ASTARS III arrives at Naval Air Station Patuxent River. The custom C-26A Metroliner is equipped with subsystems and has a matching simulation lab allowing students to familiarize themselves with the subsystems before flying with instructors. (U.S. Navy photo)

NAVAL AIR WARFARE COMMAND AIRCRAFT DIVISION, PATUXENT RIVER, Md. — The United States Naval Test Pilot School (USNTPS) welcomed Airborne Systems Training and Research Support (ASTARS) III aircraft, the newest generation of flying classrooms, today at Naval Air Station Patuxent River.

ASTARS III, the third generation of flying classroom for the USNTPS curriculum, is a custom tailored C-26A Metroliner equipped with military equipment and subsystems. A custom tailored simulation lab was also built in conjunction with the aircraft to have matching crew stations. The ASTARS objective is for students to familiarize themselves with the aircraft and its systems in a simulation lab before flying airborne for the first time which increases the efficiency of flight time spent with instructors in the air. USNTPS’ original ASTARS is a divested P-3; ASTARS II is a leased modified Saab 340 and the contract will end in fall 2018.

“The amount of proactive collaboration on this project is unprecedented,” said Jerry Swift, director of NAWCAD’s AIRWorks, the systems integration office that cultivates the
command’s organic capability to develop rapid warfighter solutions.

In fall 2015, the U.S. Government gave the C-26A to the USNTPS after it retired from conducting counter narcotics missions along the Mexican border. The aircraft arrived with minimal documentation and maintenance records requiring extensive work in order to meet Federal Aviation Administration standards. It also required unique modifications to meet the school’s flying classroom requirements for future curriculum.

The aircraft’s upgrade was a group effort between a number of organizations: USNTPS, AIRWorks, the Tactical Airlift, Adversary and Support Aircraft program office (PMA-207), and M7 Aerospace, a subsidiary of Elbit Systems of America. Each group was represented at the hangar on a daily basis by pilots, engineers, artisans, supply chain specialists, program managers, test representatives, and other crew members who worked side-by-side at the modification site in San Antonio, Texas. The project structure reduced programmatic cycle times while maintaining the aircraft’s configuration control.

The approach was another example of extraordinary effort coordinated by AIRWorks bringing together warfare center talent, industrial partnerships and emerging technologies. In partnership with NAWCAD’s Aircraft Modification Prototyping and Production (APSD) group, AIRWorks has provided the Navy affordable alternatives including rapid prototype and production of the H-60 gunner seat, integration of V-22 ballistic missile protection and C-27 maritime intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance modifications.

With facilities in Patuxent River, Maryland; Lakehurst, New Jersey; and Orlando, Florida, NAWCAD supports the research and development, engineering, test and evaluation of all Navy and Marine Corps air vehicle systems and trainers.

For more information about NAWCAD, please go to www.navair.navy.mil or follow us on Facebook at https://www.facebook.com/MyNAWCAD/.
The ASTARS III transformation was an effort brought to life by AIRWorks, the command's systems integration office that brings together the command's organic capability and talent on one project. (U.S. Navy photo)