

Members of 3<sup>d</sup> Special Forces Group search for arms cache in Afghanistan



# A Small Wars Service



AC-130 gunship supporting Special Forces

Special Forces Soldier rides all terrain vehicle into cave near Kabul to search for munitions



By D. ROBERT WORLEY

forces have those characteristics, but their focus is on major wars, putting small wars at a disadvantage. A common solution is to assign highly focused Special Operations Forces (SOF) to conventional force commands where they are often poorly utilized. Accordingly, this article proposes establishing a new Special Operations Corps.

The first step toward forming a SOF service was taken in 1987, when the special operations, civil affairs, and psychological operations forces of the Services were assigned to the U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). The next step should be assigning the entire operational and administrative U.S. Marine Corps to USSOCOM. This arrangement would immediately bring larger scale to the command, but it would not bring coherency. This article concludes with recommendations for bringing coherence to a Special Operations Corps.

## How Did We Get Here?

Prior to World War II, the Departments of War and of the Navy were divided

principally by the realities they faced on the threshold of a declared war. The War Department was prepared to mobilize the populace, industrial base, and an army if Congress declared war. The Navy Department was the State Department's strong arm of coercive diplomacy below the threshold of declared war. The unification that occurred in 1947, however, divided the Services by the elements in which they fought: land, sea, or air. The Navy Department struggled successfully to retain its air force and army. Efforts to achieve jointness since 1947 have been about solving the problems caused by the original sin of division by element. Jointness is a problem, not a solution.

Elemental division is wrong now, and, according to the actions of President Dwight Eisenhower, it has been wrong for a long time. Eisenhower initiated legislation in 1958 with a special message to Congress announcing that warfare by element—land, sea, and air—was over. The Services might be separated by element, but warfare was not.

But the Services remain divided by element. They organize, train, and equip to win in a direct clash with the forces of another great power: an army to defeat an army, a navy to defeat a navy, and an air force to defeat an air force.

The Services have a long history of neglecting critical capabilities that are not central to their conceptions of war. Air

**N**ational and military leaders failed to recognize the end of the Cold War for what it was: the abrupt ending to a long era of major power conflict and the beginning of an interwar period. Interwar periods are not peaceful, but are characterized by conflict between major and minor powers—*small wars*—rather than by conflicts between the forces of major powers—*major wars*.

Small wars are not small in the sense of importance, resources committed, or losses sustained. In scale they are national. Scale of operations is achieved not only through greater numbers but also through headquarters that have the capacity to plan, sustain, and command at the theater-strategic, operational, and tactical levels. Conventional

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commandos were developed for a “tertiary” World War II theater in China and Burma and were quickly abandoned so the new Air Force could pursue strategic bombardment. Army Rangers were established for World War II, Korea, and Vietnam—and just as quickly abandoned after each war so the Army could return to its central idea of war. The Navy neglected all aspects of brown-water operations until Vietnam. Underwater demolition teams were taught small-unit infantry tactics and became sea-air-land teams (SEALs) in 1962. The brown-water force was again

relies heavily on its distinct Army, Navy, and Air Force components for equipment, doctrine, organization, and training. The Marine Corps has a single combat development command and one materiel development command. Both SOF and the Marines prefer to adapt rather than develop equipment. The Marine Corps relies on the Navy for major acquisitions, strategic mobility, and budget.

### Mission Intersection

Direct action is the mission that has come to dominate SOF. Direct actions are

missions suited to a light infantry–based air-ground force. The Marine Expeditionary Force can conduct operations on a larger scale than can SOF.

### Points of Origin

There are fewer than 50,000 personnel designated as SOF in the U.S. military. The Army provides the majority, including 10,000 in civil affairs and psychological operations, 2,000 Rangers, 1,500 in aviation, and 9,100 in Special Forces. The Navy contributes over 6,000 personnel, and the Air Force another 10,000. The Marine Corps weighs in at just under 175,000. The important characteristics of this collective force, however, are not found in organization charts or end strength. Notable differences include expensive, scarce, and specialized equipment, the selection and training of individuals, the leader-to-led ratio in units, mission area, and headquarters capacities.

## *efforts to achieve jointness since 1947 have been about solving the problems caused by the original sin of division by element*

neglected as the Navy returned its focus to Soviet blue-water capabilities after Vietnam.

The preponderance of forces currently assigned to USSOCOM is composed of orphaned branches within the Services (for example, the Army branches of Special Forces, civil affairs, and psychological operations). Much of the designation of Special Operations Forces was about providing career progression, equipment acquisition authority, and budget protection for military specialties not central to the major-war Services’ conceptions of war. The forces designated as SOF were not selected to constitute a coherent force for a war that had yet to be imagined. They were valuable, but they were hardly sized and shaped for today’s larger-scale operations.

It is often claimed that SOF epitomizes jointness and that the rest of the Armed Forces should follow suit. There are, however, observable rifts within SOF: some lie along Service lines and others between levels of eliteness. Moreover, there is no common entry point for Special Operators.

Marines, in contrast, all undergo the same initial training to become Marines before learning a branch specialty. Every Marine officer leaves the Basic School understanding the role of commander of a rifle platoon, and in boot camp and infantry training every enlisted Marine learns the role of rifleman in that same platoon. The other Services are trusted to teach the specialized skills of artillery, armor, and aviation, but they are not trusted to build Marines.

USSOCOM has a separate budget line and Service-like acquisition authority but

short-duration strikes and other small-scale offensives to seize, destroy, damage, exploit, or recover high-value targets. Foreign internal defense and unconventional warfare are missions to train and advise forces to assist friendly governments or oppose unfriendly governments. Special reconnaissance puts eyes on targets, often for extended periods. Sophisticated methods of ingress and egress are common. SOF also conducts combat search and rescue, noncombatant evacuation, and hostage rescue. Many special operations missions are conducted in denied, politically sensitive, or hostile areas. They are often executed with extreme tactical precision designed to produce effects at the operational or strategic level of war.

Marine forces are employed as Marine Air-Ground Task Forces (MAGTFs) built around battalion-, regiment-, or division-sized ground elements. The Marine Expeditionary Unit, Special Operations Capable, is deployed forward afloat and is prepared for many of the same taskings as SOF. Missions include noncombatant evacuation operations, tactical recovery of aircraft and personnel, hostage rescue, and a variety of direct actions. The Marine Expeditionary Brigade brings forcible entry capability, including amphibious assault, and the basis upon which to build a Marine Expeditionary Force in a process called *compositing*.

In addition to rifle battalions, the Marine Corps brings armor, artillery, engineers, amphibious assault battalions, and strike and transport aircraft. The larger MAGTFs can conduct a wide range of

Marines from 11<sup>th</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) train with M203 grenade launchers, Kuwait



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

▲ Download as wallpaper at [ndupress.ndu.edu](http://ndupress.ndu.edu)

Background: **Special Forces Soldiers with Afghan forces track the Taliban and al Qaeda**

Fleet Combat Camera Group, Pacific (David A. Levy)

MH-47E helicopter used by Army Special Operations Aviation Regiment



100th Communications Squadron (Franklin J. Perkins)

MH-53 Pave Low IV used in Air Force Special Operations search and recovery and escape and evasion training



Navy SEALs during combat swimmer training dive



*Ranger battalions, SEAL teams, and Marine Corps battalions and squadrons make solid starting points for future SOF battalions*

Ranger battalions, SEAL teams, and Marine Corps battalions and squadrons make solid starting points for future SOF battalions. But if a coherent whole

is to be achieved by assembling the pieces and transforming the collection, it is worth reviewing the pieces.

*Army.* The Ranger Regiment is composed of three battalions. Rangers continue to train for airport seizure and, like much of SOF, are focused on direct action. Unlike the rest of SOF, they are capable of company- and battalion-sized operations. The lower Ranger ranks are volunteers from Army airborne units who enter the Ranger Regiment. The typical volunteer is a young man on his first enlistment. He undergoes the 3-week Ranger Indoctrination Program. After 6 to 12 months, he may meet the requirements to attend Ranger School. All selectees are jump-qualified and some are combat swimmers. Most Rangers return to the general population after a 3-year assignment.

Ranger School lasts 10 weeks. Most graduates return to their units in the conventional

forces, never to serve in a Ranger unit. The purpose and focus of the school is to develop individual leadership skills that apply throughout the Army, not just in Ranger units. All officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) who serve in Ranger units, however, have completed Ranger School. Ranger companies are commonly commanded by majors who have already commanded a company in the conventional force as captains. Rigorously trained young Soldiers led by experienced noncommissioned and commissioned officers constitute a potent formula employed by Rangers and SEALs.

Special Forces (SF) are organized into five Active duty groups, each oriented on a specific region. Two more groups are in the Reserve. The regional orientation allows for concentration on language and culture. Each 1,300-man group has 3 battalions of 3 companies that hold 6 of the standard building blocks of Special Forces, the 12-man operational detachment (A-team). Multiple A-teams can be collected under larger operational detachments B and even C. The A-team conducts foreign internal defense and unconventional warfare. Moreover, a single A-team can train and advise a battalion of

several hundred indigenous forces. Green Berets are also capable of direct action and special reconnaissance.

Special Forces—unlike SEALs, Rangers, and Marines—build exclusively on experienced NCOs. The unique capability provided by SF is a product of difficult selection criteria, rigorous training, and, above all, accumulated experience and maturity. The A-team is generally commanded by a captain seconded by a warrant officer.

Special Forces training lasts well beyond a year. Candidates are subjected to a 3-week assessment of their emotional, psychological, physical, and leadership qualities. Those selected attend the three-phased qualification course. The first phase trains small-unit tactics common to all SF. The second trains troops in one of four occupational specialties, ranging from 13 to 45 weeks. The four specialties are weapons, engineer, medical, and communications. The final phase combines specialists into an A-team for unit training.

The Army provides USSOCOM with a Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR) of highly modified light, utility, and transport helicopters organized in four battalions. They are capable of aerial refueling and enhanced with sophisticated electronics to enable low-altitude infiltration and exfiltration. Army aviation, including SOAR, does have an important characteristic that distinguishes it from Marine Corps aviation. Most Army pilots are warrant officers who accumulate many years in the cockpit. The Marine Corps relies on commissioned officers who rotate through flight, staff, and command billets, diluting their technical proficiency. The new SOF should retain the

Army aviation model, including warrant officers. Proficiency is more important than promotion potential.

*Navy.* Although 6 members constitute a team, the basic building block of naval special warfare forces is the 16-man SEAL platoon. Special boat units provide recognizable pieces of the otherwise neglected brown-water navy and more specialized vehicles that furnish waterborne ingress and egress for SEALs. All SEALs are combat swimmers and capable of hydrographic reconnaissance and underwater demolition, but each is focused on the direct action mission.

Today's SEAL is an aggressive young enlisted man, rigorously selected, highly trained, and competently led by more experienced NCOs and officers than are found in similarly sized units in the conventional force. All attend Navy basic training before entering the Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL training program. The initial 8-week training is followed by 7 weeks that produce a combat swimmer, then 10 weeks of land warfare instruction. Officers attend an additional 4 weeks but command only after several years in service. All attend the 3-week Army jump school, and some go to the 11-month Army medical training program. Real proficiency is gained in an 18-month work-up period as a unit.

*Air Force.* Specialized rotary-wing and fixed-wing capabilities are provided to USSOCOM by the Air Force. These capabilities were almost transferred to the Army in the 1980s as a way to resolve the cultural, technical, and procedural interoperability problems that remain today.

The MH-53, a heavily modified version of the CH-53 helicopter, was originally developed to search for and rescue pilots from hostile territory. But the same equipment and crews can provide infiltration and exfiltration of small units over long distances, in adverse weather, and at night. Specialized variants of the C-130 provide close air support, aerial refueling, electronic warfare, and psychological operations capabilities. This scarce equipment is often misused for mundane purposes because SOF lack conventional aircraft. Aircrew training is oriented on flight operations. Training for the MH-53 crew lasts 8 months, but only after crewmembers have mastered conventional aircraft operations. The specialized equipment and highly trained aircrews do not exist elsewhere in the U.S. force structure, but the

basic CH-53 and C-130 are common in the Marine Corps inventory.

In addition to flight operations personnel, the Air Force provides some 400 personnel for combat search and rescue and for combat air control. Selection criteria are similar to those found across Special Operations Forces, and training is long and arduous. Training for both groups begins with 10 to 12 weeks of physical conditioning, followed by 4 to 5 weeks as combat divers, the 3-week Army jump school, and 4 weeks of freefall parachuting. Subsequent to the common training, combat air controllers undergo 28 weeks of basic and combat air control training, while pararescue jumpers complete 32 weeks of medical training.

*Marine Corps.* Three Fleet Marine Forces are administrative headquarters that house the legally required minimum of three divisions and their air and support forces, although those levels are not maintained. If filled, each division provides nine rifle battalions under three regimental headquarters and a regiment of artillery battalions.

A Fleet Marine Force also provides one-of-a-kind battalions, including tank, amphibious assault, light armored infantry, reconnaissance, engineer, intelligence, communications, and others. Its Navy partner

operations capable. The Marine civil affairs groups were not designated as SOF and were not assigned to USSOCOM. As part of a pilot program begun in 2003, Marine Corps Special Operations Command Detachment One with 85 Marines was established under the command of USSOCOM and deployed in Iraq in 2004. Building on this experience, in 2005 it was decided to create Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command as a permanent component of USSOCOM.

Marine Force Reconnaissance (Force Recon), one company per Fleet Marine Force, runs counter to the Corps' reliance on first-term enlistments, building instead on more experienced NCOs. They are jump-qualified combat swimmers, capable of hydrographic reconnaissance, surveillance, and direct action. Force Recon also runs counter to the Corps' resistance to stratification, and, as a result, the Corps has generally discouraged permanent assignment to the unit, requiring return to the general population after a 5-year stint. The basic unit is a team of three to five NCOs with a radio operator and a staff sergeant in charge. Four or five teams comprise a platoon that includes a Navy corpsman and is led by a captain. Six platoons comprise a company commanded by a lieutenant colonel. In addition, each Fleet Marine Force provides

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brings medical and dental battalions, strategic mobility, all the power projection capability entailed, and a capacity for major acquisitions.

In contrast to the other Services, the Marine Corps is known to push responsibility as far down as possible and employs a sergeant to lead a squad of three fireteams, while an infantry unit in the conventional Army employs a staff sergeant to lead a squad of two fireteams. The enlisted-to-officer ratio in the Corps is nine to one, while ratios for the major-war, equipment-centric Services are four or five to one.

The Marine Corps resists an elite *within* the elite. After World War II, the Corps gave up its parachute and raider battalions, for example, and later avoided assignment of its special capabilities to USSOCOM. It insists that any Marine rifle battalion, given specialized training, can become special

an Air-Naval Gunfire Liaison Company with the ability to direct airstrikes, naval gunfire, and artillery, often independent of a larger ground force.

Training for Force Recon is among the longest in the Armed Forces. All candidates are NCOs. After selection, Force Recon Marines complete 6 months of individual skills training, including small unit infantry tactics, jump school, combat diving school, and survival, evasion, resistance, and escape (SERE) school. Advanced training includes an 8-week version of Ranger School, the Army's mountain leader's course, pathfinder's course, freefall parachuting, medical skills training, and more. The 6-month unit training is broken into 7 packages familiar to Green Berets, SEALs, and Air Force combat air controllers. Force Recon units then join a Marine Expeditionary Unit for a 6-month work-up

leading to the special operations–capable designation, and then deploy for a 6-month float.

Flight crews from the Army and Air Force do not share a common culture with SOF on the ground. They do share a 17-day SERE school. In contrast, all Marine aircrews attend the same entry training as their infantry counterparts. Marine pilots frequently return to their roots on the ground, serving in MAGTFs of all sizes.

### Destination Points

Taking the next step toward a SOF service requires changes to administrative and operational command structures in the field. It also calls for unified training and education. The objective is a *coherent force*, with a common culture for the wars of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*Administrative Command.* Force organization for today's social conflicts requires alignment with people, cultures, and languages rather than with oceans and fleets. The land-region orientation used by Special Forces is more appropriate than the maritime orientation employed by the Fleet Marine Force. While the law specifies a minimum of three Marine divisions, it does not specify their composition. The current three divisions can be divided into five or more with fewer battalions. All forces from all Services assigned to USSOCOM should be organized according to the Army SF regional model.

The internals of the regional special operations group might be organized along the lines of the old Fleet Marine Force with subordinate administrative commands, but there should be no fixed composition. Marine rifle, tank, light armored infantry, amphibious assault, and artillery units, along with Ranger, SF, and SEAL units, would be under a single subordinate administrative command. Army, Air Force, and Marine rotary- and fixed-wing assets would be merged under a single command, replacing the current administrative commands of the Services. Support forces—including communications, intelligence, medical, motor transport, and special boat units—would be included in a third administrative command.

One or more rifle battalions would be manned, trained, and designated as Ranger units. There would be no need for both SEALs and Force Recon. Scarce SOF aircraft would not be used where conventional aircraft would suffice. Assigned forces would live and train together as an integrated land, sea,

and air force. Over time, units would be designed not because that is the way the Army, Navy, Marines, or Air Force conceived them, but because the Special Operations Corps shaped them for its own needs. Ranger School would continue to be prerequisite to Ranger unit assignment and to produce leaders throughout the force.

A single service requires a single force development process. The functions and organizations of the Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Marine Corps System Development Command, USSOCOM's equivalents, and the equivalents of the USSOCOM Service component commands would be brought together. The Navy would provide support for major acquisitions (for example, the V-22 Osprey and its variants) as it currently does for the Marine Corps and naval special warfare. Communication interoperability, among other things, would be simplified across ground, rotary-wing, fixed-wing, and combat support systems.

*Operational Command.* A coherent force must be capable of scaling up and down according to the demands of the mission space—scale not only in numbers but also in the ability to plan and command a larger force, potentially including assigned conventional forces. Command of a larger force implies the ability to establish an operational headquarters in a failed state. To achieve larger-scale operations today, it is common to subordinate SOF to conventional forces where they are generally misused or underutilized. Adding more SEAL platoons and A-teams would not change that.

The Marine Corps brings the ability to command a wider range of air-ground forces than SOF can. Today's joint special operations task force (JSOTF) is a component to a combatant command but doubles as a joint task force headquarters. Education and training, however, are not commensurate with the requirement to command large forces in sustained operations. Command in small wars is relatively flat, relying on widely distributed small units that are given only broad mission guidance. Marines and SOF are more comfortable with this model than are the major-war Services.

Today's MAGTF headquarters are sized and configured to command a combined arms team based on a battalion, regiment, division, or larger ground force. The

U.S. Army (Walt Sokalski, Jr.)



**GEN Bryan D. Brown, USA, Commander, USSOCOM, listens to Vice President Cheney during International Special Forces Week**

appropriate special operations task force (SOTF) headquarters may appear similar to a MAGTF or JSOTF but be neither. It might be as small as an operational detachment B or C designed to command operational detachments. But a larger SOTF must be prepared to command conventional forces if assigned. Regardless of size, it should be stood up as a joint task force to benefit from the legal authorities that obtain. Existing MAGTF headquarters should be converted to that purpose.

To prevent misuse or underutilization of SOF in the near term, senior Army SOF officers must remain in charge at the higher headquarters. Considerable time will pass before the new common core produces senior leadership with the right education, training, and experience.

*Training and Education.* Coherence requires a career-long training and education system. USSOCOM and the Marine Corps both have school systems that could be merged into a coherent whole. The reality within SOF is that specialization produces different types and degrees of elitism. The new SOF service will have to continue specialization and stratification; but throughout their careers, SOF troops will return to an educational touchstone and circulate through the various organizations, gaining experience and reducing the friction at the seams of stratification. To assure a common culture within SOF, a single entry point is required for both privates and second lieutenants.

Establishing a common entry point is the easy part. The initial training for enlisted personnel would resemble the 4-month Marine Corps bootcamp and the follow-on infantry training. The Marine Corps' 6-month Basic School would serve as a starting

55<sup>th</sup> Signal Company (Kevin P. Bell)

Army Special Forces, 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division, and members of Northern Alliance during search of caves and bunkers in Afghanistan

*all new personnel would be Marine-qualified at the outset*

point for all officers. Warrant officers would be drawn from the enlisted pool. Both enlisted and officer entry programs would be adapted over time to meet the common needs of the Special Operations Corps. The 3-week jump school would be standard. By this mechanism, all new personnel would be Marine-qualified at the outset.

The Services would continue to provide military occupational skills training (for example, initial flight, artillery, armor, and medical). Within the first year, all new entrants to certain training programs would first be Marine-qualified. Within 2 or 3 years, all flight crew candidates for rotary- and fixed-wing units would be Marine-qualified and would have passed through major-war Services' training programs before advancing to training on the specialized aircraft and missions of SOF.

A single-service approach would allow resolution of different standards and training programs. The Army and Marine Corps both maintain training programs for category I snipers while SEALs use a different standard. Each Service operates its own medical training. The Navy has specialized training for its corpsmen to operate within the Fleet Marine Force, for Force Recon, and for Navy special warfare. The Army operates its own program for Green Berets and the Air Force for its pararescue jumpers. The Navy could clearly accommodate the

medical training requirements for the Special Operations Corps.

The number of candidates completing initial "imprinting" must be both small enough to be affordable and large enough eventually to produce a pool of candidates to fill senior leadership positions, including Special Forces. To address this dilemma, some new accessions should have primary and secondary Service affiliations. To earn Marine qualification, some new accessions of the Services would attend Marine initial training and then return to their primary Services. Those with Marine qualification could serve in the conventional force in scout, reconnaissance, and cavalry units and as liaison to SOF units. They would return to SOF for intermediate and advanced training and education throughout their careers. To meet surge requirements, they could be reassigned from their primary Services to SOF. Most importantly, they would greatly expand the candidate pool for senior service.

There is considerable experience in current SOF that cannot be replaced for a decade or more. None of that experience need be lost. All currently designated Special Operators should remain in place until natural replacement works through the system. Preserving the Army capability is critical because it is the slowest to transform due to the years of experience required for entry, lengthy training and education, and

duration of service after qualification. To prevent misuse or underutilization of Special Forces in the near term, senior Army SOF officers must remain in charge at the higher headquarters. Considerable time will pass before the new common core produces senior leadership with the right education, training, and experience.

In 1942, the Royal Marines formed commandos—specialized battalion-sized units—in direct competition with the British army commandos that were later disbanded. A similar process should begin in the United States to create a single service focused on small wars. Moreover, the new Special Operations Corps could help reestablish the strong relationship that once existed between the Department of State and the naval services. The State Department must be restored to its dominant role in foreign policy; it is the appropriate agency to orchestrate all the instruments of national power that are critical in small wars.

It is easy to imagine objections to the above proposals. The major-war Services will cry foul at the loss of their crown jewels, but their objections cannot be taken seriously after the consistent pattern of neglect that eventually forced congressional intervention. Arguments for the Nation's security needs must prevail over the emotional and parochial. **JFQ**