





# The Red Berets

story and photos by TSgt. Ken Hammond, AAVS

By their deeds you will know them. Or would you? They have, by all counts, one of the most challenging and dangerous jobs in the Air Force. But unless your business in battle was to hear them, you wouldn't.

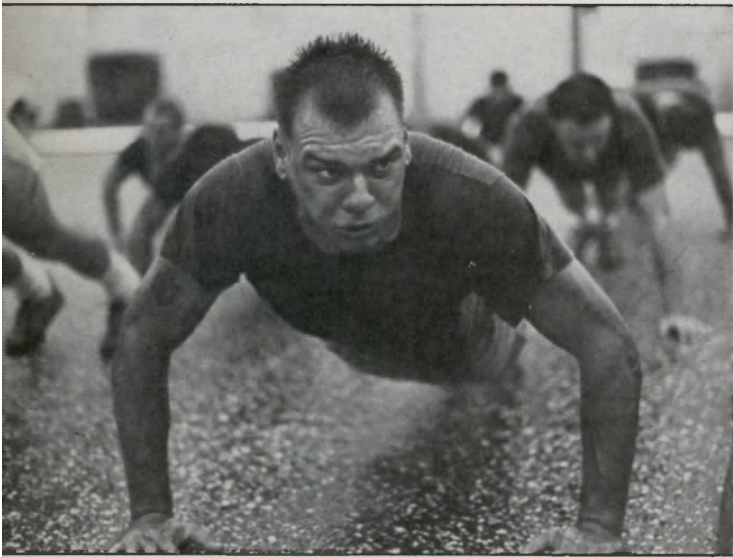
Come to think about it, you don't hear much about them in peacetime, either. They like it that way, the combat controllers do. They are a silent force, expert in warfighting specialties ranging from parachuting to gathering intelligence, whose job it is to establish and operate landing, drop, and extraction zones right under the enemy's nose.

A bit of exaggeration, yes. But combat controllers train to live where the enemy lives—and survive.

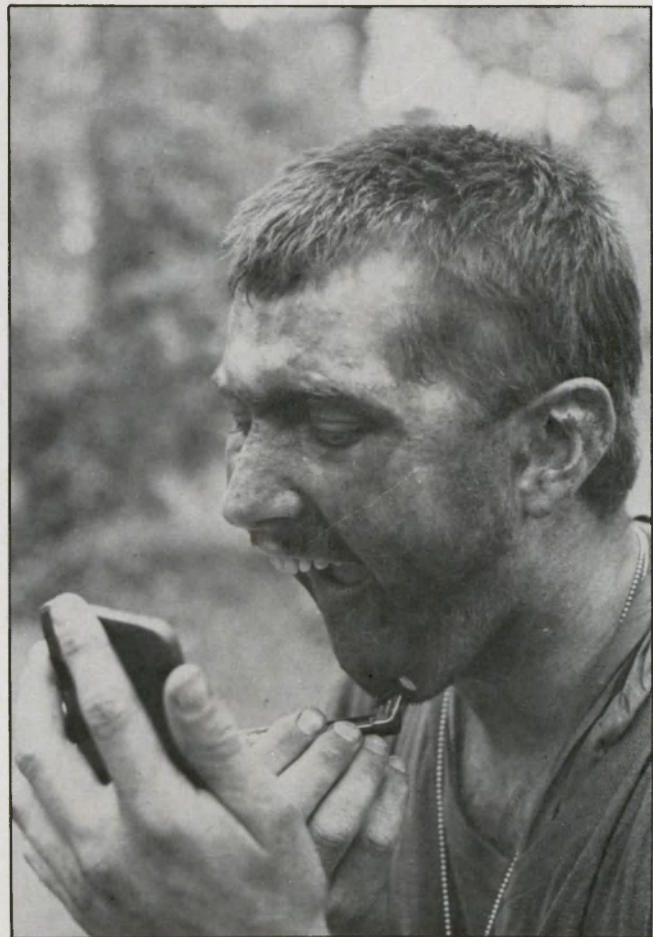
However, if it's not your business to hear them and you don't hear much about them, you can certainly spot them easily enough, but only on and around a base. They wear a distinguishing—and distinguished—symbol, a red beret, that says volumes about them.

SSgt. Chris Caffall, an instructor at the Military Airlift Command's Combat Controller School, Pope AFB, N.C., got to the heart of the matter in three sentences. "The color red represents all those combat controllers who died doing their job. The black band represents the fear of the unknown that each controller experiences and the initiative needed to conquer those fears to accomplish the mission. The knot tied in the back represents the unwritten bond of fraternity among all combat controllers."

Candidates for combat controller positions are all



Physical training is of major importance to combat controllers, whose difficult and demanding tasks in the field often require superior stamina. Dry shaving is not a favorite activity of the trainees.





Rappelling from a helicopter to the ground is another of the special skills practiced by combat controllers during training.



volunteers and enter the school by one of three avenues: from basic training, from Air Traffic Control School, or by cross-training from other career fields. The school is the final test—the culmination after 18 weeks of Air Traffic Control School at Kessler AFB, Miss., and three weeks of parachute training at Fort Benning, Ga. For all candidates, it began with an intense personal screening.

The Combat Control School, first located at Sewart AFB, Tenn., in 1965 and later at Little Rock AFB, Ark., moved to its present location in 1980. Pope offers special opportunities because of the great variety of tactical airlift it can provide for training and the base's proximity to the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, which provides excellent parachute ranges for training.

The commandant of the controllers school, Capt. Robert Holmes, is a no-nonsense officer with a master's degree in education. His instructors are selected from the best in the field. They include TSgt. William Howell, named Combat Controller of the Year in 1982, who followed in his father's footsteps by entering the career field.

All the instructors complete the same grueling physical conditioning program as their students and meet the same professional standards. "The students think we must not sweat or get tired during PT, and we like to keep it that way; it gives them something to shoot for," SSgt. Caffall said.

At the school everything is by the book. AFR 35-10 is strictly adhered to. Fatigues are starched and sport razor-sharp creases; boots are spit-shined

to a high gloss; hair is closely cropped; and open-ranks inspections are conducted daily. On Fridays the commandant or superintendent conducts the inspection. Lord help you if you're out of standards.

The school offers excellent academic instruction and hands-on training in the many facets of a combat controller's work. All nine of the instructors have served on operational teams and, thus, bring considerable firsthand experience to the job.

"The school has eight and a half weeks to take a guy who six months ago was on the streets of New York or on a farm in Iowa and turn him into a combat controller," said SMSgt. Al Corbett. "But it will normally be three to four years down the road before that graduate has enough experience and confidence to do the job without having to have someone nearby to answer the many questions he has about the job. There's something new to learn all the time."

The courses include communications, first aid, weapons, patrol and ambush techniques, establishing drop and landing zones, insertion and extraction by helicopter, demolitions, rappelling, and jumpmaster training. "The average combat controller in battle is faced with more serious decisions than many in the Air Force because he is responsible for millions of dollars in resources as well as the lives of thousands of men who depend on the decisions he makes," SMSgt. Corbett said.

During many of their field training exercises future combat controllers learn that the GAU-5A, their primary defensive weapon, is to be a constant companion.



Because of those wartime responsibilities, pressure is put on and kept on the students to make sure they can handle themselves and their duties without faltering. Both high academic and physical standards have to be maintained. Failure to do so brings immediate elimination from the program. The final proving ground is the field training exercise that comes at the end of their schooling. For 10 long days and nights they live as they would in war with C-rations their standard menu, a pup tent their home, and splotches of camouflage paint on their faces every waking moment.

AIRMAN visited a designated class on more than one occasion to observe and photograph the various training phases. On the final visit only 10 members of the original class of 28 remained. It was apparent that those still in training had lost the cockiness that came with completing jump school. In its place was a calm assurance. They were finding out about themselves, their strengths and weaknesses.

"They don't know how far they can push themselves or what their limits are," noted SSgt. Caf-fall. "We push them hard but never to their limits. What we want to see is whether they can take it or not. If they are going to quit, we want them to do it here and not while they are on a mission that could cost lives and resources," he explained.

Quitting would be easy during the last two days of the field training exercise. Up to then, the students have traveled by night, undergone an ambush, made a river crossing, performed first aid, etc., as a team. Now it is up to the individual to complete the confi-



High Altitude Low Opening (HALO) parachute jumps require concentration, skill, and double- and triple-checks of a jumper's gear.






dence course. This is the final test, and each must prove he can use a map and compass for the next two days and nights navigating through swamps and thick woods to a designated point.

As the end of the 48-hour ordeal approached for those AIRMAN was following, they began to arrive at the marshaling point, one by one, smiles breaking through dirt- and camouflage-encrusted faces. The count reached eight, and their happiness ebbed. As time passed, it became obvious. Two of their comrades had not completed the course and would not graduate with them.

The eight were lined up on a road and double-timed back to the base camp. The full rucksacks cut into their shoulders, but they were beyond caring. They knew they had made it. A final 100 pushups earned each of them a soft drink but not before they were told one last time how miserable they were.

More smiles—but *knowing* smiles this time.

"We know now what they've been trying to teach us," one student said. "They want to make us see that we can do anything if we put our minds to it."

They have done just that, and the red beret says it's so, eloquently and silently. 



The smiles and relaxed attitudes indicate that combat controller trainees have successfully completed another phase of their demanding course.

# Here's Jake

"JAKE" SCHIFFERT



"That's not what I had in mind when I told you to take a picture of a fighter pilot going into a dive!"



"Boy, my dad really works in a neat place. All they do all day is race rats."



"Be careful there, buddy-boy. That crate contains my wife and kids!!"



"So I thought, why let all that energy go to waste? Why not put those joggers to some good use!?"