

U.S. Special Operations Command Meeting the Challenges of the 21st Century

Special Forces Soldiers boarding MH-47E
for infiltration training during Exercise
Talisman Saber 2005 in Australia

Fleet Combat Camera Group Pacific (David A. Levy)

By BRYAN D. “DOUG” BROWN

Born from crisis and shaped through experience, today’s special operations capability did not come easily. Contemporary Special Operations Forces (SOF) are the product of tragedy, vision, and the innovation of Congress. Unique authorities given to the U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) empower Special Operations Soldiers, Sailors, and Airmen to perform diverse yet critical missions. Exceptional training, enhanced education, cutting-edge technology, and force maturity, coupled with the authority, agility, and willingness to change, form a responsive framework fundamental to Special Operations Forces defeating adversaries across the globe.

History

U.S. Special Operations Command, like the Central Intelligence Agency, can trace its lineage to World War II and the Office of Strategic Services. From President Franklin D. Roosevelt and World War I Medal of Honor recipient William “Wild Bill” Donovan came the idea to create a new force with unprecedented capabilities to fight the Axis powers. This force would have skills enabling it to work deep behind enemy lines, perform clandestine missions, and provide strategic intelligence.¹ The Office of Strategic Services played a critical role in the Allied victory; however, these exceptional skills rapidly deteriorated after the war.

Although special operations personnel in all the services struggled to maintain their capabilities in the postwar years, support

was severely lacking, in particular during the Cold War when strategic nuclear forces took center stage. During the Vietnam War, Army Special Forces and Rangers, Navy Underwater Demolition and Sea-Air-Land (SEAL) teams, and Air Force air commandos contributed significantly. However, the resources and organization to fully harness their potential were lacking, and again these special capabilities were greatly reduced after the war.²

The growing number of terrorist incidents in the 1970s presaged the new threat of terror-based warfare we face today. It also triggered the formation of the very command structure that is leading the war on terror: USSOCOM. In 1980, Operation *Eagle Claw* was launched to rescue the 53 Americans being held hostage at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. The rescue force met with disaster at a remote site known as “Desert One,” resulting in mission failure

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and the loss of life and equipment. The operators, composed of Marine helicopter pilots flying from Navy ships with Army Rangers and Special Forces and a mix of Air Force C-130s, knew they were facing steep odds. They did not have the benefits of habitual joint training, SOF-unique equipment, or fully developed skills. Nor did they have the joint procedures to pull off such a difficult mission.³ A capability gap was identified that fateful night, and a strategic transformation would be required to overcome that gap.

As a result of the failure of Operation *Eagle Claw*, Congress tasked the Department of Defense (DOD) to build a capability to conduct special operations missions. Despite this directive, DOD failed to act, largely because the services did not view Special Operations as vital to national defense,

- provide close civilian oversight for special operations and low-intensity conflict activities
- ensure that genuine expertise and a diversity of views are available to the President and Secretary of Defense regarding special operations requirements and low-intensity threats
- improve interagency planning and coordination for Special Operations and low-intensity conflict
- bolster Special Operations capabilities in such areas as joint doctrine and training, intelligence support, command and control, budgetary authority, personnel management, and mission planning.

By aligning SOF under a single responsive headquarters, this legislation fostered interoperability among the services and

has galvanized all joint Special Operations capabilities into a world-class force with the skill to execute the most challenging missions. The command has been willing to utilize these authorities to continuously reevaluate the SOF mission, force structure, organization, and virtually every aspect of the USSOCOM construct, and to change where necessary to meet the latest threat. This willingness continues to be the hallmark of the command's synergy—all the while adhering strictly to moral, ethical, and legal virtues. USSOCOM has provided highly trained and equipped forces to combatant commanders but, although authorized, has seldom acted as a supported command.

Supporting to Supported Command

The role of training, organizing, and equipping dramatically changed in 2002 when Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld gave USSOCOM the lead in planning the war on terror. He subsequently expanded this role, more recently detailed in the President's guidance in the 2005 Unified Command Plan, giving USSOCOM the additional responsibility to plan, synchronize for DOD, and, when directed, execute Special Operations in the war on terror. Transitioning to the supported role was a natural, although challenging, evolution for the command—and marked another key event in the evolution of Special Operations.

To meet the dual USSOCOM mission, the Center for Special Operations (CSO) was created primarily to prosecute the war on terror. Combining the traditional joint headquarters functions of intelligence, current operations, and long-range plans and strategy, and overlaid by a Joint Interagency Coordination Group, the organization is the command's warfighting hub. Led by a three-star general or flag officer, the joint interagency staff exercises command and control of the war on terror operations from its location at MacDill Air Force Base, Florida. The center includes a trained and ready joint task force headquarters that allows for seamless planning and execution of operations that traverse the spectrum of conflict. This structure provides USSOCOM the flexibility to transition to a joint special operations task force as required. Free of administrative functions, the center's sole responsibility is planning, synchronizing, supporting, and executing

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and they could not agree on its substance, funding, or how it would be controlled.

Some visionaries in Congress took action to remedy the deficiency. Congressmen Dan Daniel (D-VA) and Bill Nichols (D-AL), along with Senators Carl Levin (D-MI), Sam Nunn (D-GA), Barry Goldwater (R-AZ), and William Cohen (R-ME), saw the need for a Special Operations Force with unique skills and pushed forward innovative policy fixes.⁴ Because of this group's leadership, the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 and the Nunn-Cohen amendment to the act in 1987 instituted major defense reforms, including formal establishment of the U.S. Special Operations Command.

Authorities

The creation of a unified combatant command for SOF, commanded by a four-star general, was not the only mandate of the legislation. Also called for were an Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, a low-intensity conflict coordinating board within the National Security Council, and SOF Major Force Program (MPF)-11.⁵ The objectives of the Nunn-Cohen amendment were to:

provided USSOCOM with control over its own resources, better enabling it to meet its responsibilities to train, organize, and equip SOF. The new authorities were the construct of a highly flexible command, providing the President with additional options for approaching difficult problems.

USSOCOM was assigned authority to:

- exercise combatant command authority over Active and Reserve SOF in the United States
- command SOF missions as directed by the President or Secretary of Defense
- develop SOF strategy, doctrine, and tactics
- organize, train, and equip SOF
- program and budget for SOF
- develop/procure SOF-peculiar equipment, materiel, supplies, and services
- prioritize and validate SOF requirements
- ensure interoperability of equipment and personnel
- ensure combat readiness
- monitor SOF personnel management
- conduct internal audits.

The impact of this legislation has been profound. Since its passage, USSOCOM

Special Operations in the war on terror across the globe.

In coordination with the center's joint task force, the Special Operations Joint Inter-agency Collaboration Center was created to integrate global information requirements and facilitate information sharing with appropriate agencies. Linking priority DOD and non-DOD agencies, this center provides a means for rapid information exchange and analysis. As observed in Afghanistan and Iraq, rapid exploitation of information is the surest method to capture or kill an adversary.

Combined under one center, these elements form a powerful, responsive, and revolutionary structure to fight the war on terror. With minimal growth, USSOCOM transformed the headquarters from a supporting to a supported command and is uniquely postured to perform its new role as a warfighter, while maintaining its Title 10 responsibility to organize, train, and equip Special Operations Forces.

Geographic combatant commanders (GCCs) are tremendously supportive and continue to execute operations, including SOF-unique missions, as the supported commanders in their theaters, with USSOCOM in a supporting role. The GCCs maintain the best regional focus and knowledge of their areas of operations, having conducted many successful operations since the war on terror began. Each has a theater-

specific Special Operations Command to support his Special Operations logistics, planning, and operational control requirements. Theater Special Operations Commands have grown considerably over the last few years and, in most cases, are commanded by a two-star general or flag officer. When directed by the Secretary of Defense, however, the commander of USSOCOM will serve as the supported commander for specified operations. This designation allows improved centralized planning, expands options for mission execution, and permits a more flexible command structure to match an adversary that spans multiple countries and often several GCC regions.

USSOCOM is quickly meeting its new requirements through the CSO, which has been reviewing global strategies, developing courses of action, and formulating recommendations for operational force employment by the commander through the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of Defense. The CSO recently finalized the war on terror plan and, in the process, identified requirements for new authorities necessary to take the fight forward. Many of these requirements were approved immediately, while others call for legislative changes, making them less timely. Even so, the formation of a global plan to fight terror is an important event.

Growth

Successes in Afghanistan and Iraq have resulted in a growing demand for SOF around the globe, evidenced by the largest number of our warriors and special-skills personnel currently forward deployed than ever before. Some policymakers have called for an exponential growth in SOF, but unbridled growth is not without risk. As SOF remain decisive on the battlefield, USSOCOM is working to reconstitute its world-class forces while carefully expanding capability. SOF is not a solution for every problem. Special operations personnel and tactics must continue to be applied at the right place, at the right time, facing the right adversary. Any growth must be targeted toward unique SOF skills because of the extended time it takes to develop a fully qualified and experienced operator. And growth must not come at the expense of quality.

To meet the challenges on the battlefield, USSOCOM is judiciously adding force structure in Special Forces, civil affairs, psy-

chological operations, Naval special warfare, and Air Force Special Operations, as well as providing additional staff to its Theater Special Operations Commands. To create more Special Operators, the command is increasing the number of instructors, support personnel, and facilities within the training institutions to expand capacity

while USSOCOM's operations tempo is high, recruiting is good, training programs are full, and retention remains strong

without lowering standards. Throughout this process, USSOCOM will emphasize quality over quantity.

In the next 4 years, USSOCOM will increase by some 2,300 personnel, including 2 additional SEAL team equivalents and 500 Special Forces Soldiers. The command, for example, is enlarging the Army Special Forces (SF) community by one battalion per Special Forces group. This force structure improvement will realign SF for expeditionary deployments for purpose, ending the Cold War concept of presence and reducing the strain on overutilized SOF. To equip the new battalions, USSOCOM utilizes MFP-11 to acquire all SOF-unique equipment but relies on the standard service agreement with the Army, whereby that service provides SOF with all service-common equipment, for items such as the M4 rifle, machineguns, laser-aiming devices, and high-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles. In the case of aviation, the services provide the basic airframe, and USSOCOM, with MFP-11 funds, modifies and enhances the airframe to meet SOF requirements. This is a critical distinction. When SOF grows in any form, so must the corresponding service. Adding SF battalions, SEAL team equivalents, or special operations aviation detachments requires the component service to reallocate portions of its budget, give up force structure, or grow more force structure to compensate.

One of USSOCOM's most important issues, with considerable impact on its ability to grow, is retention of experienced operators. With the help of the services and the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the



Air Force Special Operations member touches down from C-130 during Exercise Patriot 2005

DOD

Army Special Forces combat divers fast-rope to Navy submarine during training with U.S. Southern Command



DOD

▲ Download above photo as wallpaper at ndupress.ndu.edu.

command has instituted retention initiatives that include targeted bonuses for specific operational specialties and some of the more seasoned operators, with over half of those eligible taking the bonus within the first few months. Additionally, new educational benefits for all members of SOF were approved, offering advanced education through the PhD level. USSOCOM's Joint Special Operations University has expanded to improve joint education for SOF personnel and will continue to develop new and pertinent military curricula while making civilian education opportunities available. While USSOCOM's operations tempo is high, recruiting is good, training programs are full, and retention remains strong.

Engaged Around the World

One of the primary goals of the SOF-led coalition in Afghanistan was to capture or kill al Qaeda and Taliban forces, and indeed SOF, together with Afghan National Army units, coalition partners, and conventional U.S. forces, have conducted hundreds of

operations throughout the country. These successes resulted in the overthrow of the Taliban, capture of anticoalition forces, and destruction of thousands of weapons and immeasurable quantities of explosives. The successful elections of October 2004 are the true metric of SOF achievement.

Today, SOF is working to rebuild infrastructure and establish a rapport with the populace. Deployed in small detachments throughout Afghanistan, Special Operators are working directly with the National Army, conventional U.S. forces, and central and local authorities, allowing them to identify problems and work toward cooperative solutions through local governments. This relationship also allows them to gather information about anticoalition efforts invaluable to long-term national interests.

In Operation *Iraqi Freedom*, Special Operators were at the vanguard of the invasion. Assigned several critical missions on three simultaneous fronts, they operated deep inside Iraq to prevent the V Corps in the north from reinforcing Baghdad, and

conducted special reconnaissance and direct action missions in western Iraq, and supported Combined Forces Land Component Command movement from the south toward Baghdad. Other units searched out and destroyed mobile missiles, conducted support and stability operations throughout the country, and interdicted borders and lines of communication. After the invasion, special operations units were crucial to the capture or elimination of most of the key personnel within the regime, including Saddam Hussein and his sons Uday and Qusay. SOF are still on the ground capturing high-value targets.

Following the collapse of the regime, SOF continue to play a major stability role with the long-term goal of assisting in the building of a free and democratic nation. Army Special Forces and Navy SEALs are performing foreign internal defense missions and training Iraqi soldiers in the skills necessary to win the fight. Today, every direct action mission launched against anticoalition forces is led and conducted by Iraqi soldiers, while

Special Operators advise and provide critical support. Elections and reestablishment of self-governance are highlights of SOF success in the region.

While significant attention has been placed on the command's direct action capabilities as Special Operators find, fix, and finish the enemy, that is only one element of the command's warfighting capability. Another role, more critical to the long-term success of the war on terror, is keeping warfare from igniting in other regions. The preferred solution is for individual nations to subvert terrorism using internal capabilities, but if that is not feasible, U.S. Special Operations Forces can advise the host nation and, if necessary, work in conjunction with its forces. As forward-deployed warrior-diplomats, culturally sophisticated Special Operators are continuing to build long-term, positive relationships with host nations worldwide and undermine those who spread the seeds of terrorism. SOF are in dozens of countries conducting theater security cooperation events specifically to train and work with host nations to eliminate terrorism. This engagement is always accomplished with the knowledge and coordination of host nation leaders, their American Ambassadors and U.S. country teams, and combatant commanders.

Regrettably, the current operations tempo has severely stressed the command's ability

the goal is for Special Operations Forces to provide nations with the tools to secure their own borders and provide their own internal stability

to support theater security cooperation events and train with coalition partners. As the situation in Iraq continues to mature, it

becomes imperative that SOF be incrementally replaced by their conventional force counterparts, lest we win the peace there at the cost of success elsewhere.

Today's deployments are focused. The command is working closely with the geographic combatant commanders to determine where Special Operators can achieve the best effects. USSOCOM will continue to emphasize its unconventional warfare capabilities and use foreign internal defense, civil affairs, and information operations skill sets to enable willing partner nations to eliminate the conditions that provide fertile ground for terrorist causes. We consider this the "deep fight," but not in the traditional sense of battlespace—rather, in the

latest technology at the expense of important aviation modernization. Individual operator equipment, including the latest body armor integrated with modular load carrying systems, miniature day/night weapon sights, extreme climate clothing, and the latest generation night vision devices were identified and fully funded within our budget. With the help of Congress, acquisition was accelerated through supplemental funding, delivering this and other critical equipment rapidly to the battlefield.

Additional USSOCOM force structure requirements, focusing on growth in appropriate skills to the right size without losing quality, were also identified and validated.



Marines training with M203 40mm grenade launchers at Miriam Range, Djibouti

U.S. Marine Corps (Daniel R. Lowndes)

sense of time. Defeating terrorists will require not only capturing or killing today's operatives, but also influencing the conditions that will impact the vulnerability of future generations to terrorist recruiting. Through careful engagement, the goal is for Special Operations Forces to provide nations with the tools, training, and capabilities to secure their own borders and provide their own internal stability, thus helping civilized people around the world to live free from fear of terrorist attacks.

The Key to the Future: SOF Operators

In Program Objective Memorandum (POM) 2006, USSOCOM radically refocused, choosing to equip operators with the best and

While the command is planned to grow by nearly 2,300 personnel, this approved and funded growth is less than required. Limited by its relatively small budget (1.7 percent of the DOD total), the command continues to reassess and reprioritize force structure requirements. The ongoing Quadrennial Defense Review may direct new resources to USSOCOM for additional appropriate growth.

As POM 2008 is constructed, the command is emphasizing training in critical skills, education, and increased regional focus to ensure not only that its warriors have the technical capabilities, intellectual skills, regional expertise, and language and cultural proficiency to win today's conflicts, but also

that they remain prepared to face the uncertainties of tomorrow. To remain a synergistic and decisive force, SOF warriors will need to remain globally engaged and postured to respond on short notice against diverse targets. Modernization of aviation assets, the arrival of the Special Operations variant of the tilt-rotor Osprey aircraft (CV-22), and maritime mobility assets such as the Advanced SEAL Delivery System will ensure SOF are ready to respond.

SOF accomplish missions that are tactical but that have impact across the strategic spectrum

Among its future goals, the command is focusing on objectives that will guide the development of a global SOF network. The goal is to position and manage SOF, in conjunction with other DOD, interagency, and partner assets, in simultaneous operations around the world against terrorist organizations along with their allies and sponsors. This will necessitate the synchronization of global information to gain persistent visibility and coordination while integrating the command and control of all SOF. Identification of operators, leadership, and infrastructure across the spectrum of terrorist networks requires an integrated and adaptive blue force network. Special Operators will remain essential in this role while they continue to develop indigenous capabilities to fight terrorists and rogue regimes. By positioning and networking SOF in key locations to obtain and disseminate information, supported by specialized equipment and advanced technologies, USSOCOM continues to develop ever greater situational awareness throughout vital regions to enhance its effectiveness in combating terrorist networks and remain a force multiplier.

Long-term success depends on the continued ability to employ a sustainable mix of capabilities rapidly. In addition to finding and eliminating terrorists, civil affairs and information operations forces will conduct stabilization, construction, and reconstruction operations early on to help partner nations reduce or eliminate the underlying conditions that feed terrorism. Civil affairs personnel are involved in Operations *Enduring Freedom* and *Iraqi Freedom*, working with conventional forces to win hearts and minds through construction

projects, medical assistance, education, and placing a friendly face on the U.S. presence.

The Essence of SOF

Throughout history, success by a small force against a strategic or operational objective has required units that combined selected people with unique training, experience, and equipment employing tactics not found in conventional units. Such small

forces can be employed quickly and act with speed and agility in all facets of operations. These characteristics epitomize SOF, who accomplish missions that are tactical in nature but have impact across the strategic spectrum from peacetime engagement to high-intensity combat.

The defining quality of SOF has always been its distinctive warriors, whose development is guided by four truths. First, humans are more important than hardware. Special Operations Soldiers, Sailors, and Airmen are the most critical component, a fundamental truth that USSOCOM is reinforcing in its funding priorities. Second, quality is better than quantity. A few carefully selected, well-trained, and well-led people are preferable to larger numbers of lower quality personnel.

The third truth is that SOF cannot be mass-produced. There is no easy formula for creating them. They are specially recruited, assessed, and trained. Today, there are those who would designate various conventional units as "SOF" to speed growth or simply because they believe they are like SOF. This would be a tragic mistake for those units, who are not prepared for what they will face, as well as for USSOCOM, as it would ultimately destroy a very capable force. Finally, competent SOF cannot be created after emergencies occur. Time is perhaps the most critical element: time to select, assess, train, and educate personnel and to gain the experience to perform the complex operations required. Experience—a key element—can only be gained over time. Highly specialized skill sets are required, including mastery of technology (spanning the spectrum from no-tech to high-tech), cultural and regional awareness, and operational expertise. Since competent forces

cannot be fashioned instantly, decisionmakers must plan ahead.

Like their predecessors through the years, today's Special Operators are an integral part of the joint force. The war on terror is different from any struggle the Nation has faced. Success requires patience and the application of every instrument of national and international power. Special Operations Forces are the natural pick when the mission requires capabilities not found elsewhere. Innovation, initiative, and judgment are the hallmarks of Special Operators. They remain the only force with language proficiency and cultural awareness for specific regions, allowing them to operate more effectively on foreign turf in conjunction with host nation forces. With the continued support of the President, Congress, and the American people, the Soldiers, Sailors, and Airmen of the U.S. Special Operations Command will continue to apply energy, focus, skill, and determination to quell the roots of terrorism and, when necessary, bring terrorists and their supporters to justice . . . or bring justice to them. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Bradley F. Smith, *The Shadow Warriors* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 157–168.

² James R. Locher III, *Victory on the Potomac* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002), 47.

³ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 319–413.

⁵ U.S. Congress, Senate, Public Law 99–661, S. 2638, 99th Congress, 2^d Session (November 14, 1986).

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