Guard’s elite force tests its mettle in war, peace

On The Cover

Photos and story by Master Sgt. Mike R. Smith
The brute of a sergeant could pass for any of “those guys” in the military with whom you would not mess around.

Dressed from helmet to boot in battle gear, he races the night through desert brush and finds a guarded building set inside the curve of a hill. At its doorway, he catches his breath, and then runs inside to an eruption of gunfire and shouts.

What sets him apart from other “commando” types are the white CCT letters on his uniform, the antennas protruding from his rucksack and his status as a Citizen-Airman.

“When I deploy or do a mission I am among a team whose cohesion is good,” he said. “I’m the extra guy, I’m the combat controller.”

Air Force Tech. Sgt. Steffano Guadagnuolo says about serving in the Oregon Air National Guard’s 125th Special Tactics Squadron (STS).

Guadagnuolo and a dozen other Air Guard combat controllers from Oregon and the Kentucky 123rd STS were training and testing equipment here in early May. They used combat scenarios to test new technology in a multitude of missions, and much of what happened was classified. But that’s their clandestine nature.

The Army has Rangers. The Navy has SEALs. But few outside the military can recall an Air Force combat controller when speaking of special operations. But in the Global War on Terrorism world of covert battles, to move offensively without a combat controller would be foolhardy, officials say.

In the Air Guard, there is Guadagnuolo, a.k.a. “the Italian,” and about 50 more highly trained battlefield Airmen.

Day after day, Army, Navy and Marine Corps units embark on missions with these combat controllers in tow. These Airmen juggle a mastery of tactical prowess with the ability to control the flow of air traffic into and out of a battle space. Their moments unfold in direct enemy contact, sometimes under attack, but more often as the aggressor.

As is evident from war reports, they are in high demand. Guadagnuolo, 38, came to America in the ’90s after serving as an officer in the Italian military. It took him eight years as a U.S. Army infantryman and special operations diver to earn his citizenship and gain the skills needed to apply for a combat controller position.

He would settle for nothing less. “There’s no other job that compares,” said Guadagnuolo.

Whether high-altitude parachuting with oxygen and a 100-pound pack or flying unmanned aerial vehicles, fielding questions from ground commanders for close air strikes, or infiltrating an area to mark out a runway, Guadagnuolo works an endless array of missions and problems.

After those are accomplished, he still faces endless proficiency training and adaptation to technology. It takes the Air Force two years to train a combat controller. Less than 25 percent make the grade.

Those who “arrive” gain the physical resilience and knowledge to roll into a tactical employment with any Special Forces unit in the world. They are Federal Aviation Administration certified air traffic controllers with a deadly expertise in satellite- and laser-guided bombs, strafe and other air-to-ground weaponry. If that’s not enough, they are proficient in diving, parachuting and rappelling. And tasks they practice to a muscle memory change with the latest piece of technology.

Guadagnuolo is a new guy on the block, having completed his initial training two years ago. But he already helped advance the profession into emerging, domestic response missions.

Beyond the combat

One would think that an elite fighting force is used only during war – not so.

The concept of a combat controller assisting a state was only fully appreciated after Hurricane Katrina, historians say. There, the Kentucky and Oregon combat controllers responded to the disaster as the levees were still breaking. They managed landing zones and carried evacuees from their flooded homes to waiting helicopters. They controlled the overcrowded air space of one of the largest humanitarian airlift missions in the world.

Guadagnuolo jumped off a helicopter, into the winds of Hurricane Ike. He and a doctor searched a Texas disaster area for survivors. “I spent a day searching and found a football field where I set up a small air traffic control tower and called in air [evacuations],” he said.

Physical standards

Think you have what it takes? See if you can match these entry-level, physical qualifications:

- 2 x 20 Meter underwater swim (three minutes rest in between)
- Ten minute rest
- 500 meter surface swim (under 14 minutes)
- Thirty minute rest
- 1.5 mile run (under 10 minutes, 45 seconds)
- Ten minute rest
- Pull-ups (six repetitions under 1 minute)
- Two minute rest
- Sit-ups (45 repetitions under two minutes)
- Two minute rest
- Push-ups (45 repetitions under two minutes)
- Two minute rest
- Flutter-kicks (45 repetitions under two minutes)
Combat controllers are often called Renaissance men because of their training and skill in a wide variety of subjects or fields. See how many of the skills listed here you have:

- Dirt bike riding
- Scuba diving
- Survival
- Swimming
- Free fall parachuting
- Air traffic control
- Armament
- Hand-to-hand combat
- Boating
- Counter-terrorism
- Foreign languages
- Horseback riding
- Surveying
- Airfield marking
- Rescue
- Land navigation

In another disaster response mission, he and his team waded through neck-deep water in Oregon and brought Zodiac boats into the Pacific Northwest town of Vernonia to rescue 300 residents stranded by flooding and landslides. “We put our gear together in a matter of hours and were rolling.”

“More and more agencies and officials know of our capabilities in a disaster, and that role will increase,” said Maj. Dan Schilling, commander of the 125th STS, about special tactics squadrons, which can include pararescue and special operations weather team Airmen. Schilling said demands from the war and state missions are a “constant balancing act.”

As traditional Guardmembers, Schilling said their areas of operations are the states and territories, and they are proactive in their hurricane season planning, but they also play a vital role in the war. “We make a very concerted effort to put guys in the war, and it’s all on a voluntary basis,” he said. He added the squadron “never runs short of volunteers.”

The all familiar

Upon his arrival in Afghanistan in 2005, Tech. Sgt. Russ Lemay from the Kentucky Air National Guard’s 123rd STS was greeted with bullets. He supported a Canadian Special Forces unit in his first mission outside the wire. Bad people were gunning for him, but he managed to keep his cool, he said.

It turns out, the two-year pipeline, four-months of additional training and the combat-seasoned veterans at his squadron had him prepared. He was where he worked so hard to be. “I was ready,” said Lemay. “I joined with the idea that combat controllers were affecting the war.”

In the Air Force, only a handful of combat controllers started with initial Guard enlistments like Lemay; the larger percentage served on active duty first. Most are highly decorated Airmen with washboard-size ribbon racks that often include Silver Star Medals and multiple Bronze Star Medals with Valor. If that’s not distinctive, their scarlet berets are.

Last summer, one of the Air Guard’s Airmen of the Year attended his award ceremony in Washington wearing his beret, but he also had a beard. The Oregon combat controller was on his way to Afghanistan. The beard would help him blend with the locals, he said.

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History

Combat Control Teams originated during the airborne campaigns of World War II. Major parachute assaults fell well short of expectations, resulting in some cases with personnel being air dropped as much as 30 miles from their intended targets. The shortcomings of these operations identified the need for effective guidance and control of air transported combat forces. Thus, a small parachute scout company of Army pathfinders was organized and trained. Their mission was to precede the main assault force to an objective area and, through the use of high powered lights, flares and smoke pots, provide visual guidance and critical weather information to inbound aircraft.

Want to join the team?

The 123rd STS and the 125th STS are the only two locations in the Air Guard to serve as a combat controller. Call the unit’s recruiters to schedule a try out: Master Sgt. Wes Brooks (123rd STS) at (502)413-4170; Senior Master Sgt. Adam Monticelli (125 STS) at (503) 335-5170.