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Helicopter retires after service in Vietnam, Iraq

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4/10/2008 - **HURLBURT FIELD, Fla. (AFPN)** -- MH-53 Pave Low helicopter tail number 68-10357 flew its final mission and last flight supporting special operations forces March 28 in Iraq after 38 years of service.

The helicopter was the lead command and control helicopter for a mission to rescue approximately 50 American prisoners of war from the Son Tay prison camp in North Vietnam in 1970, which became a significant event for Air Force special operations.

From Iraq, the MH-53 known as 357 will be transported to the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force in Dayton, Ohio, where it will sit on display in the Cold War Gallery.

Airmen of the Combined Joint Special Operations Air Command fly in MH-53 Pave Low tail number 68-10357 in March at an undisclosed location in Iraq. The mission for the helicopter crew was to obtain certain persons of interest involved in criminal activity, including terrorism, in Iraq. The MH-53 was retired after 38 years of service, including combat operations in Vietnam. (U.S. Navy photo/Petty Officer 2nd Class Michael Blackwell II)

"It's fitting that this aircraft's last mission was flown in combat before it is placed on permanent display at the museum," said Lt. Gen. Donald C. Wurster, commander of Air Force Special Operations Command and an MH-53 pilot. "Aircraft 357 led a formation of HH-53 and HH-3 helicopters on a daring raid into North Vietnam to rescue American POWs. Of those five 53s that participated, only tail number 357 is left."

Historical records indicate 66 prisoners were being held at the Son Tay camp, located 23 miles west of Hanoi.

Although the mission was considered a tactical failure because no prisoners were found at the camp, it was also considered a success because conditions for POWs held in North Vietnam improved after the raid.

Training for the Son Tay raid began in the summer of 1970 at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla., under the command of Brig. Gen. LeRoy J. Manor, who retired as a lieutenant general. There, an all-volunteer team of Army and Air Force conventional and special operations members planned and practiced flight and ground operations for a rescue mission deep into North Vietnam. The mission was repeatedly rehearsed using a full-sized compound mock-up near Duke Field, known as Auxiliary Airfield No. 3.

For Operation Kingpin, HH-53 357, mission call sign "Apple 1," was flown by Lt. Col. Warner Britton and carried the operation commander, Army Col. Arthur Simons and his team of Soldiers to the target.

The crew of "Apple 1" was decorated with an Air Force Cross and four Silver Stars for their role in the raid.

Within 1.5 years of the Son Tay mission, three of the five HH-53s were lost, two in combat operations and one destroyed on the ground in Danang during a rocket attack by the Vietcong. The fourth HH-53 was converted to an MH-53J and flew in a special operations role for many years. It was lost in combat in Afghanistan in 2002.

Although "Apple 1" changed call signs many times since 1970, it continued to fly in operations supporting U.S. national objectives around the globe.

"It is awe inspiring to know people sat in this very seat and created history," said Col. Brad Webb, 1st Special Operation Wing commander and MH-53 pilot. "I've flown this tail number periodically since 1988," Colonel Webb said. "The closest I came to combat while flying 357 was a combat search and rescue mission for a British aircraft shot down near Gorazde, Bosnia-Herzegovenia in 1994. I also flew it in Kuwait several times under combat support missions for Operation Southern Watch in 2001."

Inevitably, aircraft age and technology advances.

As a result, the MH-53 Pave Low's long and distinguished career will soon complete its service to the Air Force. The remaining MH-53s in the Air Force inventory will be retired as they return from combat duty.

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