

ASHLEY TWIGGS — SPECIAL TO THE DAILY PROGRESS



Sean Connolly (left), a senior at Western Albemarle High School and a Cadet Technical Sergeant in the local Civil Air Patrol, and David Yowell (center) listen as Capt. Mike Wormington teaches the cadets about the Battle of Britain during a meeting of the Civil Air Patrol.

COURTESY KIM CONNOLLY



Cadets trained in the Santa Fe National Forest in New Mexico to learn a variety of necessary rescue skills.

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Cadets were required to complete 45 good pushups in two minutes, and Sean Connolly was one of only six cadets to pass the demanding test.

Local teen learns demands of special-ops career dream

The no-nonsense voice on the other end of the telephone line made it clear that the summer time program the teenage boy wanted to attend wasn't called Camp Fun-andGames.

"Are you physically fit?" the brusque voice asked rhetorically, not bothering to wait for a reply. "If you're not, don't bother coming, because if you fail or get injured at any point, you get sent home."

What Sean Connolly was signing onto last year was the Pararescue Jumper Orientation Course, which is offered to qualified Civil Air Patrol cadets. The weeklong program is given by active duty members of the U.S. Air Force's elite Pararescue unit.

The PJs, pronounced "peejays," are tasked with, among other things, rescuing and medically assisting downed airmen from behind enemy lines. It takes upward of two years of training to earn the right to wear the coveted maroon beret, and as many as nine out of 10 candidates wash out before making the grade.

Getting through PJOC also is far from a given. Out of a class of 65 cadets, Sean was one of 50 who graduated.

On June 27, the Western Albemarle High School senior was one of only 18 cadets to graduate from the even more demanding Advanced Pararescue Jumper Orientation Course at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Arizona. When Sean decided to attend PJOC, he had no idea what he was in for, only that it was going to be an ordeal.

"I've been interested in special operations for a long time," said Sean, who celebrated his 17th birthday yesterday. "That's the sort of thing PJs do, so I thought it would be cool to go work with them.

"I knew it was going to be hard, but I wasn't sure how it was going to be hard. A PJOC graduate is not supposed to tell cadets who haven't been through the course about all you do.

"So I went in not knowing much, and it was a rude awakening. The PJs have a reputation for being tough guys, and they certainly lived up to it."

Sean joined the Monticello Composite Squadron of the U.S. Civil Air Patrol when he was in the eighth grade. He quickly fell in love with the organization, which is a volunteer civilian auxiliary of the Air Force.

CAP is charged with three primary missions - aerospace education, cadet programs and emergency services such as search and rescue. According to Col. David Carter, commander of the Virginia wing of CAP, PJOC is one of 42 different CAP programs offered to cadets during summer months.

"All these programs are opportunities for cadets to look at different types of careers, different activities, and be exposed to things they probably never would get a chance to do in their normal lives," said Carter, who, for 12 years as a CAP senior member, helped PJs put cadets through PJOC when it was held in George Washington National Forest.

"Cadets in PJOC are physically challenged by activities such as running and doing pushups. The point is to show them that their physical conditioning needs to improve, and it also teaches them self-discipline.

"The cadets usually come away feeling very good about the fact that they've finished the course. I've been with CAP for 43 years, and one of the reasons I'm still doing this is because watching the cadets grow is one of the neatest experiences."

Sean's focus was not as much on growth as survival when he arrived at Kirtland Air Force Base in Albuquerque, N.M., last summer. The year before, he had graduated from CAP's arduous Hawk Mountain Ranger School in Pennsylvania's Blue Mountains.

Sean also is an alumnus of CAP's Encampment program held at Fort Pickett, which is like a mini boot camp. Going through obstacle courses and learning skills such as rappelling came in handy when he got to the Blue Mountains.

"Hawk Mountain has a reputation for being really tough," said Sean, who credits his track coach, William Tillery, with helping him gain the strength and stamina it took to complete the two PJ courses successfully.

"It's primarily a survival and search-and-rescue school.

"We spent eight days in the woods with people yelling at us the whole time.

At the time, I didn't think it was all that much fun, but looking back on it now, it was a blast.

"Being in the woods with friends and learning a bunch of stuff was really cool."

"Cool" probably wasn't the word that sprung to mind when Sean had his initial encounter with PJ instructors on the first day of PJOC. The PJs don't subject the cadets to anything near the same brutal level of blood-and-dirt-spitting extremes they had to endure during their training, but they sure don't coddle them, either.

"There were six of them [PJs] and they were all wearing sunglasses and their maroon berets," Sean said. "We had a uniform inspection and that's what set it off.

"They just ripped into us, and we got smoked for an hour and a half. You could tell they were loving it. Here we were a bunch of scared little cadets, and they were really intimidating.

"It was pretty scary when they would get right in your ear and do this quiet talking thing they do. I thought to myself, 'OK, it could be worse.' Then it got worse."

After hours of doing punishing physical exercises, the cadets were taken to nearby Santa Fe National Forest, where the real testing would take place.

Although the cadets would spend the next five days on the side of a mountain, this wasn't a training exercise per se.

The course is designed to provide a taste of what it takes to become a member of the fraternity of men whose motto is "That Others May Live." Perfection, attained in a seemingly impossible time frame, is the only acceptable standard.

"It was more of a gut check to see how tough you are," Sean said of the course. "We did a lot of PT [physical training].

"These are PJ special operators, and they're real serious about this. One of the things they stress is pushing past your perceived limits.

"Going into it, I wouldn't have thought I could do all the stuff we did, especially for as long as we did it. Now I know I can do more than I ever thought I could do."

The advanced course gives cadets the opportunity to participate in an actual PJ combat rescue training exercise. They also receive field medical training and get the chance to take the PJ physical ability and stamina test.

"One of the things you have to do is 45 good pushups in two minutes," said Sean, who was one of six cadets to pass the test. "You end up doing 75 or 80 pushups for these guys to get 45 good ones.

"Same deal with stomach crunches; they have to be perfect. The test was particularly hard because they gave it to us at the end of the course, when we were really tired out from everything else.

"I like to test myself, and if I want to be the best, I have to do this stuff. I know I want to do some type of special operations, and this way I got a taste of what it's going to be like going through the real thing."

During the recent course, Sean and his classmates were given the honor of attending a memorial service for two PJs killed in Iraq when a rocket hit the helicopter they were in.

"There are about 350 PJs on active duty right now, and 110 of them are stationed around the world," Sean said. "There were probably 150 PJs at the memorial service.

"A lot of them didn't know the two guys, but it's such a close-knit group that everybody who could make it was there. These are definitely some of the best guys I've ever met.

"They are all so dedicated, and love their country and what they do. I really admire their drive and motivation."

Sean's mother, Kim Connolly, thinks it's the sense of brotherhood that attracts her son to elite units like Pararescue and U.S. Army Special Forces.

Currently, Sean is deciding which of the two outfits he wants to try out for.

"Sean has always had this interest in the military," said Connolly, who is the public affairs officer for the Monticello Composite Squadron. "His favorite movie is 'Band of Brothers,' and we have the DVD set.

"He is always testing himself to see if he's good enough and tough enough to be one of these guys. CAP has given him a

structure and opportunity to test him self in ways he would never have been able to if he hadn't been a part of it."

PJs, like most other elite military units, have made a science of the process that will eliminate all but the most worthy candidates from their ranks. Although the PJ instructors made life miserable for Sean and the other cadets, they also revealed a depth of grit and character that sets them apart.

"At PJOC there were two big tough guys who did most of the general intimidation, and were always dropping us for pushups," Sean said.

"Then we had four other instructors who were really tough, too, but they weren't as much in your face screaming.

"At APJOC our lead instructor was a little guy. He was a really good guy, but if you screwed up he let you know it.

"The thing is, he was probably more intimidating than the big PJs. He just had this air about him."



Sean Connolly (second from left) and classmates learn how to transport wounded airmen safely. The physical training helps prepare the cadets for the real-life demands of making rescues.



This photo shows Sean Connolly at the Hawk Mountain Ranger School in Pennsylvania's Blue Mountains. Connolly graduated from the rigorous survival school the summer before last.