KC-30A returns from Spain after comms upgrade

Robert Dougherty

A US Globemaster prepares to receive fuel from a RAAF KC-30A MRTT during Global Dexterity 23-2. (Defence, Senior Airman Makensie Cooper)

The first KC-30A multi-role transport tanker (MRTT) has returned from Spain where it was upgraded with new cyber and comms technology.

The aircraft is based on a heavily modified Airbus A330 airliner and undertakes air-to-air refuelling and strategic airlift duties. Australia has seven, which are operated by No. 33 Squadron and based at RAAF Base Amberley in Queensland.

The new upgrades, undertaken via a two-year Heavy Air Lift Systems Program Office (HALSPO) process, include secure high-frequency and very high-frequency radios, encryption devices, and tactical data link enhancements under the Crypto Remediation Project.

The upgrades are expected to allow safer and more efficient communication and improve command, control and situational awareness, as well as increase KC-30A data throughput by 300 per cent.

Officer Commanding 86 Wing Group Captain Brent Taylor said the boost in combat air mobility capability represents the opportunity for better integration and operations with other Defence or allied aircraft.

“The modernisation and system upgrades will ensure the RAAF KC-30A fleet can better integrate with other Defence aircraft and those of our coalition partner forces,” Group Captain Taylor said.

The remainder of the Royal Australian Air Force KC-30A fleet is scheduled to receive the upgrades by 2025, with the modifications being undertaken by Northrop

Grumman Australia in Brisbane.

HALSPO project management unit director Noorin Popat said the project harnessed expertise and skills across the KC-30A enterprise.

“Success required effective collaboration between HALSPO, other Air Force agencies, Airbus Defence and Space, Northrop Grumman Australia, CAE and others,” Popat said.

“CRP has delivered on the Defence Strategic Review’s directive of ‘speed to capability’.”

The KC-30A MRTT is fitted with two forms of air-to-air refuelling systems: an advanced refuelling boom system mounted on the tail of the aircraft and a pair of all-electric refuelling pods under each wing. These systems are controlled by an air refuelling operator in the cockpit, who can view refuelling on 2D and 3D screens.

More than 100 tonnes of fuel can be transferred by the aircraft to F/A-18A/B Hornets, F/A-18F Super Hornets, E/A-18G Growlers, E-7A Wedgetails, C-17A Globemaster III, P-8A and other KC-30As.

Officer Commanding HALSPO Group Captain Russell Barton said the biggest challenge the project overcame was integrating and adapting US technology to a European platform.

“CRP has leveraged HALSPO’s longstanding industry partnerships and ensures the capability is relevant, reliable and state-of-the-art to stand the test of time,” he said.

“I’m proud of the feat of acquisition CRP has accomplished.”