

# TACRON TAKES CONTROL

By Cdr. Michael J. Barea

**W**hat is a TACRON and what does it do? Outside amphibious operation lifelines, the mission of a Tactical Air Control Squadron is virtually unknown despite being in existence for more than 50 years since first used in the Pacific and the Aleutian Campaign of 1943. In the Attu operations in May of that year, the first Air Support Control Unit afloat was employed. Operating from *Pennsylvania* (BB 38), close air support missions were controlled by this unit during the amphibious phase of the operation. The unit consisted of

In the early stages of amphibious operations during WW II, the requirement for training air support control personnel in the highly specialized techniques of close air support developed. At this time, the control units were not officially established and drew personnel for each campaign from amphibious staffs. When the war in the Pacific ended, the air support organization had grown to 24 air support control units comprised of nearly 2,300 officers and enlisted personnel commanded by a rear admiral.

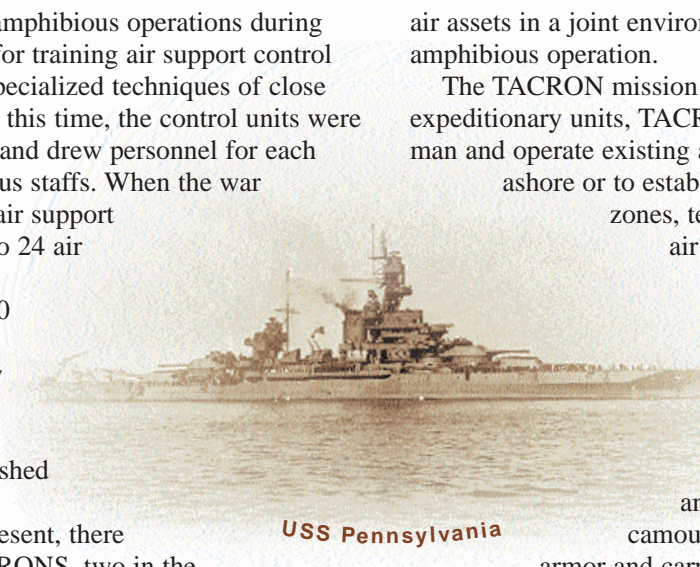
In late 1946, the air control units were established and renamed Tactical Air Control Squadrons. At present, there are four active duty TACRONs, two in the Atlantic Fleet (TACRONs 21 and 22) and two in the Pacific Fleet (TACRONs 11 and 12). All are under the control of Commander Tactical Air Control Group 1 at Naval Amphibious Base Coronado, Calif. East and West coast reserve tactical air control squadrons augment the active duty squadrons during national and NATO amphibious operations and exercises. TACRONs have participated in many theaters and routinely deploy detachments with amphibious ready groups (ARG) to the Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, Caribbean and Pacific Basin areas.

The TACRON mission is involved in every aspect of amphibious air operations, including real-time close air support, air defense, ship-to-shore troop movement by air, airborne medical evacuations and long-range planning. It is responsible for airspace management and control, as well as general coordination of operations in an amphibious objective area or other assigned airspace. In addition, joint air expertise resides within the detachment, from coordinating requests for nonorganic

air assets in a joint environment to supporting an ongoing amphibious operation.

The TACRON mission does not end at the beach. As expeditionary units, TACRONs maintain the capability to man and operate existing air traffic control facilities ashore or to establish remote facilities at landing zones, temporary airfields or forward air refueling points. TACRON personnel train alongside their fellow Marine Corps air controllers at remote airfields near Camp Lejeune, N.C., setting up expeditionary airfields and exercising field equipment and techniques. Dressed in camouflage, wearing helmets, body armor and carrying 9mm pistols, personnel carry their field gear, radios and charts ashore to augment the air support elements of the Marine Air Control Group. They provide airspace structure and safely guide the fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft from all services and nations in support of the ground commander's scheme of maneuver.

TACRONs 21 and 22 deploy two detachments per squadron, each with 16 enlisted personnel, including 12 air traffic controllers, 2 operations specialists, an information technology specialist and an intelligence specialist. Detachment support personnel provide administrative and messing assistance. Each detachment deploys with five officers. The officer in charge (OIC) is an O-5 aviator, referred to as the Tactical Air Officer, who also serves as a member of the amphibious squadron (PHIBRON) staff. The OIC leads three Naval Aviators and one Marine Corps officer with a variety of helicopter, fixed-wing and forward air controller experience. Detachments need a variety of aviation community experience to handle the numerous



**Opposite, a combat rubber raider craft from the 26th MEU's Force Reconnaissance Detachment is sprayed with seawater from the rotor wash of a CH-53 Sea Stallion alongside Saipan (LHA 2) operating in the Mediterranean in August 2000.**





Sgt. Brook R. Kelsey

contingencies encountered during amphibious operations.

In October 1999, a TACRON det returned home after completing one of the busiest Mediterranean deployments in recent years as part of the *Kearsarge* (LHD 3) ARG, comprised of PHIBRON 2 and the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) Special Operations Capable (SOC) team. The embarked TACRON detachment coordinated air operations in the southern Adriatic supporting refugees in Albania among 38 multinational surface combatant air-capable platforms. Detachment efforts synchronized numerous airlifts from several flight decks carrying Marines and equipment ashore in support of Joint Task Force Operation Shining Hope. The squadron also coordinated and conducted long-range planning to ensure AV-8B *Harriers* were properly included in the air tasking order produced at the Combined Air Operations Center in Vicenza, Italy. This coordination was imperative for the strike missions being flown into hostile territory as part of Operation Allied Force, NATO's air campaign over Yugoslavia and Kosovo.

In addition, detachment personnel played a major role in assuring Turkish government and military officials that air operations within Turkish sovereign airspace as part of earthquake relief Operation Avid Response were being

**Above, two CH-46 *Sea Knights* from Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron (HMM) 264 of the 26th MEU (SOC) fly in formation over the beach during Exercise Atlas Hinge, conducting amphibious landing and cross training with the Tunisian army, navy and air force. Opposite, top to bottom: 26th MEU (SOC) Marines board a CH-46 *Sea Knight* of HMM-264 during Atlas Hinge; *Tarawa* (LHA 1) provides security and logistics support for units assisting in the investigation of events surrounding *Cole* (DDG 67), which was struck by a terrorist bomb off the coast of Aden, Yemen, on 12 October 2000; and 26th MEU (SOC) Marines move toward the shore during the combat enhancement training phase of Exercise Destined Glory 2000 with military forces in the Mediterranean region.**

conducted responsibly. The det also ensured that airspace management, control and coordination of various Navy and Marine Corps helicopters were in compliance with humanitarian guidelines.

A significant event took place in July 2000 during *Nassau's* (LHA 4) ARG/PHIBRON/MEU integration, when a TACRON completed the first-ever close air support initiative with forces that will deploy together for an upcoming cruise. Through the hard work of many individuals, ARG/MEU air units operated with carrier air wing assets during the early stages of their respective interdeployment training cycles. The exercise was designed to better prepare for the growing

possibility of carrier air wings being called upon to support amphibious operations. This work-up training cycle provided a better understanding of the complexities involved when supporting amphibious operations from the air.

In August 2000, another TACRON det returned home after completing a highly successful deployment as part of the *Wasp* (LHD 1) ARG. Personnel participated in numerous exercises, including amphibious operations with Spanish forces and NATO exercises Dynamic Response and Dynamic Mix. They also supported real-world flight operations to and from Camp Able Sentry,



Sgt. Brook R. Kelsey

where U.S. Marines were based in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia as part of continuing

peacekeeping efforts.

These dynamic operational activities demonstrate that littoral amphibious operations are increasingly becoming more a part of American resolve. This unique aviation special mission area will play a significant role in the future. The TACRONs' ability to work in joint and combined operating arenas in the littorals while creating an atmosphere of mutual respect among diverse aviation assets exemplifies the TACRON motto: "Take Control."

Cdr. Barea is CO of the *Blackjacks* of TACRON 21 aboard Naval Amphibious Base Little Creek, Norfolk, Va.

PH1 David Miller



Sgt. Brook R. Kelsey

