



Navy SEALs conduct High Altitude Low Opening airborne operation in support of exercise Arctic Edge 2022, in Deadhorse, Alaska, March 4, 2022 (U.S. Navy)

America's Special Operations Problem

By R.D. Hooker, Jr.

Since the failure of the Iran hostage rescue mission in 1980, U.S. special operations forces (SOF) have come into their own as the most high-profile community in

the Armed Forces. Originally quite small and highly selective, they have exploded in size, taking center stage in the war on terror. Well-resourced and able to draw on the best of the military's talent pool, SOF are today the face of the U.S. military. The iconic muddy trooper of yesteryear has been replaced by a bearded, heavily tattooed commando, wearing a baseball cap backward and festooned with exotic kit.

Most commentary about SOF is admiring, if not adulatory. But there is more to the story.

Undeniably, SOF have a key role to play in national security. In the unique circumstances of the post-9/11 era, they saw dramatic growth, more than doubling in size.¹ A fourth battalion was added to each Special Forces group, and a Special Troops Battalion and Military Intelligence battalion was added to the

Colonel R.D. Hooker, Jr., USA (Ret.), Ph.D., is a Nonresident Senior Fellow in the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security Transatlantic Security Initiative at the Atlantic Council.

75th Ranger Regiment, which also added a fourth rifle company and a support company to each battalion. The Air Force Special Operations community today includes more SOF wings than USAF bomber wings and more aircraft and Airmen than many nations, while the Navy Special Warfare Community now boasts around 4,000 SEALs, ten times as many as at the height of the Cold War. Even the Marine Corps, famously resistant to such specialization, was forced to stand up an entire “Raider” regiment, whose mission set closely resembles that of the Army’s 75th Ranger Regiment. Today, the U.S. Special Operations community is larger than the entire German army.² In 2021, U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM)’s budget request was larger than the entire defense budget of Poland, one of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s largest and strongest militaries—although much of SOF funding is provided by the Services themselves or drawn from overseas contingency funds.³

Following the end of large-scale operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and the winding down of the campaign to counter the so-called Islamic State, this growth has continued, even as the conventional force has been reduced. Indeed, as these conflicts ended, USSOCOM requested further increases. As SOF are optimized for the low end of the conflict spectrum, being very light and limited in firepower, such a heavy investment is at odds with the National Security, National Defense, and National Military strategies, which explicitly prioritize Great Power and near-peer competition, not counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, unconventional warfare, or security assistance.

This growth is not confined to operational units. Today, USSOCOM is far larger than the Army staff, which oversees a force that is seven times larger.⁴ Today, Army Special Forces consists of five Active-component groups and one training group, each commanded by a colonel—and 19 generals. The Navy Special Warfare community, with fewer than 10,000 Sailors, boasts 13 admirals. The push to super-empower the SOF community is seen clearly in recent

efforts to elevate the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict to Service secretary status.⁵ This massive overhead does not encourage agility and rapidity of thought and action. Rather, it equips U.S. SOF to fight and win in the inter-Service, intergovernmental scramble for funding and authorities.

The expansion of SOF and their prioritization since 9/11 have also led to overlap and redundancy, blurring the distinctions between them. For example, Army Special Forces (“white SOF”) were founded and organized principally to train and lead indigenous forces in unconventional warfare. The community fields a remarkable number—378—of 12-man A detachments (Active- and Reserve-component), each capable of training and leading a battalion of indigenous fighters. Nevertheless, Army Special Forces largely neglected that mission during the war on terror (except for Iraqi and Afghan commandos) in favor of direct action, also the favored mission for Army Rangers, Navy SEALs, Marine Raiders, and Army and Navy special mission units.⁶ Each likes to stress its “unique” capability, but for most of the war on terror, each was used more or less interchangeably as raid forces on land—not to train and advise and not in maritime environments.

This explosive growth comes at a steep price. First, the drain on the conventional force is extraordinary but underreported. Particularly in the Army, conventional units are regularly stripped of quality young leaders for service in the Rangers and Special Forces. An example of its effect is seen in the case of a rifle platoon from the 82nd Airborne Division’s Ready Brigade, which deployed “no-notice” to Kuwait in early January 2020 following the death of Qassim Soleimani with none of the E-6 squad leaders authorized. (The 82nd is supposedly maintained at the highest readiness of any Army division.) The same unit experienced a turnover of four platoon leaders in a single platoon in one calendar year, as junior officers departed for the SOF community.⁷ Increasingly, service in the Rangers is

seen as essential for career progression by Army infantry leaders, as battalion command positions are increasingly monopolized by Ranger alumni.

This drain of quality leaders from the conventional force and into SOF had been flagged as a serious concern as far back as World War II, when many such units were formed. On this point Field Marshal William Slim, arguably the most successful British commander in that war, is worth quoting: “These formations, trained, equipped, and mentally adjusted for one kind of operation only, were wasteful. They did not give, militarily, a worthwhile return for the resources in men, material, and time that they absorbed.”⁸ Moreover, Slim stated:

The result of these methods was undoubtedly to lower the quality of the rest of the Army, especially of the infantry, not only by skimming the cream off it, but by encouraging the idea that certain of the normal operations of war were so difficult that only specially equipped corps d’elite could be expected to undertake them. Armies do not win wars by means of a few bodies of supersoldiers but by the average quality of their standard units.⁹

Paradoxically, though SOF units are expected to conduct operations with the highest levels of discipline and discretion, in fact a disproportionate number of the most egregious mishaps in the war on terror befell them. These include a Special Forces raid near Hazar Qadam in Afghanistan in January 2002 that resulted in 16 civilian deaths,¹⁰ an errant AC-130 attack on friendly forces during Operation *Anaconda* in March 2002 that killed or wounded more than a dozen U.S. and Afghan soldiers,¹¹ and the “Roberts Ridge” disaster in the same battle, resulting in the loss of an MH-47 Chinook and the death of seven U.S. special operations troops.¹² The Pat Tillman fratricide imbroglio in 2004 needs no elaboration; its echoes continue today.¹³ In 2005, an SOF element entered a village outside Baghdad at night and arrested Mohsen Abdul-Hamid and his sons. Hamid was head of Iraq’s largest Sunni Arab political party and former president of the U.S.-backed

Iraqi Governing Council.¹⁴ His arrest provoked a storm of criticism, landing on the front page of the *Washington Post*. A similar SOF operation mistakenly detained the son of Abdul Aziz Hakim, head of Iraq's strongest Shia party in 2007 and a recent visitor to the Oval Office, provoking another political controversy.¹⁵

There are many other examples. Operation *Red Wings* in 2005 resulted in the death of 19 special operations personnel and the loss of another Chinook;¹⁶ the March 2007 incident in Shinwar District in Afghanistan involved the death or injury of dozens of civilians; an AC-130 strike in Azizabad, Pakistan, in August 2008, killed a reported 91 civilians;¹⁷ the August 2011 Chinook shootdown in the Tangi Valley in Afghanistan killed 30 U.S. Servicemembers, including 15 Navy SEALs;¹⁸ the November 2011 attack near Salala, inside Pakistan, killed 26 Pakistani soldiers, wounded 11, and caused a crisis in diplomatic relations;¹⁹ and the October 2015 AC-130 strike on a Médecins sans Frontières hospital in Kunduz killed 42 civilians and wounded more than 30.²⁰

A particularly painful incident occurred in February 2010 near Gardez in Afghanistan, when Navy SEALs entered a compound in search of a high-value target. The target was absent, but the occupant—a local and friendly official—was killed, along with his brother, two other men, and three women, two pregnant. At the time, the raiders claimed that the women had been killed before their arrival in an honor killing—a deliberate falsehood that later collapsed under investigation.²¹ In recent years, allegations of war crimes, drug use, and even homicide have dogged the elite SEAL community.²² Despite their branding as the “Quiet Professionals,” SOF have figured prominently in many military disasters and scandals since 9/11.²³ Under congressional pressure, and citing “incidents of misconduct and unethical behavior [that] threatened public trust,” the USSOCOM commander accordingly directed a comprehensive review of the community in 2019.²⁴ That review uncovered “not only potential cracks in the SOF foundations at the individual and team level, but also through the chain of command,

specifically in the core tenets of leadership, discipline and accountability.”

A common explanation for these behaviors is an excessively high operations tempo, leading to burnout. In fact, for most of the war on terror, Tier 1 special mission units typically deployed for only 3 months at a time, while others, such as Army Special Forces, served 6-month tours. Conventional units during this period served repetitive 12- (and in some cases 15-) month tours. For many years, the conventional force maintained a 1:1 ratio between time in garrison and time deployed, while the SOF community was able to maintain a more sustainable 2:1 ratio featuring much shorter tours. Operations tempo should not be ignored, but it obscures deeper and more compelling factors.

An obvious issue is a drop in quality. The expansion of SOF since 9/11 has inevitably diluted the force by increasing the demand for more special operations candidates, creating pressure for lowered standards and driving commanders at times to overlook behaviors that previously demanded elimination.²⁵ A corollary is that commissioned officers often have less authority in SOF units than in the conventional force.²⁶ Unlike enlisted leaders, they tend to come and go in SOF assignments, rotating between operational and staff postings. Often, they must acquiesce to the informal leadership of senior enlisted leaders who have far longer tenure and greater actual influence. (Special operations units are characterized by the presence of very senior enlisted leaders [E8 and E9] at very low levels.) Officers who insist on strict standards of accountability and conduct are not always welcome and may be removed and reassigned, as happened to future USSOCOM commander Admiral William McRaven earlier in his SEAL career. Lieutenants and captains in the 75th Ranger Regiment or Army Special Forces who do not conform to informal enlisted norms similarly risk reassignment.

Another contributing factor is the tendency to wall off or stovepipe SOF. SOF operations are typically poorly coordinated with conventional battlespace owners—a chronic problem exacerbated

by the tendency to employ SOF outside of the normal chain of command. Even in extremis, conventional units cannot expect assistance from nearby SOF assets such as the AC-130 gunship or uncrewed aerial vehicles, as seen in the epic battles at Wanat, COP Keating, and the Ganjgal in Afghanistan. A glaring example was seen in both Iraq and Afghanistan, where special mission units (“black SOF”) were not task-organized under theater joint force commanders but instead reported to the combatant commander in Tampa. (By doctrine, theater special operations commands reported to U.S. Central Command in Tampa, not to theater joint force commanders such as the International Security Assistance Force commander in Afghanistan or Multi-National Force–I in Iraq.²⁷) Given the lack of tactical focus at such high levels, visibility and supervision of daily SOF operations were not realistic.

This issue played out in theater and campaign strategy. For years, the SOF community pursued “raiding” strategies in Iraq and Afghanistan, ostensibly aimed at destroying terrorist and insurgent networks through continuous night raids.²⁸ Though many people were killed, enemy networks showed remarkable resilience, while the animosity engendered by constant violence in local communities worked against campaign objectives by intensifying local hatreds.²⁹ Too often, the innocent were targeted while the enemy escaped. The result was independent operations that often worked *against* campaign objectives by alienating the very populations the coalition sought to protect and win over. Conventional commanders were often unaware that raids and other special operations were taking place in their areas, although they were required by default to deal with the painful aftermath. Protected by a large special operations headquarters in theater and the even larger USSOCOM, the special operations community operated with freedom of action throughout the war on terror.

These behaviors comport with an iron rule of bureaucratic politics; namely, to maximize one's own organization's autonomy and share of resources. SOF's high degree of independence was



Army Green Berets assigned to 1st Battalion, 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne), observe target for Navy Sikorsky HH-60 helicopter with Helicopter Sea Combat Squadron 85 during close air support training, Okinawa, Japan, May 13, 2021 (U.S. Army/Caleb Woodburn)

compounded by short tours, leading to a lack of the situational awareness that comes only from a sustained presence in operations. Exemption from Service regulations and standards of conduct accentuated the intentional contrast between the SOF and conventional communities, causing friction and generating distrust. These trends were complicated by a lack of interoperability with conventional forces, which generally do not share secure communications with SOF units. These units almost never train with conventional counterparts in peacetime, do not collocate their headquarters in wartime, and, as a rule, do not routinely exchange intelligence.

As the war on terror waned, Great Power competition returned to the forefront, and the SOF community began to reorient. There is surely an important place for special operations at the high end of the spectrum of conflict, as the magnificent performance of Ukrainian SOF in the recent Russian invasion has demonstrated.³⁰ The move to refocus SOF is both necessary and appropriate, and, if they are properly integrated with theater and campaign plans, SOF can contribute in major ways to campaign success.

But the United States does not win wars with commandos. While versatile and high-quality, lightly armed SOF formations cannot take and hold ground and do

not, whatever their proponents may say, deliver decisive strategic results. Neither are they true economy-of-force assets; as we have seen, they come at a price in funding and manpower that does not square with their actual contributions to campaign success. Soldier for soldier, they are far more expensive to recruit, train, equip, and retain. Perhaps most important, their operations are often poorly coordinated, even as they drain an inordinate amount of leadership talent and quality from the conventional force. These disabilities must be addressed as the joint force prepares to fight and win against Great Powers.

Fortunately, solutions to these problems are readily at hand. When



Army Ranger with 2nd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, aims rifle during Military Operations in Urban Terrain training, Marine Corps Training Area Bellows, Marine Corps Base Hawaii, June 10, 2022 (U.S. Marine Corps/Brandon Aultman)

right-sized, properly supervised, and appropriately integrated into joint operations, SOF can better fulfill their intended roles. This suggests a sharp reduction in size, to pre-9/11 numbers, beginning with cuts to the excessively large staffs. SOF units, like all others, must be subordinated to designated joint force commanders in the theater of operations and not allowed to operate autonomously. Detailed coordination with battlespace owners, fused intelligence, interoperable communications, and a genuine and shared commitment to joint and combined operations are the ideal. Above all, a return to a disciplined and ethical foundation is crucial. The Quiet Professional was a worthy sobriquet. It can be again.

This review may provoke commentary and even controversy, but the discussion needs to take place. From modest beginnings, the SOF community has become a juggernaut, operating largely independently and consuming resources disproportionate to its strategic contributions. Accordingly, national leaders should rigorously assess current investments in SOF and rationalize these decisions against other important priorities. There is an important, and indeed essential, place for SOF in the national military establishment that must be preserved. But strategic balance must ever be the goal. Today, that means a streamlined SOF, less bloated and more responsive to joint force commanders and better integrated with the entire joint force. JFQ

Notes

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² Walter Haynes, “The Hidden Costs of Strategy by Special Operations,” *War on the Rocks*, April 17, 2019, available at <<https://warontherocks.com/2019/04/the-hidden-costs-of-strategy-by-special-operations/>>.

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⁵ “ASD (SO/LIC) will continue to report directly to the Secretary of Defense in exercising authority, direction, and control of special operations—peculiar administrative matters . . . ensuring that the ASD (SO/LIC) has a seat at the table alongside the Secretaries of the Military Departments in key decision forums, such as . . . Service Secretary meetings, the Deputy’s Management Action Group, and the Joint Requirements Oversight Council.” Statement of Christopher P. Maier, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, Testimony Before the Subcommittee on Defense, House Committee on Appropriations, 117th Cong., 2nd sess., April 7, 2022, available at <<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/AP/AP02/20220407/114577/HHRG-117-AP02-Wstate-MaierC-20220407.pdf>>.

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⁷ Interview with an 82nd Airborne Division company grade officer participating in the operation described. As a battalion commander in the 82nd Airborne Division, the interviewee experienced the loss of 16 noncommissioned officers to Special Forces in a single year, a crippling blow to unit cohesion and performance.

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¹⁹ “Pakistan Outrage After ‘NATO Attack Kills Soldiers,’” BBC, November 26, 2011, available at <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-15901363>>.

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²³ Dave Phillips, “Pentagon Begins Independent Inquiry Into Special Ops and War Crimes,” *New York Times*, January 28, 2021.

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