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Engineer bids farewell to 30 years of PAVE LOW

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10/23/2008 - **HURLBURT FIELD, Fla.** -- He's just an everyday sort of guy, working toward his second retirement and looking forward to the golden years. He doesn't stand out in a crowd. In fact, many people have probably walked past him without a second thought, never realizing they were standing next to history.

Retired Senior Master Sgt. Richard Simmon was a flight engineer on the MH-53 PAVE LOW for 28 years until Sept. 18, when he accompanied the last state-side MH-53 PAVE LOW from Hurlburt Field on its final flight to the Air Force Heritage Foundation Museum at Hill Air Force Base, Utah.

On the tarmac after the final landing in Utah, Mr. Simmon said it was an emotional moment for him. "She was such a good bird and I think she has a lot left to offer, so it's really sad to see her go."

For nearly three decades, Mr. Simmon, who was selected as the project flight engineer for the PAVE LOW prototype aircraft, embraced the PAVE LOW project from beginning to end and had an enormous effect on its accomplishments throughout the years. He was involved in all developmental and operational testing and evaluation and ultimately developed the procedures for training flight engineers on the new technology. He began his career in October 1966, during the upswing of the Vietnam War; he enlisted and headed to basic training with follow-on training in helicopter maintenance.

Mr. Simmon became a flight engineer on the HH-53 Jolly Green search and rescue helicopter during the Vietnam War and within nine months of his arrival in the war torn area, was decorated four times for gallantry and extraordinary achievement.

He was also presented with the Silver Star and Air Force Distinguished Flying Cross several times during his career.

After Vietnam, Mr. Simmon continued to work on HH-53s in various capacities including flight engineer, instructor and evaluator.

In 1980 he transferred to the 1st Special Operations Wing, Hurlburt Field, Fla. as a standardization and evaluation instructor and examiner. He taught ground and flight school training for both pilots and engineers and flew on all MH-53 operational test flights to evaluate new modifications to the aircraft and equipment.

After a brief move overseas, he returned to Hurlburt Field in 1988, this time as an instructor and evaluator on the MH-53 PAVE LOW helicopter with the 20th Special Operations Squadron. There, he used his vast experience and expertise to help with new J-model upgrades.

He also participated in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm during his time at the 20 SOS. Mr. Simmon retired from active duty in 1991. But he still didn't give up flying.

Following his retirement from active duty, Mr. Simmon took a job with a civilian contracting firm that performs functional check flights for the military, and continued to do what he loved, on the aircraft he loved, the MH-53 PAVE LOW.

As Mr. Simmon reflected on his nearly 40 years in helicopter operations, he said the best part of his career was getting involved in the special operations mission. "The people here are hard working," he said. "They will go the distance to get the job done."

And that enormous respect is mutual. Lt. Col. Eugene Becker, 20th SOS commander, said "Rick is an exceptional person. He and the other enlisted personnel really made the PAVE LOW mission a success."