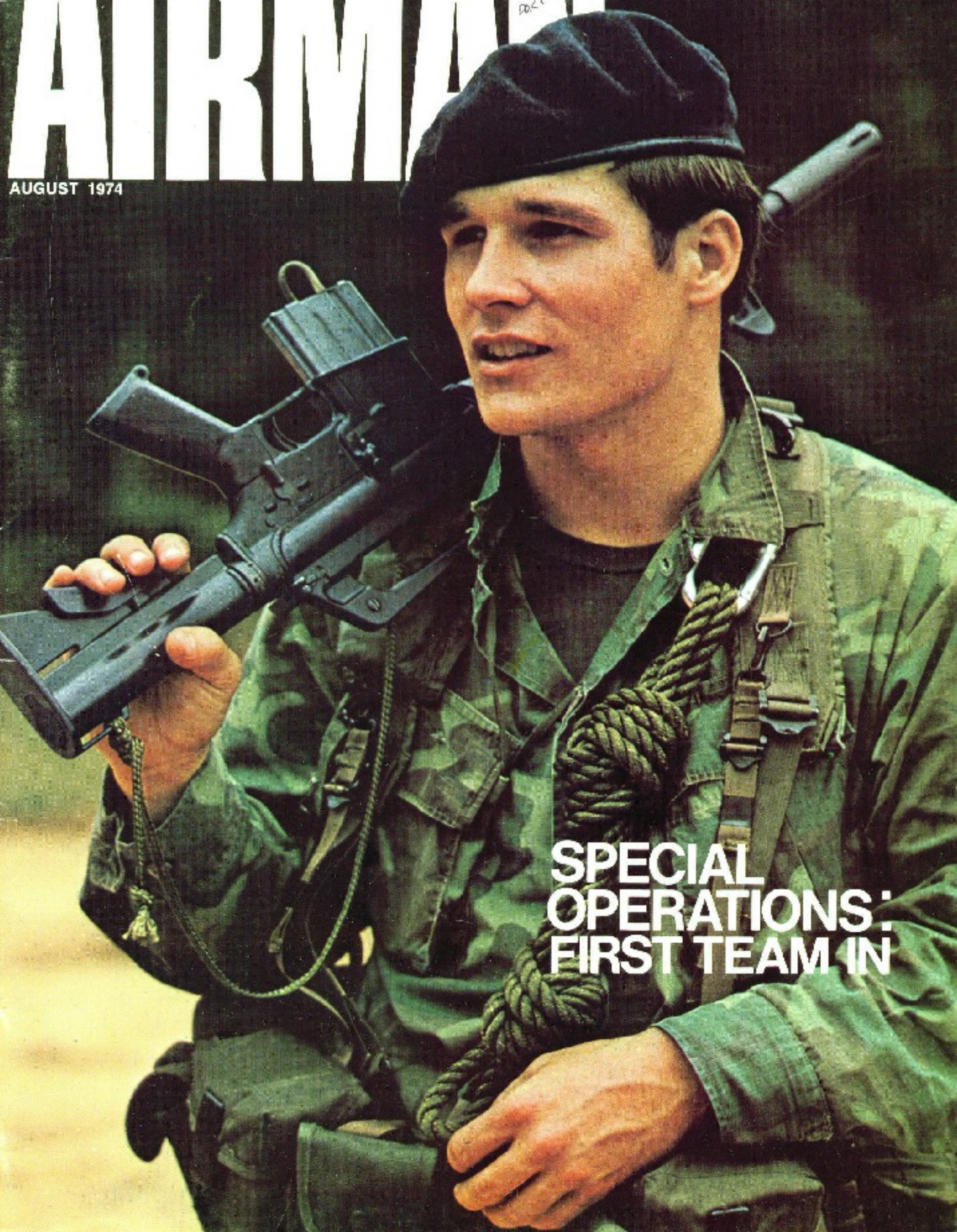


AIRMAN

DOE

AUGUST 1974



**SPECIAL
OPERATIONS:
FIRST TEAM IN**



BEHIND ENEMY LINES TO BRING OUT AN AIR MARSHAL.

The sun was just above the tree line as the CH-53 helicopter lifted off. On board were seven members of the 834th Tactical Composite Wing Combat Control Team.

As the helicopter approached its destination, the team stood in the rear, ready to jump. SSgt. Bob Blowers shrugged his shoulders, making a 35-pound parachute rest more comfortably on his back. He watched as team leader and jumpmaster Maj. Hayden Sears directed the pilot toward their target.

Sears gave his team a "thumbs-up."

One minute from the drop zone. With the chopper blades' rhythmic roar drowning any other sound, the team inched toward the door. As they reached the drop zone, the major quickly pointed to the door and stepped out. It was 10,000 feet down.

Blowers was the fourth man out. Just as he left the platform, he pivoted and faced the front of the aircraft. The force of the airstream pushed him into his free fall. Quickly, he searched the sky below to locate the team leader. His hands were drawn back by his side, palms forward and he used them to foil the air and move to within 50 yards of the rest of the team. Reaching the 2,500-foot level, he pulled the rip cord.

Less than 30 seconds after Major Sears stepped out of the helicopter, the seven-man team was on the ground, hurrying about its job. Without hesitation Bob moved to the area where he would spread an orange panel. It would mark the drop zone for a second team, scheduled to link up with friendly guerrillas and escort to freedom an air marshal who unsuccessfully attempted to overthrow his government, a totalitarian regime at war with the U.S.

FIRST TEAM

by TSgt. TOM DWYER
photos MSgt. EDDIE McCROSSAN





As he worked, Sergeant Blowers felt a long way from the peaceful scene he woke up to only a few hours ago.

It was 4 a.m. when his alarm burred its notice that the day was beginning. He rose and moved slowly into the kitchen to start brewing coffee. Between cups one and two he showered, shaved, and woke up. He listened to the surf break on the shore outside his Okaloosa Island apartment as he poured his third cup, mixing it, "blonde and sweet."

He dressed in camouflaged fatigues, realizing it might be days before he'd get a shower and clean clothes again. A quick look in the bathroom mirror, time to comb some hair back into place, and Bob headed for the blue Pinto runabout parked in front of his apartment.

Except for a few lights, the island and the main street of Fort Walton Beach were still asleep. It was already 75 degrees and the humidity was rising as he turned onto Hurlburt Field from the "right turn only" lane of Route 98.

Like the beach, the Florida base was quiet. A lone car rested in the base exchange parking lot. Bob headed for the Combat Control Team building near the flightline.

C-47s were being pre-flighted on the ramp in front of the building, and Combat Control Team jeeps and trailers stood between the building and the 47s.

After drawing his fifth cup of the morning, Bob moved to the three long, chute-packing tables, covered with gear the team would use in today's mission.

"If you're going to jump out of a helicopter at 10,000 feet you want everything to be nice and smooth," says Blowers. He grabbed the straps of his chute and checked for any problems. It only took about five minutes to make sure everything was as he had left it the night before—ready to go.

As Bob finished his check, Major Sears walked up to give the mission briefing to team one for their HALO (High Altitude-Low Opening) Mission. Bob and the others edged closer, eager to learn what today's job would be.

At the same time, team two began its briefing in the supply room close by. A third team participating would be briefed later.

Major Sears described the mission to team one. As on all special operations Combat Control Teams, three-fourths of the members are qualified as air traffic controllers, and at least a fourth as radio repairmen. They receive nearly 80 weeks of training that covers everything from High Altitude-Low Opening parachuting to SCUBA diving, amphibious landing, and skiing.

As Major Sears explained the mission, it was obvious that it would be fairly typical of those for which the teams are trained. The major indicated on a gray map where it would happen. Each man's job was explained in detail.

They learned about the air marshal. He had made an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow the Communist government of his country. He asked the U.S. Government for assistance in making his escape.

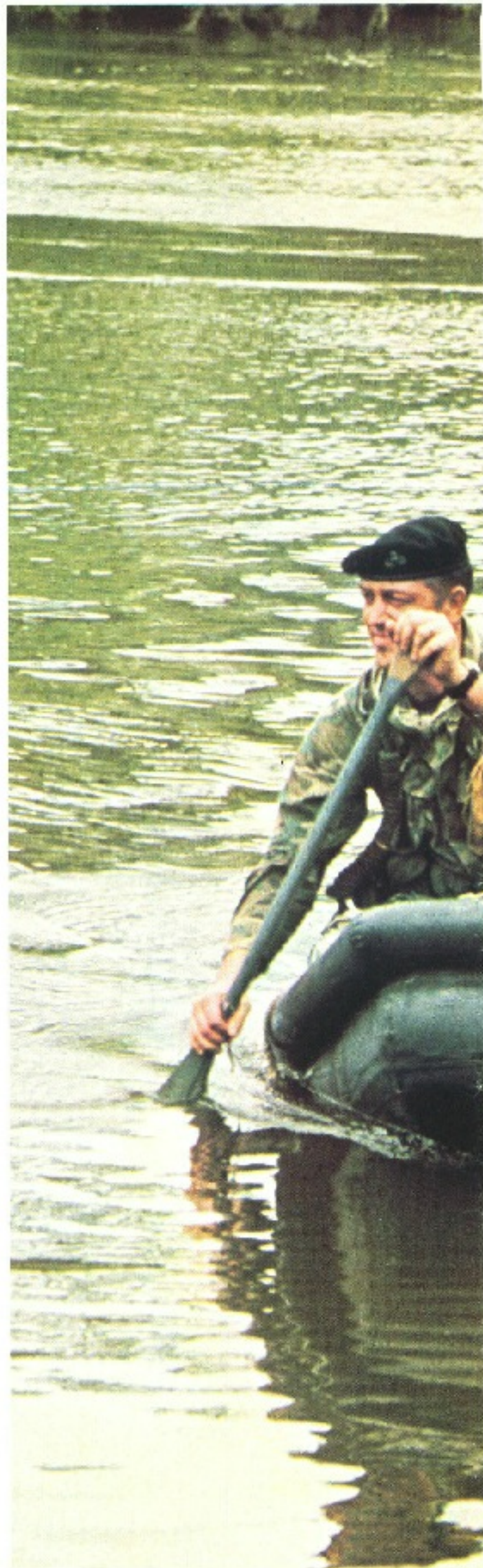
The combat controllers got the job.

"We'll be the first team to jump in," Major Sears was saying as he indicated the jump zone on the map. It wouldn't be marked for the first team. "Once we're on the ground, our first objective will be to mark the drop zone for the second team."

Getting the air marshal out of the country was the task assigned to team two, while team three's job was to get into the area and secure a landing zone for the escape helicopter.

TEAM TWO JUMPS STATIC

Bob Blowers didn't spend much time contemplating the morning's events. He quickly spread his panel and watched a fellow team-









mate compute the wind velocity. The average wind between the ground and jumping altitude would be radioed to the static line team (team two) due to arrive any minute now.

Soon the drone of a twin-engine C-47 alerted team one, just finishing its work at the drop zone. Overhead, each of the seven men on team two moved to connect his parachute "static line" to the aircraft's anchor line cable, which would activate their parachutes as they cleared the aircraft.

The jumps were clean. When the last man was out, the HALO team—team one—picked up its gear and headed into the nearby woods. Now the temperature was near 90 degrees and the humidity had almost reached its limit. Bob's fatigues were soaked with sweat and he had already emptied one canteen. But since there were plenty of streams along their route, there was no need to ration his water.

Team one rendezvoused at a nearby tower to reconfirm its route and each man's task for the rest of the mission. Bob took his position as rear guard as the team began a seven-mile trek through thick underbrush, pine groves and swamp. The ground was dry and each step seemed to echo. The team moved cautiously trying not to be heard. They hoped to avoid any contact with the enemy.

The reason was simple. Combat Controllers are not offensive forces. "We aren't fighters. Our job is to get into an area, do our job, and get out without engaging the enemy," says CMSgt. Jim Howell, NCOIC of the 834th TCW Combat Control Team. He emphasized that engaging enemy forces can only attract attention and that is one thing combat controllers *don't* want.

During the Vietnam war, combat controllers were airdropped to collect reconnaissance information. In Operation "Junction City,"

for example, it was the combat controllers who directed the South Vietnamese Airborne in their attack.

Few pilots ever flew over Vietnam without hearing Combat Control Team call signs, "Tailpipe" and "Toll House."

Tactical Composite Wing Combat Controllers have to undergo rigorous training, which emphasizes avoiding enemy contact. Often in Vietnam they received their reconnaissance training on the spot. Graduation criteria were perhaps the most unusual anywhere.

"They would take part in an actual reconnaissance patrol," says Howell, "and, if they returned alive, they graduated."

Although Bob Blowers and his HALO team (team one) weren't on a reconnaissance mission this time they still wanted to return alive. So they were making every effort to move undetected toward their objective still seven miles away.

"We were to occupy and secure an abandoned enemy camp for use in an overnight bivouac. After the air marshal had been taken out of the country, teams two and three would join us for the night. Then we would all head home in the morning," Blowers recalled later. "Team one would also serve as a decoy to keep aggressors away from the air marshal and team two," he said.

Unfortunately it didn't all work out as planned. The trouble began not long after team two regrouped on the ground, and their team chief, Capt. Dave Larson, led them to their first objective, the area where team three would arrive. It was not far from the drop zone. Once there TSgt. Charlie Hutson, assistant team chief, and SSgt. Bob Weller assisted the third team—called the rappelling team because they leave the helicopter by rappelling down ropes instead of jumping. Rappelling techniques are used when high trees make jumping dangerous.

After the rappelling team was on the ground, Captain Larson led his men to a rendezvous with friendly guerrillas and the air marshal joined them enroute to his escape.

On the ground the third team moved to mark and secure a landing zone for the helicopter that would take the air marshal out of danger.

The hike was routine—until they got within 300 yards of their objective. The crackle of small arms and machinegun fire announced the ambush. Sniper bullets dropped every man on team three, and the landing zone was taken over by the enemy. Later, Capt. Rod Lopez, who had designed the mission, would surmise that the team became complacent because they had such an uneventful hike.

A CLOSE CALL

Meanwhile, team two had a close call. Bob Weller detected the sound of a motorcycle in the distance when team two was less than two hours into its mission.

"It's coming our way," he decided and told the team to take cover.

They had just crossed a road and now they waited anxiously for the threat to pass. Only a few hundred yards away, team one was moving parallel to team two's route. Shortly after the motorcycle passed Captain Larson's unit, they heard the reports of a GAU-5 rifle. Under Major Sears, team one was doing its job as decoy.

Finally both teams were able to continue toward their objectives. Apparently the sniper had fired because he thought he heard or saw something and later decided he hadn't. At least, he didn't bother them again.

Blowers now took point guard for his team and it continued to move. The "point" clears the way and watches for local forces. Additionally, there was one man on each side of the patrol and one in the rear to keep watch. The team moved deeper into foreign territory.

Without warning, a tropical deluge soaked the men—to their delight since it lowered the soaring temperatures. Under cover of the rain, Bob picked up the pace and the team began a forced march on a zigzag course. They first traveled south, then west, then south again, and then east always moving closer to the site of their bivouac. They didn't want local forces to be able to pick up their trail too easily, and the zigzagging hindered any attempts.

Team one had been out nearly five hours when they approached their destination. Unknown to them, they missed an ambush when they decided to go to the east of the swamp rather than west

as their plan indicated. Now they decided to circle the camp and enter from the west. They watched for snipers and guards as they circled, and again their change avoided an ambush.

Meanwhile, Captain Larson and his team weren't having as much luck. They, too, had taken advantage of the rain to make better time and had quickly arrived at the end of their route. But they soon recognized that they had missed their objective by three-fourths of a mile.

The radioman, SSgt. Bob Kelly, moved toward Captain Larson so he could contact the helicopter orbiting the landing zone.

"Team two, this is *Voit-0-3*," the pilot answered. "The landing pad has not been secured and the rappelling team has been zapped. We drew heavy ground fire when we tried to make an approach. Standing by for further instructions."

Captain Larson gathered his team and decided on an alternative course.

"*Voit 0-3*, team two. Echo Juliet 83 25, 72.43."

The pilot told Larson it would take him 15 minutes to reach the new destination. For team two the mission had been extended by 45 minutes.

The team headed west again, the air marshal in the center of their column. Fortunately, the rain had cooled the air and left the leaves and ground wet. The dampness helped hush their movements. But there was a problem, too. The enemy had an additional 45 minutes to locate the pickup point. The team had to move fast.

As they moved out, Hulson took point guard, Bob Weller right security, and Sgt. Mike Brown left security. MSgt. Carl Roberts was rear guard.

The compassman, SSgt. Mike Lampe, the radioman, Captain Larson, and the air marshal grouped in the center of the column. The only obstacles that slowed them now were "gotcha bushes" and "wait-a-minute trees." Says Weller, "That's any tree or bush that gets in your way."

By now team one had started to secure the camp. It was supposedly deserted, but the crack of snipers' rifles announced otherwise.

Blowers and his teammates

began to move through the camp, creeping around corners and cautiously crossing streets.

TEAM ONE HAS PROBLEMS

The snipers' fire was deadly. One by one, team one dropped. As Blowers moved along the street his eyes darted from object to object and tree to tree in search of the enemy. The snipers were well camouflaged. Blowers didn't see the one that got him until he stood up and fired. Team one was dead.

Captain Larson and his men were unaware that they were the sole survivors as they continued toward the pickup point.

As right security Weller was attentive to every sound, and he heard two local soldiers some 200 yards north. A hushed whistle alerted the team and with hand signals Weller told of the danger. They took cover, lying on the wet ground, the smell of rotting vegetation hanging over the area as each man faced in the direction of the aggressors and waited for the "all clear" from Captain Larson. It came.

They continued west. Some of the men had developed blisters from walking in soaked boots. Their wet fatigues began to wear rashes between their legs and under their arms.

Nearly 35 minutes into the extended leg of their march they heard the helicopter overhead. It was about a quarter-mile to the northwest and Captain Larson radioed to verify their rendezvous.

Five hundred yards from the clearing where the air marshal would be hoisted into the helicopter, two men moved out to make sure it was clear of snipers.

Again Larson communicated with the chopper pilot. "*Voit 0-3*, this is team two. I'll mark the pickup point with yellow smoke."

As the smoke spewed from the cannister, Sergeant Roberts moved into the clearing with the air marshal, and the helicopter lowered a hoist.

Roberts waited while his teammates watched from the edge of the woods, alert for snipers. The hoist touched the ground and Roberts strapped the air marshal into it. The chopper crew lifted him to safety.

When the helicopter departed, Roberts rejoined the team and they headed for the bivouac area, still unaware that it was in the hands

TO THE MEN IN THE ARENA

A plaque in tribute to two airmen and one NCO who gave their lives in Southeast Asia hangs on the wall of the Combat Crew Training headquarters at Hurlburt Field, Fla.

Quoting President Theodore Roosevelt, the inscription reads:

"It's not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and who comes short again and again, who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions and spends himself in a worthy cause, who at the best knows the triumphs of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at the least falls while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be among those cold and timid souls who know neither pity nor defeat."

of the enemy. Right now, however, they were relieved and happy. With the air marshal safely out of the country, their mission was completed.

At the "resurrection" of all three teams they reviewed what had been a most realistic training exercise.

"Even with the 80 weeks of training the men receive before they join SOF Combat Control Teams, they continue to train regularly once they're in the outfit," says Howell.

Sergeant Howell notes that combat controllers don't begin with any special qualifications. "They come to us from other career fields and right out of basic training," he says.

Life for the special operations combat controller starts out tough and stays tough. When a man joins, he has to be able to "jump HALO," says their NCOIC. "We take him up to 12,500 feet and push him out of the airplane."

Of course, he's already trained to jump but not from this altitude. Then, too, his chute will open automatically should he panic and forget to pull his rip cord. This is a test.

Few have 3,000 jumps behind them like Chief Howell. But, on the 834th Team, it's likely there are some working on it. 