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SUBJECT CIA Gains Possession of Soviet Helicopter

GARRICK UTLEY: The MI-24 is the Soviet Union's premier helicopter gunship, a highly effective weapon that has seen action in Afghanistan and in Nicaragua. Now, however, the Soviets may be forced to go back to their drawing board.

NBC's Fred Francis has found out that the CIA has obtained one of these prized helicopters.

J FRED FRANCIS: According to Pentagon sources, it is a major intelligence coup. The CIA's possession of the Soviet MI-24 helicopter is changing the course of the war in Afghanistan and could prove to be a valuable military advantage in any East-West conflict.

Two MI-24's, called the Flying Tank, were flown into Pakistan in July, 1985 by defectors from the Soviet supported Afghan army. The Soviets demanded they be returned. But Pakistan secretly gave at least one of the helicopters to the CIA.

The MI-24 is the pride of the Soviet army. It is heavily armored and can fly at speeds of 200 miles per hour, making it the fastest helicopter in the world. It fires cannons, missiles and machine guns. In Nicaragua, the MI-24 helicopter has killed and wounded hundreds of contra rebels and is one reason the contras have not been effective in combat.

In Afghanistan, until recently, the MI-24 was the weapon most feared by the mujaheddin guerrillas. But after the CIA got hold of the MI-24, it was able to discover its weakness. According to Pentagon sources, the CIA has been able to figure

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out how to outsmart the defensive system of the MI-24 by making a few changes in the American Stinger missile supplied to the mujaheddin. As a result, in the Afghan war, intelligence specialists report in the past six months, the Soviets have lost at least five aircraft a week, many of them the once formidable MI-24.

Fred Francis, NBC News, the Pentagon.