

Part 1.7 Comments by Commander-in-Chief Air Command (Reviewing Officer)

1. I judge that the Panel conducted this investigation thoroughly despite the unusual and difficult circumstances and I join the Convening Authority (CA) in thanking them for their hard work. I have reviewed the report in its entirety to assure myself that military aviation has drawn everything possible from this tragic accident. My thoughts, as set out below, are independent from any other proceedings that have been undertaken.

2. The Inquiry has unearthed a catalogue of significant training, supervisory and authorisation issues in their investigations, all of which I accept. Where I have struggled is in understanding how the Puma Force came to be in the situation that was revealed in the 2008 Puma Force Review and confirmed in the evidence presented to this inquiry. Operational readiness and effectiveness are rightly the metrics which we aspire to deliver against; however, this must always be done with an eye to safety, which is the Chief of the Air Staff's and my number one priority. This does not mean that we will always deliver safely or at all costs – aviation is not a risk free activity and there is a risk reward balance to be struck which, for example, on operations may lead us to elect to accept that the activities we are undertaking will be perilous – and potentially less safe than would normally be the case. However, there were no such pressures in the circumstances that prevailed at the time of this accident – conducting the activity safely should have been an absolute priority.

3. Turning generically to the issues above in an effort to determine what might have prevented the accident I offer the following observations and clarification. It falls to those in the chain of command to ensure that an atmosphere of responsibility and trust runs through their organisation. This is achieved by example, education, attentiveness and careful empowerment. Successful inculcation of responsibility will require diligence and moral courage and if there are doubts as to the suitability of the personnel available to undertake tasks asked of that unit the tasks are either to be declined or another way of completing them must be found. Whilst a "can do" attitude has its place it is not a panacea to meet unreasonable demands from higher authority; should they occur, those in authority at the unit concerned must have the character and courage in their convictions to explain the circumstances to their higher (tasking) authority. They should not press on regardless with delivery. At the individual level, professionalism is the order of the day. Our training system and standardisation processes are well tested and internationally respected; they emphasise that task requirements and safety must be balanced, erring on the side of safety where there is any doubt, and they provide the handrail needed by tyros as they gather experience. Only the overconfident or foolhardy would choose to disregard these precepts and there is no room for such individuals in today's Royal Air Force. I am therefore deeply disappointed to observe that the evidence uncovered by the Panel demonstrates that this sortie was not conducted to the required professional standards.

4. I accept the Recommendations of the Inquiry with the amendments proposed by the CA. In particular I support his observation that the crew's actions were a contributory rather than an aggravating factor in the accident. In mitigation of the actions of the supervisory chain I accept that Force operational commitments were weighing heavily upon them, that the Sqn was undermanned and that the crews available were inexperienced. However, the outcome was unacceptable and unnecessary. Taskings are not immutable; planned activities must reflect experience levels, currency and availability; discipline must be engendered in all of our personnel through education and oversight; supervision is an active not a passive responsibility and must adapt to reflect the experience and qualifications of those involved; and higher command is responsible for the oversight, and where necessary curtailment, of activity. In this tragic accident all of these tenets were overlooked to some degree and in combination they culminated in this tragic accident. It follows that all of us and our successors will have an active part to play in ensuring that an accident of this type does

not occur again. As a first step to ensuring that we do so, the lessons gleaned from this report must be given the widest publicity.

S Bryant
Air Chief Marshal
Commander-in-Chief Air Command