

Pacific Stars & Stripes
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Controllers—Those Angels Who Never Fly

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THAT SON, Vietnam (Special) — The sun beats down on the tiny airstrip, generating a heat that can be found only in the Mekong Delta region of the Republic of Vietnam. In the distance can be seen the Cambodian border, while all around, the air is filled with the steady hum of Army helicopters. This is That Son airfield on just about any given day.

Not a garden spot by anybody's measure, this airfield plays an important role as a resupply and refueling area for both the U.S. Army and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) in the delta area. It is also the site of an ARVN training camp and a U.S. Army Special Forces-advised Civilian Irregular Defense Group unit, all of which are frequently subjected to enemy mortar fire from the surrounding hills.



Maintaining control over the constant flow of air traffic in and out of That Son is the responsibility of a group of dedicated Air Force professionals from the 8th Aerial Port Squadron Combat Control Team (CCT). The CCT's in the Republic are part of the Second Aerial Port Group, a prior agency under the 834th Air Div. headquartered at Tan Son Nhut AB.

Left: Airman 1.C. Michael T. Takach guides a C123 to a safe landing at That Son. With their portable radio equipment, the combat controllers provide air traffic control at remote airstrips throughout Vietnam.

Places such as That Son are routine assignments for Combat Controllers. Scattered throughout the Republic are hundreds of small, austere landing strips. At one time or another, Combat Controllers have been to almost all of them.

While air traffic control (ATC) may be one of the least glamorous of the Combat Controllers' varied missions, it remains one of the most important. At That Son, the 2,000 by 53 foot landing strip is surrounded by hills. Making a landing or take-off in either a C-123 Provider or C-7 Caribou always requires a maximum effort on the part, of both the crew and aircraft. Relying on such information from the CCT as wind velocity, condition of the runway, altimeter setting; other aircraft in the area and artillery fire advisories, the crew gains the vital information they need in getting in or out of the strip.



In addition to ATC, the Combat Controllers also provide weather observation service and maintain immediate contact with the Airlift Control Center (ALCC) at Tan Son Nhut. The teams of two or three men operate a battery of high frequency radios from their control jeep. When radio contact cannot be established with an aircraft in the immediate area, flares or signal lights are used. During an average day at That Son, about 100 Army helicopters take-off and land. C123 and C7 flights account for 15 to 20 flights a day in and out of the strip, and another 15 or more are logged by smaller planes such as U.S. Air Force, U.S. Army and Republic of Vietnam Air Force forward air controller aircraft.

The late afternoon sun silhouettes S. Sgt. Robert L. Phillips as he keeps watch for inbound aircraft at That Son.

If there had been no airfield to land on at That Son, or if the runway had deteriorated or been damaged, the CCT would be required to utilize yet another facet of their varied mission — jump into a forward area, secure it, and lay out a drop zone.

Combat Control teams are ready to deploy anywhere in Vietnam by airlift with as little as 15-minutes notice.

Sent by Patrick Aguilar