



Gripen for NATO: Operational with the Czech Air Force

by Anne Lewis-Olsson

Anne Lewis-Olsson is the Communications Director Czech Republic at Gripen International. Here she describes the successful and speedy introduction of Gripen aircraft into the Czech Air Force and their immediate readiness for NATO air defence.

On 14 June 2004, the Czech Government signed a contract with Gripen International for 14 Gripen fighters. That contract stipulated that the first aircraft had to be in service and available in just eleven months' time. All 14 Gripens had to be handed over by August 2005. This demanding timetable has been met and, throughout the latter half of 2005 and into 2006, the Czech Gripen force has had an impressive debut.

As the 2005 calendar flipped over from 30 June to 1 July, the Czech Air Force shifted into a new era in one fluid motion. Over the course of one duty day, the Czechs stood down their veteran MiG-21 interceptor force and brought their brand-new JAS 39C Gripens directly into service. Backed by a fully trained pilot and engineer corps, the Czech Gripens were immediately declared

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to the NATO air defence system and stood ready on 24-hour quick reaction alert (QRA).

In fact, the Czechs began full-scale flight operations with their Gripens on 1 May, about two weeks after the first aircraft were delivered. A cycle of QRA training sorties was initiated that saw the Gripens chalk up around 300 sorties for QRA preparation and qualification alone, over four months. In the middle of that process the aircraft went 'live' and never once was a planned sortie abandoned because of an aircraft problem.

A huge amount of planning, preparation, determination and perspiration lay behind this successful

move. The Czech programme to bring the Gripen into NATO service had a single-minded focus backed up by far-reaching support from both Czech and Swedish governments and from industry. Validation came on 1 July 2005 when, effectively one year after contract signature, armed Gripens stood on alert at Caslav.

'I'll be honest with you,' says Colonel Petr Mikulka, Wing Commander, Caslav Air Base, 'We looked at this transition plan and we wondered: "Is it possible?" but we believed. Moving to the Gripen is not just about the aircraft – it's a whole new system. Everything changes; our rules, our whole approach. But in the end it was just another normal working day. We finished with the MiG-21s and minutes later we were working with the Gripens. There was no buffer zone. Yes, it took a lot of preparation, but we did it for real. No cheating. We are fully integrated into NATO.'

Colonel Mikulka is the deputy base commander at Caslav and one of the first two Czech instructor pilots to be trained on the Gripen. This initial pair was joined later in 2005 by a batch of six pilots. The third batch of Gripen pilots – the first to be trained by the Czech Air Force itself – entered the training cycle at the end of 2005. By early January 2006, three had made their first solo flights. The Swedish Air Force has provided invaluable preliminary training and assistance for the Czech Gripen pilots, as it does for all export customers, but increasingly the Czech Air Force is able to take that responsibility on itself.

The ongoing training requirement, the QRA mission and the regular sustainment flying schedule makes Caslav a very busy place. Since the Air Force commenced significant Gripen operations in May/June 2005, its eight rated pilots all have over 120 flying hours on type. The fleet-leading JAS 39C aircraft, first delivered in April, already have over 100 hours on their airframes, while the remainder have well over 50. The two-seat JAS 39Ds, delivered in August last



Czech Air Force Gripens on NATO air defence (photo: Gripen International)



Czech Air Force Gripen on the runway at the Caslav air base (photo: Jan Cadil)

year, have both notched up about 30 hours each in support of batch-three pilot training.

Serviceability has been impressive throughout. Mikulenko says that, 'if every one of our pilots wanted to get up and go flying in the morning, the aircraft would be ready to support them. Of course there have been some snags. With the JAS 39C you could say we are leading the way in placing a completely new type into service, but anything that has gone wrong has been fixed – by us. We have moved forwards with caution sometimes, but only because our safety standards are paramount.

'We have never lost an operational mission due to aircraft problems. Every planned QRA mission has been flown. We have flown eight aircraft in a day and during the period in 2005, when we just had our 12 single-seaters, I know there were times when all 12 aircraft were available. I think with the JAS 39Ds we lost one mission because of a technical problem.

'Today, on a standard flying day, there are five aircraft outside, ready to go. Every day we have three flight sessions with three sorties per session. We will fly three or four jets, so we generate nine or 12 sorties each day. Or more.

'That flight activity is completely separate from the QRA mission, for which we maintain two jets on 24-hour alert, with pilots, plus a spare aircraft. To keep the QRA guys up to speed we fly a programme of practice scrambles, or Tango Scrambles – four sorties, morning and evening. We share the QRA mission in our region with the Luftwaffe at Neuburg (F-4F Phantoms of JG 74). When they are on alert we do our

Tango Scrambles, and when we are on alert they do their training flying.'

A detailed set of training objectives are worked into each Tango Scramble. The Gripens will rehearse their intercept procedures with other Czech Air Force aircraft before breaking off for other tasks. This could include navigation training, low-level flying or formation work. There will always be air combat manoeuvring: either one v. one or two v. one scenarios between the Gripens. 'We are doing a lot of dogfighting,' says Mikulenko.

A live QRA mission is known as an Alpha Scramble. To date, the Czechs have flown three 'real' Alpha Scrambles, all to intercept civilian traffic that had lost contact with ATC for one reason or another. There have been several other 'hot' scrambles that did not require intercepts in the end. The very first operational Gripen scramble took place on 24 August 2005. Mikulenko, who flew the mission, recalls, 'We launched to intercept a Turkish Airbus A320 that had lost communications over Slovakia. We escorted it through Czech airspace and 85 nautical miles into Germany, just to make sure everything was OK. This was just a few weeks after the Helios Airways 737 crash in Greece, so we were obviously concerned, but it all had a happy ending.'

Even at that early stage, the Czech Gripens had been flying at a serious rate. By October 2005, the Gripens had already flown over 300 hours in QRA alert/training and another 300 hours in regular training and day-to-day operations. By early January 2006, that figure had climbed to over 1000 flight hours – still with just eight pilots.

The greatest issue facing the Air Force today is a short-term shortage of manpower. Mikulenko notes, 'We have just eight pilots to support our QRA responsibilities and all the training. We are very, very busy and planning each flying day is a complex task. We must always meet our safety responsibilities with so much flying going on, but the fact that we have achieved so many flying hours in such a short space of time is a fantastic result for us, and our aircraft.'

Operations will be transformed when the next batch of eight pilots comes on line. 'To be qualified for the QRA mission,' says Colonel Mikulenko, 'requires between 40 and 50 training sorties, but our new guys will be ready by the early summer. It takes about six months to prepare someone for NATO tasks. I know a lot of people outside the Czech Republic are watching us to see if we really can do it – but we really can.'

The third batch of pilots will also be the first pilots to be fully-trained for multi-role operations – air-to-air, air-to-ground and tactical reconnaissance. The next step forward for the Czech Air Force will be a fuller expansion into these future missions.

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The Gripen has changed Czech Air Force operations in ways that are not always obvious, but which have a sizeable effect on Air Force capabilities. Says Mikulenko, 'We are flying non-stop during the winter. The Gripen is perfect for winter ops. In the air with the MiG-21 we had a 1000ft standard minimum in bad weather. In a Gripen it's 200ft – the leap in technology makes a difference at every level.'

'We are very proud and happy that our Government chose the Gripen. We are looking forward to having our whole squadron out there working with our Alliance partners. We have done a lot of exchange flying and training operations in the past with our L-159s and our MiGs, but when we go and do it with our Gripens, we will be astonishing.' ■