

## FIRST SEA THEATER HELIOS

IT WAS IN 1946 WHEN THE FRENCH BEGAN THEIR FIGHT WITH THE COMMUNIST LED VIET MINH GUERRILLAS IN THE JUNGLES AND RICE PADDIES OF WHAT WAS THEN KNOWN AS FRENCH INDOCHINA. ALTHOUGH AN UNCONVENTIONAL WAR, IT WOULD BE THE FRENCH WHO WOULD FIGHT IN A PROSAICALLY CONVENTIONAL MANNER AND PROMOTE THE MILITARY USE OF THE HELICOPTER. THIS IS NOT TO SAY THAT THE FRENCH HAD INTRODUCED THE HELICOPTER TO MILITARY APPLICATION AS IT IS WELL ESTABLISHED THAT THE UNITED STATES HAD FORMED THE FIRST MILITARY UNIT (8TH EMERGENCY RESCUE SQUADRON) IN CHINA IN MAY 1945 USING THE SIKORSKY R-6, RESCUING 43 AIRMEN IN 110 MISSIONS. IT WAS THE FRENCH HOWEVER, WHO WOULD FIRST APPLY THE USE OF THE HELICOPTER IN SUPPORT OF ALL ASPECTS OF MILITARY COMBAT OPERATIONS.

THE FIRST HELICOPTERS INTRODUCED INTO THE FRENCH INDOCHINA THEATER (SEA) WERE TWO HILLER 360 LIGHT HELICOPTERS WHICH ARRIVED IN SAIGON IN 1950 FOR USE BY THE MEDICAL SERVICE OF THE FRENCH AIR FORCE, FAR EAST. BY 1952, TEN HELICOPTERS WERE IN USE AS MEDEVAC NECESSITATING THE CONSTRUCTION OF A HELIPORT (THE FIRST SUCH HELIPORT IN SEA) AT TAN SON NHUT IN SAIGON. BY THE END OF THE WAR, FORTY-TWO CHOPPERS, ALL OF AMERICAN MANUFACTURE, HAD BEEN INTRODUCED INTO THE THEATER. THESE

INCLUDED THE MILLER 360 (H-23), SIKORSKY H-5s (S-5/S) AND SIKORSKY H-19s ALONG WITH WESTLAND-51s INTRODUCED NEAR THE END OF THEIR WAR.

THE MILLERS OPERATED IN THE DELTA AREA AROUND SAIGON DUE TO LACK OF POWER IN THE HIGH DENSITY. THEY ALSO WORKED THE HANOI AREA FOR THE SAME REASON. THE MOUNTAIN AREAS WERE COVERED BY THE H-5s AS WELL AS KARST'S THAT COVERED MOST OF THE INDOCHINA THEATER. THE H-19s WOULD LATER REPLACE THE H-5s AS THE H-19s WERE ABLE TO OPERATE ANYWHERE IN THE FRENCH AO's.

OF THE FORTY-TWO HELO's THAT SERVED THE FRENCH, ONLY TWO WERE KNOWN TO HAVE BEEN SHOT DOWN WHILE ALL FORTY-TWO SUSTAINED SMALL ARMS HITS AT ONE TIME OR ANOTHER. THE S.O.P. WAS TO FLY AT 3000 AND U.F.R (USUALLY FOLLOW ROADS) TO DESIRED DESTINATIONS WITH FIGHTER ESCORT IF AVAILABLE. MEDEVAC WAS THE PRIMARY FUNCTION WITH 10,820 SICK AND WOUNDED BEING AIR LIFTED TO SAFETY AND THIRTY-EIGHT PILOTS RECOVERED AFTER BADOUT. IN 1954, FRENCH HELO PILOTS WERE CREDITED WITH THE LOCATING AND PICKUP OF EIGHTY GROUND STRAGGLERS AFTER THE STAGGERING DEFEAT OF FRENCH FORCES AT DIEN BIEN PHU IN MAY.

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