

# AIRMAN

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OUR  
AMPHIBIOUS  
AIRMEN



**Our**

# Amphibious Airmen

Sometimes the amphibious airmen go to work in a submarine, but you can't really call them fish out of water.

Air Force combat controllers are at home—or at work—underwater, overwater in helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft, jumping into the water or onto the land with or without parachutes, or simply manning communications gear in some of the hottest, coldest, driest, and wettest weather in the world.

They can run, ski, climb mountains, scale and descend from cliffs, cross deserts, ford rivers, shoot rapids, chop through jungles, even wallow in the mud, to get to work.

Not every combat controller—and the Military Airlift Command has about 350 of them—is skilled in performing each of these feats. Some, like those who are amphibious qualified, are trained for tropical climates. Others operate in extreme cold. All, however, are trained in the ways of combat, parachuting, and weaponry.

It is *how* they get there that makes them what they are—a quick reaction force that will go anywhere, at any time to get the job done. By trade they are air traffic controllers or ground radio technicians.

And they are elite, handpicked from volunteers and tailor-trained for their demanding mission.

story by Lt. Col. BOB ZEHRING

photos by Lt. Col. ZEHRING, SSgt. HERMAN KOKOJAN, Sgt. FRED CECIL, and Sgt. FRANK KREINER

Combat controllers can literally live in the water. At left, Lt. Fred Matthews helps SSgt. Wendell Greek into his air tank harness straps for a practice surf entry and underwater navigation swim at the Naval Amphibious Base, Coronado, Calif. Photos of the 63rd Military Airlift Command's controllers were taken by a Hq AAVS team during a month of exercises in Hawaii and California. Combat controllers are assigned to some 20 locations around the world. Nearly all are attached to MAC aerial port squadrons.



TOP: TSgt. Charles McCarthy (left) applies camouflage grease to his face while Maj. Dave Hughes (facing camera) gets some assistance before the two donned SCUBA gear for an underwater exercise in Hawaii. BOTTOM: The two swimmers follow compass headings. Compass is mounted in wood panel. RIGHT: Controllers walk through a boiling surf at the Naval Amphibious Base, Coronado, Calif., after an underwater infiltration exercise.



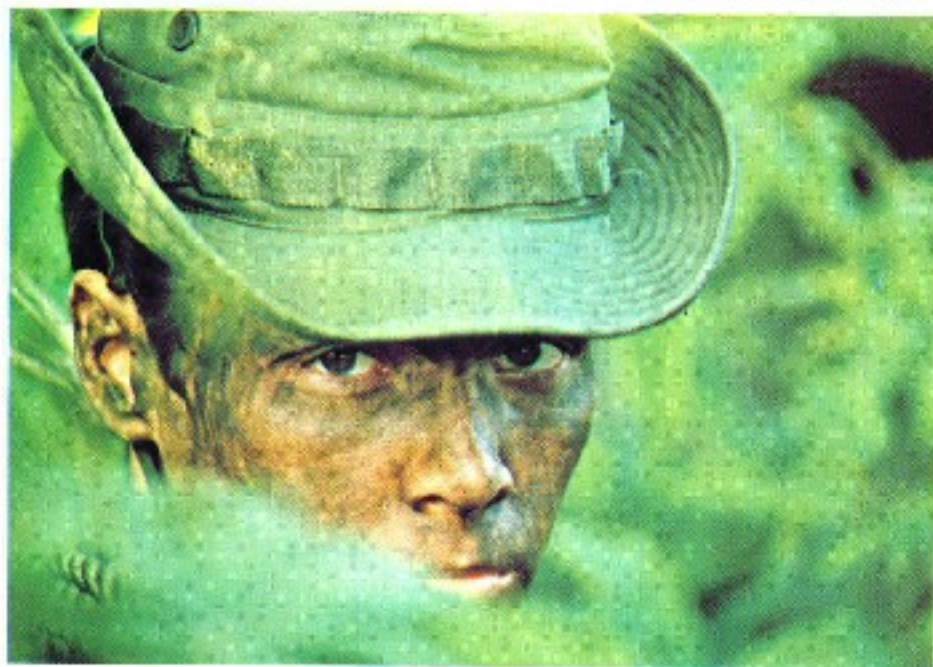


**BELOW:** A1C Bob James surveys the next leg of a jungle navigation course.

**BOTTOM and BOTTOM RIGHT:** Controllers demonstrate descent and landing techniques during a non-tactical jump at the Perris, Calif., airport.

**RIGHT:** SSgt. Pat Moynihan hauls away his combat equipment after a practice jump.

**FAR RIGHT:** Controllers climb a steep hill after emerging from the dense growth of a Hawaiian rain forest.





BELOW: Sergeant Greek studies surf action before donning the remainder of his SCUBA gear.  
LEFT: Controllers beach their flooded boat after successfully challenging heavy surf.  
BOTTOM: Major Hughes serves as coxswain for controllers practicing surf passage.





When not on specific employments, they control drop zones for a variety of missions, teach, and do other everyday tasks in their basic specialties.

Combat controllers have sweated through long hours on dirt landing and crop zones from Khe Sanh in Vietnam to Timbuktu in Africa. Bundled in mittens and parkas, they have felt the biting cold of Alaska. They can be lifesavers, too. When an aircraft commander bringing needed food and medical supplies to a disaster-struck area calls "Final" to a voice near a dirt landing strip, he's most likely on speaking terms with a combat controller.

Getting to work can be half the fun—and most of the challenge.

Swaying with the heavy heave of a submarine standing in off-shore water, the amphibious airmen, burdened with some 200 pounds of gear, scramble through the conning tower, untie the black rubber boat, inflate it with bottled, compressed air, and paddle away while the sub sinks back under the sea.

When it is more practical, the controllers drop into the water from a variety of aircraft, wearing full SCUBA gear and tactical equipment.

If the water is cold, the team wears black rubber SCUBA wet suits with camouflaged fatigues stowed in their backpacks. In warm water, they swim to shore wearing the fatigues with their combat boots hung on their web belts.

Tactical equipment includes radios in a waterproof pack, knives, modified M-16 assault rifles, maps covered in plastic, canteens, jungle boots, smoke or flares, and panels for marking drop zones. They can eat, when necessary, off the land.

The load, added to the weight of the olive drab, twin 72-cubic-foot SCUBA tanks, means that the swimmer must drag from 135 to 200 pounds through the water. It demands the best in physical stamina and determination.

Because the swim to shore, in most instances, must be made underwater, navigation is a challenge. And it's accomplished without light, at night. An illuminated compass and a depth gauge

provide the only discernible reference points. The compass is mounted on a small wooden board for easy handling and stability in the water.

Vertigo and dizziness are twin hazards at night in the water. With no surface references on a pitch black night, swimmers can become disoriented easily. They are weightless after submerging and achieving neutral buoyancy.

The swimmers go in pairs, using the "buddy" system. The lead swimmer navigates while the other helps monitor the course and depth. They support each other through the severe mental and physical strain. Physical contact between the two is the second swimmer's firm hand grasp on the leader's waist strap. Now and then through the swim, the second swimmer will tug on the strap to reassure the compass man that all is going well. When the swimmers or the raft-paddlers finally reach shallow water, they face new obstacles. Breaking surf, coral, or rock can send them crashing and somersaulting into jagged rocks and coral heads.

The amphibious airmen are also at home overwater. They count among their kind some of the most skilled and respected free-fall and static-line parachutists in the world. And they are fully self-sufficient and able to infiltrate a forward area, remote or hostile, to set up needed communications.

In addition to directing air traffic for supply or troop drops, they can provide forward weather observation and gather intelligence. If need be, they can also escape and evade with skill.

It takes two to three years to make a combat controller, who must endure and excel in many skills to earn the right to wear the distinctive blue beret. Among them are air traffic control and radio maintenance courses, arctic and tropical survival schools, jump instruction, SCUBA and amphibious training with Navy Seal teams, and counter-insurgency courses.

Age isn't necessarily a factor. Members of a combat control team can range in age from 19 to 45. Staying in shape is a key. And so is staying-with-it determination. 