



Atlas Cheetah C

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Country of origin: South Africa

Manufactured as: Atlas Cheetah C

First flight: May 1985 (Cheetah D prototype)

Service period with SAAF: 1993 until 2008

Served with: 2 squadron, 89 CFS

Role: Multirole fighter

Power plant: One SNECMA-Atar 9K- 50 turbojet; delivering 5,035kg (49.38 kN; 11,090 lbf) dry thrust; 6,810kg (66.78 kN; 15,090 lbf) with afterburner.

Max take-off weight: 13,700 kg (30,200 lb)

Max speed: Mach 1.8 (at altitude)

Max range: 1,300 km (700 nmi)

Armament:

Guns: 2× 30 mm DEFA 552 cannons with 125 rounds per gun

Rockets: 4× Matra rocket pods with 18× SNEB 68 mm rockets each, or 2× Matra JL-100 drop tank/rocket pack, each with 19× SNEB 68 mm rockets and 250 litres (66 US gal) of fuel

Missiles: 2× Python 3 AAMs, V4 R-Darter (BVR missile), A-Darter, V3C Darter and/or Matra R530 missiles

Bombs: 4,000 kg (8,800 lb) of payload on five external hardpoints, including 250 kg Laser-guided bombs (LGB), GPS-guided bombs, 250 kg 'booster' bombs, a variety of unguided 'iron' bombs, reconnaissance pods or drop tanks.

Accommodation: Pilot

Operational history

The Atlas Cheetah programme grew out of South Africa's requirement for a modern fighter and strike aircraft in the 1980s. There was a need for more advanced aircraft to attain an edge over the ever more sophisticated Soviet aircraft such as the MiG-23 being supplied to Angolan and Cuban forces in action against South African forces in the Border War. Furthermore, the increasing cost of maintenance due to sanctions and the age of the aircraft used by the SAAF had to be addressed. The arms embargo imposed at the time by United Nations Security Council Resolution 418 prevented South Africa from purchasing new aircraft from other countries, thus making an upgrade of existing aircraft the only option.

At the time, the SAAF's fast jet fleet consisted of Dassault Mirage III (EZ/CZ/BZ/DZ/D2Z/RZ/R2Z) and Mirage F1 (AZ/CZ) aircraft. Though the Mirage F1s were the most modern of the fleet, having been delivered from 1977 onwards, they were the primary element of South Africa's air defence and strike fleet. To withdraw them for an upgrade would have left an unacceptable gap in the air defence and strike capability of the country.

In addition, there were already a few successful Mirage III upgrades from which to learn, such as the Israeli Kfir and the Mirage III NG, so the SAAF's Mirage III fleet was chosen as the basis for the upgrade, to be known initially as Project Cushion.

Israel was already selling military technology to South Africa. Mirage III spare parts were bought in Israel and Israeli advisors were present in SAAF units. This, and the fact that Israel required money after cancellation of the Lavi programme, made IAI (Israel Aerospace Industries) amenable to assist with the development.

None of the Cheetah variants ever saw combat in the Border War, so their performance was never tested against the dominant fighter in the conflict, the MiG-23. The Cheetah E's were used as permanent interceptor aircraft, with a minimum of two aircraft on round-the-clock alert status until the end of the Border War in 1989.

With the entering into service of the Cheetah C, the Cheetah E's were withdrawn from service and 5 Squadron was disbanded in 1992. Soon afterwards, 89 Combat Flying School was also disbanded, and all the Cheetah Ds were transferred to 2 Squadron. They were retired in 2008 when they were replaced by the Gripen C/D.



Barcode 1: Cheetah program explained



Barcode 1: Cheetah farewell video

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