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MH-53M Pave Low IV prepares to step off the flight line

by J. Raynel Bishop Koch

5/11/2007 - FORT EUSTIS, Va. -- It's the symbol of Air Force Special Operations. But with the last of its maintainers graduating from Fort Eustis, Va., the MH-53 Pave Low IV Helicopter will soon be but a memory.

"Anywhere you see Air Force Special Operations, there is usually a lithograph or a picture of an H-53 behind it," said Tech. Sgt. Ian Holmes, MH-53M Pave Low IV Mission Ready Airman Course instructor.

The last U.S. Air Force MH-53M Pave Low IV Helicopter H-53 Mission Ready Airman Course at Felker Army Airfield, Fort Eustis, Va., graduated May 11, with a ceremony at Fort Eustis' Transportation Museum. The class of five students range in rank from E-1 to E-3 and average about seven months of active duty military experience each.

"The job of the H-53 crew chief is to maintain, repair and make flyable again one of the most labor intensive aircraft in the Air Force's inventory," said Master Sgt. John Calhoun, 360th Training Squadron Detachment 1 helicopter craftsman instructor.

After 40 years of service, the MH-53M Pave Low will be replaced with the CV-22 Osprey.

The Osprey is a tilt rotor aircraft that combines vertical takeoff, hover and vertical landing qualities of a helicopter with the long-range, fuel efficiency and speed characteristics of a turboprop fixed wing aircraft. Its mission is to conduct long-range infiltration, exfiltration and resupply missions for special operations forces, according to Sergeant Calhoun.

The Ospreys will be assigned at Kirtland Air Force Base, N.M., and Hurlbert Field, Fla.

It's a bittersweet feeling for the instructors of the Pave Low course because they all have shared a part of the lineage of the H-53.

"It feels good to know you are teaching the last class and passing on the best information we can," Sergeant Holmes said. "But at the same time it's kind of weird to think there will not be another H-53 crew chief to come out to the school. As we graduate these guys, we know they are only going to be working on the H-53s for another year or until they start getting retrained into the CV-22s."

The MH-53M Pave Low's mission is low-level, long-range, undetected penetration into denied areas, day or night, in adverse weather, for infiltration, exfiltration and resupply of special operations forces. Pave Lows often work in conjunction with an MC-130 Combat Talon for navigation, communications and combat support and with an HC-130 for in flight refueling.

"As a maintainer, the H-53 is kind of a love/hate relationship because it is so maintenance intensive, but the mission is so cool," Sergeant



The last Air Force MH-53M Pave Low IV Helicopter H-53 Mission Ready Airman Course at Felker Army Airfield on Fort Eustis graduates Friday with a ceremony at Fort Eustis' Transportation Museum. The class of five students range in rank from E-1 to E-3 and average about seven months of active duty military experience each. (U.S. Army photo/J. Raynel Bishop Koch)

Calhoun said.

The first iteration of the H-53, known as the "Super-Jolly Green Giant" enhanced the Air Force's search and rescue capability during the Vietnam era. This platform continued to move the Air Force throughout Vietnam and ensued years of H-53 helicopters involvement with several major military operations such as Operation Just Cause of 1989, Operation Desert Storm of 1990's and currently Operation Iraqi Freedom, Sergeant Calhoun said.

Maintenance training for the H-1, H-3 and H-53 was originally taught at Sheppard AFB. In 1995, H-53 and H-60 helicopter training moved to Fort Eustis as part of an inter-service review organization.

"The H-60 had been on-line in the Air Force for several years and we still had no formal training at the time. They made an inter-service deal with the Army to come up here basically for the H-60," Sergeant Calhoun said. "We have two parts of training here. One is inter-located with the Army where Army and Air Force students train together on the H-60 and the other is co-located on the airfield which is Air Force-specific for H-53 training. We came up here to do training for the H-60 because the Army school already existed and trains hundreds every year. So it made sense for the military to save money and locate both schools here."

Even though the students may never see another H-53, they are still trained with the same intensity and mind set as Airmen were 10 years ago.

"The training is just as good now at the hour of darkness as it was at the beginning of the school," said Staff Sgt. Michael Black, MH-53M MRA Course instructor. "Just because this airframe retires does not mean their careers are going to be null and void."

"Once they leave this school, we are also preparing them to potentially work on any aircraft in the Air Force inventory by giving them the mind set of the mechanical aptitude and skill set required to work on any airframe. If they can work on a 53, then they can work on any helicopter in the world."