

EUROPE

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Eurofighter release to service still a national responsibility

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Eurofighter partner nations are still striving to establish a common four-nation safety-clearance process to smooth the entry into service of future frontline variants of the Typhoon multirole fighter aircraft.

According to UK Royal Air Force (RAF) sources, it has not been possible to formally bring together the four military-release-to-service processes yet because of differing legal requirements in the UK, Germany, Italy and Spain.

"Every nation and service is operating to a different set of rules to formally accept aircraft as safe to fly," said a senior RAF source. "We recognise that this work is complementary and the work of the individual nations is coalescing towards a generic release to service. We are not there yet but it is still our aspiration."

The difficulties in establishing a common certification regime for the aircraft's acceptance into service emerged as a result of the leaking of a Military Aircraft Release (MAR) report commissioned by the UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) from research company QinetiQ's test centre at Boscombe Down. The MoD contracted QinetiQ to undertake the MAR work in August 2003 as part of a three-year effort to support the Typhoon's entry into RAF service.

RAF sources told *JDW* that the UK had the most stringent safety requirements of the four partner nations, so the report was a significant boost to efforts to ensure the safety of the Typhoon fleet. The officer stressed that the safety issues identified in the QinetiQ report only referred to the RAF's 10 Batch 1 Typhoon T.1 two-seat aircraft and this was only an "initial release". All future aircraft and variants would have to undergo further stringent release-to-service trials and testing, he said.

According to Eurofighter spokesman Ian Bustin, the clearance process will have to be undertaken throughout the life of the aircraft as new equipment and software are introduced.

The UK MoD said that, as a result of the report, "the Typhoon was modified, processes were reviewed and limitations applied to ensure the aircraft was ready for RAF service. There is no reason for this to impact on operational service".

In its report, QinetiQ identified safety issues related to the Typhoon's low-speed recovery system, its utilities control system computer and landing gear computer. The RAF did not consider these problems to be insurmountable and cleared the 10 aircraft in question for UK service on 13 May 2004.

Bustin said certification work was continuing across the four partner nations to meet their different legal requirements. Much of the clearance work had to be undertaken on a collaborative basis because not every partner nation had development, initial production and serial production aircraft equipped or configured to the same standard.

Nations therefore had to accept reports on clearance trials conducted by other nations and include them in their own process, said Bustin, who maintained that close links between the four national test communities has ensured a high level of confidence between the partners. "It is ridiculous to say aircraft are going to drop out of the sky because of this," he said, highlighting the role of the company's weapon system support centre in Munich in rapidly sharing flight-critical information between the partner nations.

Bustin stressed that the adoption of a national certification process did not mean the common configuration of the aircraft was being lost. "The customer air forces are setting different standards on how they may use the aircraft, but the aircraft's build and software standard will remain the same. That is a fundamental," he said.

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