

DEFENCE

Air 9000 inquiries clear probes breach allegations

Two investigations into alleged probity breaches on Australia's Air 9000 military helicopter rationalisation project have found no evidence of improper conduct, said Australian defence minister Robert Hill on 15 December.

He revealed that the secretary of the Australian Department of Defence (DoD) has received reports from the inspector general of defence and the Air 9000 probity adviser, and that "the secretary has accepted the findings that there was no evidence of improper conduct, bias or unethical behaviour during the evaluation process".

As first reported by *Flight International*, whistleblowers within the DoD had complained that they had been pressured by the Australian Army to change the parameters of modelling applied to AgustaWestland's EH101, the results of which were used to justify dropping the aircraft from the competition in early October. Eurocopter and Sikorsky will now contest the requirement.

Contrary to some international media claims, the internal investigations were not sparked by complaints from AgustaWestland.

The second investigation is understood to have been conducted by Australian law firm Clayton Utz. Australian government purchasing records analysed by *Flight International* identify a \$285,000 contract award to the company by the Air 9000 project office on 6 November 2003. This is consistent with *Flight International* research, which indicates that the allegations began circulating within the Australian DoD in early October.

A third investigation has also been launched within the DoD to determine how details of the whistleblower allegations became public.

TECHNOLOGY GUY NORRIS / LOS ANGELES

SpaceShipOne breaks sound barrier...and a leg

Supersonic aircraft reaches Mach 1.2 but runs off Mojave runway on landing

SpaceShipOne, the Scaled Composites low-cost suborbital demonstrator, broke the sound barrier on 17 December before running off the Mojave runway on landing after one of its undercarriage legs collapsed.

The supersonic sortie was made possible by the first airborne firing of the vehicle's SpaceDev/Scaled Composites hybrid rocket motor, which uses pressure-fed nitrous oxide as an oxidizer and hydroxy-terminated polybutadiene as the solid fuel.

The rocket motor was fired shortly after SpaceShipOne was released from the White Knight mothership at 48,000ft (14,640m).

Piloted by Brian Binnie, the vehicle accelerated from Mach 0.55 to around M1.2 during the 15s burn of the rocket. During the initial acceleration the vehicle climbed at a 60° angle and, following engine shutdown, was put into a vertical climb before achieving zero speed at 68,000ft.

The vehicle was then configured into its high-drag "feathered" shape for a 1min-long descent phase to simulate an atmospheric re-entry. This also reconfirmed the results of a series of recent glide tests undertaken over recent months to evaluate aerodynamic modifications made to correct an uncommanded pitch-up problem uncovered during

a glide test in September. During later tests Scaled Composites intends to demonstrate zero-g conditions at apogee for more than 3min.

After reconfiguring SpaceShipOne from its feathered position, Binnie restored the vehicle to its more conventional glider shape for a 12min gliding descent.

On touchdown, Scaled Composites says the left gear "retracted, causing the ship to veer to the left and leave the runway with its left wing down". The company, which is proposing SpaceShipOne for the \$10 million X-Prize, says "damage from the landing incident was minor and will easily be repaired. There were no injuries."

Scaled Composites, which timed the test attempt to coincide with the centenary of flight, says the achievement marks the first supersonic flight by an aircraft developed by a small private company without government support. Shortly after the flight, Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen confirmed his role as the sponsor of the project.

Last year Scaled Composites founder Burt Rutan said that \$20 million was a good estimate for the project's cost.



Scaled Composites says damage to SpaceShipOne will be easily repaired

BUSINESS VICTORIA MOORES / LONDON

Air Littoral future still uncertain

French regional carrier Air Littoral's future remains uncertain after would-be investor 7 Group failed to meet an 18 December deadline for funding its takeover of the airline, leaving the way open for management training company Ionis.

Ionis, which has offered to take over Air Littoral under the same conditions granted to 7 Group, has been given until 23 December to pay the initial €11 million (\$13 million) needed to secure the acquisition. The new deadline comes as 7 Group - which recently bought

Italian carrier Azzurra Air - insists that it has lined up Italian investors to provide the necessary capital.

President of 7 Group Mario Palmonella says the company has had difficulties in meeting the court-appointed deadlines, but says the problems are "normal for this period for an airline company".

Palmonella says a group of Italian investors is prepared to inject the required €11 million in exchange for 90% of the share capital in a new company called Azzurra Air Littoral, the holder of the air operator's cer-

tificate. The remaining 10% would belong to Azzurra Air.

But sources at Air Littoral say 7 Group has missed its chance and that the investment company is "definitely out" of the bidding.

Azzurra Air needs recapitalising to pay debts and 7 Group is working on raising €10 million. Recapitalisation is set to take place at a shareholders' meeting on 7 January. Although Air Malta holds 49% of Azzurra Air, Palmonella says the carrier "will not subscribe" to the recapitalisation effort.