

TRAINING, TEAMWORK PREPARE COMBAT CONTROLLERS FOR WAR by
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April 30, 2010 - Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash. (AFNS) -- "I don't care what anyone says. Whether it's two guys shooting at you or 20, when bullets start flying



overhead, it's a tense moment," said Staff Sgt. Sean Harvell, a combat controller with 22nd Special Tactics Squadron here. "You might become accustomed to (firefights) in some way, but you never completely get used to it. Anyone who says they are never scared is lying."

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Combat controllers are trained special operators and certified Federal Aviation Administration air traffic controllers. They deploy undetected into combat and hostile environments to establish assault zones or airfields and then provide air traffic control and fire support in the joint arena. As the only air liaison for special forces units on the ground, combat controllers are relied on by their teammates. In turn, they rely upon air assets to deliver when called. (U.S. Air Force photo)

Sergeant Harvell is speaking from experience. During a deployment to Afghanistan in 2007, his special forces unit engaged in around 70 to 75 firefights. On April 29, the Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Norton Schwartz, presented Sergeant Harvell two Silver Stars for his actions in three of those engagements. The Silver Star is the third-highest decoration that can be awarded to a member of the U.S. armed forces, and is given for valor in the face of the enemy.



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Sergeant Harvell was presented the Silver Stars for his actions during firefights with enemy forces in Afghanistan during the spring and summer of 2007.

Mark Twain is believed to have said, "Courage is not the lack of fear. It is acting in spite of it." It's a sentiment many in combat would echo, but Sergeant Harvell also attributed his actions to another source, intensive training.

"We have two to three years of training before we ever go to combat," he said. "By the time you're in combat, it's muscle

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memory. You don't even really think about the movements, they just naturally happen and that training keeps you alive. If you have raised a rifle 1,000 times to shoot a target in training, and then a guy jumps out of a building, your muscle memory kicks in to raise the rifle again."

Staff Sgt. Evan Jones, a 22nd Special Tactics Squadron combat controller, also credits vigorous training with his ability to act in crisis. Sergeant Jones was also presented with a Silver Star for his response when his coalition special forces team was attacked by enemy forces during fall 2008. He was presented a Bronze Star with Valor for actions in the same deployment. Sergeant Jones also notes the importance of teamwork, which is imperative to overall safety and mission success.

"We have intense training in a number of stressful situations before you ever go into combat," he said. "That prepares you and ensures you're confident to act in a war-time situation. Also, this engagement (for which he received the Silver Star) happened about halfway through my deployment, and we had really grown as a team and been involved in previous engagements together. So at that point our teamwork was significant to the mission as well."

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"When you're calling in close-air support, it's essential to trust the guys in the air," Sergeant Harvell said. "If either of you start second-guessing one other, the situation becomes a lot more dangerous. The guidance you give to them and theirs to you is critical."

Although combat controllers are among the most highly trained personnel in the U.S. military, their skills aren't purely physical. They must be experts in air and land navigation, communications, approach control, radar procedures and more.

"One thing I really enjoy about the job is that it's both technical and physical," Sergeant Evans said. "On the technical side, we are working with high-tech (communication) equipment and computers, but then on the physical side we are trained to go out with special forces and make a huge difference in the fight."

When reflecting on his achievements during battle, Sergeant Evans downplays his personal actions.

"Honestly, I was just doing my job," he said. "There are 300-plus combat controllers in the Air Force and all of us are just doing our jobs every day, and doing what we are

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trained to do. Everyone wants to do the best they can when it counts, and there are a lot of other guys in this career field that would have done the same thing, or better."

However, it's impossible to overlook their role in operations today.

"The amount of pressure and responsibility we put on young combat controllers is incredible," Sergeant Harvell said. "They have to go in and integrate with other services, who have solid reputations as being ground forces, and then work together to have a devastating effect on the enemy. The bottom line is that people are depending on you to come home alive. You have to go against every instinct of survival, and the fear is there, you just have to learn how to control it."

The combat controller's motto, "First There," reaffirms the combat controller's commitment to undertaking the most dangerous missions behind enemy lines by leading the way for other forces to follow. Embracing the responsibility and pressure, Air Force combat controllers continue to excel in an essential role.

During the ceremony April 29, General Schwartz presented a total of three Silver Stars, eight Bronze Stars, five with Valor, and two Purple Hearts to 11 combat controllers.