

National Interest Vs Marine Corps Perspective: Why The Marine Corps Should  
Contribute A Permanent Force To The United States Special Operations Command

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WHY THE MARINE CORPS SHOULD CONTRIBUTE A PERMANENT FORCE TO  
THE UNITED STATES SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND

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NATIONAL INTEREST VS MARINE CORPS PERSPECTIVE:

WHY THE MARINE CORPS SHOULD CONTRIBUTE A PERMANENT FORCE TO  
THE UNITED STATES SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND

Thesis: The commitment of a permanent Marine component force to SOCOM would have a positive impact on national strategic objectives and be beneficial to the Nation, SOCOM and the Marine Corps.

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To the detriment of national strategic objectives, the United States Marine Corps has successfully avoided contributing a permanent Marine component force to the United States Special Operations Command (SOCOM) for the last seventeen years. The Marine Corps' contentions of "Marines support Marines" and "there are no special Marines" have been the basis for the Corps' resistance to full participation in SOCOM. As a combatant command SOCOM is leading the planning and synchronization for execution of the Global War on Terror (GWOT). The commitment of a permanent Marine component force to SOCOM would have a positive impact on national strategic objectives and be beneficial to the Nation, SOCOM and the Marine Corps.

#### BACKGROUND

A "unified combatant command for special operations forces" was officially mandated by Congress on 14 October 1986, when the National Defense Authorization Act was passed amending the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986.(5:4) This legislation was in direct response to reviews of the failed Iran hostage rescue mission and of the invasion of Grenada that identified command and control as a crucial element for the successful conduct of future special operations missions.

SOCOM was officially activated on 16 April 1987 and given responsibility for doctrine, training, and budgeting of all United States special operations forces (SOF).(5:3) All Army, Navy and Air Force special operations units were eventually consolidated under the new command. The Navy provides SEALs and special boat units, the Air Force contributes para-rescue men, combat control technicians, combat weather and special operations aviation, and the Army provides Special Forces, civil affairs,

psychological operations, ranger regiment and special operations aviation. These units comprise a force of approximately 45,000 service members. SOCOM consist of about 1.3% of the Department of Defense's (DOD) personnel and utilizes roughly 1.3% of the DOD budget. Together these units conduct the full spectrum of special operations missions in support of national strategic objectives.(7:3)

SOCOM, like the Department of Defense, is in the process of transformation. This transformation involves not only changing how SOCOM will attack the new enemy in the GWOT but also changing how SOCOM will be led and employed in the future. "In collaboration with the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict, SOCOM has made great strides since the September 11, 2001 attacks to rapidly and successfully transition from a command primarily focused on training and equipping SOF, to becoming our nation's lead command for planning and executing the Global War on Terror" (GWOT).(2:3) As a result the USSOCOM mission statement was modified to state:

USSOCOM plans, directs, and executes special operations in the conduct of the GWOT in order to disrupt, defeat and destroy terrorist networks that threaten the United States, its citizens and interests worldwide.

USSOCOM organizes, trains and equips SOF provided to Geographic Combatant Commanders, American Ambassadors, and their Country Teams. (2:4)

Some of the challenges SOCOM faces and must overcome are specific to the command. "SOCOM is a unique combatant command in that it has service like responsibilities to organize, train, and equip forces to support the geographic combatant

commanders and at the same time plan, direct, and execute special operations missions in the conduct of the GWOT.”(1:10) For this reason, it is imperative that SOCOM maintain oversight of its service components to insure standards are maintained and forces are capable of conducting their core task in unconventional ways. “Because of that, SOCOM is uncomfortable employing conventional forces to the extent that the Marines feel they deserve to be employed.”(1:10)

From the early stages of SOCOM development, the Marine Corps has adamantly opposed a permanent affiliation with the command. The Marine Corps has successfully made the case against providing SOCOM with a permanent Marine component force, contending that the Corps does not have special operations forces, there are no “special” marines, and the Corps would not create new special units. “The Corps believed its forces to be at least as special as SOCOM forces, especially in regard to amphibious operations”.(1:6) A longstanding philosophy that Marines support Marines contributes significantly to the Corps’ resistance to provide a force to SOCOM as well. Despite the resistance to full participation in SOCOM, the Marine Corps developed Marine expeditionary unit, special operations capable (MUE SOC) in 1987. The Corps further expanded its SOF like units in 1989 with the formation of force reconnaissance direct action platoons. These two units were instructed by the Marine Corps to be capable of conducting various SOF like missions. Although SOCOM is a combatant command (COCOM), the Marine Corps continued to resist a COCOM relationship of Marine forces to SOCOM.

## NATIONAL STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

Special operations forces provide a unique capability to both the nation and the geographic combatant commander that cannot otherwise be fulfilled by conventional or general-purpose forces. The Joint Staff Officer's Guide, AFSC Pub 1, defines special operations as "Operations conducted by specially trained, equipped, and organized DOD forces against strategic and tactical targets in pursuit of national objectives." FM 100-25 describes special operations:

Political-military considerations frequently shape special operations, requiring clandestine, covert, or low-visibility techniques and oversight at the national level. Special operations usually differ from conventional operations in their degree of risk, operational techniques, mode of employment, independence from friendly support, and dependence upon operational intelligence and indigenous assets.

Consequently, the operational tactics, techniques and procedures SOF personnel employ, as well as the unique equipment required for SOF missions, differ significantly from those of conventional or general-purpose forces. For these reasons, SOCOM must vigorously maintain the highest training standards in order to accomplish special operations missions. This requires all branches of service to provide the appropriate number of personnel to SOCOM.

SOCOM continuously deploys SOF personnel globally in support of National Strategic Objectives. In support of these objectives, SOF conduct special reconnaissance, direct action missions, foreign internal defense, and other special operations missions. The Marine Corps is ideally suited to provide a force capable of deploying to train

foreign military units with minimal preparation. The Marine Corps' ability to fill this vital role in SOCOM would allow other SOF units to be available to conduct other operations in support of the GWOT. The key to SOCOM's successful conduct of special operations missions and ability to provide geographic combatant commanders with SOF, is finding the right personnel trained to SOCOM standards and resourced with the right equipment to accomplish the mission. Locating the right personnel to fill the ranks of SOCOM is an inherent responsibility of all the military service components.

### GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR

After September 11, 2001 the Secretary of Defense urged all of the military services to increase their support to SOCOM. Within the Marine Corps proponents of a permanent Marine force in special operations argue "for a closer integration between the Marine Corps and SOF, through more capable Marine units and even a Marine Corps component headquarters to SOF".(1:9) These proponents primarily come from the reconnaissance community. Conversely, the "rank and file" Marines, those primarily outside the reconnaissance community, "are focused on support of the Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF), Marine Expeditionary Battalion (MEB), or the Marine Expeditionary Unit (MUE)" and are opposed to anything that may pull personnel or resources away from these units.

At a time when SOF is in high demand worldwide and SOCOM is the leading combatant command for planning and synchronizing the GWOT, the Marine Corps' official entry into the special operations community would be beneficial at the operational and strategic levels. The Marine Corps' entry as a permanent component force into SOCOM would provide the combatant commander with a unique capability



that is not otherwise provided. A platoon or greater size Marine component combat force would provide a highly flexible, fully integrated, medium size special operation force. The unit would be amphibious in nature, capable of conducting a wide range of special operations missions and highly skilled in ground combat. This force would provide increased combat power and flexibility to SOF commanders for execution of special operations missions. With the exception of the Army Ranger Regiment, most special operations forces are significantly smaller than a Marine combat platoon. This Marine component force would contribute greatly to SOCOM's ability to accomplish special operations missions in support of national strategic objectives and the GWOT. Inherent to conducting special operations missions is the ability to operate in a joint operational environment. The Marine Corps' entry as a permanent component into SOCOM would promote interoperability between the services.

### MARINE CORPS

The Marine Corps would greatly benefit from this cooperative effort as well. SOCOM consistently maintains the highest training standards in the military and allocates substantial money and resources to ensure SOF personnel are fully prepared to deploy for combat. The Navy SEALs' entry into SOCOM is a prime example of a group benefiting from a relationship with SOCOM. In fact the SEALs' have profited greatly due to their entry into SOCOM. Their missions have expanded beyond responsibility for maritime operations as a result of the relationship. The Marine Corps' entry into SOCOM would have similar advantages. The shared experience and knowledge of service members within SOCOM to those in conventional or general-purpose forces is invaluable. This shared knowledge keep conventional forces apprised of the most

current tactics, techniques, and procedures used within the special operations community, such as the most current breaching techniques and optics available. This skill and experience can also be re-integrated into the operating force through the natural turnover of personnel. The Army Ranger Regiment is a subordinate command to the United States Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) and part of SOCOM. Army Rangers, both officers and enlisted, regularly move between conventional combat units and the Ranger Regiment. This lateral movement of personnel is beneficial to all units involved. The Marine Corps would experience the same transfer of personnel and skills between SOCOM units and general purpose forces.

#### COUNTERARGUMENT

Some Marines will argue “Marines support Marines” and, therefore, the Marine Corps should not become a permanent component of SOCOM. However, throughout the military, support is drawn from the service that can best provide it: the Navy provides corpsman to the Marine Corps, the Air Force provides strategic mobility to all services and every service but the Marine Corps provide forces to SOCOM to conduct special operations missions. In addition, the Marine Corps contends that every Marine is special and that there are not special Marine units in the Marine Corps. Both arguments are undermined by the development of the MEU (SOC) and force reconnaissance direct action platoons given special operations like missions. With the development of these two units, the Marine Corps has acknowledged the need for SOF and identified “special” Marines and “special” Marine units to conduct special operations-like missions. The only unresolved issue is to become an official part of SOF by committing a permanent Marine component force to SOCOM. The mission at hand for the Nation, fighting the

GWOT, requires highly trained SOF personnel provided by all the military service components to SOCOM.

The Marine Corps considers itself special, and “It sees its concept of combined arms, embodied in the Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF), as one that is unique and that can make a substantive contributions at the level of formal SOF units.”(1:6) The Marine Corps is resistant to commit a permanent force to SOCOM because it doesn’t want to lose control of critical personnel who are in high demand for MAGTF operations. Instead, the Marine Corps’ approach is to provide the unit and capabilities to the combatant commander, while retaining control over those forces. While this approach works well dealing with conventional forces, it lacks the required oversight needed for SOCOM forces. Furthermore, this approach does not comply with Title 10, section 167, which states that “unless otherwise directed by the Secretary of Defense, all active and reserve special operations forces stationed in the United States shall be assigned to USSOCOM.”

## CONCLUSION

The United States military is manned and resourced by Congress to defend the country from all enemies, foreign, and domestic. The military services’ primary function is to provide combatant commanders with the forces required to fight and win the nations wars. SOCOM is the lead combatant command planning and synchronizing the GWOT around the world, and it provides qualified SOF personnel to geographic combatant commanders to conduct special operations in support of theater operations. The Marine Corps’ warrior ethos and integrated combined arms approach to expeditionary operations makes it ideally suited to provide SOCOM with personnel to conduct special operations.

With the Marine Corps providing a permanent component force, SOCOM will be able to ensure the rapid and seamless integration of Marines into special operations. As a nation at war, defeating the enemy and conserving American lives is the highest priority.

Ultimately, the good of the nation should be the driving force behind all Department of Defense decisions regardless of military service component.

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