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A grand stage: Airman shares impression of historical flight

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9/20/2007 - **RAF MILDENHALL, England** -- Floating, dream-like, with the hum of jet turbine prop engines in my ears, I witnessed my first aerial refueling.

The sun soaked the back of the aircraft carrying the audience and lit the grand stage brilliantly. The air was crisp to breathe and filled with the sound of the approaching "Devils". It was a show packed with its own orchestra and players, a show as complete as any well-designed ballet might be - so well designed in fact, that I only took my eye away from my camera for a moment to see the entire stage.

My first AR experience was the last opportunity for the 67th Special Operations Squadron, flying the MC-130P Combat Shadow, to refuel the soon-to-be-decommissioned MH-53M Pave Low IV helicopters stationed at RAF Mildenhall.

The five helos assigned to the 21st Special Operations Squadron, affectionately know as the "Dust Devils," made a final flight Thursday, Sept. 13.

Before the flight, the MC-130P loadmaster, Tech. Sgt. Richard Hosaka, gave me a safety briefing. He explained warning signals, pointed out escape hatches, and demonstrated how to open emergency doors. This in-depth stage direction may have scared away the less adventurous, but I felt my anticipation level rising.

The RAF Mildenhall Pave Low helicopters officially drop off the "operational books" as of Oct. 1. However, the MH-53s of the 20th SOS at Hurlburt Field, Fla., continue operations for another year before they must meet a decommissioning date of Oct. 1, 2008.

Shortly after I was fitted for my life preserver and safety harness we were in the air and on our way to rendezvous with the Pave Lows over the White Cliffs of Dover. On the way the view of the ocean was incredible; we were flying "Special Ops" style - low-level.

Normally the MC-130P is flown at night with the aid of specialized radars and often by pilots wearing night vision goggles. The 67th SOS provides long-range low-level infiltration, exfiltration, and re-supply of special operations forces in hostile or denied territories. They also enable combat search and rescue, medevac, and humanitarian operations - all functions of any special operations aircraft.

Yet, it is the unique capability to supply special operations helicopters with clandestine air refueling support that sets the MC-130P apart from other C-130 airframes in its class.

Once the five-ship formation of Pave Low helicopters finished its flight past the chalky white cliffs, it met with us



A grand stage was set for the last refueling of the 21st Special Operations Squadron MH-53M Pave Low IV helicopters stationed at RAF Mildenhall, by the 67th Special Operations Squadron MC-130P Combat Shadow during the Pave Low's final flight, Sept. 13, 2007. The two loadmasters use hand signals to communicate with the helicopter pilots approaching to receive fuel. (U.S. Air Force Photo by Tech. Sgt. Tracy L. DeMarco)

at a much higher elevation to take on fuel. With my harness secured to the aircraft floor, I sat directly behind the loadmasters as the show began.

Slowly and silently the drogue baskets reached out from the wings. Three helicopters positioned themselves on the left-side while two floated to the right wing to line their probes up on target. One by one, each MH-53 pushed forward to make contact.

As the go-go juice flowed, I photographed left, then right, and then left again; pausing only to make sure I wasn't missing great shots in the opposite direction. The loadmasters sitting at the end of the Combat Shadow ramp, Sergeant Hosaka and Staff. Sgt. Marty Cowan, communicated with the helicopters using hand signals.

At one time during the AR, I recall the scene taking on a sort of spirituality - an on-top-of-the-world sensation. As our aircraft paced through the clouds, the Pave Lows would disappear for a second in the white puffs and then reappear as present as ever. In the ocean underneath us, tanker ships seemed as small as matchbox cars.

When the last of the helos finished, it slowed until the drogue released, and then gently fell away. I swear I could hear an orchestrated finish as a ballet of some 40 years ended.

Below us now, the powerful Paves peeled off to the right of our aircraft and headed to the next destination of their final flight, and we headed home. The loadmasters' waved their goodbyes at the historic and almost sad end when the formation broke away. A curtain came to a close.

The MH-53M Pave Low IV helicopter has been an Air Force asset since its first use in Vietnam in 1967. The mighty machines have served our nation well and it is just simply stated "their time to go." This intensely-used system will be replaced by the CV-22 Osprey at a later date.