

Thank you Scott.

Col Hicks, your support to this squadron has been incredible in just your few months here. Your example of leadership and attitude towards the men and women of the 20th Expeditionary Special Operations Squadron is greatly appreciated.

I'd like to thank our distinguished visitors for joining us today

Lt Gen Wurster
BG Votel
Brig Gen Bishop
Col Howell

I'd also like to welcome the members of Joint Base Balad, the CJSOAC, and of course, the members of the 20th and the Pave Low maintainers.

It is my distinct honor and pleasure to represent the members of the 20th ESOS this morning. Today's ceremony marks not only the deactivation of this storied squadron, but the retirement of the H-53 from the United States Air Force inventory after more than 40 years.

On 19 March 2003, H-53s and the 20th began combat operations in Iraq. During the first days of the war, the 20th infiltrated reconnaissance and surveillance teams in southeastern Iraq to facilitate special operations movement and the massive conventional forces advance to Baghdad. H-53s led the assault on the strategic Al Faw Peninsula petroleum pipeline and metering station in the largest ever SOF air operation. As the lightning push towards Baghdad progressed, the squadron infiltrated, exfiltrated, and re-supplied teams all over southeastern Iraq.

As the country initially settled in late 2003, the squadron moved forward to Baghdad. With the emergence of the deadly insurgency, pave low crews conducted night after night of direct action missions and logistic resupply missions all over Iraq. The move to Balad in 2004 signaled the long-term commitment of MH-53s to the theater.

The squadron's time in Balad saw the only combat loss to enemy action of an H-53 since the Vietnam War. Near Fallujah, a direct hit by an RPG obliterated the cockpit of a Pave Low. Despite the blinding of the flight engineer due to shrapnel in his eyes and the helmets and goggles of the pilot being blown off, the crew was able to land the aircraft after recovering control as the aircraft exceed approached ninety degrees nose-up pitch with almost zero airspeed. They were rescued by their sister ship just before being over run by enemy forces. Not a single crewmember or team member was lost that day due to the heroism and skill of the crew and the incredible ability of the MH-53 to absorb battle damage, just as its ancestors, the HH-53 and CH-53 from Vietnam did. In fact, not a single team member has lost their life flying on a pave low in Iraq and only one team member has been lost in combat on a pave low since Vietnam.

As the next few years unfolded, the MH-53 and the crews of the 20th would provide the majority of vertical-lift direct action and logistical resupply to the CJSOTF. When called, the 20th could be counted on to perform not only the glamorous assault mission, but the critical resupply and passenger movement missions whose impact to the morale and welfare of our SOF ground teams was immeasurable. We supported our STS brothers in opening new airfields and sat countless thousands of hours providing on call CASEVAC for other joint partners. Not always the most glamorous work, but the pave low crews executed these missions with pride knowing that anything the teams needed, they provided.

With the departure of the Pave Low from SOCOM's inventory we can look back at a distinguished record. We can also look back to 1980 when we went from 8 Pave Lows to 41 and the crews to fly them in just over a year. One of the greatest success stories of the Pave Low over the last 30 years of its operation has been the ability to recruit, train, and retain an abundance of qualified crews. Despite the closing of the other three pave low squadrons over the last 18 months and the rapid loss of crewmembers to AFSOCs expanding aircraft fleet, we stand here today with more than 1 ½ fully qualified and current crews for every pave low in existence, just as it has been for decades.

The final chapter of the 20th and the MH-53 has been written. Let the record show that our operators, maintainers, and support personnel kept a 40 year old helicopter, each averaging some 10,000 hours, fully mission capable to the abrupt end in combat. This bookend of excellence and heroism in combat matches the opening chapter of the H-53 in combat in Vietnam, where her accomplishments are legendary.

The legacy of Pave Low is certain. In 1980 she was the most advanced and most capable special operations helicopter flying with terrain-following, terrain-avoidance RADAR, and the ability to defeat a complex and mature threat network. Over the last thirty years the aircraft, crews, and maintainers have built on the work of each previous generation. We retire the Pave Low tonight with the most advanced threat detection and self-defense systems and fully automated, hands-off zero-visibility take-off and landing capability. She goes out just as she came in...the best.

As we leave the theater in just a few days, our thoughts and prayers are with all of you remaining behind to continue to take the fight to the enemy to bring peace to this nation and ultimately peace to the region. We wish you a speedy return to your families and loved ones. Know that you have our admiration and deepest respect for what you do here every day.

We look forward to a time in the near future when the 20th reactivates and brings the revolutionary CV-22 Osprey tilt-rotor to the battlefield and joins the CJSOAC to support the teams wherever they are needed.

Thank you and God bless you all.