



Issue 3
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The Canopy

North Central Florida All Airborne Chapter

*Connecting sky
soldiers, past
and present.*

2023 Best Combat Diver Competition

The Special Forces Underwater Operations Center (SFUWO) hosted the 2023 Best Combat Diver Competition September 25th through September 27th. I was invited to attend and report on the event. Continued on **page 4**.

From the chapter

Our September meeting included an unexpected stroke of good fortune and the chapter remembers charter member Vincent Speranza, **page 10**.

Airborne Unit updates

82nd Airborne Division: 3rd BCT visits the USMA, Waal River Reenactment, **page 12**. 101st Airborne Division: memorial jumps for Vince Speranza, **page 14**.



Army Base Renaming Cheat Sheet

Ft. Benning ⇒ Ft. Moore	Ft. Bragg ⇒ Ft. Liberty
Ft. Gordon ⇒ Ft. Eisenhower	Ft. A.P. Hill ⇒ Ft. Walker
Ft. Hood ⇒ Ft. Cavazos	Ft. Lee ⇒ Ft. Gregg-Adams
Ft. Pickett ⇒ Ft. Barfoot	Ft. Polk ⇒ Ft. Johnson
Ft. Rucker ⇒ Ft. Novosel	

Directory & Chapter Calendar

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Treasurer	Heath Davenport	(571) 641-9057
Secretary	Rich Troop	(610) 823-7505
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Recruiting / Ocala	Tig Blackman	(352) 591-4752
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Upcoming Events	
Tuesday, October 4 th	National Night Out (FL, TX)
Saturday, October 14 th , 1300 hrs	Chapter Meeting at VFW Post 8083
Tuesday, October 31 st	Halloween

From The Editor

Is it Autumn yet? It's hard to tell sometimes here in the sunshine state. I'm excited to share the first of two reports covering the 2023 Best Combat Diver competition. I was very fortunate to have this opportunity and I want to thank the USAJFKSWCS public affairs office and the SFUWO center for their graciousness and openness. At the time of this writing, a federal government shutdown seems likely. If it happens, I hope the situation is resolved quickly. Many of our federal workers cannot afford to skip a check or two. We've also got some interesting updates from the units in this issue. As always, you can reach me by email at <ronald.dahlgren@gmail.com>.



Airborne All The Way!

Ron Dahlgren

Editor, The Canopy

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

Chairman's Message

Oct is upon us and our Chapter needs to start thinking about planning our Christmas party. I am trying to get Dan Marrin to play for us. He's the Army Infantry guy that played for our picnic. He does it for free to give back to groups of people especially Veterans. What motivation he has, speaking of which I'd like to see the number of members coming to our meeting bumped up a little more. We are very slowly improving our numbers at the meetings but we need a bigger surge. Because we only meet once a month it's important to see what's going on with your Chapter. Remember the next meeting is OCT 14 (That's the 2nd Saturday of the month and spouses are invited!) Also call Joyce Damon our Service Officer if you can help with something to eat after our meetings. It's a lot of work planning these things. I know we all have busy lives and it's hard; I know, but I miss my Softball game on the 2nd Saturday every month. I'm thankful for an understanding manager. The POW/MIA remembrance day went well. Frank Dochniak brought and posted our colors at the event. Cindy Brown, Senator Webster's Administrative Assistant was also there (see picture) Heath Davenport, who gave a great speech and I were there at the Veteran's Park in the Villages. If you didn't see the 82nd Airborne Choir on national TV you missed a treat. They performed on America's Got Talent (AGT) Sep 19. The CG of the 82nd Airborne Division, Maj Gen LaNeve and his CSM were also shown on national TV!



See you on the manifest in Oct, Airborne All the Way!

Tony Alger
Chairman
North Central Florida All-Airborne Chapter



2023 Canopy boosters - Thank you for your support!

Tig Blackman
Heath Davenport
Nick Harty
Darla & Jay Tatman
Howard Northrup

Jerry & Robby Brust
Frank Dochniak
Regis Rossa
Marianne & George Zablocki



2024 Best Combat Diver Competition

by Ron Dahlgren



Photo by 3rd POB (A) (D)

Naval Air Station Key West, FL: The Special Forces Underwater Operations Center (SFUWO) hosted the 2023 Best Combat Diver Competition. This competition invites the joint forces to determine who is the best two-man combat dive team. This year's teams came from the Special Forces groups, including 1st and 2nd Special Warfare Training Groups, and the US Navy's Special Warfare Groups. The competition serves to push our combat divers to higher levels of performance, to provide an opportunity for the teams to talk shop, and to serve as notice to our adversaries that we have this capability. I was fortunate enough to be invited to report on the competition.



Photo by Sgt Emely Opio-Wright, 1st SFC

Day One

I arrived the afternoon of Monday the 25th and coordinated to link up with my media contacts. Due to access restrictions, I could only enter and leave the facility with my handlers. Identity Management, as they called it, also meant I was severely restricted on collecting photographs. The special operators must keep their identity safe to effectively perform their mission. I would rely on the government media teams for images. It was a clear, warm, and windy afternoon in Key West. A storm had blown through the night prior, leaving standing water in every shallow depression. The SFUWO campus is small. It consists of a handful of structures, a pool, and some docks. The admin building is where I would spend most of my time. This building is marked with the Combat Diver Qualification Badge on the doors, the rugs, and several pieces of wall art.



Photo by Ron Dahlgren

There is an air of excitement on this first day. The competitors have already completed a modified physical fitness test and taken an exhaustive 100 question academic exam. The morning's fitness test included:

- Max hand release push-ups for 2 minutes
- Max sit-ups for 2 minutes
- Pull-ups to muscle failure
- 225 lbs deadlift reps to failure
- 2 mile run for time

One of the Navy teams impressed the staff with the number of deadlift reps they completed. The media operations center buzzes with motion as public affairs teams from several commands coordinate their activities. They hunt for coffee, figure out the internet access details, introduce themselves to one-another, and share small-talk about their duty stations or experiences in Key West. The Combat Diver Qualification Course (CDQC) staff wear black ball caps with the diver's badge and rank insignia on the front. More than a few staff mention the weather the night before. It had blown over some tents that were setup outside, and the staff is worried about getting it back in place. No one is worried about competition events being delayed or canceled.

From the 2nd floor, I have an excellent view of the pool, the dive-tower and chute-shakeout building and the main entry to the admin builder. There is a single-file line of men in black diving gear leading to the pool. Across from them, along the left side of the pool deck, photographers lay prone to capture the moment.



Imagery (c) 2023 Airbus, CNES / Airbus, Maxar Technologies, U. S. Geological Survey, Map data (c) 2023



Photo by Ron Dahlgren



Photo by 3rd POB (A) (D)



Photo by Ron Dahlgren

Next to the entry foyer of the 2nd floor is a short hallway leading to one of the instruction classrooms. This hallway is marked with a piece of engraved wood as the "Fallen Heroes" hallway. Rows of service photos, arranged by date, mark CDQC graduates who have lost their lives in the line of duty. The service photos include their CDQC class number, the date of death, and the unit they were serving with. A handful of frames do not have service photos, but instead use the combat diver's badge to represent the fallen diver. I looked across those killed in action during my time overseas.

Past the Fallen Heroes hallway, the rest of the halls are decorated with class memorabilia. Classes from the 1970s on through this year have markers for their specific class. These are not uniform, but share some features: class photos, home unit or service designations, and some inside jokes. There is a wide range of materials and quality to these class plaques. Some are made from scraps, presumably recovered from Fleming Bay, some are made from canvas, some from wooden oars, some are printed on poster board material, some are as simple as photographs taped to paper with some hand-drawn cartoons. The humor shows the classic morbid, self-deprecating style seen among troops.

The cadre and other staff all have a casual but professional way of interacting. They introduce themselves and address each other by first names or nicknames. A Master Sergeant and a Sergeant might talk with a level of familiarity that would give me anxiety from my 82nd Airborne sensibilities. There is a much more relaxed and collegial atmosphere than I've experienced at other Army facilities.

Interview with SFUWO Commander

Later in the afternoon I'm able to interview the SFUWO commander, a major. He's about a year into the assignment, which is typically 3-4 years. He tells me the dive school has been around for nearly 60 years and the training is defined by a USASOC publication. Army Special Forces teams that are dive teams will need to recertify annually, and the teams are invited to perform this certification at the SFUWO center. The commander tells me that NAS Key West is really the perfect place for the SFUWO center for a few reasons: year-round weather suitable for dive training, Fleming Bay is uniformly flat with a depth of 12 feet, and due to the geography the water tends to stay clear. These features make it excellent for training.

Speaking on the competition in particular, the commander tells me it will include 10 events that were designed by his cadre. He communicated his intent and let them design the events. Care was taken to make sure the event point awards are as objective as possible. Asked what would separate the winning team from the rest, he said the winner will be defined by their grit. All of the competitors are already operating at an incredible level, to get ahead will require grit. He tells me the best part of hosting this competition is "the human capital, you can't beat that."

Interview with LTC Elliott, CDR 2 Bn, 2nd SWTG

LTC Elliott, commander of the 2nd Battalion, 2nd Special Warfare Training Group, met with me later in the day. In his role he oversees the military freefall school, sniper school, and SFUWO. For the SFUWO and the joint forces combat diver capability, he points out that all major cities are near water. This ensures the relevance of the combat diver capability in the future. Describing the competition, he says the 13 teams are testing their skills and knowledge against each other. He is here for the competition to observe personally. This is the first year that his command is hosting the competition, whereas it was previously hosted by 3rd Special Forces Group. He tells me that focusing on the basics will be what wins the podium. The tasks are physical and mental, but proficiency on the basics will be key. All of the events are designed to be common tasks that any combat diver in the joint forces will be competent in. He tells me the 2024 competition will be in May, and expects these competitions to always happen in May going forward. As we conclude the interview, LTC Elliott tells me the strategic deterrence aspect of this competition is important. By having this competition, we show our global adversaries this capability and that forces them to prepare to deal with it. Showing our capability forces the adversaries to prepare. I thanked him for his time and headed out for the day.

Day Two

The second day starts early. I meet with my media handlers at 0730 on a gray, humid, and rainy morning. There was a storm overnight but thankfully the weather has calmed down to a drizzle by this point. It's about a fifteen minute drive from their accommodations to the SFUWO facility. As we approach the fence that separates the SFUWO center from the surrounding Naval Air Station we pass by the dive teams staging their kit in the rain. Some men are unloading black gear from a travel trailer.

Today's competition events begin with a static line airborne operation out of an MH-47G Chinook at 1250 feet above ground level into Fleming Water Dropzone. They will be jumping the MC-6 parachute, a maneuverable toggle-driven canopy. The staff tell me it's the most maneuverable round-canopy they have.

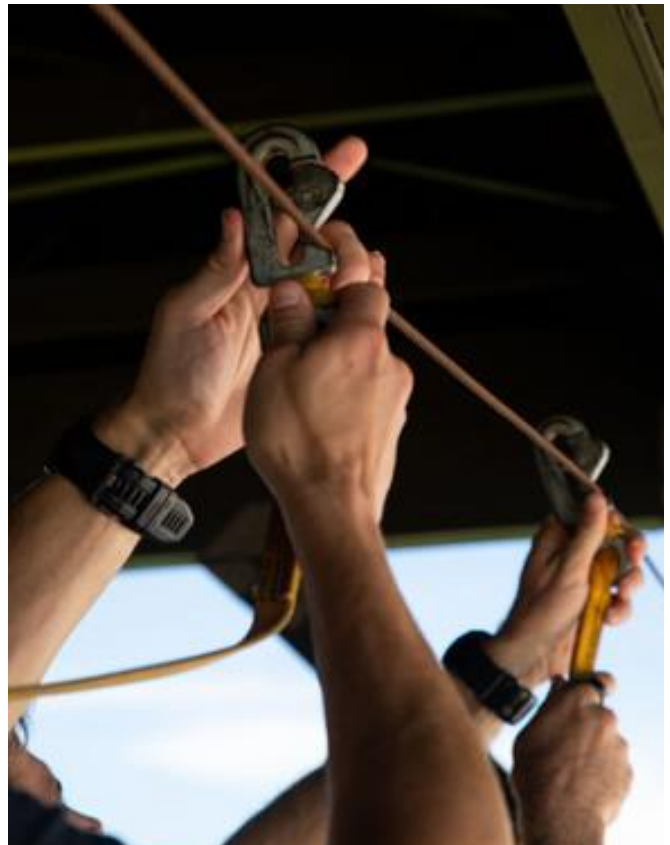


Photo by 3rd POB (A) (D)



Photo by 3rd POB (A)(D)



Photo by 3rd POB (A)(D)

Airborne Operation into Fleming Bay

The light rain finally stops close to 0800 and leaves it overcast but dry. I head out to the staging area where the teams are buddy rigging. The dive school staff perform JMPs once the teams finish rigging. There are several models of helmets among the teams. Most of them black. They have modern style camouflage duty uniforms with low-cut footwear, black fins strapped to their legs like shin-guards, goggles worn backwards around the neck. The teams are loosely in a line with the public affairs office attachments at the end. Smiles and jokes are going around the teams. They talk about the academic test from the day prior, making guesses about how they performed. The clouds break up somewhat across the bay, opening a window to sunlit clouds.



Photo by 3rd POB (A) (D)

Off in the distance, I hear the beating of chinook rotors. They grow louder and an MH-47G comes into view, then lands into a tight LZ across the gravel road from our staging area. Everyone turns away to face the bay as the rotor wash passes. The ramp is lowered and the flight crew starts making preparations. Moments later a second MH-47G swings in and lands close to the first. These helicopters are from the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment.

The assembled teams form into two parallel lines and start to put their helmets on. A member of the SFUWO cadre walks past wearing a safety harness and putting earplugs in. He waves to a crewmember

of the first Chinook who signals back for the jumpers to board. As the two lines walk to their respective helicopters, one competitor keeps his helmet off all the way to the ramp. The first helicopter takes off, followed several minutes later by the second. The media contingent on the ground, including me, move to a boat heading out to the water dropzone to observe the jump.

This event has three parts: the jump, a swim, and a kayak race. The teams will drop in and try to land as near as possible to the pool of kayaks. Once both team members are in the kayak, they are to row out to a buoy marked with a floating red balloon, then back to the shore for the finish line.

Once we are in place with the press boat, the helicopters start to come in. Each pass drops two jumpers. The jumper moves his reserve parachute to the side and pulls both toggles as he prepares to land. The parachute is released and left in the water as he puts his fins on and begins the swim to the kayaks. A safety rides past on a jet ski to make sure the jumper cleared his parachute, followed by a safety boat to pick up the parachute. The observers on my boat are excited to see some of the teams landing very close to the kayaks. Others are not so lucky and have a long swim to get to them.

Once the final team has cleared their parachutes, the chinooks do a couple of low passes to give us a photo opportunity.



In the next issue - cadre interviews, pool events and an interview with a team of competitors!



Photo by K. Kassens USAJFKSWCS



Photo by K. Kassens USAJFKSWCS



Photo by K. Kassens USAJFKSWCS

From The Chapter



Last Month's Meeting

The chapter met on September 9th at the usual location - VFW Post 8083. After being called to order, we recited the Pledge of Allegiance. The invocation was given and we covered old business and new. The chairman let us know the Domino's pizza we would receive for lunch was no charge. This was happy news. The members collected cash to make sure we tip the delivery driver well. The turnout was not as high as we hoped. To echo Tony from the Chairman's Message - come to the meetings! It's the best way to be informed about what **your chapter** is doing. I hope to see everyone this month!



Photos by Ron Dahlgren



Service photo provided by LTC (R) Frank Rasbury

Remembering Vinnie

The airborne community lost a legend this summer with the passing of Vincent "Vinnie" Speranza. Vinnie was a machine gunner with the 501st Parachute Infantry, 101st Airborne Division at Bastogne. As the story goes, while in a field hospital in Bastogne, he found a buddy who asked to find him a drink. Vinnie found a working tap in the city and used his helmet to carry the beer back to his pal. Years later, Brasserie Lamborelle in Bastogne created Airborne Beer in his memory. Vinnie was 98 years old at the time of his passing. He was a charter member of the North Central Florida All-Airborne and well-renowned with the larger airborne community. The 101st Airborne Division remembered him with a memorial jump over the summer.



Photo provided by LTC (R) Frank Rasbury



82nd 3rd BCT visits the USMA, Waal River Crossing Reenactment

Photos by Staff Sgt Catessa Palone



Branch Week at USMA

West Point, NY - 3rd BCT sent paratroopers to the United States Military Academy during Branch Week. Branch Week allows cadets to learn more about opportunities in the Army once they graduate. Cadets were rigged up with training parachutes, told about the mission of the 82nd Airborne Division, and given the opportunity to ask the troopers about their experiences in the unit.





Waal River Crossing

Ft. Liberty, NC - Engineers from the 307th Engineer Battalion took part in an annual demonstration and competition to remember the Waal River crossing of Operation Market Garden. The event began with reenactors from the All American Airborne Legion demonstrating the crossing in historical uniforms and using historical kit. Following the demonstration, teams from the 307th competed in a five-lap race on McKellar's Lake. The winner receives the coveted oar with a placard reading, "Let it be known that the guardian of this oar is the presiding champion!" Prior winners back to 2010 are engraved on the oar's surface.



101st remembers Market Garden

Photos by Sgt Caleb Pautz



Sint-Oedenrode, Netherlands – Soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division, including the command staff, visited the Netherlands to commemorate 79 years since Operation Market Garden. A memorial jump for Vincent Speranza was held at the Koevingersedijk in Eerde, Netherlands. During the memorial ceremonies, the command staff remembered the heroic actions of those involved. Kees van Rooij, Mayor of Meierijstad, was in attendance and laid a wreath at the grave of a British soldier.



During the memorial jump, the "Round Canopy Parachuting Team" (RCPT) jumped into drop zone alpha. Soldiers from the 101st joined the RCPT during the jump. A static display was set up on the dropzone to remember Vincent Speranza.



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