



Westland Lynx choppers lift off from the Iraqi desert. © Reuters

ARABIAN • KNIGHTS

Lt James Brady examines the range of US and UK helicopters deployed in the invasion of Iraq

It was Orville and Wilbur Wright who said; “we thought we were introducing into the world a machine that would make future wars impossible.” The irony no doubt, is lost on no one, especially in the context of the latest Iraqi campaign. Once again, air power has proven itself as a basic necessity in any war, conventional or otherwise. In this theatre we have seen a variety of aircraft from modern day stealth technology to the half-century old B-52 in operation, where the ability to effectively neutralize an enemy before a ground engagement occurs has become crucial in a world where public opinion holds sway. It is in this war however, in my opinion, that the helicopter has once

again proven its mettle, particularly in the field of close air support. With this in mind, I invite you to explore just some of the models that we have seen in action in the aforementioned campaign.

AH-64 Apache

The greatest publicity of this campaign given to any aircraft has to be that given to the Boeing AH-64 Apache. We will remember scenes from early in the war of an Iraqi farmer and his emaciated grin as he gestures toward an aircraft he had allegedly downed with a .303 rifle. To any aficionado of aviation, the chances of this happening are remote to the extreme: the Apache weighs in at just over eight metric tons, and with a top speed of 192mph is no

easy target to begin with. In addition to this, all areas of the fuselage are hardened, but particular attention has been given to the survivability of a helicopter’s traditionally vulnerable regions, such as the engines, shafts and the rotors. These have been tested to absorb a direct hit from a .5 inch machine gun and still afford the crew sufficient time to nurse their ship home to safety. The Apache is after all, an attack helicopter, and this aircraft has hard points for up to 16 Hellfire AGM missiles or 76 Hydra rockets, or any combination of the two. Additionally, two AIM-9 Sidewinder missiles can even be fitted giving the Apache a limited air-to-air capability. At the front of the fuselage a 30mm chain-gun is mounted, carrying 1200 rounds of various types of



AH-64 Apache in action in Afghanistan. It was also a vital component of US air supremacy in Iraq. © Reuters

ammunition. This weapon is typically used for soft skinned vehicles, buildings or infantry formations. The Apache uses the Integrated Helmet and Display Sight System. Here the helicopter's nosesight, which incorporates day/night FLIR, laser range finder/designator and laser tracker is fed directly to the pilot and gunner through a monacle fitted to the helmet. The nose sight and chain gun move in sympathy with the gunner's helmet so that this weapon is brought to bear instantaneously when the gunner looks towards a target.

This system removes the time delay that for example, tank crews experience between sighting a target, and traversing the gun turret to bear on that target. These gunships operate typically in sections of three to five helicopters, sometimes with a lighter helicopter acting as scout. When that ill-fated crew were forced to land outside Baghdad last February, it's more than likely they did so in full view of their colleagues and commander, who would have been in no position to render them any assistance.

The SuperCobra

Though the Apache has been the backbone of the Coalition combat fleet, if there is one helicopter in this Persian theatre with a longer but equally distinguished career it's undoubtedly the Bell AH-1W SuperCobra. This machine is the Marine's gunship of

proved crucial in the capture of the two vital bridges to Baghdad in Nasariyah, where ground forces had been facing dogged resistance. Here, as realised by Iraqi troops, even a modest weapon such as a 20mm cannon is particularly potent when mounted on an aircraft. The impact of any

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choice, and has been a venerable close air support aircraft with a development that started in the Vietnam War. The SuperCobra is easily recognizable by its twin blades and narrow gait when viewed head on. With provisions for eight Hellfire or wire guided TOW missiles as well as 48 Hydra rockets and a 20mm cannon, it

projectile when fired from an aircraft is amplified by the forward speed of the craft as well as acceleration due to gravity. Like the Apache, the AH-1's gunner sits in the front seat of the tandem cockpit, where missiles are guided with the aid of a telescopic sight unit. A classic close air support helicopter, with its small profile and more

than adequate weapons cache, the SuperCobra is capable of speeds up to 207mph making it a difficult target to hit, even at lower altitudes.

The Chinook

Moving away from armed helicopters for the moment, the most important cargo/transport helicopter used by the US and Britain in Iraq is yet another Vietnam vintage machine. The Boeing Vertol CH-47 Chinook, with its instantly recognisable tandem rotors is a well-proven and remarkably capable aircraft. The Chinook fully laden, weighs a staggering 24 tons, and is capable of speeds of up to 185mph. Normal loads are 44 fully equipped troops (though on one occasion 147 refugees and their belongings were carried to safety in one Chinook). On the first day of the conflict however, one Chinook was lost with the loss of all 12 on board, most likely attributable to

poor weather conditions. The Avco Lycoming engines are emergency rated to 4500 Shaft horsepower, and at such relatively light weights one engine shouldn't have had a problem maintaining altitude.

massive payload. They are also used for providing FARPs, or Forward Area Refueling Points. These clandestine fuelling stations for allied helicopters are entirely air transportable, and operate in secret well

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The Chinooks of the US and British forces in Iraq are very popular with Special Forces for insertion, due to their long range and

inside the enemy lines providing fuel for aircraft on missions well beyond their normal operating range.



AH-1W SuperCobra: This easily recognisable attack helicopter enjoys a distinguished track-record. © Reuters

The British Contingent

Unlike their American counterparts however, the British forces in Iraq have not had the luxury of a relatively new helicopter fleet. Many of their aircraft have seen action in the Falklands War, and some of them would even be quite familiar to the

and which has had ties with the Air Corps is of course the Puma, a classic medium lift transport. Used for insertion, extraction and other cargo duties, the SA 330 Puma has also been used in and around the southern Iraqi city of Basra to police the highways in search of irregular troop movements in civilian vehicles.

anti-tank strike. In this role it's armed with two quadruple mounts for wire guided TOW missiles, ready to fire with a stabilised sight system mounted on the cabin roof, though other types can be fitted including the SNEB rockets used by the Air Corps. Another eight missiles are carried internally in the cabin, and can be quickly reloaded by the crew on the ground typically at a FARP. The gunner sits in the front left seat and guides the missiles from this station. This action will undoubtedly mark the Lynx's last foray before the onset of retirement as an anti-tank helicopter.

Conscious of not having mentioned a number of the types of helicopter in service in the Iraqi theatre, least of all the ubiquitous Blackhawk, one final machine really needs to be mentioned. From the grey and hostile seas of the South Atlantic, to the stifling heat of the Arabian Desert, 43 years after it's first flight the Westland Sea King has been called upon once again. The Mk.4 Sea King, known as the Commando, gained notoriety in the Falklands campaign as a tactical transport. It has a capacity for 20 fully equipped troops, similar to the Puma, but remains a favorite chariot of the

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Air Corps. The SA 341 Gazelle for example has been used extensively in and around the area of Umm Qasr and on the Al Faw peninsula in search of both regular and irregular forces. Here, in support of Royal Marines in hovercraft, Gazelles have been actively patrolling the coastline and waterways of the country's only seaport. Another helicopter which has seen action in Iraq,

The onerous task however, of providing an attack helicopter for British forces has been given to the Westland Lynx AH Mk.2. Despite having taken delivery of the new Apache Longbow as an anti-tank helicopter, the British Army has not yet entered it into service and so has had to use the Lynx for a second time in Iraq. The Lynx has been used for logistic support, casualty evacuation, and



US soldiers escorting prisoners to a waiting PUMA helicopter. © Reuters



A Chinook descending. This multi-purpose heavy-lift craft is a veteran of Vietnam. © Reuters

SAS due to its excellent range: 764 miles with standard tanks. This can be dramatically increased if required, but to put this

when we consider a section of armed helicopters being a very cost effective way to oppose an armoured battalion. In an

cover, to hide and fire and hide again is an ability that only the humble helicopter is capable of.

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range in perspective, the best the Apache can manage is 380 miles, the Puma 400. One can see why this venerable aircraft has remained so popular for decades with soldiers operating behind the lines.

In this war, the helicopter has again proven a great many things to its masters. Its importance in a conventional war is one,

irregular war however, which we have also seen in Iraq, the helicopter has proved an indispensable aid in patrolling the highways and desert hinterland of Baghdad and Basra. It's that flexibility which has always characterised the rotary wing. The ability to fly directly to any point on the earth's surface and land, the ability to hover, to take

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