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A Dragon's Farewell

Austria retired its Draken fleet in October 2005



WERNER HARVARTH

A six-ship formation remains flying in the Austrian air force Dragon fleet. The rest of the airworthy Saabs are parked at Zeltweg, awaiting a final destination.



VINCE MOORE

A line of spectators awaiting their turn to bid farewell to the Austrian air force Saab Draken at Vienna's Imperial Palace. The jet was trucked in for static display.



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“Draken Knight” Hubert Strimitzer in the comfort of the J-350’s cockpit. Not only does he have more than 1,000 hours in type, but he was also selected to perform with three different Austrian flight demonstration teams.

Just one day after the official 50th anniversary of the Saab Draken (Dragon) debut, a farewell fly-by of the world’s last operational Draken squadron occurred over Vienna, Austria. Saving the best for last, the Austrian *Fliegerdivision* (air force) trailed its fleet of Saab Drakens behind a massive 100-aircraft flight.

Right: Austrian air force J-350 Saab Dragon retracting landing gear after takeoff. Note the wing-mounted pylons for American-made AIM-9P5 Side-winder air-to-air missiles.



When passing overhead the Hofburg palace and an estimated one million viewers, the unique fighters lit their afterburners in unison, then split apart the last, great Draken formation. The sentimental crowd of mostly Austrians bid farewell to its retiring Dragons with cheers and hollers, and a standing ovation.

In the symbolic gesture performed by the world’s last operator of the Draken, we pay tribute to an interceptor that when first rolled out was in a class of its own. And because of its special attributes, the Saab Draken has continued operational use for half a century—nearly twice the lifespan of most fighters.

Built by the Swedish company Saab, the Draken (Dragon) was known in the fighter community because of its unusual double-delta wing design. Extraordinary for its time, this aerodynamic marvel allowed the sleek interceptor to accelerate to twice the speed of sound, yet land and stop on snowy countryside highways in less than 3,000 feet (2,100 feet with a braking parachute!).

The first prototype Saab 35 rolled

off the assembly line in October 1955. Designed to meet strict *Flygvapnet* requirements of extreme reliability and versatility, the Dragon was regarded as one of the best interceptors of its time. Although its primary mission required it to be fast and have good climbing performance, later it demonstrated good dogfighting capabilities as well. Produced in increasingly more powerful and capable versions for the Swedish air force, including two-seat (SK-35C) and photo reconnaissance (S-35E) versions, the Draken was purchased by neighboring countries. By 1969, a total of 606 aircraft had been built.

Export Drakens

The *Flygvapnet*’s successful interceptor did not go unnoticed by foreign air forces. More than half a dozen countries worldwide considered its purchase, and in its 50 years of dedicated service, four countries purchased the Draken as a front-line tactical aircraft.

In 1968, the Danish government selected the J-35 for its own



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air force. Three versions were purchased: the F-35 strike fighter, TF-35 two-seat trainer, and an RF-35 photo reconnaissance fighter. These export versions were greatly modified to adapt to changing doctrine. They were structurally strengthened for an increased fuel capacity, received beefier landing gear, had larger outer wing panels, and included a runway arresting hook. The Danes purchased a total of 51 Drakens to replace F-100D Super Sabres and RF-84F Thunderflashes. Danish Draken service ended in 1993.

Finland, also Sweden's neighbor, began flying Saab Drakens in 1972. Purchased for interceptor and fighter-bomber roles, the 48 aircraft served Finland well into the 21st century. Its last Draken flew in August 2000.

The Austrian air force was the final recipient of the stalwart fighter. It is fitting that an air force with such an interesting recent history should so gallantly fly the double-delta jet. Although the Fliegerdivision will be as advanced as any air force in Europe when it receives the

EFA-2000 Eurofighter, it had humble beginnings.

The Fliegerdivision was re-created in 1955 when the country was granted full sovereignty by Russia, France, and the United States. Soon thereafter, the former Soviet Union provided Yak-11 Moose and Yak-18 Maxes as gifts to the new air force. Formal pilot training began in March 1957 in Piper PA-18s. Within two years, under the Military Assistance Program, Austria purchased seven L-19Es, six DHC-2 Beavers, 10 LT-6G Texans, and 17 Bell H-13Hs for the sum of \$1. This was the foundation of its air force.

Today, the Fliegerdivision is composed of SA-316 Alouettes, OH-58B Kiowas, AB-206 and -212 Hueys, S-70A Blackhawks, PC-6s, PC-7s, C-130Ks, Saab 105s, F-5E Tigers (leased from the Swiss air force), and the venerable J-35 Drakens.

It was not until 1987 that Austria began taking delivery of 24 ex-Swedish air force J-35Ds. Given the designation of "J-35O," where the "O" stands for Oesterreich (Austria), they had bulged canopies, RWR (ra-

dar warning receivers), twin 30-mm Aden cannons, and chaff-flare dispensers. The Austrians converted Dragon airspeed indicators to knots (versus kilometers per hour) and altimeters to feet above sea level (versus meters). Later, they painted their Draken fleet in two-tone air superiority gray camouflage.

With a length of 50 feet and a wingspan of only 31 feet, the J-35O has a 17,660-pound-thrust Volvo Flygmotor afterburning turbojet. A respectable 16,660-pound empty weight gives it enough of a thrust-to-weight ratio to climb at 34,500 feet per minute. Surpassing most other fighters of its period, the Draken has a service ceiling of 65,000 feet.

The J-35Os were used primarily as interceptors; however, reconnaissance missions were flown as well, using bottom-slung reconnaissance pods. These squadrons were based at Graz-Thalerhof and Zeltweg.

With an increase of airspace intransigence during the Balkan conflict of the early 1990s, it was evident that cannons alone were insufficient armament for successful air defense purposes. Austrian parliament recognized this and, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, granted the air force permission to purchase, and use, air-to-air weapons. After a brief use of surplus Swedish Sidewinders, AIM-9P5 Sidewinder missiles were bought from the United States. All interceptor pilots now practice live firings in the ranges of Sweden.

Because Draken flight training was part of the purchase agreement, no two-seaters were acquired. Training was provided in Sweden in the two-seat Draken variant and in simulators. The seven-and-a-half-month program was mostly at Angelholm, south Sweden, provided by the Fourth Division, F/10 training squadron. Once the initial training in Sweden was completed, different training was provided in Austria.

Flying the Dragon

What is it like to fly a hot jet fighter plane that's half a cen-



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J-350 “Oesterreich 996” in Austrian flag paint scheme zooms low over the Zeltweg airfield. This is one of two Draken bases in Austria.



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With brake parachute use, the J-350 can stop in as little as 2,100 feet of runway.

tury old? Hubert Strimitzer, a retired Austrian air force Draken pilot, longingly commented, “The Draken has always been a special airplane . . .” With more than 11,000 hours logged in airplanes, and more than 1,000 of those spent zooming around in the Dragon, he knows what he’s talking about.

Picked to fly in Austria’s first operational Draken squadron, Strimitzer has also flown with several flight demonstration teams, including the prestigious Silver Birds and Karo As (Diamond team). Most impressively, he was handpicked at the refined age of 47 years to *begin* flying the macho machine. Today, when we are looking at the end of the Austrian air force’s Draken career, Strimitzer still shows no signs of slowing down.

Strimitzer recounted some of the unforgettable moments in the double-delta airplane: “I was scared one day when a young wingman whom I was dogfighting ‘super-stalled’ his Draken and fell out of the sky.” Because the Saab Draken is tailless, it

has a unique feature of deep stalling, where, during the stall, the plane pitches back and forth with ever-increasing oscillations until there is little flow of air over the elevons. This, then, makes it impossible to recover without a spin-recovery parachute. An unconventional stall recovery technique must be executed precisely and promptly or the stall becomes unrecoverable. The pilot then must eject to safety.

“I watched him go down and further down until I lost sight of him.” The sadness in his face was still evident. He continued, “Moments later, I heard him on the radio, and then I spotted him. He was still alive!” Strimitzer sighed with relief.

Another time, he had been scrambled to take off, then radar-vectored to intercept unknown approaching aircraft. It was no drill. Closing in quickly on the bogies, he recognized the aircraft in the flight of two. “I pulled alongside the planes. They were American—an F-16 and an A-10.” The two U.S. combat planes

were taking a shortcut from Germany to the Balkans. There had been no flight plan or warning; therefore, he escorted them across the country.

How does the Draken stack up against the current generation of fighters? Strimitzer answered the question carefully, “A pilot has to know how to fight in the Draken.” More precisely: “This airplane fights like any delta-winged fighter. At high speeds, it is very quick, and with the low wing loading, it out-turns many planes.” He spoke of beating F-5 Tigers repeatedly in that speed regime. Then he conceded, “But if you get in slow flight, the induced drag is too great and the plane quickly loses energy. Then it’s too hard to get speed and acceleration up again.”

During an exercise against British aircraft, he remembered, “The British expected the old Draken to be easy prey.” His face brightened, “But the Harrier pilots we fought were very surprised at the capabilities of the Saab!”

Of the original 24 Austrian Saab Drakens, only seven remain flying. The others are parked on the ramp at Zeltweg. There have been many requests for the decommissioned Dragons. In fact, more than there are airplanes left in inventory. The Fliegerdivision is undecided as to their fate.

Once the Austrian Fliegerdivision Drakens are withdrawn from service, the National Test Pilot School in Mojave, California, will be the largest operator of the Saab fighters in the world. Although it owns six ex-Danish air force Drakens, it is reported that only two are still actively flying.

The Saab Draken’s lease on life runs out at the end of this year. Only a handful of them will then exist, but in civilian hands. In the following years, maybe one, or two, will be displayed at air shows. We can only hope. But for a million or so spectators in Vienna, October 26, 2005, was the day of the most glorious farewell to the 50-year-old gallant Dragon. The Austrians did it right! 