T-6A and M-346A aircraft in formation, representing the progression from basic to advanced fast-jet training at HIFTC.

The Hellenic International Flight Training Centre

A Strategic Enabler of NATO Air Power

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Pilot training has become a strategic determinant of combat air power. The technology of warfare has advanced rapidly, but training systems have not always evolved at a commensurate pace with modern aircraft systems. In contested airspace shaped by sophisticated Integrated Air Defence Systems (IADS), pressure in the electromagnetic spectrum (EMS), and integrated cyber- and space-enabled effects, the decisive factor is no longer the aircraft alone. Air forces must generate pilots capable of operating effectively in multi-domain, sensor-rich, and electronically contested environments. Pilot training, once viewed primarily as a national responsibility for producing sufficient aircrew, now has direct implications for Alliance

NATO Flight Training Europe (NFTE) provides a multinational framework for improving pilot training capacity, standardisation, and interoperability across the Alliance. Here, T-6A aircraft fly during formation training, developing core airmanship and handlingskills in Phase 2 at HIFTC.

readiness, interoperability, and combat credibility. Throughput, standardisation, and interoperability directly influence how rapidly NATO can generate credible combat air power.

This operational shift has increased the strategic relevance of the Hellenic International Flight Training Centre (HIFTC) at the 120 Air Training Wing (ATW) in Kalamata. It has evolved from a national training hub into an asset of Alliance-wide training relevance. On 3 April 2025, the NATO Flight Training Europe (NFTE) Steering Board formally certified the 120 ATW as a Pilot Training Centre during its 11th meeting in Cagliari, Sardinia. Today, the 120 ATW delivers the full spectrum of undergraduate and advanced fast-jet training. Phase 2 pilot candidates train on the T-6A Texan II before transitioning into Phase 3 and Phase 4 advanced and Lead-In Fighter Training on the M-346A. This flying training is supported by a Ground-Based Training System (GBTS), which includes simulators, mission-planning tools, computer-based instruction, and debriefing systems that allow students to rehearse, analyse, and refine tactical performance before and after flight. Together, these elements create an integrated, fighter-relevant training pipeline aligned with contemporary operational requirements across all training phases.

From National Asset to Strategic Infrastructure

The 120 ATW has long been a cornerstone of the Hellenic Air Force (HAF) pilot training system. The introduction of the T-6A in the early 2000s modernised basic training, while advanced jet training had relied on the T-2E Buckeye for decades. As fleet numbers declined and legacy aircraft aged, the transition away

The M-346A provides advanced fast-jet training at 120 ATW, bridging basic training and operational fighter employment.

from the T-2E offered an opportunity for more than a platform replacement. It enabled a shift from traditional 'stick-and-rudder' pilot training toward preparing aircrew to operate modern weapons systems in complex combat environments.

Kalamata's location supports that evolution. Consistently favourable weather conditions reduce disruption and improve syllabus predictability, offering an advantage for nations seeking reliable schedules and stable throughput. In practical terms, predictable flying days matter because capacity shortfalls often emerge not from single-point failures, but from cumulative training delays across a pipeline.

Training for the Realities of Modern Air Combat

Fourth- and fifth-generation platforms increase the cognitive demand placed on pilots. Modern air combat requires early mastery of sensor fusion, information management, and tactical decision-making under time pressure. Training systems that delay exposure to this complexity risk transferring the burden to frontline units. The Hellenic Air Force addresses this requirement by focusing on two critical elements of the training system: people and equipment.

The quality of the instructor cadre is central to the effectiveness of the training pipeline. At Kalamata, serving HAF officers with fighter aircraft backgrounds deliver instruction in the M-346, bringing a current operational perspective into the simulator, cockpit, and debrief. This human dimension ensures that advanced platforms and synthetic tools produce consistent, fighter-relevant learning outcomes rather than mere technical familiarity.

'Training capacity is no longer merely a domestic matter; it is a shared enabler of Alliance deterrence.'

If instructors provide the operational logic of the training system, the M-346 and its associated synthetic environment provide the means to apply it at the required level of tactical realism. The M-346 Block 5+ provides a credible bridge between basic flight training and operational fighter employment. Its avionics architecture and cockpit design replicate core logic elements of modern combat aircraft, enabling trainees to practise mission-system management as well as flight manoeuvring. The focus shifts from 'how to fly' to 'how to manage combat effects' within a system-of-systems

M-346A Full Mission Simulator.

environment. At the 120 ATW, advanced phases of the M-346A are delivered through a validated syllabus supported by integrated training devices, all assessed against NATO standards. Live flying and the live, virtual, and constructive (LVC) environment generate tactical complexity by combining live aircraft, simulators, and synthetic threats or entities within a common training scenario. This allows live sorties to interact with virtual adversaries, surface threats, and supporting assets, expanding realism while preserving cost-efficiency and safety. For air forces with limited access to dedicated adversary aircraft or expansive training airspace, such synthetic integration significantly increases training depth and flexibility.

Synthetic Training as Core Capability

Modern air forces no longer treat simulation as a mere supplement. The integration of fifth-generation aircraft and advanced munitions and sensors requires the flexibility that the synthetic environment provides. Training at Kalamata introduces complexity progressively, so that pilots build systems knowledge, procedural discipline, and tactical coordination in a deliberate learning progression.

Computer-Based Training (CBT) reinforces systems knowledge. Simulator-Based Training (SBT) enables procedural and multi-ship practice. High-fidelity Full Mission Simulators (FMS) rehearse complex tactical coordination between crews. These capabilities operate as layers within a single, coherent training architecture. The GBTS supports the M-346A syllabus through classroom instruction, computer-based learning, simulator training, and mission preparation. The Mission Planning and Debriefing System (MPDS) ensures continuity between design and outcome.

Synthetic training in the M-346A is not limited to ground-based tools, but is also integrated into live flying to build tactical competence in the live environment. Its Embedded Tactical Training System (ETTS), an on-board training capability of the aircraft, allows

High-fidelity Full Mission Simulators provide realistic mission rehearsal while enhancing crew coordination and operational readiness.

selected tactical events, simulated sensors, weapons, and computer-generated threats to be represented during the sortie. This gives students a more demanding training environment without requiring every aircraft, emitter, or threat system to be physically present in the airspace. Recorded data can then be used during the debrief to compare performance with the planned training objectives.

The HIFTC can therefore reserve live flying hours for tasks requiring the physical environment, while replicating more demanding scenarios earlier in training than was previously acceptable. The outcome is not simply cost efficiency; it is a more effective and more consistent training pipeline, an essential feature in an era of increasing pilot demand.

Integration into NATO Flight Training Europe

The integration of the HIFTC into the NFTE framework is more than an expansion of NATO's training capacity; it represents an Alliance-level effort to evolve how NATO generates combat-ready pilots. NFTE addresses fragmentation in pilot training across the Alliance by increasing capacity while improving interoperability and standardisation. Accreditation of the 120 ATW as an NFTE campus confirms compliance with NATO standards for safety, infrastructure, and instructional quality. More importantly, it positions Kalamata as a node within a networked training architecture rather than as a stand-alone national facility.

Across the Alliance, European air forces are modernising their combat fleets with advanced platforms such as the F-35, Eurofighter, Rafale, and upgraded F-16 variants. This increases the demand for high-quality pilot training at a time when many national training systems face structural constraints. Within this environment, a scalable campus inside the NFTE network provides resilience, surge capacity, and strategic depth. Training capacity is no longer merely a domestic matter; it is a shared enabler of Alliance deterrence.

Interoperability as a Training Output

The strategic value of the HIFTC extends beyond technical pilot production. By training multinational cohorts under a common syllabus and instructional culture, the model embeds interoperability from the earliest stages. Pilots who share mission-planning processes, debriefing standards, and tactical logic require less adaptation when integrated into combined formations. Interoperability becomes a reflex rather than a corrective measure applied later during operational service. In an era of multinational air policing, integrated air defence, and coalition expeditionary operations, such early convergence is a critical instrument for strengthening Alliance cohesion.

A Scalable Platform for the Future

The HIFTC was designed with expansion in mind. Additional aircraft, expanded simulator capacity, and scalable instructional architecture together create the basis for higher training output without altering the underlying training philosophy. In the near term, this scalability primarily supports growth in undergraduate and advanced fast-jet training. Over time, however, deeper networking with other European synthetic training nodes could enable more advanced forms of distributed mission rehearsal and multinational scenario-based training without requiring large-scale

deployments. Such developments would reinforce standardisation not only doctrinally, but also practically. For NATO, this scalability matters. Rising demand for qualified aircrew coincides with fiscal pressures and force-structure adaptation. A resilient, expandable training node in Southern Europe strengthens long-term force generation planning.

Conclusion

The HIFTC represents more than a national modernisation effort. It is a strategic contribution to NATO's collective air power ecosystem. Built upon the heritage of the 120 ATW, the centre integrates an advanced training fleet, and a comprehensive synthetic training architecture within the NFTE framework. Its favourable operating environment, high availability rates, and fighter-relevant instructional design create a training system aligned with the demands of contemporary air warfare. As the operational environment becomes increasingly multi-domain and data-driven, the HIFTC demonstrates how national initiative, Allied cooperation, and technological integration can converge to produce interoperable mission-ready aircrew. In doing so, it contributes not only to Greece's national defence transformation, but to the collective readiness, and credibility of NATO air power in the decades ahead. ●

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Major General Marios Bantouvas is the Commander of the Hellenic Air Training Command (HATC), where he is responsible for the selection, training, and education of Hellenic Air Force personnel. He graduated from the Hellenic Air Force Academy in 1990 as a Second Lieutenant and has since completed a broad range of operational, instructional, and joint professional military education, including the Supreme Joint War College, Joint and Operational Electronic Warfare courses, and advanced instructor and command training. Throughout his career, he has held senior command and staff appointments across the Hellenic Air Force, with a strong focus on air defence, training, and personnel policy. His assignments include Director of the HAF General Staff Training Directorate, Director of the HAF General Staff Personnel Branch, and Commander of the 350 Guided Missile Wing. He has also served at the NATO Joint Air Power Competence Centre (JAPCC) in the SEAD-EW domain. Major General Bantouvas has accumulated more than 3,600 flight hours and has flown F-5 and F-16 aircraft.

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