10 Hot Tips on Uniform Wear ● Taking the Guesswork Out of Enlisted Assignments

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Night Watch

Air Force After Dark

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Nighttime AIR FORCE

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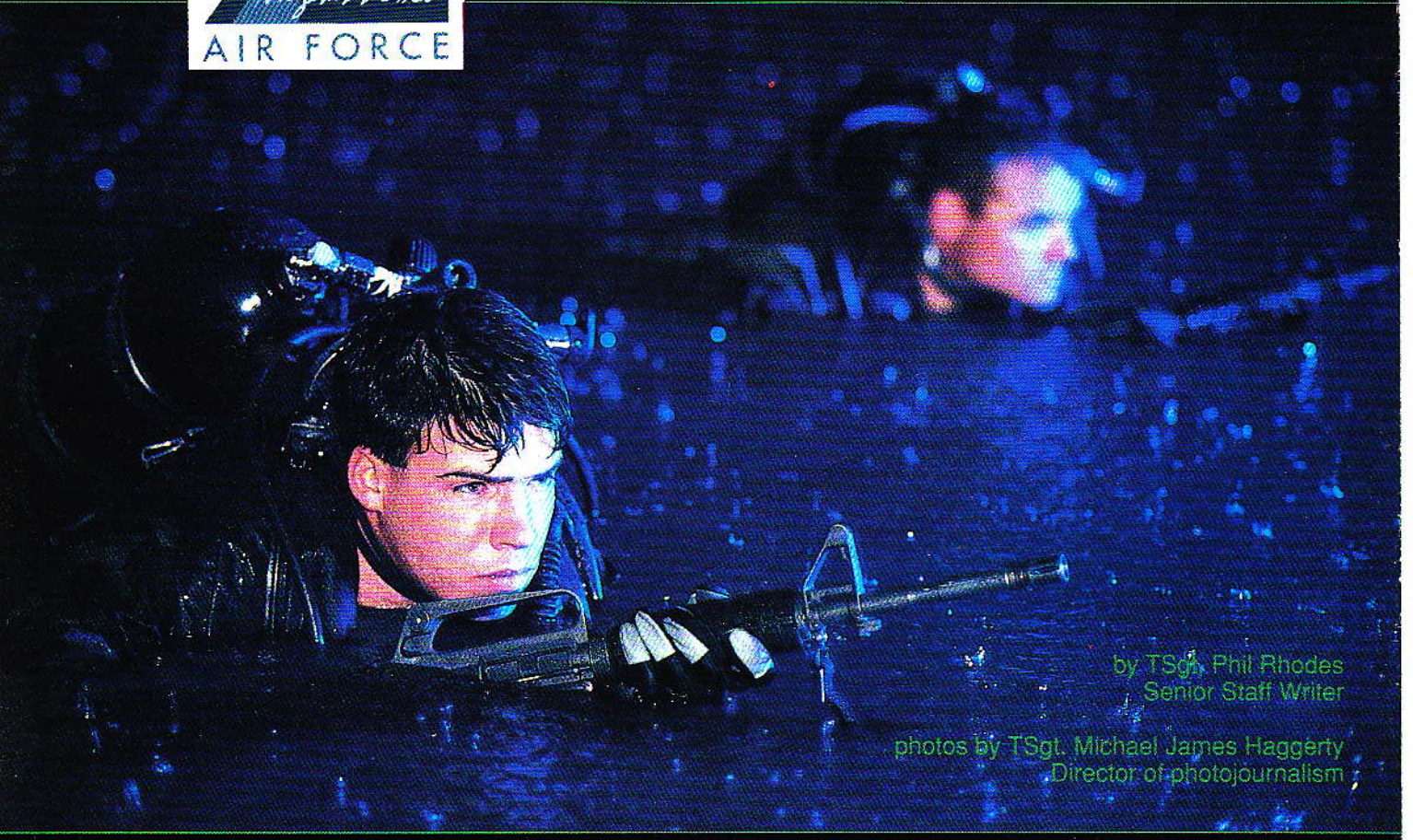


by TSgt. Phil Rhodes
Senior Staff Writer

photos by TSgt. Michael James Haggerty
Director of photojournalism

Ever drive down a pitch-black highway with your headlights off? How about standing in a room so dark you can't see your hands in front of you?

Essentially, that's the environment Air Force special operators work in every day — er, night. Darkness isn't a hindrance to these warriors. It's their ally.

Airman visited the 20th Special Operations Squadron and the 1723rd Special Tactics Squadron, two units of the Air Force Special Operations Command at Hurlburt Field, Fla. During an early morning rendezvous and a late-night flight, special operators showed how they get things done.

Special Tactics

Combat controllers — air traffic controllers with state-of-the-art equipment, and pararescuemen, the best trauma specialists in the Air Force — form the bulk of the 1723rd STS. Years of training are required before these already tough airman are fully qualified for special tactics missions.

From high-altitude parachuting to scuba diving, there's not an environment they can't operate in. Diversity is their trademark. Low keyed but highly confident, special operators work in the background, out of the limelight. In the dead of night.

In the 1723rd, as with all special tactics units, you can't tell a combat controller from a pararescueman. The two are indistinguishable, until you reveal the contents of their 100-pound ruck sacks. PJs stuff their sacks with enough triage gear to treat most injuries. Controllers carry compact satellite communications gear to keep them in touch with anyone, anywhere in the world.

Experts at concealment, team members emerge from their hiding places and move with catlike stealth when night pulls its curtain on the sun.

These warriors rely on night-vision goggles, one-eyed devices strapped to their helmets that turn the world into varying shades of green and black. They cruise through the night in total blackout mode on specially equipped motorcycles, all-terrain vehicles and in trucks, yet they see land features with stunning clarity.

Night hides naught. With infrared scopes, they can detect anything that gives off heat — animals, vehicles and

razors: SILENT

the enemy — hundreds of feet away. Never lost, they can tell with pinpoint accuracy their exact location at any spot in the world, thanks to hand-held global positioning system units.

CMSgt. Robert Boyle, 1723rd STS resource manager, described the typical mission profile for these not-so-typical bluesuiters. "Any air traffic controller can land aircraft and any medic can treat wounded people. It takes a whole different kind of guy to jump out of an airplane at 800 feet while bullets are coming up at you," he said of the dangers special tactics people face.

"You hit the ground in the dead of night, run around with 500 Army Rangers. You have to create order out of chaos, then start landing airplanes. You've got to keep artillery over you, direct gunship and helicopter fire, and clear people and planes on and off the airstrip," said Boyle, one of the few Vietnam veterans in the organization.

"They've got to have the presence of mind to direct things when things go wrong. It's not the life for everyone. Only the special ones."

Low and Fast

Zooming along at 120 miles per hour in an MH-53J isn't particularly frightening, even for the inexperienced. Skimming along above the treetops in the black of night, however, can make even the seasoned flier wince.

But for 20th SOS crews, flying low, fast and in the dark is a matter of faith — complete faith in their flying skills and the MH-53J, the world's most sophisticated helicopter.

The MH-53J Pave Low III, a derivative of the original Super Jolly of Vietnam War fame, features the most complex navigation system ever assembled in a helicopter.

The Pave Low III enhanced navigation system includes a mission computer, ring laser gyro, an inertial navigation system, a global positioning system, Doppler radar, projected map display, a terrain-following/terrain-avoidance system and forward-looking infrared, or FLIR, system.

A six-man crew keeps the aircraft aloft — two pilots, two flight engineers and two gunners. Redundancy is essential. While one pilot keeps his eyes on the instruments, the other scans the horizon. Ditto for the flight engineers. One mans the instruments. The other dons night-vision goggles and scans from the right door. When not firing 7.62mm miniguns or .50-caliber machine guns, the left- and rear-door gunners also act as scanners.

"Scanners will save the aircraft nine times out of 10," said TSgt. G.M. Van Hyning, flight engineer. "Flying at 50 feet is not overly dangerous, but it does add a little tension. When you're down that low going that fast, you don't have room for mistakes. Everyone has to be on his toes doing his job."

Learning to fly the Pave Low III is an eight-month lesson in confidence building, said Lt. Col. Gene Correll, 20th SOS operations officer. "You go out and learn. You take off those night-vision goggles and fly strictly on instruments to develop confidence. And you continually practice it."

The unit flies 80 percent of its training sorties at night, he said. "We fly in what we consider the most dangerous realm there is, about 50 feet above the ground. We do it routinely. In low weather, low visibility, on NVGs [night vision goggles] in zero illumination.

"We don't chase the moon cycle, like in the early days of night-vision goggles," Correll added. "Nowadays with the Pave Low III system and the radar, we go out any night. It's the greatest challenge anyone will face in any aircraft."

Capt. Jeff White, 20th SOS pilot, has nearly 1,300 hours in the Pave Low. Flying night missions without NVGs or the aircraft's enhanced systems is "like being in a closet and not being able to see your hand in front of you," he said.

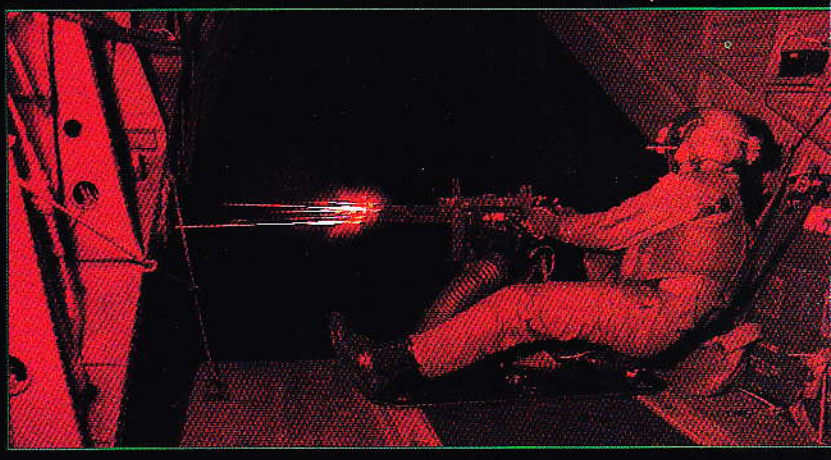
Even if the NVGs were to go bad, the crews can rely on the FLIR system. "FLIR can see things we can't," White said. "For instance, in the desert, until you're within 1,000 feet, you can't see power lines. FLIR can see those power lines about a mile and a half out. We rely on that visual intensity. And we rely on the goggles."

Accurate and reliable, Pave Low III helicopters from the 20th SOS were used to begin the air campaign during the Persian Gulf war.

Four MH-53Js led U.S. Army Apache attack helicopters across the featureless desert to blast open the air corridor through Iraqi air defenses to let F-117A stealth fighters and hundreds of other aircraft hit Baghdad early on the morning of Jan. 17.

"When you're flying low, yankin' and bankin' in the trees and the dirt, to me, personally, it's a great feeling," said SSgt. P.J. Fraley, a flight engineer on Pave Lows since 1986.

"It's exciting. You're one step away from the threshold all the time. Down low. That's where the action is."



Special Tactics Squadron members SrA. Hank Lutz and SrA. Andrew Martin (above, left) wade ashore during an amphibious training mission. SSgt. Ismayel Gonzalez (above), an MH-53J gunner, wails away on the 20mm minigun. With night-vision goggles, Gonzalez sees objects in shades of green, white and black with startling clarity.