

Battlefield Airman School



Combat controllers, tactical air control parties, and combat weathermen hone unique skills in the wilderness around Pope AFB, N.C.

Photography by Guy Aceto

USAF's battlefield airmen direct air operations from forward locations, frequently in hostile areas. On the lookout with his weapon ready is TSgt. Shane Wagner. Behind Wagner, SrA. Rob Curry and SSgt. Elijah Edwards break out this battlefield weather team's communications gear after dropping in by parachute.

During a recent exercise, tactical air control parties (TACPs), combat controllers, and battlefield weather teams trained with ground forces at Pope AFB, N.C., and adjacent Ft. Bragg. The job for these battlefield airmen is to control airspace and the employment of aircraft supporting the land component by calling in weather conditions, arranging airdrops, directing air strikes, and the like.

The TACPs on this page are with the 18th Air Support Operations Group. They are jump-qualified and work closely with the Army at Ft. Bragg, which is home to the 18th Airborne Corps and the 82nd Airborne Division.

At right, TSgt. Michael Grilli points the way to a group of TACPs who will parachute into the landing zone on a training exercise.



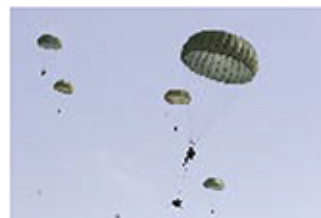
Above, A1C Joshua Suarez (l) and A1C Joshua Lockwood prepare for a jump. Lockwood's high-visibility helmet indicates that this is his first jump with the unit.

At left, the airmen listen to the jumpmaster in the center. They are arranged as they will be in their aircraft.

Before any jump, preparations are rigorous, with careful safety planning and thorough equipment checks. Note that the airmen at right sport the Army's famous 82nd Airborne patch in addition to the standard Air Force field rank insignia.



Above and right: Airmen parachute onto the landing zone and begin to collect their gear. They were delivered by a C-130 from Pope's 43rd Airlift Wing. The transport made a first pass for HALO (high-altitude low-opening) jumpers such as the one at far right, and then a second, lower pass to drop additional "sticks" of jumpers.



Once they are on the ground, the airmen go through a well-rehearsed routine of gathering their equipment and checking it out.

Jumpers range from young airmen to seasoned veterans. At left is Lt. Col. Drew Hodges, 18th ASOG director of plans, on the ground after parachuting in with the rest of the unit. He is "checking in" on the same radio he would use after a combat jump.

The 21st Special Tactics Squadron supplies the combat controller teams that help create US footholds in enemy territory. Combat controllers, such as the airmen pictured at right, parachute in, secure landing zones and airfields, and serve as air traffic controllers for the airspace around these "beachheads."

The combat controller school is at Pope. The controller trainees shown here had parachuted into this location the night before.



Airmen train on the Ft. Bragg confidence courses used by the Army's Green Berets and other special operations forces. At left, (foreground to back), 2nd Lt. Steven Cooper, SSgt. Marc Tirres, and SrA. Thomas Keefe head through the course.



Combat controllers also undergo wilderness survival training in the dense piney woods of North Carolina. At right, a camouflaged trainee goes to work on his weapon.



The Air Force's combat controllers and combat-rated divers learn scuba techniques as an infiltration tactic. Above and right, airmen of the 21st STS refresh their scuba skills. Occasional proficiency dives are required to ensure the airmen can dive and operate at depths of up to 130 feet.

These controllers had recently returned from a deployment to Iraq.

Below, Don Lauren, a retired Navy master diver with more than 31 years' experience, gives pre-dive instruction to airmen headed into the lake. Lauren has been training 21st STS controllers for nearly 10 years.



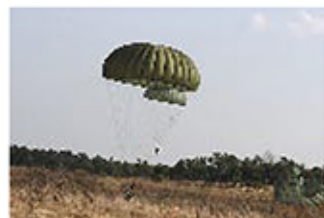
Left, camouflaged controller trainees await orders for their next assignment. The trainees earn red CCT berets at Pope and Bragg, but will move on for additional training elsewhere.

At right, three C-130s of Pope's 43rd Airlift Wing head out on a mission to one of the many nearby drop zones. A single Hercules can deliver up to 64 paratroopers, plus their gear.

The combat controllers, TACPs, battlefield weathermen, and airdrop crews have had a long and productive relationship with the Army. One airman, an 11-year veteran, said his current assignment at Pope marks the first time in his career that he has been stationed at an Air Force base. Ft. Bragg is, of course, right next door, and Pope itself will shift under Army management.



By 2009, the Air Force will have handed over control of Pope to the Army, as mandated by last year's Base Realignment and Closure legislation. Even then, however, C-130s and their crews will remain in North Carolina as tenants.



At right, TSgt. Mark Hurst, a TACP of the 18th ASOG, gathers his chute. Note that Hurst wears airborne and ranger tabs. The highly trained TACP community will be critical factors in USAF's drive to meet the Army's increasing need for air support.



At Pope and Bragg, elite combat controllers and TACPs are joined by members of another, even smaller, career field—battlefield weathermen. In the entire Air Force, there are only about 90 jump-qualified weathermen. At top, Edwards (cradling weapon) oversees Curry, who inflates a weather balloon. Wagner (above) provides cover for the pair (right) while they set up their weather and communications equipment.



At left, Curry, Edwards, and Wagner move out. The Air Force's small battlefield airman community, by linking ground forces to airpower, will continue to play a disproportionately large role in the Global War on Terrorism. ■