Boeing F/A-18C/D Hornet

On 17 June 1992 the Federal Council approved SFr 3,495 million for the purchase of 26 F/A-18C and eight F/A-18D Hornets, together with armament, spares and support. Powered by F404-GE-402 turbofans, these aircraft could only be procured after a national referendum was held on 6 June 1993, which clearly showed the Swiss public to be in favour of modernising its Air Force and approving the new fighter programme to equip three squadrons.

The first F/A-18D (serial number J-5231) and the first F/A-18C (serial number J-5001) were built by McDonnell Douglas in St Louis and were used for preliminary trials and training, but the remainder of the order (seven F/A-18Ds and 25 F/A-18Cs) was assembled in Switzerland by Schweizer Flugzeuge und System AG (Swiss Aircraft and Systems Company, formerly known as F+W, now RUAG Aerospace) at Emmen. The referendum delay allowed Switzerland to specify the AN/APG-73 radar for its Hornets, and on 25 January 1996 the first F/A-18 Hornet was delivered. The last F/A-18C (J-5026) of the order was delivered on 2 December 1999.

The first squadron to be operational with the Hornet was Fliegerstaffel 17 and was commissioned in September 1997. The second squadron to convert was Fliegerstaffel 18, which changed its F-5E/Fs for Hornets in 1998. The third and final squadron to re-equip was Fliegerstaffel 11, which traded in its Tigers in November 1999. All three squadrons are part of the Überwachungsgeschwader (UeG), or Surveillance Wing, and unlike the Swiss Tigers, the aircraft are exclusively flown by professional pilots ('Profis'). On 22 October 2003, the Meiringen cavern shelter complex for the permanent protection of the F/A-18 fleet based there during exercises or wartime was officially handed over.

Switzerland aims to have the Hornets in service for 5,000 flying hours or 30 years, and in order to achieve this service life, design modifications were carried out including strengthening the airframe by constructing some of the frames out of titanium. Other modifications include the adaptation of the electronic equipment to equipment already in service in Switzerland, such as the radio and IFF, together with another modification enabling existing stocks of Sidewinder missiles to be deployed. A low-drag pylon has been specially developed to jointly accommodate one AIM-120B AMRAAM or one AIM-9P-5 Sidewinder guided missile.

Budgeted for in Rüstungsprogramm (procurement programme) 2003, the Swiss F/A-18 fleet will undergo an intensive upgrade (Kampfwertsteigerungsprogram) worth SFr 407 million, whereby the US Navy, Boeing and RUAG Aerospace are responsible for the execution. The package includes the incorporation of the Raytheon AIM-9X Sidewinder, electro-optical helmet-mounted visor, MIDS datalink system (linked into the Florako air defence guidance system) and related update of the software to incorporate the new systems. The updated aircraft are expected to be delivered between 2008 and 2009.

The possibility of equipping some Hornets with a sophisticated reconnaissance package interlinking with the SAR capability (Synthetic Aperture Radar) of the AN/APG-73 radar is currently under review, but no funds are reserved in the 2004 budget.