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Last Bolt: Final wrench turns to end an era

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10/24/2007 - **RAF MILDENHALL, England -- "First bolt," yelled Senior Airman Brad Renninger.**

The phrase bounced around the hangar as other maintainers from the 352nd Maintenance Squadron echoed the warning. The announcement is standard practice for any crew chief in Airman Renninger's position, who was about to sever the connection between an MH-53M Pave Low IV and its rotor blades.

Previously called the 'Jolly Green Giant,' the five MH-53M metal monsters assigned to the 21st Special Operations Squadron at RAF Mildenhall, are being broken down for transport to the Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Group in Tucson, Ariz., often referred to as the 'Boneyard.'

This airframe is being retired, reconfigured for storage and replaced throughout the Air Force inventory with an overall completion date of October 2008. The Mildenhall birds have been grounded since their final flight Sept. 13, and will all be resting in the 'Boneyard' by the end of November.

"Although they're noisy, dirty, and work-intensive," said Senior Master Sgt. Jon Greene, chief of the Helicopter Maintenance Unit, "I'd be lying if I said it hasn't been emotional experiencing the retirement of our aircraft. They have a certain personality that makes them unique and will always have a special place in my heart."

The Pave past is populated with combat experience. During the 1960s, the Air Force purchased eight of the Pave Low IV predecessors, the HH-53B. Auxiliary fuel tanks were soon added to increase the flight range for combat search and rescue missions in Vietnam. Multiple system upgrades throughout the years lead to the MH-53M, a long-range infiltration, exfiltration and re-supply vehicle for the special operations force.

In order for a Pave Low to fit in the belly of a C-5 Galaxy, all six helicopter blades have to be removed, which takes the 11-person team about an hour. The rest of the tear down - including removing the rotor head that moves the blades - stretches across two days.

Tech. Sgt. Michael Barns, a 352nd MXS avionics specialist, worked the overhead hoist to lower the massive black blades.

"This is why I wanted to make [technical sergeant] - to run the crane," he said as he smiled like a boy with a new wrecker set.



Staff Sgt. Justin Rich, a crew chief from the 352nd Maintenance Squadron, Helicopter Maintenance Unit, guides the last rotor blade away from MH-53M Pave Low IV tail number 95784 during the dismantling process to prepare the aircraft for storage at the Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Group in Tucson, Ariz., commonly known as the 'Boneyard,' Oct. 02, 2007, RAF Mildenhall, England. Each rotor blade weighs 350 pounds and is lowered to the ground using an overhead hoist. All Pave Low helicopters in the Air Force inventory are due to be grounded by October 2008. (U.S. Air Force Photo by Tech. Sgt. Tracy L. DeMarco)

At the front of the 21st SOS hangar, two MH-53s were waiting - they were stripped and packaged, ready to be taken to their final resting place. Straight ahead of them outside, sitting in the rain, was the fifth and final Pave Low. It will be the last to be torn down and the last to be transported to Tucson.

With the helicopters leaving, it stands that the helicopter maintenance professionals will be moving on as well. There are 42 crew chiefs and specialists being reassigned out of the 352nd MXS to various locations in the Air Force, some of whom have already departed. In addition, 30 Airmen will simply move within the 352nd MXS from the Helicopter Maintenance Unit to the Aircraft Maintenance Unit to maintain the C-130s.

On top of the helicopter, one blade remained. Airman 1st Class Chris Ollivier, who has been assisting Airman Renninger, bellowed, "Last bolt." Again, their comrades repeated the cautionary call. Carefully, Airman Renninger removed the final bolt holding the final 350-pound rotor blade in place.