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TIM RIPLEY/ ALI AL SALEM AB, KUWAIT**The crucial role played by helicopters in the Iraq war is shaping the UK's procurement philosophy as the lessons of the conflict are absorbed**

The **UK's** experience in deploying 100 **helicopters** to the Middle East for the invasion of **Iraq** is providing the background for the British armed forces' next joint helicopter procurement.

"The air assault on the al Faw peninsula was unique - I've never seen **helicopters** used so aggressively in a plan," says Wg Cdr David Prowse, officer commanding 18 Sqn. He led the first wave of Boeing Chinook HC2s through sandstorms in the opening hours of the invasion to land Royal Marine commandos on a series of strategic oil facilities. Iraqi troops bombarded the landing zones with mortar fire and a US Marine Corps Boeing Vertol CH-46E Sea Knight participating in the operation crashed, with the loss of four crew and eight British soldiers.

Prowse says 18 Sqn's aircraft and people came out unscathed. "We have been used in so many roles, over a large area of southern **Iraq**, that we felt fully involved. When I first briefed my inner circle on the plan, there was stunned silence; after two months' training, everyone was ready for it. The plan changed very little - it flew as briefed to me. We knew the risks - that gave us a high confidence level," he says.

The Chinook's central role was also indicative of the widespread use of **helicopters** by **UK** armed forces during Operation Telic. Since the war ended, the lessons have been digested. Immediately after the conflict, *Flight International* visited the **UK's** Joint Helicopter Force Headquarters (JHF HQ) in Kuwait to gain an impression of how the **helicopters** performed.

Largest deployment

Their deployment was the largest since the 1991 Gulf conflict, with 97 machines being mobilised. Three distinct force packages were deployed, with a tailored air group embarked on the HMS *Ark Royal* task group that sailed for the Gulf in mid-January. A second package departed from Jordan to support **UK** and US special forces' operations in western **Iraq**, although little is known of their activities. The third element was a package designed to support the main land force that was ordered to Kuwait in February after Ankara turned down a **UK** request to allow its troops to operate from Turkey against northern **Iraq**.

The Joint Helicopter Command (JHC) at Wilton, Wiltshire, was responsible for providing the **helicopters**, except for the maritime machines operating from Royal Navy warships. In turn, the JHC set up an in-theatre command and control agency, JHFHQ, under Gp Capt Andy Pulford. Normally station commander at RAF Odiham, Pulford built his headquarters staff from key personnel at his station and RAF Benson. Specialist assets such as RAF Tactical Supply Wing refuellers, communication personnel from the British Army's 21 Regt Royal Signals and ground defence units from the RAF Regiment completed JHF.

Major assets from the force were delegated to the three British brigades in the Middle East for the duration of the operation or for short periods. For example, 3 Regt Army Air Corps (AAC) remained under 16 Air Assault Brigade's tactical control throughout, but RAF Chinook and Westland Puma HC1s supported 7 Armoured, 3 Commando and 16 Air Assault brigades at various times.

"We are a brigade-level force - 1,500 people - making it the biggest thing for RAF support **helicopters** since the last Gulf war," says Pulford. "The al Faw operation was the largest helicopter assault since Vietnam. There were 42 **helicopters** in the air at one point. It was the first time since the Falklands that we had to use all of the complete helicopter force [except for the RAF's new

AgustaWestland Merlin HC3s] at same time. The whole fleet has been out doing its job."

For the three weeks of open warfare, **UK helicopters** were involved in every aspect of the British operation, including landing special forces teams in western **Iraq**, landing the Royal Marines on the al Faw peninsula from ships and shore bases, moving Iraqi prisoners of war and logistic support, and hunting Iraqi tank columns with Raytheon BGM-71 TOW wire-guided missiles.

UK helicopter crews see the al Faw operation as the high point of the war for them. In a matter of hours, RAF Chinooks and Pumas, supported by RN Westland Sea King HC4s/HC6s, put the main combat elements of 3 Commando Brigade ashore on an enemy-held coastline. As the troops began to lay siege to Basra, **helicopters** were used to support operations, with AAC and RN Westland Lynx AH7s and Westland Gazelle AH1s working as tank-hunting teams. In the Rumailah oil fields, Pumas and Lynxs were used to move security patrols and vehicle checkpoints to protect the facilities from sabotage. At sea, the Sea King 7 ASaC (airborne surveillance and control) machines and Merlin HM1s provided command and control top cover, managing the helicopter traffic in the congested airspace of the northern Gulf. Multi-tasking was common, with one Sea King HC4 attacking and sinking an Iraqi patrol boat with a machine gun.

As combat operations wound down, AAC, RAF and RN **helicopters** began to be concentrated at Basra International airport to support the **UK's** humanitarian and occupation work. In four months of operations, the **UK** lost two Sea King 7s in a collision over the northern Gulf, one Chinook was badly damaged when it ran out of fuel en route to Baghdad, and another Chinook was shot up flying reinforcements to help Parachute Regiment soldiers at Al Majar Al Kabir on 24 June.

Personnel rotation

Since the fighting phase ended in April, a major effort has been under way to scale back the helicopter force and establish a sustainable personnel rotation for occupation duties.

Pulford says this affected ground support personnel just as much as aircrew, and the constant drain of operations in Afghanistan, Africa, the Balkans and the Middle East must be monitored. "The 'hard hit' trades have kept smiling," he says. "The secret is to reduce numbers as soon as possible so everyone retains their good humour. They were essential to the operation in most testing and trying circumstances. We need time to reconstitute and reduce the level of commitment. My job is to make sure we now retain the minimum required to get the job done."

Pulford says the conditions in which his men and machines had to operate were "extremely testing". During *Flight International's* visit to the JHF at Ali Al Salem AB in Kuwait, visibility was reduced to less than 100m (330ft) by a sandstorm. Yet within minutes of the storm lifting, flight operations were up and running.

Pulford says his personnel learned the "tricks of the trade" thanks to regular desert training and the provision of specialist equipment.

"Importance of training is number one," he says. "This gives you the ability to bring crews at short notice to a hostile environment and get on with the job with the minimum of fuss and preparations." A robust supply chain is also important: "Just in time is fine - just too late is not good enough."

Pulford adds: "We've done this before, trained in these conditions, not discovered anything new. Predicted air and wear rates were better than we hoped. **Helicopters** came under small-arms fire and mortar fire during various stages. We had procedures in place that worked. We took no hits.

"Much of the urgent operation requirement [UOR] work was derived from other operations. This operation has highlighted the need for improved low-ambient-light, night-vision capability and we still need secure air-to-ground communications. All in all, we're extremely pleased with previous UORs that gave us sand filters and defensive aid suites. These allowed aircraft to operate in the harshest environment and under enemy threat with a high degree of safety."

Prowse says the squadron's maintenance personnel fought a non-stop battle against sand. "Gearbox oil was changed and sampled twice as often as normal. We applied special paint and blade tape on various points. You can't keep the sand out. Particle filters reduced erosion to compressor blades significantly. They came from the last Gulf war.

"We were able to expand and extend overall serviceability rates. Manpower was always available and we had priority for spares. Most of the time, serviceability was not an issue, at least not in the first week of war. You had to take a pragmatic view of what was acceptable to have serviceable - what was relevant to what you had to do."

Wg Cdr Paul Lyall, officer commanding 33 Sqn, stresses the need for regular training in desert environments, adding that an exercise in Morocco last September gave a "huge advantage" when 33 Sqn's Pumas arrived in Kuwait. Using the CAE-owned and managed Medium Support Helicopter Aircrew Training Facility (MSHATF) at RAF Benson allows flying practice in sand, electronic warfare and night flying, and is "very useful", he adds. "At one point I was flying at night here [in Kuwait] and was thinking the texture of the ground looked just like in the simulator."

The RAF Pumas sent to Kuwait and **Iraq** had no special equipment, says Lyall. "There was a partial fit of the enhanced self-defence suite. This is optimised to defeat 'double-digit' surface-to-air missiles. SA-18s were reported in-theatre. Ideally, we should have had it across the fleet. Only three of our seven Pumas here have it and only five in the whole Puma force have it."

The size and scope of the Operation Telic helicopter deployment also gave the JHF HQa chance to prove its worth. This organisation replaced the Support Helicopter Force Headquarters (SHFHQ), which commanded the RAF **helicopters** that took 5 Airborne Brigade into Kosovo in 1999. SHFHQ was disbanded in favour of ad hoc headquarters formed using station command staff from Benson and Odiham, depending on whether Chinooks or Pumas form the majority of the deployed force.

High readiness

"The old SHF HQ did not meet planning assumptions to run two concurrent medium-scale operations," says Lyall. "At nil cost, we make 20 people do the job of 80 people. We used a core of operations, administration and engineering wing people at Benson and Odiham as the structure to provide 50 people at high readiness straight away, then augment that with 30 people. The JHF HQ pulled together staff from two stations. The majority of staff were from Odiham. It is a flexible force package."

The command arrangements for the AAC and RN Lynx anti-armour **helicopters** were less of a joint effort, with 3 and 16 Brigades retaining tactical control throughout the fighting phase. This left a lot to be desired, according to RAF officers. "The Army needs to understand apportionment of force, especially with [the Westland/Boeing] Apache due to arrive," says one RAF planner. "Apache will be held at a very high level. There are more efficient ways to use scarce resources."

Army officers involved in planning air operations in **Iraq** were less enthusiastic about ceding control of the **helicopters**, complaining that this was the only way of ensuring helicopter support when needed.

The implications of the JHF's **Iraq** operations are likely to have a major impact on the £14 billion (\$22.5 billion) Support Amphibious and Battlefield Rotorcraft (SABR) project to procure 100 **helicopters** to replace the Puma HC1, Sea King HC4 and Sea King HAR3/3A fleets, while supplementing the Chinook and Merlin HC3. SABR is in the concept phase and is due to move to assessment later this year, with a 2009 in-service date.

How the force-mix of SABR shakes out is still being worked on, but reports from **Iraq** suggest there are advantages in maintaining a mixed force, rather than procuring a single type of helicopter.

Prowse praises the large Chinook, which he says proved its worth in **Iraq**. "In the first wave on to al Faw, we delivered 220 Marines in four aircraft - it would have taken 22 Sea Kings to deliver them," he says. "When the assault was delayed, the Sea Kings with us had to go into a holding pattern and then go back to a forward arming and refuelling point or ships to refuel."

Lyall says: "This operation proved you need varying sizes of **helicopters**. In vehicle checkpoint operations, we carried eight to 12 troops. That is insignificant for the Chinook but right for a Puma. Its simplicity and ruggedness made Puma ideal for this environment. It is a risk judgement - do you have 50 troops in one target or spread them around four or five targets? You need more smaller **helicopters** alongside the big **helicopters**. The Puma is good for covert tasks - the Chinook is a larger beast, noisy and a target."

Over-tasked Pumas

He adds: "The Puma fleet is over-tasked and we've got a lot to do with a small fleet. It is showing signs of struggling to keep going as a fleet and it is difficult with a relatively small fleet to get high capability. We are now in six locations - Ali Al Salem, Rumailah, Sawfan, Banja Luka in Bosnia, the operational conversion flight in Europe and the national commitment at RAF Benson. It is just sustainable, but hard work for the aircrew. Ideally, we should acquire more aircraft [to augment the Puma fleet in the short term]. There are a lot around the world."

Although the Puma entered service in the 1970s, it is expected to remain in use for at least another decade. "UK forces are under-resourced in terms of helicopter lift, which is another reason the Puma is staying on," says Lyall. "We are due to re-equip as part of SABR, but we don't know with what. In the meantime, I am still enjoying the sports car of the support helicopter world."

Pulford also backs the idea of a mixed fleet. "I was struck by the requirement during this operation for the complete fleet of **UK** helicopter assets. The way they complemented one another - medium, light, support **helicopters**. It was a real team effort."

Source: Flight International

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