France’s Aircraft Industry

During the past ten years the French aviation industry has achieved by steady and systematic reorganization what its counterparts in Britain and the USA have either accomplished after brief periods of turmoil or hectic years of relatively uncontrolled competition. During the first ten years after World War II the industry re-established the basic ability to produce complete aircraft and to fulfil national military requirements from home production. The French Government was the industry’s main, if not only, customer.

In 1955, government and industry together took the decision to enter the international competitive field, to export existing aircraft, engines, missiles and equipment and to design new projects intended specifically for the international market. A tremendous effort to re-orientate the whole industry towards an international and competitive outlook, and to plan specifically a general expansion in every sphere, has now resulted in an export and civil turnover which, in 1960, accounted for 47 per cent of the total output; and three-fifths of the exported material has been for civil as distinct from military use. France also pioneered in co-operative, international design and production and has taken a leading part in NATO projects.

In order to form a predictable basis of national military production on which exports could be planned, the French Government recently passed the military equipment programme law which sets out for the next five years the design and production effort required to meet national military requirements. All the major projects in the programme law are now known with some certainty with the exception of those for light twin-engined tactical transports, although it has been recently reported that a firm decision has been taken on which exports could be planned, the French Government is now also in a position to produce her own nuclear weapons, tactical missiles and electronic equipment of all kinds. For years she has held a dominant position in the medium-range jet-transport field, in turbine-powered helicopters and has captured a sizeable export market with one of the world’s most effective fighters, the Mirage III.

Organization and Resources

The French aircraft industry employs more than 83,000 people and occupies about 21,340,000 sq ft of factory floorspace for the production of airframes, engines, missiles and equipment. Equipment includes about 30,000 machine tools and the annual turnover runs test, research, telecommunications and training establishments for aircraft, engines, equipment and missiles. Overall test and evaluation responsibility rests with the DTIA, but there are two bodies broadly responsible for purely commercial aircraft, the Secrétariat Général à l’Aviation Civile et Commerciale (SGACC) and the Service de la Formation Aérienne et du Tourisme (SFATAT).

These departments not only generate military orders and distribute work amongst the companies but also provide a strong, systematic backing of basic research establishments and qualitative standards, together with a powerful market research and sales propaganda service. Sound general policy has been able not only to foster technological progress by ordering advanced and elaborate military weapons, but also to accept certain limitations in the size of the industry and to concentrate commercial ventures in those areas where the sales prospect have been most attractive. Thus, the industry is preparing both manned and un-manned weapons for the national nuclear deterrent, and at the same time has come close to penetrating the American domestic market. Systematic government encouragement of sport and business flying has also created what might be termed a self-contained light aircraft industry second only to that of the United States.

While tailoring the objectives in the export and civil fields to the production capacity of a relatively small industry, the government has also given full scope to the traditional French genius in aircraft design. Successive crops of promising prototypes have been allowed to progress well into the development stages, but only those with real sales potential have been allowed to go further; and although relatively few of the types now in production represent the fringe of the state of the art a strong practical background of advanced technology exists as a basis for future developments. Thus, France has led most of Europe in engine turbo-shaft engines to light transports and helicopters, tactical attack aircraft and VTOL and STOL vehicles and aircraft. France is now also in a position to produce her own nuclear weapons, tactical missiles and electronic equipment of all kinds. For years she has held a dominant position in the medium-range jet-transport field, in ground-stationed helicopters and has captured a sizeable export market with one of the world’s most effective fighters, the Mirage III.