

1963



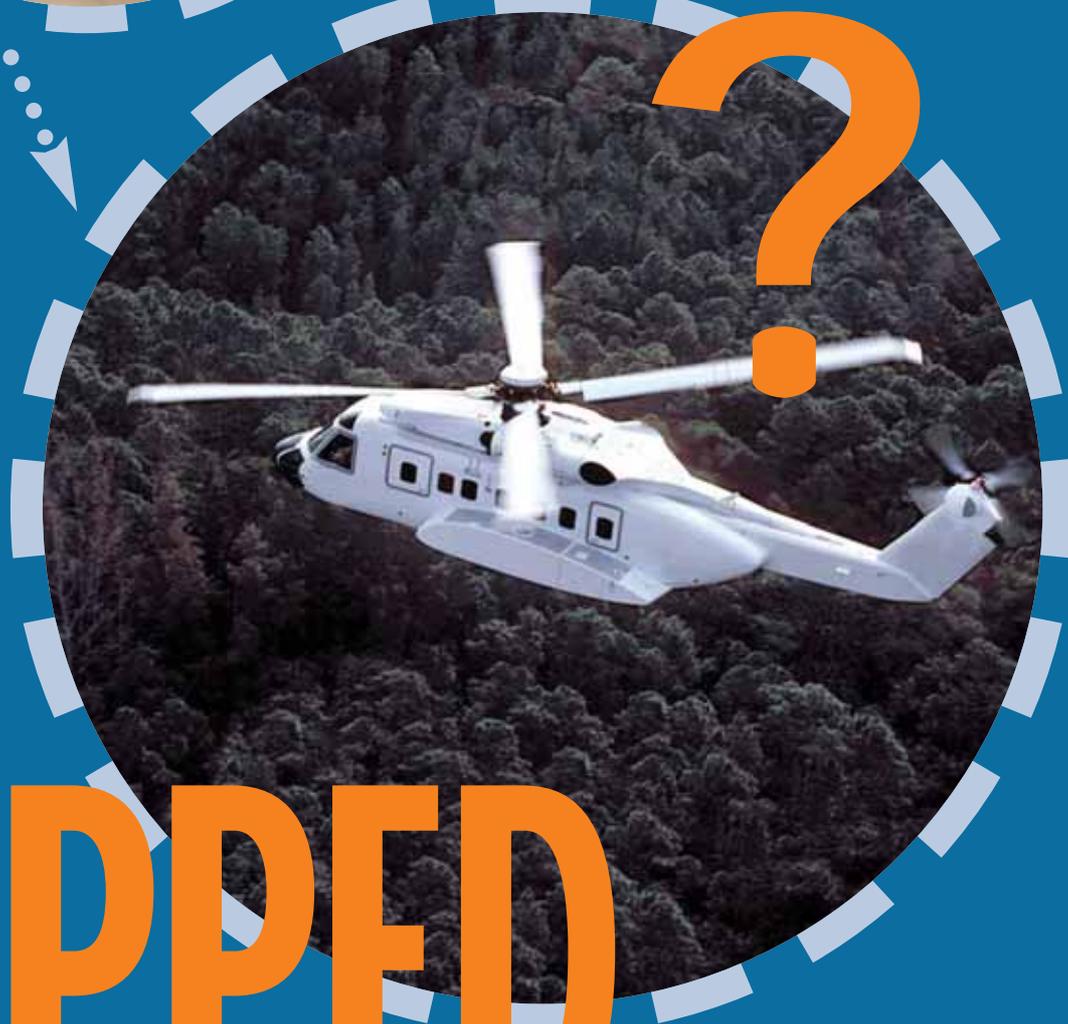
WINGS

1979





986
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Reeling from a blow that saw the cancellation of a competition for much needed medium-lift helicopters, Commandants Sean Clancy and John O'Keeffe spoke to Ruairi Kavanagh about the implications for a beleaguered Air Corps.



Comdt Sean Clancy.

“The cancellation of the contract is a bitter blow to everyone involved in it. We had worked vigorously on the project for two years,” explains Comdt Sean Clancy. “We had expectations of the introduction of medium lift helicopters since the late 1980s, when it became apparent that the Dauphin was limited in the night search and rescue role off the west coast of Ireland.” In fact, the Dauphins were originally bought to serve alongside the L.E. Eithne as part of fishery protection. “The Dauphins are an excellent aircraft, with

The medium lift project began with a request for proposals issued over two years ago in July 2000, a tender process followed in March 2001. The relevant assessment, evaluation and reporting process was completed by mid-September 2001. A best and final offer was invited by the Dept. of Defence on 6 December 2001. This was then followed by the resultant court action by EADS/Eurocopter, and then the final blow when the Department of Defence cancelled the competition. “The worst thing was, we had no idea that it would be cancelled until after the fact, it was completely out of the blue.

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many roles, but it is a short range helicopter. The Air Corps has consistently advocated the requirement for medium lift helicopters since the early 1980s. This is as true now as it was then and we need a dedicated medium lift, medium range fleet to perform 24hr operations off the Irish coastlines in extremely hostile conditions.”

“We weren’t involved in the process after the reports were submitted,” Sean explains. When Eurocopter went to the courts with their grievance, the resultant delays were very frustrating for the Air Corps, who had planned the entire acquisition process to a tight timeframe. “We had identified the fact that there was going to be a gap when the

Dauphins come in for their time-based overhaul, a normal part of our scheduling. The Dauphin’s can’t fly beyond certain dates as their overhauls are due, dates which are occurring very shortly. Therefore, the hold-up in acquiring the new craft meant constantly revising our schedules and time-frames, which were being constantly pushed back. The resultant cancelling of the contract means that a decision still has to be made on the future our Dauphins.”

“Once we had submitted our reports, our job was effectively done, that’s the way the system works. Motivation has never been an issue in the Air Corps; the tragedy in Tramore some years ago provided a great catalyst to complete this procurement process. Everybody had great expectations and anticipation as to what new medium lift aircraft would mean for the Air Corps. Everything was done impeccably in compiling the reports, the most professional project I’ve ever been involved in. The urgency of this project was realised by one and all.” When word filtered through that all this combined effort had been in vain, that their would in fact be no medium lift helicopter for the foreseeable future, and that opportunity had been lost was in a word ‘gut-wrenching’ according to Sean Clancy. “Personally I received a lot of phone calls from ex-members and serving members, and I know I wasn’t the only one, offering their condolences on the collapse of the project.” There have been reassurances recently that the project is not ‘dead’ but has just been ‘cancelled’ in this instance.

The Need For Medium Lift

The purposes and uses of the proposed new aircraft would have enabled the Air Corps to undertake a wide variety of roles that they have found difficult to undertake with their current helicopter fleet: “The tender itself was for the provision of two SAR helicopters with an option of a third and two general purpose medium lift helicopters, specifically for military purposes. SAR Helicopters would be essentially multi-purpose, focusing on SAR but also able to provide Island Medevac, Island Relief and Air Ambulance and would be a valuable state asset. Using helicopters for general military purposes is an area that we as an Air Corps believe strongly in, there is a huge gap in overall military training in the Irish Defence Forces. Any defence force has to have mobility, an essential part of which is naturally air transport. The medium lift helicopter would have been

able to provide the basic training in that regard for any of our personnel going overseas. Our troops have had very little exposure to helicopters and what they can do. This is a gap that has been identified, and while we've done our best in plugging that gap with the Dauphin and Alouette III to the best of our abilities, it's not ideal and it's a very limited and dated service. In an ideal situation, our troop transport capability would include night-vision cockpits, with night-vision goggles for night interdictions and transportations." There is a vast amount of training involved for what many people may see as a simple process involving transporting people from a to b. "You have to know a great deal about orientation and terrain, and where you are going to land, likewise for the troops involved. There is also the whole question of air-awareness, where a lack of training can leave you extremely vulnerable," adds Sean Clancy. To carry out such capabilities would require a fleet of medium lift helicopters, but with the five that the Air-Corps were due to receive, the key training could be done so that proficiency levels could be maintained. "In terms of the European Rapid-Response Force (ERRF), we haven't committed air assets, but we have committed to a standard of training, a standard that currently will be virtually impossible to attain at home."

As stated the Dauphin helicopters need a time-based major overhaul to include a major avionics refit. While a decision to do these overhauls has still not been taken, there will be a gap between these dates and the introduction of the new medium lift helicopters. The Air Corps identified this and has sought an interim solution in the form of a Sikorsky-61 helicopter to fill the void.

we are a distant second to a commercial contractor, and it's impossible to compete on those terms."

The purchase of five-medium lift helicopters would not only have been a fantastic boost for the military's itinerary, but for the State it would have been an invaluable national resource according to Sean Clancy. "The State would own the aircraft, the State

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"Currently we are training pilots to use this aircraft," explains John O'Keeffe, "it is something we were looking at to tide us over for an interim period until we received our own medium lift helicopters. The S-61 is certified until 2005 as a SAR aircraft. It is also an old aircraft, the technology is 1960's, and to be honest it's far from ideal. It doesn't represent our vision of going forward. I think the military need to get control of what they want and need in terms of aircraft, at present

agencies are our customers, and would be able to call on these resources at any time and re-deploy should circumstances dictate where they may be needed." The primary role for the medium lift helicopters, and indeed the existing Dauphin fleet, is SAR and coastal protection. While this is a key function of the Air-Corps, it is understood by all concerned parties that the Air Corps cannot provide the level of cover the Coast Guard require, which is four bases with 24-



The S-92 would have been ideal for SAR.



The Air Corps hope that the S-92 can be a future acquisition.

hour cover and medium range aircraft. There is an understanding though that, when properly equipped, the Air Corps will provide cover between Dublin and the North-West while the Coast Guards civil contracted helicopters will provide cover on the West and South coasts. "That's the ultimate goal, and that's what we are still aiming to achieve. We consider the S-61 an interim helicopter, an arrangement until we get the medium lift aircraft that we desperately need. If the

for the Air Corps: "There is a basic and normal fact that people leave, this happens in any organisation. But what happens here is different and more worrying. A military career is different than most, you stay in it because you believe in it and you want to be part of it. But we have been losing people who would be very dedicated to the Defence Forces had there been the commitment to invest in resources and equipment. This is a trend that was very evident in the 1990s, when we

who are qualified to train others. You need a lot of experience to become a Dauphin SAR skipper, experience that is very hard to come by at present. As an example, 150 hours on the aircraft type and 2,500 overall flying experience, are the pre-requisites laid down by the Coast Guard and the Irish Aviation Authority for pilots to be involved in the civil helicopter SAR contracts."

The Dept. of Defence has recently renewed a service commitment scheme for pilots which has done much to retain the remaining experience in service.

"Frankly, the situation is very serious. The Dauphins are coming in for their scheduled overhauls. That leaves us with the Alouette III, the 30th anniversary of which we celebrated in 1993. We're now looking at how to celebrate the 40th, and I can't believe that we're in a situation where we are still using this aircraft after 40 years. The Alouette is a very good reliable aircraft, but it is also very old and it is becoming increasingly more difficult to find spare parts for them. The ratio of technical maintenance time versus the actual flying time that we get out of them compared with modern light utility helicopters mean that the Alouette IIIs are no longer cost effective. That said, we have a job to do, and we do it successfully with the equipment that we have. Modern flying demands a far superior service to what we can provide at present."

For a nation with an extensive coastline, the requirements in terms of SAR, fishery and coastal protection require a far greater capability than that which the Air Corps currently has at their disposal. For instance, the Coast Guard demands a 200 nautical mile coverage from aircraft undertaking Coast Guard duties. The aircraft must be able to uplift 15 survivors on scene and of course be able to return to a safe landing site, those are the minimum requirements. "The tradition of SAR is something very close to the soul of the Air Corps," John O'Keefe explains, "it's a tradition which began in 1963 and one that we're proud of and want to maintain, people here are proud of doing SAR work." While SAR is just one of the vital roles that the Air Corps is charged to undertake, because of the major part it plays in terms of equipment and personnel, it is one that is looked on with anxiety as the equipment and training shortfall approaches critical mass. "We're stretching ourselves beyond our means, maintaining a service for the State with a fleet of aircraft which in my opinion is no longer good enough for the role," Sean Clancy explains.

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Minister reneges on his commitment to provide the medium lift helicopters, then clearly we will be unable to fulfil our duties and it will be a massive blow to morale and the future of the Air Corps. In terms of SAR, we won't be able to provide the cover that we are expected to, it would be a very bleak situation for everyone involved."

The constant drain of personnel and resources has also been a constant headache

desperately needed the equipment, when frustration became very intense and people left. These people were my superiors, my managers, my peers and my friends and left behind them a huge shortfall of key experience in key positions." This loss of personnel has a dangerous and obvious side effect for the Air Corps: "We no longer have the quantity of personnel with the requisite operational experience, we have a very thin layer of people

“In the other roles such as VIP you need the best, when you’re carrying the Head of State, you need to be able to provide an efficient and ever-ready service, a situation which doesn’t exist at the moment. We have a new buildings, a new hangar, new runways in Baldonnel but we have invested nothing in aircraft. Absolutely nothing.”

The Future

“We need a disciplined and continuous programme of investment. I believe the will is there, but we need that will to manifest itself into actual results. If things don’t change the Irish Air Corps will be in serious trouble.”

The image of the Air Corps also runs the risk of being tarnished amongst the other elements of the Irish Defence Forces, the lack of suitable aircraft capable of operating to sufficient range to that which our naval vessels patrol means that an inter-agency approach to operations is very difficult.

“The Naval Service, Army and the Air Corps should obviously be working together. The Naval Service patrol all our Irish waters, the Army work at home and abroad. As a military service we want to provide support for the other military arms. We have a great tradition of interfacing with the Navy and Army, and it’s something that we would like to do more of. Because of the distances at which the Navy operates, we can’t provide

any level of service using our current helicopters. All we can do is provide aerial cover with the CASA patrol aircraft. Likewise we can only provide a very limited interface with a few select units of the Army on a limited

there. But what I fear is that the S-61 will be installed on the North-West Coast and will be seen to be doing the job, albeit at a massive cost to the State. This helicopter, when compared to modern medium lift

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basis. These just highlight some of the problems which frustrates all of us involved.”

For the moment, the S-61 project is keeping the Air Corps, the Wing and all SAR crews busy, but no one at Baldonnel sees it as more than a temporary, stop-gap measure. For the future, there is hope that things will change. Everyone has his or her own source of motivation. For Sean Clancy, there is the motivation to change and modernise a service that has for too long been hampered with poor equipment and drained by a steady loss of key personnel. “I believe that the support in government and cabinet for new medium lift helicopters is

inferior and should be viewed as an interim measure, what I fear is that it won’t be. This aircraft will not solve the current problems of an ageing helicopter fleet in the Air Corps. We’re the Air Corps, and our reason for being here is to fly, and to provide a service, a service that has been gradually eroded. There has been ten years of stagnation in the Air Corps, and while there is new management and new efforts, essentially time has run out. Investment is needed and it’s needed now to provide a service to the state that the state can rely on, whenever and wherever they need us.”



Comdt Jim Lynott 2nd I/C and Ops Officer No.3 Ops Wing, Dauphin Flight Sgt Colm O'Connor and Comdt Sean Clancy OC 301 squadron.