

## HELICOPTER OPERATIONS AT PORT SAID

By

LT COL J F T SCOTT, TD RA

A lecture was given to members of the Association and the Royal Aero Club, at Londonderry House on Thursday, 25th April, by Lt-Col J F T Scott, TD, RA, commanding the Joint Experimental Helicopter Unit, at Middle Wallop, appropriately known as J E H U Lord Brabazon, who is President of both bodies, was in the Chair

Jock Scott, himself a member of the Association, is well known to many of us since he has for very many years been a convinced enthusiast for the use of helicopters by the Army, and no-one could be better suited to command the first unit having the broad task of discovering what those uses are to be

Introducing his subject, the lecturer explained that the original intention was that the unit should take part in an exercise, of a precautionary nature, in which its role would be casualty evacuation. During a period of intensive training a technique was evolved for handling a large number of helicopters operating from the deck of an Aircraft carrier. A dummy deck was marked out on the airfield, and later there was an exercise in the Channel

The lecturer emphasised the great value of this preliminary work which resulted in the perfection of a drill for landing, deck handling, loading, refuelling, and despatching the mixed force of Sycamores and Whirlwinds provided by J E H U and the Royal Navy, so that in the operation the turn round time (including a refuel) was reduced to six minutes

The decision to use the helicopters to land forty-five Royal Marine Commandos at Port Said was only made just before the operation

The helicopters worked on a shuttle service to lift over four hundred officers and men from H M S *Ocean* lying a few miles off-shore within a period of eighty minutes. The men were assembled in the hangar, the "sticks" coming up on the aircraft lifts and marshalled to each helicopter loading point. Fuel lines were laid to each point and pre-packed bundles of ammunition and stores of 100 lbs weight were stacked ready to be taken aboard as additional load at the discretion of the pilot. The Sycamores carried three men and the Whirlwinds five. Men were seated on the sills of the open doorways and were able to land with their weapons at the ready

In spite of gloomy prophecies 100 per cent serviceability was maintained on all available aircraft throughout the operation. Two helicopters were withdrawn from service, one due to a heavy landing after engine failure during take-off and the other being damaged by small arms fire. A large volume of stores was flown in to support the beach head, the returning helicopters being used for the evacuation of over one hundred casualties including some Egyptians. One wounded Marine was back on board and in the sick bay only nineteen minutes after he left the ship.

J E H U made twenty-eight sorties and fourteen landings on the carrier by helicopter during this commando operation and it was found that the most economical loading allowed two trips between refuelling.

After the landing operation the helicopters were in increasing demand for liaison tasks, supply, and on one occasion the reinforcement of a French unit held up in the centre of the town. The lecturer showed, by means of a large map, how difficult was the movement in the area, mostly town, water or soft sand, other than by helicopter. There was even difficulty over using Austers which would have necessitated the closing of one of the two vital roads to provide a landing place.

An unforeseen extra role for their helicopters had been for the policing of coastal dhow traffic, often correctly suspected of being up to no good, with Bren gunners sitting in the open aircraft doors and some quite effective employment of Rotor down-draught.

During question time Colonel Scott made it clear that he himself does not altogether favour the employment of very large helicopters in this kind of ship based operation, both because of limitations imposed by the dimensions of the lifts on small carriers and because the aircraft are vulnerable to ground fire and this led to the thought that it would be wiser not to carry one's eggs in too large baskets. To have been able to warm up the engines without turning the rotors would have saved time and this suggested a design improvement.

This was a most absorbing lecture, most ably presented, and well deserved the applause of the large audience which, however, reflected not only appreciation of the lecture but also admiration of the achievement of those members of the three Services whose combined effort resulted in the complete success of the first entirely British operation of this nature.