

Prepared Comments by Lt. Gen. Donny Wurster 7 Jul 08
Induction ceremony MH-53M, 68-10357 to NMUSAF

We all thank you for the invitation to this event and the chance to be part of this ceremony. Standing before this crowd, in the presence of so much history and experience, is somewhat humbling and I figure I had better get this right or I will probably hear about it for a long, long time. We are here today to induct H-53 tail number #66-10357 into the National Museum of the United States Air Force. This proud machine, like many others here has a unique story to tell. It's background is heroic, as you will hear from the speakers today, but we need to remember that it is but one of a fleet of 72 helicopters of its kind that the Air Force owned and operated for nearly the last 40 years. There are many other H-53s, many other stories of courage and daring, and innumerable actions by maintenance and support crews who made it all possible.

This aircraft has really had two significant and different segments of service—the first as a Jolly Green Giant rescue helicopter, and the second as a PAVE LOW helicopter serving in special operations. The Air Force originally bought 72 H-53s between 1966 and 1973. There were 8 B-models with the external struts supporting the aux tanks. When the HH-53 went into production the sponsors were strengthened and the struts were no longer required. These C-models included 44 HH-53s and 20 CH-53s. Like 357, each tail number has a history. But, as a fleet, the story is a remarkable compilation of courage, daring, and the grace of a merciful Creator. Of these 72 aircraft, 22 have been lost in combat operations, another 20 crashed and were destroyed in accidents due to the difficult environment in which we train and fight, and we have damaged and rebuilt 20 more. Many of the remaining aircraft have been transferred to AMARC and we will fly the last dozen in the inventory at Hurlburt Field and in Iraq until they retire at the end of September this year. These statistics are pretty remarkable—a career combat loss rate of 30%, directly attributable to the types of missions this incredible machine can accomplish. When the training attrition is factored in, the loss rate approaches 60% over the life of the airframe—a testament to the difficult nature of combat rescue, or the night, low altitude, terrain following, assault mission of the PAVE LOW. If you add in the recovered aircraft that we managed to rebuild, 62 of 72 have hit the ground hard at one time or another, although there were a few two-time winners.

The machines do not do the job themselves, it was the people who launched them, the people who flew them, and those who sustained and repaired them that are the real heroes of the efforts. But, the machines have seen a couple of generations of these people come and go, and always they remain....the enduring posture to respond to the nation's call when needed. Today, I will talk about crews and heroes, but I have intentionally left the names of individuals out—it is for one simple reason, there are too many to mention, and inevitably we would miss many who deserve to be named. So, today we'll focus on the aircraft.

These helicopters have flown on 13 missions that earned the Air Force Cross. Three for the first three chucks of the Son Tay Mission in 1970 to rescue POWs in North Viet Nam, six for daring rescues of downed airmen during the Southeast Asia conflict, and four during the Mayaguez recovery effort at Koh Tang Island. Of those 13 aircraft, only one was not subsequently lost in combat or to an accident. That aircraft is 357. I flew as Apple 1 to Son Tay Prison Camp near Hanoi in 1970—carrying the famed Bull Simons and his team of commandos to rescue American prisoners. On that mission alone, 357's crew earned one Air Force Cross and four Silver Stars, if you count the decorations of the assault force...add two Distinguished Service Crosses and 20 more Silver Stars to the count. During the remainder of its service in Southeast Asia, 357 was directly involved in several other noteworthy and historic actions. It was involved in 18 combat rescue missions, 9 while flying as the "Low Bird", contributing to a total of 28 combat saves. In the course of these sorties, 16 more Jolly Green crewmen earned Silver Stars while aboard. Amazingly, 357 participated in a second mission for which the pilot was awarded the Air Force Cross, it flew as Low Bird on the first day of the Oyster 01 Bravo mission to recover a survivor who had spent 3 weeks successfully evading in North Viet Nam. And, while we are counting, 357 also picked up a PJ who was awarded the Air Force Cross for dragging a survivor 150 yards through enemy territory to a suitable extraction point. The crew of 357, taking 16 hits in the process, picked up the PJ when the helicopter who inserted him was unable to complete the recovery. A remarkable record for an aircraft who flew combat there for three years and saw action in North Viet Nam, South Viet Nam, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and the DMZ!

Following the end of the Viet Nam War, 357, was reassigned to rescue forces in the Pacific for the next 10 years—first in Hawaii, then Okinawa. Later, it moved to McClellan Air Force Base in California where it served in the 41st Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron until it was inducted into the PAVE LOW line in 1987.

The years of the early 80s were challenging, as Congressional forces sought to revitalize the country's special operations capability. The nation had made commitments to generate a viable force and the special operations era of H-53 history began in earnest. The first PAVE LOW had been built before the accident at DESERT ONE, thought the production had been cancelled. Subsequently, the Holloway Commission made specific recommendations regarding the Air Force H-53 fleet and its future potential as PAVE LOW helicopters within special operations. A reluctant Air Force bore the brunt of the Congressional fury that was inspired when the Chiefs of Staff of the Army and the Air Force signed a series of initiatives, including Initiative 17, which made commitments to transfer the mission of rotary wing special operations to the Army.

Congressional action and investment eventually turned every remaining H-53 in the Air Force inventory into an MH-53 PAVE LOW helicopter for special operations, where the aircraft continued to serve for an additional 20 years. At one point during this series of convoluted mis-steps, Army aviators were sent to the training wing at Kirtland Air Force Base, to begin training in the MH-53 to enable the Army to eventually assume ownership of the helicopters and the mission responsibilities. This represented the last straw for the Congress. The concept was scrapped, and one senior defense official was quoted as saying “Giving the PAVE LOWS to the Army is like giving the space shuttle to Chad.”

Based on the performance of the MH-53’s in the Air Force for the last 20 years, their vision had proven accurate. But, the history of the H-53, and the PAVE LOW cannot be completely understood without considering the impact of Initiative 17, the actions and individuals who overturned it, and its aftermath. These were essential shaping factors in the second half of the H-53 fleet. Like many other stories of courage and exposure, these need to be captured and recorded.

During the conversion process, from CH or HH-53 to MH-53, numerous electronic upgrades were included—terrain following radar, forward looking infrared, ring laser gyro inertial, Doppler integration, moving map display, hover coupler, and night vision compatible lighting inside and out. Additionally, the aircraft received a much needed Service Life Extension Program or SLEP which included crashworthy fuel tanks, self sealing fuel lines, steel hydraulic tubing, stroking seats, improved landing gear, elastomeric rotor heads, improved flight control servos, titanium blades and a host of other improvements that dramatically increased the survivability of the aircraft.

In addition to our depot teams who oversaw and engineered the work, there were dedicated and committed individuals that seized the opportunity presented by the Congress to improve this fleet and its ability to support national objectives. The results speak for themselves. In the first 20 years of service, the H-53 fleet endured 23 Class A accidents at the cost of 80 lives. The next 20 years of service proved as difficult in terms of accidents, with a total of 18—but the remarkable difference was that only 7 people have lost their lives in H-53 helicopters since the SLEP. Five of them were lost in a single accident in Afghanistan when a disintegration blade slashed one of the aux tanks igniting a fire. We had not had a post crash fire since the SLEP twenty years earlier and scores of lives of PAVE LOW crewmembers and ground force customers have survived mishaps that would have been fatal in a pre-SLEP aircraft. Similar efforts following difficult lessons learned in the dust brownouts and the marginal power environment of Afghanistan and Iraq resulted in rapid software upgrades and improved hover stability—significantly improving the safety of the crews in these difficult environments.

Following 357’s conversion to MH-53 configuration and SLEP modifications, the aircraft served in several conflicts and contingencies, and until a few months ago, was flying combat missions in Iraq every day. We knew that the museum intended to induct this helicopter when it returned from battle, and we knew that somebody up here was probably chewing their fingernails off hoping that we wouldn’t smash it before it made it home. 357 continued to fly the tough ones though, and on one mission late last spring, the crew over-torqued both engines and the gearbox in an emergency go—around from a brownout landing. But, cheating fate one last time, 357 brought the crew safely home. It was a deliberate decision that following the last combat mission, maintenance would tear-down 357 and send it directly to the Wright Patterson Air Force Base. Everybody involved wanted to induct the aircraft into the museum without another sortie so that its last flight was a combat mission...a fitting tribute to the machine, the crews that flew her, and the maintenance teams who kept her combat ready.

The H-53 fleet has logged countless combat hours, flown in every contingency in the last 40 years, and met the needs of national objectives time and time again. We checked the records and found that this fleet of only 72 aircraft has racked up a combat record of 140 Silver Stars. Think of that, it is an average of 2 Silver Stars per airframe over their lifetime. It is hard to believe that any other aircraft in Air Force history could have such a remarkable and compelling story of heroism. It also makes 357s statistics all the more impressive.

They have served in Viet Nam, Laos, Koh Tang, Jonestown, Panama, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq and the subsequent Northern and Southern Watch, Afghanistan, Iraq again, among those of which we are permitted to speak. The H-53 is always there if there is vertical lift combat action—always there, always successful. The fact is, of course, because of the people, not because of the machine. But undoubtedly each of us sense and adopt the legacy of courage and combat when we get into these aircraft, hoping we will prove ourselves worthy to be counted as brothers in the impressive history of these helicopters.

Four Aviator’s Valor Awards, six Cheney Awards, the Mackay Trophy twice, two Daedalian Exceptional Pilot Awards, six time Jabara Award winner, the Kolligian Trophy three times, two Schilling Awards, two Turner Awards, four time Pitsenbarger winner, and one Helicopter Heroism Trophy...and those represent only the missions that won, how many runner—ups were there? Also, in the early 90s, the crew chief of 357 was selected as the Air Force Crew Chief of the Year.

Late last summer, tail number 794 decided to cash in her chips during a night tactical sortie on the range at Eglin Air Force Base. I am convinced that, like survivors of the USS Arizona, who still have their remains interred in Pearl Harbor with the rest of the crew to

this day, she wanted to die with her boots on. You may not know it but, within a couple of weeks, that aircraft was slated to fly to AMARC for retirement. Fortunately, she spared the crew and some exceptional airmanship got the machine near the ground before things let go for good. As you might suspect...they don't want to go. One of the first Kirtland B-models to retire, upon landing at AMARC, realized where it was and locked up the brakes, refusing to move any further. The pilot hovered into parking to terminate that final flight. One of our recent deliveries from Hurlburt developed a rotor system problem and forced a divert into Houston, attempting to delay the inevitable. Despite averaging about 12,000 hours per airframe, they just don't want to go. These machines are born to combat and have proven themselves time and time again.

Even as we speak and enjoy this quiet moment, today's MH-53 crews are preparing to fly in combat tonight—crew chiefs and specialists scramble to get the machines ready, crews review mission details, sanitize, and step to the aircraft. They start up and depart to engage the enemy like the professionals who preceded them. All of you old heads would be proud of them. They have been on the battlefield since we started this on 9/11. Never before had this force done so much, so well, for so long. That is a tribute to the crews and the maintainers. The last chapter for the H-53 is being written right now and this story will end well. Our enemies are struck with terror at the sound of these rotor blades, they fear the angry tracers from well aimed mini-guns, and they sleep fitfully hoping that tonight is not the night they will come for me. The tradition continues. Let us remember the H-53 crews of today and honor their continuing efforts, like we do for those who came before them.

Thank you for the invitation for us to participate today. It has been a privilege for me to speak here today as a part of this ceremony.

Thank you, and may God bless our people who serve in harm's way.

Addendum for the PAVE LOW Reunion Dinner, 16 Oct 08

Since 357 was inducted into the National Museum of the Air Force about three months ago, the remaining PAVE LOW helicopters have completed their missions in CONUS and in combat.

First, the remaining aircraft at Hurlburt Field flew out to AMARC or permanent locations for static displays. Last month, when only one PAVE LOW was operational in the entire United States, and three days before it was to fly to its permanent display location at Hill AFB, Hurricane Ike stormed into the Gulf of Mexico. A large ship was endangered by the storm, and true to form, 369 and her crew cranked up and launched into the fury of that hurricane to attempt a rescue of the crew. They just don't want to go.

Finally, on 26 September 2008, the crews of the last six PAVE LOWs in the inventory briefed a final combat mission in Iraq. The maintainers prepared the birds, the crews prepared for their missions, sanitized, and stepped to the aircraft. Launching in a six-ship for the last time, the crews ran combat ingress checklist, checked guns, and then broke into 2-ship elements for their respective missions. Each proceeded to their targets, completed their assigned tasks, and returned to Taji to reform as a flight of six. The six-ship then returned to Balad with a final fly-by, pitched out and landed, in the manner so familiar to all of us.

After landing and shutdown, the mood was subdued but respectful. The early dawn showed the outlines of the big birds that would never fly again. Two of these will go on display, the others will go to AMARC. Crews and maintainers traded hugs and signed their names on the machines as part of this worthy history. As I walked around the machines, I did not endure a sense of loss. It was the first time that I recognized that these machines looked war worn, and perhaps a bit tired but proud of their service, faithful to their mission and calling, and committed to the end. Their stately elegance and now-silent repose reminded me of a verse from Paul the Apostle in the letter to Timothy that says, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith". And they have.