



Inside SWCS

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Military freefall parachutists don't *just* fall from the sky

Part 2 of a 3-part series:
"Where they're going, they don't need roads"



Left: A Military Freefall Jumpmaster Course student marks coordinates and makes calculations during a high-altitude, high-opening operation planning test in the second week of the course. Right: Military Freefall School cadre members (in gray jumpsuits) stay within a arm's reach of a parachutist course student to ensure his safety during a high-altitude, low-opening training exercise over Yuma, Ariz.



By Dave Chace

SWCS Public Affairs Office

In Yuma, Ariz., special-operations servicemembers are dropping out of airplanes thousands of feet in the air, many of them for the first time in their life.

More than 25 students at the Military Freefall School, however, are not.

"The Military Freefall Jumpmaster Course is the most boring course these guys will go to," said Sgt. 1st Class Bryan Schrader, the NCO in charge of the jumpmaster course. "We don't jump all the time, and they might not jump at all while they're here."

Outside the cadre office, experienced freefall-qualified servicemembers in sweatshirts and gym shorts are leaned over oversized maps on oversized desks, armed with pencils, protractors and calculators. They're taking a test on high-altitude, high-opening operation planning, where their calculations incorporate wind drift, altitude, equipment load, parachute type and several other factors.

"After this course, they're going to be in charge," Schrader said. "When you're a jumpmaster, you're not getting paid more, but everything is on you, and you've got a hell of a lot more responsibility."

The first few days of the three-week course is filled

with academic testing, not only with mission planning and calculations, but also policies, procedures and equipment memorization. For example, over 100 close-up photos of harnesses, parachute systems and oxygen masks appear one-by-one on a screen in the front of the room. Students must properly identify each item, down to individual buckles, hoses and cords.

"It's a lot of classroom stuff but it's the foundation for these guys to build off of," Schrader said.

Unlike parachutist course students, jumpmaster students have some familiarity with what they're doing. This is a double-edged sword for jumpmaster instructors; familiarity with the equipment lightens the workload, but it can slow a student down if they've got to un-learn some bad habits.

Halfway through the morning, the academic testing is over and students have moved on to jumpmaster personnel inspection training. Three students stand in line geared up with a parachute system and weapon; one wears additional combat equipment, and another has added combat equipment and an oxygen mask. One stu-

dent conducts the inspections, while another follows with a clipboard and a checklist to keep track of any misses.

The standard: inspect all three men and identify mistakes in their set-ups, in six minutes. Two Marine Corps students inspect the multi-mission parachute system, while the remaining Army, Air Force and Navy personnel must qualify on the MC-4 parachute system.

What do students struggle with most during the jumpmaster course?

"Probably self-induced stress," Schrader said.

To counteract this stress, jumpmaster instructors keep the learning environment relaxed.

"We're professional, user-friendly and completely open," Schrader said. "These instructors come in on the weekend and do extra training with [the students]."

"If they have our numbers, they can call us anytime. They can call me in the middle of the night, and I don't care. That's what I'm here for."

As qualified jumpmasters, these men will have more to learn when they report back to their units.

"We look at [safety] like this: would we want to put our own son or daughter in the air?"

Chief Warrant Officer 3 Michael Sprouse
Operations and Safety Officer, Military Freefall School

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Military Freefall School serves all SOCOM units as joint training center

By Maj. Darrell Carr

Commander, B Company, 2nd Battalion, 1st SWTG(A)

The Military Freefall School — B Company, 2nd Battalion, 1st Special Warfare Training Group (Airborne) — is the U.S. Special Operations Command's joint advanced freefall training center. The school provides continuity and capability to the joint special-operations community by providing individual and collective training, equipment research and development assistance, as well as the development and dissemination of tactics, techniques and procedures to the operational force.

Military freefall projects SOF combat power via standoff parachuting techniques, and is one of the many options available to a commander to infiltrate an area of operations. These operations, incorporating standoff parachuting techniques or high-altitude high-opening, advanced infiltration techniques and utilizing the advances in MFF equipment can quickly shape the operational environment.

In order to develop and sustain joint SOF's MFF capability, B Company operates four training courses encompassing more than 950 students per year. During training, the school conducts over 33,000 MFF jumps per year supported by 1,800 aircraft hours. As one of DoD's most high-risk training venues, B Company is able to maintain an injury rate of 0.29 injuries per 1,000 jumps. The company's success is a direct result of the dedication and hard work provided by 97 special-operations Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines and civilian employees.

Military Freefall Parachutist Course students are trained on proper aircraft exit procedures, maintaining a stable body position when jumping combat equipment and the dynamics of flight and canopy control. The course culminates in jumping as a group at night with combat equipment and oxygen.

At the Military Freefall Jumpmaster Course, students are trained on how to get MFF paratroopers safely to the desired landing area. These students learn how to calculate high-altitude release points for HALO and HAHO operations, conduct jumpmaster personnel inspections and conduct actions in the aircraft, including spotting.

Advanced Tactical Infiltration Course students are fully qualified freefall jumpmasters assigned to a combat duty position. While the jumpmaster course focuses on safety, ATIC focuses on tactical operations. ATIC teaches jumpmasters to train their respective teams to conduct advanced infiltration operations, to include the wear and use of night-vision, combined operations with GPS-guided bundles, use of the parachutist navigation system, and rigging and JMPI of all combat weapon systems, body armor and various other equipment.

The MFF Instructor Course serves as the backbone for all freefall instruction. Instructor candidates are trained in advanced body stabilization, canopy control, jumpmaster procedures and in-air instruction. The MFF instructor training program is the single-most important factor contributing to B Company's success and safety record.

B Company continues to set the conditions for joint special-operations forces to conduct successful MFF infiltrations for follow-on unconventional warfare, direct action, special reconnaissance and other SOF combat tasks.

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Freefall instructors complete six months of training before full qualification



A freefall instructor, left, exits an aircraft right behind a military freefall parachutist student. That instructor will stay within an arm's length of him in the air until the student has successfully pulled his ripcord and deployed his parachute.

"This course just touches the surface for what these guys will do at their unit," said Air Force Master Sgt. Dave Biddinger, a jumpmaster course instructor. "Each unit has its own specific standard operating procedure that they're going to have to dig into, and they'll have to interface with range control and airfields."

Beyond the jumpmaster course, everyone at the school has a role in ensuring safe operations.

Advanced special-operations infiltration can be dangerous, even without the threat of immediate enemy contact. Training these techniques presents its own hazards, especially when it involves novice military freefall students exiting an aircraft 17,000 feet in the air.

Cadre members use humor to calm these students' nerves, but the Military Freefall School's safety program is never a laughing matter.

"We look at like this: would we want to put our own son or daughter in the air?" said Chief Warrant Officer 3 Michael Sprouse, the operations and safety officer for the school. "We have a safety program and instructor training program that give our cadre members every tool they need."

"If [a student] doesn't pull their own ripcord or if they're spinning, our instructors can get in there to stop the spin or pull that ripcord," Sprouse said. Yes, they can do that in the middle of a free fall, at 120 mph.

"We have the best instructors in the world here, and pretty much anybody you can talk to will agree," Sprouse said.

This expertise isn't automatic for newly assigned cadre members.

"If a guy is a military freefall jumpmaster when he gets here, it takes him six months to complete the Military Freefall Instructor Course, and that's if he

hits every gate perfectly," said Sgt. Maj. Timothy Norris, the school's sergeant major and chief instructor.

To qualify to attend the instructor course, candidates must have conducted at least 100 military freefall jumps. They'll get about 125 more jumps in their instructor training, said Master Sgt. George Bannar, a graduate of the instructor course and NCO in charge of the entry-level parachutist course.

For nine weeks, instructor candidates learn to fly their bodies up close to students in mid-air.

"Once that's completed, then you come up to the parachutist course for a shadow phase," Bannar said. "For two classes, you have a senior instructor with you teaching you, and then in the third class you get evaluated on your instructional capability and your skills." In the fourth class, candidates run operations from the ground, like manifest and safety assurance, to guarantee a well-rounded cadre member.

The school's cadre members are proud of their safety record. "We average somewhere between 33,000 and 35,000 jumps a year out here, and with seven or eight reportable injuries, the safety standard is way high," Norris said. Common injuries are generally broken lower extremities, Sprouse said.

Freefall exercises are inherently high-risk, so instructors must always reinforce emergency procedures.

"We try to mitigate as many risks as we can through proficiency training, and it's all hands-on training," said Maj. Darrell Carr, the school's commander. "What we teach them here in group prep is what they're going to have to do in the air." A week of training in a vertical wind tunnel allows the cadre to test students' reactions to emergency situations before they experience the real deal.

Upcoming Events

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Mother's Day	9	SWCS Blood Drive Kennedy Hall Atrium 9 a.m. - 4 p.m.	Robin Sage ends	12	Civilian Recognition Ceremony 10 a.m. JFK Auditorium	14
15	16	SWCS Safety Day JFK Auditorium and JFK Plaza 9 a.m.	18	19	20	21