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SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES: A PRIMER

Introduction

A small but critical portion of the Total Force is made up of the special operations forces (SOF) of the Army, Navy and Air Force, which are comprised of special operations, psychological operations and civil affairs organizations. Special operations forces are task organized to conduct contingency operations.

Special operations forces are designed to augment theater-based forces and, in response to a crisis situation, normally operate with an appropriate mix of conventional forces under theater control.

Almost all SOF missions require joint planning; also, they are used for missions with allied or coalition forces as well as for a number of ongoing ground missions in many countries.

U.S. Special Operations Command

The joint nature of SOF operations was recognized in the establishment of a permanent unified command, the U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). The USSOCOM commander-in-chief commands all active and reserve Special Operations, Psychological Operations and Civil Affairs forces of the Army, Navy and Air Force (about 47,000 personnel). USSOCOM supports other unified commands responsible for crisis responses in their respective geographic areas of responsibility.

The U.S. Special Operations Command is composed of four subordinate commands: U.S. Army Special Operations Command, Naval Special Warfare Command, Air Force Special Operations Command and Joint Special Operations Command.

U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC), headquartered at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, is composed of active component and reserve component Army forces consisting of Special Forces groups, a Ranger regiment, Psychological Operations groups, a Special Operations Aviation regiment, Civil Affairs commands, and special operations signal and support units.

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Naval Special Warfare Command (NAVSOC), headquartered at Coronado, California, consists of two Naval Special Warfare groups, each composed of SEAL (Sea-Air-Land) teams, SEAL delivery vehicle teams and special boat units.

Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC), headquartered at Hurlburt Field, Florida, is made up of special tactics groups and squadrons which provide fixed- and rotary-wing airlift, air fire support and a long range, night, low-level troop movement capability.

Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), headquartered at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, is a joint headquarters designed to study the special requirements and techniques of all services to ensure standardization.

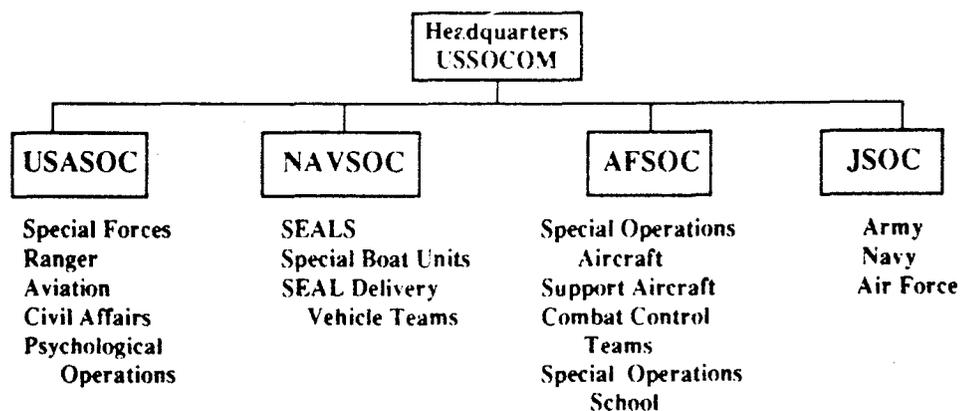


Fig. 1 - U.S. Special Operations Command

Missions assigned to USSOCOM are to:

- prepare assigned forces to carry out special operations, psychological operations and civil affairs missions as required and, if directed by the President or Secretary of Defense, to plan for and conduct special operations;
- develop doctrine, tactics, techniques and procedures for SOF;
- conduct specialized courses of instruction for all special operations forces;
- train assigned forces and ensure interoperability of equipment and forces;
- monitor the preparedness of special operations forces assigned to other unified commands;
- develop and acquire unique special operations forces equipment, materiel, supplies and services;
- consolidate and submit program and budget proposals for Major Force Program 11;

- monitor the promotions, assignments, retention, training and professional development of all special operations forces personnel.

To carry out these broad missions on a day-to-day basis, more than 2,000 personnel of USSOCOM are employed in more than 20 countries around the world; they provide training, advice and nation-building assistance. Additionally, SOF will support conventional theater forces in power projection and sea control missions. Some SOF operational missions include special reconnaissance, counterterrorism and unconventional warfare, as well as psychological operations and civil affairs activities. SOF may also be employed for direct action when required and to aid in foreign internal defense (interagency activity with the objective of assisting friendly nations in responding to subversion, illicit drugs, lawlessness and insurgency) upon request.

U.S. Army Special Operations

The U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) was established at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, on December 1, 1989, to enhance the readiness of Army SOF. USASOC commands both active Army and U.S. Army Reserve SOF. It provides oversight of Army National Guard SOF readiness, organization, training and employment in coordination with the National Guard Bureau and state adjutants general. As the Army component of USSOCOM, USASOC provides trained and ready SOF composed of Special Forces, Ranger, Special Operations Aviation, Psychological Operations and Civil Affairs units, as well as signal and support units. These are assigned and employed as directed.

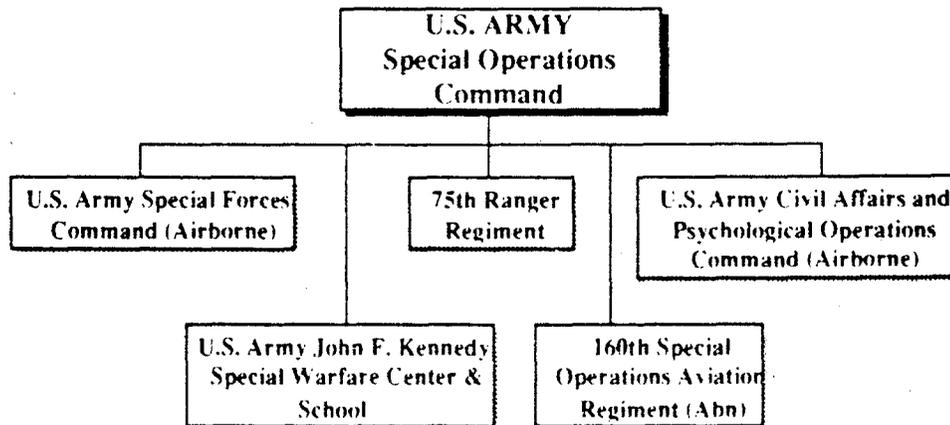


Fig. 2 - U.S. Army Special Operations Command

Special Forces plan, prepare for and, when directed, deploy to conduct unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense missions, special reconnaissance and direct actions. Units train continually to conduct unconventional warfare in any of its forms — guerrilla warfare, evasion and

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escape, subversion, and sabotage. Approximately 1,400 soldiers are assigned to a typical Special Forces group; the operating level is the 12-man "A-team" (all expert or cross-trained in weapons, engineering, communications, medical aid, and operations and intelligence). The John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School conducts SOF training and serves as the USASOC proponent and doctrine arm.

Rangers are the masters of special light infantry operations. Missions include attacks to temporarily seize and secure key objectives and other light infantry operations requiring unique capabilities. Like their Special Forces counterparts, Rangers can infiltrate an area by land, by sea or by air.

Special operations aviation provides capabilities for inserting, resupplying, extracting and search and rescue of U.S. and allied SOF personnel. These units can also provide forward air control and close air support. They are prepared to support SOF on a worldwide basis.

Psychological operations are aimed at demoralizing the enemy by causing dissension and unrest among military units while at the same time convincing the local population to support American troops. Units disseminate propaganda messages in the form of leaflets, posters, broadcasts and audiovisual tapes; each unit has its own intelligence and audiovisual specialists.

Civil affairs units are designed to assist commanders in discharging their responsibilities toward the civilian population, to provide liaison with civilian government agencies and to prevent civilian interference with tactical operations.

Signal and direct support to SOF are provided by units specifically organized for this purpose. A signal battalion provides communications links and service between the command, joint controlling agencies or commands and U.S. Army special operations commands in the theater of operations. A support battalion enhances USASOC medical, supply and transportation capabilities.

USASOC Operations

Army SOF activities have been conducted for such purposes as foreign internal defense, nation assistance, direct action raids and assaults, reconnaissance, armed penetration, unconventional warfare, psychological operations and civil affairs.

During the 1991 Gulf War, the Army SOF coalition warfare mission was open-ended — to conduct liaison and foreign internal defense operations with Royal Saudi Land Forces. Their mission was to conduct defensive training, including air-to-ground close-air support and indirect artillery fire support.

Army Special Forces were assigned to conduct special reconnaissance and early warning along the Saudi Arabia-Kuwait border. During the day, they conducted U.S. vehicle patrols, reconnaissance and training. Night patrols, conducted with the Saudis, helped to find line crossers and refugees, while providing early warning of an enemy attack.

Special Forces teams worked with the Pan-Arab forces (from Egypt, Syria, Oman, Morocco, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates and Qatar) and later assisted in reconstituting the Kuwaiti army. Upon completion of the allied buildup, some 106 liaison teams were assigned to the coalition forces. Special Forces personnel taught defensive nuclear, biological and chemical warfare methods and served as experts on staff planning, to include armored and mechanized warfare.

Another valuable mission performed by SOF was special reconnaissance. Special Forces teams, supported by Air Force and Army SOF aviation, executed missions deep inside Iraqi territory in support of the conventional ground forces. The teams observed and verified the movement of Iraqi forces along major roads and railroads. These missions — as much as 165 miles into Iraq — were in densely populated areas where SOF teams had a high risk of compromise. Some missions were compromised and required emergency exfiltration; other SOF teams remained concealed until link-up with U.S. forces.

Operation Desert Shield was representative of U.S. efforts to resolve a crisis at an acceptable level of force. Working with U.S. and allied information agencies, psychological operations specialists supported political and economic efforts to persuade the Iraqi leadership to withdraw from Kuwait. They also served to counter Iraqi propaganda and provided information to regional military personnel and civilians.

In order to terminate hostilities and minimize casualties during Operation Desert Storm, leaflets were dropped on the enemy. The leaflets described the hopelessness of the Iraqi soldiers' plight and gave directions on how to surrender. Battle areas also included many civilians who were the target audience of information campaigns intended to help them avoid becoming casualties.

During and after the battle, linguists helped control military prisoners and civilian refugees, speaking over loudspeakers and face-to-face. Civil affairs personnel met with local leaders to organize and return displaced persons, restore order and develop an infrastructure to expedite recovery.

When the plight of the Kurdish refugees of northern Iraq compelled the international community to provide relief, they were assisted during Operation Provide Comfort by Special Forces, psychological operations and civil affairs specialists, and both Air Force and Army SOF aviation. SOF teams assisted in immediate distribution of food and medicine, and helped local leaders establish control of the refugee population.

Oversight of Special Operations Forces

Oversight has been significantly strengthened in recent years. The establishment of an Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (ASD/SOLIC) and Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Special Operations Command (USCINCSOC) provides senior civilian and military oversight of special operations and forces. It ensures that appropriate special operations options are considered in meeting national security requirements. Policy affecting special operations is reviewed by the ASD/SOLIC and operational considerations are reviewed by the Joint Staff and USSOCOM.

Special operations resource issues are represented on the Defense Planning and Resources Board (DPRB) by the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy through the ASD/SOLIC. In addition, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff represents USSOCOM interests on the DPRB. Also, a proponent for Special Operations is present when an SOF item is considered by the Defense Acquisition Board.

The regional unified commands have established theater special operations commands (SOCs) to plan and control special operations that effectively meet theater requirements. The role of the theater SOCs in crises or contingencies was demonstrated during Operation Just Cause in Panama and Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm in the Persian Gulf region.

Special Operations Resource Management and Control

The resource management and control process for SOF has been enhanced by congressional establishment of Major Force Program 11 (Special Operations Forces) and provision of direct budget authority to the Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Special Operations Command. This focuses the resource process and ensures a review of special operations requirements. Management by USSOCOM provides coordination of multiservice sourcing and global employment of SOF.

In 1991, the Special Operations Research, Development and Acquisition Center (SORDAC) was established under USSOCOM. The center is responsible for the development and acquisition of equipment to meet the unique requirements of SOF. The goal is to streamline the acquisition process so that state-of-the-art equipment reaches SOF as soon as possible.

SORDAC is not intended to replace or duplicate the extensive research, development, testing and evaluation (RDT&E) capabilities of the services. It focuses on SOF-unique or critical programs, requirements and technological applications. Only selected SOF-peculiar programs will be directly managed by SORDAC.

Conclusion

Special operations forces play an increasingly significant role in supporting U.S. foreign policy. The flexibility and availability of SOF for immediate deployment offer the national command authorities a wide range of viable alternatives.

Among the threats to U.S. security are terrorism, extremes of nationalism and ethnic fundamentalism, and illegal drug activities, in addition to significant conventional threats and weapons of mass destruction. Special operations forces can, in many cases, deter or mitigate such threats through peacetime military assistance programs. Special operations forces are one of the important tools in the U.S. arsenal.

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