

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Work of the Chief of the Air Staff, HC 1108

Wednesday 1 February 2023

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Members present: Mr Tobias Ellwood (Chair); Sarah Atherton; Robert Courts; Richard Drax; Mr Mark Francois; Mr Kevan Jones; Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck; John Spellar; Derek Twigg.

Questions 1-152

Witnesses

I: Air Chief Marshal Sir Michael Wigston, Chief of the Air Staff; and Air Marshal Sir Richard Knighton, Deputy Commander for Capability and People.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Air Chief Marshal Sir Michael Wigston and Air Marshal Sir Richard Knighton.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to this Defence Committee hearing; we will be looking at the UK's air power. I am delighted to welcome Air Chief Marshal Sir Michael Wigston who is Chief of the Air Staff. With him is Air Marshal Sir Richard Knighton, who is the Deputy Commander for Capability and People. You are very much welcome and we very much appreciate your time.

I mentioned in the private session that we may be interrupted at 4 o'clock. We will do our best to get through. Before we go into the details of questions—there is much to cover this afternoon—could you just give us an overview as to the air power capability? So very straightforwardly, how many Typhoons have we got, how many F-35s have we got, and how many are operational right now?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Just to clarify, Chair, do you want me to focus just on the combat air force in answering that, or would you prefer that I give a broader answer?

Q2 Chair: Just on the fast-jet capability, and then we will move on to the other air support assets in a second.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: The current fast-jet capability consists of the Typhoon force—it is an established force, but it is still growing as a result of decisions that were made in 2015—and, of course, the Lightning force, which you and Committee members were fortunate to visit up at Marham last week. The Typhoon force currently consists of 137 aircraft in seven squadrons, plus the operational conversion unit, plus the trials unit. That is the backbone of the Royal Air Force's combat air capability—the UK's combat air capability. It is a phenomenally effective aircraft.

In the context of Ukraine-facing activity and NATO, over the last 12 months we have flown over 500 sorties from the north of Norway all the way down through the Black sea and into the Mediterranean. At the same time, we have continued the missions against violent extremists in Iraq and Syria under Operation Shader, and we have even had the ability to deploy a half squadron across to the other side of the world, to Australia, to exercise with 17 other regional air forces last summer. Currently, we have II Squadron in Nevada on Exercise Red Flag, so we are continuing the high-end training, as well as that phenomenal operational drumbeat.

We flew over 21,000 hours last year, which is between 5% to 10% more than we would normally fly in a normal year. What was most significant was that it was an almost 100% increase in operational hours. When I talk about the backbone of the Royal Air Force, it is those seven combat air squadrons on Typhoon.



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The F-35 force is a force in growth still. We have taken delivery of 30 aircraft. Very sadly, we lost one in 2021, so we are down to 29. We will continue to build the force up to 47 by 2025. Aligned with that, of course, is building the technicians who get these aeroplanes in the air and, of course, the pilots who fly them. That is a complex challenge of training the trainers, who then train the new students. I am pleased to say that, just this week, we are going to graduate another two pilots, so we will be up to 34 trained UK pilots, and another seven will graduate between now and August.

Q3 Chair: We will come on to pilots. Can I confirm that you have seven squadrons of Typhoon?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Seven frontline squadrons, plus the operational conversion unit, plus the trials unit.

Q4 Chair: Okay. If we needed to go to war, we have seven squadrons that are up and running and functional, and then you have an additional F-35 squadron, which we met when we went to Marham, so there are eight squadrons.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: There are. A second Lightning squadron will stand up this year as well, so we will have two frontline Lightning squadrons. That will take us to nine.

Q5 Chair: That will take us to nine. When you were a Tornado pilot in Operation Granby, we had 36 squadrons. You know where I am going with this. The world is getting more dangerous, not less. You really are going to be stretching what you have now with the extra duties that are going to come the RAF's way unless you are able to upgrade. Would you agree with that?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: The only bit I wouldn't agree with is that I flew on Op Granby—I was still in flying training at the time—but I recognise the rest of your statement. It is a bit like comparing the size of the Army with the size of Wellington's army. A combat aircraft today—something like the F-35—is so unbelievably more capable than the aircraft we were flying even 20 years ago, let alone 30 years ago, and that makes up for the absence of mass. We also have aircraft like the Reaper, soon to be the Protector, which bring lethality to the frontline. Air power brings the lethal into defence. Air power takes the fight to the enemy in Iraq and Syria.

Chair: Those squadrons can only be in one airspace at any one time, so while the Wellington comparison works, it then fails—we are going to need more squadrons, I think. We just flag that up, because we are making as much noise as possible given the refresh of the integrated review. As with the Navy, we will probably come to the realisation that our Air Force is very exquisite but not large enough.

Q6 Derek Twigg: Sorry, Chair, your question was twofold—how many have we got, and how many can fly?

Chair: You have this wonderful phrase “force elements at readiness”,



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which is another way of saying how many work and are available at any one time.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: I try to avoid using force elements at readiness; I use the metric of squadrons, because I see a squadron as a command-and-control unit that is deployable—

Q7 **Derek Twigg:** On the Typhoon, you said 137 aircraft—how many of those could actually fly out today?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: For the Typhoon, with aircraft that are being upgraded or going through depth maintenance, the forward area available fleet would be about 100, but I will go away to check that figure, because it varies. We can talk a very good story about improving Typhoon availability as the aircraft has matured in service and we have got to understand it.

Q8 **Derek Twigg:** You are saying that about 37 are not flying, because of issues of maintenance and so forth.

Air Marshal Knighton: Mr Twigg, it might be useful to give a bit of context. The Committee—Mr Jones—has asked this question previously. In a steady state, when we are training pilots and preparing for operations, we go through a cycle with the aircraft which, after a certain number of hours, need to be taken offline to be inspected and maintained. Sometimes, spiral upgrades also need to be undertaken. In an average period, those are the numbers that the Chief of the Air Staff is describing. In extremis—we have seen this before—we can generate some of those aircraft more quickly, but we work on the basis that we have enough pilots and enough aircraft for the seven frontline squadrons, the OCU, and the Test and Evaluation Unit. We always need to continue to maintain those aircraft, so that when we need them, we can bring them back into the frontline.

Q9 **Derek Twigg:** And the F-35s?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: The working assumption on the F-35 is that around 10% of the fleet at any one time will be in depth maintenance or upgrade, leaving the remainder for day-to-day operations. Given that these are technical beasts, which don't work 100% of the time, there will be an element of difference between those aircraft that are serviceable and those in the forward fleet. In my reckoning, anything above 80% is a good figure when we are dealing with complex combat aircraft.

Q10 **Chair:** Quickly, for a couple of minutes, let us look at the back-up for that. We visited Birmingham, where the Wedgetail—the E-7—is being made. It is a very impressive aircraft. You spoke of the Wellington comparison, and what makes the F-35 an interesting aircraft is having that mother ship being able to control all those assets with the E-7. That prompts the question: when we are growing the fleet of F-35s, why did you purchase only three E-7s and not five, as you intended originally? Would you like to have more?



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Air Chief Marshal Wigston: I will answer that by saying that our original analysis identified that the number to give our political decision makers choice, to bring resilience to the force and to add the value you talk about from this phenomenal platform, which really multiplies the force, was five airframes. The decision of three that we came out of the integrated review with I absolutely stand by, because I recognise that the decisions made were in the context of all the other decisions made across defence. My focus now is absolutely on delivering the three that we have signed up to and getting them into service as quickly as we can, so that they enhance the frontline and contribute to NATO. That analysis stands. At a future date, in a future review, it is something that I hope we would come back to, but my focus now is on delivery.

Q11 **Chair:** I understand that No. 10 takes a huge interest in Defence Committee hearings leading up to the integrated review refresh. This is your opportunity to share what you would like to come out of the upgrade.

There is a suspicion that there were an awful lot of cuts in your capabilities in air power, and this was one example—moving from five airframes to three. If you look at the equivalent of E-7 over the water—which is the P-8—you have nine of those, whereas you have only three to work over the land. Last opportunity: would you like to see more of these in the integrated review refresh?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: The integrated review refresh, as you say, is ongoing at the moment—

Chair: Just say yes.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: The decisions are for the Secretary of State. What we would recognise as a future fleet and an aspiration for a future fleet is five—

Chair: Ah, okay. We got there—thank you.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: But we recognise that the focus now has to be on delivering the three, and those decisions can come at a later date.

Chair: We saw the three. They are in the bag; we witnessed those.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: They are on the way.

Q12 **Mr Francois:** Very quickly—we used to have seven E-3s. If you have three, because of maintenance you will probably have only two available on any given day. If you are really unlucky, you will have only one. It has to be more than three to provide you with resilience.

When is the E-7 actually going to achieve initial operational capability, given that the E-3s have gone and, in the event of a hot war, we would lose most of our east coast radar stations to cruise missile strikes within 24 hours? When is the E-7 actually going to be in service?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Everything I am told and see from Boeing tells me that we will take delivery of the first aircraft next year.



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- Q13 **Mr Francois:** With respect, Air Chief Marshal, we were not born yesterday. "Take delivery" does not mean "in service". Could you answer the question that the Committee asked?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Mr Francois, you are absolutely right. I was about to get on to what it then takes to get to an operational capability. Of course, you are not immediately operational, and usually the long pole in that is people; it is technicians, pilots and aircrew.

What we are doing at the moment is exactly what we did with Poseidon. We have aircrew currently flying in Australia with the Australian air force, and we have engineers in Australia with the Australian air force, learning how to operate this aircraft so that, as quickly as possible, we can get from taking delivery to being operational. It was a matter of months with Poseidon, and I am confident that we can do the same again.

On your question about how many and the relevance of three, three aircraft will enable us to make a very meaningful contribution to the NATO airborne early warning network. In return, we will get support from NATO as well. Everything points to the USAF buying into E-7 as well now. This will be a large global fleet alongside the Australians. As I say, there is an aspiration to grow at a future date, but the focus now is on delivery.

- Q14 **Mr Francois:** We are always time-limited in these hearings. I will give you one last chance: give us a date when the E-7 will enter service.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: We will take delivery of our first E-7 in the middle of next year, in 2024.¹

- Q15 **Chair:** When is that then operational?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: The operational date—Rich might want to add some more detail on this. Because of the change of the programme from five aircraft to three, we still need to get the business case through the approvals process. Part of that process is when we actually define initial operating capability and set a date. That will happen in the next few months—so the middle of 2023. We have had to renegotiate from five aircraft to three—

- Q16 **Mr Francois:** Right, so you cannot give us a date. Can you confirm that we are paying not far short of the same amount for three as we were for five? It is about £1.9 billion for three, and we were going to pay £2 billion and a bit for five, weren't we? Surely that is a false economy.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: It is a significant reduction. In addition to reducing the number of airframes, we elected to co-locate the Wedgetail up at Lossiemouth with Poseidon, so you have two common airframes and all the efficiencies that come with that. It was a significant reduction in the costs, and that contributed to the overall balancing of the integrated review in 2021.

- Q17 **Mr Francois:** For the record, we have given you four opportunities now to

¹ The MOD expects the first E-7 to be delivered in the second half of 2024.



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tell us when this critical aircraft comes into service, and you have ducked it four times, so let's move on.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: If I may, Mr Francois. I absolutely understand what you are saying there. I have tried to give you an indication as best I could—

Chair: Maybe you can take that away. I do recall receiving a call from the American embassy saying that, if you only buy three, it might not be worth setting up the assembly line in Birmingham to make these things, because it is not in their interest to invest in just three rather than five. You did save money, and you were forced to, because of the limits of the money going into the integrated review. But ultimately, the money that you saved on two was not cost-effective—I think that is the point that Mark has made. We need to make progress. John, do you have a quick point?

Q18 **John Spellar:** The MoD has contingency plans and assessments for almost every eventuality. You must have somewhere within the RAF a contingency assessment of, "If things proceed as anticipated, this will be operational by X." The MoD always does that.

Chair: We are going to return to this.

John Spellar: I would like to know whether you have a contingency plan or an assessment that says this is probable, likely or a possibility.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Mr Spellar, in those circumstances, in extremis, it is a bit like we were talking previously about pulling aircraft out of depth servicing. In extremis, with trained and qualified crew—which I know we have, because they are flying in Australia—and with trained and qualified engineers, we would be able to do it very quickly. But actually, it is far better to do it on a programme basis and get it right.

Q19 **John Spellar:** Right, but what is your contingency plan? What is your rough assessment of when this is likely to be?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: My broad assessment is that it will be a matter of months after we take delivery of the first aircraft.

Chair: That is operational.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: It will be less than six months, but it will be a matter of months, not years, from in service to operational.

John Spellar: That's fine.

Chair: We will come back to this, but we are eating into important time to deal with some of the other substantives. Richard, let's look at manpower.

Q20 **Richard Drax:** Good afternoon, gentlemen. Pilot training, as I am sure you are aware, has been a problem for many years. The NAO investigated in '15 and '19, and both reports identified significant problems in the system. The '19 report noted that, on average, it took 7.1 years for a fast-jet pilot to be trained, against an MoD target of 3.9



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years. We met some of your pilots in Marham—I think one pilot was in his ninth year, if I recall, and another was in his eighth, and they still had not qualified to fly the F-35. It is over three years since the Secretary of State said that fixed flying training should be your No. 1 priority. Do you agree with his recent conclusion that things have in fact gone backwards?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Mr Drax, I agree with the Secretary of State when he said that things are not what we would want them to be in flying training. But there have been some misunderstandings and misinformation around what is actually going on at the moment and where the backlog that surfaced last year came from, because the part of flying training, which is the contracted military flying training system—I would describe it as the second phase—is actually delivering. It is taut, but it is delivering. That has had an awful lot of NAO attention over the years, and it has had a lot of criticism, but I would point to that as a part of the overall flying training system, which is now working.

The challenge that we have had, which began to surface at the end of 2021 and through 2022, was a combination of a number of external factors. The first was the covid-19 pandemic, where we were fortunate enough to be able to recruit 100 pilots or aircrew who had recently left the Air Force and found that they did not have the jobs that they thought they had. We were able to recruit them back into the service, and about another 100 pilots who would otherwise have left over that period elected to stay.

At the same time, we were at pace implementing the decisions made in the integrated review. We were winding down the Hercules force. We were retiring Sentry. We were retiring Sentinel. We retired the BAe 146. We had reduced the size of the Chinook force. We had reduced the size of the Puma force. All those were frontline seats, and all those forces had operational conversion units to train that would normally be training people for those seats. So somebody who had been loaded into flying training off the street some three or four or, in some unfortunate cases, five or six years previously, thinking that they were on target for a Hercules operational conversion unit place, found themselves, by the time they got to it, without the frontline seats or the training place to go to.

The third external element was of our own making. We consciously prioritised the frontline of the Typhoon force last year and took resource away from the operational conversion unit for the Typhoon just to make sure that we were absolutely ready for anything that Putin might do in terms of escalation or expansion.

That logjam ahead of the frontline is what has conspired to create the backlog that made the headlines last summer and that we are working to fix.

Q21 **Richard Drax:** What have you personally done to fix it?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: In terms of the military flying training system, as I say, that is in a much, much better place. When I became Chief, there were 150 people waiting for their first flying course, waiting



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for elementary flying training; today, it is fewer than 10. We still have hundreds of people who are waiting to get through to the frontline and are at various stages in the flying training system. However, we have fixed that element which you would recognise as the military flying training system.

As you say, the figures in the past for fast jets have been five years, which includes about three and a half years of actual flying training, but it's seven years in total to get to the frontline. That is the position historically; today it's five years, and by this time next year it will be four years. It's the same for multi-engine; it's the same for rotary wing.

Q22 Richard Drax: But what do you say to these hundreds who are waiting to be trained? Of course, time is money, you want these men and women in the cockpit of whatever they are going to fly, and the longer they wait, the longer they aren't qualified and the fewer planes and qualified pilots you have in the air.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Mr Drax, you are absolutely right. First, I absolutely feel for the position they are in; I have absolute sympathy for the position they are in. They are not doing what they joined the Air Force to do and they would give anything to be on the frontline. But what we are doing with them is that we are making sure that, wherever we can, we are giving them career-enhancing personal development opportunities.

Richard Drax: But does that mean flying?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: It's not flying, but I have holding officers working in Ministers' offices in the MoD and working in the Air Staff in the MoD. We have them supporting ambassadors and attachés—

Richard Drax: But they joined to fly—

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Absolutely.

Richard Drax: And that's not what they're doing. You have hundreds queuing up to do this training. When will these hundreds all be through the system? When will you have a system that actually works?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Because of all the things that we have put in place over the last six to—well, over the last year—I have absolute confidence that, in the absence of any other changes to our force structure or external injects, by the middle of next year, by the middle of 2024, the maximum hold that anyone will experience between flying courses is six months. The optimum hold will be about three months, because that then gives us flexibility to bring people forward and flexibility for people to take some leave, recuperate, or do some courses. All the signals are that we will get there, for multi-engine and rotary wing, by the middle of next year. For fast jets, it will happen quicker; it will happen this year. The hold for the Typhoon OCU is already down to about two months. So things have improved markedly from where they were even a year ago.

Richard Drax: Well, there are many more questions to go. Chair, I am



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going to hand back to you, because I know there is a lot more to get through.

Chair: Thank you very much. Over to John, please.

- Q23 **John Spellar:** In terms of being trained, including flying, roughly how many weeks of actual training—not just the four years—do they have to undertake to be qualified to fly a fast jet?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Fast jet is 35 months.

- Q24 **John Spellar:** When you say 35 months, do you mean that they are training every week during the course of that?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Or ground school or simulators. A fortunate fast-jet pilot who does not have any holds will do three MFTS courses—the middle phase of training—and then the OCU. That is the 35.

- Q25 **John Spellar:** Okay, so just under three years. How many pilots get through the course in that time?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Over the last three years, it has been around 20 a year, but as we continue to grow the Typhoon force, as we grow—

Mr Francois: That's not true, is it?

Chair: Let him finish the answer, Mark, and then you can come back in.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: As we grow the Lightning force, that number will have to increase. That is something that we had been working hard to put in place at Valley to increase the capacity there—stand fast, the recent developments with the Hawk engine.

- Q26 **John Spellar:** So that is 20 pilots a year who may go through the three years. How many pilots are in the whole cohort?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: We have been training about 100 a year for the last few years.

- Q27 **John Spellar:** So 80 out of the 100 a year are not going through at that pace.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: No, no. They go through to rotary wing or multi-engine.

- Q28 **John Spellar:** Okay, so clearly there are a number of bottlenecks in the system, or there have been. You say that you are eroding them away. Who is directly in charge of this? It has been an ongoing saga for a very long time and a concern to Committees for a very long time. Who is operationally dealing with this on a day-to-day basis to actually drive this process of improvement through?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Mr Spellar, that was something that I recognised when I became Chief. It is one of the driving factors when I made changes in the headquarters. I moved 22 Group, which is our



training group, underneath deputy commander operations. One three star, who is Rich's counterpart, is responsible for all our frontline force generation and operational flying, but is also responsible for the entirety of the pilot training pipeline and the aircrew training pipeline. That is something that I put in place, recognising exactly what you identify. In the space of my career, I can identify at least three—probably four—cycles where the flying training system has got out of balance, but it is a complex system that is prone to external shocks that reverberate through the system and have the kind of impact that we identified last year.

- Q29 **John Spellar:** Shocks happen; it is how quickly you react to them. By the way, do we have a comparator from other, comparable air forces for how long they take to train fast-jet pilots?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Yes, we do. We take leading practice from them as much as they take leading practice from us. One of the key debates at the moment is the balance between synthetic flying and live flying, and I would offer that we are at the front of the pack in that regard, in terms of how much we are embracing the opportunities in synthetic training.

John Spellar: The others might not agree with us.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Actually, I think that as the technology of the simulators and augmented reality in the actual cockpit is becoming better and better, we are seeing increasing levels of synthetic training before people live fly. For our Lightning pilots—there are no two-seat Lightnings—their first flight in a Lightning is on their own, but they get up to that standard by flying in the simulator.

- Q30 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Good afternoon again. The defence operational capability audit was ordered in August last year. As a Committee, we asked for an update in October, and we still have not received any feedback, but we have been led to believe that it has concluded. Has it concluded?

Air Marshal Knighton: The report was concluded, and it went to the Defence Secretary. We have not had a response back from the Minister, but it set out the conclusions that the Chief of the Air Staff set out, in terms of the causes and the actions that we are taking being exactly what the DOC audit identified. We were already, and are, acting on the recommendations that were made by the DOC audit that has gone to the Defence Secretary.

- Q31 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Is there anything in those recommendations that could not have been reached back in 2019, three years ago?

Air Marshal Knighton: As the Chief of the Air Staff set out, in 2019, the focus and the problem was principally around the contracted-out part of the military flying training system, which as a consequence of the changes in airframe type over those previous few years had led to the number of pilots holding before they started growing to an unacceptable level. As CAS has set out, that has now worked its way through the system. In



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2019, it was pre-pandemic and pre-this integrated review, so we did not know that we were going to see a reduction in the number of cockpits, nor did we know that we were going to be able to hold on to—and, in fact, attract back into the service—a whole range of pilots who had left and then wanted to rejoin.

All those things contributed to the position in which we found ourselves in the summer, and as CAS pointed out, all those issues are being addressed by a whole range of levers. There is no single solution to the problem, and the DOC audit was a useful way to flush all that out, laying that out and making sure that we left no stone unturned in trying to address these issues, because as the Chief and Mr Drax said, that is not what these young men and women join for.

Q32 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Is there any reason why we cannot see that operational capability audit?

Air Marshal Knighton: It is secret. It is classified, so you would have to—

Q33 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Bearing in mind that you went through some of the recommendations there, what is it that we are not being told, then? I suppose that is what we would want to know.

Air Marshal Knighton: On the basis that it is secret, if I were to tell you what you are not being told, that would tell you what is in there. It was classified, as DOC audits are—DOC audit stands for defence operational capability audit; that is why is it classified—but in terms of the findings, as the Chief and I have set out, they are the principal findings and the steps that we are taking. But it would be a matter for Ministers as to what they would be prepared to redact and share with the Committee.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Can I go back to Mr Spellar's question? One of the things that I am optimistic about, in terms of looking at the future, is the potential to bring technology in to help us model how resilient we are, and how we are able to withstand the sorts of shocks that we have spoken about and which have impacted on us in the past 18 months. It is something that Rich is leading on.

Air Marshal Knighton: There are around 2,000 pilots in our system, in the frontline and going through the training system, and there are multiple factors. There are different course lengths, there are different problems that might occur—weather, a whole range of factors. It is quite a difficult system to really understand and visualise, so although there is a model for the contracted-out element of the military flying training system, we did not have a sort of digital twin of the overall system for our pilot cohort.

That is what we are putting into place, taking the models we already have and enabling us to answer the question, so that when we come to the next integrated review, if there is a big increase in the pilot requirement or a reduction in the pilot requirement, we can explain to Ministers and decision makers what that impact would be. That digital twin—it is a



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slightly grand term—will provide us with a much better tool to understand and model different outcomes and the impact of different decisions.

Chair: Thank you for that.

- Q34 **Mr Francois:** Air Chief Marshal, I am sure you would agree—I will just check—that it is your duty to give as candid and accurate responses to this Committee as you can, right?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Yes, Mr Francois.

- Q35 **Mr Francois:** You told the Committee a few minutes ago, when we were asking about MFTS, that in the last three years about 20 fast-jet pilots have graduated from the programme. Did we hear you right?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: It is around 20, yes. That is right.

- Q36 **Mr Francois:** Okay, because I tabled a question on this exact subject on 26 January: “To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, how many RAF fast-jet pilots have successfully graduated from the MFTS programme in each of the last five years.” In 2021-22, there were 10. That is an official answer from the Department, which is half of what you told the Committee it was. How do you explain that discrepancy?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Because of the pandemic and lockdown, courses were delayed and slipped into subsequent years.

- Q37 **Mr Francois:** Hang on, you told us a few minutes ago that in the last three years there were 20. I have a PQ here that says you weren’t quite right. I think it is important to be accurate.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Mr Francois, I completely accept that. As you say, in-year, the accurate number, because I think your answer is rounded for statistical reasons—

Mr Francois: So it could have been less than 10.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: It was 12, but some of the other years were slightly above 20. But the throughput in a normal, non-covid year has been around 20.

- Q38 **Mr Francois:** I am not going to play semantic games with you, sir. Everyone can see what is happening. You told us that in the last three years it was 20; you have now admitted it was 12 in one of them. Let’s not get bogged down in it—we have made the point.

When we went to Marham, we spoke to some F-35 pilots and asked them, “What is the ground truth about how long it really takes?” Before I tell you what they said, how long is it taking now to train a fast-jet pilot, from when they join the service to when they actually get in the cockpit of an F-35?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: For somebody starting at the end of last year, it was five years. For somebody starting at the end of 2021, it was seven years.



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Q39 **Mr Francois:** Right, well, we asked these two chaps, "How long does it take?" The answer we were given was, "If you have average luck, it is seven years." These two had not been flying the F-35 for that long, I don't think, and other Members were there. We were told, "If you are lucky"—that was the word used—"it is six," and the guy who said that was at six years. He said, "My friend here was unlucky, and it was 10." These are real pilots. There is an old infantry saying that time spent in reconnaissance is rarely wasted. Why is it taking all these years to train someone to fly a fast jet?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: I absolutely recognise that there are people out there—because I am talking average figures, and those young pilots you were speaking to were from the generation that came through from 2015 onwards, so they battled their way through all the early introduction problems we had with MFTS, which I have spoken about previously. They have had the worst of all worlds, as they have had the misfortune of coming through that process at that time. But the average—

Q40 **Mr Francois:** So you think it is getting better?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: There is absolutely no doubt it is getting better, Mr Francois.

Mr Francois: Absolutely no doubt.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: By the end of this year, for fast-jet pilots starting—

Q41 **Mr Francois:** There is someone who disagrees with you. His name is Ben Wallace. In his introductory session with the Committee in October 2019, the Defence Secretary said he had told the Chief of the Air Staff that fixing MFTS should be his No. 1 priority. He gave each of the three service chiefs one overriding priority, and that was yours. In the evidence to the Committee in November 2022, he said, "we have gone effectively backwards from when I gave my instruction to the Chief of the Air Staff... I do not think that is acceptable." You cannot both be right. Who is right? Is it you, and the Secretary of State is wrong, or is he right and you are wrong?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Mr Francois, I completely agree with the Secretary of State that we are not where we would want to be with this, but I can say, as I have assured him after he gave me the task of fixing MFTS—the contracted part of flying training—that that has been fixed.

Q42 **Mr Francois:** With respect, that is not what he told us three months ago. He told us precisely the opposite; he said it is going backwards.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: What I believe the Secretary of State was referring to was the number of people in hold. The overall number of people has gone up. However, the key factor is not the number of people in hold, but the length of time that they are in hold.

Q43 **Mr Francois:** Air Chief Marshal, MFTS is a broken contract. Everyone knows it. Everyone in the RAF knows it; everyone in industry knows it.

This Committee knows it. It is broken. It doesn't work properly.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Mr Francois, I do apologise for interrupting your flow there. It is delivering for us now. We have actually had to ask them to cut back on capacity because of the logjam ahead of the operational conversion units—standfast one element, which is the engine problem we have with the Hawk at the moment. I assure you, Mr Francois, that on the MFTS contract, which the Secretary of State did give to me as my No. 1 task in 2019, we have fixed it and it is delivering.

Q44 **Mr Francois:** We have already caught you out on the numbers. In common patois, as one man down the pub might say to another, he gave you one job and you have failed to do it, haven't you?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: The job was fixing MFTS, and, as I said, I am confident that MFTS was fixed. In terms of aircrew training, we have explained the external shocks that have shaken through the system and caused the backlog ahead of the OCU. Mr Francois, the frontline for the last couple of years has been full. Today, it is 94% full. I am one of the few chiefs in recent history who has been able to say that I have a full frontline of pilots. That does not speak to a broken flying training system.

Q45 **Mr Francois:** With the F-35, you have almost exactly as many Brit pilots as you have planes. That is something that came out of Marham.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: But I have only one frontline squadron. As I say, we are 94% full. When you look at what we have achieved operationally over the last two years, there has been no operational impact. The flying training log jam was caused by covid and us gaining 200 pilots.

Mr Francois: It was caused by a broken contract that has not been managed properly. I will say one last thing and then we will move on. The Battle of Britain was a long while ago. None the less, the point was that we never ran out of planes, but we nearly ran out of pilots. You would think we would have learned that lesson. You have very little in terms of reserves. You can just about match pilots to planes, but if we have to go to war, you have very little left in the locker, and everybody knows it.

Q46 **Mr Jones:** We have spoken about the people we met who have been waiting seven or eight years. I understand your explanation for why that is, but what are you doing to keep them motivated? To be honest, it is a big problem to keep getting pushed back through no fault of your own. Have you had any leakage in terms of people saying it is not worth it?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Again, it speaks to the quality, talent and aspiration of these people that, given there have been hundreds in the backlog in the holding system over the last seven years, our recent records show that only two have voluntarily withdrawn because they had run out of patience. The vast majority stick with it and get to the frontline. We have been here before. We were here in the '90s after Options for Change when we massively reduced the frontline.

Q47 **Mr Jones:** What are you doing, then, to keep them motivated?



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Air Chief Marshal Wigston: We have a specific career management desk officer dedicated to the holding officers, and wherever we can, we put them in career-enhancing appointments. I recognise and appreciate their frustration that they are not flying, which is what they joined the Air Force to do, but they are getting experience that will be invaluable to them later in their careers—whether that is working in a Minister's office, in an embassy or on an operational squadron. Some of our aircrew waiting to go on to the Protector are working as extra crew in the back of a Poseidon. They are learning the skills that they will be applying as Protector operators while flying as supernumerary crew in a Poseidon.

I don't underestimate the challenges in these people getting to the frontline later than we would wish, but the Royal Air Force understands that we have to treat them carefully and that they will still have career aspirations and want to rise through the ranks, and we have to give them those opportunities. As the history of the '90s and the backlog at the turn of the century shows, people still come through and rise through, even if they have the misfortune of starting their careers in a flying training backlog.

Chair: Just a quick time out while we do some voting procedure—apologies. I have just been in touch with my pairing Whip. The number of Members from the Government and the Opposition is equal in this room. My pairing Whip has said that we can stay and miss the votes if we all promise to stay in the room. As we continue, can the Labour Members confirm that? For the Conservatives, Stuart Anderson has confirmed that. Sorry about that technicality, but it means we can continue uninterrupted. If there is a problem with that arrangement, then we all have to go, so hopefully there will be unity in the Committee.

Robert Courts: Do we need to confirm that, Chairman?

Q48 **Chair:** It is confirmed from our side, but we need confirmation from Labour Members. I will make sure Stuart speaks to the Labour pairing Whip.

Let's move on and turn to the flying training programme itself. Let's imagine I am fresh out of university or a member of the public, and I want to join the RAF. I go to Cranwell to begin with, which is the first stage where people learn about what the RAF is about. Then I go into phase 1. Is it correct to say that that would be with a frontline squadron somewhere?

Air Marshal Knighton: Elementary flying training, of which that is part.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Again, that is at Cranwell.

Q49 **Chair:** Okay. That continues at Cranwell. What aircraft would elementary flying be in?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: That is in the Prefect.

Q50 **Chair:** Okay. If I pass that, I will then be graded and it is worked out whether I will be multi-engine, helicopter or a jet fighter. Is that correct?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Yes.

Q51 **Chair:** I'm looking at the fast-jet component. Would I be flying a Texan?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Yes.

Q52 **Chair:** And if I pass that, I then move on to the Hawk.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Yes.

Q53 **Chair:** Right. And if I pass that, I can then move on to a simulator of a F-35, not the real thing, and then if I pass that, I can fly operationally in a F-35. Is that it? Is that a fast and furious career in the RAF?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: For the fast-jet stream, that is right.

Chair: Then home for tea and medals.

Air Marshal Knighton: It is worth reiterating that we forecast that by the end of this year or the beginning of next year the period that that would take, excluding the time at Cranwell, which is about six months, would be just above four years.

Q54 **Chair:** The whole process? Okay. I don't want to reopen the last discussion we had, but it took one of the pilots we met 10 years to become operational—not 3.9 years, but 10 years.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: It is to his enormous credit, and that of all his colleagues, that they stuck with it. I have the utmost admiration for them for that.

Chair: I am just getting into the meat of it, but Kevan has caught my attention.

Q55 **Mr Jones:** If we are talking about fast-jet training, one thing that came out when we went to Marham is about women. We asked how many women there were for F-35s. I think we were first told that no one had qualified yet or gone through the process, but it didn't actually come down to that, because that is not the reason, is it? It is to do with the weight of the helmet.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: It is the former, actually. To use the language of the Chief of the Defence Staff, it is the "woeful" gender diversity that we have managed to achieve, particularly in aircrew and fast-jet aircrew.

Q56 **Chair:** We are going to come on to that particular subject a bit later. There was an issue to do with the helmet that we flagged up: there needs to be a second, lighter helmet for females to use.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: I am aware of this issue. With the lighter helmet, which would allow lighter aircrew—not just women—to fly the F-35, we would have challenges clearing it in safety terms, because it does not give the pilot the protection that the other helmet has now. On a case-by-case basis, if a woman or a light person came through the flying training system and there was an operational benefit for them to be flying



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Lightning, we could make the risk case for flying with a different helmet. But as it stands at the moment, there are sufficient safety grounds for us to say, "That's the minimum weight limit for Lightning. Whether you are a man or a woman, that is what applies." Frankly, I would dearly love to be in that position, because we have a far more fundamental problem, which is the lack of women coming through flying training.

Chair: Can we come back to this? I want to focus on the Hawk.

- Q57 **Mr Jones:** But can I just say that the problem there is that you are reducing your pool straightaway? If women are lighter—they generally are—they are never going to be able to fly F-35s, so you either stop them flying or ask them to put some weight on.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: If we were in the fortunate position where I had a woman who was in a position to be flying F-35s, we would absolutely do a bespoke risk-case analysis for that person flying with a different helmet.

- Q58 **Mr Jones:** Yes, but they're not going to get that far, are they? They are going to be weeded out earlier on.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: They can fly the Hawk. The choice of whether they go to Lightning or Typhoon—

- Q59 **Mr Jones:** Come on, let's be honest. You know what is going to happen. If a woman is a certain weight and she passes all the other sections of it and gets to the point where she could go down the F-35 route, are you going to tell me that they are going to say, "We are going to make a special case for this one"? They're not.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: If that person's aptitude test and the skills they demonstrate, which are different, going through Valley—there is a different skillset to go to Typhoon, compared with Lightning—strongly pointed towards F-35 Lightning, as I say, we would look at the option of using a less safe helmet. That is what we would be saying.

- Q60 **Chair:** I want to move on. Just to conclude Kevan's point, we were told that the weight limit was 5 stone 8 lb. There is an American helmet designed for females, which is lighter, but they cost a quarter of a million pounds each, and we haven't purchased any. I think there are some health and safety regulations, or UK regs, that prohibit us from doing that. Maybe you can take that away. If you solve that particular issue, we wouldn't be debating whether a female is over or under 5 stone 8; the determining factor would be whether they can fly the F-35.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Mr Chair, I can assure you that no woman has been turned away from Lightning because of a weight limit.

- Q61 **Chair:** I don't think you have had enough pilots coming through to even test the system yet. That is why no woman has come through. We can come back to this, but I am trying to focus on the Hawk, which is part of the mechanism of getting males and females up into the sky, but at the moment it is grounded. Can you confirm that? What has happened with



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the Hawk?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: We returned to flying yesterday after a pause to investigate another engine failure at the beginning of the week before last.

Q62 **Chair:** Go round the world and the Hawk has been like the Land Rover: you find it everywhere. It is one of those ubiquitous bits of kit that everybody has enjoyed. Unfortunately, for some reason, it is no longer seen as the great trainer that everybody wants to use. In your own words, what do you think happened? Why did we go from being the world's leader in training aircraft, which everybody used for understanding how to fly fast jets, to being no longer able to export any? What happened?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: We are still exporting it, although the production is probably coming to an end—

Q63 **Chair:** That suggests that the exports are not going particularly well.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: But that is because it is an airframe that was originally designed in the '70s using 1970s manufacturing techniques. The modern digital design, the materials, the modern manufacture—that is not the Hawk. The latest generation of training aircraft come off the line faster, with more modern technology, and so are more attractive to prospective buyers. I think this is more an issue for BAE Systems than us. We were the first people to buy the Hawk T2—the new generation Hawk, as was—and we will be using it in our flying training system into the 2030s.

Q64 **Chair:** You fly the Hawk, but what is going to happen when these Hawks run out? You are going to need a new trainer aircraft, are you not?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Possibly, but we will do some analysis of that, because it may be that a turbo-prop aircraft can fulfil the role, or that synthetics will have reached such a level of development over the next 10 years that we will be able to do that element of training in a synthetic environment. So there are lots of—

Q65 **Chair:** In English, that means that instead of them going up and feeling all the vibrations and all the noise of a jet aircraft, you are going to put them in a simulator. After they have been in a turbo-prop, they are going to do that, and then they are going to straight into an F-35.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: There is a turbo-prop that is flying around the world today that is capable of minus 4 G to plus 8 G. It absolutely replicates a modern combat aircraft. That is the PC-21. The point is that we will be flying the Hawk T2 until the middle of the next decade, at least, and we have time to look at the options over that period. There is analysis to be done, but certainly no decisions or directions of travel have been identified yet.

Q66 **Chair:** Okay. I'm sorry, but I think this is another one of those little roads that leads to finances. You are making an impassioned case as to why we



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are now going down the road of training our Air Force pilots using ever more of the simulator, but I think that if you had the money, you would not be pushing people into that space: you would be using a trainer. You would be getting them out into the skies doing the real thing. I cannot help thinking that it is the money that has caused this. We are the only NATO country to do this. That is what raises my suspicions.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Chair, you are absolutely right about the physical conditioning. There is an element of live flying that will always be necessary so that the body can experience those unique stresses. However, modern technology, in the simulator environment, thanks in part to the computer-gaming industry and all of the developments and networking available, means that a large part of the training is of better value in a synthetic environment. You can do repetitions. You can put the aircraft in a position that you wouldn't want to in a live environment. You can give the student all sorts of stresses that you wouldn't be able to replicate. We get better training in a synthetic environment with our operational squadrons now that they are networked. As I said, there is still analysis to be done, but we are on the threshold of a sort of paradigm shift in how we train our aircrew.

Q67 **Chair:** It is not the same; I appreciate that. I declare my interest as a private pilot, but I can assure you that doing things in a simulator, where you just press reset—"Game over; try again"—you cannot do that in real life. There is a sense of nervousness and a sense of pressure on you, in the real McCoy, that you do not get in a simulator.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: I completely agree. There is absolutely a minimum level of live flying that will always be a part of this.

Chair: Okay. We've made the point. Kevan, over to you.

Q68 **Mr Jones:** In terms of reviewing the contract, why did you employ external consultants?

Air Marshal Knighton: I think you are referring, Mr Jones, to the work with BCG, which was around helping us to build that digital twin and model. There was some expert advice, but actually, fundamentally, what we got from that was a tool that we own that allows us to build that model of our flying training system. In fact, it will actually give us the opportunity to expand that into the modelling other elements of our workforce, so I am already expanding that into modelling the workforce associated with our groundcrew and our engineers. So we got a product at the end of it: we got all the IP and all the data, and it is ours to adjust.

Q69 **Mr Jones:** So it wasn't just a general consultancy looking at the entire—

Air Marshal Knighton: Not at all.

Q70 **Mr Jones:** In terms of developing that product, who did they speak to? Were they speaking to the actual trainers themselves?

Air Marshal Knighton: Yes, absolutely. Part of the work was to ensure that we understood all the multiple factors that are associated with the



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outcome—working directly with people in the flying training system to understand what things affect the outcome, and working with those who own the flying training system, as well as our workforce planners.

It was deliberately meant to be a method of building what I would euphemistically describe as a digital twin. It enables us to visualise the impact of decisions and to model different outcomes, depending on what levers we are able to pull. It was not a traditional consultancy contract; it was to deliver an actual software tool that we could use.

Q71 Mr Jones: So you now have that software. How is it being used?

Air Marshal Knighton: We hold an aircrew pipeline steering group meeting every couple of months. That model is becoming the definitive picture, and that allows us to feed in any changes to waiting times or the number of places, so that we can model from officer cadets to officer commanding—OC to OC.

Q72 Mr Jones: Are these just ballpark numbers or are these individuals who are actually put into this system? How does it work?

Air Marshal Knighton: We don't put individual names in, but it is about individual places and individual pilots progressing through that system. Clearly, as soon as you simulate a different inject into it, then it becomes a forecast rather than absolutely specific.

Q73 Mr Jones: Does the system allow you to say, basically, that we will have visibility of where people are at in the system?

Air Marshal Knighton: Yes.

Q74 Mr Jones: That should really get to the point that CAS has just made. If you notice that you are getting bottlenecks, for example, you should be able to either turn the pipe up or change something.

Air Marshal Knighton: That is exactly right.

Q75 Mr Jones: It sounds like a very valuable tool, but it gets back to this point about the entire system. You have clearly got visibility now. It's basically, then, who rattles the table and says, "We need to do X."

Air Marshal Knighton: If I can bring it to life for you, at the meeting of the aircrew pipeline steering group we had before Christmas, we had a specific look at pilot rotary wing—so, helicopter pilot training. We were trying to identify how big a lever we could pull in terms of increasing the number of pilots going through the Chinook OCU, and what that would do to the waiting times. This tool enables us to understand how much of a difference increasing the number of pilots going through the OCU will have on the pipeline and hold times, and how quickly that will change.

Q76 Mr Jones: In terms of visibility, does CAS get, for example, a print-out of where people are, to help to monitor it? It is fine having a committee to do these things, but you really have to have somebody at the end of the decision making who is going to say, "Yeah, that's interesting, but can you do this?"



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Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Some of the numbers that we have used today have been the result of the inputs and outputs from that tool.

Q77 **Mr Jones:** Who takes the decision? Does it arrive on your desk, CAS, so that you can say, "Look, I'm bit concerned about this"?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Ultimately, yes; but there are a number of people in the organisation who play a part in making those decisions along the way.

Air Marshal Knighton: Just to be really crystal clear for you, Mr Jones, there were some adjustments in the organisational structure of the Air Force before I started in my job last year, which put all the flying training under the deputy commander in charge of operations. Responsibility for managing that process, end to end, now sits with him—which is what the Chief talked about—so he chairs that meeting. I go with him, because I am responsible for aspects of recruitment and career management. I help him, but he is ultimately responsible, and he has got almost all the levers. The only thing that he might escalate to the executive committee or the Chief is if we need to spend money in a particular place that is beyond his delegation, but it is all focused around that single place now.

Q78 **Mr Jones:** He is the person who CAS goes and kicks if it's not working.

Air Marshal Knighton: That's one way of putting it.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: A good real-world example would have been a year ago, when we made the decision to divert resource away from the Typhoon operational conversion units so that we had everything that we had out the door supporting NATO, facing the Russian invasion of Ukraine. A year ago, it would have been nice to say, "This will be the impact of this. This is what the model is telling us will happen over the next two years because of that, and this is what you might need to do to mitigate." Today we are still in the foothills, but we have the opportunity to do that with this model in a way that we didn't a year ago.

Q79 **Derek Twigg:** Before we move on to the other matters, I will just ask one simple, quick question to the Air Chief Marshal, as one of the chiefs. On Monday at Defence questions, the Secretary of State said in response to a question about funding: "I am happy to say that we have hollowed out and underfunded." Do you agree with that and are you happy with the funding for the Air Force?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Mr Twigg, when I look all the way back to 2010 and earlier, and look at some of the decisions that our predecessors were forced to take, I would not disagree. What the Secretary of State was talking about was a long period of shortfall, where because of the nature of the operations we were conducting at the time, there were areas where we were able to take risks. Back in 2010 and in the early part of the last decade, we were not facing a near-peer adversary any time soon—although some members of this Committee were calling that out even then.



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The spending review settlement—the £24-billion uplift in defence funding—and the decisions made in the integrated review absolutely put us on the right course. When the Secretary of State uses that language, of course I agree. But for me, this is ultimately about accelerating some of those decisions.

Q80 Derek Twigg: You agree that you are underfunded and hollowed out?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Historically, but with the decisions made in 2015 to grow the Typhoon force by two squadrons and to bring back Poseidon maritime patrol, and in 2021 to set up Space Command and continue to grow the F-35 force beyond 48 aircraft up to 74 and grow the Atlas force with around another six platforms later this decade, that is not hollowing out. That is growth for a future, more uncertain world. The funding that went with that, the funding that continues, and the very welcome integrated review refresh that is ongoing, all heads in the right direction.

Q81 Derek Twigg: So you are happy with the funding that you got?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: If you are asking a service chief whether they have enough—in my case, asking the Chief of the Air Staff if they have enough aeroplanes—

Q82 Chair: This is your opportunity to say to the world that the RAF needs more money. Threats are coming over the hill and Russia is returning to type, so the RAF needs more funds.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: If you are asking the Chief of the Air Staff if he needs more aeroplanes, the answer is yes. But I absolutely recognise the huge investment that went into defence in 2021 as a step up, as well as the continued discussion that is going on as part of the refresh and the decisions that the Secretary of State will make in concert with the rest of Government.

Q83 Chair: In seriousness, we have had a couple of decades where things have been hollowed out over time—that is what everybody does agree on.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Yes, and that is not to castigate my predecessors. Those were risk decisions made because of the context we were operating in at the time. From an Air Force perspective, we had almost complete air superiority in Iraq and Afghanistan. We did not need to worry about defensive aids or air-to-air missiles, or some of the things we are focusing on now, such as Wedgetail.

Mr Jones: Chair, it is very easy for the Secretary of State, and some others, to try and throw this back to 20 years ago. But it was not the last Labour Government that cut the defence budget by 16% from 2010 onwards.

Chair: I was not trying to apportion blame; I was simply trying to say what the lay of the land is. Before we get into a political argument about whose fault it is, I will absolutely say that it was the Conservatives as well.



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I think there is a general acceptance that we became more complacent after the fall of Soviet Union and the Berlin wall. We can debate that another time.

- Q84 **Sarah Atherton:** Going back to the F-35, it is taking around 12 years for a QFI to qualify, and all but two in 207 Squadron are Navy not RAF—I will leave that one with you. Have you got enough instructors?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: It is not just a Lightning challenge; across all our frontline forces it is a constant challenge to grow the instructors. You need people with the skills and experience. Whether that is weapons instructors, flying instructors, helicopter instructors, that is the critical cohort across all our forces, and particularly a force like Lightning, which is in growth. I would say the same for Poseidon and for Protector.

- Q85 **Sarah Atherton:** Have you got American instructors?

Air Marshal Knighton: On squadron, we have three exchanges—an Australian, a US marine corps and a US air force. We have British pilots in their systems as well. We are not specifically using US air force pilots to instruct per se, but we find these exchanges very valuable, because we pick up insights from pilots who come from other countries. Likewise, our pilots are able to give them interesting insights, and then we bring them back into the force.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: We have industry partners in the simulator—those of you who visited might have seen them—who are also instructing, which again speaks to the enterprise and the working relationship with industry, not only in delivering serviceable aeroplanes but in contributing to generating the trained aircrew.

- Q86 **Sarah Atherton:** How much of a challenge is it when the carrier—singular—goes out and you take instructors from Marham?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: It is a very good question. This is a critical phase in the growth of the Lightning force. We consciously took a pause in the growth of the force—of the trained pilots and engineers—to make sure that the carrier strike group deployment all the way to Japan in 2021 was a success. We recognised that the price we would pay for that—or one of the things that we would have to accept with that—is that the force growth would level off for that period. Over the past year, however, we have absolutely been able to ramp it up again. This year, two pilots are graduating around about now, and another seven will graduate between now and August. The force is on the way and we will be standing up the second frontline squadron this year.

- Q87 **Chair:** On the F-35, we have all seen that tweeted video of the F-35 that tried to take off from the aircraft carrier in November 2021 and didn't get up to the necessary take-off speed, so the pilot had to eject, landing on the deck, and the F-35 went down to the bottom of the sea—I think it has now been retrieved. Has a report now been completed? What was the cause of the aircraft not being able to get up to take-off speed?



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Air Chief Marshal Wigston: The investigation has been completed. It was convened by the Defence Safety Authority. My understanding is that the report is still in the review phase. We can come back to you when a publication date is expected, but as is the way of things these days, it will be published.

Q88 **Chair:** And the lessons learned to ensure that it does not happen again. We would be very grateful for that report, once it has been reviewed.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: The safety-critical lessons that need to be learned, they are almost immediate. The frontline does not wait for a report to be published. I can absolutely assure the Chair and Committee of that.

Q89 **Sarah Atherton:** Just to interrupt, was it not an intake blank blown down, causing 70% power on the ramp at 30 knots?

Chair: Sounds like you have read the report, Sarah.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: That is ultimately what caused the accident but, as is often the way of these things, a number of events led up to that actually happening. That is why we have these investigations—so we can learn from them.

Q90 **Mr Francois:** Air Chief Marshal, let us turn from one controversy about training our pilots to another one about training other people's. Politicians and military leaders alike have criticised the actions of former British Armed Forces pilots who provided training to the Chinese military. What is the ground truth on that? There have been lots of rumours, but what is the truth about the extent of that? Is it one or two people, or many? What is the MoD doing to prevent any further such instances of RAF pilots and others training Chinese pilots?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Thank you for the question, Mr Francois, and thank you for this Committee's continued interest in this issue, because it is really important. As I will say in a second, among the things we will look for is for Parliament to give us some beefed-up tools with which we can deal with people who choose to go and work for a potential adversary air force.

It has been going on for many years and it goes back to a period when we took a different approach to China. We took a much more engaging approach: we did training, it was formal, we had state visits, and the Red Arrows went and displayed in China in 2016. So I can understand why those people who went and became contractors, helping in simulators and with flying—training at that stage—would have felt that it was a reasonable thing to do.

I am limited in what I can say because of the security nature of this issue, but what became a matter of concern and prompted the Ministry of Defence to publicise it was the fact that we saw a significant ramping up of this activity. It was not just the Air Force; it was across all the Armed Forces—it was not just pilots—

Mr Francois: To be fair, we did say that.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Yes, you did. And it was happening internationally too. As I say, I am limited in what I can say but, working with the equivalent organisations in our partner air forces, it has become a concerted effort to call out this behaviour for what it is, because it had gone beyond what I would say was the very benign earlier activity.

Q91 **Mr Francois:** Our understanding—perhaps you could confirm whether this is accurate—is that, at least in essence, we were officially providing RAF pilots who were providing flying training to Chinese pilots under an MoD-sponsored scheme up to about 2016, and that some Chinese nationals were receiving officer training at Cranwell as recently as 2019. Is that broadly correct?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: I don't have the figures. There were elements of flying-related training but not flying training—for example, flight safety and supervisory training; the sort of things you would do as a normal part of defence engagement with any nation as a way to build relationships—but, as I say, that was at a different time.

Q92 **Mr Francois:** So when the international climate changed and our relationship with China was no longer golden, if you like, and it became more tense and potentially adversarial, we officially stopped doing it, but some people carried on doing it, knowing that the Government's policy was to stop doing it. Can you give us any idea of how many individuals we are talking about? Are we talking about one or two, or a dozen, or 50? What is the extent of it?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: It is around 30.

Mr Francois: Around 30?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: UK people—that is my understanding. Notwithstanding my caution with figures, Mr Francois; I stand to be corrected on that.

Mr Francois: I think on this occasion we will take around 30.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: But if I may, that is going back a decade. It was not so much the volume that gave us cause for concern in the past year or so; it was just the scale of the recruiting activity that was going on.

Q93 **Mr Francois:** Is not the Official Secrets Act sufficient in this? Are you saying that new legislation is needed?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: These people are still subject to the Official Secrets Act and they have been personally reminded of that fact as we have become aware. We will continue to look at all the levers we have available. I am conscious that, with things like the National Security Bill going through Parliament, recognising the provisions within that for sanctions does become an important element of this.



- Q94 **Mr Francois:** You say you have reminded them, but there are rumours that some of these people are earning a quarter of a million pounds a year. The Chinese know what they are doing, and these people are very well remunerated. A reminder on a crisp bit of headed paper does not seem to be having the desired effect.

The situation with China is tense in the Taiwan strait. Their rhetoric is becoming more and more aggressive, but we are not at war with them. But we were not at war with Germany in 1937 and it would surely have been completely inconceivable for an RAF Fighter Command pilot to have gone and trained someone in the Luftwaffe. If you don't mind me saying so, what has gone wrong that some pilots feel they can do this—potentially train an adversary to kill their comrades?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: I cannot speak on this. That is not because of classification, but because I don't know the actual details of the individual motivations of people. What I have taken heart from is that when it was publicised last autumn, a number of our people came forward to talk about when they had been approached, how the approach was made and who made the approach. There is a level of awareness now that this is an insidious third-party recruiting activity, where you might find yourself working for an organisation that is not all that it seems. We have people coming forward now. The security climate has changed; security awareness is much higher. We will continue to do everything we can to bring these—

- Q95 **Mr Francois:** Just quickly, because I think others want to come in, it takes many years to train a fast-jet pilot—let's say that for the moment. These are highly intelligent people. They are not daft, or you wouldn't put them in charge of a £100 million aeroplane. They must know full well what they are doing. Years ago, this would just have been inconceivable. What has gone wrong?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Mr Francois, I absolutely share your frustration and, to an extent, I share—without putting words in your mouth—your disgust, but I can't speak for their individual motivations. They are still subject to the Official Secrets Act, and we have reminded them of that.

Mr Francois: Have we attempted to prosecute anybody?

Mr Jones: We can't.

Chair: Kevan, did you want to come in here?

- Q96 **Mr Jones:** Well, I sympathise with you. It is a difficult one, this. I agree with what you are doing in reminding people of their obligations, but once someone has left the armed services, I don't know how you would construct a law that said you could never actually go on and work somewhere—for life. Let's be honest, it is not just for pilots; it is for other technologies as well. It is one of those things where there seems to be an easy solution, but I'm not sure there is.



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Air Chief Marshal Wigston: We are investigating people leaving and getting non-disclosure agreements, and what legal tools we have to hand. That is why I say the continued interest of this Committee would be really helpful. I would welcome that.

- Q97 **Mr Jones:** I just don't think it is possible. If someone is determined to go and work for someone, how would you restrict them from doing that for life? Let's take a different example: if someone who has been in the Royal Marines wants to go and work for a middle eastern country and advise them on X, Y and Z, can you stop them? I'm not sure you can. I accept that you can remind them of their obligations, but I don't think it's an easy one to solve.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: That's the issue.

Air Marshal Knighton: It is very difficult to see a route through to resolving it. The Chief talks about potential support from Parliament because there may be a legislative route, but you are more expert than me on how to write that legislation.

Mr Francois: We're not going to draft legislation now in this Committee, but could we not at least have a blacklist of countries that you absolutely cannot go and work for?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: But that might change over time—in the future, once you've legislated.

Mr Jones: But it might change over time.

Mr Francois: But then you change the list.

- Q98 **John Spellar:** I think it would be helpful if you could send to us some of the considerations and legal obstacles that you've found, in order that we can then take other advice as to the needs. For example, are they subject to a potential recall to the forces after they have left?

Air Marshal Knighton: Depending on how long it is since they have left, they would be considered part of the strategic reserve, and we could recall them.

- Q99 **John Spellar:** Precisely. If you are part of the strategic reserve, surely there are obligations on you. I don't want to pursue this any longer now, but if you could send us some of the problems and considerations, we could then have further thought on this and take further advice.

Air Marshal Knighton: My understanding is that the defence legal services are thinking through these options, and I am sure they will engage with the Committee.

John Spellar: Some engagement with us would be welcome.

Air Marshal Knighton: That is noted, Mr Spellar.

Chair: Colleagues will correct me, but there is a National Security Bill, I think, making its way through. Maybe your legal teams could look at that



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to see if you require further powers, and that you bolster those. Clearly, what you have at the moment is not good enough to deter people.

Mr Jones: The Bill's a shambles as it is; it doesn't need any more things added to it. *[Laughter.]*

Q100 **Chair:** On that note—from one controversy to another, please, if we can now address a rather dark chapter for the RAF, which is to do with the formal diversity drive that you went through not too long ago. In summary, this was about a precedence of selection given to ethnic minority and female pilots over better-qualified white pilots, in order to improve the RAF's diversity profile, even though it could materially affect the RAF's operational performance.

This all began back in November 2020 and ran until March 2021. Group Captain Lizzy Nicholl was then placed in charge of recruitment and selection at that time, and it was she who refused to continue this formal programme. I understand that she determined that about 160 cases of positive discrimination had taken place and she ended up having to resign because she did not wish to go through with this policy.

In October 2022, an inquiry was launched—I think it was launched by yourself, Sir—to look into the circumstances that led to the resignation of Group Captain Lizzy Nicholl. Clearly, there has been a lack of integrity at the very top of the RAF. Your own legal team's advice said it would break the law if you pursued a policy of positive discrimination.

So this wasn't just one individual trying to improve the diversity numbers, but a formal directive from the top, because Group Captain Lizzy Nicholl was ordered by her boss, Air Commodore Jo Lincoln, who is the Director of RAF Workforce Requirements. In turn, she was ordered by her boss, Air Vice-Marshal Maria Byford, who is Chief of Personnel, who I'm guessing was ordered by her boss, the head of the Air Force, which I think is you.

My question today is this: did the wrong person resign?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Chair, I recognise some of what you say there, but I would like to offer a counterview to some of that. However, I will absolutely start by saying that I very much regret, and I'm very sorry, that the group captain you mentioned felt that she had no alternative but to resign. As I say, I very much regret that she found herself in that position.

There is a non-statutory inquiry ongoing into this; we've asked for it to be convened and run by the Army. And it hasn't made its findings to me yet. I look forward to them. I want the Royal Air Force to learn from this, and we will. And it's my understanding that the Secretary of State has undertaken to share the findings with this Committee as well.

However, in terms of what you said, I can absolutely assure this Committee that there was no compromise of entry standards. There was no impact on the standard of recruits from any background. There was no impact on the frontline or on operational effectiveness.



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Q101 Chair: I hear that, and it is understood. You were taking people who had passed the courses. What you weren't doing is allowing those who had achieved the best in the class to then go forward. Some of those people, because of their skin colour, were then held back or not allowed to progress, because others who possibly were not as good as their standards were then given preferential treatment. That is against the law.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: If I may, Mr Chair, I'll offer a different perspective on that.

Certainly, around the matter that caused the group captain to resign, I am absolutely clear that there was no discrimination, because the direction that she challenged was never implemented. But what it did do was that it did prompt us—

Mr Francois: Huh?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: It was not implemented, so there was no discrimination in the case of that August '22 matter. But what it did prompt us to do—

Q102 Chair: Sorry—there was a time between November 2020 and March 2021 where this was the policy.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Chair, I will come to that if I may. It prompted us to look into historical recruiting. We did identify mistakes and we accepted that we had made mistakes, and we accepted it publicly in last September. The mistakes we identified hinged on our categorisation of when recruitment finished and when training started, and so which part of the Equality Act applied. This was the premise that we worked on until the beginning of last year, when it was recognised as being in error.

But prior to that—and this is to your point, I think—a limited number of women and ethnic minority candidates who had passed through the recruiting system were allocated to additional slots on basic training. But that process of course loading should have been done under the less permissive parts of the Equality Act, because technically it was still recruiting, even though they had passed all of the recruitment process.

In answer to your question, Mr Chair, throughout all of this I have seen nothing to indicate that people were giving directions that they believed to be unlawful. They were working on the assumption that what we were doing was lawful, and it was all done with the best of intent to tackle this intractable challenge. As I say, I am very sorry that the group captain found herself in a position where she felt she had no option but to resign.

Q103 Chair: So she resigned because she saw the legal advice that said it was unlawful, but she was encouraged to continue with this. That is why she felt she had no option. We should be conscious in this Committee that this is being investigated. I think it is going to go to court as well—to a tribunal—and therefore we need to be careful as to how far we pursue this. I ask colleagues to have that in mind when they comment on this. The question today, which I will leave hanging, is that, to the extent that



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there was support for this going up the chain of command, there are questions of integrity that need to be addressed. This is a blot on the RAF copy book.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: I absolutely recognise the reputational harm that was done, but some of what you said in your opening remarks implied that there were different standards applied and that there was active discrimination against white men. But that was not the case. This was people within the organisation who felt that they were acting within the law, and who understood that they were acting within the law. They were doing it with the best of intentions to tackle this intractable challenge around diversity. As I mentioned earlier, the Air Force has a real challenge—across the Armed Forces we have a challenge—with our levels of diversity.

Chair: This is clearly not the way to solve it.

Q104 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Just to clarify for me—I might have missed it—you said it was the direction that she challenged. Where exactly did the direction come from, and what exactly was that direction? Just make it really clear.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: I am very happy to talk about what we have discovered around the historical mistakes we made, but for the reasons that Mr Chair discussed, I really cannot talk about the specific instance in August last year when the group captain elected to resign. As I say, the findings will be shared with the Committee, and we will be as open as we need to be on this.

Q105 **Chair:** When is that report due? I hear that it is imminent. Is that correct?

Air Marshal Knighton: I commissioned the report back in November. It is worth just describing the process. There is a review of emails and literature and a series of interviews. Those interviews have concluded. Many on the Committee will know better than I that the investigation will then be written up, and then it is shared with those who have been interviewed. They have the opportunity to comment, and then the report is reviewed again by those who author it. We are in that stage at the moment. I speak regularly to the retired major general who is doing that work to get an update. He is understandably reluctant to be definitive about when it will be ready, but you can be assured that he is trying to move it forward as quickly as possible.

Chair: Okay. Sarah has done more on this, to try to expose the challenges of diversity. I would like to give her the floor for a second.

Q106 **Sarah Atherton:** Thanks. You obviously know the difference between positive discrimination and positive action. I personally do not agree with either of them, but I appreciate that there is an investigation under way. I am more concerned about people such as Group Captain Lizzy Nicholl, who tried to raise a concern within our military—in this case, in the RAF. After a long, successful career, she felt that she had to leave. We know that we have a problem with retention. I am more concerned about what



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the RAF's whistleblowing process is. What protection are you giving to personnel when they raise legitimate concerns? She believed she was drawing attention to an illegal action. What is your whistleblowing policy? What protection have you got for people who are trying to do the right thing, and is your chain of command learning?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Ms Atherton, I absolutely agree. We have been very careful to ensure that this officer had the support that she needed. I spoke to her after she resigned; Richard has spoken to her on more than one occasion. I am really limited in what I can say about that case, for the reasons that the Chair outlined.

I can give earlier examples where people have come forward—very junior officers, in one case, from a careers office. They recognised that the direction needed legal advice—this was back in 2020 or 2021—and that person was listened to and was proved right. The legal advice was refined, and the whole organisation benefited, so I have examples where challenge worked and the organisation responded correctly. A direction that could have left the Air Force vulnerable to legal challenge was not implemented, and that was because of a junior officer making a challenge, so there are good things that I can point to on this.

On the Chair's point, I suspect that the inquiry will identify that the sharing of information—the communication both across and up and down the organisation—was not what it should have been. I have been out on the ground apologising for that, to people in recruitment and selection in particular. I make no apologies for setting a challenging, aspirational goal for the Royal Air Force on diversity; I want us to be able to recruit from every corner of British society, and to be successful at it. Those are challenging goals and stretching, aspirational levels of ambition.

One mistake that we have identified is this. That aspiration or goal was stretching. It was translated into the strategy, and then into our business plan—the command plan. It then trickled down into individual recruiting officers' and sergeants' in-year personal objectives. As it was an unattainable target, it put intolerable stress on them, and that was a failing of the organisation's; it is a failing when an aspirational goal becomes an individual target.

Q107 **Mr Francois:** To clarify, you have said that this was never implemented, but that is because the group captain resigned rather than implement it. If it had not been for what she did, it would have been implemented, wouldn't it?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Mr Francois, I would really rather not go into the circumstances of that officer's resignation. The matter that she challenged was never implemented.

Chair: We have to be conscious that we should not do that, though Mark's point is valid.

Mr Francois: Fair enough. I will leave it there.



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Chair: But I would say that if your overall task is to encourage females to join the RAF, which is absolutely commendable, and something this Committee would agree with, and that policy leads to a senior female officer having to resign as a whistleblower, that is clearly not going to help your cause, I am afraid.

Q108 **Derek Twigg:** You keep saying that the policy that she resigned over was never implemented—those were your words—so who took the decision to have that policy that was never implemented?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: That was direction pertaining to recruitment.

Derek Twigg: No, the question I am asking is: who took the decision on the policy that you said was never implemented?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Those will be matters that the ongoing inquiry looks into, and I do not know what its conclusions are.

Q109 **Derek Twigg:** Sorry—you are head of the service, and you do not know who took the decision?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: There are a number of people involved in setting directions.

Q110 **Derek Twigg:** Did you take the decision?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: I set the aspirational goal and the level of ambition for the service, and as I have said—

Q111 **Derek Twigg:** But did you take the decision on this particular policy that was not implemented?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: I set the direction, and I set the aspirational targets for the Royal Air Force to achieve.

Q112 **Chair:** But to be clear, you did not approve the concept of being able to take ethnic minority and female pilots who had passed and reached a standard, and give them precedence over white pilots who had perhaps achieved—

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: This wasn't a pilot issue, Mr Chair. This was across our recruiting—

Q113 **Chair:** But it has come out in this particular piece, because somewhere between Group Captain Lizzy Nicholl and her boss, Air Commodore Jo Lincoln, and her boss, Air Vice-Marshal Maria Byford, and her boss, you—somewhere along that chain of command—the decision was made to pursue this policy.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: In matters like this, which have so many different constituent parts, and in which there are different factors at play—parts to do with selection and how we put people on courses—a number of people play a part.

Chair: We have another issue that we need to move on to, and that equally deserves our attention. Sarah, will you continue, please?



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Q114 **Sarah Atherton:** Air Chief Marshal, you were the originator of the Wigston report, and our inquiry, "Women in the Armed Forces", used yours as a springbox. Red Arrows: what went wrong?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: I was appalled to hear reports of inappropriate behaviour among the Red Arrows, and felt a significant amount of frustration that this happened on my watch, for the reasons you just outlined, Ms Atherton. As soon as I became aware of the reports, we reached out to the people who we felt were the likely victims. We encouraged them, and to their enormous credit, they were prepared to talk; they were prepared to engage with what was at first a cultural assessment, but as soon as we saw all the warning signs, we immediately went into a non-statutory inquiry. That led ultimately to administrative action—to the dismissal of two pilots, and administrative action and sanctioning of three other members of the squadron, including ground crew as well as aircrew.

We became aware of these issues, and I applaud the number of people who came forward and were prepared to talk. I take some solace from the fact that we have a culture where so many people were prepared to engage with the inquiry, and we took action. In this case, actions and inappropriate behaviours have consequences. For me, it sends a very important signal to the rest of the service that there is no part of the service that is on such a pedestal—that is so privileged—that we will not investigate allegations of this nature. I hope it is an encouragement to anybody who finds themselves the victim of inappropriate behaviour that they are part of a service that is ready and willing to act as swiftly as we can, through due process.

Before I finish, I have to say that this is the exception. The vast majority of our people do amazing things on behalf of the country, day in, day out, and behave impeccably. They behave to the high standards that we, and I, expect of them.

Q115 **Sarah Atherton:** We are on a mission, and the MoD are on a mission, to change the culture across the military—that is without doubt—so perhaps you could explain to people here the difference between a court martial, a criminal action and a non-statutory investigation, and say why the two RAF Red Arrows pilots were administratively discharged. Is that on full pension, with reputation intact? If it is, how will we change the culture?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: I cannot speak to the individual circumstances, but on your question about changing the culture, the non-statutory inquiry is a very good way of getting people to engage in a safe space, because ultimately we need to learn from this and establish the facts. Once the facts point unmistakably towards inappropriate—potentially criminal—behaviour, there is a decision for the commanding officer to make about whether administrative action is appropriate, and that can include sanction, up to and including dismissal from the service.

If there is evidence or a suspicion of criminal activity, the case will go over to the police special investigation branch, which is now the Defence



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Serious Crime Unit; that is a development put in place by the Secretary of State to deal with exactly these issues. If necessary, it will go to court martial. In this case, the judgment by the people qualified to make that judgment was that administrative action was the right course, but I would not understate how significant it is that we dismissed two pilots from the Royal Air Force who had been Red Arrows pilots.

Q116 Sarah Atherton: I appreciate this zero-tolerance approach, but I want to touch on the case of an RAF corporal who complained of sexual assault, went to court martial and lost her case. She subsequently left the RAF, took the MoD to an employment tribunal and won that case. The MoD legal team said, funnily enough, that they had changed their mind and that the incident did happen, but not on work time. There was criticism of the investigation by the RAF police, the forensics and the chain of command. Do you have any comments on that investigation, or the structures in place? Are you concerned that there is a disparity in the final decision making of a civil court, or an employment tribunal, and a court martial?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: I cannot talk about the specifics of this case, because it is subject to ongoing legal action, but I absolutely recognise the case you refer to, which was back in 2018. It was an appalling situation that this corporal found herself in. To her enormous credit—even five years ago, it was significantly more difficult for people to come forward than it is today—she came forward. We have already acknowledged that the police investigation, the victim care and the subsequent care for this person, who had the courage to come forward, were not what they should have been, and we have said as much in previous hearings.

I am absolutely a full supporter of what the Secretary of State has done around the Defence Serious Crime Unit, because all three services now come together. It is a super-SIB, and victim care is right at the centre of how they investigate; they have the tools, techniques and expertise to do it properly.

Again, I am a full-throated supporter of the Secretary of State's zero-tolerance policy. We now have a presumption of dismissal for anybody who commits bullying, harassment or discrimination of a sexual nature. The presumption is dismissal, and we have gone further around sexual exploitation as well. I absolutely regret what that person went through, and applaud her for coming forward in the way she did. Where we have got to now is partly a consequence of that, and partly a consequence of your work, and the Committee's work, to hold us to account for not being where we should be. The steps taken are the new policies and approach and, from my perspective, the very clear message that I have sent the Royal Air Force, from day one as Chief of the Air Staff, about my expectations on standards of behaviour and how we treat each other.

Chair: Thank you for that; I am grateful to you for having touched on those two difficult subjects. In our final minutes, let us turn to Britain's air power and our defence posture. Robert, over to you.



Q117 Robert Courts: Thank you, Chair. We are on to different topics now, Air Chief Marshal. Before I get into the detail, both the IR and Command Paper will be refreshed, of course, but it is fair to say that the areas that were most cut from the original ones were the ISR and air mobility fleets. What prospect do you see of any of that cut to aviation capability being reversed in the refresh of those two documents?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: On the integrated review refresh, as I said earlier, I absolutely support the decisions made in 2021. I see positive growth and opportunity in all those areas.

To address your point about ISR, there is the opportunity to make the leap from the E-3 Sentry, for example, to the Wedgetail, and to rationalise our ISR fleet into a number of core platforms; and there is continued focus on getting Protector into service. To my mind, all those things underlined the decisions made two years ago. I will continue to drive the Royal Air Force to bring that new equipment into service as quickly as we can.

The Rivet Joint, for example—our electronic intelligence-gathering aircraft—has been fundamental to the campaign in Ukraine. It has flown over 150 missions in support of NATO, flying to the Black sea and, until 24 February last year, in Ukrainian airspace. That is a key part of what we do.

On air mobility, I welcomed the investment identified for continuing to grow the Atlas force; Rich might want to add a few points on that in a moment. We will retire the Hercules and make the leap to modern, better, faster, tactical transport aircraft with a greater payload, and continue to grow the fleet. That speaks to a Royal Air Force that is modernising, looking to the future and able to retire platforms that have increasingly limited utility in a modern, digitally connected battlespace.

I look at our future mobility force, with an uplift to Atlas, and I look at our ISR force with Protector and Wedgetail coming in—notwithstanding the earlier conversation about Wedgetail—and I am very optimistic about what that means for the future of the service and the roles we play.

Q118 Robert Courts: Let us pick up some of those points. I will first pick up on Protector and ask a little about that. One of the key lessons from Ukraine thus far has been the extraordinary attrition rate from UAVs. There are different kinds of UAVs, of course; there are very cheap ones where you have the very high rate, and there are the more expensive ones. Protector is relatively high cost and vulnerable, and we have relatively few. Will they be able to defend themselves in a contested airspace?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: I will take this one, if I may. There are many lessons that we will be able to draw from the fight in Ukraine, and one of them is around the challenge of control of the air. There are many platforms that I would not choose to operate freely in that environment, and Protector and Reaper would be among them.

We as an Air Force, alongside our allies, have the ability to set aside control of the air where we need to, but that is in the most testing, high-end scenarios. A significant number of other operational scenarios are



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tailor-made for an aircraft like Protector, which can stay airborne for 40 hours, can ferry itself to the far side of the world, can carry a significant number of weapons and has full connectivity. As Reaper has shown in Iraq and Syria in the last eight years, that is the lethal arm of defence. Other parts of defence would consider themselves to have that title, but it is actually air power and Reaper. The Reaper force has taken 1,400 enemy combatants off the battlefield.

Q119 **Chair:** Sorry, but before you go any further, can you qualify this? For the uninitiated, Reaper is our main UAV, which is armed. How many of those do we have that work?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: We have 10.

Q120 **Chair:** And they are all operational?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Notwithstanding the maintenance—

Q121 **Chair:** And they are being replaced by Protector, but there is a delay of five years on that. Is that correct?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: We have already taken delivery of our first Protector. It's still in the United States, but it will be flying in the UK, from Waddington in Lincolnshire, this year. So we are building the force as we speak.

Q122 **Chair:** As our main kinetic drone, how many of those will we have?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Sixteen.

Chair: Thank you.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: To that point—the operational utility and the lethality of these remotely piloted air systems—it speaks for itself in terms of its priority within our force structure.

Q123 **Robert Courts:** Can I talk about the air mobility force in a bit of detail? Of course, the clear march of events after the IR Command Paper came out was, first, Pitting, and then Ukraine, both of which have placed huge demands on our air mobility force. I accept your points about the fundamental ability of the A400M Atlas—its latent strength, as it were—but at present it isn't at full capability. For example, there are some tasks that it cannot perform—in particular, looking after our special forces.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: There are some niche capabilities that we are still bringing into service, but we will be bringing a number of capabilities into service this year. Single-stick parachuting, potentially next month and certainly by April, will be cleared and will be being done—low-level parachuting for paratroopers. I am optimistic that by the end of the year we will have a simultaneous, two-stick, clearance. We have got stores delivery cleared. We have got rough airstrips activities cleared.

The Hercules has been a magnificent platform, and many people will regret its retirement, because of the service it has given over many decades, but by the time the Hercules goes out of service—our final one



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lands in June—there will be remaining only a few niche capabilities that the Atlas cannot do, and they will be brought into service within a couple of years.

Q124 **Robert Courts:** There is a—relatively—small capability gap none the less.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Again, this is a remarkable success story, because when the decision was made to take Hercules out of service, some of these capabilities were not programmed to be on Atlas until the end of this decade. Over the last two years, we have accelerated—low-level parachuting was supposed to be 2028; we have accelerated it to this year. That is a remarkable achievement by DE&S, the RAF and Airbus.

Robert Courts: Thank you. Chair, can I defer to Mr Drax and then have the floor back in a moment?

Q125 **Chair:** Yes. I just want to make the comment that if you were not expecting to take Hercules out of service and you were suddenly having to upgrade Atlas so that parachutists could jump out, it shows that there is a deficit in our transport capability. You were taken by surprise by that, weren't you? Nobody was expecting the Hercules to go.

Air Marshal Knighton: The decision was taken back in 2015 for the out-of-service date for Hercules to be in the early 2030s. It was announced in 2021 that the Secretary of State had taken the decision to retire it in 2023.

Chair: To save money.

Air Marshal Knighton: Yes. We knew that the C-130 needed a very significant fatigue modification and upgrade, and actually it made more sense and was more cost-effective to focus on a single platform, the A400M, and to grow that platform.

Chair: I think Richard might have other views.

Q126 **Richard Drax:** Just a point on special forces, who have relied on this aircraft—as have the Parachute Regiment, of course—for years. It has proven itself again and again. It is a rock-hard, well-proven aircraft that can land on a very short airstrip. I know one of your colleagues said that the A400M can land in the same distance, but I doubt whether that is true.

You just said that there is a two-year capability gap until all the niche requirements that, not least, special forces require are met. In those two years, we are potentially facing a horrible threat in Europe, and our special forces need the kit, the aircraft, the weapons and everything else to do the job that we ask them to do, which is extremely dangerous. Why don't we keep the Hercules for two years?

Air Marshal Knighton: Just to be really clear, Mr Drax—in answer to Mr Courts's question—there are a small number of niche capabilities that C-130 has that will not be transferred across to A400M at the point at which C-130 is retired in the summer. When Ministers made that decision in



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2021, we were very plain about what those niche capabilities are and what the potential operational impact is. In concert with our operation staff and our Ministers, Ministers concluded that that level of operational risk was small enough to be tolerable.

Q127 **Richard Drax:** Well, everyone I have spoken to—I still have friends, and friends of friends, who are serving in special forces—regrets the loss of this aircraft. Have you been lobbied hard by them and the Parachute Regiment to keep this aircraft?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: I absolutely respect what people have told you, Mr Drax, but this wasn't a decision made in isolation by the Royal Air Force—

Q128 **Richard Drax:** Forgive me, but that was not my question. My question was: have you been lobbied hard?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: I have been lobbied hard by my own C-130 people as well.

Q129 **Richard Drax:** They are important, but have you been lobbied by the people who rely on this aircraft, who are dropped into highly dangerous situations and risk their lives for us?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: We had a sea change in the conversation with the Parachute Regiment and special forces after the evacuation from Afghanistan, when people saw and were astonished by what the A400 is capable of. It carries twice the load of a Hercules, further and faster.

Richard Drax: Forgive me, but that is not my question. It may go further and faster—

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: But your question is about lobbying, and the lobbying went much quieter.

Air Marshal Knighton: Perhaps I could come in. I have been in two jobs where I have been responsible for defence capability, and now specifically Air Force capability. I have not been lobbied hard by the SF community.

Richard Drax: Hard?

Air Marshal Knighton: I have not been lobbied hard by the SF community to retain the C-130. The A400M will pick up all that capability and deliver more in due course.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: These decisions were made with them at the table. Again, I emphasise that they appreciate the enormous potential of this aircraft because of its communications, its digital connectivity and its range and payload.

Q130 **Richard Drax:** But until this aircraft, the A400M, meets all the standards—it has got problems—why not keep the Hercules?

Air Marshal Knighton: If we kept it, we would have to pay for it, and that would mean that something else would need to be removed.

Chair: That old chestnut: you have to pay for it.

Q131 **Richard Drax:** It is affecting our military effectiveness, and men and women are risking their lives.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Mr Drax, all these decisions are made in a resource-constrained environment. There is no question but that it is about prioritisation and sequencing. For the Air Force, this is an opportunity for us to focus on the future with Atlas.

Chair: Okay, we are getting into civil service speak now. Richard, anything further? I think Robert wants to come back in, and then I will bring in Kevan.

Q132 **Richard Drax:** One last point: are you fighting hard to keep them until the A400M meets all the requirements that our special forces and the Parachute Regiment want it to meet? Are you fighting hard to keep the Hercules? Are you saying to the Secretary of State, "I'm sorry, we cannot lose this aircraft until we reach point A"?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: We came to a decision point where all parties were in alignment and agreed with the decision. That was a decision made in 2021. The Royal Air Force's part of the bargain was to get those capabilities on to the aircraft as quickly as we could, which by and large we have done, and to increase the availability and reliability of the platform. We are continuing to drive that, and we are seeing the improvement that we need.

Robert Courts: That's capability. Let's talk about reliability—

Q133 **Mr Jones:** I flew out once from Baghdad on an SF C-130—a very different beast to a standard C-130 that we have used and that has been a great workhorse for the RAF. You talk about niche capabilities that have not been met; are any of those niche capabilities ones that the SF need?

Air Marshal Knighton: There are a small number of niche capabilities that C-130 currently has that will not transfer on to A400M.

Mr Jones: Ever?

Air Marshal Knighton: No, no, at the point at which C-130 is retired. There is a plan for all of the capabilities. Obviously, the C-130 will be migrated to A400M. You will recognise that I cannot go into details of special forces capability.

Q134 **Mr Jones:** I am not asking you that; I am asking you whether those are niche capabilities for SF?

Air Marshal Knighton: I am not going to answer that question, Mr Jones.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: These decisions were made with everyone around the table.

Q135 **Mr Jones:** I have no problem with Atlas, actually, because I think it is a very good aircraft and it is certainly the future, but one of the problems



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of running two fleets is that it would be very expensive and difficult to do. The problem I have with this is that clearly decisions were taken for resource reasons, and I accept that, but if that means there will be a gap in the capability we need for the RAF or special forces, that is concerning. If you will not answer the question about numbers or whether they relate to special forces, what is the time period? When will you actually have all those niche capabilities complete—that is, the Atlas being able to do everything the C-130 could do?

Air Marshal Knighton: I anticipate by 2025.

Mr Jones: Potentially two years.

Air Marshal Knighton: A year and a half to two years.

Q136 **Mr Jones:** What happens in the meantime for those niche capabilities?

Air Marshal Knighton: As I described to Mr Drax, where you have capability gaps you will have to modify the operational design, or some tasks you will have to do in a different way and some you will not be able to do. As the Chief pointed out, when the decision was taken to withdraw the C-130 in 2023, all those issues were set out. Originally some of those capabilities were not going to be brought on to A400M until 2028; they have been accelerated. Capability gaps and risks are a fact of life in defence more generally.

Q137 **Mr Jones:** I agree with that, and well done to everyone for getting them up to speed, but what concerns me is that if some of those capability gaps are the ones that our special forces need in the next two years, we will have a capability gap in terms of their ability to carry out what they do so well.

Air Marshal Knighton: As I said, Ministers were made aware of all the gaps and issues associated with the transfer of capability from C-130 to A400M, and the operations community were engaged in that. The risks that result as a consequence of that were judged at the time to be tolerable, and that remains the case today.

Chair: I want to hand back to Robert.

Q138 **Robert Courts:** So that's capabilities—some niche capabilities for 18 months to 2 years, which you have explained. I would like to move on to a couple other aspects of this decision. You are quite right about decisions made in 2021, but a lot has changed since then. Can I look first at mass? The A400M is doing about 1,500 task lines at the moment, isn't it? The J is doing about 1,800 task lines. You are losing the J's task lines and you are losing the 146's task lines, so you will expect the A400M, with availability and reliability rates of about 80%, to pick up all the C-130J's 1,800 task lines, plus the 146's. There is not going to be enough, is there?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: I don't recognise the numbers you have provided there, Mr Courts.

Q139 **Robert Courts:** They are from a written answer that was given to our



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written question.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: Oh, from a year ago. What has happened is that in that time we have already started drawing down the C-130 force, so the first four of the 14 have retired—they have run out of hours. There is already a transition of task lines, and Atlas is picking up operational task lines in the Middle East, for example, and down in the Falklands.

Q140 **Robert Courts:** Can I pause you there? Although I accept that as Atlas comes onstream and Hercules comes down there is obviously going to be a transfer of task lines, the point I am making is that it appears on the face of those figures, even if they are a year or so old, that Atlas is going to be expected to do over double what it has currently been doing, despite the fact its availability rates are bouncing around 80%.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: We are still taking delivery—we take delivery of our 22nd and final aircraft in May. The availability is increasing as modification programmes to the gearboxes, propellers and engines work through the system. Again, Airbus and Rolls-Royce have worked through those. The point to make is that it was recognised that as we retired C-130 there would be a shortfall in airlift. Hence, provision was made, even in 2021, for funding of around six more Atlas in the second half of this decade. That is something that will still be subject to decisions by the Secretary of State as part of the IR refresh.

Q141 **Robert Courts:** But you see, the concern I have is that we lose C-130 in a couple of months' time and towards the back end of the decade we may get more Atlases to supplement Atlases that already are not at full strength—but even that is not certain.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: There are two ways that we have already mitigated that. First, for the routine strategic airlift, Defence has put in place long-standing contracts with cargo carriers, which have carried some of the load. We have brought more of the Voyager fleet into service. A few years ago, we had only eight and then nine of the fleet in service; now we have increased that. The Voyager has been a massive boost to our airlift capability. But I absolutely agree that there will be a shortfall this decade with tactical airlift, which is why Defence have identified round 6.

Q142 **Robert Courts:** Is there also an efficiency point here? You have referred to bringing Voyager on stream to deal with that, and you are right that A400 can carry more, further and faster, than Hercules can. Nonetheless, the next available aircraft down is Chinook, at 10 tonnes. If you have something that is just over 10 tonnes—so an 11 tonne load—or you want something that goes faster than the Chinook, the next thing you have got is the bigger, more expensive and more inefficient A400 or Voyager, when in the past there was Hercules in the middle. Is that not why France and Germany operate them both?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: I cannot speak to why France and Germany operate both but, having done the analysis, the A400 is more efficient to operate—it is cheaper and burns less fuel.

Q143 **Robert Courts:** But it's dependent on the relative size of loads. The point



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I am making is that if you are talking about a relatively small load, which just tips over what the Chinook can do, or you need it to go faster than a Chinook can go, you are going to be using a much bigger aircraft.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: The analysis that went into that was around how often there was an occurrence like that, what was the average load and what are the scenarios where we would find ourselves in that situation. The judgment was made that everything pointed to reverting to the original retirement date of the C-130 in the early 20s, which is what we signed up to when we ordered Atlas over a decade ago. To your point, we recognise that there is now a payload gap. The question is how often you see that requirement taking place. More often, we are reliant on taking a big load, further and faster.

Q144 **Robert Courts:** I have a couple more questions. I will be brief, but I have waited a long time to ask these questions. Does this not all come down to the fact that with the A400 we are dealing with an aircraft that is not really up to strength. It is larger and therefore, relatively speaking, more efficient. It does not have the capability that we need, and it is being asked to do twice as much as it has done before. Isn't that the reason why we should be keeping C-130J on, up until the 2035 date that its upgrade would have allowed it to reach?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: You are absolutely right, Mr Courts; they were all factors in the decision. But when it came to the decision, it was about—

Robert Courts: It was about money.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: It was about more than money. It was about the capacity of the Royal Air Force to run two tactical airlift fleets, each of them having their own supply chain, tail, and training and aircrew requirements. There is so much benefit to be had from having a reduced number of fleets and doing it well, and those things all played into that decision. We will all be sad to see the C-130 leave service because of what it has done, but Atlas is the tactical airlifter of the future and it will be carrying the British Armed Forces around the world for the large part of this century.

Q145 **Robert Courts:** Please don't think I am asking questions on the basis of emotion; of course we will all be sad—it is a legendary aircraft—but it is capability that I am worried about.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: I understand, and to go back to that point, building the capacity of the tactical airlift force is something that both Rich and I are following very closely. The integrated review announcement around that is important to us.

Q146 **Robert Courts:** I would love to go further but the Chairman is telling me that the time is up, but I would just like to ask one more thing on this note. Rather than just selling off C-130J to whoever bids for it, which is the obvious thing to do, have you considered making it available to NATO, perhaps adding it to the SAC capability?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: We are having conversations with a number of allies about a number of options and it is a live conversation.

Robert Courts: I like the idea of its being still available to the western allies.

Air Marshal Knighton: Some of the nations that have expressed an interest in buying some of the aircraft are NATO members as well.

Chair: Just to tie that up very quickly, on the niche capabilities that you did not want to talk about, this all focuses on our special forces. The one thing that we bring to the table that is appreciated by our closest allies—the United States—is our special forces. The concern is that by taking the Hercules away and not having the capabilities in the bigger aircraft—the Atlas or, indeed, the Globemaster—you are denying the SF the skillsets that they need to do what they do. These are the questions—

Mr Jones: Chair—

Q147 **Chair:** If I may, Kevan; I've got the floor right now. The Marines cannot drop boats out of an Atlas aircraft, which they can do out of the Hercules. On two-stick sorties, for example, there are also problems with the Atlas. These are all things that will cause difficulties as you remove the Hercules from the RAF fleet.

For our last question, we are turning to Ukraine. I am going to break protocol: we are joined by two Ukrainian MPs in the room today, so forgive me for honouring them. Welcome, and thank you very much for joining us. It is therefore pertinent to ask our witnesses this: if the politicians were to turn to you and say, "Ukraine needs some air power," just as they needed land power and we gifted it, what could you provide to support them?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: In terms of air power, we are already providing a significant amount of support through delivering all the lethal aid and stores that go to the border night after night. It is in the thousands of tonnes, thousands of rounds of ammunition, 3 million small arms rounds and the like.

In terms of the specialist support, we are privileged to be able to train members of the air force in niche areas. We are doing that in parallel to the larger infantry training that is going on in the UK. That is very effective and something we are proud to do. We will continue to advise and offer training and equipment as much as we can.

Q148 **Chair:** That is a helpful answer, but not the answer I was looking for. In addition to that, if the Ukrainians requested the gifting of air power so that they could use it in their own terrain, do we have anything that we could provide that we could uparm and then give to them? It could be Tucanos or Hawks, which can be provided with the 30 mm Rarden cannon. Are there Tornados across Europe that could perhaps be slid across the table? In the same way that we have looked in the cupboard with the Army, could the RAF or the air forces across Europe do the



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same?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: In terms of weapons and repurposing air-to-air missiles for surface-to-air roles, we have done that at scale and will continue to do that. We are looking into all sorts of other capabilities. I think the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State were very clear yesterday about where we stand on fast jets at this stage. The course of the brutal invasion and Ukraine's heroic defence, and how we have supported them, has been an evolutionary process. I look to the future and we should be ready for any outcomes.

Chair: I asked the question simply because it has taken us a bit of time to evolve—an entire year, in fact—to give them the main battle tanks. I fear that the same international conversation is now going to take place about air power.

Mr Francois: Just quickly, as Sir Richard will remember, because we have discussed this before, we could have given them a lot of Tornados, but we scrapped them.

Mr Jones: No you couldn't.

Mr Francois: We could have done.

Mr Jones: You couldn't.

Q149 **Mr Francois:** We could have done. They are incredibly good at refurbishing kit, Kevan—they have proved it.

Do we have any ALARM missiles left? Or are they all gone too?

Air Marshal Knighton: As far as I know, ALARM has been disposed of. If I may just make one minor point, kit is not the same as capability. To deliver meaningful capability, you have to have the training, the support and the supply chain—there is a whole bunch of factors that you have to build in to actually deliver the capability. Throughout the process we have been talking to our comrades in Ukraine about what their requirements are and helping them to define that, but I urge the Committee to remember that kit is not capability.

Q150 **Mr Francois:** We understand that—fair point. I think we are now giving them a limited number of Brimstone as well, are we not?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: We have done, yes—and others.

Q151 **Mr Francois:** As it were, what would be the next one at the margin? Have they asked for anything else that we are considering? Or can you not say?

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: We have also given AMRAAM, which again is going into the ground-based air defence. The priority at the moment, from my perspective—I have a dialogue with my counterpart in Ukraine—is ground-based air defences to keep the Russian air force out, so anything that we can provide in terms of surface-to-air missiles, radars and



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defences like that is absolutely crucial in the near term. That is where I am focusing.

Q152 **Mr Francois:** Lastly, to Richard's point, are we training pilots too?

Air Marshal Knighton: We are not at the moment, although we have an offer on the table to train helicopter pilots at our school in Shawbury. We have not signed the final deal yet, but we are content to do that.

Air Chief Marshal Wigston: To take a long-term view, that is a conversation that I am looking forward to having in more depth with my counterpart.

Chair: Maybe this is a suggestion that can be taken away in the light of what Mark has just said. We have spoken about the training of British pilots; perhaps we should start to invite some of the Ukrainian cadets to join our programme so that in a couple of years' time they are ready to fly their own aircraft. That would be the long-term thinking that I think is missing from this entire conversation about how to stand up to Russia.

On that provocative note, I will bring this sitting to a close. Thank you very much indeed. It has been an illuminating session and I am very grateful. I appreciate that you probably feel you have been under the spotlight a bit, but we are on your side and we appreciate that a lot of the difficult decisions you are making are actually about funding, and we are going to do our best to try to get more money for you. Thank you very much indeed to Air Chief Marshal Sir Michael Wigston and Air Marshal Sir Richard Knighton for your time this afternoon. I also thank my Committee and the staff. That brings our session to a close. Order.