
AXALP UNDER FIRE - THE SWISS EXERCISES 2012

AXALP UNDER FIRE

Life-firing on the Swiss Ebenfluh shooting range at Axalp is such another dimension in this kind of exercises that it is a must to witness this once. Where else can you find a shooting range in alpine mountainous area which provides an excellent location for fighters and spectators? A very unique spectator area is established during the exercises, 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 seems to know how to handle this in the face of the population. And let's be frank, an airforce has to practice, which they do many times on different scales. Focussing on a replacement of the F-5E Tiger (TTE or Tiger Teil Ersatz) the whole question about jet fighters is put on a wider scale. The 'Schweizer Luftwaffe' sees itself for the challenge to sell their objectives for the need of a new fighter to the Swiss people and in the meanwhile informing, advising, arguing and negotiating with Swiss politicians to determine which airplane should be chosen. At this moment the choice is set on the Gripen and when current Swiss Air Force commander Markus Gygax retires the job will fall at 1st January 2013 into the hands of the new commander Arno Schellenberg who is by the way not a former fighter pilot. Some 22 Saab JAS-39E Gripen are to be acquired during 2018-**2021 in one deal**. During an interim phase some 11 rented Gripens (8 JAS-39C and 3 JAS-39D) are in a special deal offered by Sweden to enable the Swiss Air Force to start replacement of a part of the F-5 fleet in the beginning of 2016. However the deal has to be confirmed by the Swiss parliament and listening to people on the streets, their pride is high and a 'second handed' aircraft is not matching with their ideas. Almost for sure a referendum will be initiated like it was the case when the F/A-18C/D Hornet was introduced and the decision could be extended till mid-2014. If not a formal contract is expected during autumn 2013. A good presentation is of major importance. Starting to show that the Swiss Air Force is a capable instrument, there is a full awareness that the Axalp firing exercise is a very good advertisement of their skills. Therefore the exercise bears the odd name of 'Demonstration Fliegerschiessen' 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. As expected, the Gripen, as a guest delegation took fully part in appearance over the range.

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 2.5 hrs from Axalp village or you must be lucky to be transported by the Swiss Air Force Super Puma's from Meiringen. In that case some

six minutes flying will do, but you must be selected between approximately 300 VIP's or between some 30 accredited journalists. But it is worth! 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) 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. A third spot is located more downwards in the valley and is called 'Brau' and much easier to reach, however not all aircraft do pass here. The pathway in the corridor is situated between the two high located observer points. From both directions fighter jets will approach suddenly above the pathway and pass the range. Aircraft started their sortie from Payerne (Hornet) or Emmen (Gripen) in the north of the range from direction Brienersee or from Sion (F-5E) in the South in the Swiss canton Wallis. Normally the base of Meiringen is also full of flying scenes. This occasion however gave so much rain that it was not possible to park cars in the reserved meadows for this purpose, cars would sink in the wet grass and mud.

So Swiss Airforce had to improvise, Meiringen was suddenly appointed to be a parking place for public and cars were parked on the runway. The day before the participating F-5 Tigers and some F/A-18 Hornets were translocated head over heels to Sion in the Rhone-valley. From there they flew to the Axalp range. Pilots are precisely briefed how to fly and they have to locate in very short moment the target and try to hit it. 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 goes down in the other valley while positioning the cockpit downwards. 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 helicopters are busy to transport people up and down. To mark the safety rules tickets have to be returned when exiting to count the return number of people. This time bad weather was playing a sad part at one day of the exercise when flights were cancelled while a the other day the wet grounds made in extremely difficult to reach position for photographers.

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. Still to pass through the parliament and with critic voices in the society apart from the F-5E replacement issue only the other fighters on strength are 33 F/A-18 Hornets. 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. In future number of fighter aircraft will be upraised to just 55 aircraft when the F-5E is completely phased out and the JAS-39E is fully introduced. (22 Gripens and 33

upgraded Hornets) One Gripen however has proved to keep up more competence than more than a handful of obsolete fighter aircraft. Numbers of aircraft have to be related to their operation ability and serviceability. The Gripen is capable of highly efficient integrated air warfare thanks to their enhanced awareness and state-of-the-art data-link capabilities. Also the maintenance cost of the Gripen is low and with the upgrade 21/25 of the F/A-18 enabling improving aerial combat and new precision-strike capabilities a fully multi-role strike element will be achieved. Hopefully the life firing exercises at Axalp will generate new splendid aircraft photographs in future, which will show the Swiss Airforce masters it's skills. The Swedish Gripen is an excellent choice to show this.

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