



Facing challenges in Rudder's Rangers

Story and photos by Bill Hughes

It's three in the morning. The temperature's in the mid-30s, but stiff gusts of wind make it feel much colder. For the shivering men guarding a camp ringed with barbed wire, there's little consolation that temperatures will reach the mid-70s later on.

A young man in a nearby building is determined the men in the camp won't live to feel the warmth of the sun. The room he's in is painted a sickly shade of green. His fatigues are green, too — in fact almost everything in the room is green. With his face covered in clown-white greasepaint, the soldier stares into a mirror lit by a single tungsten bulb as he puts the finishing touches on his skeleton-like make-up job.

It's the "face of death."

Back at the camp, the guards hunch around a small fire that provides little protection from the wind. They've been up all night guarding a downed U.S. airman being held in a small hut at the rear of the camp.

The long night has been quiet, but constant vigilance and the cruel weather have taken their toll on the guards. They're sleepy, and their nerves are frazzled from listening for noises that might signal the beginning of an attack from the darkness that surrounds their camp.

In the green room, the soldier with the white face and black-ringed eyes turns from the mirror and faces a group of young men, all wearing the "face of death." Their mission is to rescue the prisoner being held by the enemy forces.

The group commander has his men synchronize their watches, and goes over the assault plan one last time. The

group checks their equipment as they listen, sliding clips of ammunition into their weapons as the leader finishes reciting the last details of the mission.

Then they wait.

Time passes slowly for the group. The mission they've come to carry out will take less than two minutes of combat, but the preparations seem to have taken forever. They now wait in the limbo between the preparation and the intense physical and mental coordination required to carry it out. To pass the time, some make small talk, some smoke cigarettes, others dip snuff, but all are anxious to get on with the job at hand.

At a little after 5 a.m., the soldiers synchronize their watches again and begin to slip quietly from the room. They move out swiftly, taking up positions around the camp, unseen by the guards.