

# Special Operations Forces in Peacetime



High altitude jump competition, Airlift Rodeo '98.

1<sup>st</sup> Combat Camera Squadron (Jeffrey Allen)

By JOHN M. COLLINS

**S**pecial Operations Forces (SOF) help shape the international security environment, prepare for an uncertain future, and respond with precision in a range of potential crises. Unique training and skills enable them to operate in situations where conventional units cannot be used for political or military reasons. Moreover, they place a priority on applying finesse rather than brute force and possess overt, covert, and clandestine capabilities not found elsewhere within the Armed Forces.<sup>1</sup> No other formations are permanently organized, equipped, and trained for foreign internal defense, unconventional warfare, counterterrorism, and other highly sensitive missions. In addition, SOF have

call on unparalleled interagency and international expertise. Their skills offer unique, cost-effective, low-profile, and direct as well as indirect measures that enhance international stability, inhibit the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), combat terrorism, and check illicit drug trafficking in peacetime.

Familiarity with their areas of responsibility (AORs) and their ability to work closely with foreign military and other institutions give SOF an advantage over conventional forces in situations that demand cultural awareness. Army Special Forces and Psychological Operations (PSYOP) and Civil Affairs (CA) specialists, along with some Navy and Air Force personnel, are regionally oriented. Knowledge of social, political, and economic factors, coupled with language fluency, enables them to establish relationships with foreign military and civilian personnel.

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31st Marine Expeditionary Unit (Blent C. Powell)

Marines patrolling during Valiant Usher 98-1 in Australia.

### Peacetime Challenges

Foreign internal defense operations counter the effects of poverty, ignorance, lawlessness, and other ills that undermine the security of a nation. Success in such situations, which commonly takes years to achieve, not only promotes peace and stability but progressively reduces reliance on the United States. Multifaceted SOF units, which keep abreast of developments in their respective areas of interest, are best suited to perform such missions.

Several advantages are evident. Small, self-reliant SOF units function effectively in austere circumstances without an extensive infrastructure. In pursuit of U.S. interests, PSYOP campaigns mold public opinion, and civic action programs aid the local citizenry as evidenced in Haiti, where fewer than 1,200 SOCOM personnel became the de facto government. Such nontraditional efforts actually hone SOF skills, whereas conventional combat formations gradually lose their edge when assigned similar missions.

The military is often the single most influential institution in developing countries, even in nominal democracies. Foreign armed forces that can deter or defeat external and internal threats without violating international law or resorting to repression serve U.S. interests by maintaining stability, international peace, and human rights.

### SOF teams can attack confirmed WMD targets when missile or air strikes are inappropriate

### The WMD Threat

Acquisition of a relatively few weapons of mass destruction with reliable delivery systems could convert a small, aggressive state into a regional power overnight. Suitcase-size bombs could immeasurably intensify the leverage of terrorists and drug cartels. President Clinton warned that “the proliferation of nuclear, biological, and chemical [NBC] weapons . . . constitutes an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States” and declared “a national emergency to deal with that threat,” which persists despite arms control agreements and export controls.<sup>2</sup>

Detailed intelligence—which is essential for counterproliferation policies, plans, programs, and operations—is hard to obtain because cover, concealment, dispersal, and deception are used to mask WMD activity at each stage from research and development through production, storage, and deployment. Clever ploys may fool spies-in-the-sky as the Indian nuclear testing did in May 1998. Dual-use technology, moreover, makes it difficult for distant sensors to distinguish between illicit and legitimate projects. Not every nuclear reactor, for example, yields weapons grade plutonium. Facilities that could manufacture biological agents resemble plants that produce vaccines. Modern pharmaceutical plants commonly incorporate waste disposal and safety procedures once associated only with chemical warfare facilities.

Under favorable circumstances, SOF can confirm evidence gathered by other means and fill in the blanks that overhead assets may overlook. This can include participation in interagency and international intelligence collection programs to locate, identify, and follow NBC ingredients and weapons aboard ships and aircraft en route to and from a probable proliferator. As directed, SOF could collect water and soil samples in the vicinity of suspicious installations to detect the presence of the radioactive residues which uranium enrichment and plutonium extraction processes deposit. Clandestine teams can probe for methylphosphonate fingerprints that denote nerve gas production or augment officially sanctioned searches such as that conducted by the United Nations in Iraq.

### Black Arts

Sabotage involves surreptitious operations to damage or destroy enemy supplies, facilities, and infrastructure, including matériel associated with WMD. SOF teams experienced in the use of demolitions, incendiary devices, and other means can attack confirmed WMD targets when missile or conventional air strikes are inappropriate.



SEAL conducting training in the Caribbean.

U.S. Navy (Andy McKaskle)

Although no law or statute prohibits abduction, such actions rank among the most delicate of all clandestine operations.<sup>3</sup> Manuel Noriega, the former Panamanian leader, led special mission units (SMUs) on a chase during Operation Just Cause, and languid U.N. decisionmaking similarly has afflicted efforts to apprehend notorious Bosnian Serb war criminals.

Snatches that undermine nuclear weapon programs would be far more rewarding than those directed against biological and chemical warfare projects, which require less expertise to undertake. Scientists, technicians, and program managers who develop WMD constitute a potentially lucrative target. But decisionmakers have left such threats untouched, largely because of their noncombatant status in peacetime, even though they could provide an enemy with an enormous capability in war.

Executive Order 12333 of December 4, 1981, which still remains in force, explicitly asserts that “no person employed by or acting on behalf of the United States Government shall engage in, or conspire to engage in, assassination. . . . No agency of the intelligence community shall participate in or request any person to undertake activities forbidden by this order.” That statement bans such actions by U.S. surrogates as well as Americans, even when discriminate or economic in terms of their force requirements, costs, and civilian casualties.

Most counterproliferation options open to SOF are unappealing and risk-laden, but inaction can allow despots to deploy WMD with destabilizing and even disastrous effects.

### Counterterrorism

Terrorists who promote sociopolitical causes apply public, impersonal, repetitive violence or threats of violence in efforts to spread dismay and disrupt community routines so severely that compliance with their demands eventually seems preferable to continued resistance.

The United States has never experienced acts of terrorism on an extensive scale. No individual or group, for example, sought to exploit the explosions that riddled the World Trade Center in 1993, the Federal building in Oklahoma City two years later, or Khobar Towers in 1996. However, terrorists with portable WMD could wreak terrible damage. Even a well-planned hoax might achieve their political goals. The target list could include record centers, information storage and transfer facilities, transport and communication nodes, water supplies, electric power plants, petrochemical factories, and nuclear reactors.



Civil affairs unit in Bosnia.

55<sup>th</sup> Signal Company (Dwight Chaney)

MH-53J Pave Low III  
over RAF Mildenhall.



U.S. Air Force (Brad Fallin)

### **SOCOM is the only DOD component directed to conduct counterterrorism operations**

The U.S. Government actuates programs to combat domestic and transnational terrorism. Although legal limitations such as the Posse Comitatus Act foreclose full use of military capabilities inside the United States,<sup>4</sup> the President could ease this restriction with the concur-

rence of Congress and the courts if an extremely perilous threat arose.

SOCOM is the only DOD component directed by law to plan and conduct counterterrorism operations (offensive countermeasures). Military commanders at every level, along with Federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies, share antiterrorism (passive protection) responsibilities, but SOF units have devised such innovative tactics and techniques that many Federal agencies call on their expertise. SMUs, for example, helped plan security for the Olympics in Los Angeles.

Primary responsibility for terrorism rests with the FBI at home and CIA abroad. SOCOM special mission units have unique skills that policymakers may utilize under certain circumstances, but their routine use could raise suspicions among allies and friends who resent foreign intelligence intrusion and could degrade SOF ability in performing advisory and assistance missions overseas.

Absent reliable intelligence, SOF are unable to conduct preemptive strikes against terrorists. Experience gained from actual terrorist operations is limited. Special mission units excel in practice hostage rescues, but the last publicized event occurred in December 1989 during Just Cause, when an alleged CIA operative was freed from prison in Panama City before guards could kill him.

### **Counternarcotics Operations**

Active measures to detect, monitor, and discourage, disrupt, or interdict the production and distribution of illicit drugs form the basis of counternarcotics operations. Area-oriented SOF teams

Special Forces soldiers aboard Bolivian riverine craft.



SOCOM

completed more than 190 such missions during fiscal year 1997 in response to requests by CINCs and U.S. missions, most of which helped the militaries of Latin America.

Not all counterdrug duty is hazardous. Reserve officers associated with SOF professional development heighten threat awareness among senior officers and civilian officials while PSYOP military information support teams conduct classes for school children. A squadron of Air Force Special Operations Command that is focused on foreign internal defense teaches host nation air crews to maintain fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters, without which they could only cover a small fraction of the territory where drug producers and smugglers operate.

Events in Peru recently took a new turn when drug traffickers, who were losing aircraft at an unprecedented rate, began transporting larger amounts of coca paste by boat from their hideouts in the Andes to processing centers in Colombia. In response, a 30-man U.S. contingent composed mainly of members of Army Special Forces and Navy SEALs established a riverine training base for local counternarcotics forces at Iquitos, where several navigable mountain streams empty into the upper Amazon. Instruction on slowing down or stopping the waterborne movement of drugs applies lessons from the Mekong Delta and Rung Sat Special Zone in South Vietnam some thirty years ago. It is too early to predict whether blocking operations will succeed, but coca cultivation has already shifted dramatically from Peru to Colombia,

partly because drug shipments by inland waterway is too slow for narco entrepreneurs.

Colombian drug cartels, transnational criminals, and insurgents collaborate to multiply their respective capabilities. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), in return for an estimated \$60 million or more each month, protect coca and opium crops, processing facilities, and airfields from the Colombian military and police. Russian crime syndicates supply cartels as well as FARC with weapons in exchange for cocaine, giving them more firepower than many armies. Therefore Colombia was chagrined when the United States decertified that country and terminated the transfer of military equipment and most training after it was reported to have an unacceptably poor record in counternarcotics efforts. By exception to this ban, SOF personnel still teach intelligence collection, scouting, patrolling, infantry tactics, and counterterrorism but, like other American personnel, they are forbidden to participate in counterinsurgency operations.

### The Price of Success

The extensive deployment of high-demand, low-density SOF outside the continental United States in fiscal year 1997 indicates how valuable the Secretary of Defense, Chairman, and CINCs consider their contributions in situations short of war. In fact, SOF are so appropriate for many security problems around the world that there is a

**Table 1. SOF Deployments Outside the Continental U.S. (FY98)**

	Authorized SOF Personnel	Total Man-Weeks OCONUS	Average Man-Weeks OCONUS	Total Countries Involved
Special Forces	8,781	53,555	1,030	129
AFSOC Air Wings	10,122	32,395	623	58
Civil Affairs	5,112	16,030	308	82
Navy SEALs	2,707	22,199	427	77
Psychological Operations	3,863	12,568	242	78
Special Boats	2,455	13,086	252	38
Rangers	1,895	5,309	102	5
Special Operations Aviation	1,666	2,700	52	10
Special Tactics	450	1,987	38	24
SOF Headquarters and Special Operations Commands	2,006	8,373	161	66
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>39,057</b>	<b>168,202</b>	<b>3,235</b>	<b>152</b>

**Table 2. SOF Areas of Operation (FY98)**

Unified Command	Missions	Countries
U.S. Pacific Command	699	34
U.S. European Command	766	67
U.S. Southern Command	415	31
U.S. Central Command	261	15
U.S. Atlantic Command	22	3
U.S. Special Operations Command	15	2
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>2,178</b>	<b>152</b>

tendency to overextend them, as a comparison of their authorized strength and deployments indicates. Concentrations remain heaviest in Europe and the Pacific region (see accompanying tables).

Even though many SOF personnel hone their skills largely in the Continental United States, military operations other than war take others overseas. Army Special Forces, for example, logged one-third of their man-weeks abroad last year. Two active groups bore the biggest loads, because the other three and those units in the Army National Guard are oriented toward areas with relatively few requirements. The U.S. Army Reserve, which contains 24 of 25 CA battalions and nearly 70 percent of PSYOP assets, shouldered a disproportionate burden. Air National Guard personnel, who comprise a unique broadcast group which supports CINCs around the world, practically met themselves coming and going to the field. This is part of the price of SOF success.

Self-reliant, highly-motivated, superbly-trained SOF, especially those proficient in foreign languages and with cross-cultural skills, seem ideally suited for many missions which conventional forces cannot perform as effectively or economically in the twilight zone between peace and war. Low key training teams, information programs, and civic action can foster good will and routinely enhance American influence around the world. Moreover, the President and Congress could relax political and legal constraints on SOF if an enemy with weapons of mass destruction posed a threat to the United States or its allies.

Several facts about special operations nevertheless caution against overcommitment:

- humans are more important than hardware
- quality is more important than quantity
- Special Operations Forces cannot be mass produced
- competent SOF cannot be created after emergencies occur.

Experienced SOF constitute a discrete instrument of national power, an invaluable resource that would take years to reconstitute if squandered. U.S. leaders would be well advised to assign them to those missions which they are eminently qualified to perform in peacetime and war while constantly bearing in mind both the strengths and limits of their unique capabilities. **JFQ**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Title 10, section 167, of the U.S. Code identifies SOF as "core forces or as augmenting forces in the Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan, Annex E." That excludes Marine Expeditionary Units (Special Operations Capable), which are essentially conventional task forces, and Marine Corps Reserve Civil Affairs units that mainly furnish tactical support for expeditionary forces.

<sup>2</sup> See Executive Order 12938, "Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction," and the accompanying "Letter to Congressional Leaders on the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction" (November 14, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of such operations, see John M. Collins, *Assassination and Abduction as Tools of National Policy* (Norfolk: Armed Forces Staff College, March 17, 1965).

<sup>4</sup> Title 18, section 1385, U.S. Code, "Use of Army and Air Forces as Posse Comitatus."