



## Adapting Across the Spectrum of Conflict The Role of Naval Special Warfare

By EDWARD G. WINTERS



Since the 9/11 attacks on the United States, the Nation has realized a new enemy, one that has no borders, hides among the innocent, moves quickly, and is tied to no law of war—or to any law, for that matter. Because of this, the enemy is hard to predict and is difficult to find. The window of opportunity to strike him is small and comes with little warning. He is hard to engage with our conventional weapons because he surrounds himself with innocents. He is smart, calculating, has planned for the long war, yet adapts quickly to counter any success we have. Any response to this new enemy must be quick, nimble, adaptive, and precise. It must also be persistent. We must engage not only the enemy but also the environment and human terrain in which the enemy takes refuge.

The U.S. Naval Special Warfare (NSW) Command of the U.S. Special Operations Command has changed to move faster and

more precisely against this new enemy. There are no longer operations and intelligence; instead, we face “intelligence-operations” or “operations-intelligence.” Additionally, there is no single organization that can defeat this enemy; it requires joint intelligence operations at a level that surpasses anything we have done previously. It requires the interagency community working side by side developing and executing common strategies and synchronizing all efforts. It requires the application of many elements of national and coalition power against the enemy.

Speed of action was an immediate requirement and remains an enduring quest. In the 8 years since 9/11, NSW has done what it does best: more successful combat missions have been conducted, across a broader range of operational environments, than at any time in its storied history. We have achieved this success because we have remained true to our core. This article provides the story of

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continuous and agile adaptation by sea-air-land teams (SEALs), Special Warfare Combatant-craft Crewmen (SWCC), and highly trained, special operations forces (SOF)-tailored Navy technicians. It is a chronicle of an organization focused on learning, anticipating, and adapting to more effectively execute across the spectrum of indirect and direct lines of operation.

### Not Just Direct Action

An NSW squadron—composed of a SEAL team, organic and attached combat support (CS) and combat service support (CSS), Individual Augmentees, and mobilized Reservists—has been assigned as Special Operations Task Force–West (SOTF–W) in Anbar Province, Iraq, since 2005. Over the past 4 years, SOTF–W lines of operations have remained constant and include:

- conducting combined lethal operations (direct action)
- conducting foreign internal defense (FID)/security force assistance (SFA)
- developing networks of influence
- targeting enemy networks.

### Conducting Combined Lethal

**Operations.** NSW direct actions have been exclamation points within the Iraq counterinsurgency rather than the focal point of effort. These include Fallujah (2004), Ramadi (2006), Baghdad (2008), and Mosul (2009). In these four major battles, small NSW elements provided direct support to U.S. Marine Corps and Army maneuver elements. SEAL snipers and Tactical Air Controllers rained devastation upon enemy forces and helped shift the tide of these battles. In 2008, for example, a single overwatch element eliminated nearly 50 enemy personnel over a 2-day period and put an end to enemy attacks on coalition forces within their sector (Baghdad, Sadr City). NSW provided Marine Corps, Army, and Iraqi Security Forces freedom of maneuver and operational space as these General Purpose Forces heroically and successfully fought to provide security to the Iraqi population.

**Conducting FID/SFA.** SOTF–W has been successfully engaged in FID/SFA from

its inception. Training Iraqi SOF, police, and tribal security forces, NSW has helped develop and maintain security within the Western Euphrates River Valley of Anbar Province. In 2006, al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) had a stranglehold on Anbar and was conducting devastating attacks on coalition forces as well as the local population. NSW played a critical role in enabling the “Awakening,” a movement of Sunni tribes to reject and fight AQI and to ally themselves with the coalition. NSW helped train and equip those tribes’ security forces and their sheiks’ bodyguards to resist the brutal counterattack by AQI. NSW also helped transition many of those tribal security forces into the Iraqi police and continued to provide training on tactics, evidentiary documentation and control, targeting and intelligence, and command and control. While SEAL direct action operations helped put the enemy on its heels, Iraqi civil and tribal leaders and security forces, trained and mentored in part by NSW, won the fight against AQI.

islands of the Sulu Archipelago, training and advising Philippine marines and SEALs. Living a Spartan existence in these isolated outposts and teaching combat casualty care, complex mission planning, and intelligence operations, as well as providing medical evacuation and intelligence, surveillance,

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and reconnaissance support, NSW has enabled partner nation forces to take the fight to the enemy.

Around the globe, in Africa in support of Operation *Enduring Freedom–Trans Sahara*, in South America, and in Asia, NSW Active-duty and Reserve personnel are

U.S. Navy (Tim Turner)



**SEAL provides team cover while advancing on suspected al Qaeda and Taliban forces, Operation Enduring Freedom**

Half a world away in the Philippines, NSW Task Unit–Archipelago (NSWTU–Arch) has conducted a 7-year FID/SFA campaign with its Filipino counterparts enabling the harassment and capture of insurgent, terrorist, and criminal elements. NSWTU–Arch leads small, distributed teams called Liaison Coordination Elements (LCEs). These two-to seven-man LCEs are scattered across the

distributed in small teams as liaison elements, joint planning and advisory teams, and coordination elements. These warriors are engaged in the current fight through FID. Not widely known throughout Department of Defense circles, in February of 2008 rebels from Sudan pushed all the way into Ndjamena, the capital of Chad. The battalions of Chadians trained by SEALs had only one combat loss and were

**Rear Admiral Edward G. Winters, USN, is Commander, U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command.**

instrumental in keeping Chad from falling into the hands of the Sudanese rebels.

Special Warfare Combatant-craft Crewmen, NSW's master mariners and career special operations professionals, have also molded themselves to the current fight. The world's premier combat craft operator, the SWCC traditional role is waterborne insertion of SOF and clandestine delivery of special operators in the littorals and river deltas. Yet for the last 8 years, SWCC have been globally dispersed in small teams conducting FID and SFA. A maritime NSW task unit in Manda Bay, Kenya, composed primarily of SWCC operators, has led a 6-year FID/SFA campaign focused on maritime security. Initially training Kenyan naval personnel, they expanded their focus to an all-of-government approach and trained the Kenyan Wildlife Service, coast guard, and maritime police in an effort

#### *Developing Networks of Influence.*

Through combat operations, FID, and SFA, Naval Special Warfare Command builds and maintains relationships that constitute local and regional networks of influence. These networks must be fostered and developed through constant contact. Over a recent 4-month period, nearly 1,000 meetings were conducted by SOTF-W with tribal and civil leaders and Iraqi citizens. These meetings provide atmospherics and insights that are crucial to counterinsurgency. Tribal engagement in Anbar Province provides an example of the deep and broad networks of influence that NSW builds and maintains. For instance, Sheik Sattar abu Risha led the Anbari tribes in the Awakening. SEALs and NSW combat support personnel were frequent guests in his home. They provided a sounding board as he planned and executed

to better prosecute irregular warfare (IW). Support activities are excellent examples of how NSW has adapted to meet the fight more effectively. In 2006, NSW established intelligence operations commands with new and advanced collection and analytical capabilities. The support activities—two Echelon IV O-5 commands—have become the NSW targeting engine. Support activities and their subordinate units are led by SEALs, who bring with them the warrior ethos that is the core of NSW; these leaders provide the operational grounding crucial to successful advanced intelligence operations. However, career SOF personnel—SEAL and SWCC—compose less than 20 percent of support activities; over 80 percent are Navy technical specialists, highly trained and SOF-tailored combat support assigned to NSW for 2 to 5 years. These cross-functional or multidiscipline intelligence

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NSW Combatant-craft Crewmen (seen here driving special operations craft—riverine) are USSOCOM maritime mobility experts

U.S. Navy (Kathryn Whittenberger)

teams are integrated into an assault force—the SEAL troops—creating a seamless and continuous intelligence operations cycle. The comprehensive assimilation of intelligence disciplines into a single targeting element and its complete integration under tactical assault forces create a powerful synergy unachievable through traditional stovepiped intelligence silos.

#### **Adaptation**

Naval Special Warfare is learning from the current conflict and anticipating the future fight. NSW is adapting to an environment where smaller, tailored-to-task forces will be widely distributed and conducting operations and activities by, with, and through partners. This IW fight will continue for the foreseeable future. Long-term presence, knowledge, and relationships will be among our most important weapons. The Nation will require mature, joint, combined, interagency warrior-diplomats. Educating subject matter experts within the NSW force on insurgency, tribal politics, culture, law, finances, and Civil Affairs, and on the use of information to counter jihadist propaganda, will soon be a primary training require-

to increase and maintain security and control maritime lines of communication in this volatile area of the Horn of Africa.

SEALs and SWCC, as well as NSW's organic CS and CSS personnel, conduct combat FID in Iraq and Afghanistan and FID/SFA around the world. This has been the largest contribution of NSW in terms of man-hours and focus since 9/11. The relationships that they build during these activities are the foundations for networks of influence essential to counterinsurgency and the current fight.

the Awakening. When Sheik Sattar was killed in an improvised explosive device attack in 2008, select members of NSW, considered friends of the family and of the tribe, attended his funeral. Within days of his death, NSW intelligence operations identified his killers and facilitated their capture. These deep relationships are replicated around the world with tribal, civil, and military partners.

**Targeting Enemy Networks.** Since 9/11, NSW has been relentless in pursuing innovation in organization, tactics, and capabilities

ment. This is vital to build a force more fully capable of waging counterinsurgency and IW campaigns rather than simply executing episodic training exercises, raids, and reconnaissance. A growing portion of Naval Special Warfare will be dedicated to creating opportunities for the United States and its allies and facilitating the execution of complex military and civil operations *by others*. This will require close coordination with the interagency community and U.S. Country Teams, as well as mastery of FID, SFA, and advanced intelligence operations.

NSW is adapting to better conduct IW and to find and fix terrorists and their infrastructure. Developing language, regional expertise, and cultural (LREC) specialists is one area where the Navy and NSW are applying resources in fiscal year 2010. The Navy will recruit 30 Sailors through the Military Accessions Vital to National Interest (MAVNI) program for assignment to Naval Special Warfare as military linguists. MAVNI is focused on legal immigrants who possess unique, high-demand/low-density LREC skill sets. The support activities will develop education and training to tailor these unique assets into vital IW enablers. These cultural engagement specialists will support NSW squadrons and conduct tactical questioning, provide translation in support of FID and SFA, and act as cultural advisors. Additionally, they will serve as human terrain sensors, providing operational commanders with ground truth and insight into social, tribal, and cultural atmospherics gained from deeper interaction with NSW's networks of influence.

Another innovative organizational structure under development within Naval Special Warfare is the Anchor Team concept: small teams of SEALs and SWCC who focus on a particular country over a minimum 4-year assignment. Anchor Teams will resource Theater Special Operations Command (TSOC) requirements for persistent presence and focus on advise/assist, FID, SFA, and liaison duties; their time horizon will not be just a single 6-month deployment but rather an entire tour of duty. NSW has had persistent presence (365-days boots-on-the-ground) in over a dozen high-priority and priority countries. However, this presence by necessity is resourced by a constant flow of personnel from multiple commands. Each effort lacks continuity and connectedness to operational issues and interagency and host

nation partners; no single NSW organization owns or trains to the problem set. Focus and implementation plans shift with each new rotation, and personnel lack focused preparation for these unique and challenging assignments. Anchor Teams are designed to foster continuity, cultural expertise, connectedness, and long-term commitment—the “4 Cs” of

and senior enlisted personnel to meet demand worldwide. This growth is not only SEAL growth; it is also CS and CSS growth. That additional operator force will require those additional support elements. This is difficult as our requirement for CS and CSS from the Navy comes at a time when it is being directed to downsize. For some time,

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*Anchor Teams are designed to foster continuity, cultural expertise, connectedness, and long-term commitment*

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U.S. Navy (Kevin S. O'Brien)



Secretary of the Navy meets with LTG David Rodriguez and GEN Stanley McChrystal at ISAF headquarters

counterinsurgency. This construct will be transparent to operational commanders except for the fact that TSOCs will receive more focused and better prepared NSW elements to execute their strategies and plans in key locations where they currently maintain persistent presence.

NSW will continue to adapt to accomplish the needs of the Nation alongside joint, combined, and interagency partners. We will continue to grow into better, stronger partners—and we will also grow in size. We believe that we can grow at a rate of about 3 to 5 percent annually, but there is a delicate balance between growing fast enough to meet demand and growing so fast that the experience of the platoon becomes dangerously diluted, resulting in mistakes that cost lives.

In addition to the SEAL and SWCC operators, it will take years before NSW reaches the quantity of quality senior officer

we expect that we will continue to do more with less; however, the quality, strength, and dedication of our people will allow us to continue to succeed.

Naval Special Warfare is known for and characterized by high-intensity direct action. Lesser known is NSW's capacity for and accomplishments conducting foreign internal defense/security force assistance, building networks of influence, and using its robust ability to target terrorist networks. Since 9/11, NSW has displayed unique agility by rapidly adapting and transforming to meet new and evolving theater requirements and by swiftly transitioning across the spectrum of conflict—conducting tribal engagement and FID in small distributed elements and then aggregating into larger elements to conduct high-intensity urban combat. **JFQ**