

# PRACTICAL FUDGING

The UK Government's decision late in 1994 both to buy Lockheed C-130Js for the Royal Air Force and to opt back into supporting the European Future Large Aircraft (FLA programme) might look like a typically British fudge. Surprisingly, in view of the UK's long record of fudge-making, however, it was the only practical decision to make.

Celebrations, however, should not break out too enthusiastically on either side of the Atlantic. The UK decision boosts the short-term prospects for both programmes, but, on its own, it cannot guarantee long-term success for either.

If the UK Government is to be believed, there is a potential RAF order for 40-50

FLAs. That means that the type is seen as a potential replacement for the RAF's other tanker/transport, as well as for the current C-130.

If that is the case, then there will be considerable pressure on the FLA consortium to make the FLA as fast an aircraft as possible, with as long a range as possible. Other applications being canvassed for the FLA include the possibility of its being used as the platform for the replacement of the BAe Nimrod maritime-patrol aircraft, which would need massive range and loiter-time on-station. Such performance demands, however, could further confound a market already confused over just what the FLA should be and how it should be powered.

The original C-130 Hercules was launched with an order (and funding) from the US Air Force, against a very specific requirement. The C-130J has been launched with orders from the RAF and the USAF, again to a very specific requirement. The FLA, however, remains an idea for which there is some Government backing, but, as yet, no specific requirement from any of the eight sponsor governments. (It makes an interesting contrast with 1994's other military-transport debutante, the Russian-funded, Ukrainian-developed Antonov An-70, which was flown at the end of the year.)

The C-130J is being built by what is about to become the world's largest defence contractor —

Lockheed Martin — backed by a 36-company-strong industrial support group in the UK and countless other contractors around the world. It has a strong parent, which could afford to develop it (this time) without Government funding,

and is selling to a willing export customer on the strength of huge offsets.

The C-130J programme is now, essentially, a commercial one, even if most of the customers are governments buying the aircraft for military purposes. The FLA programme is still, essentially, a political one, sponsored by governments whose primary interest lies in maintaining a European aerospace industry. The military customer is, in some ways, the excuse for the FLA programme rather than the driver.

That does not diminish the relevance of the FLA, nor does it necessarily cast doubt on its ultimate worthiness. The FLA, almost by definition, will be a better product than the C-130J when it finally arrives on the market: if it were not, there would be no justification for it.

Now, more than ever, however, having a good product is no guarantee of market success. Marketing strength and financial muscle count for far more, and it is here that Lockheed Martin has real advantages. Although many of the individual companies involved with the FLA have considerable defence expertise, few have recent experience of selling tactical military transports, or in making large profits. In contrast, Lockheed has, for the last 30 years, been the dominant Western supplier of military transports of all types.

A lack of previous market presence is not necessarily a barrier to success, as Airbus Industrie has proved — but it has taken Airbus more than 20 years to reach its present position of being able to challenge Boeing for airliner-sales leadership. If the FLA is to achieve true market success, it will have to sell to a wide export market, against the smaller, older, but ubiquitous, Hercules. That battle will make the breakthrough achieved in getting the UK Government back on board seem like a trivial achievement in comparison. □



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