

# VAYU

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## *Aerospace & Defence Review*



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# Belgian Sea Kings



**58,000 hours of Koksijde Rescue**

**On 2 March 2016, the Belgian Air Force organised a Media Day to commemorate two Sea King milestones at the Koksijde air base: 58,000 flying hours and 3,185 SAR scrambles of Belgian Sea Kings, and 40 years in service of the Belgian Sea Kings. This report is filed for *Vayu*.**

**O**n 8 November 1976, five Westland Sea Kings Mk.48s flew from RNAS Culdrose in the UK to their new home base at Koksijde, to serve primarily as the main SAR helicopter type in the Belgian Air Force (*Belgische Luchtcomponent*). The tail numbers of the five Belgian Sea Kings are RS01, RS02, RS03, RS04, and RS05. Over the past 40 years, the five helicopters have accumulated a total of 58,000 flying among them,

serving with 40 Squadron of the Belgian AF. However, at the moment only three Sea Kings remain operational. RS01 left service and was flown to a museum in 2008, and RS03 was mothballed in 2013 in a hangar at Koksijde, although it can be made airworthy with 4-6 weeks of maintenance if needed. Today, Belgium's Sea Kings handle the country's SAR needs for 19 weeks in a year, while the remaining 33 weeks are handled by the type's successor, the NH90

Caiman. The Sea King will eventually be entirely replaced by the NH90 Caiman, but their final retirement depends on crew training and the remaining economical life of the airframes. 2018 has been mentioned as the type's final year of flying, but financial decisions may well change that.

Now that the UK has all but stopped Sea King operations, the Belgians anticipated that the Westland factories would cease production of spare parts. To assure spares



supplies, a retired yellow RAF SAR Sea King was flown to Koksijde in late 2015, to be cannibalised as needed. At the moment there are 2.5 Sea King crews available for flying duties, while training of future Sea King crews has been stopped in favour of the NH90.

### 58,000 Hours

Major (pilot) Peter Vandebroucke is a former commander of 40 Squadron, and will remain in service at the unit to lead the retirement of the Sea King in the next three years. He spoke about the large number of flight hours – just over 58,000 – accumulated by the small Belgian Sea King fleet. Of the original five helicopters, three helicopters are presently operational with 40 Squadron. RS01, with 10,585 hours in service with the Belgian Air Component, was phased out on 17 December 2008, and is now preserved at the Aviation Museum in Brussels. The helicopter flew to the museum, and the landing of its final flight took place on the

square in front of the museum in the centre of Brussels! The other non-operational Sea King is RS03, which has flown a total of 11,851 flying hours. This helicopter was taken out of service on 29 August 2013, and is currently in storage at Koksijde itself. RS03 is has not been formally written off yet, and is cocooned to preserve it in a near-airworthy condition. If necessary, this helicopter can be made ready to fly again after a comprehensive overhaul period of four to six weeks.

RS02 has the most flight hours of all the Belgian Sea Kings, at exactly 12,000, and is currently operational with 40 Squadron. The remaining two operational helicopters are RS04, with 11,950 flight hours, and RS05, with 11,623 flight hours. The latter is well-known on the European air show circuit, and sports a distinctive black colour scheme dating back to the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration of the Sea King, celebrated in 2001. However, RS05 will receive a new special scheme for the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorations later this year.

### Sea King Missions

For a small country with a relatively short coastline, the 40 Squadron conducts quite a large number of scrambles, although the frequency has been decreasing owing to fewer active fishing boats in the North Sea. Better safety and security measures at sea have also contributed to a reduction in heavy accidents. Over the years, the Belgian Sea Kings conducted 3,185 scrambles. These scrambles were flown by the different helicopters as follows: 523 times by RS01, 694 times by RS02, 618 times by RS03, 680 times by RS04 and finally 670 times by RS05. A total of 1,712 people were winched out of the water or from boats with hoists. Over 75 per cent of all scrambles took place for emergencies at sea, some 12 per cent over land, and another 12 per cent for Medevac. The Medevac mission consists not only of transporting people, but also transport of donor organs that need to be flown quickly to a hospital.

## The Future

Belgian Sea Kings, despite their age and reduced numbers, are currently assigned to SAR duties for about a third of the year (19 weeks). The rest of the year is handled by the new NH90 Caiman, which will eventually take over completely from the

celebrations of this milestone, a SAR Meet will be held at Koksijde air base later this year, bringing together many veterans of 40 Squadron, including the surviving members of the aircrews that flew over the first five Sea Kings from the UK in 1976. The SAR Meet will be organised from 10

to 14 October 2016, and will honour the 40th anniversary of the Sea King and the 45th anniversary of the Allouette III in Belgian service.

*Text and photos:  
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*The old .....*

Sea Kings in 2018. Withdrawal of the Sea King began in 2015, when the first pilots converted to the NH90, and further training for the Sea King fleet ceased. While the NH90 is qualified to take over all of Belgium's SAR responsibilities, the Sea Kings are kept airworthy with a small cadre of aircrew in order to provide the time required to train adequate numbers of new NH90 crews. There are currently five operational pilots flying the Sea King, translating to 2.5 crews available the type in Belgian service. The NH90, on the other hand, already has 4.5 crews qualified for operational duties.

## Commemoration

The year 2016 is the 75th anniversary of the Belgian Air Force, and as part of larger



*... and the new*