

Photo by Staff Sgt. Markus Maier

Chuck Werner, a former HH-53 crew chief, stands in front of an MH-53, tail number 4428, during a visit to the 58th Special Operations Wing June 23. He visited the wing to "reunite" with two of the 53s he remembers working on during his Air Force career more than 34 years ago.

Reunion brings back familiar sights and smells

BY STAFF SGT. MARKUS M. MAIER
58th Special Operations Wing Public Affairs

Last week, Denver resident Chuck Werner traveled south to Albuquerque to reunite with two "old friends" he left behind in the Air Force in 1972.

And, except for a few wrinkles, they haven't changed a bit.

When he enlisted in 1966, Mr. Werner worked as a heavy equipment maintainer with civil engineering. In 1968, while serving in Vietnam, he discovered a passion for helicopters when he volunteered on rescue missions as a "scanner," a crewmember who watches for enemy ground fire.

After returning to the states, he retrained into helicopter maintenance. He was second in his class and was given a choice between going to Kansas to work on HH-3 helicopters, or Florida to fix HH-53s.

"It was a simple choice," he said with a chuckle. "I chose the warmer state."

While assigned to the Air Rescue Recovery Training Squadron at Eglin AFB, Fla., Mr. Werner worked on HH-53 helicopters, which have since been converted to MH-53s. Although the bird on which he was a crew chief is now at Hurlburt Field, Fla., two of the aircraft he worked on are assigned to the 551st Special Operations Squadron here.

Although Mr. Werner left the military 34 years before – a decision, he said, he often regretted – he spoke of his days in the Air Force and about the helicopters he maintained. After his retirement from the National Park Service recently, he decided to look up some old friends. He contacted the 58th SOW and asked to renew his old acquaintance. The 551st Aircraft Maintenance Unit, 58th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, welcomed a fellow maintainer back June 23.

When he walked into Hangar 1000 that day, two of the MH-53s he used to work on, were waiting for him.

"I was amazed when I heard that they are still flying, and then I walk in and see the two 'antiques' out there," Mr. Werner said. "Those are 38 years old. That's a long time for a helicopter to be flying around."

He told members of the maintenance unit, many who were not born when he separated, they were doing a great job keeping the helicopters in the air.

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Chuck Werner
Former HH-53 crew chief

Mr. Werner circled both the helicopters as if trying to place them in a hangar in Florida more than three decades before. He stepped inside, sniffed at the hydraulic odor and he smiled.

"Smells exactly the same," he said. "Just like it did back then."

Later, Mr. Werner shared some of his past experiences with members of the 551st AMU during shift roll call. After more than 30 years, he astonished many of the young members when he talked about the aircraft as if he just left yesterday.

"It's good to see how the four years he worked on the 53 affected him so profoundly," said Chief Master Sgt. Daniel Kenyon of the AMU, who gave Mr. Werner a squadron coin. "Thirty-four years later, he cares enough to come back to see them. Most of my people weren't even around during Vietnam and I think they were intrigued by someone who only worked on them for four years and held on to something they now take for granted."

Mr. Werner had one final photo of himself next to the helicopter before he left Kirtland.

"This brings back a lot of memories, Mr. Werner said. "Other than more electronics, the aircraft still looks the same."

Mr. Werner did notice one change though.

"I see you now give flight engineers a nice chair to sit on instead of a stool," he said.