

TECHNOLOGY

Spyplane excites interest at World Fair

ONE OF THE HITS of Expo is the Optica, Britain's versatile spyplane. Optica's chances of success looked bleak about a year ago when the plane crashed, killing two policemen.

Optica Industries of Salisbury, is now receiving a steady stream of inquiries from visitors to the British Pavilion. The three-seater plane—which looks like a combination of a helicopter cockpit and an unconventional airplane—is on display outside the pavilion, alongside John Lennon's Rolls-Royce. A computerised data base inside the pavilion allows visitors to obtain a hard copy of information about all of Britain's exhibits.

Most of the inquiries are coming from law enforcement agencies in the US and Canada. The plane is also likely to be flown at the Abbotsford Air Show. The show will be held 45 kilometres east of Vancouver from August 4 to 10.

Last week, Optica Industries signed an agreement with an aviation company in Toronto to sell four of the planes this year and the components for a further 16 planes over the next two years. The company, Payne Aviation Industries, plans to assemble the Optica in Canada from 1987. It will either sell them or offer them on long-term contracts.

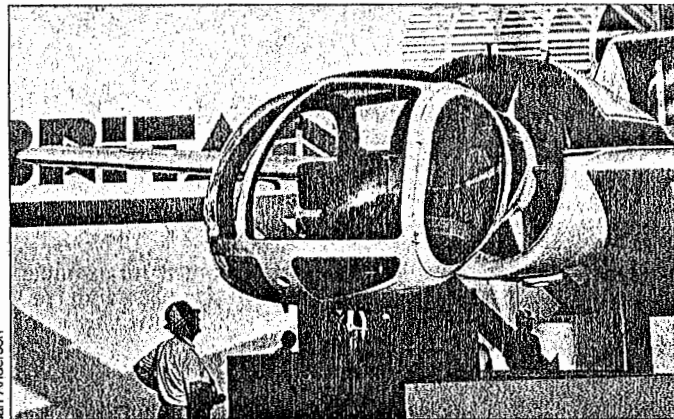
The company's head, George Payne, acknowledged last week that he still has to raise all the capital for the purchase. "The deal is dependent on my getting the money, but I don't expect that to be a problem," Payne saw the plane at last year's Paris Air Show and contacted Optica Industries at Expo.

The Optica, a promising and cheap solution to surveillance needs, has had a chequered history. The firm was reconstituted last January after the initial investors, Edgley Aircraft, went into receivership.

Ian Anderson, Vancouver

The results of the Department of Transport's inquiry into the accident are due within three weeks. Optica officials have seen a final draft of the report and they do not expect the aircraft's mechanical or structural performance to be blamed for the crash.

The Optica has a stall speed of 43 knots



Optica—a hit with the police in the US and Canada

or 79 kilometres/hour. It is ideal for long-duration surveillance work, including the patrolling of borders, forests, pipelines, power supplies and police operations. Also, it costs about one-fifth the price of a helicopter.

A ducted fan mounted behind the cockpit diverts air downward and gives the plane lift. The profile of the wing adds to the lift at high speeds. Maximum speed is 259 kilometres/hour. It can "loiter" on 35 per cent power at 122 kilometres/hour. The wing flaps can be extended to make the plane responsive at low speeds.

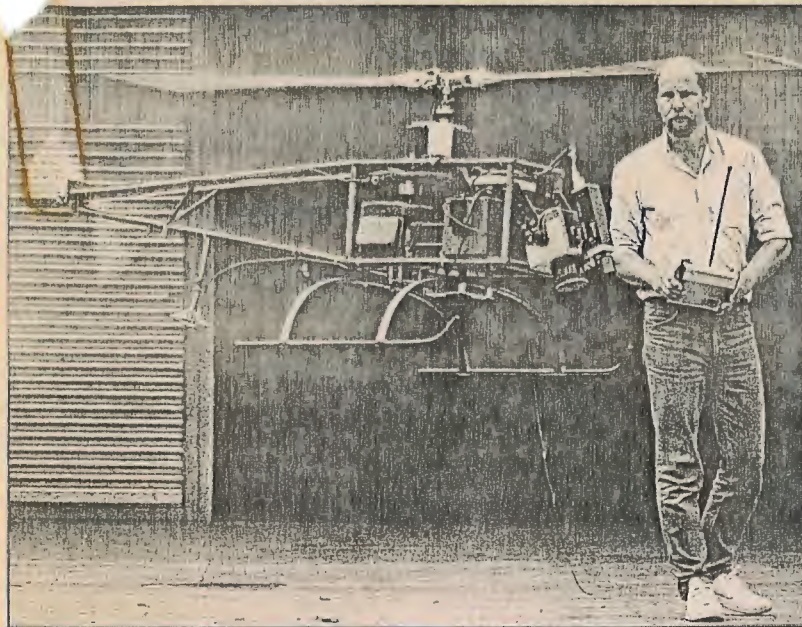
Meanwhile, orders are flowing in from other parts of the world. Alan Haikney, managing director of Optica Industries, last week finalised a deal with Contra Services of Zurich. The Swiss company sells aircraft throughout Europe and the Middle East. Three planes have been ordered, with 15 more following if the first sales are satisfactory.

Optica Industries has also been negotiating with a London-based company to sell 24 of the aircraft over two years to Nigeria. They will be used by the police and coast guard. The Ministry of Home Affairs in India is interested in six of the planes to patrol the border with Pakistan. Six Indian pilots are due in England in August to learn how to fly the Optica.

In Vancouver, a company has suggested mounting floats on the plane so that it could take off and land on water. The plane on show at Expo is likely to be fitted with the floats and to undergo test flights.

Aero Enterprises of Long Beach, California, have until the end of the year to draw up a proposal to manufacture and build the Optica in California.

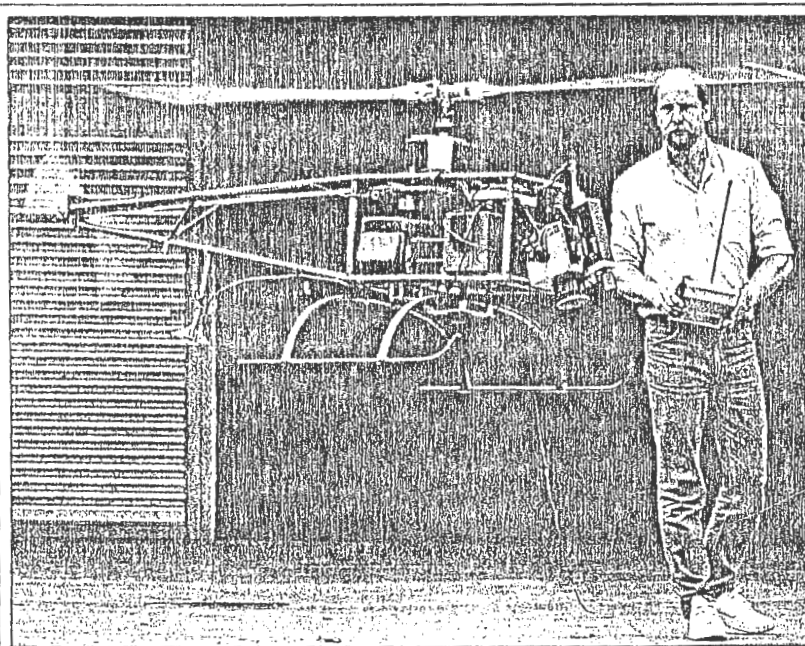
Bill Pender, sales manager for Optica Industries, says the company does not want to put out extravagant sales stories that could rebound. "Most sales are not finalised, although advanced negotiations are taking place." □



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FLIGHT INTERNATIONAL, 26 July 1986



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