

KIWIS IN FREEFALL

Arriving at the US Army's home of the Airborne – Fort Bragg, North Carolina – in the middle of winter, I reflect on just how I ended up giving away a Kiwi summer for 0 Celsius.

WORDS KIWI MAC
PICS USSOC

The answer is pretty simple really. Towards the end of my Afghan tour, I received a series of emails saying that not only were long-time CONTACT friends at the RNZAF's para school, PTSU, attending familiarisation training at Fort Bragg, but associates from my old unit's museum, the 6RNZIR history team would also be lurking about.

A few quick calls and a goodbye to Mrs Mac and yours truly was off on their trail.

Fort Bragg is situated on the doorstep of the city of Fayetteville and was named after local North Carolina Civil War hero Confederate General Braxton Bragg.

Around 50,000 people serve at the base, which touts itself as 'the home of the US Army's paratroopers and special operations'.

All that was too much surplus information for the two Kiwi parachute instructors, Flight Lieutenant Brent 'Iggy' Iggy and Master Aircrew Kevin 'Popey' Pope, who were there to further their knowledge on international free-fall parachute techniques.

"Mac, you're such a spotter," said Popey. "You just worry about the history stuff and we'll take care of the business end."

This time, the pair were following up on a trip to California last March to test and evaluate new round parachutes being adopted by the NZDF.

"We're here to assess current US free-fall methods and compare them to those we've been using in New Zealand at PTSU," Iggy says.

"We'll also be assessing current equipment we use compared to these guys for free-fall and what ability there is for us to adopt any new techniques."

To ensure there was no mistaking this trip for anything but study, he continues his practiced pitch to the board of directors... "We'll also be looking for any commonalities that can be exploited in the future."

First port of call for the PJIs is the Sergeant Major Santos Alfredo Matos Jr Military Free-Fall Simulator or 'Jump Simulation Tower' for short.

The simulator is operated by Support Battalion, 1st Special Warfare Training Group (Airborne) of the US Army's John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Centre and School. If you think that's a mouthful, its abbreviation is not much better – USAJFKSWCS.

They claim that this simulator is the largest and possibly the only one of its kind in the world and was built in 1992 at a cost of more US\$5million. The design is similar to many other installations, but is unusual in that the fan is above the flight area.

The Kiwi PJIs observed US Special Forces students practice various techniques and were suitably impressed by the facility.

"The simulator can support up to six jumpers at a time, with full equipment," Popey says.

"Each student gets about 45 minutes flying time, which may not sound like much, but probably equates to 45 or 50 standard HALO [high altitude, low opening] jumps."

Sporting 10 blades, the fan can create sufficient wind speed to allow a jumper to simulate free falling from zero to 240 feet per second.

"It's truly awesome," says Iggy, "There's just nothing like it for us either in New Zealand or Australia."

"The closest thing back home, believe it or not, is a fairground ride at a tourist centre in Rotorua," Popey says.

At Fort Bragg, the simulator is used by soldiers undergoing Special Forces training during the first phase of free-fall training following selection, while more experienced jumpers often return to the simulator to practice techniques and hone skills – meaning the facility is in constant demand.

While at the simulator, students learn the basic techniques before heading off for the descent phase of the free-fall course, which is carried out at the Yuma Proving Ground in Arizona because of the wide-open spaces out west and because Fort Bragg is subject to extremes in weather and has a busy airspace.

Students may not experience the full thrill of flying in the simulator, but they can, however, practice slowing or increasing rates of descent, turning and various other techniques.

"The instructors told us that if a student can master the techniques required for HALO jumping while in the simulator, nine times out of 10 it will be a smooth transition during the descent phase at Yuma," Iggy says. "And, as you're not jumping Mac, it's unlikely the Kiwi's will do any damage to that percentage," he adds with a grin.

Next port of call after the simulator demonstration is to the rigging facilities at Fort Bragg, followed by a trip to the 82nd Airborne Museum.

Competing with yours truly in terms of spotting rights, Popey points out that, with such a distinguished name as his, the trip wouldn't be a success without a trip to the neighboring Pope Air Force Base, home to a number of C-130s and A-10 aircraft.

Reflecting on the tour thus far, over a beer at the Green Beret Bar, Iggy says it's hard to put a monetary value on what they have learnt.

"Y'know it's really opened doors and is something we'll seek to add to further as time allows.

"It's great to be able to interact one-on-one with our counterparts. We've worked

pretty closely with the Aussies before, but now we're starting to see how other nations work," he says.

Popey agrees, saying there are a lot of little things to the various techniques that he would take away.

For the PJIs, next port of call is the Yuma Proving Ground in Arizona, while the Mac-ster seeks out the intrepid 6 Hauraki museum team.

Reporting back on the success of the descent phase of their free-fall training, the PJI pair announce they have been presented with the coveted US Army's HALO wings.

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"At Yuma we were able to see the transition into the practical application of the free-fall simulation training and get some jumps in," Iggy says.

"In addition to that, we were able to swap stories and ideas with a Dutch Special Forces officer who was the CO of their para school. So again, we're spreading our knowledge and contact base, which is what this trip is all about."

A chance visit to a civilian-run free-fall simulator in Eloy, Arizona, also turns out to be beneficial.

"The good folks at SkyVenture Arizona allowed us to use their virtual wind tunnel for some training, which was bloody great," says Popey.

"They were able to show us some more advanced free-fall techniques, one of which is known as the Mantis, which we may be able to incorporate into our Kiwi Blue display team repertoire."

A few weeks on, settled back at home, the pair reflect on the experience.

"Y'know, we talked about each half-hour to 45-minute flight being the equivalent

to say 45 or 50 jumps. Well, on reflection, in terms of learning experience for us, you could say it was worth about 300," Iggy says.

"That's because, in the simulators, you can rearrange things and start again. The only risks are, at worst, a broken arm or something, whereas in the air you make a mistake and it could result in a fatality.

"The whole trip was a great learning experience."

But it's not CONTACT readers the pair must convince in terms of the trip's validity. That falls to OC Parachute Training Support Unit Squadron Leader Darryn Pritchard.

So, on reflection, how does he see the trip?

"In terms of looking at the way other organisations run, it was a very worthwhile trip that allowed us to look at how our training at PTSU is carried out and ways we can improve," he says.

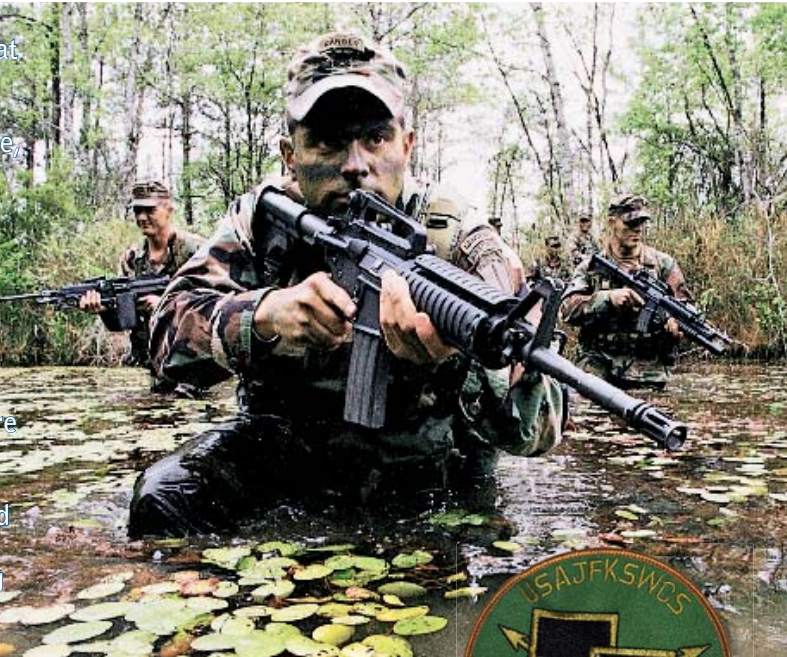
"It's opened doors for further opportunities working with other coalition partners, which will only improve our knowledge base and therefore improve our training delivery."

CAMP MACKALL

HOME OF A SPECIAL ELITE

WORDS KIWI MAC
PICS US SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND

Lying in full combat gear, you feel your body shaking – it's minus 2 Centigrade, and the wind isn't helping – but the discomfort helps you stay awake, waiting for an enemy that may not be coming. You wonder just what the hell you're doing here and ask yourself why you're not wrapped up nice and warm instead of freezing in this swamp.



Suddenly you hear something approach your squad's position. Despite the cold, sweat runs down your face, tickling your cam-creamed skin as you hear your heart pounding in your eardrums.

Suddenly you detect the signal, you tense up. An explosion rips the night apart. You fire at the movement to your front. Soon, the working parts of your M4 click on an empty chamber. Quickly, like a million times before, you change mags and spray the area to your front.

Then, as suddenly as it started, the green-painted spectres of death melt back into the bush and wait for dust-off.

But they're not fighting in the middle of Iraq – yet – merely testing new skills acquired on the 13-week Phase II of the Special Forces Pipeline.

Becoming a US Special Forces operator is no easy task, those with the responsibility of selecting and nurturing new recruits into tomorrow's Green Berets are the men of the United States Army John F Kennedy Special Warfare School based at Camp Mackall, North Carolina.

Before undertaking Special Forces selection, those new to the Army (18 X-Rays) or selected National Guard soldiers must undergo a 25-day SF preparation and conditioning course. Those who pass, join others from throughout the Army on the three-week Special Forces Assessment and Selection (SFAS) course. The SFAS cadre from Company B, 1st Battalion, USAJFKSWS, look at close to 3000 volunteers every year to determine who is and who isn't suitable for SF training.

A series of 12 attributes linked to success on the Special Forces Qualification Course (SFQC) forms the basis of determining candidate suitability.

Those who make the grade move on to 17 days common leadership training followed by a 19-day Special Forces preparation course – light infantry skills and individual and collective combat skills, plus leadership, physical fitness and stamina enhancement, in preparation for the next phase – for the 18Xs.

Phase II is where the SFQC actually begins, a gruelling 13 week course conducted by Company C, 1st Battalion USAJFKSWS that



teaches squad-level tactics, Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA or 'A Team') combat patrols and supporting-warrior skills.

On a recent visit to Camp Mackall, CONTACT watched an 18-strong squad in the middle of phase II conduct a 24-page patrol-orders brief before setting off on an ambush. All those in the squad had previous service and over half had served in Iraq. Gone was any resemblance to the 'loud Americans' much lambasted in Kiwi and Aussie menses. Here instead were attentive, quiet soldiers much like their ANZAC counterparts, struggling to come to grips with the demands of the new world of asymmetric warfare.

I thought 24 pages for a patrol was a bit much, even for Special Forces, but then the school sergeant major points out that the

primary unit successful graduates will deploy to is a 12-man ODA led by an officer, backed up by a junior officer or Warrant Officer and comprising 10 specialist sergeants.

"They will be expected to liaise at company level with commanders and carry out training of groups up to battalion size. The OC and 2IC will be committed to training the command element and these guys will be it."

Reflecting on the training staff at Camp Mackall, I find that all are experienced NCOs with recent combat time in Afghanistan, Iraq or elsewhere. I was introduced to Mickey, a sniping instructor who, I was informed, had killed more people than cancer. But, while there's no room for nonsense, a sense of humour's a must – and an ability to chew tobacco or 'dip' would certainly help you fit in.

For those who make it through Phase II, Phase III awaits – military occupational specialty (MOS) skills training for 15 weeks, where specialist courses are incorporated with language and cultural training, SF common training, instructor training and interagency operations.

Specialties include:

> **18As Officer Course;** conducted by Company A, 4th Battalion, qualifying officers in the skills required to lead an ODA (Operational Detachment Alpha).

> **18B Weapons' Sergeant Course;** led by Company B, 4th Battalion, trains and qualifies NCOs in basic skills and knowledge required to perform duties as a weapons specialist on an ODA.

> **18C Engineer Sergeant Course;** also under Coy B, 4th Battalion, where NCOs learn basic engineering skills required of an engineer in an ODA. Pre-engineering subjects, field construction, fortification, land-mine warfare, bridging, engineer recon, target analysis and demolitions are all taught.

> **18D Special Forces Medical Sergeants Course;** this 48-week specialty course also incorporates block language courses. The Special Warfare Medical Group is responsible for all medical training at the Joint Special Operations Training Centre at Fort Bragg. The medical phase includes the 26-week Special Operations Combat Medic Course and a 20-week training cycle.

> **18E Communications Sergeant Course;** taught by Company E, 4th Battalion, where NCOs qualify in the skills required to work as an ODA communications sergeant. All aspects of the communication spectrum are taught using some of the most sophisticated equipment available to the US Army.

Once the MOS training is complete, phase IV consists of language training lasting anywhere from eight to 12 weeks depending on the language.

Before students head off on phase V, they complete the Unconventional Warfare Culmination Exercise ('Robin Sage'), a four-week exercise conducted by Company E, 1st Battalion, in and around the forests of North Carolina centred around Camp Mackall.

Robin Sage is a problem-solving field-training exercise conducted eight times a year where students put their hard-earned knowledge to the test.

The exercise puts the students in a variety of unconventional scenarios and pits them against conventional forces, and requires them to interact with inhabitants of the fictitious nation of Pineland. The exercise stresses realism as students try to train a mock guerrilla force using real civilians from the surrounding community.

All their recently learned skills including languages are tested in adverse and ambiguous conditions – including those 0300hr ambushes in the freezing North Carolina swamps.

Phase VI – Graduation. Admission into the Special Forces Regiment takes place the day before graduation at JFK Plaza on Ardennes St, Fort Bragg. The Regimental First Formation is where graduates don the much-coveted Green Beret and Special Forces tab for the first time and are officially welcomed into the SF fraternity by the honorary Regimental Commander and representatives of their new unit.

Next day, a formal graduation parade officially recognises these new elite as special warriors in an exclusive martial brotherhood.



ANZAC DROP STRENGTHENS BOND

WORDS KIWI MAC
PICS KIWI MAC AND WO2 RALF JAEGER

The opportunity to participate in ANZAC Day celebrations alongside trans-Tasman comrades was a major highlight for five staff from the ADF's Parachute Training School attending Exercise Tasman Canopy.

The Nowra-based staff were in New Zealand attending the nine-day parachuting symposium, discussing new trends in parachuting and putting them into practice.

Held from 21 to 29 April the overlap with ANZAC Day was no accident according to the RNZAF's Flight Lieutenant Brent Iggo.

"We were sent three dates the Aussies would be available and once we noticed one of the periods included ANZAC Day, there was no other option but that one," he said.

Because the RNZAF's Parachute Training and Support Unit's jump into Whangamata had been so well received in 1999 the unit decided it would be fitting to jump into the town again for this year's commemorations.

Major Leigh Shepherd, OC Development Wing at PTS, was delighted to be able to incorporate ANZAC Day into the exercise proceedings.

"I've done nearly 28 years in the Army, 11 of them at PTS, and to be able to jump and then parade alongside the Kiwis in New Zealand is a real highlight.

"We had No 2 Squadron RNZAF based with us at Nowra for a while a few years back and so we got to parade with the Kiwis at home, but this is something special," he said.

Operational requirements meant numbers attending this year's event were down on previous exercises, with just five PTS staff attending compared to the 25 two years ago.

The deployment of RNZAF C130s to Timor either side of ANZAC Day also meant not all the combined staff were able to jump,

as a smaller aircraft had to be hired for the event.

Weather also conspired against the event with fog delaying takeoff from Auckland's Whenuapai airbase by two hours, consequently delaying Whangamata's parade by the same margin. But, such was the novelty of the event previously that RSA president Bill Watson said the committee was more than willing to adjust their schedule.

"We held the march and our service, then everyone went down to the school and watched the paratroopers come in, before everyone came back to the RSA to hold the wreath-laying ceremony," he said.

WO2 Ralf Jaeger from PTS said that once they flew over the Coromandel Hills, the clouds broke up and they had a perfect view of the Whangamata coast.

"It was great to be able to jump into the town and the crowd's response was terrific," he said.

A wreath was laid at the RSA cenotaph on behalf of the RNZAF and the Australian Army by Officer Commanding PTSU Squadron Leader Darryn Pritchard and Sergeant Peter Hallam from PTS.

