



CRS Report for Congress

U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF): Background and Issues for Congress

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Summary

Special Operations Forces (SOF) play a significant role in U.S. military operations and the Administration has given U.S. SOF greater responsibility for planning and conducting worldwide counterterrorism operations. Recent leadership changes, the availability of SOF special mission unit (SMU) forces, and circumstances surrounding a Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC) incident in Afghanistan might be issues for congressional consideration. This report will be updated as events warrant.

Background

Overview. Special Operations Forces (SOF) are small, elite military units with special training and equipment that can infiltrate into hostile territory through land, sea, or air to conduct a variety of operations, many of them classified. SOF personnel undergo rigorous selection and lengthy, specialized training. The U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) oversees the training, doctrine, and equipping of all U.S. SOF units.

Command Structures. In 1986, Congress expressed concern for the status of SOF within overall U.S. defense planning and passed measures (P.L. 99-661) to strengthen its position. These actions included the establishment of USSOCOM as a new unified command. USSOCOM is headquartered at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, FL. The Commander of USSOCOM is a four-star officer who may be from any service. Commander, USSOCOM reports directly to the Secretary of Defense, although an Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (ASD/SOLIC) provides immediate civilian oversight over many USSOCOM activities.

Recent Leadership Changes. On April 4, 2007, the White House announced that the President had nominated Michael G. Vickers to be the new ASD/SOLIC. Prior to his nomination, Mr. Vickers had served as director for strategic studies at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment in Washington, DC. Mr. Vickers also reportedly

Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

1. REPORT DATE 28 JUN 2007	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2007 to 00-00-2007			
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF): Background and Issues for Congress		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER			
		5b. GRANT NUMBER			
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER			
6. AUTHOR(S)		5d. PROJECT NUMBER			
		5e. TASK NUMBER			
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER			
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress, 101 Independence Ave, SE, Washington, DC, 20540-7500		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER			
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)			
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)			
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified	Same as Report (SAR)	6	

had previous service in U.S. Army Special Forces and in the CIA.¹ On May 10, 2007, the Secretary of Defense announced that Navy Vice Admiral (VADM) Eric T. Olson, deputy commander USSOCOM, had been nominated for appointment to the grade of Admiral (ADM) and selected to serve USSOCOM commander.² If approved by the Senate, ADM Olson, a Navy SEAL, will be the first naval officer to command USSOCOM and will replace retiring Army General Bryan “Doug” Brown, who has served as USSOCOM commander since September 2003.

Army Lieutenant General Stanley McCrystal, the commander of the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) — a unit believed to be conducting classified counterterrorism operations worldwide — will reportedly remain in Iraq for an additional year at the request of Army General David Petraeus, commander of U.S. military forces in Iraq.³ LTG McCrystal, who was supposed to relinquish command of JSOC as part of normal assignment rotation, has been credited with heading up counterterror efforts in Iraq that have resulted killing a number of Al Qaeda leaders and other key insurgents.

Army Special Operations Forces.⁴ U.S. Army SOF (ARSOF) include approximately 30,000 soldiers from the Active Army, National Guard, and Army Reserve who are organized into Special Forces, Ranger, and special operations aviation units, along with civil affairs units, psychological operations units, and special operations support units. ARSOF Headquarters and other resources, such as the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, are located at Fort Bragg, NC. Five active Special Forces (SF) Groups (Airborne) are stationed at Fort Bragg and at Fort Lewis, WA, Fort Campbell, KY, and Fort Carson, CO. Special Forces soldiers — also known as the Green Berets — are trained in various skills, including foreign languages, that allow teams to operate independently throughout the world. Two Army National Guard SF groups are headquartered in Utah and Alabama. An elite airborne light infantry unit specializing in direct action operations⁵, the 75th Ranger Regiment, is headquartered at Fort Benning, GA and consists of three battalions. Army special operations aviation units, including the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne) at Fort Campbell, KY, feature pilots trained to fly the most sophisticated Army rotary-wing aircraft in the harshest environments, day or night, and in adverse weather.

¹ Elaine M. Grossman, “Bush’s Special Ops Pick Sees Post-Surge Strategy Coming Soon to Iraq,” *InsideDefense.com*, June 14, 2007.

² U.S. Department of Defense News Release No. 562-07, May 10, 2007.

³ Rowan Scarborough, “Joint Special Operations Commander to Stay in Iraq,” *Washington Examiner*, June 4, 2007.

⁴ Information in this section was taken from General Bryan Brown, “U.S. Army Special Operations: Focusing on People — Humans are More Important than Hardware,” *Army*, October 2001, pp. 157-162.

⁵ Direct action operations are short-duration strikes and other small-scale offensive actions conducted as a special operation in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments and which employ specialized military capabilities to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover, or damage designated targets. Direct action differs from conventional offensive actions in the level of physical and political risk, operational techniques, and the degree of discriminate and precise use of force to achieve specific objectives.

Some of the most frequently deployed SOF assets are civil affairs (CA) units, which provide experts in every area of civil government to help administer civilian affairs in operational theaters. The recently activated 95th Civil Affairs Brigade (Airborne) is the only active CA unit, and plans call for the brigade to expand from one to four battalions by 2009.⁶ All other CA units reside in the Reserves and are affiliated with conventional Army units. Psychological operations units disseminate information to large foreign audiences through mass media. The active duty 4th Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) Group (Airborne) is stationed at Fort Bragg, and two Army Reserve PSYOPS groups work with conventional Army units.

Air Force Special Operations Forces.⁷ The Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) includes about 13,000 active and reserve personnel. AFSOC is headquartered at Hurlburt Field, FL, along with the 720th Special Tactics Group, the 18th Flight Test Squadron, and the U.S. Air Force Special Operations School. The 16th Special Operations Wing (SOW), is expected to relocate from Hurlburt Field to Cannon Air Force Base (AFB), NM by October 2007.⁸ AFSOC plans to activate the 1st SOW at Hurlburt Field using elements of the 16th SOW.⁹ The 352nd Special Operations Group is at RAF Mildenhall, England, and the 353rd Special Operations Group, is at Kadena Air Base, Japan. Reserve AFSOC components include the 193rd Special Operations Wing, Air National Guard, stationed at Harrisburg, PA, the 280th Combat Communications Squadron, Air National Guard, stationed at Dothan, AL, and the 919th Special Operations Wing, Air Force Reserve, stationed at Duke Field, FL. AFSOC's three active-duty flying units are composed of more than 100 fixed and rotary-wing aircraft.

AFSOC Operational Requirements.¹⁰ AFSOC commander Air Force LTG Michael Wooley, noting that AFSOC plans to grow from 13,000 to 15,000 personnel by the end of FY2013, cites the need for both new and additional aircraft as well as time to train with existing and future aircraft as areas of major concern. Although AFSOC has stood up the 3rd Special Operations Squadron, consisting of six Predator unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), USSOCOM leadership suggests that they could use "dozens more." AFSOC is presently preparing to stand up its first CV-22 tilt rotor squadron, which is expected to be combat ready sometime in 2009. USSOCOM plans to replace its entire fleet of HH-53 Pave Low helicopters over the next two years with CV-22s, but not on a one-for-one basis as USSOCOM presently plans to procure only 50 CV-22s by 2017. In

⁶ Kevin Maurer, "Newly Formed 95th Civil Affairs Brigade Activates," *Fayetteville Times*, August 18, 2006.

⁷ For additional information on Air Force SOF units, see Robert Wall, "Conflict Could Test Special Ops Improvements," *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, October 1, 2001, p. 30.

⁸ Michael Sirak, "Air Force Assigns Special Operations Wing to Cannon Air Force Base," *Defense Daily*, June 22, 2006.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Information in this section is taken from Je DiMascio, "Olson: SOCOM Could Use Dozens of Additional UAVs," *Defense Daily*, April 25, 2007; Ann Roosevelt, "U.S.SOCOM Commander Details Aviation Needs," *Defense Daily*, May 17, 2007; Michael Sirak, "Wooley: Training Proficiency, Need for New Aircraft AFSOC's Biggest Concerns," *Defense Daily*, May 11, 2007; and David A. Fulghum, "USAF Special Ops Growing in Personnel and Equipment," *Aerospace Daily & Defense Report*, May 14, 2007.

addition, USSOCOM would like to increase the size of its MC-130 fleet to 61 aircraft to accommodate the growth of Army and Marine Corps special operations forces. AFSOC has also indicated that it would like to replace its eight AC-130H and 13 AC-130U gunships by 2020 with a new gunship. AFSOC leadership has also voiced concern that because special operations aircraft are being used so heavily that they are not as available for training as they should be, thereby adversely impacting on aircrew training.

Naval Special Operations Forces.¹¹ The Naval Special Warfare Command (NSWC) is located in Coronado, CA. NSWC is organized around eight SEAL Teams and two SEAL Delivery Vehicle (SDV) Teams. Two of these eight SEAL Teams are deployed at any given time, with each SEAL Team consisting of six SEAL platoons each, consisting of two officers and 16 enlisted personnel. The major operational components of NSWC include Naval Special Warfare Groups One and Three stationed in San Diego, CA, and Naval Special Warfare Groups Two and Four in Norfolk, VA. These components deploy SEAL Teams, SEAL Delivery Vehicle Teams, and Special Boat Teams worldwide to meet the training, exercise, contingency and wartime requirements of theater commanders. NSWC has approximately 5,400 total active-duty personnel — including 2,450 SEALs and 600 Special Warfare Combatant-Craft Crewmen (SWCC) — as well as a 1,200-person reserve component of approximately 325 SEALs, 125 SWCC and 775 support personnel. SEALs are considered the best-trained combat swimmers in the world, and can be deployed covertly from submarines or from sea-based aircraft.

Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC).¹² On November 1, 2005, DOD announced the creation of the Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC) as a component of USSOCOM. MARSOC consists of three subordinate units — the Marine Special Operations Regiment, the Foreign Military Training Unit, and the Special Operations Support Group — totaling approximately 2,600 Marines. MARSOC Headquarters, the Foreign Military Training Unit, and the Special Operations Support Group are stationed at Camp Lejeune, NC. The Marine Special Operations Regiment has its headquarters at Camp Lejeune and has an element stationed at Camp Pendleton, CA. MARSOC has reportedly deployed Foreign Military Training Teams to Africa and South America and two Marine Special Operations Battalions have been activated — one on each coast.¹³

Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). According to DOD, the JSOC is “a joint headquarters designed to study special operations requirements and techniques; ensure interoperability and equipment standardization; plan and conduct joint special

¹¹ Information in this section is from the U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command’s Official website, [<https://www.navsoc.navy.mil/>], accessed on March 6, 2007.

¹² Information in this section is taken from DOD Press Release No. 1127-05, dated November 1, 2005, Subject: Secretary of Defense Approves Marine Special Operations Command; Donna Miles, “Marine Corps to Join U.S. Special Operations Command,” American Forces Press Service, November 1, 2005; and Christian Lowe, “U.S. Marine Corps to Create Special Operations Unit,” Defense News, November 1, 2005.

¹³ Statement by General Bryan D. Brown, Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, before the House Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities, “Current Manning, Equipping, and Readiness Challenges Facing Special Operations Forces,” January 31, 2007, p. 4.

operations exercises and training; and develop joint special operations tactics.”¹⁴ While not official acknowledged by DOD or USSOCOM, JSOC, which is headquartered at Pope Air Force Base, NC, is widely believed to command and control what are described as the military’s three special missions units — the Army’s Delta Force, the Navy’s SEAL Team Six, a joint unit allegedly designed to conduct clandestine operations, as well as the 75th Ranger Regiment, the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment and the Air Force’s 24th Special Tactics Squadron.¹⁵ JSOC’s primary mission is believed to be identifying and destroying terrorists and terror cells worldwide.

USOCOM Budget

FY2008 Budget Request. USSOCOM requested \$3.28 billion for Operations & Maintenance (O&M); \$374 million for Research, Development, Test & Evaluation (RDT&E); \$1.83 billion for Procurement; and \$652 million for Military Construction (MILCON) for FY2008.¹⁶ USSOCOM also reportedly had \$391 million in “unfunded requirements for FY2008, including such items as body armor, laser range finders, advanced night vision devices, and weapons.”¹⁷

Recent Congressional Action.¹⁸ The House Armed Services Committee (HASC) recommended fully funding USSOCOM’s \$6.2 billion budget request and recommended that USSOCOM “place a greater emphasis on unconventional techniques and irregular warfare.” Toward this end, the HASC has recommended a number of initiatives to “empower USSOCOM and improve its ability to face current security challenges.” The HASC plans to update PL 99-661 to reflect USSOCOM’s planning, synchronizing, and executing roles as a supported combatant command in the war on terror. The HASC also wants to update and expand the Special Operations Activity list in law, elevating unconventional warfare as USSOCOM’s primary activity and de-emphasizing direct actions activities. The HASC also hopes to improve USSOCOM’s acquisition authorities and its funding authority to facilitate cooperation between foreign special forces and U.S. SOF. The Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) also recommended fully funding USSOCOM’s budget request and added an additional \$124 million to meet unfunded requirements for Mine-Resistant, Ambush-Proof (MRAP) vehicles. The SASC also directed the DOD Comptroller General to review the reorganization of the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy as it pertains to the ASD/SOLIC office. The SASC also added more than \$25 million to meet critical language and cultural awareness training requirements and for a variety of science and technology programs.

¹⁴ USSOCOM website [<http://www.socom.mil/components/components.htm>], accessed April 4, 2006.

¹⁵ Sean D. Naylor, “JSOC to Become Three-Star Command,” *Army Times*, February 13, 2006.

¹⁶ USSOCOM FY2008/FY2009 Budget Estimates, February 2007.

¹⁷ Jason Sherman, “SOCOM Requires Additional \$391 Million in FY-08 for Body Armor, Weapons,” *InsideDefense.com*, February 19, 2007.

¹⁸ Information in this section is taken from House Armed Services Committee Press Release, “House Armed Services Committee Approves Fiscal Year 2008 Defense Authorization Bill,” May 9, 2007 and Senate Armed Services Committee Press Release, “Senate Statement on the FY-08 Defense Authorization Bill,” May 25, 2007.

Issues for Congress

Availability of JSOC Assets.¹⁹ Not unlike conventional Army and Marine forces, JSOC special mission units, are reportedly being stressed by the high operational tempo in Iraq and Afghanistan. In total, JSOC is believed to consist of 1,000 “operators” and support and intelligence personnel. JSOC forces thought to be operating in Iraq include about 120 Delta soldiers and an equal number of SEALs, augmented by about 800 Army Rangers. These forces reportedly conduct anywhere from six to a dozen raids every day throughout Iraq against Al Qaeda and insurgent targets. While JSOC operations in Iraq have been considered by some as highly effective, the focus on Iraq has supposedly resulted in a significantly reduced JSOC presence in Afghanistan. JSOC reportedly had once maintained a “robust” presence of 100 “operators” and a large contingent of Rangers in Afghanistan, but demands in Iraq have decreased this force to about 30 SEALs and 100 Rangers. While some might consider this an inequitable distribution of JSOC forces, circumstances in Afghanistan where many Al Qaeda targets operate in and out of Pakistan likely result in fewer actionable opportunities for JSOC forces in Afghanistan than Iraq. Some are nonetheless concerned that there are not enough uncommitted JSOC forces to address other potential threats outside of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Investigation of MARSOC Forces Ordered to Leave Afghanistan.²⁰ On March 4, 2007, a MARSOC platoon in six High Mobility Multi Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWVs) patrolling in Nangarhar Province, Afghanistan responded to a suicide bombing by firing on Afghans, resulting in more than 40 Afghans killed or wounded. Believing the actions by the MARSOC platoon to be excessive, the U.S. commander in Afghanistan ordered the entire MARSOC company to leave Afghanistan and subsequently initiated an investigation into the incident. The results of the investigation, in addition to establishing accountability, might also cover organizational, leadership, and training deficiencies that might have contributed to the Marine’s actions on that day. Another issue that might be examined is if the MARSOC company was deployed to Afghanistan earlier than it should have been, owing to the recent creation of MARSOC. It is conceivable that in an effort to relieve stress on special operations forces as well to demonstrate the effectiveness of newly-created MARSOC units, that this unit was deployed into a situation that it may not have had the experience, cultural awareness, or maturity to handle. One potential result of this action might be that MARSOC units might not be permitted back into Afghanistan by the Afghan government for the foreseeable future.

¹⁹ Information in this section is taken from Rowan Scarborough, “United States Terrorist Hunters Stretched Thin,” *Washington Examiner*, May 27, 2007 and Thom Shanker, “Special Operations: High Profile, But in Shadow,” *New York Times*, May 29, 2007.

²⁰ Information in this section is taken from “U.S. Pulls Marines Out of Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, March 23, 2007; Carlotta Gall, “Marine’s Actions in Afghanistan Called Excessive,” *New York Times*, April 15, 2007; and Ann Scott Tyson and Josh White, “Marines Killed Civilians, U.S. Says,” *Washington Post*, April 15, 2007.