

By Great North News Services staff reporter

The UK MoD has just placed a £303,500 contract for around 20,000 Model 4B NATO standard compasses with Silva Limited, a 10 person company in Livingston, West Lothian. Previously made in Scotland, compasses of this sort now come from Sweden.

The West Lothian Question is of course, why does the MoD need all these compasses all of a sudden? And have they paid a reasonable price to the single supplier with whom they negotiated a deal?

This tiny story set the alarm bells ringing when the MoD answer to questions was literally "It's none of your business." Subsequent enquiries suggest this may have been the result of poor training of the hapless staff member whose name appeared in the European Contracts Bulletin as the point of contact. Further up the food chain rather more information was forthcoming than had been expected.

There's been a shortage of these personal compasses for some time, and the next roulement on Op Herrick was getting a bit anxious. Seems central stores don't get anything like the number issued coming back to them!

They're not your common or garden compasses, also manufactured by Silva, available in Tesco, so the head MoD man said, although Millets and other fine camping stores is more likely, where such things retail in the range £12-£20 a piece.

The fine specimens for our lads need to be read in the dark. And as the nice Scottish lady at Silva said, there's a world wide shortage of Tritium, which helps the glow. So they've had to be redesigned to military standards with alternative materials.

Digits have been extracted, a contract placed, and production lines cranked up. New milspec £15 compasses will be forthcoming pronto and in sufficient quantities to meet demand in Afghanistan this autumn.

When the MoD hides its light under a bushel, it's usually bad news in the undergrowth. But not this time.

Mind you, what's behind the award to a Deutsche Bahn subsidiary of a £110,000 contract for rail transit trials for 24x20 feet ISO containers within Europe and the Middle East hasn't quite been fathomed yet.