic movements.

Switzerland on one hand values to maintain their neutrality, but on the other hand they will avoid becoming a 'less capable island' in Europe. Between other countries they want to hold up the same level of strength and skills to be able to provide the same high level of help wheater this is inside the country or when necessary or asked outside Switzerland. And lets be frank, there are many dangers and threats that other countries also face. Thinking on armed conflicts elsewhere in Europe that might escalate, nature and technical catastrophes, violant extremism, terror, electronic warfare, and so on. It's not possible either necessary to maintain a 24/7 alert on possible war situations ofcourse. But the army and airforce should maintain their skills and know-how when ever a threat situation might arise. Fighterjets will in such a case play the major role to guard and defend the airspace. Don't forget Switzerland is a country of mountains. The Hornets for instance are capable of observing large parts of land from above with their in breadth and altitude adjustable radar systems.

TTE

Bundsrat Mr. Schmid declared the air force is and stays of a major importance and in the same time the politicians will embrace those who suffer from noise and stay in communication with them. The Tiger replacement (TTE or Tiger Teil Ersatz) is in progress and evaluation of possible replacements is on going. Quotes are placed with EADS, Dassault and Saab and initially also with Boeing. The latter was officially

cancelled as an option on 30 April 2008 and so the choice will be amongst the Typhoon, the Rafale or Gripen. One might consider purchasing Russian aeroplanes, but this option was rejected for the same reason Spain purchased Hornets and no Mig-29 fulcrums for instance. Russian planes are perhaps cheaper to buy, but they need far more maintainance, and spare parts might be a problem. When Gripen, Rafale and Eurofighter are available as very economical, reliable and give even low-cost maintainance, adding new alternatives to the list is not wished. Looking at a major aspect, noise nuisance, it was looked upon very thorough.

A fighterjet will produce noise after all, but looking at geographic positions of the airfields, looking at what hours you fly, and also the fact that - compared to the F-5 - advanced avionics and technologies make it possible to work with a smaller number of planes which reduces the average.

The Swiss are looking for a formula by focussing on other 'little countries' in Europe like Belgium, Finland, Norway and the Netherlands. Especially the last one has much credit with the Swiss as a good working system and with plans to order 85 JSF also a good standard to measure your own need. Hopefully when one of the mentioned competitors enters service with the Swiss Air Force the life firing exercise at Axalp will still exist. It would generate whole new series of splendid aircraft photographing.

Kees Otten & Wim Das
