

History-making helicopter lands at Ohio museum

By James Hannah

DAYTON, Ohio (AP) — Helicopter No. 357 has a long and daring history.

The special-operations Sikorsky MH-53 was used in a rescue attempt of U.S. prisoners of war in North Vietnam in 1970 and later in Bosnia and Iraq.

Now the 88-foot-long chopper is being retired, with honor. The helicopter has made its final landing at the National Museum of the United States Air Force, where it went on permanent display Monday.

"It's been a busy aircraft," said museum historian Jeff Underwood. "It absolutely encompasses U.S. military history for the fourth quarter of the 20th century and carries into the first quarter of the 21st century."

No. 357 — nicknamed "Magnum" after the gun — flew for 38 years. It is the last to remain of the handful of helicopters used in the Son Tay raid in Vietnam. Its final flight was a combat mission in Iraq on March 28.

There were originally about 70 MH-53s. There are still 12 in service, but the last of those will be retired in September. The fleet will be replaced by the Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft.

The massive MH-53s were created from the HH-53s — the "Super Jolly Green Giants" — by outfitting them with new engines, rotors and skins.

"This is really the first real beast of a helicopter that they ever made," said Lt. Col. Shawn Henrie, aircraft commander for the helicopter's final flight in Iraq. "When this thing was developed, it was enormous."

The MH-53s were later equipped with infrared sensors, global positioning systems and terrain-avoidance radar that enabled them to fly clandestine missions at night, in bad weather and under enemy radar.

Henrie, who now flies Huey helicopters in Wyoming, said he has developed a special attachment to No. 357 and other MH-53s he's flown.

"I feel like I've cut off an arm and left it behind," he said.

That was echoed by Tech Sgt. Vin Depersio, flight engineer on No. 357's final flight.

"We've all lived through some pretty hairy conditions. The thing that always seems to bring you back home is the '53," Depersio said. "I've crashed in one. It took care of me. Even though we crashed, it still takes care of you."

The Son Tay raid using MH-53s was an attempt to rescue more than 50 U.S. prisoners of war believed to be held at the camp in North Vietnam. Fifty-six Special Forces troops used a full-size mock-up of the camp at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida to train for the raid.

The force took off from Thailand at night, flying low. Arriving at the camp, one helicopter destroyed the guard towers with gunfire and another made a controlled crash landing in the middle of the camp. They found that the prisoners had been moved.

The Air Force says the attack boosted the morale of POWs and prompted North Vietnam to gather POWs in fewer locations to try to better defend against such raids, making communication and organization among POWs easier. The raid also served as a model of organization, cooperation among the services and flexible execution, according to the Air Force.

Henrie was aircraft commander for a March 28 mission in Iraq. He said it was a fitting last hurrah for a helicopter with so much history.

The crew inserted a team of U.S. Army and Iraqi special forces into a spot north of Baghdad. "They grabbed all the bad guys they were looking for," Henrie said.

Master Sgt. Kevin James, a flight engineer on No. 357's final mission, said he has always been impressed by the helicopter's history.

"You walk out to 357 and you just think about what that thing has done," James said. "And you're just like, 'Man, I can't believe I get to fly on that bird today.'"