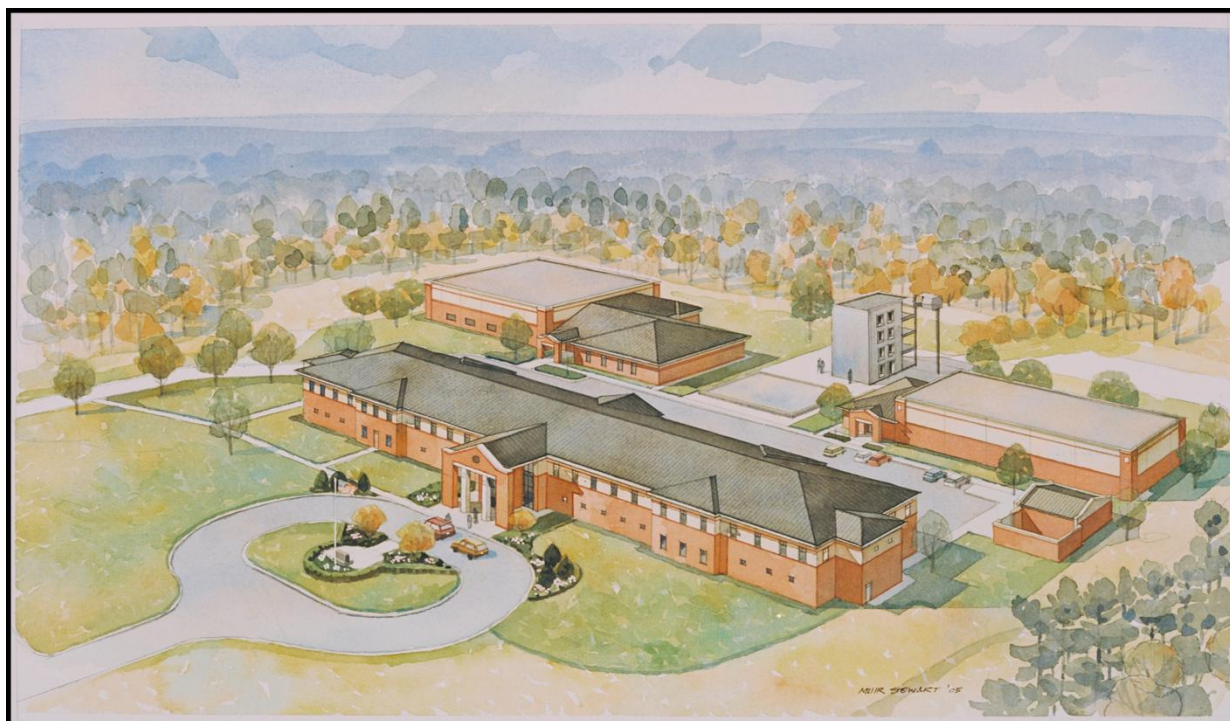


AIR FORCE COMBAT CONTROLLERS PLAY A KEY ROLE by Donna Miles, American Forces Press Service

April 26, 2004- Washington -- The largest-ever class of future Air Force combat controllers is training at Pope Air Force Base, N.C., to provide critical skills required in the war on terror.

The current class of 32 students will help bolster the Air Force's cadre of 360 combat controllers -- special operations forces who deploy quickly into restricted, often hostile territory, set up landing strips and guide in helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft.



The Combat Control School campus, Pope AFB, NC is shown here in the builder's architectural drawing. The main building is pictured at the end of a circular drive that connects to Riley Road. At left-rear is a fitness center with a fully equipped work-out area and training pool. The pool is used for pre-scuba training. At right-rear is a multilane firing range for weapons qualification and training. (Architectural drawing courtesy of the Combat Control School)

Master Sgt. Tim Tennant, director of operations for the Combat Control School, said the new crop of combat controllers will provide a wide range of other support during combat operations, from controlling air traffic to setting up drop zones to calling in air strikes.

"We're the air-to-ground link," said Tech. Sgt. Robert Boulanger, noncommissioned officer in charge of the course. "We talk Air Force language to (Navy) SEALs and to the Army on the ground. It allows us to get more airpower into a theater of operations in a smaller amount of time."

NOTE: This online-only information was added to the CCT history after publication of *The Eye of the Storm – A history of Combat Control Teams*.



This sign marks the school exit off of Riley Road. It is located very near the north end of Pope's main runway. (Photo courtesy of Red Ghormley - CCA LM 251).

Like most of his fellow combat controllers, Boulanger has deployed frequently in support of the war on terror — three

times to Afghanistan and once to Iraq. True to the combat controllers' motto, "First there," he said he was the 13th person to jump from the first U.S. aircraft into Afghanistan in October 2001, just one month after terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. "I was still angry," he said.

Anger, top physical fitness and finely honed skills in air traffic control, close-air support and command and control made Boulanger a formidable force on the battlefield. During his first four-month mission to Afghanistan, he established an airhead to support combat operations and identified where the enemy was to direct U.S. military ordnance onto key Taliban and al Qaeda targets. "It was a combination of precision-guided munitions and a guy on the ground telling them where they need to go," Boulanger said.

During his deployment to Iraq for the first three months of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Boulanger was attached to a Navy SEAL team to provide a liaison between the air and ground forces. He also was one of three combat controllers on the special operations team that rescued prisoner of war Pfc. Jessica Lynch. "It was very rewarding to see that frail little woman," he said.

Well-versed on the real-life demands on combat controllers, Boulanger said he strives to instill in his students the physical and mental skills needed to do the job.

Before starting the 13-week Combat Control School, students complete the 15-week Air Force Air Traffic Control School at Keesler Air Force Base, Miss., the three-week Army Airborne School at Fort Benning, Ga., and the three-week Air Force Basic Survival School at Fairchild Air Force Base, Wash.

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At Pope Air Force Base, the students' training focuses on field training, demolitions, battlefield communications, land navigation and small-unit tactics. Their training culminates with a field exercise that requires them to set up drop zones and landing zones, establish a runway and direct in an aircraft, all within strict timeframes.

Physical fitness gets stressed throughout the training and remains paramount after students don their distinctive scarlet berets after graduation. "Having a high level of physical fitness allows you to think clear under stress," Boulanger said.

He said the school's intensive fitness standards ensure that combat controllers can carry communications equipment and other gear in rucksacks that often exceed 100 pounds, frequently moving over long distances with other special operations forces. "You have to be in great shape to keep up and not be a liability," Boulanger said.

Attention to detail is also vital for combat controllers, as well as ability to work as a team. "In our role as combat controllers, sometimes you're leading and sometimes you're following," Boulanger said. "You have to be able to do both."

But even more important, Tennant said, is mental toughness. "You have to be stubborn and have a non-quit attitude," he said. "It takes an extraordinary level of dedication."

Dedication "isn't something you can teach," Boulanger acknowledged. "But you can teach all the things that lead up to it."

Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld praised combat controllers' dedication during a visit in December to the Combat Control School, which he said, "produces some of the finest warriors in the Air Force and the armed services." Rumsfeld noted that "some 85 percent of the air strikes in Operation Enduring Freedom were called in by Air Force combat controllers" — a testament, he said, to the quality of the training they receive and the airmen's courage and skills.

Today's combat controllers carry out far more diverse missions than envisioned when they were established as Army Pathfinders during World War II. These parachute infantrymen, trained in air traffic control, first earned their stripes in 1943 when they used radios, smoke pots and flares to mark the way for 82nd Airborne Division paratroopers jumping into Salerno, Italy.

Since then, Army Pathfinders — which became Air Force combat controllers after the Air Force was established in 1947 -- expanded their missions to include navigation aid and air traffic control. Now they're an integral part of a huge percentage of U.S. military combat, humanitarian assistance and other missions.

Combat controllers say they expect this trend to continue in the future. "Special Forces is just screaming for us out there," said Boulanger. "This is a growth industry," agreed Tennant, "with combat controllers involved in more and more emerging missions."

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