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Aged veteran - Pave Low retires to AMARC

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1/18/2007 - **Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Ariz.** -- The first Air Force MH-53J, the famed Pave Low, retired to the Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Center Jan. 4.

The aircraft, an aged veteran of the Air Force Special Operations airlift world, left Kirtland Air Force Base, N.M., that morning for well-deserved rest at Davis-Monthan where it joined 2,700 other aircraft stored and preserved in the desert climate.

Other MH-53Js from the 551st Special Operations Squadron, which trains special operations flightcrews for Air Education and Training Command, will follow to Davis-Monthan in increments of two after the last Pave Low class graduates from Kirtland in March. The last two will be gone in June.

The MH-53J, tail number 66-4428, was piloted by Col. Thomas Trask, the commander of the 58th Special Operations Wing. The colonel has been flying the helicopter for 19 years, through special operations in Panama, the Persian Gulf and the Balkans. The first rescue of Desert Storm in Iraq was completed by an MH-53J, piloted by then-Captain Trask. He had no idea at the time, he said, that he would be the first to ferry it to Davis-Monthan.

"It was an emotional time during the flight," he said. "Not during the flight itself, but when we put on the brakes at Davis-Monthan - that's when you know it's for the last time."

The aircraft has been in the Air Force inventory since the 1960's and has seen action in every American conflict since Vietnam. The J model's service record is impeccable, but maintenance man-hours have steadily increased as the years passed.

"It's still a capable aircraft but tough to maintain," Colonel Trask said. "It was designed for 5,000 hours of use and we've got some with 13,000. That's more than twice the original design level."

The age of the aircraft played a part in the Air Force's decision to retire the Pave Low.

"It's all about parts and availability," said Chief Master Sgt. Dan Kenyon, NCO in charge of the 551st Aircraft Maintenance Unit at Kirtland. "They're no longer making many of the parts and it's tough to get them. It just wasn't cost-effective anymore. The Air Force had to pool its money for a new generation of aircraft which has newer, lighter and easy-to-maintain systems."

When asked if the MH-53J was notoriously difficult to maintain, the chief laughed.

"Let's just say it doesn't fly; it beats the air into submission," he said.

Despite its maintenance woes, the bird will be sorely missed by the Pave Low community.

"It was tough to see it go away and land at AMARC," said Col. John Maubach, the deputy commander (rotary wing) of the 58th Operations Group, who trained with Colonel Trask in 1987 on the Pave Low. They shared their first training flight together 19 years ago and completed the trip to Davis-Monthan together.

"It's tough to watch because you know what it gave to this country," he said. "It's not only the aircraft; it's the phase-out of the mission -- a long legacy." The colonel said this move is the first phase of turning over the special operations rotary wing airlift mission to the Army. Part of that legacy is the famed survivability of the MH-53J. "It used to take a lot of battle damage and continue to fly home," he said. "Two years ago, a crew took a Rocket Propelled Grenade through the nose in Iraq. They still were able to make the approach and land safely. I've flown it home in Saudi with a cracked tail. It's a sad day. It's more than a chunk of metal; it's a mission." No one feels that more deeply than Colonel Trask because this flight was the last Pave Low mission for him. He will leave the Wing this month to be commandant of the Squadron Officers College at Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala., a job noted for its lack of flying time.

"I think it's appropriate to take what could be possibly my last flight in the Air Force in the MH-53J," Colonel Trask said. "My goal was to stay in for 30 years until 2014 and retire with the 53, but it's not meant to be."

His memories of the aircraft will last the rest of his life, he said.

"It's a temperamental aircraft, but we always knew before leaving if it needed repair. Once we were in the air, I always knew it would bring me back home. I always felt the best part of flying the 53 was the initial pick-up and hover. It's 25 tons of metal with all the parts flying in opposite directions, all spinning and grinding to get us a few feet off the ground. I've always thought that was an amazing thing."

At 9 a.m., Jan. 4, Colonel Trask found that amazement for the last time as he brought 66-4428 to a hover over the Kirtland tarmac.

The helicopter hung there for a few moments, turning its nose back as if to say good-bye, then lifted into the clear morning sky and flew westward until it was lost over the horizon.