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PRODUCER: Ian Muir-Cochrane

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“FILE ON 4”

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ACTUALITY OF GUNFIRE

URRY: British troops are fighting a war with the Taliban, but today they were told they'll be better paid for doing it, and the Prime Minister's also been offering more help.

EXTRACT FROM SPEECH

BLAIR: If the climbers on the ground want more equipment – armoured vehicles, for example, more helicopters - that will be provided. Whatever package they want, we will do.

ACTUALITY OF DRIVING

MAN ON RADIO: of twenty to twenty-five terrorists wearing civilian clothes ...

URRY: But in the week when the Government is promising more support, can the Ministry of Defence deliver? Tonight, we report on the failures of the MOD to provide the right equipment for British forces in Afghanistan and Iraq. Has it cost soldiers their lives?

LEIGH: I think it's well-recognised now that our troops are seriously under-supported, under-provisioned, and as a result our own troops are now being fired at because they can't take stuff in helicopters, they're having to use under-protected Land Rovers and people are actually dying directly as a result of this procurement failure.

SIGNATURE TUNE

ACTUALITY WITH VEHICLE

MAN: The whole idea of the vehicle is to load a pallet of ammunition or whatever is required by the tanks. They load the pallet on the back and ship it out to wherever the vehicle may be, offload it and disappear off again.

URRY: A senior instructor at an off-road centre in Northamptonshire, putting a 6 wheeled all-terrain vehicle through its paces. It's known as a Supacat. Well we're right down now into a huge pool of water and up the other side.

MAN: There's very few places this won't go. It was designed specifically to support the tanks, so if you can get a tank there, you should be able to get this there as well.

URRY: You can take them over sand dunes as well, I'm told.

MAN: Sand dunes, yes. Low pressure tyres, so it gives out a massive footprint and keeps on the sand and just keeps going.

URRY: Its such a handy buggy that the Ministry of Defence bought sixty-five Mark 3 Supacats at a cost of around £57,000 each. They had planned for more, but decided they couldn't afford them, which was a mistake, because in 2003, when the invasion of Iraq started and the decision was taken that British forces should approach from the south through desert terrain, the army's 16th Air Assault Brigade called for more Supacats as a matter of urgency. Not only did the MOD not have enough, they'd actually got rid of others which would have filled the gap - older, but serviceable Mark 2 versions had been sold off as surplus stock. According to the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, the Conservative MP Edward Leigh, they then had to find money they said they hadn't got to buy them back for much more than they'd sold them.

LEIGH: MOD went into panic when Iraq started. They bought them back for £17,000 having flogged them off for £3,000. They then spent £18,000 on upgrading each one of these little things, and by the time they'd done all this, the Iraq war was over, they couldn't use them and they sold them again at a net loss, and the whole business has cost us about £700,000 – money completely down the drain.

ACTUALITY OF VEHICLE

URRY: And this is one of those expensive surplus Supacats. Having been refurbished and sent by ship to the Gulf it, along with the twenty-nine others didn't get there in time, never saw action and was shipped back to the UK and sold off again to private buyers. Some went for as little as £6,500. Many, like this one, are now being put to good use here at an off-road driving school, or by mountain rescue teams. But for the MP Edward Leigh, the fiasco over the Supacats raises a more fundamental question.

LEIGH: Where was their planning? After all, the Iraq war wasn't something impossible to predict. You would have thought that a sort of super small buggy would be quite useful in desert war. You would have thought that somebody might have worked out that it was a mistake to sell these things in the first place, having already acquired them. And then, if you were going to re-buy them, why do you have such a bad deal? Why do you have to spend so much money on it and take so much time, so that they're too late for the war anyway? The whole thing is an extraordinary saga,

LEIGH cont: which I know in terms of MOD spending is probably quite small, but I think it does illustrate larger problems that they obviously suffer from as an organisation. If you had had a series of procurement decisions like this, say, in Tesco, would the manager of that particular project survive in his job? I suspect he wouldn't, but this culture of failure in terms of procurement it seems is forgiven in the higher reaches of the MOD. There's a war on, you just get on with it. You need something, you get on with it, you get it out there.

URRY: We can't say if anyone was killed as a result of the failure to deliver the Supacats on time, but families of soldiers who've died in other vehicles have begun to accuse the Ministry of Defence of putting lives at risk for want of the right transport.

BACON: He started off by becoming an army cadet when he was barely thirteen. He saw service in the first Gulf War, front line, one of the first ones over the line into Iraq.

URRY: Roger Bacon, a former Special Branch officer with the Metropolitan Police whose 34 year old son Matthew was killed last year by a roadside bomb in Basra. Major Matthew Bacon wasn't even on active patrol, he was being taxied to the airport.

BACON: On 11th September last year he was at Basra Palace and he was due to return to Basra airbase. It's not very far, it's a matter really of just a few miles, and the routes that you take get varied, and there are certain areas that are considered safer than others. None of them are safe. They're all dangerous.

URRY: Roger Bacon's been told his son should have been taken by helicopter, but that it broke down at the last minute, forcing him and others with whom he was travelling to go by road in a lightly-armoured army Land Rover known as a Snatch vehicle.

BACON: Matthew was in the back of the first vehicle. When they got to this particular point on the ... Road, and it is literally, it's a housing estate basically, just as they were approaching that, on a dual carriageway the bomb went off and he was killed. Three other soldiers with him in the same vehicle received very severe wounds. The two top men, they're the guys who stick out of the top of the snatch, both lost a leg each and the other guy who was in the back of the Land Rover with Matthew received very severe arm injuries, burns and facial injuries.

URRY: It is said that insurgents know the vulnerabilities of these Land Rovers and they do make them a specific target. Is that something you get a sense of when you've looked at how your son came to be killed?

BACON: Absolutely. This makes it an absolute death trap. In the case of the Snatch, of course, it's fibreglass and Kevlar, capable of stopping a bullet and nothing else.

ACTUALITY IN VEHICLE

URRY: Snatch Land Rovers were developed for use in the troubles in Northern Ireland, but critics say they're not up to the job of protecting soldiers. MPs from the Defence Select Committee visiting Iraq in June of this year agreed, highlighting in a report the vulnerability of British troops travelling in Snatch vehicles. However, we've discovered that the concern about the shortage of better alternatives goes back much further than the current operation in Iraq - back at least to the first Gulf War fifteen years ago, when it was raised by the Royal Military Police. The Conservative MP Robert Key, who's a member of the Defence Select Committee, says the unique role played by the Redcaps during operations like Desert Storm leaves them exposed.

KEY: The Royal Military Police lead the way, find the paths literally in front of the heavy armour. It's their duty to ensure that the heavy armour avoids bogs, sand and can stick to a steady path and are not going to be trapped and they're not going to lose vehicles. So they are absolutely at the very very sharp end of everything that moves when the British army is in theatre. And so it's really critical that they should have proper protection for those purposes.

URRY: Military Police sources confirmed to File on 4 that lightly-protected Army Land Rovers were deemed unsuitable following de-briefs after Desert Storm.

KEY: It was 1991 when this was first identified as a deficiency and reported as such. And then in 2001 – ten years on – it became an urgent operational requirement that the RMP should have these vehicles.

URRY: When an item of equipment is listed as an urgent operational requirement, as these vehicles were in 2001, what is supposed to happen?

KEY: Well then proposals are supposed to be put eventually to ministers from the military, through the Ministry of Defence for ministerial decision on procurement. That's how it's supposed to work.

URRY: Do you know what's gone wrong then?

KEY: I wish I did, and I think that the Ministry of Defence wished they knew what's gone wrong, and it is in my mind quite irresponsible.

URRY: The Ministry of Defence argues that Snatch Land Rovers do have a proper role in today's conflicts, being relatively quick and agile, and less noisy or destructive in areas where civilian populations might resent heavier armour. And the procurement minister, Lord Drayson, says he's seen examples of where they've saved lives.

DRAYSON: When I was in Afghanistan last week, I was shown a Snatch Land Rover which had saved the life of a number of our soldiers because the armour protection that the Land Rover has had operated very effectively against a roadside bomb. The Land Rover does provide very good protection for a vehicle of that size, that weight. It is a state of the art vehicle in its class.

URRY: But the need for protected vehicles has been clear for years, hasn't it?

DRAYSON: I don't think it has, no.

URRY: Well the Royal Military Police were asking for better protected vehicles fifteen years ago after Desert Storm, the first Gulf War.

DRAYSON: The protected vehicles that the British Army has in terms of the Royal Military Police, there have been a range of vehicles going back twenty, thirty years. Those vehicles that have been available have been at the one end Land Rovers, through to the other end, thirty ton tanks like a Challenger tank ...

URRY: The Royal Military Police raised an urgent operational order in 2001 for better protected vehicles, because of the nature of the work that they do in war-time. They're still not getting them now, five years later.

DRAYSON: Procurement within defence does take time ...

URRY: Five years?

DRAYSON: Sometimes it can take longer than five years to provide equipment. We this year have procured additional patrol vehicles to go alongside the Snatch Land Rover. We've procured the Mastiff and the Vecta and up-armoured some of our other vehicles which you would describe as a light tank, to provide the commanders, such as people within the Royal Military Police with the vehicle options such that the commander on the ground can choose, with his experience, the balance of risk.

URRY: But even before the latest announcement about buying more vehicles, the Government had already been providing extra protected transport for others under fire in Basra and Baghdad - the Iraqi security forces and army.

SMITH: This is the photograph that I had mounted with Phillip's medals and that's actually the Snatch vehicle that he was in when he actually died.

URRY: For those like Sue Smith whose 21 year old son Phillip died when he was blown up in an Army Land Rover on patrol in Al Amarah, north of Basra, that's a bitter pill.

Do you know whether Phillip had any reservations himself about driving around in these lightly-armoured vehicles?

SMITH: Yes he did. He did say to me that the Iraqis had got better vehicles than they were driving round. I think he was frightened to go out, but he would have gone anyway, because that's what his job was.

URRY: In what way are the vehicles used by the Iraqi security forces better protected?

SMITH: The Snatches have got like a cage over them, haven't they, whereas the Iraqi ones are fully armoured, they've got more armour underneath as well.

URRY: And where are the Iraqi security forces getting their vehicles from?

SMITH: Apparently they're supplied by the Americans and the British.

URRY: So what has Britain provided for the Iraqis? Publicly-sourced information is sketchy. Last November a question was put down in the House of Lords, asking the procurement minister ...

READER IN STUDIO: whether the provision of armoured vehicles to the Iraqi police force has contributed to the non-availability of such vehicles to UK forces.

URRY: Lord Drayson responded by saying police at that time had been given fifty-nine ex Northern Ireland urban patrol Land Rovers under a scheme called Osiris, a security sector reform project. These were said to be surplus to UK

URRY cont: requirements and modified to a configuration not operated by our forces. However, on the 29th of June this year, in an MOD press release about new cars for Iraqi police under the Osiris project, we spotted this final short paragraph.

READER IN STUDIO: The cars are part of an ongoing programme to re-equip Iraqi Defence forces, which saw the Iraqi army receiving new armoured personnel carriers at the end of May, and which are already seeing service on the streets of Basra.

SMITH: I think it's pretty disgusting, and it's pretty disgusting that our sons are dying through lack of equipment, and yet we're investing money into rebuilding an army for another country, when our own hasn't got the stuff that it needs.

URRY: Despite Sue Smith's anger, the minister, Lord Drayson, denies that Britain has sent the new armour referred to in the press release to the Iraqi forces.
What protected vehicles has the government given to Iraqi forces?

DRAYSON: The government has given a range of vehicles from the one end in the Snatch Land Rover, in terms of the four ton class, so that is a Land Rover with additional armour protection on it, through to medium weight vehicles up to the larger vehicles such as the going through to Challenger tanks.

URRY: In an MOD press release, it was already talking about the Iraqi army having received new armoured personnel carriers at the end of May, which are already seeing, it says, service on the streets of Basra. And yet we haven't got full armoured personnel carriers yet for our own troops.

DRAYSON: The vehicles that were provided to the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police were Land Rovers.

URRY: Well why does it say new armoured personnel carriers then, in the Ministry of Defence press release?

DRAYSON: That is not true. It may be in a Ministry of Defence press release, but I can tell you that we have not provided armoured personnel carriers, as you've described them, to the Iraqi armed forces, which we have not provided to our own armed forces, and that's just a fact.

URRY: It's not just a shortage of the right vehicles which could be putting lives at risk. Concern is emerging about the new communications system being rolled out by the Ministry of Defence. It's called Bowman.

ACTUALITY OF COMPANY VIDEO

PRESENTER: All new equipment must be improved capability. But once in a while equipment is introduced that does a great deal more than that. Enhancing capability to such an extent that it changes whole aspects of the way operations are conducted. In the battle space, that's just what Bowman is set to achieve.

URRY: A promotional video made by the MOD's chosen contractor for the project, General Dynamics UK, full of praise for its capabilities. Bowman has been introduced into service under great pressure. It's been much delayed as the MOD switched contractors, and extra requirements were asked of it. Bowman is supposed to transform military communications and enable the armed forces to operate more effectively at a higher tempo. Soldiers using it in Iraq spoke to the promotional video makers with some enthusiasm.

SOLDIER: It's a lot easier, it's a lot more user-friendly.

SOLDIER 2: It worked really well out in Iraq. It was even in all the built-up areas in the city, it still was performing.

SOLDIER 3: For the first time we've had secure voice communications from brigade level all the way down to section level.

URRY: But away from the glossy promotions, others working with Bowman sets in the field are not so complimentary. Emails have been appearing on a website set up for service personnel like the infantry to let off steam.
July 27th 2006:

READER IN STUDIO: In my estimate at least a third of patrols using Bowman have to be scrapped early on the ground due to comms problems. It is a dangerous piece of equipment to rely on in an operational environment, as I have found out on too many occasions.

URRY: July 21st 2006:

READER IN STUDIO: As predicted, it happened. The whole battle group in a contact and the Bowman net fails. I had the pleasure of lying in a dip, rounds whacking round me, being thrown PMR handsets by my commanders, until on the third attempt I got some comms. Before that we communicated through runners.

URRY: We have no way of checking the sources of this information, all postings on the website are anonymous. So we asked a retired infantry officer with twenty years military experience, including as a regimental signals officer, to review them. Michael Moriarty, a former army major, also has contacts among those currently serving in Afghanistan.
You've had a chance to analyse these emails. Do they seem credible to you?

MORIATY: They do. The ring of authenticity is absolutely there, and that's from my own personal experience as a communications officer and as a commander.

URRY: What are the complaints specifically about then?

MORIATY: One is that the equipment is issued on an inadequate scale, so not enough kit. Secondly that the capabilities are not necessarily there, so the time to get through from A to B on a radio, there's some delay, things do not work properly, and there has been inadequate training prior to deployment. And what's becoming clear is that effectively this equipment is being trialled on operations.

URRY: Yes, and they complained about this in the email, didn't they? I've got one in front of me here where the person, who's anonymous, has said, you know, 'we should and we must receive finished kit,' as he described it. 'Why am I involved in what is, to all intents and purposes, a fielding trial in a dangerous theatre?' Do you see his point?

MORIATY: I couldn't agree more.

URRY: And he also says, 'I passionately hate Bowman because it puts the lives of my soldiers at risk.' I mean, could that be the case?

MORIATY: It sounds like it's the case, yes.

URRY: On another bit here he says, 'Please, we can't even talk to each other.' It can't be that bad, can it?

MORIATY: There you have the voice of a man who's actually using it on operations.

URRY: The National Audit Office has other concerns. It published a report about Bowman in July of this year. The NAO makes clear that from as far back as 1998, senior officers were insisting that part of the radio system, the portable set for an 8 strong infantry section, which has to be carried on foot, should not be heavier than its already bulky predecessor. The report states the dialogue went on for seven years, with no real solution found.

READER IN STUDIO: December 2005. Though the radio meets the contracted requirements, Director Infantry considers that the weight and ergonomics make it unsuitable for use in dismounted combat. Alternative options are under consideration.

URRY: Too heavy for infantrymen to carry in combat - a serious matter in an infantry war like Afghanistan. What's more, the report criticises both the MOD and the contractor, General Dynamics, for underestimating the scale of the problem of converting army vehicles, which carry other Bowman radio sets, slowing that

URRY cont: conversion and increasing costs. We've been told that the two radios carried by a Land Rover, the batteries to power them and the frames in which they fit exceed the vehicle's axle weights. Edward Leigh, who chairs the Public Accounts Committee, says there's been a failure of project management.

LEIGH: I think this often happens in defence procurements. The Bowman radio is going to cost billions, it's 5% over budget, been going on since 1995, it's years late, there's all sorts of problems with the equipment when it comes onstream. That's why I think squaddies feel so angry about this sort of thing, because they go along to their local shop and they can buy equipment which is better than what's been acquired for £2.5 billion back home on a so-called smart procurement programme on behalf of the Ministry of Defence.

URRY: But what went wrong with Bowman then? What was the problem?

LEIGH: It's a very advanced piece of kit which the requirement is constantly changing, and I just don't think the project management could cope with the continually changing demands made on it. This is what ... procurement in the MOD, it's a bit like a Christmas tree. Somebody dreams up the idea of a Christmas tree twenty years ago and then a new minister, a new civil servant, a new operational requirement comes along and they constantly add things on to the Christmas tree and eventually the tree falls down.

URRY: No one from General Dynamics would be interviewed for this programme, but the procurement minister Lord Drayson, who's just arrived back from a visit to the troops in Afghanistan, accepts that there have been problems in the field.

DRAYSON: Those pieces of equipment will fail, it's the nature of life that complex equipment will fail. It is the most challenging environment for both men and equipment that there is, both in terms of the conditions under which it has to operate, and therefore it pushes the boundaries of what technology and equipment is able to do. You're not going to have a situation where everything works all of the time and never fails ...

URRY: All right, well here's a basic example then that isn't related to the high tech nature of Bowman. It is too heavy. It is too heavy for an infantry section on foot in combat. How has that happened?

DRAYSON: Well, I was in Afghanistan last week and spent a lot of time, hours, talking to our people – troops – about the equipment which they're operating. And as part of that I talked to them about the burden that they have in terms of the weight of equipment. The state of technology in 2006 means that to give it the capability which it needs, the state of technology today means it is not possible for us to come up with something which is lighter than this. We do not believe that it is too heavy.

URRY: Well, the Director of Infantry does.

DRAYSON: Well, in terms of, it's these things, when you procure a piece of equipment you have to make a trade-off in terms of the performance of the equipment against a number of different parameters, and the thing that's most important is that the Bowman radio is robust enough to be able to operate under those challenging environmental conditions. We need to continue to develop it, to make it lighter, to improve it. However, this is where the state of the art is today.

URRY: While the Bowman radio system is getting mixed reviews, there's no doubting the number one equipment priority for Commanders following the Prime Minister's promise of more support at the weekend.

BUTLER: Helicopters has always been top of my priority and clearly they are working very hard and there's been some phenomenal flying from the pilots in very difficult and dangerous conditions. And if we had more, then clearly we could generate a higher tempo, not just offensive operations, but also to crack on with the reconstruction development.

URRY: What Brigadier Ed Butler, the commander of UK troops in Afghanistan is asking for is more American made Chinook helicopters, the workhorse of the skies.

ACTUALITY OF HELICOPTER

URRY: Chinooks are able to move troops and supplies around, even in the tough environments of Afghanistan and Iraq. They provide what military calls heavy lift capability, a fundamental necessity. To assess the vital role played by these helicopters, File on 4 interviewed a former RAF Squadron Leader with thousands of hours of flying time in Chinooks, Robert Burke. He says they help get around the problem of patrols in convoy being attacked on the road.

BURKE: Where you have an internal security situation, or indeed, as in Afghanistan, a counter-insurgency situation, the key military element is foot soldiers. But if the roads are mined or controlled by the enemy for a large part of the time, perhaps by hours of night, perhaps all the time, you've got to move those foot soldiers around, and not only move the soldiers, but their supplies as well. And for that, helicopters are not just desirable, they are an essential.

URRY: And what is the sort of capacity that UK forces currently have?

BURKE: The main source of heavy lift helicopters for the British forces is the American Chinook, the CH47. That will, with all its seats fitted in, carry thirty-odd troops. But in its war role it can carry as many as about sixty-five. And I think in total we've got something just over thirty of those, including those which are in repair at the moment.

URRY: It doesn't sound very many.

BURKE: We'd like many more for our commitments at the moment.

URRY: But, if they are so important, why the shortage? Although the Prime Minister's offer has been welcomed by some, there've been dire warnings by Parliamentary Committees about the lack of lift capability. In 2004, the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, Edward Leigh, was able to quantify the seriousness of the problem.

LEIGH: We found, when we last reported, that we're 38% short. That's very high. When you got to amphibious operations, it was over 80%. Now since 2004 the situation has got much worse. There's increasing pressure in Iraq, which we now all know about, which wasn't foreseen at the time. People were thinking Iraq was a bit of a pushover. And, of course, we now have this very dangerous situation in Afghanistan. Frankly troops should not be put in a situation where there is not sufficient capacity for helicopters in a modern war.

URRY: A 38% shortfall, by the MOD's own admission, seems huge really.

LEIGH: Well I think this is probably the most serious problem they face, because everybody knows, everybody's known since the Vietnam War that helicopters are absolutely vital in the modern battlefield environment. The only way you defeat the Taliban is to get very fast support in terms of men and supplies between areas that are threatened. So how anybody in the MOD can think to themselves they can commit to a war in Afghanistan, when they've got a 40% shortfall in helicopter lift I think is staggering admission of failure, and people no doubt are dying as a result.

URRY: Others point out that helicopter lift deficiency goes back a long way. A former head of the MOD's defence programme told File on 4 it was a concern when he was in charge in the early 1990s. And the shortage of helicopters is being compounded by the conditions in which they are currently operating. According to Robert Burke, the former RAF Chinook pilot, they require heavy maintenance to keep them flying.

BURKE: The first part of the problem is basically they're flying lots of hours, and the more hours you fly, the more you consume in the way of rotating components. The other major problem is the environment in which they're working. They're working in an area where there's lots of sharp sand around and sand wreaks havoc with turbine engines. We need more Chinooks and a vat more spares, we really do.

URRY: Procurement Minister Lord Drayson agrees that keeping helicopters operational is a complex matter, and he also accepts there aren't enough of them.

DRAYSON: We do have a shortage of helicopters, I agree.

URRY: Where are the Chinooks that the Commander of the forces in Afghanistan says he wants, following the Prime Minister's offer at the weekend?

DRAYSON: Right, so with regard to Chinooks, we're looking at obtaining additional airframes, additional helicopters. We're also looking at ...

URRY: Where are you going to get those from?

DRAYSON: Where they come from is not something I'm able to discuss at the moment on your programme. What I can tell you is ...

URRY: How quickly are you going to get them?

DRAYSON: I would like to see them provided in time for the next ... in Afghanistan next May.

URRY: You would like to see that? But what are the chances of that happening?

DRAYSON: Well, I think if you look at my track record as procurement minister, I do tend to deliver.

URRY: Well if you've got them, if you're able to get some so quickly, why haven't we had them before?

DRAYSON: We have had the helicopters in theatre in Afghanistan based upon the force package, which was decided at the beginning of the operation earlier this year. Now, what we have learnt is that we, frankly, underestimated what we were up against in Afghanistan.

URRY: You got it wrong?

DRAYSON: I just said, we have learnt that we have underestimated the threat that we had from the Taliban in Afghanistan. Despite that, our forces have, through their courage and bravery and just being so extremely good at what they do, they have effected a tactical defeat on the enemy this year. But we have also learnt that helicopters are a real force multiplier and that we do need to provide more helicopter capability in Afghanistan. So what we're doing about it is a range of things – looking at improving the spares support of helicopters, the availability of the helicopters that we have got are available a higher percentage of the time.

URRY: But to make matters worse, it turns out we do have more Chinooks which Commanders are crying out for, it's just that they can't fly.

ACTUALITY OF JET

URRY: I'm standing just outside the perimeter fence of the base where Britain's military aircraft are tested and evaluated. Boscombe Down in Wiltshire. And today a fighter jet is being put through its paces in the sky above me. Somewhere inside this facility there are eight Chinooks - helicopters which, had it not been for serious mistakes by the MOD, could be making so much difference to those fighting Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Instead they're grounded, victims of one of the worst procurement blunders of recent history, according to the Public Accounts Committee. In 1995, the MOD decided to upgrade eight of fourteen Chinooks it was procuring to improve range, night vision and navigation. The idea was to kit them out for Special Forces work. The Americans bought an off the shelf version from manufacturers Boeing for their own Special Forces, and the Dutch successfully managed to have theirs modified with a fully digital suite of instruments and other avionics. The MOD decided they too wanted modifications and they got it all wrong. They didn't pay enough attention to detail in the specifications of the contract with Boeing. Because of that, when the aircraft were delivered in 2001, the MOD discovered it couldn't do safety checks on the extra software it had installed, a process known as verification. And because of that they couldn't be passed safe to fly. According to Robert Burke, who was then a leading Chinook test pilot for the RAF, there were plenty of warnings.

BURKE: It was a special-to-type fit, and everything you do special-to-type in any walk of life is more difficult to achieve and much more expensive ultimately to achieve. I was a serving officer when the procurement was made for these helicopters and there were a number of people, including at a very low level myself, suggesting this was not a good idea.

URRY: What were you saying then?

BURKE: That we should have gone either for the American fit or indeed for a fit which the Dutch Air Force had specified for their own aircraft, which was a fully digital fit in a Chinook. Everything was digital, it fitted very nicely into the Chinook cockpit, but we decided that at the time it was too expensive for us.

URRY: So what you're saying is that at the time there were actually off-the-shelf options that we could have bought?

BURKE: Oh absolutely, yes. And there were quite a lot of voices suggesting that perhaps the option that the MOD had chosen was not a good idea.

URRY: Were those voices not listened to then?

BURKE: No.

URRY: The Public Accounts Committee found failure to specify proper detail in more than half of the one hundred essential elements the MOD was asking for. And, according to defence analyst Paul Beaver, it's not the first time the MOD have complicated the procurement of aircraft.

BEAVER: We do have a history of buying aeroplanes that aren't the same standard as somebody else, and we tend to do this from the Americans. We bought the F4 Phantom and decided, for the sake of jobs in the United Kingdom, to put Rolls Royce engines in. Very good engines, it's just that we had to completely redesign the engine compartments of the aeroplane to do that. And the result was that the aircraft, the Phantom, was late into service. We've had the same thing with the Chinook,

BEAVER cont: that if we had just bought eight – and eight isn't a very large number – straight from the Americans, then we could have had a helicopter that would have been in service in time for 2001 operations in Afghanistan, for the Iraq operations and today would be usable – we'd have eight more aircraft. That's the equivalent of around 15% to 18% of the deficit we have in helicopter lift, because we are desperately short of helicopters.

URRY: The Ministry of Defence were forced to admit to Parliament that their Chinook project was flawed from the outset in 1995 and got worse after that. And the cost? More than a quarter of a billion pounds. The Public Accounts Committee called it one of the worse acquisitions it had ever come across. But for the Conservative MP for Salisbury, Robert Key, in whose constituency this has all been taking place, there's a further question. Why haven't the helicopters been fixed? At one stage the MOD estimated it would cost £127 million to put the problem right - pocket change for the defence budget.

KEY: If you're looking at the cost of sending them back to Boeing, which they could have done at any point in the last five years at a reported cost of £127 million to put them right, why haven't they done it? They keep telling us they've spent half a billion pounds on urgent operational requirements in Afghanistan and Iraq in the last two years. There's something like a £6 billion a year military procurement budget in the United Kingdom and yet we can't find the money either to get the eight Chinook helicopters flying or the very modest sums of money in terms of that budget to buy, even off the shelf, the sort of vehicles that are so desperately needed out there in the front line. And that is, that is cock-up territory.

URRY: Well, is it cock-up, as you describe it, or is it lack of funds?

KEY: Answer is partly money, but also partly paralysis in the procurement process. It is a sorry tale that we have the finest military forces in the world, but we are not looking after them properly in terms of their kit or their budgets, and it's not necessarily just a matter about money in the short term. It is actually about prioritisation and about listening to people on the ground and about getting decisions made quickly.

URRY: The procurement minister Lord Drayson says money's not the problem. He argues that the faults with the eight Chinooks are so complex, that even after five years they haven't been able to come up with a solution which they feel confident about. But he says he's expecting more suggestions for a fix soon.

DRAYSON: Well the reason we haven't spent the money is because we haven't been convinced that it will fix the problem.

URRY: But how long is it going to take then?

DRAYSON: Well I'm hoping that Boeing come up with a proposal this month, which we can have confidence in, which will allow us to give us the go-ahead to get these helicopters fixed.

URRY: But the point is, had they have been flying, had there not been such a foul-up, we wouldn't have been in such a mess that we are now.

DRAYSON: It is true, if those helicopters had not been procured with software which couldn't be verified, we would have an additional eight Chinook helicopters flying. We have to find ways to improve the lift capability to meet the requirements we have, whether or not the Mark 3 Chinook problem will be part of that solution, we'll have to see what the industry comes up with. If it does not come up with a solution, I'll have to find a solution elsewhere and that's something which I'm working on.

URRY: All right, well in that case, do you accept that British soldiers have been killed as a result of procurement issues with equipment?

DRAYSON: No, I don't.

URRY: You put your hand on your heart and say that no British soldier has died for want of the right equipment, the right vehicle, the right helicopter support?

DRAYSON: I think escalating these issues in those kind of terms actually doesn't help anybody. What is true is that we have to be able to respond more quickly to the threats as they change, and that is something which we are doing.

SIGNATURE TUNE