

TRIAL OF HERCULES

Almost a panacea for competing US/European airlift programmes, the UK House of Commons Defence Committee report into the future of the RAF's transport fleet is in danger of ending up as a quack cure-all.

Under the auspices of Staff Requirement (Air) 435, the Royal Air Force is looking to replace up to half of its 60-strong Lockheed C-130 Hercules Mk1/Mk3 fleet in a rolling replacement programme starting in 1997.

What is a relatively small purchase has, however, become ensnared in aerospace industry politicking within the UK, compounded by the issue of whether the Government adopts an Atlantic or European position, even if by default, in its procurement decision.

The option which British Aerospace is championing — and which has tasked the UK House of Commons Defence Committee — is the European Future Large Aircraft (FLA) project, the committee having rejected the Ukrainian-built Antonov An-70T. Although not available inside the desired time-scale, the FLA is being pushed as a competitor to Lockheed's improved Hercules, the C-130J, which is the runaway favourite within senior RAF circles to replace the Mk1/Mk3 Hercules.

Reviewing the options available to the RAF, the report recommends that "...purchase of new C-130J aircraft is the most attractive option at this stage", but adds: "We call for careful consideration to be given to the operation of a larger aircraft, such as the European Future Large Aircraft."

The committee offers, therefore, a hostage to fortune by suggesting: "Consequently, the Ministry should give renewed consideration to development funding of the FLA programme." It is not difficult to imagine the hoots of derision in certain Whitehall offices which may result from such a recommendation.

The UK pulled out of the FLA project at national level in 1989 and there has been no

indication that the Government is even remotely interested in re-joining what it views as a paper project. Indicative of the strength of conviction (or perhaps lack of it) behind the report's views on the FLA is the way in which it couches its recommendation.

"We recommend that, if there is in the MoD's [Ministry of Defence] judgement a substantial probability of buying FLA in the next decade, serious consideration be given to mak-

Exactly to what extent BAe believes its own rhetoric is unclear, but this is the line it is pursuing in pushing for refurbishment of the RAF's Hercules fleet, followed by replacing the C-130s with the FLA around 2006.

BAe is also concerned that Lockheed's strategy in the UK is a blow aimed directly at the heart of European collaboration. In evidence submitted to the committee, it claims: "With the RAF on board, Lockheed

patible, rather than being in competition.

Lockheed's public position is effectively supported by the Defence Committee in that it views a mixed transport fleet as potentially the optimum solution to the RAF's requirements.

The C-130J, like its predecessor, will not be able to carry certain key elements of army equipment. These are quaintly described by the RAF as "outsize loads" such as the Warrior armoured fighting vehicle (AFV) and the "DROPS" transport vehicles.

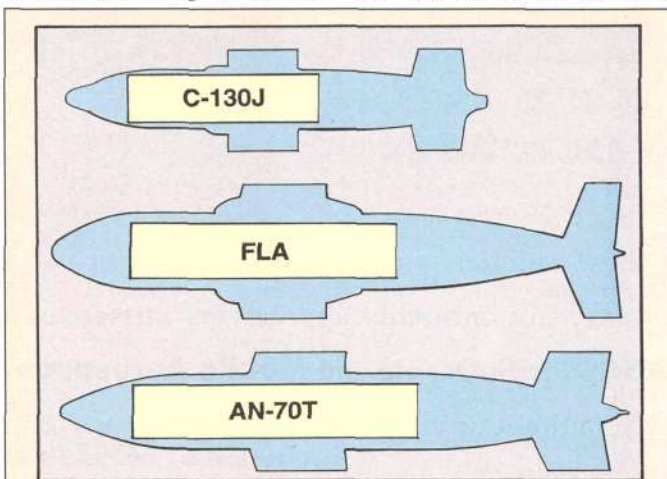
Instead, the MoD has contracted — in civil air-cargo operators to deal with outsize loads or has sent them by sea, as in the case of AFVs to Bosnia. This approach was found unsatisfactory by the committee, which recommends that "...either charter arrangements should be strengthened", or "...very careful consideration be given to operation of a larger aircraft than the C-130 when the second half of the Hercules fleet is replaced".

Given the increasing importance of rapid-reaction forces being deployed out of area, the ability to move by air units with their AFVs would appear self evident.

The committee, in considering this issue, suggests: "The as-yet unqualified, cost penalty in running a mixed fleet of the C-130J and a larger aircraft may...be a price worth paying."

The final irony, at least for BAe, is that, if its reasoning is to be followed, the FLA might not be available to meet a mixed-fleet requirement. The RAF, by opting for the Lockheed C-130J, could also open the door for the much larger McDonnell Douglas C-17 Globemaster, giving the USA a clean sweep of the transport requirement in the UK.

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Comparative hold sizes

"The as-yet unqualified cost penalty in running a mixed fleet of C-130J and larger aircraft may be a price worth paying"

ing some funding available to the FLA programme, to ensure its continuation and the participation of the UK aerospace industry workforce in eventual aircraft production."

Such a view will come as cold comfort to BAe, which maintains that, "...if the C-130J is purchased for what is known as the 'first tranche', then the UK's role in the FLA, and any chance of obtaining significant workshare, will be at risk".

would press for a US Administration commitment to the C-130J programme and then seek to kill off FLA and to monopolise the military large-aircraft market in Europe and worldwide. There is therefore much at stake, strategically, for the UK [and European] aerospace industry."

Faced with such allegations, Lockheed, BAe would suggest disingenuously, claims that the FLA and the C-130J are com-