

Postflight of the '80s

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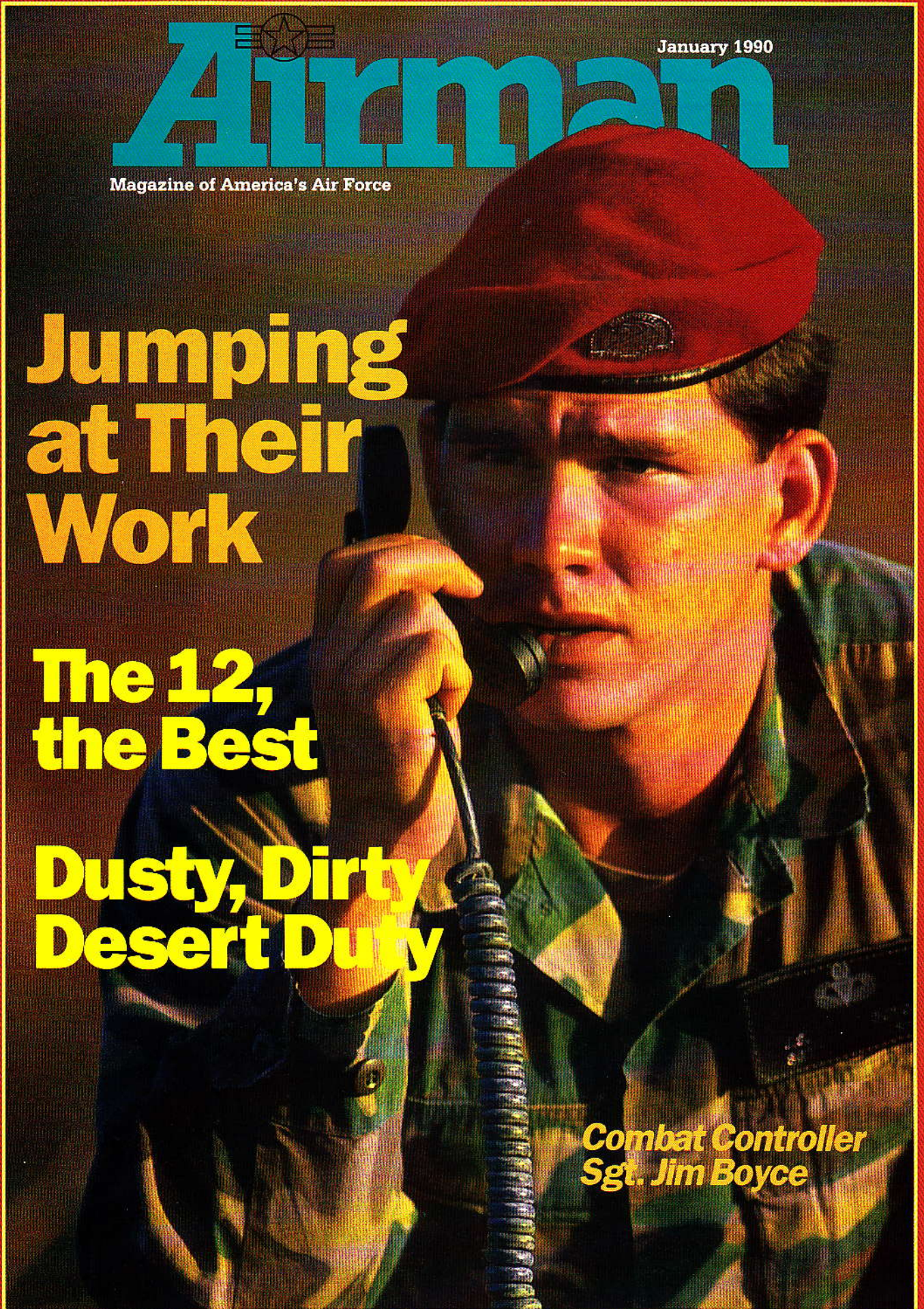
Magazine of America's Air Force

**Jumping
at Their
Work**

**The 12,
the Best**

**Dusty, Dirty
Desert Duty**

**Combat Controller
Sgt. Jim Boyce**



Combat Controllers Head for the Office

Their Commute Is Straight Down.

Story and photos by
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Assistant Director of
Photojournalism

A

C-130 *Hercules* grinds its way on a training flight through the pre-dawn sky at 10,000 feet. Inside, four men with faces blackened, weapons anchored at their sides and 80-pound rucksacks strapped between their knees are on their way to work.

For Air Force combat controllers, getting there is half the battle.

At the green light that signals their arrival at the target area, the four spring out the open troop door for the last leg of their trip. A 42-second free fall takes them to 3,000 feet. There they tug the ripcords that open the square-canopied parachutes that will slow their drop into a jungle clearing — their office this morning.

"Our office is located on the assault zone, usually in a remote

CHUTE COMMUTE: *Combat controllers (top right) drive their parachutes to the office. TSgt. Randy Carmichael (right) pulls and packs his parachute.*



area," said Capt. Ronald Locke, commander of Detachment 1 of the 1721st Combat Control Squadron at Howard AFB, Panama. As a result, combat control teams have earned the reputation of being "first in" to establish drop or landing zones.

But combat controllers have other methods for beating the crowd to the office, from which they provide field air traffic control.

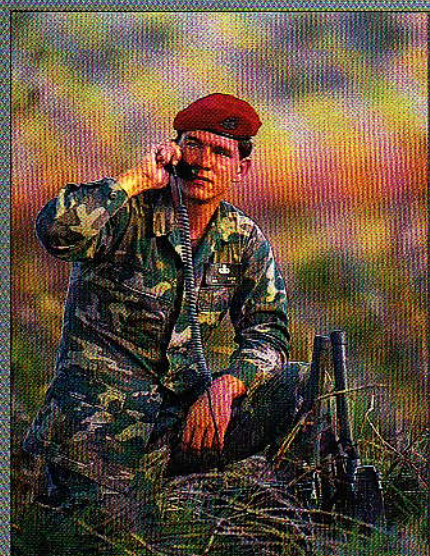
Sometimes, for example, Howard's team calls on Army UH-60







GOING DOWN: S/A Tyler Clark and SSgt. Chet Ebeling (left) prepare to "fast-rope" down from a Blackhawk helicopter. After jumping from a helicopter, TSgt. John Eklof (below) heads for shore. Sgt. James Boyce (bottom) relays wind velocities to a squad of controllers waiting to parachute in.



JUNGLE JAUNT: TSgt. Randy Carmichael and John Eklof (right) plot their position during their jungle patrol. SrA. Tyler Clark (bottom right) pauses during a patrol.

Blackhawk helicopters to deliver them to an assault zone a mere 30 feet above the jungle. Using a technique called "fast-rope," anywhere from four to nine controllers will quickly slide down a four-inch-thick rope from the hovering *Blackhawk*, hit the ground and set up perimeter positions. Just that quickly they're ready for aircraft to begin airdrops or assault landings.

Controllers don't always expect to hit solid ground when they jump. Sometimes they swoop out of a moving *Blackhawk* into the ocean. In their terms, they helo-cast.

Team members are scuba-trained, have attended water survival training, and can swim up to 4,000 meters.

"There are missions where we helo-cast into the ocean and swim 2,000 meters to shore," said TSgt. Randy Carmichael, a team leader. "Then we scout for a drop zone."

Controllers also must be surveyors. Before MAC aircraft can land or drop troops, controllers survey and certify the drop zone. This is especially needed when jungle growth, during the rainy season, transforms familiar remote runways into unrecognizable green clearings.

Controllers determine how many landings the dirt strip can tolerate, check tree lines and rock formations, and ensure aircraft approach and departure angles haven't changed.

These modern-day scouts, marathon swimmers, and surveyors don't have the luxury of a nine-to-five workday. Yet to them, it's always just another day at the office.



