



HOUSE OF COMMONS

# Defence Committee

## Oral evidence: Armed Forces Readiness, HC 26

Tuesday 7 November 2023

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

Questions 184-285

### Witnesses

I: Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton, Chief of the Air Staff, and General Sir Patrick Sanders, Chief of the General Staff.



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton and General Sir Patrick Sanders.

Q184 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to the latest hearing in our readiness inquiry. We are very grateful today to have in front of us to give evidence two witnesses: General Sir Patrick Sanders, the Chief of the General Staff, and Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton, the Chief of the Air Staff. Welcome, both of you.

Shortly I will turn to members of the Committee and we will start on the substantive matters in our readiness inquiry, but before we do that, there are some topical matters that I would like to address, as we have you here,. Air Chief Marshal, could I start with you, please? May I give you an opportunity to make a short statement on the report that you released last week on the investigation into the Royal Air Force Aerobatic Team, the Red Arrows?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** Sure. Thank you very much, Chair. I assume that you read the statement I made, and I have spoken to a number of members of the Committee about both the statement and the report. Where I start is to say that I am sorry, and that I offer my unreserved apology to anyone who was subject to the unacceptable behaviours that were reported or have occurred. The report and the investigation uncovered plenty of examples.

As the report set out, there was a culture in the Red Arrows at the time that was entirely unacceptable. We have seen improvements through the leadership in the culture on the team, and that continues to be the case. As I said in my statement, I have confidence in the leadership of the team today. As I briefed the media, and as I will happily brief the Committee—I have spoken to a number of you—culture change takes time and requires consistent hard work and effort. It requires us to set out the standards that we expect, to identify when people fall below those standards, and to deal with them when that is the case. I think the report and the actions that we have taken show that we are prepared to use, and I am prepared to use, the full range of options available to us where we find that standards fall below those that we would expect from those who serve.

**Chair:** Air Chief Marshal, thank you very much. I know that a number of members of the Committee would like to ask some questions arising from that statement. I turn first to Sarah Atherton.

Q185 **Sarah Atherton:** Air Chief Marshal, you have given some reassurance to the Committee, but how can you give reassurance to the wider public that the Red Arrows and the wider RAF are actually fit for purpose, given the public issues in such an elite unit, the discrimination in recruitment, the length of time it takes to train aircrew, and the inherent lack of transparency in all those processes?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** There is a lot there, Ms Atherton. In terms of reassurance around the Red Arrows, I point to the



evidence in the report. There is clear evidence in both reports of improvements that have been made in the Red Arrows and of the work done and the steps taken to ensure that there is a much better bystander culture, that standards are well understood, and that the training has been adequately undertaken; and as I said, the team has performed well through 2023.

I think the fact that I was prepared—in fact, I wanted—to be open and transparent about the report and to publish it proactively, rather than it being pulled from us through a freedom of information request, demonstrates that we as an organisation, and I as the head of that organisation at the moment, are transparent, and that when we fail I will put my hand up and say that we failed. What I and the people in the Air Force will do is work tirelessly to ensure that we are as good as we can be, so that we are ready to protect the UK from whatever threats we face. That is what we are going to talk about later in the session.

**Q186 Sarah Atherton:** You talk about transparency. Why did you choose a non-statutory investigation as opposed to a statutory investigation?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** I was not in the organisation when that decision was taken, but you know—we have discussed this previously, and I know that this has been a topic in relation to some of the issues in the national health service—that in a statutory inquiry, you can compel witnesses to come forward and give evidence.

I think the judgment that was taken here, to have the non-statutory inquiry, was that, first, it potentially offered us some speed and pace to conclude it; as we see, statutory inquiries can take a very long time. Secondly, in this case with the Red Arrows and that first investigation, in order to really get underneath the skin of what was going on, the judgment was taken that offering people the opportunity to talk to the investigation confidentially, rather than doing it through a statutory inquiry, improved the probability of understanding what was going on.

These are always balanced judgments, and I think that you, as elected politicians, know that there are sometimes difficult judgments to make about which is the best way. I believe the non-statutory inquiry has enabled us to understand what was going on and to ensure that we put in place measures to fix it, and that is fundamentally what the outcome of an inquiry ought to be.

**Q187 Sarah Atherton:** When the criminal threshold was met and exceeded, why did you decide not to hand the case over to the civilian Home Office police, like they did in the Submarine Service?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** I cannot comment on the Submarine Service, but certainly the report sets out that where instances of potentially criminal activity were identified, that was referred to the service police and then investigated. This was before the Defence Serious Crime Unit was established. As you know, however, it can be very difficult in these circumstances to gather the evidence and then take it to a criminal charge. What we know in the service is that where the service



justice system investigates these kinds of issues, we take many more of them to trial than you see in the civil courts, and the overall conviction rates are higher as a consequence.

**Sarah Atherton:** Thank you, Richard.

Q188 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Richard, people are at the heart of all that defence does, and the way that they are treated impacts readiness at every stage, so I think that what the Committee—not just the Committee, but women in the Armed Forces and in general maybe—are looking for, given some of the heavy redactions in the NSI report, is how you can assure us, first of all, that the victims are being looked after and that those perpetrators, some of them—

Actually, I will come back to the NSI point that my friend the Member for Wrexham has raised in a second. What assurances can you give us about the treatment of victims, first of all?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** As I set out right at the start of my statement today and in the statement that I released is that I am sorry that anybody in the Armed Forces and anybody in the Royal Air Force has been treated in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable, doesn't make them feel included, and doesn't make them feel part of the wider team that is the Royal Air Force. Three individuals came forward to my predecessor, and that is what initiated the investigation. I have offered the opportunity for each of those to come and talk to me, and for me to listen to their perspectives.

The investigation team—the team that conducted the work of the non-statutory inquiry—had a good degree of expertise and experience in these areas, and they have offered support throughout that process. There is a range of other routes open to other individuals if they have either experienced behaviours or need support and help. My statement included links to those and how we can try to help people.

Q189 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I am going to be blunt, Richard. I think your answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham was not satisfactory.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** In what way?

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I can appreciate that you have been left to carry the can here. I am bamboozled by the fact that this is a non-statutory inquiry. I am absolutely bamboozled as to why that decision was made. I know that is not within your control, but as a member of this Committee who sat on the Sub-Committee on Women in the Armed Forces, chaired by the Member for Wrexham, I see no change. I am as appalled now as I was then about the treatment of women in the Armed Forces. Something has to change here. I don't know if this opinion is shared by the Committee, but I think that a statutory inquiry, no matter how long it took, would have forced that change. Sometimes a bit of daylight opens everything up. Quite frankly, I don't think there is enough daylight around this issue at all. I know that you have had to come up to this and are having to step up to the plate, but your predecessors have



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certainly let the side down. This should have been a statutory inquiry. I will leave it at that.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** Might I make one comment? My predecessor, Sir Mike Wigston, wrote that report in 2019, and he was a powerful champion of addressing these issues. There is no question and no denial on my or anybody else's part that there are elements within our organisation where people do not behave appropriately. You know this in Parliament, and many organisations suffer from it.

Maybe a year or so ago, I was in contact with a number of women I had worked with earlier in my career who said, "We don't recognise this characterisation of the Air Force as a misogynistic organisation." It is a minority of people who exhibit these kinds of behaviours. We need to identify them, find them, deal with them and remove them from the organisation, but that will not happen overnight. It requires us constantly to stay focused on it and to work on it.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** As I said, Richard, you are having to step up to this. Clearly, there is an institutional culture of misogyny, which has impacted women in a profound sense. I do not know how other Committee members feel about this, but it needs to be opened up. This should have been a statutory inquiry. I am gobsmacked that here we are in 2023, after the last Sub-Committee report, and we are going through this again. It is just extraordinary that we are back at this stage. I am not surprised, but I am dumbfounded.

Q190 **Mr Jones:** Who determines promotion in the Red Arrows?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** Nobody inside the Red Arrows. We have a promotion system that applies to everybody in the service, whether you are an aviator or an officer.

Q191 **Mr Jones:** So why was someone promoted when allegations were being made against them, and subsequently dismissed? Why would that person be promoted?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** You know full well, Mr Jones, that I cannot talk about individual cases. I don't know the case that you are talking about.

**Mr Jones:** Well, you do, because it is in the press.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** I do not know the case you are talking about. I cannot talk about individuals. I think you are suggesting that if an allegation was made against somebody that was then refuted, they should not be promoted. Is that what you are telling me?

Q192 **Mr Jones:** No, don't play games with me. What I am saying is this: someone was promoted, not from anywhere else in the Red Arrows but from outside, through promotion boards, when there was an accusation against that individual which was subsequently proven, because you dismissed him.



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**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** Honestly, Mr Jones, I have no idea what the case is that you are talking about. Two people were dismissed. Neither was promoted before they were dismissed.

Q193 **Mr Jones:** So what was in the press—that this individual was promoted—was not true?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** I am afraid you will have to provide me with details. I cannot talk in public session about individuals.

Q194 **Mr Jones:** Well, MailOnline, 1 November, said that some of the women say they were victims of unacceptable behaviour while working with the squadron. It said that this follows the dismissal last year of Flight Lieutenant Damon Green, who was promoted within the squadron despite facing allegations of sexual assault. He was not charged with these alleged offences.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** He left us as flight lieutenant, as far as I am concerned; he was not promoted. Sorry, I don't follow the logic.

Q195 **Mr Jones:** So he wasn't promoted. This is untrue, is it?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** As far as I am concerned, yes. He left as a flight lieutenant.

Q196 **Mr Jones:** Right, so this is obviously something the press have picked up—

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** I cannot comment. I don't know.

Q197 **Mr Jones:** Well, of course you could comment.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** I have commented. I don't know where that story came from, but as I understand it that individual left the Air Force as a flight lieutenant and was not promoted, so I don't understand the story, I'm afraid.

Q198 **Mr Jones:** Well, if you could clarify it in writing, that would be helpful.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** Of course.

Q199 **Mr Jones:** Can I ask about another issue? Like other Members, I spent my great Sunday afternoon reading our evidence from "Women in the Armed Forces"—our revisit to it. It is not pretty reading. It includes some first-hand accounts from members of the RAF. There are some very serious accusations, and reading them wasn't a very pleasant experience. If we publish some of them, even redacted, they will make pretty harrowing reading. I accept what you are saying about your commitment to culture change, but even after our report, do you think things are really changing?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** Which report?

**Mr Jones:** "Women in the Armed Forces".



**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** Yes, I genuinely do, although we might want it to happen faster, and we might want to do better. I was with our women's Air Force network very recently, and we were talking about these issues. Multiple steps have been taken to improve things, but it is not good enough—I recognise that. There is no question in my mind. To deny that these things happen—there are 30,000 people in the Air Force, and sadly some of them behave inappropriately or exhibit unacceptable behaviours. What we have to do is identify that, call it out, stop it and deal with people when those things happen. As we talked about, this is fundamentally about culture change, and that will take time. We just have to keep focused on it and keep driving at it.

**Mr Jones:** Thank you.

Q200 **Chair:** Air Chief Marshal, from the previous two questions, you will see that, although the Committee understands that it is the actions of individuals, there is a wider cultural concern. That is what both the previous two questions were about. Your report makes reference to a failure of leadership and to culture. That is particularly concerning in an organisation that prides itself on exemplary leadership. Are you confident that the steps you have taken will be sufficient to restore public trust in not just the Red Arrows but the wider Royal Air Force, given the leadership failure that you yourself referred to?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** I am clear that we will need to continue to stay focused on this and do more. We draw from right across society. As I say, there are a large number of people in the Armed Forces, and sadly there will be some who display behaviours that are not compatible with the standards that we set. Leadership at every level has a role to play in that—in setting the right example, understanding what is right and wrong, and dealing with things when they are identified. From my perspective, I am not satisfied that we have done enough, because we need to continue to do this. We need to continue to drive forward on this journey.

Q201 **Chair:** Do I understand you correctly that that process will take place in training at all levels across the whole Air Force?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** Oh yes, absolutely. Following the release of the unacceptable behaviours policy last year, everybody in the Air Force was trained, and I know the same approach was taken elsewhere. That is something we do routinely to update people. We did more on the Red Arrows because of the particular issues that were found. As I say, this is something that we just have to keep driving at. Sadly, it is a thing that we see in society more broadly, and we need to ensure that as an organisation we do everything we can to identify it, stop it and deal with it.

Q202 **Sarah Atherton:** Forty-three service personnel gave evidence—perhaps there might have been more than that. Some of them, as you might expect, have been in contact with me, and they do not concur with your account that they are being kept involved and updated. They do not agree



that the correct admissibility conclusions were made.

If they feel that, what should they do? If they feel that they are not having their needs as a victim met, will you agree to their referral to the victim witness support unit? So first of all, what do they do if they do not agree with what you are saying and they feel that the admissibility was wrong by the commanding officers and the service police—so it is very much in-house admissibility? If they do not agree with that, what do they do? If they need support, can they go to the victim witness support unit?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** I am very sorry if those who were subject to unacceptable behaviours feel that they were not appropriately looked after or are unsure of what to do. When people make a complaint around criminal activity, sexual assault or whatever it might be, we have a duty to investigate that, provided that an appropriate threshold of evidence is met. If individuals feel that they have not had the opportunity to make a complaint or have not had their complaint of criminal behaviour investigated, they should raise it. In the first instance, under the new system, that would be looked at by the Defence Serious Crime Unit. In terms of the defence victim care unit, I would have to ask the Chief of Defence People quite how that would support those people and directly how that would happen. From a personal perspective, I would be absolutely delighted for defence to support them, and we should absolutely do so.

**Sarah Atherton:** Thank you.

Q203 **Chair:** I will move on to the second question before we get on to the substantive. I will ask both of you to comment on the readiness of your respective Armed Forces in the light of events in the Middle East. I am conscious that we have men and women deployed across all services in training operations and in operations themselves, and I will ask you to comment briefly on any steps you have may have taken in the light of those events. Can I turn first to General Sanders?

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** Thank you, Chair. The first question, I guess, is ready for what? I do not think it is likely that we are going to find ourselves drawn into combat or conflict in the region, or certainly we would seek to avert that. At the moment, the role that we are playing is a combination of exploiting the network we have—for example, we have our special operations forces, the Rangers, in Lebanon. They have been there for many years, and they have built up a very close relationship with the Lebanese armed forces. That provides an insight and influence on Lebanese decision making and seeing things from the other side of the northern border, which clearly concerns Israel.

More broadly, we have a network in the region that we are using to reassure our allies and partners out there and to try to alleviate some of the tension. Some of that involves formation-level training. Some of the nations concerned, for domestic reasons, would rather that was not advertised, so forgive me if I do not talk about it, but it is important to them that we are there.





Most directly, we are involved in trying to enable some of the options—the contingency options—we are considering. Clearly, there is a prospect, if the conflict does expand, of a non-combatant evacuation operation in some parts of that region. We are posturing ourselves for that, but most significantly we are trying to posture ourselves so that we can enable, as rapidly as possible, humanitarian support. Some of that is going on already; the Royal Air Force has been involved directly with that. If we are able to expand that further—whether that is field hospitals or getting aid in—we have force elements forward, largely using Cyprus, to get into that position.

The wider impacts we would all be concerned about are the prospects of escalation in the region, hence why defence is looking at a series of contingencies, primarily to deter any Iranian action but also to reassure other partners. The biggest impact has been on Ukraine. President Zelensky was very clear about this over the weekend. I think there are genuine risks of drawing away attention from the requirement to continue to support Ukraine and not fuel Putin’s belief that he can outlast the west. You and I were both at an event this morning where Fiona Hill talked about the risks of proliferation and expansion of this conflict. What that tells us is the importance of investing in readiness, in our enablers and in our stockpiles in a way that I think the DCPR begins to address.

**Q204 Chair:** General, thank you for that. We will get into the detail on readiness and those issues shortly. I am conscious of the fact that the Americans have had some related action and that we also have people in that part of the world. Air Chief Marshal, from your perspective, we of course have Shader ongoing, and we have P-8s deployed more directly on this operation, but are there any other steps you have taken in the light of recent events in the Middle East?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** As you say, we have aircraft and forces already forward deployed in Cyprus for Operation Shader. We have eight Typhoons and a Voyager, and an A400M Atlas has been flying sorties in and out of the region, both delivering aid and taking people out of the region.

As you say, we deployed forward a P-8, and it was really quite an impressive piece of work from the team at RAF Lossiemouth in very short order to get that out into the region, to Sigonella, to support operations there. The fact that we are already well set in the theatre and have people and assets there gives us resources that we can employ in whatever way might be necessary for the contingencies that we might face.

As the General says, the risk we most need to guard against is escalation both in the region and more broadly, and pulling that attention away from Ukraine. It reinforces the instability and breadth of threats that we and the UK’s interests face around the world.

**Chair:** Thank you. I will pick up on some of those issues. I am grateful to you for mentioning logistics at this point, because that goes to some of the issues we are about to delve into. Thank you for taking questions on the



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initial issues. We will move now to the substantive matters on our readiness inquiry. To kick us off, I will turn to Martin Docherty-Hughes.

**Q205 Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Patrick, I am going to come to you first, and then to Richard. Has the MOD's measurement of readiness and the way that information is provided to NATO changed since the development of the new force model and regional plans?

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** Let me just repeat the question back: has the way that we provide readiness information to NATO changed since the NFM?

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Yes.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** No, because NATO's assessments of readiness and capability are run through the NATO defence planning process. That is a biannual cycle. The information provided is classified, but the last time that we went through that process was in 2021. We will expect another assessment in 2023. We provide offers to NATO against the NATO force model and against a variety of tiers of readiness and categories of how committed they are. Those will then be assessed, either through tactical evaluations or combat readiness evaluations. We are in the process of going through that.

**Q206 Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Do you think there would be any worth in the tactical evaluation process formally being brought back into use, or do you not see that having any future benefit at all?

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** It is slightly different for the Royal Air Force—for the air domain and land domain. In the land domain, we have combat readiness evaluations, and those have not stopped. To give you an example, the Headquarters of the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps has just been through its CREVAL. The contribution that we make currently to the Very High Readiness Joint Taskforce—soon to become the ARF—has been through a CREVAL process. The 1st Division, who provide the Headquarters for the ARF, is about to go through it. In each of those cases—for those who have been through it—we have received largely very positive reports commenting on a lot of best practice for the rest of the alliance.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** There are two things. First, in terms of evaluations, yes, they do happen; for example, this year the NATO headquarters air command came and did its evaluation of the C-17. There is the NATO TACEVAL conference this month, which our operational training centre will go to to make sure that it is assessing the likes of the Typhoon force for its pre-deployment training prior to its air policing role. The Typhoon force has relatively recently been through an evaluation. As Patrick describes, the reports we get back are very positive.

What you might be driving at is whether the NATO force model has changed the ask of the Armed Forces across the allies. That is true. The fundamental purpose of the NATO force model is to improve the readiness of the forces and provide SACEUR with more forces at its fingertips in



order to enhance the deterrent effect and to react to events that might occur in Europe. As a consequence, NATO is particularly interested in the readiness states of the forces that it has right across the alliance. The evaluation part of that is through the information we provide through the NATO defence planning process and in response to the NATO force model for sensing and force attribution work that we do.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** I will make a slight supplementary point, as Richard has triggered my mind. If you look, for example, at the forward land forces—those forward elements that we are committed to, in our case, in Estonia—there is now a process in NATO where that will be subject to a more rigorous examination than has happened previously. We are going through that at the moment.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Thank you.

Q207 **Chair:** The TACEVAL process that you referred to for the Typhoon force was for the Leeming 135 EAW force, wasn't it?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** That was actually for the expeditionary air wing before it went out, but prior to that, the Typhoon force has been through evaluations, as have other forces that we attribute to NATO.

Q208 **Chair:** Was that for air policing? I am conscious that that was an air-policing mission. I am interested in complex air operations against a peer adversary. What about a TACEVAL for that?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** The evaluation that is undertaken for a specific operation, which will be about ensuring that the pre-deployment training is adequate, will be done by us and then affirmed with NATO. More generally, the forces and the C-17 force, having been through that evaluation, would have looked at the full range of the capabilities that it is required to deliver. NATO is assessing the forces against the full range, from high-end warfighting to the specific actions that it is asking forces to undertake. NATO has, in my experience, a good understanding of the strengths of the forces that are allocated to it by the nations.

Q209 **Chair:** Thank you; that is very helpful. Can I pick up a point that General Sanders made in answer to a question from me? You said, "Readiness? Well, readiness for what?" That is possibly at the heart of everything we are looking at in this inquiry. We will all understand that there are different potential scenarios. On one level, you could have everybody stood up and every tank ready to go, all the time. You could have every Typhoon ready to go at the end of the runway, all the time. But that would burn the force out and be massively expensive. So the question is: ready for what? Would you agree with the general statement that what you are ready for depends on your general attitude to risk—how much risk you are prepared to carry as a country?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** It is probably worth my spending a moment describing the process of analysis that will lead to the



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conclusion that, fundamentally, it is as you describe. It is: ready for what, how much risk do we carry and how much risk are we prepared to carry?

**Chair:** Forgive me for interrupting—I think I am about to ask you that question, anyway. I just wanted to understand, as an outset, whether you agree with that general principle.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** I would frame it in this sense: military operations are never risk-free. We set a policy that describes what it is we would expect the Armed Forces to be able to do in order to meet the political intent, and we conduct a series of war games and assessments. We produce a thing called the defence capability assessment register, which identifies what risks we might carry against a set of scenarios that we might face in the future.

In the nearer term, we have a thing called the capability readiness assessment framework—the CRAF—which assesses the readiness of the forces we have today. We look at two different perspectives on that: readiness to operate—that is, to conduct routine operations around the world—and readiness to warfight. We recognise that the risk you might carry for warfighting will be different to the risk you might carry in terms of your ability to operate around the world. Those assessments will drive our prioritisation decisions when we come to defence reviews or whatever it might be.

Q210 **Chair:** General, I will come to you in a second, but that is at the heart of this matter. How good do you think the MOD is at differentiating between the three broad scenarios of air-policing and peacekeeping operations; peer adversary warfighting; and unexpected events, such as those we have seen recently in the Middle East? Those are three broad scenarios. That is at the heart of it. How good are we at differentiating between those?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** We explicitly and specifically look at all three of those scenarios. We would consider full-scale warfighting as the most demanding. We might describe an unexpected event as a medium-scale operation that would require deployment, which we would look at as a specific example. Then there are routine operations, whether that be air policing or a deployment of the offshore patrol vessels into the Pacific—those are looked at as well. The three scenarios that you describe are exactly the way in which we look at the potential requirement for deployment and use of our Armed Forces.

Q211 **Chair:** Thank you. I will pick up some more of those points in a second, but would you like to add to that, General?

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** I do not think I would add much to what Richard has said, other than that the nature of the operation or the task you are going to undertake is always sui generis; it is always unique. I have served in, if you like, four Armies: one that was optimised for the cold war; one that was optimised for interventions, starting with humanitarian interventions in Sierra Leone and the Balkans, and then expanded into interventions in the Middle East; one that reset itself for



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counter-insurgency or stabilisation operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and, tactically, became extremely proficient and well prepared for it; and now an Army that is optimising for war and for warfighting.

The point I am making is that it is much more than a mechanical or mathematical calculation of people, equipment and the stockpiles you have. It is about your ability to adapt to, understand and optimise for a particular operation, and the one thing you can be sure of is that whatever operation you are doing next, it will not be like the last one.

**Q212 Chair:** Indeed. Are we quick enough at switching between one of those broad three scenarios to another, as we are seeing happening now?

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** We really put a premium on adaptability and agility, and the two are subtly different things. It is relatively straightforward to calculate whether you can switch between regions or whether you can switch up and down the scale. Those are reasonably black and white answers. Tailoring a force for everything from peacekeeping operations right the way up to warfighting operations requires a level of investment in training. I would say that we are as good at this as most armed forces, if not better than most armed forces in the world.

**Q213 Chair:** Thank you. I have one more question and then I will bring my colleagues in. The question I want to ask on the back of that is whether or not there has been a rebalancing of the advice that you are giving to Ministers on risk in the light of Ukraine and the Middle East.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** The short answer is yes, and the specific example I would give is around stockpiles. We made judgments about the likely consumption of stockpiles of weapons over the last 10 to 15 years, and what Ukraine demonstrated is that the assumptions that were made, and the risks that we were prepared to carry, needed to be revisited. That is exactly what has happened, and it is part of the reason why you have seen the announcement from the previous Defence Secretary, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor that we will invest more in replacing the items we have gifted and to enhance our stockpiles and the capacity of industry in the UK to generate those stockpiles. That would be an example of where the advice and judgment around risk has changed as a consequence of what we have seen in Ukraine.

**Q214 John Spellar:** So your judgment was that there would be no peer-on-peer warfighting in central Europe.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** No, that's not right, Mr Spellar. What I am saying is that you make judgments around the likelihood, in terms of the rates of effort—how many weapons you would use and how quickly, and over what period of time that fighting would last.

**Q215 John Spellar:** But you knew that from a military exercise that 3 Division undertook with the Americans on a desktop operation. We had evidence here from General Hodges, head of the US army in Europe, that we—the



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Army—ran out of munitions within eight days. So if there was a peer-on-peer conflict of any seriousness, we did not have the stocks. It was really based on a judgment of what the Russians' intentions were.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** As I said earlier, no operations are risk-free. As the General pointed out, the nature of that particular fight will vary, and planners have to make judgments around the relative priorities and balance of risk that they carry. The judgment, as I said, is one that has been revisited, and I have no doubt we will continue to invest more in weapons stockpiles over the next few years.

**Chair:** General?

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** I am not sure I could add to what Richard has said.

Q216 **John Spellar:** But it was your service—it was basically artillery munitions, wasn't it?

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** You will forgive me, Mr Spellar, if I don't go into the details of what stockpiles we hold. I can't do that here; we can do it in private.

Q217 **John Spellar:** But we know from the evidence that General Hodges gave to us—and this was in an open session—that the British Army ran out within eight days in that exercise.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** So you know what General Hodges said.

**John Spellar** *indicated assent.*

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** I am not going to add to that.

Q218 **Derek Twigg:** Can I just ask both of you a very simple question? Given that you have talked a lot, and said some interesting things, about readiness, flexibility, agility and adaptability, what keeps you awake most at night? General Sanders?

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** Well, readiness. But I think that that is true of anyone—any chief—occupying my role, at almost any point in history. You are always concerned about the unforeseen, and whether or not you are prepared for it, and whether you can adapt to it.

I think the Defence Command Paper was very clear about the fact that we recognise that we have not invested in the enablers and the stockpiles over several decades, and that is why it has sought to put that right. There is nothing more useless than a soldier with an empty magazine, and that is why I think Defence is now investing significantly in restoring those stockpiles and getting them back up to levels that will help to contribute to the deterrent effect that we need to have as part of a wider NATO alliance.

Q219 **Derek Twigg:** So what is it specifically that keeps you awake most?

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** I would say stockpiles at the moment.

Q220 **Derek Twigg:** Right. Air Chief Marshal?



**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** I agree with General Sanders about stockpiles. The second thing for me is people—the workforce. At the start of this year, there were 1.3 million job vacancies in the UK and a significant pull on people in the Armed Services into the private sector. So retaining our people, with the skills that they have, and ensuring that we recruit the people we need are right up there at the top of my priority list.

Q221 **Derek Twigg:** It continues to be a struggle to keep on—

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** It does, and it will be.

Q222 **Sarah Atherton:** The previous CDS, released from his constraints of office, told us that there is a lack of readiness, scale and mass in all three services now. You gentlemen know exactly how volatile this world is. But I have spoken to American colleagues who are telling me they are preparing in America for an imminent future conflict, and they gave me timelines. Now, we have not sent a carrier force out to the Mediterranean; we can speculate why that is. Is the focus of the MOD correctly aligned with regard to risk acceptance and readiness?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** Could you just expand a little bit? Sorry, Ms Atherton, it's just that I am not quite—

**Sarah Atherton:** In summary, America are preparing for war; that is what they are doing. We do not seem to be doing that. Why aren't we?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** You mean specifically with China?

**Sarah Atherton:** Just in general, with the volatile world that we live in. They are increasing stockpiles, they are increasing training, they are increasing personnel and they are increasing platforms. We do not seem to be doing that, and I am just asking you gentlemen why you think that is.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** I think you could legitimately challenge whether we could have started doing this earlier, or whether we are able to do it faster. But I don't think I agree with your characterisation that we are not doing it.

The first point to make—recognising that there are black swan events out there, and you'll be the first to challenge me on this—is that, at the moment, we have been given the gift of time by the Ukrainians. The importance of investing in the Ukrainian fight is that it buys us time for our own recapitalisation and our own modernisation, as long as we use that time. The likelihood of an article 5 operation in NATO or the Euro-Atlantic area in the next, let's say, three or four years is lower than it was, so we should use that time. I don't think we should be drawn into the spectre of "fight tomorrow"—we have some time.

The second point to make is that we fight as part of NATO. Our deterrent effect comes from being a member of NATO and not from being an exclusively sovereign force. But, to point to my own service, I took over



this role over a year ago, and the first thing I set out, three weeks after I took over, was starkly the threat that we faced. I talked about how we would mobilise the Army so that it would be ready to fight with what it has in the course of the next two or three years, and that is absolutely what the Army has been focused on. I can point to significant uplifts in investments, in our workforce, in improving the availability of our equipment and in accelerating modernisation, to significant investment in training and increasingly—not at the pace I would like and not at the volume I would like, but increasingly—to investment in stockpiles. I am very happy to offer some examples of that. So I don't recognise that we are not doing anything to prepare for war.

**Q223 Sarah Atherton:** Would you say that the British Army is proportionate to its investment, not its challenges or commitments?

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** I'm sorry, I don't understand the question.

**Sarah Atherton:** Do you think the British Army is proportionate? Is it doing a good job given the level of investment, or is it doing a good job given its threats and commitment to NATO?

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** I think—I know—that the British Army is the most productive army in Europe. We are delivering at 130% of our capacity. We are delivering the same outputs at the same levels of deployment that we did from an Army that was 20,000 bigger than it is now. This is an extraordinarily productive Army. Is the Army ready for every single scenario and every eventuality? No. There are some things that we can deliver, and do, very effectively: I point to Pitting and a number of the deployments that we made straight after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. But we also know that we have got some weaknesses, which will continue to persist through this decade. Those weaknesses are on the back of conscious decisions that were taken, and we are doing our best to mitigate them at speed.

**Q224 Mr Jones:** You said that no operation is risk-free, and I agree with that—neither are some of the decisions that you have to take in terms of the spending envelope that you are given. How do you think Ministers understand readiness? We used to have a Chair of this Committee who, as soon as there was any natural disaster anywhere, would call on the Army to be deployed at a minute's notice. I often used to point out to him the fact that the Army is only so big. Do you think that Ministers, and certainly the Treasury, understand what it actually entails if you want to do that and keep things at the readiness that you are?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** I know that we make defence complex for people to understand sometimes, and it is—there are a whole bunch of factors that go into ensuring that we are ready to do the broadest range of requirements. A number of you around this table have been Ministers I have worked with and have been very good on understanding readiness, asking for advice about the impacts on readiness of committing forces to particular operations, and understanding the limitations they have. You would have to ask other Ministers whether they





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understand it, but my personal experience, over a number of years of working with Ministers, is that I have found them to understand it.

**Q225 Mr Jones:** I wasn't thinking so much of MOD Ministers—I was thinking more of Treasury, in the sense of what Patrick has just said on stockpiles, for example. I accept what he is saying in terms of the breathing space possibly that he's got, but there is a serious issue in the Army around, for example, the heavy element. I know movements are being made on Challenger 3 and other things, but they are going to take time to deliver what you actually need, aren't they?

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** If you want to talk specifically about Challenger 3 and Challenger 2, we have a three-way demand on a fleet. First, there is support to Ukraine, and that is more than just the 14 Challengers that we are giving them, because it is the stockpiles and the spare parts that go behind it. Secondly, it is about ensuring we have a ready fleet that we can begin to convert to Challenger 3. The third demand signal is on delivering the output—the readiness—that we have committed to for NATO. At the moment, we are just about succeeding in doing that.

**Mr Jones:** That's not what I'm hearing.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** As you would expect, I imagined that this question might come up. I can't talk about the actual figures, but I can give you confidence that we can deliver the readiness that we have committed to for NATO.

**Q226 Mr Jones:** You are supposed to have the two first demonstrations on Challenger 3 by Christmas, but I am told they will not be achievable by then.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** I am not hearing that. I am expecting to see those two prototypes at Twickenham for the armoured vehicle conference in January.

**Q227 Mr Jones:** You should ask some deeper questions on that.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** I have. We are hearing different answers, then.

**Q228 Richard Drax:** Before I ask my question, I will just go back to the old chestnut of the size of the Army, which is dear to my heart. Are you happy, General, that the Army is going to be reduced by 10,000?

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** I think I am on record as having answered this one publicly. As I said when I took over, it did feel perverse to be cutting the Army in the face of a land war in Europe. I guess I would make two points. First, within a fixed cost envelope, if you asked me whether I would have fewer people, better equipped—with more lethal and better protection—I would go with that. There is absolutely no point in simply increasing the size of the Armed Forces, or the Army in particular, if you can't then equip people to fight. I have to make those judgments.



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The second points really to emerging lessons on how we fight. You will have heard this before, I'm sure, but how you can generate mass, lethality and effect on the battlefield is not necessarily through human waves, in the way the Russians do. It is about how you can combine those capabilities and draw on the other domains and services to operate in a smarter way and to compensate for a lack of immediate mass in a very highly professionalised force. You then clearly need a plan for expansion and for generating a second and third echelon.

As I think about what the future shape, size, structure and roles of the Army should be, at the very forefront of my mind is not simply a larger Regular component, but how we can structure to grow—in a way, I think we can draw lessons from Israel and the way that it can draw on Reservists, and we can clearly point to the Ukrainians and the way that they have been able to mobilise the general population against a particular threat.

**Q229 Richard Drax:** I don't want to dwell too much on this, but I have just one more point. As far as the Ukrainian war is concerned, numbers of dead and casualties are kept secret for obvious reasons, but we know they run into the thousands—

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** Hundreds of thousands.

**Richard Drax:** Yes. We are told they are fighting in this new, efficient way—I think you indicated that a new, efficient Army, with all the new kit we've got, will fight in a slightly different way. Can I be devil's advocate and say that may be true to a certain extent, but Ukraine has proven that, even with this new way of fighting, they are still taking huge casualties and mass is essential to fight a war for a period of time, certainly against a superior adversary? We simply could not cope with that, despite the fact that we would fight with NATO—I totally accept that.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** I do not think it would be fair to say that the Ukrainians are fighting in the way that we would fight, and there are very good reasons for that. Ukraine has taken a conscious decision to mobilise more mature people for conflict. The average age of soldiers on the frontline in Ukraine is 45. They are protecting their young men and women for the sake of the future of the economy. That is a conscious, strategic decision that they have taken, and 45-year-olds fight and behave very differently to 18 and 19-year-olds—they are more cautious. So they are having to fight to preserve the force, not to achieve decisive breakthroughs and manoeuvre. They are also facing some of the most challenging conditions around minefields, obstacles and terrain, where they don't have the same sort of air cover. We could be absolutely confident that, in a conflict between NATO and Russia, within a matter of weeks or months we would establish the sort of air cover that allows you to operate very differently. So I don't for one second undermine or underestimate the importance of mass and being able to generate mass; I am just not sure you need to hold it at high readiness in a Regular army.

**Q230 Richard Drax:** Can I move on to the question now? Sorry, there was a



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slight delay in asking it. As well as the decision to stop providing figures on serious and critical weakness in force elements in 2014, as part of the SDR process in '15, the defence planning assumptions were reclassified as secret. That means that there is no publicly available information on what Defence thinks it ought to be able to do, the force elements it requires to do it, and the extent to which there is a lack of manpower, equipment, training or sustainability within those force elements, creating a serious or critical weakness. Why the change?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** This was a conversation that I had with the Minister for the Armed Forces the other day. Neither of us know what the change was in 2015. There may be people on the Committee who know better. Finding a way to allow the Committee to scrutinise the readiness of the Armed Forces, but not doing it in a public way that will risk our adversaries—our potential enemies—learning things that they could use against us, is exactly what he wants to try to do. If you don't mind, Mr Drax, I suggest that you pick that question up with him in the session that he has planned in a couple of weeks' time.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** There are some semantics here. DPAs weren't classified; they were confidential, which is an obsolete classification. I suspect that might be it. They are now of course secret.

Q231 **Richard Drax:** Do you think that there should be more democratic scrutiny of the defence planning assumptions or not? Do you think, as you say, that there is a risk of giving the enemy information that they shouldn't have?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** There is a philosophical point, which, from my perspective, is that we have to be careful that we don't inadvertently hand advantage to our potential enemies and adversaries. But it seems to me entirely reasonable, when, fundamentally, it is a political judgment about the level of investment you make in defence, that Parliament and politicians have an opportunity to scrutinise and understand how ready we are as a military to do what politicians might ask us to do. The mechanism by which that is done is one that I know the Minister for the Armed Forces is eager to talk to you about.

**Richard Drax:** General, do you want to add anything?

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** I suppose I would say that there are some things that we are very public about—for example, our commitment to NATO. We have described through the process of the NFM and off the back of Vilnius what it is that we will provide. What we don't talk about, and I agree with Rich, are what we describe as the concurrency assumptions—how many different things you should be able to do at once and at what scale.

Q232 **Mr Francois:** Just quickly, Air Chief Marshal, I am all for not making it easy for our adversaries, but do we really kid ourselves that the Russians and the Chinese don't understand in great detail how ready we are, or are not, to fight? We work very hard to understand that about them; they work very hard to understand that about us.



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We are talking to the First Sea Lord later in a different hearing. As a quick example, it was all over the internet six weeks ago that not a single one of our attack submarines was at sea—all the sub-watchers had seen them tied up alongside. Is it not true that sometimes the MOD hides behind secrecy and national security because it is too embarrassed to talk about how unready we actually are? We pretend that our adversaries don't know so that we don't have to tell our own public.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** I'll have a first go.

**Mr Francois:** And then the General can follow, because he is grinning.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** I always try not to be facetious with the Committee, but I will be just a tiny bit facetious: I think you are saying that Parliament doesn't know but China does.

**Mr Francois:** I am saying that China knows better than Parliament. And so does Moscow.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** Right. I do not accept that the MOD hides behind secrecy. We take operational security and secrecy very seriously. The relative judgment about how much information is provided to Members of Parliament and Parliament is a matter for Ministers. We have both set out our view that it seems perfectly reasonable, given Parliament's role in making judgments about investment levels, that you should be able to understand the position of the Armed Forces.

As a Committee, you might want to think about this from two perspectives. One is the here and now. You can go and count the number of Type 45s that are tied up in Portsmouth or you can stand at the end of the runway at Cranwell and take the tail letters down of Typhoons and know which ones are flying and which ones are not. That would give you a state in terms of the actual number, but our planning assumptions, the risks, the kinds of operations we expect to fight, the policy assumptions that underpin that and the stockpiles—all that is material that would be of interest to our potential adversaries. We should do all that we can to protect that. I am sure the Committee would support us in protecting that information. I know that James Heappey, our Minister for the Armed Forces, is looking at ways to help the Committee understand these things better.

**Chair:** But there is a case for democratic scrutiny of those assumptions by this Committee.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** Of course.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** I do not think, with the greatest respect to ourselves, that the Chinese or the Russians spend a huge amount of time worrying about what the UK has. I think they worry very specifically about what the US has, and then I think they would lump together the rest of NATO and the European powers and worry about what the compound effect of all that is.



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I think the comment you were making about submarines you can extend to the land domain, which is an issue of posture and capabilities. It is no secret that we have given away large parts of our capability to Ukraine to enable them to fight. I will use artillery as an example: Russia or our adversaries will know that we have significant gaps in artillery. They will also know what we are doing to address it because we have been quite public about announcing it, but it is a very different thing for them to know the level of our ammunition stockpiles or our ability to draw on stockpiles.

**Q233 Mr Francois:** With respect, General Hodges told them 18 months ago and you haven't contradicted him, so it is not that much of a secret, is it?

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** Nor have I agreed with him.

**Mr Francois:** Come on, Patrick!

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** Mr Francois, you know well that I cannot comment on our stockpiles.

**Q234 Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Just to follow on from my colleague's question, the USA and Germany do report on their military readiness; how are they managing the risk of their adversaries knowing what they want to do? Why can we not manage the risks in the same way and make it publicly available?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** I do not know the methods that the Germans use, but I can tell you that the Americans do not release details of their stockpiles to the public domain. Readiness is about availability, the capability we have and our ability to sustain it. The Minister for the Armed Forces is eager to find a route to help you to do this.

**Q235 John Spellar:** That wasn't the case. When he was the Defence Secretary, General Mattis went into some detail about the level of availability of fast jets and how he had called on the US Air Force to move that up. They were far more open than we are.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** I suggest that you raise this issue with Ministers.

**Mr Jones:** The Germans have their own inspectorate that publishes an annual report on it.

**Chair:** It is a ministerial decision, Air Chief Marshal.

**Mr Jones:** It is why we had the headlines a few years ago about how few submarines could actually go to sea or how few tanks they had.

**Mr Francois:** Well, they can still put more to sea than we can.

**Chair:** We will take that up with Min AF. Thank you, General and Air Chief Marshal.

**Q236 Derek Twigg:** If we could move on a little bit, we have obviously discussed a broad range of things in terms of readiness, but not so much



that is operational now. I will start with you, General. Can you tell us what you have done in the last two years to improve warfighting readiness?

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** As I alluded to earlier, we established a programme that we called Operation Mobilise to mobilise the British Army to make it ready for war in Europe, recognising that we have some significant gaps in our capability because, as Ben Wallace has said and as the DCPR points to, we have underestimated readiness in the land domain and in the Army for some time.

We are carrying a number of things that will not be a surprise to this Committee: stockpiles that are reduced, a range of equipment that is coming to the end of its life—it is a very ambitious programme of modernisation that I have a huge amount of confidence in—and levels of training that were inadequate. For example, in 2020-21, only 10% of the Army's battle groups did combined arms manoeuvre training. We were coming from a pretty low base, and then that low base was exacerbated by the requirement to give equipment, ammunition and stockpiles to the Ukrainians. I support that for all the reasons we described earlier.

What that programme—Operation Mobilise—has done is to galvanise the Army. It has provided a very singular focus on preparing for warfighting—not for operating around the rest of the world but preparing for war. It has catalysed a series of things. First of all, it has provided a warfighting headmark. How are we going to fight with the forces we have, knowing what we are learning from the lessons in Ukraine, Nagorno-Karabakh and other conflicts, with what we have? What can we do differently? That provides, if you like, sheet music doctrine for the field army to fight differently. We have gone after a series of measures, in particular around training. We have a 150% increase in the level of combined arms manoeuvre unit training in the Army since we announced Operation Mobilise. By next year, 90% of the Army's battle groups will have gone through combined arms manoeuvre training.

Q237 **Derek Twigg:** That is despite the amount of time you have put into training the Ukrainian armed forces.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** Yes. We have trained our divisional headquarters—3 Div—in probably the toughest trade test you can go through as a divisional headquarters, and it came out as effective as, if not more so, many of its US counterparts. We trained at divisional level in the UK just this summer. Over two months, we ran a divisional-level exercise involving—I do not have the figures here, but I'll come back to it.

Next year, we will go on the largest training deployment that the British Army has done since the end of the cold war. That will be 16,000 troops, a three-star headquarters, two two-star headquarters, two brigade combat teams and mobilising Reservists across seven countries to test the sinews of whether or not we are ready. We have done a lot in training. On stockpiles, we have invested on top of what was announced in the DCPR. I am confident that we will have sufficient stockpiles for fighting, among the brigades that would make up a division, within a year or two.



Q238 **Derek Twigg:** A year or two?

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** Yes. I do not want to get into too much detail, but that is within the time limit that we set ourselves. We have done a lot. I could then point to increasing equipment availability. This summer, it was 4,000 troops, 2,000 vehicles and 40 sub-units at 22 different training sites across the whole of the UK. On equipment, I will point to two things. We have replaced some of the artillery pieces that we gave away—we did that within two months—and we have doubled the amount of logistics lift, in one buy, for the whole of the British Army. These are the measures that we have taken. If you ask me whether we still have gaps and whether I am still worried, I will say, “Yes”, but it is not for—

Q239 **Derek Twigg:** What is the biggest gap you have?

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** I think what I said earlier on: stockpiles.

Q240 **Derek Twigg:** Before I go on to the Air Chief Marshal, can I ask you the perennial question—you have been asked this before—about the ability to put out a British warfighting division? Am I still right in assuming that you could not do that without the support of some of our allies, in terms of one of two extra battalions—for instance, it might be artillery—to make that an effective warfighting division? Is that still the case?

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** First, we have to be clear about what a division is. Generally speaking, it is a tailorable force package: it is the first level at which you can do deep strike operations, you can do close operations and you can sustain yourself. It can range from being 8,000 strong, which is what a Russian division is, to about 36,000 or 37,000 strong, if we rolled out the whole of our warfighting capability. It is a very tailorable thing. We tailor it to the task, but it is also tailored by what you have available. For example, in the second Gulf war, we sent a division that consisted of an air assault brigade, a commando brigade and an armoured brigade. That is not something that Ben Hodges would recognise as something that he would like to fight with, but it is what we fought with, and we did not do it too badly. I can absolutely assure the Committee that we can provide a trained divisional headquarters and certified and assured brigades—16 Brigade, 7th Light Mech Brigade Combat Team, and an armoured brigade—but there will be capability gaps in our ability to get there and our ability to sustain it for time.

**Derek Twigg:** We need to rely on allies to provide that.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** Some of the gaps that we have at the moment, we would look to fill with allies.

Q241 **Derek Twigg:** Thank you for that. Air Chief Marshal, what have you done in the last two years specifically to approve the warfighting capability?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** It is worth going back just a little further in the sense that the Air Force today is a much more capable Air Force than it was four or five years ago. As an Air Force, we have been fortunate to have benefited from a significant level of investment over the



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last 15 years or so, which has seen us bring F-35 into service, A400M into service, Voyager into service, P-8 into service, and so on. The Air Force is a more capable Air Force and it is better able to meet the threats of the high-end fight that you describe. But I am really clear that if you look right across the Armed Services, but I will take the Air Force specifically, over the last 25 years, we have been focused on making the Air Force efficient to deliver force-generate capability that we can deploy across the world and bring it back here.

**Derek Twigg:** I understand all of that, but my question was specifically about the last two years.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** What has changed is the recognition that operating from single static bases in the UK will not be how we would need to fight if we found ourselves in a conflict in Europe. So there is a real focus for me and for the Air Force on enhancing our operational agility.

We have a concept called agile combat employment, which is about regaining some of the skills that some of you will remember from the 1980s and '90s around how we employ our forces in a flexible manner. For example, we think that in Ukraine a jet that gets airborne on a mission never lands back at the same airfield. We are not configured to be able to do that. We worked really hard over the last two years, and we have a programme of work that we are describing as an ACE-eval—an agile combat employment evaluation—in the back end of 2024. Leading up to that we have deployed P-8s to Aldergrove, for example; we have taken Typhoons out of Cyprus and deployed them into the Middle East; and we have taken Typhoons that were in Estonia and deployed them up to Scandinavia to develop and build those skills for our people.

In the longer term, we have to make sure that we get the most out of the investment that has been made. That is going to require some investment in spares and some further investment in infrastructure and in people. I think there is a role for the Reserves as we think about what that kind of agile combat employment might use.

Q242 **Derek Twigg:** So you still have a problem with spares.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** With spares and stockpiles, if you are going to operate from multiple locations, then that is inevitably going to be more demanding.

Q243 **Derek Twigg:** I will finish here, but you are basically saying that to improve your warfighting, the basic take from what you just said is about being more flexible in terms of the airfields you use—

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** Greater agility, that's right.

**Derek Twigg:** But you also have an issue around spares.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** To deliver the maximum level of agility and operational flexibility, that will ultimately require us to





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change the way we operate and require us to invest in spares. It is those boring things around spares and stockpiles that will actually unlock the capability that we need in the future.

**Derek Twigg:** And that is hampering your warfighting ability at the moment.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** Yes. So we are enhancing that as we go through.

**Chair:** There is a lot of interest in this topic, so I ask for brief questions and brief answers, please.

Q244 **Sarah Atherton:** Patrick, I love an optimist. I really liked what you were saying about how you can deploy the Army. I have been doing some number-crunching on the MOD personnel figures that have been published. These are rather dumb statistics, but for every seven personnel leaving—these are Regulars, trained and experienced—there are five recruited. That number is worse in the Reserves, where for every three joining there are five leaving. This is across all services. We talk about preparedness and readiness, but do we have the manpower and womanpower to do what you both want to do? Do they have the right skills and are they in the right place? Because the statistics say that you don't.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** The assurance that I gave you earlier was in answer to a specific question about what we can deploy now. That is what we have at the moment. That does not undermine the central point you are making, which is that recruiting and retention are both more challenging than they have been.

I will deal with retention first. We are, believe it or not, on about historic averages for Regular retention, just peaking in some areas. It is worse in the Reserves. For in-flow, having had very good in-flow in 2020 and 2021, I think the cyber-attack we had on our recruiting mechanism disguised a trend that was going to come down anyway. That is what we are seeing. It is a combination of demographics, so fewer people, and fewer interested and eligible to join the Army or the Armed Forces.

What are we doing about it? As you would expect, on recruiting there is a very significant effort around a new marketing campaign. We are reinforcing the marketing campaign by taking soldiers out of the field army, which gives you an indication of how important this is to me—after operations, this is my highest priority. We are taking 400 soldiers out of the field army to put them alongside recruiters, because—guess what?—it takes a soldier to recruit a soldier.

**Mr Jones:** If someone had said that at the time—

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** From the results of that, we are seeing an 83% increase in expressions of interest and about a 36% increase in registrations. But it is a bit early to tell, because the marketing campaign only really launched in September. I am not going to bank anything until



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December, but it tells us at least that we are doing some things right. There are some other measures, and we are being challenged by Ministers—by Min DPV in particular—to consider how much further we could go and what radical things we might put on to increase it.

The thing that worries me most is about the Reserves, because we are losing Reservists faster than we are recruiting them. We have got a very good story to tell about what we expect from the Reserves and what we need from them, but I don't think we are telling it very well.

**Q245 Sarah Atherton:** Can I ask you the same hard question that I asked Richard? How can you give reassurances to this Committee and the wider public that the Army is fit for purpose, given the public issues around sexual misconduct at Sandhurst, which, we remember, is the seat of leadership development? This was replicated at Larkhill with the Royal Artillery, and yet no one in leadership or command roles in those establishments has been held to account.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** That is not true of Sandhurst. I think you know how many people were removed from the service associated with officer cadet Olivia Perks. There were a number of people absolutely held to account at Sandhurst. Other than expressing my deep regret for what happened at Larkhill, I cannot comment on the process yet, because we are still waiting for the coroner's inquest, but it is not safe to say that we are not looking to hold people to account for it.

More broadly, I underline absolutely what Rich said about the requirement to drive cultural change into an army. I think we are making progress with it. It has been a very personal issue for me. You will remember that the very first step I took was to highlight a case of behaviour that was unacceptable and hold a unit back from operations. That unit is now a model. It shows that you can change an organisation, but I take nothing for granted. It requires constant effort.

**Q246 Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Readiness is not just about equipment; it is about intelligence. Some members of the Committee will remember I used to go on, at some length, about the old Russian military archive at Shrivenham—Richard, you might even remember me going on about it at some length. It is now the Russian Military Studies Centre.

I have two specific questions. First, are you able to tell us, either today or in writing, how many Russian speakers we have in the department? Secondly, where does the Russian Military Studies Centre, which is an extraordinary academic and research centre, sit in gaining intelligence about how the Russian military structure works? The last time I went there, when it was in a hut with a leaking roof, they could not only tell me in which city the Novichok used in Salisbury was made, but also the lab in which it was made, the floor of the hospital it was made in, and who was making it—and nobody else knew about it. So what I am asking is how many folk in the department speak Russian, and where the Russian Military Studies Centre now sits within gaining intelligence on the Russian structure.



**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** On the question about Russian speakers, I would have to come back to you, but the department does hold that information; I am sorry I do not have it at my fingertips. Patrick and I use the product from the studies centre and from our Defence Intelligence organisations. My experience over the last few years would say that the focus and effort put into understanding Russia and Russia's capability has gained greater prominence, and more energy has gone into it. I absolutely echo your complimentary comments about the capabilities that we have.

Because we use the Defence Intelligence product, rather than owning the organisation, I am afraid do not know how those two elements dovetail together. My experience has been that the quality of the intelligence we are seeing is very, very high, and it comes down to people with that experience, expertise and understanding.

Q247 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** At commander-to-commander level, when a senior commander is planning a risk assessment of the possibility of confrontation, would the military studies centre be involved in utilising their facilities to better understand their commander-to-commander counterpart's information? It is an extraordinary facility.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** I have just asked a question of our team, because Russia has just appointed a new head of the air force. I have asked for exactly that assessment to be provided, and it will be my intelligence team at Air Command that will reach out into the organisation to do that. I would expect them to draw on that expertise, but I will test when I get back.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** I have two quick codas. Nothing replaces the ability to grow deep expertise. People like Chris Donnelly—he is a national treasure, and we need to grow more Chris Donnellys over time. The information and intelligence that we are gathering is as much a product of open source as it is of deep study centres. While we cannot, and should not, try to replace these deep study centres, it may well be that much of the insight we are gaining will come from our ability to extract open-source intelligence as well.

Q248 **Mr Jones:** Patrick, you gave a description about divisional headquarters. You seem to be saying that you can deliver it and it is there. You rightly say that under a division, it can be whatever the elements are going to be. But traditionally when people think about a division, they think of it as being all-purpose and able to do all tasks. Is it still our aim to get to that? When will we get to it?

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** My military assistant and I were trying to remember the last time when Defence could afford to have a division that was exquisitely designed for one thing. I think that was probably during the cold war. Since then, every time we have deployed at divisional level it has been a combination of what was available and ready, what the nature of the task was, and compensating for gaps or incapacities by operating



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with other allies and partners. The US Marine Corps was a great case in point in the second Gulf war.

I don't see that changing. My aiming point is to ensure that as we get towards the back end of this decade and we go through that extraordinary period of modernisation, you have an Army that has not got two matched divisions that are perfectly mirrored and balanced, but has got the command capacity at divisional level mirrored and then the ability to tailor forces amongst it, so that you would group for a particular task.

**Q249 Mr Jones:** That includes, obviously, fitting it within our NATO element.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** Yes. If you look at the tasks that we are going to take on for NATO in the next few years, next year we will step up and take up the land component command of the allied response force. That requires a very rapid response—360° in all of NATO's AOR. That is quite a different requirement from delivering, in future, part of a strategic response corps to either restore territory in the Baltic states or reinforce penetration on the central front. You have to design to be able to balance between those two things.

**Q250 Mr Jones:** So really when we talk about deploying a division, we should talk about divisional headquarters and then look at the force elements possibly being made up of UK, but also NATO.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** And the most important capabilities we bring may not be infantry battalions or close combat troops. They will be, first of all, the ability to plug into the other domains and secondly our ability to provide the enablers for it: long-range precision fires, the ISR networks that go with it, the electronic warfare—all the things that make it possible then for you to plug in mass from partners, because you're setting the conditions for success.

**Q251 Mr Jones:** So it is not about the UK doing everything. It is about us making sure we have that divisional headquarters that can then fit into—

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** The divisional headquarters and the enablers, and enough of a corps of combat troops to be credible without trying to emulate, say, the Polish army, because we don't need to be the Polish army.

**Q252 Richard Drax:** I have a very quick question for you, Air Chief Marshal. For our warfighting capability, a very valuable asset will be our special forces. On a recent visit, one of their complaints, or rather observations, was about the inability to get our aircraft when they wanted it, for either operations or training—that is exacerbated not least, I suspect, by the loss of the Hercules aircraft—and that the RAF was insufficiently skilled for the expertise that is required, and that it was risk-averse. Can you reassure us that our special forces have your full attention and the assets they need and that the crews manning the aircraft can provide the specialist skills that are needed?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** Yes. I am disappointed to hear that there is a concern that our aircrews are risk-averse. There is plenty of



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history—I would point to Operation Polarbear most recently—where aircrews have shown great bravery and worked very closely with special forces. You may know that the Director Special Forces and I know each other well. I have spoken to him recently about the support he gets, and that has not been the story that I have heard.

What is fair to say is that as the expertise that resided in 47 Squadron—which was the C-130 squadron, which supported primarily or solely special forces—transfers to A400M, to Atlas, there will be a development and learning curve as more crews with that experience can bring that to bear on A400M. That is a fair reflection of what will happen, but I can reassure you that our support to special forces is of the highest priority for us and that our people—my pilots and crews—absolutely know what is expected of them and will deliver it when asked to do so.

**Chair:** Thank you, Air Chief Marshal. We look forward to picking that up with you again in due course.

Q253 **Mr Francois:** General, can I just check something you said earlier? You said that we are now deploying 400 soldiers from the Army to assist with the recruiting effort. So why is it that we have paid Capita a small fortune to do this for us, and continue to do so, and then have to supplement it with 400 soldiers because they cannot deliver what we are paying them to do? Why is that?

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** I am seeing the head of Capita later this week. I see him once a quarter.

**Mr Francois:** The corporate CEO has just changed. The previous guy, for some reason, disappeared overnight.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** This will be his last meeting.

**Mr Francois:** Before he disappears.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** I think he has stepped down.

We can point to a much improved story with Capita's performance. You are right to say that for much of the early part of this contract it failed, or was failing. But all of the figures that we had, up until the crisis that we had with the cyber-attack and loss of data last year, were that we were performing and Capita was performing and delivering, and we did not need to bring in soldiers to engage. We were hitting all of the targets and all the numbers that we needed to.

Off the back of that changing picture that I have described, we recognised that we were carrying a gap as a result of that failure last year, and then we began to spot that the trends were coming down. I pulled on every lever I could, and so has Capita. It has done a range of different things, including introducing some of the measures and the technology that it would seek to bid for under the new recruiting contracts. It is exposing those already and taking commercial risks in doing so. I have to treat this as a partnership, and at the moment Capita is a good partner.



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Q254 **Mr Francois:** After their performance, the idea of having a new tri-service recruitment contract based on that is beyond lunacy. Are they then paying for those 400 soldiers?

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** No.

Q255 **Mr Francois:** Why are we continuing to pay them for failing, because they are not hitting the targets for this year that they are down to hit, and then having to put 400 soldiers in a very hard-working Army? We took your point about how productive the Army is. Why take 400 soldiers to supplement a failing commercial contract? Surely that makes no sense.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** Forgive me, but I will come back to you on the commercial details. I do not feel sufficiently well prepared to talk about that.

**Mr Francois:** But you understand the question in principle.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** I do understand the question. I have to pull on every lever I can. These are not 400 soldiers all the time. They are two surges. This was a plan that was developed in concert with Capita, and they have been a good partner for the last few years. I will come back to you on the commercial case.

Q256 **Mr Francois:** Okay. You might also cover whether they are giving us any kind of rebate.

Coming back to the divisional HQ, it has been well covered already, but if we understand you, what you are saying is that we can provide a warfighting divisional headquarters and some brigades. Traditionally it would have been three heavy brigades in a division, but you are going back to the cold war there. We could not really do that now, but we could do a divisional HQ and a mixture of other brigades, and that could fight tonight.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** And some enablers, but there would be some gaps, too.

Q257 **Mr Francois:** Okay. It helps to know that.

Air Chief Marshal, we went to Lossiemouth. Some of what we saw was very impressive; some of what we saw was very worrying. We have no doubt that if the balloon really went up, everybody there would perform amazingly. What I think worried us was how much of what they have got they could put in the air. You are going to have this ACEVAL exercise towards the back end of next year to simulate a peer-on-peer conflict. Why aren't we doing that this year? Why do we have to wait a year to run a warfighting exercise like that?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** We will run warfighting exercises. Sometimes the Americans describe a crawl, walk, run approach. There are incremental components to it. That is why we deployed the P-8 to Aldergrove earlier this year; that is why we are deploying Typhoon into Scandinavia. We deployed F-35s to support Germany's NATO Air Defender exercise. These ultimately come together into an overall evaluation



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exercise, but developing these skills in an incremental fashion is a well-tried and tested approach—

**Q258 Mr Francois:** With respect, Air Chief Marshal, the Japanese did not invite the Americans to do a crawl, walk, run at Pearl Harbor; they just attacked them out of the blue and delivered a gigantic blow. After what has happened in Ukraine, we should not be crawling or walking. We should be running—now. What we saw at Lossiemouth was not running.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** Could you expand on that for me? I am not quite sure what you mean.

**Mr Francois:** If in open session you want me to go into how many aircraft could fight tonight, I am happy to do so, but then you will come back and tell me that we are spilling the beans. Suffice it to say that the numbers were insufficient.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** Okay. In the UK, we lived for 10 years without a maritime patrol aircraft, when we retired Nimrod. The P-8 was brought into service, from a decision in 2015 to being in actual service in 2020. The capacity and capability of that force is building as we grow the number of crews, increase the stockpiles of sonobuoys and improve the availability of the force. The focus on us being able to do that is relentless. The ACEVAL is about how we deploy and employ that in more operationally agile fashion—

**Q259 Mr Francois:** I don't wish to appear rude, but to save you time, I think it is fair to say that the P-8 was not the worry bead—it was really impressive. The worry beads were Typhoon availability and the continuing delays on the E-7. Those were the real worries.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** We have a gap with E-7. We have a gap in airborne early warning capability, and we have talked about that on a number of occasions in this Committee—

**Q260 Mr Francois:** We have, and it is still slipping to the right, isn't it?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** It is in service today, and its initial operating capability date will be confirmed when the full business accounts come forward, but there are clear signs that Boeing is unable to deliver against the timeline that it had set, so we continue to drive Boeing and the supply chain to deliver the capability as quickly as possible. I am acutely conscious of the fact that we do not have an airborne early warning capability right now, and I want to see that in service as quickly as we can possibly make it.

**Q261 Mr Francois:** For the record, we wanted at least five. We realise that the decision for three was ministerial—it was not yours—so we are not going to beat you up on that this afternoon, but we are very concerned about the delays. If it is only three, them being late is even worse. What are you actually doing with your DE&S colleagues to press Boeing to hurry up? Given what is going on in Ukraine, the gap is now unacceptable.



**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** Running the programme is the senior responsible owner, who works for me—we have one of the best SROs in Defence. He is a scary individual when it comes to driving both Boeing and DE&S to deliver the capability and the performance required. There are a whole range of problems, and there is no one silver bullet or magic wand that we can wave over it. This requires us to drive Boeing, it requires Boeing to respond by driving its subcontractors, and it requires us to work tightly with the likes of the Military Aviation Authority, because certification will be a challenge and has been underestimated—

Q262 **Mr Francois:** If he is that scary, what is the IOC?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** I am expecting it to come into service in 2025. The precise date will depend on—

**Mr Francois:** Into service?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** Yes, bringing it into service and delivering initial operating capability shortly thereafter.

When I give you a date, Mr Francois, what you will do is come to me and say, "Right, you gave me a date; you were wrong." What I am telling you is that that is what I am planning, and over the next few weeks I am expecting what the details around that plan for delivery will be, so that I can have assurance about the date so we can plan against the date.

Q263 **Mr Francois:** I am not trying to have the last word, but I would much rather you just gave us a date and kept to it. That is a much simpler way of doing it.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** So would I, Mr Francois.

**Chair:** We will be picking that point up with you in due course.

Q264 **Mr Jones:** Is this Boeing's problem?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** Yes, fundamentally. Boeing took on a contract to deliver a capability in a timescale that it has been unable to do it in. I am not suggesting that the MOD is perfect in every way, but fundamentally we need to deliver the projects—

Q265 **Mr Jones:** I find that very interesting, because Mr Spellar and I visited Boeing during the summer—

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** In America?

**Mr Jones:** No, in Birmingham. Everything was tickety-boo, according to them.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** I was very recently with the most senior person in Boeing who deals with this, and he is absolutely clear that it is not tickety-boo and needs to be driven hard.

Q266 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Just a quick one, Air Chief Marshal: did I just hear you say in response to my colleague that you will have a date very soon?





**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** Correct.

Q267 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Could you share that with us when you have it, then?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** Yes, of course.

**Chair:** Thank you very much. Mark?

**Mr Francois:** I was just going to say, why don't you swap? Why don't you get Patrick to go and beat Boeing up, and then you can go and talk to Capita, and we'll see if either of you has more luck the other way around? I am sorry, Richard, but it is not acceptable. We have taken the E-3s out. The Department knew they were taking risk, but they didn't know they were taking this much risk. This is about the defence of the realm; we have got to do better than this.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** I agree.

**Chair:** We will look forward to that data and to picking that up again with you in due course.

Q268 **John Spellar:** Just as an aside, you mentioned Chris Donnelly, but my recollection is that Chris Donnelly and the Russia-watching section were basically pensioned off, and that section broken up, in an absolutely catastrophic decision that greatly weakened our ability not just to acquire information but, most importantly, to analyse it. I just mention that in this context.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** I agree.

Q269 **John Spellar:** The next question was going to be about your assessment of the levels of sustainment and logistic support available. In a way, by your reference to stockpiles and to gaps, you have answered that. Surely the key to this is the ability to resupply. That is recognised all the way through NATO as a result of Ukraine. What are we doing to build and maintain the resupply network?

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** It may be dead obvious to historians, but one of the starkest lessons that we can draw from the Ukraine war is that our historical approach to logistics, particularly on land, which has involved long lines of communication, logistics dumps, big central depots and large field hospitals, simply does not work. One of the biggest challenges that we have is how we address that challenge. How do you distribute logistics in a way that it is small enough to be survivable? How can you manoeuvre on multiple routes, rather than a single resupply axis, and yet not run into civilian traffic or refugees, and all the congestion that goes with warfare? These are really hard challenges.

The biggest thing that that points to—Richard was getting at this in one of his earlier answers—is that we have optimised for efficiency, and we now have to optimise for resilience and credibility. That means building into our resupply and logistics the sort of resilience that is necessary, which will mean a very long-term commitment to growing stockpiles and spares and ensuring that our relationship with industry—both here in the UK and



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through friendshoring, to use the term—means that we have never reached the end of a supply run but it is constantly growing; it is always on.

The DCPR points to some of this. Is there sufficient investment? I mean, no, because there never can be—we are coming from a pretty low base, as some of your early evidence hearings attested to—but this is a start.

Q270 **John Spellar:** So why did it take a year to place the order for the resupply of 155 mm munitions, which are being used at a massive, world-war-one scale in Ukraine?

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** I was not involved in that decision making, Mr Spellar, and I do not think that I could comment on the intricate negotiations between British Aerospace and the Department. I am just glad that—

Q271 **John Spellar:** That worries me even more. Here we have the head of the Army not being involved by the Department in the necessary re-ordering of an absolutely crucial component.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** There will have been advice provided from the Army into the head office. I would not normally be sitting in detailed meetings around contract negotiations. What I could point to is that there were successes in early procurement. For those early contracts for replenishing the stockpiles, you can point to some very quick decisions that were taken. The decision around British Aerospace and where we would place that contract revolved around—frankly, I think it was about cost share about an additional plant.

Q272 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** You have both touched on Reserves already, but I am curious to hear, from each of you, how Reserves play a role in your assessments of readiness in your services.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** The model across the three services is different. In the Royal Air Force, although we are built around a number of squadrons, most of them are designed not to be mobilised as a full squadron but instead to provide trained people to reinforce our delivery of outputs. To give you some idea, in terms of trained strength we are a little bit under 2,000 at the moment from a Royal Air Force perspective. I think there are opportunities for us and I have an intention to grow the size of our Reserve forces—notwithstanding some of the difficulties with recruitment that Patrick describes—to do two things.

One is to help provide capability in new areas of technology—for example, space and cyber—where those skills are practised and used in the commercial sector, which we can then use in the Air Force. Secondly, I described this idea of agile combat employment. That is where we will disperse our forces in airfields around the world and move them regularly. As I have said, my view is that that will require more people, but we won't necessarily want to hold those people 100% of the time. It seems to me that the Reserve offers an opportunity to do that. I can see a path through



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to a 50% increase in the number of Reserves in the Air Force over the next few years, as we develop that capability.

One of the other things about the Reserve for the Royal Air Force—I am very proud of it, and I am very proud of the Reserves who serve—is that of the something like 75,000 Reserve service days that we use each year, more than half, 55%, are actually delivering operational outputs. If you go to Brize Norton in the Chair's constituency, you will see Reservists on shift supporting the delivery. They are getting training and they are supporting the delivery of our outputs. I do think the Reserve is a really important part of our workforce mix and capability as I look to the future.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** Regular armies start wars; reserve armies end them. That is true of any war. The idea that you could design an army that is exquisitely for one shot and then not have some behind it is complete nonsense. That does not mean that you cannot have Reservists in that first echelon; in the way that Richard was describing, they play an absolutely critical role because they can bring some specialist expertise. We need to get better, for example, at having sponsored Reserves. We have a particularly effective contract with our heavy equipment transporters—the tank transporters. That is a blend of Reservists who do civilian work and then we can call on them whenever we need to. We should be looking at more of that.

We also need Reservists not simply to ensure that we have a viable second-echelon force, but so that we can defend this country. As we get into an era of much more peril, thinking about civil defence—the defence of this country—will come back to the fore again. It is also about ensuring that we get much better at tracking what we call our strategic Reserve—our Regular Reserve. Those are people who have done Regular service and then left. In any other country, that is a pool of forces that you can call on, and they are liable. In Finland they can deploy a quarter of a million like that, in eight weeks. We don't track them. That can't be right. We are putting that right.

Then it is about making sure that it is just easier for Reservists to train and to stay. I have removed equivalence between Regulars and Reservists. You could not possibly hope to command a Challenger tank in the British Army as a Reservist unless you had been a Regular. We are setting unrealistic demands on Reservists, so let us ensure that they are trained for what they need to do and remove some of the bars to that.

Finally, the way we account for and pay for our Reservists is not right, either. We hold ourselves to what we call PIDs—the individual posts that we pay for as an Army. That is nonsense when it comes to Reserves. We should just grow Reserves at a capacity we can. I have a link with a Reservist unit that I am very proud of; I am the Colonel Commandant of the Honourable Artillery Company, and I have told the commanding officer just to grow and grow and grow, and not let anyone else stop him. We have to make sure that that gets easier across the Army.

Q273 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** You are both saying that you want to increase



Reserves to improve readiness. Are we not as ready as we need to be, then, if we are not increasing Reserves?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** The point I was trying to make was that we have spent 25 years optimising for the delivery of the kind of warfare we saw from 2003 to 2015. The war in Ukraine has really shone a light on the vulnerabilities and challenges around resilience associated with that kind of optimisation, which was exactly the right thing to do at the time. I am talking about evolving our capability to be better able to meet the kinds of threats and challenges we will face in the future. You cannot do that overnight, so what I am describing is an evolution of our capability. Some of it starts with simply getting back to doing some of the things that we did in the 1980s and 1990s, in terms of the style of deployment and activity. Some of it will inevitably require investment in people, equipment and potentially infrastructure. We need to work through what that is, and then judgments will need to be made about the relative priorities of that, alongside other things in Defence and Government.

Q274 **Gavin Robinson:** Good afternoon to you both, gentlemen. Neither of you mentioned Lord Lancaster's report in 2021, although you talked of challenges and you talked of the aspiration for change. Neither of you mentioned Defence Reserve Transformation, RF30. Neither of you mentioned the Reserves Roadmap that was announced by the Minister a number of weeks ago—on 26 October, I think.

We are trying not only to get an assessment of where we are but to recognise the challenges and efforts that will or should change them. How do we assess how well we are doing, knowing what we know was identified in the report in 2021 and in further updates since? How can we track progress positively? Yes, you are identifying the issues and aspirations, but there is no sense of whether that bears any resemblance to what we know from 2021—the Haythornthwaite report.

Can I ask you to put some more meat on the bones of your response? We want to know not that there is a problem or that there is a plan to get there, but how we can associate that with all that we have seen publicly announced and laid before us.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** What I described in narrative terms is everything that Mark Lancaster's report set out and the RF30 plan that flowed from it intended. Then there was the revitalisation of that through what the Minister described the other day. I am lucky, because General Lancaster is now my Director of Reserves for the Army, so he is poacher turned gamekeeper. He is responsible for delivering this, but he is also incredibly useful in terms of challenge inside the Army Board and the Army's decision-making processes—he is providing plenty of it.

I don't think I can give you a procedural answer to that question, but I recognise what you are describing. The role of the Committee is to track and hold us to account for what we have said, and I think we need to do better by giving you some milestones, targets and indications of progress. Rather than waffle, can we come back to you?



**Q275 Gavin Robinson:** I think that would be very useful. Even if you take the statement from 26 October, go back to 2021 and tell us what has changed in that two-year period, and then how you will mark progress in the future months and years, that would be useful.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** I would agree with exactly what Patrick said. What I described is the input that we made to Mark Lancaster's work and report, but you raise an excellent question about how we set that out, both internally and externally, to demonstrate that we are making progress. It is a good question.

**Chair:** I would be grateful if you would follow that up as requested. Thank you. We are very nearly at the end of our time. Can I trouble you for another few minutes just to cover off the last couple of questions?

**Q276 Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Patrick, I thought it was interesting that you mentioned Finland—a great country of 5 million people, though it is very different, because if you are not in the Regulars then everybody else is technically a Reservist. The nation has a duty—that whole societal approach.

I want to dig a wee bit deeper on the Reservists that we have at the moment. Richard, you mentioned that you saw Reservists getting trained and doing Regular work. This is where I think I get a wee bit confused. Are we seeing more Reservists doing more Regular work, and if so, do they have the same rights as Regulars? I have some concern that some of our Reservists are doing stuff—in offices and so on—but are not necessarily getting the same rights, for example sick pay or sick leave. If they have been there for quite some time, and it has more or less become a Regular job, even though they are still Reservists, they are not getting the same rights as those they work alongside.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** Just to give you some numbers, the RAF has mobilised 671 of our Reservists since April '21. When they are doing their Reserve service days, more than half of those are delivering real output, and we are combining that with training. I am not concerned that we are somehow substituting for Regulars with our Reservists. I think the balance feels just about right. Reservists want to be employed and engaged. They can add value to delivery, and they can potentially ease the burden on somebody else who might have to deploy.

On your specific question about employment status, I am afraid I would have to take advice from the lawyers on the precise elements of that. I imagine that Patrick would say the same.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** I think that is a fair assumption. Can we come back to you on the terms and conditions?

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Yes. I am hearing concerns about the terms and conditions for Reservists.

**Q277 Chair:** I am grateful for that; thank you. What effect have MACA requests had on readiness?



**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** Are you asking about now, or historically?

**Chair:** Well, in the recent past.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** Historically, it has had an impact. We could point to the second Gulf war, when we were involved in Operation Fresco, which was covering for the fire brigade. That limited the number of troops that were available for that deployment.

Q278 **Chair:** I am really thinking about readiness now, and the recent past leading to that.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** On readiness now, on lots of levels it has got much better. For example, the demand from Operation Temperer, which was the backfill in the event of a terrorist incident, has dropped down from tens of thousands to a tenth of that now, which I think is a relief for us. By and large, we can mitigate and manage the demand for MACA. We would clearly prefer as a Department that we were tasked only to do things that only soldiers, sailors and air specialists—

**Chair:** Aviators.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** Aviators—thank you for that—can do. But we also recognise that in times of national crisis or emergency, our ability to provide command and control specialisms and mobilise mass rapidly are things that you sometimes have to turn to.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** At about the turn of the year, I think there were 692 people either employed on a MACA task or stood by to go on to a MACA task. That is 2% of the Air Force, in round numbers terms. It really depends on the scale and duration. If it goes on for a long time or there is a large number, inevitably that would have an impact on our ability to force-generate and therefore on our readiness.

So far, I can tell you that the MACA requests that occurred at the tail end of last year did not result in us down-declaring capability. But if it goes on for a long time or is a large number, I would start to get concerned, and ultimately we would have to say that that would require us to down-declare some capability. Then it becomes a choice around relative prioritisation. But generally speaking, we are able to manage it, and we try to bear down on the MACA requests to a sensible level.

Q279 **Mr Francois:** Gentlemen, the integrated review has at its heart a concept of smaller Armed Forces that are much better interconnected, so that you get a force multiplier effect, but that whole concept hangs on the existence of systems that allow all these different units to communicate effectively. If we look at the Army to begin with, Bowman is approaching obsolescence, though we are trying to extend it. The system that is meant to really allow this greater connectivity is Morpheus. That is years late; the IOC is classified, but it is now into the next decade. If we cannot make these things work, the integrated review starts to disintegrate. How, in the Army's case, are we going to get round this?



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**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** Morpheus is one component of our ability to exchange data between platforms and to connect sensors, platforms and decision makers. It is not the only one. We are already able to share data between satellites, aircraft, helicopters and effectors. Last year, we trialled a US Air Force aircraft to a UK MLRS, and one triggered the other. There is no reason why we cannot do the same thing ourselves. This year we will do it with satellite data. Am I happy about the progress of Morpheus, where it has got to and the position that we find ourselves in now? No, I am not.

**Mr Francois:** For the record, neither are we.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** Of course not. But I also do not buy that not being able to do Morpheus means that we cannot fight and that we cannot fight in an integrated way. The extension of Bowman, and BCIP 5.7 particularly, will allow us to employ and deploy those brigade combat teams; it just will not allow us to expand and do the things that we would like to do at the rate that we would want to. Off the back of what we describe as the enterprise design authority from Strategic Command, which sets the standards and architecture at which the services need to be able to exchange data and information, that is moving at an appropriate pace.

Q280 **Mr Francois:** Just to push back a bit there, General, at the tactical level— at the battlefield level—Morpheus is still meant to be the fundamental system. There are other higher-formation systems, as you say. With BCIP 5.7 we are going to try to upgrade Bowman to keep it running, but the reason we are in such a mess with Morpheus is that we got into an endless dispute with General Dynamics, and it is General Dynamics that is doing the BCIP 5.7 upgrades. It still has us over a barrel, doesn't it?

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** In the absence of Morpheus, we are using multiple different bearers and forms of software to exploit and exchange data and, indeed, compress data. There is stuff that we are doing in Ukraine that allows us to operate in GPS-denied environments where we can extract live video feed, compress it and share it with people on the battlefield who can then effect it. I cannot talk about the techniques behind that, but the failed procurement of Morpheus has not impeded progress in other areas, and we are working around the obstacles.

Q281 **Mr Francois:** So you are trying to come up with some workarounds.

**General Sir Patrick Sanders:** Yes.

Q282 **Mr Francois:** For brevity, Air Chief Marshal, I am sorry again, but by the same token, Wedgetail is meant to be your great eye in the sky. It is meant to co-ordinate air combat; it has people on board specifically to do that. It is a similar problem, isn't it? Without that capability, you cannot fight as well as you should.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** I think it is fair to say that without an airborne early warning and control capability you cannot fight as well as we would want to. I am on record saying that in here.



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I recognise why you did this, Mr Francois, but you jumped straight to the technological solution. Multi-domain integration is much more than that. It is about training together; it is about making sure we develop our commanders at quite junior levels to understand all five domains and operate. An element of it is how you connect them digitally, and an element of it is the sensors and capability you put into the battle space. In the Air Force we have developed a programme called Nexus, which is a really innovative way in which we can exchange information, agnostic of bearer and agnostic of where the information came from in the first place. That has been developed in-house, and it offers huge opportunities for us to improve the level of connectivity. But I just restate my point that it is not just about technology, although I absolutely accept that it is important.

**Q283 Mr Francois:** I think we get that, and it is partly conceptual: it is how you think about fighting. You have a fair point, Sir Richard. But at the end of the day, unless all this stuff can communicate effectively, the whole force multiplier concept that lies at the heart of the integrated review does not really work. There is a lacuna in the whole thing. For brevity, because the Chair wants to conclude—we have gone over the two hours; you have been generous—do you accept that unless we can get the technology to work properly, the integrated review is wobbly?

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** No, I am not sure that I do accept that at all. There will be gaps in our capability, like E-7 until it comes into service, but there are already lots of ways in which we are able to exchange data and information across our Armed Forces. We will need to enhance that and improve it, but I am not sure that the whole integrated review hinges on whether Morpheus comes into service or E-7 comes into service, I'm sorry.

**Q284 Mr Francois:** I will have one more go. The whole concept is that we have smaller Armed Forces, but they can communicate far more effectively as a force multiplier. We are discussing the fact that the Army is having to come up with workarounds in order to communicate, and the Royal Air Force is having trouble doing it because some of the critical systems are late, so I'm sorry, but I'm going to push back on you. At the moment, the theory is great but the practice is lacking.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** I will push back on your push back and say that we are able to deliver multi-domain effects, and we continue to do so. If you go to the Middle East and the CAOC there, you can see this happening—space, cyber, air and land forces being integrated together—so we can do it.

**Mr Francois:** All right. We will dig into this another time.

**Chair:** There may be a multifaceted answer, and we will analyse that. The final question is from Sarah Atherton.

**Q285 Sarah Atherton:** Just a quick one, Richard: can I have a progress report or an update on the carrier-borne 619 Squadron?





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**Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton:** I think you mean 809 Squadron. It is due to stand up in December this year. To be really clear, that is a stand-up. It will grow. It will not be at full operating capability until we come back from the Carrier Strike Group deployment in 2025. That has been the case all along but, just to be really clear to the Committee, that is what will happen.

**Chair:** Thank you. Looking to the future is a good point to end the session. You have been very generous with your time, General and Air Chief Marshal. Can I thank you for coming and answering our questions? General Sir Patrick Sanders and Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton, thank you very much indeed.