

# Wounded warrior takes on various challenges, strives

By SENIOR AIRMAN KENTAVIST P. BRACKIN

1st Special Operations Wing  
Public Affairs

Retired Staff Sgt. Johnnie Yellock participated in SCUBA-Pool Emergency Procedures training at the 23rd Special Tactics Training Squadron on Hurlburt Field, Oct. 21.

The training is commonly used as a refresher to familiarize Airmen with life support equipment not used in daily activities, and highlight the dangers associated with a high-risk activity like scuba diving.

For Yellock, former 23rd STS combat controller, it's the first time he has attempted scuba diving since a deployment to Afghanistan in 2011, where he suffered serious injuries from an improvised explosive device. The explosion resulted in open fractures and lost portions of bones in both of his lower extremities.

Initially, the injuries all but crippled the Fort Worth, Texas native, and doctors told him that he would never be able to run again.

"I feel like doctors are supposed to be as blunt as possible with you and what they say applies to normal people," said Yellock.

The special operations community is anything but normal, he added.

Since his injuries to his legs, he has endured 30 surgeries and now wears adapted braces. The braces help him maintain the same amount of physical activity he has grown accustomed to throughout his life, such as running and swimming.

One of challenges he faced during the refresher training was maintaining his balance in water without the usual support and propulsion of his legs.

"Johnny's situation does not allow the use of swim fins," said Michael Gray, 24th Special Operations Wing water operations instructor. "He pretty much follows the same guidelines used for paraplegics."

According to Gray, he had to



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Johnnie Yellock, middle, retired Staff Sgt. and 23rd Special Tactics Squadron combat controller, takes a group photo with his instructors during SCUBA-Pool Emergency Procedures training on Hurlburt Field. Oct. 21.

demonstrate mastery of buoyancy control similar to that of an astronaut untethered in space.

Yellock noted diving was one of the simpler challenges compared to when he was initially injured. During his recovery process, one of the hardest things he had to overcome was relying on others.

"For combat controllers, it sucks when you can't control anything anymore, like seeing something at the edge of a table or the foot of your bed about to fall off and you can't pre-emptively grab it before it does," he said. "You just have to sit there and watch."

He attributes his resiliency and cheerful demeanor despite those hardships to a strong support network of family, friends and fellow combat controllers.



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Johnnie Yellock, retired Staff Sgt. and 23rd Special Tactics Squadron combat controller, poses for a photo after completing the SCUBA-Pool Emergency Procedures training on Hurlburt Field. Oct. 21.



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Yellock attempts vertical swimming.

# SecAF learns how Hurlburt Air Commandos operate

By SRA CHRISTOPHER CALLAWAY

1st Special Operations Wing  
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Secretary of the Air Force Deborah Lee James learned how Air Commandos operate during a visit to Hurlburt Field, Oct. 20-21.

James said she is making her way to bases across the Air Force to familiarize herself with various missions and discuss her priorities with Airmen.

"If you look back at our 67-year history, today we are the smallest Air Force we have ever been, yet our operations tempo is nearly through the roof," she said. "The great news is we have great technology and even better people."

Immediately after landing at Hurlburt, the Secretary attended mission briefs at various units and viewed four different aircraft. Later that night, she participated in training flights of an AC-130U Spooky Gunship and a CV-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft, getting an up-close look at the capabilities both aircraft and their crews can deliver.

"Since arriving, I have had the privilege of meeting many very wonderful, passionate and dedicated Airmen in all the communities," James said.

The next morning more than 500 Air Commandos gathered at the Freedom Hangar for an all-call with the Secretary.

She discussed a variety of topics but said the Air Force is fueled by its people.

"I would like to talk to everyone about the three priorities I have established for our Air Force," she said. "The most important priority is taking care of the people. Everything comes down to people. Technology is cool, equipment is cool, but if you do not have the right people, you don't have anything to hang your hat on."

After the all-call she visited multiple Air Force Special Operations Command units and



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Secretary of the Air Force Deborah Lee James enters the Riptide Dining Facility at Hurlburt Field, Oct. 21. James met with Airmen and toured various facilities here to familiarize herself with Air Commando operations.



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Secretary of the Air Force Deborah Lee James looks out a window on board an AC-130U Spooky Gunship, Oct. 20.



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Secretary of the Air Force Deborah Lee James takes a selfie with Col. Bill West, 1st Special Operations Wing commander, and other 1st SOW personnel at Hurlburt.

had lunch with Airmen at the Riptide Dining Facility.

"My experience with the SecAF was remarkable," said Staff Sgt. Marcus Wright, 1st Special Operations Aircraft Maintenance Squadron commander support staff NCO-in charge. "Having the opportunity to listen and converse with someone so important to my

Air Force career was amazing. I feel she is truly passionate about what she does and is really trying to make things happen in today's Air Force."

Following the lunch, James had a one-on-one meeting with Jill Stewmon, Hurlburt's Sexual Assault Response Coordinator, followed by a final brief and tour at the Air Force Special

Operations Air Warfare Center.

"I always meet with the base's SARC because it is a top issue with me," she said. "We are working on stamping out sexual assault in our Air Force and we all have a role to play. We want you all to take this seriously and provide the correct atmosphere for all here in our

Air Force."

Concluding her speech, she thanked Airmen for their dedication.

"I thank you all so very much," the Secretary said. "I am onward and upward for the rest of my day and am thoroughly impressed with everything you guys do."