



# 21st Special Operations Squadron Deactivated

**A**FTER 19 years of service in the United Kingdom, the 21st Special Operations Squadron (SOS) is to be deactivated on October 9. Currently equipped with five Sikorsky MH-53M Pave Low helicopters, the unit was initially re-formed in May 1988 at RAF Woodbridge, Suffolk, before eventually relocating to RAF Mildenhall, Suffolk in February 1995.

Throughout its UK-based period, the 21st SOS has been involved in many hostilities, including Operation Desert Storm in 1991. Throughout most of the 1990s it participated in the Balkans conflict. Its most recent war role was in 2003 during the opening days of Operation *Iraqi Freedom*, in the second Gulf War.

The Squadron has also been heavily involved in many humanitarian aid efforts, including Liberia in 1996, when it airlifted 2,100 civilians during the African civil war. Other operations included delivering over 32,000lb (14,500kg) of aid to displaced Kosovar refugees in the Balkan conflict and, in 2000, 84,000lb (38,100kg) of supplies to victims of the floods in Mozambique.

As the UK's only long-range search and rescue (SAR) unit, the 21st SOS will be hard to replace. However, the role now transfers to the 56th Rescue Squadron, which moved into RAF Lakenheath, Suffolk, from Naval Air Station Keflavik, Iceland, in June 2006 with five Sikorsky HH-60G Pave Hawks. In order to extend their range, refuelling support will be provided by 352nd Special Operations Group/67th Special Operations Squadron Lockheed MC-130P Hercules, based at RAF Mildenhall, which formerly served the 21st SOS.



All five MH-53Ms made a formation sortie out of RAF Mildenhall on September 13, during which the helicopters overflew many airfields or installations with USAF connections, including the former USAF airfields at RAF Alconbury and RAF Woodbridge, and the American Military Cemetery at Madingley, Cambridgeshire. *Derek Bower*

Gunners manning the pintle-mounted 7.62mm M135 miniguns at the cabin door, and 0.50mm machine guns on the open rear ramp, fired off over 3,500 rounds of ammunition at flare targets dropped into the sea from the lead MH-53M. *Derek Bower*



It was Operation *Eagle Claw*, the failed attempt by American forces to rescue US hostages from the American Embassy in Iran in April 1980 that led to the development of the Sikorsky HH-53. This combat-survivable, all-weather, heavy lift helicopter capable of special forces activities was developed into the Pave Low MH-53J with improvements to operate at night and in adverse weather conditions. Modifications for this role included forward-looking infra-red, inertial and global positioning systems, and terrain-following radar. Further advances, such as interactive defensive avionics, have brought a further change in designation to MH-53M.

The MH-53Ms (67-14994, 69-5784, 69-5795, 69-5796 and 70-1630) are destined to be flown by Boeing C-17 Globemaster III or Lockheed C-5 Galaxy to the Aerospace Maintenance And Regeneration Group at Davis Monthan AFB, Tucson, Arizona, where they will be used for spares recovery. That said, the 21st SOS squadron commander Lt Col Kirk Smith believes that should a sufficiently complete aircraft remain after cannibalisation, one may be made available to the Imperial War Museum, Duxford, Cambridgeshire, for display in its American Air Museum.

- Derek Bower



During the final 3 hour 55 min sortie, the MH-53Ms each took on board 250 Imp gal of fuel from a 352nd Special Operations Group MC-130P Hercules, which trailed drogues from its two underwing refuelling pods.

*Derek Bower*



A 21st SOS MH-53M Pave Low IV, 69-5796, flies over flooded Central Mozambique near the town of Chibuto on March 20, 2000, whilst refuelling from a 67th SOS MC-130P Combat Shadow. At the time, the Pave Lows and supporting MC-130Ps were operating from South African Air Force Base Hoedspruit, South Africa, where they were deployed to support Operation *Atlas Response*. This was a multi-national humanitarian relief operation to assist displaced persons in Central and Southern Mozambique, which had been devastated by extensive flooding.

*USAF/Tech Sgt Cary Humphries*