



Issue 10
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The Canopy

North Central Florida All Airborne Chapter

*Connecting sky
soldiers, past
and present.*



Sign marking the Domeij Fires Center. Photo by Ron Dahlgren

75th Ranger Regiment Domeij Fires Center

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Directory & Chapter Calendar

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Upcoming Events

Saturday, May 11th, 1300 hrs Last meeting until September
 VFW Post 8083
 12666 US-441
 Belleview, FL 34420

From The Editor

This month's issue had a lot of original content come together. I want to thank the 82nd Airborne Division's 1st Brigade for hosting me back in that chilly January. It was a great experience to get out there with the troops and witness the paratroopers doing what they do best. There's not many opportunities to feel the "thump" of a C4 breaching charge in my daily life.



I'm also very thankful for the connection I've made with the 75th Ranger Regiment's Fire Support Cell. As a prior fire supporter, it's truly inspirational to learn from those at the apex of skill.

The first ever General Raymond T. Odierno Best Redleg Competition takes place in May. I'm working on interviews with the fire support teams sent from the 82nd, 75th, and 101st. There are teams from the rest of the Army, of course, but they're leg units. It sounds like an awesome program put together by the Artillery center at Ft. Sill, OK. I'm hoping to make it out for some live reporting at the event.

Airborne! All The Way!

Ron Dahlgren

Editor, The Canopy

<https://www.the-canopy.org>

Chairman's Message

Kudos to everyone who attended our Annual Airborne Picnic at Gary Gariepy's man cave! It was a great success with a total of 44 people attending. Great job - Airborne! Should be some nice pictures of the event. We introduced three new potential members since I last talked with you all. Please welcome Al Warta, Bob Little, Julio Feliciano and their wives to our chapter.

Our Chapter also awarded the 82nd Airborne Medal and Certificate of Achievement to JROTC Cadet Camila Castro of Westport High School. Gary Blasczienski, Vice Chairman did the honors of awarding her during their annual awards ceremony Apr 16th. Leo McInnis will be our delegate to the All American Week at Fort Liberty (Bragg) NC. I'm sure he'll be in for a treat being at the home of the Paratroopers. He'll be supervised by Rich Becker but I'm sure trouble will find them. Have fun there. In August the 82nd Airborne Convention will be held at the Rosen Centre in Orlando Aug 14-17. If you are around the area, consider attending it. It's only an hour away from the Villages and it's a really fun time. You'll probably see an old familiar face there.



Let's also remember all the mothers out there for Mother's Day. We are forever in their debt for guiding us through life and especially for putting up with us paratroopers because we can be a handful. Happy Mother's Day to you moms out there.

Memorial Day is coming around and is a time for honoring our fallen service members. There will be many events around the area to celebrate this day so please attend one if you are able.

Our last meeting for the season before our "summer hiatus" will be a regular meeting at the VFW May 11 at 1:00 p.m. I'll be on my way to Colorado so will miss the gathering but hope the rest of you all will be there. If you're coming to the Colorado Springs area, let me know. Just bring your oxygen. I live at almost 9000 ft. And lastly, be safe over the summer. We want to see your smiling faces at the September meeting so until then, Airborne All the Way and see you on the manifest in September!

Stand in the door! Airborne!

Tony Alger, Chairman, North Central Florida All-Airborne Chapter

10 Most Recent Canopy Boosters - Thank you for your support!

- | | |
|--------------------|--------------------------|
| Galen Mitchell | Jerry & Robby Brust |
| Heath Davenport | Christopher Adams |
| Nick Harty | Regis Rossa |
| Darla & Jay Tatman | John Kinney |
| Howard Northrup | Arthur Tate |

Our 2024 Booster Goal is \$500

Start 50% Complete!



75th Ranger Regiment Domeij Fires Center



The dome trainer. Photo by Ron Dahlgren

February 20th, Ft. Moore, GA - February 20th, Ft. Moore, GA - I was invited to visit the 75th Ranger Regiment headquarters to tour their Domeij Fires Center. This is a cutting edge fire support training facility with some unique capabilities. As a past fire support specialist (fister), I was particularly interested in seeing what the 75th was doing. Unlike conventional units, the 75th rarely operates at the battalion or company level. Most operations are platoon or even smaller maneuver elements. With an incredible amount of support assets at hand, the lowly platoon forward observer is instead granted earth-shattering powers: A-10s, F-18s, F-16s, AC-130 gunships, MQ-9 drones, and of course any

mortar or artillery assets in range. Platoon forward observers are qualified as joint fires observers (JFOs) or even qualified as joint terminal air controllers (JTACs). To train incoming personnel up to the desired level, they need facilities. The Domeij Fires Center aims to provide that capability.

The Regimental Fires NCO, MSG Ian Pletch, was unable to join at the last minute but instead sent the Regimental Targeting NCO, SFC Tucker Trathen in his place. Entering the facility, I see a computer lab style layout in the main room. There are battle stations setup in several rows, each with two monitors, a chair, and a bit of workspace. The far wall has several large displays mounted centrally.



SFC Trathen, photo by Ron Dahlgren

There is a small enclosed room off to the side with a conference table and several chairs, SFC Trathen and I head there to talk.

SFC Trathen is the targeting NCO for the 75th Ranger Regiment. Prior to this assignment, he was most recently the 3-75 battalion FSNCO. The rangers have multiple simulators they can use here at the Domeij Fires Center. There's a tabletop setup, a dome simulator, and some smaller systems. The tabletop system has a large TV display to show the observer's view with an LLDR prop configured to match the range and distances displayed. A civilian expert is on-hand to configure and care for that system. SFC Trathen says it helps to have the civilian contractors because of the turnover of people at the regiment level. Most assignments are short, as the rangers want to get their staff back to the battalions. The rangers are able to use it to stay current on CAS requirements, as the simulator is accredited for that purpose.

"So all our JTACs have required controls they can come down and execute on here. We also use them for our junior guys for more skill level 1 tasks like rotary wing, call for fire, AC-130, and indirect fire." - SFC Trathen

In the same room as the tabletop sim, they have a dome simulator. The dome provides a wide field of view for the observer - I'd estimate close to 180 degrees of visibility. This particular system is soon to be replaced. The underlying software system is not supported anymore. The dome is also used for mission qualification training - a set of practices needed for JTACs.

The Domeij Fires Center is easily accessible for rangers assigned to 3-75 or the special troops battalion, as both are based at Ft. Moore. The only thing that regularly books the facility is the quarterly controller upgrade program (CUP). The first of these CUPs completed the week before my visit. This program includes a one-week block of densely packed training including classes and simulator time.

One unique feature of the facility is the work on putting the intelligence staff into the fires training. SFC Trathen highlights the layout of the main room. It is intended to mimic a JOC. The three large TVs on the far wall will be replaced with a "CineMassive"-style display. The room we are speaking in will have a link to aircraft simulators at aircraft units. This connectivity will allow, for instance, real A-10 pilots flying in their simulator over the same simulated environment the JOC is viewing on their display. The dome can also sync with the same system. The observers in the dome, the aviators flying CAS missions, and the JOC coordinating it all can work together in the same simulation.



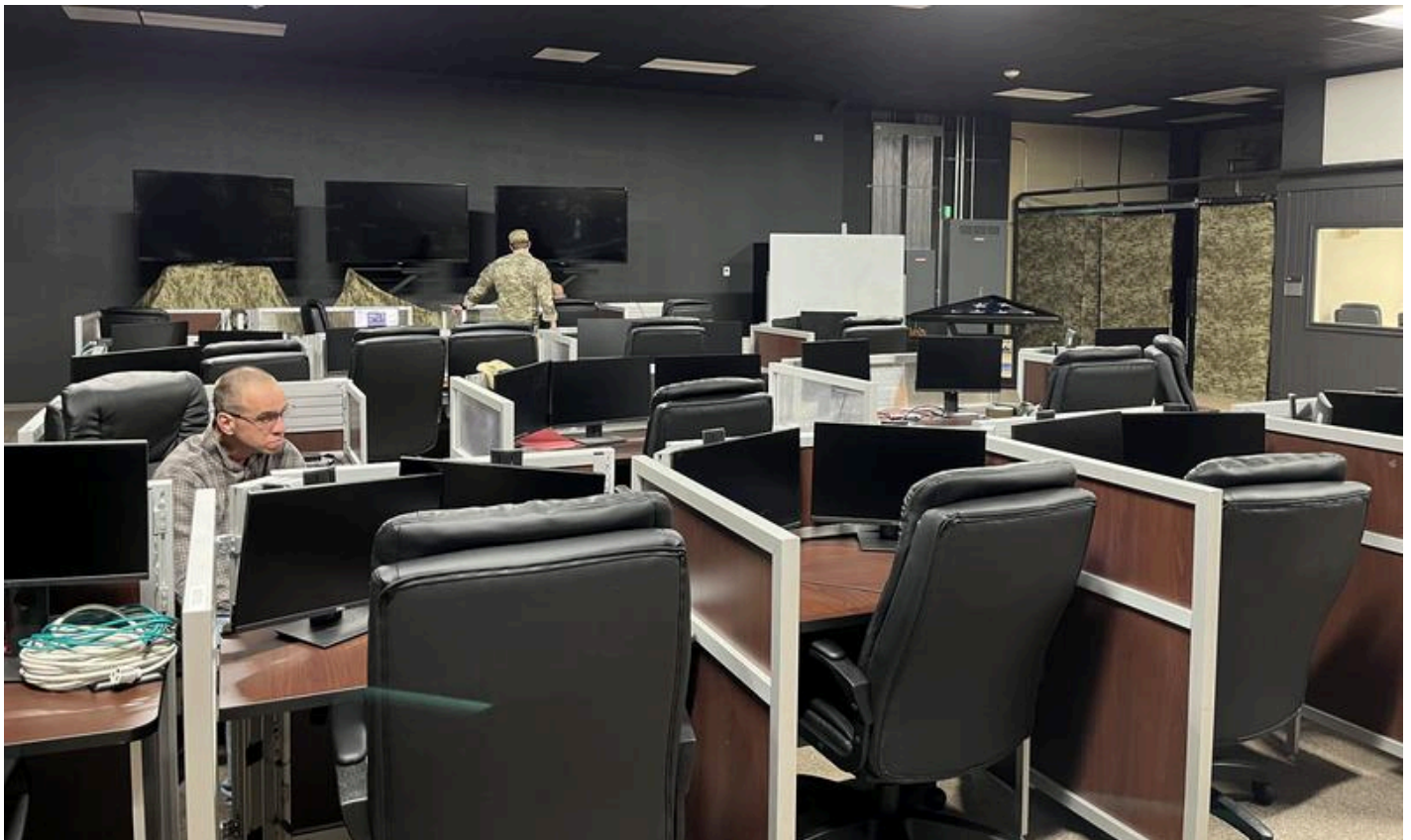
Ranger signs on the exterior of the Domeij Fires Center. Photo by Ron Dahlgren

The Ranger Regiment uses fisters in a unique way. The focus on air assets over ground-based indirect fire is unique to the unit. As such, they have been trailblazers in that regard. The first 13F JTACs came from the 75th Ranger Regiment - SFC Kris Domeij was one of those first JTACs. I ask about how the lessons-learned and experiences from the 75th can make their way back to the big Army.

"I think that the largest way that we get our lessons learned out to the Army is through our fire support officers. So when they come here they get to interact with NCOs that have been doing this job for a very long time [...] We now qualify our [battalion and regimental] FSOs as JTACs but, then when they are done here they rotate back to the Army [...]" - SFC Trathen

The Ranger Regiment is a very "fires heavy" unit. They develop tactics, techniques, and procedures that other units may not have developed due to this distinct focus. The battalion commanders are avid users of fire support when developing maneuver plans.

A brand-new, 13F fresh from Airborne School will arrive at RASP - the Ranger Assessment and Selection Program. This program is an intense eight-week course including physical and psychological tests, character and leadership ability. Additional training on marksmanship, explosives, personnel recovery, and land navigation ensure a strong baseline for every ranger in the regiment. If selected, the fister will go through a training cycle with their company. After that point, they will be expected to complete ranger school. Once they come back "tabbed", training as a JFO will begin. If the 13F then shows potential to stay in the regiment and show longevity as an NCO, they will go to the SOTACC course.



Central room JOC-style layout. Photo by Ron Dahlgren

The Special Operations Terminal Attack Controller Course is run at Hurlburt AFB, Florida. It is hosted by the US Air Force 24th Special Operations Wing. Attendees conduct CAS missions to receive their Joint Terminal Attack Controller (JTAC) certification. After that, the fister returns to the regiment to complete all the required qualifications and gets evaluated. Evaluations and currency requirements are the biggest bottleneck to producing JTACs in the 75th. Many of the currency controls require something to be renewed and tested every six months. Ideally, every platoon forward observer would be JTAC qualified. In practice, the time and training required to produce and maintain JTACs cannot scale to that level. Regardless, SFC Trathen says one of the large changes he's seen in the last ten years is the significant increase in the number of JTACs being produced.

"It used to be like one per company. Now we are kind of at the point where we are trying to get to where every platoon has a ranger JTAC." - SFC Trathen

The simulators help a great deal, but without the pilot feedback, the training is missing something. The connectivity between flight simulators and the fires systems at the Domeij Fires Center will provide that opportunity.

As part of the connectivity vision, the regiment has mortar system trainers that can also be connected to the simulator. The mortar trainer includes a pneumatic tube to provide some of the physical feedback of firing a round without the operator being exposed to harmful overpressure. This system can fire simulated rounds into the very same environment.

As I'm looking around the facility, SFC Trathen introduces me to a ranger putting together a training system. He has pulled an off-the-shelf product, Arma 3, and some plugins to customize the experience. By loading specific map data, he can also sync his tactical phone map to the same

data. The Arma 3 system can network multiple computers together. In the setup he's showing me, one computer is acting as an AC-130, another acting as the on-the-ground observer. It provides a good approximation for the experience of talking the gunship onto targets. This was done with a \$7 commercially available video game.

* * *

The following week, I was able to catch up with MSG Pletch. We spoke about fire support in the regiment.

Interview with Master Sgt Ian Pletch

The Canopy: *So if you could start out by introducing yourself and your billet...*

My name's Master Sergeant Ian Pletch, 75th Ranger Regiment Fire Support NCO

The Canopy: *Awesome, so I'm gonna go right into the questions that were left over for you, so all the easy ones have been taken. Item 1, I'm interested... we spoke about this on the phone before, about integrating live virtual and constructed together. tell me more about how you're doing that currently and what your vision is further down the road.*

Sure, so currently we kind a have two paths on that. One is Kinetic Strike, which is very SOF specific and then the other is your traditional JTAC roles, fire support roles. So the Kinetic Strike, very SOF specific, is... we're able to replicate all the MQ-9 systems, sensors, their actions that the pilots will take in a simulated environment, which is great, because FAA with an MQ-9 flying over a restricted airspace is a little bit more difficult - especially with their live munitions. We're able to replicate everything in a simulated world on what they would do. So the pilot is in a GCS in the room next to us while we are talking to them on our phone, just like we would down range, so instead of us being 3000 miles apart, we can be in the same room. We're able to stop, pause the tape, and then go through our actions, their actions, and what they were think-

ing on the other end of the line. So that's the Kinetic Strike route and that's how it really started with this. We transition from that, or we found a way to put a simulated aircraft into the live environment where the MQ-9 pilot is still flying their GCS, there local, so we have a range, Hurlburt field, or out in Jacksonville, we're gonna do it in Avon Park in a couple weeks where the MQ-9 pilot is flying a simulated MQ-9 and they are seeing things that we are seeing on the ground. So we replicate that through a small puck and I tell the operator, I want this puck to be a white SUV and it shows up in the GCS as a white SUV, which replicates our white SUV we are driving around in the [area].

The Canopy: *Does that have like a blue force tracker or something similar to push updates from live to virtual?*

I'm not exactly sure of the system, of what it is. But it's very similar. It's [data] and the 1s and 0s get translated into an image on the screen.

The Canopy: *When you said puck, what does that stand for?*

Well we call it a puck, it's basically just a... we can use a phone or a small square that we can put onto a car.

The Canopy: *Oh I see, so you mean like a hockey puck because it's a little tracker thing.*

Yeah, it's a little tracking device, you can program that tracking device to be whatever you want, so we're able to fly a simulated MQ-9 in [an area] where A-10s and F-16s are flying at the same time, so they might not look the same, the SUV might look different to the MQ-9 but it's the same... we can get the same actions out of it, so we're able to replicate a lot of our controls that we need with ISR downrange.

The Canopy: *That's pretty cool and I like that you mention that.. you mention that they visuals might not be 1 to 1, because that's OK. you're not training target recognition of the MQ-9 operator, right?*

Exactly, and then the more conventional JTAC role that we're really getting out of the simulated world is we're trying to train O-5 and O-6 battle staff on how to conduct pre-assault fires, preparatory fires and targeting. So that's our next step, targeting. Right now we're able to conduct preparatory fires, pre-assault fires, because we can use the MACE system (modern air combat equipment), which is a computer program. You can put an A-10 pilot into his simulator or into a MACE computer and he can fly around and you can see what he is seeing in his sensor just like you would if you had a [connection device]. So we can replicate some pre-assault fires for an O-5 or an O-6 battle staff prior to anybody actually jumping in for a JFE. Now, we're moving that into a little bit more targeting because we understand that hey we can't just put an airplane above whatever country and just start playing whack-a-mole, we have to find, fix, finish, track, target, all those - the threat systems, APCs - anything that would be a threat to the ground force and now we're moving into a targeting realm where we're able to integrate COMINT, SIGINT, and put all that together and be able to track a target for a couple of days before we actually strike.

The Canopy: *When I was there at the center, SFC Trathen pointed out the JOC-style layout of the main room and also highlighted the intent to tie this thing to the S-2 intel piece. So that's interesting as you're describing it to be able to train that upper echelon is kind of a unique capability. I'm thinking way back in the day, Warfighter was this thing at Ft. Gordon. That's the only simulator I can think of with a similar kind of high-level capability like that.*

Right, and if you remember, you know, a JFE in the 82nd if you're gonna jump, that's individual and squad level training, we still have to jump onto an airfield because the saw gunner needs to find where taxiway delta is, know how to get to the assembly area. But we also need to be able to train the BQ captain that is the CHoPS on how to battle track what's happening, [...] understand go / nogo / abort criteria prior to influencing the AO. So we're able to simulate that without having to use real planes, real gas, and time. Really time, because time is precious with the Air Force planes. We only have so many of them to go around, so we can still let the individual still do his individual tasks on the airfield.

The Canopy: *Awesome. Switching gears a little bit, but in kinda the same vein, how have the lessons learned at the regiment helped the larger fire support community across the services? Have you seen any of that where the stuff that you guys have learned has been pushed out and maybe changed some TTPs at the larger level?*

There has been so, the big influence, you have JFOs at the platoon and company level that are very experienced JFOs that understand air to surface as well as surface to surface fires. I have noticed that throughout the conventional force. So that's strictly taken from the regiment where we had JTACs at every platoon level that were surface to surface and air to surface experts. What I have noticed in the last 6-8 months though is the transition from raids, unconventional warfare to LSCO. The conventional force is a little bit ahead of us now on where our FO and JTAC placement will be. We are so comfortable with putting a JTAC with every PL that in a LSCO / MSCO medium scale combat environment, we may not be able to do that so we are still trying to figure out where our observer placement will be and how we're gonna communicate - whether that will be a centralized control out of a battalion or company level or a decentralized control. In an asset constrained environment, decentralized where every platoon

has a JTAC may not be realistic - to be able to say this platoon, you have a set of A-10s for the next two hours, go conquer the world.. we probably don't have enough bombs to be able to do that for every platoon.

The Canopy: *Sure. SFC Trathen mentioned a similar thing, that when he would go to the NCOES schools, it would be a learning experience for him because it's such a different experience you guys have as fisters versus the rest of the service.*

That's right. SLC they pulled out an AFATDS box and I had never seen one. I had to figure out how to connect all the wires and the 1s and 0s and then went back home and we didn't have any AFATDS boxes back home, so I moved on from that then.

The Canopy: *So you mentioned one of the things was the JFOs becoming more endemic to the service, I saw this in the 82nd as they are pushing*

Glossary

17th ASOS - US Air Force unit supporting special operations forces. The close-air support experts.

AFATDS - Advanced Field Artillery Tactical Data System. A ruggedized computer system for managing fire control measures at the battalion and higher level.

BQ - branch qualified.

CHoPs - Chief of Operations.

COMINT - communications intelligence.

GCS - ground control station.

ISR - intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance

JFE - joint forcible entry - when we jump in and seize an airfield.

JFO - joint fires observer.

JOC - joint operations center.

JTAC - joint terminal attack controller.

LSCO - large scale combat operations.

MSCO - medium scale combat operations.

SIGINT - signals intelligence.

SLC - Senior Leaders Course. E-7 school.

SMU - Special mission unit.

to get JFOs at the platoon level. Not quite there yet but that is the goal. To that end, with as many JTAC people as you have in the regiment, how has the role of the 17th ASOS changed? Are they putting their people in other roles or supporting other SMUs or something or are they still integrated tightly with you guys?

No, they are definitely still very integrated with us. We cannot build enough JTACs fast enough within the army to maintain the standards we want to maintain with one per platoon, so it is a 4-5 year process for an option 40 kid to come in through his pipeline before he is JTAC qualified. Even when he is jtac qualified, he's a baby JTAC and doesn't know enough. He knows enough to be dangerous. So we still rely on our 17th partners to be able to do what they do. And they have some advantages that we don't have as far as being able to go to weapons school and other graduate level courses. Where their knowledge is greatly appreciated to be able to pick their brain and be able to be a team with them.

The Canopy: *Ok, got it. The last piece here is kind of a looser question, and it's the last one I've got for you. As I've been asking around on this, everybody that I have heard that has bumped into or otherwise served with Kris Domeij over the years has really just had glowing remarks about the level of fire support capabilities that he had and being a great ranger and stuff and I understand that you guys worked together in some capacity. I was hoping you could give a little color on your experience of Kris Domeij and maybe a memory that sticks out to you.*

Yeah, sure so Kris was the battalion FSNCO when I was a tabbed spec-4 and e-5 when I got to go to JTAC QC. So we had... I was the 6th JTAC... 6th or 7th in 2-75 that we ever got. So, learning from him and seeing how he was able to influence the officers of a staff and be able to tell them the firing solution and get to it quickly where infantry IIAs that might not understand the 1s and 0s he was able to break it down very easily for them to understand, "Here is

the problem and here is the solution that I have to fix it", before we have to do a bold flanking maneuver or something. He was able to do that. But his level of expertise was always growing, right? We always think we know something but I always saw with Kris that he knew he didn't know everything and was always ready to go find the answer.

So we were out at Pine Castle Bombing Range right outside of Jacksonville, Florida. F-18s checked on with a munition we had never heard of and I'm up in the tower and I'm like "what is that...", I'm scratching my head and I'm not trying to look like an idiot in front of Sergeant Domeij and I look over and it's him and the other company team chiefs looking through their books knowing exactly what the munition was, what it did, and he was able to, without having to slow the training down, quickly identify what it was, what we're gonna be able to do, how we're gonna use it, what the range regs were with it... so he always knew where to go to find the information. That's one thing that I've always kept.. like you're not going to know everything, but you need to be able to make sure you're able to figure it out and quickly react to the training situation. So that's definitely one memory that I have from Pine Castle.

And then another time we were out at... in the UK for a Jaded Thunder and his level of tenacity in wanting to quickly move and destroy the enemy is unmatched - by anybody. So we get slowed down, we're moving a little bit and there he is moving us, yelling at us, telling us to go more quickly and upping the level of stress to an unrealistic level so that when it was real, we would be ready for it, all the time. So I've always tried to keep that going within the regiment, so kinda our motto is "fangs out".

We always want to be one step ahead of the maneuver, we always wanna know what the next problem is. We are ready for phase three while phase two is finishing. So those are a couple of memories for that.

From The Chapter



The assembled membership. Photo by Catherine Dahlgren.

April 13th, Gary's Man Cave - The chapter held its annual Airborne Picnic. Music was provided by chapter fixture, Dan Marrin. There was a serious buffet of food provided by the chapter and its members. Also of note were three new faces to the chapter. Welcome! The weather was absolutely beautiful. A cool breeze and full sunshine. We had a great turnout this year.

I made a point to connect one of our new members with another member that had served in a rather exotic Vietnam-era unit. I suspected they might have had some overlap or perhaps knew some of the same people. Our chapter has several stories of connections between members that span decades.



Photo provided by Tony Alger



Photo by Ron Dahlgren



Photo provided by Tony Alger



Photo Provided by Tony Alger



Photo provided by Tony Alger



Photo provided by Tony Alger

April 16th, West Port High School – The North Central Florida All-Airborne Chapter was proud to present an award to an outstanding Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) cadet. Vice Chairman Gary Blasczienski awarded an 82nd Airborne Division Association Achievement Medal and associated certificate to Cadet Camila Castro. Cadet Castro was recognized for excellence among her peers in the West Port High School JROTC program. The JROTC program at West Port focuses on "developing cadets' character and leadership skills, abilities, and potential; foundations for success; leadership; wellness; geography; and teaching math and science skills." Cadet Castro truly embodies the program's motto, "Excellence in Action".



Photo provided by Gary Blasczienski

Devil Live Fires, Conclusion



Red Devil support by fire laying it down. Photo by PFC McGlown, 82nd PAO

Ft. Liberty, NC, Monday January 29th – After a long, cold night sleeping in 30–60 minute stretches, the sun starts to light up the area and I get up and start moving. The cold isn't as bad once I'm up and about. At 0745, field breakfast is set up. After the troops have fed, I get a plate of corned beef hash, oatmeal, and eggs. There is coffee as well, but it's pretty watered down. I have a cup anyway, as it's warm and I'm cold.

My PAO contacts meet with me again at West McKeithan Pond. The plan today is to see a live-fire iteration this morning, then see mortars firing, then view the heavy weapons company maneuvering across Sicily dropzone, then see a night live fire.

We get into position for the first live fire exercise. As everyone is pulling security at the ORP, the leaders are taking a knee in a huddle in the center.

The observers and BC are in a separate group, standing and talking. Several minutes pass. After a spell, the BC walks off the range by himself. The platoon is told to lock and clear their weapons.

A few minutes after that, the word is received that we are on hold for the live fire iteration and we should leave the range. Back at the sleeping area, I talk with the PAO contacts about our plans for the day. We decide to head to Range 63, where we have heard the heavy weapons company will be doing live-fires.

It's a cold and windy day, but with clear skies and full sun.

We drive out to range 63 and learn the heavy weapons company completed their live fires on a previous day and are not there anymore. We learn that a British paratrooper company is doing live fire

lanes on the other end of the range. We head down to meet up with them. The leaders on the scene tell us they will be doing a blank iteration first followed by a live iteration. Before the iteration starts, I walk over to chat with the British troops about their gear. I ask their "boss", a lieutenant, some questions about the differences in TTPs between our two forces. My first question is how would I know his rank. He tells me they don't wear rank in the field, you have to know who you're with. I also note the cut-down brim on their boonie caps. I ask about that and learn it's a style choice, but it's universal that a British soldier chops down the brim of his boonie cap.

The Brits all use bullpups for their individual rifles. Their machine guns are made by FN, like ours, but a different model. There are no equivalents to our "SAW" in their squads, though they have more medium machine guns with the platoon than our forces.

We follow along with them, sticking with the US OCs. I follow along to their support by fire position. At this range, the assault element will clear triple-strand concertina wire, neutralize a vehicle, and clear three bunkers on the objective.

They emplace 4 machine guns and start laying down fire. It's interesting to me that they mount the gun onto the tripod before running up to position. I make a note their machine guns process the blanks smoothly. At one point, the 3 gun stutters with some feeding issues. Their machine gun sergeant yells out, "3, fuckin' sort that belt out!".

The machine gun sergeant calls out different timing instructions as the maneuvers continue: "1 every 6!", "1 every 3!".



"Sort that fuckin' belt" - photo by SGT Moir, 82nd PAO



Once the support by fire has lifted, I talk with the one of the OCs, 1SG Carabello from HHC 2-504. I ask about how the Brits signal lift and shift. He says all radio. I ask how his jump went - he says he was the PJ on his plane and they had an issue with a stuck door bundle that cost 40 seconds of greenlight. Everyone on his bird made it out to the drop zone, but he said others faced a similar issue and a group ended up in the trees past the end of the drop zone. I ask how heavy his pack was. He says it wasn't too bad, he tries to stick to the 60 lbs limit. I ask him if he had to pack the steiner aid. He says they don't use steiner aids anymore.

As we are leaving the range, I overhear fragments of conversation between the US observers and the British paras. There is a lot of shared interest in gear - their equipment belt, their bullpups, their jackets.

When we regroup after the iteration, it's about noon. Hot chow is setup for the troops. The PAOs and myself have an MRE. Once we see the Brits are eating lunch, we realize it will be a long time before they do their live iteration. We decide to use this time to head to the other end of Range 63 where a mortar firing position is setup. The drive out to the MFP from the entrance is long and twisting. We drove past a number of burned out trees. The range is flat and empty. We arrive to find the White Devil 81mm mortar platoon is setup with an additional set of 120mm tubes a little further down. The British paras



(above) 81mm mortar flying off to its new home. (below) Mortar team firing. Photos by SGT Moir, 82nd PAO



also have a mortar position set up.

The Brits are supporting their guys during their exercises, so the 81s are using the time between iterations to register their guns. It's very windy on the large open field where the mortars are set up. Between the Brits and the 81s, there are three rusting dumpsters riddled with .50 caliber bullet holes. One of them has an open door that will slowly move in the wind, letting out a low-pitched squeal periodically.

When the observers call in the fire mission, one mortarman enters the data and comes up with a firing solution. He calls it out to the gun, "deflection... charge 2... elevation... when ready". Each piece of information is repeated back from the entire mortar team. One of the mortar men on each gun uses a notebook to track the information.

When the mortar is dropped, it fires the charge and shoots out of the tube. The explosive charge can be felt in my body and the mortar fire leaves a lingering smell similar to fireworks. The tubes ring after the round leaves. The ringing is distinct and lasts 4-5 seconds. The first couple of rounds cause the baseplate to kick up a rooster tail of dirt.

On the radio, the mortar PL radios to the observers "shot over", and a few seconds later, "splash over". After a moment, the observers send their corrections and the process repeats until the guns are registered. "End of mission".

I talk with the section sergeant about the guns. Unlike the 60mm tubes, these baseplates and tubes are not jumped. Instead they are delivered as door bundles. The mortar sergeant says he's been working on a bundle that weighs about 400 lbs, using the tootsie rolls (their slang for the tubes mortar rounds are packaged in) filled with sand to simulate the weight of ordinance.

After the section sheaf is adjusted, the US team has to stop as the British infantry is about to start their live fire iteration on the range. The Brits will be supporting them.

We head over to OP 12 where the observers are based, hoping we can catch them after the British iteration is completed and they are registering the 120mm mortars.

It's a long drive, as we have to go out and around to get to them. Along the way, we pass some controlled burns happening out in the training area. The fires are right up to the road. The smoke hangs low. This is why they call them "fire breaks".

At the OP, I speak with SSG Garman, the 2-504 Targeting NCO and an FSO. They are the observers for the 81s and 120s set up back at the MFP on Range 63. They have a laser rangefinder and observation device setup on the tower with them. It is very windy up in the tower.



Photo by SGT Moir, 82nd PAO



The cold wind is finding cracks in my jacket and collar to get onto me. I ask the two how their jumps went. The SSG says he drove in as a notional jumper. The LT says his jump was good, but cold. He was fine as he made the 3 km trek to the assembly area, but once he was there planning, stationary, he says he started to notice the cold. His pack was not particularly heavy.

Also on the OP are two British mortar observers. I ask them about their role. I'm surprised to learn that mortarmen in the paras work their way up to being observers. They will then embed with the maneuver element when needed. I ask if they also work with any aircraft. They say no, that's the artillery observers. After some time talking with the FIST team about their training and staffing, we head back to West McKeithan Pond to try and catch a live fire iteration.



When we get there, we learn there is a platoon queued up and ready so we rush out to catch up with them. The safety officer at the range entrance tells us they have been under a check fire for more than an hour, as there are fires nearby. We walk up to the range tower to link up with an OC. After waiting around for ten minutes, we decide the check fire probably won't end and we walk back to the sleeping area. I take the opportunity to speak with LTC Shin again. As we are talking, his XO steps out of the BN TOC tent to let the BC know the range is cleared hot again. We quickly get our gear and head over.



Photos by SGT Moir, 82nd PAO

When the BC joins us, he starts running through the trees to the support by fire position. We follow the ~200 meters in a jog. When LTC Shin gets near the guns, he yells out 'go! start!'.

The support by fire opens up and it's loud and glorious. While the 240s were choking on the blanks the night prior, they are loving the live rounds. As the assaulters get into place a hundred meters to my right, I watch the engineers move forward and put their breaching charge into place. I know this will be loud, so I step back to put the crest of the hill between me and the charge. A minute later, I hear "fire in the hole" and a moment after an intense blasts occurs. It's loud and it's strong. I can feel it in my chest. A mushroom cloud comes up from the breach. A purple smoke grenade starts smoking the breach.

I move to a position closer to the breach where some observers are standing. There is a crater about a foot deep and 3 feet around with a shredded piece of concertina wire where the breach was set off. The engineers have used fragments of a VS-17 panel to mark the edges of the obstacle.

The squads waiting to enter the breach are in the prone pulling security. Around them, small grass fires are burning. I can see concertina wire, purple smoke, and the troops with a background of burnt and burning grass and pines.

A squad moves into the trenches and begin firing on targets. The muted "thump thump thump" of rifles firing in the trench is punctuated by the occasional loud thump from another source. A second squad moves to another target to the right of the breach and begins engaging. Once the trenches and bunkers are cleared, the platoon moves to the berm and gets on line. The rifles and machine guns are laying it down on the targets as two soldiers in the middle of the berm ready a Carl Gustaf recoilless rifle for use. "Backblast area all clear!", then a boom, a whoosh, and a second boom as the HE round is sent out and impacts with the target. This ends the iteration. Eager to seize the remaining daylight, the men move quickly off the range to let the next group enter.

On the way back I talk to the Battalion engineer, asking about how the breaching charges are prepped and why they are shaped the way they are, etc.



Photo by SGT Moir, 82nd PAO.

Back at the sleeping area, I talk with some of the staff as the next iteration kicks off. A few minutes into the sound of small arms fire, a ponderously loud crack followed by a thump I feel in my chest announces the engineer's breach. As the sun sets, I line up with C 1-504 and talk with the Company RTO and a medic while waiting in the line. A transmission comes over the radio indicating that a different platoon from a different company will preempt C 1-504 for another blank iteration. I decide to call it and head back to the PAOs. We drive back to the motor pool from WMP. It's a long drive with poor visibility.

We part ways at the Division HHBD motor pool. I thank the PAO staff for making this happen and ride with SSG Mallet back to the Division HQ, where my vehicle is parked.



Photos by SGT Moir, 82nd PAO

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