

G4 DEFENCE

SUPPLYING THE FRONTLINE

LAND 121
PROJECT
OVERLANDER
SIMILAR NEEDS
AND SOLUTIONS

GOOD TO GO

A view of DSDA Ashchurch

SUPPORTING
HEAVY ARMOUR

SO2 CS MAT HQ Land
talks about the challenge

MINIFLITS

How can we achieve
better defence
equipment availability?

FREE
SUBSCRIPTION
SEE INSIDE

Pause, take a deep breath

Ainsley Fraser puts some points to consider going forward for the next Strategic Defence Review

Whatever the colour, political complexion or balance of government after the election, there is going to be a Strategic Defence Review (SDR). Whether it is accompanied by a second round Defence Industry Strategy (DIS2) remains to be seen. There is already a strategy for acquisition reform, which makes a very valuable contribution to the necessary changes which have to happen. From a defence industry supply chain and logistics support perspective, all of these present a timely opportunity to pause, reflect - and inhale a long, slow intake of breath - and hopefully some common sense.

Our armed forces - all of them - need and deserve a properly planned equipment supply and support strategy for the future, which is based on long-term thinking. The acquisition system which reforms and evolves to drive it, also needs to recognise the depth of empathy which exists between operational forces in the frontline - and the dedicated teams of designers, engineers, manufacturers and industry partners, who work tirelessly to provide a capability that is fit for purpose. The procurement process

is the servant and facilitator - not the end in itself.

An independent review of defence procurement activity over the last decade - and the last five years in particular - would expose a trend. We all know it's there - but nobody seems to have articulated it. Buying policy has been made up pretty much on the hoof. Part of that is out of necessity - the demands of two concurrent theatres of operation. The other is more worrying - the lack of adequate core funding.

This has been driven not only by a deep-seated attitude within the Treasury - that defence is somehow less important and a lower priority than frontline services and social engineering - but also its sympathy with a political ideology, dogma and imperative which, from time to time has manifested itself almost as dismissive contempt for Britain's obligations as a player of serious weight and influence on the world stage. The result has been at least weighting - if not bias - for more and more requirements to be met via the Urgent Operational Requirement (UOR) process - because that has evolved as the more likely





Airbus Military A400M the replacement for the aging C130 Hercules to sustain the UK Airlift capability. Photo credit Airbus



method to secure the money. Even within government there is some recognition that delaying core funded programmes is unwise – which may be why we have seen a sudden and sharp rise in contract announcements in the run up to the election.

When members of the House of Lords – including some former high ranking officers of great military experience, distinction and public respect, unite in open condemnation of government's attitude to Britain's defence capability, we should listen. When we see stories in the popular media about shortcomings in equipment and supply, maybe sometimes, we are inclined to take them with a pinch of salt. However, even though, sadly, sensationalism and exaggeration sells newspapers or makes good television drama, the inadequacies reported are often pretty close to the truth.

But when real frontline personnel arrive back from theatre – or industry's under-sung heroes – volunteers working on Contractors ON Deployed Operations (CONDO) secondment – return home, with real life experiences and hard evidence of kit that doesn't work, equipment that is simply not fit for purpose – and a wide range of other concerns – that should be the wake up call.

Some of the problems are understandable. Equipment which was specified for operations in northern Europe – in cold weather theatres such as Bosnia – is suddenly expected to operate in temperatures

of +40 degrees C and above – and in a dust cloud which will choke anything breathing other than through filtration or a respirator. In fairness, there have been some good examples of UOR upgrades and modifications that have enabled deployed equipment to operate very effectively in this new and challenging environment. Meeting these latter requirements have also demonstrated the agility and resourcefulness of some relatively quite small – but technically world class – small firms, many of them British.

What a pity then that more of the new equipment has not been supplied by British companies, with home grown and world-beating skill and engineering – and which support UK jobs. Why is MoD so persuaded that best means 'not British or built overseas' – or is it simply down to price – or an offset deal? Aside from recent speculation about the future of 'the special relationship' between Britain and the US, if our government dared to hint that it might introduce protectionist tariffs – even resembling those currently emerging in the US, it would quickly find itself in trouble with European rules – and rightly so.

Elsewhere in the supply chain, there

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are some examples of new equipment which has been far less effective – and in some cases, plain downright inadequate. Let's look at some of the UOR Land Systems purchases – which for some reason, seem to have been given names more usually heard at Crufts dog show. Anyone with a leisure interest in field sports (and there are a lot of those in the military) will know the instinctive characteristics of a Springer at heel behind a line of guns. Contrast its canine capability with that of the army's latest 'dune-buggy' of the same name. It was supposed to provide forces with a nimble platform to carry kit in – and, if necessary, casi-vac out. It would have significant mobility, good altitude performance (a hint of where it might be going) and the customary big payload for size of vehicle.

Allegedly, according to chaps who have interfaced with it in theatre, it is being used typically to run about 800 metres from the entrance of a Forward Operating Base (FOB) to and from waiting aircraft. That could have something to do with the performance of the vehicle – which has two-wheel drive – not the all-wheel-drive identified in the requirement. It has a modest, naturally aspirated diesel

engine which gasps for air as soon as the atmosphere gets a little rarefied. Maybe the air was a little rarefied when the decision was made to buy it? According to G4's enquiries, the vehicle was not trialed via the usual vehicle testing channels – and its cost at in service date (ISD) was significantly above equivalent packages available from manufacturers of vehicles in the same class.

But the problems are not exclusive. If the right decisions had been made at the time, we could have avoided the shortages in operational helicopters... or the excessive delays with the JSF programme... or the well-catalogued Nimrod saga... and we won't even mention the FRES word. The fact that Afghanistan is significantly land locked is probably the only reason why we are not hearing about as many equipment issues from the Royal Navy – although they have had their own fair share. It is worrying to note that, since 1997, over sixty RN and RFA vessels have been decommissioned – and only a dozen or so new ones have been ordered – that is until the recent pre-election burst of shipyard job-saving announcements.

Is anybody accountable? Probably not. It is a terrible indictment of our national defence capability, pride and reputation on the world stage that many now see 'the system' as accurately portrayed in an omnibus edition of 'Yes Minister', seasoned with those remarkably

candid interviews with George Parr (the mythical mandarin or well scrambled eggged officer of Bird & Fortune).

In the words of the school report, the SDR must open with the phrase "Promising, could do much better". Our next political masters have a duty to the nation – let alone to our troops – to look at the executive function which runs UK Limited. Our most recent government has grown about a million jobs across the public sector during its watch. It has handed government departments (not always the right ones) purses filled and overflowing, which have allowed public sector expenditure to rise to a frightening 52% of GDP. No wonder we have a deficit.

So part of the change management process that must now follow, has to include the introduction of the same level of commercial accountability in government and public service as exists in industry and business. The framework within which that can move forward is probably there already – if the findings of Bernard Gray's report are embraced – indeed as many of them are already accepted. It is then down to robust and transparent implementation.

Ainsley Fraser



The Navistar MXT on which the Husky is based