

PRESS RELEASE

NEW CONTRACT SEES MODIFICATION WORK START ON UK'S 'EXCALIBUR' COMBAT AIR FLIGHT TEST AIRCRAFT PROJECT

Following a successful initial design phase, a second Boeing 757 airframe has been purchased to be transformed into a flying combat air laboratory by UK-based SME 2Excel

Fairford, 14/07/2023 – Leonardo, the UK's defence electronics champion, has announced a contract from the UK Ministry of Defence worth around 134million euros (115 million pounds) that will launch the next stage of the Excalibur Flight Test Aircraft (FTA) project. The FTA will support the introduction into service of a new combat aircraft, which will be at the heart of the UK's Future Combat Air System (FCAS). This next generation fighter is being delivered for 2035 by the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP), an international collaboration between the UK, Italy and Japan.

The Excalibur project is a key part of FCAS, which will include the crewed fighter and a broader range of capabilities such as uncrewed aircraft, F-35, information systems and weapon systems. Central to the development of the crewed fighter is the FTA; a Boeing 757 aircraft that will be completely overhauled, turning it into a flying laboratory for combat air technology.

As a founding member of the UK's Tempest combat air partnership, Leonardo will primarily use the airliner to test new technologies being developed by the trilateral programme. The UK Tempest Partners, BAE Systems, Leonardo UK, Rolls Royce & MBDA, working together with the UK Ministry of Defence, are continuing to collaborate on a range of test and demonstration activities, including Excalibur, to enable the successful delivery of GCAP in the required programme timelines.

Phase one of the Excalibur project saw 2Excel conduct an engineering study into the 757 airframe to understand its construction in-depth, which entailed experts from UK industry taking the retired aircraft apart piece-by-piece. This was required so that the UK team would be able provide the appropriate regulatory evidence and design information to the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) and enable the second, modified aircraft to be certified for flight.

Having completed this phase of the project, the team has generated the knowledge required to undertake the modification of a second aircraft. That aircraft, a commercial jet bought from charter flight company Titan Airways, has already arrived at 2Excel's facility in Lasham, Hampshire, ready for engineering. The new contract will cover the physical modification of the 757, as well as flight tests, certification and the work required to secure approval from the CAA.

The Excalibur aircraft will be adapted to host integrated sensors, non-kinetic effects (ISANKE) and integrated communications systems (ICS) that Leonardo and its international partners are developing as part of GCAP. This aircraft is expected to fly with the new technology within the next three years, when on-board scientists and engineers will test the sensors and communications systems whilst in flight.

Andrew Howard, Director Future Combat Air/GCAP UK, Leonardo UK, said: "The Excalibur programme will help us to accelerate the development of advanced electronics for the ISANKE & ICS domain via early flight testing, which can take place in parallel with the wider development of the core platform. This will inject additional pace into the programme and support our ambitious goal to deliver a next generation combat aircraft by 2035."

Richard Berthon, Director Future Combat Air, UK MOD, said: "This contract is a major milestone for the FTA project and demonstrates our commitment in support of the UK Future Combat Air System. I'm excited that this work will enable us to test, in a live flying environment, some of the highly advanced technology that could feature on the aircraft being delivered by GCAP."

Chris Norton, Director and Excalibur programme lead at 2Excel Aviation, said: “2Excel is excited and proud to be playing its part in such a unique, cutting edge and nationally important project. Conceived by Leonardo in Bedfordshire and 2Excel in Northamptonshire, designed in Yorkshire and built in Hampshire, Excalibur is already contributing to the UK’s economic recovery, helping us to create more highly skilled and valuable jobs, including apprenticeships. It will promote national prosperity and technological leadership for many decades ahead.”

Leonardo is a leading global Aerospace, Defence and Security (AD&S) company. With 51,000 employees worldwide, it operates in the fields of Helicopters, Electronics, Aircraft, Cyber & Security and Space, and is a key partner in major international programmes including Eurofighter, NH-90, FREMM, GCAP and Eurodrone. Leonardo has significant industrial capabilities in Italy, the UK, Poland, the US and Israel and also operates through subsidiaries, joint ventures and stakes, including Leonardo DRS (80.9%), MBDA (25%), ATR (50%), Hensoldt (25.1%), Telespazio (67%), Thales Alenia Space (33%) and Avio (29.6%). Listed on the Milan Stock Exchange (LDO), Leonardo reported new orders of €17.3 billion in 2022, with an order backlog of €37.5 billion and consolidated revenues of €14.7 billion. The company is included in the MIB ESG index and has been part of the Dow Jones Sustainability Indices (DJSI) since 2010.

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