

Top News

NEW! Kirtland AFB Bids A Fond Adieu To Pave Low Helos

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Real Men Wear Red Scarves

To the men who fly the aging MH-53 Pave Low helicopter, watching the last of their decommissioned fleet leave New Mexico airspace Tuesday will be tough. But the Pave Low has taught this group a thing or two about being tough -- tough enough to make red scarves part of their uniform.



Battle-hardened members of the close-knit group that forms the 551st Special Operations Wing of the United States Air Force will say goodbye to the last of their beloved Pave Lows as they make their final journey... as they sing, teary-eyed, to Bon Jovi.

"It really struck home when we had a deactivation party a few weeks ago," says Air Force Capt. John Totty. "Our theme song in the Pave Low community is "Dead or Alive." Whenever we get together, we play that song, sometimes many times, and we're locking arms, putting our scarves around our heads and singing that song at the top of our lungs."

The 551st's six faithful Pave Lows will soon be gathering dust at their retirement home at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Tucson, AZ -- also known as the Boneyard. Three left on Friday; the final three are scheduled to follow Tuesday, according to The Albuquerque Tribune.

Why all the emotion over a machine?

That machine is a nimble twin-engine, Sikorsky-built beast capable of carrying as many as 20 specially trained troops. Pave Low and her crews have been doing things since the 1960s most people could never even imagine. But, that's the Special Ops code: Never talk; never brag.

"It's a perfect blend of utility and agility and just outright strength," says Totty, a 21-year veteran who flew the Pave Low in combat in Afghanistan.

But, the ravages of time are evident and it's time for the old guard to be replaced by the new. One of those replacements is the V-22 Osprey, a 21st century flexible combat troop transport aircraft that features both Vertical Take Off and Landing (VTOL) capabilities, as well as the ability to fly forward at near-turboprop speeds.

Over the past year, Ospreys have become an increasingly familiar sight in the skies over Albuquerque.



Another replacement for the Pave Low is the twin-rotor MH-47 Chinook, a Special Operations Aircraft (SOA) equipped with a fast-rope rappelling system, aerial refueling capability, and operations-specific equipment.

Part of the fierce bond these men have was developed involuntarily. In most aircraft, it's the pilot alone that keeps a crew in the air. But in the Pave Low, it's up to everyone on board, two pilots, one flight engineer and three gunners, to be alert for threats or problems -- and yell out an opinion or observation, regardless of rank.

"We talk to guys that are going through here and say, 'Hey, the aircraft doesn't crash in compartments,'" says Lt. Col. Brett Hauenstein. "If something's going wrong, you better open your damn mouth."

"It's a crew coordination orchestra," adds Hauenstein. "It's literally an orchestrated event."

Sitting in a Pave Low cockpit is like stepping back into the 1970s with round gauges and toggle switches, and a cockpit compartment reminiscent of an old subcompact car. And the old girl can still make flying a heart-stopping chore for all involved.

An essential key to keeping a Pave Low in the air is an enlisted flight engineer, who sits directly behind the pilots and coordinates between the front and rear of the aircraft. One such flight engineer in the 551st is Master Sgt. B.J. Jobling who explains his job this way: "It's like test-driving a roller coaster."



The squadron's motto is "The Best Teach the Rest," and they have lived up to it many times over, instructing pilots and crew at the "Schoolhouse" within Kirtland since the early 1990s. But, sadly, they, too, must go... as the unit will cease to exist in June. Other Pave Low squadrons some based in England, South Korea, Florida and the Middle East, will soon face the same fate as the military phases the helicopter out.

Leaving such a stressful, unique job won't be easy. The men of the 551st are bonded, joined by a force even they can't explain.

"You never have a feeling like, I'm going in somewhere to do something alone," says Master Sgt. Al Aguinaldo of his many missions in the Pave Low. "Yes, it's a big Air Force. Yes, some of the missions are scary. But I'll always know that before anybody else, before any other assets, I know my Pave brothers will come and get me, or make things right.

"Which," he adds, "did, in fact, happen a couple of times."

With their time together running short, Hauenstein opts to focus more on the people than the machine. In a lot of ways, he says, the men made the machine what it is.

"The thing that's saddest to me is just the community of people that have been around and now are

scattering off to do different things," Hauenstein says. "Our community is really tight-knit."

Just how tight-knit is something only those who have experienced the Pave will ever truly understand. With their red scarves and Bon Jovi tunes, they understand the true concept of what it means to be on a team: what happens to one, happens to all.



And what about that scarf? It identifies the member as part of a unique brotherhood and got its start in a 1978 training exercise. A crew member is awarded their badge of honor once they are qualified to fly.

"This is going to suck when we all go to the four winds," Aguinaldo says. "I honestly believe that although we're going to be apart, off doing different things, we're going to be together. That whole 'Band of Brothers' thing? I understand it. Other people watch the movie, but I understand it because of the things I've experienced in the Pave Low."

FMI: www.mh-53pavelow.com, [The 551st](http://www.kirtland.af.mil), www.kirtland.af.mil