

COMBAT CONTROLLERS SUPPORT NORTHERN EDGE by 1st Lt. John Callahan

Northern Edge Joint Information Bureau

JUNE 26, 2009 - EIELSON AIR FORCE BASE, Alaska (AFNS) -- Air Force combat controllers are a rare breed of elite specialists who accompany U.S. ground troops to serve as a liaison between those forces and the air support they rely on.

Each combat controller is a fully qualified air traffic control expert, able to manage the complex air operations above a combat zone or remote airfield.



An Air Force combat controller uses a laser range finder, which helps him direct pilots to their correct targets. During this training mission June 23, several combat controllers called in airstrikes on Fort Wainwright's Range 2205 in Alaska. The training mission was part of Northern Edge 2009, an exercise designed to prepare joint forces to respond to crises in the Asian Pacific region. (U.S. Air Force photo/1st. Lt. John Callahan) <<<<

Many also qualify as joint terminal attack control experts, coordinating airstrikes, reconnaissance and other forms of air support on behalf of the ground troops they accompany.

"It definitely takes a special kind of person to do this," said the team commander of a small team of combat controllers with the 320th Special Tactics Squadron based at Kadena Air Base, Japan. The commander's name was withheld for security reasons. His team is in Alaska participating in Northern Edge 2009.

"The typical combat controller is your classic 'Type A' personality," he explained, listing off some of the things the Air Force looks for in a recruit. "Absolute self-confidence, to the point where they are not afraid to make mistakes. A 'never quit' attitude. And, bottom line, you really need to be an athlete. This job is just so physical. You look around at this career field, and it's all a bunch of high school and college wrestlers and swimmers."



An Air Force combat controller from the 320th Special Tactics Squadron based at Kadena Air Base, Japan, uses a compass to help direct pilots to their correct targets. During this mission June 23, several combat controllers called in airstrikes on Fort Wainwright's Range 2205 in Alaska. The training mission was part of Northern Edge 2009, an exercise designed to prepare joint forces to respond to crises in the Asian Pacific region. (U.S. Air Force photo/1st. Lt. John Callahan) <<<<

"That's right," agreed an airman 1st class, the

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team's junior member. "In fact, that's how I got into this field. I grew up playing a lot of soccer and basketball. At some point, a recruiter who had seen me play came up to me and said, 'Hey, have you ever considered special forces?' Until that point, I would have said 'Me? Special forces?'"

Ultimately, the commander and the airman it is mental and emotional toughness that sets the combat controller apart. Every combat controller is the survivor of an incredibly grueling training and selection "pipeline," similar to that endured by the better-known Navy SEALs, Air Force pararescuemen and other special operations units.

The entire process, the junior team member said, is designed to try to convince participants to quit.

"The instructors will always give you an easy out," he said. "And they never let you know exactly how much work you have ahead of you or when you'll be done. In other words, they won't say, 'We'll be training tonight until 2100 hours.' Instead, they'll just say, 'All right, let's go.' Or they'll tell your team something like, 'Push this Humvee up the hill. When you're done, do it again, and keep doing it.' For all you know, you'll be working all day and night. And that does happen!"

Once a combat controller graduates training, his unique blend of skills places him in high demand.

"We travel and train so much, sometimes it seems like we're hardly ever actually at our base," the airman 1st class said.

The commander said his team members were eager to put their training to good use. In fact, the prospect of a difficult and dangerous assignment to a combat zone was one of the things that attracted him to the life of a combat controller.

"Let's face it, we do a lot of cool stuff," he said. "Jumps, diving, travel. We love what we do."

A combat controller's roots lie in the Army's old Pathfinder Corps, a group of World War II paratroopers trained to drop into an assault zone in advance of the main force, identifying drop zones and guiding in gliders and troop transport planes.