



National Audit Office

# Support to High Intensity Operations

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# SUMMARY

**1** This report looks at the Ministry of Defence's (the Department's) arrangements for supporting high intensity operations and focuses on four key areas: equipment, logistics, pre-deployment training and support to personnel. The intention of this report is not to examine military judgement or the outcomes of operations, nor does it look at the support provided to the many smaller operations in which the Department is engaged. Following on from the National Audit Office's previous work on operations<sup>1</sup>, the aim of this report is to examine the Department's support to high intensity operations, since it is on this kind of operation that support arrangements are most stress-tested. For each key area of support, the report sets out the Department's

generic arrangements before examining how well these arrangements have been working on Operation TELIC in Iraq and Operation HERRICK in Afghanistan, primarily over the last two years.

**2** The United Kingdom has deployed forces in Iraq since 2003 as part of the United States-led Multi-National Force-Iraq. The number of United Kingdom forces has recently reduced to around 3,700 as they prepare for a planned draw down by July 2009. In Afghanistan, the United Kingdom has deployed around 8,300 personnel as part of a NATO-led International Security Assistance Force, predominantly in Southern Afghanistan.

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Defence: The Financial Management of the Military Operation in the Former Yugoslavia, HC132, 1996; Kosovo: The Financial Management of Military Operations, HC530, 2000; Operation TELIC – United Kingdom Military Operations in Iraq, HC60, 2003.

**3** Both these theatres present real difficulties for United Kingdom forces and considerable support challenges for the Department. The combination of long distances between both Iraq and Afghanistan and the United Kingdom and the lack of direct maritime access to Afghanistan complicate the transporting of personnel and equipment. In addition, undertaking operations in both theatres means coping with difficult environmental conditions, including harsh and varied terrain, temperature extremes and dust. In Afghanistan the pace and intensity of operations continues to be high, against a significant ongoing and evolving threat from a dangerous and determined enemy. United Kingdom forces in Iraq have also faced evolving threats and circumstances over the years, and are now in the final stages of a drawdown.

## Main Findings

**4** In preparing for an operational deployment the Department selects the appropriate equipments to meet the military tasks that may arise. Not all equipment in the Department's inventory can be used on every operation. The capabilities provided by some equipment will simply not be needed. In some circumstances the Department's existing equipment may also be unsuitable for the task because they may be too imposing when operating closely amongst civilian populations; the protection of personnel needs to keep pace with the evolving and increasing threat posed by enemy forces; or because the terrain and/or climatic conditions reduce equipment performance to unacceptable levels. In these cases the Department has a choice either to modify or upgrade existing equipment or to procure new equipment; items modified or procured in this way are known as Urgent Operational Requirements.

**5** **The Department has approved £4.2 billion on Urgent Operational Requirements as at March 2009, including modifications to helicopters and aircraft, better protection for existing vehicles, early attack warning systems for bases and electronic counter-measures.** While additional armour and electronic counter-measures have improved protection, together with communications equipment they increase vehicle weights and power requirements. 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.

**6** **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.

**7** The Department provides logistic support to United Kingdom forces through the Joint Supply Chain which sits within the Defence Equipment and Support organisation. The end-to-end supply chain stretches from the requirements of operational commanders through to industrial manufacturers in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. The Department uses a series of information systems to provide both inventory control and asset tracking of stocks between the United Kingdom and operational theatres. A system of priority codes is used to provide the Department with measurable targets for delivery of stocks from the United Kingdom to operational theatres.

**8** **Despite the challenging operational environments, the Department has successfully delivered around 300,000 personnel and 90,000 tonnes of freight to the two theatres combined over the last two years. The Department has not consistently met its supply chain targets for the timeliness of delivery but there are signs that the supply chain is becoming more resilient.** On average since July 2007, 57 per cent of all demands made in Afghanistan and 71 per cent made in Iraq have met the supply chain targets. The Department's performance against supply chain targets has varied monthly over time and is lower for Priority 01 (highest priority) demands than Priority 02. The average length of time a unit waits for a particular demand has however reduced by around 47 per cent in Afghanistan and 33 per cent in Iraq, suggesting the supply chain is becoming more stable and resilient. Further measures being taken to improve the effectiveness of supply include: a rebalancing of the stocks held in Afghanistan; and action to increase the proportion of routine requirements delivered by surface means. The Department's transport for passengers to Iraq, centred on a commercial charter to Qatar, provides a good level of service. Since February 2006, an average of 12.5 per cent of passenger flights to Afghanistan and 16.9 per cent of flights returning to the United Kingdom using the Department's own fleets have been subject to a delay of six hours or more, although these can be

attributed to many factors ranging from enemy action to aircraft reliability. The Department is now operating a complementary route which alleviates the pressure on the military air transport fleet and enables a more timely service to be achieved.

**9** Training is an essential military activity which underpins capability and readiness for operations. The Department provides all personnel deploying on operations with training for those specific theatres (called pre-deployment training). Personnel may be deployed on operations either as part of a formed unit or individually. Pre-deployment training builds on generic war-fighting training to equip the individual, unit or formation with a specific skill set for operations in a particular theatre, role or environment.

**10** For Iraq and Afghanistan, pre-deployment training is responsive to lessons identified in theatre and commanders are confident of its quality; but it is constrained by a number of factors. These include the difficulty of fitting all the required training elements into the allotted six months, the challenge of replicating operational environments and the large number of individuals who are not deploying with their units and complete short individual reinforcement packages rather than more extensive pre-deployment training. The Department has also, until recently, prioritised the delivery of new Urgent Operational Requirement equipments to theatre, and there have been shortages of equipments to train on that match the equipments in theatre. In response, the Department has introduced a new Operational Training Equipment Pool which has provided trainers with new vehicles and equipments not previously available, but numbers remain limited to support the scale of pre-deployment training.

**11** The Department's Defence Medical Services provide forward medical facilities and personnel up to "Role 3" which includes deployable field hospitals. The aim of in-theatre medical support is to provide care which promptly returns personnel to duty and when necessary stabilises casualties in order for them to be medically evacuated to medical facilities in the United Kingdom. **The Department's success in delivering life-saving medical treatment is underlined by the number of 'unexpected survivors' following the most severe of injuries.** The introduction of the Medical Emergency Response Teams to quickly take life-saving medical support to casualties and evacuate them speedily to hospital has been a particular success. There is widespread confidence in the healthcare system in both theatres.

**12** Accommodation for personnel at bases meets most needs and personnel are generally satisfied with it, although conditions at forward operating and patrol bases are more austere. It ranges from basic tents to more complex tented Expeditionary Campaign Infrastructure to hardened structures. Over the course of the operations in Iraq and Afghanistan the Department has moved from tented to more permanent structures.

**13** The Department has a Deployable Welfare Package which aims to provide welfare support to personnel on operations to maintain their emotional and physical wellbeing. This package includes access to communications, leisure and laundry facilities and mid- and post-tour leave. **The Department is delivering the Package successfully, although there are some problems with access to facilities during peak demand as a result of the application of specific planning ratios, and with welfare provision at forward bases.**

**14** To strike a balance between deploying people on operations, training and spending time with their families the Department has "harmony guidelines" which set out the frequency with which personnel should be deployed on operations. **Both the Army and the Royal Air Force are struggling to meet harmony guidelines.**

## Conclusion on Value for Money

**15** We have assessed value for money in terms of the effectiveness of the Department's support for the Armed Forces in theatre. Delivering effective support is complicated by the logistical challenges of supporting forces in distant locations and the harsh environments of Iraq and Afghanistan. In some areas, the Department has achieved significant success, not least the provision of medical support, including life-saving treatment at the front line, and responsive pre-deployment training which prepares personnel well for deployment. In other areas, performance has been less effective. For example new equipment, whilst providing improved capability, has in some cases been both difficult to support and not always available for training. The Department has also found it difficult to meet supply chain targets, in part because of fluctuations in demand. Overall, support to operations in Iraq and Afghanistan has improved over the timeframe we have examined, indicating that the Department's efforts are becoming more effective, despite evolving threats.



## Recommendations

**16** The Department is moving to a longer-term approach to the Afghanistan campaign, which should enable it to improve the effectiveness of support.

**i** **Urgent Operational Requirement equipments have performed well but there have been shortages of spares in theatre for some vehicles and insufficient equipments on which to conduct pre-deployment training.** The Department has a difficult balance to strike between fielding Urgent Operational Requirements quickly and ensuring that support and training is put in place. The Department should, however, maintain a full capability once equipment is in theatre, through:

- conducting analysis which takes into account possible scenarios under which new equipment might be used, as operational circumstances change, in order to provide sufficient spares to keep them available until actual usage patterns have become clear;
- allocating a sufficient proportion of equipment for pre-deployment training so that personnel are up to date and familiar with equipment before arriving in theatre; and
- cataloguing spares in a timely way, wherever possible before equipment is fielded.

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.

**ii** **Equipments provided to the Operational Training Equipment Pool are not always equipped to the same level as those deployed in theatre, making training less realistic.** The Department should provide training equipment that resembles that used in theatre, either through including all modifications, so that equipments are at “theatre entry standard” or by modifying them so that they adequately represent that standard.

**iii** **The Department’s performance against supply chain targets has been variable and lower for the highest priority demands, although there are signs that the supply chain is becoming more resilient.**

The Department should alleviate the pressure on the supply chain by smoothing the trend in demand from theatre, where possible, and enabling greater use of lower priority deliveries. It should also further improve and integrate its logistics information systems, including consignment and asset tracking, so users on operations have visibility over the stock already available at different locations in theatre, can track the progress of deliveries throughout the supply pipeline, and see stock availability back in the United Kingdom.

**iv** **In preparing to drawdown forces from Iraq, the Department has compiled a compendium of assets in theatre as a tool to enable detailed planning for redistribution, movement and repair.** It should use this information to verify that it can properly account for all assets, reconciling them against its fixed asset registers, whether returned to the United Kingdom, gifted or exchanged. In continuing to develop its logistic information systems the Department should look to connect this information on its assets in theatre with its asset registers and inventory management systems.

**v** **There is a significant difference in the provision of welfare packages at main operating bases, and at forward operating and patrol bases.**

The Department should roll out more welfare provision to personnel in forward positions in line with its existing planning ratios and, where this is impracticable, introduce more flexibility about the balance of provision between different items; for example, providing a greater number of satellite phones in lieu of internet access.