

Experimentación (CLAEX), based at Torrejón air base (Madrid), providing the necessary test equipment and personnel. In such a way a large portion of the work is executed in Spain, guaranteeing national employment. In addition, IAI subcontracts Boeing for the common elements from the USAF T-38 AUP.

Due to the reduction of the initial budget available for this update, the project has been split into two phases. In the first phase, four aircraft were upgraded to serve as prototypes. Once tested and accepted, the availability of sufficient funding then had to be guaranteed in order to modernise the remaining 18 SF-5Bs. This first phase was initiated in July 2000 and power was put on the first aircraft on 31 May 2001. The maiden flight of the first 'glass' cockpit prototype was performed on 12 October by Comandante Ignacio Lombo and Capitán Agustín Álvarez, both from the CLAEX.

On 11/12 July 2002, the four prototypes (serials AE.9-005/009/016/018) were delivered from EADS-CASA factory airfield at Madrid-Getafe to their home base at Talavera la Real. After the four prototype aircraft had undergone their series tests to the satisfaction of all parties involved, the EdA and IAI Lahav signed the contract for the upgrade of the remaining fleet of SF-5B+ aircraft on 17 December 2002. EADS-CASA Military Aircraft will be the main contractor. The total value of the contract is worth more than 31 million Euros, this price being achieved by ordering the 18 upgrades as one complete package. The remaining aircraft will pass through EADS-CASA Getafe over a period of two years. The first 'production' aircraft, AE.9-029, was delivered soon after, and the contract specifies that the aircraft must be returned to Talavera la Real within nine months of the contract date.

In the meantime, bad luck struck Ala 23 on the morning of 22 January 2003, when SF-5B AE.9-003/23-24 crashed. The aircraft had apparently entered a zone with heavy turbulence caused by a thunderstorm, and the crew was forced to eject at low level when control was lost. The instructor failed to survive the ejection. This reduced the number of aircraft to be upgraded to 17. A second tragedy struck Ala 23 in April 2003, when the wing's anniversary aircraft AR.9-070/23-33 crashed while rehearsing a display at Talavera la Real, killing its pilot. This aircraft, an SRF-5A, had received a special glossy dark blue paint scheme to celebrate the wing's 50th anniversary. The celebrations that were planned to take place on 6 and 11 May were consequently cancelled. Although not destined for the upgrade, this aircraft was the last operational single-seat Freedom Fighter in Spanish inventory.

The F-5Ms, as the upgraded aircraft are referred to, will act as Lead-In-Fighter-Trainers (LIFT) for Spain's Hornets and Eurofighters. Despite the tragic setbacks of early 2003, the odds are looking likely that the Iberian F-5s from Ala 23 will continue the type's impressive career and celebrate the type's golden jubilee as the backbone of the Spanish fighter instruction community in November 2020. In the meantime, EADS-CASA remains the EdA's depot-level maintenance centre for the SF-5, and will maintain the installations and capacity to carry out the overhaul/repair on any structural elements and on many spare parts.

*Marnix Sap/MIAS*

