

# Little Known Air Arms



## The Air Force of El Salvador

**F**uerza Aérea de El Salvador (FAS) was formed in 1923 (a decade before the Indian Air Force) as the *Flotilla Aérea Salvadoreña*. The FAS, with much help from the USA, was shortly to be built up as a relatively large and potent air arm whose combat element post Second World War consisted of FG-1D Corsairs and Harvards and later F-51 Mustang fighter bombers and B-26 interdictor bombers.

The jet-age in El Salvador started in the early seventies with the delivery of eighteen MD450 Ouragans and five CM170 *Tzukits* from Israel. The Ouragans (which type also served with the French, Indian and Israeli air forces) were intensively used during the civil war against FMLN guerilla groups between 1980 and 1982. However, the FLMN managed to destroy several Ouragans in counter attacks, necessitating the FAS to acquire new aircraft. The first of 15 Cessna (O)A-37 Dragonfly were delivered from the USA. Currently, the FAS has 14 A-37s in its fleet.

### The Air Force today

The *Centro de Educación e Instrucción Militar Aeronáutico (CIMA)*, or The Centre for Education and Military Aeronautical Instruction (CIMA) was established on 16 July 1987. Besides the EAM, the CIMA also incorporates the Technical School (*Escuela Técnica de Aviación/ETAM*) and the School of Military Aeronautical Perfection (*Escuela de Perfeccionamiento Aeronáutico Militar/EPAM*).



ENAER T-35A Pillán at Ilopango



*IAI202 Pegasus acquired from Israel in 2008, is seen at Ilopango*

The EAM uses a single ENAER T-35A Pillán and three ENAER T-35B-3 Pillán for their basic training syllabus. Originally, seven were delivered from the late nineties (2xT-35A and 5xT-35B-3) but three were lost in accidents. The aircraft were to gradually replace the MS893-235GTA *Rallyes* that were in use since 1979, but two of these aircraft are still in the fleet as well as single T-41. Trainee pilots start with 20 hours on simulators before transiting to the *Rallye*. After 20-30 hours on this type, another 20 hours of simulator time is needed, this time for the T-35, and final training is done on the single Ce337G.

For rotary wing training, the EAM has four Schweizer TH-300C Halcón helicopters that have been in service since 1986. Helicopter pilots start with 20 hours on a TH-300 simulator before moving to the helicopters themselves. Each pilot must complete a combined 50 hours of training on both simulator and TH-300 before moving to the next level.

After basic training, fixed wing pilots either go to the *Grupo de Transporte* flying the IAI202 and BT-67, or the *Grupo Caza y Bombardeo* flying A-37s. Helicopter pilots



*The Bell 412EP has been in service with the FAS since 2001*

move to the *Grupo de Helicopteres* flying a variety of types.

The *Primera Brigada Aérea*, founded under its current designation in 1994, consists of two units: the *Grupo de Helicopteres* and the *Grupo de Transporte*. The FAS has operated several types of C-47 Dakotas since the sixties and currently two of four delivered have been converted into Basler BT-67s. One of them is in

operational storage while the other recently had an incident and is awaiting final checks to re-enter service.

Main tasks of the BT-67s are transportation, support for the Special Forces and drug interdiction missions. For this task, the aircraft is fitted with FLIR and machine guns. For training and liaison duties the *Grupo de Transporte* uses two Ce210s and a single RC114.



O-2 for liaison duties and training

The *Grupo de Helicopteros* has several types. Five Bell 412EPs are used, one for VIP-duties, eight MD500Es and nine UH-1Hs. Besides a single Bell 206 and Bell 407 are used for Government VIP flights. Most of the UH-1Hs are awaiting upgrade to UH-1H-II standard.

### 'Operations Torogoz and Gavilan' in Timbuktu

Despite the fact that FAS has limited funds and operational capacity, it has had strong participation in peace operations in Mali, under the *United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali*

(*MINUSMA*). Three MD500Es, 13 pilots and 90 other personnel are based at Timbuktu supporting the Quick Reaction Forces operating from there. The operation is called *Torogoz* named after El Salvador's national bird and now in its fourth rotation since 2015: *Torogoz IV*. More recently, the FAS deployed three more MD500s to Mali. In December 2018, it shipped the helicopters to Gao, replacing the four German Tigres that had earlier left in 2018. The deployment, named *Gavilan I*, brings the total of FAS personnel involved in Mali to over 200.



The *Grupo de Helicopteros* at Ilopango flies eight MD500Es, of which six are currently stationed in Mali for the *United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali* (*MINUSMA*)

### The Future

In September 2016, it was announced that the FAS wanted to upgrade its UH-1H helicopters to UH-1H-II standard but of the current fleet, only one was upgraded and that too was lost in an accident in November 2016. The A-37s are in urgent need of replacement but are still rendering their services as the current government has not found a successor yet. With the newly elected President, hopes are that more attention will be given to the needs of the FAS and the upgrade of the fleet of aircraft. ✈️

### Segunda Brigada Aérea

After finishing training at the CIMA, fixed wing pilots selected for the A-37 are transferred to the B.A. de Comalapa, where the *Segunda Brigada Aérea* (Second Flying Brigade) is based. This was formed in 1968, shortly before the '100-hour war'. Generally, new pilots need about 40 hours of conversion on the A-37 before they are fully operational. Besides the A-37, the unit flies six number of O-2s for liaison duties and training.

El Salvador has been flying the (O)A-37 *Dragón* from 1982, when 15 aircraft were delivered from the United States, while another 10 aircraft were delivered from Chile a couple of years ago.



The UH-1H has been flying for the FAS for many years although only a few remain in service today

Photos and text : Arnold ten Pas/4Aviation