BELGIAN AVIATION AND SPACE ARE PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

BRUSSELS – 16 December 2020 – Today, exactly one hundred years ago, the Société Anonyme Belge de Constructions Aéronautiques (Sabca) was founded. The company played a pioneering role in the conquest of air and space and became an international benchmark a century later. Sabca is celebrating its centenary with an exclusive, limited-edition photographic work and comic, and discusses the challenges of the future together with the Directorate General of Aviation and the von Karman Institute.

The Origins

It was with a 47-pager that Georges Nélis, commander in the Belgian army, convinced the government to develop an autonomous civil and military aerospace industry in Belgium. He founded Sneta (Syndicat National pour l'Etude des Transports Aériens) to study the feasibility of this project and in a short time span, the dreams, ideas and studies of these pioneers became reality. In 1923, shortly after the foundation of Sabca on 16 December 1920, Sabena was also born from the same Sneta. This way Belgium had an aircraft construction and maintenance company (Sabca) and an airline (Sabena) in its hands.

"A century later, the passion of the early days is still there. Aeronautics and space are a source of endless fascination. Knowing that through our profession, we help to launch rockets, fly aeroplanes and control drones flawlessly, gives an immense feeling of satisfaction. We tend to forget this on a daily basis, but we achieve amazing feats," says Thibauld Jongen, CEO of SABCA.

The Directorate General of Aviation, the current Directorate

General of Air Transport, was created at the same time. Together with the Netherlands, Belgium became the first country with aviation legislation, in which the government had a clear forward-looking political vision and was prepared to make major investments in the development of aviation. The fast changes in the industry have meant that the DGTA has had to continually adapt to new developments, a reality that continues to this day. “In a few months’ time, we will publish a white paper for Belgian aviation with a vision for the future including all stakeholders. This paper is intended to provide policy makers with the necessary information to help aviation survive in the post-Covid era. The close collaboration between industry and academia, which has always been a guarantee of success, will be one of our sources of inspiration,” says Koen Milis, Director General of DGTA.

Development

Sabca developed its activities in the aerospace industry on the grounds of the former Haren airfield. In its early days, the company had about 160 employees engaged in the production of aircraft. This number has grown over the years, in parallel with the development of design and production activities for major aircraft manufacturers such as Airbus and Fokker. Sabca was also an early participant in European space programmes, and today still produces complex sub- assemblies for the renowned Ariane 5 and Ariane 6 launchers.

In the course of its century of existence, Sabca has also opened other sites. In the 1950s, the company built a workshop in Charleroi. Today, this site is used for the maintenance of various types of military aircraft of the Belgian Air Force and several international air forces. In 1992, Sabca acquired an ultra-modern factory in Lummen, where it manufactures aircraft structures in composite material and 3D printing. Finally, eight years ago, Sabca inaugurated a new facility in Casablanca, Morocco, for the assembly of parts.

The future of Sabca

Sabca is present in many markets and has evolved in line with technology on the one hand and the demand of its industrial customers on the other. One example is its new Unmanned Aerial Systems unit, which develops systems enabling UAVs to fly autonomously in airspace. The focus is on high-risk missions and is aimed at customers outside the aeronautics industry, where operations must meet all the quality requirements of aviation. Examples include the inspection of nuclear power plants and wind turbines, the transport of medical equipment and the inspection of buildings and infrastructure.

“In the aviation industry, we have always been and still are constantly faced with new challenges,” says Jongen. “The Coronavirus crisis has transformed our industry, which will require resilience and innovation. In the coming years, the industry will need to invest heavily if it wants to stay ahead on the world rankings. I am thinking in particular about the digitisation of production processes, more research into lightweight and electrical components for the green aircraft of tomorrow and the retention of knowledge in Belgium through excellent training and pioneering developments.”

Scientists at the von Karman Institute (VKI) are currently working tirelessly to design the aerospace of the future. “We are studying a new generation of very quiet, economical and even CO2-free hydrogen-powered aircraft engines and on small satellites that can return to earth autonomously. In order to improve our processes and results, these studies are built on knowledge of the past and on current research programmes in cooperation with industrial partners,” says Peter Grognard, Managing Director of the VKI.

With Blueberry as a new shareholder, Sabca is on the right track. Blueberry wants to create a unique ecosystem in the aerospace industry by bringing together different companies with the aim of stimulating and developing the sector.

Blueberry has already reunited Sabca and Sabena Aerospace, both born out of Sneta 100 years ago. And it is today that the “aerospace” of the next 100 years is taking shape!