

story and photos by
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The Mi-24 'Hind' provides the backbone of the Ukrainian Army's attack helicopter force.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and declaration of independence in 1991, Ukraine inherited one of the most powerful Armed Forces in Europe. On August 24, 1991, the Verkhovna Rada (Parliament) of Ukraine adopted a resolution that took under its jurisdiction all military units of the former Soviet armed forces then situated on Ukrainian territory and set about the establishment of the country's Ministry of Defense. Big changes have followed — today's Ukrainian Army Aviation may be smaller than it used to be, but it's certainly far more effective.

Just before Ukraine declared its independence, the Soviets transferred most of their combat, combat transport and transport helicopter previously operated by the *Voyenno-Vozdushniye*

Sily (air force) to the Army. At the beginning of 1992, the Ukrainian Army Aviation could rely on some nine regiments and seven helicopter squadrons subordinated to five armies, distributed between three Military Districts (MDs) — Kiev, Odessa and Carpathian.

Today, nearly all Ukrainian military helicopters continue to be operated by Army Aviation. The exceptions are those flown by the air academy at Kharkov, some staff helicopters attached to the Air Force headquarters at Vinnitsa and the special mission helicopters, like the Mi-8PPA (I p-K), which are all operated by the air force. But further big changes are afoot. The so-called 'State Program for Armed Forces Development until 2005' deals with strength reduction, reorganization and the improvement of all organizational and functional elements of

Ukraine's armed forces, enabling them to maintain their combat potential at an appropriate level. Among the alterations, it is also planned to withdraw from the inventory 400 tanks, 289 aircraft, 189 helicopters, 11 ships and vessels of various classes. The costs saved (more than 100m hryvnia annually) will be spent on updating advanced weapons and military equipment. Furthermore the State Program envisages the establishment of a Rapid Reaction Corps within the Ground Forces by late 2005, as well as an Aviation Group in the Air Force and a Combined Squadron in the Navy, capable to operate both independently and in a combined formation under a unified command and in close co-operation with each other.

For the Army Aviation branch specifically, the State Program will bring about structural reorganization. A Brigade structure is to be adopted, each operating two mixed-type squadrons (a combination of 'Hips' and Hinds), while upholding the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty that limits Ukraine's total number of attack helicopters to 330.

At present, the Ukrainian Army is organized into three Operational Commands (OCs), these being the Western OC with its headquarters in Lviv, Southern OC (HQ in Odessa) and Northern OC (HQ in Chernihiv), of which only the Western and Southern commands maintain helicopter assets. The majority of rotary wing machines are held by the Western OC, which has two helicopter brigades at its disposal.

3rd Independent Brigade

The smallest Western OC base is that of the 3rd Independent Brigade of Army Aviation, located some 12km north of the ancient city of Brody, while the brigade headquarters are found in the city itself. The airfield retains a small west-east orientated runway and old-style revetments previously used by Il-2 Sturmoviks during WW2 and shortly after.

The current regiment based there was formed as recently as November 1995, when the 119th Independent Helicopter Regiment still reported to the 38th Army Corps. On August 26, 2004 the regiment was reformed and named 3rd Independent Helicopter Brigade of Army Aviation, reporting directly to the Commander of Army Aviation at the Western OC. The unit has some 700 people on its strength. As with the brigade at Novi Kalynov, many of its senior officers have seen real combat action in Afghanistan and/or served in the former German Democratic Republic (DDR). As such, they bring a lot of experience to operations, the unit's main tasks being to train crews for peacekeeping and rescue

