VIRTUAL SECOND DECISION

INSIDER TIPS TO KNOW

TACP/ALO

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- I want to join AFSPECWAR because they execute important missions outside the wire. What are the possibilities for seeing combat? As each TACP unit is aligned with an army element, this will most likely depend on if that element deploys and what their deployed mission will be. There are still deployments happening, but the conventional army's ops tempo is dramatically reduced from what it was 10 years ago. There is potential for getting on single-man deployments to hot spots but those are rare and unfortunately usually for captains and above. The biggest factors are truly the political landscape, the aligned army unit, and pure luck. If you're seriously looking for a deployment, I would recommend assessing for SOF TACP Officer as a senior 1st Lt or Captain.

- What is the difference between a STO and TACPO? The first difference is the mission. STOs primary doctrinal mission is global access, and performing air traffic control on austere airfields they set up. TACPOs primary mission is close air support, and being a JTAC in support of conventional army elements. While STOs can become JTACs and support Army SOF as such, it is an additional qualification and not all STOs or even CCTs are JTACs. However, the JTAC qualification is mandatory for all TACP personnel and is the sole focus as a mission set. Where STOs are like Swiss Army knives abs are able to perform many duties and maintain various qualifications, TACPOs are like a machete in that their only focus in life is performing close air support as JTACs. Second, the organization varies. While STOs fall under AFSOC/SOCOM, TACPOs are under AFSPECWAR alongside them, but are not under AFSOC or SOCOM as 99% of them support conventional army units. Thus they fall underneath ACC/PACAF/USAFE. STOs belong to a special tactics squadron, whereas most TACPOs belong to an air support operations squadron. There is a handful of TACPOs that do fall under AFSOC and make up the TACP-centric 17th STS, which supports the 75th Ranger Regiment. However this is an exception. Thirdly, the training varies. Where STOs go through military freefall, dive, ATC school, airborne, SERE, and combat control school totaling about 2 years,

TACPOs go through the TACP schoolhouse, SERE, airborne, basic ALO skills course, and then report to their unit for individual JTAC upgrade training.

- What is the TOPT Assessment like and how do I prepare for it? TOPT is a 5 day assessment course meant to critically analyze your personality, leadership traits, interpersonal skills, stress tolerance, internal drive, and physical fitness. It consists of various events that cover all those bases ranging from PT tests, to written exams, board interviews, team endurance events, peer evaluations, mock missions, and psychological evaluations. Recommendations physically are to have good cardio/muscle endurance first, and strength second. You must be able to crush the PT test, along with having your legs deal with the constant weight of a ruck while moving quickly, which is where cardio and endurance are paramount. Strength is required for the PT test and can come in handy at other events, but overall you will struggle if you are not fast as a runner, or lack proper grip endurance. As for the non physical-First be authentic. The cadre can spot someone lying or trying to look good from a mile away and it will severely degrade your standing with them and your teammates if you are fake. Second, be an asset to the team not a detriment. You want the team to see you as reliable both physically and emotionally, thus it behooves you to be fit and able to perform when others may not. No one looks fondly upon a person constantly holding the team back, or acting like a liability. Lastly, go in with a “present” mindset. Selection is a arduous and painful experience, and 5 days of that can take a toll especially mentally. I’d advise you to stay in the present tense and focus on each event as it comes, not the next event or the next days events. The farthest you should look forward is to the next meal. That strategy has always served me well, and allowed me to avoid stressing myself out unnecessarily which can lead to unwanted consequences.

- What is the Day to Day life like? The most consistent part of the workweek is morning PT. Normally PT is at the unit gym from 0700-0930 and primarily on your own following one of the coach’s programs. Work for the rest of the day varies greatly depending on unit, time of year, and position. Most of the time while actually at home it is admin/squadron meetings mixed with JTAC training in the areas around the squadron and conducting JTAC sims. Usually once a month we go on training TDYs for about a week to a live range somewhere in the U.S. where we conduct live fly JTAC training with multiple aircraft. Here we plan and brief with pilots and then execute before coming back to debrief, similar to the pilot culture of training missions. Since JTAC is a currency, we are constantly training to stay current or green so that we are able to deploy if required. Overall we adhere to the work hard play hard culture where we spend most of our time devoted to constantly planning and controlling missions on TDY, but also relax as a team at the end and are able to blow off steam before coming home.

- What is the primary job of a TACP Officer while deployed? As a TACPO, your main job is to advise the ground commander with regards to CAS employment, assist the army team in planning, and control aircraft as a JTAC. Many times, this all

takes place in the tactical operations center of an army battalion or brigade where you will be working directly with an O-5/6 to properly employ CAS assets. It involves much interpersonal skills and relationship building, as well as team communication, along with a high level of competence and knowledge with regards to weapons, aircraft capabilities, radio skills, and ground maneuver tactics.