

AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE

AIR UNIVERSITY

**SPECIAL OPERATIONS PROFESSIONAL MILITARY EDUCATION FOR FIELD  
GRADE OFFICERS**

by

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## **Abstract**

Current officer professional military education (PME) is lacking in the education of special operations field grade officers due to lack of regulatory guidance. Special operations officer should be afforded PME founded upon the instruction of history, theory, doctrine and research of special operations and its issues. In this way, special operations officers would be afforded perspectives and development uniquely concerned with the issues they could face in future assignments. The development of special operations officers is fundamental to future successes and advancement of special operations. Over the last several decades, special operations have been heavily relied upon to achieve national security objectives, and this trend will continue for the foreseeable future. The continued reliance on the special operations community motivates an improvement in the development of its field grade officers.

Professional military education (PME) faces many challenges when trying to develop joint leaders to ensure success in the current dynamic international security environment. One of these challenges is developing joint special operations understanding and interoperability amongst field grade officers. Presently, each Service has its own intermediate developmental education (IDE) program focused on its own history, theory, and doctrine. Further, current US policies have opted to continue military operations with a decreased footprint, relying heavily on special operations forces to combat terrorism and conduct foreign internal defense in nations such as Afghanistan and Iraq. The lack of a specifically designed special operations PME program for field grade officers in the US military negatively impacts the special operations community. Establishing a special operations PME program within the current Congressional mandates that utilizes a curriculum tying together special operations history, theory, and doctrine into focused research areas identified by US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) and/or by special operations officers will increase effectiveness across the range of military operations.<sup>1</sup>

## **Regulatory Guidance**

Before delving into the what a special operations PME program or curriculum would look like, it is imperative to understand what laws, policies, and guidelines are currently in place that regulate officer joint PME in the Department of Defense (DoD). First, the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 provides overarching guidance for PME by directing that each Service, “review and revise its curriculum for senior and intermediate grade officers in order to strengthen the focus on (1) joint matters; and – (2) preparing officers for joint duty assignments.”<sup>2</sup> Additionally, this law also established accountability for ensuring joint military education by

mandating the Secretary of Defense conduct initial curriculum reviews and institute revised curriculum changes. This set the precedent for continued military education refinement, but did not provide any further specifics for PME curriculum.

Second, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction 1800.01E, 29 May 2015, provides more explicit guidance on the policies, procedures, objectives, and responsibilities for joint PME. This instruction has many strong points. Specifically, it outlines focus areas of Joint education: Joint planning, Joint doctrine, Joint command and control, Joint force and Joint requirements development.<sup>3</sup> This instruction also emphasizes the development of “the most professionally competent (strategic-minded critical thinking) individual possible,” by applying six Desired Leadership Attributes (DLAs) to officer PME.<sup>4</sup> The DLAs are:

- (1) Understand the security environment and contributions of all instruments of national power.
- (2) Anticipate and respond to surprise and uncertainty.
- (3) Anticipate and recognize change and lead transitions.
- (4) Operate on intent through trust, empowerment, and understanding (the essentials of Mission Command).
- (5) Make ethical decisions based on the shared values of the profession of arms.
- (6) Think critically and strategically in applying joint warfighting principles and concepts of joint operations.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, one of the biggest drawbacks to this instruction is that it fails to definitively address special operations PME at the intermediate development level. Special operations forces are not incorporated into the learning objectives until senior developmental education, specifically in Learning Area 5 for JMPE-1.<sup>6</sup> Yet, this learning area does not focus on the development or education of special operations officers; rather it focuses on understanding the capabilities and limitations of special operations forces in achieving national strategic objectives.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, CJCSI 1800.01E, 29 May 2015, provides a very clear policy regarding the curriculum requirements for intermediate and senior level service colleges. It states, “PME institutions will base their curriculums on their parent Service's needs or, in the case of the NDU colleges, on their CJCS-assigned missions.”<sup>8</sup> This allows Services, specifically intermediate developmental education colleges, to focus heavily on developing field grade officers prepared to achieve dominance across air, land, and sea domains. The Army Command and General Staff College’s succinct mission is the development of critical thinking leaders in complex and uncertain environments for land campaign.<sup>9</sup> The Air Command and Staff College’s succinct mission is to develop leaders to apply airpower.<sup>10</sup> The Naval Command and Staff College’s mission essentially develops leaders prepared to plan and execute maritime operations in support of national security interests.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, specific special operations study within these curricula is often relegated to electives and introductory level material which is specifically determined by the Service or college. This lack of focused, dedicated education to special operations does little to promote and enhance a special operations officer’s development.<sup>12</sup>

## **Previous SOF PME Proposals**

With the understanding that policy guidance has gaps in special operations PME, this paper will now examine two proposals written within the last decade advocating for special operations PME. The first proposal is Major Bryan Cannady’s thesis *Irregular Warfare: Special Operations Joint Professional Military Education Transformation*, written in 2008. Major Cannady provides a very detailed analysis of joint PME requirements as outlined by the Goldwater-Nichols Act, Representative Ike Skelton’s 1989 report (as known as the Skelton Report) on PME, and the CJCSI 1800.01C. Writing during the height of military operations in

Iraq and close to the peak of operations in Afghanistan, Maj Cannady focuses the majority of his proposal on the integration of special operations military education into the existing joint PME construct. He argued that increased education on special operations as part of joint force integration is the most effective means to increase US effectiveness in irregular warfare. Major Cannady writes, “irregular warfare is no longer just a SOF [special operations force] problem but a total-force problem requiring all services and agencies to unite and integrate to fight it.”<sup>13</sup> Additionally, Maj Cannady recognized the need for USSOCOM to have greater ability to direct and lead the military education of special operations leaders. His recommendations to solve this issue included reviewing and expanding SOCOM’s Title 10 education authorities, USSOCOM voting representation on the Military Education Coordination Council, implementation of a policy directive for inclusion of special operations integration in joint PME, and providing USSOCOM the ability to implement and oversee special operations curriculum at all Service schools.<sup>14</sup>

The second proposal is Major Bradford Burris’s 2010 thesis *Army Special Operations Forces Professional Military Education for the Future*. Interestingly, Major Burris’s approach is confined specifically to US Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) personnel and proposes the development of an ARSOF (Army Special Operations) University responsible for educating its special operations personnel with a model separate and distinct from the General Purpose Force model.<sup>15</sup> The strength of Major Burris’s proposed ARSOF [Army Special Operations Forces] Career-Long Education Utilization Model is that it focuses on preparing their fighting force with analytical competency or relational competency depending on whether they are preparing for a future deployment or future staff work, respectively. Burris writes, “things I like best about our model are that it supports SOCOM’s themes and objective; it allows for the

education of individuals who can be task organized and utilized in countless combinations; and it predicates itself on the understanding that strategic and operational contexts, mission requirements, and preferences will change over time.”<sup>16</sup> Yet, his proposal lacks any acknowledgement of higher authority guidance and policy beyond Army Pamphlets 600-25 and 600-3 because this type of PME is not intended to be a substitute for joint PME for officers or enlisted.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, he does provide a secondary proposal in which the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) oversees all special operations forces education but allows each Service a degree of autonomy to conduct mandatory course requirements.<sup>18</sup> However, this is not much different than what JSOU currently provides for special operations PME.

### **SOF PME Curriculum Fundamentals for Intermediate Level Education**

Recognizing current limitations and/or lack of special operations PME for field grade officers at Service colleges, it is incumbent that more effort be taken to ensure appropriate joint PME be provided for special operations leaders given the current reliance on special operations forces by the US government across the globe as part of its National Security Strategy. This proposal outlines curriculum fundamentals of a special operations PME course conducted by JSOU for special operations and select non-special operations field grade officers in lieu of Service intermediate level college. It assumes appropriate legislation and policy, specifically CJCSI 1800.01E, changes have been made authorizing USSOCOM to conduct such curriculum as part of joint PME requirements. This curriculum is based on the education of history, theory, and doctrine as educational fundamentals to develop critically thinking special operations field grade officers.



This proposal will first rely on history as a curriculum fundamental because it is important to understand the history of US special operations. History demonstrates the continual growth and development of special operations forces. Special operations forces in the US can trace their history back to the French and Indian Wars with Rogers' Rangers, a light infantry corps used for reconnaissance and special operations by the British Army. Yet, special operations forces appear to have been lost within the US military lexicon until World War II where Army Rangers performed heroically at Normandy, Navy Underwater Demolition Teams found their beginnings in North Africa and on the invasion of Sicily, and of Air (Force) Commandos were formed in the China-Burma-India theater. The value of special operations forces in the US military would ebb and flow, culminating in a landmark event that would forever change its path: OPERATION EAGLE CLAW.

OPERATION EAGLE CLAW was a joint special operations mission tasked to rescue 52 US hostages in Iran in 1979. This joint task force was established with members from Army, Air Force, and Marine special operations and conventional units. Unfortunately, the mission was a tactical failure, resulting in an aborted operation, the loss of eight service members, and an embarrassment to the US. While this operation was a tactical failure, it resulted in a review process with the Holloway Commission that ultimately led to the passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Act, the silver lining of this tragic failure. Interestingly, the Goldwater-Nichols Act not only established joint PME but also established United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM).

Fast forward to present day USSOCOM and one finds a joint organization abuzz with global operations supporting every Geographic Combatant Command (GCC).<sup>19</sup> Recognizing that special operations are conducted in support of the National Military Strategy is a critical

component to understanding and effectively utilizing special operations theory to achieve national strategic objectives. Just as Service PME courses teach on their domain specific theory, it is necessary for a special operations PME course include special operations the examination of special operations theory. Curriculum would include the study of three theories of special operations. First, special operations theory, as defined by Admiral McRaven in his thesis *The Theory of Special Operations*, outlines how numerically smaller forces achieve victory by gaining and exploiting relative superiority.<sup>20</sup> This theory is extremely useful when applied to direct action operations as it relies upon six principles: simplicity, security, repetition, surprise, speed, and purpose.<sup>21</sup> Second, Robert Spulak's *A Theory of Special Operations: The Origins, Qualities and Use of SOF*, provides a more encompassing understanding of special operations.

Spulak writes:

A theory of special operations can be stated concisely: special operations are missions to accomplish strategic objectives where the use of conventional forces would create unacceptable risks due to Clausewitzian friction. Overcoming these risks requires special operations forces that directly address the ultimate sources of friction through qualities that are the result of the distribution of the attributes of SOF personnel.<sup>22</sup>

Spulak's theory is extremely useful by identifying special operations as a specific military tool used in a different context from conventional forces that reduces conflict between the Clausewitzian relationship of the people, military and government. The third theory is not so much a theory but rather a construct for the development of a new or updated theory of special operations. Harry Yarger's *21<sup>st</sup> Century SOF: Toward an American Theory of Special Operations* analyzes both McRaven's and Spulak's theories and provides insight into premises, principles, and characteristics of special operations and special operations forces. He describes special operations theory as, "the school of thought and theory presented in this monograph seek to provide a strategic perspective of SOF power and special operations, and SOF's evolving role

in U.S. national security.”<sup>23</sup> The power of this statement is its advocacy for SOF power which is fundamentally the same as Service components advocating land power, air power, and sea power. Yarger also writes, “Although SOF may operate in the domains of other services—air, land, and sea, and across or in the seams and gaps among these domains—it is qualitatively different than the contributions of the other military services just as the military element of power differs qualitatively from the economic or political elements.”<sup>24</sup> Recognizing the uniqueness of SOF power underscores the need for appropriately educating its special operations field grade officers to ensure the optimization of special operations towards achieving national strategic objectives.

The application of theory directly draws upon doctrine which provides established guidelines for the employment and support of military forces. In this case, special operations doctrine is outlined in Joint Publication 3-05. It provides guidance on which forces are considered special operations forces, defines core activities, delineates command and control functions, and outlines support considerations for special operations.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, each of the Services have corresponding special operations doctrine outlining their characteristics, capabilities, limitations, force structure, and core mission areas. Understanding this doctrine is fundamental for special operations effectiveness in support of national strategic objectives.

## **Instruction Methodology**

With the curriculum fundamentals established, it is imperative to determine the appropriate teaching methodology to optimize, as General Dempsey states, “developing agile and adaptive leaders with the requisite values, strategic vision and critical thinking skills necessary to keep pace with the changing strategic environment.”<sup>26</sup> To achieve this education optimization, a

mixture of pedagogy and andragogy will be utilized throughout the proposed course. Pedagogy, the instructional method of teaching children, will be used primarily to instruct the core fundamentals of history, theory, and doctrine. However, andragogy, the instructional method of teaching adults, will be used primarily in applying the history, theory, and doctrine of special operations into applicable research projects for the enhancement of special operations.

These research projects under an andragogical approach are a critical component to the success of an independent special operations PME program as they will aid in the development of special operations leaders who think critically and provide novel answers to identified special operations issues. Many of these research projects have already been identified by the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) and published in their annual *Special Operations Research Topics* report. USSOCOM carefully crafts this publication but it intentionally seeks, “topics [that] will stir creativity and critical thinking among the best and brightest in our SOF network to generate new ideas.”<sup>27</sup> Yet, research topics will not be strictly confined to those identified in the *Special Operations Research Topics* report, but rather special operations PME students will be encouraged to research issues or concerns that they identify from their military experiences. This truly ensures an andragogical methodology as it captures the passion and desire to learn by the student and allows USSOCOM to capitalize on them. This is indicated by JSOU when it states “careful research and analysis will lead to the development of innovative solutions for the most pressing issues and concerns that face our community.”<sup>28</sup>

## **Current SOF PME Construct**

As USSOCOM has evolved, it recognized that professional development and education of special operations leaders is paramount to the success of its force just as developing land maneuver leaders, airpower leaders, and maritime leaders is vital to the success of the Army, Air

Force, and Navy. To tackle this problem, it established JSOU in 2000, which provides education opportunities to special operations forces but more importantly to “shape the future strategic environment by providing specialized joint professional military education.”<sup>29</sup> Currently, JSOU provides curriculum inputs to SOF senior liaisons to Service PME colleges to ensure SOF curriculum is provided. However, this instruction is often relegated to electives. The JSOU Factbook for academic year 2014 indicated that Air Command & Staff College received 613 hours of special operations PME instruction for 541 students.<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, this only provides an average of 1 hour and 7.8 minutes of special operations PME to the entire student populace. Yet, the reality is a few dozen students received at least 20 hours of special operations PME instruction while most students received little to none.

Recently, JSOU instituted the Joint Special Operations Forces Senior Enlisted Academy responsible for the PME of E8-E9s within the special operations components of the Services. This course is recognized and accredited by the Accrediting Council for Continuing Education & Training (ACCET), a national accrediting agency recognized by the Department of Education, thus fulfilling the service component requirements of PME for those who complete the course.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the course “develops students for operational and strategic level positions across a broad range of joint and special operations assignments.”<sup>32</sup> The development and execution of a Service-independent PME course highlights that a special operations specific officer PME course is not unreasonable or even unfeasible.

Despite these advancements by USSOCOM in PME, arguments can be made that special operations PME for field grade officers is not warranted for the following reasons. First, special operations officers are first and foremost officers within their Services vice special operations officers. Second, special operations must fully understand how their Service unique special

operations capabilities work within their Service before they can effectively be incorporated into a joint special operations PME program. Third, it is incumbent for special operations officers to educate their conventional peers within their Service specific PME institution. Fourth, special operations officers must understand how their operations integrate with and/or impact conventional operations within the National Military Strategy. Finally, enlisted PME does not equate to officer PME due to their differing roles and responsibilities, thus negating the appropriateness of a special operations officer PME analogy to an existing special operations senior enlisted academy.

All of these arguments fly in the face of reason for the simple fact that a professional special operations force must be led by professionally developed and educated special operations leaders. Second, special operations officers understand and recognize that they are officers in their respective Services. Third, education of conventional officers at the expenses of special operations officers stymies the development and future successes of special operations forces and impedes the achievement of national strategic objectives. Fourth, special operations officers already understand their role and the impacts of their operations in relation to the National Military Strategy. Finally, special operations PME would benefit officers more than senior enlisted leaders because field grade officers are generally at the midpoint of their career rather than the end of their career, allowing USSOCOM to reap the benefits of more time in service. Moreover, it will be field grade officers that will accomplish much of the staff work required of USSOCOM and Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs) where specialized education is necessary.

## **Recommendation**

In conclusion, the creation of USSOCOM and its subsequent establishment of JSOU have been immensely beneficial to professionalizing special operations forces across the services but there is more than can be accomplished. A dedicated special operations PME program for field grade officers focusing on history, theory, doctrine and the development of critical thinking skills through research of identified special operations areas of issue and concern is critical to the future success of USSOCOM as its operations that are directly tied to national security objectives. This special operations officer PME program would be a joint program whose majority student populace would special operations officers. A small percentage of the student populace would be open to conventional officers from intelligence, logistics, communications, and other support specialties from across the Services, as these specialties bring crucial perspectives and contributions to the execution and advancement of special operations. Furthermore, the development of a Senior Enlisted Academy for special operations forces is an excellent example that demonstrates a service independent special operations PME program is possible. The existing infrastructure at JSOU provides a command and control construct to make a special operations PME program for field grade officers a reality; however Service special operations components would need to provide necessary manpower for instructors and staff. Finally, this proposal recognizes necessary changes within the regulatory guidance of CJCSI 1800.01E and an expansion of Title 10 educational authorities for USSOCOM to bring a Service independent special operations officer PME program to fruition.

### Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Majors Brown, Casey, Loken, McIntyre, and Summerville for their thoughtful comments and suggestions. All errors found herein are my own.
- <sup>2</sup> *Goldwater-Nichols Act 1986*. Public Law 99-433. 99<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1 October 1986, 10 USC 663 (b).
- <sup>3</sup> Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) Instruction 1800.01E, *Officer Professional Military Education Policy (OPMEP)*, 29 May 2015, A-2.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid, A-2.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid, A-2.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid, E-D-3.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid, E-D-3.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid, B-1.
- <sup>9</sup> United States Army Combined Arms Center, "Command and General Staff College Mission Statement," <http://usacac.army.mil/organizations/cace/cgsc/cgss> (accessed 31 August 2015).
- <sup>10</sup> United States Air Force Air Command and Staff College, "Air Command and Staff College Mission Statement," <http://www.au.af.mil/au/acsc/about.aspx> (accessed 1 September 2015).
- <sup>11</sup> United States Naval War College, "Naval War College Missions," <https://www.usnwc.edu/About/Missions.aspx> (accessed 1 September 2015).
- <sup>12</sup> Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) Instruction 1800.01E, *Officer Professional Military Education Policy (OPMEP)*, 29 May 2015, B-1.
- <sup>13</sup> Cannady, Bryan. "Irregular Warfare: Special Operations Joint Professional Military Education Transformation." Master's thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2008, 38.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid, 79-83.
- <sup>15</sup> Burris, Bradford. "Army Special Operations Forces Professional Military Education for the Future." Master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2010, 70.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid, 61.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid, 64.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid, 71.
- <sup>19</sup> United States Special Operations Command, "SOCOM Mission in support of the GCCs," <http://www.socom.mil/Pages/Mission.aspx> (accessed 1 September 2015).
- <sup>20</sup> McRaven, William H., "The Theory of Special Operations." Master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 1993., iii.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid, 11.
- <sup>22</sup> Spulak, Robert G. *A Theory of Special Operations: The Origins, Qualities, and Use of SOF*. JSOU Report 07-7. Tampa, FL: The JSOU Press, 2007, 41.
- <sup>23</sup> Yarger, Harry R. *21st Century SOF: Toward an American Theory of Special Operations*. JSOU Report 13-1. Tampa, FL: The JSOU Press, 2013, 76.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid, 27.
- <sup>25</sup> Joint Publication 3-05, *Special Operations*, 16 July 2014, ix-xv.
- <sup>26</sup> Dempsey, General Martin, CJCS, *Joint Education White Paper*, 16 July 2012, 3.
- <sup>27</sup> Joint Special Operations University. *Special Operations Research Topics: 2016*. MacDill Air Force Base, FL., The JSOU Press. 2015, v.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid, v.
- <sup>29</sup> Joint Special Operations University, "JSOU Mission," <https://jsou.socom.mil/Pages/Default.aspx> (accessed 1 September 2015).
- <sup>30</sup> Joint Special Operations University, *2014 Factbook*, <http://jsou.socom.mil/Pages/Default.aspx> (accessed 3 October 2015), 32.
- <sup>31</sup> Joint Special Operations University, "JSOU Senior Enlisted Academy Course," [https://jsou.socom.mil/Pages/CourseInformation.aspx?CourseName=Joint Special Operations Forces Senior Enlisted Academy](https://jsou.socom.mil/Pages/CourseInformation.aspx?CourseName=Joint%20Special%20Operations%20Forces%20Senior%20Enlisted%20Academy) (accessed 1 Sep 2015).
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid.





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