

Jean-Paul Béchat

Engineer and experienced industrial leader who became the first chief executive of Safran, overseeing the difficult merger of heavyweight French companies Snecma and Sagem

The announced merger of state-controlled French engine maker Snecma and privately-owned defence electronics group Sagem 10 years ago may have been greeted by scepticism by analysts and been more about Gallic industrial machismo than smart business. After all, Safran, the seemingly unwieldy conglomerate it created, made everything from photocopiers to unmanned air vehicles. The two seemed far from a natural fit.

But despite expressing personal doubts about the merger, Jean-Paul Béchat, Safran's first chief executive who has died aged 72, insisted the partners in the arranged marriage did have much in common. Those expecting instant cost savings or a range of jointly-developed technologies misunderstood the strategy, he told *Flight International* in an interview at Safran's Paris headquarters in 2005.

"We heard all the comments that there are no synergies between aircraft engines and mobile phones. I agree," said the veteran Snecma executive. "But we have put two trains together and there are places where the carriages are linked." Already, he noted, engineers from both companies were sharing expertise on products such as electrical brakes.

A decade on – and seven years after Béchat left the company under somewhat of a cloud – Safran does feel like a single and successful business under Jean-Paul Herteman, who succeeded Béchat in 2007, albeit one dominated by the previous Snecma businesses such as its CFM International joint venture with General Electric, Labinal, and landing gear specialist Messier-Dowty-Bugatti.

After four decades with Snecma, Béchat's final two years with Safran were not entirely happy ones. Although he steered through the merger and ramped up earnings, there were tensions, including a profits warning in 2006 related to accounting irregularities in the former Sagem business that led to a management restructure. However, there were worries that his departure at the age of 65 would leave the group bereft of its most experienced, capable executive.

"We owe him a lot," his successor said of him when Béchat's death was announced on 24 November. Describing him as a "remarkable industrial leader", Herteman added: "He has played a pivotal role in our efforts to build a robust, high-technology group that has emerged as a leader in its fields and built a solid reputation on international markets."

A graduate of France's Ecole Polytechnique and later Stanford University, Béchat joined Snecma in 1965 and held various engineering and management positions, including responsibility for the Concorde engine nozzle assembly. He was production director, vice president industrial affairs and ran the Hispano-Suiza and the then-Messier-Hispano-Bugatti units, establishing the Franco-UK Messier-Dowty landing gear business in



Béchat played a "pivotal role" in Safran's success

1994 before going on to head Snecma. As head of the state-controlled group, Béchat won plaudits for turning Snecma into an international company, consolidating the CFM partnership with GE that had been established in 1974 and helping to turn that into one of the most successful alliances in the history of commercial aerospace, as sales of Airbus and Boeing narrowbodies and CFM56 engines soared into the mid-2000s.

Writing in a Royal Aeronautical Society newsletter, analyst Howard Wheeldon said the two years Béchat spent building Safran into a "cohesive unit" were "made all the more difficult by differing cultures and through wounds inflicted by management in-fighting, combined with a lack of cohesive strategy and synergy behind the original state-designated merger".

However, he adds: "That Béchat succeeded in doing so against almost all the odds and that he was responsible for laying down the strong foundations for what Safran is today, a powerful well-run aero-engine and defence electronics conglomerate, is to his enormous credit." The Safran he retired from in 2007 was "on a very much firmer footing than he found it". ■

Jean-Paul Béchat, 2 September 1942 – 24 November 2014



Read about the thinking behind Safran's 2014 acquisition of a division of Eaton at flightglobalimages.safran