



A Leonardo AW139, masked ready for paint in Gama Aviation's new dedicated helicopter paint shop. [Gama Aviation](#)

Painting Planes & Helicopters Too

While MAAS Aviation has been in the business of painting fixed-wing aircraft for decades, Gama Aviation has just entered the helicopter painting market, albeit with an expert team. Paul Kinch, Managing Director MRO at Gama Aviation and Richard Marston, Chief Commercial Officer at MAAS Aviation, describe their industry sectors

Few disciplines in aviation blend engineering and artistry quite so completely as exterior paint. Aircraft coatings protect assets, helping maintain airworthiness and retaining value. On business jets and VIP aircraft they must also remain pristine through the harshest of environments that might see them sitting on the ramp at 40°C or more and cruising at high speed in the frigid

temperatures of high altitude 30 minutes later. And they must do this while resisting fluid spills, deicing agents and regular washing.

Now consider helicopter coatings. VIP owners and operators want their helicopters to look every bit as pristine as their jets, and while helicopter finishes do not face the rapid temperature changes or high-speed flight of jets, since helicopters operate at lower altitudes they are more likely to spend extended periods

in dusty or salty environments, or simply in the weather.

The UK's Gama Aviation recently established a dedicated helicopter painting facility at its Leonardo-focused Staverton, Gloucestershire MRO base. The infrastructure required for aircraft painting is extensive and complex, while finding suitably skilled personnel adds to the challenge. The new paint shop therefore represents not only a significant investment, but also an important expansion in capability, as Paul Kinch, Managing Director MRO at Gama Aviation, explains.

“Exterior paint at this scale is a new capability for Gama Aviation, but it hasn't been developed in isolation. The investment is a natural extension of our established rotary MRO presence at Staverton and reflects our strategy to provide operators with a more complete, end-to-end maintenance solution.

“You don’t create a capability like this overnight. It starts with designing a facility specifically around the requirements of modern helicopters, then recruiting highly experienced specialists, and embedding the processes, safety standards and quality controls expected within a Part 145 environment.”

MAAS Aviation, by contrast, specialises in airliners, painting fleets of aircraft at 13 paint shops in Germany, Lithuania, the Netherlands and the US. The company has a solid reputation for airliner special schemes and applies the same skills to private and VVIP jet customers. Like Gama Aviation, MAAS has built its paint shops from scratch and to the highest environmental standards. In aircraft painting terms, those standards mean conforming to strict regulations governing emissions, chemical usage and waste disposal, as well as health and safety, and employing advanced environmental control systems to optimise the paint shop

environment for surface preparation, coating application and curing.

Painting experience

Creating the necessary infrastructure is one thing, but Gama Aviation has also created its painting team from scratch. Kinch notes: “Experience is critical in this discipline, so our first priority was attracting skilled professionals with a strong track record in aerospace painting.” The industry cannot and must not solely rely on tempting painters from the current pool of experienced personnel, however, a fact Kinch recognises: “Looking ahead, we see real opportunity to develop the next generation of specialists. Gama Aviation already operates a highly successful engineering apprenticeship programme, and we are actively exploring how that model could evolve to support the paint environment over time.”

Most of the airframes MAAS Aviation paints are considerably larger than those

Gama’s painters might expect to see and Richard Marston, MAAS Aviation’s Chief Commercial Officer, raises an interesting additional point about aircraft painting and especially working on larger aircraft: it is very physical. Smiling as he describes a typical MAAS painter as resembling a ‘racing snake’, he says they are typically strong, agile people, since the job has them constantly moving around the aircraft paint bays, frequently working at height and often with heavy equipment.

Just as Kinch is looking at the potential for future helicopter painting apprenticeships, so Marston is acutely aware of the need to attract entry-level people into MAAS Aviation. For some painting tasks, being of smaller stature is advantageous for an aircraft painter; combine this with the requirement to be fit and agile, and it seems like a job that ought to be attracting more women. In fact, he says, last year a fully female paint team at the company’s Alabama facility



Freshly painted by MAAS Aviation, this AirX Challenger 850 demonstrates the mirror-like finish expected on a business jet. MAAS Aviation

completed an aircraft for the first time in MAAS's history.

Both men also highlight the importance of staff retention. Marston notes: "There's only so much we can teach in a classroom, so we have a buddy system where our highly skilled people buddy up with less experienced painters."

Kinch adds: "Retention ultimately comes down to creating the right culture, investing in people, providing modern facilities and giving teams the opportunity to work on varied and technically interesting projects. When you bring the right people into a purpose-built environment, you create a capability that is built to last."

Expressing identity

Some of the skills required for helicopter painting are unique. "Rotary aircraft present a very different technical challenge to fixed-wing platforms," says Kinch. "Complex geometries, mission equipment and the environments many helicopters operate in demand a tailored approach to surface preparation and coating application. It's not simply a case of using different products – it requires technicians with the right experience and judgement. That's why we focused heavily on recruiting paint professionals who understand the nuances of helicopter platforms and the standards required by OEM-approved maintenance organisations.

"Having managed paint operations earlier in my career, including programmes for VVIP fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft, I've seen first-hand the level of precision and craftsmanship required. Owners in this segment expect exceptional quality – not just in durability, but in the depth of finish and overall presentation."

Sometimes customers bring a pre-designed scheme to a paint shop, other times they may have only a vague notion and look to the paint shop for design input. In the world of business jets, white with one or two stripes remains a popular choice, providing a degree of anonymity on the ground, although flamboyant or expressive schemes are becoming more common. Marston says: "Business jet and VIP customers are typically looking for a mirror-like finish, with maximum visual impact in the areas the owner sees. We're seeing more customers who want something different for their scheme – we did a gold mica finish with a couple of stripes recently."

Again, there is a contrast with helicopters, as Kinch explains: "Helicopters often perform highly specialised roles and operators want aircraft that reflect both their mission and their brand. We see strong potential in the private and VVIP market, where owners increasingly view their aircraft as



Richard Marston, Chief Commercial Officer, MAAS Aviation. MAAS Aviation

an extension of their personal identity or corporate brand. A helicopter is often far more visible than a business jet. While a private jet typically remains within the airport environment, a helicopter may land directly at a customer site, hotel, or event, where it is seen up close."

Usually VIP customers come to MAAS with a design already specified, although the company assists where special elements require expert input from its painters. Gama Aviation helps its helicopter customers navigate their way to a completed finish regardless of starting point. "The design phase carries real importance. A painter will faithfully execute a scheme, but the true differentiation often begins with the concept itself," Kinch reports. "With our Part 21J design capability sitting alongside production capability under Part 21G, we offer a fully integrated service, from initial concept through to application. The real value lies in combining creative expertise with engineering discipline. Our design team understands how to translate ambitious concepts into schemes that are not only visually impactful but also fully certifiable and practical in operation." ■



Paul Kinch, Managing Director MRO, Gama Aviation. Gama Aviation