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PAvCon Europe 2023 Special Report

June 2023



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PAvCon Europe 2023 Report

This year PAvCon was hosted by the Basque National Police Force, Ertzaintza at their helicopter base near Durango, just 30 minutes from the airport at Bilbao. With the ongoing delay in the announcement of the fleet modernisation programme the current in-service fleet is a pair of very early EC135T1 helicopters with a basic specification although there is an out of service AS350 lingering in the hangar.

The main role is mountain rescue using the EC135T1 helicopters pending the signing off of a fleet replacement programme that is predicted to see the purchase of one new aircraft and the leasing of another.

For those still unfamiliar with the layout of the event it is fair to stress that it is basic 'Table Top' focussed on a simple table and a couple of chairs. No booths, no stalls and little active support from the organisers for exhibitors to construct 'proper' stalls/booths. There is electric on supply but it is simply laid to the floor for the exhibitor to plug into.

Where the organiser offers greater access is that all are equal in the refreshment department and provide complimentary refreshments and even midday meals to all attendees throughout the day. Where possible – and this year it was not allowed – a beer sampling is incorporated into the evening of the first day. Generally for any PAvCon held on police premises the drinking of alcohol is not allowed so in terms of the event it is best viewed as an occasional dalliance.

Following the usual, successful format the two-day event was part conference and part exhibition with training inputs from a number of European police aviation units, including the French Gendarmerie, the Netherlands Police Air Support Unit, Belgium, Sweden and Hungary. Those attending amounted to 180 but they were drawn from those with the greatest interest and knowledge of airborne law enforcement aviation – a focus group allowing for Networking at its best.



Large scale exhibits were scarce but, as most agreed, those present knew what an aircraft was and where the equipment on display should fit. For the record there were two Ertzaintza Eurocopter EC135T1s from the hosts and a now out of service AS350 minus its main rotor blades alongside the recently refurbished EC135 of the *Policia de la Generalitat de Catalunya* (Mossos) normally operating from Barcelona. In addition, there was a mock-up of the Airbus Helicopters H160 helicopter, another of the Skeldar fixed wing drone and some local Ertzaintza drones demonstrating some of their capabilities within the restrictions imposed by the base and event.

From industry there were both large and small aerospace companies, importantly the numbers include the coveted major manufacturers - Airbus, Bell and Leonardo. Despite the event being relatively small all three majors are fully behind the event both in belief in concept and financially and supportive for its future.

COVER IMAGE: A view across the expansive flight area towards the mountains that provide most of the rescue work for the Basque Police.
Nearest helicopter, recently refurbished by last year's PAvCon Europe hosts Airborne Technologies, is that of the Barcelona based Catalonia Police, generally known as Mossos.

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www.publicsafetyaviation.org
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Airbus and the French Gendarmerie introduced the new Airbus H160 medium sized utility helicopter to the delegates and exhibition visitors. The timing was just right as within a week Airbus was able to announce the first of ten on order for the customer was flying. The Gendarmerie are all too fully aware that the H160 will feature heavily in their developing plans for covering the Paris Summer Olympics just a year ahead.



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A large, dark-colored helicopter with 'SHERIFF' and 'N977ME' written on its side is shown in flight over a desert landscape. The helicopter is viewed from a low angle, emphasizing its size. Below it, a white car and a dark van are visible on the ground. The background shows a vast, arid desert under a hazy sky.

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An International gathering: PAVCon Europe was, as ever, an opportunity for industry (the sales teams of course, but often the developers also) to gather together on one place in not too formal surroundings and discuss operational needs and aspirations now and in the future and to perhaps highlight a need that no-one had yet realized was required.



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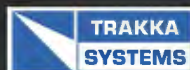
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Almost every exhibitor had the opportunity to address their customer base face to face aided by leaflets, pop up stands and hands on demo equipment. Occasionally that all goes wrong and the exhibitor spends the time at the event with an empty table, two chairs and a few business cards. The images and equipment intended to support the product promotion are lost or locked in transit. Getting through customs is often a complex process beset with carnets, red tape and illogical rules.

For the larger exhibitor this can be less of a problem – often their product is already a household name and it is easier to fill in the gaps.

Two companies were particularly badly hit this year and they were bringing effectively locally unknown products for launch – products that never made it to the show floor after being stalled at the border of the EU. Texas based Rebtech Engineering a long established is a global provider of night vision compatible equipment, modifications and installations for civil and military projects were bringing – a smart new steerable searchlight to establish their name in Europe – not just for the product but also for their established lines that already had a strong following in the USA through APSA.

Fortunately, as stated, the vast majority of the exhibitors were not faced with these difficulties and they enjoyed gaining the full attention of the audience they sought.

In the conference the Dutch Police had returned to the event to speak about combating the cultivation of marijuana. Even in Europe different countries exhibit the frustrations of dealing with substances that most countries cannot definitely decide whether they are good or bad for you. The confusion regularly displayed by politicians is naturally reflected by the pontifications of Chief Officers. As might be expected, the PAvCon Europe event faithfully reflects society.

The content of the event also reflects market forces and effectively decimated the usually significant US content. Plans to host half a dozen American police officers from California, Maryland,

There was not a great deal of 'action' on the fight line but from time to time the locally based EC135T1 was dispatched on a mission into the hills.



New York, Tennessee and Texas foundered for a range of reasons – mostly financial. Finding hotel rooms for them in Spain was easy but transatlantic air fares were slanted skyward at the time and effectively unaffordable. PAvCon is a European product but does rely on attracting police from around the world. The Covid Pandemic interfered with that aim in a major way and the previous expectation of visitors from as far away as Australia has taken a back seat in the last three years.

The great pity of this negative pressure was that it depressed some great instances of international cooperation. The relatively recent upgrades of the Netherlands police air fleet led to the unit (and the people of The Netherlands) donating spare role equipment to other less well-off operators. The recipients included both Tennessee and the Basque Police who now have FLIR EO/IR turrets. They may not be the latest on offer but they are far in advance of equipment already held. Hopes for a simple but effective “thank you” photo opportunities were dashed. Maybe another day.

There was one US flavoured presentation that made an appearance, the excellent flight safety/CRM presentation by a US police helicopter pilot who described surviving an engine failure, from a complete loss of power to a controlled crash, in just 17 seconds! The badly damaged AS350 was repaired and returned to service, only recently having been replaced by another more modern AS350 [or H125 these days].

There was also a presentation, by the highly regarded communications and airborne sensor engi-

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neer, George DeCock who now works for Airborne Technologies in Austria. His theme was that the future belongs to the use of small, multi-purpose aircraft equipped with integrated multi-role sensors. Aircraft such as the Airbus H135 which can be quickly re-rolled between ISR and med-evac. The general view was that the optimum size EO turret for a police aircraft, fixed-wing and helicopter is, most probably, 15" which undoubtedly begs the question as to why many units select smaller equipment.

It is no secret of course – it is all about money - the NPAS Vulcanair P68R aeroplane carries the highly capable but compact L3 Harris Wescam MX-10 EO/IR turret because at the time of its selection there was a deal to be had across the helicopter and fixed wing fleet. A 15 inch turret costs double that of its smaller cousin. The fact that the person doing the deal for NPAS was not, and never had been, a flier with pertinent operational knowledge of using the product undoubtedly had some bearing.

On the performance and flight safety sides of the argument there are drawbacks in that the aircraft needs to be flying lower to get the same performance out of the EO/IR equipment, lower means more visible and affording less time to sort out emergencies.

Across the operational part of the industry price is king. If the result is that the operational fliers have to fly lower to get optimum performance that is a fact of life. Some nations fare better than others and even today there are hard pressed units out there in operational land still using FLIR dating back to the earliest days of its introduction some forty years ago. Needs must.

With a yawning gap created in the original programme by the 'air fare exclusions' some unusual presentations moved into fill the space. One such covered the air element of the efforts to halt migrants travelling from France to the United Kingdom. Under normal circumstances the subject might be simply an aside but at PAvCon there were additional threads giving a new twist on the rarely reported French side of the story as they try to stop the migrants reach the beaches. Despite regular requests the British Government are simply not giving the French side of the story.

A perfect gathering of PAvCon Europe would result in fair representation of every European nation but that is rarely achieved, this year Germany was underrepresented but that is an ebb and flow matter. The only European nation to consistently fail to take part in recent years has been Italy. PAvCon and Leonardo have tried but failed to create a spark of interest among the senior staff in Rome for well over a decade. Even plans to run the event in Rome came to nothing but that was partly associated with the Covid pandemic.



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The media in Spain were interested, a series of Spanish language news reports took to You Tube in the wake of the conference, naturally their main interest was the local politicians, police and engineering companies but the wider visual message shines through.

Several Spanish TV news extracts reporting on the PAvCon Europe event at the start of June are now available on You tube. All in Spanish of course but the visuals are good!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OS24BHCdUwE>

The actual location of the police facility is well served by surface transport but it is remote so there was just one hotel that barely served half of those attending and many were obliged to commute from Bilbao each day. There were no complaints about the travel arrangement – or indeed and part of the arrangements made to ensure all made the best of the many Networking opportunities. Being on an operational base, no matter how remote, brings with it an atmosphere that the best hotel convention space can never match.

All too soon it seems it was time to pack up the kit and the bags and head off home – or to the next aeronautical gig.



The days since the event have been interspersed with messages of future support for PAvCon Europe in the form of direct messages and Social Media.

Where next? Is the usual refrain and we simply do not yet know. Regular readers will be aware that for the last few years the event needed to pass to new hands that understood and were keen on the format of PAvCon events. A rejig was attempted in 2018 (Poland) but that failed, and a new set of options are being worked on. Now it is clear that the principal (Admin/President) can no longer operate the event effectively mainly through age a new way is being investigated.

Watch this space!

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