

Lt Col Homan's comments:

The 5,000-hour milestone reached for the MH-53J Pave Low III fleet operating out of Brindisi underscores not only our Nation's, the Air Force's, and AFSOC's commitment to the Bosnia mission but also the importance and value of the MH-53J fleet. Over the last three years, the capabilities of the Pave Low, and more importantly the aircrews, have been the difference between success or failure of real-world missions. Not the least of these have been the CSAR flight for two downed French flyers when two Pave Low crew members suffered shrapnel wounds, flights supporting SAR efforts after the crash of Secretary Ron Brown's aircraft, and numerous flights supporting the Monrovia evacuation efforts. The combined efforts of all the MH-53J community have had a synergistic effect on capabilities of the Brindisi forces. The men and women supporting this 5,000-hour effort have accomplished a remarkable feat and it is a superb testament to their professionalism and devotion to duty.

AFSOC helicopters surpass milestone

by Tech. Sgt. Jim Greeley
352nd Special Operations Group public affairs

BRINDISI, Italy -- Air Force Special Operations Command helicopters recently surpassed the 5,000 flying-hour milestone supporting NATO's Bosnian operations from this deployed location in southern Italy.

MH-53J Pave Low III crews from both the 20th Special Operations Squadron at Hurlburt Field and the 21st SOS, RAF Mildenhall, United Kingdom, have provided continuous combat search and rescue capability for more than three years and continue flying missions supporting Operation Joint Endeavor.

"This is a bittersweet moment for the Joint Special Operations Air Component," said Col. John Fullerton, the JSOAC commander. "On one hand, 5,000 flying hours punctuates our commitment to supporting the various NATO missions in Bosnia during the last three years. It also highlights the fact a lot of special operations people have been away from family and home an awful lot."

This milestone means nothing unless it's put in perspective according to Fullerton. The Pave Low is one of the most maintenance-intensive aircraft in the Air Force. On average, maintenance people put in between 40 and 50 hours of maintenance for every hour flown. That equates to almost 200,000 maintenance hours for the Pave Lows to top 5,000 hours in Italy.

"Simply put, the maintainers put in a heck of a lot of hours supporting the our alert and required flying training commitments," said Fullerton.

"This has been done with a lot blood and sweat and very little recognition," said Lt. Col. Steve Dreyer, the director of operations for the 21st SOS and the deployed helicopter flight commander here.

"We've flown a lot of demanding missions here, but the bottom line is we've been flying our tails off for the past three-plus years."

According to Dreyer, Brindisi has become a home-away-from-home for the helicopter people. "The people here don't look at Brindisi as a TDY location," said Dreyer. "It's a home. Some people in the squadron spend more time here than they do at Mildenhall."

What keeps both the flyers and maintenance people going despite the grueling pace here is the importance placed on what they do. The Pave Lows have done numerous combat search and rescue missions, including two missions into Bosnia to search for two French crewmembers shot down during Operation Deliberate Force. The

Pave Lows aided the Marine helicopters that rescued Capt. Scott O'Grady. The helicopters also played a vital role in making the Bosnian Peace Accord a reality. When Adm. Leighton Smith, the Bosnian Implementation Force commander, needed to get into Sarajevo for the transfer of authority from the United Nations to NATO forces, the only aircraft that could get him there in horrendous weather conditions was the Pave Low.

"We're doing real-world missions here," said Sampson. "That's the driving force that keeps these folks going and putting in the long hours." (Courtesy Air Force News Service)

