


The washout rate in training is seventy percent. Those who make it are in for a grueling time.



THE AIR Force's special operations forces—a relative handful of pilots, combat controllers, pararescuemen, and support troops—are heavily engaged around the world and struggling to maintain readiness in the face of a punishing operations tempo.

Today's Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) is small, with only about 12,000 airmen and roughly 130 aircraft.

AFSOC's list of duties, however, is extensive—and growing. In a conflict, AFSOC transports Army and Navy special operations forces, provides fire support to friendly troops, controls air traffic in combat zones, conducts rescues, and evacuates wounded. Recently, members also have become involved in

The Fast Pace of Special Ops

By Bill Gertz



USAF's special operations forces are concentrated in Air Force Special Operations Command. AFSOC troops, such as the members of this combat control team, often find themselves in harm's way.



All of AFSOC's fixed-wing assets are variants of the C-130. Above, an AC-130H Spectre gunship spews protective flares during a training mission. The newer AC-130U can fly higher, see better, and fire weapons more accurately.

so-called "Military Operations Other Than War."

"Our biggest issue right now is operations tempo," said Maj. Gen. James L. Hobson, Jr., AFSOC commander. "Wherever there's been any kind of contingency or hot spot, our people have been there."

The General's words are underscored by a partial list of recent AFSOC activities, large and small.

Liberia. This spring, Air Force commandos evacuated Americans from the US Embassy compound in Monrovia, Liberia, that had been threatened by roving, anarchic militias.

Croatia. In April, AFSOC search-and-rescue personnel were the first US troops on the scene in Croatia after the Air Force CT-43 crash that killed Commerce Secretary Ronald H. Brown and a delegation of US business executives.

Bosnia-Herzegovina. AFSOC AC-130H Spectre gunships saw action during NATO's August and September 1995 air attack, when the aircraft's weapons knocked out Serbian artillery sites around Sarajevo. MH-53J Pave Low helicopters took part in search-and-rescue operations for two downed French flyers (who were later released).

Rwanda. In the humanitarian operation to Rwanda in 1994, USAF special operations forces (SOF) helped set up airfields as part of the effort to airlift relief supplies to starving refugees.

Haiti. The return to power of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide featured Air Force EC-130E Commando Solo aircraft, operated by the Pennsylvania Air National Guard, conducting psychological operations and transporting small SOF teams to remote areas.

Somalia. In 1992, AC-130s and MH-60G Pave Hawks were deployed to Somalia. Three airmen from the 24th Special Tactics Squadron, Pope AFB, N. C., displayed extreme heroism during the rescue of Army Rangers from a fierce firefight in Mogadishu

October 3, 1993. TSgt. Timothy A. Wilkinson, a pararescueman, received the Air Force Cross. MSgt. Scott C. Fales, also a pararescueman, was awarded a Silver Star, as was SSgt. Jeffrey W. Bray, a combat controller.

Iraq. In the 1991 Persian Gulf War, AFSOC troops helped knock out many vital Iraqi command, control, and communications nodes. In the years since, it has been active in Operation Provide Comfort, the enforcement of a no-fly zone over northern Iraq.

The command's leaders point out that these real-world operations have come on top of a rigorous program of training deployments in the US and around the world.

General Hobson, who commanded special operations aircraft in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War, was awarded a medal for piloting an MC-130 transport loaded with paratroopers through heavy ground fire at the start of the 1983 Grenada operation. He noted that, since Grenada, AFSOC has been involved in every military operation in which the US has participated.

Cranked Up

The Gulf War marked a major increase in SOF activity, said General Hobson, and AFSOC personnel now are constantly on the go. "It really kind of cranked up during [Operation] Desert Storm, and it's been a hectic pace ever since," he said.



AFSOC maintenance personnel check over an MC-130E Combat Talon I transport, used to get special operations troops into and out of some of the most dangerous places in the world, mostly at night.

The figures bear him out. On average, AFSOC troops spend 144 days per year deployed, with some deploying for more than 200 days on special missions. General Hobson said the goal is to reduce the average individual deployment rate to 120 days per year, but he concedes that, given the heavy demand for SOF, he is not likely to achieve that goal any time soon.

Compounding the problem is the difficulty of filling out AFSOC units. Many are below authorized strength because the Air Force has had trouble finding qualified people who can make it through a year of rigorous training for many demanding skills.

The washout rate for newcomers undergoing AFSOC's grueling ini-



Photo by Randy Jolly



USAF photo by Fernando Serna

MH-60G *Pave Hawk* (top) and MH-53J *Pave Low III* helicopters serve as workhorses for insert, recovery, and search-and-rescue operations. Above, a pararescueman looks toward a helicopter as he readies a "patient" for a hoist during an exercise. AFSOC leaders deem the pararescue career field "severely undermanned."

tial ten-week training course: seventy percent. Many slots in the combat controller school, combat swimmer school, and jump courses go unfilled "because we can't get the guys past the first challenge," said General Hobson.

When it comes to personnel, the biggest problem for the group today is a shortage of pararescuers. "Pararescue is a very, very small career field and . . . is severely undermanned," said Lt. Col. Steve Scott, deputy group commander of the 720th Special Tactics Group, Hurlburt Field, Fla.

The furious pace has had a cost. In

the past year, according to command leaders, there has been a serious dip in the readiness of the 16th Special Operations Wing, the command's main US-based component, also at Hurlburt Field. The problem led to a 150-day pullback from Operation Provide Comfort II, the effort based at Incirlik AB, Turkey, to enforce the United Nations no-fly zone over northern Iraq.

Four elements of the command's forces—MH-60G *Pave Hawk* helicopters from the 55th Special Operations Squadron, MC-130P *Combat Shadow* refueling aircraft from the 9th SOS, the 16th Helicopter

Generation Squadron, and the 16th Maintenance Squadron—returned to Hurlburt and nearby Eglin AFB in April, having been relieved by Air Combat Command units.

"We came upon a situation where the fundamental readiness of one of our units was really at risk," said Brig. Gen. Norton A. Schwartz, commander of the 16th Special Operations Wing. "It had been 100 percent deployed, and the basic . . . skills were the things we were worried about. And we came to the conclusion that it was time to say, 'Time out.' . . . We were at a point where we were simply in a death spiral."

To break the cycle, the Air Force exempted the unit from further operational duty while its airmen retrained. The hiatus has helped. The 16th SOW in May received a readiness rating of "excellent" during a major inspection.

The balancing act between maintaining warfighting readiness and conducting lengthy Operations Other Than War is a difficult one. "The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff [Army Gen. John M. Shalikashvili] told us we need to be able to maintain our core competencies and capability—things like unconventional warfare, direct action, psychological operations, and so forth," General Hobson said. "But at the same time, we're going to be responsible for doing Operations Other Than War—the Somalias, the Rwandas, those kinds of things.

"Our challenge in the command is to be able to do those kinds of things



The distinctive nose gives this aircraft away as an MC-130H Combat Talon II, a newer version that complements the role of the E model in covert delivery of AFSOC troops and equipment.

with high ops tempo and at the same time maintain our training proficiencies and core competencies.”

What does AFSOC think about the significant increase in the non-combat Military Operations Other Than War?

“They’re not as glamorous as [combat],” said General Hobson, “but we realize we’re going to have to do that, and we realize that when . . . [a commander] calls me on the phone and says, ‘Pack your bags,’ we’re going to do it.”

General Hobson has taken other steps to reduce operations tempo, with the aim of improving readiness. They include efforts to speed up deployment of the new gunships to reduce the strain on overworked AC-130 crews, slice deployments to Italy to support Bosnian operations, and curtail activities in Haiti. The command also is limiting the number of joint exercises in which its forces participate.

Running Hard

Sometimes it seems that AFSOC has to run hard just to stay even, however, because new missions keep popping up. For example, the chaos in Liberia prompted a noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO), and several AFSOC officers said they expect the Air Force’s SOF to engage in these activities frequently.

In fact, Col. Mike Russell, deputy commander of the 16th Operations Group, sees missions like the Liberia

evacuation as the most likely type in which SOF will engage. Stability, he pointed out, is not a widespread feature of the world these days. “NEOs are the future,” he said. “I think we’ll be pulling Americans out of harm’s way.”

AFSOC, headquartered at Hurlburt, comprises three major active-duty operational units—the 16th SOW, at Hurlburt; the 352d Special Operations Group, RAF Mildenhall, UK; and the 353d SOG, Kadena AB, Japan. The command also runs the Air Force Special Operations School,

where SOF personnel from all services train.

Air Force Reserve and Air National Guard units also are components of the command. The 919th SOW (AFRES), at Duke Field and Eglin AFB, Fla., operates C-130E/H, MC-130E, and MC-130P aircraft. The 193d SOW is an Air National Guard unit at Harrisburg IAP, Pa., and operates EC-130E Commando Solo electronic warfare aircraft.

The 720th Special Tactics Group, at Hurlburt, is in charge of worldwide combat controller and pararescue operations for the command. It includes individuals who work closely with Army and Navy commando counterparts. Colonel Scott sees his combat controllers as “the glue that holds an operation together.”

“To get the shooters on the ground, to get the resupply in there, to take care of the trauma—medical triage and evacuation—that’s what [special tactics squadron] combat control and pararescue do for any military operation,” said the Colonel, a veteran controller with eighteen years of experience.

“We’re all kind of soldiers in the Air Force—Army-type guys operating in the Air Force,” said Capt. Todd Woodrick, a team leader with the 23d Special Tactics Squadron at Hurlburt. “Our job is to provide an interface between ground units and the Air Force.”

SrA. Brandon Plaster, a pararescue-



In response to the increasing threat from surface-to-air missiles, the AC-130U contains a dazzling array of sensors. It also has offensive sensors, seen here in the aircraft’s targeting center, which aid the accuracy of the AC-130’s guns.

man from the 23d STS, has been in the Air Force less than a year, but he was part of the first team to search for and recover Secretary Brown's aircraft in Croatia and participated in the evacuation operations in Liberia. There was no rest between the two operations, said Airman Plaster. "We got back from Croatia and had to reconfigure and repack and then packed up on a C-5 to go down to Freetown [Sierra Leone], where we staged . . . for the evacuation from Liberia."

Varied Fleet

The command operates a fleet of about 130 specialized aircraft, including AC-130U and AC-130H Spectre gunships, MH-53J Pave Low III and MH-60G Pave Hawk helicopters, MC-130P Combat Shadow tankers, and MC-130E/H Combat Talon I and II transports.

Six EC-130E Commando Solos are available for psychological operations as flying broadcast stations. They can receive, analyze, and transmit a variety of electronic signals and can broadcast in AM/FM radio, shortwave, television, and military command, control, and communications channels. They also have jamming, deception, and manipulation capabilities.

"For a change, most of our systems are new," General Hobson noted.

The command has taken delivery of twelve new AC-130U gunships, which some call "U-boats." Procured within the last several years, the U models, all based at Hurlburt, allow aircrews to fly higher, see better, and fire weapons with greater precision than was the case with the older AC-130H models that have been carrying the load in such places as Somalia, Bosnia, and Liberia.

Each AC-130 is equipped with a computer-driven fire-control system that allows its weapons to engage two targets simultaneously with its formidable guns: a 105-mm howitzer mounted in the left rear side of the fuselage, a 40-mm cannon, and a 25-mm Gatling gun.

The aircraft also has a special synthetic aperture radar, originally developed for the F-15, allowing it to



Photo by Randy Jolly

This upgraded MC-130P Combat Shadow and an MH-53J Pave Low perform a precise dance at exact airspeeds in order to refuel without cutting a fuel line. Night vision goggles allow them to do this in blackout conditions.

find targets through cloud cover, and a new all-light-level television system that is an improvement over the low-light TV used on H models.

During a demonstration at a test range on the Florida panhandle, an AC-130U conducted a test-firing after being called in by an Army Special Forces team on the ground. The Special Forces used infrared laser pointers to help the gunship locate targets. The gunship, circling at an altitude of about 8,000 feet, emitted a series of rips, pops, and booms as its various weapons fired during the night exercise.

The Combat Shadow gives extra range to other special operations aircraft by allowing midair refueling, usually carried out during difficult nighttime and low-altitude operations.

"Air refueling is a key capability," said Col. Dave Miles, vice commander of the 16th SOW. "If we can keep the aircraft in the air, that's the way to go."

The first delivery of a CV-22 tiltrotor aircraft has been scheduled for 2003. The tiltrotor is expected to replace many of the transport aircraft currently in the fleet. According to General Hobson, the CV-22 will be a major step forward in special operations.

Noon in Darkness

Night vision goggles are another critical AFSOC tool. This advanced night vision equipment figuratively turns night into day by amplifying starlight or moonlight to increase visibility. NVGs allow AFSOC crews to distinguish between friendly and enemy forces on the ground and to carry out critical nighttime midair refuelings.

Technology has vastly improved night vision equipment, but it has also made NVGs readily available to armed forces around the world. "It used to be that night was our sanctuary, exclusively," General Schwartz said. "That's not so true anymore."

Still, AFSOC boasts the most modern NVGs, which officers contend are far better than equipment that can be purchased on the open market. An observer wearing the \$6,000 goggles during a half moon can see the landscape and water in intricate detail. Said General Schwartz, "Our night vision goggles are stunning."

For General Schwartz, the most important job for Air Force special operations missions is providing reliable and precise air support. "It is extremely important that what we do be precise," he said. "You should be exactly where you should be, exactly at the right time, and the bullet [will go] in the right window on the right side of the building."

He added, "Those are the kinds of things we do." ■

Bill Gertz covers national security affairs and defense for the Washington Times. His most recent article for Air Force Magazine, "Iran's Regional Powerhouse," appeared in the June 1996 issue.