

That Others May Live

Photos by Guy Aceto, Art Director, and Paul Kennedy

An individual needs skill and determination to get through pararescue training. If you need help, that's the kind of person you're looking for.

Pararescue instructor, SSgt. Kenneth C. Fournier keeps an eye on his students during a rescue exercise in the desert hills near Kirtland AFB, N.M. Fournier has been a PJ, or Pararescue Jumper, for almost eight years.



You're cold, hurt, hungry, and lost—maybe even behind enemy lines. Then you make out the shape of a large helicopter coming over the horizon. Suddenly a figure emerges from the aircraft and descends to your position to administer aid. In virtually no time, you're stabilized and you are transported by helicopter to safety and more complete medical attention. And the person you have to thank: an Air Force pararescuer.

Personnel accepted into the pararescue field come from other services, from within the Air Force itself, and through an active recruiting effort by pararescue instructors at Lackland AFB, Texas, who select from the latest crop of basic trainees. Each candidate for the USAF Pararescue School at Kirtland must undergo a 10-week indoctrination course that makes basic training feel like a walk in the park.



Each stage of training is designed to weed out those candidates who lack the necessary dedication to complete the grueling program. In fact, it takes more than 45 weeks of training in various specialties like parachuting, scuba diving, and survival training just to prepare them for arrival at the Pararescue School. There, they take part in an intensive 21-week course that will earn the few graduates the coveted maroon beret and badge. Trainees go through a specially designed confidence course that combines scaling a four-story structure (above), rappelling from it, using a rifle to fire from a series of preset stations, vaulting a barbed wire topped fence (left), dragging a 185-pound sled, and finally demonstrating proficiency with a 9 mm pistol. All of this is done in under four minutes and sometimes, as shown here, in the middle of a snow squall.



Above and at right, trainees wait for the signal to board a TH-53 from Kirtland's 58th Special Operations Wing. These helicopters are modified, former Marine CH-53s used by the school as an alternative to the more sophisticated USAF MH-53 Pave Low special operations helicopter.

Realism during the training period is key. The exercise today has been scripted to include the status of a "downed pilot" as well as a fictitious political climate of the region. The team of trainees will be inserted into the area, then navigate over land to the pilot, who is being played by another trainee. The pilot will have specific injuries that the PJs have to diagnose and treat. When the survivor has been removed from the area, the team will proceed to a pick-up point where they will be extracted by a TH-53. Briefing for the exercise is very detailed, complete with a rundown of possible aggressor forces (played by the instructors) that may be in the area.



Kirtland provides the perfect backdrop for such intensive training. Each trainee must be in the proper frame of mind and physical condition to survive the rugged climate and conditions of the New Mexico desert. Training is extremely taxing on all individuals, and while a class can start with as many as 24 men, a graduating class has been known to consist of only a single person.

At right, A1C Robert L. Sanders steam cleans his personal weapon. After 12 to 14 hours in the New Mexico hinterland, it needs cleaning. PJs are introduced to a variety of weapons and equipment during their training. Even more specialized training will take place, depending on what unit they are assigned to after graduation.



Photos by Paul Kennedy



Staff photo by Guy Aceto



At left, another class goes through a portion of their medical training. This group is practicing how to start an intravenous line. They will learn to be as adept at starting an IV as they are at using an assault rifle. Under the watchful eye of instructor Capt. Jim McMahon, SrA. Duwane Goodwin starts an IV on SrA. Dave Goodale. After he is finished it will be Goodale's turn to work on his classmate.

Trainees receive extensive medical training and will become registered Emergency Medical Technicians by the time they finish school. They will even spend time in the local community hospital emergency rooms where they will put the skills they have learned at pararescue school to the test against real-life cases.

The "para" part of pararescue is learned at the US Army basic jump school at Ft. Benning, Ga. After that Air Force PJs will undergo a four-week free-fall class, first at Ft. Bragg, N.C., then at US Army Yuma Proving Ground, Ariz. Scuba and survival training come next. Each candidate must complete all four courses prior to his entrance into USAF Pararescue School.

At right, PJs assemble in the rear of a TH-53, preparing to "fast rope" into the drop zone. This action requires them to quickly make their way down a single heavy rope suspended from the TH-53. This commonly used method of insertion for special forces is quick; thus the helicopter will spend less time exposed to any external threats.



Staff photo by Guy Aceto



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The exit from the hovering helicopter, even with each trainee carrying a heavy pack, is quick. Once on the ground, trainees immediately take up defensive positions, lingering for only a few

moments to get their bearings, then proceed to locate the downed pilot. Above, Sanders checks the terrain before moving off.



Photo by Paul Kennedy

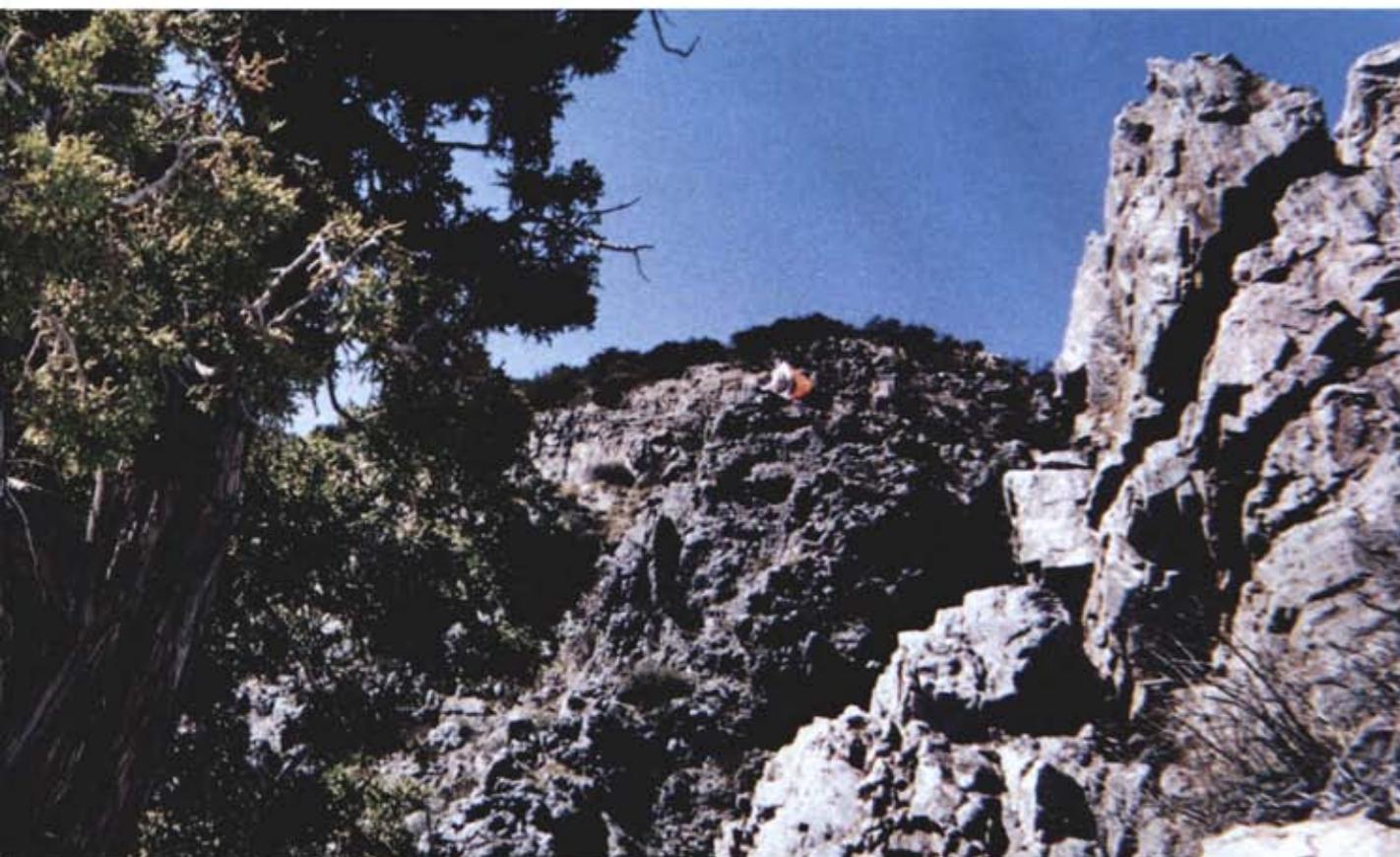


After completing training, each PJ can be assigned to either a rescue squadron or special operations squadron. The squadron will expand upon the PJ's skills depending on its mission. With SOF units, the PJ will work closely with USAF combat controllers. Some in rescue squadrons will be assigned to support NASA shuttle missions. Above, instructor Fournier climbs aboard the TH-53 after making sure the trainees have everything they will need for the exercise.

At right, Sanders discusses with fellow trainee SrA. Dennis Hay (right) the best way to proceed to the rescue site.



At left, A1C Jack Hamilton maintains a defensive position as the team moves out. They will work their way carefully to the pilot, with due regard for any surprises the instructor-aggressors may have in store for them along the way. During this portion of the exercise the trainees use many of the skills learned during the ground operations portion of their training. Navigation skills, basic mountaineering, small team tactics, weapons training, and survival all come into play.



Above, the survivor is still hanging in his parachute harness against an almost sheer rock face (beneath the orange and white parachute). The trainees will find the best way to scale the cliff and assess the survivor's injuries before stabilizing him and bringing him down the mountain. At right, they are under constant watch of the instructors. To add even more to the realism, an exercise such as this is normally done at night.

Once they graduate from Pararescue School, PJs can expect to deploy anywhere in the world as many as 250 days a year on temporary duty. There are fewer than 300 active duty members in the career field, yet Air Force pararescuemen have deployed in every contingency involving US armed forces from Europe to the Middle East to Asia. ■

