



Afghanistan: Equipment Issues

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Periodically the issue of military equipment becomes high on the political agenda and criticisms over shortages and the quality of that equipment are covered extensively by the media and other such commentators. Such periods tend to coincide with the deployment of troops in conflict zones, and in the last few years this issue has been debated mainly within the context of Iraq and Afghanistan. More specifically those criticisms have been levelled at the standard of personal equipment issued to British soldiers and allegations that troops have had to purchase their own kit to supplement that already issued; the shortage of big ticket items such as helicopters, armoured vehicles and transport aircraft and the efficiency of the logistics supply chain.

This note provides a generic overview of the debate that has been underway over the last few years, with specific reference to current operations in Afghanistan, and the operational enhancements that the MOD has announced during that time in order to address concerns.

It does not, however, examine the coalition's strategy in Afghanistan more generally, the deployment of British forces in the country or the contributions of other NATO nations. Those issues are examined in Library Standard Note SN/IA/4854, *The International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan*.

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1 Background

Periodically the issue of military equipment becomes high on the political agenda and criticisms over shortages and the quality of that equipment are covered extensively by the media and other such commentators. Such periods tend to coincide with the deployment of troops in conflict zones, and in the last few years this issue has been debated mainly within the context of Iraq and Afghanistan. More specifically those criticisms have been levelled at the standard of personal equipment issued to British soldiers and allegations that troops have had to purchase their own kit to supplement that already issued; the shortage of big ticket items such as helicopters, armoured vehicles and transport aircraft and the efficiency of the logistics supply chain. The Oxfordshire Coroner has been particularly vocal in his criticisms over the last few years during his investigations into the deaths of Service personnel in both theatres.

UK operations in Iraq¹ ceased on 31 May 2009 and the UK's assets in the country are currently being withdrawn.² The debate over the adequacy and availability of equipment is subsequently now focused on operations in Afghanistan and given the level of British casualties that have been sustained in that theatre over the last few weeks, it has once again topped the political agenda. However, the issue as it related to operations in Iraq is useful for background to the wider debate. Therefore, the following information looks at the equipment issue, not just in relation to recent events, but as a generic overview of the arguments that have been raised thus far.

1.1 High Court Ruling on Human Rights 2008/09

In May 2009 the Court of Appeal backed a ruling by the High Court in April 2008 which determined that deploying British troops on operations with inadequate or defective equipment could breach their human rights under article 2 (Right to Life) of the European Convention on Human Rights. The case was brought in 2008 by the mother of Private Jason Smith who died in Basra in 2003 from heatstroke. In the original ruling Judge Andrew Collins

¹ With the exception of some naval training that the UK is providing to the Iraqi Security Forces.

² The deadline for withdrawing UK assets from theatre is 31 July 2009.

argued that “The soldier does not lose all protection simply because he is in hostile territory carrying out dangerous operations”.³

The Court of Appeal was to determine the extent to which British Service personnel fall under the jurisdiction of the ECHR while deployed. Thus far the courts had only determined that the ECHR applied extra-territorially in relation to personnel on a British base.⁴ In its ruling the Court of Appeal stated:

it is accepted that a British soldier is protected by the HRA and the Convention when he is at a military base. In our judgment, it makes no sense to hold that he is not so protected when in an ambulance or in a truck or in the street or in the desert. There is no sensible reason for not holding that there is a sufficient link between the soldier as victim and the UK whether he is at a base or not. So too, if he is court-martialled for an act committed in Iraq, he should be entitled to the protection of article 6 of the Convention wherever the court martial takes place...⁵

The MOD was however given further leave to appeal to the House of Lords on this matter.

A copy of the Court of Appeal’s ruling is available online at:

http://www.judiciary.gov.uk/docs/judgments_guidance/sec-state-defence-queen-smith-others.pdf

In response to that ruling the Chief of the Defence Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup, stated:

We are disappointed by this judgment, which allows claims to be brought against the Department under the Human Rights Act in relation to operations overseas. It has potential implications for the ability of our Armed Forces to conduct such operations, which we are now considering carefully.

We take very seriously the duty of care we have to our people. But we have consistently argued that, in the heat of battle, during dynamic, fast-moving military operations on foreign territory, it would be unrealistic to expect to be able to guarantee the rights and freedoms which the European Convention on Human Rights seeks to secure.

Nevertheless, I want to reassure commanders at all levels that this judgment does not alter their authority to make operational decisions, nor does it leave them open to personal legal challenge. Any claims under the Human Rights Act would be brought against the Department, not individual commanders; legal liability under the Act lies with MOD.

Meanwhile, we shall continue to argue for a legal framework that enables our Armed Forces to sustain the very high level of effectiveness in difficult and dangerous operations that they have demonstrated so convincingly in recent years.⁶

³ “Sending troops into battle without proper equipment could breach rights, says Judge”, *The Guardian*, 12 April 2008

⁴ House of Lords ruling on R (Al-Skeini) v Secretary of State for Defence, 2007, UKHL 27: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200607/ldjudgmt/jd070613/skeini-1.htm>

⁵ 2009 EWCA Civ 441

⁶ MOD Press Release, “MOD loses appeal regarding Human Rights Act”, 18 May 2009: <http://www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/DefenceNews/DefencePolicyAndBusiness/ModLosesAppealRegardingHumanRightsAct.htm>

An article on *BBC News Online* reported Shadow Secretary of State for Defence, Dr Liam Fox as acknowledging “the government’s moral obligation to minimise the risks to service personnel” but that it was “nonsensical and absurd to apply human rights in a war zone”.⁷

Frank Ledwidge, Justice Advisor to the UK Task Force in Helmand in 2007, has argued however:

No serious lawyer with expertise in this field... believes that this was anything other than the right legal decision. Moving aside for a moment from the law, ask soldiers whose jurisdiction they believe they are under and the answer, surely, will be UK law. After all, they are subject to military law, why in principle should they not be protected by human rights law? This point was well made by Master of the Rolls, Sir Anthony Clark, in his judgement [...]

There will of course be litigation flowing from this case. With those cases, matters will be clarified, and the worries of pundits settled. That is the way with the common law. The litigation will make clear... that the fears of operational officers will prove groundless. Yes, there will be some setbacks for the MOD. But if this has the effect of making our armed forces more operationally efficient, as well as ensuring soldiers have all the protection that can be reasonably afforded them, that will be no bad thing.⁸

2 Availability of Helicopters and Armoured Vehicles

The nature of the threat faced by British troops in Afghanistan has continued to evolve as a result of increasing insurgent activity and their use of tactics involving equipment such as roadside IED. The deployment of British forces into the more volatile southern provinces since May 2006 has also changed the role of the Armed Forces from a relatively benign peacekeeping role to one involving direct confrontation with Taliban fighters.

Changes in operational circumstances such as this require a requisite response in terms of both the numbers of military personnel deployed and the type of equipment with which they are issued. Over the past year or so the MOD has acknowledged that the change in the nature and tempo of operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan has required alterations to be made to the UK’s force posture, whilst consistently reiterating that that force planning is kept under review. However, a number of commentators have criticised the sufficiency of UK forces and requisite equipment deployed in both Iraq and Afghanistan in order to meet the current threat. In particular they have questioned the number of helicopters and armoured vehicles available to Service personnel and the adequacy of those capabilities, in particular the ability of deployed vehicles such as the Snatch Land Rover to protect UK personnel from the IED threat.

In two reports on Afghanistan and Iraq published in April and August 2006 respectively, the Defence Select Committee expressed its concerns over the availability of equipment of this type. In its report on Iraq, the Committee concluded:

We are concerned at the increasingly sophisticated nature of the threat and the consequent vulnerability of UK Forces travelling in Snatch Land Rovers. We welcome the Secretary of State’s review of the use of Snatch vehicles in Iraq and believe it is

⁷ “MOD loses battlefield rights case”, *BBC News Online*, 18 May 2009

⁸ Frank Ledwidge “The High Court decision on battlefield rights is not as terrifying as the MOD would have us think”, *RUSI*, May 2009

essential that this review be completed as quickly as possible. In the long-term, FRES may offer a solution to the difficulties associated with the Snatch, but its introduction is too far off to offer an answer to current operational needs in Iraq. The MoD should consider an "off the shelf" purchase as an immediate and interim replacement for Snatch, even if it does not fulfil the long-term capability requirement. It is unsatisfactory that the lack of capability was not addressed with greater urgency much earlier [...]

We were impressed by the work of the Joint Helicopter Force—Iraq (JHF-I) which fulfils an essential role in enabling UK operations on the ground. But we are deeply concerned at the shortage of helicopters in theatre and believe that unless measures are taken to increase the number of helicopters and to reduce pressure on crews, the effectiveness and coherence of UK operations on the ground will suffer. We call upon the MoD to examine what steps it can take to remedy the shortage of helicopters and implement them as a matter of urgency [...]

We call upon the MoD to address the issue of airbridge unreliability as a matter of priority. Although we recognise the improvements already made in this area, we believe additional steps must be taken to address the shortage of available aircraft in theatre.⁹

With respect to Afghanistan the Committee noted:

Given the importance to the Helmand mission of airlift capability, we note with concern the small number of UK helicopters dedicated to the deployment. We welcome the commitment made by the US and Dutch air forces to supplement the UK airlift. We remain deeply concerned about the ability of the UK's ten dedicated helicopters to perform the extensive range of roles that will be asked of them, particularly given the demanding environment in which they will operate and the likely attrition rates that will result [...]

A recent feature of insurgent activity in Afghanistan has been an increase in the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) against armoured vehicles [...]

We note MoD's assurances that the force package to Helmand is fit for purpose. The threat from improvised explosive devices will need to be kept under constant review.

We note the Minister's commitment that commanders in theatre will be listened to and given what they need to ensure the protection of troops. We shall monitor this closely.¹⁰

In order to address these concerns the MOD has announced a number of operational force enhancements over the last few years in order to increase the protection of British soldiers in both theatres.

2.1 Armoured Vehicles

Since 2006 the MOD has procured a number of armoured vehicles to meet urgent operational requirements in Iraq and Afghanistan. The majority of those acquisitions have been focused on force protection due largely to the fact that it has been improvised explosive devices (IED), which are difficult to track and detect, that have presented the greatest threat to British and Coalition forces, particularly those operating in Afghanistan. According to the National Audit Office, since operations began approximately £4.9bn has been spent on

⁹ Defence Select Committee, *UK Operations in Iraq*, HC 1241, Session 2005-06

¹⁰ Defence Select Committee, *The UK Deployment to Afghanistan*, HC 558, Session 2005-06

urgent operational requirements (UOR) with approximately 85% of those related to force protection capabilities.¹¹

In July 2006 the MOD announced the first of its additional armoured vehicle packages for deployment in Iraq and Afghanistan:

I have made clear my determination to ensure the armed forces on operations have the resources they need to do the job. I said I would update the House on developments in two particular areas of operational capability: additional options for armoured vehicles and helicopter support for Afghanistan.

As I told the House on 26 June, I ordered an urgent review of our armoured vehicle fleet, particularly focused on the evolving threat in Iraq, but covering the whole operational picture including Afghanistan, to ensure we were providing commanders with the best options.

That review has now concluded. It has confirmed that there is a growing requirement for a protected vehicle with capabilities between our heavy armour, such as Warrior, and lighter patrol vehicles, such as SNATCH. The review has also identified feasible options to address the gap in the short term. We have now completed a very rapid assessment of those options and have identified three, complementary, ways forward. Two of these build on, and accelerate, work already ongoing in the Department. The third is new. The necessary funding will come in part from acceleration of existing funding within the defence budget, and in part from substantial new funding from the Treasury.

The first element is an additional buy of around 100 VECTOR, our new Pinzgauer based protected patrol vehicle, for Afghanistan, on top of the 62 already on contract. VECTOR provides good protection and, importantly, increased mobility and capacity compared to SNATCH which makes it very suitable for the rugged terrain and long patrol distances in Afghanistan.

The second element is to provide around 70 additional up-armoured and upgraded FV430 to equip a mechanised infantry battlegroup for Iraq by the spring of 2007, again on top of the 54 we have already ordered. The FV430 will be delivered incrementally with the first vehicles currently expected to be delivered this autumn.

Significantly smaller and lighter than Warrior, the up-armoured FV430 will provide a similar level of protection while being less intimidating and having less impact on local infrastructure—thereby providing commanders with an important additional option. Since it is able to carry out many of the same tasks as Warrior, it will also relieve pressure on heavily committed Warrior vehicles and armoured infantry battlegroups.

The third, new element is the Cougar manufactured by Force Protection Incorporated of Charleston, South Carolina. We judge that this vehicle meets our requirement for a well protected, wheeled patrol vehicle with a less intimidating profile than tracked vehicles like Warrior or FV430. We are arranging to rapidly procure around 100 vehicles through US military sources. We have received excellent co-operation from the US Government, military and industry—an example of the special relationship bringing real benefits for our soldiers on the ground. Once we take possession of the vehicles, we must then customise them with Bowman radios and electronic counter-measures—and then fit additional armour beyond the standard level, to ensure they have the best possible protection. This procurement and enhancement process takes time. But we expect to be able to deliver the vehicles, in batches, with an effective

¹¹ National Audit Office, Support to High Intensity Operations, HC 508, Session 2008-09

capability in place before the end of the year and continuing through the next six month rotations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

These three vehicles will complement existing Warrior and SNATCH. Warrior will continue to provide the capability to deal with the most demanding threats, but its profile and weight makes it unsuitable for some operations and situations, such as Afghanistan. SNATCH, with a much less intimidating profile, enables troops to interact with locals and promotes a sense of normality and will remain a key tool for building and maintaining consent. The up-armoured FV430, the Cougar medium PPV, and VECTOR fill the requirements for varying degrees of protection, mobility and profile between these two extremes. But I am confident that together these vehicles provide commanders with the right range of options to deal with the situations and threats they face.¹²

The first of the FV430 vehicles arrived into theatre at the beginning of December 2006, while the first of the Mastiff armoured vehicles arrived in Iraq on 30 December 2006. The remaining vehicles were introduced into both theatres in batches throughout the first half of 2007. In June 2007 the MOD also confirmed that a new fleet of 130 MWMIK 4x4 patrol vehicles would be purchased for Iraq and Afghanistan under an Urgent Operational Requirement (UOR) and would be deployed in theatre throughout 2008. Commenting on the extra investment in force protection that had been made over the previous year, the then Minister for Defence Procurement Lord Drayson stated:

We have made a considerable effort and investment to ensure that our deployed troops get the right equipment to do their jobs. We have a range of enhancements in place covering protection, firepower and mobility. Many options are now available to commanders on operations.

Since operations began in Iraq and Afghanistan the MoD has spent over £750 million on force protection for our forces in both theatres. We are committed to ensuring that our troops continue to receive the level of support they deserve.¹³

In October 2007 the Prime Minister announced further plans to purchase 140 additional Mastiff vehicles for operations in both theatres at a projected cost of £100m;¹⁴ while in October 2008 the MOD announced that a further £700m would be spent on an additional 700 new armoured vehicles for forces on operations in Afghanistan, including several hundred Tactical Support Vehicles (Wolfhound, Husky and Coyote), over 100 more Jackals and a new vehicle called Warthog which will replace the Viking in Afghanistan, and a number of upgrade and modifications to existing vehicles, including the Jackal. That announcement also set out the intention to procure a specialist route clearance system for dealing with the threat of IEDs. An MOD press release commented:

£96m from the package will also be used to develop a specialist route clearance system known as Talisman, which will provide a new high-tech way of dealing with the IED threat. Among the Talisman vehicles to be developed will be the Buffalo mine-protected vehicle and the Engineer Excavator.¹⁵

£500m of the funding for that protected mobility package has been allocated from the Treasury Reserve, while the MOD will fund the remaining part of the package in acknowledgement of the longer term benefit to core defence capability these vehicles will

¹² HC Deb 24 July 2006, c74-76WS

¹³ Ministry of Defence press release, 28 June 2007

¹⁴ Ministry of Defence press release 8 October 2007

¹⁵ MOD Press Release, 29 October 2008

offer beyond current operations.¹⁶ The Jackal 2 and Coyote are currently scheduled to be delivered to the MOD from summer 2009 onwards and deployed into Afghanistan from the autumn. In answer to a PQ in June 2009 the MOD set out its intention for various elements of this protected mobility package:

Improvements to existing vehicles, either complete or under way, include enhanced mine blast protection for the Viking all-terrain vehicle, a series of modifications to enhance Snatch's mobility and protection, and modifications to the Combat Vehicle Reconnaissance (Tracked) (CVR(T)) to enable the vehicles to perform better in the harsh Afghan conditions.

We have also continued to acquire new vehicles to meet the evolving threat. New vehicles delivered in the last year, or in the process of being delivered, include Mastiff 2, Ridgback and Panther. In addition, we have placed contracts for a number of new vehicles which include the three tactical support vehicles (Coyote, Husky and Wolfhound), Jackal 2, and Warthog. We intend that the tactical support vehicles will replace unprotected vehicles such as the General Service Land Rover and the RB44 operating outside our protected camps.

Viking has now reached its limit to carry extra weight and protection and Warthog will replace Viking on operations.¹⁷

In response to the Defence Select Committee's February 2009 report on *Defence Equipment 2009*, the Government also set out a breakdown of the expected costs of these procurements:

(Recommendation 7) We welcome the announcement on 29 October 2008 that a substantial number of protected vehicles are to be procured as Urgent Operational Requirements. The protection of our Service Personnel against continuously evolving threats must be the top priority. In its response to our Report, we expect the MoD to provide us with an update on its progress in acquiring these new vehicles and a breakdown of the procurement costs, including details of how much is to be funded from the MoD's budget. We also expect the MoD to provide us with details of which of the vehicles are expected to provide "longer-term benefit" beyond the current operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. (Paragraph 31)

We note the Committee's conclusion regarding the high priority of protecting service personnel on operations. The Secretary of State's announcement on 29 October 2008, which covered the procurement of a number of vehicles including a Protected Mobility package for Afghanistan, is evidence of our continued commitment in this area. The Protected Mobility package includes measures which will enable us to field Panther; upgrade Snatch; procure further Jackal vehicles; and deliver new well-protected logistics vehicles, to be called Tactical Support Vehicles (TSVs): Light (Coyote), Medium (Husky) and Heavy (Wolfhound). In the longer term, but as part of the same package, we are replacing the successful Viking vehicle with a better protected alternative (Warthog). Outside the package, but announced on the same day, is the procurement of Cougar training vehicles, and the development of a route proving and clearing capability known as Talisman. The latter capabilities are being fully funded from the Reserve as UORs. For the Protected Mobility package HM Treasury is providing £500M funding, with MoD contributing the remainder. The package was approved at £628M:

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ HC Deb 29 June 2009, c36-7W

Costs of the package of Protected Mobility vehicles are:

Equipment	Original Estimate (Rounded)	Current Estimate (Rounded)
Additional Jackal	£75M	£75M
Warthog	£140M	£185M
Panther Theatre Entry Standard modifications	£20M	£20M
Snatch Vixen upgrade	£30M	£30M
Coyote	£65M	£65M
Husky	£170M	£180M
Wolfhound	£120M	£125M
TOTAL	£620M	£680M

Current estimated costs are based on signed contracts and current negotiations. Increases in estimated costs are principally due to changes in foreign exchange rates.

The MoD's financial contribution acknowledges the potential for long term benefit to defence of these vehicles beyond the immediate operation. Elements of the TSV fleet, for instance, are likely to offer a credible capability in a number of scenarios once operations in Afghanistan have ceased.

In terms of procurement progress, we are already on contract for Cougar Training Vehicles, Talisman, Jackal, Warthog, Coyote, Husky and the Panther modifications. Cougar is due to be fielded imminently, production of Jackal has started and the first tranche of Panther is currently in transit to Afghanistan. It is planned that Snatch Vixen and some of the TSVs will be delivered to training in Autumn 2009 with the majority of the TSVs to be delivered in time for the Spring 2010 deployment to take place.¹⁸

On the feasibility of the UOR process more generally, the government commented in that report:

(Recommendation 8) In November 2007 new arrangements for the funding of Urgent Operational Requirements (UORs) were announced. These new arrangements mean that, once the cost of UORs in a year have exceeded an agreed total with the Treasury, the MoD will have to contribute to half of the

¹⁸ Defence Select Committee, *Defence Equipment 2009: Government Response to the Committee's Third Report*, HC 491, Session 2008-09

costs exceeding the agreed total and repay this two years later to the Treasury. In its response to our Report we expect the MoD to provide us with details of how the new arrangements have operated in practice, including its estimate of how much of the spend on UORs in 2008-09 will be funded from the MoD budget. We also expect the MoD to set out which of its programmes or activities will need to be re-prioritised in order to fund the cost of the UORs in 2008-09 which fall to the MoD's core budget. (Paragraph 36)

The arrangements outlined in the report reflect the agreement for Financial Year 2008/09. Expenditure in Financial Year 2008/09 has been contained within the estimate and therefore there is no excess to be repaid in 2009/10.

(Recommendation 9) While we are satisfied with UOR process, we remain concerned that the extent of UORs represents at least a partial failure by the MoD to equip adequately its forces for expeditionary operations which were anticipated by the Strategic Defence Review a decade ago. (Paragraph 37)

We do not accept that the level of investment in UORs represents a failure by the MoD to equip its forces for expeditionary operations. The Equipment Programme is designed to deliver long-term core capabilities that can be employed globally, to meet a range of potential future threats. MoD continues to invest heavily in equipment for expeditionary operations and significant quantities of new equipment will enter service in the next few years.

The UOR process, on the other hand, is designed to adapt and respond quickly to unforeseen requirements specific to particular operational environments and emerging threats, for example as a result of developing techniques, tactics and procedures of the enemy forces.

A requirement that aimed to equip our forces for generic expeditionary operations would not meet the UOR criteria and would not qualify for Reserve funding. Moreover, where UORs prove highly successful and have broader utility, the option exists for them to become part of the core equipment programme.

(Recommendation 10) We are concerned that the MoD appears to have made little progress with regard to its examination of the impact of current operations on equipment. While the MoD appears to have robust data on the cost of equipment procured through the Urgent Operational Requirement process, it does not have information on the cost of recuperating equipment returning from current operations nor on the impact of those costs on other areas of its budget. Such costs must be substantial given the length of time that UK Armed Forces have been involved in current operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. The MoD must identify accurately the costs to date of recuperating equipment and the likely future costs of recuperation. Without such information, there is a real risk that these costs will fall on the Defence Budget, which is already under pressure, rather than on the Reserve as they rightly should be. (Paragraph 44)

We do not accept this conclusion. The MoD is aware of a variety of costs of recuperation where rolling recuperation has taken place (such as re-provision of munitions) or where equipment has returned from operations for recovery to stock or training use. For equipment not yet recovered, full costs can only be truly known once the equipment has been properly assessed. Since the Committee received evidence,

MoD has now submitted a full assessment of recovery from Op TELIC to HM Treasury and the Committee has been briefed on the key findings of this work.¹⁹

In answer to a Parliamentary Question on 17 June 2009 the MOD provided a useful summary of the number of vehicles that have been procured since 2006 and how many have been delivered to UK land forces, thus far:²⁰

Mr. Quentin Davies: 1,124 Urgent Operational Requirement armoured vehicles have been ordered since July 2006. As at 12 June 2009, 444 had been delivered to UK Land Forces. The breakdown by type is as follows:

<i>Vehicle</i>	<i>Ordered since July 2006</i>	<i>Delivered to UK Land Forces</i>
Warthog	115	0
Talisman Mastiff 2	24	0
Talisman Buffalo	14	0
Talisman high mobility excavator (HMEE)	13	4
Ridgback	157	57
Mastiff	274	190
Vector ⁽¹⁾	138	178
Wolfound	97	0
Husky	262	0
Cougar	30	15
Total	1,124	444
<p>⁽¹⁾ Vector -138 vehicles have been ordered since July 2006; In addition to this figure 60 were ordered in June 2006, and these are reflected in the delivery column.</p>		

On the issue of the Snatch Land Rover an MOD statement in March 2009 reiterated:

¹⁹ Defence Select Committee, *Defence Equipment 2009: Government Response to the Committee's Third Report*, HC 491, Session 2008-09

²⁰ HC Deb 17 June 2009, c336W

UK forces are better equipped than ever before, with new technology and state-of-the-art armoured vehicles continuing to arrive in Afghanistan. Regarding Snatch, the clear advice of military commanders is that these vehicles remain mission-critical for certain roles. We accept that Snatch is not suitable for high-risk environments but it is adequate for the job it is given, particular urban patrolling where heavier armoured vehicles would be inappropriate.²¹

In May 2009 the National Audit Office published a report into *Support for High Intensity Operations*. With respect to armoured vehicle provision that report concluded:

The availability of vehicles procured or upgraded as Urgent Operational Requirements has generally met or exceeded the Department's targets, except for the Vector vehicle, whose suspension and wheel hub reliability has been poor. There have also been shortages of spares for some fleets, particularly when the vehicle has been used in a role different to that intended, such as the Mastiff vehicle in Afghanistan. Armed Forces personnel throughout the chain of command in both theatres told us that Urgent Operational Requirement equipments had performed well overall, including those procured to enhance protected mobility.²²

That report went on to recommend that:

Now the delivery of new equipment fleets, particularly vehicles providing protected mobility, is well underway, the Department should increase the priority it gives to spares purchases and the training fleet, relative to the delivery of vehicles to the operational theatre. For future fleets, it may be appropriate to increase the priority given to spares purchases and the training fleet from the outset.²³

2.2 Helicopters

The availability and serviceability of helicopters has been particularly pertinent to the debate on operations in Afghanistan. Calls for additional helicopters to be deployed to the country in light of the IED threat on the ground have consistently been made; while concerns have also been expressed over their ability to operate in the "hot and high" conditions prevalent in Afghanistan.

In line with the measures intended to enhance armoured vehicle capabilities on the ground, the MOD has also announced over the last few years several additions to the deployed helicopter force. In June 2006 the MOD confirmed the deployment of two additional Chinook CH-47 helicopters to the country; while on 30 March 2007 the Secretary of State for Defence announced that a further 14 helicopters would be made available for combat operations over the next 2 years, including the procurement of six new Merlin Mk3 helicopters from Denmark and the conversion of eight existing Chinook helicopters which were delivered to the UK by Boeing in 2001 but have been unavailable for deployment due to technical reasons.²⁴ The combined cost of these programmes is expected to be approximately £230m. The Merlin Mk3 entered service in 2008 and the Chinook Mk3 is expected to be operational by the end of 2009/early 2010.

Despite these additions to the operational force package in Iraq and Afghanistan the Defence Select Committee has continued to express its concerns over the continued availability of

²¹ MOD Statement, 9 March 2009

²² National Audit Office, *Support to High Intensity Operations*, HC 508, Session 2008-09

²³ *ibid*

²⁴ <http://www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/DefenceNews/EquipmentAndLogistics/MoreBattlefieldHelicoptersForUkArmedForcesvideo.htm>

helicopters. In a report on operations in Afghanistan, published in July 2007, the Committee commented:

While we welcome the additional commitment of helicopters since the initial deployment in 2006, we recommend that the MoD make even greater efforts to increase the provision of appropriate helicopters to UK Forces and sufficient trained air and ground crew. UK helicopter operations in Afghanistan are not sustainable at the present intensity.

The MoD should continue to press NATO allies to provide sufficient air support to operations in the South. In the meantime, we welcome the MoD's commitment to extend the deployment of Apache helicopters and the Harrier GR7 / GR 9 squadron until June 2009.²⁵

In response to ongoing concerns the MOD made the following statement to the House in May 2008:

My right honourable friend, the Secretary of State for Defence (Des Browne) has made the following Written Ministerial Statement.

The provision of battlefield helicopter capability in Iraq and Afghanistan has attracted considerable interest amongst honourable Members and the British public. I therefore felt it would be helpful to set out in some detail, within the constraints of operational security, the current position, and our future intentions.

This Statement does not cover our wider plans on helicopters: it is focused on our plans relating to current operations over the next two years. At the same time, I am keen that honourable Members appreciate the wider context. While we are focused on providing as much helicopter support as we can to troops on operations, we must also manage our helicopter fleet to ensure that we maintain a sustainable capability in the future. One question often asked by honourable Members is why the number of helicopters deployed is significantly less than the number in our inventory. The answer is that the number deployed is limited by the need to keep the burden on our airframes, crews and ground support staff at a sustainable level over time. We also have to make aircraft available in the UK for training, maintenance and essential modification programmes. This means that, as a rule of thumb, it takes three additional helicopters to sustain the deployment of a single helicopter on operations.

To this first principle we have added recently a second principle, which is that, if possible, each helicopter type should be deployed in only one operational theatre at any time. Concurrent deployment of a single type in both theatres increases the pressure on crews and supervisory staff, with implications for our ability to train them effectively between deployments, for harmony ratios, and ultimately the risk of them leaving the service. On the positive side, focusing each helicopter type in one theatre has allowed us to rationalise our logistics and support arrangements. We have completed the process of consolidating our medium and heavy fleets across the two theatres, with Merlin and Puma in Iraq, and Chinook and Sea King in Afghanistan.

Against the background of these two principles, we are making significant progress in enhancing UK helicopter capability for operational commanders. I have approved the decision to commit the Merlin fleet (alongside Puma) to Iraq, to support our continuing efforts to train and mentor the Iraqi army, and maintaining the ability to re-intervene in extreme circumstances. We intend to deploy a further two Merlin to Iraq towards the end of this summer.

²⁵ Defence Select Committee, *UK Operations in Afghanistan*, HC 408, Session 2006-07

Turning to Afghanistan, the drawdown in Iraq has enabled us to remove Sea King from Iraq and, working with AgustaWestland, to fit those helicopters with new, state-of-the-art main and tail rotor blades to deliver improved performance in hot and high conditions, and deploy them to Afghanistan. They are performing extremely well, and a further two helicopters deployed last month.

Through the deployment of the Sea Kings, and improvements to support and crewing arrangements for Chinook and Apache (assisted by the consolidation of types in one theatre), we have increased the total amount of flying time—measured by the number of hours per month—available to commanders in the south of Afghanistan by over a third since last March. (We do not release the total number of helicopters or hours for reasons of operational security: it would allow others to infer too much about our overall capability.) But we are clear that commanders on the ground will always be able to use more helicopters, and we are determined to continue to make every effort to give them the options they need.

Chinook is the UK support helicopter best suited to the demanding hot and high conditions in Afghanistan. In the past six months, we have ramped up the maintenance regime and logistics support to increase the HC2/2a Chinook flying rate on operations by 20 per cent.

In relation to Apache in Afghanistan, we are clear about the importance of ensuring that we maximise this proven battle-winning capability. We deployed the Apache on operations three years ahead of schedule, and have been increasing steadily on the number of Apache flying hours available to commanders each month—most recently by a further 15 per cent at the end of March. We aim to increase flying hours by a further 25 per cent by early next year, by deploying additional helicopters, and we are building the logistic support required in terms of spare parts and personnel, particularly engineering manpower, to enable this.

Finally in relation to Afghanistan, it is important to recognise that we are operating there as part of a wider NATO effort, and we draw significantly on helicopter assets provided by allies. We continue to work with allies to identify opportunities for further increases in the capability of the overall NATO fleet. For example, the UK and France have undertaken to support initiatives to set up training courses for crews, and to upgrade aircraft—and recently we established, and agreed to provide seed funding for, a helicopter fund to help improve the availability of NATO and EU helicopters on operations. There were expressions of interest in this latter initiative from several countries at the recent NATO summit in Bucharest, and we are following these up.

In addition, since February 2008, NATO has had in place a commercial helicopter contract designed to enable the movement of freight across the whole of Afghanistan. This contract was recently replaced in the south of Afghanistan by a new contract specifically to deliver the movement of up to 10,000 kilograms of freight per day for the Kandahar hub in Regional Command (South), freeing up a significant number of flying hours for Chinook (and the Apache which support them) for higher priority tasks. In the hotter summer months, this can enable the equivalent of an additional four Chinook sorties per day. We will continue to monitor the effectiveness of the contracts closely and assess whether there are opportunities to shift any more of our helicopter tasking on to contractors.

That completes the summary of current initiatives on operations. In relation to additional capacity for the future, in March 2007 the Prime Minister and I announced we would be investing in additional support helicopters, purchasing six Merlins from Denmark, and modifying eight Chinook HC3 helicopters to a support role. We stated at the time that this choice of projects had been based on their potential to generate

additional capability for operations over the following two years. In relation to Merlin, it should be noted that this sort of timeline—under two years from procurement to fielding—is much shorter than the standard either in the UK or internationally.

Rightly, we have set ourselves challenging targets; and we are making progress towards meeting those targets.

Since the delivery of additional Danish Merlins to the UK last July, the aircraft have been undergoing a complex conversion to meet the UK standard, carried out in partnership with AgustaWestland. We have been modifying the aircraft to a standard where they are suitable for operations in Iraq, including the installation of improved communications systems and state-of-the-art main rotor blades. Three have now been delivered to the RAF for training purposes. The remaining three will be delivered this summer. The addition of these six helicopters will increase the Merlin battlefield helicopter fleet by 25 per cent, and will enable us to deploy the further two Merlin to Iraq this summer referred to above. In the longer-term it remains our intention to deploy Merlin to Afghanistan, and we are looking at what further steps we can take now to shorten the lead-in times ahead of any possible deployment.

We are also making progress with the HC3 Chinooks. This conversion programme involves a redesign of the cockpit area and avionics bays, as well as the modifications necessary to operate in Afghanistan. A contract is in place with Boeing to carry out the conversion work, and we have secured funding from the reserve for the additional theatre-specific modifications necessary for Afghanistan. The project is on schedule for the first converted Chinook to be fielded in late 2009, allowing the Chinook force to begin deploying more helicopters to theatre. The remaining seven will become available over the following months, the last one entering service during the first half of 2010. This is some two years in advance of previous options to field these aircraft. All other enabling personnel and support issues have been planned and funded to coincide with the delivery of the modified aircraft to the front line, thus ensuring that we are ready to deploy them at the earliest opportunity.

I hope that honourable Members will recognise from this short summary that despite the challenges and constraints in this area, we have made significant progress both in delivering additional capability from within our existing assets, and in procuring and adapting additional assets to give operational commanders additional options over the next two years. This is not an area where we can ever afford complacency, but I believe this summary demonstrates that we are on the right path.²⁶

In its report on Defence Equipment in February 2009 the Committee re-examined the issue of helicopter availability, particularly in Afghanistan, and concluded:

We have examined issues relating to helicopter support in our inquiries into current operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. At our evidence session on 25 November 2008, CDM told us that "helicopters—you can always use more helicopters". The MoD's memorandum provides details of the current UK military helicopter fleets, including the current planned out-of-service dates, and the UK military helicopter fleets expected to be operating in 2020. The Written Ministerial Statement on 11 December 2008 announced the following regarding UK military helicopters:

We have increased the number of helicopter airframes and hours available to our commanders in Afghanistan by around 60 per cent. over the past two years, and will make a further significant increase in helicopter capacity in Afghanistan over the next two years.

²⁶ HC Deb 20 May 2008, c79-82WS

In addition to our planned battlefield helicopter procurements, we will be spending £70 million from the reserve to upgrade 12 Lynx Mark 9 helicopters with new engines, with the first aircraft available by the end of 2009. This will give commanders more helicopters able to operate effectively all year round in the hot and high altitude in Afghanistan, freeing up other aircraft for other tasks. Taken with the Chinook Mark 3 reversion, the additional planned Apache capability and the Merlins that we plan to move to Afghanistan once they have completed their mission in Iraq, this will deliver a significant increase in helicopter capability available to military commanders.

The new AgustaWestland Future Lynx helicopter will provide even greater operational capability when it comes into service, as planned, in 2014.

97. We welcome the announcement made on 11 December 2008 that the MoD will be further increasing helicopter capacity in Afghanistan over the next two years. Given our continuing interest in helicopter support for current operations, we plan to monitor closely the progress in delivering the commitments set out in the announcement.²⁷

The issue of helicopter availability has also been the subject of a separate inquiry by the Defence Select Committee. The Committee's report has yet to be published. However, copies of the uncorrected transcripts of evidence from 19 May 2009 and 2 June 2009 are available online at: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmdfence.htm>

In its report on *Support to High intensity Operations* in May 2009 the National Audit Office commented that:

The availability and serviceability of the helicopter fleets on operations have exceeded the Department's targets. Although none of the helicopter types was designed to operate in the environmental conditions in Iraq and Afghanistan, Chinook, Puma, Apache and Merlin have coped consistently with the harsh conditions and the Department has modified Sea King helicopters and is planning an upgrade for Lynx. There has been a paucity of some spare parts for some helicopter types which has led to short-term cannibalisation of helicopters in theatre. The Department has prioritised spares for operations, missing its targets for the availability of fleets back in the United Kingdom as a result.²⁸

Recent Commentary

The level of British casualties sustained in Afghanistan in the last few weeks and the use of US military helicopters for transporting British military personnel during the current Operation Panther's Claw has led many observers to re-open the debate on the number of helicopters deployed in support of British forces on the ground. Speaking on the Andrew Marr Show on 13 July 2009 former Conservative Defence Secretary Lord King commented:

But where there really is a shortage, a really critical shortage, is helicopters, and the degree to which they need to be on the roads, the need to which they need to have the supply convoys, whether some could be done by helicopter.

Which is what we did in Northern Ireland in my time. When the roads became too dangerous we switched to helicopters, and there appears to be a serious shortage at the present time.

ANDREW MARR:

²⁷ Defence Select Committee, Defence Equipment 2009, HC 107, Session 2008-09

²⁸ National Audit Office, Support to High Intensity Operations, HC 508, Session 2008-09

And is it simply too few helicopters or are they not good enough helicopters?

LORD KING:

Far too few. If you look at the number of helicopters that the new American troops are taking with them into Helmand. I did a quick calculation. They have eight times as many helicopters for the number of troops that they have out there, and there are stories in the papers today that particular requests for helicopters for our special forces were turned down by the Treasury.

ANDREW MARR:

Because if they're, if they're therefore forced to travel by road, that suggests that people are actually dying - British soldiers are being killed because of the lack of helicopters.

LORD KING:

Well that ... Each incident is different in these cases, but certainly serious worries and quite clearly they're borrowing helicopters from the Americans. But what matters now is that this is the crunch time. We are in this critical offensive at the present time, which I think will determine the outcome of the Afghan situation and the whole Afghanistan campaign. It's us, it's the Americans, and it's critically also the Pakistan Army and what they can do the other side of the border - putting this total squeeze on the Taliban, hopefully picking up with Osama bin Laden, maybe Mullah Omar as well. But this is the critical time and they must have the resources to do the job.²⁹

Leader of the Opposition, David Cameron also commented on 11 July that "promises of more helicopters in the future are not enough. More helicopters are needed today. More helicopters would save lives. We have been calling for more helicopters for three years. Instead of promising, the Government must act to provide more helicopters immediately".³⁰

In response to questions in the House on 13 July 2009, the Secretary of State, Bob Ainsworth defended the Government's position on helicopter capability:

James Brokenshire: I join the Secretary of State and the whole House in paying tribute to the service personnel who lost their lives in recent days. They died serving their country and, to use those immortal words, for our tomorrows they gave their today.

Some of the greatest security threats that our service personnel face in Afghanistan are on the ground. Can the Secretary of State explain why he believes that the current provision of, and support for, helicopter cover is sufficient, particularly in the context of recent changes in policy and in the approach to operations in theatre, which put our troops' lives at greater risk?

Mr. Ainsworth: As we have said repeatedly, we have seen a huge uplift in the helicopter frames available to commanders, and also in helicopter hours: over the past two years, there has been an 84 per cent. increase. There will be more: by the end of the year, we will have the Merlin in theatre, and we will get some of the eight Chinooks out into theatre in 2010. The issue that the hon. Gentleman raises points up the problem; changes in how operations are being conducted have led to more ground operations, which cannot be conducted from helicopters. At the moment, troops involved in Operation Panchai Palang are clearing compounds and taking on the

²⁹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/andrew_marr_show/8146455.stm

³⁰ Conservative Party Press Release, 11 July 2009

Taliban in one of their heartland areas. There has been hand-to-hand fighting, which, sadly, resulted in some of the deaths that took place over the past week or so. That cannot be conducted from inside a highly armoured vehicle or a helicopter.

Mr. Chris Mullin (Sunderland, South) (Lab): May I put it to my right hon. Friend that, tragic though all the deaths are, and although we must do as much as we can to minimise casualties, it is irresponsible and dishonest to pretend that if only the Government had provided this piece of equipment or that piece of equipment, all those lives could have been saved? That only serves to upset unnecessarily the grieving relatives.

Mr. Ainsworth: My hon. Friend is right. In the Sangin area, we have lost five people who were conducting a security patrol. Such patrols are vital, and are done from time to time. There was a pretty well-planned ambush set for our people. One cannot conduct those security patrols other than on foot. We lost a member of 4 Rifles who had just dismounted from a Mastiff vehicle. It is the most heavily armoured vehicle that we have in theatre, but our troops have to get out to engage with people and to deal with the insurgency. Our troops have to take those risks; they understand that. I think that the British public understand that, too. I appeal to Members of the House to accept that that is inevitable. It is our duty to supply the kit and equipment needed to keep people as safe as we can, but we cannot remove risk from that kind of operation.³¹

He went on to state:

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring) (Con): On behalf of the Opposition, may I add my condolences to the families of the servicemen killed in the past week? Every single death is an individual tragedy, and our thoughts and prayers are with all the families and friends involved.

When the Government cut the helicopter budget in 2004 by £1.4 billion, was it a mistake?

Mr. Ainsworth: The hon. Gentleman goes back to a decision that was taken some time ago. We have made great strides to increase helicopter availability and capability, with a large degree of success over the past two years in Afghanistan. There are now 60 per cent. more helicopter frames and 80 per cent. more helicopter hours. Merlin is yet to be moved into theatre, and enhancements are possible both to Lynx and Chinook. That would make them better helicopters, more capable of dealing with a very difficult theatre.

Dr. Fox: I shall take that as a yes, shall I? People in this country understand the security need for our mission in Afghanistan and they understand that in wars there are casualties and fatalities. What they do not understand is why we are not doing everything we can to reduce the risks to our forces. We do need more and better armoured vehicles and we do need better ways of countering improvised explosive devices, but if we cannot move our forces by air, they will be more vulnerable on the ground. As Lord Guthrie, the former Chief of the Defence Staff, said:

“of course they need more helicopters. If there had been more, it is very likely that fewer soldiers would have been killed by roadside bombs”.

Why is it that in Helmand, as Lord King pointed out, American forces have eight times as many helicopters for the number of personnel? How on earth did we get into such an unacceptable position? Who is to blame and how are we going to get out of this situation?

³¹ HC Deb 13 July 2009, c1-3

Mr. Ainsworth: I have heard the hon. Gentleman for a period of time, but I have yet to hear how he thinks we can get more helicopters into theatre. *[Interruption.]* Well, he is saying from the Dispatch Box that we ought to get as many helicopters into theatre as quickly as possible, yet I have heard him say nothing that indicates he could do that any quicker than we plan to.

I understand that on the radio this morning the hon. Gentleman said that we should look to our allies, and that is true. We are part of a coalition; it would be nonsense for anybody to suggest that we ought to be down on the fact that our American allies are assisting in Helmand. The hon. Gentleman cannot do the impossible; we will do everything possible to enhance the whole of the protective capability in Helmand province.³²

Those sentiments were reiterated by Lt Col Nick Richardson, British Army spokesmen in Afghanistan who has been reported by *The Daily Telegraph* as commenting “you can put as many helicopters as you wanted in here, but sadly at the end of the day troops have got to go out on the ground”.³³ Lord Ashdown was also reported to have said that “returning troops were not complaining about a lack of resources with the big exception of helicopters”. He went on to add, however, that “no helicopter could have saved the casualties of the last few days”.³⁴

The Prime Minister also indicated on 13 July that the number of British forces on the ground would be reviewed after the election in August 2009.³⁵

3 Standard Issue Kit

The MOD has consistently argued that “Service personnel are provided with all the equipment they require to do their jobs. The clothing and equipment with which they are issued is designed to be fit for purpose in a range of circumstances”.³⁶

However, prior to the onset of the Iraq conflict in March 2003 a Continuous Attitudes Survey conducted by the MOD examined the attitudes of British military personnel on a range of subjects, including the standard of equipment issued. The results of that survey were published in an article in *Soldier Magazine* in November 2002:

The CAS asked how much confidence people had in their fighting equipment. Of soldiers, 48 per cent reported that they were confident, or very confident, up seven percentage points, which was also mirrored by officers.

But, 55 per cent of soldiers and 42 per cent of officers said they still found it necessary to buy additional kit – values unchanged from the earlier survey. The responses in that questionnaire’s comments box indicated that jackets, boots, torches and load-carrying equipment (for example, daysacks, bergens and chest-webbing) were the most common purchases.³⁷

For information, a full list of the standard equipment issued to each individual deploying on operations in Afghanistan was set out in answer to a Parliamentary Question on 14 March 2008 (Hansard ref: HC Deb 14 March, c716-7W).

³² HC Deb 13 July 2009, c5-6W

³³ “MOD budgets for new helicopters falls by half since 2001”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 14 July 2009

³⁴ “No 10 hits back over Afghanistan”, *BBC News Online*, 13 July 2009

³⁵ HC Deb 13 July 2009, c23

³⁶ HC Deb 6 November 2002, c284W

³⁷ “Trend spotting”, *Soldier Magazine*, November 2002, p.27

3.1 Operations in Iraq

Throughout the conflict in Iraq accusations were continually made in the media over the shortage of equipment supplied to troops in the Gulf and also over the standard of that kit, and in particular combat boots and desert clothing. As a result, a number of troops were reported to have purchased their own equipment. The allegations regarding personal equipment were, however, refuted by both the Government and the Armed Forces. During Question Time on 25 February 2003 the then Prime Minister stated:

To deal simply with the issue of Army equipment, about which there are many stories, I should say that those stories are categorically denied both by people in the military and ourselves. I urge people not to take everything that they read at face value. I very much hope that people understand that not only are our armed forces among the finest in the world but they are also among the best equipped. The best testament to that comes from members of the armed forces themselves.³⁸

Giving evidence to the Defence Select Committee inquiry on *The Lessons of Iraq* on 14 May 2003 the then Secretary of State for Defence, Geoff Hoon, also stated:

Forces like ours do not simply fall, ready formed, from the sky. More immediately, we embarked on a process of prudent preparation and planning to bring our forces up to maximum readiness. This included working to meet urgent equipment capability requirements, either by accelerating existing programmes or by procuring new equipment against very short time scales. One issue which the Committee will no doubt want to explore in due course is our performance in terms of ensuring the reliability and appropriateness of the equipment. To fine-tune the existing capability, we worked around the clock with our partners in industry to implement over 180 measures at a total value of half a million pounds, from dust mitigation for the Challenger 2 tank through enhancements for our maritime mine disposal capability to accelerated delivery of Storm Shadow missiles. Initial reports on equipment performance in the campaign are very positive. They suggest, for example, that availability for the Challenger 2 tanks was over 90 per cent; availability of the AS90 self-propelled gun and Warrior armoured infantry fighting vehicle was also very high, but it will take some time to collect full data on equipment performance and to analyse it properly. I am sure we will identify room for improvement but I think we will also find a number of very significant successes.³⁹

In its first report into the conduct of Operation *Telic*⁴⁰, published in July 2003, the MOD did acknowledge, however, that there had been a number of shortcomings in the supply of equipment to British troops. The report stated:

one area we need to look at is the quantities of boots, clothing and other personal equipment we routinely hold. Under SDR planning assumptions there was sufficient personal equipment to equip both the Joint Rapid Reaction Force and the Spearhead Battalion (a total of 9000 personnel) for desert operations. In the case of this operation, the numbers deployed were significantly higher, and whilst most materials were sent out in time, difficulties with in-theatre tracking meant that there were some problems with distribution. These are being investigated. That said, front-line forces were equipped as a first priority.⁴¹

In its subsequent report in December 2003 the MOD went on to state:

³⁸ HC Deb 25 February 2003, c128

³⁹ Defence Select Committee, *The Lessons of Iraq: Uncorrected Evidence*, 14 May 2003

⁴⁰ Operation *Telic* is the name for the UK contribution to the campaign in Iraq.

⁴¹ Ministry of Defence, *Operations in Iraq: First Reflections*, July 2003, p.25

Under current planning assumptions MOD does not hold enough stock to match the requirements for a large-scale operation, but instead has mechanisms in place to purchase additional or operation-specific equipment when needed, within the assumed preparation time [...] there was less time for preparation before this operation than generic planning guidance allowed for and consequently some equipment could not be bought in time. In some cases, this was compounded by the difficulty in defining the Services' requirements until the start of specific logistic planning for the operation and by the changes to the campaign plan. In other cases, individual units held fewer supplies than they should, some of which were out of date. However, although this resulted in some shortages in theatre, these were mostly in respect of personal kit and spares, and did not impact upon UK forces' overall ability to fight [...]

Despite a huge effort by industry and the Department, by the time the operation began a number of deployed Service personnel had not received the ideal quantities of desert boots or combat clothing. However, over 40,000 pairs of desert boots and some 80,000 sets of desert clothing had been sent, sufficient to equip each Serviceman and woman requiring desert clothing with enough boots and two sets of clothing. While less than the ideal scaling of three sets of clothing each, this would have been a pragmatic solution to the shortage. However, tight timelines, inadequate tracking of equipment in theatre, and some instances of incorrect boot and clothing sizes meant that not all Servicemen and women received their allocation. These shortages did not significantly impair the ability to fight, since standard, non-desert equipment was designed to be used in temperatures experienced in theatre at the time, albeit it did not provide the same camouflage effect (hence front line troops were the priority for the available desert equipment).⁴²

The National Audit Office (NAO) has also been critical over the adequacy of equipment supplied to troops in the Gulf. In its report of December 2003 the NAO stated:

Within 10 weeks, around half the time it took for the 1990-91 Gulf War, the large United Kingdom force was deployed some 3,400 miles into an austere environment, and prepared for warfighting. This was a major achievement given that some elements of the force were required to be ready to deploy more quickly than planning assumptions envisaged. There were, however, some gaps in capability. Existing operational stock levels were, in many instances, not sufficient for readiness and sustainability. The rapid deployment highlighted where the Department had made a judgement that it would have the time and ability to build up operational stocks in advance of deployment. Examples include Nuclear, Biological and Chemical warfare protection equipment, spare parts for tanks and armoured vehicles, medical supplies, helicopter spares, ammunition, particularly air munitions and desert combat clothing and boots.⁴³

On the issue of personal equipment specifically the report stated:

An additional 20,000 pairs of desert boots were ordered on 29 November 2002 and a further 10,000 pairs on 10 January 2003 at a total cost of £742,500 [...] Approximately 40 per cent of the additional clothing requirement was available in-theatre by 13 April 2003. The procurement was regarded as of limited effectiveness because few troops received their full complement, and mismatches in sizing remained into the post-conflict phase of the operation [...]

⁴² Ministry of Defence, *Operations in Iraq: Lessons for the future*, December 2003, p.40. A copy of this report is available online at:
<http://www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/AboutDefence/CorporatePublications/DoctrineOperationsandDiplomacyPublications/OperationsInIraq/>

⁴³ National Audit Office, *Operation Telic: United Kingdom Military Operations in Iraq*, HC 60, Session 2003-04, 11 December 2003

The lack of confidence in the ability of the logistics system to meet units needs in-theatre led to a considerable degree of misappropriation of equipment and stores moving through the supply chain; items included desert combat clothing, boots and Nuclear, Biological and Chemical protective clothing. The unauthorised removal of items as they moved through the chain towards the frontline served to further complicate the logistics process.⁴⁴

The NAO went on to recommend that:

The Department should, as a matter of urgency, continue to work to develop appropriate logistics systems to track materiel to theatre and ensure its timely delivery to frontline units;

Within the above, the Department should implement the Public Accounts Committee recommendation on Exercise Saif Sareea II to ensure that, in future, forces sent into harsh environments are equipped appropriately.⁴⁵ To this end it should hold, or have access within readiness timescales to, sufficient stocks of appropriate combat clothing. While these items do not necessarily affect combat capability, they are nevertheless important to the morale of troops.⁴⁶

A House of Commons Debate on the NAO report took place on 13 January 2004. A copy of the transcript is available online at:

http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmhansrd/vo040113/debtext/40113-07.htm#40113-07_head0

In December 2006 the Assistant Deputy Coroner for Oxfordshire concluded that the death of tank commander Sergeant Steve Roberts in Iraq in March 2003 was the result of an “unforgivable and inexcusable delay in issuing personal body armour to troops in Iraq”. In his verdict he stated:

To send soldiers into a combat zone without the appropriate basic equipment is, in my view, unforgivable and inexcusable and represents a breach of trust that the soldiers have in those in Government.

This Enhanced Combat Body Armour was a basic piece of protective equipment. I have heard justification and excuse and I put these to one side as I remind myself that Sgt Roberts lost his life because he did not have that basic piece of equipment.

Sgt Roberts's death was as a result of delay and serious failures in the acquisition and support chain that resulted in a significant shortage within his fighting unit of Enhanced Combat Body Armour, none being available for him.⁴⁷

Responding to that verdict, the MOD indicated that it had already acknowledged that the provision of enhanced combat body armour would have saved the life of Sergeant Roberts and reiterated its intention to examine the matter more closely. In a statement to the press the MOD commented:

⁴⁴ National Audit Office, *Operation Telic: United Kingdom military operations in Iraq*, HC60, Session 2003-04, p.19 and 21

⁴⁵ Public Accounts Committee Sixth Report of Session 2002-03.

⁴⁶ National Audit Office, *Operation Telic: United Kingdom military operations in Iraq*, HC60, Session 2003-04, p.23

⁴⁷ “Unforgivable armour delay caused death”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 19 December 2006

We take the Coroner's comments extremely seriously and we will examine them as a matter of urgency. Until we have done so it would not be appropriate for us comment any further.⁴⁸

In answer to a Parliamentary Question in June 2007 the MOD went on to state:

In March 2007 there were some 7,100 UK troops in Iraq which has reduced to currently some 5,500 personnel in theatre. There have been four members of the 1 Battalion, The Rifles deployed to Iraq since March 2007 of which three are still currently in Iraq. All of the troops serving with the Rifles Battalion are issued with Enhanced Combat Body Armour (ECBA) which is standard issue to all troops deploying to Iraq and Afghanistan. Improved Performance Body Armour (known as 'OSPREY') and Enhanced Personnel Protection Equipment (EPPE) (known as 'KESTREL') are provided in addition to ECBA and have been designed to protect against specific threats faced by personnel undertaking certain roles. In total there are over 14,000 sets of body armour in theatre.⁴⁹

3.2 Afghanistan

The criticism of shortages of equipment in Afghanistan has largely focused on equipment such as helicopters and armoured vehicles (as outlined above), rather than the personal kit issued to individual Service personnel. However, in August 2006 allegations were made in the British media that soldiers serving in Afghanistan had been left without adequate ammunition. Those criticisms were raised again in November 2006 when several newspapers reported that British personnel had been issued with defective ammunition, in addition to suggestions that other core equipment such as night vision goggles were also seriously lacking. In response to those allegations the MOD issued a series of rebuttal statements:

British soldiers in Afghanistan have not been left without ammunition or other core equipment. As with any other operation, some equipment is used more quickly than other types of equipment. To ensure these demands are met, robust plans are in place to resupply our troops regularly.

At present, strategic freighters are scheduled five times each week and, when required, additional assets are also available. Last week alone we shipped over 80 tonnes of munitions to theatre.

Because of their sensitive nature, munitions are prioritised by the Force Commander in theatre and delivered in accordance with his direction. Where the situation changes on the ground and the Commander requires additional munitions these are met from UK sources and flown to theatre as soon as possible. Should a new threat be detected and new munitions required, robust and well practised procedures are implemented.⁵⁰

In November 2006 the MOD issued the following additional statements:

Allegations of lack of equipment in Afghanistan

Several newspapers reports allege that UK forces operating in Helmand believe they don't have the right equipment to do the job. Specific complaints include a lack of Weapons Mounted Installation Kit (WMIKs), armoured vehicles, night vision goggles and ammunition for the under-barrel grenade launchers. Providing our forces with

⁴⁸ Ministry of Defence, *Defence News Daily*, 19 December 2006

⁴⁹ HC Deb 25 June 2007, c125W

⁵⁰ Ministry of Defence press release, 28 August 2006

equipment that is both fit for purpose and effective in theatre is an absolute priority for this department. In the past few years a range of new systems have been introduced which have significantly enhanced our troops' capability, including new improved body armour, new vehicles and a range of new weapons.

Alleged defective Ammunition

In June a single batch of ammunition was discovered to be defective when used in the half inch Heavy Machine Gun by elements of 3 PARA battlegroup in Afghanistan. Immediate action was taken to identify alternate sources of suitable ammunition. As an interim measure, a quantity was procured from the Canadian Forces, This is the norm in case of such contingency, and ensures the maximum possible cover for our forces. Further amounts were subsequently procured by the MOD and moved to Afghanistan to solve the problem as quickly as possible. This ammunition was NATO standard sourced in the usual way from a high quality supplier in Belgium. Any suggestion that the MOD would put the lives of our forces at risk by supplying them with cheap ammunition is both wrong and deeply offensive. The MOD is committed to providing our forces with equipment (including ammunition) that is both fit for purpose and effective in theatre. There are currently no problems with ammunition in theatre.⁵¹

This issue has also been raised in the House several times since the end of 2006. In response to a question in the House of Lords on 8 January 2007 the then Minister for Defence Procurement, Lord Drayson, commented:

At no time have troops on the ground run out of all ammunition types available to them. There have been occasional instances where units in remote locations might have exhausted supplies of a particular ammunition type during a specific attack or operation. In such instances, our helicopters have done an excellent job in resupplying ground forces, sometimes in very dangerous circumstances.

In the rare incidents where we could not get UK troops stocks of specific ammunition moved forward within the required operational timeframe, we have shared stocks of coalition force ammunition. It is standard practice to share equipment between ISAF nations where necessary and on occasions the UK has provided ammunition to other nations.⁵²

In March 2007 the MOD also confirmed:

It is departmental policy that all troops deploying to Op. Herrick are provided with Enhanced Combat Body Armour before they deploy to theatre. This armour, as well as protecting against small-arms fire, could additionally protect against shrapnel and blast injuries.⁵³

The improvements that have been made to equipment issued to Service personnel over the last year, were subsequently outlined by the MOD in answer to a Parliamentary Question in June 2009. On the issue of personal equipment, the MOD commented:

There have also been recent improvements in the personal equipment issued to our armed forces. These include the purchase of Underslung Grenade Launchers, combat shotguns and the 60mm mortar and improved night vision devices. We have also introduced enhancements to the fit of Osprey body armour which have improved user manoeuvrability. Additionally, a system which allows troops to wear front and back

⁵¹ Ministry of Defence, *Defence in the Media*, 24 November 2006

⁵² HL Deb 8 January 2007, c1WA

⁵³ HC Deb 26 March 2007, c1352W

Osprey plates without the soft armour jacket has just been introduced. This system is used by troops who require extra mobility or are operating in confined spaces.⁵⁴

In the longer term the MOD's Personal Equipment and Common Operational Clothing (PECOC) programme is intended to deliver further upgrades to items of personal protective equipment, including improved ballistic protection. That programme is currently in its assessment phase and is expected to enter service after 2010.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ HC Deb 1 June 2009, c37W

⁵⁵ HC Deb 26 May 2005, c191W and HC Deb 3 February 2009, c1117W