

Spain's Freedom Fighters

Although it lost its combat role some while ago, the veteran CASA-built F-5 retains a vital place in the inventory of the Ejército del Aire (Spanish Air Force). Relieved in a major structural upgrade in the early 1990s, the two-seaters are currently in the process of receiving a modern avionics suite and 'glass' cockpit to equip them for training the Eurofighter and Hornet pilots of tomorrow.

At the end of the 1950s, a high-ranking official of the Ministerio del Aire (MAE) of the Spanish Air Force was invited by the USAF to visit the Northrop facilities, where he was presented the N-156, the prototype of the F-5. On his return, Don José, the director of Construcciones Aeronáuticas S.A. (CASA) was informed of the potential co-operation between the two companies, and specifically on the positive development and possible construction of this aircraft in Spain. In May 1960, to further investigate a possible co-operation, Northrop sent a representative to visit CASA, which already undertook maintenance for USAF.

Both manufacturers were impressed by each other's performance and confirmed the potential of combining their efforts. This mutual confidence grew to such a level that Northrop proposed to become a full partner of CASA, taking shares in the capital of CASA. An agreement was reached whereby Northrop initially acquired 20,000 shares, worth 10 million Pesetas. At a later stage, as projects evolved, Northrop had the option to extend its participation to 24 percent. In July 1962 the Spanish government approved the first phase and the shares were purchased.

As early as February 1964, the prospect of

building the F-5 in Spain became more realistic, and Northrop extended its share of CASA to 24 percent. In 1965, the MAE instructed CASA to make a proposal for 100 aircraft, to be built either completely, or partially, in Spain. After a series of meetings between technicians of both companies in Madrid and Los Angeles, the first proposal was presented. The MAE feared, however, that the Spanish-built F-5 would not be built quickly enough to meet the Air Force requirements, and there was a lack of confidence that the aircraft would be of the same quality compared to US-built aircraft.

Anticipating these doubts, CASA presented three different offers when the MAE finally requested 36 single-seaters and 34 twin-stickers. The first alternative was that CASA was to produce the entire aircraft under license in Spain within the time requirement as expressed by the MAE. The second offer consisted of CASA receiving disassembled airframes, whereby final assembly and test flights would be performed by CASA. The last offer was to take delivery of the aircraft directly from the Northrop production lines in California. Were the full contract to be executed in Spain it would guarantee work worth some 4 million man-hours in just over four years, plus a significant boost to the technology level of the Spanish aircraft industry.

Despite lingering doubts as to CASA's ability to meet the required quality-levels and delivery

On 22 May 2003 this aircraft – the first Spanish SF-5B – chalked up 35 years since its first flight. As the lead aircraft in the programme, it was constructed entirely by Northrop before being shipped to CASA as a rapid-assembly kit. It is now at Getafe undergoing the F-5M upgrade process.

