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One more for the road

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6/26/2007 - **RAF MILDENHALL, England** -- It was as if the mighty MH-53M Pave Low IVs didn't want to bid goodbye to Master Sergeant Eddie Linnbaum, much less help add time to his flight-hour record on the day of his finis flight May 3.

The first two helicopters refused to pass run up checklists. But the third didn't let the 21st Special Operations Squadron senior flight engineer down, and both veterans; man and machine, were airborne and on the way to London for a unique flight.

Venerable aircraft and flight engineer alike, both retire soon, and Sergeant Linnbaum is first - in more ways than one.

The noncommissioned officer is proud of his accomplishments while in uniform - among them the fact he holds the record for most hours aboard a helicopter for his career field.

"I've got 6, 546.7 hours in the air," said Sergeant Linnbaum. "The only guy that's close to me we can find is Chief Master Sgt. Ed Hux, out at Davis Monthan, Air Force Base, Ariz., with 5,960 hours."

Chief Hux and Sergeant Linnbaum trained together in basic technical school.

"He's chained to a desk full of paper now. I called him, and he said there's no way he would catch my record (he only has a year left)," said Sergeant Linnbaum, who departs the Air Force Sept. 1, after 25 years in the special operations and search and rescue communities.

It was an easy decision for the NCO to end his career before the MH-53M Pave Low IV is retired.

"I've flown in Hueys and H3s," said the sergeant, who acknowledges he's dating himself (Air Force CH-47 Chinooks and the H-3 Jolly Green Giants were retired during 1989 and '90), but I spent most of my time on the Paves."

With a cup of coffee in hand, aboard the aircraft he keys the headset microphone and chats to crew mates as the helicopter flies toward the Thames River and the heart of London.

Each of the crewmen spots points of interest on the ground en route. Everyone on board, except the pilots, periodically acquires targets - with their cameras.

"When I decided I wanted to retire, (flying over central London) was the only thing I wanted to do," he said.



Master Sgt. Eddie Linnbaum, 21st Special Operations Squadron, and his wife Theresa wait patiently for the aircraft's show time prior to Sergeant Linnbaum's finis flight. (U.S. Air Force photo by Master Sgt. Dennis Brewer)

Cruising over the city, the aircraft passes the London Eye; everyone strains to capture the image.

He couldn't have envisioned this flight 25 years ago. Back then he was green, flying one of his first missions, but it also provided memorable moments. In fact according to him, "air refueling is the scariest part of our job.

"On one of my first flights on an H-3, we were going out for air refueling training and our standard AR (air refueling) track was weathered in," said Sergeant Linnbaum. "So the tanker dragged us about 110 miles off the south end of the island (Iceland). It developed a hydraulic failure, and they left us to take care of the in-flight emergency.

"It's back in the day before GPS (global positioning satellite), INS (inertial navigation systems) or night vision goggles.

"So the crew aboard the tanker gave us a heading north - it's all we had to get home with. It was a tense ride back, no real visibility at night, 50 feet above the water in real extreme weather."

He's been shot at, picked up civilians from war zones, dropped off special operators behind enemy lines and seen rockets launched at his airplane.

But according to the seasoned veteran, it's the small margins of human error, if something goes wrong, that unnerves a guy.

"The things I can see; I don't think about much," he said. "If you can engage it, you have some control. It's what you can't see that you need to be acutely aware of."

He trains and evaluates other flight engineers in his unit, and he always stresses that point.

"It's a way of thinking - like safety issues," said the Randallstown, Md. native "You have to be thinking in advance. If it's hot, and you're picking up people during a non-combatant evacuation like during Joint Task Force Lebanon, you have to make sure you bring water for your passengers. It seems like a small thing, but it's the little things that can mean the difference between success and failure."

To new Airmen entering the Air Force and special operations, the senior NCO had this to say, "Pay attention, learn all you can, become the expert in your field and you will have a great career.

"Treat people with respect, like adults until they prove themselves otherwise," he continued. "Be flexible when trying to get the job done. Take care of your family and people. And, you can make fun out of almost anything."

He also said that not everything bad that happens is a negative.

"I've lost some hearing; one of the old guys, when I first came in, told me to wear ear plugs," said the sergeant. "Back then some guys didn't, and even with wearing them all these years, a helicopter is a noisy place, but I wouldn't trade the experience for anything."

After joking about working at Wal-Mart as a greeter for his retirement plan, Sergeant Linnbaum said, "No, I don't feel old, but the kids in the Squadron think I am."

He laughed and continued, "I overheard one of 'em say, 'Eddie's so old he stood fire guard when God lit the Sun.' Everyone's got jokes, but you can't take yourself too seriously."

Officially, the former Navy brat who followed his dad and grandfather into a military service career departs Sept. 1.

Until then he, his wife Theresa and their children will prepare for their first day of civilian life - and Sergeant Linnbaum will get some much-needed family time.

"We're going to see some sites around Europe while we still can," he said. "I'd like to add - my wife is my hero. She takes care of the house, the kids while I'm gone, and me when I'm home.

"It's time we all take a break together as a family."