

WORDS AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRIAN HARTIGAN

cuttlebutt had it that the Australian government was all set to announce a direct purchase of the 'Team Romeo' Sikorsky MH-60R without going to tender.

Why? Because the helicopter was touted as the only in-service machine capable of replacing the current Sea Hawk fleet and covering the capability gap left by the cancellation of the Seasprite project.

Well, Australian Aerospace wasn't going to cop that lying down, so they 'borrowed' an Italian Navy owned model of their own contender – the NH90 NFH (NATO frigate helicopter) – and brought it Downunder for a whirlwind tour that included such PR gems as a sonar-dipping demo-flight on Sydney Harbour during official Australia Day celebrations, and various media-, military- and political-passenger 'joy flights' around the country.

Of course, it wasn't all 'jollies', with the helicopter flying up to four sorties per day at the Royal Australian Navy's fleet-air headquarters in Nowra, with Australian Navy personnel witnessing "real mission profiles."

And, the expensive gamble paid off.

The government announced on 25 February that Project AIR9000 Phase 8 would indeed go out to tender, with MH-60R and NH90 NFH listed as the only two contenders.

A very relieved Australian Aerospace CEO Jens Goennemann said the Australian tour by the Italian Navy helicopter was very important in the argument that eventually caused the decision to go to tender.

"It was definitely worth the effort, to prove that NH90 is a mature helicopter and was ready for competition," he said.

"This demonstration tour was logistically a challenge, but we felt the time was right to bring the helicopter to this country.

"During this two weeks I can say it was an overwhelming success.

"We made a total of 30 sorties, adding up to 34 flight hours, with a maintenance crew of just four people – and achieved an availability rate of 93 per cent.

"That is brilliant by every helicopter standard – and even more brilliant for such a new helicopter that is called immature by some."

In another PR coup, Dr Goennemann invited CONTACT (and other media) to lunch, where he pulled few punches in describing NH90 as "the only truly multi-role helicopter being considered by the Australian government – with genuine anti-ship missiles rather than light-weight missiles that were designed to attack tanks – and the only helicopter that can satisfy the

AIR9000 requirement to reduce the number of helicopter types in use with the ADF."

"NH90 NFH can deliver every requirement the Royal Australian Navy desires, plus it will satisfy the government's desire to create opportunities for Australian industry, with 750 new jobs to be created in Brisbane."

With a competitive process now under way, a decision on which helicopter will replace the in-service Australian Sea Hawk and the defunct Seasprite is expected next year, with initial deliveries to commence in 2014.

By that time, NH90 will be fully operational with several foreign navies, "thus making any claim that the helicopter is immature and will not be ready to meet Australian requirements, truly false," Dr Goennemann said.



EXPENSIVE

GAMBLE



NH90 NFH v MH-60R size comparison



Technical Data	NH90 NFH	MH-60R
Max gross weight	10,600kg	10,659kg
Power plant	2 x RTM 322-01/9	2 x T700-GE401C
Power	1788kW – 2397shp (max 30 min)	2554kW – 3426shp (max takeoff 5min) 1425kW – 1911shp (normal)
Max Cruise Speed	290km/h – 157kts	267km/h – 144kts