The Tribune
CHANDIGARH, WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 4, 2010

Check exodus of technical manpower

WG CDR D.P. SABHARWAL (RETD)

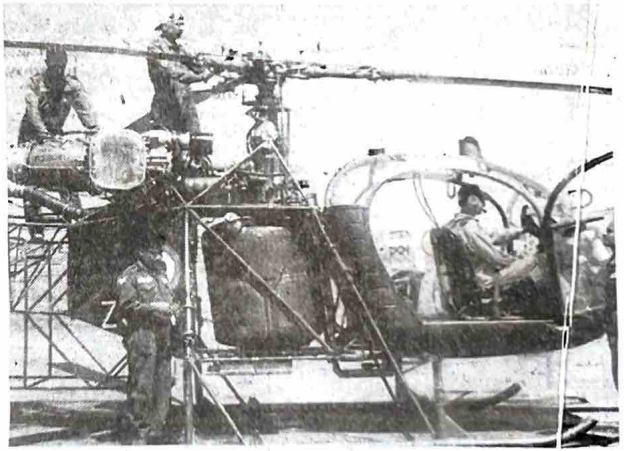
Wars may be fought with machines but are won by the men behind them, is an age-old maxim whose wisdom can neither be negated nor denied. But that it can be ignored, is perhaps the notion many present day air force commanders seem to have. It is sad as it cannot be proved during peacetime that it can be ignored and in times of war it would be too costly in terms of lives and equipment lost.

Driving a car is easier than maintaining it. Moreover, the car and its systems are relatively less in number and simple as compared to an aircraft. A modern day aircraft costing hundreds of crores of rupees is a very intricate and complex machine. To maintain it in a flyworthy condition round the clock is a challenging if not ...ting task. Therefore, the ...entrusted with this task have to be fully fit physically and more so mentally. This however is not the case, if one looks at the number of technicians seeking pre-mature release.

Technicians are among the most important assets of the air force, constituting almost 65 per cent of the manpower. For the past many years, they are leaving in large numbers. There are many important aspects linked to this that need consideration. Firstly, they are leaving in the prime of their lives, at an age of 38-40 years. Secondly, they are leaving after an experience of 20 odd years, which is too good to be lost. Thirdly, those who are leaving are no dead-wood. In fact they are generally the best. They are skilled and have enough confidence that they will be able to settle in another job outside. On the contrary those who are not confident of themselves prefer to remain in service, keep cribbing about the not-so-conducive environment and continue giving their second or third best to the organisation.

There may be many reasons why technicians leave, but the sad part is the organisation is apparently not interested in knowing these. This feeling arises from the simple fact that there is no system in place to obtain the exit feedback. The air-warrior gives his unwillingness to continue in service almost 30 months before he can hang his uniform. During this long period, he is not interviewed by his immediate section commander or the commanding officer or any other specialist from higher echelons. He is neither advised nor counseled against leaving or continuing in service. He is just asked by Air Force Records Office, which he visits for final clearance, to fill a two-page performa stating his reasons for leaving. What happens to this lone performa, no one knows.

Upward communication in any organisation, is as essential as



downward communication for proper functioning and growth. In fact many organisations regard it more useful and value upward communication from its employees, since it is considered good for growth as well as employee morale. The defence forces, at one point of time, used to employ this method to great use. There used to be "barakhanas" (lunch or dinner with subordinates in their mess) and "welfare meetings" that were meaningful. Subordinates were made comfortable and coaxed to come out with grievances, small or big, relevant or irrelevant. The fact that they were able to do so in the presence of their commanding officer, considered to be the father figure, gave them a lot of solace and mental satisfaction. All this is being done today, but apparently without any heart and soul in it and merely as a formality on the part of seniors. Even subordinates tend to feel uncomfortable at such meetings and in fact, are reluctant to bring out irregularities or disturbing points for fear they may be harassed and victimised.

Another important area in which the air force has not done anything except making cosmetic changes is related to security duties by highly skilled technicians. Imagine technicians who are paid Rs 25,000 or so per month are required to do night duties guarding buildings and hangers. How effective they are in performing such duties is anybody's guess, but one thing is clear. Professional security personnel such as pre-maturely retired army personnel can perform such duties more efficiently.

Yet another important point is that technical airmen seeking pre-mature release make a beeline for clerical jobs, preferably in banks, while there is a great shortage of trained technicians in civil airlines. There is no cell in the vast Air Headquarters to look in to this aspect and do the necessary tie-up with Directorate General of Civil Aviation.

The air force is going in a big way to modernise its ageing fleet. More complex and state-of-the-art aircraft would require trained and skilled technicians. Before the new aircraft arrive, the air force needs to modernise its thinking process, look into the reasons for the large outflow of the skilled manpower and take timely steps to arrest the trend. Only then will it be able to "touch the sky with glory".