



The Air Force Special Operations Training Center is discovering new ways to turn out highly trained airmen.

*Left: Capt. Keith Weber and 1st Lt. Daniel Duck practice basic skills on a simulator at the Air Force Special Operations Training Center. Below: Students train inside the center's C-130 fuselage.*

# AIR COMMANDO U

By Amy McCullough

**A**n assignment to the Air Force Special Operations Training Center at Hurlburt Field, Fla., does not make you an air commando. That title must be earned through countless hours of grueling training.

On any given day, however, AFSOTC may “transform” the white sandy beaches of Pensacola into the dun-colored terrain of Mogadishu, Somalia. Before long, the operational aviation detachment, tasked with supporting the local government, comes under attack. Sniper fire rings out and the deafening sounds of explosions pierce the once quiet, muggy air. The trainees are forced to work together to defend the team and extract themselves from the situation as the “country” implodes around them.

A few miles away, airmen assigned to the special tactics training squadron, which falls under AFSOTC, swim laps in an Olympic-size pool with their hands tied behind their backs. As they attempt not to panic, they kick their feet and bob to the surface to catch a breath before sinking back down. Lap after lap they swim in the warm water, defying the urge to break their hands free.

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AFSOTC photos





**SrA. Eli Terry, a candidate for the combat controller career field, performs calisthenics at Hurlburt Field, Fla. The combat controller career field is one of the most physically taxing of all specialties.**

In a classroom around the corner, a captain and a staff sergeant stand in front of their instructor, conversing in Arabic, Tagalog, or one of the other core languages taught at AFSOTC's language center.

Before AFSOTC opened its doors on Oct. 6, 2008, the burden of training future air commandos fell on the operational squadrons, which since Sept. 11, 2001, were already stressed with an exceptionally high operational tempo. Training often lagged behind because the operational mission always took priority.

The activation of the training center marked a fundamental shift in the resourcing and organization of Air Force special operations training. For the first time in Air Force Special Operations Command's history, all education and initial special operations forces training fell under a single commander. The move standardized the training and created efficiencies in a command already operating on a bare bones budget.

"I'm not a big reorganization guy, [but] we recognized that with the force growth AFSOC was going through and the new missions we faced—ISR, CV-

22, etc.—that we needed a dedicated training structure," then-AFSOC Commander Lt. Gen. Donald C. Wurster said in an interview before relinquishing command in late June. "Ten years from now when we look back, AFSOTC will be the most important thing we did."

#### **No Fat Here**

Today AFSOTC is responsible for recruiting, assessing, selecting, indoctrinating, training, and educating air commandos. It pushes through more than 6,000 students each year in more than 20 Air Force specialty codes and conducts all mission qualification training for more than a dozen types of aircraft, including the AC-130H/U gunship, AFSOC's newest tactical airlifter the MC-130J, and common foreign military aircraft such as the Mi-17. It also trains combat aviation advisors, medical element personnel, special tactics battlefield airmen, and AFSOC security forces.

Col. Mark B. Alsid, AFSOTC commander, said he is proud of what the center has accomplished without pulling funding from operational units. The center will train more than 900 students for flying qualification, which includes all aircrew for any of the flying programs. AFSOTC will also train more than 1,200 students for ground training, which includes special tactics, SF, and

CAA and the language lab. In total, they will educate and indoctrinate more than 4,000 students in initial SOF and joint training under its \$60.8 million Fiscal 2011 budget.

"We've collectively swept all the different training budgets under us to include the simulators and everything. Right now, we are resourced adequately and there is no fat here. We have just enough dough to get away with what we need," Alsid said. "We take great pride in the fact that we are resource neutral and manpower neutral because there were a lot of people who thought we wouldn't be able to do it."

In August 2010, AFSOTC activated the 371st Special Operations Combat Training Squadron. In addition to serving as the formal school for small unmanned aerial systems and irregular warfare integrated skills training, the squadron is also responsible for AFSOC recruitment, assessment, and selection.

The command attached 13 experienced special operators to Air Force recruiting stations across the country. Although their primary responsibility is recruiting qualified AFSOC candidates, the liaisons also follow the students once they enter training and serve as mentors along the way. "One of the things that we've never done well as a command, ... is recruit the right people. When you

recruit the right people, the chances of them making it through training [are] greater," Alsid said.

Right now the focus is on bringing in new battlefield airmen, although this could change based on the needs of the command. Alsid said the effort already is "paying itself back in spades."

Since Fiscal 2009, when the command first unleashed its recruiting liaisons, the washout rate for the combat control specialty course has dropped from the mid-to-high 70th percentile to the low 40th percentile, said CMSgt. Antonio D. Travis, AFSOTC chief enlisted manager. "That doesn't sound like a lot, but when you look at 100 people and you are bringing in an extra 30, that's phenomenal," Travis said. "We've only been tracking data since our liaisons have been out in the field, but we believe ... this is going to show dividends throughout the pipeline as well." The first week of training at the combat control school at Pope AFB, N.C., for example, also has a historically high washout rate, but Travis said this too is beginning to decrease. However, it's still too early to determine by exactly how much.

The first AFSOTC classes to undergo the new standardized training are just now coming through the pipeline, so officials are still in the early stages of sorting through data, which they hope

will one day be used to accurately predict exactly what it takes to become an air commando. For example, if a person does a ruck march in one hour and 47 minutes, perhaps that means he is less likely to succeed than a person who makes the same march in one hour and 45 minutes, Travis said. "All these data points are being ironed out. ... If everything goes the way that we believe, we should be able to, within the first 30 minutes or so of a physical assessment test, be able to tell that this person has a high probability of success."

### Virtual Reality Training

Alsid said his goal is to reach an 85 percent success rate—something he openly admits will not be easy.

The training center is using technology to improve the quantity of training time available as well as the quality. Lt. Col. Shawn Brady, commander of the 19th Special Operations Squadron, said the size of the squadron nearly tripled overnight when AFSOTC stood up, but the budget stayed relatively flat. Instructors had to come up with "new and ingenious" ways to train that didn't eat up additional funding, such as the introduction of a C-130 fuselage that can be used to train maintainers, loadmasters, and other AFSOC personnel who aren't part of an aircrew.

AFSOTC shares its aircraft with operational units based at Hurlburt, but because most of AFSOC's birds are deployed downrange, it can be challenging to find training time even with the development of the new center. With the introduction of the fuselage, roughly 80 percent of the work formerly done on the flight line can now be done inside, said Ray Doyle, a contractor with Lockheed Martin who works with the students at the 19th SOS.

The goal is to remove all loadmaster and static special tactics training from the flight line to free up training time for aircrews, said Brady. The fuselage is fully functional, and the training cadre has the ability to blacken out the warehouse to simulate night missions and to transition the aircraft to represent different aircraft. The 19th SOS is about a year away from making the fuselage a virtual training device, Brady said. Once this is complete, aircrews operating on a simulator in another part of the building could practice flying into enemy territory during brown-out conditions, while loadmasters, operating in the back of the fuselage, offload a Humvee in a hot

***A training crew launches its cargo from an EC-130J at the 193rd Special Operations Wing. Airmen don't become air commandos until they have been through grueling training.***



USAF photo by SSgt. Julianne M. Showalter





**SrA. Andrew Tilley (l) and SrA. Abeoul Toure (r) develop their “buddy breathing” skills during water confidence training at Hurlburt.**

landing zone. The two teams would be able to communicate just as they would in a live mission, he said.

A similar concept has been funded for the static gun room, which includes a 25 mm Gatling gun, a 40 mm cannon, and 105 mm Howitzer. A cardboard control panel stands next to each weapon system, and some of the ammo dates back to 1942. Before they ever step foot on an aircraft, AC-130 aerial gunners spend weeks learning how to break the weapons apart so they can study the internal workings of the guns and learn what types of fuses are used. They are taught how the weapons could malfunction and the proper procedures to clear them out, but they never interact with aircrews while in the static room.

That is about to change. In the next six months, officials intend to switch out the old handmade panels with new state-of-the-art virtual panels that will allow the gunners to communicate with aircrews on the flight line. The change will essentially turn the old static gun room into the back end of a gunship, allowing officials to eliminate two real-world flights.

“We will be able to throw a lot more at them earlier, but not to the point where it will be negative training. This will just make them a lot better,” Brady said. “The enemy can do crazy things,

and once these guys leave training they are basically going right into combat. This is extending the umbilical cord from the back to the front end where the pilots and engineers are.” Not only will the gunners be able to talk to aircraft in real time, but officials also intend to tie in other aircraft, such as the CV-22, so they all can execute a mission together just as they would in an operational environment.

### Searching for Flatline

Brady said he doesn’t see the 19th SOS’ growth flatlining anytime soon, because the center is preparing to absorb the training pipeline for AFSOC’s newest bird, the MC-130J. Lockheed Martin rolled out the first Combat Shadow IIs during a ceremony at its Marietta, Ga., facility at the end of March and AFSOC is expected to take possession this summer.

The first class of combat-ready crew members has completed training and is assigned to the 522nd SOS, at Cannon AFB, N.M.

AFSOTC is on track to train seven mission-ready crews by November 2011 with an annual production plan of five crews per year prior to the first MC-130J combat deployment in December 2012. To do that, officials are utilizing the Air National

Guard’s 193rd Special Operations Wing, based out of Harrisburg, Pa., which provides mission qualification training for AFSOC’s MC-130 recapitalization program (since the unit’s Commando Solo airframes are also J models). Until AFSOC gets its first aircraft, AFSOTC instructors are using the 193rd SOW’s EC-130Js to train students on MC-130J tactics, techniques, and procedures, Alsid said. Once Cannon starts receiving its aircraft, MC-130J training at AFSOTC will start to wind down.

As the training center evolves, officials are working to revamp its curriculum. They are shelving courses no longer relevant to today’s battles and bringing in more veterans of combat in Iraq and Afghanistan to bring home the lessons learned.

“At some point, ideally, we are going to flatline, and I would say we are just about there,” Alsid said. “It’s been a huge undertaking and very emotional because people aren’t as open to change, but I’m really happy with how that transition is going, but it’s still a work in progress.” ■