

AIR COMMANDO

A Professional Publication by the Air Commando Association
Dedicated to Air Commandos Past, Present & Future

JOURNAL

PAVE LOWS

Excerpts from "On A Steel
Horse I Ride: A History of the
MH-53 Pave Low Helicopters
in War and Peace"

**Operation Assured
Response**

**Rescue of
Knife 03**

**Pave Low
in Bosnia**

**Search & Recovery
of CT-43 Crash**

Winter/Spring 2013



Vol 2: Issue 2

**Foreword by Maj Gen Michael Kingsley
Director NATO Afghanistan Task Force**

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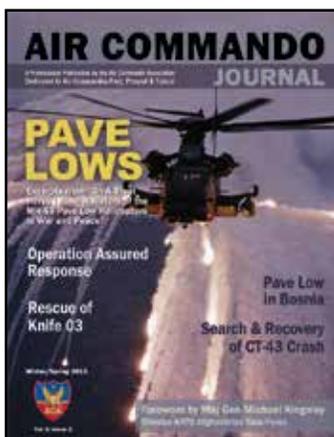
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Photo courtesy of USAF



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FOREWORD

It is my distinct honor to contribute to this issue of the *Air Commando Journal* in dedication to the MH-53 “Pave Low” helicopter and the men and women who supported the mission. Over the past 30+ years, until the retirement in 2008, the “red scarf” community of Air Commandos were involved in, and I would say critical to the success of, nearly every military engagement required by our nation’s leaders. From the jungles of Panama to the mountains of Bosnia and the deserts of Afghanistan and Iraq with many harrowing contingencies in between, this aircraft and its crews were relied upon to perform some of the most difficult missions imaginable in order to save American lives and support special operations forces around the world. To this day I am in awe of their bravery and commitment.



When I was a young captain in the 20 SOS, during the late 80s and early 90s, I quickly learned that this squadron was different. There was a cadre of leaders and support personnel who understood the importance of the MH-53 in the tactical SOF mission. With unique modifications, the Pave Low would prove over time the ability to do what no other aircraft in the world could do; precise infiltration and exfiltration in nearly all weather conditions, day or night. As the Pave Low grew, those leaders would spread the same tactics and procedures, and instill the new leadership with the same understanding. This revolution in capability would be the guiding vision that eventually bonded the three operational squadrons and the training squadron together. It created a culture of innovation and pushed the limits of training and performance for the crews and the aircraft. If I could encapsulate the essence of Pave Low, it would be the enduring commitment of the people and the willingness to dedicate their lives in support of the mission. Gen Schwartz put it so eloquently in the foreword of the recent by Darrel Whitcomb *On a Steel Horse I Ride*: “Ultimately, the story of Pave Low bears out the first SOF Truth: Pave Low proved to be a highly capable and impressive aircraft, but more significantly, the people behind Pave Low, and those who served with it, were, and always will be, even more impressive.” Over the years, those people coalesced into a family of operators, maintainers, trainers, testers, and acquirers who gave it their all time and time again.

Today, MH-53 aircraft are proudly displayed in air parks and museums across our nation. Pave Low crews and support personnel served with great distinction in combat all the way until the very last flight in September 2008. But the culture of innovation, tenacity, and mission focus lives on in the myriad of other squadrons in AFSOC. I am proud to see how far our command has come since then, and I am inspired by our current leaders and the direction they are going. We have passed the torch and they are running strong. God-speed on their mission in the future.



Maj Gen Michael Kingsley is the Director for the NATO Afghanistan Task Force. He is the former AFSOC Vice Commander.



CHINDIT CHATTER

We start this issue of the ACJ with a great article about one of our true heroes, 1st Lt James Fleming and the events surrounding his mission in November 1968 as a UH-1F pilot with the 20th Special Operations Squadron (SOS) in Vietnam, for which he was awarded the Medal of Honor by President Richard Nixon. It is a great lead-in for us because this edition of the Magazine is dedicated as a remembrance of the Pave Lows, the HH, CH and MH-53/B/C/H/J/M helicopters, the great airmen who flew them, and the unsung airmen who supported them. Their experiences and élan were very much in the same vein as those of Fleming, and their community was a key element of AFSOC until the inactivation of the aircraft in September 2008. However, I will present this edition a bit differently. Darrel Whitcomb was recently sponsored by the AFSOC to write an inclusive history of the Pave Low. His book, *On a Steel Horse I Ride: A History of the MH-53 Pave Low Helicopters in War and Peace (OASHIR)* was published in November 2012 by the Air University Press, and we have invited him to act as our guest editor for this edition.

Thank you, Dennis. I am deeply honored to have this opportunity. My plan for this is simple; I will use the words of the Pave Low participants themselves to tell snippets of the story. In fact, let me begin with Lt Gen Donny Wurster, a Pave Low pilot and commander, who set the tone for this edition when he said, “There are times when men, machines and mission combine to produce something larger than the sum of their parts.”

Maj Gen Mike Kingsley provides us with a great foreword which continues that theme by stating, “If I could encapsulate the essence of Pave Low, it would be the enduring commitment of the people and the willingness to dedicate their lives in support of the mission.” The first article is an extract from OASHIR, and looks at the early use of the H-53s in Southeast Asia for rescue and special operations missions, and highlights the role they played in the evacuations of Phnom Penh, Cambodia and Saigon, South Vietnam, in April 1975. The heroic tales of the aircraft and crews in this conflict are endless. However, during the conflict, we never developed a night all-weather rescue capability. That need, officially identified as SEA Operational requirement #114, eventually led to the Pave Low III modification for initially nine HH-53s.

Next up is another extract from OASHIR which features some of the operational flight testing which was done to validate the Pave Low concept III and aircraft modifications. It tells the story of one mission flown over the Nellis AFB, Nevada, test ranges which showed what the Pave Lows could do, and the creative energy and methodology used by the initial Pave Low Airmen to bring the concept to fruition. With concept validation, the first nine aircraft were modified and prepared for rescue duty. However, the debacle in Iran in 1980 and desire of President Jimmy Carter to make another attempt, caused the aircraft and many crews to be diverted to the 20th SOS at Hurlburt Field, FL, where that second effort was being prepared. That mission was never executed; the Pave Lows remained at Hurlburt and became a staple of the AFSOF community as it worked through the great challenges of the 1980s which led to the creation of the Special Operations Command and its AF component, AFSOC. Within that process, Congress approved funding to convert all USAF HH and CH-53s to the Pave Low III Enhanced version and to re-designate them as MH-53Js. This provided aircraft for two more operational squadrons, the 21st SOS in England and the 31st SOS in the Philippines.

As the growth continued, 20th SOS Pave Lows, crews, and support personnel deployed to Panama and Desert Storm. A recent edition of the ACJ highlighted missions in Desert Storm. Our next article is from Joe Becker who writes about the experience of the 31st SOS and the explosion of Mt Pinatubo in 1991. That event eventually forced the squadron to be moved to Korea where it served until inactivation in 2001. Next,

continued on page 6

Brig Gen Brad Webb regales us with tales of the seemingly never ending Pave Low operations of the 21st SOS (with augmentation from the 20th SOS) in the Balkans followed by a great article from Steve Kelly and the sad recovery operation of the CT-43 crash in Croatia, which killed the entire crew and Commerce Secretary Ron Brown and his entourage. Steve Connelly provides us with an article which highlights the actions of the 352d SOG and 21st SOS when they were ordered to deploy to Liberia for Operation ASSURED RESPONSE.

Unfortunately, tensions remained high in the Balkans, and in 1999, US and allied forces conducted Operation ALLIED FORCE against Serbia. The 20th and 21st SOS provided CSAR support and the next article, an extract from OASHIR, tells the story of the rescue of Vega 31, which finally validated the need for night all-weather rescue capability first scripted in the Vietnam War.

Like all Americans, the Airmen of Pave Low were shocked and deeply angered by the events of 9-11. Within days, their lead elements (led by Lt Col Kingsley) were headed for combat in Afghanistan in Operation ENDURING FREEDOM. Paul Harmon writes about one representative event in Afghanistan. This is followed by another piece from OASHIR focusing on the first night of combat operations in Iraq where the further upgraded MH-53Ms, flew in combat until their final mission in September 2008. Of course any narrative about Pave Low must include the deep felt admiration for and appreciation of the great maintenance troops who kept the finicky aircraft in the air, and Kent Mueller gives us that narrative from his unique perspective. We conclude with an article focusing on the words of Lt Gen Wurster, who, as the AFSOC vice-commander and then commander directed the inactivation and enshrinement of the Pave Lows. As the aircraft were being inactivated, he gave several speeches which dispatched them with grace and style, as only he can do. He also flew on their very last mission, and I conclude with his words about these hard-ridden Steel Horses as their engines spun down for the last time, "Their stately elegance and now-silent repose reminded me of a verse from Paul the Apostle in a letter to Timothy that says, 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.' And they have."

To the Airmen of Pave Low, I offer a humble hand salute.

Darrel Whitcomb, USAFR (Ret)
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Correction:

Page 49 (Fall 2012 issue of the *Air Commando Journal*) the Medal of Honor Recipient Lt Col Joe M. Jackson article incorrectly showed the position as Army Rangers when it should have stated the position of Combat Controllers.

Great Journals!

Dennis (Editor In Chief)

I retired from the 16th at Hurlburt, but was also in the first wave of AC-119K (Stingers) in Vietnam. Was so great to read about and recall some of the stuff we did over there.

Thanks again,
Jim Brickell

You guys are really doing a great job getting the word out on ACA...with the hats, publications, growth in the DC area I keep seeing ACA everywhere I turn. AFSOC has grown like crazy and look forward to you guys growing your ranks even more. You should be extremely proud! Thanks for what you do to share the legacy of Air Commandos.

v/r
Lt Col Trevor Benitone

I have to admit over the years, my father (SMgt James R McRae) retired and deceased (he served 1 year Vietnam in 1970 and 2 - six months in Laos), really really enjoyed belonging to this great association. You all have come so far over these years, and what a great magazine you have now. Thank you for continuing with all the great ventures.

Ardis McRae

AC-130s and Iranian Hostage Rescue Attempt

Dear Lt Col Lawrence,

Sir, I was thoroughly thrilled and grateful to read your recent article in the *Air Commando Journal*, "AC-130s and Iranian Hostage Rescue Attempt." It certainly brought back many memories of having the opportunity to work with the AC-130s during Eagle Claw 79.

As a young KC-135 Navigator stationed at Grissom AFB, IN, (305th ARW), I was trained and served in the initial cadre of Refuelable Tankers (RT -13 5s) in 1979 and 1980. Proud to say, we supported the AC-130s literally around the world in those very exciting and challenging times. Particularly relished the times at Guam.

Having served and worked with your crews at the Wadi (Col Barton's Tanker Task Force), there was so much that I observed and noticed, but never understood until I read your detailed article on the AC-130s mission. I do remember when we were planning our refueling orbits over the coast of eastern Saudi Arabia to join the ACs departing out of country, one HQ officer informed us, "Just go ahead and proceed across Saudi - the diplomats will work it out later." Nothing like an Ad Hoc mission.

One of my highlights of my AF career was supporting the AC-130s in 79 and 80. If you happen to have any good photos, paper or digital, of ACs being refueled by KCs, I would be very grateful to receive a copy.

Very Respectfully
Lt Col (Ret) John Witzel
Papillion, NE

Shadow and Stinger

Thank you, Dr Fletcher and Editor Barnett for a great article on Gunship III - the interim fixed-wing gunbird between the most-honorable Spooky and the incredible Spectre.

Not enough was mentioned about the 1.5 million candlepower [vice "candlelight," p. 26] Xenon-arc spotlight we carried. The zoom-able airborne spotlight was the unique

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hallmark and signature of the AC-119G and AC-119K. No other USAF gunship, in the Vietnam era or after, employed such a thing. It took a very big APU - 50KVA in output - to power the light and the guns of the G and K models.

Ground forces under threat or under attack loved the lethal combination of our guns and the spotlight. The light's singular virtue was that it brightly illuminated the enemy, while letting our guys down below maintain their cover, out of the light. As to brightness, ground commanders said they could read a newspaper by it. Our pneumatic flare-launcher could kick out 24 long-duration parachute flares, which troops often asked for, but the "big light" was usually the favorite. (Since the G-model Shadow most often supported troops in contact, the G probably used the light more often than the K, which mostly hunted trucks on the HCMT with radar aids that the bare-bones G lacked.)

In training in 1968, original aircrew members like me were pretty dubious about the spotlight - "You mean to say, that while we're orbiting at 2500 feet in the deep dark, with enemy gunfire coming up at us, we're gonna turn on a light brighter than a searchlight? You gotta be kidding." As it turned out, the spotlight worked far better in-country than any of us expected; when on, it dazzled the enemy in its intense beam. Without the light and at firing altitude, the blue flame of our engine exhaust stacks was giveaway enough. But VC and NVA never understood how to lead a target when they fired at us - a good thing.

To summarize: Without question, in the Vietnam War the Shadows and Stingers were the most effective weapons for exclusively night use, either in defense or in covering pre-planned night operations. Just two months after the G-models first flew in combat (early 1969), in-country intel from Army, Special Ops, and Marine sources said repeatedly that just the sound of our ancient Wright R-3350's approaching was often enough to drive off an attack. Our three-foot-long, targeting night obs scope (NOS - it was mounted on gimbals in our open left-front doorway and operated/aimed by one of the two navs; it controlled the moving reticle in the pilot's left-aiming gun sight) pioneered the helmet-mounted night scopes used universally today.

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Submissions can be e-mailed to info@aircommando.org or mailed to Hot Wash c/o Air Commando Association, P.O. Box 7, Mary Esther, FL 32569. ACA reserves the right to eliminate those that are not deemed appropriate. However, we will answer each and every input, whether it is placed in this column or not. Thank you in advance for your interest in the Air Commando Journal.

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Medal of Honor Recipient

1ST LIEUTENANT JAMES PHILLIP FLEMING

By Harry Bright

A Thanksgiving Week of Meaning

James P. Fleming was born on March 12, 1943 in Sedalia, MO. His family moved to Moses Lake, WA in 1957, where he graduated from Moses Lake High School. His father was a career Air Force pilot and the driving force guiding him in his desire for an Air Force career. James entered Washington State University in the ROTC program and graduated in 1966. He then entered the Air Force at Pullman, Washington and was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant. He attended pilot training at Laredo, TX. Half way through his pilot training the Air Force needed helicopter pilots for Vietnam duty, so he volunteered for helicopter training. After he completed helicopter pilot training in May of 1967, and subsequent stateside assignments, he was sent to Vietnam in 1968. He attended special operations training at Hurlburt Field, FL, prior to deployment.

Thanksgiving Week, Vietnam

Day 1: Ban Me Thout, Republic of Vietnam. Monday, Nov 25, 1968. Three days before Thanksgiving. 1st Lt. James Fleming, aircraft commander of a UH-1F (Huey) transport helicopter, 20th Special Operations Squadron at Nha Trang AB, was flying his first combat mission in country. While performing an exfiltration mission of a disoriented reconnaissance team receiving intense enemy fire, his helicopter was struck by a rocket propelled grenade. He maintained control of the helicopter and safely flew out of the combat zone with the team on board and landed in friendly territory a short time later. For

his actions on this day he would later be awarded the Silver Star. But it is for his actions the following day that we most remember James Fleming.

Day 2: On Tuesday, November 26, 1968 - two days before Thanksgiving - he was part of five-ship formation inserting an Army Special Forces (SF) recon team of seven men across the border into Cambodia, west of Pleiku. The formation was made up of two gunship helicopter, the lift helicopter "Slick" (Fleming), an empty Slick to pick up anyone that might get shot down, and a medevac helicopter. A Forward Air Controller (FAC) O-1 Bird Dog was also assigned to guide them to the insertion area. The mission of the recon team was intelligence gathering and to conduct a small scale ambush.

After the SF team was on the ground and their 20 minute "OK" period had passed, they advanced to a road and established their observation and ambush positions. The helicopters exited the area to a remote, safe, landing zone and waited for the call to return and exfiltrate the team. Approximately two hours later a large enemy force traveled the road near the soldiers' hiding place. One enemy soldier left the formation to "take care of business" and saw a hiding SF trooper. A fire fight erupted. The SF team took out the enemy in front of them and began a leap frog maneuver to leave the area and return to the safe pick-up LZ. Their radio operator broadcasted, "Tango 5-1, contact, need extraction." Hearing this, the helicopter crews immediately got their choppers airborne and headed to the

general location of the SF team.

The enemy force was pursuing the team to a wide, un-crossable river that forms the border between Cambodia and Vietnam. The team was surrounded on three sides by the enemy and had the river at their backs. As they could not cross the river, they established a defensive position with Claymore mines in front of them. The FAC flew into the area and identified the approximate location of the trapped team. The two Huey gunships came in behind the FAC with full automatic gunfire and rockets. The first gunship was hit by large caliber machine gun fire and limped to the opposite side of the river and crashed. The empty Slick followed them, picked up the crew, and returned to their home base. The medevac helicopter developed engine problems and also had to leave the area. Fleming's Slick and the lone gunship remained. As the remaining gunship engaged the enemy, it was hit and started trailing smoke. MAJ Leonard Gonzales, the pilot, flew the crippled gunship out of the danger area. Lt. James Fleming and his crew were the only hope the SF team on the ground had of surviving.

The FAC contacted Fleming asked him what they should do. Fleming told him to pinpoint the team's location and

guide him in, low on the river and out of the line of fire. As they approached the river bank Fleming turned his aircraft sideways, allowing the right door gunner to fire at the enemy. Although they were flying a Slick, they did have light machine guns for self protection. The helicopter began taking hits from enemy gunfire. The SF team's radio operator reported that the enemy had them targeted and advised Fleming get out of the area. Fleming nosed down the chopper and flew down the river bank to leave the area. As he did, he brought the helicopter above the trees and found the SF team. He also saw the overwhelming enemy force closing in on the team. The team activated the Claymore mines which knocked back the attackers. Fleming told the FAC to bring him in one more time because now he knew where the team was and could make the pickup.

With that transmission, MAJ Gonzales from the damaged Huey gunship came back on the radio and told Fleming that if he was going back in, to follow him. He had regained control of the helicopter and had enough ammunition and fuel to make one more pass. The gunship flew over the enemy location and opened up with every weapon they had, the crewmembers not firing

mounted guns used their handguns to fire out the windows. Out of ammunition and low on fuel, the gunship finally had to leave. Fleming then repeated the same maneuver he used previously, and one of his crewmen, Fred Cook, instructed him to, "Go right, go right. I see them. Go down, down, hold your hover, I have one." The soldiers were partially in the water, trying to board the helicopter.

The rotor wash had blown down the reeds along the river bank and the helicopter crew could see the team. Fred Cook was reaching down and pulling the soldiers into the aircraft one at a time. Enemy soldiers were firing at the chopper and the door gunner was firing at the enemy. Six of the team members were on board the helicopter. The seventh member, Randy Harrison, had waited until all his team was on the aircraft before he stopped firing his weapon and ran to the river. He leaped into the water and tried to reach the helicopter, but he fell short and hooked his arm over the skid. Fred Cook reached down and grabbed him, holding him by his rucksack. Under a barrage of hostile fire, Fleming flew the Huey out of the area with Harrison holding onto the skid, Cook holding onto Harrison. (Some versions of the story claim a rope ladder was



A UH-1 crew armed and ready for a covert mission. Editor's Note: This is not the exact model 1st Lt Fleming flew, but is very similar.
(Photo: U.S. Air Force)



Picture taken just moments after landing his chopper in the mission that would earn Captain James Fleming the Medal of Honor. A six-man ground unit was about to be overrun by a large hostile force. Despite knowing that another chopper had just been shot down trying to rescue the patrol, Fleming landed his craft and balanced the chopper on a river bank with the tail boom hanging over open water. The patrol, however, could not get to the landing zone forcing Fleming to withdraw.

However, Fleming soon repeated his original landing position. Remaining in this exposed position, Fleming's chopper took numerous hits as bullets crashed through his windscreen. After the patrol boarded, Fleming was able to fly out of the area, despite an incredible barrage of hostile fire.

used and Harrison clung to that as they flew away). During the action Fleming at times balanced his Huey between the river and the river bank. They received numerous hits from the enemy gun fire, and some hits through the windshield, which they weren't aware of at the time. Amazingly, none of the crew members or the SF team were seriously wounded.

THE MEDAL OF HONOR

For his actions on that day, 1st Lt. James P. Fleming would receive the Medal of Honor on Memorial Day, May 14, 1970, at the White House. During the presentation ceremony, President Richard Nixon presented Medals of Honor to recipients from the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force. The order in which each Medal of Honor was presented went by the oldest branch of military Service to the youngest branch, officers first, enlisted next, in each Service branch. Also receiving the Medal

of Honor that day from the Air Force was A1C John Levitow.

Fleming's citation reads in part: "Disregarding his own safety, he remained in this exposed position. Hostile fire crashed through his windscreen as the patrol boarded his helicopter. Capt. Fleming made a successful takeoff through a barrage of hostile fire and recovered safely at a forward base. Capt. Fleming's profound concern for his fellow men and the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty are in keeping with the highest traditions of the US Air Force and reflect great credit upon himself and the Armed Forces of his Country."

When a person receives the Medal of Honor, they are automatically promoted to the next higher rank. 1st Lt. James P. Fleming became Capt. James P. Fleming.

At the Medal of Honor ceremony, Fleming's father wore his Air Force dress uniform. This was the first time

James had ever seen him in that uniform because he had always worn flight suits. On his father's ribbon bar was the Air Medal. James never knew his father had been awarded that medal. He asked his father where he got the Air Medal. "Two Jima," his father answer, "I was a pilot on one of the C-47s that flew down the beach dropping gun barrels and plasma to the Marines."

Post Vietnam

After returning from Vietnam, Fleming completed fixed wing flight training at Randolph AFB, TX. He then flew C-141 aircraft with the 8th Military Airlift Squadron, McChord AFB, WA (June 1970-August 1971). He held many positions of leadership during the rest of his Air Force career. Among those assignments were four years at the Air Force Academy, Vice Commander of the Air Force Officer Training School,



President Richard Nixon presents 1st Lt James P. Fleming the Medal of Honor on Memorial Day, May 14, 1970 at the White House.

and Operations Officer of the Squadron Officers School. His final assignment was the Professor of Aerospace Science for the ROTC detachment at Texas Christian University. He retired with the rank of Colonel on July 1, 1996, after 30 years service.. He and his wife live on small ranch in Texas.

Lesser Known Facts

After completing helicopter pilot training his first assignment was with the 862nd Combat Support Group, Minot AFB, ND. While at Minot AFB, he flew missions for the U.S. Forest Service supporting fire-fighting teams (June 1967-July 1968).

He took part in a mission to Greenland searching for the wreckage of a nuclear weapons armed B-52, while stationed at Minot AFB.

He had over 5,000 flight hours. 450 were in combat.

On May 11, 2002, "Valor Park" adjacent to the entrance of the National Museum of the United States Air Force, Dayton Ohio, was dedicated in honor of Air Force Medal of Honor recipients. Col (ret) James Fleming was there for the dedication, along with the other living Air Force Medal of Honor recipients.

On December 9, 2009, Fleming was awarded the USO Distinguished Service Award. The ceremony was held in New York City.

His ribbon rack consisted of 21 ribbons. Included among those are the Silver Star, Distinguished Flying Cross, Air Medal with seven oak leaf clusters, and the Legion Of Merit.

When he received his Medal of Honor, he donated his secondary medal to Washington State University. It is displayed at the WSU Lewis Alumni Association along with a

copy of the citation.

Col. Fleming is one of two people that graduated from Moses Lake High School who were awarded the Medal of Honor. CPT Joe Ronnie Hooper, from the 101st Airborne Division, was the other person. CPT Hooper received the Medal of Honor for heroism near Hue, South Vietnam, during the 1968 Tet Offensive. Moses Lake H.S. is one of a very few high schools that can claim two Medal of Honor recipients.

Col. Fleming was stationed at McGuire AFB, NJ, shortly before the beginning of Desert Storm. He would visit Dover AFB, DE, to talk with the students of the 21st Air Force NCO Leadership School (NCOLS). Ron Gough: "As guest speaker, Colonel Fleming would spend the first hour talking about the events surrounding his actions that would warrant the awarding of his Medal of Honor. The second hour was spent talking about military and world history, the normalization of Vietnam, the plight of POW's left behind, etc. On occasion, he and I would afterwards visit the "Hallway of Heroes" where he would share personal stories with me of other recipients of the Medal of Honor whose photographs and citations adorned the Hallway of Heroes."

"On one occasion, Colonel Fleming called from McGuire and said he was coming to Dover to just visit the Hallway of Heroes, and not to say anything to anyone since he didn't want to ratchet up protocol. When he arrived, we went into the hall, and after a few minutes I left him alone since he said he needed time 'for prayer and reflection' for the men and women who were going to be in harm's way since Operation Desert Storm was inevitable. After about an hour he slipped out as quietly as he had slipped in."

"One fond memory I have with Colonel Fleming is that he reenlisted me in front of the entire student body and staff at the NCOLS." Ron Gough goes on to say, "That would be my final reenlistment and one of the proudest moments of my military career."

Note: Several sites state that there were six people in the recon team. In Col. Fleming's YouTube interview he says seven. He also says that they were in Cambodia, while some sites state the Highlands of Vietnam. Research with the Congressional Medal of Honor Society indicates this was due to the mission being highly classified at the time. In later years, when these types of missions were declassified, the actual location was correctly identified as in Cambodia.



Information sources for this article:

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Congressional Medal of Honor Society, Mt. Pleasant, SC

Air Mobility Command Museum, Dover AFB, Delaware

Based upon lessons learned in World War II, the US Marine Corps needed a new, heavy lift helicopter. In 1961, Sikorsky Aircraft Corporation developed their S-65 model. Testing showed that it could fulfill the USMC needs and in 1966 they began procuring the aircraft as the CH-53A. When the machines showed their great value in Vietnam, the US Air Force ordered H-53s for use as rescue and special operations aircraft, eventually procuring 52 HH-53B/C and 20 CH-53C aircraft respectively. The aircraft and their crews flew countless missions across the breadth and depth of Southeast Asia, with the 37th and 40th Air Rescue and Recovery Squadrons (ARRS), and the 21st Special Operations Squadron (SOS) until literally the very last action to recover the SS *Mayaguez* and its crew in 1975. This narrative from OASHIR tells of the participation in the 21st SOS

and 40th ARRS in the evacuation of the last Americans out of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and Saigon, South Vietnam, just a month before the *Mayaguez* action.

On 11 April, 1975 both squadrons were ordered to launch aircraft to Ubon for their first potential combat action in over 20 months. The 21st launched nine CH-53C aircraft. Arriving at Ubon, three went immediately on 30-minute alert and the rest on one-hour alert. The 40th launched seven HH-53Cs, also to Ubon. The next day, USAAG/7AF ordered the complete evacuation of all American and selected allied personnel from Phnom Penh. Two 40th ARRS HH-53s launched with combat control teams (CCT) on board. First Lts Don Backlund and Gary Weikel flew the lead aircraft. As they descended into the designated landing zone, a large bird smashed into the windshield, smearing its entrails all over it and severely obstructing forward

vision. The windshield washers were able to clear away enough of the bird the pilots could continue the mission. They and their second aircraft inserted the teams into the designated landing zones around Phnom Penh and then departed. The teams directed the flow of helicopters in and out. The 21st SOS launched all nine of its aircraft to holding points north of the city. However, the evacuees were all taken out by USMC CH-53s and CH-46s, operating off of the aircraft carrier USS *Midway*, located in the Gulf of Thailand.

The Knives (21st SOS) returned to Ubon without evacuating any personnel. As the USMC helicopters finished evacuating 276 persons, the two Jolly Greens (40th ARRS) returned to the landing zones to recover the CCTs and then proceeded back to Ubon. Both aircraft sustained battle damage for their efforts. Both squadrons returned to Nakhon Phanom AB (NKP) the next day,

CH-53C #68-10933, serving with the 21st SOS, inserting indigenous forces in Laos in 1970. It was destroyed on 13 May 1975, when it crashed 37 miles south of Nakhon Phanom Airbase, Thailand, killing its crew of five and the 18 security police airmen onboard. (Photo courtesy of USAF/HRA)



The Southeast Asia Evacuations

By Darrel Whitcomb

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An HH-53 in Thailand. The rescue forces were proud of their saves. Photo courtesy of: USAF/HRA.

only to be notified that Communist forces were threatening Saigon, South Vietnam, and that both units were now to begin detailed planning for Operation Frequent Wind, the evacuation of American and designated allied personnel from that city.

When the US ambassador to South Vietnam, the Honorable Graham Martin, directed that evacuation operations should begin, the 21st SOS received an execution order and on 19 April deployed eight aircraft to U-Tapao AB in southern Thailand, while the 40th ARRS followed with seven aircraft. Both contingents took extra crews and maintenance support. The next morning, six CH-53s and four HH-53s departed U-Tapao and flew to the USS *Midway*, located in the South China Sea, 50 miles southeast of Saigon. They joined the fleet of USMC CH-53s and CH-46s that had flown the Phnom Penh mission. Two days later, the 40th ARRS was ordered to return two aircraft to U-Tapao, and two more Knives were dispatched to take their place, leaving eight CH-53s and two HH-53s. All HH-53s were then moved to Ubon AB to assume SAR alert for the pending operation.

Collaterally, the 40th ARRS received another recovery mission. On the morning of the 29th, the unit was directed to launch two HH-53s to recover a sailor with a broken back off of a ship in the Gulf of Thailand. The two crews made the 2,000-mile round-trip with no difficulties.

That same afternoon at 3 p.m., USSAG/7AF directed that Operation Frequent Wind be executed. Immediately, the collected CH-53s of both services, HH-53s, and CH-46s lifted off in a coordinated fashion to begin the evacuation. For the next 13 and a half hours, they shuttled back and forth from the ship to several landing zones in the city. None of the aircraft from the two squadrons suffered any damage from enemy fire, although the crews observed a great deal of it. One USAF CH-53, #68-10928, had a serious mechanical problem and could not fly. It provided parts to the other aircraft. Another CH-53 had a complete electrical failure while flying at night. Quick action by the crew recovered one generator, and it was able to

safely land aboard the aircraft carrier.

After departing Saigon for the last time the next morning, the helicopters shuttled evacuees between various ships. The next day, the Knives were alerted to make one more run into Saigon, but that directive was subsequently cancelled. Both the Knives and Jolly Greens were alerted to fly an evacuation mission to Con Son Island off the coast of South Vietnam. But that mission, too, was cancelled.

On 2 May, the 21st SOS and 40th ARRS aircraft and crews departed the *Midway* for U-Tapao, carrying with them 97 American evacuees from Saigon. The next day, the Jolly Greens returned to NKP. However, the Knives received another mission at U-Tapao. During the evacuation of Saigon, numerous South Vietnamese aircraft had been flown to the huge air base. There, they and the persons they carried were interned. The Thai government wanted the aircraft either removed or destroyed, and the Knives were directed to sling-load 27 A-37 and 14 F-5 aircraft aboard the USS *Midway* for shipment back to the United States. Finally, the Knives returned to NKP on 6 May.

Both squadrons brought home aircraft in dire need of maintenance, and technicians swarmed over the aircraft as the aircrews tried to enjoy a respite from their busy schedules of late. But the hiatus was short-lived, as unforeseen events began to dictate their redeployment. Next up would be the *Mayaguez* effort.



An HH-53 and two CH-53s operating off of the USS *Midway* during the evacuation of Saigon. (Photo courtesy of USAF/HRA)



About the Author: Darrel Whitcomb is the author of: The Rescue of Bat 21 (1998), Combat Search and Rescue in Desert Storm (2006), Call Sign - DUSTOFF: A History of US Army Aeromedical Evacuation from Conception to Hurricane Katrina (2011), and On a Steel Horse I Ride: A History of the MH-53 Pave Low Helicopters in War and Peace published in 2012 by the Air University Press. This excerpt and all others from: On a Steel Horse I ride: A History of the MH-53 Pave Low Helicopters in War and Peace by Darrel Whitcomb is used by the ACJ with permission.

They went out at night and flew on NVGs as low as 15 feet above ground level through the ranges. When they landed, the commander demanded to know who authorized such a mission, clearly in violation of MAC regulations.

In September 1978, Lt Col Frank Pehr, Capt Steve Connelly and TSgt Rick Simmon, assigned to the 1550th Aircrew Training and Test Wing (ATTW) at Kirtland AFB, NM, took the first Pave Low III modified aircraft #66-14433, to Nellis AFB to participate in a Red Flag exercise. To prepare the aircraft for the sorties, they had to manually open the projected map display to put in a map strip for the Nellis region. They actually accomplished that tricky task at one point, with the map filmstrip stretched out along the length of the cabin. That was no small feat because the strips had to be aligned exactly right, or they would cause navigational errors.

One of the crew's assigned missions was to do a night recovery of a "downed" airman deep in enemy territory, actually the Tonopah Test Range, an area filled with a variety of "hostile" radars and threats. The "survivor" was 1st Lt Jim Teeple, a former Army warrant officer pilot who had switched over to the Air Force and was assigned to fly HH-53s with the 41st ARRS. While temporarily assigned to Kirtland AFB, Teeple had met Steve Connelly and expressed an interest in getting involved in the Pave Low. The aircrew took him along to Nellis AFB and he volunteered to be the survivor.

The weather was windy and cold.

Teeple and a survival instructor were driven to a site a few miles from the projected rescue area and directed to walk in. As Teeple was in good physical condition, he quickly separated from the instructor, who was later recovered by ground transportation. Equipped with a locating device, Teeple moved into the assigned area. At the appointed time, he set it up so that the Pave Low crew could find him.

Using the full capabilities of the Pave Low, Pehr and Connelly flew through the dark—undetected across the middle of the range—and came to a hover over the survivor's location. In the cabin, Rick Simmon saw Teeple and

Testing The Pave Low III

By Darrel Whitcomb

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HH-53B # 66-14433, the "Black Knight," first Pave Low prototype. (Photo courtesy of Lt Col (ret) Frank Pehr.)

announced, “Penetrator is going down.” When the cold, soaked survivor was on board, they departed the range—again, fully undetected—and allowed Teeple to get some flying time on the machine. Simmon remembers that “it was a pretty interesting environment to be in with the capabilities of the aircraft. Low-level flying, in actual terrain at that point, on NVGs, what I call ‘down in the dirt.’ [It was] actually lower than the capability of the radar to carry us. It was some fun flying. I was a little nervous a few times, but it was pretty good flying.”

That feat drew a lot of attention to the project. On another day, low clouds and fog again covered the tactical areas, and all missions except a few F-111s and the Pave Low were cancelled. Pehr and Connelly flew a normal mission through all of the ranges and never had to abort because of the weather.

When flying into and out of the Nellis ranges, the Pave Low occasionally needed in-flight refueling, and HC-130 tankers would be sent up to rendezvous with them. Connelly and Pehr set up no-communications procedures so that radio calls were not necessary, just a few light signals. Their integrated navigational system allowed them to navigate precisely to the rendezvous point exactly on time. On one occasion, just as they were finishing, the tanker crew was not sure where it was. Connelly checked his map display and was able to direct the tanker crew to make a turn before the aircraft entered one of the restricted areas.

Thinking tactically, Connelly felt that such precise low-level navigational capability made the Pave Lows natural lead aircraft for formations of other helicopters, such as Army CH-47s for larger unit infiltrations or exfiltrations or for virtually any tactical purpose. He developed a test plan to validate the

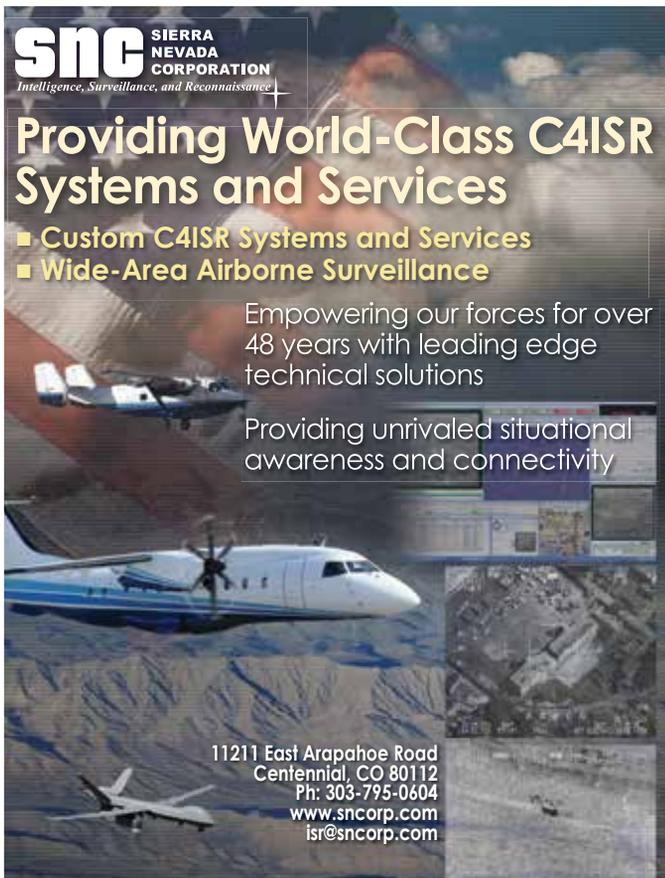
concept. However, the ARRS staff disapproved the plan with the pithy comment that “the Pave Low would never be used like that.”

Hearing about these successes, the 1550th ATTW commander decided to take a flight with Connelly and Pehr. They went out at night and flew on NVGs as low as 15 feet above ground level through the ranges. When they landed, the commander demanded to know who authorized such a mission, clearly in violation of MAC regulations. Pehr pointed out to him that they flew that way because it was called for in the test plan that the commander himself had signed! Regardless, the commander called MAC headquarters and had them restricted to 100 feet. Additionally, they were forbidden any further use of NVGs until a proper test program had been conducted. Pehr could not believe the commander and MAC’s reluctance to accept the capabilities of the aircraft. Pehr said to them, “Listen guys, this is the best thing that ever happened to you. It is making you viable as a rescue organization, and it’s probably the best thing that’s ever going to happen to rescue. And you people are shooting it down. What is the matter with you people?”

However, orders were orders and Connelly developed a program to determine the best initial NVG use. Given the collage of lights of various colors arrayed throughout, Pehr and Connelly rigged an old Army wool blanket from the aircraft ceiling so that the pilot flying could turn down all lights and use his NVGs, while the copilot and flight mechanic could then use their lights without bothering the pilot flying. It worked just fine. They could not admit that their light restrictor was just an old Army blanket. Instead, they had to list it as a “light isolation device.” Connelly later said that “we could have painted the windows black, and we could have done the mission.” Pehr later described the rationale for their expediency:

Maybe we were being a little devious and a little untruthful, but it was almost like if we told them exactly what we were going to do or what we had to do, they wouldn’t have let us do it. And in order to get through the test phase, if we didn’t test it, how could we say that this is a way we could operate the aircraft? So we had to test all of this stuff beforehand so that we could put it into the training program so we could develop the capability to do that stuff. Of course, later they developed the night vision lighting package that made cockpit lighting compatible with the goggles, and allowed you to have cockpit lights on and still be able to see outside with the goggles. But earlier in the program, you couldn’t do that. The cockpit lights would shut down the earlier versions of NVGs; you couldn’t see past the windscreen.

They were determined to aggressively carry out their testing of this revolutionary new technological marvel by seeking forgiveness for any discovered transgressions instead of requesting permission from a doubting and hesitant bureaucratic organization. But there were so many who just refused to believe in the system. Connelly and Pehr tried to talk some of the other HH-53 pilots into volunteering to fly with them. There was a dearth of interest. “You do not want to fly ‘Grave Low,’ ” the pilots said. “They are all going to kill themselves.” 



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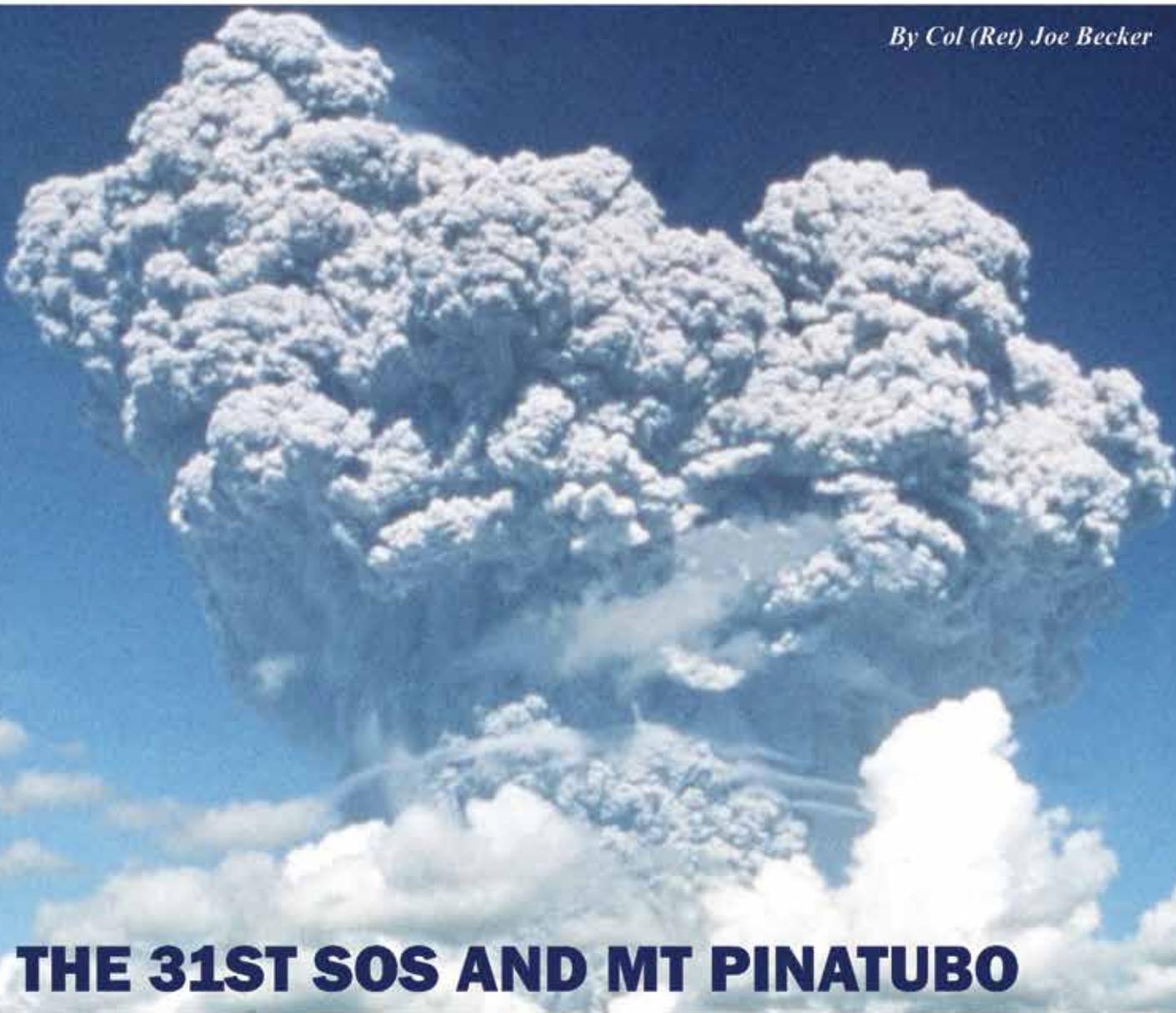
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Smoke and Rumors: A Prelude to Joint Cooperation

By Col (Ret) Joe Becker



Mt Pinatubo explosion (Photo courtesy of 353d SOG History Office)

THE 31ST SOS AND MT PINATUBO

In the summer of 1990, while most of the newly established Air Force Special Operations Command was focused on deploying to Saudi Arabia for Operation Desert Shield, (which would become Desert Storm in January of 1991; probably better known to the current generation of Air Commandos as the “first” Gulf War), a fairly small group was heading in the other direction to transition the 31st SOS (formerly the 31st Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron) from the HH-3 to the MH-53J Pave Low helicopter. From the very beginning, this assignment stood out as being quite different. There

were coups, an earthquake and the tragic fatal shooting of several airmen outside the gate which led to restrictions being imposed on when family members were allowed to move to Clark AB. Later, there were lock downs of the base during negotiations on the extension of the lease of U.S. military installations in the Philippines. Throughout all this, the 31st SOS’ transition continued, fueled by a few special operations veterans from the 20th SOS at Hurlburt Field, a few former H-3 pilots, a handful of former AC-130 aerial gunners, and a whole lot of former UH-1 pilots fresh out of the frigid

Northern Tier by way of Kirtland AFB, NM. To the best of my recollection, we focused the preponderance of our training on cooperation with internal 353rd Special Operations Wing assets, both our sister flying units, the 1st and 17th SOS’, as well as our organic Special Tactics unit, Detachment 2 of the 1723rd Special Tactics Squadron. We rarely, if ever, linked up with our Navy counterparts, Naval Special Warfare Unit One, who were based about 60 miles away at Subic Bay Naval Station.

At some point in the early spring of 1991, smoke started to billow out

of Mount Pinatubo like a giant natural chimney. The mountain was situated only about nine miles from Clark AB and the smoke became an instant source of rumor, speculation and gossip. However, the base's leadership refused to publicly acknowledge that there could be a problem, and put out the word that since there was no problem, there was nothing to talk about. Of course, this just led to an increase in the chatter among the Company Grade Officer, NCO and spouse "networks."

At times there was just one column of smoke visible, at others there were multiple columns, and sometimes it would cease smoking altogether. Each new development was cause for additional speculation that there either was, or wasn't, some major problem at hand. There was talk of secret Crisis Action Team meetings and as the spring wore on, visits by numerous scientists, all of whom were very tight lipped about what might be about to happen. One of these groups ended up flying on a 31st SOS Pave Low to take a closer look. They refused to say anything to the crew about what they had seen, but they looked very serious and confiscated the FLIR tapes.

Things came to a head on the weekend of 8 & 9 June when the mountain seemed a bit angrier than before. On Sunday the 9th, the Base Public Affairs Officer, Lt Col Ron Rand (later a Brig Gen, who as a Lt had flown aboard an H-53 helicopter during the recovery of the crew of the SS Mayaguez in May, 1975) went on Armed Forces Radio and Television to announce that we had gone to "VOLCON 1" (whatever the heck that was) and that the Security Police would be going door-to-door to distribute the evacuation plan, in the "unlikely event that it would be needed."

The 31st SOS ran a squadron recall at which the commander, Lt Col Lee Massey, put out guidance to not follow the general instructions, but to muster at the squadron in order to evacuate together. This was a great call, but unfortunately circumstances would transpire to preclude him from complying with it himself. We also

generated crews comprised of single and/or unaccompanied pilots, flight engineers and gunners who flew the squadron's helicopters to the Naval Air Station at Cubi Point, which was adjacent to Subic Bay Naval Station. Later that night, following a number of delays, Lt Col Rand told Clark Air Base to get some sleep and tune back in at 0500 for further guidance.

When we awakened on the morning of Monday, 10 June 1991, it appeared as if nothing had changed. There had been no eruption but we were told that the base would be evacuated as a precautionary measure. Squadron members who had not departed the day before on the helicopters gathered at the squadron with our families, pets and a suitcase or two. We milled around for some time before one of our gunners, "Flash" Gordon, approached a gaggle of captains and asked what the plan was. It was quickly determined that with our commander missing and all of our field grade officers being off station (the DO was in the States at the simulator and our two majors, one from Wing DOV and the other our ADO, had flown helicopters to Cubi Point), I was the senior man present.

These were the days before cell phones, so we sent someone to the commander's house to see if he was there, but he was nowhere to be found. The clock was ticking, the sun was rising and the line of cars heading out the gate was growing, so I made the decision to evacuate the squadron to Subic Bay and then try to link up with our ADO at Cubi Point. We had 30 vehicles; 29 POVs and the squadron "bread truck." Because we only had ten hand-held radios, I broke us down into three 10-ship "flights" and assigned a "flight lead" a "mission commander" and a "tail end Charlie" equipped with a radio to each "flight."

I knew that we couldn't hope to merge 30 vehicles into the traffic flow at once, so we agreed to leave in our 10-ship elements at 15 minute intervals. Fortunately the Security Police cooperated and allowed our groups to remain intact. I served as "mission commander" for the first group, and we

reached Subic after about 4 hours (the 52 mile drive normally took about two hours). The two groups which left later ended up taking much longer and it was early afternoon before the entire unit had arrived at Subic and were accounted for.

The scene at Subic was what Woodstock might have looked like if the attendees had been allowed to drive their cars. There were people, cars and pets as far as the eye could see. The great folks from Subic were trying to put some order to the process of matching USAF personnel and their families with Navy families of similar rank, while also trying to avoid sending people with dogs to homes with cats, and vice versa.

All of this was being done by hand with each family from Clark being asked to fill out a 3 x 5 card with their vital statistics. Each family was then given a number and told to check back periodically at the Chief's Club to see if they'd been assigned to a Navy family.

As I recall, our numbers were somewhere in the 800s. The third of our three groups was comprised of the single enlisted men who, in addition to their personal belongings, had taken control of the squadron's sensitive items such as NVGs, Stan/Eval records, and the Flight Crew Information File library, etc. SMSgt Larry Hunter was in charge of this group and after checking in with me upon their arrival, asked for permission to go "work the senior NCO network" to see if he could find suitable quarters. He was able to get the keys to a gymnasium, so that group headed off on their own after we'd established a daily communications check-in plan.

The group that I had driven with had staked out a piece of real estate near a building and the folks who worked there were quite good about letting our wives go inside to use the restroom and to get the babies and small children out of the blazing sun...until around 1600 when a Petty Officer came out and announced that they were locking up for the day and that it would be "last call" for the Head.

Someone went to the CPO Club and found that the matching of families was only in the low 200s, meaning that we probably had another 10-12 hours before

we would learn which Navy family was going to “adopt” us. This, combined with the closing of the building with the bathroom, caused a near revolt among the wives. I quickly decided that it was time to try to capitalize on my previous tour as a liaison to a SEAL Team, so I trotted off to the nearby compound of Naval Special Warfare Unit (NSWU) One.

As luck would have it, just as I arrived at their front gate I ran into a newly minted warrant officer named Mike Rush. Mike had been an enlisted “plank owner” at the team to which I’d been the liaison and he immediately told me that he had saved room at his house for me and my family and had been waiting for me to find him. I thanked him for that but told him that I couldn’t accept his offer because I was now responsible for an entire squadron of families (and their pets). He asked what we needed and I said that if there was a way to get us access to a building with air conditioning and a bathroom while we waited for our numbers to be called, it would be greatly appreciated.

Mike asked if I remembered LCDR Bob Harward (now a vice admiral) who I’d also known from my liaison officer duties. I said that I sure did, and Mike told me that Bob was the XO of NSWU ONE. Mike took me back to Bob’s office to see what could be arranged. Much to my surprise, my squadron commander and his wife were there. They had apparently experienced car trouble and decided to bypass going to the squadron in favor of departing directly for Subic; they were going to be staying at the house of Bob Harward and his wife, Jane.

Bob asked me what we needed and immediately agreed to let the entire 31st SOS hang out in the Unit ONE compound. While I went back to get the two groups of families, Bob called his commanding officer, CDR Dave Foreman. CDR Foreman and his wife Debby came back to the compound and also recalled their unit and the deployed SEAL Platoon. The permanent party members of Unit ONE had each already been assigned an Air Force family, but CDR Foreman told them to squeeze a family from the 31st SOS into their homes if at all possible.

In the meantime, he pressed the SEALs who were deployed to Subic into duty walking dogs, setting up cots, going to McDonalds to buy food and even changing babies. Within just a few hours, all but two 31st SOS families had been taken in by Unit One families, and the other two were able to spend the night in the air conditioned Training Room until they were placed with other families the next day.

The mountain finally did erupt on the morning of Wednesday, 12 June 1991, but most of the ash blew out to sea. Most of us expected that we’d be returning to Clark within a few days and that after a little clean up things would go back to normal. Unfortunately, Mother Nature had different plans.

On the evening of Friday, 14 June 1991, just as a Typhoon Yunya was approaching the Philippines, Mt Pinatubo began an eruption, which lasted for over 24 hours. The eruption triggered, or perhaps was triggered by, a series of earthquakes and expunged over ten times the volume of ash as that of the 1980 eruption of Mount Saint Helens in Washington. The ensuing damage knocked out power and water supplies to the Navy installations (as well as the surrounding communities) and an evacuation of all USAF families and non-essential personnel was ordered to begin on Monday, 17 June 1991. Evacuation of Navy families began shortly thereafter.

The 31st SOS was deemed to be mission essential, although we were not permitted to fly our helicopters due to the corrosive nature of the ash, so we spent the next few weeks operating as a chain gang clearing several feet of mud and ash off the roofs of buildings around Subic and Cubi Point. Meanwhile, our spouses, children and pets embarked on a journey of “planes, trains and automobiles” (actually, mostly ships and planes), the details of which are each probably worthy of its own article. Finally, near the end of June it was decided that we would fly our MH-53J helicopters aboard the USS Midway and sail to Okinawa where it was assumed that we would bed down at Kadena AB along with the rest of the 353rd SOW.

In stark contrast to the reception that had been received by the squadron from the Navy and the NSWU families at Subic, the commanding officer of the USAF’s 18th Wing at Kadena refused to allow the 31st SOS to bed down on the base. The Rescue Squadron assigned to Kadena had recently experienced an accident during taxiing and the wing commander was concerned about adding additional rotary-wing aircraft to an already crowded base. Fortunately, the 31st SOS had become friendly with some of the Marines while aboard the Midway en-route to Okinawa. We were able to obtain ramp space, an operations building and billeting for the officers and maintenance personnel at nearby Futenma Marine Corps Air Station. SMSgt Hunter once again worked his senior NCO magic and found billeting for the enlisted aircrew members at Kadena, along with a bus to transport them back and forth to Futenma.

Eventually, AFSOC started to PCS those who wanted to leave the unit to the other Pave Low squadrons. The 31st SOS was manned by TDY personnel until a final permanent home was established at Osan Air Base in the Republic of Korea in the late spring of 1992.

The professionalism and esprit demonstrated by the leaders, men and families of NSWU One toward the members and families of the 31st SOS were epic. Then CDR Dave Foreman and his team went above and beyond in their support to the Black Knights who were homeless and in dire need of assistance. At a time when joint cooperation on the battlefield was nowhere near the level that it is today, a Naval Special Warfare unit came to the aid of an AFSOC squadron in ways that will not be forgotten by those of us who were on the receiving end; BRAVO ZULU NSWU-ONE!



About the Author: Col (Ret) Joe Becker retired as Chief of Staff of the Joint Special Operations Command after commanding at the Squadron, Group and Expeditionary Wing levels. He lives in Colorado where he is the President of the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the Air Commando Association.



Pave Low landing at IFOR's Ilidza Compound in Sarajevo, Bosnia. (Photo courtesy of Brig Gen Brad Webb)

Pave Low Leads... IN BOSNIA!

By the mid-1990s, Pave Low – both the men and machines – was well established as the preeminent helicopter force on the globe. The propitious combination of assault mentality and clandestine penetration/precise navigation capability forged by visionary earlier air commandos had reaped handsome rewards in Panama, Iraq, Haiti and elsewhere. In Bosnia, the mountainous terrain, the famously poor weather and the unique politics of the conflict served to provide exceptional challenges to the many and varied mission sets the Pave Low force would encounter, but Pave Low would flourish.

By Maj Gen (sel) Marshall "Brad" Webb

Background

While AFSOC aircrews had been deployed in Brindisi, Italy (San Vito dei Normanni Air Station) supporting Bosnian operations for several years (beginning in 1993 with Operations DENY FLIGHT and PROVIDE PROMISE), events in the fall of 1995 proved indicative of operations to come. Starting with Operation DELIBERATE FORCE, NATO's response to the Bosnian Serb's shelling of Sarajevo, the number of Pave Low missions in Bosnia greatly increased.

In early September, Pave Low crews flew several sorties in the environs of Pale, Bosnia searching for the crew of Ebro 33, a French Mirage 2000 shot down supporting DELIBERATE FORCE. The mission involved collaboration with NATO Command and Control aircraft and fighters, as well as AFSOC Gunships, Talon I's and Combat Shadow tankers. Considered a fairly routine

coordinated planning effort today after 12 years of fighting jointly; in 1996, this complex mission was fraught with the difficulties of navigating the NATO, UN and USEUCOM command structures. Additionally, the crews would be required to penetrate the Bosnian-Serb early warning system and fly in treacherous weather to reach Pale. Thunderstorms, low clouds and fog combined with profuse ground fire challenged Captains Mark Harmon and Mike Moncrief (Knife 44 and 47) in their execution of back-to-back nights of flying in search of Ebro 33's crew.

Harmon and Moncrief and the crews of Knife 44 and Knife 47 superbly navigated through the severe weather, flying into and below the fog while utilizing Global Positioning System (GPS), then relatively new to aircraft, and Terrain Following/Terrain Avoidance (TF/TA) radar to keep themselves situationally aware during the search for the missing crew. Furthermore, they withstood withering ground fire on both nights, suffering injured crewmembers and aircraft damage on night two. SSgts Randy Rutledge and Dennis Turner received Purple Hearts for their wounds.

While ultimately, it was determined that Ebro 33's crew had been captured within an hour of their bailout (they were later released), the valorous efforts of the Pave Low force had made their "mark." Both the NATO forces and the key leadership quickly recognized the unique capabilities of Pave Low and would employ them in even more challenging conditions in the near future. Captains Harmon and Moncrief were subsequently awarded the 1995 Cheney Award for USAF's most valorous flight of the year in a humanitarian effort – an award presented by the then Air Force Chief of Staff, General Ronald Fogleman.

By November 1995, UN Special Envoy Richard Holbrooke had secured an agreement, the Dayton Peace Accords, between the warring factions and in December, Operation JOINT ENDEAVOR was launched. Pave Low was to play a pivotal role throughout this operation, but the early months were absolutely crucial. As US and NATO conventional ground forces deployed to Tuzla and bases elsewhere in Bosnia to implement the agreement, special operations forces would be important in establishing links for close air support, medical evacuation, intelligence connectivity and liaison between the various factions of the conflict. Special Forces were assigned this duty and conducted it by deploying Coalition Support Teams (CSTs).

The job of emplacing CSTs everywhere and anywhere in Bosnia fell by-and-large to Pave Low. The thunderstorms and low mists of September had given way to snow-storms, and fog, and icy inversion layers in the valleys. Again, Pave Low crews maximized the capabilities of their aircraft, precisely penetrating into the valleys using TF/TA and GPS. On occasion, the Pave Low crews used the on-board hover coupler to place the helicopter exactly over the intended landing spot, then dialed themselves down to the ground -- all without ever seeing it! These skills endeared the crews to the SF as Pave Lows were quite literally the only aircraft capable of the low-level flying required in the country at that time.

Concurrent with the CST missions, numerous dignitaries were attempting to shuttle in and out of Bosnia to help implement



the fragile Accords. The omnipresent ice fog made flying anywhere in Bosnia a tremendous challenge, even at established airports like Sarajevo and Tuzla. As Envoy Richard Holbrooke and numerous NATO leaders would discover, if they wanted to make a key meeting or ceremony in Bosnia that winter, they would have to count on the Pave Low to ensure their arrival. Countless Pave Low missions during the early months of 1996 were dedicated to "extreme weather DV support."

A War Story

One such mission was a sortie I flew on February 4th. That day started as almost all these missions had – on reverse circadian rhythm cycle. Although typically night flyers, we started this day at 0400 – charged with flying Admiral Leighton W. "Snuffy" Smith, Commander in Chief, Allied Forces Southern Europe and Commander, NATO Implementation Force (IFOR). I was the flight lead pilot for the two-ship formation with Capt Dave Blades as my copilot flying tail number 70-1626 – Lunar Lady – serendipitously, the aircraft I have flown on many of my memorable missions on several continents. Lt Col Mike Homan, squadron commander of the 20 SOS and Maj Scott Schafer were "Chalk 2." Typically, ADM Smith, headquartered in Naples, Italy, was flown by a US Navy P-3 to Split, Croatia on the Dalmatian coast. The P-3 rarely ventured further inland due to the weather conditions and the nascent air traffic control facilities then available in the war zone.

This day, ADM Smith scheduled a key engagement with IFOR leadership in the Croatian countryside village of Otok, one ridgeline over from Split. We then planned to fly onward to Sarajevo to pick up more leadership at Zetra Arena, site of the 1984 Winter Olympic ceremonies, which served as the IFOR HQ landing zone. Finally, we were to take his leadership team and members of the press to investigate an alleged atrocity site near the town of Banja Luka in northern Bosnia, near the Croatian border. Once complete, we would fly back to Sarajevo



Neretva River Valley

and Split to drop everyone back off.

At Brindisi, we were already experiencing freezing rain and snow. We knew it was going to be worse once we crossed the Adriatic Sea. By the time we picked up ADM Smith at Split, snow was falling heavily.

We waited on the ground at Otok's soccer field because the only open spaces large enough to land helicopters in the war zone that were guaranteed to not be mined were soccer fields. As we waited for ADM Smith's meeting to conclude the weather worsened. By the time we took off for Sarajevo, nearly all of Bosnia was experiencing Instrument Meteorological Conditions (IMC).

This was problematic because icing was so prevalent in the clouds and the Pave Low had no de-icing capability for the rotors. The only anti-ice we had was for the engines and pitot static system. Therefore, we typically chose one of two tactics in order to complete the mission. One, we could fly low utilizing our TF/TA radar on set altitudes to "fly the system" until we entered Visual Meteorological Conditions (VMC). This technique allowed us to theoretically minimize the icing conditions more

prevalent the higher we had to climb. As a second option, we could climb to an altitude above terrain, through the icing, to hopefully reach VMC. Because the Balkans are so mountainous, the minimum altitude safe to traverse in these conditions was 9000 feet – fairly high for peak helicopter performance.

This day, climbing was not an option. The Airborne Warning and Control System aircraft informed us that the cloud levels topped well above 10,000 feet. So, leaving Otok, our plan would be to drop into the lowest ground available in order to negotiate the conditions to Zetra. The lowest ground on all these missions, inevitably, was the Neretva River valley – really the only low terrain southwest of Sarajevo. We would follow the river upstream from Mostar to Sarajevo...a trip of about 75 miles. This route was commonly known by all Pave Low crews as "The Gauntlet" due to its imposing 5000' sheer granite cliffs encasing both sides of the river.

So...off we flew, Lt Col Homan flying lead as a "weather bird" and ADM Smith riding with me in the second aircraft. Initial weather in the Neretva

was okay, but rapidly deteriorated to IMC throughout the granite corridor. We found ourselves at 200 feet, helicopters separated by 500 feet, with high-tension wires to negotiate. From my vantage point, there was nothing to see outside the windscreen but vertigo-inducing blowing snow and clouds, and ice building up on the airframe.

The good news was the Pave Low Forward Looking Infrared (FLIR) camera displayed a crystal clear image of Homan's engine exhausts in front of me, and, the TA portion of our radar displayed a crisp depiction of the Neretva river valley's granite walls! I simply needed to fly The Gauntlet and keep an eye peeled on Homan's exhausts to ensure they weren't "growing bigger".

While I admit this set of flying conditions is somewhat seat cushion-sucking at first, the absolute clarity of the awareness the Lunar Lady's systems were providing soon had me fairly comfortable. In fact, I distinctly remember ADM Smith, himself a distinguished fighter pilot with 280 combat missions over North Vietnam, at one point in The Gauntlet, appearing over my shoulder to ask how it was going and where we were. When we showed him the TA radar display and the FLIR camera he shook his head, mouthed "wow," laughed, and went back to his seat!

Needless to say, we eventually made it through the valley and popped out into the natural terrain bowl of Sarajevo. The challenges, however, didn't stop there as snipers were still exceptionally active in the surrounding hills...and helicopters were a favorite target. The good news was that we had encountered VMC conditions; at least the cloud decks were above 500 feet. The bad news was we could see the flashes of ground fire aimed with varying degrees of accuracy at us (or our noise) as we made our way across the city to Zetra. And, the excitement didn't end there as we now encountered a full-blown whiteout landing from all the accumulated snow upon landing in the arena. All told, it made for a firm landing!

After on-loading more IFOR leadership and the press, we took off

for the alleged atrocity site – a potential mass body gravesite at the entrance to a mine shaft. My crew re-assumed flight lead duties. We were a bit behind on the fuel plan due to the excitement. The hope was that we could sit with engines at idle while ADM Smith conducted his what was supposed to be a short visit and make it back to Zetra. We'd then divert a couple of miles over to Sarajevo airport to gas up and go. We took off and dodged more ineffective ground fire on the way out and made it up to Banja Luka in more of the same fashion as previously described – gotta love the TF/TA radar, FLIR and GPS!

On the ground near Banja Luka, ADM Smith needed to stay much longer than originally planned for; as in several hours longer. Therefore, I made the decision to split the formation up – I'd go get gas in Zagreb, Croatia as I had the least fuel, while Homan would wait on the ground with the admiral. Then, when I got back, he'd go. Zagreb wasn't too far, maybe 50 miles away.



Neretva Terrain shown above and below.

The River Neretva flows through Bosnia and Herzegovina and into Croatia. With a total length of 225 kilometers, it is the largest river in the eastern part of the Adriatic basin. It's one of the coldest rivers in the world: its source is located in the Dinaric Alps, at approximately 1300 meters above sea level.





Pave Lows in Zetra Arena, Sarajevo, Bosnia; February 4, 1996

The Croatians had supposedly been informed of our presence and our mission, and were supposed to allow us access if needed. Of course, the political situation was still very tenuous. While I had little doubt NATO had coordinated our divert plan as we had asked, what the Croatians would acknowledge was anyone's guess. National sovereignty was particularly ticklish at this point in the war. So, of course, as we crossed the Bosnia-Croatian border we were immediately intercepted by a Croatian Hind helicopter with its nose-mounted 12.7 mm machine guns aimed right at us. My gunners returned the acknowledgement and high drama ensued. For several minutes, I talked excitedly to Croatian air traffic controllers in English and they talked to me...in Serbo-Croatian. I continued to urge restraint with my crew and continued flying toward the airport as frankly, I had little choice. I was out of gas. I landed the Lunar Lady at the airfield and went into the Fixed Base Operator to try to sort out the "misunderstanding." They were none too pleased about my crew "invading" their sovereignty and demanded to know about my mission. Evidently, they knew absolutely nothing about my "pre-coordinated" plan. They could read that I was in a hurry to make amends but I certainly was not going to let them know about the 4-star Admiral I had left in the field. After 15-20 minutes of good cop-bad cop between several Croatians "interrogating" me, I was finally allowed to leave and rejoin my crew. We got the fuel, and launched back to Banja Luka to relieve Homan...much later than planned.

By the time we got back to the Banja Luka site, my wingman, with Admiral Smith onboard, was gone. They had calculated that they could TF back to Sarajevo with just enough gas to get one chalk of the team to Zetra and therefore decided to execute so the ADM would not have to wait. I landed and cleaned up the landing zone just after Homan launched for Zetra Arena, so I was only several minutes behind. Flying conditions were more of same back to Sarajevo where we again landed in a white-out to Zetra Arena. This time one of the female members of the press was bounced out of her seat upon landing and right into the lap of one of our security team members. He seemed not to mind!

ADM Smith, awaiting my return and therefore still in Zetra Arena, came up to us, climbed in the cockpit and and says "you guys are *&@# crazy...I love ya!" With that as our attaboy and anxious to head home, we got Number 2 fueled up, then dodged ground fire and snow and ice all the way back to Italy with ***steering to one!***



About the Author: Maj Gen (sel) Marshall "Brad" Webb is presently Director of AFSOC A-5/8/9 and was recently named as the next Commander Special Operations Command Europe. He ensures the 16,000 Air Commandos worldwide are resourced and equipped through force structure planning and programming, establishing requirements, and acquisition program oversight through U.S. Air Force and U. S. Special Operations Command processes.



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The “real” story of MH-53J Pave Low crews who found and recovered US Commerce Secretary Ron Brown.

SEARCH FOR AND RECOVERY OF



CT-43 CRASH IN CROATIA

By Maj (Ret) Steve Kelly, USAF

USAF MH-53J Pave Low helicopter over wreckage of the USAF CT-43A north of the Dubrovnik Airport in Croatia.

“There is no way we are going to get called out today,” I casually speculated to MH-53J Pave Low and MC-130H Talon II crew members as we filed into the briefing room. As flight lead, I was responsible for briefing our flight of two Pave Low crews, one Talon II crew and numerous Special Tactics (STS) team members who would assume our alert. Our alert flight provided NATO commanders with highly trained crews able to respond to various crises following the cessation of a three and a half year long Bosnian War. My speculation was, as usual, wrong and almost immediately we were called to respond to the crash of an Air Force transport aircraft in Croatia. We began a week long mission, in the international spot light, that showcased the trusty MH-53J Pave Low III and its brave and skilled crews.

After the briefing, we drove the seven miles, from our operations base at San Vito dei Normanni Air Station, to where our aircraft were based - Brindisi Air Base on Italy’s “boot heel.” Our STS personnel remained at San Vito to ready their gear. Our two Pave Low crews arrived at the airfield, met with maintenance personnel and began the process of preparing our aircraft for the 72 hour alert period.

With preparations complete, I wrote the day’s date “03 Apr 96” in the aircraft logbook as rumors spread of a possible search and rescue mission. Eventually, we were given the official alert launch orders to search the Adriatic coast near Dubrovnik, Croatia - an hour flight east - for a T-34 aircraft crash. Read that again, a T-34. I wrote that down on my knee board and asked my co-pilot, Capt. Jim Breck, what a two person US Navy training aircraft was doing in the area, he shrugged and we taxied for takeoff. Our two-ship departed Brindisi west for the five-minute flight to San Vito to pick up our three-man STS teams. SSgt Rob Ridout, SrA Eric Beane and SSgt Calvin Markham boarded my aircraft, call sign Facet 23 and SrA Gary Salway, SrA Scott Duffman and SrA Brandon Plaster boarded Facet 24 piloted by Capt Lee Moore and Capt Steve Merritt. After a short delay for loading the men and their equipment, we headed east for the flight to Croatian coast.

During the hour-long flight to Croatia I was appointed on-scene commander, so I used the remaining flight time to review our limited mission info and develop a more detailed plan of action. We received a flurry of radio calls that; corrected the aircraft type to a T-43 - the AF version of a Boeing 737, updated the terminal weather - worst thunderstorms in decades, and listed the other eight international helicopters and one Spanish Tactical Air Control Party (TACP) ground team currently searching the suspected crash area. A TACP is normally tasked with coordinating close air support for troops incontact. On this night those young men were soaked and chilled to the bond. They were not having much fun.

The closer we got to Croatia, the more the weather deteriorated. Upon arrival in the search area it was very dark, with very low ceilings. The torrential rain and frequent lightening from an epic thunderstorm cell made for perfect Pave Low weather. The 100-foot ceiling compressed the working area for the 8 international helicopters that were not as well equipped for the conditions. One of those helicopters nearly collided with our Pave Low, so I ordered the other helicopters

to return to their bases to refuel and standby for further tasking. Our MH-53J helicopters were fully equipped for night search operations with a forward looking infrared (FLIR) device, the Pave Low terrain following, terrain avoidance (TF/TA) radar, an analog moving map, a personnel locating system (PLS) that could hone in on emergency beacons, and our crew members wore night vision goggles (NVGs). The TF/TA radar in particular would prove to be indispensable during the mission as it provided guidance around obstacles down to 100 feet above the water.

Our flight of two helicopters split up to cover more area, both searching the shore line for debris, as ordered. An overview of the area revealed a rocky shoreline that rises to a 2500 foot mountain ridge that follows the curve of the sea then parallels the Dubrovnik airport runway.

During the hour and a half search, Capt Moore’s crew notified us that their PLS - tuned to the CT-43’s emergency beacon frequency - was weak and intermittent yet routinely pointed away from the shoreline toward the mountainous terrain near the Dubrovnik airport. Our PLS confirmed his findings yet the thunderstorm cells were marching down the ridgeline, one after another, making it impossible, at that time, to search any further inland.

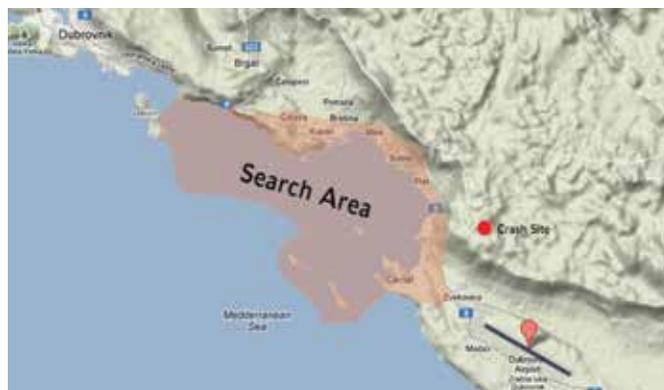


Figure 1: Google Map (Photo courtesy of author)

As our crews scoured the shoreline for debris we were unknowingly being filmed and broadcast worldwide by CNN. It would soon become common knowledge that the CT-43 belonged to the 76th Airlift Squadron based at Ramstein Air Base in Germany. Their mission was to provide airlift to visiting distinguished visitors in the European Theater.

On 03 April 1996, they were tasked with flying US Commerce Secretary Ron Brown and his party to Dubrovnik for meetings to further commercial interests between the US and Croatia. While performing an instrument approach, in bad weather, they crashed near the top of a ridgeline in close proximity to the Dubrovnik runway (see fig. 1).

On the evening of the 3rd our crews did not know the identities of the passengers, nor would it have mattered. Our concern was to perform a thorough search for the downed aircraft (see fig. 2). Both Pave Lows searched until we exhausted our fuel supplies, and at approximately 1900, landed at Dubrovnik airport to refuel.

Earlier that afternoon, prior to the alert briefing, Maj Brad Webb, pulled me aside to reference a map of the area’s 20 to

30 airports, their fuel status indicated by a tiny yellow sticky note stating “good” or “bad.” The Bosnian war had just ended, therefore we could not assume that the fuel status of a given airport was “good” as it would be in peacetime. That briefing proved pivotal to my thinking when our flight’s fuel supply started to diminish. We were given the option of flying up through the low ceiling to rendezvous with and refuel from the MC-130P Combat Shadow, or refueling at Dubrovnik. I totally trusted the Shadow crew from the 67th Special Operations Squadron at RAF Mildenhall, to be on time at the refueling track - that was not an issue. My greatest concern was, if able to climb above the weather, we ran the risk of the ceiling lowering enough to preclude us from returning to the search area. I could clearly see in my mind’s eye the “good” yellow sticky note next to Dubrovnik airport on that map. After consulting Captains Breck and Moore, we refueled our helicopters at Dubrovnik’s airport.

Once refueled, the situation quickly devolved into three hours of conflicting radio reports. Here’s a fine example, “The fuel at Dubrovnik is bad – do not refuel.” Ten minutes later, “The fuel at Dubrovnik is good – refuel.” This conflicting guidance went back and forth all night. We took it all in stride though the overarching order that we could no longer fly in Croatian airspace diminished our active role in the search effort. Many times I sprinted across the flooded flight ramp, cringing as lightning hit the airfield, to coordinate with ground search teams, to include the Spanish TACP.

Years earlier, when many of us were learning how to fly the Pave Low, at Kirtland AFB, Albuquerque, NM, an instructor pilot, Major Jim Moulton, told a story that I retold as we waited for new developments. Major Moulton spoke of a search effort his helicopter squadron was alerted for while fighting in Vietnam. The crux of the story was that although the weather was so bad that they could not take off, the crew taxied their helicopter to the end of the runway and kept the rotor blades turning while waiting for the weather to improve. The base commander stormed into their squadron operations



Figure 2: Dubrovnik shoreline matches Fig 1 Google map (Photo courtesy of author)

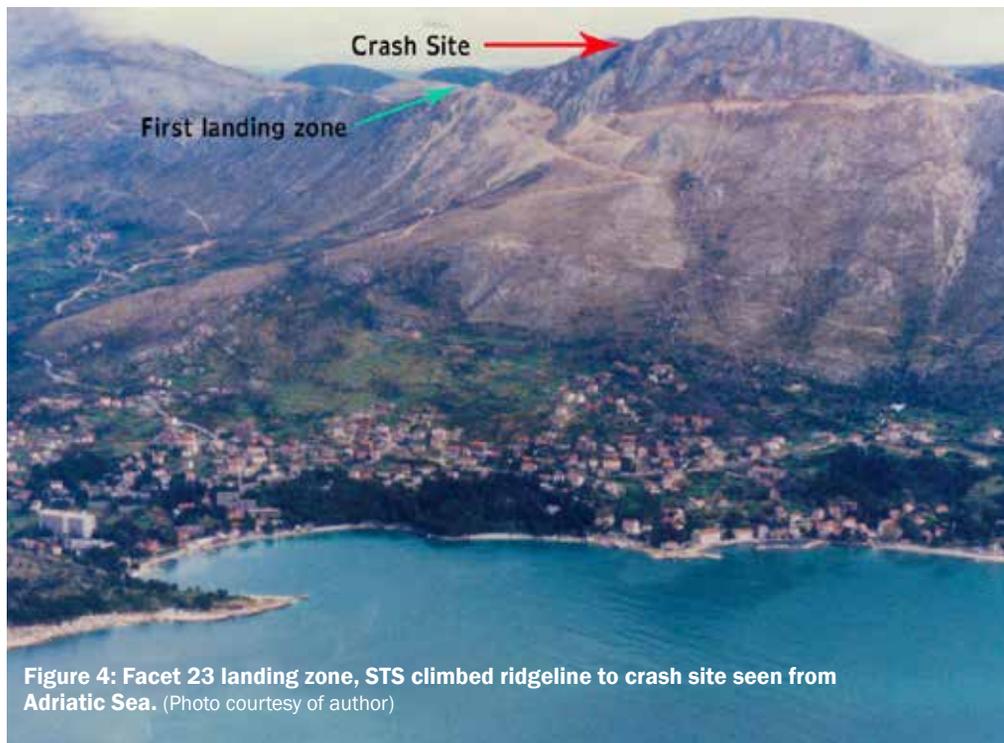


Figure 4: Facet 23 landing zone, STS climbed ridgeline to crash site seen from Adriatic Sea. (Photo courtesy of author)

room and asked what was being done to aid in the search. The duty officer pointed toward the helicopter, barely visible in the monsoon rain, and stated “we are doing all we can at the moment.” Major Moulton’s point was that if the commander showed up and the helicopter crew was sitting around drinking coffee, theirs would be an indefensible position. On this night, instead of drinking hot coffee in the airport lounge, our two Pave Low crews were parked on the ramp of a foreign country, at their crew positions,

in a thunderstorm, restricted from flight, with the auxiliary power plant running, making radios calls, coordinating with ground assets and “doing all we could at that moment.”

Our helicopters were parked facing the mountain ridge, (see fig. 3) giving our crews a vantage point to watch emergency vehicles drive up a mountain road until their lights vanished in the low overcast clouds. Over the next three hours the weather improved slightly and to our surprise, a Croatian Army major

Figure 3: Pave Low on Dubrovnik ramp looking toward crash site (Photo courtesy of author)



Figure 5: CT-43 wreckage note location of fuselage, engines, tail and personnel (Photo courtesy of author)

and his radioman arrived to provide an eyewitness account of the accident scene. They relayed the news that one crew member had survived the impact though they did not believe she would survive much longer. Upon hearing his report I directed Capt Breck, and flight engineer SrA Tony Taber, to start the aircraft while I worked out a major issue; permission to fly in Croatian airspace. A radio call to NATO HQ started the ball rolling for permission to takeoff while I persuaded the major and his radioman

to stay on board. Their knowledge of the crash location and more importantly their ability to speak Croatian via two-way radio communications with searchers made them invaluable.

When our helicopter was ready for takeoff, it became apparent that permission for takeoff would take much longer than the survivor could endure. I stated on the radio, "she has minutes to live, not hours" and took off in the direction of the ridgeline we had seen the emergency vehicles ascend. Much later,

the "no fly" order was rescinded so that we could continue our recovery efforts.

Immediately after our 2230 takeoff we entered the low overcast and used the Pave Low's moving map and radar to orient ourselves to the unfamiliar ridgeline. The skies were clear above the clouds so we circled in the clear air, identified an approach path then began a descent into the clouds in an attempt to identify a landing area, any landing area, before we impacted the rocks. I have often described our rescue attempts as walking into an unfamiliar room, blindfolded, so as to arrive within six inches of the far wall without hitting the wall.

We were not blindfolded, but the weather and illumination conditions were so poor that we could not see the terrain through the clouds, even when perilously close to rocks. As we neared the terrain our radar's computer illuminated the obstacle warning (OW) light signifying imminent contact with obstacles in our path. We hesitated for a moment, hoping to catch a glimpse of a landing area, then turned away to the Adriatic Sea, relying on the radar to clear our descent path to 100 feet above the water. Once in the clear we climbed up through the clouds, popped out above the mountain ridge and attempted to find another path into the terminal area. After multiple attempts, regretfully, I relayed to rescue personnel at the crash site, through the Croatian major's radioman, that we could not land in time to aid the survivor. She did not survive the descent down the mountain. In time I would be credited with 327 lives saved during my helicopter career, the one I could not save still haunts me.

We returned to Dubrovnik to await the arrival of BG Canavan - both the Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF) and Special Operations Command Europe (SOCEUR), Commander from his headquarters at our shared base, San Vito Air Base, Italy. Capts Mark Harmon and John Connelly's two-ship Pave Low formation arrived within the hour, near midnight, dropped off Gen Canavan and his personnel, then departed for their return flight to Brindisi. I asked them to diverge from their direct flight path home to fly over the mountain to check the weather. As luck would have it, Capt Harmon's crew spotted the still burning

Facet 23

Capt Steve Kelly

Capt Jim Breck

MSGT Nelson Neal

SRA Tony Taber

SSgt Ovie (Wayne) Mulkey

SSgt Chuck Shock

STS

SSgt Rob Ridout

SRA Eric Beane

SSgt Calvin Markham

Facet 24

Capt Lee Moore

Capt Steve Merritt

SSgt Steve Roman

SSgt Todd Buice

SSgt Barry Bergschneider

SRA Joe Kirsch

STS

SRA Gary Salway

SRA Scott Duffman

SRA Brandon Plaster



Figure 6: US Navy SEALs off load US Commerce Secretary Ron Brown's casket for return flight home. (Photo courtesy of author)

wreckage through a break in the clouds. The weather closed in before they could provide assistance at the scene yet they were able to radio the scene's GPS coordinates to us as they flew back to Italy as directed. Very quickly our crew scrambled to get our helicopter airborne so we could deliver our STS team to the crash site.

As we flew to the GPS coordinates, the weather deteriorated again though this time we saw a faint light shining through the thinning clouds near the edge of the ridge. We began an approach to the light, and as we neared the terrain, a large power line tower appeared out of the fog in front and ABOVE our flight path. We executed an urgent missed approach within feet of the wires, our gunners, SSgt Ovie (Wayne) Mulkey and SSgt Chuck Shock, had the best view and notified the crew when we cleared the wires. We again descended through and under the clouds to 100 feet over the Adriatic, collected ourselves and renewed our approach to the light.

The second approach was not nearly as eventful. Once clear of the wires we neared the light; a porch light of a small farmhouse. Our flight engineer in the right door, MSGT Nelson Neal, did a spectacular job of guiding us to a suitable landing zone close to the ridgeline that led to the crash site (see fig 4). He found an area barely big enough to hover, with 10 feet of clearance around the main rotor blades, where we cleared our STS team to slide down thick ropes the 40 feet to the ground. Once clear of the aircraft the three STS team members, SSgt Ridout, SrA Beane and SSgt Markham, hiked up the spine of the ridge and were the first Americans to arrive on scene. Facet 24 was soon airborne and, although they too had a run-in with the large power line towers, they successfully deposited their STS team into the same landing area.

When Facet 23's STS team arrived on scene they verified there were no survivors. At that point the mission changed from a rescue to a recovery mission. For the next few hours, Facet 23 and 24 alternated remaining overhead until daybreak relaying radio calls to the STS teams and providing overwatch.

Unknown to me, Facet 24's STS team was dropped off "near" our landing area and had to climb the face of the mountain. Normally that would not have been a major concern, yet the mountainside had seen quite a bit of fighting during the Bosnian war. NATO commanders passed along



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a message for our STS teams to be cautious for wires connected to land mines. I passed along the message to both STS teams. After the mission one of Facet 24's STS team members pulled me aside to say that when he received that radio call he had a wire in his hand that he was raising high enough to get over his backpack. He froze, composed himself, dropped the wire and continued climbing to the crash site.

Around daybreak, Maj Webb led a two-ship Pave Low formation to relieve our Facet 23 formation and command the recovery mission. Maj Webb recalled me from Italy to fly with his crew while he led the SOCEUR staff in their endeavor to recover the victims, treat them with dignity, and arrange for their repatriation.

During the next few days Pave Low crewmembers would perform amazing feats of airmanship to facilitate the removal of the bodies off the mountain. The steeply angled terrain dictated a hover that placed the rotors in very close proximity to the rocks so as not to play out the entire length of hoist cable. More than once loose debris flew onto the windshield blocking the pilot's view of the rocks, or clouds rolled in forcing the crews to abandon their hovers. Navy LT. John Alvarez and Capt. Brett Hauenstein kept their cool when fast moving clouds enveloped them while hovering mere feet from the rocks. Their nerves were tested, yet they remained calm and professional as they drifted away from the rocks, into the clouds and made a "blind" departure in a preplanned direction away from the mountain; averting sure disaster.

When in position over the wreckage, the flight engineers use the aircraft hoist to bring the body bags onto the helicopters. Despite the grisly task, the flight engineers and gunners worked together to bring the bodies aboard and treat them with the utmost respect.

After nearly a week of recovering the victims, Maj Webb oversaw the completion of recovery efforts, coordinated with medical personnel caring for the deceased and arranged for their return to the United States. When all the bodies were accounted for a military memorial service was conducted and broadcast via live TV to the United States from the Dubrovnik ramp.

In all, 35 people, including US Commerce Secretary Ron Brown, 26 US businessmen, 2 Croatian media personnel and the 6-member CT-43 crew, perished on mountain ridge beside Dubrovnik airport. The men and women of the Pave Low community can take great pride in their role in the search, recovery, and eventual homecoming of the victims' remains.



About the Author: Maj (Ret) Steve Kelly is a 1985 graduate of the US Air Force Academy, he treasured his 12 year active duty career as a combat rescue and Special Operations helicopter pilot. He left active duty to pursue a commercial pilot position with Delta Air Lines yet felt unfulfilled. He joined the AF Reserves and divided his time between Delta and flying the HH-60G Pavehawk for the 305th Rescue Squadron at Davis Monthan AFB, AZ. A minor injury suffered in Afghanistan revealed a cancerous tumor in his hip and pelvis. The resulting surgery permanently altered his left leg which led to his medical retirement from the AF and medical leave from Delta. Currently living in Salt Lake City with his wife Holly, he is training to improve upon his 5th place finish in the 2012 Para Cycling National Championships.

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Top: A 21st SOS MH-53J lands at the American Embassy in Monrovia, Liberia for Operation ASSURED RESPONSE. (Photo courtesy of AFSOC/HQ)

OPERATION ASSURED RESPONSE

By Col (Ret) Steve Connelly

Bottom: Evacuees from Monrovia, Liberia, disembark from MH-53 Pave Low III helicopter assigned to the 352nd SOG, RAF Mildenhall, UK, to board an MC-130H Talon II, assigned to the 7th SOS, on their way to Dakar, Senegal. (Photo courtesy of SrA Richard Heileman)



Non-essential Evacuation of American Citizens: Liberia 1996

Some months ago the ACA asked me for some reflections on AFSOC helicopter operations, particularly the Pave Low IIIs that supported Operation ASSURED RESPONSE, the evacuation of the American Embassy in Liberia, Sierra Leone, in 1996. I accepted the task knowing that there were some pitfalls I was likely to fall into. One of those would be to give insufficient credit to the many agencies and teams that made the effort

so successful. To mitigate that, I offer this brief paragraph. The evacuation from Liberia to Freetown, Sierra Leone, was conducted by 21st SOS Pave Low forces from the 352nd SOG and 20th SOS crews deployed to San Vito dei Normanni AS, at Brindisi, Italy, as well as the 3rd Battalion of the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR) with their venerable heavy-lift helicopters, the Boeing MH-47 Chinooks.

But that was not all. Sierra Leone was a forward operating base for the much larger operation. To be successful, the airlift had to take the evacuees farther, to Dakar, Senegal, and that required an equally massive effort supported by both special operations and Air Mobility Command (AMC) assets. Overhead, the Navy provided P-3s for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, and AFSOC provided AC-130 gunships for

overwatch. The ground force component included SEALs, Special Forces, and an airborne infantry element from the Southern European Task Force (SETAF). A sprinkling of AFSOC Special Tactics was included to integrate all the various air and ground elements. Tankers from the 100th ARW kept the task force fuelled and provided key support both forward and at home station (RAF Mildenhall, UK).

All the special operations elements had practiced together for this sort of contingency; 1/10 Special Forces Group, Hq elements from SOCEUR, AFSOC elements from RAF Mildenhall and Hurlburt Field, and Army aviation from Ft Campbell, KY. ASSURED RESPONSE was a very successful operation, launched with minimal notice, and executed with excellence by a joint team that had rehearsed similar missions for the on-going conflict in Bosnia. The lessons from Eagle Claw (Desert One) had been learned. And, while the distances involved were equally great and the timeline to execute very short, the joint SOF team was ready. Even the weather was mostly cooperative.

End of Helicopter Era in AFSOC

In September of 2012, AFSOC flew its last helicopter flight from Hurlburt field. It was an H-1 from the 6th SOS. I had the pleasure of talking with one of the pilots on that last AFSOC helicopter flight from Hurlburt Field. We are old enough to be nostalgic about this. A few years ago the last of the Sikorsky MH-53 Pave Lows flew off to museums and the “Boneyard.” Now AFSOC has no rotor blades of its own, except for the new prop-rotors of CV-22 Ospreys. Helicopters have been part of the 1st SOW since before there was an AFSOC, back since before Viet Nam. During the 1980s, the MH-53 fleet grew tremendously in terms of crews, machines, and total capability from the original nine MH-53Hs that were transferred from Rescue. Every HH-53 and many CH-53s in the USAF were converted to the MH-53J Pave Low III, and ultimately to the MH-53M configuration.

Assured Response

In the approach to Assured Response, the evacuation of the American Embassy

in Liberia, the Pave Low fleet was near its peak, and maintenance, logistics (parts) and operation crews were in approximate readiness. It was springtime of 1996. I was wrapping up a very rewarding assignment as commander of the 352nd SOG at RAF Mildenhall, UK. My last trip to Brindisi and JSOTF 2 was complete. Pickup of my household baggage and furniture for my PCS move was already scheduled.

Late on Saturday, 6 April, the Deputy SOCEUR commander, Col Mark Race called Mildenhall to notify the 352nd SOG that we might be involved in an

ran into the 100th Wing commander near the billeting office. He asked me if there was something I knew that he might need to know. Additional actions in support of this operation were moving quickly. I told him the 100th Wing would soon have C-5s dropping in and processing lines set up to move our crews and machines, and 100th Wing tankers forward in support of ASSURED RESPONSE.

The SOF/Rescue force at Brindisi had just finished operations to assist with recovery efforts after the CT-43 accident at Dubrovnik, where Secretary of Transportation Ron Brown, his staff, and



The skills for rapid disassembly and rebuild of MH-53s were honed in the months prior to Eagle Claw/Desert One when Pave Lows assigned to the 1550 ATTW conducting FOT&E at Kirtland AFB. A pair of HH-53Hs (the rescue designation for the Pave Low IIIs) were, in fact, prepared for shipment to provide a rescue force to cover the exfil after recovery of the US hostages in Iran. The machines, maintainers, and crews were enroute in C-5A transport when the Desert One crash occurred. (Photo courtesy of CMSgt (Ret) Frank Dailey)

evacuation of the embassy in Liberia. Col Race was a C-141 pilot by training, but a pure SOF warrior deep within. He was the kind of smiling and bright leadership you could trust. Within a few hours of our discussion, late on Easter Saturday, the maintainers began to tear-down a single MH-53 to prepare it for loading onto a C-5. On Easter Sunday morning, at 0700, that MH-53 was prepared for shipment and AMC was diverting aircraft to begin the strategic airlift of the our MH-53s.

I walked from the 21st SOS hangar to sunrise services in my flight suit and

the aircrew had been lost. (See previous article by Steve Kelly)

Performing superbly in that effort in spite of very poor weather, and very restricted visibility in Croatia, the force recovered to Brindisi on Saturday. Just as had happened at RAF Mildenhall, the MH-53 force at Brindisi began preparing to support the evacuation of the embassy in Monrovia, Liberia. By Easter Sunday morning the team at Brindisi had two MH-53s ready for strategic airlift shipment to support ASSURED RESPONSE. The rapid preparation of

an operational MH-53 for C-5 shipment was an intentionally developed and practiced skill. To the maintainers, this was the NFL equivalent of the two minute offense and production without mistake was their standard. Two more MH-53s would be prepared for shipment on the heels of the first two. A pair of MH-53s would remain to cover the Bosnia requirements. Brindisi-based MC-130P Shadow tankers and AC-130 Gunships would also support ASSURED RESPONSE.

Very early on Easter Sunday morning MC-130H Talon II crews and SEALs from Naval Special Warfare Unit TWO (NSWU2) launched from Stuttgart, GE, with the SOCEUR battle staff. As the embassy in Monrovia faces the Atlantic Ocean, the intention was to airdrop a team of SEALs and allow them to reinforce the embassy from the sea. The sea was flat, and the weather perfect, but the ambassador did not think the situation warranted the risk, so the force recovered at Freetown, Sierra Leone, which would eventually become the helicopter staging base.

Lungi International Airport in Freetown was austere, with limited support, but Sierra Leone was peaceful at the time and it provided a reasonable level of security. Lungi IAP would become the helicopter forward operating location (FOL) and transload point for the evacuees. The helicopters would bring people from the embassy helipad in Monrovia, about an hour and a half away by helicopter, to Lungi IAP, and then fixed-wing aircraft would do the final leg to Dakar, Senegal to complete their evacuation. Dakar is a modern large city with embassy support that could handle the hundreds of evacuees envisioned (by the end of the operation, the total number of evacuated would be over 2000).

Speed was crucial and with C-5 and C-17 support (the first use of a C-17 for an MH-53 shipment), the movement of the needed helicopter force was well underway. The crane, tug, and forklift needed to rebuild the helicopters arrived at Freetown from RAF Mildenhall within minutes of the first MH-53s arriving from Brindisi. Deploying from a deployed location was not something we had practiced, yet the crews and maintainers handled it with a great deal of precision, speed, and professionalism.

The helicopter maintenance team knew what needed to be done. They stacked their bags off to the side in the sweltering African sun and went to immediate work preparing the MH-53s to start the evacuation flights from the embassy in Monrovia. Two of the transmission and rotor head assemblies had 'kissed' during loading and the damage added to the maintenance burden. One of the five MH-53Js was designated the 'organ donor' and significantly increased the spare parts availability. Only four MH-53s would fly during the evacuation. They would be augmented in a few days' time by four MH-47s from the 3rd Battalion, 160th SOAR. USAF medical personnel walked the flight line ensuring the crews stayed hydrated and protected from the relentless, blistering African sun.

The first MH-53J touched down at the tiny embassy helipad in Monrovia on Tuesday, 9 April. Piloted by Maj Brad Webb, the helicopter flew 16 hours, non-stop, burning through 2 crews, and bringing the SEALs into the embassy and starting the evacuation process upon the first landing. The

SEALs expanded the landing zone at the embassy helipad to accommodate the MH-53's large size, began improving embassy security, and took charge of the evacuation process. Once the SEALs were in the embassy, the Special Forces soldiers from 1st Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group (SFG) were transported to the embassy to further enhance security and bring additional structure to the evacuation process. The number of potential evacuees swelled from a few hundred to many hundreds with thousands of people pushed by government and rebel forces into a small open park adjacent to the US embassy.

Quickly, the maintainers had the additional three MH-53Js re-built and we began a schedule of departures and arrivals from the embassy intended to maximize lift, make the operation predictable, and protect the crews from threats and the sweltering heat and humidity. Four H-53Js would launch at first light making the 200 mile trip to the embassy in sequence, refueling inflight from the MC-130s so that they always had sufficient fuel on board to make it back to Freetown. Takeoffs were sequenced so that each MH-53 had 10 minutes on the embassy helipad to off-load water and MREs to sustain the force and then on-load evacuees. During the return flight the helicopters would also hit a tanker to minimize fuel needed at Freetown (which had been sucked nearly dry by the first C-5 to land there). The maintenance team would quickly reload the running MH-53s after their passengers were trans-loaded to waiting fixed wing aircraft for the final leg (500 miles) to Senegal. Then the MH-53s would return to the embassy and do it all over again. That cycle was repeated three times each day during daylight hours and twice more each night, making a maximum of five trips for each helicopter each day, if nothing went wrong. In order to sustain a maximum effort, it would have taken eight complete helicopter crews. As we had only 7 crews, our maximum effort was restricted to 12 trips each day and 6 trips each night. No time was set aside for maintenance, we had much to do and little time to get the evacuation completed.

As it turned out the second night sortie was frequently not required by the embassy team or we were unable to accomplish it because of weather, lack of people processed and ready for evacuation, or threats. Several nights we were able to get all the people who were ready for evacuation out prior to the last



Joint Task Force Members prepare to load onto the Pave Lows to begin the NEO. (Photo courtesy of 352 SOG)

scheduled lift...and discovered that the embassy had gained new evacuees in the early morning hours. Several nights the last sortie was cancelled due to massive thunderstorms in close proximity to the embassy and helipad.

The 21st SOS men and machines were impressive. Six weeks of flying time were burned off in 9 days, for a total of 54 sorties and 262 flying hours. The maintenance team used the few hours available each day to nurse the machines to sufficient health to run hard for another 16 to 20 hours, flying 4 – 5 trips each between the embassy and Freetown, with a hot swap of crews at sunset.

Reinforcements to the embassy included the SEALs, the 1/10 SFG, and finally the 3rd Battalion, 325th infantry from the SETAF. Once the bulk of the evacuation was completed, the SEALs, 1/10th SFG, and 352nd SOG were pulled back to prepare for other theater missions. The mission transitioned to the 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit, who completed the final details of the evacuation.

Summary

A question the reader might ask is, “Why not stage out of Liberia, or offshore?” An amphibious evacuation to US ships was considered, but there were no ships in the area capable of supporting this effort. The in-theater USMC forces needed were on shore leave in Trieste, it would take 10 days for the ships to cover the more than 2800 miles from northern Italy to Liberia. FOLs in Liberia were considered but the threat and security issues ruled them out. Reconnaissance of the airfields near Monrovia revealed burning vehicles and a complete lack of security.

An MC-130 Talon II from the 7th SOS was sent to overfly both Roberts Field and Sprigs Payne airports in and near Monrovia to determine the suitability of these airfields to support the evacuation. When the photographs were delivered to BG Canavan, the SOCEUR commander, he became a bit upset. It appeared that the pictures had been taken from the ground level and the general had specifically told the aircrew not to land. The Talon crew assured the general that they had not landed, but the camera was very good. It is a fact that sitting on the aft ramp of a Talon II places the camera at about the same eye position as if standing on the ground...if you are low enough!

The two-phase evacuation from Liberia to Sierra Leone to Senegal was not terribly complex and had been rehearsed for similar contingencies in Bosnia. The commanders of SOCEUR, 352nd SOG, 1/10 SFG, NSWU-2, and 3/325 SETAF were known to each other and had trained and exercised together. Infantry, SEALs and Special Forces knew the helicopter gunners, engineers and pilots by name. The leadership from 3/160th SOAR had been to Brindisi and worked with the JSOTF and 352nd SOG leadership on previous missions. The relationship of confidence and trust developed in training was solidly in place.

About 1400 US forces participated in Operation ASSURED RESPONSE. After 11 days of operations, 2115 civilians had been evacuated from the embassy, representing 76 nationalities and including 386 US civilians. All were very appreciative; promising to pay taxes, thanking the military,



Col Connelly, Col Gene Haas and an Mx NCO observe the flight line build up of the Paves after being off loaded from the C-5s.

(Photo courtesy of 352 SOG)

praising the excellent cuisine after being offered an MRE, and completely over the top in gratitude for a liter of clean water. Life in the embassy compound over a few days had made life precious.

Except for BG Canavan and Col Race, my bosses, I have left many names out. The exception is Maj Webb who you probably saw sitting at President Obama's side the night that Osama bin Laden was taken. I refer you to the beginning of this article. It is a short view from the MH-53 viewpoint. By this point in time, SOF had built with sweat on sweat and blood on blood; we were a practiced, cohesive, and ready team. The problems after Iran, Grenada, and dozens of exercises, coupled with Congressional and military support had revitalized SOF. Operation ASSURED RESPONSE was proof positive that the effort and investment had paid off.

The event was significant enough to be captured in a short History ([Operation Assured Response: SOCEUR's NEO in Liberia](#), April 1996, USSOCOM History and Research Office (Dr. John W Partin and Capt Rob Rhoden, Sept 1997)). In retrospect, it was the end of the easy stuff for the Pave Low community, and the end of the growth of the fleet, maintenance, and crews. In the days to come the MH-53Js and MH-53Ms would be called to perform more dangerous and more demanding missions. Those missions would be after the events of 9/11. ASSURED RESPONSE was a prelude to the reputation for excellence that the MH-53s, its crews and maintainers, would generate until its retirement.



About the Author: Col (Ret) Steve Connelly is a retired Colonel whose final assignment was as Director of Operations (A3) for HQ AFSOC. He was the 352 SOG/CC from 1994 to 1996 and deployed to Freetown to serve in the Air Component Command for Assured Response. He was qualified helicopter, fixed wing, and test pilot and participated in some of the development and fielding of the Pave Low Helicopter force. Col Connelly resides in Fort Walton Beach and works with the ACA to sustain funding for the John Grove High School in Honduras.

Pave Low Rescue Operations for Operation Allied Force and the Recovery of Vega 31



The crew of Moccasin 60 the morning after leading the rescue of Vega 31, Lt Col Dale Zelko: L-R, MSgt John Dubuisson, Capt John Glass, TSgt Ed Hux, SSgt Bill Clemons, SrA Chris Bloomfield, and Capt Jim Cardoso. (Photo courtesy of Col Jim Cardoso)

©2012 Darrel Whitcomb "On a Steel Horse I Ride: A History of the MH-53 Pave Low Helicopters in War and Peace"

By Darrel Whitcomb

Combat operations against Serbia began on 24 March 1999. Lt Col Paul Harmon, the commander of the 21st Special Operations Squadron (SOS) worked with Capt Jim Slife to build five helicopter teams, each led by a very experienced flight lead: from the augmenting 20th SOS, Capt Jim Cardoso and Capt Paul Pereira, and from the 21st, Capt Jim Breck, Maj Lou Caporicci, and Capt Jim Slife. Every 24 hours, two teams would be on alert as primary and secondary. They would rotate through on the schedule with secondary, primary, and local duties. The primary would move

forward to Tuzla, Bosnia-Herzegovina, in order to reduce reaction time over Serbia, and the secondary would sit alert at Brindisi and primarily respond to calls in Kosovo. Since two models of Pave Lows were assigned, whatever type the primary crew flew would lead. The two squadrons did not intermix their personnel. Capt Cardoso agreed with this plan. He had now flown both the MH-53J and M models and knew that the newer M models were more technologically advanced. However, he also believed that the theater experience of the 21st SOS guys was clearly a mitigating factor, later

stating that "having theater experience outweighs the machine."

The bombing campaign began as scheduled. That night the primary rescue task force, led by Capt Slife, flew to Tuzla and assumed strip alert there. On the night of 27 March, a 20th SOS crew, with Capt Cardoso as flight lead for the rescue package and copilot Capt John Glass, took off in an MH-53M. Their call sign was Moccasin 60. One wingman, Moccasin 61, was an MH-53J from the 21st SOS, flown by Capt Shawn Cameron with copilot Capt Matt Daley and crew. The other wingman was Gator

07, an MH-60G from the 55th SOS, commanded by Capt Chad Franks with copilot Capt Matt Glover and crew. Col Steve Laushine was aboard Moccasin 60 as the on scene mission commander. As directed, a ground team from the 1st Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group, as well as USAF special tactics personnel were dispersed among the three aircraft.

As the flight of three helicopters proceeded to Tuzla, the crews checked in with the NATO AWACS that was on station and overseeing the strikes that evening. The weather over the region was poor, with mixed rain showers and low visibility. Many strikes had been cancelled that day. Cardoso and his group landed at Tuzla and taxied to the refueling pits to fill their tanks. As they were doing so, the crews aboard Moccasin 61 and Gator 07 heard a Mayday call on the UHF emergency frequency.

Immediately, Laushine and the aircraft commanders went into the Tuzla command center to determine what was going on. There they were told that an F-117 had gone down in Serbia. They quickly began to formulate a recovery plan and tasked intelligence for the most accurate location of the pilot, Lt Col Dale Zelko, call sign Vega 31, from the 49th FW at Holloman. Laushine asked for data on the enemy threats that they would have to deal with to get the pilot out. Cardoso was a bit concerned, thinking, "A Stealth just got shot down and now [they] want us to go in there?" However, he was now a highly experienced Pave Low pilot and knew that, while the immediate plan was not clear, the crews knew what they had to do and would figure out a way to get Zelko home safely.

The requested information promptly flowed into the command center. Intelligence sources indicated that Vega 31 was down near Novi Sad, Serbia, an estimated 90 miles from Tuzla. Those sources also reported that the Serbs realized they had shot down an F-117 and were scrambling to capture the pilot. Several flights of A-10s and other supporting aircraft were being launched to assist in the rescue. With that information, Laushine directed his task force to take off and head north to set up a rendezvous with the A-10s near Osijek in northeastern Croatia.

The three helicopters quickly launched and headed north. In this area, at least, the air was clear, and night visibility was good, although the moon was slowly setting. En route they had difficulties establishing communications with the A-10s and other support aircraft as Laushine tried to organize the recovery effort. Meanwhile, Zelko had been able to use his handheld GPS to determine his location and had securely passed it to a C-130 orbiting over Kosovo. The C-130 crew quickly forwarded it through intelligence channels to Laushine. The reported position, validated by the A-10 flight lead, Capt John Cherrey, who had established radio communications with and authenticated the survivor, indicated that Vega 31 was on the ground just south of the city of Ruma, 25 miles farther south. This was much closer to Belgrade, the heavily defended Serbian capital, and necessitated a complete rework of the recovery plan as the helicopter crews quickly entered Zelko's reported GPS location into their navigation systems.

To save fuel, Cardoso directed his flight crews to land their helicopters and dismount their PJs and some of the Special Forces soldiers to provide site security. He, copilot Glass, and flight engineer SSgt Bill Clemons frantically built a new route to the survivor while the crew of Moccasin 61 coordinated for an MC-130P Shadow to refuel the helicopters. Once that was worked out, the helicopters re-launched, quickly rendezvoused with the tanker just 700 feet above the ground, and took on fuel as ground fog and low clouds were forming in the area. They repositioned to a holding point west of Ruma, but still in Bosnian airspace and awaited the arrival of Cherrey's A-10 flight. The Warthogs would escort the helicopters to the survivor and provide top cover against any threats that

challenged them.

Enemy forces were now aware of Zelko's presence and were fully mobilizing to capture him. Time was of the essence. As Capt Cherrey was orchestrating his portion of the effort, he received an intelligence report that Zelko had been captured. Cherrey called him on his survival radio and re-authenticated him. The rescue was still on.

At the holding point, Cherrey briefed Cardoso and his flight on the escort and recovery plan. He told Cardoso to call him when they were two miles from Zelko so that he could tell Zelko to turn on his signaling device. They all acknowledged the plan, and Cherrey directed them to execute.

Throughout the night, the helicopters had been operating mostly in clear air. As they turned inbound to Zelko, though, they encountered a layer of low-hanging clouds, fog, and rain. Flight engineer TSgt Ed Hux, serving as the right-door gunner and scanner on Cardoso's aircraft, noted, "It was probably in the top five of the darkest nights that I have ever flown in 30 years of flying." As visibility rapidly deteriorated, Cardoso and his crew, already wearing

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These guys would be out of their minds to try and come in where I am. I was mentally and emotionally well prepared for capture. Those CSAR professionals are simply astonishing.

— Dale Zelko, Pilot Vega 31

”

NVGs, began utilizing the FLIR system to proceed. Unfortunately, as they entered the low scud, Cherrey and his flight could no longer see the helicopters to provide direct fire support. The A-10s were being engaged by deadly SA-6 surface-to-air missiles and were now occupied trying to avoid suffering Zelko's fate.

Entering the low clouds and fog at about 50 feet above the ground, the two

other helicopters held tactical formation on Moccasin 60 so that they did not get separated while so dangerously low. On board all three helicopters, gunners and flight engineers were earnestly scanning for immediate physical threats such as trees, towers, or power lines—anything that could damage or destroy a helicopter—as well as for enemy forces. Suddenly, Hux spotted an uncharted power line in the haze, just ahead and level with the helicopters. He quickly shouted, “Wires! Climb! Climb!” as copilot Glass echoed his call. Cardoso immediately reacted and pulled back on the controls, flying his helicopter up and over the threatening wires. The other two crews maintained formation and also avoided the threat. Once clear of the wires, Cardoso descended the flight back down about 100 feet and proceeded toward Zelko.

As the helicopters approached a point two miles from the survivor, Zelko was instructed to turn on his covert radio signal. He did so, not realizing that it was not working. Without visual contact with Zelko, the helicopters began to orbit the position. Zelko could hear them. He also could sense that enemy forces were very near. Cardoso could also now see the enemy forces in the area.

Time was now extremely critical; they needed to move in very quickly. Cardoso called to Zelko, “Just give me any signal!” Zelko lit one of his overt signal flares, and everybody in the helicopter task force and probably every Serbian within two miles saw him. Cardoso issued a few last-second directions as Gator 07, the primary actual recovery aircraft, maneuvered to land and pick up the survivor. Capt Franks and crew quickly and expertly landed their MH-60 just a few feet from Zelko as the two MH-53s orbited above, guns at the ready. Franks ordered his two PJs, SSgt Eric Giacchino and SrA John Jordan, to dismount and retrieve Vega 31. As they were doing so, Cardoso, flying above, spotted Serbian vehicles 50 meters away, but did not direct his gunners to shoot them since he did not want to unnecessarily highlight his helicopter. Below, the two PJs quickly moved to secure Zelko and put him aboard the MH-60. Gator 07 was on the ground for

only about 40 seconds before the three men were aboard and Franks lifted off and rejoined the formation.

As the helicopters rejoined into their pre-briefed formation, the three aircraft turned west and headed back to Tuzla. When they landed there after their six-hour-and-30-minute adventure, an effusively thankful Dale Zelko was handed over to the flight surgeon and then flown to Aviano AB, Italy, for repatriation. The next day the crews held a debrief and reviewed the operation, identifying lessons learned and issues that needed to be addressed. To Cardoso, the results spoke for themselves. “We went in with 37 [personnel],” he said, adding, “We came back with 38.”

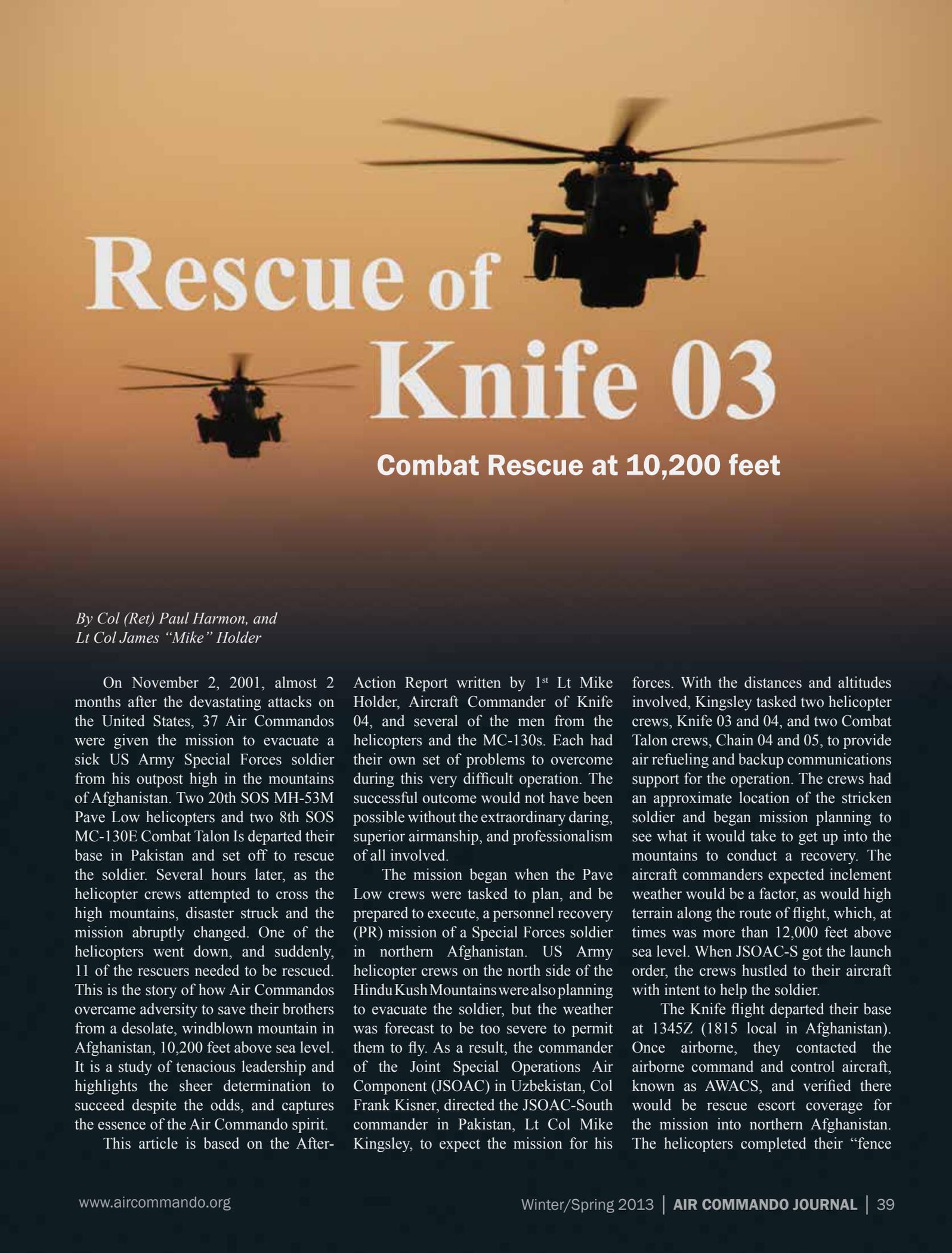
The members of the task force reconstituted and were put back in the rotation schedule. Later, the rescue mission received the acclaim that it deserved; all participants were recognized for the roles they played, with several receiving Silver Stars, Distinguished Flying Crosses, Bronze Stars, and Air Medals. For his key leadership, Capt Jim Cardoso was presented the 2000 Jabara Award for “superior performance in fields directly involved with aerospace vehicles.”

However, this mission had another significance, perhaps unrecognized at this time but profound in its historical implications. In 1967, at a time when the USAF was engaged in an intense theater war and losing aircraft and aircrews on a daily basis, its commanders in SEA forwarded to the Pentagon a requirement, SEA Operational Requirement 114, which called for “an integrated system to enable . . . helicopters to perform the essential elements of search and rescue under conditions of total darkness and/or low visibility.” That requirement provided the impetus for the development of the technology that changed HH and CH-53s into MH-53Js and then MH-53Ms. However, it took the right crews, young air commandos, men of consummate professionalism and intense drive, to operationally bring those helicopters alive, to give them the honor of being Pave Lows. It was the men and machines together that made it all work. The right machines plus the right airmen together were “Pave Low.”

At the heart of the combination was the individual crew, highly trained and formally structured. Each of the two officer pilots and four enlisted flight engineers and gunners had an integrated role to play based on a foundation of fundamental trust. Never was that more graphically on display than when Ed Hux called out those wires. Their presence at that precise moment was an immediate and perhaps mortal threat to those helicopters. However, the Pave Low navigational equipment did not detect them; Ed Hux did, using his “Mark One” eyeballs. His timely verbal warning made the difference. Given the relatively tight formation in which the helicopters were flying, if they had flown into those wires, it is very possible that any or all of the helicopters could have been destroyed, along with their crews. Hux saw them and called them out. His warning to the crew was not questioned; there was no request to repeat or validate or explain. Cardoso and Glass did what needed to be done to protect the flight— instantaneously. Seconds later, the danger was behind them, and they were back on task, a bit wiser nonetheless. Hux rather casually said of that event later, “We had been flying as a group for a little while back at home station, and we could do those things—a simple testament to the idea that you ‘train like you fight.’”

Then, the pickup itself was classic Pave Low. Moccasin 60 did not land to recover Vega 31, although it could have done so. Instead, it provided the overall leadership for the mission to facilitate the recovery action by the brave crew of Gator 07. The true meaning of “Pave Low leads” was on display.

Ultimately, the simple truth is that in the early morning hours of 28 March 1999 in the skies over Serbia, a concept germinated 32 years earlier in the frustrations of the long war in Southeast Asia finally came to fruition. Fully 32 years of conceptualizing, planning, modifying, organizing, and training jelled in one seminal moment, and the rescue of Vega 31, Lt Col Dale Zelko, was the final and ultimate fulfillment of that requirement. His freedom was the end result of the right equipment and the right men at the right place at the right time, and for all of the right reasons. 



Rescue of Knife 03

Combat Rescue at 10,200 feet

*By Col (Ret) Paul Harmon, and
Lt Col James "Mike" Holder*

On November 2, 2001, almost 2 months after the devastating attacks on the United States, 37 Air Commandos were given the mission to evacuate a sick US Army Special Forces soldier from his outpost high in the mountains of Afghanistan. Two 20th SOS MH-53M Pave Low helicopters and two 8th SOS MC-130E Combat Talon Is departed their base in Pakistan and set off to rescue the soldier. Several hours later, as the helicopter crews attempted to cross the high mountains, disaster struck and the mission abruptly changed. One of the helicopters went down, and suddenly, 11 of the rescuers needed to be rescued. This is the story of how Air Commandos overcame adversity to save their brothers from a desolate, windblown mountain in Afghanistan, 10,200 feet above sea level. It is a study of tenacious leadership and highlights the sheer determination to succeed despite the odds, and captures the essence of the Air Commando spirit.

This article is based on the After-

Action Report written by 1st Lt Mike Holder, Aircraft Commander of Knife 04, and several of the men from the helicopters and the MC-130s. Each had their own set of problems to overcome during this very difficult operation. The successful outcome would not have been possible without the extraordinary daring, superior airmanship, and professionalism of all involved.

The mission began when the Pave Low crews were tasked to plan, and be prepared to execute, a personnel recovery (PR) mission of a Special Forces soldier in northern Afghanistan. US Army helicopter crews on the north side of the Hindu Kush Mountains were also planning to evacuate the soldier, but the weather was forecast to be too severe to permit them to fly. As a result, the commander of the Joint Special Operations Air Component (JSOAC) in Uzbekistan, Col Frank Kisner, directed the JSOAC-South commander in Pakistan, Lt Col Mike Kingsley, to expect the mission for his

forces. With the distances and altitudes involved, Kingsley tasked two helicopter crews, Knife 03 and 04, and two Combat Talon crews, Chain 04 and 05, to provide air refueling and backup communications support for the operation. The crews had an approximate location of the stricken soldier and began mission planning to see what it would take to get up into the mountains to conduct a recovery. The aircraft commanders expected inclement weather would be a factor, as would high terrain along the route of flight, which, at times was more than 12,000 feet above sea level. When JSOAC-S got the launch order, the crews hustled to their aircraft with intent to help the soldier.

The Knife flight departed their base at 1345Z (1815 local in Afghanistan). Once airborne, they contacted the airborne command and control aircraft, known as AWACS, and verified there would be rescue escort coverage for the mission into northern Afghanistan. The helicopters completed their "fence



Crew of Knife 03

(Photo courtesy of Col (Ret) Paul Harmon)

checks” and crossed into Afghanistan at 1530Z (2000 local time) where they immediately joined up with Chain 04 flight for inflight refueling. This would be the first of five air refuelings the team would perform over the next eight hours. All the aircrews were equipped with the latest version of night vision goggles that allowed them to fly in close formation with minimal light. The helicopter refueling was conducted at 1,000 feet above the ground with the Talons and Pave Lows moving in one smooth formation through the night sky.

With the first refueling complete and with several hours of fuel on board, the helicopters continued northwest toward their first weather decision point. Finding the skies clear, the helicopters continued along their route into the higher terrain. During their pre-mission planning both Pave Low aircrews briefed aircraft performance, because flying at high altitude in a helicopter was anything but routine. Once in the mountains, the flight began crossing mountain passes at over 10,000 feet. Knowing the Special Forces soldier needed to be evacuated, they continued on. As they flew deeper into the rugged terrain the weather began to deteriorate. The leader, Knife 03, completed his radar checks and discovered it was not working properly. Now faced with mountainous terrain and deteriorating weather, he ordered the flight to orbit over an open plain so they could reassess the situation.

Knife 04’s radar was working, so Lt Mike Holder (aircraft commander

of Knife 04) and his crew went ahead to scout for a clear route through the mountains. Finding a clear canyon, Knife 04 rejoined his leader and began leading the way through the weather. Knife 03 flew close formation so he could maintain visual contact with Knife 04 in the marginal weather. As the two MH-53s negotiated the mountain passes, the weather got worse with heavy snow showers. Seeing this, Knife 03 directed Knife 04 to turn back. However, while attempting to turn around, Knife 04 inadvertently went into the clouds. To complicate the situation, Holder was already at his aircraft’s dual engine service ceiling of 11,000 feet, so he could not climb to get above the weather. Now in the weather, Lt Holder’s airspeed bled off to zero and his groundspeed was just 24 knots. The situation became even more dire as the Pave Low’s main rotor speed began to fall below the normal 105 percent and the aircraft began to descend at nearly 1,500 feet per minute. They were too heavy for their flying altitude. Holder was rapidly losing control of his aircraft, but through the teamwork of his cockpit crew, his backend crew, and a bit of luck, he regained control of the aircraft and visual contact with the terrain at approximately 200 feet above the ground.

The flight of helicopters was now separated by several miles, but Knife 04’s aerial gunners were able to see the second helicopter despite the worsening conditions. The primary focus of both crews was now on finding an escape

route out of the terrible weather. Knife 03 advised Knife 04 that if conditions did not improve, they might have to consider making a forced landing on the rugged terrain. Holder began leading the formation south again to get clear of the weather. After flying three or four miles Knife 04’s scanners lost sight of their wingman. Likewise, Knife 03 lost sight of lead and turned back to the last known clear area. Holder and his crew finally found a clear area over a dry lakebed and set up an orbit trying to contact Knife 03 on the radio. Knife 03 answered and asked them to return in order to lead them out of the high terrain. Knife 04 asked for their position, Knife 03 replied with “... *Standby.*”

Orbiting over the dry lake bed, avoiding several small villages, Knife 04 tried in vain to contact Knife 03 on all available radios. After almost 15 minutes, Knife 04 finally called the AWACS, passed they had lost contact with Knife 03 and asked them to report the situation to their home base. At nearly the same time, Sandy 01 flight, the rescue escort provided for the PR mission, arrived in the area and made an initial CSAR assessment. Sandy 01 confirmed Knife 03 was on the ground, but his status was unknown. A short time later, Sandy 01 asked Knife 04 to confirm the number of souls on board the downed helicopter. Knife 04 told Sandy there were 11 souls on board, which included the 6 aircrew, a mission commander, a direct support operator (DSO), and a 3-man special tactics (ST) team. The Sandy said he saw 11 crewmen moving away from their aircraft and that he established radio communications with Jaguar 03, the combat controller.

The crew was moving on the ground, but the enemy situation was unknown. Lt Holder and his crew made

several attempts to fly back to the last known location, but was frustrated by the fast moving snow showers and could not get closer than several miles away. This effort took the better part of an hour as it became apparent that Knife 04 was not going to reach Knife 03's crew until the weather cleared. Holder's crew continued to monitor the conversation of the Sandy, but could not hear Jaguar 03 on the ground. In the radio chatter, Holder learned the downed crew had two possible back injuries and several other minor injuries, and were unable to move any farther. Knife 03's crew needed to find cover until someone came for them.

At the forced landing site, the conditions were severe with the cold and blowing snow. The high altitude was also taking its toll. Despite several injuries, the crew collected some of their winter clothes and equipment before they walked away from the helicopter. After a short time on the ground, the Americans saw 15 or so unidentified people with weapons approaching their position. The airmen took cover and prepared for the possibility of defending themselves. The DSO was trained in the local Afghan language and culture. After watching the men for a time, he assessed the group to be local villagers and not necessarily hostile. Betting on his instincts, the sergeant put down his weapon and went to speak with the men. Even though he was suffering from injuries sustained in the crash and the onset of hypothermia, he was able to talk to the men in their own language. After a few tense minutes, he was finally able to convince the villagers that the Americans meant no harm and it would be best for them move away from the aircrew and the downed helicopter for their own safety. With the situation defused for the time being, the airman returned to his compatriots to wait for a ride home.

Still flying, Knife 04 was losing options to stay close because the weather began to deteriorate again. Lt Holder

discussed with his crew the option of landing until the weather cleared or to wait for sunrise, which was still six hours away, before making another attempt to rescue their friends. Holder relayed his intentions back to base, but was told to remain airborne and on station as long as he could. To do this, Knife 04 needed more fuel, so he called the Chain flight and advised Sandy they were departing the area to refuel. This was not a pre-planned refueling so they had to coordinate with Chain for an air refueling track in lower terrain and clearer weather. As it turns out, Chain 04 had radar problems of its own, so Chain 05 assumed the lead for the refueling rendezvous. The navigators aboard Chain 05 worked feverishly to plan an impromptu refueling track as near as possible to the stranded crew. The Pave Low flight engineer programmed his navigational equipment while the pilots calculated the fuel requirements to ensure they would have ample station time in case the weather took a while to clear.

Moving south to rendezvous with the Combat Talons, Knife 04 encountered more severe weather. Holder knew the general area he was flying over was still over 9,000 feet MSL, but it was relatively flat. Climbing into the weather was a poor option for the helicopter because of potential icing. Additionally, if Knife 04 got on top of the weather he might not be able to descend into a clear area again. Holder decided to fly between 200-300 feet above the ground using his

terrain-following radar to stay clear of terrain. Chain 05 kept them advised of the weather and after a short while, the weather cleared and Knife 04 acquired visual contact with the ground and continued for his refueling. As it turned out, the weather was not the only threat Knife 04 would face that night.

On the way to the rendezvous point, about 45 miles south of Knife 03, Holder's tail scanner spotted a puff of smoke and a streak of light coming from a small village. Instinctively, he made the engagement call, initially calling a SAM (surface to air missile) at their six o'clock for approximately two miles. He did not dispense flares because the missile did not appear to be tracking the helicopter and he did not want to reveal their position in the darkness. The flight engineer and pilots quickly checked their defensive warfare systems, but no threat was displayed. Knife 04 continued on course, but descended even lower to 100 feet. The flight engineer stored the threat position in the mission computer in order to avoid it on the way back and passed a situation report to AWACS.

After a few more minutes, Knife 04 finally met up with Chain flight and took on 9,000 pounds of fuel giving them just about three hours of fuel. Topped off with gas, Lt Holder and crew headed back north to be ready to pick up their squadron mates as soon as the weather broke. On the way back, Holder's crew was monitoring the CSAR radio net and heard Sandy talking with Jaguar 03. The



Crew of Knife 04

(Photo courtesy of Col (Ret) Paul Harmon)



MH-53 “Lights Out” refueling somewhere in the Middle East. (Photo courtesy of Col (Ret) Paul Harmon)

report indicated the weather over the survivors was clearing and the combat controller believed a pick-up was now possible. Holder called Sandy and told him they would be back in the area in forty minutes.

The flight engineer began working the take-off and landing data (TOLD) for the extraction site, adding the weight of the eleven survivors. The numbers were not encouraging. With the altitude of the site at 10,200 feet, the engineer determined they would have to dump nearly 6,000 pounds of fuel leaving just under 2,000 pounds on board in order to land and then take back off with the survivors. The margin of power required, versus what was available from the engines was razor thin. Holder described the situation to Chain and told them he would require refueling almost immediately after they took off from the site. The Talons orbiting in the mountains nearby assured Holder they would be there when needed. With the plan coming together, Holder decided to delay dumping any fuel until they could see the survivors and landing area and a landing could be accomplished.

While Knife 04 flew back to the recovery area, Holder asked the Sandy to get as much information about the landing zone as he could to build a picture of what to expect. Jaguar 03 said the landing area was generally north to south, just to the west of a small stream. Jaguar also relayed their position and the fact that the surface was gravel mixed with snow; cautioning of a possible whiteout condition on landing. The combat controller’s description and detail dramatically improved Knife 04’s situational awareness. About five miles

south of the survivors, Holder was able to hear Jaguar directly, which simplified communications.

As Knife 04 approached the pick-up area, they found the weather had cleared significantly. The helicopter’s navigation system was taking them into a very narrow north/south canyon. Low ceilings were creeping across the ridge lines, but the canyon was clear. Knife 04 told the combat controller to mark his position with an IR strobe so they could see exactly where the survivors were located. When Knife was one mile south, Holder, flying in the left seat, spotted the strobe light and maneuvered to put the survivors’ location on the left side so he could see it while the flight engineer stored the position in the navigation system for steering back to the point for his landing approach. As they flew over, the scanners spotted the wreckage of the downed MH-53, as well a village to the northwest of the landing area. Holder continued to fly north for another four miles and began to orbit to discuss the situation with his crew. Holder made the decision to attempt a recovery even though the TOLD was extremely close leaving no room for error. The decision made, Holder directed his flight engineer to begin dumping fuel to reduce their weight leaving just enough to climb-up and meet the tanker for fuel.

The MH-53’s system can jettison fuel at a maximum of 1,000 pounds per minute. In this case, it took 6 – 7 minutes to dump nearly 5,000 pounds of fuel. With the aircraft weight down and checklists complete, Knife 04 was ready to land and get their Pave Low brothers off the mountain to safety. Holder set up for the landing, heading to the south into the

prevailing wind as the combat controller advised. The aircraft commander briefed his crew one last time and told the engineer to configure the cockpit systems for a low visibility approach anticipating a whiteout on landing. A mile north of the LZ, Holder began his final approach and everyone immediately spotted the IR strobe light. The right and tail scanners watched the village closely for any activity. On short final, both pilots saw the survivors emerge from their hide site, at the one-o’clock position from the helicopter. At ten feet above the ground, Knife 04 became completely enveloped in a cloud of snow and Holder lost his visual reference with the ground. The left and right scanners still had the ground in sight and immediately began guiding their pilot to the ground. The MH-53 rolled about twenty feet before coming to a stop and settling slightly in the snow. When the aircraft came to a complete stop, the tail gunner began lowering the ramp and directed the onboard ST team to assist in getting the survivors on board. The eleven airmen climbed aboard and began to get settled in the crowded, but warm cabin. The pararescue specialists immediately started to treat those crew members with injuries, making them as comfortable as possible. Knife 04 now had twenty souls on board, and although they just passed the 7-hour mark for the mission, it was far from over.

While everyone was getting settled in the back, Lt Holder, his copilot and flight engineer reconfirmed the take off data. The landing was tough, but it was assisted by gravity. The take off, on the other hand, is a matter of physics and aerodynamics and would be solely dependent on the power of the engines to get them off the mountain. The elevation of the LZ was 10,200 feet and Knife 04 had just taken on approximately 2,750 pounds worth of additional personnel. They were at the limits of what the MH-53 could do. The flight engineer discussed jettisoning the auxiliary fuel tanks in

the landing area since they were nearly empty, effectively reducing the aircraft weight by nearly a thousand pounds. The aircraft commander considered it, but decided to keep the tanks because they would add stability to the helicopter in the event the take off went bad. However, Holder told his flight engineer to have his fingers on the switches...just in case. After sitting on the ground for about two minutes, Knife 04 was ready to go home.

Lt Holder began applying engine power by raising the collective. With the power in, the MH-53 initially lifted up to about ten feet, but quickly settled to five feet above the ground. The increased rotor wash also caused an immediate whiteout and the pilot lost his outside visual references. Holder shifted his scan to the inside instruments while his left and right scanners immediately began providing drift calls until the helicopter emerged from the snow cloud. While this was happening, the flight engineer's eyes were glued to the gauges as he began calling out the gradual, but steady decrease in main rotor RPM. Holder knew this would be the most harrowing part of the flight, and while a successful take off was still far from certain, he thought they would make it.

The flight engineer's hand was on the switch to jettison the auxiliary fuel tanks, but he waited for the aircraft commander's call. The copilot kept Holder advised of altitude and upcoming terrain. The left and tail scanners were calling any drift and immediate hazards in the take off path. During this time, the aircraft was only five or ten feet off the ground and was not accelerating much past 15-20 knots ground speed. The main rotor RPM stabilized between 92-94 percent, 10 percent below normal, and the engines were screaming at maximum power. Everyone on board felt severe vibrations throughout the aircraft; some thought the old MH-53 might come apart.

Lt Holder was totally focused the take off. He was well aware that his rotor

RPM was low and because of that the tail rotor not turning at its normal speed. There was a possibility of losing some yaw control, which would have prevented him from keeping the nose aligned with the direction of travel. As the helicopter moved 200-300 meters down the landing zone, the crew noticed the terrain was beginning to rise, but was not as extreme as on the left and right side of the helicopter. As Holder continued forward he was able to stay in ground effect as the speed began to increase. At about 45 knots or so, the gradual upslope opened up on the right side and then fell away to a high level plain about 100 feet below the aircraft. This was fortuitous because the recommended technique to get out of a low main rotor and low tail rotor RPM situation is to turn right and reduce power allowing the helicopter to turn and descend, allowing the main rotor and tail rotor to come back within limits.

Holder aimed for the opening with a gradual right turn and then traded off a little altitude for airspeed as the terrain fell away from under the aircraft. Once he reached flying speed, he reduced power a bit and the rotor RPM rose to normal operating range. It only took forty-five seconds to a minute from the start of the take off until the thirty-plus year old MH-53 began to fly, but for the crew it felt like an eternity.

Once safely airborne, Knife 04's problem was getting enough fuel to make it back to a transfer point so the injured could be transported to a medical facility for care and then back to base, which was still three hours away. Knife 04 had roughly 35 minutes of fuel on board before they would be in real

trouble. Aboard Chain 05, about 15 miles from the crash site, the navigators were working to find the best area to conduct a helicopter air refueling. Because Knife 04 was so low on fuel the initial refueling would have to be in the high terrain. When the Combat Talons heard Knife 04 announce his take off, they headed toward the helicopter's position to set up for the refueling as quickly as possible. Chain 05 had an operable radar so its navigators used all their chart reading and radar skills to find an area away from the highest terrain, but also moving in the general direction of their operating base.

Because the surrounding terrain was so high in all directions, Chain 05 directed Knife 04 to climb to 11,000 feet to clear the terrain to allow the join up. Normal helicopter refueling is usually done no higher than 7,500 feet MSL and at 115 knots airspeed. The higher altitude required for this situation would put the MC-130s very close to their stall speed during the refueling. Likewise, for the helicopter to fly 115 knots at 11,000 feet, even at moderate gross weight, it was going to be difficult for the helicopter and Combat Talon to perform a routine aerial refueling.

Chain 05 began its rendezvous from the north, just a few hundred feet higher than the helicopter. All crew members on the flight deck were straining their eyes to spot the helicopter flying in the dark. The navigator was able to identify the helicopter on the radar and as they closed the distance, the MC-130 started to slow to 115 knots passing just above and to the right of the Pave Low. The tail gunner on Knife 04 could see the Talons as they approached in the darkness and began

Crew of Chain 05

(Photo courtesy of Col (Ret) Paul Harmon)





The rescuers and rescued. Both Pave Low crews together, Knife 03 and Knife 04. (Photo courtesy of Col (Ret) Paul Harmon)

calling the distance to the copilot, who was flying in the right seat. As Chain 05 passed slowly above, the copilot cautiously climbed up into position for the refueling. Within a minute, the helicopter was taking fuel from the left hose.

After they had taken on about 2,500 pounds, Knife 04 became too heavy to stay in formation and started to fall away from Chain 05. Just as the drogue pulled away from the helicopter's refueling probe, the co-pilot was able to time it so that the rising drogue remained clear of the rotor blades. With the additional fuel on board, Holder decided to fly formation, drafting off the Combat Talon, until they could clear the high terrain for a lower altitude. Twenty minutes later the formation cleared the mountains and they were able descend to 9,000 feet. The combination of lighter weight because of the fuel they had consumed and the lower altitude, allowed Lt Holder to take on enough gas to reach the transfer site, which was still one-and-a-half hours away.

After receiving the required fuel, the flight to the transfer site in Pakistan was relatively routine, except that the crew had been flying for nearly nine stressful hours. Knife 04 finally landed at the transfer site and taxied to the rear of the running aircraft. The ST team then took charge and escorted the three ambulatory and two litter patients to the waiting aircraft for the flight to the theater hospital. The uninjured members of Knife 03 stayed on board for the return flight to their home base. With the passenger transfer complete, Knife 04 departed for one last air refueling, the fifth for the night, and the two-hour return flight to their operating base.

On the way back to their base, the last refueling went smoothly until the formation hit unexpected turbulence from the nearby mountains, which caused the MC-130 to roll suddenly left toward the refueling helicopter. Holder executed an emergency breakaway to avoid the Talon as it maneuvered back to level flight. After that, Holder confirmed he had taken on enough fuel for the return flight and cancelled the remainder of the refueling.

Once more, flying single ship, Knife 04 continued on to their operating base. When Holder called into the Operations Center, he was advised the visibility was three-quarters of

a mile with smoke, but skies were clear. Knife 04 continued on, being familiar with the lowlands surrounding the operating base. At approximately 30 miles from the base, the visibility rapidly decreased to near zero. Taking the whole mission into account, Lt Holder decided it was safer to fly above the weather avoiding possible small arms rather than attempt to stay low and fly using the terrain-following radar. As they got nearer, the airfield was obscured so Knife 04 descended slowly using the radar and FLIR, breaking out of the weather at about 400 feet. A few miles further, Knife 04 landed and shut down. After logging 10.6 hours flight time, Lt Holder and his crew were physically and mentally exhausted, but were happy to be back with their brothers; a little banged up, but alive and well.

After the rescue of Knife 03, all the aircrews went back to work supporting combat operations against al Qaeda and the Taliban. This was at the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom. For a mission that began as a medical evacuation of a Special Forces soldier, ending with the successful rescue of 11 airmen, the aircrews were recognized for their courage and aerial skill. Lt Mike Holder, his copilot, Capt Jay Humphrey, and the cockpit flight engineer, SSgt Chad Ackman, were each awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for their extraordinary airmanship. The second flight engineer, SSgt Vince DePersio and aerial gunners, SSgt Mark Wolcott and SSgt Al Aguinaldo, were each awarded the Air Medal. Further, the National Aeronautics' Association recognized the Knife 04 crew, which included their ST team, SSgt Paul Orse, SSgt Bill Adams, and SSgt Jason Andrews for efforts during the rescue with the presentation of the Mackay Trophy for the most meritorious flight in 2001. The crew of Chain 05 received recognition for their airmanship as well. The pilots, Capt Doug Distaso and Maj Greg Nelson, and the navigators, Capt Mark Miller and Capt Jim Stott, were each awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for superior airmanship. The entire Chain 05 crew, which also included Lt Richard Obert, MSgt Steven "Bud" Willman, TSgt Mike Carroll, TSgt Rod Langley, and SSgt Lucas Singletary, was recognized with Air Force Association's Brigadier General Ross G. Hoyt Award for the most meritorious air refueling mission for 2001. Finally, the Air Force Sergeant's Association recognized TSgt Navid Garshasb, the DSO on Knife 03, as its recipient of the Pitsenbarger Award for defusing the situation and possible firefight between the Afghan villagers and US airmen on the mountain.



About the Authors: Lt Col James "Mike" Holder is currently the Operations Officer for the 71 SOS at Kirtland AFB NM. Col Holder is graduate of the USAF Weapons School and served as an Air Power Strategist in the Checkmate Division on the Air Staff. Col Holder is a Command Pilot with 3,750 hours flying the CV-22, MH53M, AH-64A, AH1E, and the UH-1H aircraft.

Col (Ret) Harmon retired from the USAF in 2010 after 30 years of service. During his tenure, Col Harmon held several command positions in operations and training and served twice as the Director, Special Operations Liaison Element in the Central Command's Combined Air Operations Center during Operation Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom.

OIF - THE FIRST NIGHT

In 2002, intelligence sources indicated that the Iraqi people wanted to be rid of Saddam and would welcome an invasion by coalition troops to depose him and his Baathist regime. Skeptics believed that these reports were overinflated and that a large portion of the Iraqi response to any invasion would be guerilla-type operations against allied forces.

Saddam, believing that any substantial allied attack against Iraq would mirror the Desert Storm campaign from 1990, expected an extensive air campaign to precede any ground attack. Sensing an opportunity to achieve at least operational surprise, GEN Franks decided to initiate the ground campaign with the forces in Kuwait prior to an air campaign. And, he intended to launch it in March, before the heat had built up.

©2012 Darrel Whitcomb "On a Steel Horse I Ride: A History of the MH-53 Pave Low Helicopters in War and Peace"



Lt Col Brad Webb addresses his airmen at the beginning of OIF. (Photo courtesy Brig Gen Brad Webb)

The ever dangerous "brown-out" landing. (Photo courtesy SSgt Glen Fleming)

By Darrel Whitcomb

On 17 March, President Bush addressed the nation. He gave Saddam and his sons, Uday and Qusay, 48 hours to leave Iraq, explaining that "their refusal to do so will result in military conflict, commenced at a time of our choosing." Saddam immediately responded with his own appearance on television saying, "This will be Iraq's last great battle with the malicious tyrant in our time, and America's last great war of aggression, too."

Saddam and his sons did not withdraw as directed, and 48 hours later, GEN Franks was ordered to begin his campaign. The first mission to launch would be a seven-ship of Pave Lows

led by Lt Col Jim Slife. They would proceed into south-central Iraq to deliver several Special Forces teams from the 5th Special Forces Group (SFG), along with special "nonstandard vehicles" to perform strategic reconnaissance along US V Corps and I MEF advance routes. Slife was crewed with 1st Lt Tom Lessner, flight engineers TSgt John Tharp and TSgt Todd Buice, and gunners TSgt Aaron Bettison and Amn Eric Ezell.

All of the helicopters were at their absolute maximum wartime takeoff weights. As they taxied out for takeoff, the maintenance crew members lined up to salute them, waving a large American flag illuminated by flashlights.

The ground crew's gesture touched the aircrews, especially when they considered how hard the maintenance crews had worked to get those almost 40-year-old aircraft ready to go to war one more time.

Slife and his flight of three Pave Lows lifted off into a terrible sandstorm with low ceilings and poor visibility. Capt Michalek led the second element of four aircraft. At the first landing zone near the key city of Nasiriyah, one of the crews in the first element, carrying Special Forces Operational Detachment-Alpha (ODA) 553, crashed in the brownout conditions. The helicopter, MH-53M #67-14493, flipped on its side and was destroyed. The

crew and passengers escaped, although several were injured. Michalek landed his helicopters around the crash site; a security team he was carrying secured the site so that the helicopter crew could be recovered. The men of ODA 553 retrieved enough of their equipment to continue their mission; initially to overwatch a key bridge near the city and, eventually, to infiltrate into Nasiriyah and begin working with anti-Saddam forces.

When Slife and his six remaining helicopters returned to Ali al Salem, though, all was in chaos. The crews had another insertion mission to fly and were now behind schedule to get all teams in safely before sunrise. As they refueled and reloaded and additional Special Forces troops began coming aboard, Slife could see that he had a serious morale problem. Col Randy O'Boyle met him at the aircraft. He was very direct. "What do you think?" he asked of Slife. "We've got to go," Slife responded firmly. "We cannot cancel at this point. We've got to go and do this second mission." O'Boyle swallowed hard. "Okay," he said and walked away. The 20th SOS commander, Lt Col Brad Webb and Slife then talked with the other crews. Some were brimming with confidence; some, less so. One crew was obviously too shaken to continue. Webb replaced it with a spare crew, and the six aircraft lifted off with their teams.

Needing another aircraft, Slife and Webb grabbed the one spare that was available with its crew. The pilots were 1st Lt Jim Peterson and 1st Lt Matt Berry. Peterson was another of the highly skilled and experienced US Army warrant officers who had crossed over to Pave Low. Berry was in awe of Peterson's flying ability and felt fortunate to be paired with him, in particular. Sgt Jobling was the lead flight engineer. In preparing the aircraft for departure, the crew discovered several issues with its countermeasures, fuel, and hydraulic systems. Regardless, the crew members pressed on, receiving a quick mission brief as the ODA, and equipment, and vehicle were quickly loaded.

The initial landing zone had been compromised, and they were handed another set of coordinates as their destination. The weather was still

very poor with low clouds and limited visibility. Jobling had his hands full as his pilots battled vertigo in the dark, featureless night. He recounts, "I pulled such stuff out of my a-- that night. That is when I realized that I really knew how to do my job." At the time, Jobling had a broken bone in one of his feet. The break had occurred in Afghanistan a year earlier, but he had deferred surgery on it twice to make deployments to Djibouti and then to Kuwait. He later admitted that "it was just uncomfortable."

Slife and his flight inserted ODA 555 near Samawah; however, they had to divert to an alternate landing site when intelligence sources informed them in-flight that enemy forces occupied the primary location. Unlike the first sortie, though, Slife and his flight were able to uneventfully insert all of the teams as planned. But the mission was not without excitement.

Returning from their insertions, Slife and his crews had a difficult time linking up with their designated tanker and almost ran out of gas while deep in Iraq. In the world of combat aviation, there are many stressors; concern for fuel is a primary one. Slife's crews were flying so far into Iraq with such heavy loads that they could not do their missions without tanker support. The flight of MC-130s that had been scheduled to support them was delayed when it encountered some active Roland SAM batteries. The batteries were most probably on high alert because as Slife's flight was delivering its loads in south-central Iraq, USAF F-117s and 39 cruise missiles were sweeping into Iraq in an attempt to kill Saddam Hussein. Slife's flight of helicopters was instructed to immediately climb to 1,500 feet as the cruise missiles transited their approximate location.

Under GEN Franks's plan, the air campaign was not scheduled to begin until 22 March, after the conventional ground forces in Kuwait and the coalition special forces from Saudi Arabia and Jordan had initiated their attacks. However, when solid CIA sources reported Saddam's location, Lt Gen Moseley, the 9th Air Force Commander, received permission from the President to attack it. The strikes went in as targeted; however, Saddam was not there. The intelligence

had been faulty and the element of surprise had been lost. Apparently, the strategic impact of that development was minor for the ground attack occurred as scheduled. However, for the MC-130s and six Pave Lows over southern Iraq, the unintended consequences could have been dramatic. For Slife and his crews, it had been an eventful night.

The actions of Slife and his crew that night had quite an impact on their junior member. Reflects Amn Eric Ezell, who flew as his left gunner,

I was the left scanner, Chalk Lead [the mission command helicopter]. I would say that I would consider at the time that it was the most important thing that I had done. . . . There was so much going on. . . . We sit in the brief, hear the plan, talk to the teams. We go and preflight the aircraft. We load up vehicles and get ready to go. We launch; we take off. Here's a [flight] of helicopters flying across to basically start a war. It was exhilarating, though it had some scary moments. . . . There were times where I was nervous or anxious, but I was with a really great crew. All the back-enders were great. . . . my being, at the time, a 19-year-old kid. They brought me in; we had probably been crewed together for not even a month, but they knew what was going on; they showed me all the ropes for training and what-not. I think we meshed well as a crew.

We had a problem with one of the tie-down straps on the truck. The vehicle had shifted a bit; it was pulled taut so you weren't able to release the strap. What should have taken a matter of seconds to get the ramp down, pop the straps, and get the vehicle out was taking longer. You could hear the hesitation in the pilot's voice. I [can't] remember if it was [Slife] or Lessner who was asking, "What's going on? What's going on?" We said, "We're working it!" "Okay, work it," he replied. So it was one of those things where he trusted his people.

During the following day, the maintenance crews worked diligently to prepare the aircraft for the next night's missions. The Pave Lows and airmen of the 20th SOS subsequently flew continuously in Iraq until their inactivation five and one half years later.



If you multiply...

STORIED PAVE LOW MISSION SUCCESS...

By 84 maintenance man-hours per flying hour, a 200% commitment, and spares shortages, you get...

PAVE MX

MH-53J/M is a platform that evokes strong emotions from all who have come in contact with it; operators and maintainers, friends and foes. Mythological and technological, what became the PAVE LOW IV rode the history of the HH and CH before it, evolving to what was arguably the first real special operations information warfare combat helicopter. As described in Darrel Whitcomb's recently published history of the PAVE LOW, *On A Steel Horse I Ride*, and also in Lt Gen (ret) Donny Wurster's remarks made on the occasion of the PAVE LOW induction into the Air Force Museum, the number of decorations and historic missions performed by the PAVE LOW will remain an historical high watermark for special operations forces. Maj Gen (ret) Rich Comer, himself an H-53 pilot and AFSOC combat leader, when commenting on Gen Wurster's remarks, alluded to the contributions of the men and women who have maintained this platform.

Gen Comer noted that there is no question that the story of PAVE LOW is more than a story of operations, and it is also not just a story of technology. As Gen Wurster pointed out, it is a story about airmen like Ed Reed, whose vision for the future and his ability to find funding and push the programming documents through the bureaucracy made the evolution and fielding of this amazing aircraft possible. But, in the greater history of this weapon system, it is really the story of thousands of mostly nameless Air Commandos, whose devotion, extreme dedication, creativity, and innovation produced and maintained the platform that delivered unbelievable mission success... and created the legendary Steel Horse... the Dark Horse.... MH-53J/M PAVE LOW.

Now, thanks to the vision of our current ACA leadership, a number of us who lived our lives devoted to keeping the PAVE LOW mission ready will collaborate to recount the grit, blood, sweat, and tears, and yes the love, that bought and paid for the 84 maintenance man-hours per flying hours required to ensure the PAVE LOWs were available and mission ready for the crews when needed. Those stories are planned to be both about the development and maintenance of the aircraft. There will be accounts relating the history of the overhauls of the helicopter, supply chain breakthroughs, deployed operations, and more. There will also be accounts of the physical and mental courage, as well as the raw determination, of the men and women who kept this amazing aircraft flying.

The collection will include more of the sort of stories just beginning to be told in this issue of the Air Commando Journal; accounts such as the one Steve Connelly described in his article on Operation Assured Response. You will also hear about how a small team of PAVE LOW maintainers was inserted deep into the mountains of Taliban-held Afghanistan, and during the night changed three main rotor blades on an MH-53 that had crash landed on an island in the middle of a mountain river. You'll

also hear about maintainers making some difficult, but spot-on, safety of flight calls, when they and the crew wanted the birds to fly/needed them to fly, but it just was not possible. Through these and many other stories, the intention is to bring into the light of day the heroic efforts that enabled the PAVE LOW crews to "mount their steel horses and ride into battle."

Not too long ago, as Donny Wurster and I headed to the skeet range together, he and I waxed philosophically about the PAVE LOW. We agreed that the rest of the story is long overdue. He gets to scold me often when I rant about what I considered to be the early retirement of the PAVE LOW. I, in turn, then admit that I'm a zealot. When I was the AFSOC A4 I kept a model on my desk of the MH-53S Super PAVE LOW, which was based on a plan I had to cross-deck the PAVE



TSgt Cedric Herron, 16th Helicopter Maintenance Squadron Hurlburt Field.
(Photo courtesy USAF)

LOW's "magic" onto the Marine Corps' three-engine CH-53E Super Stallion. Of course, that never happened, but on the skeet range, retired guys are allowed to rant. Nonetheless, Gen Wurster and I completely agree that it was the extreme devotion of the thousands of PAVE LOW maintainers that made the incredible mission success possible.

So, in the months and years ahead, Air Commandos should look forward to sharing the exploits, personal histories, achievements, and devotion of PAVE LOW maintainers. The goal is to share the exploits of the "squires" of PAVE LOW, those who selflessly readied the armor, weapons, and Steel Horses, so that the aircrews to whom we were devoted, could fly into battle, win, and return home safely. It may sound too romantic, but I guarantee it is not. Air Commando PAVE LOW maintainers lived this devotion, and now we intend to share a passionate history with all of you. ...PAVE LOW Leads! 

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 #68-10357 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-

Editor's Note: Lt Gen (Ret) Donny Wurster's speech from 7 July 2008 Induction ceremony at the National Museum of the US Air Force for MH-53M #68-10357, Wright-Patterson AFB, OH used with permission by www.defensemianetwork.com, Faircount LLC D/B/A Faircount Media Group. First appeared in the 2009 issue of "The Year in Special Operations."

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

– Paul the Apostle

MH-53 Pave Lows from the 20th Expeditionary Special Operations Squadron fly over Iraq on their last combat missions Sept 27. (USAF photo)

SAYIN

time winners. The machines did 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 heroics, 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. It 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

Lt. Col. Gene Becker speaks to the crews and maintainers after the last combat mission of the MH-53 Pave Low Sept. 28 in Iraq. The 20th ESOS MH-53 helicopters and their crews provided much of the vertical lift, direct action and logistical resupply to the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force in Iraq. (USAF photo/Staff Sgt. Aaron Allmon)



By Lt Gen (Ret) Donny Wurster

NG GOODBYE

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 in 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, though 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-53s in the Air Force for the last 20 years, their vision has 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 life 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 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 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 dusty 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. 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 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 Tunner 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 for 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 has 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. 🦅



Lt Gen Donny Wurster speaks at the inactivation dinner.
(Photo courtesy author)

Further comments at the Pave Low farewell dinner, Hurlburt Field, FL on 16 October 2008

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 Air Force Base, 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 27 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 checklists, checked guns, and then broke into two-ship elements for their respective missions. Each proceeded to their targets, completed their assigned tasks, and returned to Taji to re-form 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 a letter to Timothy that says, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." And they have.



Once an Air Commando - Always an Air Commando

As my brothers and sisters before me, I am proud to step into history as a member of the Air Force Special Operations Command. I will walk with pride with my head held high, my heart and attitude will show my allegiance to God, country and comrades. When unable to walk another step, I will walk another mile. With freedom my goal, I will step into destiny with pride and the Air Force Special Operations Command.



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