

## 551<sup>st</sup> SPECIAL OPERATIONS SQUADRON



### MISSION

551<sup>st</sup> Special Operations Squadron conducted flying training in helicopters, and responsible for special operations contingencies and humanitarian rescue missions.

### LINEAGE

1551<sup>st</sup> Flying Training Squadron designated and activated, 1 Apr 1971  
Redesignated 551<sup>st</sup> Flying Training Squadron, 1 Oct 1991  
Redesignated 551<sup>st</sup> Special Operations Squadron, 1 Apr 1994

### STATIONS

Hill AFB, UT, 1 Apr 1971  
Kirtland AFB, NM, 15 Mar 1976

### ASSIGNMENTS

1550<sup>th</sup> Aircrew Training and Test (later, 1550<sup>th</sup> Combat Crew Training) Wing, 1 Apr 1971  
542<sup>nd</sup> Operations Group, 1 Oct 1991  
58<sup>th</sup> Operations Group, 1 Apr 1994

### WEAPON SYSTEMS

H-3, 1971-1992  
H-43, 1971-1975  
H-53, 1971-1987  
HC-130, 1973-1987  
UH-1, 1987-1994  
H-60, 1990-1994  
HH-53B

HH-53C  
MH-53J, 1994

## **COMMANDERS**

## **HONORS**

### **Service Streamers**

None

### **Campaign Streamers**

None

### **Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers**

None

## **Decorations**

Air Force Outstanding Unit Awards

1 Apr 1974–31 May 1976

1 Apr 1976–31 Mar 1978

1 Jul 1985–30 Jun 1987

1 Jul 1987–30 Jan 1989

1 Jan 1993 to 30 Jun 1994

1 Jul 1994 to 31 Dec 1995

1 Jul 1996 to 30 Jun 1998

1 Jul 1998 to 30 Jun 2000

1 Jul 2001 to 30 Jun 2002

1 Jul 2002 to 30 Jun 2003

## **EMBLEM**



## 1551<sup>st</sup> Flying Training Squadron



551<sup>st</sup> Special Operations Squadron emblem: Per pale Sable and Or an owl descending per pale Azure and proper eyed Gules below in dexter chief five mullets of four points three diminished bendwise two bendwise sinister Argent and in sinister chief a zia sun of the fourth, all within a diminished bordure Brown. (Approved, 9 Oct 1992 emblem approved, 9 Oct 1986)

### **MOTTO**

THE BEST TEACH THE BEST

### **NICKNAME**

### **OPERATIONS**

On 10 January 2002, at approximately 0328 (all times are local), the mishap aircraft (MA). a MH-53, S/N 68-10363. crashed approximately 22 miles north northwest of Durango CO. The crew on the MA consisted of six people, the mission pilot, copilot, two flight engineers, and two aerial gunners. Also on board were a civilian search and rescue (SAR) responder, and the Cessna pilot whose earlier accident precipitated the SAR mission. The MA was one of two MH-53s conducting SAR operations at the request of civilian authorities. The mishap crew (MC) and civilian passengers suffered only minor injuries and egressed without incident. The MA was severely damaged upon impact with the loss valued at 5,303,376.00 dollars. The crash site is on national forest land and no claims for damage have been or are expected. The helicopter has been recovered and released by the AIB to be reconditioned, and Kirtland AFB environmentalists are working with the San Juan Forest officials to thoroughly clean the site. The MC initially planned a 2-ship night tactical training mission sortie. Prior to starting engines, the crews were tasked with a real-world SAR mission. An MC-130P from Kirtland AFB was also tasked to provide air refueling support. A civilian Cessna 172 with three persons on board had crashed earlier in the day, injuring two of the persons on board. The helicopters were

reconfigured for SAR while cursory mission planning was taking place, and both MH-53s took off at 1930. The helicopters proceeded to Animas Airpark (4 miles from Durango CO) where local authorities briefed selected members from each helicopter. The MA also boarded a civilian SAR responder. The MA conducted search operations in the area identified by local authorities. After searching approximately three hours, the MA then returned to Animas Airpark 2330 and picked up the mishap Cessna pilot. His role was to narrow the search area by identifying terrain he flew over prior to his crash. At approximately 0300 the MC located the Cessna. While on final approach to the Cessna, the MA crashed in a gully less than a mile from the Cessna. All eight persons on board the helicopter safely egressed and established a campsite. The accident was the result of pilot error brought on by a combination of fatigue and channelized attention. The aircraft was operating at the edge of its performance envelope and the crew had performed an extended duty day. Under these conditions, errors in judging speed and altitude made recovery impossible when the helicopter was confronted with an unexpected barrier.

23 Nov 2003 Major Steven Plumhoff, a helicopter pilot, assigned to the 551st Special Operations Squadron died in a MH-53M crash near Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan.

5/10/2007 - KIRTLAND AIR FORCE BASE, New Mexico -- An era came to an end when Team Kirtland said farewell to the 551st Special Operations Squadron during the inactivation ceremony during the 58th Special Operations Wing here April 27. The squadron, which trained MH-53 Pave Low aircrews since 1989, stood down due to the Air Force's decision to retire the MH-53. "For those of us who have flown the 53 it's a sad day," said Lt. Col. Todd Lancaster, the squadron's former commander. "But for special operations, this represents what we have always done, which is a continuum of the special ops warrior spirit. The guys who have flown the 53s will keep on the same tradition, which started during World War II and will carry far into the future." Most squadron members will continue to serve at the 58th SOW, according to Colonel Lancaster. "Many of our flight engineers are going to the CV-22 Osprey. Our aerial gunners are going to fly on the HH-60 Pave Hawk. Most of our pilots are retiring and some are moving on to higher leadership positions," he said. During the ceremony, the colonel took the opportunity to thank his fellow squadron members. "I'd like to thank the entire 58th SOW," Colonel Lancaster said. "We've always worked as a great team together, whether it's here training or off doing special operations around the world. We depend on each other. It's been a pleasure and honor serving with this great team." The MH-53 Pave Low will still have a presence here at Kirtland. One is scheduled to be placed in the air park on the west side of the base in the near future.

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Air Force Lineage and Honors

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#### Sources

Air Force Historical Research Agency. U.S. Air Force. Maxwell AFB, AL.

The Institute of Heraldry. U.S. Army. Fort Belvoir, VA.

Air Force News. Air Force Public Affairs Agency.