

FIGHTER TRAINING THE ITALIAN WAY

Visit Amendola's AMX fighters

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Situated near Gargano Peninsula is a plain and very windy area around the town Foggia. Somehow situated like it is separated from the rest of Italia this special area can give you the feeling of being in a outpost. In fact this in summer hot area has enough pleasure life in villages at nearby Adriatic coast. Between Foggia and Gargano mountains is Amendola located. Italy's second largest airbase.

Just some 15 kilometres from Amendola you can find the village of San Giovanni Retondo where the holy Padre Pio lived. Already devoted by airman in world war 2 you can trace this man everywhere around. It isn't a surprise that Padre Pio is a patron to Airfield workers. The legend is that this man saved local people from enemy aerial attacks. Multiple air raids were not enough to hit his village. They say that his protection caused the failure of the bombs not to fall on the targets in the town.

Starting with the OCU

Today Amendola is a operational field with AMX aircraft based only and a Predator UAV squadron. Organised within 32 Stormo (wing) is the 13 Gruppo (squadron) and 101 OCU (Operational Conversion Unit) with AMX and 28 Gruppo with the Predator. Pilots come here to specialize in offensive missions on the AMX.

When you start to fly on the AMX you have already finished 27 missions of a pre flight course on the Aermacchi MB-339 at the jet flying school / 61 Stormo at Lecce.

From here a choice will be made after judging the qualities of the pilot for a further career. This can be either on the Typhoon at Grosetto, the Tornado at Ghedi, the F-16 at Tucson/Trapani or an AMX squadron. When your destiny is with the AMX you won't shift to another type and your operational life can be at 4 bases. These bases are Istrana, Rivolto, Villafranca and Amendola, the latter as a primary base to start.

Amendola is well suited for training courses housing the OCU with the AMX-T trainer version. The AMX-T can train every war mission. After 67 missions (approximately 90 hrs of jet aircraft) the pilot reaches limited combat readiness.

Training on different aspects

In mission blocks the skills of the pilot will be made more effective. In the course are the next subjects; transitional period, night flying, instrumental flying, basic navigation, air-to-air basic fighter manoeuvres, introduction to combat manoeuvres, air-to-air refuelling and introduction to tactical missions/advanced combat missions.

Initial parts of the course starts in the AMX-T with an instructor in the back. After progress is made at some point the pilot starts with solo flights and later on learns things like how to be a wing man and how to behave in formation flying. There is an availability for 2-6 pilots twice a year in a 26 weeks period. Of all 5 operational AMX

OCU goes twice a year a couple of weeks to Decimomannu (“Deci”) on Sardinia to offer the students practice at the shooting range. However, no bullet will be fired from a canon, or a bomb will be dropped since there is no life-firing. The range is only in use for simulated attacks. For this purpose special dummy’s are available to simulate ballistics etc. If a pilot wants to serve at the OCU itself he can continue with an instructor course to be qualified as a tactical instructor for pilots.

Operational Capability

The AMX is a fighter bomber aircraft with medium capacities. The aircraft is easy to learn for basic flying and in many pilots opinion flying is really convenient. The cockpit is fitted with HUD and MFC head down but not every control button is on the stick. In combat action the pilot is fairly busy to handle every aspect in the game. Concentration is divided between flight controls, Electronic Counter Measures (ECM), Radar Warning (RWR), Early Warning (EW), etc. Normally the AMX carries conventional Mk.82, Mk.83 or Mk.84 bombs and rocket pods with unguided rockets, but during the last days of Allied Force over Serbia and Kosovo involved AMX fighters carried Laser Guided Bombs (LGB).. These were to be designated by a Forward Air Controller (FAC) or another flying platform with laser designator like the Tornado or A-10. The speed is transonic (mach 0,98) due to lack of an afterburner on the engine. For self defence 2 infrared homing AIM-9L Sidewinders can be taken at the wingtips. A Vulcan gun is fitted for both air-to-ground offensive or air-to-air defensive capability.

Air raids on Kosovo and Serbia

The primary task of fighter bomber attack missions (FBA) became some years ago during the Bosnia and Kosovo crisis suddenly very actual. Operations with AMX aircraft to end the Bosnia war were from individual bases but during the Kosovo crisis and in operation Allied Force AMX aircraft and personnel of all squadrons were concentrated at Amendola. The Airfield was heavily involved in the air raids hosting aircraft of other NATO countries. It was a very intense period sometimes with a complete occupied ramp. Fighters for tactical missions, air defence, reconnaissance and transport aircraft were active every day. The main attack force was besides the AMX fleet a complete squadron of Dutch F-16AM. These aircraft from different Klu. squadrons on rotation carried out combat air patrols (CAP) above Bosnia and Kosovo and flew together with the AMX offensive sorties during the Allied Force air campaign. The AMX flew strike missions only at daytime however take off and taking fuel could be done in the dark while the F-16’s were active during night hours or early

very hard. Everybody had to study the rules of engagement to avoid mistakes or confusion. During the missions you are too busy with your work to think about danger. Later on when you are back on the base you might feel the tension and have a few drinks at the bar but in the same time others went with their family to a pick nick or a swimming pool. How to react on the tension is for everybody different.

Perspective today

To develop tactics, pilots of the 13 Gruppo and the 101 OCU which are the most experienced at the AMX join international exercises. Two years ago they were present at Red Flag on Nellis AB and reached pretty good results. Such exercises are to check your level at some specific scenario's and feels like graduating for an examination. You try your tactics and you can see where you are. To the pilots the Tactical Leader Ship for Pilots (TLP) at Florennes in Belgium is more challenging. The TLP is much more a learning course. In Dennis opinion this course is very valuable "They really teach you". As many pilots as possible are sent to Florennes to participate and not only AMX pilots. At this moment at the OCU is a tactics officer who studied tactics at the Warfare School at Firenze. He is one of the most experienced pilots, also on other types. His job is to adept tactics to the AMX learned from other types like introducing F-16 tactics for example. There are possibilities to exchange as a pilot to other squadrons and types of the Aeronautica Militare and for those to seek more qualifying there are "Package Commander Courses", "Weaponing Courses" or "Electronic Warfare Courses" in Firenze. For the pilots operating the predator UAV there is the chance of keeping up flight hours with the so-called little training squadron using an MB-339A and a NH-500 and a S-208M This aircraft are also to be used in liaison flights or transporting the base commander. There is little activity of Predators at Amendola today. Most of them are at Tallil AB in Iraq momentarily so the visit was concerning aircraft only. The AMX had a memorial fact recently in reaching over 12.000 flying hours with 8 pilots on 4 jets being the best AMX T4 ship ever. With a comfortable large base, learning courses and a modern AMX maintenance facility Amendola is well supplemented. Amendola provides enough objectives to have a good career and to stay enthusiastic with your Job.

Dutch Aviation Support

Wim Das & Kees Otten.