

As seen in USA TODAY, MAY 24, 2006

# Special tactics training tests body, mind

## Recruits better have a type-A personality — and a will of steel

By Tom Vanden Brook  
USA TODAY

HURLBURT FIELD, Fla. — It might be the most demanding part of becoming an Air Force combat controller or pararescuer: staying afloat while a diving instructor rips away the breathing tube you share with a buddy and dunks both of you in the pool's deep end.

The airmen, who have been training in the pool for more than an hour before the dunking, emerge from the water with relief and fatigue etched on their faces.

"Buddy breathing is hard," says Tech. Sgt. Abel Martens, 30, of Asheville, N.C., shivering in the cool morning air. "Mentally, you have to tell yourself not to be selfish, not taking several breaths even if you want it. You have to try to remember to stay calm."

The pool does more than test a trainee's swimming ability.

"Water allows us to induce a high degree of stress," says Chief Master Sgt. of the Air Force Mike Ramos, 44, superintendent of the 720th Special Tactics Group. "You won't be a success for long if you freak out underwater."

The nature of their jobs demands that Air Force special tactics airmen become skilled swimmers and comfortable underwater. Their jobs may require them to be dropped offshore to complete their tasks in hostile territory: establishing airfields and calling in airstrikes, rescuing wounded colleagues and gathering weather data for the Army and Air Force. Often, they'll be embedded with special operations teams from other branches of the military, such as the Navy SEALs.

"The primary job of a combat controller is air-traffic control, to bring in an airstrike," Col. Bill Sherman says. "It's not necessarily kicking down a door and firing a weapon."



By Airman 1st Class Veronica Pierce, U.S. Air Force

**Tough tryout before training even starts:** Applicants in a 306th Rescue Squadron pararescue screening do sit-ups in a mud pit while holding a log at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Arizona.

The Air Force, like the other military services, is looking for more special tactics troops. The Special Operations Command plans to add 13,000 personnel, including more special operators, over the next five years.

Ramos and others say the Air Force training is as tough as any the military can dish out. Special operators jump from planes as high as 35,000 feet or plunge in the dark into roiling seas beneath a helicopter's whirling blades.

"Anybody can swim in an ocean," says Master Sgt. Robert Jeeves, 39. "Physically, these guys are studs. But put them in water with 8-foot swells and see how they respond."

Jeeves is a combat controller, a special operator trained as an air-traffic controller. He rode on horseback in Afghanistan and toted a 165-pound rucksack in Iraq.

"My rifle's not my best weapon; it's the radio on my back," he says. "For every kill with an M-4 (rifle), we killed 168 more with close air support (in Iraq)."

Finding recruits with the right combination of strength, smarts and will to succeed isn't easy.

"We're looking for the type-A personality, unusually aggressive, focused," says Tech. Sgt. Jay Chambers, a pararescuer and instructor. "We need somebody who's always wanted to succeed. People who don't want to do ordinary things. We're looking for the physically fit — the high school wrestler, track runners, swimmers."

"The key is the mind-set. It's physically demanding but even more psychologically demanding."

Ramos adds: "You need guys with heart and desire and drive. Guys who will not quit. People who can take no sleep, the wet and the cold without tiring."

About one in three will complete the training, says Wayne Norrad, an Air Force special tactics contractor who helps with recruiting. For starters, he says, trainees should be able to run 3 miles at a seven-minute-a-mile pace, swim 1,000 meters non-stop and do about a dozen pull-ups and 75 sit-ups.

Swimming may be the most physically demanding task, and about one in four who drop out are culled during that portion of the training. Even more — 30% — are lost in the combat controller's apprentice course, which includes land navigation and small-unit tactics.

Senior Airman Scott Ashley, 23, of Princeton, Minn., says he enjoys training to be a combat controller. He says he likes the physical and mental challenges of being a special operator and disdains the office.

"I didn't want to work in a cubicle," Ashley says. "I researched it and found this was the best way to get involved. I love this job. Free-falling from airplanes, shooting stuff, blowing things up. I get to work out a lot. What's not to like?"

Back at the pool, training continues. One exercise has the trainees swimming with their hands and feet bound with Velcro. They tread water without using their hands.

Mike Fox, 42, an instructor and former combat controller, points out that none of the trainees looks like a body-builder. They're extremely fit, for sure, but not bulky.

"They can't be all sinew, muscle and bone," Fox says. "You wouldn't float, and it would wear you out completely to tread water. Being a musclehead is not an advantage in this career field."

Martens and the other trainees tie and untie knots while underwater. They're down for a long time when one recruit surfaces, gulps for air and utters a curse. An instructor immediately reprimands him. A combat controller must never show emotion, he says.

Fox says the goal of pool training isn't attrition.



By Tech Sgt. Cecilio M. Ricardo, U.S. Air Force

**Pool training:** Airman 1st Class Brian Pajor treads water with 16-pound weights on his belt at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas.

"We really want to see these guys succeed," Fox says. "There are hundreds of guys deployed who would definitely like a breather, too."

Martens says his motivation is simple.

"I don't want to let people down," he says.

## DISCUSSION

- ▶ What is the purpose of training exercises like buddy breathing?
- ▶ What psychological and physical challenges do Air Force combat controllers and pararescuers face? Which type of challenge is the most difficult to overcome?
- ▶ What kind of people are special ops recruiters seeking? What non-military jobs might these individuals excel at?
- ▶ Describe a scenario that might require the skills of a combat controller. How do these experts serve Americans?

## VOCABULARY

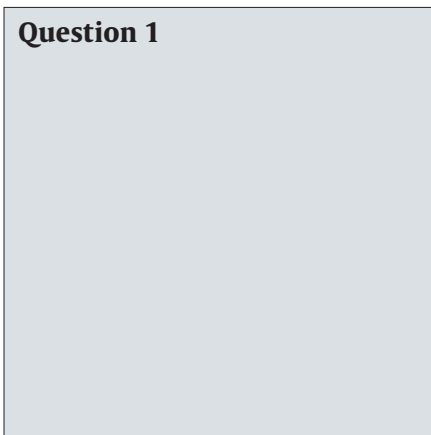
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**Directions:** Recruiters, whether for government service or the private sector, need reliable ways to determine whether a potential recruit has the desired qualities. Many organizations create inventories or questionnaires that, through a series of carefully developed and worded questions, help reveal whether a particular trait is present in a person. For example, to discover an applicant's attitude toward extreme physical exertion, a good inventory wouldn't simply ask the question outright – e.g., “How do you feel about extreme physical exertion?” Not only does this question assume that all candidates will provide accurate, coherent information, it also allows applicants to answer in one word (“good”) or 10 pages. A better question might ask individuals to select the sport (from a given list) that provides them with the greatest

feeling of satisfaction. (The list would include a range or challenging sports, some of which require extreme physical stamina.) Or, the questionnaire might provide a scenario and ask applicants to choose their most likely response to it. In the exercise below, you will practice forming questions that seek specific information. Learning to ask the right kind of questions will help you choose colleges, jobs, supervisors and political candidates that meet your expectations.

Adopt the roles of Air Force recruiters who are looking for combat controller and pararescuer candidates. In small groups, devise two questions for an inventory that would determine whether a potential recruit would succeed at a psychologically demanding job. Explain the rationale behind each question.

**Question 1**

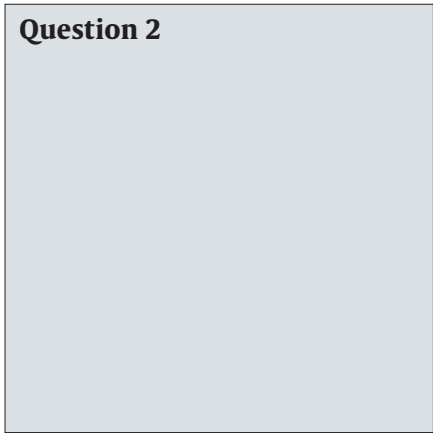


**Possible answers**

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**Possible answers**

**Question 2**



**Rationale** \_\_\_\_\_  
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