

Three French Sikorsky S-55's, flying in formation over the mountainous country of Algeria, carrying troops and supplies on anti-rebel operations.



This contribution, from a French correspondent, forms an instructive examination of the helicopter's tactical value in a particular class of military operation, as represented by the French Army's engagements with the rebel forces in North Africa. It is based on official reports and data.

## HELICOPTERS IN NORTH AFRICA

IN order to give its forces a means of speeding up anti-terrorist operations in North Africa, the French Government decided at the end of 1955 to place large orders for helicopters of all sizes, as had been recommended by the High Command following experience of a year of fighting in Algeria.

The engagements of 1954-55 had proved to the Army Command that only helicopters could regain for the French troops, encumbered by their heavy equipment and rigid organization, a degree of mobility sufficient to give them equality with the highly mobile and well-concealed enemy forces.

These *fellaghas*, as the rebels are called, are essentially mobile troops, their favourite tactics being the avoidance of direct combat. Through their knowledge of the local terrain, and because of the terror in which they hold the populations among which they move, it is easy for them to direct their attacks against any convenient objectives which are either lightly defended or not defended at all. In other words, they take the operational initiative only when, at the moment of attack, they are sure of their numerical and tactical superiority.

On the other hand, if they chance to meet ground forces of superior strength, they do not open fire; at the most, they maintain contact for just long enough to allow their main body to get clear and disperse rapidly over the countryside.

The rebels are also specially favoured by the Algerian topography, which is ideal for guerilla operations. The relative paucity

of roads and tracks hinders the French forces' transport system, though its vehicles may appear excellent to the uninitiated observer.

In such circumstances it is not difficult to define the methods which must be used to regain the initiative. Above all, any new air equipment must be of a kind which would permit the French to seek the rebels carefully and systematically, continually and everywhere and, after identifying them, not to lose contact. The greatest effect would be achieved by being able to attack straight away and to launch a pursuit immediately. From this it is a small step to visualize a permanent watch kept by helicopter-transported detachments of troops. It would indeed be the ideal, though costly, solution.

A continual search over such extensive territory for an enemy who more often than not cannot be identified by anything such as a uniform would require the setting up of an intelligence net with a very fine mesh. It would itself be the more effective as contacts between the security forces and the population become more numerous. But in the case of the Algerian rebels every piece of information, however definite, has only a transient value, since the band of men it concerns is so mobile.

If one takes into account the delay in transmission, the information allows the enemy's position to be calculated only to the nearest 10 or 20 km; and in order to exploit such an indication with reasonable chances of success, a sweeping search operation to cover at least 300 sq km would have to be organized in a matter of hours; and this is an optimistic estimate of the area which would in fact have to be searched.

Experience during the first year of fighting in Algeria has shown the difficulties of this type of operation, because the movement of ground forces required for the sweep is more often than not slow and only too obvious to the enemy, giving him an excellent chance to get away, if not by day, then at least at night. Enveloping movements, to have the maximum hope of success, must bring about complete encirclement a matter of hours after the rebel band has been discovered by aerial reconnaissance or by direct contact.

The helicopter can achieve such an encirclement by the precision, the stealth and above all the speed with which it can be brought into action. It is here that we find the explanation of the Government's large orders—orders which, in little over a year, have raised the total of helicopters used by French forces in North Africa from 30 to about 100, half of them operated by the Air Force.

In January 1956, the mixed helicopter unit Groupe Mixte Hélicoptères 57 of the French Air Force counted as its total resources six Bell 47s and eight Sikorsky S-55s. By the beginning of September its strength comprised 28 Bell 47s, 14 S-55s and 18 S-58s, carrying 13 soldiers each. And, in the month of September alone, 14 Bells flew 482 hours; 14 S-55s, 704 hours;



Soldiers and helicopter crews pause after setting down on a flowery meadow in a mountain valley.