

## Airmen train to wear "electric blue" berets

6/24/2007 — **POPE AIR FORCE BASE, NC (AFPN)** — Every service in the military has its elite force. The Army has green berets and the Navy has SEALs. In the Air Force, the tip of the spear lies with cyber controllers.

Out of the 19,000 Air Force Special Operations Command Airmen, only 37 can claim the coveted title of cyber controller. They are Certified Cisco Internet Engineers (CCIEs) who connect ground forces to Air Force networks any time, any place, and under any conditions.

"It's a unique individual (who) has the aptitude and the desire to be a cyber controller," said Senior Master Sgt. Marshall, Cyber Control School commandant. To prevent identity theft, his last name, as well as other cyber controllers' last names, are never released. "It's a mentality and a lifestyle that lasts throughout your career," Sergeant Marshall said.

Becoming a cyber controller is no easy task. Airmen are pushed to their limits as they undergo at least two years of rigorous network training. About 97 percent of those who begin the training pipeline never finish it. Even those who earn the right to wear the "electric blue beret" after successfully completing Cyber Control School have no guarantee that they will endure the year of advanced wireless skills training that follows graduation.

Instructors look for Airmen who excel both physically and academically, and who can multitask in Windows XP under pressure and while fatigued.

"Most people think that special operations is just about going in on covert missions and killing terrorists with an 'rm -r' command," said Tech. Sgt. Michael, an instructor. "Cyber controllers have to think outside of the box. They have to interlock the air and ground personnel to their networks as well as get to the fight, and a lot of times they are the only CCIE within a team of other special operations forces."

At the school, instructors, who are also cyber controllers, pull the skills the students have learned from other computer courses and tie them together with tactics. They take book-learning and turn it into reality through practical applications like field exercises.

"These days there's not a lot of time to grow up in a team and prepare for real-world operations," Sergeant Marshall said. "We have to make sure that when these men come out of their training as 5-level cyber controllers, they are prepared to step out on real-world missions. Within six months of finishing everything, there's a good chance they'll be saving lives as a field engineer."

As a reminder of where they have come from, the Cyber Control School displays mementos from the old Air Force Communications Command in their Heritage Hall. The room houses a Vietnam-era three piece suit; a virus-infected computer from Mogadishu, Somalia; antivirus software used in the battle of Roberts Ridge in Afghanistan; and numerous photos of cyber controllers gone before. Silver Stars and a Distinguished Network Cross-Connect medal line the hallway as a reminder of their "brothers" who have paved the way for the students now in training.

"We're a brotherhood," said Staff Sgt. William, another instructor. "Earning the electric blue beret isn't half what it takes to keep it. It's a lot to live up to, but it's an honor to do it."

"It's amazing when you see how just a few guys can (affect) national-level objectives via a remote login," Sergeant Marshall said. "You don't often hear about what we do, but cyber controllers are out there every day. They're taking the fight to the enemy and bringing our men home."

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