

Last flight for the Pave Low near Shalimar

## **Hurlburt MH-53 flies last mission to where it is displayed at the Air Force Armament Museum**

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Eglin Dispatch

SHALIMAR - The 20th Special Operations Squadron's Pave Low helicopter has flown many missions.

She was in Jonestown, Guyana, in November 1978 to recover 903 Americans who died in the Jonestown Massacre. She flew night missions in Bosnia and just returned from Iraq last year.

But Friday, MH-53 tail No. 73-1652 flew her last mission when she landed at the Air Force Armament Museum near Shalimar, where she will be on permanent display as a monument to all Air Force MH-53 Pave Lows that will retire Sept. 30.

"I'm stoked to have it here," said George Jones, director of the museum.

Jones, wearing a grin as big as Texas, worked with officials from Hurlburt Field and Eglin Air Force Base for five months to get the airframe.

"It's been his dream," said Col. Rick Locastro, vice commander of the 96th Air Base Wing. "He said we have to get this helicopter in," which he did in five months time. "It's a great addition and a real piece of history."

The Pave Low helicopter has gone through a number of modifications since its inception with the Air Force in 1967 as the HH-53B Super Jolly Green.

The heavy-lift helicopter is the largest, most powerful and technologically advanced helicopter in the Air Force's inventory, according to a 1st Special Operations Wing press release. It has been modified for radar and terrain-following avoidance systems, night and adverse weather equipment, forward-looking infrared sensors, GPS and onboard computers.

Missions typically were search and rescue, direct action and other low-level, long-range missions, including infiltrating, exfiltrating or resupplying special operations forces in "denied" territory.

The airframe flew combat missions in Vietnam and the attempted Prisoner of War rescue attempt at Son Tay. They led the way for Army Apaches in Desert Storm, aided rescue efforts in the aftermath of 9/11 and flew in Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom.



A Pave Low makes a graceful landing adjacent to its exhibit site.

Jones officiated the dedication ceremony Friday, calling it "a wonderful aircraft that served its country proudly for over the past 35 years."

He requested this particular Pave Low through Air Force Special Operations Command because of its ties to Hurlburt and Eglin. Tail No. 73-1652 was assigned to the 55th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron at Eglin in the mid-1970s and spent the last 27 years at Hurlburt's 1st Special Operations Wing.

Jones particularly was pleased at her grand entrance.

"All the other museum aircraft were either towed here or transported by truck," he said. "This is the first time an aircraft as ever flown into the museum."

The dedication ceremony was originally set for Sept. 2, but was postponed because of inclement weather. Col. Bruce McClintock, the 96th Air Base Wing commander, also pointed out that the Air Force also wanted the aircraft on hand in case it was needed for search and rescue operations after Hurricane Gustav.

Lt. Col. Sean Hoyer, special assistant to the commander, 20th Special Operations Squadron, piloted the helicopter's last mission. It was also the fini flight - the last flight in a particular airframe - for him and flight engineer Master Sgt. Jason Rushing.

Hoyer said it was bittersweet. "We knew it's the end of an era," he said.

Hoyer also flew his first combat mission on the aircraft in Bosnia in September 1997. But he doesn't think this will be the last he sees of her. He said he probably will come back to visit after he leaves for Cannon Air Force Base, N.M., in January.

Rushing, still wet after being doused with water - a tradition for fini flights - was happy the aircraft will stay at the museum.

"It's a fitting end, where people get to appreciate it," Rushing said. "I've had a good amount of combat time in this one."

But his sorrow wasn't limited to that particular helicopter. He said he was going to miss all the Pave Lows, the mission and the crew.

"No other (helicopter) has such tight crew integration," Rushing said.

The MH-53 Pave Low helicopter is now on display in front of the museum, just where it landed. Military Editor Noel Getlin can be reached at 315-4472.