



More than 30,000 service members took part—
and with more than 2,800 of them in the skies
over North Carolina, things were jumping.

Purple Dragon

Loaded down with equipment they need to get to the battle and fight, paratroopers from the Army's 82d Airborne Division, Ft. Bragg, N.C., board an Air Force C-130 as part of Operation Big Drop, one of the largest activities of Joint Task Force Exercise 98-1, better known as Purple Dragon.

Photographs by Erik Hildebrandt





Purple Dragon brought together some 30,000 soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines for three weeks in January and February. They trained in a simulated high-threat environment, with operations that included maritime interdiction, forcible entry using airborne and air assault tactics, surveillance, rescue, and ground operations. Staggering in scope, Purple Dragon maneuvers ranged along the eastern seaboard from Florida and Puerto Rico to Virginia. At left, an Air Force loadmaster checks on a Humvee as it is loaded aboard a C-17 Globemaster III.

A major feature of the exercise was Operation Big Drop, a massive nighttime airdrop of 2,800 troops and a helicopter assault force of 1,400. Five C-17s, 37 C-141s, and 27 C-130s from AMC, AETC, ANG, and AFRC units supported the huge operation. "It was a great day to be an airlifter," said mobility forces mission commander Col. Bob Cosand, 305th Operations Group, McGuire AFB, N.J.



Purple Dragon was truly Joint, from cooperative intelligence efforts to the airdrop. Jumping along with soldiers were airmen—ranging from combat controllers to Tactical Air Control Party personnel. At left, airmen check each other's "six," making certain that each piece of equipment is in perfect readiness for the next jump.



Above, some of the C-130 aircraft tasked to participate in Purple Dragon line the flight line at Pope AFB, N.C. The exercise was built around an intricate scenario designed to put the troops into extremely challenging conditions. In the story line, US forces come to the aid of the fictional country "Kartuna" and deter military action by "Florida," which is believed to be exporting weapons to Kartuna's enemy, "Korona." Ultimately, Koronan offensive capability must be destroyed and the territorial integrity of Kartuna restored. The airdrop and assault occurred at night, at the peak of the exercise, at four separate drop zones under simulated combat conditions. At right, as darkness begins to fall, troops stage next to their assigned aircraft.



Once Air Force TACP members are on the ground, they work with Army ground units to check out the area to locate potential targets. Then, they direct air support from aircraft like this 75th Fighter Squadron A-10, shown at far left preparing to launch from Pope.

Central to the success of an exercise is coordination of resources—no small feat for one of this scope. At right is the hub of the operation, known as the "Rock"—a bustling, interconnected planning and operations center from which the "war" is run. Here, the battle staff and all the major players can follow the exercise as it unfolds. Refined tactics and updated methods of command, control, communications, and intelligence streamline much of the work.

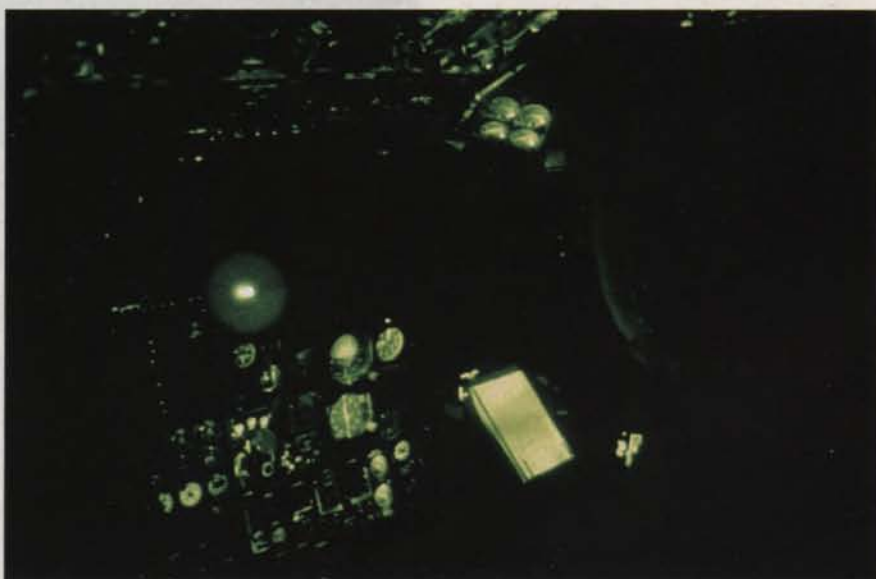


Photos by Erik Hildebrandt



Pope provided much of the aircraft—from airlift to close air support—and served as the staging area for Operation Big Drop. A-10s, like the one at left from the 23d Fighter Group at Pope, had plenty of time on target, as did Navy, Marine, and ANG fighter aircraft.

Adding an additional measure of reality during nighttime drops, aircrews flew with night-vision equipment. At right, the cockpit instruments of a C-130 lend an eerie glow to the faces of the flight deck crew as the airlifter approaches its assigned drop zone.





Jumpers from the 82d Airborne fill the belly of a C-130 (above). Once airborne (below), the loadmaster and jumpmaster are the undisputed bosses—checking and rechecking preparations and equipment. At right, the jumpers, heavily loaded with equipment and parachutes, look ungainly and barely able to move, but when the jumpmaster says it's time, paratrooper after paratrooper plunges into the darkness over the drop zone. These scenes were photographed with a red filter to preserve the night vision of the troops.



Purple Dragon and similar exercises with their "as real as it gets" approach provide vital Joint training—meshing the unique and necessary skills and assets that each service brings to a fight. Through Joint training operations US combat forces remain ready to engage an enemy and to win decisively. ■