



Sales at last ... 10 Bell 525 helicopters have been sold to oil company Equinor.

HI Uplift: Bell 525 Relentless aims to quench demand for medium lift

Relentless is a popular name – from energy drinks to US warships (and even a 24th century Star Trek patrol vessel). Another chapter is opening for this heroic name with the first commercial order for Bell's 525 Relentless super-medium helicopter. Can it carve out a legendary career in resurgent offshore markets and elsewhere?

The first order – from oil and gas giant Equinor, which recently opened the aircraft's sales book with a booking for 10 aircraft – must be a welcome relief. The Bell 525 was launched at Heli-Expo 2012 in Dallas and completed its maiden flight

on July 1st, 2015. The manufacturer is still working towards Bell 525 FAA certification. And the global pandemic has caused significant delays.

Bell certainly sees the sale as a landmark transaction. The manufacturer's chief commercial officer Danny Maldonado tells us: "*Bell's agreement with Equinor is an exciting step closer in its path to bring the Bell 525's revolutionary technology and capabilities to North Sea offshore operations.*"

Maldonado described the 525 as a step-change in technology for the rotorcraft industry and "*foundationally different*" from any other offshore helicopter available today. It's a clean sheet design shaped by an offshore customer advisory panel. A key requirement was to address the rigorous safety requirements of the industry.

"For example, the main rotor gear box design uses separation, redundancy and low speed gears to create a safer gearbox capable of passing the EASA one-hour Loss of Lubrication Test," says Maldonado. *"Additionally, the fly-by-wire control architecture acts as a full-time autopilot, which reduces pilot workload and fatigue through every phase of flight."*

Transport up to 20 passengers

The aircraft incorporates fly-by-wire flight controls and is powered by two General Electric CT7-2F1 turboshaft engines. They deliver a maximum speed of 190mph (306km/h) and a range of 644 miles (1,037km). It has the capacity to transport up to 20 passengers or a useful load of 8,200lbs (3,700kg). By the end of last year,

the manufacturer's test fleet of four aircraft had logged well over a combined total of 3,000 hours of flight testing.



A key part of the manufacturer's pitch is the aircraft's sustainability performance. It is said to offer significant benefits in supporting the oil and gas industry's sustainability objectives by consuming 30% less fuel per hour of operation than the heavy class helicopters that fly offshore today on the Norwegian Continental Shelf. Bell is currently exploring the benefits of SAF across its commercial production aircraft, with the Bell 525 already completing a number of SAF-fuelled flights.

So, what persuaded oil giant Equinor to invest in the Bell 525? First, the reason for its purchase. The company plans to deploy the aircraft – alongside five new Leonardo AW189 aircraft – for passenger transport on the Norwegian Continental Shelf. Both feature technological innovations in terms of helicopter safety, reduced CO2 emissions, pilot support systems, passenger comfort and external noise reduction, according to Equinor.

The new aircraft will supplement the existing fleet of Sikorsky S-92s. *"All three helicopter models meet stringent safety requirements. By increasing from one to*

three helicopter models on the NCS we get more flexibility and regularity,” said Kjetil Hove, executive vice president, Exploration & Production Norway, Equinor.

‘Safe and efficient logistics’

Ørjan Kvelvane, senior vice president for joint operations support at Equinor: “We depend on safe and efficient logistics operations to maintain a high activity level on the NCS well into the future. The new models feature technological improvements in terms of pilot support systems, passenger comfort and noise reduction.”



Union representatives at Equinor endorsed the choice of the Bell 525.

All Equinor unions, including the safety delegates, had endorsed the helicopters' selection, according to the company. (Top safety standards have never been more important after the [fatal crash](#) last month of a search and rescue (SAR) S-92

helicopter off the Norwegian coast, operated by Bristow on behalf of the oil company).

The 10 Relentless helicopters placed with Equinor can certainly look forward to a full flight programme. Each year the company transports 160,000 offshore employees to and from the Norwegian Continental Shelf with transfers totalling more than 24,000 flight hours. Annual landings on Equinor-operated installations in the area amount to about 16,000.

Bell's path to its first commercial 525 sale to Equinor was eased by Norwegian Aviation and Defense Group (NADG), which represented the manufacturer in Norway. Its chief executive Ole Petter Bakken said: *"Bell has delivered aircraft and reliable services for more than 30 years to Norwegian operators, both in the government and commercial spheres, and will continue to do the same to the Norwegian Continental Shelf and the energy sector. We are looking forward to developing this further with Equinor."*

Offshore-configured aircraft

Production of the Bell 525 production is ramping up at the manufacturer's Amarillo Assembly Center. Offshore-configured aircraft are expected to roll off the Texas production line later this year. Equinor expects to receive four Bell 525s in 2026, with the additional six aircraft delivered between 2027-2030. The financial terms of the deal remain confidential.

After a long wait for a launch customer, Maldonado sums up the Bell 525's intended industry appeal like this: "*The Bell 525 technology provides a generational leap forward and will revolutionise offshore oil and gas operations by providing enhanced safety capabilities, reliability and optimised operations.*"

Meanwhile, there's no doubting the Bell 525's legendary name. But will it quench demand for medium lift in offshore and other markets? Since the major oil companies generally judge 10 years to be the primary mission life of offshore helicopters, why not make a date to find out by checking back with Helicopter Investor on Tuesday March 21st 2034?

Have a grand end of week,

Mike

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HI Uplift Dashboard: Helicopters for sale

Multi engine

- Total for sale/lease: 312 – one more than last week
- Percentage for sale/lease: 4.15
- Absorption rate: 5.2
- Total fleet: 7,524 – three more than last week.

Single engine

- Total for sale/lease: 409 – the same as last week
- Percentage for sale/lease: 3.54
- Absorption rate: 3.91
- Total fleet: 11,569 – three more than last week.

Source: **AMSTAT**, March 21st, 2024.



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