

— In Theaters Now —

The New CRO

story and photos by Master Sgt. Efrain Gonzalez

Wanted: A new generation of action heroes

After 53 years as an enlisted-only career field, combat rescue is fielding the first generation of officers trained to be experts in repatriating isolated Airmen. Combat rescue officers will provide an important voice in survival, evasion, resistance and escape training and real-world decision-making processes.

Like their enlisted counterparts, the officer candidates must survive more than a year of some of the hardest, most demanding training the Air Force offers. The candidates will learn to parachute, swim, dive, fight, perform basic emergency medical technician skills and rescue a downed Airman while the enemy is bearing down on them.

Following training, CROs will have an influential role at the war-planning table during contingency operations. They'll be the experts commanders tap for advice on rescuing people and handling survival training for Airmen in the field.

The Air Force wants to have roughly 166 CROs in various commands by 2007. The first cadre of officers began training in 2002 and is already combat-experienced in hotspots around the world.

Special Operations Command is the lead for all combat rescue officer initiatives. The month-long SERE training at Fairchild Air Force Base, Wash., falls under Air Education and Training Command. ☺



After successfully completing a static line jump, a combat rescue officer scans the horizon for other parachutists before recovering his own. These officers are in the desert phase of survival, evasion, resistance and escape training, just one aspect of a four-week course teaching essential survival skills. Due to the nature of the special operations mission, the officers asked not to be identified by name.

Taking advantage of the daylight hours, a combat rescue officer practices recovery tactics just before sunset. When the sun goes down, he and the others will conduct a night extraction exercise.



It's time to hunker down (left) in a makeshift shelter during the day to avoid detection, conserve energy and avoid fluid loss from physical exertion. For an evading aircrew member, potable water is the most vital need for survival — without it, a person stranded in desert-like conditions could start dehydrating within hours.



Instructors corner and kill a western rattlesnake (above) that slithered into the campsite. The rattlesnake is just one of many deadly creatures indigenous to desert training in Washington. Part of a parachute (left) provides a temporary shelter and relief from the sun. The exercise exposes students to similar conditions and stress experienced by Airmen evading enemy forces.



Tech. Sgts. Chris Lum and Vince O'Dell (above) use a Quick Draw II radio to communicate with the combat rescue officers during an 18-hour survival exercise. The students were allowed one canteen of water each and had to procure any additional water and food from their surrounding environment. Ever tried a static-line jump from a UH-1 Huey helicopter? Airborne operations (right) are just a small part of a four-week training course that includes academic, laboratory and field training activities.



A UH-1 takes combat rescue officers to the training area (above) for a static-line jump. Once there (left), officers make their way to a training site in Vantage, Wash., where they'll spend a week in advance desert survival training. The training increases their combat tactics, techniques and procedures.