Chapter 7

Government Flying Service

Overview

Role of the Government Flying Service

7.1 The Government Flying Service was established in April 1993 under the GFS Ordinance (Cap. 322) to take over the functions of the then Royal Hong Kong Auxiliary Air Force (RHKAAF). It operates within the Hong Kong territory as well as in international waters within the 400 nautical mile radius of the Hong Kong Flight Information Region. The GFS provides flying services for the Government, including search and rescue operations in the open seas in the middle of typhoons, fire-fighting and conveyance of casualties to hospitals.

7.2 With enhanced capabilities of its fleet, the GFS has, over the years, developed into an internationally renowned search and rescue agency. Its operations have extended beyond Hong Kong. It has set a record of rescuing 91 lives from the wild seas during the passage of Typhoon Prapiroon in August 2006. Over the three-week deployment to the earthquake-hit Sichuan in May 2008, the GFS crew were involved in 26 operations, in which 96 casualties were brought to safety and 119 members of ground search teams and specialists were flown to the disaster areas. These missions have won applause to Hong Kong and the GFS and demonstrated the professionalism and esprit de corps of the GFS crew.

Organisation Structure

7.3 The GFS is headed by the Controller, GFS. He is supported by the following five sections –

(a) *the Operations Section* provides flying services, including search and rescue and casualty evacuation, to the community of Hong Kong as well as people who make a living in the South China Sea, and

supports law enforcement operations and government tasks;

(b) *the Training and Standards Section* is responsible for setting professional standards and overseeing training and development of all aircrew;

(c) *the Engineering Section* is an approved Hong Kong Aviation Requirements 145 maintenance organisation supporting all flying and operational activities. It provides maintenance services virtually to all GFS aircraft and equipment;

(d) *the Quality Section* is the internal auditor to ensure that the operation of the GFS conforms to civil aviation flying regulations and other quality and flight safety standards; and

(e) *the Administration Section* provides administrative support to the whole Department.

Staffing

7.4 As at 1 January 2008, the GFS had an establishment of 223, including 166 posts under the disciplined services grades of Pilot, Air Crewman Officer (ACMO), Aircraft Engineer (AE) and Aircraft Technician (AT). Details are set out in *Table 7.1*.

Table 7.1: Distribution of disciplined services posts in the GFS as at 1 January 2008

Grade	No. of Established Posts (%)
Directorate	4 (2%)
Pilot	41 (25%)
Air Crewman Officer	27 (16%)
Aircraft Engineer	24 (15%)
Aircraft Technician	70 (42%)
Total	166 (100%)

Grade and Rank Structure

7.5 The Controller, GFS is ranked at GDS(C) 3. He is underpinned at the directorate level by two Chief Pilots and one Chief Aircraft Engineer, all ranked at GDS(C) 1.

7.6 At the non-directorate level, there are four ranks each in the Pilot grade and the ACMO grade, two ranks in the AE grade and three ranks in the AT grade. The current grade structure has reflected the creation of the new ranks of Senior Air Crewman Officer (SACMO) in 1990 and Chief Pilot in 1992; and the amalgamation of the Air Crewman and ACMO grades in 2000. Details of their rank structure and existing pay scales are set out at **Appendix 15**.

7.7 The GFS grades, unlike the majority of other grades and ranks in the Disciplined Services, are not structured distinctly into the Rank and File and Officer cadres. In this connection, we note that the then RHKAAF departmental grades were remunerated on the Master Pay Scale before they were transferred to the General Disciplined Services Pay Scales in May 1989 in the light of the recommendations of Mr Rennie[21] and the advice of the Standing Committee.

Relevant Considerations

Job Factors and Special Factors

7.8 We have considered the job factors and special factors in respect of the GFS grades. Some key features are set out below –

(a) Potential danger and risks faced by aircrew are relatively high since the pilots and ACMO are required to work under all weather conditions in search and rescue missions and handle a range of dangerous, unfamiliar and unpredictable situations in order to save lives. They suffer a high degree of stress as each flying mission is unique with uncertainty and difficulties.

[21] The Rennie Review in 1988 did not cover the GFS (or the then RHKAAF) as the latter was in the middle of transformation from a military set-up to a civilian Disciplined Service. Subsequently, the Administration invited Mr Rennie, in his personal capacity, to conduct a study of the RHKAAF and advise how it should be brought within the ambit of the Disciplined Services. At the invitation of the Administration in May 1989, the Standing Committee agreed to assume responsibility for advising on the salaries and conditions of service for the GFS (the then RHKAAF).

(b) Individual responsibility required of the aircrew is great especially during search and rescue operations. An ACMO is often the only rescuer at the scene and has to make difficult and timely life-and-death decisions independently. For the ground crew, they are responsible for the airworthiness of the aircraft and hence their work bears crucial importance in terms of flight safety.

(c) All GFS staff have to perform shift duties although their conditioned hours of work are 44 hours per week. They are also subject to the requirement to be on-call and are liable to be called out for emergency tasks during off-duty. Owing to the reactive nature of their work, the aircrew are not expected to work particularly long periods of continuous duty, except for special missions.

Changes Since Last Reviews

7.9 Both the GFS management and staff have highlighted that many changes in the past two decades have significant impact on their role and mode of operation, which further heighten the level of responsibilities, workload and pressure on the staff. Some of the more significant changes are summarised below –

(a) *Changes in modus operandi and professional qualification :* In the past, the RHKAAF had many features of an auxiliary military force in its command structure and mode of operation, and its pilots and engineers were not required to hold any civilian professional licence in performing their duties. Since its establishment in 1993, the GFS has been operating in accordance with civilian rules and regulations and is subject to the regulatory scrutiny of the Hong Kong Civil Aviation Department. These new requirements are more stringent than before, resulting in higher demand on the qualifications and professional abilities of the aircrew and ground crew. All pilots and engineers are required to hold professional licences to carry

out their duties, which have to be validated periodically. Particularly for the pilots, their licences are also subject to the requirement of currency.

(b) *Changes in span of responsibilities :* The phasing out of the British Royal Air Force and the Army Air Corp in the early 1990s resulted in the GFS having to gradually shoulder some of the responsibilities previously shared among these agencies. To support its enhanced role, the GFS has expedited its localisation programme, put in place a comprehensive training plan and strengthened its fleet of aircraft and equipment. The tasks and missions performed by the GFS crew have been expanded in types and complexity, and the missions are much more demanding, exposing the crew to higher level of risk.

(c) *Changes in aircraft fleet :* With its expanded role and responsibilities, the GFS has to provide a safe platform for its crew to handle the demanding and risky operations. The Department has undertaken replacement programmes on its fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters, and the current aircraft fleet is much more sophisticated and technologically advanced than those operated in the RHKAAF days. At present, the GFS operates a fleet of nine aircraft, including two Jetstream-41 fixed-wing aircraft, three AS332 L2 Super Puma helicopters and four EC155 B1 helicopters. The enhanced capability of the aircraft requires a corresponding enhancement of the skills and training of both the operating aircrew and the engineering staff.

(d) *Changes in establishment :* The GFS has emerged from an auxiliary service (with 98 auxiliary members out of 199 staff in 1988) into a department (with 223 permanent staff as at 1 January 2008) providing full-time, round-the-clock and all-weather service in support of rescue and law enforcement. The current establishment is more or less similar to

the level in 1993, despite an expansion of the GFS's work portfolio during the period.

7.10 Some workload indicators of the GFS are summarised in *Table 7.2*.

Table 7.2: Examples of workload indicators of the GFS

	1988 (RHKAAF)	1998	2006	2007
Establishment as at 1 April	199[22]	254	225	223
Number of Aircraft[23]	10	11	9	9
Total flying hours[24]				
(a) Fixed wing	1 316	1 454	1 266	1 282
(b) Helicopters	1 758	5 628	4 690	4 306
Number of call-outs	379	1 879	2 476	2 293

Recruitment

7.11 Recruitment statistics of the GFS grades reflect no recruitment difficulty. For the aircrew grades of Pilot and ACMO, we note that recruitment of Cadet Pilots is carefully planned for better succession such that vacancies are not filled at one go and normally only two to four candidates are accepted in each recruitment exercise. For recruitment of Air Crewman Officer III (ACMO III), some 1 992 applications were received in the recent recruitment exercise against three vacancies.

7.12 There is no recruitment difficulty in the AE and AT ranks either. Qualified AT grade officers may also join the AE rank through in-service appointment.

Retention

7.13 Retention has been an emerging issue in the Pilot grade. In the past five years, five pilots left the Pilot grade in total: one Pilot I in 2006-07, one Senior Pilot in 2007-08 and three (including one

[22] The figures include the Volunteer Members.

[23] Although the fleet size in the earlier years was slightly larger, they were simple aircraft that were relatively easy to operate and maintain.

[24] The number of flying hours include hours for training, operations and related tasks.

Pilot I and two Pilot II) in 2008-09, causing a loss of operational experience. This also represents a loss in financial terms as the total training costs for each Cadet Pilot alone amount to $1.2 million for aeroplane training and $2.0 million for helicopter training, not to mention the costs of in-house upgrading and recurrent training to enable the staff to perform the full range of the GFS operations and retain currency.

7.14 For the ACMO grade, the GFS is facing retention difficulties at the ACMO III level. A total of six ACMO III left in the past five years. Details of the wastage figures other than retirement cases are summarised in *Table 7.3*.

Table 7.3: Wastage from the ACMO III rank in the past five years

Recruitment rank		2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08
ACMO III	Wastage	1	0	1	2	2
	As % of strength	7.1%	-	7.7%	16.7%	15.4%

7.15 For the AE and AT grades, we observe no retention problem.

Career Progression

7.16 We have looked into the promotion prospects in the GFS in very broad terms. Staff profile information of the GFS grades indicates that their average length of in-rank service before promotion to the next higher rank is generally within reasonable ranges. As at 1 January 2008, about 71% of the staff were serving on the maximum pay point of the ranks (detailed figures in respect of the recruitment ranks of ACMO III, AE and AT were 55%, 80% and 100% respectively). The rank ratio is reasonable although the small establishment in some ranks may restrict actual promotion opportunities. In this respect, we have to emphasise the fundamental principle that promotion is not a right and is in practice subject to a range of factors such as availability of vacancies, operational need, age profile of serving staff and individual merit.

Analysis and Recommendations

Pilot Grade

Cadet Pilot Rank

7.17 We agree that the Cadet Pilot is a training rank and its existing academic entry qualification (i.e. matriculation) is sufficient to meet the job requirement. The Cadet Pilot pay scale, i.e. GDS(O) 1b-2, should remain unchanged. (**Recommendation 7.1**)

Pilot II to Senior Pilot Ranks

7.18 There are requests for raising the starting and maximum pay of the Pilot ranks on grounds of retention, motivation and increased job complexity. We are aware that with a shortage of pilots worldwide, the salaries of pilots in the commercial sector are rising and qualified pilots are being drawn to companies offering better remuneration packages. As mentioned in paragraph 7.13, the Pilot grade encounters a rather serious wastage problem in 2008-09, and the retention issue may aggravate as competition for talents in the aviation sector intensifies.

7.19 Notwithstanding the above, we consider that the pay of the Pilot II does not compare less favourably with that for junior First Officers in the commercial sector, bearing in mind the substantial differences in flight hours and the purposes of the flight. We believe that the main reason why a GFS pilot leaves, normally after expiry of the ten-year training bond period applicable to Cadet Pilots, is for gaining the requisite experience required for career purpose (either the aircraft type or flight time or both) rather than for immediate financial gain. In fact, for those pilots who decided to pursue a career in the commercial career, they have to move to an aircraft type used by the major carriers and focus on building up the flight time before they are considered for appointment. The existing work nature of a fixed-wing pilot with relatively limited flight time may not be conducive to a career with a major commercial carrier. Those pilots who choose to leave the GFS often face a pay cut in the short term with a view to gaining a substantial increase in the medium to long term. Giving them more pay in the GFS therefore does not seem to be able to contain or solve the problem.

7.20 At the outset, we wish to point out that there are intrinsic differences between a career in the GFS and the commercial career. It is evident to us that the GFS crew are driven by a strong sense of mission, a sense of achievement to save lives and protect property, and the privilege and honour to serve. Training and development opportunities, a caring and supportive management, the esprit de corps of the staff and stability of employment are also important. These intangible factors outweigh the material gains in attracting and motivating them to deliver quality service with professionalism. Within the framework of the civil service remuneration system, we do not find it possible to match the salary and fringe benefits in the market, which are, in turn, subject to fluctuations from time to time. A balance has to be struck, and we have to ensure that the remuneration package, coupled with the intangible factors, is considered fair and reasonable by the staff and the community at large.

7.21 Taking into account the job factors and other relevant considerations, we recommend enhancing the pay scales of the Pilot ranks as follows (**Recommendation 7.2**) –

Rank	Existing Pay Scale	Recommended Pay Scale
Pilot II	GDS(O) 14–25	GDS(O) 14–26
Pilot I	GDS(O) 26–35	GDS(O) 27–36
Senior Pilot	GDS(O) 36–38	GDS(O) 37–39

The improvements should help alleviate the wastage problem to a certain extent.

Incremental Jumps

7.22 In view of the retention issue of the Pilot II rank, which is the first functional rank in the Pilot grade, we see a need to provide additional motivation in the rank by recognising enhanced professional competence and duties required. For this purpose, we recommend introducing incremental jumps to the Pilot II rank as follows–

(a) two additional incremental jumps to Pilot IIs who have obtained dual licences for both helicopter and fixed-wing aircraft and are required to perform Pilot I flying duties frequently; and

(b) another two incremental jumps to Pilot IIs who have obtained an Instrument Rating, become qualified to operate as Captain in coastal and day offshore search and rescue in accordance with the GFS Operations Manual approved by the Civil Aviation Department and are required to perform Pilot I flying duties frequently.

These additional incremental jumps serve to provide financial incentive to those Pilot II who have not yet reached the maximum scale of the rank. (**Recommendation 7.3**)

Other Related Issues

7.23 There are also requests to upgrade certain Pilot II posts to Pilot I rank to enhance operational flexibility and to ensure that rescue missions are staffed by officers with the experience and proficiency commensurate with higher risks associated with flying duties in severe weather and challenging operating environment. We encourage the GFS to review whether it is functionally justified to pursue these proposals and, where appropriate, take them forward under the existing mechanism.

7.24 The staff also propose to change the rank titles of the Pilot grade to better reflect their roles and responsibilities in line with the aviation sector. The Standing Committee is open-minded on this subject so long as the change has no implication on the grade's structure or pay. On this understanding, we encourage the GFS management to discuss with the staff with a view to formulating mutually agreed proposals for pursuing with the Administration.

Air Crewman Officer Grade

Entry Pay

7.25 Both the GFS management and staff have requested that the entry pay of the ACMO grade be raised on a par with other equivalent disciplined services ranks in order to attract and retain staff as well as to reflect the increased job complexity.

7.26 The ACMO grade is a hybrid grade with a pay scale straddling both the Rank and File and the Officer grades. Indeed, the present structure stems from the amalgamation of the former Air Crewman grade which was a Rank and File grade and the former ACMO grade which was an Officer grade. The merger in 2000 was intended to streamline the grade structure, enhance staff management and formalise the advancement arrangement. It was approved on the premise that the merger would be cost-neutral; be in line with the localisation of GFS staff (which rendered it unnecessary to recruit the ACMO from overseas); raise the morale of the Air Crewman grade by streamlining the progression; and avoid proliferation of small grades. As currently structured, the ACMO grade comprises four ranks: ACMO III, ACMO II, ACMO I, and SACMO.

7.27 Unlike the Rank and File grades in other Disciplined Services, the ACMO III has a better career progression to the Officer level. As distinct from most Officer grades in other Disciplined Services, the ACMO grade does not have command responsibilities over any Rank and File grade. In recognition of this unique nature, the entry pay for the ACMO III rank straddles the GDS(R) and GDS(O) Pay Scales, with its standard entry at GDS(O) 1b for matriculants and GDS(R) 7 for school certificate leavers. Given the uniqueness of the ACMO grade, we do not consider it appropriate to have direct comparison with either the Rank and File grades or the Officer grades in the Disciplined Services requiring similar academic qualifications. We should instead focus on the job factors, recruitment, retention and career progression of the ACMO grade.

7.28 We note that the ACMO III rank has no recruitment difficulty, showing that the present entry pay is sufficient to attract people of suitable calibre to apply and join the ACMO grade. Moreover, we see the merit to have broad relativity between the entry pay point for the ACMO III and Cadet Pilot at GDS(O) 1b. We therefore recommend that the entry pay for the ACMO III be maintained at the current level. (**Recommendation 7.4**)

7.29 The staff have proposed to raise the present levels of starting salary for ACMO III and add multiple entry points for recruits holding higher qualifications. We have consulted the GFS management and understand that the current arrangement would better reflect the nature of a hybrid grade. We therefore recommend that no

change be made. This is consistent with our recommendation not to introduce more multiple entry points above the reference benchmark qualifications.

Incremental Jumps

7.30 As mentioned in paragraph 7.14, the ACMO III rank encounters rather serious retention difficulties, particularly in the first five years of service. We also note that an ACMO III has to undergo a series of rigorous training in his early career to equip him with a wide spectrum of technical skills. At present, an ACMO III is granted four incremental jumps: two upon passing the qualifying examination at Level 3 of the crewman training (i.e. qualified as a Winchman, which normally takes place within the first three years of their appointment); and another two incremental jumps for passing Level 5 of the training (i.e. qualified as Winch Operator for night mission, which is normally attained in the fifth year of appointment).

7.31 To address the retention problem and recognise the increased skill level of the ACMO III, we recommend that one incremental jump each be awarded upon passing the qualifying examination at Levels 1, 2 and 4 of the crewman training, such that an ACMO III will enjoy three more incremental jumps within the first five years on obtaining the relevant qualifications. The improvements will help address the retention issue facing the ACMO III rank. **(Recommendation 7.5)**

Pay Scales

7.32 We appreciate the increasingly important role and higher level of responsibilities of the ACMO grade as a result of the changes in the operating environment of search and rescue work. Taking into account the job factors and other relevant considerations, we recommend improving the pay scales of the different ranks in the ACMO grade as follows (**Recommendation 7.6**) –

Rank	Existing Pay Scale	Recommended Pay Scale
Air Crewman Officer III	GDS(R) 7–GDS(O) 16	GDS(R) 7–GDS(O) 17
Air Crewman Officer II	GDS(O) 17–25	GDS(O) 18–26
Air Crewman Officer I	GDS(O) 26–35	GDS(O) 27–36
Senior Air Crewman Officer	GDS(O) 36–38	GDS(O) 37–39

Aircraft Engineer Grade

7.33 The staff have proposed that the entry qualification of the future AE recruits be formally defined as: (a) qualified with aircraft maintenance licence in either (i) Cat. B1.1 and Cat. B1.3; or (ii) Cat B2; and (b) valid aircraft maintenance experience of certain duration in civilian aviation in supervisory role. Other proposals suggest creation of a new Assistant AE rank to improve the career prospects of the AT grade. Given that these proposals involve major structural changes, we consider it more appropriate for the GFS management to follow this up and revert in due course when it has completed deliberations on the proposed arrangements in re-defining the role of the AE grade vis-à-vis restructuring the AT grade (paragraphs 7.38 to 7.40 below are relevant).

7.34 The AE rank has not encountered any recruitment difficulty, indicating that the present entry pay is sufficient to attract candidates of suitable calibre to join the rank. We recommend that the entry pay of the AE rank should be maintained at the current level. (**Recommendation 7.7**)

7.35 Taking into account that responsibilities of the AE grade have increased in line with the evolution of the aircraft maintenance licensing system and that they are now required to work on both helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft as well as other supporting duties, we recommend raising the pay scales of the respective ranks as follows (**Recommendation 7.8**) –

Rank	Existing Pay Scale	Recommended Pay Scale
Aircraft Engineer	GDS(O) 22–35	GDS(O) 22–36
Senior Aircraft Engineer	GDS(O) 36–37	GDS(O) 37–38

The maximum pay point of the Senior AE rank will remain to be one point lower than that of the SACMO rank to retain the one point difference between the aircrew and the ground crew.

Aircraft Technician Grade

Pay Scales

7.36 There is no recruitment difficulty in the AT grade. We propose that the entry pay of the AT rank should remain unchanged. Nevertheless, we note that the responsibilities of the AT grade have increased in line with the evolution of the aircraft maintenance licensing system and that they are now required to work on both helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft as well as other supporting duties, in tandem with the expanded scope of the AE grade. We therefore recommend upgrading the pay scales of the AT ranks as follows (**Recommendation 7.9**) –

Rank	Existing Pay Scale	Recommended Pay Scale
Aircraft Technician	GDS(R) 3–GDS(O) 5	GDS(R) 3–GDS(O) 6
Senior Aircraft Technician	GDS(O) 6–11	GDS(O) 7–12
Chief Aircraft Technician	GDS(O) 12–24	GDS(O) 13–25

7.37 There are requests from the staff that Long Service Increments (LSI) should be introduced to the AT grade to motivate staff with long and meritorious performance. As explained in Chapter 3 (paragraph 3.21), LSI are designed for the first ranks of the Rank and File grades since a significant portion of them are unlikely to have promotion beyond the first rank despite meritorious and long service given the special command structures in the disciplined services Rank and File grades. In this light, we do not see valid reasons for introducing the LSI to the AT grade, which is not a Rank and File grade.

Restructuring Proposal

7.38 The management has expressed the view that the current three-tier structure of the AT grade is not entirely satisfactory. Their main consideration is that as a result of the changeover of the GFS to a

civilian regulatory agency, certification work was removed from the Chief Aircraft Technician rank while the GFS has to appoint more licensed AE in order to fulfil the legal requirements of having a licensed personnel to certify aircraft maintenance work and release of the aircraft.

7.39 The GFS proposes to take the opportunity to review the working relationship of the AE and AT grades, with a view to improving the deployment of resources. We understand that the management is giving detailed thought to various issues in the proposal, including reforming the AT grade by re-shuffling of duties, grade re-structuring, upgrading the entry qualification from apprenticeship or a Polytechnic/Technical Institute Certificate to Higher Diploma, consequential impact on the AE rank, as well as transitional arrangements for serving staff.

7.40 We agree with the management that the overall direction is correct. These measures, if come to fruition, will help develop a highly qualified workforce to meet operational demands. We are, however, mindful of the views of the AT grade as some grade members may be concerned about the pace of reform and the implications on the future manpower provision. The management would need to proceed carefully, taking into account the long-term development needs as well as the interests of all stakeholders. Hence, at this embryonic stage when concrete proposals have yet to be fully formulated, we consider it inappropriate to form any view at this juncture. We understand the GFS would continue to formulate detailed proposals in consultation with the staff and the Administration before seeking our advice in due course.

The Directorate

7.41 The GFS has submitted the following proposals on directorate ranks and posts –

(a) the post of the Controller, GFS be upgraded from GDS(C) 3 to a rank equivalent to D5 and retitled as Director, GFS;

(b) a new rank and post of Deputy Director, GFS at GDS(C) 3 be created to serve as deputy head of the Department;

(c) the two posts of Chief Pilot be upgraded from GDS(C) 1 to GDS(C) 2 to reflect job complexity; and

(d) the post of Chief Aircraft Engineer be upgraded from GDS(C) 1 to GDS(C) 2 to be in line with the pay scale for the Chief Pilot.

7.42 Ranking of the Disciplined Services Heads is a matter outside the ambit of the Standing Committee. We have therefore referred the upgrading proposal to the Standing Committee on Directorate Salaries and Conditions of Service (the Directorate Committee) for consideration. The Directorate Committee's recommendation is that the present salary levels of the Heads of Disciplined Services are appropriate and should be maintained. In other words, the pay of the Controller, GFS should be maintained at the current level of GDS(C) 3.

7.43 Having considered the nature and scale of operations of the GFS, we do not see strong functional grounds to support the creation of a deputy head at GDS(C) 3 level, nor the upgrading of the Chief Pilot and Chief Aircraft Engineer posts from GDS(C) 1 to GDS(C) 2. The current directorate structure in the GFS should remain unchanged. (**Recommendation 7.10**)

7.44 We will set out our recommendations on the directorate pay scales in Chapter 11 (paragraph 11.10).

Summary of Key Recommendations

7.45 In summary, we recommend that –

(a) the pay scales of the non-directorate ranks of the GFS should be enhanced as detailed in **Appendix 16**; and

(b) the current directorate structure in the GFS should be maintained.