

CCT @ The Eye of the Storm

COMBAT CONTROLLERS - FIRST IN, LAST OUT from Sgt Mac's Bar

November 1968 - Tan Son Nhut AB, Vietnam - Combat Controllers TSgt Mort Freedman and Sgt Jim Lundie and their airlift mission commander, Major John Gallagher, lay in a ditch along what was left of the Kham Duc runway. Sweat poured from their dirt-caked bodies and etched tiny rivers of grime down their beard-stubble faces. Their flak vests and steel helmets provided protection on the outside but kept the heat on the inside swirling into a built-in steam bath. They had been this way for three days. There was no hint of the typical, spit-and-polish, Combat Control image. No starched fatigues topped with a blue beret nattily cocked to one side. Not that it mattered now.

They squinted hard into the glare of the Vietnam day, searching for some sign, any sign, of a rescuer who would pluck them from this nightmare.

Kham Duc - Until a week earlier, it had been just one of many Special Forces camps dotting the Vietnamese countryside. Now it was destined to capture the attention of the entire country.

For two days, the two combat controllers had labored under a fierce barrage of enemy mortar fire, directing Air Force C-130 'Hercules', C-123 'Providers', C-7 'Caribous' and even Army 'Huey' helicopters into and out of the airstrip. Their MRC-108 radio jeep had been peppered by deadly mortar shrapnel, and had almost taken a direct hit. The jeep trailer was completely destroyed by the near miss. During the attacks they had dragged wounded from exposed areas to cover, where they could give first aid. They had even directed fighter strikes on enemy positions around the perimeter until an airborne forward air controller (FAC) arrived.



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One C-130 was hit by ground fire on landing. It lay crumpled on the side of the runway. The runway and camp were strewn with the wreckage of helicopters, bulldozers, vehicles and other aircraft. (DOD Official Photo)

It was now coming to a foreboding climax. They had come close to death during the past two days. Now, they

thought, their time had indeed come. Earlier that afternoon, the entire camp had been evacuated in one of the most harrowing and spectacular airlifts ever carried out. One C-130 was hit by ground fire on landing. It lay crumpled on the side of the runway. The runway and camp were strewn with the wreckage of helicopters, bulldozers, vehicles and other aircraft.

Now the relative silence was deathly. Gone were the sounds of aircraft landing and taking off. Gone was the evacuees' high-pitched banter as they waited to be picked up. The combat control radio jeep had been

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destroyed in preparation for a quick air evacuation. The survival radio was out. Everything was gone. Everything, that is, except the three Americans; and the North Vietnamese soldiers who were closing in around the camp. The three men could see the figures darting back and forth between gun emplacements, waiting for the order to charge down and take the camp.

It was normal for the combat controllers to be the last out of a camp. They were always the "first in, last out", according to their unofficial motto. But where was that last plane; the one that was to take them out? Have they left us? Have we been forgotten? Despair quickly answered their question.

The sound of airplane engines ("the greatest sound in the world") snapped them back to reality. A C-123 swooped in low and touched down. The combat controllers sprang to their feet and made a dash to the taxiing plane. Enemy automatic weapons blazed away. Tracers lighted a deadly path toward the moving plane. Mortar rounds were landing all around the aircraft.

The plane picked up speed. It wasn't stopping!

Lundie and Freedman yelled at the tops of their voices, but it was to no one. Their pleas were lost in the thunderous roar of the engines and jet boosters. "They didn't see us. They didn't see us," cursed Lundie.

NVA tracer bullets from machine gun emplacements at the end of the runway followed the C-123 as it climbed out of range. Quickly the enemy gunners pivoted back down on the runway where the three lonely figures stood, their hopes of rescue now dashed. And just as quickly, the controllers bolted for the relative safety of the ditch, firing their M-16s from the hip as they ran, silencing at least one of the guns.



Sgt James Lundie
8th APS, RVN 1968



Sgt Michael K. Dunphy, left, and Sgt James G. Lundie
bring in a Hercules near Bac Lieu.

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"That was really it," Freedman recalled later. "They sent in a plane but the pilot saw no one left on the ground, so he took off. No one would come back. At that point we had two choices. Either be taken prisoner or fight it out. There was no doubt about it. We had 11 magazines left among us and we were going to take as many of them with us as we could."

"I told Lundy that if he made it and I didn't, to be sure to get my wallet so those bastards wouldn't take it."

The C-123 crew had seen them, but was too far down the runway to stop. And soon another C-123, piloted by Lt Col Joe Jackson and Major Jesse Campbell, landed in a barrage of enemy bullets and mortar shells, screeched to a stop long enough for the combat controllers and their mission commander to jump in, and took off, trailed by the "biggest hail of tracers you've ever seen."

Mort Freedman and Jim Lundy's experience at Kham Duc is by no means "all in a day's work" for combat controllers; but it serves to underscore **combat** in combat control. Vietnam is providing Combat Control Teams (CCT) with their first real test under fire.

"Our purpose in being, as planned in 1952, and as practiced in Vietnam today, is basically unchanged," explained Major Robert Barinowski, head combat controller in Vietnam. "We've had a few variations in theme, but our primary task is still that of performing as air traffic controllers in a forward, austere airstrip or drop zone."



Sgt Michael Welding
8th APS, RVN 1968



Sgt John Rosemeyer
8th APS, RVN 1968



TSgt Timothy McCann
8th APS, RVN 1968

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The need for the combat control function arose in World War II when, in Sicily, Army paratroopers were scattered all over the countryside because no one was controlling the drops from the ground. The dispersal of men and equipment made the airborne force ineffective as a combat unit.

Since that time Air Force combat controllers had been a part of US troop deployments to meet crises in Lebanon, the Congo, and the Dominican Republic and were put on alert during the Cuban crisis in 1962. During troop and cargo airlifts, they are always the first in to the airstrip or drop zone to set up marker panels, portable communication and navigational gear necessary to accurately guide the main wave of airlift aircraft in.

But never has the combat control team concept, and the mettle of the controllers, been tested like it is in Vietnam today. And as the nature of the Vietnam War is one of constant change in tactics and strategy, so it has followed that combat control has had to adapt and innovate with the shifting scenes.

One combat controller who speaks with great authority on the job of the "Blue Berets" in Vietnam is Capt Hayden F. Sears, Jr., who has been in country since 1965, longer than any other controller.

"When I arrived we had 24 men and were housed in a shack here at Tan Son Nhut," he recalls. "Now we are three times that number. In the beginning, we had many air traffic control (ATC) missions, because control towers had not yet been constructed at various remote airstrips."

"But today many of those strips have permanent towers and some navigational equipment. As a result, our ATC mission has decreased and our role as a field extension of the airlift command and control system has become more prominent."

Using high-frequency radios, the combat controllers feed vital data from remote airstrips back to the 834th Air Division Airlift Control Center at Tan Son Nhut, the nerve center for all in-country airlift operations.

"Also during the first year, we had very few rocket and mortar attacks to hinder our job," Sears continued. "That sure has changed! Now we're always sandbagging the radio jeep and always digging a foxhole on the DZ for the combat controller."

Today, at the peak of their activity in Vietnam, combat controllers are deployed throughout the country by the Airlift Control Center. The men are divided into three teams, each headed by an officer and consisting of air traffic controllers and radio maintenance specialists. One team is always on alert, ready with jeep and portable navigational aids to deploy by airlift in as little as 15 minutes.

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Sgt James Sink
8th APS, RVN 1968



SSgt John Eddington
8th APS, RVN 1968

Their missions are varied. Like a one-day air traffic control job at a remote airfield guiding in airlift C-130s, C-123s or C-7s laden with badly needed supplies; or accompanying the 1st Air Cavalry Division tramping through the jungles for 30 days, providing necessary control for emergency airdrops of ammunition, rations and fuel. The operating conditions vary, too---from the relative quiet of nearby outgoing friendly artillery, to the terrors of "incoming" rounds of a Kham Duc or Khe Sanh.

Between field missions, the combat controllers go through numerous standard checks at their Tan Son Nhut home station, maintaining proficiency in air traffic control procedures, packing parachutes, performing radio maintenance, cleaning their weapons (the M-16 and the shortened version, the CAR-15 used in par drops) and spending time on the rifle range.

Perhaps the clearest image of what a combat controller's life in Vietnam is all about is found by snatching glimpses of experiences during various operations.

Since most of the CCT was at Khe Sanh at one time or another during the 78-day siege, that operation---in which eight controllers received Purple Hearts---provides a good look.

Jim Lundie was there, crouched in a foxhole, directing aircraft in and out of the airstrip on February 23, when the NVA fired over 1,000 artillery rounds into the combat base, or the equivalent of nearly one round a minute. He'll never forget that day. It was his 21st birthday.

Following the crash of a Marine helicopter, Captain Sears and his team of SSgt Jimmy Grishom, Sgt Arthur Hosey, Freedman and Lundie, ignored the possible explosion of the helicopters fuel and incoming mortar rounds to pull the crew members out of the burning wreckage. Although two were already dead, the third was saved by their action.

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TSgt Thomas Monley and his team of Sgts David McCracken, Erwin Rhodes and Walter Smith, have been awarded Silver Stars for pushing a burning pallet of mortar rounds away from Khe Sanh's populated bunkers (Lifeline to Khe Sanh, The Airman, July 1968).

During another operation the 1st Air Cavalry Division pushed into the A Shau Valley, an enemy stronghold. TSgt Richard Taylor, SSgt James Philpot and Sgts Gary Brock and Michael Welding went into the valley's thick, jungle carpeted floor with the first wave of assault helicopters, which received some of the heaviest enemy antiaircraft fire of the war. Once in the valley, the CCT marked the assault landing strip for C-123s and C-7s and directed C-130s over the drop zone for emergency drops of ammunition, rations and fuel. During the same operation, SSgt Robert Mahaffey withstood five straight hours of enemy shelling to perform the control mission.

On one of the rare airborne operations, Capt Danny M. Pugh, a 19-month Vietnam veteran, led his eight-man team in combat control's classic role---support of a mass parachute assault. Jumping 30 minutes ahead of a 1,000-man Vietnamese paratroop formation at Van Kiep, the CCT was dropped short of the drop zone. Realizing the error and realizing the potential disaster if the mass formation was also dropped short, Pugh led his team at a rapid clip, overland, through enemy territory. They found the DZ, set up communications equipment, and guided the formation in---right on schedule. There was no doubt about the value of combat control on that occasion.

On another jump two years ago, Capt Sears, who has four combat jumps to his credit (more than any other controller), parachuted into a drop zone in the Northern II Corps Tactical Zone.

"We jumped from about 800 feet," he said, "and immediately could hear ground fire coming up at us. All of a sudden, I felt something, and looked up to see two bullet holes in my 'chute. When we hit the ground, we started receiving a lot of sniper fire."

More Than Guts and Glory - But combat control is more than the guts and glory of combat. It takes a special breed to hurdle all the obstacles set in the path of earning and keeping the blue beret. In addition to jump school, combat controllers attend other schools: control tower, combat control, survival, tropical survival, arctic survival, water survival, amphibious training, High Altitude Low Opening, parachute rigging, and radio maintenance. And what's more, failing any one school means elimination from combat control.

"In Vietnam, in a given month, we work more airfields than drop zones," said Major Barinowski. "Consequently, I place heavy emphasis on proficiency in air-landing techniques---operating three or four radios, proper voice procedures, 'stacking' airplanes; and on two other tasks which have become part of our mission in Vietnam---coordinating artillery firings with landings of aircraft, and installation and maintenance of the Ground Proximity Extraction System, a method used by the C-130s to delivery bulky cargo loads to the ground forces.

But no matter what role combat controllers perform, one fact is certain: they are a vital part of the airlift effort in Vietnam. It doesn't really matter whether they're the "first in and last out." It's what they do while there that counts. And that adds up to quite a lot.

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8th Aerial Port Squadron, Combat Control Team (Circa 1968 - Sgt Mac's Bar)

Back Row (L to R) Bob Barinowski, Gene Hatfield, John Rosemeyer, Larry Lower, Marty North, Dennis Herbert, (Hosey or Gary Keiser?), Harper, Philpot, Danny Deaver

Center Row (L to R) Dan Coonan, Danny Pugh, Pete Taylor, Bob Triplett, Lonnie Stewart, Jim Sink, Virgil Cox, Raymond Cameron.

Kneeling (L to R) Hayden Sears, Vince Campisi, Tim McCann, Dusty Rhodes, Walter Smith, Dave McCracken, Rudy Elizondo.



*Ed. Note: CCT's unofficial motto: **First in, Last out** was later changed to the official motto **FIRST IN**, after learning the former was adopted earlier by an Army unit. Source: DOD Heraldry Division.*

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