Utah Guard's 197th Special Troops Company Conducts First Jump

By LTC Hank McIntire *Photos by SGT Samantha Xanthos*

CEDAR FORT, Utah — Altitude: 1,500 feet. Wind: None. Landing surface: A freshly plowed field. Number of Soldiers: Thirty. Level of enthusiasm: Off the chart.

The conditions were indeed perfect at Drop Zone Ashau April 18 for members of the Utah National Guard's 197th Special Troops Company, based in Ogden. This was to be the first airborne operation carried out completely by unit members, without any help from the 19th Special Forces Group, the other—and much larger—airborne game in town.

Adding to the novelty of the operation was that a handful of 197th Soldiers were to complete their "cherry" jump, meaning their first parachute jump since completing the Basic Airborne Course at Fort Benning, Ga.

Part of the day's excitement for these first-timers was they would be jumping from a UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter instead of the usual C-130, the aircraft they trained on while at Fort Benning.

Unlike a C-130, where Soldiers fly in an enclosed aircraft and dash out the back of the plane, Soldiers assume a

ABOVE: Three "Sky Sharks" from the 197th contemplate their upcoming cherry jump from a Blackhawk helicopter. LEFT: Soldiers from Stick 2 lift off the ground in a UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter en route to Drop Zone Ashau. BACKGROUND: Drop Zone Ashau near Cedar Fort, Utah.

seated position and dangle their legs out of the Blackhawk's open doorway, waiting for a not-so-gentle tap on the helmet from the jumpmaster as he yells, "Go!" and they vault out into the blue.

I'm excited," said PV1 Myles Kevern, a Cottonwood High School graduate from Salt Lake City, while waiting his turn to board the helicopter. "When I left airborne school I was like, 'I wish I could jump from a Blackhawk.'"

"I'm psyched," added Kevern, who enlisted a year ago and finished airborne training in January. "This is a good unit."

Only one jump removed from her "cherry" experience, PFC Janelle Zenger, of Farmington, described what would likely be going through Kevern's and his fellow initiates' minds as they approach the moment of truth.

"As soon as you sit down, there's only one way out of the bird," she recalled. "That's what you have to think about the whole time."

Also preparing to jump was MAJ Andrew Archuleta, of West Point, Utah, commander of the 160 Soldiers of the 197th. The unit was created in December 2008 with the mission to provide front-lines logistics and other support to units in combat theaters of operations worldwide. The unit has a few Soldiers currently deployed in support of Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom.

"We built up the anticipation in our Soldiers that this is an airborne unit," said Archuleta. "We've talked about jumping, and now they're experiencing it."

Joining Archuleta on the first "stick," or group of Soldiers who jump from an individual aircraft, was LTC Douglas Briles, commander of Special Troops Battalion, 528th Sustainment Brigade (Airborne), based at Fort Bragg, N.C. The 197th is war-traced to the STB, meaning that Briles' unit exercises oversight, provides the mission and synchronizes the training of the 197th in preparation for combat.

"These guys are truly a combat multiplier," said Briles. "The unit was created on Dec. 16, and in January they sent 6 guys to Afghanistan. They are enablers to the Active [Army] to round out their shortfalls or enable them to take a knee."

The single Blackhawk helicopter from the Utah Guard's 2-211th Aviation, flew a total of five sorties for the operation, carrying six Soldiers and one media representative each time.

After each stick hit the drop zone and each Soldier collected him- or herself and their chute, they walked back to the base area at a speed that reflected the hardness—or softness—of their individual landing.

"I loved it; it was awesome!" said Kevern, just beginning to roll out the adjectives—some more than once—to describe his jump. "It's so much different than jumping out of a C-130, you can actually see it coming. It was a rush! It was awesome! Everything I thought it would be. It was sweet!"

"The jump was a lot smoother than last time," said Zenger of her second jump from a Blackhawk. "A nice, soft landing, but a little rough with the rocks and the hard ground."

Also qualifying for "cherry" status was Fox 13 cameraman Pete Deluca.

"I'm still shaking; I'm afraid of heights," he said as he came off the helicopter after filming the first stick. "This is the best thing I've ever done! I'm gonna put it on my blog."

Families and friends were also on hand for this historic day, taking photos and home video, but most important, to be there for their Soldier.

"This is really exciting," said Daneka Ewert, wife of SFC William Ewert, of Pinedale, Wyo. "It's a special day with the new unit, and it's an honor to be a part of it."

Daneka explained that her husband is a former Ranger

LEFT TO RIGHT: Members of 197th Special Troops Company prepare for their first unit parachute jump April 18.

and has not done a parachute jump in several years.

"I wasn't concerned; I was excited for him," she said. "We have small children and they were beside themselves with anticipation."

Private Kevern's mother Kimberly was also there with other family members in tow to see her son's first jump.

"He did great, and he didn't get hurt!" she said. "I didn't even feel nervous."

"I'm very proud," she added, when asked for her thoughts about her son's service. "He is very motived and determined to support his country, and I want to support my son. I'm all about family, so I'm here supporting him."

Circulating among his troops, shaking hands and ribbing the newbies wearing their cherry-red "Sky Shark" covers on their helmets, was Archuleta, thankful for the successful premiere of his stand-alone jump operation and visibly proud of his Soldiers.

"It went very, very well—as good as it could go," he said. "It was a perfect day for jumping: no injuries and everyone was accounted for safely. That's the first priority. It couldn't have gone any better."

Archuleta sees a bright future for his Soldiers, whose specialties include maintenance, medical, shower and laundry, mortuary affairs, communications, administrative, construction, ammunition and chaplain services.

"Our capabilities are really what make us unique from the rest of the National Guard," he said. "We're the only company of its kind."

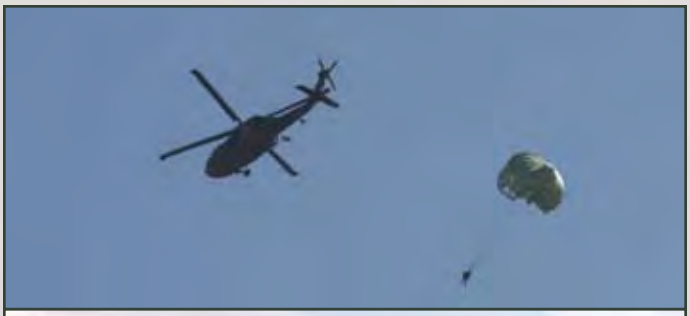
"We are not only unique for Special Operations, but we can use these capabilities to support our state mission," he explained. "All these can be utilized during a state emergency."

Family members also recognize how the 197th protects Utahns by serving abroad and at home.

"It's critical for us to have the freedoms we have today," observed Daneka Ewert. "This is what it's all about. I support him in whatever decisions he makes militarywise. It's a very honorable profession."

And because of the versatility of the 197th, Archuleta knows what that can mean for him and his Soldiers.

"In the event that we have to jump in[to a combat situation], we can do that," he said. "We're prepared."



LEFT: 197th Soldier's chute deploys after jumping from a UH-60 Blackhawk. Soldier from Stick 5 prepares to exit the helicopter over Drop Zone Ashau. Cherry and seasoned Soldiers from Stick 2 board the helicopter. BELOW: The leadership team of 197th Special Troops Company were all smiles after their first unit parachute jump April 18.