

Police Aviation News

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PAvCon Special Report 2011

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International line-up of those officers attending the PAvCon in uniform [cBasque Police]

PAvCON 2011 the

International meeting place



There have been Police Aviation Conferences around for a long time now, aside from the fully open industry sponsored and nominally member only access ALEA [the US based Airborne Law Enforcement Association] events, Alexander Shephard started them in Europe 20 years ago, as a 'pay-to-view' operation but tired of the concept for a decade before restarting it as a 'cops come free' venture in 2006. Unfortunately new owners dropped the ball and PAvCon was created to fill the resultant gap in 2009.

There is one other group based in Europe - PACE – they are wholly police operated and not particularly 'industry interactive' usually holding meetings in house so little is known of what they do or how they do it.

PAvCon is open to all, free to police of all ranks - access heavily subsidised by an industry that wishes to talk first hand to the users and operators of the law enforcement products they develop and manufacture. It is only by interaction that industry can accurately gauge what the users want in their operations for the future and PAvCon provides

a user friendly forum to help make that happen. Hopefully any 'blind alley' directions on products can be avoided.

This year the hosts of PAvCon were the Basque Police, the Ertzaintza (Public Guard or People's Guard), the police force of the Basque Country, one of the autonomous communities of Spain located in the north of the Iberian Peninsula. Operating the three year old police aviation conference event from a police facility in a partnership with an operational police air wing is a new and welcome departure that is likely to be repeated in the future.

Everyone was invited but not everyone chose to come along. Nothing new there then. That said the attendees were drawn from Australia, Austria, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, UK and the USA. Despite the common requirement for English speaking everyone managed. It may be easier for those with English as their first language but the difficulties for those for whom it is not to readily understand and interact face to face are many.

More important was that the event grew significantly this year and continues to exhibit a growing confidence among mainland European police forces and the aerospace supply industry in what PAvCon offers them on a range of levels – despite the English. In three instances the ‘English only’ diktat was eased for speakers and PAvCon’s local contact and sole Spanish ALEA member, Officer Joseba Mendizabal, made use of his good grasp of ‘Combat English’ to both translate and ease the odd difficulty in understanding.



‘Combat English’? A standing joke among longer term PAvCon insiders - Joseba initially struggled to grasp ‘real’ day-to-day English rather than the sensible classroom style. Eventually it was a case of Combat well handled!

The aims and objectives of the PAvCon event can be summarised as Training, Networking and Social.

Training – the conference brings with it opportunities for attendees to learn from others the positive and negative aspects of areas of operation they may never have experienced or even considered, to see first-hand what new products industry is working on or considering and how other operational units deal with common problems. Not every element of the programme is likely to suit everyone

present, the trick is to provide a good balanced overall menu that pleases rather than displeases.

Expertise – Many of the attendees, both speakers and delegates, are experts in their field. For the length of the conference this knowledge is a few paces away for all attendees.

Networking – It is interacting with International colleagues, industry leaders and sales staff that is at the core of PAvCon. Contacts made on the floor of the conference and its associated commercial exhibition can be a key to future help and inspiration in the workplace for decades ahead. It is not what you know but who you know and year on year PAvCon offers the opportunity to meet many of these useful contacts. Networking has no rank and where possible everyone is similarly dressed in business suits. Unlike many conferences everyone is the same, police customers, commercial sales staff, consultants and the simply interested are all delegates on the floor of the conference room. The principle is that [despite claims to the contrary] there are no secrets and everyone can learn from knowing how operations work and what advances are likely or required in the future. Police officers do not invent or develop aviation, they simply use it as a tool, but industry can potentially develop products against an identifiable need. PAvCon might make that link.

Social opportunities – Over the years it has become abundantly clear that there is another aspect to PAvCon that has grown exponentially when compared with the training and networking – the social opportunities ‘after hours.’ A wholly voluntary gathering of all delegates over some local food can be as genteel as the participants wish to make it – but bland interaction is rare – it is time for the business suits to go and networking at a new higher level to be inserted. Here too is a rich mixture of information, expertise, experience and interaction. Lifelong friendships can result.

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Travel to the venue from Bilbao was on a coach



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The hosts of the 2011 Event

The Basque Police air base is currently located in rolling fields on the edge of Durango, a small town around 30km from the beautiful and art filled city of Bilbao. The high security base houses a number of specialist units and training facilities in modern buildings overlooking the A8 autoroute. The ready access to the venue given to PAvCon was probably the first time the defensive shield – erected to defend against the deadly attacks of the ETA terrorists – was allowed to dip a little. That alone underscored the great honour being afforded to PAvCon. There is a ceasefire in place, but it is not that old.

The aircraft component of the trim facility is a large heliport with well appointed permanent facilities. A large hangar offers ample maintenance and parking space for five helicopters – the original unit strength – and a dominating control tower and office block below.

The air unit is tasked with law enforcement and rescue for which it has access to three operational helicopters; two examples of the

Eurocopter EC135T1 undertaking all the primary tasking and a single AS350 back up and training craft. The early production standard EC135s were delivered without an autopilot, they were upgraded many years later by McAlpine Helicopters in the UK. Equipment includes rescue hoist and the carriage of cameras. Two elderly Wescam units are held, one daylight only sensor is the most used but they also have a dual sensor 12DS. The limitations of the existing vintage equipment place restrictions on the capabilities of the unit and funding for replacements is being sought. The current financial crises in the national economy will undoubtedly continue to delay fleet renewal but, as PAvCon has shown, not depress the appetite of the staff to learn from others.

The fleet size has declined in recent years with two larger airframes already disposed of. An early model Aerospatiale SA365C



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Dauphin is still on charge but is expected to join another example that has already departed. None of the fleet is in the prime of life but the very basic equipment and interior fittings in the Dauphin reflect a very much starker period in helicopter development. The seating in no way reflects the crashworthy offerings of today – the simple metal framed canvas having more in common with a Citroen 2CV motor car than 21st Century aviation.

Throughout the exercise PAvCon dealt with Officer and pilot Joseba Mendizabal who brought his boundless enthusiasm to the whole effort. As the only member of the Airborne Law Enforcement Association [ALEA] in Spain he needed that enthusiasm. As a result of the joint efforts of this officer and his colleagues, for the first time in recent years, there was an opportunity for air unit officers in Spain to interact together towards a common task. That is the stated purpose of both ALEA and PACE but prior to PAvCon 2011 nothing had actually taken place in the region so it is a start.



The people involved – the Basque police – put on a great welcome to the International audience. They were amply assisted by the facilities that their base offered.

The Conference Centre offering four tiered classrooms normally used for special operations briefings allowed PAvCon ample space in three of the rooms to house the seventy-five attending International delegates and provide a separate foyer space for a small industry related exhibition in great comfort. In addition to the building the hosts contributed food and drink throughout the day. The standard Basque fare was a local and delicious introduction to food most of the visitors would have normally avoided! It stood them in good stead as an essay other dishes they were to meet over the next few evenings. Presentations at the conference were a mix-

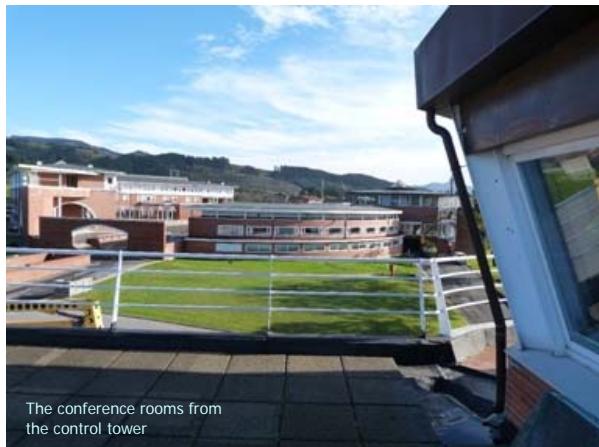
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ture of police and industrial, historical and futuristic. In a perfect police delegates world each chapter would be given by the police, but in the real world advances rest with industry and only rarely can they be fronted by serving officers. So the end result was a mix of police unit introductions, new equipment presentations and items intended to bring forth thought on how to operate airframes and fit into the rules with safety in mind. Quirky material accepted even though it clearly mystified on occasion. The result – according to the Delegate Survey – was a

mix that went down well. Repeating them all verbatim would be pointless; With such a wide International content present selecting highlights among the speakers is difficult. The American content was consistently favoured and both Glenn Daley [New York retired] and Sergeant Bill Proberts [Chief Pilot of a unit patrolling San Francisco Bay but hailing from Surrey in the UK] were lauded for their selected 'hands on' presentations. Getting the US content to the show is a major element, so they give two presentations each.



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With Durango being very much a heliport, arrangements for fixed wing input to the event required special measures. Mid-afternoon on Day 1 everyone was taken by coach to the Business terminal of Bilbao Airport and a chance to inspect additional aircraft. GippsAero from Australia brought their turbo AirVan to back up the conference room

presentation and Air Attack from southern France brought in a MX-15 sensor equipped Cessna Ce-208 Caravan. Lessons were learned on this conference room extraction but it worked surprisingly well and the meal – the Gala Dinner - that followed in the *Hotel Melia Bilbao* was exquisite although as ever some aspects of the local recipe book, the black rice for instance, took some by surprise. PAvCon is creating a learning curve for international cuisine as well as aviation.



Naturally there was a sense of suspicion in place as PAvCon first negotiated the holding of this event, not all members of the hosts spoke or understood English well, it was mainly the pilots who could, but this gave way to a very genuine acceptance of the interlopers and a warm friendship among all ranks of the Ertzaintza. As the event wound down late in Day 2 out came the mutual gifts between hosts and visitors. The event has gone but the interaction between the Basque Police and their former guests has not ceased.

For all parties this was a PR exercise and as part of that on Day 1 the serving officers turned out in uniform for the media. Local



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interest in the event ran to newspaper reports over two days and a television feature – all in Spanish of course. At the centre of the interest was Glenn Daley and the connection he had with High Rise Rescue and the events of 9-11— it was the PAvCon event that triggered it.



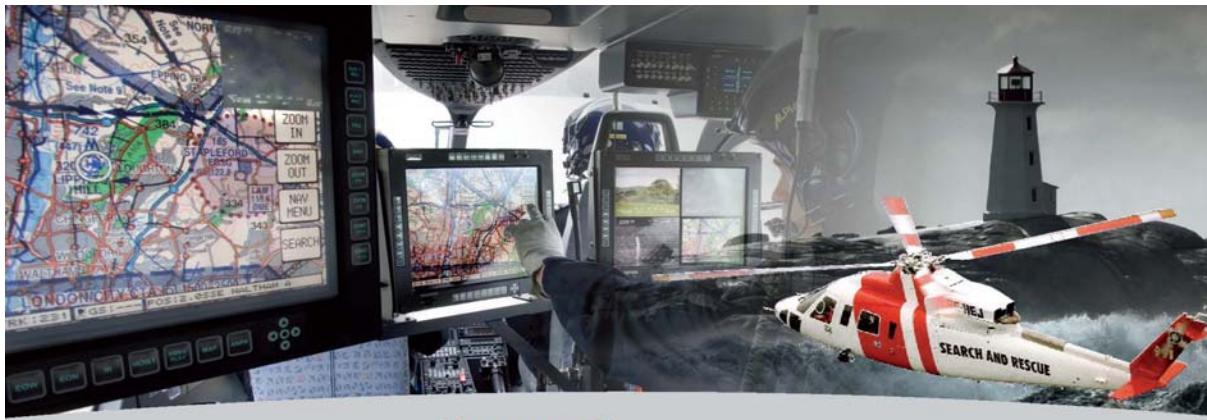
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Where next?

PAvCon is in negotiation with the German Federal Police to hold the 2012 event in their helicopter base unit at St Augustin near Bonn. It is a fabulous location for the event and should be highly attractive to both police and industry. This location has a small general aviation airfield adjacent which should meet many of the needs of the light fixed wing fraternity. The location should be easy for many central European agencies to attend. Long term readers may recall PAN visited the location on two occasions where the

editor was invited to retirement events.

The Commander of the St Augustin facility Col. Thomas Helbig was at PAvCon 2010 in Pribram, Czech Republic. The potential for Bonn in 2012 was first raised then. This year Herr Helbig's diary was full so he was unable to get to Bilbao in May; in his place he sent his deputy Torsten Hallmann. The devil, as they say, is in the detail.

Hopefully this location and the date will be settled by the end of the summer.

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