

FIRST AIR FORCE DIVE COURSE GRADUATES 17 AIRMEN by Chrissy Cuttita, 325th Fighter Wing Public Affairs

March 16, 2006 - Tyndall Air Force Base, Florida (AFPN) -- This was the final test. An underwater compass and a buddy harnessed three feet from their bodies provide direction.



A 25-pound breathing device strapped to their chests provides vital oxygen while underwater without making surface bubbles.

A 50-pound rucksack and weapon weighted on their backs are the tools they'll need to infiltrate the beach when they get there.

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TSgt. Sean McGinley, instructor, inspects Airman 1st Class Conor Wesling, a Combat Dive Course pararescueman student. Instructors inspect each student before the students dive to ensure their equipment is connected correctly. (U.S. Air Force photo/Chrissy Cuttita)

These teams of two kick underwater in murky water more than 2,000 yards to reach the shore. They have to hit a precise, targeted objective there without being spotted by anyone on boat or land. Fortunately, they succeed.

The new Air Force Combat Dive Course here graduated its first class of 17 special operations Airmen on March 2, after students completed more

than six weeks of high-risk rigorous training at the Panama City Naval Support Activity's shoreline. To get there, the graduates had to build underwater confidence and teamwork.

"They are excited to be here and find an amount of ownership in being the first class," said Tech. Sgt. Marshal McClanahan, CDC NCO in charge of operations, who applies his former Marine force reconnaissance skills to the training he provides to the Air Force. "They'll eventually meet others in this career field and share the experience with them. There is camaraderie in this small community service wide."

The new combat dive school is prepared to host six classes per year and 40 students each class to meet the Air Force's increased need for divers since 9/11. Before this year, students attended an Army Special Forces combat dive course in Key West, Fla. In 2004, the Air Force hosted its own course at the naval station in Panama City because of their need to increase graduates and the available infrastructure at the naval station.

The Air Force CDC is just one of nearly 10 schools the special operations students attend to become qualified in their career field. They are on their way to becoming pararescuemen, combat controllers, combat rescue officers or special tactics officers.

Pararescuemen are trained medics prepared to recover and rescue people in all types of environments. They need to get to the location by any means available -- parachuting, repelling off a helicopter, ice climbing or diving into rough waters.

Combat controllers manage air space wherever close air support needs coordination.



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Airman 1st Class Josh Welch and Staff Sgt. Brian Enslev, Combat Dive Course students, reach the shore after a closed circuit dive. (U.S. Air Force photo/Chrissy Cuttita)

Combat rescue and special tactics officers are the leaders within the ranks, and they train side-by-side with their troops.

Graduates here have varied careers. The youngest Airman

joined the Air Force less than two years ago. The oldest classmate cross-trained from another career field in hopes of meeting a greater personal challenge and service to country.

“I did a lot of research online and read stories on Web sites before joining, but I didn’t expect the length of time training takes to be fully completed,” said Airman 1st Class Joseph Akens, a CDC student. “It’s cool to be a part of the first Air Force CDC.”

“The most challenging part of this course is remembering all you have to do to be safe plus knowing all the tactical information while putting it into practice,” said Tech. Sgt. Don Stevens, CDC student who applies his 10 years of experience in security forces to his combat control future.

But no matter where they come from, they share a bond in what lies ahead as members of a small, unique military family. Some have seen their class number go from 100 to 20 in the early stages of training, and all continue to be seriously graded by instructors, hoping they are not the handful who fall from the ranks throughout technical training.

Pool week is the most challenging part of the course, said dive instructors.

“No one likes to be underwater without being able to breathe,” said Capt. John Graver, CDC commander. “That’s why it takes special people to do these special jobs. These men must be comfortable under the water and familiar with their equipment to correct deficiencies put in place by instructors. The Pararescue Indoctrination and the Combat Control pre-scuba prepare these men for this caliber of training. Underwater confidence is the most important thing here, and the reason this course is one of the hardest they will have to complete.”

It’s for that reason the first two weeks of dive school are spent in the classroom learning diving physics, decompression tables, diving physiology, life-saving skills and aquatic knowledge of tides, waves and currents.

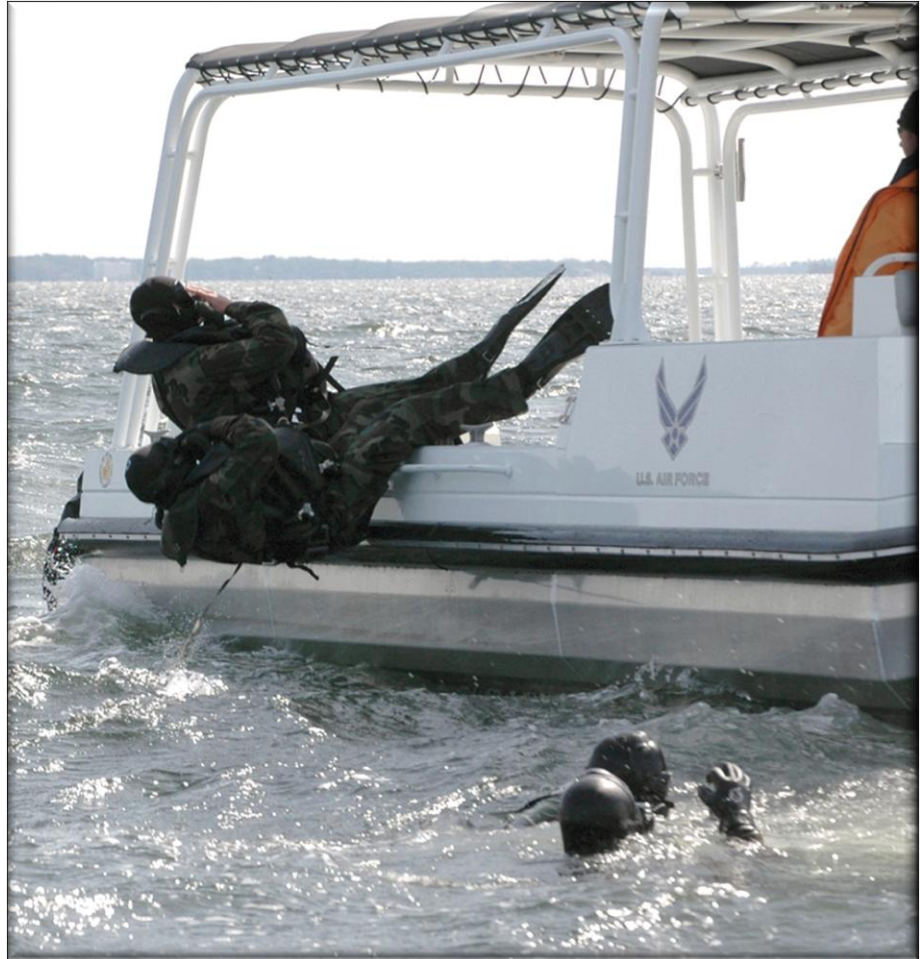
Pool week is an intense test in buddy rescue, equipment donning and loss-of-breath exercises so the students will be ready to handle the situations that may face them in open water. A typical scenario consists of having to retrieve a lost breathing hose by holding their breath for one minute while untangling their equipment or sharing an airway with a buddy.

During the last 12 days, they learn closed-circuit diving in open water. The difference from open circuit is the breathing equipment. Instead of using the 80-pound oxygen tanks most scuba divers use, they use the sophisticated Mk-25 breathing system that allows them to circulate their own air through a tank up to 20 feet below the surface.

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Combat Dive Course students dive backward from their boat to submerge into the Gulf waters. (U.S. Air Force photo/Chrissy Cutitta)

“It’s not natural for anyone to do what we do, but it becomes natural with training like any part of our everyday activities like brushing our teeth,” said Senior Airman Phil Dreyer, a CDC student.



The student compares his future pararescue career with the New York Air National Guard to the characters in the movie “The Perfect Storm,” who acted as members of his unit on a rescue mission.

“We have to give to the instructors what they give to us and live up to their expectations,” Airman Dreyer said. “They build our confidence.”

For one year, instructors developed a curriculum for its first class of students putting their combat experiences and teaching techniques learned from other military services into the class requirements.

“We tie everything we do operationally into training to try and get students to think and act like good operators, whether they are in the water or not,” said Tobin Berry, CDC instructor. “They have to be able to mentally think and react to solve problems both underwater and in combat.”

“We are able to start a whole new chapter in the book for the Air Force,” Sergeant Berry said. “This is a huge accomplishment for all of us.”