

Posted By Staff Reporter

Pilot in contract dogfight with Defence Department over its Pacific aerial surveillance operation

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One of Australia's most battle-hardened Vietnam War pilots is bringing a multi-million-dollar lawsuit against the Department of Defence over its Pacific aerial surveillance operation.

Veteran forward air controller Chris Langton, who survived being shot down twice while flying 400 missions in the war, originally held a Defence contract to undertake aerial surveillance in the Western Pacific from 2014-15 with what he alleges was a clear option to extend.

But in August 2015, he alleges, Defence abruptly told him it was discontinuing the contract, leaving his Australian company millions of dollars out of pocket.

The contract was then put up to tender and was awarded to the little-known US company Technology Service Corporation, which has since become embroiled in controversy over its sole surveillance plane, a Cessna 337, being grounded in Yap.

Last week, The Australian revealed how the 40-year-old Cessna had not flown any surveillance missions because it was grounded in December after the plane was taken on a photo-op flight that raised concerns with local authorities about permits.

A frustrated Langton says the grounding of the aircraft is indicative of Defence's lack of experience in operating in the Pacific.

He confirmed he was taking legal action against Defence over the cancellation of his 2015 contract. "We were stunned and shocked when (the contract was not renewed). We had been led to believe all along that it would continue. We had to sell two planes within six months and had to lay off the crews and all the agents across the Pacific Islands."

Langton, 75, said he had been given legal advice to say he had a case for breach of contract worth millions of dollars.

He said that during last year, his lawyers had been corresponding with the Defence Department through to December seeking some form of settlement but now, because of unsatisfactory responses, he would be filing in court for breach of contract.

“They (Defence) have already been issued with a letter of demand and we have received a letter back which is unsatisfactory and we intend to file as soon as possible,” he said.

Langton said he had been doubly frustrated with the situation as Defence’s cancellation of his contract in 2015 left him out of pocket and unable to enter the tender process when the new contract was offered up last year.

He also alleges that one of his proposals to Defence to develop the contract in 2015 appeared to have been copied and offered out in the Defence Department’s Invitation to Register an Interest for the most recent contract.

Lawyers for Defence have rejected Langton’s letter of demand, saying they consider the claims contained in the draft pleading to be “without merit”.

TSC has referred all questions about the issue to Defence.

A Defence spokesman said: “It is not appropriate to comment further at this time.”

He said the approach to deliver the aerial surveillance component had been informed by Defence’s vast military and contract experiences delivering regional maritime aerial surveillance in support of Pacific Island countries.

Defence has repeatedly refused to answer questions from The Australian as to exactly what are the problems that have grounded the TSC aircraft in Yap and when they would be resolved.

SOURCE: THE AUSTRALIAN

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/defence/vietnam-war-pilot-in-contract-dogfight-with-defence-department/news-story/54bd28c9b3254a6ccd0df5d7403dad80>

<https://www.pngfacts.com/international-news/pilot-in-contract-dogfight-with-defence-department-over-its-pacific-aerial-surveillance-operation>