PARAGLIDE
Telling the Fort Bragg and Pope Air Force Base Story™

*This is a multi-story series; it will educate you about the U.S. Air Force combat controller. Nearly every week, between 10 June and 16 September 2010, there was a different story on how a combat controller is born and nurtured. The series explains the formal education and training an Airman must successfully complete in order to become an apprentice combat controller. In these stories, combat control candidates will be referred to by their rank and first name only. The series ran in the **Paraglide** during the period 10 June through 16 September 2010. A related story published during the same period; a story written by Brig. Gen. Darryl W. Burke, 82nd TW Commander is included at the end.*

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE AIR FORCE COMBAT CONTROLLER by Sharilyn Wells, Paraglide

In the beginning …

Air Force combat controllers say it all in their motto, "First There." Combat controllers are one of the trained special operations units in the Air Force and are certified Federal Aviation Administration air traffic controllers. They take on some of the most dangerous missions behind enemy lines and lead the way for other forces to follow.

According to the Air Force Special Operations Command website, combat controllers' mission is to deploy, undetected, into combat and hostile environments to establish assault zones or air fields, while simultaneously conducting air traffic control, first support, command and control, counter-terrorism, humanitarian assistance and special reconnaissance.

Combat controllers Captain Bob Barinowski (standing) and SSgt Peter Larkin (kneeling) perform during a US Army training an exercise in Germany in the early 1960s. Photo courtesy of www.usafcct.com

Combat control teams got their start during the airborne missions of World War II. Many important parachute assault missions resulted in personnel being dropped over 30 miles off their intended target area. Even though paratroopers were far from their area of operation, they were still able to slow the German counterattacks, but the need for effective guidance and control of air operations was identified. The Army pathfinder was born. The pathfinders were organized of a small parachute scout company that was trained to layout the

drop zone, and through the use of flares and other visual aids, provide guidance to inbound aircrafts filled with equipment and men ready to be dropped.

In September of 1943, pathfinders were first used in an airborne reinforcement of allied troops in Italy. Parachuting in only minutes before the main body, they established drop zones and resulted in successful airborne assaults. Pathfinders also played a huge role in the Normandy invasion. The U.S. Air Force was reestablished as a separate force in September of 1947, and with changes in missions, resulted in tactical airlift and aerial port squadrons assuming responsibility in support of U.S. Army ground forces. The Army pathfinders weren't meeting the Air Forces' needs in combat; thus, the Air Force pathfinder (later called combat controller) was born in 1953. Combat controllers were assigned to provide navigational aids and air traffic control for the growing airlift forces. The Army decided to keep their pathfinders and still use them today, however more for helicopter operations.

Combat control teams were first incorporated in real-world missions in 1958 during the Lebanon crisis. Later in the 1960s, combat control teams responded to the Congo crisis where they were instrumental in the development of parachuting tactics and equipment. Also in the mid 1960s, military freefall was integrated into the combat controller wide variety of skills needed. Combat control teams also participated and distinguished themselves in the Cuban crisis in 1962, the China-India confrontation, the Dominican Republic contingency, and the Southeast Asia conflict, including the evacuation of Vietnam and Cambodia, according to Combat Control Team Online web site.

During Vietnam, combat controllers helped assure mission safety, expedite air traffic flow, and coordinate with local agencies and airlift control elements, which led to the forming of today's combat controller. Also, because of their unique capabilities and quick reaction time, combat controllers have been important assets in several international emergencies and humanitarian relief efforts. They've assisted in earthquake-devastated parts of Guatemala, Peru, Nicaragua, and most recently, Haiti. Combat controllers worked small airfields throughout North Africa and Bangladesh when the U.S. donated tons of food to the suffering countries. In 1980 combat controllers were involved in the humanitarian attempt to rescue the American hostages held in Iran, as well as playing a vital role during the Grenada rescue operation and Panama invasion.

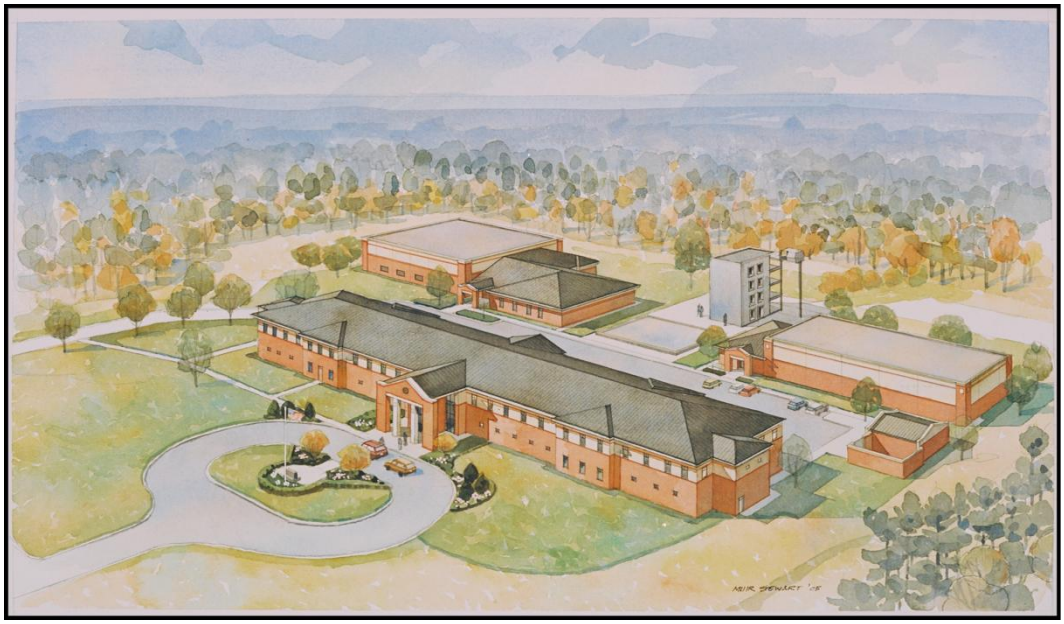
They've participated in the operation Just Cause in 1989, working jointly with U.S. Army Rangers and were part of the pre-strike build up of the United Nation coalition during operation Desert Shield. Combat controllers were also involved with operations in Somalia and are currently supporting the global war on terrorism with Operation Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom.

(Paraglide Editor's note: Much of the information used in this series of stories was taken from www.usafcct.com, www.specialtactics.com, and www.afsoc.af.mil.)

AIR FORCE COMBAT CONTROLLERS TRAIN TO BE 'FIRST THERE' by Sharilyn Wells, Paraglide

To have the honor of wearing a scarlet beret, an U.S. Air Force Airman has to endure 35 weeks of mentally and physically tiring, intense training. Becoming a combat controller isn't easy; the special operations pipeline shows clearly what it takes to be "First There."

After completing basic military training at Lackland Air Force Base located in San Antonio, an Airman wishing to become a combat controller will need to complete the Combat Controller Orientation Course. During this training, Airmen will learn about the history, missions and career field-specific skills needed to become a combat controller.



The Combat Control School campus is located at the north end of Pope's main runway; just off Reilly Road; and adjacent to the Pope Park. (Combat Control School photograph.)

"They're instructed on how to train smartly, pre and post training needs, about nutrition, basic combat life saving skills, (combat control team) history, basic career field skills and to accept this physical fitness as a way of life and not just a test to get (them) through the training," said Senior Master Sgt. Sean Gleffe, commandant of the Combat Control School at Pope AFB.

Upon completion of the orientation course, Airmen will need to complete a two-phase course for air traffic control located at Keesler AFB, Biloxi, Miss. The Combat Control Operator Course includes aircraft recognition and performance, air navigation aids, weather, airport traffic control and rules, flight assistance service, communication procedures, and radar procedures.

"Our core skill in air traffic control compliments our skills as joint terminal attack controllers in the close air support umbrella of the battlefield," said Gleffe.

The next step in becoming a combat controller is successfully completing the U.S. Army Airborne School at Fort Benning, Ga. This three-week course teaches basic parachuting skills required to infiltrate an objective using static line airdrop procedures. After completing five jumps and receiving airborne wings, the recruit will head to Fairchild AFB, Wash., for a 17-day basic survival course, learning principles, procedures, equipment and techniques that will enable

him to survive, regardless of climatic conditions or unfriendly environments and return home, according to AFSOC website.

To become combat mission ready, the recruit will need to complete Combat Control School at Pope AFB. The newly built 14 million dollar school includes classrooms, a high tech gym, 40 foot rappelling wall and fast rope training aid, indoor firing range and an aquatic training facility for amphibious military training. In 84 days, Airmen will receive intense physical training, learn small unit tactics that include fast rope and rappel, land navigation skills, communication, assault zones training in which the candidates assess, measure, align, and mark the landing zone for day and night operations and control all air traffic in U.S. airspace. At the end of the course the recruits will participate in a field exercise that will incorporate all skills learned, including a static line airborne operation as a method of insertion for a total of five jumps with landing zone establishments. Upon completion of the exercise, recruits will take on a 15-mile walk back to the school carrying all their combat equipment in order to receive the scarlet beret.

"We aren't the keepers of the scarlet beret, we put the best guys we can through," said Master Sgt. Roger Pursley, an instructor at the Combat Control School. "It's all up to (the candidate) to follow through; it's 20 percent physical, 80 percent mental."

These airmen who complete the Pope AFB course are considered combat controllers, their training doesn't end here. They will continue to expand their skills at the Special Tactics Advanced Skills course at Hurlburt Field, Fla. This nearly year-long course is needed before combat controllers are assigned to an operation squadron. The course has three phases that include formal training, core skills and operational readiness. The course tests the trainee's personal limits through demanding mental and physical training, according to the AFSOC website.

"(Our job is to) produce more quality guys to go through here (Combat Control School), so they are able to go out and do their job; whether it be in Iraq, Afghanistan, or most recently Haiti," said Tech Sgt. Scott Seamone, an instructor at the Combat Control School for four years. Combat controllers also attend the U.S. Army Military Freefall Parachutist School at Fort Bragg and Yuma Proving Grounds, Ariz., and the U.S. Air Force Combat Divers School.

"The reason for the free fall and combat diver certifications is so that any combat controller can be picked from a unit to be embedded with Army, Navy, and coalition Special Operations Forces and not be a limiting factor in the planning considerations for any method of insertion," Gleffe said.

Both Seamone and Pursley said their biggest accomplishment since becoming an instructor at the Combat Controller School was having the ability to see the guys they've trained finally joining a combat control team and being able to do what they were trained for.

However, a fully qualified combat controller's training is never complete. A combat controller must always train and learn new techniques in order to be combat mission ready. Combat controllers fully live their commitment to undertake the most dangerous missions behind enemy lines in order to lead the way for other forces to follow.

"One could say they do this job because of his patriotism or the duty to serve his country, but we do this because it's our job," said Seamone. "Everyone has their piece of the puzzle; it's a sense of accomplishment."

COMMUNICATION SKILLS CRITICAL FOR COMBAT CONTROLLERS by Sharilyn Wells**,** Paraglide

Two weeks into the Combat Control School at Pope Air Force Base, candidates are beginning to settle in and realize the challenges and expectations that the instructors want them to meet.

A combat controller candidate keys in a frequency during his radio communications test Monday. Combat controllers must learn how to communicate with multiple types of radios. Photo by Sharilyn Wells/Paraglide

This week, the candidates are being trained on probably the most important core skill they will need to know to get the mission accomplished — communications with multiple types of radios.

"Our primary job is air traffic control – we're always talking back and forth with airplanes and higher headquarters," said Master Sgt. Charles McHarney, operations superintendent.

He continued to say that the radios they use are the most important piece of equipment they have in passing on critical information. "If we aren't able to get it to work or troubleshoot (the radio), then we are in a world of hurt," McHarney said.

Learning from both a book and hands-on, practical exercises, the candidates are able to permanently ingrain the communication skills they need for real-world combat missions. Each candidate was tested and timed on how to quickly and efficiently set up each of the different radios.

"We started (last) Tuesday on how to program different frequencies, crypto and how to attach different types of antennas needed in various situations," said Staff Sgt. David. "Everyone is starting to get into the groove of things and we know what is expected of us … mainly due to the good leadership we have with us."

Multiple junior officers are also training in this course to become combat controllers. Second Lt. Drew says he loves being in this type of school environment and being part of a team in which everyone brings their own set of skills to the team. The officers help the other candidates with better emphasis on what needs to be done and how to meet the deadlines. "Of course there are

going to be growing pains, but we're getting through it," Drew said. "(Communication) is the core of what we do … these fundamental skills will follow through for everyone's (career)."

EXPLOSIVES USEFUL TOOL FOR COMBAT CONTROLLERS by Sharilyn Wells, Ft. Bragg's Paraglide

Except for the soft snickers of anticipation, the bunker was silent as one student of the Combat Control School yelled, "Fire in the hole!" three times as he hit the detonator switch that set off three explosives down range destroying various objects with calculated charges on them.

A combat control candidate crimps a blasting cap to the detonator wire during a demolition range exercise. (Photo by Sharilyn Wells/Paraglide)

Entering week three of their training, candidates of the Pope Air Force Base Combat Control School received training on demolition and explosives. On July 8, they put their training to use building, setting up, and detonating three different types of explosives they could possibly use during real-world missions.

"This is a very useful tool for us," said Airman 1st Class Payton. "We'd use (explosives) if we needed to breach a building or set up obstacles (towards the enemy)."

Combat controllers are primarily trained in demolition operations to support landing zone applications. Whether on an airfield removing obstacles, unexploded ordnances or clearing an area for a helicopter landing zone, the goal is to eliminate those things that would be a hazard of flight to landing or departing aircraft. As an advanced skill and during joint contingency operations, their demolitions scope may include breeching used to gain entry into structures of various types.

This wasn't the students' first time on a demolition range, the day before they had hooked up and set off non-electrical explosives in which they set up the explosive and manually lit the fuse for the explosion. On this range they used electrical detonators in which they set off the explosives using a remote control.

When asked which was more thrilling, Payton said, "Definitely setting the non-electrical and walking back up for the countdown."

The candidates were separated into four groups and were tacked in making three different types of explosives, depending on what their hypothetical mission was. Of the three explosives, one of them was the students' choice. Each team built an improvised explosive device using anything they could get their hands on. Some of the teams' explosives included nails, chains and bolts, while another one included accelerants.

"You could say that whichever one had the most explosives, was the favorite (among the students)," said 2nd Lt. Drew as students around him laughed and nodded their heads.
Any person standing next to a group of combat control candidates will immediately feel the camaraderie and brotherhood each of the students have towards the other. Most have been training together for more than a year, some even going through basic training together. With nine weeks of training left, 24 students remain out of the original 28. Students agree that working together and helping each other is the key to completing this course.

STUDENTS FIND NAVIGATION SKILLS ESSENTIAL TO MISSION by Sharilyn Well, Ft. Bragg's Paraglide

With a compass in one hand and a map in the other, teams of combat control students headed out into the Fort Bragg wilderness. For their fifth week of training, the students attending the Combat Control School on Pope Air Force Base spent a week out in the field, testing their skills on different ways of navigating through the forest and swamps of Camp Mackall.

A combat control candidate plots his next coordinates during the land navigation phase of Combat Control School. (Photo by Sharilyn Wells/Paraglide)

The week prior to their field training, the students spent a week of in-classroom hands-on land navigation training. They learned how to read and orientate their maps, terrain association, how to calculate distances, pace counts and how to use a compass and military global positioning system. They also learned the true basics of navigation — how to navigate using the stars and sun.

Land navigation is an essential tool for combat controllers in a combat environment. According to the combat control instructors, solid land navigation skill sets have proven to be absolutely crucial to maintaining situational awareness on the battlefield. Not only is it important to know where you are going and how you are going to get there, but knowing exactly where you are on the battlefield at any given time is absolutely critical. Whether calling for a medical evacuation or directing an air strike within close proximity of friendly forces, a combat controller's ability to know (and effectively communicate to others) where he is on the battlefield at any given moment routinely translates into life and death situations.

"You need to know where you are at and where the enemy is at," said Staff Sgt. Timothy Brauch, an instructor at the Combat Control School. "(Land navigation) is one of the first skills taught and the biggest test for (the students)."

The students were first introduced to hands-on land navigation during instructor-led teams. After the students were comfortable with the navigation process, they were sent out in two-man teams in a timed event to locate four points using a map, a protractor and a compass. Each team walked about two kilometers between each point depending on how they planned their route.

After the team events, day and night, the students were sent on another course using their GPS. Even though most would entrust everything to a GPS, the basic skills of reading a map and using a compass comes in handy when batteries die during a mission.

"Each test is dealing with a navigational tool, so we teach compass and terrain association as a back up," Brauch said. "Terrain association is the key to knowing where you're at." According to Brauch the two rules of land navigation are: trusting in your compass and keeping track of your pace count.

By the end of the week, each student will have walked 10 kilometers or more per test in the heat carrying their gear and equipment on their backs. Not only were they taught how to navigate, they were also taught how to keep energized and hydrated while they searched for their numerous points.

"This is where they apply all their learned skills from the past week," said Brauch.

Brauch added that by the time the students leave the field, they will have a solid land navigation skill set and will be better prepared for follow-on phases of training.

READY, AIM, FIRE: STUDENTS TRAIN ON WEAPONS by Sharilyn Wells Ft. Bragg's Paraglide

Combat control student takes aim silhouette target. (Photo by Sharilyn Wells/Paraglide)

The remaining 21 combat control students lined up July 28 on Range 41 with their weapons prepared to engage a black-silhouetted target. In week six of their training, the combat control students have begun learning the fundamentals of tactics and weapons training. Loaded with an M4 and M9, the students continuously shoot their target at different distances, starting from the low ready position every time.

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.

This is the first time the students have shot outside of the basic training qualifications they went through upon joining the Air Force. Instructors teach the fundamentals of aiming, breathing and proper stance and then build on the techniques until it's muscle memory for the students. The M4 and M9 will be the same weapons they'll use downrange. By teaching them these fundamentals now in a safer environment, they won't second-guess what they're doing, said one of the instructors.

"We have been learning tactical fundamentals, employment methods and how to call for fire," said Staff Sgt. Billy. "Learning these fundamentals is key for further learning on how to handle a weapon."

Billy said the tactics training would help him better prepare for real world missions, especially through troop movements.

"This definitely makes you more aware of what's around you," he said.

Just about half way through their training, the students seem to be blending better as a team. Class leader, 2nd Lt. Drew noted that the guys are starting to get along better and are thinking as a team.

"I believe there's that natural progression of closeness they've acquired," said Drew. "They're thinking more of what the team needs rather than how thirsty they are or what they individually need."

For Airman 1st Class Joshua, being out in the field has been the best part of the course so far.

"It readies you for what you're actually going to be doing out there," he said.

Land navigation has been the biggest learning experience for Billy thus far.

"It really plays an important role in getting you from point A to point B," Billy said. "It helps you get to your destination effectively and efficiently."

Rounding out week six's training, the students learned how to fast rope and rappel from a 45-foot training tower. According to instructors, this will prepare the students for the next level of training which will be from actual helicopters. The skills learned during this phase of training will also serve as a foundation for alternate insertion techniques. These techniques will be executed from various airborne platforms on combat missions. Additionally, this training serves as a confidence builder as training becomes more and more challenging.

As the students quietly talked to each other while waiting their turns, anyone could see how close they have become through their training. The young officers, non-commissioned officers and lower enlisted treat each other with the proper respects but they can joke around with each other as well. They all act like brothers, which in essence they are.

"A lot of these guys have been together for a while, since basic training even," Drew said. "The

other lieutenants and I were thrown into this new dynamic bunch and we seem to be jelling really well."

STUDENTS SET UP RUNWAY BEHIND 'ENEMY LINES' by Sharilyn Wells, Ft. Bragg's Paraglide

A combat control student waits by a colored panel for further direction during landing zone training.
(Photo by Sharilyn Wells/Paraglide)

With three weeks more to endure, the combat control students spread out over 4,000 feet preparing to conduct the most important part in their job — laying out a runway for an incoming aircraft. A fourteen-man team each played important roles in laying out visual markers on Holland Drop Zone, Aug. 19.

After endless hours of residual classroom instruction, the remaining 20 students are beginning to see the end of the tunnel of their 12-week course at the Pope Air Force Base Combat Control School. The students have trained, sweated and endured ups and downs together as a team. Instructors noticed and understood that the constant hours of classroom work can wear a student down. Leading up to their final field exercise, the instructors will remind students that they can't slack off nearing the end of the course and motivate them to continue.

"It's go, go, go all the time and we get little time to ourselves," said Airman Devin. "When we do go out, we go out as a team."

Staff Sgt. Matthew agreed that the group of guys has become closer as a team. "We get a day or two to hang out and do team dinners or go to the movies as a team."

But don't be fooled, even though the group of students go out and have fun, it's all business during training hours. They all understood that even though the training they were going through at that moment was hypothetical; during the field exercise they will be talking to live aircraft and directing them to land.

A normal jump clearing team consists of a five man team, which jumps into a hostile environment to layout landing zones and drop zones for follow-on units. Upon finding a clearing for a runway, the team will split up to place colored panels at the beginning and end of the

runway. They will also place panels 500 feet apart as guidelines for the aircraft. This particular training was for a large aircraft, the C-130, which needs 3,500 feet to land. Different types of planes require different distances to land.

Once a team exits their aircraft to the location chosen, they will immediately start looking for possible enemy or any debris that may hinder the aircraft's approach. A team member will have the responsibility of watching the weather and wind, constantly updating the aircraft. The pilot will reciprocate anything he sees from the air to the team as they set up the runway.

Matthew had the task of communicating via satellite to higher headquarters. He provides an execution checklist to headquarters and informs them of any major events the team or aircraft encounter.

Probably the most important job was given to Devin, who was the pace man. His job was to pace and mark off 3,500 feet for the other team members to set up their panels for the aircraft. As he is marking off every 500 feet, he is also searching the runway for any obstacles on the runway and relaying information on anything that may interfere with the mission.

"My job is very important," Devin said. "If you don't have the right pace count, the aircraft might not have enough room to land."

The importance of Devin's job was confirmed when the team failed the first round because the runway was 500 feet too short. Instructors made it very clear that if an aircraft doesn't have enough runway to land, bad things can happen. It could mean the difference between life and death if the aircraft is holding more personnel to help with the follow-on mission or loss of equipment if the plane crashes.

At the 2,000 feet marker of the runway, Airman 1st Class Richard pulled security after marking his distance with a panel. Combat controllers are one of the first to enter behind enemy lines and must always be prepared for anything they may encounter.

More than ever, relying on each other to complete the mission is essential. The brotherhood of this class has become the highlight of their success. The scarlet beret is within grasp. All they have to remember is how bad they want to be a combat controller.

FINAL TEST: CANDIDATES EVALUATED IN FIELD EXERCISE by Sharilyn Wells
Ft. Bragg's Paraglide

It was all business and straight faces the afternoon of Sept. 2, on Holland Drop Zone for the remaining 20 combat control students hustling to their assigned positions. The usually talkative and joke-cracking group got to work laying out their landing zone after simulating an air drop into unfamiliar territory with the mission of setting up a proper runway for a C-130 to land safely.

Because of high wind speeds, air operations were canceled and the students were bused to the drop zone still rigged in their parachutes to simulate dropping into a hostile environment. The students needed to de-rig, set up their radios, and meet up with other teammates while keeping an eye out for possible enemy. This test is part of an eight-day, final field exercise that assesses a culmination of what the students have learned over the 12-week course at Pope Air Force Base's Combat Control School.

A combat control student checks air speed in preparation for landing a C-130 after simulating an airdrop into unfamiliar territory to set up a landing zone for follow-on mission, Sept. 2. This training is part of the students' eight-day final field exercise in which they are tested on everything they've learned in the past 12 weeks of training at Pope Air Force Base's Combat Control School. (Photo by Sharilyn Wells/Paraglide)

Setting up a landing zone with proper width and length for different types of air craft may be the most important part of their job, but the students were trained on everything and anything they could possibly be in contact with in a real-life situation.

Thursday was only their second day of testing and the students already completed their land navigation, setting up helicopter landing zones, and reconnaissance and surveillance assessments. Not to mention the students will also be tested on two night landing zone set-ups and numerous follow-on missions that will include tracking down a high value target. The assessment includes small unit tactics incorporating immediate action drills and breaking contact.

According to Tech. Sgt. John Noll, an instructor of four years and course development curriculum writer for the Combat Control School, there is a possibility of coming into enemy contact during real-life missions, depending on whom the team would be supporting, so the students need to be prepared for anything. The students were being tested on knowing the aircraft's movement and being able to safely land the aircraft.

"Our job incorporates dropping into a land that is literally a desert or marsh land that no one has been through," said Noll. "We have to be in constant communication with the area commander." Combat controllers report everything to the area commander from useable runway length to how many aircrafts the landing zone can handle. They also report any enemy in the area, what munitions are needed or the type of terrain — anything that could affect the mission.

Being one of the largest classes to make it to the final exercise, the tight knit group of students appear to be in good shape and ready for the honor of receiving and wearing a scarlet beret. Their last step, and final test, was a 15-mile rucksack march from the location of the exercise to the front doors of the schoolhouse. Following the exercise, the students, who are physically and emotionally drained already, began their long walk home. All of the 20 remaining students - from the original 28 students - finished the rucksack march home. What set apart the weak from

the strong was the willingness to keep moving forward, one step at a time, to the ultimate prize — the scarlet beret … and possibly a shower.

GRADUATES DON SCARLET, COLOR OF SUCCESS by Sharilyn Wells, Ft. Bragg's Paraglide

The 20 remaining students of the Combat Control School clean up pretty well. Wearing their dress blues, the class was called into formation in front of their cadre, Family and friends to make the final adjustments to their uniform. On Sept. 9, the students bloused their pants over their shiny, black boots and adjusted their hard-earned scarlet berets on their heads. Out of the 28 original students, these 20 students are the newest combat controllers in the United States Air Force.

Combat control students don their scarlet berets for the first time during their graduation ceremony, Sept. 9. Out of the 28 original students, 20 new graduates' completed the 12-week course on Pope Air Force Base. Their next stop will be in Hurlburt, Fla., where they will continue to expand their skills at the Special Tactics Advanced Skills course. (Photo by Sharilyn Wells/Paraglide)

Col. Robert Armfield, 720th Special Tactics Group commander, was the guest speaker at the graduation.

"If your relationship with your son is anything like my relationship with my parents, they really have no clue what I do," said Armfield, "And I take pride in that — that they have a son who does quiet things."

Combat controllers take on some of the most dangerous missions behind enemy lines and lead the way for other forces to follow. As their motto states, they're the "first there." Armfield explained to Family members about what their sons, grandsons, husbands, and brothers would be up against.

"The mission we do is complicated and very demanding. (They) have very little supervision," Armfield explained. "There are very few jobs out there that trust 20 to 22 year-olds with the type of responsibility they will have out on the battlefield.

"(Combat control) may be the most nerve-wracking, dangerous job in the world, and gentlemen, you're going to excel at it," Armfield continued. "Simply stated, we make order out of chaos."

Armfield also pointed out that the newly graduated class is part of a brotherhood that many in the Air Force and other branches of the service look up to.

"(These berets) are red, they stand out and they are an unmistakable sign of what we do. It does not make you special and it does not make you elite. It represents what you are responsible for — a very important and critical mission out there," he said. "Everyone in the Air Force is going to respect you and look up to you, so act accordingly. You are first an Airman and then a combat controller."

The graduates' next stop will be in Hurlburt, Fla., where they will continue to hone their skills at the Special Tactics Advanced Skills course. The nearly year-long course is needed before the graduates are assigned to an operation squadron. They will also attend the U.S. Army Military Freefall Parachutist School at Fort Bragg and Yuma Ground, Ariz., as well as the U.S. Air Force Combat Divers School in Panama City, Fla.

Among the presentation of the scarlet berets, three awards were given to the students for their achievements. Second Lt. Drew, class leader, was awarded the Distinguished Graduate Award for his 93 percent average, the highest-grade point average for the class. He was also given the Iron Man Award for having the highest physical fitness evaluations and maintaining overall physical fitness endurance and continued spirit throughout the course. The award has not been given to a student in the past three years.

Airman 1st Class Adam was awarded the Jerome E. Bennett Award, in honor of a fallen combat control comrade, for being "truly the best of the best." Adam was voted by his teammates for the award.

"These guys volunteered to be in the service when the country is in a delicate state and that says something about these individuals. Not only that, but they volunteered to be part of a tip of the spear organization," said Chief Master Sgt. Sean Gleffe, commandant of the Combat Control School. "That says even more about these guys."

After enduring those grueling 12 weeks of training, a sense of pride reflected on the students' faces as they shaped their berets on their heads.

"I have never been this happy in my military career," said Staff Sgt. Matthew, who has been in the military for seven years.

Upon receiving his scarlet beret, Drew simply said, "This is amazing; a culmination of a lot of hard work."

A feeling of accomplishment was shared among the graduates. Staff Sgt. Jair agreed and urges anyone thinking about becoming a combat controller to "train hard, know 100 percent that this is what they want to do, and never quit."

Describing the course in one sentence, Drew concluded that the school was grueling, yet very rewarding.

Airman 1st Class Pedro smiled when asked if he would do the course over again.
"Absolutely," he said. "In a heartbeat."

ADDED COMMENTARY: AVOIDING THE VERTICAL PRONOUN by Brig. Gen. Darryl W. Burke, 82nd TW Commander

Sheppard Air Force Base, Texas — Staff Sgt. Zachary Rhyner is one, of only three Airmen since September 11, 2001, to receive the Air Force's highest honor, the Air Force Cross, and the only one who did not receive it posthumously.

Secretary of the Air Force Michael B. Donley presents Staff Sgt. Zachary Rhyner the Air Force Cross March 10, 2009 at Pope Air Force Base, N.C. Sergeant Rhyner of the 21st Special Tactics Squadron received the medal for uncommon valor during Operation Enduring Freedom for his actions during an intense 6.5-hour battle in Shok Valley, Afghanistan, April 6, 2008. (U.S. Air Force photo)

A combat controller, Rhyner saved countless lives by calling in more than fifty "danger close" air strikes, many virtually on top of his own position, after his special operations team was caught in a 360-degree ambush in Afghanistan's Shok Valley in April 2008. Even as he controlled eight Air Force fighters and four Army attack helicopters while perched on the side of a cliff, he laid down suppressing fire so wounded teammates could be extracted from the line of fire.

The Air Force Cross

Rhyner's actions that day were truly heroic and his story has been rightfully used by many, including Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Norton Schwartz, to illustrate what Airmen bring to the joint fight.

But I'd like to use his actions off the battlefield to illustrate another principle.

Earning the Air Force Cross was a big news story and many interviews followed. Rhyner's conduct during that time demonstrated his character almost as much as the Shok Valley experience did.

You find one word repeated over and over when Rhyner is quoted: "We."

"We had to pull the wounded guys out ..."

"I think that was the moment when the insurgents we were fighting called time-out."

"What was going through my head was we don't have another option. We are still taking fire. We need it to stop ..."

Even noted news personality Glen Beck couldn't get Rhyner to talk about himself.

"You make this sound like it was just, you know, another day at the office," Beck said in a Fox News interview. "But there are only — what is it? — 192 people who have ever received the Air Force Cross...How do you put that together in your head? I mean, you are in a very elite group."

Rhyner's response?

"Any other combat controller put in the same situation would have performed in the same, exact way" he said. "Credit that to the training we receive and the process that we go through to become a combat controller."

No other Airman would have been more justified in basking a little in the light of fame. Yet given the ultimate opportunity to make it "all about me," Rhyner chose instead to make it all about "we."

That is a great, great lesson for all of us.

"It's all about me" sometimes seems to be the mantra of our time, but that attitude has no place in our Air Force. We are taught from the first day we don our uniforms to subordinate our personal ambitions and desires to the needs of our unit, our service and our nation.

We can't allow ourselves to get puffed up because of rank or position, or to let awards and accolades go to our heads.

We know that "we" is a much stronger word than "I." What "I" can accomplish is insignificant, but what "we" can accomplish is virtually without limit.

Rhyner understands that well. We can learn much from his great courage and selfless sacrifice in the line of duty. We can learn much, too, from his humble ability to avoid the vertical pronoun, even as the cameras rolled.

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