

# LAST FLIGHT OUT...*THE END OF AN ERA*

Hurlburt Field, FL.

16 September 2008

By Jim Burns

Today, Tuesday, September 16, 2008, as I stood on the flight line in front of the USAF 20<sup>th</sup> SOS, "Green Hornet" maintenance hangar on the ramp at Hurlburt Field, FL., I witnessed the end of an era. The last takeoff of MH-53M Pave Low IV, tail number 68-10369, from Hurlburt Field as it headed west and to retirement, after nearly 40 years of service, at the Hill Aerospace Museum on Hill AFB, near Ogdon, UT. This was not only the last takeoff for 68-10369 but the last ever takeoff of the Sikorsky MH-53M Pave Low IV helicopter from Hurlburt Field, Florida.



MH-53M Pave Low IV tail number 68-10369 ready to taxi from parking for last take-off at Hurlburt Fld., FL. 16 Sept. 2008 ... High Noon. Photo by Jim Burns.

Standing with a large crowd of members, former members, family, and friends of the 20<sup>th</sup> SOS "Green Hornets" and next to a fellow 'retired' "Green Hornet", and my good friend Fred Cook, on a beautiful 86° Florida day, we watched this magnificent machine come to life. Her two General Electric T-64-GE-100 engines, each capable of over 4,300 shaft horse power, spooling up and bringing Her six blade, 72 foot diameter, rotor system to life. As the first whiff of the engine exhaust being blown our way by the spinning rotors engulfed us Fred and I turned and at almost the same time commented to each other about how that odor brought back a rush of memories of times past when we were crew members on USAF helicopters. We stood silently, buffeted by the rotor wash, watching as the crew went through their ground checks, pre-flight and pre-takeoff check list, watched as one of the crew climbed up on the left sponson and opened the cowling of the running left engine making one last check, then closing the cowling, buttoning it up, hopping down and giving the signal that this nearly forty year old warrior was ready once again to grab the air and enter Her element. We watched, feeling the wind from the rotor wash, feeling the heat from the engine exhaust, absorbing the smell and sounds this one last time as 68-10369 began to taxi out of Her parking spot, crossing right to left, in front of us She made a 'smart' right face and headed toward the taxi-way.



**MH-53M Pave Low IV tail Number 68-10369 turning toward taxiway. 16 Sept. 2008 Hurlburt Fld., FL. Photo by Jim Burns**

As 68-10369 taxied by, Fred Cook made the following comment to me, “that’s not my bird, but even so, this is still a sad day”. I knew immediately just how Fred felt as I had the same feelings myself. Our time in the USAF was on different helicopters, but we couldn’t help but feel the impact that the event we were witnessing would have on helicopter operations of the USAF, it was indeed the end of an era. As 68-10369 was taxiing out, I looked to the left and saw the beginning of a new era ... four new MV-22 Ospreys ... setting silently on the ramp as 68-10369 rolled by and headed toward the end of the ramp ... as if to salute and wish a fond farewell to this last MH-54M Pave Low IV to depart from Hurlburt Field.

As 68-10369 approached the taxi-way She was honored with a traditional last mission “wet down” as two large fire trucks, one on each side, created a huge arch of water overhead for 68-10369 to taxi through. My thought at the moment was, as I remembered it, this tradition normally took place at the end of the last mission, but since the end of this mission and career for 68-10369 would be taking place at Hill AFB, UT., this was a fitting and impressive send off for this last take-off from Hurlburt. 68-10369 briefly disappeared in the spray of water. Reappearing, 68-10369 came out the other side of the water spray, the the fire trucks shut down their water spray and 68-10369 made a ‘smart’ left face onto the taxi-way, taxed a short distance south then turned around pointing Her nose north, into the wind, and this powerful MH-53M warrior entered the air and came to a hover.



**MH-53M Pave Low IV, tail number 68-10369 last flight “wet down” as She departs for the last MH-53M take-off from Hurlburt Fld., FL. 16 Sept. 2008 at “High Noon”. Photo by Jim Burns**



**MH-53M Pave Low IV, tail number 68-10369 'bows' to the crowd just prior to the last MH-53M take-off from Hurlburt Fld., FL. 16 Sept. 2008 at "High Noon".**  
 Photo by Jim Burns

68-10369 rose to a slightly higher hover, turned to face us and the crowd of well wishers and dipped Her nose over, making a final bow. Then 68-10369 turned back into the wind, nosed over again, picked up speed and altitude and made Her take-off to the North. We all stood quietly, many with moisture in our eyes, watching as She disappeared into the beautiful blue Florida sky, with high scattered clouds overhead, and disappeared from sight.

We could hear the word passing through the crowd "look behind and to the right" as 68-10369 would be making a last high speed, low level pass over the trees and the base.

MH-53M moving toward us at high speed, suddenly there She was right over the trees, giving us all an impressive farewell fly-by. 68-10369 zipped by, crossed over the ramp, turned to the south and climbed out over the runway finally turning toward the west and flying out of site.

In short order we could hear the unmistakable sound of the



**MH-53M Pave Low IV, tail number 68-10369 makes a last low level, high speed pass as She departs Hurlburt Field, FL. for the last time 16 Sept. 2008.** Photo by Jim Burns



**My last view of MH-53M Pave Low IV, serial number 68-10369... can you spot it? If you look at the round topped tree at the far left of the hanger and can see a small speck over the hanger just to the right of the tree...that small speck is my last glimpse of 68-10369, Hurlburt Field, FL., 16 Sept. 2008. Photo by Jim Burns**

On this last flight MH-53M, tail number 68-10369 was crewed by a civilian contract crew consisting of Aircraft Commander Jim "Pappy" Walters (USAF Retired), Pilot Tom Aldrich (USAF Retired), Flight Engineer Rick Simmons (USAF Retired), Flight Engineer Billy Smith (USAF Retired), active duty Flight Engineer Mick Tritt and crew chief SSgt Jasen D. Pen. I found it quite interesting that almost all of the crew taking 68-10369 to retirement were retired members as well.

While at this event I also saw fellow USAF RotorHead, Jim Henthorn, who was busy working at the 20<sup>th</sup> SOS memorabilia table before and after the take-off event. We did have a few minutes to talk and it is always a pleasure to see Jim and share some time. I'm sure Jim Henthorn will have additional photos and stories about this event to share with us all.

One last item, while at the event for 68-10369's departure, which I had thought was the last flying MH-53M, I discovered that the 20<sup>th</sup> SOS "Green Hornets" was, still serving our country in the deserts of Southwest Asia flying the MH-53M Pave Low IV's. These last flying MH-53M's are all scheduled to be airlifted to retirement at museums or in the Arizona desert and the 20<sup>th</sup> SOS "Green Hornets" deactivated by the end of October 2008.