

MH-53 Pave Low.



# The 1st Special Operations Wing

## Any Time Any Place

By Maj. Thomas C. Weinzierl

*(Editor's Comments: This was Maj. Weinzierl's last article as supervising editor for TMF.)*

**T**his month *TMF* takes a look at the 1st Special Operations Wing (1 SOW), located at Hurlburt Field, Fla. as part of our continuing series highlighting MAC's wings and how they meet their most pressing safety challenges.

But first, a little background. The 1st Special Operations Wing's mission is to organize, train, and equip Air Force special operations forces for global employment. The special operations mission focuses on unconventional warfare, including counterinsurgency and psychological operations during low-intensity conflicts.

The 1 SOW reports to 23d Air Force, the air arm of United States Special Operations Command. (For more on 23 AF, see the July

89 *TMF*.) At the direction of the National Command Authority, the 1 SOW deploys with specially trained and equipped forces from each service, working as a team to support national security objectives. As a result, special operations may be undertaken in enemy controlled or politically sensitive areas and covers a myriad of activities.

Naturally, due to the nature of this mission, they would prefer not to be seen by casual (or hostile) observers. The best way to prevent this, of course, is to perform the mission under conditions that make observation difficult—at night. This requires sophisticated equipment and well-trained crewmembers. Their equipment includes things like

night vision goggles (NVGs), infrared sensors, including low light level television (LLLTV), night low-level terrain-following radar, inertial navigation systems, forward looking infrared (FLIR), and precision ground mapping radar, to name but a few.

But fancy equipment is not enough without the right people to operate it safely; in that regard, the 1 SOW does very well. It's a real challenge to operate aircraft as diverse as the MH-53J Pave Low and MH-60G Pave Hawk helicopters, MC-130 Combat Talon, HC-130 tankers, and AC-130 Spectre gunships.

Airplanes and helicopters can't tell you what makes a safe operation, but people can, so, as usual, I started my research into the 1 SOW's safety story at the most logical place — the wing safety office.

Lt. Col. Marvin Olson, 1 SOW Chief of Safety, greeted me and we got right down to business. He began with words I was to hear throughout my two-day stay: "Our day-to-day operations are





HC-130 tanker with Fulton recovery system.



MH-60 Pave Hawk.

right on the edge of the envelope. When compared to other MAC units, our envelope is very small." The envelope he mentioned relates to the combined demands of low-level, night, on-NVG flying, called for by the nature of the 1 SOW's mission. The 1 SOW also combines operational mission training with a "schoolhouse" operation for the Combat Talon and MH-53J. Also, the wing's 55th Special Operations Squadron, located at nearby Eglin Air Force Base, flies the only H-60s in the Air Force. The colonel continued to stress that, "The biggest challenge seems to be the heavy training load in these units, which, along with their operational mission, generates a very unique situation. Combine that with the fact we have five unique weapon systems, several with different

cockpit configurations in the same type, then training and standardization become very critical parts of our everyday operation."

Safety and training to a high standard are interwoven into the wing's operation. It's tough to practice the wing's mission in the daytime, so when the sun goes down, the 1 SOW goes up. If possible, they try to minimize fatigue by scheduling training missions so they're completed at a reasonable hour. It's tough to keep up a constant schedule of night flying and stay rested, especially in the summer. All the wing's crewmembers contend with the mission's demands. Col. Dale E. Stovall (then 1st Special Operations Wing Commander), described a typical scenario: "Our aircraft, being air-refuelable, lend

themselves to very demanding missions, many where we have to fly long hours to get to a place where we enter a low level environment, fly into a target area, engage a target under hostile defenses, and then leave the area low level and hit more tankers on the way out. You're talking about a twenty-hour mission. That's very demanding from a human factors standpoint. In aircraft such as the AC-130 and helicopters, you're unpressurized and subject to a lot of noise and vibration. So it's very fatiguing. It's one of our important safety issues, and we talk a lot about knowing your personal limits. We're subject to the same 55-130 regs as everyone else, yet when contingency planning starts, we're asked to stretch the limits. We're always asked in exercises 'How long can you fly, engage the target, and make it back to a recovery base?' You can't just go up and do that on day one. The training and conditioning we go through will go a long way in preparing us for those missions."

Crewmembers in the 1st face the same hectic family life as other MAC crewmembers, so resource managers keep a close eye on the flight schedule to balance the demands of the mission against a normal family life.

Another aspect of the 1 SOW mission other MAC wings don't contend with is the fact they carry and fire vast amounts of live ammunition on their AC-130H Spectre gunships, as well as their MH-53s and MH-60s. With two 20-millimeter (mm) Gatling-type guns, one trainable 40mm Bofors cannon, and one trainable 105mm howitzer, Spectre gunships carry truly impressive firepower and can deliver it with surgical precision. Of course, all that live ammunition also represents a very real safety hazard. As Col. Carl E. Anderson,



1 SOW/DO, put it, "We deal with live ammunition daily. We don't use any simulators as the fighter guys do. When we go out on a training mission, we use live ordnance, so our gunners have to be very proficient in munitions handling and safety. That is a very big part of our squadron safety program." So training and standardization, along with a strong safety program, again result in a top-notch operation, as evidenced by the MAC Explosives Safety Award and USAF Explosives Safety Plaque to go along with the MAC Flight Safety Achievement Award the wing received for FY 1988.

My trip revealed this unit's unique diversity, and filled me with the sense of excitement about the mission displayed by everyone I met. It's obviously a tough mission; flying at night, on NVGs, almost always at maximum gross weight, at 250 feet. But, as Colonel Stovall put it, "living inside a very small safety bubble," must bring out the best, because all I saw were people dedicated to safely completing the wing's mission. One other point I picked up is that everyone at the 1 SOW is proud to be part of MAC, and they depend on other MAC units to help them do their mission. Colonel Stovall made that point when he said, "We can't go to war without MAC. We can't self-deploy like many MAC units. So we need MAC strat and tac airlift units to get to the war." And that's what it's all about, isn't it? We're all part of the team, working to get the job done as safely as possible. Everyone at the 1 SOW realizes that destroying an aircraft in peacetime just makes the enemy's wartime job easier. When you're only a phone call away from the next war, you know that running a safe operation is the only way to insure you'll have the assets to go out and win it. ✈

## 1st Special Operations Wing Units

### 8th Special Operations Squadron

The 8 SOS flies the MC-130E Combat Talon, a Lockheed C-130E airplane modified for special operations activities. The squadron's mission is primarily airlift, to get forces in, through either airland or airdrop, resupply them and, in some cases, get them out. Specialized aerial delivery equipment on the MC-130 includes onboard radar and computers. This system enables crews to locate small drop zones and deliver equipment and supplies with great accuracy in unfamiliar terrain, day or night. Aircraft modifications permit high speed aerial deliveries, permitting safer ingress and egress in hostile areas.

### 9th Special Operations Squadron

The 9 SOS flies HC-130P/N airplanes specifically modified for special operations activities. The squadron's mission is covert penetration of enemy territory to provide aerial refueling of special operations assets and infiltration, exfiltration, and resupply of special operations forces by airdrop or airland operations. The mission can be conducted day or night.

### 16th Special Operations Squadron

The 16 SOS flies the AC-130H Spectre, a heavily armed gunship. AC-130s can perform numerous combat roles, including close air support, interdiction, armed reconnaissance, and air base defense. They are equipped with infrared and low-light level television detection systems or sensors and a computerized fire control system. Armament includes two 20mm Vulcan cannons that fire

2,500 rounds a minute, a 40mm Bofors cannon that fires 100 rounds a minute, and a 106mm Army howitzer that fires up to four rounds a minute.

### 20th Special Operations Squadron

The 20 SOS flies the MH-53 Pave Low helicopter, a twin-turbine engine, single rotor, heavy lift helicopter used for airlift support of special operations and certain rescue missions. It is equipped with a retractable air refueling probe, external hoist, two jettisonable auxiliary fuel tanks, and armor plating and may be configured with three 7.62mm mini-guns or three .50 caliber machine guns to deliver suppressive fire. The MH-53's night/adverse weather, threat penetration capability is attained through its terrain following/terrain avoidance /ground mapping radar, central avionics computer, forward looking infrared receiver (FLIR), doppler/inertial navigation, and electronic and infrared countermeasures systems. This version of the H-53 is the most sophisticated helicopter in the free world.

### 55th Special Operations Squadron

The 55 SOS flies the MH-60 Pave Hawk helicopter and conducts peacetime, contingency, and wartime special operations missions to infiltrate, resupply, conduct combat rescue, and exfiltrate U.S. and allied special operations forces. It accomplishes this mission by flying long-range, low level, communications-out, night penetration of hostile or denied territory, using surprise, unique systems, night vision goggles, and detailed mission planning to avoid known threats.