



## **CHANGE FATIGUE IN THE FLEET AIR ARM: DOES THE MERLIN HELICOPTER FORCE REQUIRE ANOTHER TRANSFORMATION?**

**Commander Sarah Birchett, RN**

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# **CHANGE FATIGUE IN THE FLEET AIR ARM: DOES THE MERLIN HELICOPTER FORCE REQUIRE ANOTHER TRANSFORMATION?**

## **AIM**

1. This paper will argue that the Transformation programme within the Royal Navy (RN) has led to change fatigue. With a focus on Fleet Air Arm (FAA) personnel and in particular Merlin Helicopter Force (MHF), it will be recommended Director Force Generation (Dir FGen) agrees considered changes with relation to force construct are paused to allow for a period of consistency and stability.

## **INTRODUCTION**

2. In recent years, it has been noticeable that satisfaction with service life in general amongst RN personnel has dropped to 36%, and personnel rate the service morale at 11%<sup>1</sup>. With only 28% having confidence in RN leadership and just 19% believing change is managed well in the RN, whilst change might be seen as the way to increase these figures it must be considered whether one of the main explanations for this dissatisfaction is change itself. As defined by Cox *et al.*, “Change fatigue is a state in which excessive change within an organization has led to employee exhaustion as well as the perception that future change will be difficult to accomplish.”<sup>2</sup> This paper will briefly look at the Transformation programme within the RN and the increasing demands placed on its personnel. It will then examine, in greater detail, the FAA and specifically MHF considering how it contributes to fighting power and its relevance to the RN in support to UK defence.

3. The rationalisation of force structures has been identified as an area for consideration. Whilst it will be acknowledged that the current structure of MHF is not optimal, it will be suggested that providing consistency and stability to FAA personnel would increase retention rates and workforce satisfaction thus confirming the RN as a people centric organisation. The RN Strategy goals of “Reduce workforce costs, better utilise our people to increase productivity, and improve the lived experience”<sup>3</sup> will therefore be met and this in turn will increase operational effectiveness and warfighting capability in line with the desired defence policy and priorities.

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<sup>1</sup> Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey: 2023 Results from the Armed Forces “Continuous Attitude Survey (AFCAS),” *States News Service* (1 June, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Cody B. Cox, Emily Gallegos, Gregory J. Pool, K. Matthew Gilley, and Natasha Haight, “Mapping the Nomological Network of Change Fatigue: Identifying Predictors, Mediators and Consequences,” *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 35, no. 4/5 (2022): 719.

<sup>3</sup> Royal Navy, “Royal Navy Strategy” Updated 2023: 18.

## TRANSFORMATION

4. In 2019 the RN hierarchy acknowledged a requirement to change to adapt to the dynamically shifting world, with greater uncertainty faced today and expected in future. The plans were ambitious and set to reshape the RN recognising a need to modernise and gain operational advantage to deliver into the future<sup>4</sup>. This change programme, known as *transformation*, has continued with a pursuit for greater efficiency in all areas including digitisation with innovative crewing models seen as a solution for maximising the output of platforms. The concept appeared clear, the seniors delivered the message of innovation and technological advance to sailors through a series of targeted briefings, but the reality of implementation has not achieved as much as desired as quickly as hoped. The result is the change programme continues but without reference to the words *change* or *transformation*.

## DO MORE WITH LESS

5. Due to the workforce shortage seen across UK defence, it is understandable the RN investigates all avenues to improve operational effectiveness. The extra workforce demands placed upon Career Managers (CM) have challenged across every area. Non-discretionary tasks (NDTs) are increasing without an increase in equipment or workforce and whilst discretionary tasks should be just that, they are often given a ‘just do it’ line by seniors. The increased demand has included domestic operations such as support to immigration forces, fire fighters and ambulance drivers and an ask for military support has become common place as a first port of call when a domestic issue emerges under the remit of Military Aid for Civil Authorities (MACA)<sup>5</sup>. Whilst this is no doubt an issue seen across all services, this paper is focused on the RN and more specifically, the FAA and the current issues seen within MHF.

## MERLIN HELICOPTER FORCE

6. The mission of MHF is to provide an enduring commitment to Continuous at Sea Deterrent (CASD) as well as supporting maritime counter-terrorism (MCT) operations and delivering organic force protection (FP) including Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW), Anti-Surface Warfare (ASuW) and Airborne Early Warning (AEW) to Queen Elizabeth Class (QEC) carriers supporting the delivery of Carrier Strike (CS). This makes MHF fundamental to the RN contribution to UK defence priorities.<sup>6</sup>

7. When Merlin Mk 1 entered service in 1998, the FAA had many talented engineers servicing three variants of Sea King aircraft with crews in abundance trained to fly the

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<sup>4</sup> Nick Hine, “When is a box not a box?” 2SL DSEI Speech, (15 September 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Fright, “Using the military to response to public sector strikes: Military Aid for Civilian Authorities (MACA)”, Institute for government (13 January, 2023).  
[www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/military-public-sector-strikes](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/military-public-sector-strikes)

<sup>6</sup> Defence Command Paper, *Defence’s response to a more contested and volatile world* (July 2023), 62.

aircraft to meet the demands of the Cold War; search and rescue (SAR) was also held as a military aviation duty. A shift in focus was witnessed as events such as 9/11 turned the global focus towards non-state threats. Since then, the spectrum of conflict has continued to shift with Horn of Africa, Gulf of Oman and Red Sea operations becoming more frequent and Merlin being used to conduct counter piracy (CP) and ASuW operations over and above its primary ASW mission. With Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, the requirement for Merlin to conduct its primary role has never been greater and yet MHF has never been more stretched. Generating and maintaining the highest possible operational capability has forced another look at the force construct and whether it is configured to meet the demands of today and those of the future.

8. It can be argued the current construct of MHF is not efficient. There are many duplications of effort with the tasking split between three Squadrons, in three separate buildings, under three separate OF4 Commands. Airframe and crews are double if not triple attributed for NDTs. The training has been diluted and the monthly requirements for aircrew currency have also been drastically reduced over the past three years<sup>7</sup>. This has produced a new normal of more simulator hours, less live hours and less aviation experience amongst junior aircrew. Training has also been compounded by a lack of live sub-surface assets and thus a subsequent degrade in operational capability amongst crews for their primary mission; MHF has lost its war fighting edge, and therefore the operational advantage desired through the original *transformation* agenda.

9. MHF has already undergone many changes. The greatest was arguably the transition from Mk1 to Mk2 in 2013. However, the inclusion of Crowsnest<sup>8</sup> and this new capability shift taking on the AEW duties previously held by the SkASaC, required the force to be reimagined. Tasks such as MCT, once held by Sea King, now fall within the Merlin NDTs.

10. MHF has changed its configuration on an almost biannual basis, often with the supersession in Commanding Officer (CO) MHF, there appears a constant desire for change as each has a personal idea of the most efficient way to configure the force. Squadrons have been decommissioned and repurposed but essentially the fundamental problem appears to remain consistent, not enough serviceable airframes crewed and maintained by not enough workforce to conduct those tasks attributed to the force.

## **WORKFORCE CHALLENGES**

11. There is nothing unique regarding a lack of workforce who are correctly trained and ready to output core tasks of a military. Stated workforce numbers often include

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<sup>7</sup> Royal Navy, "Book of Reference 767 - Naval Aviation Orders" (NAO 2103 (6)) (Updated January 2024).

<sup>8</sup> Navy Lookout. "First Crowsnest equipped airborne surveillance and control helicopter goes into service with Royal Navy." 21 March 2021. [www.navylookout.com/first-crowsnest-equipped-airborne-surveillance-and-control-helicopter-goes-into-service-with-the-royal-navy/](http://www.navylookout.com/first-crowsnest-equipped-airborne-surveillance-and-control-helicopter-goes-into-service-with-the-royal-navy/).

untrained or undertrained personnel, disguise medical or welfare complications or do not account regeneration and rest. Compounding the issue within MHF, is the personnel situation seen across the RN. A shift has been seen of FAA personnel being required to fill 'out of branch' roles and non-aviation focused positions. Even within branch, there has been a sudden balloon growth of 700X Naval Air Squadron (NAS) and Remote Piloted Air Systems (RPAS) /Uncrewed Air Systems (UAS) activity which has attracted senior focus on this emerging capability. With no workforce development plan, the pull has been on current maritime aircrew to fill these positions with impact to front line rotary workforce numbers. The demands placed upon every branch to supply personnel for Operational Tours (OPTOURS) and augmentation events, even down to ceremonial events of State, are a daily struggle to fulfill. 'One brick thick' became 'one brick thin' and CMs face a constant shuffle of pain with no good solutions only least pain options.

12. This continued uncertainty amongst the workforce has had a severe impact. In my two year tenure as CM SO1 Air, I conducted many leaving interviews with FAA personnel and noted a lack of job satisfaction, poor work/life balance and future uncertainty, amongst the primary reasons for early termination of service. This trend is evidenced further in the Haythornwaite Review with 59% of personnel stating their reason for leaving as impact on family and personal life<sup>9</sup>. Trawls were conducted on an almost daily basis demanding a personnel support request (PSR) to be filled out for new demanded positions often with a lead time of under a month. Even those deemed in priority one positions had to provide evidence of why they could not be removed at short notice and this was often linked to critical flight safety qualifications. It was evident that this constant workforce demand placed additional pressure on all ranks and rates to continue delivery of their duties by taking on additional tasks. |

## **FLEET AIR ARM CONSTRUCTS**

13. To provide an idea of context, it is necessary to look at the other rotary wing forces within the FAA and how they are constructed differently. Wildcat Maritime Force (WMF) has 2 Squadrons commanded by OF4 and a Force Commander also of OF4. Put simply, one is the training Squadron and one the operational Squadron. Commando Helicopter Force (CHF) has 2 Squadrons commanded by OF4 and a CO CHF at OF5, although this force falls under Joint Helicopter Command, an Army led 2\* organisation. This complete lack of parity amongst the forces leads to an internal FAA competition. The lack of understanding as to who effectively owns the personnel within each force is also apparent with Squadrons and furthermore forces competing against each other for the retention of workforce.

14. Parity amongst the Squadrons should be an aim, and it could be questioned why two forces are able to deliver training and operations through two Squadrons, but another requires three? If the numbers of personnel and aircraft are reasonably similar and division is simply by task, then it would appear sensible to form mirrored force constructs and this would produce a rationalisation of Squadron numbers. It has been suggested

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<sup>9</sup> Rick Haythornthwaite, "Agency and Agility: Incentivising people in a new era" (2023), 14.

MHF is too top heavy, it provides more Command opportunities for OF4 and OF3 ranks than the other forces and thus offers a seeming advantage to its aircrew. Due to these factors, a solution could be to remove a Squadron, and this is currently in consideration. This provides fairness and parity amongst FAA so seems reasonable.

15. Constructs are however also historically significant with Squadron Battle Honours<sup>10</sup> held in high regard. Decommissioning a Squadron is very emotive and cannot be done without due consideration; identity and pride are evident factors. 2018 saw the decommissioning of 829 NAS as its aircraft, personnel and infrastructure were amalgamated with 814 NAS. As the CO responsible to deliver this, I witnessed first-hand the animosity and distress this caused. The stand-up of 849 NAS as a Merlin Mk2 Squadron was cancelled in 2020 despite a CO being selected and the entire force construct being reimaged; this would have produced an even greater top-heavy force so was arguably a favorable, if not a timely, decision.

## **COMMAND AND CONTROL**

16. CO MHF is the Force Generating Authority (FGA) for all Merlin HM Mk2 Squadrons and responsible to CO RNAS Culdrose as the Delivery Duty Holder (DDH) for their generation. Long term strategic planning is driven via direction from Commander Operations (COMOPS) via the Command Plan detailing readiness profiles and Force Elements at Readiness (FE@R) so there becomes a tension as to who generates, who employs and who reports to who. Dir FGen ultimately has responsibility for the generation of MHF and WMF and is the titular head of FAA as a fighting arm of the RN; it is ultimately their direction as to how the FAA is constructed to meet generation demands.

## **OUR PEOPLE**

17. “Our people come first” is the opening line of Chapter 1 in the recently issued Defence Command Paper<sup>11</sup>. This must be our top priority as this builds operational advantage. The independent Haythornthwaite Review was commissioned to look at the terms and conditions, and incentivisation of service in UK Armed Forces; the retention of highly trained individuals is a priority.<sup>12</sup> The career management of individuals is fundamental to this with a desire for a longer-term planning horizon. We are currently seeing turnover of individuals in positions on an 18– to 36-month average, but if this could be pushed out to 36 months as the minimum, individuals would see greater stability. It would also reduce the burden of refresher training packages and so reduce impact to the flying training pipeline. The counter to this is those who wish to progress quickly or desire an out of branch role are held in post for three years; this would be worthy of further investigation in a follow-on paper.

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<sup>10</sup> Fleet Air Arm Association, “Fleet Air Arm Battle Honours” (Accessed 12 February, 2023). [www.fleetairarmoa.org/fleet-air-arm-battle-honours](http://www.fleetairarmoa.org/fleet-air-arm-battle-honours)

<sup>11</sup> Defence Command Paper, *Defence’s response to a more contested and volatile world* (July 2023), 16.

<sup>12</sup> Rick Haythornthwaite, “Agency and Agility: Incentivising people in a new era” (2023), 15.

## CONCLUSION

18. Whilst this paper has clearly focused on MHF as a specific area they are not alone in the issues faced. Change fatigue has been rife during transformation and change for change's sake is seen as a new norm. It has been argued that whilst efficiencies can be made and should be sought, this must be balance with continuity and maintenance of morale. If a principle of war is selection and maintenance of the aim, then selection and maintenance of a solution would be a wise choice.

19. Cox et al., conclude that change fatigue can manifest itself in employees through increased stress, potential burnout, reduced commitment to an organisation and greater likelihood of leaving that employment<sup>13</sup>. To counter this, a pause to considered changes in force construct is recommended which will increase stability and continuity for personnel. This will result in increased work satisfaction, reduced impact on family and personnel life and therefore be a retention positive measure, placing people at the heart of the organisation. This is in line with defence priorities and RN Strategy and therefore maximises operational capability for the future.

## RECOMMENDATION

20. Dir FGen agrees to secure the construct of MHF for no less than three years allowing a period of stability and continuity. It is recommended Director Personnel and Training (Dir P&T) investigates a lengthening of the standard appointing cycle to 36 months minimum to provide continuity and reduce training burden. These measures will in tandem reduce change fatigue within MHF.

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<sup>13</sup> Cody B. Cox, Emily Gallegos, Gregory J. Pool, K. Matthew Gilley, and Natasha Haight, "Mapping the Nomological Network of Change Fatigue: Identifying Predictors, Mediators and Consequences," *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 35, no. 4/5 (2022): 730.



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