

Police Aviation News

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Issue 359

March 2026



DORNIER 228 RESURGENT

SWEEPING THE SEAS

NPAS H135 DELIVERIES



FOOTY FOOTING THE DFR BILL

REPLACING THE DC-10 FIRE FLEET

DRONES FOR WAR - BUILD BUILD BUILD



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EDITORIAL

As the last edition of *Police Aviation News* (Number 358 February) was being finalised last month The Editor had the pleasure of taking in a night with the humour of Chris McCausland, a blind comedian and the winner of the 2024 UK Strictly Come Dancing competition broadcast by the BBC.

His raw humour and insights brought me back to a period in my life when you could say what you see and deal with problems swiftly and with little care for what others thought. As a blind person Chris can only see his own viewpoint because it is a picture he paints inside his head – he cannot see what others are seeing so every move by him is based on his perception. During his many weeks of a competitive dancing career, he acted in concert with his sighted dancing partner but when prompted by her to applaud the other, unseen, competitors it was but a wholly unscientific gesture. He would have applauded a bunch of flowers if told to.

Perhaps this harks back to a time when policing was a pleasure to perform, when you could stand on your own and deal with situations in what you thought was the best way possible. You might be criticised, but you were the one on scene and it was ultimately your call and your responsibility to get it right or wrong – it was how you judged it.

Unfortunately, that is no longer the way. Call for the police on any matter and you will get a posse turn up. Never one, rarely two but usually five heads dealing with something that is best dealt with by a single person's decision making. If the single person gets it wrong, everyone knows where the responsibility lies.

In recent years we have seen UK police air support morph from being a series of largely successful small operations fearlessly led by one person to a combined operation led by 'thousands' (well 35 or so in a Strategic Board staffed by anything but experts). Well, how did that go?

It is not rocket science, a blind man can see the problem. Unfortunately, the National Police Chiefs in the UK are sighted and what they see clearly clouds their judgement.

Bryn Elliott

LAW ENFORCEMENT INTERNATIONAL

MAOC-N: An initiative by 8 EU Member States (Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands and Portugal) and the United Kingdom, MAOC (N) is co-funded by the Internal Security Fund of the European Union. The Centre provides a forum for multi-lateral cooperation, to tackle illicit drug trafficking by sea and air.

The Centre was inaugurated in September 2007 in Lisbon, following the signing of an International Agreement by Ministers from each of the Partner Countries. MAOC (N) is staffed by Country Liaison Officers representing the police, customs, military and maritime authorities of the participating European nations, as well as permanent liaison officers from the United States (the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Joint Inter-agency Task Force – South).



In November 2025 an operation carried out by the Portuguese Judicial Police (PJ), supported by the Navy, the National Maritime Authority and the Air Force, resulted in the interception of two fishing vessels transporting more than seven tonnes of cocaine by surface assets and a Lynx helicopter of the Portuguese military. The vessels were intercepted on the high seas, approximately 1,000 nautical miles from Lisbon, with 10 Brazilian nationals on board.

FRONT COVER: The venerable Dornier 228 is a design now around 50 years old, but its days are not over. General Atomics AeroTec Systems based in Gauting, Germany took over the future development of the design from RUAG in 2017. It remains in production in Germany and India, mainly to undertake ISR roles. General Atomics are marketing what is now termed the Do228 NXT multi-role aircraft with the addition of the CPLS Sentinel, telephone seeking technology by CDA Systems, a technology innovator from Andorra. Check out page 26.

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The investigation, coordinated by the Judicial Police's Unit for Combating Drug Trafficking, was launched on the basis of information provided by MAOC-N, which indicated that two vessels loaded with narcotics were already under way and heading for Europe, specifically towards Portuguese coast. This successful operation was made possible through extensive collaboration between several partners, including the Brazilian Federal Police, the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the US Joint Interagency Task Force West (JIATF West), the UK's National Crime Agency (NCA) and the Judicial Police's Criminal Investigation Department in Madeira.

In 2025, MAOC-N member countries seized more than 84 tonnes of cocaine in operations supported by the Centre.

Into 2026 the MAOC-N have continued with a successful run of interceptions and seizures. In late January they successfully located and intercepted a semi-submersible vessel (SPSS) on the high seas, which was being used to transport several tonnes of cocaine. The vessel, originating from Latin America and crewed by four foreign nationals, was carrying an estimated total of 300 bales of cocaine.

The interception took place approximately 230 nautical miles from the Azores, under extremely challenging and hazardous conditions due to severe adverse weather at sea. Despite these difficulties, the operation was successfully executed, demonstrating a high level of coordination, operational capability and resilience among the forces involved.



This success was followed by the seizure of approximately 1300 kg of cocaine destined for Denmark. The operation also resulted in the seizure of two vessels and three vehicles, as well as the arrest of ten individuals.

In early February, the French Navy intercepted a fishing vessel in the Atlantic Ocean, resulting in the seizure of 1,375 kg of cocaine and the arrest of the individuals on board, who were subsequently handed over to the Brazilian authorities during a scheduled port call.

The vessel was operating on a route from South America towards Europe when it was interdicted in international waters and was triggered by intelligence shared through the Centre and developed in close cooperation between the French National Directorate for Customs Investigations and Intelligence (DNRED), the French Anti-Narcotics Office (OFAST), the United Kingdom's National Crime Agency (NCA), and the United States' Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-S).



BELGIUM

STATE POLICE: In the middle of February an ‘over the fence’ image of an Airbus Helicopter H145 destined for the Federal Police was taken at the Airbus plant at Donauwörth wearing the marks OO-POL.

Belgium’s military intelligence service, ADIV, is investigating the helicopter company Noordzee Helikopters Vlaanderen (NHV), based in Ostend, over concerns about national security.

NHV operates 27 helicopters that transport workers to offshore wind farms and oil platforms in the North Sea. These sites are vital to the country’s energy supply. The company is also bidding for a major Defence contract to maintain new military helicopters that include those destined for the State Police air unit. Last year it was announced that NHV would be taken over by Irish firm GD Helicopter Finance. However, this company is owned by China’s GDAT. This means NHV could effectively come under Chinese control.

The possible takeover has raised alarm within the Defence Ministry and the federal government. Belgium recently ordered Airbus H145M helicopters for the army and police and NHV is seeking to become a subcontractor for their maintenance. The government is reviewing the situation to see whether they should block any of the current bidders. [VRT NWS/belganewsagency]

The advertisement features the "macro-blue" logo in blue text with a stylized eye icon, and the tagline "TACTICAL MISSION DISPLAYS" below it. On the left, there is a detailed image of a radio control panel with various buttons and a small screen displaying flight data. To the right of the panel, the text reads "Now Partnering with Technisonic for radio integration." Below this text is the "TECHNISONIC COMMUNICATIONS" logo. At the bottom center, the website "www.macro-blue.com" is displayed in blue. The background of the advertisement is a light blue sky with white clouds.



The NPAS team Bruce Cooper (Head of Technical Services), Fiona Gaffney MSc, (Head of the National Police Air Service/ Accountable Manager, Glenn Shelley (Head of Business Service and Deputy Accountable Manager) beside the painted but as yet not role fitted Airbus H135T3 helicopter G-NPAA c/n 2338, which still wears the German test registration D-HECO.



UNITED KINGDOM

NPAS: In January, senior NPAS leaders (including Fiona Gaffney MSc, Glenn Shelley and Bruce Cooper MSc) visited the Airbus Helicopters production line in Donauwörth, Germany, to review progress on the next generation of helicopters for NPAS.

The team spent time with Airbus production, engineering and support technicians, toured the factory, and viewed the first aircraft currently in build. This work is a key part of ensuring the platform will meet the future operational needs of UK policing.

It is now confirmed that the first two training aircraft are due to have arrived at Airbus UK in Oxford before the end of February, with pilot training scheduled to begin in early March.

These developments come at a time of continued national investment in police aviation, supporting the vital role NPAS plays in frontline policing.

“This visit marks an important milestone in ensuring the replacement programme continues to align with NPAS expectations on capability, quality and delivery timelines.” Bruce Cooper MSc - Head of Technical Services at NPAS

The new aircraft fleet will be taking up unused registrations in the series from G-NPAA and beyond. UK registrations cannot be re-used and are unique to the aircraft they are first allotted.

One aircraft marked G-NPAA (D-HECO), c/n 2338, was registered on February 17. It will enter the modification programme soon after arrival. Another, G-NPAS, c/n 2339, already at Oxford, will initially be used to help develop the Approved Training Organisation manual and training framework for the new type before later joining the wider fleet conversion programme. The difference in the training regime between the existing fleet and the new is major. The old fleet is a mix of standard systems where the new is based on the Helionix. [NPAS/CAA/Parapex]

A bright new future beckons for at least part of the existing fleet, but it will be some time before air operations outside of the big cities get to receiving any new aircraft.



In January this year, the National Police Air Service (NPAS) was able to increase the number of aircraft that were available for operational deployment. The latest update outlines their performance in January 2026, highlighting key achievements and their ongoing commitment to operational resilience.

Aircraft availability

In January, NPAS aircraft were available for deployment 83.4% of the time, a significant improvement on December. It should be noted that due to routine annual maintenance and engineering requirements necessary for an aviation fleet, it is not possible to achieve 100% availability.

Engineering downtime fell further to 7.7%, continuing the reduction in maintenance related unavailability and supporting improved operational resilience.

NPAS crews continued to respond quickly to incidents where air support can make a difference:

Priority 1 (urgent) incidents: Average response time was 10 minutes and 34 seconds.

Priority 2 incidents: Average response time was 20 minutes and three seconds.

These times reflect the average from call received to arrival on scene.

In January, NPAS received 3,253 calls for service, a decrease from December.

NPAS crews continued to deliver results: 91.4% of attended deployments led to a positive outcome*.

Between April 2025 and January 2026, NPAS crews located: 1,031 vulnerable people; 3,304 suspects and 1,594 vehicles.

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FLYSIGHT



Villa Park is a football stadium in Aston, Birmingham, with a seating capacity of 43,205. ... It has been the home of Premier League club Aston Villa since 1897

Since the start of the financial year rotary aircraft have flown 8,049 hours and fixed wing aircraft have flown 659 hours, supported 36 forces and completed 165 hours of patrols.

Meanwhile the drone continues to be embraced across the land. West Midlands Police announced last month that Police drones are being installed at two football grounds called Villa Park and Molineux in a UK-first.

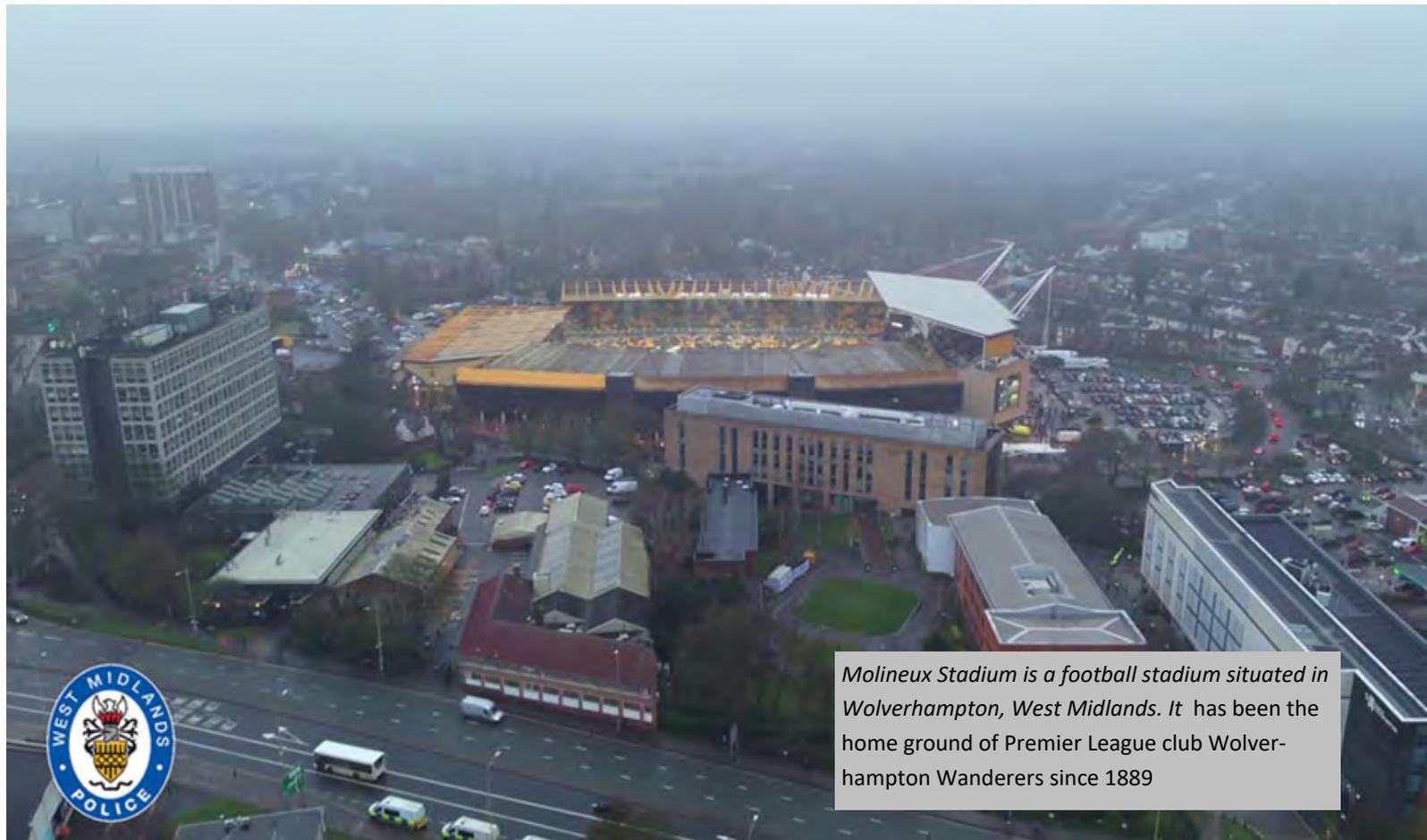
The police have teamed up with the Premier League, Aston Villa and Wolverhampton Wanderers and the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) for the pioneering project, which will enable live footage of crowds coming to and from matches to be beamed into club control rooms using satellite internet.

The project got underway in January, with a successful test flight of existing drones and the new satellite kit at Aston Villa's game against Nottingham Forest, and Wolves' match with West Ham.

The next phase will see weather-proof drone hubs installed at the two stadiums. They will permanently house drones which are capable of being flown by experienced police pilots working from control rooms many miles away. As well as supporting match-day policing operations, the drones can be launched at a moment's notice to any other emergency incidents.

Editor: The release explains that this is DFR equipment. The actual football need could easily be met by CCTV (which is already in place within the grounds and is arguably less affected by poor weather), but this project offers gains for both parties. The Premier League is effectively both providing a secure base for the drone and subsidising a DFR set up for the immediate locality. The end result will be a more flexible tool for policing locally.





Molineux Stadium is a football stadium situated in Wolverhampton, West Midlands. It has been the home ground of Premier League club Wolverhampton Wanderers since 1889

UNITED STATES

CALIFORNIA: Two new deliveries of Airbus Helicopters H125 helicopters from Hangar One Avionics completion centre at McClellan-Palomar Airport in Carlsbad. Hangar One is an FAA Part 145 certified avionics and maintenance service centre for helicopters and fixed wing.

The Fresno Police Department has taken delivery of its first 2025 build AS350B3 AStar helicopter N534PD c/n 9698 from their order authorised in August 2024. Fresno has been operating helicopters for nearly thirty years now having started with Enstrom F28s. They currently operate two 20 years old EC120Bs.

In 2024 the deal was announced by Fresno City Council after they approved a \$4.7M, 10-year lease-purchase deal with Airbus Helicopters Inc. to buy the new helicopter. Under a separate 10-year, \$2.2M contract, the city purchased police equipment for the new helicopter from Hangar One Inc. Buying the base-model helicopter from Airbus and the police accessories through Hangar One was set to save the city more than \$860,000 compared to buying a fully police-equipped helicopter through Airbus. The prime reason for moving to the H125 was the worsening maintenance situation with the out-of-production EC120 helicopters, one of which was already 21 years old..

The AStar on delivery comes complete with FLIR 380HDC EO/IR camera, Spectrolab SX-16 searchlight, AEM Audio system with separate control heads for the pilot, front TFO and rear passenger, a Shotover ARS750 mapping system, Macro Blue video screens and a touchscreen EFIS system. The normal crew is two but items like the searchlight control are set up to allow easy remote access from the rear seats.

Safety features of the completion include a small camera under the tailboom to give the pilot a view of the rear tail rotor area and another pointing forward giving a view of the skids.

Another delivery is to the Glendale/Burbank Police Department Aviation Unit, which has successfully operated a fleet of MD520N NOTAR helicopters for many years, it has taken delivery of its first AS350B3 helicopter through Airbus and Hangar One Avionics.

Glendale and Burbank have had a long history of working together but that has seen separation in the past. Over a period of nearly 50 years they have mainly operated either Hughes or MD helicopters but like many others have now settled on the US built Airbus AStar.

Their new aircraft, N818PD c/n 9642, completed in late January, is equipped with the latest observation and safety technology, enhances the unit's operational capabilities and complements the existing fleet—

further strengthening aerial support services that contribute to public safety and emergency response for the communities of Glendale and Burbank, California. [Hangar One/Fresno Bee]

Tactical Flying Inc., based in Murrieta, California are seeking a pre-used searchlight for a LE customer. Either Spectrolab or Trakka will suit them. Contact info@tacticalflying.com with any offers. As with all surplus equipment [Tactical Flying](http://TacticalFlying.com) will purchase from you and supply the customer.

FLORIDA: The Editor was tripped up by the detail again in the last edition.

In the article about the Flagler County Sheriff Bell 505 the manufacturers' identity of the EO/IR camera Flagler are to have was stated to be FLIR, indicating Teledyne FLIR. It is one of those facts of life that makes vacuum cleaners Hoovers and airborne cameras are generally termed as being a flir, CAPITALISE the letters and Teledyne take the credit (but not the sale and the money in the bank).

I have now learned that the customer has in fact purchased a complete Trakka Total System including the TC300 Gen II HD Camera, TM100 Maps, TL360 searchlight, and Trakkastream and they will duly appear on the airframe when it is rolled out.



TEXAS: The Texas Department of Public Safety officially opened their new Aircraft Operations Division hangar in Edinburg in January. The ribbon cutting ceremony was attended by law enforcement officials and political leaders. This marks a major expansion of the DPS' aviation capability in the south of Texas.

The new 30,000 square foot hangar cost \$11.1M, which was made possible through \$10M in funding from the Texas Legislature, and \$1.1M from the City of Edinburg to complete the project.

Strategically located in the Rio Grande Valley, the hangar significantly enhances DPS' ability to rapidly respond to daily demands and large-scale emergencies across the region. In the event of a natural disaster, the hangar will serve as a critical staging location for both air and ground assets, allowing DPS to quickly coordinate response efforts and deploy resources to support affected communities.

The Edinburg hangar is currently staffed by seven pilots, five tactical flight officers, two remote pilots and two aircraft mechanics. The facility supports two state-owned helicopters, one state-owned airplane, and one federally owned airplane. On the day of the opening the aircraft present included two AStar helicopters, with N824TX operational, one Cessna 208 N430TX and two Cessna light piston singles.

The old Edinburg hangar is now being used by the National Guard supporting border security operations.



AIR AMBULANCE

CANADA

BRITISH COLUMBIA: Ascent Helicopters who operate specialised flight services to a variety of government and industry clients including BC Air Ambulance are now operating seven Leonardo AW169s including C-GSIO, C-GSIY, C-GSVM and C-GSIW in partnership with Babcock from five HEMS bases in BC. The AW169s replaced a fleet of Sikorsky S-76.



©Kenneth Swartz

Parksville and Fernie, BC based Ascent Helicopters still have a varied fleet in BC including Bell 206L4, 205A-1 and 212HP along with an MD902 but the S76 fleet is now less involved with the air ambulance contracting. Helijet seems to have operated their last S-76C++ HEMS flight late last year. [Kenneth Swartz]

JAPAN

Nakanihon Air Co., Ltd. (NNK), one of Japan's largest helicopter operators, has signed a purchase agreement for two additional Bell 429 aircraft to support helicopter emergency medical services (HEMS). This follows NNK's purchase of two Bell 429s in 2017.

NNK currently operates a fleet of over 10 Bell helicopters, including the 430, 412, and 429 models. As an authorized Customer Service Facility since 1994, NNK has acquired approximately 80 Bell aircraft over the past 60 years, underscoring its long-standing relationship with Bell. Globally, the Bell 429 fleet has surpassed 811,900 flight hours, with over 500 aircraft in operation. [Helihub]

NEW ZEALAND

NORTH ISLAND: Life Flight chief executive Mark Johnston and Health Minister Simeon Brown officially opened the new aeromedical airbase for the upper north island at Hamilton airport last month. They had been operating from a hangar at Hamilton airport since 2024.

The Hamilton hangar is the upper North Island base for two of Life Flight's air ambulance planes which provide bed-to-bed hospital transfers for critically ill and injured patients.

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UNITED KINGDOM

DORSET & SOMERSET: The Dorset & Somerset 2nd AW169 helicopter has now been registered with the CAA. The marks for this helicopter are allocated G-DSCC c/n 69202. This was registered 10 Feb 2026 with the ownership shown to Gama Aviation (UK) Ltd at their Farnborough HQ.

In the middle of February, the aircraft was ferried across France via Le Touquet through to Gloucestershire Airport, Staverton for Gama Aviation for kitting out into a fully operational air ambulance. [MJ]

ESSEX & HERTS: The charity Air Ambulance unveiled a brand-new critical care car and newly refurbished helipad at its Earls Colne, Essex, airbase early last month, thanks to funding from the HELP Appeal, the only charity in the country dedicated to funding helipads at NHS hospitals and air ambulance bases.

The grant of nearly £100,000 from the HELP Appeal has allowed Essex & Herts Air Ambulance to refurbish its existing helipad to ensure it continues to meet the latest aviation standards and remains fit for purpose – keeping the critical care teams flying.

The new critical care car means the charity now operates six critical care cars. They are deployed at night or when the helicopters can't fly due to bad weather or maintenance, ensuring Essex & Herts Air Ambulance can continue to respond quickly and safely to emergencies.

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©GNAAS H145 (Proposed)

GREAT NORTH: The air ambulance charity based in the north east of England and mainly providing Cumbria, Northumberland, Durham and Teesside with free at the point of need emergency healthcare is changing its fleet.

As a charity, GNAAS does not receive government funding, and their current aircraft, which are Dauphin N3 and Dauphin N3+ helicopters, are coming to the end of their economically viable life due to parts shortages, ever-rising maintenance costs, and extended downtime. Due to extended scheduled maintenance on the current fleet, approximately 70% of callouts were attended via rapid response vehicles.

The new airframes that are intended to be acquired are three Airbus Helicopters H145. Current fund raising has secured deposits on two of the airframes but now money is being found to secure the third. An illustration showing their intended paintwork has been issued (above).

Twenty percent of the £2.5M target needed to secure the deposit for a third helicopter is now in place. [The Advertiser]

NORTH WEST: The charity has reported its busiest year to date with a 21.8% increase in calls for its service in 2025. Last year they responded to 3,862 missions across the North West of England (primarily Cheshire, Cumbria, Greater Manchester, Lancashire and Merseyside) with their fleet of three EC135 helicopters and four response cars based at Barton Airport Greater Manchester and Blackpool.

In October 2024, the charity extended operating hours, and the expansion of its Night Car service has contributed to a significant rise in missions, with 977 completed by critical care vehicles alone – a 106.5% increase from 2024.

STOKE-ON-TRENT: Last month PAN carried an updating story on the efforts of a group calling themselves the Stoke-on-Trent Air Ambulance Charity to operate a service locally in Stoke-on-Trent a city and unitary authority in Staffordshire. Within days a story was run by the BBC that suggested had breached the Fundraising Code of Practice by giving the impression it was operating a functional air ambulance service when it had no aircraft.

The Fundraising Regulator said Stoke Air Ambulance did not have access to a helicopter, an operational base, or clinicians, and did not have Care Quality Commission approval either. It was also said to have encouraged people to redirect donations away from other air ambulance causes.

On their part the trustees of Stoke Air Ambulance CIO [Charitable Incorporated Organisation] stated they were aware of the allegations from the Fundraising Regulator and that they were addressing the perceived problem.

The regulator states that the charity was putting forward an impression that it was operating a helicopter. Stoke Air Ambulance has a retail store at The Potteries Centre in Hanley. Stoke Air Ambulance claimed it would reach emergencies faster than other air ambulance charities, the regulator found.

"This confusion creates consequences," said Hanna Sebright, chief executive of the Midland Air Ambulance charity which has been operating for 35 years, and has three helicopters at bases in located in Staffordshire as well as in the adjoining counties of Shropshire and Worcestershire.

"Some people hesitate to donate because they simply don't know who to trust anymore.

"Every pound lost through confusion is a pound not going into patient care, not into doctors on board, nor advanced treatment in saving lives."

Charity Commission figures show that in the year ending June 2024, Stoke Air Ambulance spent £353,000 while its income was £332,000, which left a deficit of £21,000. In its annual report, the charity said the planned deficit was due to startup costs and infrastructure matters.

Stoke Air Ambulance, a formally registered charity, launched an appeal in 2022 to try to raise £2.5m for a dedicated air ambulance serving Stoke and north Staffordshire. The charity is still running and asking people to donate on its website. It has been told by the regulator to take down misleading claims and to stop making unfair or insulting statements about other charities.



The Stoke helicopter—just a dream

There are 21 operational air ambulance charities supported by the organisation Air Ambulances UK – but Stoke Air Ambulance does not appear on its website.

Air Ambulances UK chief executive Lindsay Boswell said: "[The Midlands] area ironically is probably the best covered part of the United Kingdom for air ambulance [provision].

"There simply isn't the need for a duplication, a replication and yet another air ambulance.

"I guess it's kind of a waste of donors' money and I'd love them to be [using] their generous donations for better purposes."

Editor: This may not be the end for the Stoke operation. It has been a while since similar complaints have been put forward by the established air ambulance community against start-ups but there have been several and some of those survived the attacks and continue to operate viable air ambulance services. Similar negative talk surrounded several other start-up operations including, the long standing Great North operation which was far from happy when Yorkshire AA started to rattle their collection tins in a part of North Yorkshire they saw as theirs. More recently setting up any air ambulances in Ireland resulted in rivalries and allegations of malpractice but a service eventually survived in both the north and the republic.

The Air Ambulance Service set up in the Midlands not far from the region currently seeing turmoil and prevailed despite the apparent duplication of effort. They perhaps further endeared themselves by rescuing a clearly troubled Children's Air Ambulance that just like the Stoke operation was collecting money for a non-existent operation. Each of these operations was busy putting collection boxes in the areas of other established air ambulance charities. That was the real issue.

In their past the air operations of Essex, East Anglia and Magpas squabbled about duplication of effort but now they cooperate on a daily basis. Call an air ambulance in Essex and you are just as likely to get a helicopter from Cambridge or London turn up. The ready availability of donations from a very generous public tends to mend fences. Air ambulances occupy a very positive space in the charity hierarchy.

All the established charities have seen difficult days – and some still do where their collection system is less than fully resilient – but most are not in that position.

Contrary to that though there must be a finite limit to the number of air ambulance charities donor funding will support and similarly a limit to the number of aircraft needed.

GREAT WESTERN: For the second year in a row, Great Western Air Ambulance Charity (GWAAC) has been called to a record number of incidents across its region of Gloucestershire, Bristol, Bath and North East Somerset, South Gloucestershire, North Somerset, and parts of Wiltshire.

With one helicopter and three critical care cars, the specially trained crew responded to 2,344 people in urgent need of medical care in 2025 — an average of six more callouts each month compared to 2024. GWAAC's crew, which includes Critical Care Paramedics and Consultant Doctors from hospitals, bring the skills, experience and equipment usually found in a hospital emergency department direct to the patient, fast. By making critical decisions at the scene, and with doctors on board, the crew can deliver treatments and interventions that would not normally be possible out of hospital, giving patients the best chance of surviving a serious medical emergency or traumatic injury.

Serious medical-related incidents accounted for 56% of GWAAC's total callouts in 2025 while trauma-related injuries accounted for 44% of missions. This is a slight increase on 2024 when the charity saw a heightened level of medical incidents (55% in 2024) compared to previous years.

GWAAC's crews were called to help 677 people in Gloucestershire, making up 29% of all callouts for the charity. Bristol closely followed with 668 people needing the specialist skills of GWAAC's crew. South Gloucestershire came next with 323 people in urgent need, followed by North Somerset (281), Wiltshire (138), Bath and North East Somerset (121), and Somerset (90). GWAAC's crews were tasked to 46 patients outside of its usual region, such as in Wales.

The crew rushed to help 74% of people in urgent need across GWAAC's region in one of the charity's fully equipped critical care cars. In Bristol, GWAAC's critical care cars were used for 93% of callouts to the city.

Twenty-six percent of taskings were in GWAAC's recognisable bright green and blue helicopter and as is consistent with previous years, only 2% of patients were conveyed to hospital by air. More often, their crew continue treating patients in the back of a road ambulance, where there is more space to work, while transporting them to the hospital best suited to their needs. www.gwaac.com

SUSSEX: A hospital helipad thought to be the most expensive ever built in the NHS will open shortly after an eight-year delay but will be unusable half of the time. The £16M landing pad, which is believed to have cost nearly twice as much as any other in England, could help as few as 23 additional patients a year.

The facility at the Royal Sussex County Hospital in Brighton is run by the University Hospitals Sussex NHS Foundation Trust (UHS), which is separately under police investigation over more than 200 cases of serious harm and patient deaths.

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While similar NHS hospital helipads have typically been built within two years at a cost of £5 to £7M, the Brighton project has been plagued by problems, taken a decade to finish and cost £15.6M at the last reckoning.

The new helipad will be closed for at least 12 hours every day, because it can operate only in daylight and between 7am and 7pm. Helicopters also cannot use the landing pad in very windy conditions.

Editor: In fairness most helipads have similar constraints placed on them for a variety of reasons. Even without the restrictions placed on all helipads after the fatal accident in Devon due to downwash killing a senior, most air ambulances cannot yet fly at night let alone land into a restricted space in the dark and the weather places further reasons not to fly. That is what the response cars are for. Many are complaining about the failure of the NHS to get value for money on this specific contract but most of this and other helipad funding falls to the HELP Appeal charity set up specifically to cover costs of HEMS pads and landing grounds.

WALES: The Welsh Government has given the green light to nearly £1M in funding to upgrade helicopter landing capabilities at a North Wales hospital. Last year, Cyngor Gwynedd approved plans to remove the existing helicopter landing site and construct two replacement helipads.



Test flight ©EMRTS/HELP

The Grange University Hospital helipad was re-opened last month. The hospital is on the eastern edge of Cwmbran, Gwent, surrounded by countryside. The pad is at ground level opposite the Emergency Department.

After successful test landings with Wales Air Ambulance Charity and Emergency Medical Retrieval and Transfer Service - EMRTS Wales, the helipad outside the Emergency Department became operational again after it needed to close between November 2023 for extension works.

The helipad will initially operate in daylight hours before moving to 24/7 use as soon as possible.

Editor: Again, not everyone is happy with the proposal however and there are comments that the money would be better spent elsewhere in the health service. Those commentators are likely to be unaware that most of the finance comes from the HELP Appeal charity funds.





YORKSHIRE: The charity is reporting great progress at the new Skipton Bridge Northern Air Support Unit despite the ongoing difficulties caused by inclement weather.

Over the past few weeks, the steel framework for the first floor is now in, and work on the roof is complete, even with the Yorkshire weather doing its best to try and slow things down. Next up are some walls!

They remain on track to be operational by late summer 2026 and will continue to share updates as the project progresses.

UNITED STATES

NORTH CAROLINA: This ten-years old Dare County MedFlight H145 N401MF c/n 20024 is based in North Carolina. It was the first H145 to be operated in the US; delivered into operational service in July 2015 as a BK117D-2, it has now been upgraded to a five-blade rotor system. BK117D-3.



©Kenneth Swartz

In 2019 it was announced that the air medical operator was to be the first customer in North America to retrofit its helicopter to the new 5-bladed version, announced at the Heli-Expo tradeshow in Georgia.

The helicopter is based at Dare County Regional Airport in Manteo. MedFlight has a dedicated staff of five pilots, two mechanics and 11 flight paramedics [Kenneth Swartz]



©Kenneth Swartz

OHIO: Part of the Northern Ohio Trauma System (NOTS) which utilizes both fixed wing and rotary wing assets in the air ambulance role, the Cleveland Clinic upgraded from S-76s to three examples of the H145 (BK117D-3s) in 2025, including this 2021 build N972CC c/n 21047. The airframe is registered to TVPX Aircraft Solutions Inc. based in North Salt Lake City, Utah.

The three started to arrive in Ohio last March and has now built up to full strength. NOTS still uses a mixed fleet that still has examples of the Sikorsky S-76 in operations. [Kenneth Swartz]

ILLINOIS: OSF Healthcare in Peoria, Illinois, took delivery of H145 (BK117 D-3) N540SF c/n 21230 new in 2023. OSF Life Flight is a 24-hour helicopter air-medical transport system, based in Bloomington, Galesburg and Peru, Illinois, which has been in service since June 1984.



©Kenneth Swartz

Central Illinois patient helicopter transportation began on January 10, 1967, when the first helicopter transport involving OSF HealthCare Saint Francis Medical Center was the transfer of a neonatal infant from Zion, Illinois. The transfer was historic for the community. The infant was transported in a helicopter owned by the Peoria Journal Star Newspaper. The Peoria Journal Star continued to transfer patients into the early 1970s. But with the increase of patient transfer requests, the Illinois Department of Transportation assumed the transport role from June 1984, with OSF Life Flight officially formalized. [Kenneth Swartz]



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FIRE

CHILE

CARABINEROS: During forest fire operations in Chile, Carabineros De Chile deployed their Camcopter S-100 equipped with a thermal imaging sensor to support emergency response on the ground.

Providing real-time aerial oversight, the S-100 detected fire fronts and hotspots through smoke, guiding ground units safely and improving situational awareness during critical firefighting operations. [\[Linked In\]](#)

SOUTH KOREA

INITIAL ATTACK: Bell Textron Inc., announced that South Korean aviation operator EnB Air has signed a purchase agreement for a Bell 505 helicopter dedicated to initial attack firefighting missions. This marks the Bell 505's entry into Korea's firefighting operations and expands the aircraft's growing role in aerial firefighting worldwide.

Initial attack firefighting deploys aircraft as first responders to rapidly contain fires before they spread, buying critical time for ground crews to arrive and establish control. The Bell 505's combination of speed, manoeuvrability, and advanced avionics makes it exceptionally suited for these time-sensitive missions.

Equipped with the Garmin G1000H NXi avionics suite and dual-channel FADEC-controlled engine, the aircraft delivers reduced pilot workload and reliable performance—essential attributes when operating in demanding firefighting environments.

This purchase order builds on EnB Air's 2024 purchase of its first Bell 505—the initial commercial Bell 505 sale in South Korea. The Republic of Korea's Defence Acquisition Programme Administration previously selected the Bell 505 as its military helicopter trainer in 2022. [\[Helihub\]](#)

UNITED STATES

CALIFORNIA: Aerial firefighting firm Coulson Aviation USA has announced the launch of its Very Large Airtanker (VLAT) programme, which aims to incorporate the firm's internal tank Retardant Aerial Delivery System (RADS) into the Boeing 767 airframe. Coulson Aviation has offices in Port Alberni, British Columbia, Canada, Thermal, California USA and Bankstown, New South Wales, Australia.

The recent grounding of the MD11 and DC10 fleets has highlighted a structural challenge for the world's firefighting agencies. As older wide-body aircraft retire, the industry faces a significant reduction in high-capacity, large-scale retardant delivery capability. Coulson's 767 VLAT is being developed to address this gap with an aircraft that offers greater payload, lower fuel burn, and long-term sustainability compared to existing platforms.



©Coulson Aviation

Coulson's 767 VLAT will incorporate the largest example of their patented RADS retardant delivery system, while retaining the ability to carry over 160 passengers, and delivering a tank capacity that exceeds any VLAT currently in operation.

The 767 VLAT will operate alongside the existing fleet lineup that includes the Lockheed C-130H Hercules and the Boeing 737 Fireliner, which currently offer 4,000-gallon capacity.



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ARTEMIS



MINNESOTA: At the other end of the scale, mid-February saw the gathering of firefighting leaders in Eagan for the 2026 Fire Boss Operators Conference.

Operators from across North America gathered in Eagan on February 10–11 for a two day event dedicated to advancing safety, performance, and innovation in aerial firefighting. The program brought together operators and industry partners for seminars, technical sessions, OEM updates, and collaborative discussions. This included operator led discussion on operational best practices and lessons learned.

The conference underscored the essential role Fire Boss operators play in North America's wildfire response capabilities. By bringing together diverse perspectives from across the continent, the event fostered stronger connections and a shared vision for the future of amphibious aerial firefighting.

SEARCH AND RESCUE

NEPAL

NO RESCUE: In late January a court in Kathmandu ordered six executives from three prominent mountain rescue agencies to be remanded in custody for allegedly orchestrating staged fake helicopter rescues of foreign tourists.

It is alleged that some \$19.7M had been siphoned off through an insurance fraud.

Tourism is a cornerstone of Nepal's economy, drawing nearly 1.2 million visitors each year, with about 300,000 trekking in high-altitude regions including Everest, Annapurna, Langtang and Manaslu.

The Nepal Police said the suspects were arrested as part of an inquiry into what officials describe as a sophisticated racket that exploited Nepal's multi-million-dollar trekking industry by arranging unnecessary helicopter evacuations from high-altitude regions and submitting forged medical and flight documents to justify the rescues that were later billed to foreign insurance companies.

The Nepalese Helicopter Rescue service has been carrying out 'false' rescue missions, and apparently with the Hospitals help in regard to false documentation. In some cases, a single helicopter trip would be billed multiple times under different emergency pretexts, inflating costs dramatically. For instance, a standard Kathmandu-Lukla flight worth roughly \$2,500 was claimed for up to \$31,000 through repeated false invoicing. Private hospitals were also allegedly involved in providing false documentation to support the claims.

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UNITED STATES

BOEING: With the population of military SAR (and submarine hunting) aircraft growing forever older those that can afford an upgrade in capability are selecting either a less capable ISR configurable airframe or seeking to buy the Boeing 737 based P-8 Poseidon.

P-8 Poseidon operators, include the US Navy, several European nations including the Royal Air Force (RAF), have reported supply chain and maintenance challenges that have impacted aircraft availability and operations. When the RAF fleet of Poseidon MRA1 has shrunk from a not inconsiderably sized Nimrod fleet to just nine purchased for the modern RAF it is clear that there is no real room for declaring any of the fleet to be a 'hangar queen' spares source. The RAF is looking to add Protector Drones to their assets to make up for the shortfall in capability.



A 2019 US Congressional report highlighted that the P-8A faced shortages in spare parts, which increased maintenance downtime and led to higher rates of cannibalizing parts from other aircraft. The problem lies in the reliance on Boeing as the single source of supply and does not appear to have improved greatly thanks, perhaps, to the manufacturing and staff management problems still besetting the manufacturer. After about five years of difficult trading and bad press over accidents and poor manufacturing Boeing returned to profits in the last year, offering a possibility that things might improve.

INDUSTRY

In mid-December last year **Austro Engine** announced a major milestone: the global fleet of Diamond Aircraft powered by Austro Engine technology has now accumulated over 5 million "Life in Network" (LIN) flight hours. This achievement underscores the reliability, efficiency, and performance of Austro Engine's powerplants, which have become the backbone of Diamond Aircraft's modern piston-engine platforms.

Tracking of fleet hours began in 2009, and today there are well over 5,500 Austro Engine units in service, operating in 82 countries worldwide. These engines power Diamond's most popular aircraft such as the DA40 NG single-engine and DA42-VI and DA62 twin-engine aircraft, which are widely used by flight schools, private owners, and special mission operators around the globe. The milestone reflects the trust placed in Austro Engine by thousands of operators and highlights the engines' proven reliability in diverse environments. What are LIN flight hours? LIN (Life in Network) flight hours represent the cumulative operational time of engines across the entire global fleet, tracked through Austro Engine's integrated monitoring systems. This metric provides a precise measure of real-world reliability and performance, as it aggregates data from thousands of aircraft operating in varied conditions worldwide.

Austro Engine GmbH, based in Wiener Neustadt, Austria, specializes in the development and production of advanced jet-fuel piston engines for general aviation derived from automotive engines. The engine is based on the Mercedes-Benz OM640 road Diesel engine; these are delivered straight from the car factory and stripped off the parts of no use to the aviation operations. Known for reliability, efficiency, and environmental responsibility, Austro Engine powerplants are trusted by operators worldwide for training and commercial missions.



Diamond Aircraft Industries announced the successful delivery of three DA62 MPP (Multi-Purpose Platform) special mission aircraft to the Greek Ministry of Climate Crisis and Civil Protection. This milestone marks a significant advancement in Greece's aerial surveillance and emergency response capabilities. The DA62 MPP aircraft are equipped with cutting-edge surveillance and communication technologies, tai-

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lored to support firefighting, search and rescue, and real-time intelligence operations. Each aircraft features a Trakka TC-375 EO/IR Camera: High-resolution electro-optical and infrared imaging for day and night operations, a Smith Myers ARTEMIS Mobile Phone Localization System, CarteNav AIMS-ISR Mission Management System, 4G/5G Data Link and Maritime VHF Radio.

The contract includes the aircraft, ground stations, training, spare parts, and long-term support. Prime contractor ATESE S.A., in collaboration with Diamond Aircraft and local representative IHOR, played a pivotal role in bringing this project to fruition—from initial demonstration flights in November 2022 to completion of deliveries in October 2025.



In a later release Diamond Aircraft announced the delivery of a highly customised surveillance aircraft to QinetiQ, with the Dutch Military Police as the end user.

A few years ago, Diamond announced the sale of two DA62 aircraft to the QinetiQ Germany as part of a general new fleet upgrade. The Diamond aircraft were delivered a year ago and saw use in the surveillance market. Now one of the pair has been given a major systems upgrade that includes the fitting of the Shotover M2 camera system.



The sale is apparently in the wake of the 2024 appearance of the Shotover sensor on a DA62 at the May 2024 PAvCon Europe event in Austria, the upgrade of the systems has been made to better serve the needs of a military operator in Europe. This might be seen as a great success by the sales teams at Diamond, Shotover and others to underline the opportunity presented by the annual PAvCon security event. The project highlights the collaboration between Diamond Aircraft and QinetiQ, ensuring that mission-critical assets remain at the forefront of technology. As part of the delivery Diamond Aircraft performed a comprehensive retrofit of one of QinetiQ's existing and already operational DA62 MPP aircraft D-IBMT c/n 62.206. This approach maximizes asset lifecycle value but also demonstrates Diamond Aircraft's capability to modernize and adapt existing fleets to meet evolving mission requirements.

Diamond delivered the aircraft as a fully certified, turnkey package, ensuring compliance with all relevant aviation and operational standards. The retrofit and integration work was performed under EASA Part-145 maintenance approval.

The aircraft has been equipped with an extensive suite of mission equipment designed to ensure superior operational capability and flexibility. Key systems include the Shotover camera and mapping system, Rohde & Schwarz multiband radio, TETRA Radios for interoperability across agencies, AEM Advanced Audio Router for optimized audio management and a line-of-sight downlink for real-time data transmission.

Over in Boulder, Colorado Tom Churchill the Shotover CEO hailed the completion of the work on Linked-In in announcing.

“Cutting Edge” sounds about right. Our team is laser focused on building the best — if you are curious what makes the SHOTOVER M2 different than what everyone else is delivering, we’d love to talk. With 24MP sensors, 4K video, advanced AI features, and the world’s smallest (but most powerful) mission computer, we’re building the next generation of imaging systems — truly stabilized (6 axis), software defined, and now with the world’s best hand controller as well!”

In January 2025 in the 'Staatscourant', the official publication of the Government of the Netherlands, the Koninklijke Marechaussee (KMar, Royal Netherlands Military Police) announced the delivery of the two Diamond DA 62MPP aircraft.

The KMar will operate D-IAMT DA 62MPP c/n 62.201 call sign Charley 01 and D-IBMT DA 62MPP c/n 62.206 call sign Charley 02. The aircraft for the Netherlands are leased from QinetiQ GmbH fully role equipped. The aircraft can fly long sorties of more than nine hours. QinetiQ GmbH ordered the two DA 62MPP in Autumn 2021 for delivery in September 2022.

Flying the two Diamonds was launched as an experimental project for the KMar for a period of three years. They are flown by former Air Force pilots from military airfields in the Netherlands. The first of the new DA 62MPPs, D-IAMT, arrived at Gilze-Rijen airbase in February 2025.

Radio frequency (RF) technology specialist **Enterprise Control Systems (ECS)**, part of the SPX Communication Technologies Group, introduced ECS Connect, its new intelligent data link network manager to the Middle East at World Defence Show in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (February 8-12, 2026).

Key capabilities of the technology include:

Uninterrupted airborne intelligence. With airborne platforms increasingly required to operate across diverse scenarios from border surveillance to Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR), ECS Connect provides the flexibility and assurance needed to maintain a continuous flow of intelligence data.

Seamless, secure connectivity. Ensuring access to the most reliable and cost-effective communication protocol, removing the burden of manual link management.

Automated network swap. ECS Connect intelligently switches between COFDM, SATCOM, LTE, Cellular, and MESH networks to ensure uninterrupted and reliable transmission of video, audio, and data between air, land, and sea.

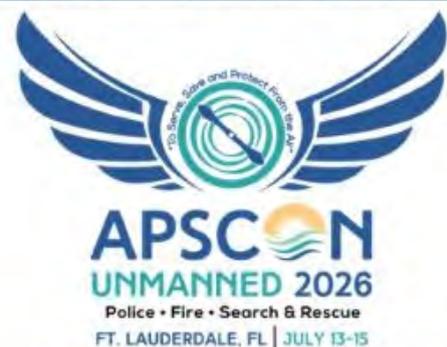
Optimised channel selection. Evaluating geography and signal strength in real-time to select the best connection, even in the harshest environments.

ECS Connect marks a shift in the company’s evolution from a data link hardware provider to a holistic managed connectivity solutions partner, building on 30 years of delivering reliable RF technology to security and defence organisations in the Middle East and across the globe.

ECS is based at Silverstone in the United Kingdom. www.enterprisecontrol.co.uk



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A 'Serving Suggestion' for the future?
©ERC Systems

ERC Systems, a Munich, Germany, based aviation startup, has begun flight testing its third-generation, full-scale and full-mass eVTOL prototype "Romeo," in Erding near Munich. The flight test campaign supports the development of a hybrid-electric, crewed aircraft optimized for critical missions, including interhospital patient transport and emergency medical services. For DRF Luftrettung, a strategic partner of ERC System, this milestone is more than just a technical success—it is a significant step forward for future airborne patient care.

Weighing 2735 kgs and sporting a 16m wingspan, the aircraft is among the largest and heaviest eVTOL aircraft flown in Europe so far and DRF see it as a potential supplement to the existing helicopters in the first instance.



eVTOLs can prospectively demonstrate their value in interhospital transport, where patients need to be moved from one hospital to another. They also offer significant potential for post primary transport—particularly for time critical transfers following initial treatment, in cases where an emergency physician or advanced medical care is not required during the flight. (Source: ERC System)

General Atomics AeroTec Systems (GA-ATS) based in Gauting, Germany took over the future development of the 50 years old Dornier 228 design from RUAG in 2017. It may be an old design but it is rugged and still seen to have a future in ISR roles with production in Europe and India on-going. GA-ATS is expanding the mission capabilities of its Dornier Do228 NXT multi-role aircraft with the offering of a new advanced sensor option: the CPLS Sentinel, developed by CDA Systems, a technology innovator from Sant Julia de Loria, Andorra specializing in aerospace, communications and precision optics. They have offices in London, UK.



With the additional option of Sentinel, the 'NXT further strengthens its position as a versatile special mission aircraft and high-performance platform for search and rescue (SAR), law enforcement, disaster response, maritime patrol and humanitarian missions.

The CPLS Sentinel is a state-of-the-art cellular geolocation system that enables rescue teams to locate missing or endangered people with exceptional accuracy - even in remote regions or areas where traditional communication infrastructure has been destroyed.

Using preloaded or newly scanned cell tower information, Sentinel builds an offline operational map for mission areas. Once the operator enters a target phone's ID, the system acts as a secure and non-intrusive base station, detecting the phone's signal without interacting with live networks or accessing personal user data.

Through advanced Phase Difference of Arrival (PDOA) analysis, Sentinel pinpoints the phone's exact location. An intuitive graphical interface displays directional cues, coordinates and mapping support to guide teams directly to the individual in distress. Operators can establish direct text or voice contact and export mission-ready coordinates into external command systems for immediate action.

With its operator-friendly design featuring a rectangular fuselage cross-section and numerous installation points for sensors, the Do228 NXT is ideally suited for sensor integration. <https://cdasystems.ad/sentinel/>

©RUAG



It seems an age since the independently developed Swiss Marenco/Kopter helicopter morphed into the **Leonardo AW09** but progress towards full production is being made. The first production aircraft, the first AW09 to be built at Vergiate, with previous prototypes or pre-serial assets having been assembled at facilities in Switzerland, is now flying in its new metallic grey livery and is welcoming customers on board for demonstration flights. The Marenco SKYe SH09 was announced as a project in 2009 with a plan to fly in 2012 but it actually flew in October 2014 at Mollis Airport, Switzerland. In 2020 Leonardo acquired the programme as the Leonardo AW09.

2Excel Aviation is teaming up with **JD2E** its simulation and training partner to provide EO/IR training services to the Royal Danish Air Force. They are to design and deliver a comprehensive training programme that will prepare Tactical Coordinators (TACCOs) and Sensor Operators (SENSOs) for conversion to the Sikorsky MH-60R Seahawk.

Students entering the MH 60R conversion process are introduced to core aviation disciplines—including Crew Resource Management (CRM), aircraft systems, flight planning and navigation—as well as the principles underlying Maritime Air Operations and warfare.

Drawing on four years of successful delivery of RAF Mission Aircrew training for Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) platforms, 2Excel and JD2E were tasked to design the syllabus, integrate the training architecture and launch the programme in under three months. The resulting 25 week course blends ground school, synthetic training and live flying, providing a structured progression from aviation fundamentals through to complex sensor theory and application.

Synthetic and academic training will be delivered at JD2E's Wellingore facility in Lincolnshire, while all live flying will take place from 2Excel's dedicated base at Humberside Airport using the DA 62 MPP platform. The first course will commence this month.

Vulcanair have sold four A-VIATOR (AP.68TP-600) turboprop twin engine aircraft to the Indonesian Navy for surveillance missions. The contract for the four initial airframes plus training and a simulator was signed in December 2023 but not concluded until the end of January this year. Construction has now started.



Canadian avionics manufacturer, **Anodyne Electronics Manufacturing Corp.** (AEM), has introduced the industry's newest and most advanced narrowband/wideband panel-mount VHF FM radio for special-mission platforms. The [MTP138](#) is a modern and reliable solution for analogue communication on all channels across the 138MHz to 174MHz frequency band.

Further details available from the manufacturer. If you are visiting VERTICON 2026 they can be found at Booth #B7023.

Also in Canada, **Airbus Helicopters** has been approved by the Transport Canada Civil Aviation (TCCA) authority for the operation of the H175 helicopter in Canada, positioning the aircraft for entry into the Canadian market.

The H175 is a proven platform capable of supporting diverse operations including: energy, search and rescue (SAR), emergency medical services (EMS), private and business aviation, public services, and defence.

With 300,000 flight hours accumulated worldwide and also certified by EASA and CAAC, the H175 has proven its reliability and performance across a wide range of missions, providing a strong foundation for its potential use and success across various segments for Canada.



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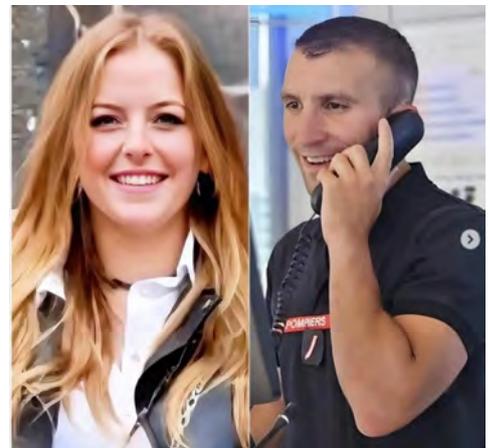
ACCIDENTS & INCIDENTS

30 January 2026 Cessna 172S Skyhawk SP N832MA of the State of Wisconsin State Patrol. Aircraft departed Dane County Regional Airport (MSN/KMSN), Madison, WI. The airplane struck a bird, and the post flight inspection revealed a dent in the left wing. [ASN]

4 February 2026 Bell 407 N56AZ. Department of Public Safety, Arizona. Departed Kingman Regional Medical Center on a law enforcement mission with a pilot and paramedic/TFO on board. Suffered a fatal crash and was destroyed when it impacted terrain in Flagstaff, Arizona. Both crew died. Multiple law enforcement departments were on scene for an active shooter incident in which large numbers of shots were fired. The helicopter crashed west of the shooting situation immediately after the domestic violence suspect was taken into custody. It is seen on ADS-B data to enter a rapid climb towards the conclusion of the flight with groundspeeds reported as low as 4 knots. A witness video showed the helicopter in an out-of-control spin. It impacted alongside rail tracks and was totally destroyed. The crew were DPS pilot Robert Skankey and Trooper Hunter Bennett. Both funerals were in February. [AZDPS]

4 February 2026 Bell 407GXP N407VS Air ambulance of Kalispell Regional Medical Center, Kalispell, Montana operating with pilot and two crew. The tail rotor made contact with a light pole on the helipad located near Libby, Montana. It caused substantial damage. [ASN]

11 February 2026 Airbus Helicopters H145 F-ZBQC Securite Civile. Two rescuers, sergeant Maxime Pillitieri, a firefighter from Haute-Loire and Sophie Fleurquin, an emergency physician from SAMU 63 (the local emergency medical service), died during a helicopter rescue exercise in Puy-de-Dôme, in the Saint-Nectaire area at the Rivalet rocky site, described as difficult to access but where training exercises are regularly conducted. The Dragon 63 civil security helicopter, based at Clermont-Ferrand, its four-person crew, and the two rescuers winched down by a cable attached to the aircraft, were conducting a training exercise in a rocky area with adverse weather conditions. Shortly after 4:00 p.m., an unforeseen manoeuvre, the cause of which is undetermined, caused the cable to break, resulting in the fatal fall of the two rescuers. [Media]



11 February 2026 Thrush S-2R-T660 710P EC-NXY Firefighting aircraft of PLYSA, operating for CONAF in Chile performed an emergency landing after a malfunction. Rancagua-de la Independencia Airport for El Bordo Airfield (SCCA), Cauquenes, Maule and was near there when there was a malfunction. No injuries reported but the aircraft was substantially damaged. [ASN]

19 February 2026 Robinson R44 Raven II “not registered” Privately owned helicopter. The helicopter departed from a logging site 130 kilometres from the village of Amaranka in the Amur Region of Russia’s far east with an owner/pilot and two passengers and crashed nearby. The latter are said to have been an investigator from the Oktyabrsky Interdistrict Investigative Department of the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation for the Amur Region and the head of the district police department and the juvenile affairs unit of the Oktyabrsky Ministry of Internal Affairs. They arrived at the forest site by ground transportation and were returning to their office. No names have been released. The flight from there did not have permission to fly. The crash site in among trees in a snow-covered region was found by searchers around 1.5 km from the take-off point with the three dead in the wreck. The aircraft belonged to the deceased pilot, who did not have the right to operate it, the flight was carried out without notifying air navigation authorities, and the helicopter was not officially registered in the prescribed manner (the registration plates were missing). [ASN/Telegram/IZ]





UNMANNED

Another Amazon Prime Air delivery drone crashed early in February. The latest incident led to the craft hitting an apartment building in Richardson, Texas and falling to the ground.

One of the building's residents witnessed the incident and recorded video showing the aircraft near the building moments before debris fell to the ground. The Richardson Fire Department responded, and officials reported no fire and minimal damage to the structure. Amazon said it is investigating the cause and coordinating repairs.

The resident began filming the drone because it was the first time she had seen one making a delivery. The drone was moving slowly close to the building and moved upwards to a higher part of it. The next view was of parts falling to ground and smoke appeared from the wreckage.

This latest incident in Richardson follows other recent incidents involving the company's MK30 drones. In November, a drone contacted a cable in Waco, Texas, and two MK30 aircraft struck a construction crane minutes apart in Tolleson, Arizona, in October.

Amazon's drone is designed to carry packages weighing up to 5 pounds (2kg) and operates within a limited-service radius at low altitude as part of the company's delivery service. It is now known what it was delivering or whether it was delivering to the same block as the crash.

Editor: Meanwhile in the UK, there are complaints about the soon to be realised trial operation of Drone Delivery in Durham in NE England. One or two experimental deliveries is one thing, but the complainants are assuming that the craft will multiply to replace a large part of the current Amazon road vehicle delivery and they expect noise! The road vehicle is quiet and efficient electric transport able to deliver multiple parcels all together. In contrast the Amazon drones are expected to bring along the hum of rotor blades and multiply due to the limits placed on payload. People are not currently happy at the prospect.



In the UK the Greater Manchester Police have been showing off their dedicated drone support vehicle and extolling its features.

Their vehicle has been designed from the ground up, with direct input from officers on the GMP Drone Unit. It offers more rural/off road capabilities and is bristling with features to make drone operations more efficient and effective. It has full off grid power capabilities with battery and inverter systems, and the addition of roof mounted solar panels. Connectivity is enhanced with a roof mounted Starlink satellite system, and a bespoke 'livestream station' with a monitor screen, radio comms and direct HDMI connections. The ample

storage within the vehicle allows the carriage of all the drones and equipment necessary to support to front line policing. [Rob Crossley, Chief Pilot LI]



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©TEKEVER

The Portuguese Drone Manufacturer **Tekever** was little heard of a few years ago but that has changed. Last month there was news of a new factory in Swindon UK and now news of a new facility in France and a training facility in Wales.

The presentation session of the #TEKEVER industrial project in Cahors was a huge success. This event marks a key step in the deployment of our new industrial site in France.

The future industrial site in Cahors, with a surface area of 4,500 m², is currently being transformed in order to accommodate, initially, the assembly, integration and testing of drones. The first units produced on site are expected before the summer of 2026, before a gradual ramp-up to all production operations.

The site will host the production and testing of the AR3 and AR5 platforms, as well as TEKEVER's space AIT activities, with a particular focus on radio frequency technologies. This establishment aims to meet the growing demand for sovereign defence and security capabilities, while strengthening the French and European industrial base in the fields of drones and space.

In terms of employment, growth is already exceeding the initial objectives: TEKEVER will exceed 100 qualified jobs in France this year, ahead of the initially announced target. In Cahors, recruitment will continue from 2026, actively contributing to the local and regional economic dynamism.

The Tekever site in Swindon (shown last month) is on the edge of the village of South Marston in the Borough of Swindon, and about 3 miles north-east of Swindon town centre.



A 525,000 sq. ft MoD indoor drone-testing facility is set to anchor the new defence tech cluster in Swindon, on the former Honda site that once produced Spitfires aircraft and, more recently, Japanese motor cars.

Industry insiders say the development will be a facility covering 360 acres and offering an indoor training space equivalent to eight football pitches—around four times the size of NATO's small tactical drone centre in Latvia. The development sits within a £925M redevelopment led by Panattoni that will ultimately deliver 7.2m sq. ft of industrial space. As reported last month, Portugal's Tekever is opening a 200,000 sq. ft manufacturing plant this summer as part of a £400M UK investment over five years, while Stark and Flyby Technology have also moved in. The government has pledged to procure up to 8,000 drones in 2026, though industry continues to flag a £28bn equipment funding gap over the next decade.

Swindon's emergence reflects a deliberate effort to align sovereign UAS capability with manufacturing scale, testing infrastructure and proximity to Abbey Wood procurement along the London to Wales M4 motorway corridor.

This growing aerospace development in Swindon was originally a 1940s shadow factory building Spitfire aircraft that when closed was demolished to make way for a Honda car factory for 36 years until its closure and demolition from 2021. The site still has the remains of the runway; it became the Honda test track and will now presumably provide a launching area for the drones.

Some 121 Mark 21 Spitfires were built here, with a further 50 modified Spitfires bound for naval action also produced so with war apparently looming once again the projected number of drones to be built on the site will far dwarf the number of Spitfires.

Meanwhile Tekever has issued an image of its facility in West Wales that has since January been ready to provide its new AI-centred uncrewed aerial systems Training School at West Wales Airport.



Fully operational since January 2026, the facility is a significant part of TEKEVER's UK OVERMATCH investment programme and is designed to deliver training for both internal operations teams and external customers.

The Training School welcomed its first internal and external cohorts in the second week of January and is now fully operational. Designed to support consistent, high-quality training standards, the facility brings together experienced instructors, modern training resources, and an environment that mirrors real-world demands. Over the course of 2026, TEKEVER expects its training volume to exceed 120 students, supported by the formal establishment of a permanent training team within the school.

The UK Government has opened a £1.85M competition to counter illegal drone use around prisons and sensitive sites. The use of drones to deliver contraband into prisons has skyrocketed. In some instances, daily drone flights to smuggle drugs, weapons, and phones directly to cell windows. Incidents in England and Wales rose by over 770% between 2019 and 2023, with 1,712 drone incidents recorded between April 2024 and March 2025 alone, marking a 43% increase over the previous year.

UK Defence Innovation (UKDI) has launched a major competition backed by the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), Prison & Probation Service (HMPPS), Ministry of Defence (MoD), Nuclear Decommissioning Authority



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(NDA), Home Office, Police and Innovate UK and it seeks to overcome an ever-growing problem posed by criminal access to drones.

The competition is seeking solutions that:

- Act as a last line of defence once a drone has entered a secure area.
- Can be used within the powers available to prison officers.
- Neutralise drones with minimal risk to people, buildings and communications.
- Are safe to use in prisons, urban areas and near critical national infrastructure.
- Can be deployed quickly by a small team, without specialist training.
- Are legally and ethically compliant, with clear consideration of operational constraints.
- Integrated detect, track and identify capabilities are welcome, but this competition is focused on defeating drones — not detection alone.

They have already stated they will not fund paper based studies or literature reviews, resubmissions of previous bids, off the shelf products, solutions that will require major infrastructure changes or are not scalable or adaptable to real world operations.

Specifically excluded are firearms and nets and fixed capture systems. They have been tried before and found to be wanting. They are looking for something new that might finally halt the ongoing delivery of contraband into the prisons and might also serve other establishments.

The project has a short timeframe in that it was announced early in February, had a launch webinar on February 17 and closes on March 31. It is expected that the submissions will be announced in mid-May with projects being tested in a matter of months. [www.gov.uk / Dorian Ellis]

Editor: I am not sure we should hold our breath on this. Whilst researching the back-story on this I found a remarkably similar 'competition' issued by HM Government in November 2025. That, "The Counter-Drone Challenge invites industry to find cutting-edge solutions to detect drones designed by criminals to evade current detection methods available on the market. Successful applicants will receive £60,000 funding to develop proof-of-concept systems over a 12-week period." Was this just not enough money to interest the market?

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/185-million-competition-launched-to-counter-illegal-uas-use-around-prisons-and-sensitive-sites>

Late last month, Schiebel announces its intention to establish a dedicated Schiebel UK legal entity, reflecting strong growth opportunities in the United Kingdom defence market and the company's long-term commitment to supporting the UK Armed Forces and industrial partners.

The decision follows the successful collaboration with Thales UK to deliver the Peregrine Rotary Wing Uncrewed Aerial System (RWUAS), based on Schiebel's CAMCOPTER® S-100. Peregrine is currently fielded operationally with the Royal Navy, where it has demonstrated proven performance in demanding operational environments, delivering persistent Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) capability. Based on this operational success, the programme is expected to continue to grow as operational requirements evolve.

Looking ahead, Schiebel sees significant opportunity through future UK land and joint-domain programmes, including the UK Land Autonomous Collaborative Platforms (ACP) programme. Within this context, Schiebel's partnership with Thales UK offers a highly complementary value proposition.

As part of its UK growth strategy, Schiebel also intends to bring to market its much larger CAMCOPTER® S-300 rotary wing Unmanned Air System (UAS). Building on the proven CAMCOPTER® S-100, the S-300 offers increased endurance, payload capacity and multi-mission flexibility to support extended-range ISR as well as future autonomous and collaborative operations across land and maritime domains.



The establishment of Schiebel UK will provide a strong foundation for in-country manufacturing, assembly and rapid capability enhancement. This approach will enable closer support to UK programmes, faster integration of innovative upgrades and alignment with UK industrial participation and sovereign capability objectives.

ADVERTISING WITH POLICE AVIATION NEWS

Times they are a changing sang Bob Dylan way back in 1964 and the same happens here in *Police Aviation News* in its 30th year of publication. 'Stuff' is being outsourced and that includes the PAVCon Europe Conference and Exhibition and now advertising.

New advertising customers are now being directed to a long-standing associate in Parapex Media, better known as Jeremy Parkin. We have worked together for a very long time, but he has an age advantage on The Editor.

As part of a plan to future proof the publication I have now outsourced the advertising and the website content therefore has been altered to reflect the new position.

The new Media Pack is on the primary www.policeaviationnews.com site in PDF form [in text on the www.policeaviationnews.info site]

Publication date for all issues is the first day of each month [National holidays excepted].

Advertising copy to be received by the 20th of the month prior to the scheduled publication date to guarantee appearance.

This will not change the arrangement for existing advertising currently dealt with directly by the editor.

PEOPLE

Metro Aviation announced that Managing Director Milton Geltz has been awarded the Charles Taylor Master Mechanic Award, one of the highest honours presented by the Federal Aviation Administration to recognise lifetime achievement in aircraft maintenance.

The Charles Taylor Master Mechanic Award honours aviation maintenance professionals with 50 or more years of exemplary service. Geltz becomes one of fewer than one percent of certified mechanics worldwide to receive this distinguished recognition.

Throughout his career, Geltz has been instrumental in advancing Metro Aviation's maintenance standards, mentoring generations of technicians, and strengthening the company's reputation for excellence across the aviation industry. His influence can be seen in every hangar, every aircraft, and every team member who has had the privilege of learning from him.

With the major rotary aviation show, Verticon 2026, coming up later this month in Atlanta, Georgia, last month Vertical Aviation International (VAI) announced the recipients of their 2026 Salute to Excellence Awards, including APSA members Nicholas Romano and Matt Pagano.

Deputy Nicholas Romano of the Broward Sheriff's Office has been selected as the 2026 recipient of VAI's Salute to Excellence Law Enforcement Award for his leadership in public-safety drone operations. Raised in a law enforcement family, Romano began on road patrol before moving to the detective bureau as a computer forensics examiner. Nearly a decade ago, he was selected as one of the agency's first drone pilots, despite having no prior experience in unmanned systems. He built expertise through intensive research, became an early trainer, and later served as unit coordinator. Romano credits the significant advancement of sensors and other capabilities with protecting officers, including during a barricaded-suspect incident in which a drone, instead of a SWAT officer, drew gunfire. Deputy Romano was also the recipient of APSA's 2025 Unmanned Aerial Systems Award.

Matt Pagano, Senior Mechanic for the Riverside Police Department Air Support Unit (ASU) will receive the VAI Salute to Excellence Maintenance Award, recognizing his sustained excellence in rotorcraft maintenance under demanding conditions. A former US Marine Corps aviation maintainer and Hamilton Standard quality-control and blade-repair



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specialist, Pagano earned his FAA A&P certificate and joined the ASU in 2003. Pagano is currently the sole mechanic for the unit, which operates two Airbus H125 helicopters, each flying 1,100 to 1,200 hours annually. Having led standardized preflight training and managed a fleet transition from MD 500s, he prioritizes clear pilot–mechanic communication to protect crews and missions. Senior Mechanic Pagano was also the recipient of APSA’s 2025 Technical Specialist Award

LINKED IN

“Photo of what I’m told was the Met’s first helicopter. Pilot is a Bob Mayes. Bob joined the Met as a PC way back, only did a year or so before leaving to pursue a career in commercial aviation. Flew all over the world and spent a lot of time flying outback in Australia. On his return to England, he got a job with a company who had just secured a contract to supply the Met with a helicopter. Bob tells me they said, “you were a copper once, so you’ll know what to do” and he flew the single engine Enstrom all over London and beyond.

“I see Bob regularly and hear some great stories including when he landed at Hendon to drop off some urgent medical supplies during a passing out parade. Apparently, the brass was somewhat annoyed at the disruption but after things cooled down a landing pad was installed... well away from any parade. The picture was taken at Chigwell in 1976 where Bob and Observer visited for refs. He cannot remember who the Observer was that day.” (original post on Linked In by Kevin Smith)



Editorial Detail: Enstrom F28C G-BCOT was an aircraft contracted from Helicopter Hire then owned by John Crewdson who was well known for supplying helicopters to the movie industry including the early James Bond films as the British-based Film Aviation Services. The Enstrom was built as c/n 199 in 1974 and was one of the helicopters that was rarely photographed when flying for the Metropolitan Police. The comment about joining the police and having to move on was typical of the time, there being numerous figures in UK police aviation who found themselves having to curtail their police career to get into flying. There were exceptions of course, some of the early fixed wing operations used pre-qualified “police with pilots’ licences” to fly their aircraft.

I think that the photograph was taken as the Enstrom was landing at Lippitts Hill, those buildings in the background look very like the dog section prefab with the private housing beyond. I spent many hours in that building a few years later when the Bell 222s had arrived ready to repel any attack by the IRA with my six-gun and 12 rounds. But I could be wrong!



MOVE ALONG THERE

There is much trouble at the Mill. UK newspapers are focussed on the ongoing issue of Kier Starmer the Prime Minister and his lack of judgement and frequent changes of mind and about turns due to criticism. Early in February the much reviled but nonetheless widely read *Daily Mail* reported negatively on the latest moves in Parliament and it resonated with events years ago in the ranks of NPAS. Looking back to 2016/17 all appeared well in the corridors of police aviation power in Wakefield but that went wrong when the boss Chief Super Whitehouse was found to be associating with a detective who was on the cusp of going down for 'fitting up' a prisoner with somewhat enhanced evidence. He was the right man at the right time, but he had to go which was unfortunate. NPAS took a long time to recover from the problem. Perhaps it never did.

While mentioning our highly trained lawyer Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer, I understand that there is no truth in the rumour that he has been offered a highly paid executive job with U-Switch Limited a UK-based comparison service. Indeed, he has enough on his hands in trying to pay for someone to take a valuable USA base on the Chagos Islands off his hands. Rumour has it that 'The Donald' could not believe Sir Kier was willing to pay billions to a potential enemy to take the islands off the UK rather than spend the money on defence! You betta believe it.



More news aligned to silly lawyers is that there are moves by defence briefs to have the footage of Body Worn Cameras suppressed from court cases simply because they are showing up time and again that their customers are invariably liars. We have known that for many decades of course but now, having fought the good fight to have those nasty lying police officers made "accountable" with the cameras, the lawyers have egg on their faces and struggle to hide the facts by lawful means.

Telling the truth about the state of policing in the United Kingdom is not a popular pastime among politicians or often politically driven senior officers. Recent cases in the courts and statements in the Houses of Parliament seem to suggest that there is some movement to turn this around.

In late January a High Court ruling declared that the Police Federation broke the law to silence elected officers. The Police Federation was set up over 100 years ago to be the sole representation for officers up the rank of Inspector. Over the years some of its official statements, beliefs and actions have called its probity into question but it has somehow survived.

At times it has been difficult for PAN to get a straight answer out of its media department. One of the major complaints from the rank-and-file police aviators has been a lack of representation from the Police Federation which is led by officers that are both removed from day-to-day policing duties and given greatly enhanced salaries. They have long been seen as having a greater affiliation with politicians, civil servants and the NPCC (nee ACPO) than the members they represent.

In the latest development Rick Prior and Richard Cooke were "purged" for voicing the concerns of thousands of their members because the views they expressed were not acceptable by the hierarchy of the Federation. Now, a devastating High Court ruling has exposed a culture of illegal censorship on their part. There is nothing particularly new about the poor representation of the Police Federation it was a regularly voiced complaint 40-50 years ago.

Spain is putting one of its old EC135s on public display somewhere. EC-IKX (c/n 0222) is now painted as EC-UAP in the new Policia scheme and carries the bogus code "Angel 091" on the tail. 091 - Spanish Emergency number and UAP - 'Unidad Aérea de la Policía', the Police Air Unit of the Spanish National Police Corps. There is a photo of it here on a low loader waiting for adding to the as yet unknown plinth <https://www.jetphotos.com/photo/12002282> It is noteworthy that the 135 is younger than some of the EC135T2s in the everyday UK police fleet.



From time-to-time PAN has warned its readership about the dangers of 'numerous' drones watching over them with malevolent intent. Well, it seems it is simply getting worse.

A total of 22,580 drones illuminated the night sky over Hefei, east China's Anhui Province, during the 2026 Spring Festival Gala, creating a breathtaking fusion of tradition and cutting-edge technology.

A massive fleet of GD4.0 formation drones operated by EHang's subsidiary, EHang Egret, rose above the main stage. The resulting display was all very pretty as the drones formed intricate 3D animations to set a new Guinness World Record for the "most multicopter/drones airborne simultaneously from a single computer."

The performance looked great but what if the lights had been extinguished and replaced a more lethal concoction? It really does not bear thinking about.

Next month marks the 30th Anniversary of *Police Aviation News* (PAN) with edition 360 of the regular editions produced – plus a couple of dozen extra special editions and I suspect that fact may be mentioned!



I am not sure how we got here or why but it has been a great journey.



Within the pages of PAN has been the continuing history of Police Aviation the free to download PDF book to be found on the PAN websites. Someday someone might stitch that story up to the 1990s to some of the content of PAN... there again they may not!

Along the way PAN has posted stories that have taken airborne policing from the era of the officer standing on a milk crate in order to see over a fence to the point where drones, aircraft and helicopters now perform that task by flying far higher (but at much greater cost).

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MIGRATION

SPAIN: The Canary Islands saw irregular immigration in small boats (pateras) fall by over 60% in 2025, according to figures released by the Spanish Ministry of the Interior.

Some 17,778 people in 216 boats were intercepted in the Atlantic Ocean waters around the islands, this being a massive decrease on the 692 boats and 46,893 in 2024. The figures in 2024 dwarfed those reported by the nearly 37,000 arriving uninvited in the United Kingdom.

Last year the people arriving in the UK by boat more than doubled the figure of those arriving in the Canaries and was higher than the total figure of boat arrivals in Spain (32,925). The UN figures suggest that drownings on the route fell by half to an estimated 416 from more than double that in 2024.

The small boat arrivals in the Canaries are almost all from the African nations such as Gambia, Mauretania, Senegal and Morocco where those crossing the English Channel come from such as Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Syria. [Lanzerote Gazette]

UNITED KINGDOM CHANNEL UPDATE - *COASTGUARD RESPONSE*

The adverse weather in the UK in the first two months of 2026, included 4 named storms, Goretta, Ingrid, Chandra and Pedro, which brought strong winds, serious flooding and, in some areas, significant falls of snow. This adverse weather also impacted in the flow of illegal migrants crossing the English Channel in large, unseaworthy inflatable boats each carrying 60 passengers, or more. Nevertheless, by the end of February the annual total for 2026 had already exceeded 2,200.

AN UNWELCOME ACCOLADE

The media were quick to point out that since forming the Labour government in July 2024 and despite numerous sound bites, including 'stop the boats' and 'smash the gangs', Sir Keir Starmer had, on the 9 February 2026, gained a new, an unwelcome accolade. The record for the greatest number of illegal migrants, 65,922, crossing the English Channel during the tenure of any British Prime Minister since the first migrants crossed the Channel in 1818. The following day, the 10 February, a day with good weather with light winds, a further 322 illegal migrants were landed at Dover from 5 boats by the UK Border Force, an average of 64 migrants per boat.

During a period of good weather, with a light breeze of 10 knots or less, a large, grossly overloaded inflatable boat, full of young men, without lifejackets, crosses the English Channel with impunity, assisted by the French Maritime Gendarmerie and the UK Border Force.



A NEW PLAN

The January 2026 edition of 'Police Aviation News' carried the article, 'Channel Report - A New Year, A New Focus', with a set of recommendation to, once and for all, close the irregular cross-Channel route to illegal migration. There were 4 recommendations:

1. Form a unified Search and Rescue Region (SRR) in the English Channel with Belgium, France and the United Kingdom.
2. Establish a joint rescue coordination centre at Cap Gris-Nez, or at Dover.
3. Agree that all large, unseaworthy inflatable boats, those carrying illegal migrants and without qualified crew are, de facto, in distress and their passengers must be rescued at the earliest opportunity, in Belgium, or French waters.
4. Those vessels currently used by the UK Border Force to 'rescue' illegal migrants before transporting them from mid-Channel to Dover should, in the future, be operated by HM Coastguard as a clearly identifiable search and rescue asset, used to rescue migrants in the proposed English Channel SRR.

In an earlier letter the UK Home Office (Department of the Interior) stated:

"Any first responders, whether or not the Royal Navy, Border Force, or any other force duly coordinated by Maritime & Coastguard Agency [HM Coastguard] are bound by international maritime law, particularly the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) convention and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). These require mariners to assist any vessel in distress regardless of the occupants legal status. Most migrant boats are small, overcrowded and unseaworthy - thus legally considered 'in distress'.

COASTGUARD RESPONSE

More recently, on the 9 February, the Deputy Chief Coastguard - Channel Operations, John Craig responded in writing to the article, 'Channel Report - New Year, New Focus'.



Department
for Transport

Deputy Chief Coastguard –
Channel Operations
HM Coastguard

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Dear Squadron Leader Cowan MBE

Thank you for your correspondence of 5th January 2026 to Keir Mather MP, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport, and for your recommendations relating to the coordination of Small Boat Search and Rescue operations in the Channel, which has been passed to me to respond to on behalf of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency.

While I will allow the Home Office to respond to the recommendations you made in your associated correspondence to the Home Secretary separately, I can confirm that—notwithstanding the fact that the vessels Defender, Hurricane, Ranger, Typhoon and Volunteer have historically been contracted by the Home Office in relation to Border Security—their primary role is conducting Search and Rescue (SAR) under the coordination of HM Coastguard, as saving lives is always given the highest priority. Changing the contract from one HM Government Department to another would make no practical difference to the delivery of SAR operations.

I must point out, however, that it is incorrect to state that “[HM Coastguard contracting rescue vessels] would, under the international rules for saving lives at sea, permit these vessel to be used to rescue migrants as soon as these unseaworthy vessels enter deep water and before they cross the shipping lanes” as, firstly, every Coastal State is obliged to coordinate SAR within its own clearly defined Search and Rescue Region (SRR) and, secondly, until such time as the occupants declare themselves to be in distress, neither the French Coastguard nor HM Coastguard is able to conduct any form of rescue operation without the compliance of those in the Small Boat, as to do so would endanger the lives of those onboard more than the current system of 'shadowing' vessels until they are willing to accept rescue.

I hope that the above will reassure you that HM Coastguard and all those involved in rescuing people in distress in the Channel are complying with international law and continuing to act to preserve life.

Yours sincerely,

John Craig

Deputy Chief Coastguard – Channel Operations
HM Coastguard



The fact is that, apart from the volunteers of the Coastguard Rescue Service, those who conduct cliff and beach rescues, the primary duty of HM Coastguard is to provide a rescue coordination service with others, principally the national lifeboat service, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) carrying out rescues at sea. Those aircraft in Coastguard livery, search and rescue helicopters, together with a smaller number of maritime patrol aircraft, are flown on contract by aircrew employed by the aviation companies, the Bristow Group and 2Excel Aviation.

A Diamond DA62 maritime patrol aircraft in HM Coastguard livery. These aircraft patrol the whole of the English Channel between the coast of Kent and the beaches of northern France, patrolling the territorial waters of both France and the UK.

Mr Craig is quick to point out that HM Coastguard's primary function is that of Search and Rescue (SAR) coordination. In his view, the role of those Border Force vessels based in Kent, at Ramsgate, is SAR, rather than border security, despite the fact that each of the 5 vessels is clearly marked, 'Border Force'. Moreover, he avoids the recommendation of a single, unified Search and Rescue Region (SRR) in the English Channel, together with a joint rescue coordination centre in either France, at Cap Gris-Nez, or in the UK, at Dover.

It would seem that Mr Craig, together with his Coastguard colleagues, are of the opinion that a person can only be 'rescued' if they declare themselves to be in distress. Whilst this may be true of a professional mariner, or even a recreational sailor, the situation in the English Channel is quite different. This is a criminal operation facilitated by organised criminal groups with the sole purpose of making a profit from those that can afford to 'game' the system. First, setting sail from a beach in northern France in a grossly overcrowded inflatable boat, the same boats in which migrants have been crushed to death, with just sufficient fuel to reach the middle of the Channel, the UK border. These illegal migrants then use a mobile 'phone to request transport, transport provided by the UK Border Force, or by the RNLI, to complete their journey to 'Shangri-La'. Clearly, this operation is well outside the accepted, the international definition of search and rescue.

Do we now have to wait for more horrific accidents like the one that occurred in November 2021 when the loss of 31 lives, together with those other, more recent accidents that have also claimed lives in French waters? This 'avoidable accident' was attributed, by the Chairman of the subsequent inquiry, Sir Ross Cranston, to the people smugglers who supplied the unsafe inflatable vessel, together with flaws in HM Coastguard's search and rescue response which, together, contributed to the "deadliest incident of its kind" on record. Any response must be tailored to address these particular circumstances. Many will agree that in these circumstances the illegal migrants must be rescued at the earliest opportunity and before their boats enter the busiest shipping lane in the world, the Strait of Dover.

The deadliest incident of its kind on record, in November 2021, was attributed to the people smugglers, who provided the unsafe inflatable vessel, and flaws in HM Coastguard's search and rescue response. ©AFP



CONCLUSION

More of the same, more migrants crossing the English Channel in large, grossly overloaded, unseaworthy inflatable boats, escorted by the French Maritime Gendarmerie before being transported to the UK by the Border Force will not be tolerated indefinitely. Apart from the economic burden to the UK economy, estimated to be up to £6billion per annum with some £4.7million per day spent on accommodation alone, there is a significant impact on social cohesion in both the UK and in France.

Moreover, it's grossly unfair that the volunteers of the UK's lifeboat service, the RNLI should become embroiled in a criminal enterprise and, as a consequence, suffer from reputational damage. This is the consequence of responding to requests, from HM Coastguard, to provide additional transport for illegal migrants, those 'rescued' in mid-Channel before being taken to Dover. As a result the lifeboat rescue service is now regarded by some as a 'taxi service'! The RNLI is funded by charitable donations. Reputational damage is the precursor to a loss of income.

Although new legislation, including the '*Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Act 2025*', to bear down on those migrants who have no right to be in the UK, is very welcome, there are many, in both the UK and in France who are now demanding more direct action in the English Channel. How else will this irregular migration route be closed and how else will the squalid migrant camps in northern France be closed too?

The present approach by the UK Border Force, using a large maritime patrol aircraft, a deHavilland Dash 8, to patrol mid-Channel, along the median line, with Border Force vessels waiting mid-Channel, to make a rendezvous, to transfer illegal migrants from their large inflatable boats, before transporting them to the UK, to the Port of Dover, is a sham. The public knows this, the Government knows it too. In the absence of any better ideas HM Coastguard must now step up to the mark and coordinate a quick response as soon as it's reported that the large inflatable boats, those carrying illegal migrants, have left the beaches of northern France and are heading towards the UK. Doing so with their own rescue vessels, vessels identified with HM Coastguard markings, would demonstrate to the world that this is a search and rescue operation and that those migrants at risk are being rescued at the earliest opportunity, to save their lives.

James A Cowan MBE

Note: The author is a former member of the Royal Air Force where he flew maritime patrol aircraft, aircraft that were also used for search and rescue duties. He is also a former police and a former air ambulance pilot.

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24-26 March 2026 APSA Safety Seminar, Jacksonville, Florida, USA. Check out the details on the APSA website. www.publicsafetyaviation.org

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27-29 May 2026 PAVCon Europe, Malaga, Spain.

Working with their partners and site hosts, [World Aviation Aerial Services](http://WorldAviationAerialServices.com). The PAVCon Europe team are finalizing details of the 2026 event. This will be held at a small, private, GA airport near Malaga. Further updates and booking forms will appear on the usual website at www.pavconeurope.eu soon. Block the dates in your diary now and register your interest in attending the event either as a member of the emergency services community, an individual attendee, and for more information about sponsorship and exhibiting at the show. Please share this announcement with your colleagues and other industry partners. Málaga is a busy airport (especially around the end of May), it is suggested that would be attendees book flights as soon as possible to avoid having to travel to another airport. **The Networking Continues**



13-17 July 2026 APSCON 2026, the 55th annual conference & expo, to be held in Fort. Lauderdale, Florida, USA. [APSA] www.publicsafetyaviation.org

20-24 July 2026 Farnborough International Air Show Every two years, the aerospace, aviation and defence industries are invited to Farnborough International Exhibition & Conference Centre for the world's best airshow. Providing unparalleled opportunities to build new connections, engage with thought leaders and pioneer change. Contact Show Centre, ETPS Road, Farnborough, GU14 6FD +44 1252 532800 enquiries@farnborough.com <https://www.farnboroughairshow.com>



Save the date

**ANNUAL CONFERENCE AND
AWARDS OF EXCELLENCE**

Thursday 3rd December 2026

03 | 12 | 26

Telford International Centre
St Quentin Gate
TF3 4DE