

**STRATEGY
RESEARCH
PROJECT**

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Defense or any of its agencies. This document may not be released for open publication until it has been cleared by the appropriate military service or government agency.

ELITE FORCES -- THE ARMY OF THE FUTURE

BY

**COLONEL MIHAI FLOCA
Romanian Army**

**DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A:
Approved for public release.
Distribution is unlimited.**



USAWC CLASS OF 1997

U.S. ARMY WAR COLLEGE, CARLISLE BARRACKS, PA 17013-5050

19970625 126

DTIC QUALITY INSPECTED 8

ACADEMIC YEAR 1997

DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A:
Approved for public
release. Distribution is
unlimited.

STRATEGIC RESEARCH PAPER

ELITE FORCES -- THE ARMY OF THE FUTURE

FACULTY ADVISOR
LTC THOMAS K. ADAMS

COL MIHAI FLOCA
Romanian Army
Class of 97
Seminar 19

DTIC QUALITY INSPECTED 3

US ARMY WAR COLLEGE
CARLISLE BARRACKS, PA
APRIL, 1997

MOTTO: "In my opinion, troops put out as bait, *elite* troops, and an enemy in well-regulated and imposing formation should not be attacked."

Sun Tzu

Why Elite Forces?

--Foreword--

Modern warfare carries the attendant risk that chemical, biological or nuclear weapons will be deployed. A conflict where such munitions could be used on a large scale might indeed be a war to end all wars. During the Cold War, both the NATO and Warsaw Pact forces were preparing to fight such a major war in Central Europe. This conflict envisioned massive tank battles surging across the countryside, accompanied by apocalyptic doses of artillery and airpower. Fortunately, such heated battle never happened and is not likely to occur in the near future.

As one of the U.S. Army War College strategists, Thomas K. Adams, points out, WW II-like clashes of conventional mechanized combat have happened to America's military forces exactly once in the past fifty years. This was the Iraqi war of 1991 and it lasted not quite six days (6, p. 1). Yet, in Algeria, Vietnam and Afghanistan, French, American and Soviet Armed

Forces faced other kinds of conflicts during the same period, in settings where they could not benefit from their military and technological superiority. Ultimately, three agricultural nations managed to defeat highly industrialized ones. Subsequently, a large array of situations have arisen that straddle the ill-defined boundary between uneasy peace and something that isn't quite war -- Lebanon, Panama, Somalia, Haiti, Rwanda, Nicaragua, Angola -- also occurred.

Analysts as Alvin and Heidi Toffler believe that the future global system will be configured into three tiers, each defined by economic form and degree of governability (26). At the first tier (composed of technologically advanced states), intense economic competition may occasionally lead to **full-blown information warfare**. First tier state may also use **proxy violence** against each other. In contrast to the first tier, second tier states (which will retain most feature of Cold War era) may occasionally resort to **conventional, inter-state war**. Third tier states (which will consist of nations with largely dependent on subsistence production, foreign aid, and export of primary products) may engage in **spasmodic wars** with each other. **Proliferation of weapons of mass destruction** and other technology may augment the power of sub-state actors. Through **terrorism**, sub-state actors may be able to stymie or deter militarily superior opponents such as nations.

To cope with these kinds of conflicts or threats, the states must be able to prosecute a wide scale of military activities or military activities other than war such as: a. traditional warfighting; b. peace-keeping and peace-enforcement; c. combating terrorism; d. unconventional warfare; e. information warfare; f. foreign internal defense; g. counterproliferation of weapons of mass destruction; h. civil affairs; i. war by proxy etc.

Conventional forces can only accomplish activities "a" and "b".

On this paper, I am going to demonstrate that activities “c-i” need **elite forces** or/and **Special Operation Forces**.

Even under the shadow of the Cold War a more limited form of warfare developed. Embodied in a host of terms such as *covert action*, *special activities*, *special operations* and *direct action missions*, they embraced commando raids, combat-rescue missions, paramilitary operations, counter-terrorism, war by proxy, intervention, peace-keeping and peace-enforcement missions, guerrilla warfare, insurgencies and even assassination and kidnapping. More than any other nations, four democracies -- the U.S., the United Kingdom, France and Israel -- and the Soviet Union have found it necessary to use elite forces in the postwar period. The first question we should ask is **who** created these units and **why**? Were their purposes “military”, “political”, or both?

**“A small army consisting of chosen troops is far
better than a vast body chiefly composed of rabble.”**

The Hitopadesa

Military Utility

Trying to discover why an elite unit was created or expanded, some authors look at three military arguments (11, p. 30-34).

The Specialist Function

Elite forces often perform tasks that require special training and familiarity with a particular type of operation. The raising of distinct Commando units by the U.K. was defended on just such grounds: if British troops were to raid the Continent in order to gather information, they had to be skilled in combined ground and naval operations. Nowadays, the Royal Marines deploy more highly specialized formations. The men of the Royal Marine Commandos Mountain and Arctic Warfare Cadre are tasked with teaching mountain and arctic skills to fellow marines, acting as guides and advisers and operating as a recce-commando unit in the frozen wastes of NATO's northern flank.ⁱ

In order to be elite, their specialized function must be hazardous or seem to require particularly brave or tough men. Their tasks are quite different from those of the ordinary soldier:

counterterrorism, special reconnaissance, combat search and rescue, and psychological operations, for example. Standing special operations forces are created when multiple opportunities exist to attain strategic or operational objectives with small units, against a family of targets with similar characteristics.ⁱⁱ Modern technology makes commando-type units mobile, logistically sustainable behind enemy lines for long periods of time, and potentially very destructive. As a result, such units can cause panic and damage in an enemy's rear zones quite disproportionate to their numbers. The SAS destroyed some 400 German aircraft on the ground in North Africa although the unit rarely numbered more than a couple of hundred.

A good example is the formation of the Sixth U.S. Army Special Reconnaissance Unit during WW II (known unofficially as the "Alamo Scouts"). The Army Commander, Lieutenant General Walter Krueger, recognized the recurring need for reconnaissance against operational targets to precede attacks against Japanese positions in the Southwest Pacific. The Alamo Scouts were carefully selected and extensively trained for these operations. In all, they conducted more than 100 missions, providing a great deal of intelligence while losing no personnel to enemy action.

By October 1942, every Soviet Front Headquarters had been allotted a guards battalion of demolition experts, called "miners" -- *otdelnyy gvardeyeskiy batal'on minerov* (OGBM). These troops were carefully selected on the basis of their absolute loyalty to the Communist Party, resilience and stamina: most were 18- to 30-years-old and, in many cases, were very experienced sportsmen and hunters. They were taught long-range reconnaissance patrolling skills, demolition and sabotage, terrain and night navigation, escape and evasion and the necessary skills to survive for long period in the forests, swamps and tundra. Before the large Smolensk offensive in

July 1943, 316 “miners”, in nine groups, were parachuted behind the Kalinin Front. Operating up to 300 km behind the German’s line, the “miners” and partisans laid more the 3500 charges on an aggregate length of 700 km of railway track.

During the Vietnam War, the Green Berets trained the Montagnard tribes in counter-guerrilla warfare. As they were extremely poor, susceptible to disease, and only two tribes had any form of written language, **nation building and motivation** became the foundation of Special Forces programs. By 1970, this “heart and minds” work listed 49,902 economic aid projects, 10,959 medical projects and 34,334 education projects. In short, the Green Berets had created 129 churches, 110 hospitals, 1003 classrooms, 398 dispensaries, 272 markets, 6436 wells, 1949 km of road, 14,934 transportation depots and provided support for half a million refugees, since 1961 (28, p. 146).

It seems reasonable to argue, then, that some men should be trained in special units for such operations.

The Laboratory Role

Elite forces are often defended as military laboratories for new tactical systems. They can try out new doctrines, test their validity, and then spread the doctrines to the rest of the army. Their separate existence is justified by their ability to inject fresh thinking into the mainstream of military thought.

The Green Berets have been viewed by their defenders as a laboratory for the development of counterinsurgency techniques -- techniques to be adopted by the rest of the U.S. Army and by the other armies. Often, Special Forces instilled their “way of war” in other units.

In order to train other units to carry out long-range patrols, the 5th SFG opened the MAC Recondo (Reconnaissance Commando) School at Nha Trang in September 1966. There the students were given an introduction to "common core" SF skills such as survival training, map reading, navigation, intelligence, communications, emergency first-aid and patrolling. Throughout the training, the candidates were exposed to severe physical conditioning. This was vital for men operating on their own, who might be forced to escape over long distances, while carrying heavy loads, in order to break contact with enemy forces.

The *Palmach* was a guerrilla-type force created in World War II, by Jewish paramilitary groups as the Haganah, in order to operate behind German lines if the latter's army invaded Palestine (13, p. 61). Composed of highly trained fighters it would also be responsible for defending the land and people should all else fail. The intensive training of non-commissioned officers (NCOs) was one of the innovations that the *Palmach* brought to the Israeli Army. Also, the *Palmach* emphasized and developed night-fighting tactics: skill in night fighting was a hallmark of the Israeli Army at least until the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

Leader Nursery

One of the most compelling reasons advanced in favor of elite forces is that such units will develop leaders for the rest of the army. Membership in an elite force endows future officers with extra elan and teaches them superior tactical doctrines.

The *Palmach* offers the most successful example of the nursery role of elite forces: it trained the generations of Israeli officers that directed and fought the Six Day War and Yom Kippur War -- two extraordinary campaigns. The three Front commanders of the Six Day War

(Gavish, Narkiss, and Elazar), the Chiefs of Staff during and between that war and the next (Rabin, Bar Lev, Elazar) and the Defense Minister (Dayan) were all *ex-Palmach* men. To notice, later, two of them -- Dayan and Rabin -- would become Prime Ministers! The Israeli paratroop corps serves a similar role today: the former Chief of Staff (Mordechai Gur), for example, was a career-long paratrooper.ⁱⁱⁱ

Multifunctional Role (Any Role Anywhere)

Other authors -- Terry White, David Eshel, Max Walmer, Rod Paschall, Ross S. Kelly -- emphasize the multifunctional role as the most significant capability of elite forces. Trained for “any role anywhere”, they must be able to operate in a variety of climates, cultures, and terrain: desert, jungle, arctic and mountain areas (29, p. 63). Rangers are a classic example: they provide a large-scale strike capability, as well as an additional rescue potential.

By way of comparison, we can look to the Soviet *Spetsnaz* and their use in both general war fighting and intervention operations.

Special force units played vital roles in the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia (August, 1968), swooping down to seize Prague Airport in advance of main Warsaw Pact invasion force.

A joint *Spetsnaz*-KGB force was infiltrated into Kabul (December, 1979) to pave the way for the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In 1983, *Spetsnaz* forces went on the offensive. They attacked isolated towns and villages which the *Mujahedeens* had once considered safe. Infiltration and supply routes were ambushed or peppered with mines, while villages suspected of helping the guerrilla were razed to the ground in a “scorched earth” policy. Some of these operations were carried out by *Spetsnaz* disguised as guerrillas, who burned mosques and food supplies to heighten tension between warring *Mujahedeen* factions. In the spring of 1985, *Spetsnaz* conscripts began to operate in close conjunction with conventional ground troops in an attempt to rid the Afghan valleys of enemy activity.^{iv}

Most certainly, various types of special operations can be and have been carried out by elite forces not specifically designated as “special operations forces”. This role is vital for small

countries that can not afford luxury to design or set up a special unit for each mission.

The airborne and marine forces of the world routinely train for small unit raid operations. A paratroop unit may be able to conduct or participate in a raid, peace enforcement or in a surgical rescue operation.

The Israeli paratroops represent a genuine example of multifunctional role. Being not only highly trained in both parachute and heliborne assault, they acted as *mountain troops* (Mitla Pass, 1967), *landing troops (Marines)* (Suez Canal, 1973), *mechanized infantry* (Sinai, 1973). At the end of the Six-Day War, hostilities continued in the shape of terrorism, guerilla warfare and the shelling of Israeli positions on the eastern side of the Suez Canal. The Israeli paras were assigned a role in countering all of these forms of aggression and, in so doing achieved international fame as a *commando force*. One raid was directed against a fortified anti-aircraft position at the mouth of the Suez Canal, while in another brilliant operation a *Nahal* parachute battalion hijacked an entire Soviet-built P-12 'Spoonrest' radar installation from a fortified site at Ras Gharib (1969).^v

“Political activities were more important than military activities, and fighting less important than propaganda.”

General Vo Nguyen Giap

Political Utility

Unconventional Warfare

In order to highlight the military utility of special forces, we have to consider the form of conflict that elite forces have the capabilities to wage. In a post-Cold War environment, military forces face another kind of war, so-called “unconventional”. According to Thomas K. Adams, unconventional warfare is **“any form of military conflict that does not involve the direct clash of organized armies in pursuit of military victory.”** (6, p. 7). This kind of warfare differs sharply from that which preceded it.

The first of these fundamental changes is **the fading of distinctions between war and peace**. The internal violence of the Algerian rebellions against the French Empire was not the result of a formally declared war -- nor were Vietnam and Afghanistan. The Arab-Israeli conflict has continued intermittently for almost half a century, periods of relative quiet alternating with periods of intense fighting.

The complexity and intensity of operations have increased tremendously. Territorial

questions are less of an issue, for example in Africa. War now focuses increasingly on the question of **who shall rule** -- not **what** will be ruled over. Unlike classic conflicts, unconventional warfare not only recognizes the presence of a civil population: by nature, it occurs in the midst of people (6, p. 18). Both sides struggle to gain allegiance of the populace: **the prize is popular support**, not territory; the objective is people's minds and hearts. To achieve a community allegiance, a force needs special capabilities of units like Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations components of SOF.

Such changes in the goals and maneuver of warfare impose severe strains, especially on conscripts. Under conditions of revolutionary war they usually become demoralized, and their demoralization (see Algerian and Vietnamese conflicts) often leads to public revulsion against the war. The only viable solution to this dilemma is the use of elite forces for the special missions of revolutionary war. These units consist mainly of high-quality volunteers who do not suffer the morale problems of conscripts.

Politico-Military Signaling and Deterrent

Clausewitz had a vision when he wrote, almost two hundred years ago, "... the political element does not sink deep into the details of War. Vedetts are not planted, patrols do not make their rounds from political considerations; but small as is its influence in this respect, is great in the formation of a plan for a whole War..." (11, p. 48)

Nowadays, the actions of a squad commander at a Bosnian checkpoint may resonate at the United Nations in New York, causing enormous pain and serious friction. Due to the advances in the technology of communication, the movements of a small unit may now be

directed from political headquarters.^{vi}

The technological developments that permitted political leaders to direct the “planting of vedetts” has also made military actions immediately visible. Small, discrete military actions can be used to signal to a number of audiences -- an opposing government, its population, one’s own population -- threats, commitments, and intents. One study estimated that the U.S. had conducted over 200 such shows of force since WW II.^{vii} One signal of this sort was the alert of U.S. nuclear forces during the 1973 Yom Kippur War in order to deter Soviet intervention in the Middle East.

The Israeli government needed successful retaliatory raids in the 1950s in order to deter Arab states from guerilla and conventional attacks. Also, Israel’s November 1968 airborne raid on the Naj Hammadi power station deep in Egypt demonstrated to Nasser his country’s vulnerability. *That signal cut short an Egyptian campaign of attrition against Israeli units on the Suez Canal.*

The policy-driving rationale for prioritizing SOF program was best articulated by then Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger in the FY 1985 Annual Report to Congress:

Buttressed by their massive buildup of strategic and conventional forces, the Soviets have undertaken, both directly and through surrogates, a global campaign of destabilization, focused on the Third World, that seeks to obtain their objectives without direct confrontation with the United States. This is, and will continue to be for some time, the most prominent direct threat to U.S. national security interests... U.S. special operation forces are being employed to counter these destabilization efforts... By assisting others to prepare their own defenses, we enhance the Free World’s ability to cope with Soviet expansionism, reduce the likelihood that U.S. forces will become involved in combat, and demonstrate our determination not to default on our commitments.

A small elite unit may be able to perform “deniable” missions -- actions which the government wishes to keep unpublicized. Obviously, such units contain career soldiers who are much less likely to divulge their operations to the press than disgruntled conscripts.^{viii}

Elite forces offer two basic advantages to the would-be signaller. Firstly, they may be inherently valuable as a signal of serious commitment because of their reputation. Secondly, elite units tend to offer governments more chances for success than regular units in performing sensitive signaling operations. Extreme reliability is obviously necessary for an action whose aims are symbolic rather purely military. In the short run, at least, the use of elite forces offers a better chance of success than would the use of regulars.

Popular and National Symbol

The symbol of elite forces, like a strong antidote, has often been used for positive results. Societies engaged in prolonged conflicts want heroes. There is a true "hunger for heroes" (9, p. 1). Difficult and complex military conflicts stimulate but can not satisfy a population's needs for heroes to worship. An elite unit offers the public the illusion, if not reality, of "brilliant and sudden" military success. A dramatic portrayal of such supermen reduces war to simple and understandable elements: courage, self-sacrifice, and enterprise. Military elite forces therefore, constitute social indicators which no politician or soldier can ignore. Thus, it is understandable why great political men such as Churchill, Kennedy and Dayan not only had extremely close relationships with particular elite units (11, p. 37-41), they even were founders of those forces: British SAS and Commando (1942), Israeli Paratroops (early 1950s) and American Green Berets (1952).

Churchill had to deal with a Nazi-occupied continent, and Dayan faced frequent infiltration of Arab terrorists.^{ix} The Kennedy administration of the early 1960s confronted the post-World War II communist-backed insurgencies. The nascent Green Berets -- the 10th Special

Forces Group (Airborne) activated on 20 June 1952 -- found a powerful ally in President John Kennedy, who believed that victory in Vietnam would require a whole new kind of strategy, a wholly different kind of force, and a new and wholly different kind of military training. After Kennedy's visit to Fort Bragg (October 1961), four more groups were formed for deployment to Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and Southeast Asia.

Elite forces are obvious symbols. In the era of total war they can raise public morale. During a prolonged conflict an elite unit may become a symbol of enterprise and success.^x As such they may play an important role in mobilizing a people for such a conflict. British military authority, for example, suggested that even if the Commandos accomplished little militarily, they were invaluable as a morale booster during the dark days that followed the collapse of France, to keep alive the spirit of resistance.

The ultimate significance in the proliferation of *forces d'elite* in the late 20th century, aside from those with a specific technological function, is as symptoms of stress in countries or organizations reaching desperately for nostrum in crisis situations.

Parents are not eager to send their children to death.

Even the Army's doctrine -- due to Desert Storm strategic success -- stresses this imperative: **"The American people expect decisive victory and abhor unnecessary casualties. They prefer quick resolution of conflicts and reserve the right to reconsider their support should any of these conditions not be met."** (1, p. 1-3). That means the importance of the elite forces shall continue to increase during the next years.

What Are They ?

“ There are few people who would want to jump out of a perfectly good airplane into an ocean with three or five foot waves during daylight. Fewer still would want to do in at night.”

Chuck Mussi

The Elite

What are elite forces? **“Elite”**, according to *Webster's*, means **“a choice part”**, **“socially superior”**. There is no a general agreement about elite forces. To some extent, all units -- particularly in a well-run and motivated army -- consider themselves superior. But even in such an army, some units are more elite than other. Even military specialists do not share the same points of view about what qualifies as elite. Almost every author promotes his own concept.

Max Walmer (27) includes these *“elite forces”*: Special Air Service (Australia/New Zealand), Special Service Force (Canada), Foreign Legion and Paratroops (France), GSG 9 (Germany), Parachute Regiment (India), Paratroops (Israel), Alpine Troops and San Marco Marines (Italy), Special Forces (Jordan), Special Forces (Korea), Selous Scouts and Special Air Service (Rhodesia), Reconnaissance Commandos (South Africa), Airborne Forces, Naval Infantry and Spetsnaz (Soviet Union), Long-range Amphibious Reconnaissance Commandos (Taiwan), Army Special Forces (Thailand), Gurkhas, Parachute Regiment, Royal Marines

Special Boat Squadron and Special Air Service (United Kingdom), 23rd Air Force, 82 Airborne Division, Delta, Rangers, Special Forces, Marine Corps, SEALs and UDTs (United States), Death Volunteers (Vietnam).

In his book , *“Special Forces”*, Bruce Quarrie mentions even more units from all around the world. For example, in the case of Federal Republic of Germany, he adds 1st Fallschirmjager Division (paratroopers) and 1st Gebirgsjager Division (mountain troops) -- which “is the second truly elite formation within the total 12 of the Bundeswehr” (19, p.70). In his opinion, paratroops, marines, mountain troops, rapid reaction forces, counter-terrorist units are “special”.

Looking at the common elements of the aforementioned units, we can formulate some **criteria that define elite forces**. First, their soldiers are **strictly selected**, during a long and exhausting process. General Roue, the former French Army Personnel, says that, in order to belong to the elite, an officer must be above the average in four main qualities: **moral, professional, psychological and physical** (20). Secondly, the soldiers are **trained to superhuman standards** to undertake unusual, extremely hazardous, sometimes impossible missions. For this reason, airborne and mountain troops units have been considered elite since parachuting or climbing mountains are risky ways of going into battle. To counter terrorism and to gain information or to survive behind enemy’s line are particularly dangerous tasks, too. Thirdly, to accomplish these missions, Special Forces need **special weapons and equipment**. Last, but not least, a unit becomes elite only when achieves **a reputation for bravura and success**.

It is not by chance that Terry White considers as “**elite units**” only SAS Regiment (Australia), Foreign Legion and GIGN (France), Paratroopers (Israel), Spetsnaz (Soviet Union),

SAS, Parachute Regiment and Royal Marines (United Kingdom), Green Berets, Airborne Troops, Rangers, Marine Corps, Delta Force and SEALs (United States) (28). All these units achieved a rich fighting experience in the conflicts that followed World War II.

In another work, White underlines that **“Special Forces are personnel who receive specialized training to execute tasks behind the enemy’s lines in support of conventional military operations or a counter-insurgency campaign. Additionally, they may be asked to undertake covert special operations in support of foreign policy aims”**. He divides special forces into four groups (29, p. 1-3).

Reconnaissance. These troops spend indefinite periods deep in the enemy’s territory, collecting intelligence raiding or conducting prolonged campaign of guerrilla warfare. Deep behind enemy lines, they are difficult to supply and must live off the land and use captured weapons and ammunition to continue to fight. It is generally accepted that these units will find their own way home, fight until relieved or, where this proves difficult, enter a “combat-survival mode”, -- living off the land in concealed positions until the military/political situation changes. The ideal emphasis on the use of units as the SAS, Green Berets and the “professional-elements of Russian Spetsnaz is **strategic**. Their operations should either support the battle indirectly or affect the overall conduct of the war.

Assault Commando are paratroops, Rangers, Marines, army commandos and the “non-professional” elements of Spetsnaz. They differ from the recce-commando in their reliance upon resupply or relief by the vanguard of advancing forces. Historically they have been employed as raiders or as special assault forces for seizing strong-points, key-bridges, town or roads prior to an invasion or battle-field offensive. While they may be used in the guerrilla role or to conduct

special operations, their missions have usually had a **tactical** emphasis.

Covert Action Departments or teams of the *Foreign (overseas) Intelligence Service*.

Before World War II, their primary role was to warn their political masters of foreign developments. Few intelligence services had the capacity for direct action, one exception being Russia's Unified State Political Administration (OGPU, later KGB), which employed assassination as a means of removing political opponents and foreign intelligence officers.

During the war, Western intelligence services expanded into paramilitary operations. The primary task of the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) and the Operational Groups of the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS) was to conduct sabotage operations against the political/economic infrastructure in the occupied countries. They were tasked with organizing partisan forces, whose activities would reach a synchronized crescendo immediately before the arrival of the conventional forces. Both these organizations were disbanded at the end of the war, but not before they introduced a new term into the military lexicon: "Special Forces".

Partisan or *Guerrilla*. In the traditional sense, they are "popular" armed groups arising from a conquered people to continue to fight the occupying forces (e.g. paramilitary elements of the Resistance). However, they may also be a specially created force of nationals motivated by ideology or mercenaries with little or no popular support who are aided and funded from outside.

We consider that groupings 2 and 4 are **elite forces**. Also, they are nurseries for grouping 1 and 3, who represent **the elite of the elite, the core of elite forces or special operations forces**.

“We put Special Forces deep into enemy territory. They went out on strategic reconnaissance for us and they let us know what was going there. They were eyes that were out there...”

General Norman Schwarzkopf

The Elite of the Elite

– Special Operations Forces –

In an excellent book (12), John M. Collins refers only to *Green Berets*, *SEALs* and *Spetsnaz* -- US and Soviet forces capable to carry out “special military operations”. He defines them so: **“Small, carefully selected military, paramilitary, and civilian units with unusual (occasionally unique) skills, which are superlatively trained for specific rather than general purposes, and are designed to undertake unorthodox tasks that ordinary units could accomplish only with far greater difficulty and far less effectiveness, if at all.”** (12, p.112).

According to him, SOF are not needed for all special operations.

Since the world’s special operations forces are so diverse, it is better to describe them by what they do as opposed to attempting a precise definition of what they are. **“Special operations forces** are those military or naval elements specifically organized, trained, and equipped to conduct or support insurgency, sabotage, psychological, deception, counter-terrorist, foreign assistance, or commando operations.” (18, p.8)

According to the official U.S. military documents -- USSOCOM PUB 1 and Joint Pub 3-05 -- there are two categories of special operation missions: **SO Principal Missions** and **SO Collateral Activities**.

SO PRINCIPAL MISSIONS

- a. **Direct Action (DA)**: raids, ambushes, and direct assaults; standoff attacks; terminal guidance operations; recovery operations; precision destruction operations; anti-surface warfare; amphibious warfare; mine warfare;
- b. **Special Reconnaissance (SR)**: environmental reconnaissance; armed reconnaissance; coastal patrol and interdiction; target and threat assessment; poststrike reconnaissance;
- c. **Foreign Internal Defense (FID)**: aiding and assisting HN military; providing population security;
- d. **Unconventional Warfare (UW)**: guerrilla warfare; subversion; sabotage; support to evasion and escape networks;
- e. **Combating Terrorism (CBT)**: recovery of hostages or sensitive materiel from terrorist organizations; attack of terrorist infrastructure; reduction of vulnerability to terrorism;
- f. **Psychological Operations (PSYOP)**: behavior influence; reduction of enemy force efficiency;
- g. **Civil Affairs (CA)**: civil-military operations (CMO); civil administrative operations;
- h. **Counterproliferation (CP) of Weapons of Mass Destruction**;
- i. **Information Warfare (IW)/Command and Control Warfare (C2W)**.

SO COLLATERAL ACTIVITIES

- a. **Coalition Support**;
- b. **Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR)**;
- c. **Counterdrug (CD) Activities**;
- d. **Countermine (CM) Activities**;
- e. **Humanitarian Assistance (HA)**;
- f. **Security Assistance (SA)**;
- g. **Special Activities**.

It is important to notice that, from the mission point of view, there is an essential difference between elite forces belonging to democratic countries and elite forces belonging to dictatorial regimes. By law, elite forces belonging to democratic countries are not allowed to kill political personalities. But KGB *Spetsnaz*, disguised as conventional airborne troops, accompanied their GRU and MVD *Spetsnaz* on assault on Darulaman (Afghanistan, 1979), which resulted in the murder of President Amin and his entire family.

There is a historical tension within the SOF community between the role of commando-style fighter in conventional war and the role of military-political operator in unconventional warfare.

For the first role, the “special” in special operations means an ability to perform the same functions as the rest of the military but much better, more efficient. Rangers -- like Marines, paratroopers and mountain troops -- are prepared for “multifunctional role”. They perform a full

spectrum of infantry tasks at a very high level of proficiency. Rangers are organized and trained as elite light infantry battalions, in a modified organizational structure familiar to most soldiers. Where they differ is in their readiness, level of training and motivation, "shock" mission, and the Ranger qualification prerequisite for its leader personnel. They are the **elite** forces.

For the second role, the "special" comes from **doing jobs that no one else in the military does**. For instance, the purpose of Psyop units is to induce or reinforce foreign attitudes and behavior favorable to the originator's objectives. Also, Special Forces Operational Detachment Delta accomplishes very narrow specialized function.

In section 2 of this book (12, p. 82-90), Collins connects tasks to skills. He concludes that missions as strategic sabotage, capture, termination, hostages rescue, psychological operations, subversion, advice and training, key-personnel target acquisition, infiltration and exfiltration require the greatest special operation skills.

Recently, General Henry H. Shelton, the Commander in Chief of the USSOCOM, defined **special operations** as, "**The use of small units in direct and indirect military actions focused on strategic and operational objectives. These actions require units with combinations of specialized personnel, equipment, training, or tactics that go beyond the routine capabilities of conventional military forces.**" (22, slide 2) Only the experts in the "art of the possible" are normally capable of performing rescue, reconnaissance, and intelligence-gathering tasks. Special operations forces are not configured to conduct sustained combat against regular forces and -- unlike Royal Marine Commandos or U.S. Marine Corps -- are therefore not equipped with artillery, tanks, fighter aircraft, or combatant ships. They are **the elite of the elite forces**.

In his work, Thomas Adams takes the position that the second role is the most appropriate and useful for SOF in general and Army SF in particular. I completely agree with this position. Doing their mission they are closer to diplomat's job and embody Sun Tzu's quotation, **"So you should take away the energy of their armies, and take away the heart of their generals."**

"It is better to have a small number of well-kept and well disciplined troops than to have a great number who are neglected in these matters. It is not big armies that win battles: it is the good ones."

Maurice de Saxe

The Future Belongs to Them

In the post WW II period the elite forces gained huge prestige and celebrity. The recent conflicts prove that they are not the most flexible, adaptable to changing warfare, but they, themselves, can change the face of the war. They are blooming still in the last third of the 20th century. For example, during the Afghanistan conflict (1979-1989) many Soviet soldiers avoided their duty. In contrast, *Spetsnaz* troops, soldiers in airborne and air assault units continually sought close combat with *the mujahidin* -- the Afghan freedom fighters. These elite forces were accustomed to fighting outside armored vehicles. They had not developed the "mobile bunker" mentality; they were not prisoners of the "Soviet style" warfighting. While far less innovation was apparent among the motorized rifle regiments, the elite forces applied the most innovative tactics. *Spetsnaz*, for example, sharpened their skills, developed and employed air assault techniques.^{xi}

It is easy to assume that, in the near future, the elite forces often will be an alternative to the mass-armies. Continued growth of *corps d'elite* can be expected where and when short-range emergencies are the rule. They are an instrument of power more powerful than the nuclear

weapons not employed in Algeria, Vietnam or Afghanistan.

In "Military Elites", Roger A. Beaumont considers elite forces as a "counterpoise to mass-man." He concludes, "Elitism is a function of organization, since organizations tend to become stratified as they grow and as they persist... If a high standard of living, general education and urbanization weaken people's will to maintain military forces, than corps d'elite should multiply at a time when the power of machines relative to men is such forces is also growing."^{xii} (9, p. 191)

Haiti, Bosnia and Liberia are only three of the more than 850 acknowledged missions, in 101 different countries, that U.S. Army special operations forces participated in FY 96. Lt. Gen. James T. Scott points out that in these three countries new chapters in special operation history were written. (21, p.159) There, U.S. military operations were as different as the regions in which the countries are located. But the three operations reflect the focus of providing theater commanders in chief with trained and ready special operations forces that can deploy quickly worldwide, plan, and execute missions in support of the national security strategy and the national military strategy.

This trend it is not valid only for the U.S. or for great powers. Barring the unlikely event of world peace, the occurrence of low-intensity conflict will unfortunately be far more prevalent in early 21st Century than is today. However, the character of these small wars will be different. In the late 20th Century, these conflicts have often been marked by superpower intervention. Rod Paschall foresees that "In the future, the bipolar world will be greatly diminished, if not extinct, and external intervention will likely feature multiple actors, including commercial enterprises (18, p. 5).

In terms of its national security, a country without elite units is a damned country. Elite forces earned romantic names such as "children of frustration" (Beaumont), "soldiers of the shadow" (Kelly), "children of the storm" (Adams), because their units are products of crisis and instability. The implication of their creation was a response to enemy success or threat of advantage. Today, when a conflict does not last years, but months and weeks, there is no time to create an effective elite unit. The Six-Day War (1967) illustrated the advantage for the country with stand-by special forces.^{xiii}

Rapid, peaceful economic development does not appear to have a future in much of the Third World. Another discouraging trend is **the rising propensity to use force** in an effort to achieve political goals.

An ominous trend is **the proliferation of nations capable of producing and using nuclear and chemical weapons**; from six -- in the late 1980, to twenty-two -- in 2010. An accidental or unplanned use of nuclear weapons will simply be more possible with a larger number of nuclear powers than it is with a small number. Another effect of nuclear and chemical proliferation is further erosion of the global policeman roles of the two 20th Century superpowers.

One of the positive aspects of the coming century will be a considerable effort made in the field of peacekeeping. The dramatic increasing incidence of low-intensity conflicts, the trends and changes above, anticipated by Rod Paschall, make clear that, during the next decades, the world's elite forces will see much service. They are the only able to adapt and to face these challenges." Elite forces in 2010 will be quite similar to the same types of forces of the late 20th Century" (18, p.6). The most noticeable difference will be that there will simply be more of these

units represented in the armed forces of the world's nations.

Additionally, it is unlikely that the fundamental mission of these forces will be revised. However, in 21st Century, elite forces are quite likely to achieve unprecedented levels of performance, based on several substantial technological advances and vastly improved personnel selection and training techniques. As in the past, these organizations will be prepared to conduct their mission in all levels of warfare: conventional and unconventional, low-, mid-, and high-intensity conflict.

They are asked and, finally, they will succeed in achieving Sun Tzu's imperative: **"For to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill."**

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Headquarters, Department of the Army, *FM 100-5 OPERATIONS*, Washington DC, 14 June 1993;
2. United States Special Operations Command Pub 1, *SPECIAL OPERATIONS IN PEACE AND WAR*, 25 January 1996;
3. Joint Pub 3-05, *DOCTRINE FOR JOINT SPECIAL OPERATIONS*, Month 199;
4. *UNITED STATES SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES*, 1996, POSTURE STATEMENT;
5. *SPECIAL FORCES AND MISSIONS*, BY THE EDITORS OF TIME-LIFE BOOKS, ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA;
6. Adams, Thomas K., *CHILDREN OF THE STORM*, (CASS: London) 1997, forthcoming;
7. Bank, Aaron, Colonel, U.S.A. (ret.), *FROM OSS TO GREEN BERETS. THE BIRTH OF SPECIAL FORCES*, PRESIDIO, Novato CA, 1986;
8. Beres, Louis Rene, *PREVENTING NUCLEAR TERRORISM AGAINST THE UNITED STATES: 10 VITAL QUESTIONS*, Special Warfare, August 1996, p. 22-29;
9. Beaumont, Roger A., *MILITARY ELITES*, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., INDIANAPOLIS/NEW YORK, 1974;
10. Brown, Ashley & Reed, Jonathan, *THE UNIQUE UNITS*, A Publication of THE NATIONAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY, Great Britain, 1986;
11. Cohen, Eliot A., *COMMANDOS AND POLITICIANS. Elite Military Units in Modern Democracies*, Published by the Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, 1978;
12. Collins, John M., *GREEN BERETS, SEALs & SPETSNAZ: U.S. & Soviet Special Military Operations*, PERGAMON-BRASSEY'S, 1987;
13. Eshel, David, Lt. Col., *ELITE FIGHTING UNITS*, ARCO PUBLISHING, INC., New York, 1984;
14. Grau, Lester W., Lieutenant Colonel, US Army, Retired, and Nawroz, Mohammad Yahya, General, Afghanistan Army, Retired, *THE SOVIET EXPERIENCE IN AFGHANISTAN*, MILITARY REVIEW, September-October 1995, p. 17-27;
15. Kelly, Ross S., *SPECIAL OPERATIONS AND NATIONAL PURPOSE*, Lexington Books, D.C. Heath and Company/Lexington, Massachusetts/Toronto, 1989;
16. Ladd, James, *COMMANDOS AND RANGERS OF WORLD WAR II*, ST. MARTIN'S PRESS, NEW YORK, 1978;
17. McRaven, William H., *SPEC OPS. Case Studies in Special Operation Warfare: Theory and Practice*, PRESIDIO, Novato CA, 1995;
18. Paschall, Rod, *LIC 2010. Special Operations & Unconventional Warfare in the Next Century*, BRASSEY'S (US), Inc., 1990;
19. Quarrie, Bruce, *SPECIAL FORCES*, THE APPLE PRESS, London, 1990;
20. Roue, General de corps d'arme, *HUMAINEMENT ELITISTE. SELECTION ET GESTION DES ELITES MILITAIRES*, ARMEES D'AUJOURD'HUI, No 180 - MAI 1993, p. 20-24;
21. Scott, James T., Lt. Gen., *WRITING NEW CHAPTERS IN SPECIAL OPERATIONS HISTORY*, ARMY, October 1996, p. 159-162;

22. Shelton, Henry H., GEN., *THE EMPLOYMENT OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES*, Briefing, U.S. Army War College, 12 February 1997;
23. Sutherland, Ian D.W., LTC (Ret), *1952/1982. SPECIAL FORCES OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY*, Published by James Bender Publishing, San Jose CA, 1990;
24. Suvorov, Viktor, *SPETSNAZ. THE INSIDE STORY OF THE SOVIET SPECIAL FORCES*, W.W. NORTON & COMPANY, New York, London, 1987;
25. Suvorov, Victor, *GRU. CENUSA FARA EPOLETI*, Editura Nemira, Bucuresti, 1992;
26. Toffler, Alvin an Heidi, *WAR AND ANTI-WAR: SURVIVAL AT THE DOWN OF THE 21st CENTURY*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1993;
27. Walmer, Max, *AN ILLUSTRATED GUIDE TO MODERN ELITE FORCES. The weapons, uniforms, tactics and operations of the world's toughest troops*, Published by PRENTICE HALL PRESS, New York, 1986;
28. White, Terry, *THE MAKING OF THE WORLD'S ELITE FORCES*, Sidgwick & Jackson Limited, London, 1992;
29. White, Terry, *SWORDS OF LIGHTNING. SPECIAL FORCES AND THE CHANGING FACE OF WARFARE*, BRASSEY'S (UK), 1992;
30. Winters, Edward G. and Paro, Kent A., *THE MISUSE OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES*, NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL, MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA, December, 1994.

NOTES

ⁱ Modern Russian elite forces, *Spetsnaz*, are also an outcome of the Soviet experience in World War II. Confronted with the almost irresistible thrust of the German Panzers and infantry in 1941, the bulk of the paratroops and special purpose battalions were expended as infantry and shock troops. In order to slow the momentum of the Germans, the intelligence troops were reformed into shock armies. Also, some intelligence staff and forces of special designation, such as combat-engineers, had formed partisan groups. Other *Spetsnaz* units were formed to support operations in the Soviet Far East and the Murmansk-Kirkenes area.

ⁱⁱ For example, in May 1940, the Germans neutralized the Belgian artillery fort at Eben Emael. This was an operational target because it controlled key crossing sites over the Maas Canal that was essential for the rapid German advance. The Germans selected a conventional 80-man engineer company and gave it special equipment (hollow charges), training (demolition parties), and tactics (night glider assault). This allowed the engineers to achieve surprise and defeat a vastly superior force of 600 men, swiftly attaining an operational objective.

ⁱⁱⁱ Parachute training and Ranger training further the career of an ambitious U.S. officer, although such training is not mandatory. Although their militaries have not officially adopted the "nursery" approach, a large number of paratroop officers have reached very high rank in several armies: Maxwell Taylor, Matthew Ridgway, and William Westmoreland -- in the United States, Generals Marcel Bigeard and Jacques Massu -- in France, for example.

^{iv} The British Royal Marines are organized around "commandos", and one would therefore expect these units to be "special operations forces". But the Royal Marine commandos have an artillery regiment permanently attached and are expected to conduct stand-up, continuous battle against an opponent's regular forces. The U.S. Marine Corps is much the same. It has no standing special operation force.

^v The Israeli rescue operation at Entebbe (1976) also involved not only the General Reconnaissance Unit but also paratroops and members of the Golani Brigade.

^{vi} During the Cuban missile crisis, the members of the ExCom knew each of the ships by name and argued extensively about which should be stopped first, at what point, and how... Thus, for the first time in U.S. military history, local commanders received repeated orders about the details of their military operations directly from political leaders -- contrary to two sacred military doctrines.

^{vii} In September 1987, imaginative use of Army special operation helicopters and Navy SEALs enabled the U.S. commander in the Persian Gulf to not only force cessation of mine laying by an Iranian naval vessel, and abandonment of the ship, but later to capture the ship and crew and demonstrate to the world Iran's perfidy.

^{viii} Israel's Prime Minister during the early 1950s, David Ben Gurion wished to use Unit 101 for just such a purpose. The Soviet Spetsnaz, the British SAS, and the U.S. Special Forces have also been used as low-visibility intervention forces.

^{ix} On May 5 1980, a SAS team ended the siege at the Iranian Embassy (London), staged by members of the self-styled Democratic Revolutionary Front for the Liberation of Arabistan. As the world watched, the black-clad counter-terrorist soldiers, amid smoke, explosions and gunfire, abseiled down the sides of the building, entered the Embassy and rescued the hostages, without casualties, except for terrorists, scoring a remarkable success and admiration.

^x For instance, the October 1977 German rescue of Lufthansa passengers in Mogadishu, Somalia, boosted that country's morale in its war against terrorism, morale that was diminished after Munich debacle (1972). A similar Israeli raid on Entebbe Airport (Uganda, July 1976) created several months of euphoria in Israel, and revived the idea that is very difficult to match or to trifle with Israeli paratroopers.

^{xi} In early 1991, U.S. and British Special Forces undertook a number of strategic, vital tasks such as: training indigenous troops, combat rescue, reconnaissance and surveillance, Scud busting, raids and sabotage, air-support (special operations squadrons). In Vietnam, nonlinear warfare denied the massing of targets that the American weapon system was designed to destroy. During "Desert Storm", due to special operation forces, the Allies could do "surgical strikes", that not only destroyed key military targets, but limited casualties among Iraqi civilian population. It is very important to mention that the participants included two components of UK Special Forces Group -- 22 SAS and Royal Marine's Special Boat Service (SBS); the 5th Army Special Forces Group; US Delta Force and three US Navy SEAL teams. Despite only were numbering around 5,000, a mere fraction of the total Allied force, they succeeded in hastening the end of the Gulf War. A war in which few SF-personnel were killed!

^{xii} The number of U.S. SOF deployments has been steadily rising since the end of the Cold War, from 102 countries -- in FY 92 -- to 140 countries -- in 1996 --, covering most of the world (Shelton, slide 48). Except for SOF, a few units can match such a performance.

^{xiii} In the future, a terrorist attack may occur anytime and everywhere. The incidence rate of terrorism may be in decline, but the lethality of the terrorist's weapons will likely grow. During the first decade of the 21st Century, insurgency should be much in evidence. The rapid improvement in shoulder-fired anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles will make insurgents far more potent combatants in 2010 than they were in the late 20th Century. Guerillas will be able to infiltrate into enemy's territory with much more ease than their predecessors did. Technology will not favor the insurgent alone.