

# Airbus tanker proves its worth

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DESPITE being in service for only a year, the RAAF's Airbus KC-30A Multi-Role Tanker Transport is already demonstrating prowess as an air refuelling tanker and strategic airlifter.

Refuelling testing with Australia's F/A-18A/B Classic Hornet fleet is now almost complete and the declaration of an initial operating capability is on track for the end of the year.

Four of the five aircraft on order have been accepted by the commonwealth, although one is being retained by Airbus Military in Spain to conduct further software testing of the advanced Aerial Refuelling Boom System, which will allow the KC-30A to refuel Australia's Wedgetail, C-17A and, in the future, Joint Strike Fighters.

The ARBS system is one of two important systems still to be tested on the aircraft, the other being the Large Aircraft Infra-Red Countermeasures suite.

Both will begin testing across the next year, but the focus in the meantime will be to clear the RAAF's two squadrons of Super Hornets with the hose and drogue system now in use.

"The KC-30A has participated in exercises Pitch Black, Arnhem Thunder, Kakadu and High Sierra in the last 4½ months, almost an exercise a month, and in September we flew 71 sorties with two of the three aircraft delivered, over half of which were air to air refuelling missions," said Air Commodore Gary Martin, commander Air Lift Group. "We're heading towards our annual Airworthiness Board in November

and, from the write-ups we see, we're happy that we will declare an IOC by the end of December."

Between now and then, a second round of testing with the Classic Hornet will be undertaken to certify the hose and drogue system during full day and night operations, as well as the crossover times during dawn and dusk. The trials also will test the Hornet's ability to receive fuel at different weights and armament loads.

So far, the testing has gone exceedingly well. "We were quite cautious initially and ensured the experience of the Hornet pilots was very high, but now all squadron pilots are tanking off the aircraft," Air Commodore Martin said. "It's such a big aeroplane and the feedback is that it's the easiest aeroplane they've ever connected to. Out of the 50 per cent of the 71 sorties we flew last month, the AAR missions, we didn't have a single aircraft turn away from us."

The declaration of IOC will clear the KC-30A for the full range of AAR tasks with the Hornet and allow strategic airborne logistics support tasks, which have already taken the aircraft to Malaysia and Scotland in operational test and evaluation phase.

A dedicated KC-30A full flight mission simulator is now at Amberley and being used to train

crews, and all ground support equipment has been delivered.

The KC-30A is a large aircraft, able to carry 270 passengers and up to 26 LD3 cargo containers in the underfloor holds. Maximum fuel capacity is 111,000kg, all of which is usable as it doesn't need extra fuel tanks for AAR offload.

"This aircraft can take six fighters from Australia to the mainland United States happily," Air Commodore Martin said.

"Its loiter time and offload is almost twice that of a US Air Force KC-10A Extender."

However, it hasn't always been a smooth ride; the KC-30A program is about two years behind schedule and was placed on the government's projects of concern list in October 2010.

The latest delays centre on the ARBS system, following separation of the boom from the first Australian aircraft while under testing in Spain in January 2011.

"We asked for software modifications to control the way the boom was flown because we found there were shortfalls in the system," Air Commodore Martin said. "We are servicing the ARBS but not conducting any operations with the boom at this stage because of what we found out in that incident. ARBS testing will begin in 2013 after Airbus Military has installed and trialled the new hardware and software in Spain."

Airbus Military suffered the loss of another boom in flight in September, when the unit separated from an MRTT under flight test for the United Arab Emirates. Air Commodore Martin says that aircraft had a less-advanced version of the ARBS software than that in Australia's KC-30A.

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AIR COMMODORE MARTIN  
COMMANDER AIR LIFT GROUP



Taking on fuel mid-air greatly extends range and hours in the air