

Comments at the 20 SOS (Green Hornets) Dining Out, 10 Nov 2007  
By: Maj Gen Donny Wurster

I must admit that I accepted this invitation without a clue of what I could possibly say that would hold the interest of a squadron of the most aggressive, determined, and capable crews in the entire Air Force. A bit intimidating for a dumb helicopter pilot, which is all I really am underneath these stars.

After thinking about it, I decided to talk about your remarkable machines, the MH-53 PAVE LOW helicopter fleet, and their legendary history.

A few weeks ago 794 decided to cash in her chips during a night tactical sortie on the range. 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. As you know, 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.

When we notified the Chief of Staff about the accident, General Moseley asked for information about the aircraft. Like the rest of the Air Force, modernization and recapitalization are at the top AFSOC's list of needs for the future. We sent some information that included reference to the 35 hits that the helicopter took during the recovery of the Mayaguez, that it participated in the evacuation of Saigon, that the 12,000 hours on the airframe was slightly above the 11,000 hour average for the fleet, and that 794 had completed its fourth rotation to the desert in support of national objectives. I was surprised to see that he had forwarded that information to the Air Force Public Affairs office with the sense that "There is a story here worth telling." As I read his note, I thought: "Gosh, they are all like that." These machines are born to combat and have proven themselves time and time again.

We 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 sponsons were strengthened and

the struts were no longer required. These C-models included 44 HH-53s and 20 CH-53s. Like 794, 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 due to accidents in the difficult environment in which we train and fight, and we have damaged and rebuilt 20 more. Many of the remaining 30 aircraft have been transferred to AMARC and we will fly the last 13 in the inventory here at the 20th SOS and in combat in Iraq until they are retired at the end of next 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 the night, low altitude, terrain following, combat assault mission of the PAVE LOW.

These machines have flown on 13 missions that earned the Air Force Cross. Three for the first three chalks 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. It flew as the formation lead to Son Tay Prison Camp near Hanoi in 1970. It has served in several conflicts and contingencies since then, and it is currently flying combat missions in Iraq every day. The Air Force museum intends to induct 357 into the museum when it completes its service and I am sure that somebody up there is gnawing their fingernails hoping that we don't smash that aircraft somehow before it makes it home. When 357 departs the theater in March, we will tear it down and send it directly to Wright Patterson, inducting the aircraft to 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 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. Viet Nam, 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 PAVE LOW is a veritable energizer bunny of vertical lift combat action--always there, always successful. That 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 machines.

There are others to whom we should be grateful regarding the increases in safety of the MH-53 fleet. In the first 20 years of service, the H-53 fleet endured 23 Class A accidents at the cost of 80 lives. In the late 80s, the aircraft were upgraded to PAVE LOW configuration and received a much needed Service Life Extension Program 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 are a few people who deserve personal recognition for the vision and tenacity to make the MH-53J and then the MH-53M happen. One is Col Gary Weikel and another is Lt Col Ed Reed, both of whom were inspired by a tremendous leader named Col Bill Takacs--others helped and did the work but the vision and the strategy to define the upgrades, get the funding, and make it happen were theirs. We all owe them a debt of gratitude.

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 PAVE LOW helicopters since the SLEP. Five of them were lost in a single accident in Afghanistan when a disintegrating 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 crew members 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 dusty brownouts and the marginal power environment of Afghanistan and Iraq resulted in rapid software upgrades and hover stability--significantly improving the safety of the crews in these difficult environments.

So, as I look out here at the bright faces in this tremendous squadron--all this has preceded you. The torch is now yours to carry, and as I have said before, this is the finest era of PAVE LOW. Never before have we done so much, so well, for so long. That is a tribute to you and your maintainers. The 20th SOS continues to be the most relevant rotary wing unit in the history of the Department of Defense--bar none.

As you are all well aware, we will retire the last PAVE LOWs at the end of September. It is important that you finish strong. Our drawdown plan will move the CONUS force to AMARC before we cease combat operations. The last PAVE LOWs forward will fly combat missions until 30 September 2008, then we will fold them up, put them on a C-5 and deliver them to AMARC. Like you...they don't want to go. One of the first Kirtland B-models to retire, upon landing at AMARC, realized where she 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. And, I already told you about 794. They just don't want to go.

Each of you are or will soon be identified for another great job in AFSOC. Regrettably, we can't transfer this talented pool of Air Commandos directly into the CV-22 because we don't have enough of them yet. I am counting on many of you moving to that machine in the future and bringing the culture of the Green Hornets to that force. It is important that the gutsy determination of the crews and culture of PAVE LOW manifests itself into the CV-22 community.

You are not done yet. Even as we speak, 20th crews are taking the fight to the enemy. Enemies who are struck with terror at the sound of rotor blades, who fear the angry tracers from well aimed mini-guns, and who sleep fitfully hoping that tonight is not the night they will come for me. All of us from a former age envy you today. The last chapters of this aircraft are yours to write. We are counting on you to do it well. We could expect nothing less from the Green Hornets of the 20th SOS. Thank you.