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THESIS

**DEPTH VS. BREADTH:
TALENT MANAGEMENT FOR SPECIAL WARFARE**

by

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December 2016

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TALENT MANAGEMENT FOR SPECIAL WARFARE**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents recommendations for improving officer talent management for Special Warfare units. Success in this complex, human domain demands that key planners and commanders of a Special Warfare campaign operate with a long-term perspective, a depth of expertise, and a strong network of relationships. However, on any given day in a U.S. Army Special Forces Group, the preponderance of field grade officers are in their first year on the job.

With a particular focus on what constitutes adequate time in key leadership positions, this thesis examines talent management in Nordic SOF units, the Intelligence Community, Google, and elite college basketball teams. Based on how these exceptional organizations balance breadth vs. depth—and grounded in interviews with former four-star commanders and Defense Department leadership—the research determines that the current method of rotating field grade officers through key jobs every 12–24 months is antithetical to the needs of Special Warfare. The thesis concludes with three recommendations to improve talent management for field grade Special Forces officers.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ADC	Aide-de-Camp
ADM	Admiral (O-10)
ARSOF	Army Special Operations Forces
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
COL	Colonel (O-6)
CPT	Captain (O-3)
CT	Counterterrorism
DA	Department of the Army
DCI	Director of Central Intelligence
DNI	Director of National Intelligence
DOD	Department of Defense
DOPMA	Defense Officer Personnel Management Act
FY	Fiscal Year
G-1	Personnel (Army)
GEN	General (O-10)
HR	Human Resources
HRC	Human Resources Command
IC	Intelligence Community
ILE	Intermediate Level Education (O-4 level)
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force (NATO)
JSOC	Joint Special Operations Command
KD	Key Developmental
LNO	Liaison Officer
LTC	Lieutenant Colonel (O-5)
MAJ	Major (O-4)
MOS	Military Occupational Specialty
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NBA	National Basketball Association
NCAA	National Collegiate Athletics Association
NCO	Non-commissioned officer

NSA	National Security Agency
ODA	Operational Detachment- Alpha
OEF	Operation Enduring Freedom
OER	Officer Evaluation Report
OGLA	Officer Grade Limitation Act
OIC	Officer in charge
OPA	Officer Personnel Act of 1947
OSD	Office of the Secretary of Defense
OSS	Office of Strategic Services
PD	Preferred Developmental
RASP	Ranger Assessment and Selection Program
RET	Retired
S-3	Operations (Army)
SES	Senior Executive Service
SF	Special Forces (Army)
SOF	Special Operations Forces
SWCS	Special Warfare Center and School
TSOC	Theater Special Operations Command
UK	University of Kentucky
UNC	University of North Carolina
USASOC	U.S. Army Special Operations Command
USSOCOM	U.S. Special Operations Command
UW	Unconventional Warfare
XO	Executive Officer

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A. TALENT MANAGEMENT FOR SPECIAL WARFARE

Special Warfare is a vital tool in conflicts against both state and non-state actors fought in the murky places between war and peace. But just as Special Warfare is important, it is also extremely complex. In an interview for this project, ADM (Ret.) William McRaven, former commander of USSOCOM and JSOC, described the difference between direct action operations and Special Warfare. He stated plainly, “The harder part—the much harder part—is working by, with, and through.”¹

Yet, despite the daunting nature of pursuing a long-duration, relationship-driven, indirect approach, the U.S. Army’s Special Warfare forces rapidly churn through leaders just like conventional Infantry or Armor branches. In an Army Special Forces Group, every single commander and key practitioner, from O-4 to O-6, will rotate every 12–24 months. Sometimes faster. The result should strike any reasonable person as deeply problematic. At any given moment in a Special Forces Group, the preponderance of our Special Warfare leaders and planners are serving in the first year of their current job.

Consequently, my research focuses on a narrow but important aspect of talent management: how long should a leader be in each role before rotating up or out? This project draws on interviews with leaders from other elite, people-driven organizations—the country’s top college basketball teams, the Director of People Operations at Google, the U.S. Intelligence Community, and Nordic Special Operations units—as well as interviews with former 4-star SOF commanders, officers at SF branch and the Army G-1, and the former Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness.

B. DEPTH VS. BREADTH

I begin by looking at how we currently manage officer career paths—and why. Our personnel system is a product of the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act, or DOPMA. Little has changed since DOPMA was signed into law in 1980. And frankly,

¹ William H. McRaven, “JSOC Commander’s Update to ISAF SOF” (presentation, International Security Assistance Force SOF Commander’s Conference, Kabul, Afghanistan, December 2010).

the collection of reforms represented by this act was nothing new; DOPMA carved in statutory stone the existing officer management paradigm—including the concept of “up-or-out” promotions—which had solidified directly after World War II. The result, it is worth noting, is that the way in which our military manages officers in the 21st century is based on 60- and even 70-year-old reforms. And these reforms are firmly rooted in how officer management was accomplished during a worldwide, conventional conflict fought in the first half of the 20th century.

The benefit of our up-or-out system is officer breadth; officers rotate regularly through various jobs as they promote (or depart). But there are costs to leader rotation, and the costs rise significantly when operating in a complex, human domain like Special Warfare. Churning leaders through key positions creates a problematic degree of organizational turbulence. But there are two, more subtle results of rapid rotation: short-term perspective and a lack of legitimate expertise. Both are antithetical to success when conducting a complex, long-duration mission.

C. TALENT MANAGEMENT IN EXCEPTIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Bearing in mind the challenges created by talent churn, I turned to other, elite organizations that operate in dynamic and competitive environments, labor under the expectation of continued and repeatable success, and believe that the fundamental building block for that success is their carefully selected people.

Nordic SOF units—elite units from Sweden, Denmark, and Norway—are small and nimble. As a result, they enjoy a striking level of talent management dexterity. These units recognize that true expertise takes time; leaders spend 3–4 years in key jobs, which enables them to develop expertise, take a long-term perspective, and build a durable network of relationships. These Special Operations units also recognize that an officer’s first year is the least likely period to see bold, innovative leadership and decision making.

To understand how the Intelligence Community addresses the factor of time in the job given their similar requirements for regional expertise and key relationships, I turned to the Central Intelligence Agency’s Director for Leadership Learning, the National Security Agency’s Technical Director for Workplace Development, and the former Chief

Human Capital Officer for the Intelligence Community. Organizations in the Intelligence Community recognize that success will often depend on a network of human relationships that cross-cuts bureaucratic and national boundaries. Building such networks requires developing trust—which takes time. Of note, these leaders from the Intelligence Community also emphasized the importance of a third year in the job.

At Google, I spoke with Laszlo Bock, the Director of People Operations. Google values long-term perspective, and sees two years in the job as a minimum. The recommendation: shoot for three. In fact, Bock cautioned that by asking leaders to make a measurable impact in the first 12 months of their tenure, the organization may end up rewarding leaders who “play the game” and manage up.² Tragically, this short-term incentive structure also tends to select against the less flashy leaders who humbly seek to enable their peers and are steadily making everyone around them better.

Finally, this thesis leans on interviews with the basketball coaching staff at the University of North Carolina, Duke University, and the University of Kentucky. In the last 30 years, these three college basketball programs have been in the Final Four a combined 29 times—they are truly elite. Because of the allure of the NBA Draft, the best college teams face the perennial challenge of winning with first-year players; they churn through top talent even faster than any Special Warfare unit. Consequently, coaches go out of their way to emphasize the importance of legacy. Simply making new players aware of the team’s rich history is not enough. Through time spent together, current players join a close-knit group of team alumni and basketball greats. By coming together every summer, these teams build the network and better understand that they are part of something far bigger than themselves.

D. RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of my research lead to three recommendations. First, and most importantly, is to recognize that we, the Special Warfare community, have a problem. Over the course of interviewing more than 25 leaders and experts from a variety of

² Laszlo Bock (Google’s Director of People Operations), in interview with the author, August 23, 2016.

backgrounds—from former SF battalion commanders to former four-star commanders, from a former SF branch manager to a former Under Secretary of Defense, and from Google’s top talent manager to coaches at elite college basketball programs—not a single person believes 12 months in the job is an effective way to do business in a complex domain. Most agree that 24 months is an absolute minimum—and that a third year could make a considerable difference. Acknowledging the problem means recognizing a significant opportunity to improve. To do so requires assembling an empowered team to better analyze the issues and to recommend clever and effectual ways to move forward.

My second recommendation is to decelerate O-4 churn. Special Forces Majors should spend two years in each job. With two years as an SF Company Commander or in a key staff position, officers can truly understand the current problem set. They can afford to think beyond a 12-month report card. They can develop a level of mastery in their craft. And they can cultivate the right relationships. If indeed our commitment to the Army is to stand ready with experts who can plan and conduct a long-duration Special Warfare campaign, then we cannot continue to churn our O-4s through company commands and key planning jobs. As GEN (Ret.) Stanley McChrystal explained, individuals possess a different mindset when they know they will be in the job long enough to reap what they sow; they will take ownership of the problem.³ Meanwhile, if slowing down that officer churn ratchets up the competition among O-4s in the SF Regiment, then that increased competition will offer battalion and group commanders an opportunity to more deliberately manage the talent seeking to return to Special Forces Groups by holding a brief but rigorous field grade selection event.

Finally, because the benefits of a third year on the job were repeatedly mentioned by leaders and experts during the course of my research, further study should be invested in understanding the pros and cons of lengthening command tours for both O-5 and O-6 officers in command of Special Warfare units. For instance, GEN (Ret.) McChrystal made it clear that when a commander is trying to lead in an environment where change

³ Stanley McChrystal (former ISAF and JSOC Commander), in interview with the author, September 29, 2016.

takes time, “two years is not enough... you probably need three.”⁴ And as Harvard Business Professor John Gabarro reminds us in *The Dynamics of Taking Charge*:

If an individual manager’s prior experience is broad and deep and also appropriate to the assignment, eighteen months to two years may be sufficient. *I suspect this is unlikely*. I would argue that companies looking for “quick fixes” with brief assignments at upper and middle levels will get just that. The manager will not be there long enough to deal with problems beyond those that become apparent or obvious to him based on his past experience.⁵

While U.S. Army Special Warfare units will seek to select, train, and groom exceptional leaders, and while, ideally, our leaders may rotate through similar regions and similar jobs throughout their careers, it is worth bearing in mind ADM (Ret.) McRaven’s recommendation for what to do with our best officers: “If you’re really good, well then the [service] ought to leave you some place so you can *make a difference*—not just get your ticket punched.”⁶

⁴ Stanley McChrystal (former ISAF and JSOC Commander), in interview with the author, September 29, 2016.

⁵ John J. Gabarro, *The Dynamics of Taking Charge* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1987). Emphasis added.

⁶ William H. McRaven (former SOCOM and JSOC Commander), in interview with the author, September 26, 2016.

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. THE IMPORTANCE OF SPECIAL WARFARE

Special Warfare matters. Across the globe, conflicts increasingly occur in the space between peace and a formal state of war. Since World War II, the United States has regularly found itself confronted with what President John F. Kennedy called “another type of war...war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins, war by ambush instead of by combat; by infiltration, instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him.”¹ It is safe to assume our nation will continue to ask the U.S. Special Operations community to provide solutions to these tough, ambiguous problems.

Such irregular conflicts often require an indirect approach, as opposed to conventional or head-on engagement. Furthermore, there is a mounting body of research indicating that when powerful nations meet indirect threats with an indirect approach, like Special Warfare, they increase their chance for success. Conversely, the same research suggests a weak actor’s best hope for success against a far superior opponent lies in that strong actor making the mistake of choosing a direct strategic approach.² Put simply, Special Warfare is a vital tool in conflicts against both state and non-state actors fought in the murky places between war and peace.³

B. SPECIAL WARFARE IS CHALLENGING

If indeed Special Warfare matters, then our ability to do it well is unquestionably important. But doing it well is not easy. Special Warfare is, by its very nature, a demanding and unconventional task. The U.S. Army defines Special Warfare as:

¹ John F. Kennedy, “Remarks at West Point to the Graduating Class of the U.S. Military Academy” (speech, June 6, 1962), American Presidency Project, accessed August 12, 2016, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=8695>.

² Ivan Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

³ USSOCOM, “USSOCOM White Paper: The Gray Zone” (white paper, USSOCOM, September 9, 2015).

The execution of activities that involve a combination of lethal and non-lethal actions taken by specially trained and educated forces that have a deep understanding of cultures and foreign language, proficiency in small-unit tactics, subversion, sabotage and the ability to build and fight alongside indigenous combat formations in a permissive, uncertain or hostile environment.⁴

It is equally germane to describe what Special Warfare is not. Special Warfare is not a task for conventional units; the U.S. Army has assigned this task to Special Operations Forces (SOF). While there will be overlap and some degree of interdependence between SOF and Conventional Forces, *Army Doctrine Program 3-05: Special Operations* clearly states that Army SOF (ARSOF) is the force tasked with providing world-class Special Warfare (and Surgical Strike) capabilities.⁵ And speaking of Surgical Strike, it is worth pointing out that this vital form of Special Operations is necessarily direct; herein we are specifically interested in the indirect approach.

In fact, during an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) SOF Commander's Conference in 2010, the commander of Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), offered a telling comparison. While discussing the unquestionable importance of pressuring the enemy network through direct action missions, the JSOC Commander acknowledged that Surgical Strike forces have it relatively easy, telling the assembled commanders that their multinational, partnered approach to Special Warfare was, "without question, the tougher task."⁶

So what is it about Special Warfare that makes it such a complex domain? First, Special Warfare is typically a long-duration effort.⁷ The unhurried, deliberate nature of the indirect approach requires operational patience and strategic persistence, it makes creating measures of effectiveness a hellacious challenge, and it works against our ability to properly incentivize Special Warfare leaders and practitioners.

⁴ Department of the Army, *Special Operations* (FM ADP 3-05) (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, August 2012), https://fas.org/irp/doddir/army/adp3_05.pdf.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ William H. McRaven, "JSOC Commander's Update to ISAF SOF" (presentation, International Security Assistance Force SOF Commander's Conference, Kabul, Afghanistan, December 2010).

⁷ Joseph L. Votel et al., "Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone," *National Defense University Press Joint Forces Quarterly*, no. 80 (1st quarter 2016): 160.

Special Warfare is also, by its very nature, a people business; it requires nurturing the right relationships. Whether conducting Foreign Internal Defense, Counterinsurgency, or Unconventional Warfare, Special Operations Forces will be working through or with indigenous forces and will often find themselves in politically sensitive environments. These efforts will require interagency relationships and host-nation partnerships.⁸ As former USSOCOM Commander ADM William McRaven repeatedly cautioned when speaking about operating across cultural boundaries, “You can’t surge trust.”⁹

Finally, Special Warfare requires significant domain knowledge. Ideally, we will continue to select high-potential problem solvers and foster an emotionally intelligent approach to leadership. However, a credible Special Warfare capability will require more than the right leader or a purpose-built qualification course; it requires commanders and planners who are experts in assessing and addressing the problem at hand. The depth of understanding required from Special Warfare leaders and key practitioners includes cultural competency, a rich understanding of the local and regional environment, knowledge about social movement theory and resistance, and the necessary education and experience with networks—to include clandestine logistics networks, network development, or co-opting an existing network for our own purposes.¹⁰ Some of the required expertise is broadly applicable to Special Warfare as a domain; some of it will be intensely specific, given the local and regional problems at hand.

C. FOCUS ON THE HUMAN DOMAIN

The purpose of this thesis is to identify a way to take our U.S. Special Warfare capability to the next level. While I will largely focus on the Special Forces Regiment, this work will be applicable to Civil Affairs, Psychological Operations, and indeed any unit within U.S. Special Operations Command that finds itself with the important and arduous task of offering our nation a viable, indirect approach to warfare.

⁸ Department of the Army, *Special Operations*.

⁹ David Trulio, “You Can’t Surge Trust—Insights from the Opening of the Aspen Security Forum,” *Security Debrief*, July 27, 2012, <http://securitydebrief.com/2012/07/27/you-cant-surge-trust-insights-from-the-opening-of-the-aspen-security-forum/>.

¹⁰ “ARSOF 2022 Part II,” U.S. Army Special Operations Command, 2014.

To achieve success in this complex pursuit, the key ingredient is found within the human domain. However, the domain I intend to cover is not in some far-flung corner of the world; perhaps the greatest opportunity for improvement is within our own ranks.¹¹ Despite the daunting requirement to provide a long-duration, relationship-driven, indirect approach, the U.S. Army's Special Warfare forces rapidly churn through leaders and vital staff positions just like conventional Infantry or Armor branches. A Special Warfare campaign will likely require years of patient engagement, relationship building, and expert application of a nuanced strategy.¹² However, every single field grade commander and key practitioner in an Army Special Forces Group, from O-4 to O-6, will rotate every 12–24 months. Sometimes faster.

As Special Warfare challenges proliferate and the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) seeks creative solutions for improved personnel practices, it is time to ask the question: What characterizes effective talent management for Special Warfare?

D. THE CASE FOR TALENT MANAGEMENT

Talent management, or strategic human resource planning, is a broad term. Thinking strategically about the workforce means managing selection, rewards, retention, development, promotions, career path design, and a host of other human resource (HR) functions.¹³ This thesis will focus on a narrow but important aspect of talent management: time. How long should a leader be in each role before rotating up or out? How should leaders balance the importance of depth and breadth? While the time-on-the-job aspect of talent management may sound relatively simple, the implications extend to succession planning, leader development, career paths, officer retention, and beyond.

Why focus on how long officers remain in a single job? Because instead of proposing a new, resource-driven approach that requires better funding, improved

¹¹ The Army G1 refers to this internal aspect of the force as “The Human Dimension”; see https://www.army.mil/standto/archive_2014-07-03.

¹² David Maxwell, “Thoughts on the Future of Special Operations,” *Small Wars Journal*, October 31, 2013, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/printpdf/14833>.

¹³ Ed Michaels, Helen Handfield-Jones, and Beth Axelrod, *The War for Talent* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2001).

support, more realistic training, or more superlative education—instead of proposing more of the same—the most efficient and effective approach available is to examine the opportunity cost that inhere in what we are currently doing with the talented officers we already have.

During my time as a Special Forces Captain, I had leaders who continually challenged me by entrusting me with new and demanding roles. In the five years I spent in Stuttgart, Germany, I served in five entirely different jobs.¹⁴ Without question, this proved broadening. But I began to consider the organizational cost of leadership churn. If I am honest, I never spent long at the top of a learning curve; if I am particularly honest, I am not sure I ever made it to the top in any of those jobs. We have all heard the common refrain: “I was just getting good when I left.”

But my story is far from unusual. One of my three battalion commanders in Germany, a high-potential officer who has been repeatedly selected for challenging assignments, told me that his 24 months in battalion command marked the first time since being on an ODA that he was in a job for more than 12 months. In fact, between detachment and battalion command, he held seven key positions—each one of them for 10–12 months at a time.¹⁵

These are not isolated examples. Because the officers in the Special Warfare community are selected for both promotion and command by the Department of the Army, the official guidance from Special Forces Branch (at U.S. Army Human Resources Command, or HRC) is actually quite similar to the guidance coming out of Infantry

¹⁴ I served as a liaison officer (LNO) in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), two very different Key Developmental (KD) assignments, a Preferred Developmental (PD) assignment, and a broadening assignment.

¹⁵ LTC(P) Josh Kennedy’s path from ODA Command to Battalion Command: HSC Commander, SF Group Assistant S3, SF Company Commander, SF Battalion S3, SF Group S3, TSOC J35, TSOC Commanding General’s Executive Officer. The only position lasting longer than 12 months was non-operational—as a student at the Naval Postgraduate School.

Branch.¹⁶ SF Branch plainly emphasizes breadth over depth; branch guidance repeatedly stresses the importance of immediate and measurable performance in each new job and recommends broadening yourself over seeking opportunities to acquire personal expertise (or staying in a role long enough to improve organizational stability). In fact, when asked about opportunities to reduce the personnel churn by keeping an officer in a job longer than 12 months, the briefer from Special Forces Branch made the HRC perspective abundantly clear: “Spending a second year as a Special Forces Company Commander is a disservice to that officer.”¹⁷

HRC is tasked by the Army with developing “agile and adaptive” officers and ensuring our top talent remains competitive for promotion and command.¹⁸ But for special operators in the human domain, might stringing together a collection of 10–12-month experiences as an O-4 be a disservice to *the mission*?

So here is our dilemma: Special Warfare requires more than just great leaders; it requires experienced planners and operational practitioners with deep domain knowledge, a long-term perspective, and carefully cultivated relationships. And our key leadership positions in Special Warfare—those of commander and operations officer—are filled by our most promising officers. Yet, despite the clear requirement for depth, the same high-potential officers are the most likely to be rotating rapidly through those key jobs. Ultimately, breadth is prized while depth is defined by how many repetitions an officer acquires in a similar position, rather than how long he remains engaged with a single challenge.

This thesis focuses specifically on talent management for the field grade officer population because officers drive our operational performance. Therefore, this segment of

¹⁶ The Infantry Branch newsletter from 3rd Quarter FY16 enumerates key career decision points. Infantry officers are cautioned that their first officer evaluation report (OER) as an O-3 Commander, their first O-4 KD OER, and their first OER as an O-5 Commander will each determine their potential for promotion, further broadening assignments, and future opportunities to lead troops. They must make an immediate and measurable impact within the first 12 months or risk being shown the door.

¹⁷ “Human Resources Command: Special Forces Branch Brief” (presentation, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, March 15, 2016).

¹⁸ “HRC Mission and Vision,” United States Army Human Resources Command, November 8, 2016, <https://www.hrc.army.mil/content/HRC%20Mission%20and%20Vision>.

the force offers the greatest potential for improvement at the operational level.¹⁹ At the tactical level, we ask our SOF warriors to be highly skilled and adaptable problem solvers—tactically proficient, physically fit, culturally aware, qualified in their language, and masters in their military occupational specialty (MOS). The lion’s share of our tactical competence will always come from experienced non-commissioned officers (NCOs), but someone must take on the immense challenge of pursuing mastery in the planning and execution of Special Warfare. While NCOs and warrant officers will play a supporting role in this effort, our field grade officers will be the leaders ultimately responsible for the operational-level planning and command of Special Warfare. And at higher levels of command, our field grade officers will be the ones asked to provide answers for strategic-level decision makers. As my First Sergeant in the 82nd Airborne Division often told me when I asked tough questions of my chain of command, “Like it or not, this is an officer-driven organization.”

In order to explore our potential for operational improvement, this thesis will borrow from the literature on human capital management while exploring actor-specific examples of what exceptional talent management looks like. I will begin with a quick overview of how we, the military, arrived where we are today with officer management. I will also address some of the underlying theoretical and empirical ideas about leader rotation. But the bulk of this work will focus on carefully selected, informative cases of talent management. I believe the result will be threefold: First, I would humbly submit that it never hurts to conduct an azimuth check—for the Special Warfare community to better understand the impact of talent management practices. Second, I will endeavor to identify both notable successes and hard lessons learned by other organizations. Finally, I am optimistic that our Special Warfare leaders will be interested in these findings, and will glean some specific best practices or improvements worth their time and effort.

It is always something of a stretch to compare the U.S. military to other organizations. Because no comparison is ever perfectly analogous, I have deliberately chosen a broad range of places in which to identify exceptional talent management

¹⁹ Talent management for Special Warfare NCOs is equally important. However, the scope of my research is necessarily limited.

practices. I will start by looking at how our Nordic SOF partners manage their leadership talent; I have spoken with field grade Special Operations officers serving in the Swedish SOG, the Danish Jaegers, and the Norwegian FSK.²⁰ From there, I will branch out beyond military organizations and discuss how the Intelligence Community thinks about talent management; I had the privilege of speaking with the CIA's (Central Intelligence Agency) Director for Leadership Learning, the NSA's (National Security Agency) Technical Director for Workforce Development, and the former Chief Human Capital Officer for the DNI (Office of the Director of National Intelligence). Leaving the government sphere, I will transition to current best practices in the corporate arena; I will draw on my interviews with the Director of Google's groundbreaking People Operations team, Laszlo Bock. Finally, we will move well outside the box to discuss the relevant aspects of how competitive sports teams think about and manage the inevitable churn of their most talented players; I will construct this final chapter based on interviews with the coaching staff from three of the top college basketball programs in the nation: the University of North Carolina (UNC), Duke University, and University of Kentucky (UK).

I have also sought to ground my research in reality. In order to better understand the Pentagon's personnel reform efforts and what the near future holds, I spoke with Brad Carson, the former Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness (and former Under Secretary of the Army), who served as the key architect for many of the most progressive Force of the Future reforms.²¹ For the Army-specific elements of these reforms, I also collaborated with a field grade officer in the Army G-1 (Manpower and Personnel) who works on the Army Talent Management Task Force.

Finally, I benefited from the wisdom of former senior SOF leaders. ADM (Ret.) William McRaven offered his experience as the former SOCOM Commander to help shape my conclusions in a way that I hope will be helpful to the Special Operations enterprise and respectful of the Services. Also, GEN (Ret.) Stan McChrystal offered

²⁰ To be clear: the Swedish Särskilda operationsgruppen (SOG), the Danish Jægerkorpsset (Jaegers), and the Norwegian Forsvarets Spesialkommando (FSK).

²¹ Tom Philpott, "'Force of the Future' Might Survive Attack on Its Architect," *Newport News Daily Press*, March 6, 2016, <http://www.dailypress.com/news/military/dp-nws-military-update-0307-20160306-story.html>.

critical perspective based on both his experience spending five years in the same SOF leadership position and his role as the 4-star commander of NATO's massive counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan.²²

Special Operations is not a business, an intelligence organization, or a sports team. But U.S. Special Warfare forces are similar to these organizations in that we all operate in dynamic and competitive environments, we all labor under an expectation of continued and repeatable success, and we all agree that the fundamental building block for that success is our carefully selected people. To SOF and the military's credit, many of these organizations frequently lean on *us* for best practices; they recognize that bold and innovative thinking will sometimes come from unexpected places. We can surely reciprocate.

²² LTG McChrystal spent five years in command of the JSOC before commanding Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan as Commander, ISAF.

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II. BACKGROUND

A. HOW WE GOT HERE

Before building out this discussion with lessons learned from other organizations, the topic of talent management merits an examination. In the present day, we manage officer talent under DOPMA—the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act. In our current structure, there exists little room for maneuver or creativity; DOPMA is inflexible because it is not policy, it is federal law.¹ To understand our talent management environment, it is worth taking a brief look at the impact of DOPMA and how we got to where we are now with officer personnel management.

As the United States military ramped up for World War II, it quickly became apparent that we had a problem with officer management. In 1940, the Chief of Staff of the Army, General George Marshall, sought and received special permission from President Roosevelt to inject new life into an officer corps heavy on Colonels in their 60s.² General Marshall, who himself had waited 32 years before achieving the grade of O-6, made room for talented, younger officers by purging this lopsided officer corps, effectively reducing the logjam near the top. In doing so, he was able to more rapidly promote younger officers—in some cases even ignoring seniority in favor of extraordinary potential. It was precisely this bold maneuver that allowed Dwight Eisenhower to jump 350 more senior officers when selected as the first Supreme Allied Commander Europe.³

Further authority to thin the ranks and keep the talent moving was codified in the Army Vitalization Act of 1941. This was the first taste of “up-or-out” for the U.S.

¹ *Defense Officer Personnel Management Act*, Pub. L. No. 96–513, 10 U.S.C. (December 12, 1980), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/96th-congress/senate-bill/01918>.

² Bernard D. Rostker et al., *The Defense Officer Personnel Management Act of 1980*, Research Assessment (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1993), 88, <http://www.rand.org/pubs/reports/R4246.html>.

³ Before commanding Operation Neptune (the D-Day Invasion), Eisenhower was also hand-selected to command the Allied Forces landing in North Africa (Operation Torch). *Ibid.*, 89.

Army.⁴ Despite these measures, it became increasingly apparent throughout World War II that the Army and the Navy were ill prepared for the meteoric increase in numbers as the United States grew into a military-industrial behemoth.⁵ As World War II came to a close and the military began to shed much of this wartime growth, it was obvious to lawmakers that a more systematic approach was required.

Soon after the war, the foundation for DOPMA was solidified with the passage of two new laws. The first major reform was the Officer Personnel Act of 1947 (OPA). During testimony leading up to the passage of this law, General Eisenhower opined from his perch as Chief of Staff of the Army that proper officer management was merely a question of “keeping the outflow at the top so as to keep your vigorous body underneath.”⁶ This opening act for DOPMA included three important themes that remain today: uniformity of officer management between the Services, the pursuit of a “young and vigorous” officer corps (achieved largely through uniformly adopting the Navy’s up-or-out promotion system),⁷ and the ability to rapidly remobilize in the event of another war.⁸ Despite the far-reaching restrictions inherent in OPA, the Services still retained a way around the legal constraints: temporary promotions were untouched by statutory limits. However, Congress eventually caught on, moving in 1954 to enact the Officer Grade Limitation Act (OGLA). This act restricted the number of officers who could serve in grades of O-4 and above and it set grade tables for the Services.⁹

By the time DOPMA was enacted in 1980, most of its tenets had been in place for some time. Far from revolutionary, DOPMA served as more of a statutory bear hug,

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The size of the U.S. Army increased over 40-fold between 1939 and 1945. In September 1939, our Army of 190,000 was ranked 19th in size in the world, just between Portugal and Bulgaria. Six years later, the regular U.S. Army was over 8.2 million; Rostker et al., *Defense Officer Personnel Management Act*, 88.

⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁷ “Up-or-out” was inherently a U.S. Navy program prior to 1947 (Rostker et al., 90).

⁸ Rostker et al., *Defense Officer Personnel Management Act*, 90; the ability to rapidly remobilize was to be achieved by retaining a large number of field grade officers who could take charge of an expanded force. The ratio of field grade officers to enlisted personnel more than tripled from 1945 to 1950 as a result of this emphasis on remobilization (Rostker et al., 3).

⁹ Rostker et al., *Defense Officer Personnel Management Act*, 95.

allowing Congress to get its regulatory arms around the existing hodgepodge of rules and regulations. Congress was optimistic, voicing the expectation that DOPMA would “maintain a high-quality, numerically sufficient officer corps, provide career opportunity that would attract and retain the numbers of high-caliber officers needed, [and] provide reasonably consistent career opportunity among the Services.”¹⁰ However, as the RAND Corporation reported in its 10-year retrospective study of DOPMA, “it was basically an evolutionary document, extending the existing paradigm (grade controls, promotion opportunity and timing objectives, up-or-out, and consistency across the Services) that was established after World War II.”¹¹

Little has changed since the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act was passed in 1980. To be quite clear: this means that how our military manages officers in the 21st century is based on 60- and even 70-year-old reforms. And these reforms are firmly rooted in how officer management was accomplished during a worldwide, conventional conflict fought in the first half of the 20th century.

B. YOUTH AND VIGOR—THE VALUE OF ROTATION

That said, DOPMA was not merely a solution looking for a problem. As Generals Marshall and Eisenhower both saw firsthand, leadership rotation is a valuable and important tool when it comes to managing officer talent. In the corporate world, business skill has been strongly linked to leader rotation—rotating individuals through positions.¹² The assumption is that leaders who experience more of the organization see more of the big picture and are inherently better able to make decisions with a corporate perspective. The benefits of rotating leaders and managers also include their satisfaction in engaging with new and different problems and developing a broader network of contacts. Leader rotation also proves a convenient way to help transfer and transmit company culture and

¹⁰ Ibid., v.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Michael A. Campion, Lisa Cheraskin, and Michael J. Stevens, “Career-Related Antecedents and Outcomes of Job Rotation,” *The Academy of Management Journal* 37, no. 6 (1994): 1518–42.

it helps create the perception of personal development that comes along with being intentionally broadened.¹³

The military's up-or-out rotation model may be inflexible, but it is important to remember the legitimate upside to broadening officers via rotation. In fact, RAND Corporation's published recommendation to improve senior leadership within federal government is largely based on the military's experience. In a chapter entitled "Developing Leadership: Emulating the Military Model," RAND advocates, "To ensure that the required multi-functionality will be available in their senior leader corps, organizations need to systematically rotate promising future leaders through jobs in the appropriate functional areas during their mid-career years."¹⁴ RAND is far from the first to recognize that the military model can be used to develop exceptional leaders.

C. EXPERIENCE AND WISDOM—THE IMPORTANCE OF DEPTH

But nothing is free. It is equally important to understand the costs of leader rotation. Some of these costs are obvious. Every Soldier and subordinate leader has felt the pain of adjusting to a fresh vision, new processes, different expectations...only to see that leader move on and the process begin anew. Even if there were no cost in leader or manager effectiveness, it is perfectly reasonable (and patently obvious) to note that organizations pay a price for churn. They pay with the inevitable time lost to transitions, but there is also a subtler and far more devastating enemy. Organizations that frequently rotate all their key players suffer from a dearth of long-term perspective.

The shorter one's tenure, the harder it is to create long-term perspective. By placing an officer in a key position for a single year—a position that will be judged by a single evaluation—you have created an environment in which long-term perspective takes a backseat to measurable impact. The literature is quite clear on this point: frequent rotation of managers usually results in a short-term view of problems and a scarcity of long-term solutions. And perhaps even more concerning, short-term perspectives

¹³ Ibid., 1537.

¹⁴ Robert Klitgaard and Paul C. Light, eds., *High-Performance Government* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2005), 261, <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG256.html>.

influence not just the leaders who rotate, but their peers and subordinates as well.¹⁵ When the most influential leaders rotate the fastest, the result is a contagion of short-term perspective that spreads throughout the organization.

There also exists a subtler cost to rapid rotation: depth. In an Army infatuated with the idea of “broadening,” we often confuse legitimate depth with a plethora of rotational experiences.¹⁶ What does depth encompass? For our purposes, I want to emphasize the following benefits of serving in one role long enough to gain substantial depth in that position: management skills, domain knowledge, and relationship development.

Acknowledging that the Army usually excels at leader development, it is important to note that, in a complex environment like Special Warfare, commanders and key staff officers require more than just leadership; they need to understand and appreciate how to manage complexity. The RAND Corporation’s explanation is artful and worth the read:

In more complex environments, however, leaders must find increasingly sophisticated ways to select among alternative paths toward their goals and to ensure effective implementation of their chosen paths. Typically, they must understand the factors that influence important outcomes, marshal information regarding those factors, establish criteria for choosing among alternatives, and choose those that make the best operational or business sense...and establish feedback loops to determine if the organization is moving in the desired direction. These activities require management skills, which can usefully be viewed as *distinct* from leadership skills.¹⁷

The RAND report on leadership makes it clear that, as an environment grows increasingly complex, organizational performance requires more domain knowledge from leaders and managers. The all-purpose leader is an illusion; the report emphasizes that the

¹⁵ Campion, Cheraskin, and Stevens, “Career-Related Antecedents and Outcomes,” 1524.

¹⁶ Here is one example of the mixed terms we use to describe depth and breadth: In an [army.mil](https://www.army.mil/article/102717) article detailing a speech made by the Commander of HRC, we read, “The third major change [the Commander] talked about was Broadening leaders’ experiences, providing the force with a deeper depth of knowledge in its officer corps.” See: <https://www.army.mil/article/102717>.

¹⁷ Klitgaard and Light, *High-Performance Government*, 259. Emphasis added.

manager who can take on any challenge based purely on leadership skill exists only in management textbooks. At some point, leaders and managers need to have the necessary depth of understanding—the necessary domain knowledge—to contend with the problem at hand.¹⁸

Training and education are important because they help leaders acquire background information. They cannot, however, replace the impact of time in the job, which adds the context and first-hand learning needed to develop depth. In a relevant chapter entitled “Career Building: Learning from Cumulative Work Experience,” researchers Morrison and Hock explain how time trumps training: “Researchers and practitioners are beginning to recognize that the contribution of work experience to career development is significantly greater than the contribution of education and training.”¹⁹ Morrison and Hock argue strongly that a developmental sequence of roles is not enough. Exposure is important, but their research reveals the far superior solution is to ensure leaders remain in the position long enough to develop an acceptable level of mastery.²⁰

Some in the Army might contend that we have carefully selected leaders who work harder and faster.²¹ This is an important consideration, but even our best officers are not exempt from the realities of a steep learning curve. In *The Dynamics of Taking Charge*, Harvard Business Professor John Gabarro discusses his research into the process behind successful (and failed) leader rotation. Gabarro’s research exposes five predictable phases of leadership succession: Taking Hold, Immersion, Reshaping,

¹⁸ Ibid., 257.

¹⁹ Douglas T. Hall, *Career Development in Organizations*, Jossey-Bass Management Series (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1986), 266.

²⁰ Ibid., 249. The authors use the word “acceptable” because at more complex and senior levels they recognize mastery becomes harder to measure. Regardless of seniority, their recommendation extends well beyond a box check; mastery takes time.

²¹ Or the argument I sincerely hope not to hear from our senior leaders: my unit and I spend so much time at work each day that two years is more like three. The best leaders know when to work late into the night and, conversely, when to *leave by example*. Even GEN (Ret.) McChrystal, so notorious for his unrelenting work ethic, advised me: “Life balance, and what’s important, means taking the long view... You can balance it. Learn when to really lean into [your work], and don’t complain about it. And learn when to ratchet back. Get that balance right.”

Consolidation, and Refinement.²² While these stages are based more on learning than duration, there are some important, time-based takeaways. To summarize why climbing a learning curve and building the requisite relationships take time and patience:

1. In the Taking Hold stage, leaders ascend the steepest part of the learning curve and fix immediately apparent problems. As one manager in Gabarro's study remarked, "There aren't enough hours in the day" during this arduous stage of transition.²³
2. During Immersion, leaders go below surface level to develop a more granular understanding of their current operating environment and the challenges facing the organization. Much of this stage is spent watching and learning.
3. Most leaders reach the Reshaping stage in 13–18 months. By now, the leader understands the role, the problem set, and the environment. During this stage, the leader is equipped to make substantive, purposeful change. Of note, this is change based on in-role learning as opposed to adjustments rooted in past experience.
4. In the Consolidation stage, the leader performs a step that is crucial for long-term organizational success: he assesses the impact of the significant changes he has made. This stage will include corrective action based on those assessments.
5. After 27–30 months, the leader is no longer new. Entering the Refinement stage, the leader is fully in charge and comfortable. The role largely transitions to subtle tweaks, maintaining the current course, and recognizing new opportunities (or handover to the next leader).²⁴

There is more to leader transition than conducting a brief assessment and taking decisive action—especially if we are interested in durable, institutional impact and

²² I recommend this book if you want to develop a deeper understanding of succession and some of the key factors behind success or failure in leader transition. My brief explanation is no substitute for Professor Gabarro's insightful, research-driven conclusions.

²³ This stage occurs during the first 3–6 months. Interestingly, when the CIA's Director of Leadership Learning was a young intelligence officer, the same guidance was recommended by then-Director of Central Intelligence Robert Gates. Gates told him and his peers that they had six months to get the equivalent of a Master's degree in their role. After that, they had better be ready for questions and have something to offer.

²⁴ John J. Gabarro, *The Dynamics of Taking Charge* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1987).

improvement versus simply keeping the train on the track. Interestingly, and especially pertinent to those of us concerned with operating in the human domain, Gabarro's research reveals that the quality of relationships going into the second year proves the single most relevant difference between success and a failure in that leader's tenure.²⁵ Again, returning to the mission at hand, and perhaps of greater concern, Gabarro cautions against "short-term assignments" because, as his research clearly signals, it takes between two and two and a half years for a leader to gain in-depth understanding of his current role and environment before being able to translate that depth into lasting organizational impact. He defines "short-term" as two years or less.²⁶

D. A PROBLEM WORTH SOLVING

Despite the very real challenges created and compounded by having to operate in a deeply complex domain, we continue to churn through key planners and commanders because "that's how the system works." Nearly every Assistant Operations Officer, every SF Company Commander, and every Battalion and Group Operations Officer is serving in his first and only year in that job. The only leaders who can expect to spend more than 12 months in one job are the Battalion and Group Commanders, who will spend 24 months in command.²⁷

The result should strike any reasonable person as deeply problematic given the importance and complexity of our mission and the challenge of taking charge in a new job. At any given moment in an Army Special Forces Group, a preponderance of our key Special Warfare leaders are in the first year of the job.²⁸ This is a problem worth solving.

²⁵ Ibid., 57.

²⁶ Ibid., 137.

²⁷ As Gabarro cautions us, 24 months in command is, by definition, a "short-term assignment."

²⁸ The math checks out. Assume O-5 and O-6 commanders get 24 months. Assume O-4 jobs average 13 months (to account for a rare Major in the job for a second year). Even if you include ODA Commanders—and assume an average of 18 months on the *same* ODA—the resultant average key leader tenure is just over 17 months. And perhaps the more relevant figure, the average tenure for field grade officers who will plan and command a Special Warfare operation is no different—17 months. Therefore, at any given moment, there is a 70% chance a randomly selected leader is still climbing a steep learning curve in his first 12 months on the job.

Before we look at how other elite organizations think about and manage leadership talent, it is worth noting that the future looks more promising than the recent past. The DOD and the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) are aggressively pursuing creative talent management solutions, both within the construct of DOPMA and as exceptions or statutory changes. While the exact nature of these solutions remains unclear at the time of writing, the discussion is well underway. The current method of managing officer talent, according to the recent Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, “is in its death throes.”²⁹

For instance, as a result of the push to create a “Force of the Future,” the Army G-1 has established a Talent Management Task Force to “integrate and synchronize” an Army-wide transformation of the way in which we manage talent. Buzzwords aside, the Army G-1 has every intention of rapidly evolving to a more deliberate talent management system “that demonstrates the Army’s institutional agility and strength as a learning organization.”³⁰ According to one field grade Adjutant General officer serving on this task force, “the environment is currently *very* accommodating to people thinking outside the box.”³¹

Yet, despite the promise of the changes to come, substantive change—let alone transformation—is rarely easy to execute. The challenges I describe in what follows exist despite the many well-researched and well-reasoned articles and theses that have already

²⁹ Brad Carson (former acting Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness), in interview with the author, October 26, 2016.

³⁰ Army G-1, “Army Talent Management Task Force,” STAND-TO!, August 11, 2016, https://www.army.mil/standto/archive_2016-08-11.

³¹ Field grade officer on the Army Talent Management Task Force, in interview with the author, October 5, 16.

been published, all of which argue for various reforms to how we manage officer talent or how we structure our force to best conduct the indirect approach to warfare.³²

Interestingly, and perhaps tellingly, when I spoke with Google's Laszlo Bock about the importance of intellectual humility and a willingness to learn lessons from other organizations, his response was both instructive and pointed: "It's the height of hubris and arrogance to say, 'we have nothing to learn from anyone else.' When you propose something that has potential to actually create a really big change, that's always off-putting and threatening; it's just not how people who have been doing something for a long time view the world. That resistance is a good sign."³³

I believe the following chapters will provide us with a different and worthwhile view—an opportunity to see how things are done outside our own experience within a rigid personnel system.

³² Anthony Heisler, "By, With, and Through: The Theory and Practice of Special Operations Capacity-Building" (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2014), <http://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/44575>; Christopher N. Riga and Philip L. Mahla, "An Operational Concept for the Transformation of SOF into a Fifth Service" (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2003), <https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/952>; Brent W. Lindeman, "Better Lucky than Good: A Theory of Unconventional Minds and the Power of 'Who'" (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2009), <https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/4312>; Andrew P. Aswell, "Calming the Churn: Resolving the Dilemma of Rotational Warfare in Counterinsurgency" (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2013), <https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/38873>; Marty D. Timmons, Walter H. Allman, and Jonathan M. Fussell, "High-Value Talent: Identifying, Developing, and Retaining Naval Special Warfare's Best Leaders" (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2012), <https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/7301>; Scott White, David J. Painter, and Mark C. Weaver, "Reorganizing for Irregular Warfare" (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2009), <https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/4353>; Daniel K. Hedman, "Reorganizing SOF for Irregular Warfare" (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2008), <https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/3825>; Kevin D. Stringer, "The War on Terror and the War for Officer Talent: Linked Challenges for the U.S. Army," *Land Warfare Papers*, no. 67 (July 2008); Casey Wardynski, David S. Lyle, and Michael J. Colarusso, "Towards a U.S. Army Officer Corps Strategy for Success: A Proposed Human Capital Model Focused upon Talent" (monograph, Strategic Studies Institute, April 2009), <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=912>; Tim Kane, "Why Our Best Officers Are Leaving," *Atlantic*, February 2011, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/01/why-our-best-officers-are-leaving/308346/>.

³³ Laszlo Bock (Google's Director of People Operations), in interview with the author, August 23, 2016.

III. NORDIC SOF

A. CAPABLE PARTNERS

During my five years as a Special Forces officer in Stuttgart, I was fortunate to have repeated opportunities to work alongside our Nordic partners—specifically from SOF units in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden.¹ These Special Operators are well resourced, carefully selected, and highly trained; very few partner nation Special Operations Forces—NATO or otherwise—are so fluidly interoperable with U.S. SOF.

Nevertheless, there are differences between our forces. These three Special Operations Forces exist in different militaries with dissimilar structures. Admittedly, too, these forces have traditionally been more focused on the direct approach and counterterrorism than Special Warfare.² However, all three nations have served in varying capacities as part of ISAF SOF, working through the Afghan Special Police in committed support of the indirect approach.³ Finally, like all of our partners, they are far smaller than we are. In fact, and as you would expect, SOF units in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark are orders of magnitude smaller than U.S. SOF.⁴ And while these units have experienced periods of growth to match the operational demand of recent conflicts, they have largely chosen quality over quantity. For them being small means being nimble, which also leads to an enviable degree of human resource agility.

This chapter is rooted in interviews with field grade colleagues from three Special Operations units: the Norwegian FSK (Forsvarets Spesialkommando), the Danish Jaegers

¹ This chapter discusses SOF units from three Nordic (or Scandinavian) countries. Part of the reason I chose these units is that I have trained with all three nations and we have served together in Afghanistan as part of ISAF SOF. I have also traveled to all three countries to train with or visit their Special Operations Forces—some official travel and some visits to see old friends.

² I think we, the U.S. Special Warfare community, could also admit to instances of the same behavior since 9/11. It is easy to lose patience with the indirect approach and seek a more measurable, direct impact.

³ Mark Smethurst, “ISAF SOF Brief to SO/LIC Symposium” (NDIA SO/LIC Symposium and Exhibition, Washington, DC, January 2013), <http://www.dtic.mil/ndia/2013SOLIC/Smethurst.pdf>.

⁴ While the command and support structure looks like a U.S. Special Forces Group, the operational force is smaller than a U.S. Special Forces Battalion.

(Jægerkorpset), and the Swedish SOG (Särskilda operationsgruppen).⁵ I met these officers while fighting in Afghanistan, training in Denmark, and studying at NPS. This chapter will discuss the impact and implications of managing officers without the constraint of up-or-out promotions.

To be quite clear, it is not my aim to detail Nordic SOF HR systems. The system in all three countries is less rigid than ours; their leaders have more ability to flex within those systems; and the units are able to manage leaders with a liveness we will likely never achieve. Instead, my primary aim is for us to recognize the time-on-the-job choices these units make, given their similar mission and striking talent management dexterity.

B. TWO DIFFERENT PYRAMIDS

It may be hard for us Americans to imagine officer talent management outside a system pressurized by “up-or-out.” However, these Nordic SOF units have a great deal more flexibility to prioritize humans over hardware. Their path from junior officer to General officer is not dissimilar from ours; it is comprised of an extremely steep pyramid, especially inside SOF. However, there is an entirely different—and fairly flat—pyramid for time in service. Put simply: if you are not going to promote, but there exists a role at your rank in which you can add value, your chain of command has the flexibility, within the existing human resource framework, to find a place to plant you and let you grow.

To give readers a better idea of what this might look like, I will share an example. Take a good Special Operations officer who, at some point, reaches the level where he is no longer thriving or adding significant value to the organization as a commander. Now imagine that his leaders have the ability to remove him without ruining him; this officer would come off the leadership track—the steep pyramid—and would specialize. His new staff role would likely be in training support, intelligence, or logistics. Alternatively, the officer might opt to go back to the conventional force. However, provided he excels in this new support role, he can progress in the specialization track. He will never command again, but he will remain eligible for promotion and continued progress as a support

⁵ These units, and the environments in which they operate, are quite similar to one another—and quite different from U.S. SOF in terms of talent management.

specialist. If he is “good enough,” he can stay in his new line of work indefinitely. He might never make it past company-grade rank, but he can finish his career⁶ as deeply experienced support expert.⁷

By creating outlets whereby experienced and motivated Special Operations officers can leave the command track and specialize, Nordic SOF units gain several advantages. First, they reduce the pressure on leaders. In our U.S. system, by contrast, if you receive middle-of-the-road evaluations in key and developmental positions as an O-3 or especially as a field grade, you are unlikely to promote—which means it is a matter of time before you are asked to leave the military. For those moving through key positions, a degree of pressure is positive. But at some point, excessive pressure to excel on a 12-month officer evaluation report (OER) can lead to short-term decision making, “playing it safe,” or both. This is mitigated in all three of these Nordic SOF units by longer time in a job, but also thanks to their multi-track system; individuals who are good, but are not command material, can be transitioned to a support role, thrive there, and still have a chance to progress.

Nordic SOF units also benefit considerably from the ability of their non-command-track officers to develop legitimate depth—the expertise and long-lasting relationships necessary to provide exceptional support. In a complex domain, “it is these support officers who end up providing the backbone [for the unit].”⁸ Skilled support elements are a huge force multiplier for any mission; in a nuanced and uncertain environment, they are a necessity. As our own professional literature makes quite clear, the complexity of Special Warfare presents a massive challenge for support elements.⁹ However, our U.S. Special Warfare units are, inexplicably, the only element within ARSOF without a selection process to ensure our logisticians and other support elements

⁶ In these nations, the military is obligated to let a service member in good standing keep his job until retirement age (around 60). Therefore, you could feasibly finish your career on the support track as a 60-year-old Captain or Major.

⁷ Swedish SOG Field Grade Officer, in interview with the author, July 29, 2016.

⁸ Danish Jaeger Field Grade Officer, in interview with the author, July 27, 2016.

⁹ “ARSOF 2022,” U.S. Army Special Operations Command, April 1, 2013, 4.

are up to the challenge; we remain at the mercy of the Department of the Army, and whichever airborne-qualified Soldiers the personnel manager sees fit to put on orders to our Special Warfare units.¹⁰ Imagine the organizational benefit of having a solid Special Forces officer—an officer who served well, but will not command at the next level—transition to a support role by coming off the up-or-out pyramid.

C. ENOUGH TIME TO MAKE AN IMPACT

In the Swedish SOG, four years is a normal time for Troop Command; two to three years is considered quite fast. Less than two years, according to my Swedish colleague, “is hard to even believe.”¹¹ Tellingly, the Danish Jaegers have moved away from a tenure of two to three years in favor of four to five years. Three years is now considered a minimum.¹² In the Norwegian FSK, two years is sufficient to check the HR box. However, the FSK leadership retains the flexibility to fine-tune this tenure based on mission requirements.¹³ In one remarkable example of adjusting leader tenure to suit the operational environment, an FSK Squadron second-in-command spent five years in the same job in order to provide stability during a particularly turbulent time. And yet, this officer was also able to go on to command a Squadron; the system was flexible enough that his chain of command was empowered to reward his sacrifice.¹⁴

According to the Nordic SOF officers with whom I spoke, more time in key positions allows their units to better identify talented leaders. As one pointed out, “you might fool the system for one rotation. You aren’t likely to fool anyone if you’re in the job for three years.”¹⁵ Another key advantage is that individuals in such positions can take a long-term perspective. As one officer put it, “you can say NO when needed”; you

¹⁰ Jason Alvis, “The (SOF) Truth about ARSOF Logistics Transformation” (monograph, Ft. Leavenworth, KS: School of Advanced Military Studies, 2009).

¹¹ Swedish SOG Field Grade Officer, in interview with the author.

¹² Danish Jaeger Field Grade Officer, in interview with the author.

¹³ It is not forced; it is requested. The leader has the ability to stay longer without hurting his career—the system will adjust. He also has the ability to say “no.” As I was told, “It’s not ideal, but he can recover.”

¹⁴ Norwegian FSK Field Grade Officer, in interview with the author, July 20, 2016.

¹⁵ Ibid.

do not have to take on every challenge. If what is best for your unit is to take a knee for a brief period, you have several years to prove that this was a wise move.¹⁶ Or as another officer commented when reflecting on the challenges of the indirect approach ISAF SOF faced in Afghanistan, “If specialized skills are required, it doesn’t make sense to move people constantly.”¹⁷

Without question, organizations benefit when leaders balance the needs of the present with a long-term perspective. These Nordic SOF units do not solve the challenge of instilling long-term perspective by lengthening the evaluation periods or creating complex incentive systems. Instead, they create long-term perspective the simple way: leaving leaders in place longer—long enough to live through (and assess) the impact of their own decisions. As Gabarro would caution us, “the manager does not consolidate [his most impactful] changes, or get feedback on their efficacy, until the Consolidation stage. Hence, I would argue that a new manager has not really mastered an assignment until he reaches the Refinement stage,” usually mid-way through the third year of his tenure.¹⁸

D. LOW EXPECTATIONS

Interestingly, Nordic SOF officers offered strong and unanimous feedback about the incomparable importance of first year in the job. Their units view the first 12 months as a time for officers to understand the environment, a time to assess more than act, and a time to identify the subtler problems, providing a key foundation for the actions taken in the remainder of the job. To paraphrase my Danish colleague: you have one year to learn the job, you have a second year to perform, and you have a third year to give back—to take the organization to the next level. If you move that leader after two years, you really prioritize individual development over organizational performance.¹⁹

My colleagues from all three countries also remarked on the importance of taking care of individuals. As we discussed stressful learning curves and the impact on families,

¹⁶ Swedish SOG Field Grade Officer, in interview with the author.

¹⁷ Danish Jaeger Field Grade Officer, in interview with the author.

¹⁸ Gabarro, *Dynamics of Taking Charge*, 137.

¹⁹ Danish Jaeger Field Grade Officer, in interview with the author.

my friend from Denmark challenged me, asking, “Is moving people every one to two years really taking good care of your people?”²⁰ As we agreed, climbing the learning curve in that first year is stressful.²¹ This is the period during which an officer is likely to spend the most hours at work and away from family. Bearing in mind Gabarro’s research: this is a period of intense learning and corrective action (Taking Hold), followed by a deeper look at the subtler challenges inside the organization (Immersion).²² Tellingly, Nordic SOF units recognize that because of that stress, the first year is the least likely year to see bold and innovative thinking from leaders—the opposite of what U.S. SOF leaders expect and the Special Warfare mission demands.

E. TAKEAWAYS FROM NORDIC SOF UNITS

So what can we learn from our Nordic SOF partners about managing leader talent? Here are three key takeaways from the philosophy behind their patient and flexible human resource practices:

(1) True expertise takes time

If certain individuals can be kept in a job long enough for them to gain significant experience and develop the right relationships, they can become the backbone of the unit—even if some high potential leaders come and go.

(2) Long-term perspective flows naturally from long-term presence

Serving three years in the job allows a leader to make informed, durable changes, assess the results of those actions, and leave a lasting impact.

(3) The first year is the hardest and the least productive

Leaders will spend the most time at work. Both leaders and families will feel the stress as the officer climbs the learning curve—especially in a complex, human domain. Bold and innovative thinking is least likely to happen in the first year on the job.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ While the first year may be personally productive—in terms of learning—it is rarely organizationally productive. Making an impact takes more time.

²² John Gabarro, “An Excerpt from *The Dynamics of Taking Charge*,” Management Thinking, Emerald Group Publishing, November 2008, http://www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/learning/management_thinking/articles/pdf/gabarro_excerpt.pdf?PHPSESSID=rob744odngecfv1khldcg36j81.

IV. INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY

A. SIMILAR CHALLENGES

In the summer of 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt tapped William Donovan—a college football star, lawyer, and Medal of Honor recipient turned diplomat²³—to head an agency that would soon be called the Office of Strategic Services (OSS).²⁴ Under Donovan’s leadership, the OSS conducted espionage, sabotage, and morale operations against the Axis powers of World War II.²⁵ The OSS was instrumental in both intelligence and Unconventional Warfare operations throughout Second World War, to include Project Jedburgh, which assisted the French Resistance and helped set the conditions for the Allied invasion of Normandy on D-Day.²⁶

Today we no longer have the OSS; we have the Central Intelligence Agency and the U.S. Army Special Forces. The OSS was the forerunner to the modern CIA, which was created in 1947.²⁷ As for the military, COL Aaron Bank, an OSS veteran of Project Jedburgh, led the formation of the Special Forces in 1952—largely by recruiting airborne and OSS veterans. Even USSOCOM acknowledges the Office of Strategic Services as part of our larger SOF heritage.²⁸

This shared lineage with the CIA is just the beginning of the overlap between SOF and the Intelligence Community (IC). We also share many of the same challenges. The U.S. intelligence agencies recruit top talent and operate in a dynamic, high-stakes

²³ “A Look Back ... Gen. William J. Donovan Heads Office of Strategic Services,” Central Intelligence Agency, News and Information, last modified April 30, 2013, <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/featured-story-archive/gen.-william-j.-donovan-heads-oss.html>.

²⁴ “Military Records: About,” National Archives, last reviewed August 15, 2016, <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/ww2/oss>.

²⁵ “A Look Back ...”

²⁶ “USASOC: OSS and Jedburghs,” U.S. Army Special Operations Command, accessed September 15, 2016, <http://www.soc.mil/OSS/jedburghs.htm>.

²⁷ “The Office of Strategic Services: The Forerunner of Today’s CIA,” Central Intelligence Agency, News and Information, last modified April 30, 2013, <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/featured-story-archive/2008-featured-story-archive/office-of-strategic-services.html>.

²⁸ U.S. Army Special Operations Command, “USASOC: OSS and Jedburghs.”

environment.²⁹ In order to succeed in their mission, these agencies require significant depth and expertise. A skilled intelligence officer often possesses considerable depth—attributes like regional and local knowledge, cultural understanding, language skills, and a key network of relationships. These features should sound familiar; they are equally critical for the conduct of Special Warfare.

But agencies like the CIA and the NSA also require good leadership. To ensure that these agencies have adequately developed those personnel who will be asked to provide operational leadership, they have begun to selectively cede depth in favor of broadening. A degree of breadth allows leaders—even those with long tenure and a previously narrow focus—to gain a broader perspective and understand the larger enterprise. Here is where we find the Intelligence Community struggling with a very similar challenge to our Special Warfare forces: how best to balance the criticality of depth with the big-picture perspective that comes from breadth?

To better understand how the IC thinks about this challenge and manages leader talent, I spoke with several experienced officers from the CIA. I also met with and interviewed the CIA’s Director of Leadership Learning (DLL). Likewise, I met with the NSA’s Technical Director for Workforce Development.³⁰ I also benefited from an interview with the former Chief Human Capital Officer for the Intelligence Community (Office of the Director of National Intelligence), Dr. Ronald Sanders.³¹ I will begin by covering the CIA and how it views talent management, transition to discuss lessons learned from the NSA, and close with overarching takeaways from the Intel Community.

²⁹ The Director of Leadership Learning at the CIA made it clear that intel officers conduct business in a “VUCA” environment. The operational environment is: Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous.

³⁰ I will refer to intelligence officers still actively associated with the CIA and NSA by title only.

³¹ Dr. Sanders is an adjunct faculty member at the Brookings Institution as well as a Vice President and Fellow at Booze Allen Hamilton. <http://www.boozeallen.com/about/leadership/executive-leadership/Ronald-Sanders>

B. CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

The CIA usually finds itself on the opposite end of the depth-breadth spectrum from the military.³² The Agency has a proud tradition of tradecraft and deep expertise—and this depth takes time to develop. During the Cold War, it was not uncommon to have intelligence officers in the same job for 10 years or more—in some cases even 20+ years in the same position.³³³⁴ For certain roles, this unrelenting pursuit of expertise is justified. There are undoubtedly experts in the CIA whose sole focus is to hone their craft—somebody has to be a world-class makeup and disguise expert,³⁵ an experienced biotechnologist, or a skilled cyber threat analyst.³⁶ Without question, different aspects of espionage require “super SMEs” who are protected from rotation and rarely pursue formal leadership positions.³⁷ But for the rest—for the pool of future leaders—the Agency has realized there is a cost to focusing too heavily on depth at the expense of breadth.³⁸

In 2014, the CIA launched a major modernization effort.³⁹ While the creation of the Digital Innovation Directorate and ten Mission Centers are likely to attract the most attention,⁴⁰ this reorganization is highly focused on restructuring how the CIA manages talent. In fact, the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) made it abundantly clear that

³² CIA Officer, in interview with the author, August 13, 2016.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ The Director of Leadership Learning has moved jobs about every five years. Some of his peers still consider that pace of leader rotation to be “rapid shuffling.”

³⁵ “Experience the Collection,” Central Intelligence Agency, About CIA, last modified October 1, 2014, <https://www.cia.gov/about-cia/cia-museum/experience-the-collection/index.html#!/artifact/157>.

³⁶ “View All Career Opportunities,” Central Intelligence Agency, Careers and Internships, last modified November 10, 2016, <https://www.cia.gov/careers/opportunities/cia-jobs>.

³⁷ CIA Director of Leadership Learning, in interview with the author, August 25, 2016.

³⁸ CIA Officer, in interview with the author.

³⁹ “CIA Achieves Key Milestone in Agency-Wide Modernization Initiative,” Central Intelligence Agency, News and Information, October 1, 2015, <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/press-releases-statements/2015-press-releases-statements/cia-achieves-key-milestone-in-agency-wide-modernization-initiative.html>.

⁴⁰ These Mission Centers are functional and geographic (for example: Mission Center for Africa and Mission Center for CT). These centers are not part of any single directorate; they will include both operatives and analysts, allowing intelligence to be fused at a much lower level.

improving leader development and talent management is the foundation of the CIA's modernization effort:

We must make it easier for our officers to acquire new skills, to strengthen their leadership abilities, and to deepen their distinctive tradecrafts while also broadening their understanding of CIA, the intelligence profession, and the national security mission. This was the number one issue raised by the workforce to the Study Group and is foundational to all other initiatives.⁴¹

Frankly, the CIA recognizes that striking a productive balance between depth and breadth is tough. To improve that balance, the Agency is pushing itself to think more deliberately about broadening its intelligence officers and preparing them for the challenges of leadership.⁴² As the Director of Leadership Learning observed, "We need to think of our leadership skills as tradecraft."⁴³ Today, intelligence officers usually spend three years in the position. While some may opt for two years, due for example to a challenging location or a desire to pursue a broadening opportunity, three years is viewed as the standard.⁴⁴ Worth noting, however, is that intelligence officers often spend repeated tours working the same challenge in the same region; they simply move to another country as they build regional issue expertise.⁴⁵

Because I wanted to understand where Agency talent managers drew the line between developmental broadening and detrimental churn, I queried the DLL about the issue of tenure: would the CIA object to rotating leaders every 18–24 months through jobs considered to be key mid-level or operational positions?⁴⁶ The initial response

⁴¹ John Brennan, "Unclassified Version of March 6, 2015 Message to the Workforce from CIA Director John Brennan: Our Agency's Blueprint for the Future," Central Intelligence Agency, News and Information, March 6, 2015, <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/press-releases-statements/2015-press-releases-statements/message-to-workforce-agencys-blueprint-for-the-future.html>.

⁴² CIA Officer, in interview with the author.

⁴³ CIA Director of Leadership Learning, in interview with the author.

⁴⁴ CIA Officer, in interview with the author.

⁴⁵ This is also done for counterintelligence reasons—to balance language and cultural knowledge while avoiding the possibility of becoming too personally aligned with the host nation where they are serving. This is also why a balance of field and Washington assignments is desired. (CIA officer)

⁴⁶ I did not ask about or mention key leaders being in the job for 12 months or less. It was abundantly clear, in my interviews, how vital the Intel Community considers depth and expertise (and frankly, how amateurish it would sound if I brought up our propensity for only 12 months in the job).

revealed the cyclical nature of government work: the shorter your tenure, the less likely you are to see the full range of recurring challenges. If you are only in the job for a cycle or two—whether that cycle is a fiscal year, your organization’s planning cycle or manning cycle—you have stunted your opportunity to impact the system and develop the robust understanding you will need at higher levels. The DLL was clear: if you are only in a key job for 18–24 months, you are relying on a degree of luck.⁴⁷ For example, if you are only in a staff job for 18 months, you may only see October 1st—the new fiscal year—a single time. The frequent result: you learn some hard lessons about wrapping up one fiscal year or starting another, you leave for a new job, and your replacement stumbles through the turn of the next fiscal year.⁴⁸ In theory, a good handover will nullify problems like this. In practice, handover quality varies and significant institutional knowledge gets lost with every key leader rotation. In fact, the reality of planning, budgeting and personnel cycles was one of GEN (Ret.) McChrystal’s principal concerns when he expressed doubt that an operational leader can make a lasting impact in 12–24 months.⁴⁹ This idea also reinforces what we see in Gabarro’s *Dynamics of Taking Charge*: it takes 13–18 months just to complete the Immersion stage (second stage), when the majority of fine-grain learning occurs.

The DLL’s second objection to rapid rotation was based on the inherent risk of promoting the wrong leaders. If someone is in a key job for a short time, the organization has signaled to that leader that he needs to “make a splash.” Some interesting questions emerged from this discussion: Are we promoting flashy leaders who meet the mission *before* we realize “the dead bodies they left behind?”⁵⁰ Are we promoting people who step up with confidence *before* we can discern whether they have made a positive impact? And perhaps most concerning, sometimes leaders make a splash despite their

⁴⁷ CIA Director of Leadership Learning, in interview with the author.

⁴⁸ In the U.S. Department of Defense, like the rest of our federal government, 1 October is the beginning of the new fiscal year.

⁴⁹ Stanley McChrystal (former ISAF and JSOC Commander), in interview with the author, September 29, 2016.

⁵⁰ CIA Director of Leadership Learning, in interview with the author.

short tenure because they are truly outstanding: what might they have done for the organization and the mission if given more time?⁵¹

My interview with the CIA's Director of Leadership Learning ended with a metaphor. When I asked him, based on the hard lessons his agency had learned in restructuring, whether the CIA could thrive in its complex domain given leader tenures of 18–24 months, he told me to imagine a swimming pool: During your first year in the pool, you are treading water; it is a tough year. During your second year in the pool, you are swimming laps; you grow more productive and efficient. But if you get a third year in the pool, you can tread water, swim laps... You can even save others if they fall in. You make the whole pool better.⁵²

C. NATIONAL SECURITY AGENCY

The NSA, much like the CIA, is in the middle of a major reorganization. After more than 60 years of foreign signals intelligence and information assurance, the Agency recognizes that the domain in which it operates is so complex and changing so rapidly, it is time to restructure. A significant aspect of that restructuring effort is to make the organization flatter and more agile by merging Signals Intelligence and Information Assurance into one Operations Directorate.⁵³ But, as with the CIA, the primary objective is not about directorates, harnessing new software, or investing in new hardware; the number one imperative is people-driven. Specifically, the NSA21 initiative seeks to simplify personnel processes and improve leadership.⁵⁴

Because of the NSA's deep focus on technical skills, the Agency has traditionally leaned towards very deliberate rotation for its technical leaders.⁵⁵ In recent years, the NSA

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ellen Nakashima, "National Security Agency Plans Major Reorganization," *Washington Post*, February 2, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/national-security-agency-plans-major-reorganization/2016/02/02/2a66555e-c960-11e5-a7b2-5a2f824b02c9_story.html.

⁵⁴ "NSA21: NSA in the 21st Century," NSA, May 3, 2016, <https://www.nsa.gov/news-features/initiatives/nsa21/>.

⁵⁵ NSA Technical Director for Workplace Development, in interview with the author, August 25, 2016.

has begun to seek a more balanced approach to the question of depth versus breadth. In 2015, the NSA instituted a policy limiting the tenure of incumbents in both senior executive and senior technical leader positions to no more than 4 years. Even leaders in deeply technical positions are required to apply for extensions to their 4-year rotation dates. The goal of requiring leaders in extremely complex, technical fields to move every four years is to ensure that, despite the intricate nature of their work, these leaders have the opportunity to grow by applying their specific skills in various environments—whether this is in a different area of the Agency, with a partner nation that has similar capabilities and goals, or even with industry in places like Silicon Valley.⁵⁶

While four years may seem like a long time from a military perspective, it is important to note that the NSA is also very deliberate about ensuring that its leaders receive broadening opportunities. For years, NSA has used 2–3- year structured development programs to develop both the technical expertise and the fundamental leadership competencies of selected technical leaders. These programs integrate a series of rotational assignments, usually six to twelve months in duration each, with training and often mentoring and peer learning. Under NSA21, the Agency is consolidating these programs—now more than 40—under a new Workforce Development Group. The purpose of this consolidation is to achieve greater synergies and integration, effectiveness, and efficiencies, and to plan more strategically for the development of NSA’s most promising talent.⁵⁷ While many technical experts will still remain in their role for a long period of time, the intent is to broaden the *right people*.

Here we find a key difference between the NSA and our Special Warfare units: the NSA’s broadening programs are the exception, not the talent management norm.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ I equate these short-term, broadening experiences to an aide-de-camp role. Everyone knows the ADC is there for a short time. While the ADC job may be an important role, it is certainly not a key leadership position. The ADC runs hard, he learns, and he leaves. There is a broadening effect for the individual and minimal cost to the organization. On the other hand, the positions through which our high potential leaders hustle are, in many cases, the center of gravity for our organization and Special Warfare mission.

These programs are competitive and focus primarily on the Agency's most critical skill areas and mission needs. Such programs and other initiatives, such as NSA's Enterprise Succession Management process, all seek to accelerate the career growth of technical and managerial leaders through deliberately planned experience in developmental assignments. Most of these developmental assignments are short-term—or at least less than four years in duration.⁵⁹

By balancing significant time in the job with carefully targeted broadening assignments, NSA avoids churn while ensuring an important degree of breadth for high-potential leaders.

Outside perspective is critical. When I spoke with former Intelligence Community Chief Human Capital Officer Ronald Sanders, PhD., a man who served 37 years in the human resources field for DOD and government agencies—two decades of that time in Senior Executive Service (or SES-equivalent) positions—I asked him if it was possible that our rapid rotation was counterproductive given the complex, long-term nature of Special Warfare. His answer was to the point: “I’m going to take your question as rhetorical. *Yes*. It needs to be done differently.” Dr. Sanders made it clear that both cyber and Special Warfare share this particular challenge.⁶⁰ Because of the highly complex nature of the work and the depth required to plan and command cyber and Special Warfare operations, they both “deserve—in fact demand—a more mission-centric career path than the standard DOPMA template.”⁶¹

Interestingly, the importance of relationships is one of the primary reasons that more time is required in a role. Even within the highly technical fields found throughout the Intel Community, success is closely correlated with developing a network of high-value relationships. In each and every organization, there is massive value in finding colleagues who have built a network and “know who to call” regardless of the challenge.

⁵⁹ NSA Technical Director for Workforce Development, in interview with the author.

⁶⁰ According to Dr. Sanders and former Under Secretary of Defense Brad Carson, people throughout the Pentagon largely accept as fact that cyber is so complex it requires a different method for managing talent. However, few recognize that Special Warfare belongs in the same category. Dr. Sanders believes this is largely because most in the National Capital Region think of SOF in terms of Surgical Strike, not more nuanced, long-term missions like SW.

⁶¹ Ronald Sanders, in interview with the author, September 1, 2016.

In the Intel Community, much as in Special Operations, these relationships often cross agency boundaries and even national boundaries. It requires time to build the necessary trust and credibility to cement relationships that can help yield mission success. From the perspective of the Intel Community, this is a primary reason why rapid leader rotation leads to failure. As Dr. Sanders made clear, “you can’t build, sustain, and leverage those relationships doing 12 to 18 to 24-month ‘in and out’ rotations.”⁶²

D. TAKEAWAYS FROM THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY

The Intelligence Community operates—much as the Special Warfare community does—in a complex and demanding environment that requires expertise, the right network of relationships, and quality leadership. Based on my interviews with leaders in this community, here are three important takeaways for managing leaders in a complex domain:

(1) Balance is key

Too much focus on depth leaves the pool of future leaders without the necessary perspective on the larger enterprise. Developing great leaders requires broadening.

(2) Relationships take time

Even in a highly technical field, success will often depend on a network of human relationships that cross-cuts bureaucratic and national boundaries. This requires developing trust, which takes time.

(3) The third year is a game changer

A third year in a key job can make the whole organization better. Even when an exceptional leader is very productive in the second year, there is an opportunity cost to him moving on—the chance for him to make a lasting impact on the organization.

⁶² Ibid.

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V. GOOGLE

A. A BILLION SEARCHES

Google has a no-fail mission. Its search products are expected—relied upon—to provide worldwide results in milliseconds. Google’s workforce is not particularly large; it is closer in size to USSOCOM than to the U.S. Army. And much like U.S. Special Operations Forces, Google punches well above its weight.⁶³ This quote from Google’s Chief Economist is staggering:

A billion minutes ago, Christianity began.
A billion seconds ago, the IBM personal computer was released.
A billion Google searches ago... was this morning.⁶⁴

Google is a public, for-profit, tech company.⁶⁵ Its mission, to organize and make useful the world’s information, is deceptively simple.⁶⁶ Headquartered in the heart of Silicon Valley, Google operates in a complex, highly competitive domain.⁶⁷ Google’s numerous consumer products sit atop a technological and algorithmic foundation so complex that few in the world truly understand it. But behind all that technology lies something far simpler: exceptional people. Here, too, humans are more important than hardware.

Our Special Operations community is rightfully proud of the rigorous selection standards, but few organizations in the world are as selective as Google. In fact, LinkedIn would tell you that a job at Google is the most sought after on the planet.⁶⁸ Because of

⁶³ Google earned an astounding \$1.15 million in revenue per employee in 2015. See <http://www.businessinsider.com/top-tech-companies-revenue-per-employee-2015-10/#3-softbank-918449-per-employee-10>.

⁶⁴ Laszlo Bock, *Work Rules! Insights from Inside Google that Will Transform How You Live and Lead* (New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing, 2015), 7.

⁶⁵ In pursuit of simplicity, and in keeping with most current material, I will simply use “Google” to refer to both Alphabet, Inc. and its subsidiary, Google.

⁶⁶ “About Google,” Google, accessed September 27, 2016, <https://www.google.com/about/>.

⁶⁷ Sramana Mitra, “Don’t Move to Silicon Valley without Preparation,” *Harvard Business Review*, October 29, 2013, <https://hbr.org/2013/10/dont-move-to-silicon-valley-without-preparation>.

⁶⁸ “Announcing North America’s Most InDemand Employers: 2015,” LinkedIn, accessed September 27, 2016, <https://business.linkedin.com/talent-solutions/indemand-north-america-2015>.

that demand—represented by more than two million applications each year—Google is able to be extremely selective. In fact, it is 25 times more selective than Harvard, Princeton, or Yale. As any elite community must be, Google is serious about the quality of its people.⁶⁹

Google’s obsession with quality people does not end with selection. As it has grown from a start-up in 1998 to a Fortune 100 powerhouse with over 70,000 employees, Google has been forced to think carefully about how best to manage its extraordinarily talented workforce.⁷⁰ In his award-winning book, *Work Rules!*, Google’s Director of People Operations, Laszlo Bock, explains Google’s people-driven culture. Bock recommends, “Think of your work as a calling, with a mission that matters. Give people slightly more trust, freedom, and authority than you are comfortable giving them. If you’re not nervous, you haven’t given them enough.”⁷¹ Sound familiar? A calling... a worthwhile mission... leading by intent. Google’s focus on people makes this case analogous to and worthwhile for our Special Operations community.⁷²

During Laszlo Bock’s tenure leading Google’s innovative People Operations team, Google was named the *Best Company to Work For* more than 30 times by numerous publications.⁷³ A recent article that named Bock as the HR Professional of the Decade makes it clear how impactful his leadership has been:

Using any set of assessment criteria, Laszlo Bock of Google has been in the vanguard in creating revolutionary change in the profession... Under

⁶⁹ Bock, *Work Rules!*, 5.

⁷⁰ Bock, in interview with the author.

⁷¹ Bock, *Work Rules!*, 53.

⁷² To be even-handed, Google also has its share of turnover and “brain drain.” Like the Special Operations community, Google asks a great deal of its numerous (and highly marketable) employees. While some degree of “burn out” and turnover is inevitable, a strong majority of Google employees answer favorably in surveys asking whether they are satisfied in their job or believe their work is meaningful. See: <http://www.businessinsider.com/google-is-the-best-company-to-work-for-in-america-2016-4>

⁷³ Laszlo Bock served as Google’s Director of People Operations from 2006 to 2016.

his leadership, Google has literally led the way in innovation in all aspects of HR and it has become the world's only data-driven HR function.⁷⁴

To understand Google's unique and highly innovative approach to managing leadership talent, I interviewed Laszlo Bock. While Google operates in a vastly different environment than SOF, some of the thinking and techniques behind its talent management success are applicable to our force. From my interviews and insights from Bock's book, I will touch briefly on three topics relevant for managing our Special Warfare officers. Specifically, this chapter will look at how much time one should spend in a leadership role, how an organization can incentivize long-term thinking during an individual's relatively short tenure, and the very real danger of rewarding the wrong people in an environment of constant leader rotation.

B. SLOWING DOWN WHILE MOVING UP

At Google, time spent in a leadership position varies largely depending on seniority. Bock recommends that junior leaders rotate through positions more rapidly—18 to 24 months in the job for leaders in the first five to six years with the organization. This acknowledges the importance of broadening young leaders with a variety of low-level experiences. The goal of this relatively fast rate of rotation is to infuse junior leaders with an enterprise perspective.⁷⁵ However, unlike many prestigious corporations, Google does not believe that rotation is inherently good. According to Bock, constant leader rotation leads to a dearth of long-term relationships, hinders the build-up of knowledge, and sharply curtails long-term planning and execution.⁷⁶

As Google's leaders move into mid-level, operational roles, the rotation slows down. Bock points to the two-year mark as a minimum tenure for mid-level leaders.

⁷⁴ John Sullivan, "Revealing the 'HR Professional of the Decade' – Laszlo Bock of Google," ERE: Recruiting Intelligence, March 30, 2015, <https://www.ere-media.com/ere/revealing-the-hr-professional-of-the-decade-laszlo-bock-of-google/>.

⁷⁵ Bock, in interview with the author.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

However, three years is recommended.⁷⁷ Google recognizes that the bigger the job, the harder it will be for a leader to show results. By spending three years in a position, key leaders at the operational level—leaders with more influence on the organization—are granted the necessary time to make a demonstrable impact.⁷⁸ Bock also recommends a change in the interval for evaluations as leaders become more senior: Requiring that individuals be reviewed annually “is too often because it takes time to see the results of your work. It instills a short-term thinking that is dangerous.”⁷⁹

But as we saw in the Intel Community, there is also such a thing as too much time in a position. At Google, five years is seen as an upper limit. “Unless you can actually reinvent how you think about the job—fundamentally think about it differently—you shouldn’t be in the job more than five years. People get comfortable and pattern recognition kicks in. The problem is: the world changes. You’re likely to make sub-optimal decisions.”⁸⁰ From the military perspective, GEN (Ret.) McChrystal, one of the few senior leaders to spend five years in a leadership role, agrees with Google’s experience. He believes that strategic leaders, like the SOCOM Commander, benefit from the long-term perspective that accompanies four to five years in the job.⁸¹ However, both McChrystal and Bock would also likely concur with ADM (Ret.) McRaven: four to five years in the job should be viewed as an upper limit—even for our most senior leaders.⁸²

⁷⁷ Bock believes that with a two-year job, you get 12 productive months. You spent six months climbing the learning curve on the way in and you spend six months preparing yourself and the organization for handover and your transition out. One more year gives you twice the productive time in your role.

⁷⁸ Bock, *Work Rules!*

⁷⁹ Bock, in interview with the author.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Stanley McChrystal (former ISAF and JSOC Commander), in interview with the author, September 29, 2016.

⁸² William H. McRaven (former SOCOM and JSOC Commander), in interview with the author, September 26, 2016.

C. IF YOU VALUE IT, MEASURE IT

Google is obsessed with data. Let Google find a metric that matters, and it will invariably find a way to measure it, understand it, and make data-driven improvements. For instance, imagine that you, as a commander, were told by your chain of command that you were in the bottom 5% of commanders across the SOF enterprise based on feedback from your subordinates. If you were a manager at Google with that level of performance, you would not receive anonymous, upward (or bottom-up) feedback that is yours to ignore; your leaders and coaches from the HR team would instead sit down with you to discuss how you can improve.⁸³ Leadership is just one of the many not-so-concrete variables that Google is determined to measure, learn about, and improve.

The same data-driven approach can be applied to our leader rotation and handover. If we value long-term thinking, but a leader will only be in place for a relatively short time, should we not find a way to measure the performance of his command *after* his departure? Did he drive the organization into the ground to “make mission” or did he put things in place that will provide long-term benefit to both the mission and the organization?⁸⁴ The way Google approaches these kinds of assessments does not require a ream of new forms or an elaborate process. Instead, we could find a reasonable way to specify what a successful command and handover looks like after the fact, and measure it. The example Laszlo Bock offered would be to create measures of effectiveness for a successful handover, and then use those metrics to determine how the command has fared 12 months after a leader departs. Arguably, even if SOF initially only did this as part of a pilot study, it could offer useful context to the senior leaders who will make crucial decisions about talent management. Ideally, over time, developing this measure of effectiveness could help with leader assessment and ameliorate some of the short-term thinking inherent in 12-month evaluation cycles.

⁸³ Bock, *Work Rules!*, 201.

⁸⁴ This need not be painful. It could even be pass-fail like the PT test on the OER. Bottom line: if someone leaves an organization with great paper but the next 6-12 months are filled with IG inspections, a mass exodus of junior officers, or some other measurable indicator of a job poorly done, this should be noted and used to improve our talent management.

D. WORST CASE SCENARIO: REWARDING THE WRONG LEADERS

Great leaders are valued at Google. But it is also recognized that being a great leader, and making a worthwhile impact, can take time. Sometimes the best key leaders are not the ones who have the strongest first year. To be frank, sometimes the people who appear to make a big splash at the outset are not the people you want to retain. Laszlo Bock cautions us:

A rotational environment creates this incentive: as soon as you're in something, you've got to change it and make your mark. In corporations, this destroys value. It rewards people who play the game. And it massively rewards the skill set of managing up, being political, and making things seem better than they are.⁸⁵

One of the things that struck me about Google is its emphasis on finding key leaders who provide “the glue”—leaders whose individual performance may be less impactful than the connecting and unifying effect they have on the organization.⁸⁶ For example, Google values the manager who, after talking with the boss and getting a better sense of what is expected, shares what he just learned with his peers to set them up for success. In a highly competitive organization, it takes both confidence and humility to do business in a way that honors your boss but intentionally makes your peers—the competition, in some sense—better. Leaders who operate with this humility and cultivate this style of mission-first leadership can be hard to recognize at first. Because Google values leaders who eschew opportunities to make a big splash in favor of leaders who think long-term and enable those around them, rapid leader rotation is viewed as deeply counterproductive. Once again, Laszlo Bock's expertise is well worth our time:

But [the rotational environment] also hides a different kind of person... the people you really want to retain, the people who are making everyone around them better, get massively overlooked in that kind of structure. Part of what makes them so successful is context and culture. If you're moving them around, they're not going to get that traction. They're going to get overlooked and moved out before you see the effects over time...

⁸⁵ Bock, in interview with the author.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

these are exactly the people you inadvertently select against in a system that's geared towards moving you every 12–18 months.⁸⁷

Which brings us to a question that nobody enjoys asking: What if we are not promoting our best people? What if, by contorting our Special Warfare community into the Army's view of what gets officers promoted and what gets us selected for command, we have prioritized short-term performance despite our long-term mission? Or even worse: might we have created a system in which key leaders have such a short time to understand deeply complex Special Warfare environments that, to some degree, they are rewarded for their ability to fake it?

E. TAKEAWAYS FROM GOOGLE

In the corporate arena, there are few better examples of innovative and measurably effective talent management than what Laszlo Bock and his People Operations team have achieved at Google. Here are three takeaways from what Google has learned in the complex and competitive world of Silicon Valley.

(1) Mid-level leaders should slow down, not speed up

As a leader's influence grows, it takes longer to see the impact of his work. The short-term perspective that accompanies rapid rotation is antithetical to mission success. Two years should be viewed as a minimum—three is better. Strategic leaders should rotate even slower.

(2) If we are seeking long-term perspective, value it by measuring it

If we value long-term thinking, we can incentivize it by measuring a leader's impact after his departure. This does not have to be complex. It should be possible to define beneficial and detrimental impacts and measure them; the data points will become valued by Special Warfare leaders.

(3) Rapid rotation makes it easy to promote the wrong leaders

The best people may not make a big splash in the short-term. In fact, demanding a measurable impact during a 12-month tenure may reward leaders who can manage up—regardless of whether they are thinking long-term or making a positive impact on the organization.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

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VI. COLLEGE BASKETBALL

A. WHEN THE TOP TALENT CHURNS THE FASTEST

As with any elite organization, there is something worth learning from the country's best college basketball programs. Few organizations churn through top talent like elite college basketball teams. So far, I have made the case for longer tenure by focusing on organizations that rotate personnel through leadership positions more slowly than the Special Warfare community does. For the fourth and final case of talent management, we will turn towards the other end of the spectrum. The military may rotate rapidly, but elite college basketball programs churn through talent even faster. The very best players are often on the way out soon after they join.⁸⁸ And yet, the longer an exceptional member remains in place, the more his talent contributes to overall success and indirectly shapes the organization for the better.

On the nation's best college basketball teams, top players are only one special season away from leaving—declaring for the NBA draft.⁸⁹ Because the allure of the NBA causes these teams to churn through marquee players each year, it should be instructive to look closely at how the most elite teams view talent management. This chapter will address how these elite schools view the increasing churn of top talent through their basketball programs. Additionally, I will conclude with a question we have yet to ask: if short tenure is inevitable in certain cases, how might about manage that churn?

While I plan to make robust comparisons in this final case, I recognize this analogy requires some imagination. Granted, it is sports; the competition does not involve life or death, and success is eminently measurable. Measures of effectiveness are simple: win or lose; get selected for the NCAA tournament or not; make it to the National

⁸⁸ Andrew Carter, "Gotta Go: College Players Arrive Ready to Leave Early for NBA Draft," *Charlotte Observer*, May 16, 2015, <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/sports/college/mens-basketball/article21165348.html>.

⁸⁹ Joel Justus (Kentucky Basketball assistant coach), in interview with the author, August 31, 2016.

Championship or Final Four. Consistently winning is complex, but the feedback loop in college basketball is tight and big-picture success is well defined.

Second, and worth noting, this chapter explores talent management in terms of player tenure (or time in position). The best head coaches are often in place for decades; a coach like Dean Smith and his impact on Carolina basketball can be regarded as analogous to doctrine and culture—even organizational values.⁹⁰ The coaches *are* the continuity. No player will ever shape the organizational landscape to the same extent. But great players do shape each game and, in turn, each season.

Thus, despite obvious differences between the challenges faced by basketball teams and Special Warfare units, the importance of time and talent management remains critical to both; a winning program requires that the coach and his team put the right mix of talent and teamwork on the floor. And perhaps the most critical aspect of the basketball-SOF analogy: in our Special Warfare community, the more talented the individual, the more likely he is to rotate rapidly.

B. BLUE BLOODS

According to ESPN, only six teams in men's college basketball can be considered the "Blue Bloods": UCLA, Kansas, Indiana, Kentucky, Duke, and North Carolina.

They are the elite of the elite, the kind of programs who blend historical success and influence with sheer cultural force, and thus maintain the highest set of expectations each and every season. Those expectations are simple, even singular: Win the national championship.⁹¹

To understand how elite teams position themselves to remain competitive year after year, I spoke with assistant coaches at the three teams that have had the most recent success: the University of North Carolina (UNC), Duke University, and the University of Kentucky.

⁹⁰ Dean Smith et al., *The Carolina Way: Leadership Lessons from a Life in Coaching*, reprint ed. (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2005).

⁹¹ Eamonn Brennan, "Four for Four: Blue Bloods in the Dog House," ESPN College Basketball, April 2013, http://www.espn.com/blog/collegebasketballnation/post/_id/82691.

In an incredibly competitive and turbulent environment, Kentucky, Duke, and UNC stand out beyond being perennial favorites in their conferences; they are reliably among the best in the nation, and have been for decades.⁹² These three teams represent three of the four all-time winningest college basketball programs.⁹³ Together they have won a combined 18 national championships since the tournament began in 1939.⁹⁴ Or, for an alternative perspective on just how consistently competitive these programs remain, Kentucky, Duke, and UNC have reached the Final Four a combined 29 times in the last 30 years.⁹⁵ This, in turn, means that their Hall of Fame coaches⁹⁶ strive under unforgivingly high expectations and intense scrutiny. They represent the highest level of college basketball.

C. CHOOSE STABILITY OVER TALENT

One challenge elite college basketball programs confront is the phenomenon known as “one and done,” which refers to freshmen who play one year of college and depart for the NBA. Because of the inexorable pull of the NBA draft—and the life-changing riches associated with being drafted—the most talented players, those with the greatest potential, are increasingly likely to leave after their freshman season.⁹⁷ This trend has been exacerbated since the NBA’s 2005 collective bargaining agreement

⁹² The college basketball landscape has shifted dramatically in recent decades. Factors like NBA and NCAA regulations, television network and social media coverage, and donor funding have all required flexibility and adaptability from the best programs. College basketball teams with intermittent success and long periods of mediocrity are far more common than those that demonstrate predictable excellence.

⁹³ The four winningest programs of all time are Kentucky, Kansas, Carolina and Duke. All four universities have fielded a basketball program for more than a century. See <http://www.sports-reference.com/cbb/postseason/>.

⁹⁴ NCAA Division 1 National Championships: Kentucky 8, Duke 5, Carolina 5. See <http://www.sports-reference.com/cbb/postseason/>.

⁹⁵ For the last three decades, one or more of these programs has competed amongst the four top teams in the NCAA Tournament 24 out of 30 years, which equates to an 80% chance that one of them will be among the very best in any given year. See <http://www.sports-reference.com/cbb/postseason/>.

⁹⁶ These teams share a total of eight Naismith Hall of Fame coaches. See <http://www.hoophall.com/hall-of-famers/>.

⁹⁷ Even a little known role player in the NBA can make millions of dollars a year. The salary cap has recently been raised to over \$94 million per NBA team, making an annual salary of \$10 million or more common among starters. See <http://www.espn.com/nba/salaries>.

mandated that draft prospects be at least one year removed from high school.⁹⁸ The result is that the very best players—the top talent in college basketball—often arrive straight from high school and depart the team after a single basketball season.⁹⁹

Across these three teams, the coaches' verdict on freshmen was unanimous, and should sound familiar: the first year is tough. Even chart-topping high school players must acclimate to a new and different environment. Leading them is hard. Leading a team comprised of multiple freshmen starters is harder still. Duke has had some spectacular first-year players, but the coaching staff will readily admit, "It's hard to win with freshmen."¹⁰⁰ And when a rare freshman comes along who makes an immediate, head-turning contribution, the cost of losing that talent after a single year is considerable.¹⁰¹ Even a single year of experience makes a big difference; as the UNC assistant coach remarked, "We really value our sophomores."¹⁰²

While Kentucky, Duke, and UNC do things very differently, all three coaches agreed: the churn of talent through key positions is exhausting. This was revealed when I asked each assistant coach, "What one thing would you change, for the benefit of your program, if you were king for a day?" The answer was unanimous: allow the very best players to go straight to the NBA from high school.¹⁰³ I was floored. I expected that the coaches would want a rule that requires players to finish their college degree before departing, or at least to stay two years before pursuing an NBA contract. Instead, they chose stability over talent. Put simply: these coaches would forego NBA-level talent, freeing those high school all-stars to chase their dreams, in order to be confident that very good players would be with the team for two or more years.

⁹⁸ Coleman Collins, "The One-and-Done Conundrum," ESPN, June 18, 2016, http://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/16237629.

⁹⁹ C. B. McGrath (UNC Basketball assistant coach), in interview with the author, August 25, 2016.

¹⁰⁰ Nate James (Duke Basketball assistant coach), in interview with the author, August 25, 2016.

¹⁰¹ McGrath, in interview with the author; James, in interview with the author; Justus, in interview with the author.

¹⁰² McGrath, in interview with the author.

¹⁰³ Ibid.; James, in interview with the author; Justus, in interview with the author.

Coaches at these programs acknowledge that they must think beyond the next big win or even a successful season; they have to think long-term to build a program. Each coach cited the opportunity cost when a tremendously talented player leaves. They recognize the outsized impact a marquee player could have had with another year or two of development in addition to the long-term, exponential impact of elite players who elevate the performances of their peers.¹⁰⁴ As I heard repeatedly during my brief time in the basement of the Dean E. Smith Center at Chapel Hill: there is an enormous difference between chasing wins and building a basketball program. “At Carolina, we’re trying to build a *program*.”¹⁰⁵

D. THE IMPORTANCE OF LEGACY

Inertia is a powerful force in a large, bureaucratic organization like the U.S. military; while SOF would prefer to envision itself as lithe and flexible compared to the conventional force, we are far from turning on a dime. Recognizing that change in the military rarely comes fast, I sought to understand best practices for blunting the impact of talent churn. I looked to these organizations—these elite basketball teams—who often churn through the top talent at a rate that makes our rotational pace appear glacial by comparison. How do they manage to blunt the impact of talent churn? Here one recommendation stood out from the rest: strengthen the sense of legacy.

In each interview with Kentucky, Duke, and UNC, we never strayed far from this central theme of legacy. All three organizations value wins; they are hungry for national championships. But they focus an unwavering eye on the future of their programs. This theme emerged in various ways, but was never far beneath the surface. At Duke, coaches are searching for kids who will “unpack their bag” and think about how they want to be remembered as a part of *Duke Basketball*, regardless of their eventual NBA dreams.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Justus, in interview with the author.

¹⁰⁵ McGrath, in interview with the author.

¹⁰⁶ James, in interview with the author.

At Kentucky, the message is clear from the moment recruiting begins: “this is bigger than you... you’re not going to be the face of Kentucky Basketball.”¹⁰⁷ Kentucky’s commitment to this culture is steadfast; players are told to show up ready to test themselves, ready to learn about being servant leaders, and ready to be part of something unique that has been over a century in the making.

Meanwhile, at UNC, you hear about the program that “Coach Smith built.” Players are taught UNC’s history; the coaches want to ensure that every player understands that he is “part of something truly special.” In other words, legacy goes beyond basketball. Every summer at Carolina, former players return from the NBA or wherever else they may be working. The current (and incoming) team members then get to scrimmage against current NBA starters or swap stories with a legend. The point is not to instruct about history or legacy, so much as to build a sense of pride and camaraderie through relationships. The result is powerful. When UNC played in the national championship game in 2016, Michael Jordan was just one of the 51 former Tar Heels who showed up to be with the “Carolina Family.” And as Jordan said after Coach Dean Smith passed away in 2015, “He was more than a coach—he was my mentor, my teacher, my second father... In teaching me the game of basketball, he taught me about life.”¹⁰⁸

This focus on leaving a legacy—on being part of something special—has an interesting side effect.¹⁰⁹ The best players in these elite programs are confident and ruthlessly competitive. In the toughest situations, these players want the ball; they are ready to step up, even in their first year with the organization. But the players who recognize they are part of something bigger than themselves do something extra: they step down well too. These are the players who leave the team, but make an effort to come back every summer to keep the network alive. These are the players who take the uniform

¹⁰⁷ Justus, in interview with the author.

¹⁰⁸ Nick Schwartz, “Michael Jordan on Dean Smith: ‘He Was My Mentor, My Teacher, My Second Father,’” USA Today Sports, For the Win, February 8, 2015, <http://ftw.usatoday.com/2015/02/michael-jordan-remembers-dean-smith>.

¹⁰⁹ While not directly related to the subject of time in the job, it is worth noting that legacy and reputation are incredible recruiting tools. Talent management begins with the attracting the right people.

off, but make sure their successors know they remain available for advice.¹¹⁰ The best players—the ones who step up strong *and* step down well—have an impact that goes well beyond the season. Even if they only spend a year with the team, they make the whole organization better, thanks to an attitude instilled by recognizing the opportunity they have had to be a small part of a broader legacy.

I believe we can learn something from this focus on history and legacy. During my time in the Special Forces community, I have heard a few guest speakers, been handed a few books, and attended a few events where the regiment highlighted its Special Warfare legacy.¹¹¹ However, leader priorities can be confusing; I have spent far more time doing mandatory annual training than learning about our rich history. It has been my privilege to serve in this community. USASOC has invested considerably in me; as a CPT, I spent 14 months becoming a Special Forces officer and another 6+ months in various schools. But despite the emphasis placed on performing in the present in order to succeed in the future, I have yet to experience a deliberate, ongoing effort to inculcate in my peers and me a knowledge of our history, an understanding of why our legacy matters, or an appreciation that we, as members of the Special Warfare community, are part of something special—something that endures beyond us as individuals.

E. TAKEAWAYS FROM COLLEGE BASKETBALL

The coaching staffs from UNC, Kentucky, and Duke helped me understand how they manage talent to consistently remain atop the field of exceptional college basketball programs... even when the best talent is often only one year away from leaving for the NBA. Here are three takeaways—to include two on thriving despite rapid talent turnover.

¹¹⁰ McGrath, in interview with the author; James, in interview with the author; Justus, in interview with the author.

¹¹¹ I do not mean to imply that we are not making an effort or that we do not have traditions. But, at times, the effort feels rote. I have heard “The Ballad of the Green Beret” far more times than I have enjoyed a conversation with a mentor about our history or engaged with a standout former member of our regiment. Relationships, I believe, are how we make believers out of the current SF Regiment—how we get invested in and excited about our small part in a greater legacy. And relationships require time.

(1) Given the choice, choose stability over short-term talent

In basketball, winning with freshmen is tough. In every organization, no matter how talented someone might be, the first year is challenging. When exceptional talent remains in the role for a second or third year, the organizational benefit is exponential.

(2) The right talent will step up strong *and* step down well

It is critical to promote individuals who will do more than make a big splash in the short term. Identifying the right talent means finding individuals who think about more than their own success, regardless of time in the role. This attitude is contagious—it will make the whole organization better.

(3) Teach legacy through relationships

At these elite basketball programs, coaches lead with an eye towards legacy. Talking about history is not enough. Players are made to feel part of a close-knit group of former players and basketball greats, who, by getting together every summer, build the network and convey to all involved that they are part of something bigger than themselves.

VII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. WORTH THE FIGHT

Time is priceless. More time on the job means more time to understand the current environment, more time to prioritize and define the most pressing problems, more time to craft durable solutions with an eye to the future, and more time to assess the impacts of one's own actions before handing over the reins. Equally important, as years and decades pass, time well spent adds to legacy—the accumulated knowledge of those who have come before and the humbling awareness that we are all part of something bigger than ourselves. Experience in a job is a good thing. But experience, paired with humility and a long-term perspective, leads to wisdom. Every one of us wants to serve alongside wise leaders. The best way to ensure that Special Warfare officers can do so is to give us the *time* required in each job to make a lasting difference.

I did not start this thesis to right a perceived wrong or ameliorate a problem within the SOF community. I did not undertake this project convinced that our Special Warfare forces need to change the way we manage officer talent in the ways I have described. I chose this particular problem because I believed—and still do—that we recruit, select, and train some of the very best officers in the military.

I acknowledge that many exceptional leaders are products of the current system and that our organization has accomplished important work for our nation. However, because we are oriented towards continuous improvement, we should pursue anything within reach to unleash the considerable talent resident in our force and improve our capability to conduct Special Warfare. If we can measurably improve our ability to conduct our primary mission, we should fight to make it happen.

My intent with the recommendations to follow is not to lay out a comprehensive fix or a detailed career path. If I have learned anything from my conversations with General and flag officers, officers from HRC and Army G-1, and the former Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, I recognize that it will require a team of thoughtful Special Warfare leaders and experienced human resources professionals to

account for the inevitable second and third-order effects of changing the way we do business. That said, I have spent the past six chapters presenting a discomfiting map check; in the arena of officer talent management, we are not where we could be as a force.

In the takeaways from each chapter, I have offered lessons learned that will help leaders making tough decisions in a complex domain; my goal is to improve time management for talent management. These lead me to three final recommendations: recognize, decelerate, and consider.

B. RECOMMENDATIONS

(1) Recognize: We Have an Opportunity to Improve

The problem is well defined. Of the more than 25 leaders I interviewed for this thesis—from former SF battalion commanders to former four-star commanders, from a former SF branch manager to a former Under Secretary of Defense, and from Google’s top talent manager to coaches at elite college basketball programs—not a single person believes 12 months in the job is an effective way to do business in a complex domain. Most agreed that 24 months is an absolute minimum—and that a third year could make a considerable difference. At best, our current system of rotating every 12–24 months is characterized by the leaders and experts with whom I spoke as broken but unlikely to be fixed; by others, it was characterized as running directly counter to our stated mission or best practices for how to manage leaders.

Recognizing the opportunity means acknowledging we have work to do. Former Under Secretary of Defense Brad Carson is definitive: change is coming. Being positioned to exploit change, however, requires having a plan for where we want to go if given the chance—particularly since it is being acknowledged that one size no longer fits all (e.g. Infantry, Cyber, Special Operations).

To devise such a plan, USASOC should assemble an empowered team of SOF leaders and personnel experts to explore ways to improve officer talent management—to give key field grade officers the *time* in each position that a mission like Special Warfare demands—and to understand the long-term consequences of these improvements. This

will ensure USASOC is prepared to make a data-driven, mission-based case that Special Warfare, much like Cyber, will require the help of our Service Secretary to “waive select DOPMA constraints” when exceptions to the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act are approved by Congress, as they inevitably will be.¹¹²

(2) Decelerate: Refuse to Accept 12-Month Rotations for O-4s in Special Warfare

There are two good reasons for a Special Forces Major to be in a key job for a year or less. First, if he is one of the very best—easily the number one officer in his organization—then it may occasionally be worthwhile to accelerate him towards more challenging or broadening work.¹¹³ The second reason an O-4 should rotate rapidly is an abject failure to perform. If we profess that quality trumps quantity, then commanders must prove it—by being willing to endure the short-term pain of an empty billet for the long-term benefit and credibility of the organization. Any officer who unambiguously fails to perform should receive an honest report and be thanked for his service.

In the Special Warfare business, our field grade officers should be in place for two years. This would allow an SF Company Commander to make a lasting impact on his unit. This would allow the S3 and XO to unpack their bags, develop systems, and make the organization better. This would also permit these officers to progress well beyond whatever regional orientation or experience in similar jobs they had acquired previously—a necessity for developing an understanding of a complex situation and being able to plan effective operations in the human domain.

Both McRaven and McChrystal offered hard-earned insights into the importance of time in the job. GEN (Ret.) McChrystal advised that there are periods in one’s career—and specific jobs—when the desired outcome is tilted towards individual development. In these cases, senior leaders should acknowledge the cost of this rotation

¹¹² Ash Carter, “SECDEF Speech: Remarks on ‘The Next Two Links to the Force of the Future’” (speech, Pentagon Courtyard, Washington, DC, June 9, 2016), <http://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/795341/remarks-on-the-next-two-links-to-the-force-of-the-future>.

¹¹³ Even then, however, we must recognize the opportunity cost. Who knows what lasting impact he might have made, given more time in his position?

and set the organization up to take this into account.¹¹⁴ But McChrystal also stressed the importance of identifying key jobs—the jobs that require both the right person and enough time so that the officer can develop mastery in the role.¹¹⁵ First, McChrystal pointed to the importance of mindset. In key jobs, officers need time to grow in the job and to reap what they sow. Being in place long enough to deal with the impact of one’s own decisions changes a person’s mindset. “There’s a different mindset if they’re going to be there for the long haul,” Interestingly, the first benefit of the long-haul mindset that McChrystal pointed to is leader development. When a leader is in place long enough to reap what he sows—certainly longer than 12 months—those serving under him will benefit.¹¹⁶

GEN (Ret.) McChrystal also believes having the correct, long-term mindset means owning the problem, and not just cycling through.¹¹⁷ Owning the problem includes pursuing a depth of expertise and the right network of relationships. Speaking specifically about the challenges of Special Warfare, McChrystal stated that, as a commander in the indirect fight, “your real strength is going to be your network of people who know what they’re doing and have built the relationships.” Based on his time as the Commanding General in Afghanistan, he noted that, “cultural acuity... for the SF guys it’s off the charts how important this is.” But developing the depth required to plan and run Special Warfare operations takes time.

McChrystal readily admitted that it could take the majority of one’s career to truly understand the dynamics on the ground in a complex, human domain. “This goes against how diverse can a person be. We like the idea that they’ve seen a bunch of different things and that’s their template for problem solving; and that’s good... but we paid a

¹¹⁴ To reinforce a previously made point: McChrystal is explaining that rotational jobs should not be *the* key jobs that enable the organization to accomplish its mission.

¹¹⁵ McChrystal made it clear that these jobs include key staff positions, not just command tours.

¹¹⁶ Stanley McChrystal (former ISAF and JSOC Commander), in interview with the author.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

huge price at times for doing things tactically well without understanding how things connected in society.”¹¹⁸

For his part, ADM (Ret.) McRaven also emphasized the importance of depth—even at the cost of breadth. McRaven acknowledged that many officers who have been intentionally broadened by their superiors, via multiple short tours, ended up in command positions without the requisite depth. As he put it, “The problem with that: I’m not sure you really learned a lot from those jobs.” He continued, “Frankly, a lot of these guys moved up so fast... they really didn’t have the depth of experience, even though they had done a lot of jobs.”¹¹⁹

If one turns to recent writing about Special Warfare, our leaders offer much the same advice. Senior ARSOF leaders recognize the long-term nature of the fight, the importance of expertise, and the benefit of owning the problem.¹²⁰ And yet, somehow, we still allow our best officers to spend most of their field grade years repeatedly tackling the first 12 months in a new job. Perhaps this is what leads ADM (Ret.) McRaven to caution, “If you’re really good, well then the [service] ought to leave you some place so you can *make a difference*—not just get your ticket punched.”¹²¹

As we saw with Gabarro’s five stages of taking charge, it takes 13–18 months before a leader reaches the Reshaping stage—the stage when the most substantive changes will be made.¹²² With two years in the job, officers can better understand the current problem set. They can afford to think beyond a 12-month report card. They can develop a level of mastery in their craft. They can also cultivate relationships that will add value to the organization, in their current role and beyond. Extending O-4 tenure benefits our Special Warfare mission without the addition of a special talent management program or more training and education; we simply need to readjust the clock. And while those adjustments may seem, at first glance, to not fit within the constraints of the current

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ William H. McRaven (former SOCOM and JSOC Commander), in interview with the author.

¹²⁰ “ARSOF 2022,” U.S. Army Special Operations Command, April 1, 2013.

¹²¹ William H. McRaven (former SOCOM and JSOC Commander), in interview with the author.

¹²² Gabarro, *Dynamics of Taking Charge*, 29.

system, the *mission* must come first. Ultimately, we should refuse to be content with a veritable legion of Special Forces Majors rotating rapidly through jobs, left only to imagine the impact they could have made if given the time.

(3) Consider: Further Study Is Warranted to Assess a Third Year for Command Tours

Question: Would our Special Warfare units benefit significantly by adding a third year to command tours for O-5 and O-6 commanders operating in the complex, human domain?¹²³ Over the years, the Army has implemented command tour lengths varying from six months to 36 months. During the Cold War, we settled on 24 months in command.¹²⁴ As ADM (Ret.) McRaven acknowledged, “every service has gone through this thought-drill time and time again.” There are pro’s and con’s to each option.¹²⁵

Here is where further study is needed. Twenty-first century Special Warfare is not simply a reprise of counterinsurgency in Vietnam or Unconventional Warfare during WWII.¹²⁶ New technologies, new political sensitivities and sensibilities, and new types of adversaries mean we should acknowledge important differences between how the Army, as a whole, views command tour length and how Special Warfare units—a relatively small slice of the force with a very different mission—should view commanders and the importance of time in the job.

While some might argue that growing up in a regionally oriented Group¹²⁷ and already having key experiences and relationships should be sufficient, I point to Gabarro’s conclusion as a compelling counterpoint:

¹²³ Of the leaders I interviewed from various, exceptional organizations, over half of them specifically noted the benefit of leaders staying beyond two years when operating in a complex domain.

¹²⁴ Stanley McChrystal (former ISAF and JSOC Commander), in interview with the author.

¹²⁵ William H. McRaven (former SOCOM and JSOC Commander), in interview with the author.

¹²⁶ For more, see Timothy Ball, “From Successful Defense to Problematic Offense: The Devolution of Unconventional Warfare” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, unpublished).

¹²⁷ “Regional Orientation” briefs well. However, an officer who goes from Detachment Commander to Group Commander in the same operational environment is the exception, rather than the rule. Even then, Gabarro’s point stands: a leader having adequate time in the current job is a key component of long-term perspective and organizational success.

If an individual manager's prior experience is broad and deep and also appropriate to the assignment, eighteen months to two years may be sufficient. *I suspect this is unlikely.* I would argue that companies looking for "quick fixes" with brief assignments at upper and middle levels will get just that. The manager will not be there long enough to deal with problems beyond those that become apparent or obvious to him based on his past experience.¹²⁸

Gabarro contends that it takes between 24–30 months to develop an in-depth understanding and translate that understanding into lasting impact. Commanders who punch out after 24 months will likely have completed the Reshaping stage and left their mark. However, the tragic, sub-optimal reality is that these commanders will have never made it to the last two stages—Consolidation and Refinement; they will have missed the opportunity to assess the impact of their biggest changes or fix the unanticipated problems resulting from those actions.¹²⁹

The senior leaders I interviewed also underscored the value of a third year in command. GEN (Ret.) McChrystal believes three years offers a substantial advantage in terms of long-term perspective in a complex environment. "If you're commanding something at the Regimental (O-6) level or above, where you're really trying to do things that take *a long time to make the change*, I would argue two years is not enough in that job... you probably need three." But the former, five-year JSOC Commander also sees a fifth year as an upper limit—even for strategic-level command tours. McChrystal joked, "At a certain point, you've had all your good ideas."¹³⁰

When depth and breadth get out of balance, the imbalance impacts both the mission and the officer's ability to learn and progress. ADM (Ret.) McRaven reinforced this point by sharing that he had, over the course of his Special Operations career, served in both short and long tours. He expressed concern about making a lasting impact in

¹²⁸ Gabarro, *Dynamics of Taking Charge*, 138. Emphasis added.

¹²⁹ John J. Gabarro, "When a New Manager Takes Charge," *Harvard Business Review*, January 2007, <https://hbr.org/2007/01/when-a-new-manager-takes-charge>.

¹³⁰ Stanley McChrystal (former ISAF and JSOC Commander), in interview with the author. Emphasis added.

command. “I’m not sure, within 24 months, you can make fundamental changes.”¹³¹ McRaven believes that three years offers a balance—you have an opportunity to make worthwhile change and improve your effectiveness in a complex environment, but you avoid staying in the role too long.¹³² As McRaven described officers who churned through various leadership roles, he commented, “They hadn’t had to spend three years in a job fighting through all the issues. They hadn’t learned everything they should, as a commanding officer, because they’d barely gotten in there, they figured it out, and by that time, they’re on the way out.”¹³³

C. AND TO THE DOUBTERS...

Change is hard. Even change most might agree with can seem frustratingly out of reach. I anticipate three primary objections from the defense establishment and my military brethren. The first is simple: *right-sizing time in the job is worth doing, but it will be too hard*. SOF peers and mentors have offered dozens of reasons why systematic or structural constraints stand in the way of changing officer timelines. That said, I have yet to hear a single, mission-based argument for why 12–24 months in a job is right for Special Warfare.

Human Resources innovator Laszlo Bock would encourage us to experiment, even if only with a pilot program or an incremental change:

There’s always this assumption from people in executive and leadership roles that this change we’re making is forever. The reality is: if it’s a bad thing you’ll stop it, if it’s a good thing you’ll do more of it, and if you keep doing things the same way you’ve been doing them, you will never improve. You’ve got to take that chance; you’ve got to change.¹³⁴

Before Special Forces was an official branch in the U.S. Army, the list of reasons it could not become a branch seemed longer than the list of reasons it should. The road to

¹³¹ William H. McRaven (former SOCOM and JSOC Commander), in interview with the author.

¹³² One additional note for further research: McRaven mentioned that he experienced benefits from “fleeting up”—spending 18 months as the deputy commander and then 18 months as the commander of the same unit, which is the Navy’s take on apprenticeship.

¹³³ William H. McRaven (former SOCOM and JSOC Commander), in interview with the author.

¹³⁴ Laszlo Bock, Interview with Google’s Director of People Operations, August 23, 2016.

legitimacy within the broader Army was, as the father of the Special Forces, COL Aaron Bank, tells it, “a pretty tortuous path through that maze that is called the Pentagon.”¹³⁵ But advocates kept pushing for change they believed in. Much of the regiment’s hard-won success since the creation of Special Forces in 1952 can be credited to determined, creative leaders who refused to give up.

The second likely objection is perfectly reasonable. *If you slow down officer rotation and lengthen tenure, you will create a bottleneck.* This is undeniable. If every field grade officer in Special Warfare spends longer in the job, that will slow down throughput. And if serving in these jobs is viewed as a *right*, the result of slower throughput will be a backlog. However, there is another way to consider this: decreasing throughput is increasing competition.¹³⁶

If, by slowing down the churn of O-4s through key Special Warfare jobs, the competition intensifies among SF Majors seeking to return to a Special Forces Group, this should be viewed as a win.¹³⁷ A more competitive environment offers an opportunity for O-6 and O-5 commanders to more intentionally select and manage the talent returning to SF Groups. In turn, this would not just improve the quality of our battalions, but the credibility of our force (and the lives of SF Captains everywhere).

For instance, imagine if Group Commanders coordinated through the ARSOF chain of command to work with the Special Warfare Center and School (SWCS) and the 75th Ranger Regiment¹³⁸ to develop a concise but rigorous in-person screening event for all Majors seeking an invite back to an SF Group. The benefit would be three-fold. First, a screening would challenge these officers; it would ensure the bar remains high, especially if it included an assessment of their ongoing commitment to leading by

¹³⁵ Richard Goldstein, “Col. Aaron Bank, 101, Dies; Was ‘Father of Special Forces,’” *New York Times*, April 6, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/04/06/business/col-aaron-bank-101-dies-was-father-of-special-forces.html>.

¹³⁶ Brad Carson, in interview with the author, October 26, 2016.

¹³⁷ This could be particularly beneficial if U.S. SOF borrowed a page from the Nordic SOF units and coded positions for talented officers to serve *off* the command track.

¹³⁸ The Ranger Regiment runs a program called ILE RASP (Ranger Assessment and Selection Program) that helps Ranger leaders look closely at every field grade officer returning to the 75th.

example (in terms of physical fitness and language skills, perhaps). Second, and equally important, an in-person screening would allow commanders to conduct events that would enable them to better understand each officer's strengths and weaknesses. This, in turn, would lead to more intentional job placement—managing talent based on more than just reputation and paperwork. Finally, continuing to challenge our officers in this way would add to their sense that they are part of an elite brotherhood. There is a reason every officer who goes through brutal selection events still tells stories about the experience; high standards and shared trials undeniably contribute to that all-important sense of legacy. The best officers, the ones that each SF Group should seek to bring back for both command and key staff assignments, will rise to the occasion and relish the challenge.

But the Army promotes us and selects us for command. Special Warfare units cannot just do our own thing. This third objection is valid; we are in the unfortunate position of having a unique mission and force, but little authority to manage our own people. Thus, what will a promotion board, consisting primarily of conventional Army officers, think about a Major who spends two years in command of a company, for example? It is hard to imagine that proactive communication with our Service and guidance to the board would not help offset some of this concern.¹³⁹ However, there remains a degree of risk to our careers if we choose to step off the familiar, well-worn path to command.¹⁴⁰

Nevertheless, in the not-so-distant past, donning a Green Beret was risky business for one's career. In the early days, the Special Forces attracted few traditional officers, but instead enticed "innovators and imaginative people who wanted to try something new and challenging, who chafed at rigid discipline, and who didn't care what the career managers at the Pentagon said or believed."¹⁴¹ Our legacy was formed by men who sought a challenge and believed in the mission—regardless of how it impacted their

¹³⁹ SWCS has full authority and responsibility for updating the Special Forces section of DA Pamphlet 600-3 to determine "what right looks like" in terms of officer professional development and assignments.

¹⁴⁰ Field grade officer on the Army Talent Management Task Force, in interview with the author.

¹⁴¹ Charles M. Simpson III and Robert B. Rheault, *Inside the Green Berets: The First Thirty Years, a History of the U.S. Army Special Forces* (New York, NY: Presidio Press, 1983), 21.

careers. This force was forged by, as COL Aaron Bank describes them, “only the most rugged, capable, dedicated, and motivated.”¹⁴²

I recognize the ironic truth that officers who will be in command for a relatively short time are particularly reticent to take on a snarled, long-standing challenge like reforming officer talent management. But I believe there are still Special Warfare leaders who are willing to fight for worthwhile change. Indeed, I am counting on it.

¹⁴² Aaron Bank, *From OSS to Green Berets: The Birth of Special Forces* (New York, NY: Presidio Press, 1986), 177.

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