

PART 1.6 – CONVENING AUTHORITY COMMENTS

1. My role as the Convening Authority in reviewing this Report is to draw the key lessons together and attempt to highlight the most important areas to everyone involved in Air Safety, with the aim of preventing recurrence.
2. The provision of the H450 UOR capability and its employment by the Royal Artillery (RA) has been an outstanding success. The swift introduction of the associated advanced airborne ISR capability on operations, the ramping up of the scale of the service provision and its sustainment over a prolonged period of time not foreseen at the outset, are all testament to the drive, commitment and professionalism of RA personnel. And I believe it is entirely justifiable to claim that the capability provided by the UOR has saved lives. Nonetheless, significant risks have been accepted in the process, no doubt necessarily in some, or even many, cases. What this Report makes clear, though, is that the model employed to date is unlikely to be suitable for an enduring, contingent capability. Moreover, notwithstanding the RA's evident pedigree in operating unmanned air systems (UAS), the advent of relatively complex and increasingly capable air systems in their inventory has exposed the fact that there are shortcomings in their organic air mindedness and understanding of some of the core principles that should underwrite the operation of such advanced systems. Moreover, the UAS Regts' current structures and *modus operandi* effectively constrain their ability to improve in this area. Clearly, as the Watchkeeper era beckons, this is unsatisfactory.
3. In response to an earlier H450 occurrence at Bastion in May 11, and in partial recognition at that time of 1 Arty Bde's highly commendable initial efforts to adjust quickly to the new post-MAA Air Safety governance environment, I elected not to convene an SI into that incident and opted for a Non Statutory Inquiry conducted by the Bde, informed by an independent RAF CAM HF investigation. It is disappointing that so many of the issues highlighted by the RAF CAM report have been identified again in this accident and that the CAM Report's recommendations do not appear to have been acted upon by the command chain with a sufficient degree of alacrity. This SI Report's findings with respect to selection criteria for UAS operators; lack of SQEP involved in key instructional duties; poor systems knowledge amongst operators; shortcomings in training and development of airmanship in operators; inadequate training for operating with ATC agencies, especially in complex airspace; and an unsatisfactory flying Authoriser construct make uncomfortable reading. Even taking into account a reasonable 'operational imperative' abatement, the findings may be interpreted as pointing to an organization pushing the limits of their organic air competence.
4. That this should be so is at first counter-intuitive. The RA have operated UAS for a considerable period of time. One might therefore have expected the corporate experience gained to have been consolidated, and to be evident in the experience levels within 1 Arty Bde's flying cadre and in their approach to delivering an advanced air ISR capability. However, this SI has exposed the impact of the natural churn across the Bde, into and out of the UAS units, and the fact that there are surprisingly few deep air specialists readily available to the Bde internally. Through the lens of this Report and as alluded to above, the effect of this can be seen across the raise, train, sustain spectrum. Moreover, whilst resource limitations have undoubtedly constrained the Bde's ability to provide the necessary live flying and synthetic consolidation training for their H450 operators outside of operations, the implied lack of understanding of its likely impact should be of concern. The absence of a defined, meaningful currency requirement and acceptance of currencies lapsing routinely between operational tours is not just inefficient, but it also precludes corporate learning, development of individuals' capacity and consolidation in particularly perishable critical disciplines and skills. Finally, whilst the reasons are elaborated in the Report, the absence

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of truly independent external and informed scrutiny of the Bde's UAS activities, standards and practices cannot be sustained. Arguably, it is the absence of such scrutiny to date that has allowed the current situation to develop.

5. I believe the SI Panel have provided a comprehensive and helpful series of recommendations, particularly with regard to selection and training of RA UAS operators and supervisors and the further development of a core professional RA UAS career stream. Swift and effective implementation of this Report's recommendations should be accorded appropriate priority, not just with the aim of preventing recurrence within the extant H450 capability area, but perhaps more importantly to ensure that the conditions are set properly for Watchkeeper's imminent arrival. Aspirations for Watchkeeper range from operating outside UK segregated airspace to weaponizing the system – the ability to do either of these things in future will be critically dependent on the delivery of a credible initial capability, viewed across the Defence Lines of Development. I recommend strongly, therefore, that CGS considers resourcing a small SQEP team in the ODH HQ to assist in oversight of the implementation of this Report's recommendations and developing them further. In my opinion, the team should be headed up at SO1 level by an experienced manned air system aviator, ideally post-command, and equipped with suitable ToRs. He should be accompanied by a minimum of an SO3 operator, the latter preferably from elsewhere within the Defence UAS community and they should support the command chain for a minimum of 24 months to bridge Watchkeeper's introduction into service.

6. As is now the norm, Hd MilAAIB will track implementation of the Recommendations and report to me on progress regularly.