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COMBAT CONTROLLERS  
FIRST IN, LAST OUT

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**C**OMBAT controllers TSgt. Mort Freedman and Sgt. Jim Lundle, and their airlift mission commander, Maj. John Gallagher, lay in a ditch along what was left of the Kham Duc runway. Sweat poured from their dirt-caked bodies and etched tiny rivers of grime down their beard-stubbed faces. Their flak vests and steel helmets provided protection on the outside but kept the heat on the inside swirling into a built-in steam bath. They had been this way for three days. There was no hint of the typical, spit-and-polish, combat control image. No starched fatigues topped with a blue beret nattily cocked to one side. Not that it mattered now.

They squinted hard into the glare of the Vietnam sky, searching for some sign, any sign, of a rescuer who would pluck them from this nightmare.

Kham Duc. Until a week earlier it had been just one of many Special Forces camps dotting the Vietnamese countryside. Now it was destined to capture the attention of the entire country.

For two days, the two combat controllers had labored under a fierce barrage of enemy mortar fire, directing Air Force C-130 *Hercules*, C-123 *Providers*, C-7 *Caribous* and even Army helicopters into and out of the airstrip. Their Mark 108 radio jeep had been peppered by deadly mortar shrapnel, and had almost taken a direct hit. The jeep trailer was completely destroyed. During the attacks they had dragged wounded from exposed areas to cover, where they could give first aid. They had even directed fighter strikes on enemy positions around the perimeter until an airborne forward air controller (FAC) arrived.

It was now coming to a foreboding climax. They had come close to death during the past two days. Now, they thought, their time had indeed come. Earlier that afternoon, the entire camp had been evacuated



TOP: Substituting boats for rafts, the team makes a water route infiltration. Taking part are SSgt. Alvin Burksdale, A1C Ralph G. Lockwood, Sgt. Harold L. Dufilda, Sgt. William R. Nellums and A1C Charles W. Mason II.

CENTER: Crouched in the concealing thicket, Sergeant Dufilda prepares to make radio contact with the airlift aircraft. A little later he comes up with some fresh meat for lunch—a non-poisonous snake.

LEFT: Lt. Charles B. Christian, Jr., rappels down a sheer cliff, 30 feet at a time.

ABOVE: Constant alertness becomes second nature to combat controllers. This patrol includes Captain Hughes, Sgt. Steven G. Horvath, Lieutenant Christian and TSgt. Richard L. Myers.

by **Capt. KEN KASHIWAHARA**  
Tan Son Nhut AB, Vietnam

in one of the most harrowing and spectacular airlifts ever carried out. One C-130 was hit by ground fire on landing. It lay crumpled on the side of the runway. The runway and camp were strewn with the wreckage of helicopters, bulldozers, vehicles and other aircraft.

Now the relative silence was deathly. Gone were the sounds of airplanes landing and taking off. Gone was the evacuees' high-pitched banter as they waited to be picked up. The combat control radio jeep had been destroyed in preparation for a quick air evacuation. The survival radio was out. Everything was gone. Everything, that is, except the three Americans. *And* the North Vietnamese soldiers who were closing in around the camp. The three men could see the figures darting back and forth between gun emplacements, waiting for the order to charge down and take the camp.

It was normal for the combat controllers to be the last out of a camp. They were always the "first in, last out," according to their unofficial motto. But where was that last plane? The one that was to take them *out*? Have they left us? Have we been forgotten? Despair quickly answered their questions.

The sound of airplane engines ("the greatest sound in the world") snapped them back to reality. A C-123 swooped in low and touched down. The combat controllers sprang to their feet and made a dash for the taxiing plane. Enemy automatic weapons blazed away. Tracers lighted a deadly path toward the moving plane. Mortar rounds were landing all around the aircraft.

The plane picked up speed. It wasn't stopping!

Lundie and Freedman yelled at the tops of their voices, but it was no use. Their pleas were lost in the thunderous roar of the engines and jet boosters. "They didn't see us. They didn't see us," cursed Lundie.

NVA tracer bullets from machine

gun emplacements at the end of the runway followed the C-123 as it climbed out of range. Quickly the enemy gunners pivoted back down on the runway where the three lonely figures stood, their hopes of rescue now dashed. And just as quickly, the controllers bolted for the relative safety of the ditch, firing their M-16s from the hip as they ran, silencing at least one of the guns.

"That was *really* it," Freedman recalled later. "They sent in a plane, but the pilot saw no one left on the ground, so he took off. No one would come back. At that point we had two choices. Either be taken prisoner or fight it out. There was no doubt about it. We had 11 magazines left among us and we were going to take as many of them with us as we could.

"I told Lundie that if he made it and I didn't, to be sure to get my wallet so those bastards wouldn't take it."

The C-123 crew *had* seen them, but was too far down the runway to stop. And soon another C-123, piloted by Lt. Col. Joe Jackson and Maj. Jesse Campbell, landed in a barrage of enemy bullets and mortar shells, screeched to a stop long enough for the combat controllers and their mission commander to jump in, and took off, trailed by the "biggest hail of tracers you've ever seen."

#### **Adapt and Innovate**

Mort Freedman's and Jim Lundie's experience at Kham Duc is by no means "all in a day's work" for combat controllers. But it serves to dramatically underscore the "combat" in combat control. Vietnam is providing combat control teams (CCTs) with their first real test under fire.

"Our purpose in being, as planned at our inception in 1952, and as practiced in Vietnam today, is basically unchanged," explained Maj. Robert Barinowski, head combat controller in Vietnam. "We've had a

few variations in theme, but our primary task is still that of performing as air traffic controllers in a forward, austere airstrip or drop zone."

The need for the combat control function arose in World War II when, in Sicily, Army paratroopers were scattered all over the countryside because no one was controlling the drops from the ground. The dispersal of men and equipment made the airborne force ineffective as a combat unit.

Since that time Air Force combat controllers had been part of US troop deployments to meet crises in Lebanon, the Congo, the Dominican Republic and were put on alert during the Cuban crisis in 1962. During troop and cargo airlifts, they are always the first in to the airstrip or drop zone to set up marker panels, portable communication and navigational gear necessary to accurately guide the main wave of airlift aircraft in.

But never has the combat control team concept, and the mettle of the controllers, been tested like it is in Vietnam today. And as the nature of the Vietnam war is one of constant change in tactics and strategy, so it has followed that combat control has had to adapt and innovate with the shifting scenes.

One combat controller who speaks with great authority on the job of the "Blue Berets" in Vietnam is Capt. Hayden F. Sears, Jr., who has been in country since 1965, longer than any other controller.

"When I arrived, we had 24 men and were housed in a shack here at Tan Son Nhut," he recalls. "Now we are three times that number. In the beginning, we had many air traffic control (ATC) missions, because control towers had not yet been constructed at various remote airstrips.

"But today many of those strips have permanent towers and some navigational equipment. As a result our ATC mission has decreased and our role as a field extension of the



**THE MANY FACES OF COMBAT CONTROL**  
In the center is SSgt. John J. Edgington. Clockwise from above are SSgt. John D. Rosemeyer, Sgt. James G. Lundie (see accompanying story), Sgt. Michael W. Welding, TSgt. Timothy N. McCann and Sgt. James Six.



Sgt. Michael K. Durphy, left, and Sgt. James G. Lundie bring in a Hercules near Bac Lieu.

airlift command and control system has become more prominent."

Using their high-frequency radios, the combat controllers feed vital data from remote airstrips back to the 834th Air Division Airlift Control Center at Tan Son Nhat, the nerve center for all in-country airlift operations.

"Also during the first year, we had very few rocket and mortar attacks to hinder our job," Sears continued. "That has sure changed! Now we're always sandbagging the radio jeep and always digging a foxhole on the DZ for the combat controller."

Today, at the peak of their activity in Vietnam, combat controllers are deployed throughout the country by the Airlift Control Center. The men are divided into three teams, each headed by an officer and consisting of air traffic controllers and radio maintenance specialists. One team is always on alert, ready with jeep and portable navigational aids to deploy by airlift in as little as 15 minutes.

Their missions are varied. Like a one-day air traffic control job at a remote airfield guiding in airlift C-130s, C-123s or C-7s laden with badly needed supplies. Or accompanying the 101st Air Cavalry Division tramping through the jungles for 30 days, providing the necessary control for emergency airdrops of ammunition, rations and fuel. The operating conditions vary, too—from the relative quiet of nearby outgoing, friendly artillery, to the terrors of "incoming" rounds of a Kham Duc or a Khe Sanh.

Between field missions, the combat controllers go through numerous standard checks at their Tan Son Nhat home station, maintaining proficiency in air traffic control procedures, packing parachutes, performing radio maintenance, cleaning their weapons (the M-16 and the shortened version, "Car" 15 used in paradrops) and spending time on the rifle range.

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They train for the worst, then back up their claim . . .

## "WE CAN DO ANYTHING!"

They are many people in one. Ranger, skydiver, weather observer, frogman, linguist, radio maintenance man and air traffic controller. They use all these skills, plus a bag of tricks, to do their vital job—pave the way for an airborne assault.

When airborne troops drop behind enemy lines, the Air Force combat control team is already there. They have scouted the area, reported wind velocity and direction, marked the drop zone and provided air traffic control to the tactical airlift aircraft in which the troops arrived.

"We manage to hit most of the hot spots in the world," said Capt. David R. Hughes, a 495-jump veteran from Sewart AFB, Tenn.

Combat controllers were at Panama, Lebanon, the Dominican Republic and, as recorded here, they play a vital role in Vietnam. You can find them with Army Special Forces, Air Force Special Operations Forces, and in worldwide STRIKE command exercises.

There are only 485 combat controllers in the Air Force. Generally, they don't want headlines. Too much exposure could play havoc with their methods. That's why not many people know about them. They don't readily recount their adventures to outsiders.

Because it is a tough career field, it is a proud one.

"If a man makes it through the first two years," said Captain Hughes, "he usually doesn't want any other kind of duty."

By then he has acquired a lot of common sense, a high degree of physical dexterity, and is in superb physical condition. He is eager and self-confident. He needs these attributes.

In his first year he gets more special and varied instruction than most airmen get in an entire career. He attends eight schools totalling 49 weeks. Less than 20 percent of all volunteers make it over the first hurdle—jump school. Of these, only about half complete the remaining rigorous physical and mental conditioning.

Training and conditioning never stop. Recently, Captain Hughes' team was operating out of a thickly wooded area near Tennessee's Cane Fork River in Davy Crockett country. Their command post sat atop a steep hill. One could survey the entire surrounding area.

"The conditions here are perfect for our needs. It's secluded, wild, hilly and there's plenty of water. We completely isolate ourselves to practice our mission skills. We set up security and defense perimeters, pinpoint all 'un-friendlies' in the area (in this case vacationing civilians) without them seeing us. We sharpen our small surface craft techniques, perform patrols and reconnaissance missions.

"During this time we try to live off the land," Hughes concluded as he finished off the last of his lunch—water moccasin and catfish.

Later, these team members will get their conventional HALO (high altitude, low opening) jump training while others will work assault landings and PLADS (parachute low altitude delivery system) drops made by tactical airlift aircraft.

Whatever they do, whenever they do it, they train for the worst—so they can be ready to do anything.

—EM





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Perhaps the clearest image of what a combat controller's life in Vietnam is all about is found by snatching glimpses of experiences during various operations.

Since most of the CCT was at Khe Sanh at one time or another during the 78-day siege, that operation—in which eight controllers received Purple Hearts—provides a good look.

• Jim Lundie was there, crouched in a foxhole, directing aircraft in and out of the airstrip on February 23, when the NVA fired over 1,000 artillery rounds into the combat base, or the equivalent of nearly one round a minute. He'll never forget that day. It was his 21st birthday.

• Following the crash of a Marine helicopter, Captain Sears and his team of SSgt. Jimmy Grishom, Sgt. Arthur Hosey, Freedman and Lundie, ignored the possible explosion of the helicopter's fuel and incoming mortar rounds to pull the crew members out of the burning wreckage. Although two were already dead, the third was saved by their action.

• TSgt. Thomas Monley and his team of Sgts. David McCracken, Erwin Rhodes and Walter Smith, have been awarded Silver Stars for pushing a burning pallet of mortar rounds away from Khe Sanh's populated bunkers (*Lifeline to Khe Sanh*, THE AIRMAN, July 1968).

During another operation the 1st Air Cavalry pushed into the A Shau Valley, an enemy stronghold. TSgt. Richard Taylor, SSgt. James Philpot and Sgts. Gary Brock and Michael Welding went into the valley's thick, jungle-carpeted floor with the first wave of assault helicopters, which received some of the heaviest enemy antiaircraft fire of the war. Once in the valley, the CCT marked the assault landing strip for C-123s and C-7s and directed C-130s over the drop zone for emergency drops of ammunition, rations and fuel. During the same operation, SSgt. Robert Mahaffey withstood five straight hours of enemy shelling to perform the control mission.

On one of the rare airborne operations, Capt. Danny M. Pugh, a 19-month Vietnam veteran, led his eight-man team in combat control's classic role—support of a mass parachute assault. Jumping 30 minutes ahead of a 1,000-man Vietnamese paratroop formation at Van Kiep, the CCT was dropped short of the





drop zone. Realizing the error, and realizing the potential disaster if the mass formation was also dropped short, Pugh led his team at a rapid clip, overland, through enemy territory. They found the DZ, set up communications equipment, and guided the formation in—right on schedule. There was no doubt about the value of combat control on that occasion.

On another jump, two years ago, Captain Sears, who has four combat jumps to his credit (more than any other controller), parachuted onto a drop zone in the Northern II Corps Tactical Zone.

"We jumped from about 800 feet," he said, "and immediately could hear ground fire coming up at us. All of a sudden, I felt something, and looked up to see two bullet holes in my chute. When we hit the ground, we started receiving a lot of sniper fire."

#### **More Than Guts and Glory**

But combat control is more than the guts and glory of combat. It takes a special breed to hurdle all the obstacles set in the path of earning and *keeping* the blue beret. In addition to jump school, combat controllers attend other schools: control tower, combat control, survival, tropical survival, arctic survival, water survival, amphibious training, High Altitude Low Opening, parachute rigging, and radio maintenance. And what's more, failing any one school means elimination from combat control.

"In Vietnam, in a given month, we work more airfields than drop zones," said Major Barinowski. "Consequently, I place heavy emphasis on proficiency in airlanding techniques—operating three or four radios, proper voice procedures, 'stacking' airplanes; and on two other tasks which have become part of our mission in Vietnam—coordinating artillery firings with landings of aircraft, and installation and maintenance of the Ground Proximity Extraction System, a method used by the C-130s to deliver bulky cargo loads to the ground forces.

But no matter what role combat controllers perform, one fact is certain: they are a vital part of the airlift effort in Vietnam. It doesn't really matter whether they're the "first in and last out." It's what they do in between that counts. And that adds up to quite a lot.

