

# Pararescuemen

## CAP Cadet Among Those Trained to Serve

By Kimberly L. Wright



Mounted atop a modified Boeing 747 shuttle carrier aircraft, Space Shuttle Endeavour heads toward NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida after a stopover in Texas. The 45th Space Wing assisted in transport of the shuttle from its landing spot at Edwards Air Force Base, Calif., after bad weather prevented a Florida landing. Air Force pararescueman Sr. Airman Tom Culpepper is a part of a multiagency support system for shuttle missions.

Photo courtesy of NASA

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*The Air Force's 45th Space Wing performs a service it hopes will not be used. Still, wing members stand by in HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopters and airborne C-130s, some at the launch site for security and others for search and rescue support in case something goes wrong with a shuttle during launch. Among the wing's dedicated men and women is former Civil Air Patrol cadet and Air Force Sr. Airman Tom Culpepper, a member of the 58th Rescue Squadron out of Nellis Air Force Base, Nev.*



Air Force pararescueman Sr. Airman Tom Culpepper, kneeling, is shown at his Air Force pararescue graduation in September 2006 with friends he met in CAP — from left, Lt. Col. Peter Bowden, Stephen Langone, Leo Leonato and Colin Greata. The class demonstrated their skills for the friends and families assembled. Langone is a prospective pararescueman.

Culpepper has something in common with Space Shuttle Endeavour pilot Eric Boe besides their cadet heritage. Both tenaciously underwent years of preparation for their current jobs and both attended CAP’s Air Force Pararescue Orientation Course as cadets. The course, which introduces youth to the basics of life as a

pararescueman, made a lasting impression on Culpepper.

Air Force pararescuemen undergo some of the U.S. military’s toughest training. The journey begins with a preliminary test, and those who pass advance to tryouts. The program has an 80-85 percent failure rate.

“You basically get pushed to your limits,” said Culpepper. “It’s a mind-over-matter type thing.”

Culpepper beat the long odds, graduating from the program at Kirtland Air Force Base, N.M., in September 2006. From start to finish, it took him about three years.

He credits CAP with helping him gain the grit to make it: “CAP gave me some of the base-level maturity I picked up, and it is probably the biggest thing it did for me.”

Culpepper is not the only former CAP cadet who has completed the program. “I know of two others that I work with,” he said, “and another in training.”

## The 45th Space Wing

Based at Patrick Air Force Base, Fla., the 45th Space Wing’s responsibilities include supporting unmanned rocket launches and space shuttle launches and landings. Support for the shuttle includes training for rescue scenarios, launch security, weather assessments for landings and assistance with landing. A multitude of agencies help the 45th Space Wing with their missions, including

## Culpepper’s Cadet Experience

Tom Culpepper’s CAP mentor, Lt. Col. Peter K. Bowden, now of the Florida Wing, first met him in 1994 when Culpepper transferred to the National Capital Wing’s Fairfax Composite Squadron.

Bowden said of Culpepper: “Tom was a lot like me as a cadet; he enjoyed CAP more than he enjoyed school. He was one of those young people who just ‘get it,’ and he made my job easy. You almost had to treat him like an adult, because he was mature beyond his age.”

An energetic cadet, he found a variety of ways to serve, and ultimately became cadet commander. “Tom was the cadet I called on to install a radio in the squadron van or to create a recruitment training program for cadets from scratch,” said Bowden. “He did both of these things and more. In 1996 he built a squadron Web site before most people had a home e-mail account.”

When he became a senior member, Culpepper served as squadron leadership officer. Though he entered the Air Force in January 2004, his legacy in the squadron lives on.

“We named an award after him called the Thomas H. Culpepper Award,” said Bowden, “which is presented to the honor graduate of our basic cadet training flight.”

Culpepper's 58th Rescue Squadron.

For the launch of NASA mission STS-126, Culpepper was stationed in Long Island, N.Y., one of five sites in the U.S. and abroad on standby. The team, part of a multiagency arsenal, trains regularly for search and rescue scenarios to ensure the highest possible success if faced with a critical situation. Culpepper's training includes swift water rescue, close-quarters combat, confined space rescue, black water dive rescue, high angle rescue and snow and ice rescue.

"My role (and the role of all PJs for a launch) is to provide contingency coverage in case of an abort after launch," said Culpepper. "In case of emergency, we would launch in a C-130 to the incident site, deploy our Zodiac boats by parachute into the ocean and then parachute down after them. Once we enter the water, we would inflate the boats and start searching for and recovering the astronauts that bailed out. Then we provide medical treatment until helicopters or a nearby ship can reach us, at which point we would facilitate their extraction and continue medical care until a higher level of care arrives to take over."

Culpepper was excited to be part of the mission, par-

ticularly since a fellow CAP member was piloting the shuttle. "It was very cool thing to find out," he said, "definitely cool to be a part of it."

This is the fourth launch Culpepper has supported. A relative newbie, he has not participated in a search and rescue mission.

Beyond providing a safety net in case of a critical situation, the 45th Space Wing supported the shuttle mission in other ways. For instance, bad weather at the primary landing site forced the Endeavour to land at an alternate site at Edwards Air Force Base, Calif. Members of the 45th Space Wing accompanied the shuttle as it was piggybacked atop another craft back to Kennedy Space Center, Fla.

"It feels great to do what I do," said Culpepper. "To be able to say my job is to train and prepare to ensure our military men and women come home by whatever means necessary is something I take great pride in. The Air Force gives us the best training and equipment available to ensure that when the time comes, we are ready to save that life and bring someone home. I think the last line of the PJ creed sums it up well. 'These things we do, that others may live.' " ▲

Photo by Lt. Col. Phillip Bowden, Georgia Wing



Pararescueman Tom Culpepper takes part in exercises in the Horn of Africa in support of the War on Terror.

## About the Pararescue Mission

Air Force Special Operations Command pararescuemen, also known as PJs, are the only Department of Defense specialty specifically trained and equipped to conduct conventional or unconventional rescue operations.

A pararescueman's primary function is as a personnel recovery specialist, with emergency medical capabilities in humanitarian and combat environments.

PJs deploy in any available manner, including air-land-sea tactics, into restricted environments to authenticate, extract, treat, stabilize and evacuate injured personnel while acting in an enemy-evading, recovery role. They participate in search and rescue, combat search and rescue and recovery support for NASA and conduct other operations as appropriate.

— Source: U.S. Air Force