Welcome Back

French legislators say, despite their deep misgivings, they are unlikely to block President Nicolas Sarkozy's plan to rejoin NATO's integrated command structure. Members of the ruling UMP party complain that NATO pledges to give France leadership of the Allied Command Transformation office in Norfolk, Va., and a regional command in Portugal do not constitute sufficient payback for relinquishing France's military independence (AW&ST Feb. 9, p. 21). According to Josselein de Rohan, chairman of the Senate foreign affairs, defense and security committee, UMP leadership intends to ensure the matter does not come to a vote, virtually guaranteeing its passage. Sarkozy is expected to announce the return to NATO command at this year's annual summit, scheduled for Apr. 3-4.

Submerged

British and French naval experts are trying to determine how two nuclear-powered submarines, both carrying nuclear missiles, collided early in February and how to prevent a recurrence in the future. The Triomphant, the first of a new generation of French submarines designed to carry the M51 ballistic missile, was forced to return to home port after striking a submerged object. On Feb. 16 the French ministry confirmed that the Triomphant had collided with the HMS Vanguard, which also returned to base. The British Defense Ministry says the incident occurred at a low speed during routine patrols in the Atlantic. The collision was the worst since the sinking of Russia's Kursk in 2000. NATO operates a system that alerts member states to the presence of submarines, but neither the French nor the British divulge their locations.

Quick-Change

Singapore Technologies Aerospace has completed its Boeing 757 conversion program for the Royal New Zealand Air Force with the delivery of a second quick-change freight-passenger aircraft.

On-Wing Care

The European Commission has granted antitrust approval to plans by Rolls-Royce and Mubadala to establish an engine maintenance joint venture. The two companies announced their plans last year to provide services to customers in the Middle East. Mubadala's Abu Dhabi Aircraft Technologies would provide on-wing care of Rolls-Royce Trent engines as well as performing engine changes and operating an asset management service for components and accessories. The EC says that although there is some overlap in the maintenance market for aircraft engines, for the majority of services, the two companies are not direct competitors because they work on different engines. As a result, the EC concluded that there are no concerns about limiting competition.

Cat's Eyes

One increasingly important safety-related educational topic during the 2009 Heli-Expo show this week in Anaheim, Calif., will be how to reduce accidents involving emergency medical service helicopters flying at night in reduced visibility. During the past 20 years, 49% of accidents involving EMS rotorcraft were traced to flying in reduced visibility at night, and that combination continues to be a serious safety issue, according to the Helicopter Assn. International (HAI). Although for three years the NTSB has recommended that EMS operators install night vision technology and implement a pilot training program for helicopter night vision goggle flights, less than one-third of helicopters in the U.S. EMS fleet are properly equipped. Wayne Richardson, training chief for Air Methods, says night vision goggles have a "profound effect upon crew participation during night operations" by helping pilots avoid obstacles. Air Methods operates 320 aircraft in 42 states and transports about 100,000 patients annually.