

Thin end of the wedge

The United Nations helicopter force has to toe a fine line when conducting its Middle East operations.

AL VENTER/NAQOURA

IT IS A FEATURE of helicopter operations in the Middle East that, when Israel decides to react to any kind of provocation in south Lebanon — and the Tel Aviv Government does so often — the United Nations peacekeeping force in the area is grounded. UN operations in the region require the authority of the Israeli and Lebanese Governments. While it is officially not necessary to do so, the Naqoura-based UN command prudently also advises the regional Hizbollah office. This is a precaution to prevent its aircraft coming under attack.

UN air crews have become ground-fire targets in the past, particularly at night, when some units are unable (and often unwilling) to distinguish between the brilliant-white livery of UN helicopters and that of Israeli gunships.

Flight International spent time in March, and again in August, 1996, flying with Heliwing Itair from Naqoura, a few kilometres north of the Israeli border post at Rosh Haniqra. All flights were on Italian air force Agusta-Bell 206s, of which there are four based permanently in Lebanon, down from five in 1995.

The Heliwing complement of 40, all officers and NCOs (ratings, as national servicemen, are not allowed in hostile areas), live on the base. Security in and out of the area is tight. French soldiers monitor all movements, and civilian visitors must carry identity passes at all times.

Life at the Heliwing headquarters is communal and casual. The Italians tend to live a life apart from the rest of the multi-national force, staying on base and sharing their meals in one large communal hall in winter and on a patio adjacent to the mess in summer. Aldo tends to foster a friendly camaraderie quite unlike that found in some of the other national gathering

points at Naqoura. Most senior UN officers live across the border, in Israel.

The day starts late, rarely before 0800. After breakfast, the pilots will gather in the "ready room" for a briefing. Ground crews will already have started work in one of the large hangars, where they can fulfil routing maintenance tasks.

During an average three-month period, according to Aldo, the Heliwing will transport about 1,000 passengers and roughly 25,000kg of freight. Outside any major conflagration, there are between 20 and 25 medical evacuations a month, or fewer than one a day.

Each fortnight, a section of the unit is rotated. An Italian air force Lockheed Martin C-130 lands at Beirut. Frequently, a fully serviced Bell 205 will be disgorged and another due for overhaul will be loaded on board and taken to Italy. The process takes place at Beirut Airport, again under stringent security. During normal trips to the Lebanese capital, made three times a week for delivery of essential supplies and mail and the transport of VIPs — and, when necessary, for casualty evacuation — the engines are not even switched off after touchdown.

The home unit of the Italian Air Wing is Antares RGT Aves (Army Aviation). Many of the men now on active service in Lebanon have seen duty in other trouble spots, including Albania, Mozambique, Namibia and Somalia. The unit was based in Mogadishu, Somalia, in Operation Unisom in 1993, where it also deployed Agusta A129 Mangustas and Boeing CH-47 Chinooks.

KEEPING IT SIMPLE

In Lebanon, the Italians try to keep matters uncomplicated. "We are here on sufferance. The Israelis don't like us and the fundamentalists fighting them don't trust us. We don't know



when we might have to move out of here in a hurry, so the less we leave behind, the better," an Italian officer says candidly.

In south Lebanon, the unit has been indirectly affected by financial cuts imposed by UN headquarters in New York. As it is, the Italian Heliwing is budgeted to fly only 60h a month, which includes the three flights a week to Beirut. The Italian Government pays 90% of the cost of deployment of the unit in the eastern Mediterranean and, like other nations involved, is asking questions as to whether it is worth the expense and effort to remain in a region where the adversaries are so intransigent.

Several countries are reviewing the roles of their forces in the no-win, no-lose, Middle-East environment. The Dutch pulled their contingent out some time ago.

Sorties across the 70km (40nm)-wide security corridor of south Lebanon are varied. These can range from dropping supplies to a Norwegian patrol cut off by snow in the mountains of the east, adjacent to the Syrian border, to a casualty call at 0300. Clearly, crews will not enter a hostile zone while fire is being exchanged, although they have done so in past emergencies. During the earlier period, when Norway was responsible for air operations, one of its helicopters was shot down by ground fire. All on board were killed.

The UN air contingent also monitors the movement of armed elements (as they are euphemistically phrased) at the request of any UN battalion deployed in the region.

I was to witness this. We took off shortly after breakfast on a 2h familiarisation flight intended to instruct a new pilot. Our objective, said Warrant Officer **Stefano Benassi**, was to touch down at about a dozen bases within the security zone and then head back.

A group of Hizbollah insurgents was spotted from an Irish base just before our arrival. We circled a few times, kept the intruders in view



and moved on. Israel monitors all UN radio traffic in the enclave; artillery fire usually follows any sighting and, since the information is "secondhand", it is not always accurate. Another incident involved the Fijian Battalion, which was unable to secure a landing for us in a remote area of the mountains near the coast. Later that morning, Israeli 155mm artillery pounded both positions.

I did not discover why we had skirted the Fijian temporary base. It was not a UN camp like the others; it was rather an open stretch of field, dominated on one side by a big stone double-storeyed building which overlooked one of the valleys and (I was able to ascertain later) a strategic wadi used regularly by Hizbollah for infiltrating southwards. We circled half a dozen times and could clearly see the Fijians deployed around the perimeter.

The unit's commander, Lt Col Guaccio Aldo, confirmed that, while his helicopters are not fired upon often, accidents happen. He cited an incident a few months before, when Israeli gunners fired on a Norwegian patrol in the Litani valley in the east, wounding three men. They had been mistaken for Hizbollah, says Aldo.

"These days, we tell everyone who wants to listen exactly what we are doing. We clear it with all parties first. Then we fly directly to our objective, do what we have to do and get right back here. Certainly we don't hang about in the air in south Lebanon", says Aldo emphatically.

He says that among his unit's priorities, the main one is to keep open as many lines of communication as possible in one of the most volatile regions on the globe.

"Obviously, the mail forms part of that, and supplying remote or isolated observation posts in the interior, when only a helicopter can reach them," Aldo says. Part of the Heliwing role is also to ferry VIPs around, but on that he is not prepared to comment.

The biggest problem his unit faces, at a base

which abuts almost directly on to the sea, is the need to wash engine compressors daily. "We have a serious problem here with saturated salty air getting into the turbines. If we don't attend to it regularly, we all know what can happen," he comments.

CONTINUING HOSTILITIES

According to Timur Goskel, spokesman for the 4,500-man United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), whose insignia is a large crest which incorporates a Bell 205 as part of the motif, with the words "Flying For Peace" at its base for the past 15 years, everyone is affected by the *impasse* created by continuing hostilities in the region. "You only need to look at the statistics," says this tough-talking Turk who was with the Turkish army before he was posted to the UN. In almost 18 years, he says, the UN contingent has lost more than 220 men: only about 40% of those deaths were non-military, caused by illness, road or other accidents, etc. "Contacts do not happen very often, but, when they do,



This wadi situated in southern Lebanon is known as "Hizbollah Highway"

Take-off on an operation from Naqoura, the UN headquarters in the eastern Mediterranean

they can be severe," he adds. The Fijians, largely because of their uncompromising, no-nonsense, approach to peacekeeping operations, have suffered the most casualties. Some, like the Ghanaians whose role, many feel, is purely symbolic, and the Irish, never place their forces in any kind of compromising position and, as a result, hardly ever came under fire.

At the same time, it was an Irish soldier, together with Goskel's deputy, Mike Lindvall, a Swede, who was responsible for taking food to beleaguered civilian communities cut off by the fighting during Operation Grapes of Wrath in 1996. The two men went by road into areas under Israeli fire, and spent days in exposed positions. The Heliwing was unable to help.

Of the six nations which have troops deployed in south Lebanon — Fiji, Finland, Ghana, Ireland, Nepal and Norway — only the first two patrol actively at night in a bid to stop Hizbollah incursions.

According to Goskel, the UN has standard routines for all emergencies. Clearances given, however, do not filter through to some Hizbollah crews who might be in an area to which the Heliwing needs to go. "It's fine in the day. Then everyone can see who is flying — but, at one o'clock in the morning, it's something else. A UN soldier might have been hurt in a landmine blast. Or caught in a cross-fire. Then what?" he asks.

The situation is further exacerbated by a lack of communications with the other major Arab faction in south Lebanon, the South Lebanese army (SLA), an Israeli surrogate force. While the UN tends to minimise the role of the 3,000-man SLA which is led, in part, by Israeli officers, most UN operational battalions impinge on areas dominated by the SLA. The Heliwing has to fly over them constantly. More than one observer has questioned the ignoring of one of the major participants in a steadily escalating military campaign where casualty figures can be measured in hundreds.

There have been incidents involving the Italians with UNIFIL. For example, a Hizbollah maritime-strike force tried to run the Israeli naval blockade out of Tyre, about 30min drive to the north of Naqoura. Around a dozen guerrillas in two high-speed rubber boats headed for Natanya in northern Israel, after dark, hugging the coast. They were spotted by an Israeli patrol craft and a chase began. After one of the insurgent boats was hit, the other put in to shore, just short of the Israeli border at Rosh Haniqra. The guerrillas took hostages, including an Italian airman with the Heliwing. The man was killed shortly afterwards in an exchange of fire with the Israeli pursuers.

Few of those involved are prepared to comment on the dangers inherent with the work. "It's hazardous, yes," says one pilot, who adds: "But it is always interesting." □