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Airmen on the Ground:

Special Tactics

by Michael E. Haas

IN Action

The least known of U.S. special operations units, the 720th STG—combat controllers, pararescuemen and combat

weathermen—is perhaps the most unique of the military elite, as it recently demonstrated in Afghanistan.



“Are you in the same Air Force I am?” The startling question instantly spiked the briefing officer’s voice, terminating his update on the progress of the ongoing, tactical air-ground exercise. For long minutes the general had simply stared in bewilderment at the tall, tough-looking captain speaking to him in the command tent.

As sweat-stained and mud-spattered as the boots and BDUs he wore, Combat Control Team (CCT) officer Craig Brotchie spoke like an airman, but looked more like some swamp-savvy Ranger or Marine.

The general could be forgiven his outburst of curiosity. Brotchie was indeed a USAF officer and a highly trained one at that. But the tactical performance of his small team in that exercise represented a little-known aspect of air-ground operations that routinely surprises even those within the Air Force.

Even more surprising to many is the emergence within the Air Force of the 720th Special Tactics Group (STG), a special-purpose combat force combining the proud

◀ *Tech. Sgt. Michael Del Soldato (right) and Senior Airman Lance Du Mond pull guard duty with Northern Alliance soldiers at a former Soviet air base in Bagram, Afghanistan.*



CCT with another elite force with an impressive combat record—pararescuemen. The most recent addition to STG was a combat weather squadron.

The 720th was activated in October 1987 at Hurlburt Field, Fla. By 1996, combat weather troops—used to support Army Special Forces—were part of the team. All told, Special Tactics numbers only some 800 operational personnel.

The Air Force Special Operations Command (6% is ST) now possesses a potent air-ground capability so versatile that Special Tactics airmen are invariably deployed with their U.S. Army Green Beret and Navy SEAL counterparts.

The 720th STG presently supervises seven Special Tactics squadrons stationed elsewhere in the U.S., as well as Europe and the Far East. The squadrons are designated the 21st, 22nd, 23rd, 24th and 10th Weather; and the 320th and 321st. The latter two are based on Okinawa and in England, respectively.

The Group's mission is presented in deceptively simple language "... to organize, train and equip Special Tactics forces worldwide to establish and control the air-ground interface in the objective areas."

These often-classified, high-risk missions take place in a world that seems light-years away from the public's perception of the "wild blue yonder" Air Force. But in fact, they represent an evolution in tactical joint-force operations that is as sophisticated as any of the much more visible weaponry now in the U.S. arsenal.

The key to the effectiveness of the Special Tactics concept is the combination of superb human talent with the latest advances in technology. And for years, the mainstay of this concept has been the all-enlisted pararescue and CCT officer-enlisted teams working together to execute their separate missions.

RESCUE, CONTROL, WEATHER

Pararescuemen ("PJs") are arguably the finest combat trauma medics in the armed forces. Their motto—"That Others May Live"—is a commitment that has been paid for with pararescue blood on battlefields as far apart as Laos and Somalia. These personnel recovery specialists in

▲ *Pararescuemen performing their specialty—recovery of wounded Americans behind enemy lines. "PJs," as they are known, are top-notch combat trauma medics.*

▶ *Combat weatherman, one of the three specialties that comprise the 720th Special Tactics Group, are critical to the success of missions. "Weather warriors" are few in number, but most effective.*

▼ *The Air Force Special Operations Command insignia.*



their distinctive maroon berets made their first official combat jump into Panama in 1989 during *Operation Just Cause*.

They have subsequently conducted numerous, open-ocean parachute rescue missions to aid injured sailors, and work closely in their rescue role for all NASA space shuttle launches. For a force that has seldom numbered as many as 400 strong, the PJs have compiled an astonishing history of valor and achievement.

The scarlet beret worn by CCT operators is seldom seen during their operational deployments overseas. This is a prudent decision considering the extremely sensitive nature of their mission in the combat zone. The versatile CCT have good reason for their motto ("First There") because one of their missions resembles, in many

respects, that of the famous U.S. Army WWII-era Pathfinders.

The first of the first to enter denied territory, usually at night and often by parachute, CCT establish assault zones for follow-on airborne forces.

Chief Master Sgt. Wayne Norrad, then with the 23rd STS, remembers his first combat jump on one such mission during *Operation Just Cause*. "I jumped in as part of the command group of the 3rd Ranger Battalion, and even though we jumped low, they were still firing at us as we came down in our parachutes. Strings of red tracer rounds from automatic weapons stitched the sky all around me. A real eye-opener for my first combat jump."

They also are trained in the tactical art of calling in air strikes on enemy positions. And they have developed an unparalleled expertise in controlling the devastatingly accurate firepower of AC-

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130 Specter gunships. (CCTs, however, should not be confused with Tactical Air Control Parties, whose members are not part of the 720th.)

The latest example of their courage and skill was demonstrated yet again in Afghanistan, as CCT "eyes on target" brought to bear hand-held laser designators to pinpoint Taliban targets with precise selectivity. An 11-man team from the 23rd STS called in many of the 175 strikes conducted during 25 consecutive days.

As the *New York Times* reported in January, 100 combat controllers, pararescuemen and weathermen served there. A CCT staff sergeant named Mike called in air strikes. "I've trained for a lot, but this was the first time I ever rode on horseback," he said. Mike nearly lost his life when a bomb exploded nearby. "Everything went black, and I thought I was dead," he said.

The latest increase in Special Tactics versatility is represented by another group of specialists, the combat weathermen with their gray berets and motto, "Weather Warriors." Five detachments field about 120 men.

As Senior Airman Edwin Gideons, then an airborne weather observer, once explained to *Airman* magazine: "The Army uses our weather data to decide what they're going to do, as far as weapons and tactics. Our missions turn into direct action."

Their participation in dangerous missions can—and has—proven critical to successful accomplishment in some spectacular operations.

Such was the case, for example, when in November 1970 a combined U.S. Army-Air Force commando unit waited impatiently in Thailand. Clear weather was necessary to launch the daring Son Tay POW rescue attempt into North Vietnam.

Within the short, 38-day timeframe available to the commandos, foul weather grounded the rescue attempt. That is, until the task force's assigned weathermen detected a single 12-hour "weather window" of opportunity. Placing both their faith and their lives on the weathermen's judgment, the commandos launched their now-famous mission that brought them to the outskirts of Hanoi.

In Vietnam and Laos, 20 pararescuemen and seven CCT were KIA. (A memorial to the CCT was dedicated in 1980 in Hurlburt Field's air park.) One of the pararescuemen, Airman 1st Class William H. Pitsenbarger, became the only man of

his military occupational specialty to earn the Medal of Honor. Killed on April 11, 1966, he was posthumously awarded the MOH in December 2000.

Since Vietnam, STG elements have served in Grenada, Panama, the Persian Gulf War, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, Colombia and currently in the Philippines and Afghanistan.

In Somalia, some of the 11 airmen from the 24th STS who fought in Mogadishu on Oct. 3-4, 1993, were wounded. Bravery was abundant: a pararescueman earned the Air Force Cross, another the Silver Star, a CCT the Silver Star and Bronze Stars for valor went to the other 8 team members.

On Feb. 22, 2002, two pararescue jumpers from the Okinawa-based 320th STS were killed in a helicopter crash in the Philippines during anti-terrorist operations. On March 4, a pararescueman and combat controller were KIA in Afghanistan.

WARRIOR SPIRIT

As always in the conduct of risky special operations missions, the most critical weapon present is the human warrior. Operating in small groups and armed only with light weapons, often in company with Green Berets and SEALs, Special Tactics airmen work in an extremely lethal, unforgiving environment.

Human failure can prove catastrophic in such situations. That's why the CCT/PJ selection-training pipeline makes an enormous effort to weed out all but the best of the candidates who volunteer for such duty.

"The biggest problem we have is that Hollywood hasn't made a movie about us," Sr. Master Sgt. Mike Breeden (now with the 22nd STS) once told the *Air Force Times*. "We're looking for a mental character who is independent and is strong-willed and who doesn't quit, but by the same token is also a team player."

Those who complete the initial selection phase can look forward to further training in their core skills specialties. These include basic and advance parachuting, open and closed-circuit Scuba tactics, Survival School and other specialty courses.

No doubt, as the war on terrorism continues, the highly skilled 720th STG will play a crucial yet virtually unknown role. ☛

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