



Photo by Courtesy of Capt. John Totty, U.S. Air Force

Pave Low, sweet chariot: The choppers fly out of Kirtland for the last time

By Phill Casaus

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The venerable MH-53 Pave Low helicopters at Kirtland Air Force Base are being retired to make way for a new generation of aircraft. Pilots and crew say they'll miss the big Sikorskys, seen here over a taxiway at Albuquerque International Sunport.

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PAVE LOW FACTS

Length: 88 feet

Height: 25 feet

Rotary diameter: 72 feet

Speed: 165 mph at sea level

Ceiling: 16,000 feet

Armament: Three 7.62 mm miniguns or three .50 caliber machine guns.

Source: mh-53pavelow.com

They are secure enough - or, maybe, tough enough - to wear red scarves to work and become teary-eyed over a Bon Jovi song.

That may be all you need to know about the men who fly the MH-53 Pave Low helicopter, a history-filled machine that departs Albuquerque's skies for the final time today.

"It really struck home when we had a deactivation party a few weeks ago," says Air Force Capt. John Totty. "Our theme song in the Pave Low community is 'Dead or Alive.' Whenever we get together, we play that song, sometimes many times, and we're locking arms, putting our scarves around our heads and singing that song at the top of our lungs."

If the sight of nails-hard pilots and crew members from the 551st Special Operations Wing welling up to "Dead or Alive" seems incongruous, please consider the fate of the Pave Low - the whump-whump-whumping heartbeat of the Air Force's Special Operations Command.

As tough and nimble and deadly as a derringer, variants of the Pave Low have been doing things since the late 1960s most of us

will never know. That's the Special Ops code: Never talk; never brag.

But among the crew members, it's an established fact that the tip of the big stick of U.S. foreign policy is the Pave - a twin-engine, Sikorsky-built machine that generally carries a crew of six and as many as 20 specially trained troops who, in times of trouble, are the first ones in.

"It's a perfect blend of utility and agility and just outright strength," says Totty, a 21-year veteran who flew the Pave Low in combat in Afghanistan.

But even near-perfection cannot blunt the onset of wrinkles and crow's feet, and that's what's happened to the Pave Low. With the new, 21st-century V-22 Osprey coming on line to handle some special operations missions and others going to the MH-47 Chinook, the old girl is headed to history.

Or worse, perhaps, the "Boneyard."

That's what military wags call Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Tucson, where the six Pave Lows belonging to the 551st will gather Arizona dust in retirement. Three of the aircraft took their final flight from Kirtland Air Force Base on Friday; the final three were scheduled to follow today.

That grown men would feel sad about saying goodbye to a machine older than they are says a lot about the 24/7 lifestyle Pave Low pilots and crew members lead - not to mention the stressful synchronicity most revel in with every mission.

"It's a crew coordination orchestra," says Lt. Col. Brett Hauenstein. "It's literally an orchestrated event."

Yes, this is the military, so insignia is not insignificant. But the Pave Low engenders an egalitarian sense of teamwork based less on rank than on a shared sense of danger. Two pilots, one flight engineer and three gunners all have a variety of mind-bending duties, every single one aimed at making sure the aircraft stays aloft under the worst conditions imaginable.

In most aircraft, keeping 'em flying is the province only of the pilot. But in the Pave Low, the windshield is narrow and often obscured, so it's often up to the men in the back to be alert for peripheral threats or problems - and yell out an opinion or observation, regardless of rank.

"We talk to guys that are going through here and say, 'Hey, the aircraft doesn't crash in compartments,' " Hauenstein says. "If something's going wrong, you better open your damn mouth."

The cockpit of the Pave Low is a touchstone to its time, full of 1970s-era round gauges and toggle switches and a cockpit compartment that suggests the old Opel subcompact. But while there's a definite whiff of museum piece when you're inside, the aircraft still has enough whiz-bang avionics and visual stimuli to make flying the thing a heart-stopping chore for all involved.

Key to the process is an enlisted flight engineer, who sits in a jump seat just behind the pilots and serves as a kind of coordinator between the front and rear of the aircraft.

One of the flight engineers in the 551st, Master Sgt. B.J. Jobling, says he's struggled to explain his job and the mission of his chopper, but has finally settled on this one: "It's like test-driving a roller coaster."

That gets a knowing laugh from the men of the 551st. The squadron (motto: The Best Teach the Rest) has instructed pilots

and crew at the "Schoolhouse" within Kirtland since the early 1990s. The unit ceases to exist in June, and its men are at the front end of the Pave Low's phase-out. Other squadrons, based in England, South Korea, Florida and the Middle East, will soon face the same fate - headed to different aircraft, or perhaps retirement.

In a specialized line of work where almost everyone knows everyone else and nearly all have been in the kind of life-or-death situations that galvanize soldiers forever, the end of an era is not just as simple - or unemotional - as turning a page.

"You never have a feeling like, I'm going in somewhere to do something alone," says Master Sgt. Al Aguinaldo of his many missions in the Pave Low. "Yes, it's a big Air Force. Yes, some of the missions are scary. But I'll always know that before anybody else, before any other assets, I know my Pave brothers will come and get me, or make things right.

"Which," Aguinaldo adds quietly, "did, in fact, happen a couple of times."

With the clock ticking, and the Last Flight of the Pave Low near, Hauenstein says he chooses to think about the people more than the machine. In a lot of ways, he says, the men made the machine what it is.

Was.

"The thing that's saddest to me is just the community of people that have been around and now are scattering off to do different things," Hauenstein says. "Our community is really tightknit."

Those who've never flown in the Pave might never understand. You have to wear the red scarf, its edges jauntily peeking out

above the collar of the flight suit. Maybe you even have to sing Bon Jovi. But mostly, you have to be part of a team that knows what happens to one, happens to all.

"This is going to suck when we all go to the four winds," Aguinaldo says. "I honestly believe that although we're going to be apart, off doing different things, we're going to be together. That whole 'Band of Brothers' thing? I understand it. Other people watch the movie, but I understand it because of the things I've experienced in the Pave Low."