In March 2012, a coup in Mali enabled three Islamic militant groups—Anser Dine, Al-Qaeda in Islamic Magreb and Movement for One & Jihad in West Africa—to combine with the local Tuareg National Movement for Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) to overrun Northern Mali. The United Nations approved the formation and employment of the African International Support mission in Mali (AFISMA) to recapture the overrun areas. To pre-empt the deployment, the militants launched an offensive into Southern Mali in early 2013, threatening thousands of French citizens living mainly in Bamako. On 10 January, the French Defence Minister Mr. Le Drian, outlined intervention plans through Operation SERVAL. The aim was to assist Mali forces to halt the militant offensive, recapture Northern Mali in conjunction with AFISMA forces and re-establish government control.

The French were well positioned to respond quickly. Already located in theatre was an Operational Headquarters (HQ) at Dakar in Senegal, a Joint Force Air Combat Command (JFACC) at N’Djamena in Chad, and tactical HQ at Bamako in Mali; all connected via secure Syracuse satellite communications allowing voice and data exchange. Strategic Intelligence, Surveillance & Reconnaissance (ISR) was available through the French Helios/Astrium satellite systems providing daily imagery on Mali. From 14 January, this was supplemented by US input from the Air Operations Centre (AOC) in Ramstein, Germany. Theatre ISR already in West Africa included two FI-CR and one Transall C-160 at N’Djamena in Chad, two Harfang Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) with a ground station at Niamey in Niger, and two Atlantique II aircraft at Dakar in Senegal.

Operating in a benign air environment enabled uninterrupted French build up at Bamako, 400km south of the militant advance. Forward operating bases included Mopti Harbour on the Niger River and Sevare Airport less than 50km from militant forces. Over 1800 personnel and light armoured vehicles deployed from Chad, Burkina Faso, the Ivory Coast and France during the first week. Lack of strategic air lift assets to shift outsized cargo required leasing and requests to allies for C-17 aircraft. Theatre airlift assets were stretched and there were requests for NATO assistance. The French Army Cheetah Plan was activated with paratroopers, helicopters and mechanised units readied for deployment by air and sea lift.

Air power provided speed and surprise to reduce the offensive momentum of the militants and gave sufficient lead-time for ground forces to deploy in Central Mali. On 11 January, a surprise strike by 4 Gazelle armed helicopters launched from Sevare airport hit the mobile southern militant column near Konna destroying vehicles and forcing a withdrawal. One Gazelle was hit by militant fire. The northern militant column near Diabaly was struck by a surprise night air strike by four Mirage 2000D launched from N’Djamena over 2000km away and required two refuellings. On 13 January, four Rafale and two C-135 tankers flew 3000km from France across Algeria to strike militant logistics and vehicle parks in Gao, dropping 21 precision weapons. The force flew a further 1690km to recover at N’Djamena. Subsequent air strikes were co-ordinated and launched daily from N’Djamena against a range of militant targets in Central and Northern Mali based on target priority and dependent on tanker availability.

“The air force and ‘air power’ are political tools. For our political leaders, the ability of what we call ‘first entry’ is very important—if we intervene and have to take on responsibility.”

—Lt Gen Jean-Patrick Gaviard (Ret), Armee de l’Air

Map of Mali
On 15 January, French ground forces were committed against the southern militant positions near Konna resulting in a series of engagements before the militants withdrew. The continued push of the northern militant column past Diabaly required a switch in the operational axis to support Mali forces. Ground operations were supported by 60 strike, 10 attack helicopter, 40 ISR/tanker and 30 intra-theatre airlift sorties in the first week. These initial actions successfully halted the militant offensive.

French sealift and airlift continued to build forces enabling the commencement of operations in Northern Mali. Air assets were relocated to Bamako to provide more responsive air support. ISR focused on building a picture of militant activity in urban centres and the deployment of a Royal Air Force (UK) Sentinel aircraft enabled real time road traffic monitoring. The offensive began on 26 January against Gao and set a pattern for follow-up operations that resulted in the recapture of Timbuktu, Kidal and Tessalit by mid-February. ISR enabled early precision air strikes. This was followed by persistent surveillance by a combination of a UAV and an Atlantique II aircraft that enabled French paratroopers to air drop and secure the local airport before linking with mobile ground forces to recapture the urban areas. On 29-30 January, AFISMA forces attacked from Niger and linked up with French/Mali forces in Kidal. On 18 January, Operation PANTHER sought to destroy militant strongholds in the northern mountain regions resulting in the last major conventional confrontations.

From mid-February the militants began to switch to guerrilla warfare, hiding outside towns or moving to northern mountain strongholds. They also commenced suicide bomb attacks and hit-and-run raids against Government buildings and supporters. Allied forces increased pattern-of-life and compound surveillance sorties to locate and target militant hideouts, weapons, logistics caches, and surviving militant leaders. The US increased persistent ISR support including Global Hawk and Predator UAS, EP-3 and other manned platforms to enable the French to increase air strikes on suspected militant targets. Implementing government control and rebuilding the Mali Armed Forces began in April.

The major air power lessons that came out were: the need to improve effects chain response; the importance of timely strategic and theatre level ISR, secure long range communications and in-theatre persistent air assets; and sparsely deployed air assets (that include tactical fighters, manned ISR, UAS, air tankers, airlift and maritime patrol aircraft) require an appropriate level of networking to boost combined operations capability. Further, it was demonstrated that tactical aircraft could provide responsive and effective long range strike support, although sortie rates are determined by tanker support; and that attack helicopters require good integration with ground forces and enough stand-off capability to avoid small arms ground fire. At the planning level it was seen that the availability of strategic and theatre airlift directly impacted the speed of response to a crisis.

The French Defence Review in late April provided an assessment of the impact of Operation SERVAL on future French planning. In a constrained financial environment, the French sought to boost investment in intelligence and power-projection forces. Proposed new acquisitions included manned persistent ISR platforms and unmanned Predator UAS. The review confirmed the importance of continuing the planned acquisition of Rafale fighter aircraft, tanker/transport and new tactical air lift assets. However, no increase in numbers was being funded.

Operation SERVAL tested the French ability to perform combined operations at long range in a benign air environment. Many of the lessons mirror the challenges the ADF may face when undertaking crisis response at range in a regional context.

Key Points

- In January 2013 French forces were deployed to assist weakened Mali military forces to halt a militant ground offensive threatening to overrun Southern Mali.
- The French employed air power to slow the momentum of the militant offensive and thereafter combined operations to counter attack and retake Northern Mali.
- The operation demonstrated the viability of French forces undertaking combined operations at long range in a benign air environment.