

An MH-53's last mission brings it to Wright-Patterson



Skywrighter photos by Christy Webb

Staff Sgt. James Swanagan works diligently on wing fasteners April 17.

by Mike Wallace
Skywrighter Staff

After 38 years of active military service supporting special operations forces, an MH-53 Pave Low helicopter known as 357 is retiring to the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force. Its last flying missions were performed in Iraq.

Number 357 was the lead command and control helicopter for a mission to rescue approximately more than 50 American prisoners-of-war from the Son Tay prison camp 23 miles from Hanoi, North Vietnam in 1970. The aircraft's call

sign for the mission was "Apple One."

This mission was a significant event for Air Force special operations because, although no prisoners were found at the camp, the operation caused conditions for POWs held in North Vietnam to improve.

Following its duty in Iraq, the helicopter was loaded into the bay of a C-17 Globemaster III, flown first to Germany, then to Wright-Patterson, where it arrived on the evening of April 14. The next day, the Pave Low helicopter was towed to a museum restoration hangar.

Eleven maintenance technicians

from the 1st Special Operations Helicopter Maintenance Squadron, Hurlburt Field, Fla., accompanied the MH-53. After three months of deployment, they rode with the helicopter, and reassembled it on April 16. The aircraft will be cleaned but not painted, and when it's displayed in the museum, it will appear much like it did as a working rescue helicopter. There is not yet a specific date for when it goes on display.

The MH-53 is 88 feet long, its six-bladed rotor has a 72-foot diameter, and its propeller is 25 feet above the deck. Powered by twin General Electric T64-100 turbo-prop engines, the helicopter has, during war operations, a maximum takeoff weight of 50,000 lbs.

The MH-53 can carry approximately 30 combat-equipped people in addition to the six-member crew, closer to 38-40 if not carrying combat gear.

Its fact sheet states the mission is: "low-level, long-range, undetected penetration into denied areas, day or night, in adverse weather, for infiltration, exfiltration and resupply of special operations forces."

The 53 is primarily used for infix and exfil. Rescue isn't really listed as a mission, but they do rescue when necessary.

Of the assembly work performed by the special ops maintenance technicians, Greg Hassler, a museum restoration supervisor, said, "These guys assembled (the helicopter) in about one-third of the time it would have taken us.

There are 11 of them, and they're very familiar with the aircraft. We could have assigned maybe four people to that job."

The maintenance technicians included: Master Sgt. Cedric Heron (Group Leader), Tech. Sgt. Michael Armstrong, Tech. Sgt. Michael Freer, Staff Sgt. David Coyle, Staff Sgt. James Johnson, Staff Sgt. James Swanagan, Senior Airman Robert Biggers, Senior Airman James Fowler, Senior Airman Wesley Hulick, Airman 1st Class Sean Courtois and Airman 1st Class Matthew Holliman.



Senior Airman Wes Hulick helps hold up a propeller as squadron members Staff Sgt. David Coyle and Senior Airman James Fowler help to attach it to the helicopter.

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Team reassembles MH-53 for its final mission



◀ As the reassembly of the MH-53 helicopter completion Mike Douglass does a safety check on the cockpit before can be displayed at the National Museum of the United States Air Force.



◀ Much sweat and teamwork went into putting the MH-53 back together for museum display as Staff Sgt. David Coyle and Senior Airman Logan Biggers do their part.

▶ Senior Airman James Fowler unfastens a safety strap as he finishes work on a propeller.



▲ Senior Airman James Fowler leaps from the top of the retiring MH-53 during the operation to reassemble it for display.

▶ Airman 1st Class Matthew Holliman threads safety wire while helping to reassemble the MH-53.



▲ Staff Sgt. David Coyle and Senior Airman James Fowler concentrate on the task at hand at the restoration hanger.

▶ Tech Sgt. James Johnson works on wing assembly during his last assignment on the MH-53.



▲ Airman 1st Class Matthew Holliman concentrates on his task while looking forward to his arrival home in a matter of hours.

Skywriter
photos by
Christy Webb