



PHOTOS BY LUKE ELLIOTT

Air Force sharpshooters Tech. Sgt. Robert Johnson, left, and Sr. Airman Jose Felix, both with the Texas Air National Guard's 204th Security Forces Squadron, based at Biggs Army Airfield, lay waiting as part of a demonstration Saturday for Maj. Gen. Charles G. Rodriguez, adjutant general, Texas National Guard.

204th SFS trains sharpshooter teams at Biggs

LUKE ELLIOTT

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The word sniper brings many things to mind, such as Marines, Army scouts or even Tom Berenger as Thomas Beckett in the Hollywood movie. One thing it might not bring to mind is the United States Air Force or more specifically, the Texas Air National Guard.

Perhaps, it should now that the TXANG's 204th Security Forces Squadron, based at Biggs Army Airfield, has established a new capability known as sharpshooters, the Air Force version of snipers.

Sr. Airman Jose Felix, sharpshooter, 204th SFS, said it surprised him to learn that the Texas Air National Guard has snipers or sharpshooters.

"I was pretty surprised when the opportunity arose to join the team, especially since it's in the fundamental stages," said Felix, a former infantryman with the 10th Mountain Division who has been on the squadron sharpshooter team for about a year. "I wanted to part of an elite team that can make a difference out there."

In 2005, the 81-mm mortar system went away, and the squadron moved some of the mortar slots to the .50-caliber machine gun and Mk 19 grenade launcher teams and used the remaining slots to form the sharpshooter teams, said Chief Master Sgt. Mark Lindell, 204th SFS.

"It [sharpshooters] is another defensive capability we can bring to the fight," said Lindell. "You can just see the enthusiasm our sharpshooters have for it."

Enthusiasm may seem a bit of an understatement to someone listening to Air Force sharpshooter Tech. Sgt. Robert Johnson, lead noncommissioned officer for the 204th SFS sharpshooter teams, as he speaks passionately about his profession.

"Our mission is to deliver long-range, precision rifle fire; enhanced

observation and reporting in support of airbase defense and continuous airfield operations," Johnson, a former Marine Corps infantryman who volunteered for the squadron's sharpshooter team, recited verbatim from memory.

Johnson said of all the skills in the military, he believes a sharpshooters' is the most perishable.

"You always have to keep training," said Johnson.

To keep their skills honed, squadron sharpshooters use both military and civilian police training.

"There's a big difference between military sharpshooters and civilian police snipers," said Johnson, who indicated that military sharpshooters or snipers engage targets at about 1,000 yards, while the average police sniper engages targets at about 70 yards. "We [squadron sharpshooters] are forced to learn and embrace and be proficient in both worlds."

Johnson said movies like "Sniper" give the profession a bad name.

"They try to glorify the sniper," said Johnson, who indicated that 99 percent of the job doesn't involve engaging enemies. "The primary mission of the sharpshooter is gathering information. Those movies glorify the dropping of the hammer and the sending of 115 grains down range. There's nothing glorifying about it. It's a job."

Johnson said to become an Air Force sharpshooter, you must be in physical shape and have a real desire to become one.

"The number one requirement is you have to want to do it," said Johnson. "You have to want it to do it so bad you're willing put up with a little pain. You have to have the heart and the will."

"The unit [204th SFS] is very special because it's not geographically adjacent to an Air Force wing," said Maj. Gen. Charles G. Rodriguez, adjutant general, Texas National Guard. "This makes it possible for them to be a lot more inventive ... we have a very good track record of taking their own initiative."

Part of what makes the unit special is their sharpshooter capability, as they are, according to Lindell, the only Air National Guard unit with this capability.

Johnson said that while there are about 270 sharpshooters in the Air Force, 12 of them reside with the 204th SFS.

"Twelve of 270, that's amazing," said Johnson.

Johnson estimated that percentage wise or per capita within a unit, their squadron, which consists of about one sharpshooter for every ten Airmen, has more sharpshooters than any other unit in the Air Force.

"We're a unique organization," said Lt. Col. Scott Elliott, commander, 204th SFS. "There is no other organization in DoD [Department of Defense] for us to mirror after."



Air Force sharpshooter Sr. Airman Jose Marrero with the Texas Air National Guard's 204th Security Forces Squadron, based at Biggs Army Airfield, hammers a stake to support a camouflage netting Saturday.



Air Force sharpshooters

(Left) Air Force sharpshooter Sr. Airman Jose Marrero, Texas Air National Guard's 204th Security Forces Squadron, based at Biggs Army Airfield, demonstrates sharpshooter attire.

(Right) Air Force sharpshooter Tech. Sgt. Robert Johnson, Texas Air National Guard's 204th Sec. Forces Sqdn., explains sharpshooter capabilities.

