

COMBAT CONTROL CANDIDATES VIE FOR SHOT AT SCARLET BERET by Rachel Arroyo, Air Force Special Operations Command Public Affairs

February 22, 2011 - Hurlburt Field, Fla. (AFNS) -- When the muscle burn set in and it became a struggle to breathe, a shot at earning a scarlet beret was enough to push through.



Thirteen servicemen traveled from as far as Washington and North Dakota to participate in the 371st Special Operations Combat Training Squadron's third combat controller and special operations weather team assessment held recently.

Lt. Col. John Trube, the commander of the 371st SOCTS, welcomed the candidates, challenging them to meet the high standards demanded of special operations Airmen throughout the course of the assessment.



Senior Airmen Andrew Tilley and Abeoul Toure exercise their buddy breathing skills during water confidence training Feb. 8, 2011, at Hurlburt Field, Fla. The Airmen were taking part in a combat controller and special operations weather team assessment. (U.S. Air Force photo/Airman 1st Class Caitlin O'Neil-McKeown)

"There are very few men in the Air Force who have earned the right to wear the red beret," Colonel Trube said. "The standards are high. The standards are exacting. I wish the best to you all."

Testing the physical and psychological limits of each candidate, the assessment is designed to assist an eight-member cadre in choosing the right Airmen to enter the combat controller pipeline.

The week-long event incorporates traditional physical fitness exercises with rucksack marches, boat races, water-confidence training and extensive psychological evaluations.

"The goal is to assess the goodness of fit between candidates' inherent strengths and vulnerabilities and the demands of the job they are seeking," said Maj. Stephanie Allison, the head psychologist for the 371st SOCTS.

CCT @ The Eye of the Storm

The events can be difficult enough for some to complete on eight hours of sleep and in familiar terrain. They pose an added challenge when fatigue sets in and candidates are expected to perform in a foreign environment at a moment's notice.



Senior Airman Eli Terry completes flutter kicks Feb. 8, 2011, on Hurlburt Field, Fla. Airman Terry is assigned to the 5th Force Support Squadron at Minot Air Force Base, N.D. He is a cross-training candidate for the combat controller career field. (U.S. Air Force photo/Airman 1st Class Caitlin O'Neil-McKeown)

Participants arrived at the Air Force Special Operations Training Center blind to what the week held in store for them.

They were placed in an environment controlled by the cadre. Internet access and cell phone use were prohibited. Candidates could consume only water, Gatorade and Meals Ready to Eat. Their rubber M-4 rifles were to be in hand at all times. Their rucksacks were to be weighted with 40-pound sandbags.

When there was time blocked to sleep, and it was to be spent in tents pitched behind the AFSOTC schoolhouse.

Candidates were numbered by rank order. Those numbers were written on the back of each calf and on each arm in black marker so that cadre members evaluating could easily pick them out during a march or a water exercise.

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*.

CCT @ The Eye of the Storm

Prior to beginning, Capt. Stewart Parker, the special tactics officer and assessment director, reminded cadre members of the importance of being objective while making observations.

"There should be no presumptions about success," Captain Parker said. "Just because an individual performs in the physical fitness test doesn't mean they'll be an ideal combat controller."

Using a "whole person" concept unique to the 371st SOCTS, the cadre would be examining the physical fitness, mental agility, professionalism, interpersonal skills, initiative and motivation of each candidate.

Captain Parker stressed there are no quotas to fill.

By marrying personal observations with scientific data, the selection board would choose only the most suitable candidates to enter the pipeline, he said.

No facet of the assessment was to be pass-fail. A decision would be made only after all data had been collected in order to give each candidate a fair shot at the pipeline as well as provide a means of tracking trends among successful operators.

He laid the ground rules for the candidates and prepped them for a rigorous week.

"I encourage no one to quit while they are here," he said. "I will be very impressed if no one quits."

With several retrainees in the group, some of them knew how it felt to fall out of an assessment or be rejected by the cadre, but that did not stop them from returning with a better sense of what would be expected of them.

Staff Sgt. Justin Rice, a dental lab technician at Peterson Air Force Base, Co., attended an assessment in November. Eleven months prior Sergeant Rice didn't know how to swim. In the months leading up to his first assessment, he taught himself basic strokes, swimming six days a week in preparation.

Though he was not accepted in 2010, he arrived at Hurlburt Field, Fla., more driven and with better situational awareness, he said.

"I'm a spiritual guy, and I feel like this is what I was called to do," he said. "I'll never quit."

CCT @ The Eye of the Storm

Senior Airman Joshua Arias was originally in the combat controller pipeline but self-eliminated. Itching for another opportunity to pursue a career as a special operator, Airman Arias said he received his wife's blessing to attend the assessment though she was slated to deliver their second child at any moment.

"I told her it was now or never, and she told me to go," he said.

Other candidates said they desired a change that would get them away from their desks.

Senior Airman Eli Terry, an air traffic controller at Minot Air Force Base, N.D., completed his bachelor's degree in political science and went on to work for a vacation company following graduation. Unsatisfied in his line of work, he joined the military with the eventual goal of pursuing a career in special tactics.

"I don't want to be sitting in a control tower all day," Airman Terry said. "The idea of applying American foreign policy directly appeals to me."

The candidates got the change they wanted if only for a week.

After meeting the cadre members and undergoing preliminary psychological evaluations, the candidates kicked off the physical portion of the assessment with a physical fitness test that included push-ups, pull-ups, sit-ups, a three-mile run and a one-mile swim.

The following morning began with a 4-mile rucksack march and quickly segwayed into a series of team boat races covering a distance of approximately two miles.

By early afternoon the group narrowed to a field of 11. One candidate self-eliminated and the other sustained an ankle injury.

The group was afforded limited time to eat, rest and hydrate before the cadre tested physical fitness, mental agility and motivation in the tactical air control party obstacle course.

Instructors offered tips for completing each obstacle efficiently before candidates completed their six pulls-ups to enter the course.

From how a candidate approaches an obstacle to how he deals with falling off one, each movement tells observers something about the person, said JT Thomas, the chief of AFSOC Recruiting and Assessments

"This is the chance to truly look at these guys as individuals acting in a more foreign

CCT @ The Eye of the Storm

environment," Mr. Thomas told the cadre.

Senior Airman Andrew Tilley, a survival evasion resistance escape instructor at Fairchild Air Force Base, Wash., took the tips offered by instructors to work smarter, using his momentum to power him through the ring swing and his legs to pull him through the cross bars.

After completing the obstacle course, Airmen Tilley said he was optimistic about his performance in the assessment thus far.

"I feel great," he said. "There have been little mistakes here and there, but I think I'm doing well."

Airman Tilley added the assessment is the most difficult challenge he has undertaken to date.

After completing the obstacle course, the group moved to the pool where they prepared for two hours of water confidence training by holding their breath for up to 1:40 minutes to push carbon dioxide from their lungs.

In addition to testing the physical fitness of each candidate, pool exercises demonstrate which individuals will be able to learn scuba skills essential to special tactics.

"This allows us to track the ability to learn," said Master Sgt. Kenneth Huhman, the 342nd Training Squadron superintendent. "Fear is crippling. It's very difficult to teach someone if they're afraid."

Psychologists and medics stood by as candidates began drown proofing. Bound at the wrists and ankles, the candidates jumped into the pool. They descended to the bottom and pushed off to return to the surface where they were able to take a breath before sinking again.

Buddy breathing required candidates to submerge their heads and pass a single snorkel to a partner to provide him with air when needed. While passing the snorkel, instructors pushed water in their faces and held individuals under, testing their ability to stay calm and maintain a steady breathing pattern.

Muscle cramps plagued some while the inability to stay calm saw others turn frantic.

Toward the end of the assessment, candidates received the opportunity to ask questions pertaining to the career field. A social was held to give them the opportunity to interact with cadre members in a non-stressful environment.

CCT @ The Eye of the Storm

Chief Master Sgt. Michael Lamonica, the 720th Special Tactics Group chief enlisted manager and cadre leader, emphasized the importance of using the "whole person" concept when choosing cross-trainees to enter the pipeline.

The cadre devotes 51 percent of its effort to picking candidates and 49 percent to preparing them for the pipeline, he said.

"The combat controller career field loses 60 percent of its cross-trainees currently," Chief Lamonica said. "For every guy that quits, four or five quit with him."

They are trying to achieve a retention rate of 80 percent, he said.

The holistic nature of the assessments and analysis of the mined data is a means of moving toward a greater retention rate by fine-tuning what makes a successful cross-trainee and how he is selected.

"These assessments are a fusion of objective and subjective data based on a whole-person evaluation," the psychologist, Major Allison said. "We know that technical skill or being a physical stud is not enough to be a successful operator."

Each candidate said they felt they brought something unique to the table. For some it was the experience that comes with age and time spent in the military. For others, it was skill with a weapon or the ability to motivate.

"Being older than the other guys, it's not about me getting through," Airman Terry said. "It's about them getting through."

At the close of the assessment, each candidate was called before a selection board to be informed of his status.

While the selection rate varies, it rarely goes above 60 percent, Captain Parker said.

Out of the 11 candidates remaining, five were accepted into the pipeline. Though the assessments are open to CCT and SOWT candidates, only CCT candidates participated.

Airman Arias, who became a father for the second time during the assessment, was beaming after hearing he had been accepted back into the pipeline.

"It has been a good week; a baby and this," he said.

CCT @ The Eye of the Storm

Airman Tilley said he was on cloud nine, but that he was all nerves before coming in front of the board.

"They were just ripping off that Band-Aid slowly while I was waiting," he said.

For Airman Terry the moment was exciting, but sobering. He recognized whatever hard work he put into the assessment would have to be amplified from this point on.

"Now I've got to get in shape. I've got to step up," he said. "I've learned so much in training, but the challenge is applying it."