

# SZOLNOK HELICOPTER BÁZIS

ARTICLE BY BRAM MARIJNISSEN,  
PETER DE VOS AND RENÉ SLEEGERS



## HISTORY

Szolnok, also known as Szolnok-Rákóczi falva, was the more important of the two airfields during World War II compared to the Szolnok-Szandai airfield, which is closer to the city and was only used by the German Air Force as an alternative airfield during the Balkan campaign. Szolnok-Rákóczi falva was an operational base for Hungarian fighter aircraft during the war. The 1st Group of the 1st Fighter Regiment was located there from 1940 to around May 1944 and, for a shorter period, the 1st Independent Hunting Group "Horthy István" was added in the spring of 1942. In 1944, the German Air Force only used the airfield as a base for flying reserve units. From February to August 1944, this included the V group of Kampfgeschwader 53 (V./KG 53) and in August of that year, the IV. Group of Kampfgeschwader 55 (IV./KG 55). The He

111 stationed there were the target of an American B-24 bomber attack by the Fifteenth Air Force on 20 August 1944. The Russian Army captured the base and Szolnok became a Russian medical base for injured soldiers in 1944.

Until 1973, there was no Hungarian Army Aviation Command. The Hungarian tactical reconnaissance, cargo, and courier air units were subordinate to the Air Defense Command in peacetime. From 1964 to 1965, the pilot school at Szolnok airfield received 18 new L-29 *Delfin* trainer aircraft. The school's other two squadrons used the MiG-15bis 'Fagot-B' for advanced training. In the early seventies, the 101st Reconnaissance Air Regiment was formed at Szolnok. All aircraft of the pilot school remained in the squadrons but the task of the squadrons changed. In the late seventies, the MiGs left Szolnok and only the

L-29 *Delfins* stayed at the base. In 1984, the old L-29 *Delfin* reconnaissance aircraft were scrapped.

When the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991, Hungary declared itself independent. In the early 90s, the 89. Vegyes Szállító Repülő Ezred, a mixed transport regiment with one squadron equipped with the An-26 *Curl* transport aircraft and two squadrons with Mi-8S and Mi-8T helicopters was based at Szolnok airfield. At Szentkirályszabadja airfield, the 87. 'Bakony' Herchihelikopter Ezred was based with two squadrons Mi-24D and Mi-24Vs, one squadron with Mi-8T helicopters, and one squadron with Mi-17 transport and a small number of special mission equipped Mi-17PP helicopters. At Börgönd airfield, the 'Asboth Oszkár' helicopter regiment with the Mi-2 helicopters was based.

During the 90s, a lot changed within the Hungarian Air Force and Börgönd airfield was the first base that closed. The Mi-2s transferred to Szolnok. Followed by Szentkirályszabadja a few years later all the Mi-8s, Mi-17s, and Mi-24s also transferred to Szolnok airbase. The An-26 *Curl* transport aircraft from Szolnok AB transferred to Kecskemét AB. From that moment, the unit was renamed MH 86. Szolnok Helicopter Ezred. During the years, the Mi-2s and most Mi-8s, Mi-17s, and Mi-24s were withdrawn from use. An Air Academy was established within the Hungarian Air Force for which twelve Yak-52s were bought from Romania and based at Szolnok AB but on paper, they were based at Kecskemét Air Base. Those Yaks were replaced by Zlin training aircraft not too long ago. Next to the Yaks, twenty L-39ZOs were bought from former East Germany and also based at Kecskemét

A Mi-24P *Hind* and two H145M helicopters are ready for take-off from the FARP (Forward Air Refueling Point) at the Bakony range.

# AS350B2 Écureuil





AB. In 2018, Szolnok AB was completely renewed due to the delivery of new helicopters and more training aircraft.

#### PRESENT

Today, Szolnok AB is home to MH 86. 'Szolnok' Helicopter Ezred with two flying battalions and one squadron. The first one is 1. Szállító Helikopter Zászlóalj which are flying with the Mi-17s and H145s. The other one is Phoenix Attack Helicopter Battalion and they are flying with the Mi-24P/Vs. A third squadron is also operating at Szolnok AB as a "trainer" squadron, flying the AS350s helicopter, the four-seat Zlin 143s and the two-seat Zlin 242s aircraft.

Currently, only a handful of Mi-17s are operational for Search and Rescue (SAR) duties. As new helicopters are being acquired, within a few years, these aging Russian-made helicopters will be withdrawn from service like the Mi-8s have been in 2021. The other Russian-made helicopters, the Mi-24P and V, are still operational after they received extensive maintenance in Russia in 2017 and 2019. Six Mi-24s, former (East) German Air Force helicopters, which have been stored for many years at Szentkiralyzabadja AB are still operational as Mi-24Ps. Next to those six attack helicopters, another two Mi-24Vs are still operational. All eight Mi-24s were completely overhauled and upgraded in Russia.

On 18 November 2019, a new era began with the delivery of the first two Airbus Helicopters H145Ms to MH 86. Helicopter Base. A total of twenty H145Ms

were ordered and the last two were delivered at the end of 2021. With the "HForce" Modular Weapon System, the H145Ms can be configured as attack helicopter. This system allows the helicopter to be armed with 70 mm rockets, a 12.7mm machine gun, or a 20mm gun. A total of five H145Ms can be equipped with the above at the same time, and all the equipment fits on all twenty helicopters. Besides armament, the helicopters also received a missile protection package, a fast roping system, an electronic countermeasures system, and an electro-optical targeting camera. The H145Ms are used for HForce, Transport, and VIP tasks.

#### TRAINING

The basic military training takes place in Budapest and lasts two years. After passing the basic military training, basic flying training begins at Szolnok AB. The first part of the training is on the Zlin single-engine propeller aircraft. The next step is flying the Eurocopter AS350 *Ecureuil*, followed by the Airbus Helicopters H145. In this final part of the flight training, the decision is made as to which helicopter the student is best qualified for. During basic flying training, which also lasts two years, the student pilot accumulates about 200 flight hours with these three types. In total, it takes about four years from the beginning of the basic military training for the student pilot to earn her/his wings to fly helicopters.

**Left** Four-seat Zlin 143LSI *Genius* trainer aircraft. **Right:** The instructor pilot and his female student are performing the pre-flight check of their Zlin 242L prior to another training flight



# ZLIN 242L





1



2



3



4

#### MAINTENANCE

At Szolnok AB, for the H145M operational and intermediate-level maintenance is performed, and continuing airworthiness management organization services (CAMO) are included. Also, scheduled, periodical inspection/maintenance at 1,000 flying hours of the Mi-24 and 2,000 flying hours of the Mi-17 is done there too.

Heavy maintenance for the helicopters is done at different places: The Airbus Helicopters H145M go to the Airbus Helicopters factory at Donauwörth, Germany, the Mi-24s – they had their heavy maintenance in Russia between 2017 and 2019 – and Mi-17s will go to Russia. The only problem with the Russian-made helicopters is getting spare parts from Russia. That is why the Mi-8s aren't flying anymore because they need spare parts. LOM Praha in Czechia can also deliver spare parts but then, the warranties from Russia will expire.

#### SEARCH AND RESCUE (SAR) DUTY

The Hungarian Air Force is using the Mi-17s for SAR tasks and there is one Mi-17 at Szolnok AB and one Mi-17 at Papá AB 7/24 stand-by. On a SAR mission, the crew of a Mi-17 is seven people: pilot, co-pilot, mechanic, flight engineer, medic, and two paratroopers, depending on the mission.

#### FUTURE

At the end of 2016, the Hungarian Government

launched the ambitious "Zrinyi 2026" modernization program and since then, much has changed within the Hungarian Air Force. Six Mi-24Ps and two Mi-24Vs were overhauled in Russia. Twenty H145Ms, two Zlin Z 143s, and six Zlin 242Ls were delivered in the past few years. Also, sixteen Airbus Helicopters H225Ms with the HForce modular weapon system have been ordered. The first H225M should be delivered in 2023 to MH 86. Szolnok AB. The tasks of the H225Ms are special operations, transport, and search and rescue (SAR). With the delivery of all these helicopters, the end is near for the Mi-17s and Mi-24s. There is also the need for extra hangar space or modernization of the existing hangars. For advanced training, the Hungarian Government is considering the L-39NG or the Embraer EMB314 *Super Tucano*, but it is unknown whether they will be based at SzolnokAB or Kecskemét AB.

#### There are various configurations of the HM145

- 1, 3 The helicopter in a clean configuration is used for standard transport tasks.
- 2 The attack configuration comprises an electro optical/infrared sensor and an 12 x 68/70 mm unguided rocket launcher.
- 3 With an installed hoist and stretchers the H145M can perform search and rescue missions.



### EXERCISE BREAK THROUGH 2021

Exercise BREAK THROUGH 2021 took place at the Bakony range just north of the former Hungarian airbase Szentkiralyzabadja. This range is 200 square kilometers in size. It is also used by the JAS39 *Gripen*s for live bombing. Four Mi-24s, eight H145Ms, and one Mi-17 took part in this exercise. In addition, one Mi-17 was on standby for SAR. A FARP (Forward Air Refueling Point) has been established at the Bakony range, which served to refuel the helicopters and as a launching point for missions in the training area. After the mission, the helicopters landed back at the FARP for debriefing. Overnight, the helicopters were parked at Papá Air Force Base. This

exercise was a realistic training and firing exercise to improve cooperation with Hungarian land forces. It was also the first time the H145M took part in such an exercise, so the Hungarian air force could get to know the H145M better.

These two H145M are in transport configuration and not armed.



An Mi-17 landing at the FARP after having it s mission completed.

Mi-17N HIP





This Mi-17 has three pylons mounted to be used e.g. for rocket pods on a tubular support structure on either side of the fuselage. The port side pylons have a guard to prevent parachutes snagging them during paratrooper operations.



Mi-17Ns and a Mi-24P coming in to land. The Mi-24 is ex-GDR.





Two Mi-24P *Hinds* just took off for a training mission. The helicopters are carrying a B-8V20 rocket pod on either side. This rocket pod can hold 20 rounds of unguided 80mm S-8 rockets.