

LOCKHEED VENTURE LIFTS OFF WITH LOI FOR 12 HYBRID AIRSHIPS

News / Manufacturer



Lockheed Martin's decade of development work on hybrid airships large enough to carry the payload of a C-130J has finally led to a signed commitment from a UK-based customer.

Straightline Aviation was registered in 2015 as an airship service provider and plans to acquire 12 of the helium-buoyed aircraft through Lockheed's LMH-1 reseller Hybrid Enterprises for "approximately \$480 million".

"We are delighted to be first in line with this magnificent aircraft that is going to dramatically change the way cargo is moved around the world," says Straightline chief executive and co-founder Mike Kendrick in a statement. "The clear-cut economic and environmental advantages of these Hybrids are attracting vast amounts of attention from a wide range of potential end users."

Derived from the tri-hull Lockheed P-791, which first flew in January 2006 under the US Army's defunct long-endurance multi-intelligence (LEMV) programme, the airship will enter commercial service in 2018.

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Lockheed P-791 first flight on January 31, 2006

Lockheed Martin

Lockheed retains the original P-791 at its Skunk Works facility in Palmdale. It is a scaled-down, 40% version of the commercial variant.

The first production-representative model is already under construction and will undergo FAA certification in 2017 for delivery in 2018, Hybrid Enterprises chief commercial officer Brian Bauer told Flightglobal earlier this month.

The full-scale version is designed to lift 21t (47,000lbs) including up to 19 passengers over 1,400nm at speeds of 60kt. It's powered by four 350hp trust-vectoring propulsion units built by Continental. Unlike a blimp or tethered aerostat, it uses aerodynamic lift and buoyancy to rise and a three-duct air cushion landing system allows it to launch, land and hold on most surfaces.

“That takeoff and landing can be any surface: water, ice, snow, a glacier, sand, mud, swamp,” says Bauer, who says the primary market is for transport to remote oil, gas and mining stations. “In the final bit of that landing area, it needs to have obstacles that are under 1m.”

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Hybrid Airship

Lockheed Martin

Hybrid Enterprises chief executive Rob Binns says LMH-1 represents a revolution in remote cargo delivery. “Having an experienced team such as SLA recognise the Hybrid Airship’s potential by signing the LOI solidifies the demand for this new mode of transportation,” he says in 30 March statement.

The hybrid airship was born of a boom in US military interest in lighter-than-air vehicles, with 15 programmes launched and more than \$7 billion spent from 2007 to 2012. But interest in airships for reconnaissance and transport missions, as well as funding, dropped off in 2013. Lockheed’s concept originally lost to Northrop Grumman’s HAV-3, now known as the Airlander 10, which was transferred to the UK following the programme’s cancellation in 2013. Hybrid Air Vehicles is now

building a larger version named Airlander 50 because of its 50t carrying capacity.

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