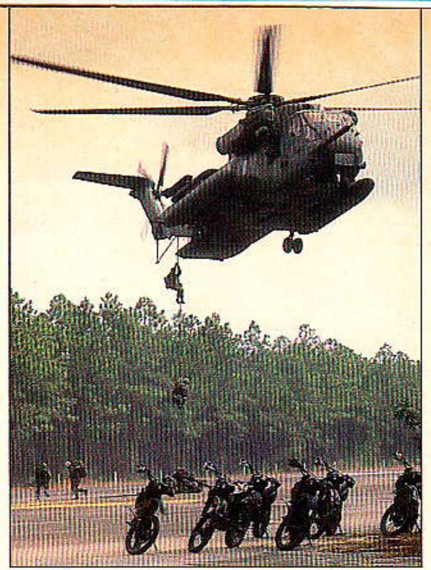
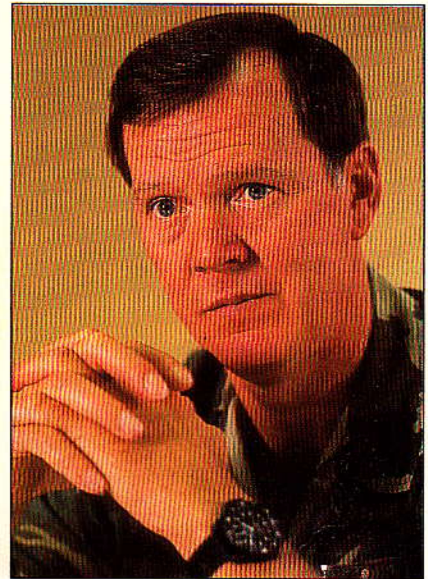


ALL IN A DAY'S WORK: *A special tactics team fast-ropes from a hovering HH-53 helicopter then scurries off on specially equipped dirt bikes. Col. John Carney (right) commands the group.*

This Team is Unconventional

by TSgt. Phil Rhodes
Staff Writer

photos by MSgt. Bill Thompson
Rhein-Main AB, West Germany



They're few. They're proud. Add rough, tough, lean and mean and that only begins to describe the men in Air Force's elite 1720th Special Tactics Group.

The group is a conglomerate of two of the most demanding career fields in the Air Force — combat control and pararescue. Together, they become formidable teams deployable in almost any situation.

Be it land, sea, or air.

Combat controllers are air traffic controllers, weather observers, intelligence gatherers, airfield operators and almost everything else that has to do with getting airplanes and people on the ground. Pararescuemen are selfless lifesavers and the best trauma specialists in the Air Force.

Controllers work in the shadow of successful military operations, while PJs, because of the humanitarian nature of their discipline, are often thrust into the spotlight.

Two completely different, but no less demanding career fields thrown into one basket. Mixing apples with oranges?

Negatory. As group commander Col. John T. Carney explains, even though combat controllers and PJs do things differently, they get to the "office" in the same fashion.

Reason number one for forming the special tactics group: It standardizes procedures for parachuting, combat swimming, amphibious operations, weapons training, and all other combat skills common to both career fields.

But there's a bigger reason for bringing these super-talented airmen together. Consolidation offers more opportunity to learn the ropes in the wily world of special operations.

"Special operations missions require more intensively trained people," explained Colonel Carney. Both PJs and combat controllers have similar training in HALO [high-altitude, low-opening] and HAHO [high-altitude,

high-opening] parachute techniques, amphibious operations and other basic requirements.

"But in special operations, we get into more unique ways of employing. Instead of training in daylight, we concentrate on operating at night. Darkness is our ally — in everything we do," he said, his piercing eyes telling more about the special tactics business than his carefully selected words.

"And we train in the harshest conditions we can find, simulating what we think we'd be up against in a worst-case scenario."

Colonel Carney directs three organizations from the Hurlburt Field, Fla., headquarters: the 1723rd Combat Control Squadron at Hurlburt and its detachments in West Germany and the Philippines; the 1724th Special Tactics Squadron, Fort Bragg, N.C.; and the 1730th Pararescue Squadron, Eglin AFB, Fla., which has six detachments worldwide.

The group hones its perishable skills all over the globe, in every climate. One week they're on skis in Wisconsin, working with Army Rangers. The next week they're on motorcycles in the desert. Or it could be Norway, or the jungles of Central America.

But what exactly do these unconventional airmen do? An example was the October 1983 Grenada operation.

In doing their part to help regain control of the Caribbean island, Colonel Carney and a handful of combat controllers parachuted in to reconnoiter Point Salinas Airfield, provided weather observation, set up navigation beacons, coordinated airdrops that put paratroopers on target, directed AC-130 *Spectre* and Navy A-7 *Corsair* strikes that silenced Cuban anti-aircraft batteries, provided the communications link between the island and joint task force headquarters, controlled air traffic into and out of the island, and marshaled aircraft onto limited ramp space.

A major undertaking for such a small force.

"But that's the beauty of it," explained Colonel Carney. "We are very 'thin' in ranks, and expensive to

LAYING LOW: *Veteran combat controller SMSgt. Robert Boyle (right) and his team are experts at concealment. Daylight hours are spent resting and watching. When darkness comes, they move with catlike stealth.*

train, but we provide a lot of punch in any situation."

Roughly 370 Air Force men [by law, women aren't allowed in the career field] wear the red beret of a combat controller. Of those, about 130 are qualified in the special operations arena. Earning the special operations moniker takes nearly three years of training at a cost of more than $1 million.

"But well worth the cost," said the colonel. "We're a multi-talented force that an air-component commander can use in any situation."

A special operator's hallmark is the weapon systems he supports. Sophisticated military hardware includes the MC-130 Combat Talon — the global/adverse-weather transport that can skirt under enemy radars; the AC-130 *Gunship* that can rain destruction on any enemy with its 20mm, 40mm and 105mm guns; and the MH-53J Pave Low II helicopter, one of the world's largest and fastest.

If the Grenada operation were to occur today, the 1720th SPTG's deployment would include special operations combat controllers and PJs.

PJs were not involved in Grenada — a shortfall which Colonel Carney brought to Military Airlift Command's attention. Today, the 300 hand-picked men who wear the PJs' distinctive maroon beret are integral to the special tactics mission.

A PJ's mission is basically rescue and recovery. But a special ops mission adds a new twist, as SSgt. David Cruz, a PJ for five years, can attest. He recalled his first exercise with combat controllers.

"We're used to roughing it. That part is OK," he said about the bivouac lifestyle. "But we're not always in as much of a hurry as these guys are — and they travel in absolute darkness. The first night we hit the ground, we moved 15 kilometers [9.1 miles] — with 75-pound sacks on our backs and 10 minutes rest per hour. We were driven pretty hard."

He was assigned to SMSgt. Robert Boyle's combat control team during the exercise. "Having the PJs makes us more responsive," said Sergeant Boyle, a bull-necked, 25-year combat controller and director of operations for the 1723rd CCS. "They're the best trauma specialists in the business.

"It's one thing to practice first-aid, another to be lying on a landing zone trying to keep someone alive who's badly injured. Having a PJ there takes a big burden off our shoulders."

The highly trained pararescuemen aren't there for just life-or-death encounters, Sergeant Boyle points out. "Sergeant Cruz keeps us going. He holds sick call every morning and helps us with the creature comforts — a little

MEDICINE MAN: *SSgt. David Cruz and other pararescuemen bring an added capability to the special tactics mission. Primarily lifesavers, PJs can hold their own in clandestine or combat situations.*

moleskin when our rucksacks start wearing the skin off our shoulders, or with headache cures."

PJ's carry almost 40 kinds of medicine — from aspirin to morphine — "enough to handle most trauma situations," Sergeant Cruz said.

"PJs add another dimension to our mission," Sergeant Boyle added. "If we had to pick up someone with a weak heart or whatever, we could move them to the airlift point with the PJ's help."

Sergeant Boyle speaks from experience. He's a two-tour Vietnam veteran, one of those spent with the 101st Airborne at Hue during the 1968 Tet offensive.

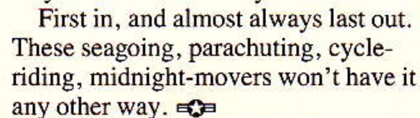
Special tactics group members are real danger rangers, but have no qualms about the lifestyle.

Being "first in" means plunging into the unexpected, the dangerous. "But that's part of what attracts us to the job," says Sergeant Boyle.

"We're the first line to hit the ground in an operation. We're probably going to be called upon — as we have been in the past — to face life-threatening situations," he said.

"Most people in the Air Force don't believe they'll be confronted with that. They know they won't come to work one morning and find themselves in a hostile environment the next afternoon — yet we do it routinely."

First in, and almost always last out. These seagoing, parachuting, cycle-riding, midnight-movers won't have it any other way.



FIRST IN: *Seldom seen or heard, special tactics troops are usually first in and last out during operations requiring Air Force airlift or close air support.*