

Rival Hybrid Airship Programs Gain Momentum

Ain Online

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British start-up Streamline Aviation is negotiating the purchase of hybrid airships from Lockheed Martin.

British start-up company Straightline Aviation has signed a letter of intent for up to 12 Lockheed Martin Hybrid Airships “with a potential value of up to \$480 million,” according to Lockheed Martin. Straightline is working to finalize a purchase agreement with Hybrid Enterprises, the company that LM appointed last year as its official reseller. The announcement comes just as Hybrid Air Vehicles (HAV) of the UK is preparing to fly the rival Airlander 10 at Cardington in the UK. Both HAV and Lockheed Martin say that the long-mooted potential of these vehicles is about to be realized, as an alternative, environmentally friendly means of transporting cargo and passengers to remote destinations.

“We are delighted to be first in line with this magnificent aircraft,” said Mike Kendrick, co-founder and chief executive officer of Straightline. The company has been formed by former directors of Virgin Group companies that operated airships for advertising purposes in more than 30 countries. Straightline plans to manage the certification, crewing, operation and maintenance of hybrid airships for end users such as companies in the oil and gas, mining and renewable energy industries.

Lockheed Martin has been pursuing the development of airships and hybrids at its Skunk Works facility in Palmdale for 25 years. In 2006, it successfully flew a half-scale demonstrator designated P791. It subsequently refined the tri-lobe design for both defense and commercial

applications, although the latter market is currently the main focus. It has also worked with the FAA to confirm the certification requirements. Lockheed Martin has not yet built a prototype, but says that its LMH-1 Hybrid Airship would be 280 feet long and offer a payload of up to 47,000 pounds; a range of 1,400 nm; and a cruising speed 60 knots. The four 350-hp diesel engines provide vectored thrust, and together with an air cushion landing system, allow operations from unprepared surfaces as short as 500 feet.

Meanwhile, HAV has completed the inflation and reassembly of the similarly sized hybrid that it designed as subcontractor to Northrop Grumman for the U.S. Army long-endurance multi-intelligence vehicle (LEMV) program. This flew only once in August 2012 before the program was cancelled. HAV bought the LEMV minus its sensor suite, shipped it to the UK, renamed it the Airlander 10, and has since raised over \$17 million in government grants and additional equity to pay for a return to flight and demonstration program. Straightline has also been talking to HAV about a potential purchase.