

Requiem for a Heavy Lift

©Jim Henthorn, 2008 (Wednesday Sept 17, 2008)

She sat alone on the ramp. That ramp, once the crowded home of so many of her kind over the years, now deserted. All gone save one. She was an MH-53M Pave Low IV, affectionately known as the Love Machine, tail number 68-10369, forty years old and a veteran of many missions. She'd been in Rescue and Special Operations throughout her long career, cared for by many and loved as only a living machine can be.

For the current and former serving members of the Air Force Special Operations and the Rescue community, this was a final farewell. The last goodbye to an aircraft that had transported them into harm's way and brought them home again each time. They would see that she went out in style, as befitted the last of her kind.

People gathered, in uniform and civilian clothing, two stripers and colonels, all brought together on this day by their love and respect for what was happening here. The end of an era. The Air Force would now be out of the heavy lift helicopter business and the special operators would ride a new and very different steed into battle. That one was already parked in the spaces formerly reserved for her and her kind.



The crowd, quiet in anticipation, watched as the crew brought her to life for the final time at the home of Air Force Special Operations, Hurlburt Field. The flight crew, her last, went through the usual routine of the start check list and systems checks prior to be marshaled out of her parking spot.



The crowd, which had been gathering all morning, stood quietly, anticipating what was to come. They knew that they were sharing a historic moment in time. One that would never be repeated anywhere ever again. Something very special was about to leave their lives.

The young airman hustled to his place out in front of her and raised his hands up over his head. Skillfully guiding her out of her parking place, turning her toward the waiting airfield one last time.



Past the remaining crews still assigned to the 20th Special Operations Squadron who rendered one final hand salute to her and the crew who would fly her to her new home at Hill AFB. She would not be going to salvage but would spend her

coming years on display to the public and members of the Air Force. They will learn about her and the things that she and others like her had done. History, preserved in an airpark, for all to wonder at and learn from.

A fitting salute as she prepares to depart, a wash down. Tradition preserved. Flight crews often are on the receiving end of a hosing from their friends and flight crews



at the end of their final mission, combat flight or career and it's only appropriate that the same tradition is rendered to this valued member of the Special Operations and Rescue community.



Hover check, everything in the green!



A final "bow" to all those assembled to see her final departure...



And exit stage left, low over the trees

No one moves. No one leaves. Everyone knowing that this can't be the last they will see of her.



A sudden roar of rotor blades and she pops up coming back for one last pass over the field that has been home for so many years and missions. Then climbing up and away, she disappears in a misty, eye-watering moment of time...

