

Special Forces NCO History

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by

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## Outline

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**1. Lineage.**

Specialized forces have been on this continent since the days of the French and Indian War if one includes Native American warrior societies. Limiting the discussion to the European peoples who migrated to this continent, however, we know that troops such as Roger's Rangers (commanded by Major Robert Rogers during the Revolutionary War) were unconventional forces employing specialized techniques (U.S. Army Special Forces, 1998).

The men comprising the preliminary stages of Special Forces were the elite of the elite. These men were most often the equivalent of today's Special Forces NCO. They fought in terrain that challenged even the most skilled of normal troops, occasionally employing hand-to-hand combat, but most often relying on their own wits to sabotage and interfere with enemy activities. The tradition they created would become part of the of the American Revolution with Francis Marion (the Swamp Fox), the Civil War with the Confederate Colonel John Singleton Mosby (the Gray Ghost), and on into World War II. It was during the period centering around World War II where special operations troops would find ultimate acclaim with units such as the Devil's Brigade, Darby's Rangers, Merrill's Marauders and the Alamo Scouts (U.S. Army Special Forces, 1998). Specialized forces were also employed in Korea and in Vietnam as well as numerous other places around the world. They wreaked havoc on the enemy, oftentimes against overwhelming odds.

**2. The OSS.**

These types of men or military forces would eventually be labeled under a new name, which set them apart from the armed forces in general. What would eventually be known as the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) was officially formed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in

consideration of the urgings of William Donovan during World War II (U.S. Army Special Forces, 1998).

Donovan was a World War I veteran and a Medal of Honor recipient. Donovan recognized that a new type of organization was needed which could penetrate enemy lines for the purposes of collecting intelligence. Formed in 1941, this organization was first named Coordinator of Intelligence (COI), but would be renamed the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) (U.S. Army Special Forces, 1998). On July 9, 1942 the 1st Special Service Force (the Devil's Brigade), a joint Canadian-American venture would be formed at Fort William Henry Harrison, Montana. The 96th Headquarters & Headquarters Detachment, Military Government Group would be activated on August 26, 1945 (U.S. Army Special Forces, 1998).

"The primary operation of the OSS in Europe was called the Jedburgh mission. It consisted of dropping three-man teams into France, Belgium, and Holland, where they trained partisan resistance movements and conducted guerrilla operations against the Germans in preparation for the D-Day invasion. Other OSS operations took place in Asia, most spectacularly in Burma, where OSS Detachment 101 organized 11,000 Kachin tribesmen into a force that eventually killed 10,000 Japanese at a loss of only 206 of its own". (U.S. Army Special Forces, 1998).

### **3. 1st Special Service Force and Rangers.**

The Devil's Brigade was a combined American and Canadian airborne force, which specialized in mountain warfare and close-quarter combat, pitting a few well-trained men against masses of enemy troops (U.S. Army Special Forces, 1998). They saw most of their action in Italy, but also operated in France. The 1st Ranger Battalion (Darby's Rangers) was another branch of the OSS. They were activated on June 19, 1942 in Carrickfergus, Ireland. Like many

others in the OSS they fought throughout Western Europe and became famous for scaling the cliffs of Pointe du Hoc during the D-day invasion of Normandy (U.S. Army Special Forces, 1998).

#### **4. Colonel Aaron Banks.**

Harry Truman would dissolve the OSS after the war. Its legacy lived on through agencies like the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). From these agencies would come the Special Forces designation, a name derived from the OSS whose operational field teams had been given the same name in 1944 (U.S. Army Special Forces, 1998). Special Forces would be created through the efforts of many, but two men in particular, Colonel Aaron Bank and Colonel Russell Volckmann, were especially influential. These men were former OSS operatives who had remained in the military after the culmination of World War II. They saw the need for a guerrilla-style force; and Brigadier General Robert McClure echoed their convictions. McClure was head of the Pentagon-based psychological warfare staff of the Army. On April 10, 1952 the U. S. Army Psychological Warfare Center would be established at Fort Bragg, N.C. (U.S. Army Special Forces, 1998).

The whole concept of a Special Force was unconventional to the ultimate degree, an idea that had not been attempted on any type of concentrated effort at any other time in history. By 1952, however, the Army was ready to pursue this concept and to enter a new era of unconventional warfare. Special Forces was justified by the number of areas in the world, Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe in particular, where conventional warfare had been demonstrated to be ineffective. These forces were initially envisioned as being a small number of men (mostly NCOs) with exceptional skills, which could be targeted at the enemy. This force was viewed as a force multiplier: a small investment of men for a larger result (U.S. Army

Special Forces, 1998). A few properly trained and positioned men could wreak havoc on enemy forces, create diversionary tactics and engage in sabotage, and potentially bring an enemy to its knees. On June 19, 1952, Col. Aaron Bank would found the 10th Special Forces Group at Fort Bragg, N.C.

## **5. The Vietnam War.**

During June 1956, sixteen Special Forces Operational Detachments would enter South Vietnam to train their Vietnamese equivalents in skills and tactics. It would be the beginning of a fourteen year stay, a stay in which many men would die (Stanton 1990). During the last four years of the 1950s and the early 1960s, Special Forces would send increasing numbers of NCOs as military advisors into Vietnam. Their purpose was to train South Vietnamese soldiers, and to shape the political views of Vietnamese villages and tribes away from communism and toward American values.

On December 10, 1956 the U. S. Army Psychological Warfare Center was renamed the U.S. Army Special Warfare School. On September 21, 1961 the 5th Special Forces Group was activated at Fort Bragg, N.C. (U.S. Army Special Forces, 1998). In September of 1964, yet another step would be taken in Vietnam, a step to claim Vietnam as the exclusive operational province of 5th Special Forces Group, headquartered in Nha Trang. Nha Trang became the permanent headquarters of the 5th in February 1965 (Stanton 1990).

In 1967, yet another facet of Special Forces materialized. On November 7<sup>th</sup>, the Headquarters & Headquarters Company 4th Psychological Operations Group would be constituted into the Regular Army. On December 1st the 4th Psychological Operations Group was organized in Vietnam from elements of the 6th PSYOPS Battalion (U.S. Army Special Forces, 1998). Additional activities during the 1960s include operations in Bolivia, Guatemala,

Columbia, and the Dominican Republic. (The Bolivian operation resulted in the killing of Che Gueverra). This period, however, would see the Special Forces concentrating primarily in Southeast Asia (Stanton 1990). Eventually, 254 outposts were established throughout Vietnam, many of which were defended by a single A-team in coordination with friendly natives. The accomplishments of Special Forces in Vietnam are overwhelming and beyond the scope of this paper. One component of the Special Forces was the Studies and Observation Group (SOG). Small SOG teams of two or three U.S. Special Forces NCOs and three to nine indigenous members were inserted by helicopter into Cambodia and Laos, typically outnumbered 50 to 1, a radio, and their wits their only lifeline to safety. They penetrated enemy bastions to gather information, sabotage ammunition and destroy weapons caravans, kidnap North Vietnamese (NVA) soldiers and raid installations along the Ho Chi Minh Trail (Saal 1990).

## **6. Honors.**

Special Forces fought and succeeded against the odds. Eighteen Medals of Honors were awarded to Special Forces soldiers in Vietnam (14 to NCOs) as well as the following awards:

- 1 Distinguished Service Medal,
- 90 Distinguished Service Crosses,
- 814, Silver Stars,
- 13,234 Bronze Stars,
- 235 Legions of Merit,
- 46 Distinguished Flying Crosses,
- 232 Soldier's Medals,
- 4,891 Air Medals,

6,908 Army Commendation Medals,

2,658 Purple Hearts (Plaster 2000).

COL (Ret) Robert L. Howard is the most highly decorated soldier of the Vietnam War. He was awarded the Medal of Honor in 1968 while a platoon sergeant in a Special Forces Mike Force in 1968. Two previous recommendations for the award were downgraded to a Distinguished Service Cross and a Silver Star respectively.

## **7. Post Vietnam.**

The Special Forces would leave Vietnam due to pressures from America. Recognizing the unpopularity and the ultimate futility of the war recently elected President Richard Nixon began a calculated withdrawal of Special Forces from Vietnam. Beginning in 1969, Special Forces began to turn over their camps to the Vietnamese. The 5th returned to Fort Bragg on March 5, 1971. Although some Special Forces teams remained in Thailand launching secret missions into Vietnam, by 1972 Special Forces no longer had a role in Vietnam (Stanton 1990).

## **8. Conclusion.**

Wars in the future will not be the traditional wars of yesterday. The extent of a nation's territory will no longer be the sole or guiding argument. Instead, the focus will concentrate on industry, communications, and technology. The most critical elements of future wars will be the wealth of nations and the battlefield will consequently be global (Connor, 1997). This does not mean that Special Forces will no longer be necessary, however, only that their skills and tasks will adapt to changing circumstances. Today's Special Forces soldier is adding intellectual cyber skills to already extensive martial combat skills in the fight against terrorism. The face of Special Forces has changed continually since the earlier years of this century, progressing from an idea to a well-honed machine, employed in every armed conflict from World War II to Korea to the



present. War has shaped Special Forces. Since it is unlikely that warfare will ever be a thing of our past, war will continue to shape our Special Forces of tomorrow.

To the uninitiated current U.S. actions and policy in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) is due to the terrorist actions on 9/11. To those in Special Forces, 9/11 only brought to the forefront a war long fought covertly in obscure and far away places by shadow warriors. Special Forces have and will continue to lead the war against those that would bring harm to our nation and way of life. Today's shadow warrior NCOs will continue the proud legacy of Roger's, Mosby's and Darby's Rangers, the OSS veterans, the Devil's Brigade, Merrill's Marauders, the Partisan Forces in Korea, and SOG.

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