
Challenges For The Honduran Air Force

By

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As the most potent air arm in Central America, the Honduran Air Force (FAH) operates a variety of aircraft ranging from the basic to the sophisticated, such as the F-5E fighter. Throughout the fleet, however, the age of the aircraft and the effect of Honduras' tropical climate are creating maintenance challenges which test the ability of their support personnel. These problems coupled with a meager military budget and no new U.S. Foreign Military Financing support, present a challenge to the FAH Commander and his staff that sometimes seems insurmountable. For this reason, the FAH is faced with the old dilemma of "doing more with less" and the USMILGP must help in this endeavor.

The FAH inventory covers numerous pages of Jane's All the World's Aircraft with aircraft ranging from Cessna 182s, Beech Barons, and a Westwind Jet, to C-130s, A-37s and F-5s. They even possess a supply of French-origin Super Mysteres acquired from Israel; these aircraft saw action in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. The primary flight trainers consist of Cessna T-41s and EMBRAER Tucanos. In Honduras, the Air Force is also the sole owner and operator of all military helicopter assets, flying UH-1H and Bell 412s as the primary air support for the Army. Given all these aircraft, their great diversity, age, and in many cases their expensive upkeep, the FAH is finding itself at point where the cost of maintaining their fleet is beyond the limitations of their current budget.

Solutions range from selling off some of their assets and using the resulting funds to maintain those aircraft deemed most essential, to that of flying fewer hours to reduce wear and tear and save fuel costs. The first option is often slow in finding a qualified buyer and processing the transaction, whereas the second cuts into pilot proficiency. Obviously there is no easy solution.

As for maintaining the quality of the fleet, the FAH is again experiencing a growing problem. The USMILGP remains dedicated to assisting the Hondurans in maintaining a fleet which is first and foremost safe and also operationally reliable and marketable should the FAH decide to sell. Most of the assistance geared at achieving this goal is provided through the International Military Education and Training (IMET) Program. Classes in jet engine repair, avionics, corrosion control, and other associated topics are offered every year. These technical and Professional Military Education courses are provided primarily through the Inter American Air Force Academy (IAAFA) and are the backbone of FAH maintenance training. They are crucial to maintaining not only the Honduran's operational capability, but supporting the U.S. goal of regional security cooperation for all countries. Although DSAA guidance limits the amount of technical training in the IMET program, the high level of E-IMET executed in Honduras has allowed us to continue to provide these critical maintenance courses. This high level of E-IMET along with the USMILGP's closely monitored traditional IMET program, allows the FAH to maintain currency for their personnel and train much needed replacements.

Another method of keeping the FAH's options open is the prudent use of residual funds from FMS cases which are being closed. Working closely with the Hondurans, cases are continually updated and analyzed to determine if a case should be modified or closed and have its residuals applied toward another case. It becomes a matter of juggling funds where they will be most effective to maintain the Honduran fleet. Recently, several cases were closed and the

funds transferred to a new case to provide the Hondurans with \$1.6 million to use for critical parts for their top-line fighter aircraft.

Additionally, the FAH is tasked with the job of maintaining and manning the country's only radar site. This too is a sophisticated piece of equipment which requires expensive maintenance. The U.S. Government has assisted with some funding in order to integrate this radar into the Caribbean Basin Radar Net (CBRN), which is instrumental in regional counternarcotics operations. Although Honduras has not been a popular overflight area for drug traffickers since the Hondurans shot down one such airplane, they still rely on their radar to monitor their airspace for any attempted intrusion. Of course a strong air fleet is the other arm of this system in protecting Honduran sovereign airspace.

The final cornerstone of meeting the needs of the FAH is comprised of a mixture of the Latin American Cooperation program, SOUTHCOM Traditional CINC Activities, combined exercises/deployments for training, and frequent local contact designed to improve FAH professionalism and interoperability. Such programs include orientation visits to U.S. Air Force facilities to observe operations, seminars in Honduras or in neighboring countries which provide thought-provoking discussions on important regional topics, and combined exercises which hone the skills of all involved, and contribute to improved interoperability between regional air forces.

Responding to the numerous challenges of maintaining their fleet, the FAH leadership has asked for increased funding from their government, has reduced flying hours and has offered up some of their aircraft for sale. In 1992 the USMILGP conducted a study which recommended the sale of F-5 and C-130 aircraft in favor of expanded use of the Tucano and C-47 fleets. Neither the military or the civilian leadership in Honduras are keen to do so. The military is increasingly aware that budget increases are directly dependent upon the domestic economic situation and the civilian side of the government must address numerous competing national requirements. The degree to which civilian and military authorities cooperate in balancing these requirements could determine the future of the Honduran Air Force. Hard work and careful management are needed throughout the government and the military if their plan is to succeed.