

Special operations squadron halts Pave Low student training

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3/24/2007 - **KIRTLAND AIR FORCE BASE, New Mexico** -- The flightline here will be a little quieter and fewer helicopters will dot the skyline over Albuquerque by the end of the month. The 551st Special Operations Squadron will stop training students for the soon-to-be-retired Pave Low March 31.

The first MH-53J left here Jan. 4 for the Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Center at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Ariz., where it will rest now that it is being removed from the inventory. The remaining Pave Lows here will continue to be ferried to Davis-Monthan over the next several months, said 551st Squadron Commander Lt. Col. Todd R. Lancaster. The last two Pave Lows will leave the hangar here in June.

Colonel Lancaster said that there are currently about 12 students remaining in the training program and that the last of them will finish their training by the end of the month. He said most of the students that have finished training recently and the last group to finish training here will most likely see at least one, if not two, deployments before the Pave Low is removed from the inventory.

The MH-53Js have earned a reputation for being a reliable aircraft and students and veteran flyers alike say they respect and appreciate the Pave Low. Although the aircraft will be leaving the Air Force inventory in the near future, Colonel Lancaster said that having the "Pave Low stamp" on a résumé will help the Airmen that have trained and worked with the aircraft and the students agree.

"The mission inspired me to be a part of the special operations and Pave Low community even though I knew it was disappearing," said Staff Sgt. Christofer Curtis, a student in the flight engineer program at the 551st SOS.

Sergeant Curtis started his Air Force career with the MH-53J working as a maintainer and is now in his final stages of training to be a flight engineer. He said he considers himself lucky to have been able to work with the Pave Low.

Flight engineers are responsible for the basic health of the aircraft, radios, the right hoist, and they also play a vital part in navigation responsibilities.

"The crew concept is really the main part of flying the Pave Low and that's part of what makes the community so tight-knit and why the camaraderie is so strong," Sergeant Curtis said.

Staff Sgt. Pete Cunningham, also of the flight engineer course, said that he wanted to get involved with the special operations community, specifically the Pave Low community, because of the caliber of the personnel and the close relationships they have.

"Even though it's going away, I'm extremely proud to say that I was a part of that. Hopefully, I'll get to see two deployments with it and I'll get to see other professionals in operations," Sergeant Cunningham said.

Colonel Lancaster said that the 551st SOS will deactivate once all of the students, staff and helicopters have left Kirtland.

He said that most students will go on to see operations with the aircraft and most will eventually move on to the CV-22 Osprey or the HH-60G Pave Hawk.

When the students leave the squadron and move on to operations, they will take with them the can-do attitude learned and shared in the Pave Low community.

"There is no limit to what you can do, it's simply how you approach it," said Sergeant Cunningham. "It's not 'that can't be done,' it's 'how will we do it?'"

Sergeant Cunningham said that he believes the nature of the tight-knit community will continue on with the Airmen of the 551st long after they graduate and move on.



Staff Sgt. Christopher Curtis, a student at the 551st Special Operations Squadron, performs a preflight inspection on an MH-53 Pave Low. There are 12 students remaining in the squadron, and the last of them are due to leave by the end of March. (U.S. Air Force photo by Laurence Zankowski)