

## **DUTCH COUGAR FORCE DECIMISED**

### **DUTCH COUGAR FORCE DECIMISED**

What nobody expected, happened suddenly. The minister of defence saw himself confronted with budget problems and defence cuts were inevitable. So, one of his actions was the withdrawal of the Royal Netherlands Air Force (RNLAf) Cougar force. Less than a handful of these helicopters would stay active for fire fighting and maritime duties, however later on it was recognized that operational needs were in danger and the withdrawal will be less abruptly leaving some seven helicopters in interim phase in use until the NH-90 will replace them.

### **MULTIFUNCTIONAL HELICOPTER**

The RNLAf acquired 17 Eurocopter AS-532U2 Cougar II helicopters in early 1996. In the designation the U is for utility and the number 2 for upgrade level 2 with a stretched fuselage and more spacey cabin. Initially the Cougar flew from Soesterberg Air Base with 300 Squadron but moved to Gilze Rijen Air Base on 8 September 2008 and was included in the Defence Helicopter Commando (DHC). The Cougar is capable of transporting 20 passengers or 16 fully armed soldiers and is very suitable for cooperation with 11<sup>th</sup> Air Mobile Brigade of the Royal Netherlands Army which however was also subject of the recent defence cuts and was decreased to half proportion. When on mission with the brigade the Cougars are accompanied by Apache combat helicopters for protection. Also the Cougar could be given armament such as a FN MAG 7.62 gun in the door at one or both sides and manned by the loadmaster and an extra added gunner. Utility means most of the times transport duties, and not only passengers but also cargo, inside or under the fuselage with a sling which could be a bambi bucket with water for fire fighting. Another main role of the Cougar is Search & Rescue over greater distance. Seven Cougars were fitted with emergency floatation units installed on the main landing gear fairings and on the forward section of the fuselage to operate them safely above water and for operation from the Amphibious helicopter ship of the Koninklijke Marine (Royal Netherlands Navy).

### **ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY**

The night vision goggle (NVG) capable cockpit is utilised with an Electronic Flight Instrumentation System (EFIS), a Flight Data System (FDS) and a digital 4-axis SFIM 165 automated flight control system (AFCS) which latter enables the Cougar to use automatic search patterns and hover hold in the SAR-mode. Four multifunctional 15x15 cm LCD's including a smart multimode display (SMDS) form the Integrated Flight and Display System (IFDS). Other avionics include GPS, AlliedSignal weather radar and FLIR. The engines are digitally controlled by an Digital Engine Control Unit and protected on the outside by Multi Purpose Air Intake (MPAI). Smart thinking resulted in an advanced self protection unit for the Cougar with the Integrated Self Protection System (ISPS) as the main component. The ISPS controls a Missile

Approach Warning System (MAWS) which reacts on UV signals from incoming rockets and a Radar Warning System (RWR) picking up radar waves sent by hostile objects and counters these threats with the Advanced Counter Measures Set (ACMS). The ACMS controls chaff and flare dispensers. The four blade rotor is made from special material called articulated spheriflex and is very strong. The wheel units can be inducted in spoilers.

## **INTERNATIONAL OPERATIONS**

Not only the Cougar was a common sight over the Netherlands for many years, also the RNLAf Cougar saw several deployments in international missions under UN-flag. Two 300 Squadron Cougars flew under SFOR command in 2001, 2002 and 2004 missions from Bugojino, Sipovo and Banja Luka, mainly important medevac operations. In 2004 the 300 Squadron Cougars arrived at Tallil in Iraq to rotate with RNLAf 298 Squadron Chinooks to operate with the SFIR stabilisation operation and a medevac alert detachment with four Cougars was based on Al Muthana. From April 2006 until mid 2010 the Cougars were deployed to Afghanistan to operate in the ISAF force and supported the Dutch troops on the ground in Task Force Uruzgan (TFU) in Kandahar and Tarin Kowt. There was again a rotational structure in the deployment with 298 Squadron Chinooks and sometimes no less than six helicopters were operational. Besides Medevac tasks and transport ferries also dropping of special forces were in the envelope of operations.

## **VERY COMPATIBLE**

The Cougar used to be an ideal platform for fire fighting. Not only on local territory but also on several occasions even foreign countries asked for help such as Portugal (2005) and Greece (2007) to fight the huge fires in forest areas. A special device called the 'bambi bucket' is carried with 2500 litres water under the fuselage to the fire. In recent years some RNLAf Cougars were painted in tone down grey colours when the idea was accepted that this colour scheme resembles more the Dutch environment and creates low visibility. Why the Cougar became a victim of the defence cuts seems initially unreasonable but who looks closer can see that the Cougar is not very far away from cost able upgrades which The Hague don't want to raise funds for. Tasks can be adopted by the NH-90 but this helicopter is considerably far from full operational use. While there was an announcement that the full Cougar force would cease flying operations except 3-4 examples the government was reconsidering an amount of seven to stay in service. However the official 'fare well' party was on 9<sup>th</sup> May 2011 and grounded definitively the main part of the DHC Cougar force.

Kees Otten & Wim Das