



HEAVY DUTY

LEBANON'S DIY "HUEYBOMBERS"

In 2007 Lebanese armed forces were subjected to a series of attacks by a militant Sunni Islamist group occupying the fortified Nahr al-Bared refugee camp in northern Lebanon. **JOÃO PAULO MORALES & VATCHE MITILIAN** reveal how the Lebanese Air Force, then equipped only with helicopters, used old Hawker Hunter parts to solve a major operational problem



A pair of UH-1Hs at Kleyate Air Force Base north of Tripoli in northern Lebanon in 2007. The nearest has been converted into a "Hueybomber" with the help of parts taken from various other Lebanese Air Force aircraft, including its then-non-airworthy Hunter FGA.70s and its Aérospatiale Gazelle helicopters.

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS VIA AUTHORS

FROM THE HIGH ground about a mile from the sea, the water seems vivid gold and silver, glittering with the movement of the waves. This is where the Phoenicians set out to spread culture and open trade routes in the 1st Century BC. The scene is remarkable, like something from a classic Hollywood movie — or would be were it not for the rising mountains of sand, ash and debris where hundreds of mid-rise buildings used to stand. Hanging in the air, a tiny black point releases two small specks that start falling slowly, gaining speed as the seconds tick by. Ten, eleven, thirteen . . . boom! A black and orange plume reaches skywards moments later, accompanied by the sound of nearby celebrations. It is the conclusion of another bombing sortie by a Bell UH-1H Huey helicopter of *Al Quwwat Al Jawwiya Al Lubnaniya* (Lebanese Air Force — LAF) on the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp near Tripoli in northern Lebanon in 2007.

When faced with dire situations, actions and risks have to be taken that, under normal circumstances, would perhaps be deemed unthinkable, particularly if the situation involves fighting on home soil. It was precisely under

such circumstances that Lebanon took the decision to convert part of its force of unarmed utility helicopters into bombers.

THE POLITICAL BACKDROP

In 1994, in the wake of the devastating 1975–90 Lebanese Civil War, the LAF withdrew its last Hawker Hunters from service, leaving the air arm with no fixed-wing combat aircraft. The following year Lebanon acquired 16 UH-1H Huey utility helicopters from the USA (further deliveries making a total of 24) for use in the transport, search-and-rescue, firefighting, troop transport and agricultural spraying roles.

The Hueys provided sufficient support during the period of relative peace up until July 2006, when Israel mounted attacks on Lebanese territory after the Shi'a Islamic militant group and political party Hezbollah, based in Lebanon, fired thousands of surface-to-surface rockets into Israeli territory. Fighting continued until August that year, despite Lebanon having little with which to oppose Israel's retaliation attacks. Unlike most of the world's air arms, the LAF is part of the bigger structure of the Lebanese Armed Forces and is therefore subordinate to it.

OPPOSITE PAGE By some margin the most used aircraft in the Lebanese Air Force, the Bell UH-1H has proved to be a versatile and enduring asset used in numerous roles — including that of bomber, as demonstrated in this photograph of a UH-1H carrying a full load of two 500lb bombs on pylons and one 400kg (880lb) bomb on its belly.