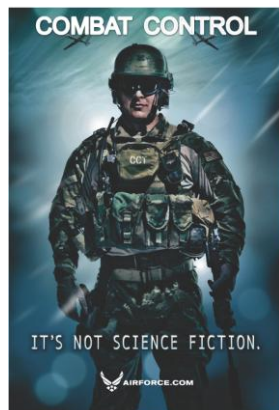


## AIRMEN IN THE SHADOWS by W. Thomas Smith, Jr.

*The Air Force is a major player in rooting out terrorists.*

**September 17, 2004 - National Review Online** - When most Americans think of the U.S. Air Force, the first images that come to mind are of supersonic fighters like the F-15 Eagle or the new F-22 Raptor. Perhaps they think of B-2 stealth bombers, the big lumbering B-52 Stratofortresses, or C-130 and C-141 cargo planes. Some may think of nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles, reconnaissance satellites, or super-secret subterranean command posts like the one beneath Colorado's Cheyenne Mountain. After all, aircraft, crews, and ICBMs have been the service's *raison d'être* since breaking free from the U.S. Army and becoming a separate branch of the U.S. armed forces on September 18, 1947.



Few Americans, however, think of Air Force "special tactics" commandos as trained and equipped to fight in a ground combat environment, when, in fact, airmen are often first on the ground during airborne and special operations.

Like Navy SEALs, Army Special Forces, and Recon Marines, the missions of these airmen are often classified; their efforts rarely make the papers. They don't duplicate the work of other "shooters": Instead they bring a number of unique features to the special-operations mix, including men, aircraft, and battle-field wizardry.

"The Air Force has always prided itself on things like high-tech information systems and space technologies, and that has carried over into its approach to special operations," Maj. General William W. Hoover (a retired two-star who currently serves as an advisor to NASA) tells NRO. "Our ability to precision-locate things, to insert people and weapons systems, and to communicate has simply been devastating to the enemy."

Beyond the science is the art. And that's where the operators come in.



Air Force special-tactics units are comprised of three elements (not including the pilots, aircrews, and support personnel). These include combat controllers, pararescuemen, and combat weather teams.

Combat controllers are specially trained paratroopers who jump in advance of large-scale airborne assaults—like the one conducted by the Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade over northern Iraq in March 2003—in order to set up, secure, and provide on-ground navigational assistance on landing or drop zones for inbound pilots and paratroopers. As the title suggests, the combat controller's specialty is establishing and maintaining air-traffic control in a combat zone. But as highly skilled air commandos who are almost always outnumbered by enemy forces on the ground, they often find themselves performing tasks outside the box.

Isolated, behind enemy lines or far out in front of advancing friendly armies, a combat controller might be tasked with coordinating an air strike on an enemy air-defense position. Equipped with special range-finding binoculars, a palm-top computer, a GPS (global positioning system) receiver, and a rifle, the airmen can clandestinely spot the target, direct an attacking pilot to it, and then leap on a motorcycle and race toward another target where he will repeat the process.

On another mission, combat controllers might be tasked with making a high altitude/low opening (HALO) parachute jump onto a field slated to be assaulted by larger airborne forces. There, the airmen will silently land, overwhelm and kill and any defenders who discover them, and prepare the way for inbound planes and paratroopers.

In the hours before the 1983 invasion of Grenada, a handful of combat controllers and SEALs conducted an open-water parachute drop off Point Salinas on the southern tip of the island. The SEALs were responsible for reconnoitering the airfield, determining the condition of the runway, then locating and determining the strength of nearby enemy forces. The airmen were tasked with positioning radar beacons on the airfield so that parachuting Army Rangers and other airborne forces would be able to find the drop zone. Unfortunately, four SEALs drowned in heavy seas, and the others were ordered to withdraw before completing the mission.

Nevertheless, the invasion was a "go," and just over 24 hours later, a team of combat controllers made the first parachute jump over the island's heavily defended Point Salinas Airport. Weighed down with nearly 100 pounds of equipment, the airmen jumped from an altitude of only 500 feet. A malfunctioning main parachute would have killed them. On the ground and under constant fire from Cuban forces, the airmen then directed transport aircraft ferrying two parachuting battalions of the Army's 75th Ranger Regiment over the airport. At Point Salinas, the combat controllers and the Rangers encountered the toughest overall resistance of the operation.



*U.S. Army Pathfinder Badge*

Air Force combat controllers trace their lineage to the U.S. Army's pathfinders of World War II. During some of the earliest American airborne operations, paratroopers were inadvertently dropped several miles short of their drop zones by pilots then utilizing crude methods of navigation. As a result, the Army began training pathfinders—scouts who parachuted over the target drop zone before the main airborne assault, secured the field, and then guided the aircraft in over the target. As a means of signaling the pilots, the pathfinders used all manner of "visuals" from smoke pots to flares to flashlights and small fires. They also used crude radio homing devices that the pilots could follow.

When the war ended in 1945, pathfinder units were some of the first to be disbanded (the Army reestablished its pathfinder program in 1955). In 1947, the National Security Act was passed, which, among other things, established the Air Force as a separate arm of service. Soon thereafter, pathfinder responsibilities were assumed by the Air Force's new Air Resupply and Communications Service—the direct predecessor organization to the modern Air Force combat-control teams.



Today, the scarlet beret of a combat controller is highly sought by many young Air Force recruits, but not all pack the mental or physical gear to win it. The Air Force wants "men [women are currently barred from serving in special operations] between the ages of 18 and 27 who are athletic enough to enter the ranks" and tough enough to remain there.

All applicants for combat-controller slots must pass a rigorous Physical Abilities and Stamina Test, including swimming, running, pull-ups, sit-ups, push-ups, and flutter kicks. The test is followed by a grueling ten-week indoctrination course, affectionately referred to as "Ironman 101."

The course is characterized by constant running and calisthenics. But the most difficult portion is the

"pool work." During pool work, students must demonstrate the ability to swim with a weight belt, tread water, drown-proof, and work closely with a "buddy" swimmer. The course is meant to enhance the water confidence of those who have what it takes and eliminate those who don't.

Following "Ironman 101," combat-control hopefuls must attend a variety of special-operations-related schools including the Army's combat-diver school, Navy underwater-egress training, Army parachute training, Air Force survival training, and field-tactics training. Additionally, students are trained in the use of ropes, skis, and motorcycles.

Upon successful completion of the combat-training programs, the students must earn the second part of their title, "controller." To do so, they attend the Air Force's air-traffic-control school, where they ultimately become certified by the Federal Aviation Administration.

To suggest that their training is tough is an understatement. In fact, only seven men out of a total of 130 candidates in Combat Control class 02-04 stayed the course and graduated in December 2002.

The second element of Air Force special tactics is pararescue. These airmen, recognizable by their maroon berets, are trained to save lives by jumping, swimming, or fighting their way overland into enemy-held territory in order to rescue wounded American soldiers or downed pilots. Like combat controllers, pararescuemen are all parachute, dive, and survival qualified, but they also undergo a demanding medical course followed by a recovery-and-rescue course.

The third special-tactics element is the combat weather team. A unique force, a combat weather team is comprised of parachute-qualified meteorologists armed with pistols and assault rifles for personal protection on the ground. The mission of the gray-bereted "weathermen" is to gather and update real-time weather data during special operations.

Like all special-operations forces, members of Air Force special tactics are usually deployed with the "bare minimum" supplies and equipment needed to complete their mission: just the basics that will sustain them for up to 72 hours without being re-supplied. Beyond that time, the airmen will find themselves in dire need of "consumables"—food, water, batteries, vehicle fuel, and additional equipment that may not have been factored into the needs of the original mission.

Today, 57 years after its establishment as a separate service, the Air Force maintains approximately 370,473 men and women in uniform (not counting the Air Force Reserve and Air National Guard). Counting special-operations pilots, crews, and special-tactics airmen, there are 12,735 active-duty personnel assigned to Air Force special operations. It's a number that will increase as the special-operations community continues to expand.

During the early days of the war on terror, airmen were among the first to see action. In one instance, according to General Hoover, a special-tactics team jumped into Afghanistan, secured a tower at a deserted airport, and from there, coordinated air strikes on Taliban forces less than a mile away. "This kind of capability was a new dimension the bad guys had not experienced with the Soviets," he says. "The marriage between technology and special operators is one of the reasons we've been so successful against the enemy in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere in the world." And it's why we will continue to be.

*—A former U.S. Marine infantry leader and paratrooper, W. Thomas Smith Jr. is a freelance journalist and the author of four books, including the [Alpha Bravo Delta Guide to American Airborne Forces](#). --The article was reprinted with permission granted by Mr. Smith in an email sent to the EOS author on November 13, 2009. Public domain images added for emphasis.*

