

THE SCARLET BERET: THE ROAD LESS TAKEN by Dave Manjumdar, Military and Civil Aviation Examiner – Online Edition



*USAF Special Tactics Squadron trainees practice HALO free fall parachuting.
(U.S. Air Force photo by Master Sgt. Lance S. Cheung)*

7 May 2009 – Hurlburt Field, Florida - Working hand in glove with elite Special Operations Forces (SOF) such as the [Navy Sea Air Land \(SEAL\) Teams](#) and the [Army Special Forces \(SF\)](#) are the [United States Air Force \(USAF\) Special Tactics Squadrons \(STS\)](#). While not as well known as their Army and Navy counterparts, the elite airmen of the STS units are every ounce their equals.

Divided into four distinct specialties of Combat Control, Pararescue, Special Operations Weather and Tactical Air Control Parties (TACP), the STS units fall under the umbrella of the [Air Force Special Operations Command \(AFSOC\)](#). As such, the STS members are attached to Army and Naval SOF units such as the SEALs, SF, [Rangers](#) and also coalition SOF units as directed by [US Special Operations Command \(SOCOM\)](#), says Senior Master Sergeant Dennis Knuth, a Combat Controller attached to the 720th Operations Support Squadron (OSS).

Organized as a support unit for other SOF, the STS units offer a distinct capability not organic to any other American special operations unit. Combat Controllers are the “interface between ground and air power”, Knuth explained. They are “skilled at integrating air and ground forces”, he added, saying that the Combat Controllers will act as Air Traffic Control (ATC) for aircraft or Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTAC) for strike aircraft while out in the field. This ability to direct aircraft and call in air strikes make Combat Controllers indispensable assets for other SOF.

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.*



*Combat Control and Pararescue students train at the 720th OSS at Hurlburt Field, Florida
(U.S. Air Force photo/Senior Airman Ali Flisek)*

[Combat Controllers](#) and [Pararescue Jumpers](#) (PJ) also have “knowledge of ground forces”, Knuth said. In addition, to their unique skill sets, the Combat Controllers, PJs, and Special Operations Weathermen are trained in survival skills, land navigation, and have the ability to “shoot, move, and communicate” just like any other SOF warrior. Additionally, Combat Controllers and PJs are trained in [SCUBA](#), [HALO \(High Altitude Low Opening\)](#), [HAHO \(High Altitude High Opening\)](#), and [static line](#) parachute jumps, and fast roping skills.

The STS units are trained so that they integrate seamlessly with the SOF of the other services. When out in the field, Knuth explains, STS airmen “operate as any another team-member” when not carrying out duties specific to their particular specialty. “You’re out there doing what they do”, he added.

Because of the close integration of the STS units with their Army and Navy brethren, the STS airmen are armed and equipped identically to their SEAL, SF, Ranger, etc, counterparts. The STS men are armed with the same M-4 carbines and wear the same body armor and uniforms as the soldiers and sailors they are out in the field with. Knuth explains that a distinct USAF uniform would mark the STS operators as distinct targets to the enemy.

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While the STS units work closely with the better known SEALs, SF, and Rangers among others, the general public is not aware of the contributions of these elite few airmen. “We don’t have the same advertising as the SEALs or SF”, Knuth said. Consequently, the high demand STS units are chronically undermanned.

The road to becoming a Combat Controller is a harsh one, taking over two years to complete. Most of those who begin the journey do not finish. It begins with eight weeks of basic training at Lackland AFB, Texas. Basic training, however, is the easy part. After basic training, potential Combat Controllers go through the 10-day Combat Control Orientation Course also at Lackland AFB. The Combat Control Operator Course at Keesler AFB, Mississippi, follows the orientation course and begins the process of molding the students into Combat Controllers. The majority of the course is dedicated to the Combat Controller’s core mission of air traffic control.

Assuming the students make it through the Combat Control Operator Course, the next step is three weeks at Fort Benning, Georgia. Here, the students undergo training at the US Army’s Airborne School to become basic airborne qualified. In order to graduate, the students have to complete five static line parachute jumps.

After the Airborne School, comes the [Survival Escape Resistance and Evasion](#) (SERE) course conducted at Fairchild AFB in Washington (US Army SOF units undergo a similar course called SERE Level C at Fort Bragg). For two and a half weeks, the students are taught to survive in the wilderness while evading capture. Resistance to interrogation techniques is also covered.

Next comes the Combat Control School at Pope AFB, North Carolina. Spanning 84 hellish training days, the course covers the final Combat Controller qualifications. Training includes small unit tactics, land navigation, communications, assault zones, demolitions, fire-support, and field operations-which includes parachuting. At the end of this grueling course, those surviving students are awarded the coveted scarlet beret and flash of a Combat Controller.

While the students may have passed the trials to become a Combat Controller, their journey is not yet complete. Following the award of the scarlet beret, the newly minted Combat Controllers undergo a year of additional training at the Advanced Skills Training (AST) course at the Special Tactics Training Squadron at Hurlburt Field, Florida. Over course of the following year, the new Combat Controllers will undergo training at the U.S. Army’s Military Freefall Parachutist School at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. At Fort Bragg, the new operators will learn the critical skills of HALO and HAHO. While the wind tunnel phase of this course is conducted at Fort Bragg, actual free fall jumps are carried out at the Yuma Proving Grounds in Arizona. The fledgling Combat Controllers are also required to attend the USAF Combat Diver School in Panama City, Florida. Only after they complete these and other courses will they finally be allowed to deploy with an operational STS unit (under most circumstances).

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Special Operations personnel from the 22nd and 23rd STS fast rope on to the ballistic missile submarine USS Alabama during a training exercise. (US Navy Photo FTCM (SS) Daniel J. Niclas)

There are only six active duty and two Air National Guard STS units in the USAF. Of these eight units, the 24th STS stands out from the rest. The 24th STS is staffed only with the most experienced airmen, specially selected from the ranks of other STS units, to support the [Joint Special Operations Command's \(JSOC\)](#) elite of the elite Tier One Special Mission Units (SMU). These JSOC units include the US Army's [1st Special Forces Operational Detachment-Delta \(Delta Force\)](#) and the Navy's [Naval Special Warfare Development Group \(SEAL Team Six\)](#) among others.

The USAF, recognizing that more needs to be done to fill the ranks of its STS units, has taken to assigning Scarlet Berets to recruiting centers in a bid to increase the number of potential recruits entering the Special Tactics ranks, says Captain Amy Cooper, an Air Force Special Operations Command spokeswoman. It is hoped that the presence of these elite airmen at the recruiting centers will boost the number of enlistees entering the critical STS training pipelines. "It helps getting the kids attention", Knuth said.