Boeing Sikorsky Comanche Posts Robust Month of Flight Test

The Boeing Sikorsky RAH-66 Comanche flight test team completed a record level of activity during March 1999. During that time, 20 operations were recorded, an average of nearly one per weekday at the Comanche Team's Experimental Flight Test Facility in West Palm Beach, Fl.

According to Comanche Team officials, prototype No. 1 flew seven times in March, and prototype No. 2 flew once, its first flight. Comanche prototype No. 1 had accumulated 137 flight hours in 122 flights by month's end. The prototype performed its first flight on Jan. 4, 1996, and has completed more than three-quarters of assigned tasks, focusing on handling qualities and flight controls. Most recently, prototype No. 1 has been evaluating a new main rotor pylon design and other modifications to reduce minor empennage buffeting during flight. The Comanche Team will conduct several more test flights to determine an optimal configuration for smooth performance, primarily to ensure maximum crew comfort during flight.

Prototype No. 2's first flight was a success and enabled the flight crew to evaluate flight controls at up to 80 knots, the maximum air speed currently permitted on the aircraft. Both test pilots commented that prototype No. 2 performed as expected and handled extremely well. The second prototype will be used primarily to evaluate the Comanche's integrated targeting, navigation and communication system, known as the Mission Equipment Package (MEP).

In addition to the flights, the test team completed 12 instrumented ground runs, divided about equally between prototype Nos. 1 and 2. These operations enable flight test engineers to evaluate a variety of system responses while the rotorcrafts' dynamic components are functioning at various power levels.

"Our test schedule has been rigorous, but we are achieving good results and addressing issues as they arise," said Comanche Team Flight Test Director C. L. "Hutch" Hutchinson. "We have not encountered a single show-stopper in what we believe to be one of, if not the most efficient and productive flight test program in recent history. We have accomplished a great deal with just two prototypes, the majority of which involved only one new aircraft. Our team has good reason to be proud of this outcome."

The RAH-66 Comanche, the U.S. Army's 21st century combat helicopter, is being developed by U.S. Army Aviation and a team of leading aerospace companies headed by Boeing and Sikorsky Aircraft Corp., a subsidiary of United Technologies Corp.

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