

# Cypriot gunships

The Cypriot National Guard's Mi-35 *Hind* and SA342 *Gazelle* attack helicopters are very rarely reported on. Dirk Jan de Ridder and Menso van Westrhenen visited what may well be the European Union's most exotic attack helicopter squadron – a unit that has never left national territory for operations or training exercises.

**B**y legend the birthplace of the Ancient Greek goddess of love, Aphrodite, Cyprus has been divided since 1974 when Turkey invaded the north in response to a military coup in Cyprus backed by the military-run Greek government. Today, Northern Cyprus is still occupied by Turkey and internationally is only recognised as a separate entity by Ankara. Separated from the north by a 'Green Line' patrolled by United Nations troops, the internationally recognised Republic of Cyprus covers the southern two-thirds of the island. Reunification talks continue to take place, but have made little progress.

## Cypriot 'Crocodiles'

Twelve Mi-35P *Hind-F* helicopters spearhead the Ethniki Frouará's (Cypriot National Guard's) air arm, the Kypríaki Stratoitiki Aeroporia (Cypriot Air Force). These aircraft entered service from August 2001 after pilots had received military training in Russia. As early as 1999, rumours had begun to emerge concerning a possible purchase of South African Rooivalk attack helicopters. A year later, the defence ministry switched its attention to Russia, after failing to close a deal with South Africa. The national

guard initially showed interest in the Ka-50, but a study concluded that the Mi-24 or Mi-28 would better suit its needs. American attack helicopters were never considered due to an arms embargo in force since the 1974 invasion. That embargo was partially lifted in 2015, but only for defensive weapons. One other, undisclosed European country allegedly offered to sell attack helicopters, before the Cypriot National Guard opted for the Mi-35P – an export designation for the Mi-24P. The presence of the *Hind* in Cyprus was initially kept secret until 2002 when the type appeared in a fly-past during a general's funeral. The squadron became fully operational the same year.

One Mi-35 crashed shortly after take-off in 2006, killing a Cypriot pilot and his Russian instructor. The remaining 11 helicopters form part of the second platoon of the 450 Mira Elikopteron (450 ME/P) based at Andreas Papandreou near Paphos, the only air base still operated by the Cypriot National Guard. At any time, around four examples are normally airworthy. All 11 were overhauled by the 419 Aviatsionny Remontny Zavod (ARZ, Aircraft Repair Plant) at Saint Petersburg in Russia during 2014. When they returned to Cyprus, they had been repainted in a light desert camouflage scheme, in stark contrast with the overall dark grey colours in which they were originally delivered.

## Gazelle force

The Cypriot Air Force's SA342L1 Gazelles were transferred to the 450 ME/P in 2010



Above: A pair of Mi-35Ps on a training flight near Paphos. Today, Andreas Papandreou air base is the only active station operated by the Cypriot Air Force. Left: A Mi-35 front-seater in his 'office'. All photos Dirk Jan de Ridder and Menso van Westrhenen unless stated Inset: Cypriot Mi-35 crews use the callsign 'Panther'. James Lawrence



Mi-35P serial 814 armed with a 20-round pod for S-8KOM rockets on the wing's inner weapon station. The inner station is used only for these weapons, while the outer hardpoints can accommodate any of the available stores, including rocket pods.

when their former squadron – based in Nicosia, the capital of Cyprus – was disbanded. With this, all airborne attack assets of the national guard were brought together. A total of six Gazelles had been purchased in 1987 and were delivered from the following year. Four examples remain in service with the first platoon in their original three-tone desert camouflage colour scheme. The helicopter can carry up to three passengers, but is mainly used as an anti-tank asset.

When Gazelles and *Hinds* work together, the Gazelles usually fly in front. Their small size and low noise profile make them very hard to detect, especially at treetop level. The SA342L1's only armament is the HOT 3 wire-guided anti-tank missile, up to four of which can be carried. This weapon can penetrate 51in (1,300mm) of steel at a maximum range of 2.7 miles (4.3km). In contrast, the Mi-35's 9M120 Ataka (AT-9 *Spiral-2*) anti-tank missile can be launched from a distance up to 3.6 miles (5.8km) from the target and is able to penetrate 31in (800mm) of steel.

Whereas the Gazelle is a specialised anti-armour attack helicopter, the Mi-35 has various

means of prosecuting other types of targets. This includes the fixed 30mm cannon mounted on the right-hand side, which the Mi-35 pilots praise for its precision and destructiveness, but it can be supplemented by 23mm cannon pods under the wings. Both guns carry up to 250 rounds and have a range of up to 1.2 miles (2,000m). Up to four rocket pods each containing 20 80mm (3.15in) calibre S-8KOM rockets can also be carried under the wings, or four 240mm (9.45in) calibre S-24B rockets with a fragmentation radius of 1,312ft (400m). Typically, the Cypriot National Guard equips its *Hinds* with S-8 rockets or nothing at all on the inner wing hardpoint and 9M120 missiles or any other type of armament on the outer stations. The Mi-35P can also accommodate up to eight armed soldiers, making it the Cypriot National Guard's largest (and, in practical terms, only) tactical transport helicopter. This enables them to support special operations or carry out combat search and rescue (CSAR) missions. For survivability in combat, crews rely on heat shields for the exhausts, a radar warning receiver, flare

dispensers and armour-protected cockpits. On the other hand, the Mi-35 lacks a forward-looking infrared camera or fire-control radar and cannot share its tactical picture with other helicopters or ground troops in real time.

### Pilot training

New pilots join the squadron after completing pilot training in Greece, the country's main ally. Their syllabus is identical to that of any Hellenic Air Force fighter pilot, including more than 100 hours on the T-2 Buckeye jet. The tactical aspects taught in fast jet training are considered indispensable, even when they continue as a helicopter pilot. They then join the 450 ME/P for flying training on the Gazelle and to gain experience in the anti-tank role. Some pilots initially fly the Bell 206L-3 before progressing to the Gazelle. Pilots remain operational on the Gazelle for several years, before ultimately converting to the *Hind*.

The squadron's pilots describe their role as mostly defensive, as an attack against the Turkish-backed north would be more or less pointless.



Right: A Mi-35P starting up for a night flight – these take place every two weeks for crew training. The helicopter's main rotor is equipped with rotor tip lights. Inset: The Gazelle crews use the callsign 'Scorpios' (Scorpion), named after the type's former squadron. James Lawrence  
Left: SA342L1 Gazelle 355 parked on the ramp at Andreas Papandreou air base. This is the first rotary-wing type flown by new attack helicopter pilots after they complete training on the T-2 Buckeye with the Hellenic Air Force.

The *Cyprus Mail*, the country's largest English-language newspaper, described it fittingly: "People, although they may occasionally get carried away by media-generated military hype, are pragmatic enough to know that the national guard, regardless of how much it invested in arms, could never be a match for the second largest standing military force in NATO."

The squadron's official mission is to conduct defensive, offensive and special operations near or behind enemy lines. Pilots continuously practise destroying or neutralising armoured and non-armoured targets. During *AFM*'s two-day visit, two Mi-35s with rocket pods attached flew both in the morning and afternoon or night. 'Hot' crew changes (crew swaps with engines running) took place an hour into every flight. This enabled eight pilots to fly for an hour each day. Meanwhile, the Gazelles were grounded for a short period due to a shortage of spare parts.

In October last year, it came to light that the entire Mi-35 fleet had also been grounded for several months after they failed to appear at the annual military parade in Nicosia. This was also due to a lack of spares, probably caused by Cyprus freezing the bank accounts of Rosoboronexport, Russia's defence export agency, in the wake of American and EU sanctions. The Mi-35s were back in the air by early November, when two examples took part in Exercise Dynamic Fist 2018 between November 5-10. These annual manoeuvres are



In Cypriot National Guard service, the 'Hind' is normally operated by a crew of three. The Mi-35P can also accommodate up to eight fully equipped troops.

intended to examine how the national guard's aerial, land and maritime forces deal with conventional and asymmetric threats. Cyprus also regularly hosts international exercises with Greece and Israel. Hellenic Army AH-64 Apaches and CH-47 Chinooks deployed to Andreas Papandreou in October last year. An annual counterterrorism exercise with Israeli Air Force aircraft, helicopters and special forces units has also taken place in Cyprus since 2016.

### Future of the fleet

The Mi-35 has a lifespan of 25 years, meaning it can remain operational until 2026 with just one more overhaul. An experienced Gazelle pilot told *AFM* he did not currently see any urgency to convert to the Mi-35 as plans are beginning to emerge to replace both the Gazelles and *Hinds* with a new attack helicopter. This could potentially happen when the Mi-35s are due for their next overhaul, around 2021 – a process which is considered to be very expensive.

On the other hand, there's no doubt that purchasing a new helicopter will also be costly and it's questionable that Cyprus has the budget for it.

The country's defence spending has remained fairly steady in recent years, but more and more of the budget is required to cover increasing payroll costs. This year, the total defence budget will be over €350m, but expenditure on equipment will only amount to €52m, down from €77m last year. Until a new attack helicopter fleet becomes reality, it's up to the 450 ME/P to present such a threat that its northern neighbour will never consider a renewed offensive on the island. *AFM*



A member of the 'Hind' rear crew keeps a close eye on the proximity of a lake surface during overwater operations. The Cypriot Mi-35P's landing gear cannot be retracted.

