



SAUDI ARAMCO AVIATION: A PIONEER PAST AND A PROMISING FUTURE - ROTOR-WING OPERATIONS

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Around the clock in the skies over the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, helicopters are being flown on and offshore. This shuttling of passengers from land to sea and back again is part of the nonstop 24/7 activities of the Saudi Aramco Aviation Department’s rotor-wing operations. Offshore oil fields, along with the requisite need for operators to run the drilling barges and offshore platforms and ships, present one of the most operationally intensive parts of aviation in the Kingdom. This job takes highly skilled pilots with the ability to navigate and eventually focus on that small spot in the Arabian Gulf, no matter if it is night or day.

These types of operations started when the first platforms were erected in the Arabian Gulf with the exception that boats were used to shuttle employees back and forth. Boats turned out to be much slower and, with heavy waves and changing weather conditions, sometimes needed to stop working during rough seas. With the first helicopter fleet of Bell 206s and 212s, Saudi Aramco was able to begin moving people with much greater speed and with more frequency. Even when inclement weather stopped or slowed operations, when the weather cleared it was found to be easier and much faster to recover personnel using helicopters. While boats are still used in large numbers to transport materials and cargo, the helicopter proved itself to be a priceless investment.

Today, the primary helicopter of the fleet is the Agusta AW139. Each of the 18 aircraft in the fleet is capable of carrying as many as 12 passengers, and these helicopters work around the clock to deliver Company personnel and contractors to drilling barges and offshore platforms, jacking rigs, and other offshore sites. The helicopters also have hoist capabilities, which enable them to lower harbor pilots onto ships entering port. Additionally, Saudi Aramco operates a fleet of six smaller Agusta A109E helicopters. While these helicopters serve the same purpose as the AW139, their smaller size permits them to land in smaller-sized platforms that the AW139 is too big to use. Both fleets are operated out of the two main helicopter bases at Ras Tanura and Tanajib. Soon to enter into service with Saudi Aramco is a fleet of Airbus 145 helicopters that will replace the Agusta A109E. Equipped with the latest technology and capable of landing on ships, this new addition will give the Company a new level of capability and efficiency.

Rotor-wing operations also have two special purpose missions: medevac and search and rescue. The medevac configuration incorporates the same LifePort Air Medical sled configuration as that used in fixed wing. This capability is critical, especially when talking about the need for a fast medical response on a drilling barge or offshore platform in the Arabian Gulf. The quick configuration change capability means it can be readied in a very short time and dispatched anywhere. There are also helicopters equipped with search and rescue capabilities. Using Night Vision Goggles (NVG) and Forward Looking InfraRed (FLIR) pods, the AW139 is transformed into a valuable tool in special search missions should the need arise. In emergency situations, Saudi Aramco has the ability to provide a lifeline for those in need of rescue. In the past, Saudi Aramco Aviation has performed searches for missing persons and transported critically injured vehicle accident victims to medical facilities. As an integral part of Saudi Aramco Aviation, rotor-wing operations have served not only as a valuable part of the team but also as a part of the wider community.

Meanwhile, in the maintenance hangars, the technicians are always hard at work inspecting the helicopters and ensuring they are ready for service. The harsh desert and salt water environments that the helicopters are exposed to on a daily basis are grueling and require that much extra attention is paid to ensure safe operations. As an FAA Certificated Repair Station, Saudi Aramco Aviation performs everything from simple line maintenance all the way up to the super intense heavy checks where the aircraft is stripped to a basic shell, inspected, and put back together again. All of this looks very daunting to the untrained eye. However, at this repair station, it is routine. While most of the maintenance technicians are Saudi nationals, a contingent of expatriate Company employees and contractors bring expertise that they pass on to the next generation. While the majority of maintenance and inspections are performed at the Tanajib base, the Ras Tanura base is also used to supplement the inspection activities.

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