

AETC



Story and photos by  
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## More than meets the eye

**MH-53 Pave Low aerial gunner and flight engineer students at Kirtland AFB learn there's a lot more to their jobs than they ever imagined and that the most dangerous enemies may not be just hostile forces**

A giant helicopter stands on its tail and slows as the door gunner guides the pilots into a 15-foot hover. Tracer rounds begin to pour from the surrounding trees like a swarm of angry bees. The gunner and flight engineer in the forward doors return fire while the tail gunner lowers a rope ladder to the special forces team on the ground awaiting extraction.



One-by-one the special ops team climbs the ladder.

Meanwhile, the tail gunner keeps a constant stream of information flowing to the pilots. With the last team member safely aboard, the flight engineer reads the necessary information from the instrument panel to the pilots who quickly push the helicopter forward and head for home.

A mission scenario like this is only a small portion of what the MH-53 aerial gunner and flight engineer students at the 551st Special Operations Squadron at Kirtland Air Force Base, N.M., can expect during their career.

Flying low and fast in hostile territory at night requires complete awareness and crew coordination. The responsibility of flying the helicopter belongs to the entire crew, not only the pilots. The slightest lapse in concentration by one member can prove to be fatal.

Complacency, lack of experience and poor judgment are the enemy, as deadly as any hostile forces. That's why training is so crucial.

Most students enter training without a full understanding of their responsibilities as a crewmember. "It's a lot more responsibility than I expected," said Airman Robert Lamont, aerial gunner student. "I thought I was just going to shoot guns from a helicopter."

The instructors have several years of operational experience in their crew positions that they are more than willing to share with the students. During routine training missions, the instructors continually throw problems at the students.



"My first flight was just to get used to what's going on, but after that they seem to hit you with stuff all at once," said Airman 1st Class Brandon Midthun, another aerial gunner student.

There's a method to the madness.

Whether it's a flight control problem, a fast rope stuck on rocks or enemy fire, all the scenarios are based on the instructor's actual experience.

"Every malfunction or training scenario is how the guys get their heads into it," said Tech. Sgt. Robert Dinsmore, an instructor.

Aerial gunner instructor A.C. Smith added, "Everything we teach them boils down to crew coordination and situational awareness."

Having situational awareness allows the students to react to unforeseen problems quickly and safely.

When students complete the school, they will slide right into an operational crew.

"The guys in Afghanistan aren't doing anything different from us," said flight engineer instructor Staff Sgt. Brad Forslund. "That's why instructors are so hard on students."

Given the current tempo of a special operations unit, students could find themselves flying behind enemy lines under hostile fire before they know it. Not only will their lives be at stake, but the lives of others may be in their hands. So wherever their students go, 551st instructors try to ensure they have the tools necessary to complete the mission.

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