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The Role of SOF

Across the Range of Military Operations

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"...first, break down the wall that has more or less come between special operations forces and the other parts of our military...second, educate the rest of the military; spread a recognition and an understanding of what you do, why you do it, and how important it is that you do it. Last, integrate your efforts into the full spectrum of our military capability."

Admiral William J. Crowe, Jr. (former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff)

USSOCOM Activation Ceremony

1 June 1987[1]

Since the creation of the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), Special Operations Forces (SOF) personnel have been working hard to tear down the walls of secrecy which have led to years of misunderstanding between conventional and special operations forces. Both USSOCOM and the Services are actively integrating SOF curriculum into the Service's professional military education schools to educate future military leaders on the role of SOF across the range of military operations (war and military operations other than war).[2]

The end of the Cold War has dramatically changed the international security environment. The US now faces a world marked by numerous regional and transnational uncertainties. The opportunity to employ SOF to meet these challenges is as great today as it has ever been. With its unique capabilities and specialized equipment, SOF can support a wide range of operations from humanitarian assistance in a benign environment, to combat operations during war. The purpose of this article is to explain how SOF can be integrated into joint operations across the range of military operations.

Just as each Service team brings certain capabilities to the theater of operations, SOF similarly offer unique capabilities to the Joint Force Commander (JFC). In addition to their primary special operations missions, (direct action, special reconnaissance, unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, counterterrorist operations, psychological operations, and support to counterproliferation operations), SOF are also suited to conduct certain collateral activities. Some of their more common collateral activities include humanitarian assistance, counterdrug operations, combat search and rescue (CSAR), and coalition warfare.[3]

SOF at the Theater Level

Each regional commander in chief (CINC) has established a theater Special Operations Command (SOC) as a subordinate unified command, responsible for special operations matters within the CINC's area of responsibility. The CINC or JFC normally designates the theater SOC commander as the Joint Force Special Operations Component Commander (JFSOCC). However, depending on the scope and duration of the operation, the JFC may choose to designate a Joint Special Operations Task Force Commander. One role of the SOF commander (for the purposes of this article, the term JFSOCC will be used) is to advise the JFC on the proper employment of SOF to meet theater objectives across the range of military operations.[4]

Prior to planning and conducting any mission, JFSOCCs need to consider the five special operations mission criteria established by USCINCSOC. [5] These criteria provide a clear set of standards to determine the feasibility and utility of SOF operations and forms the basis for advising the JFC on the proper employment of SOF. They allow commanders to conduct operations which contribute to overall theater objectives and to ensure SOF resources are used wisely. Commanders should apply these criteria for taskings across the range of military operations.

The operation should be an appropriate mission that takes advantage of unique SOF skills and capabilities.

SOF operations should support the theater campaign plan or operational objectives.

SOF missions should be operationally feasible.

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Required resources should be available to execute SOF operations.

The expected outcome should justify the risk.

The Special Operations Liaison Element

While components are not necessarily restricted by artificial boundaries, both SOF and conventional air are considered theater-level assets with no boundaries in either the depth or width of their operations. Because SOF and joint air share a common operating environment, proactive liaison between the JFSOCC and the Joint Force Air Component Commander (JFACC) is absolutely essential. AFM 1-1, *Basic Aerospace Doctrine of the United States Air Force*, states "Effective force application and safety requirements make it essential that the Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF) commander [JFSOCC] operates in close coordination with the theater air commander."[6] To coordinate operations within this joint environment, the JFSOCC provides a special operations liaison element (SOLE) to the JFACC's headquarters.[7] The purpose of the SOLE is to fully coordinate and integrate SOF air and surface efforts with JFACC operations, create opportunities for synergistic attack, and to prevent fratricide. The SOLE is integrated into all major functions of the JFACC's headquarters, including the Joint Search and Rescue Center (JSRC), if it is collocated at the JFACC's headquarters. The SOLE assists with the Air Tasking Order (ATO) and Airspace Coordination Order generation, provides real-time mission support within the theater Air Operations Center, coordinates with the special plans functions, and provides airspace management and coordination of SOF with conventional air forces.[8] The SOLE is primarily composed of AFSOF personnel; however, steps are being taken to make this a truly joint SOF team by adding Army special operations aviation, Army Special Forces, and Navy Sea-Air-Land (SEAL) expertise.[9]

Integrating SOF into the Air Campaign

Air Operations Center (AOC) Combat Plans. One of the primary functions of Combat Plans is airspace coordination. The SOLE ensures SOF operations are properly integrated into the ATO and coordinates and publishes the Joint Special Operating Areas; with no fire, and restricted fire areas. This allows SOF and joint air to conduct operations without fear of friendly fire.

AOC Air Campaign Planning Cell. As the AOC Air Campaign Planning Cell develops its plan, both air and SOF planners should carefully consider all air and surface operations to avoid duplicative targeting and to prevent fratricide. In addition to conducting their primary theater special operations objectives, SOF can contribute to joint air operations in one of four areas: First, SOF can act as an **economy of force measure,** striking certain targets which allow conventional assets to strike higher priority targets. Second, SOF may be able to conduct some **surgical operations** which may be beyond the capability of conventional assets. Third, because of their unique training and aircraft capability, SOF can combine with conventional airpower in a **synergistic attack**. And finally, because of unique personnel and platform capabilities, SOF can provide other air campaign enhancements (**enhancement operations**).[10]

The Role of SOF in the Air Campaign

Economy of Force Measures Operations. Economy of force measures are operations which may be conducted by more than one component. By conducting these operations, SOF can free conventional aviation assets to conduct higher priority air missions. As an example, on the very first mission of Operation Desert Storm, Special Operations Command Central Command (SOCCENT) forces conducted a raid on an Iraqi early warning/ground control intercept (EW/GCI) site. Originally, F-117 stealth fighters were considered for this mission.[11] By using SOF assets, the F-117s were available to conduct higher priority strikes in Baghdad.

Surgical Operations. Surgical operations are operations which may be outside the capabilities of one component, but within the capability of another. SOF has the capability to destroy certain targets which may be either mobile or concealed to the air (triple canopy jungle, camouflaged concealment, and so forth). SOF may also be employed when the intent is to damage a target, and not destroy it. As an example, the objective might be to disable an electrical power grid, versus destroying it. SOF can also be used when there is a need to contain pollutants and contaminants, such as the destruction of a chemical, nuclear, or biological plant near high density population centers.

Synergistic Attack. Synergistic attack operations are operations that neither SOF nor airpower can accomplish alone, but together can provide a deadly one-two punch. A synergistic attack is much greater than the sum of its parts. With special equipment, SOF personnel can locate, positively identify, and then designate enemy targets (visually, electronically, or optically) for conventional assets to destroy. Positive identification is crucial. Several Iraqi decoys were identified by SOF and destroyed during the Gulf War, thus saving valuable resources and time. Additionally, SOF can act as a pathfinder for other assets. Special operations MH-53J Pave Low helicopters, with enhanced navigation systems, led a joint task force during Operation Eager Anvil (the attack against the Iraqi EW/GCI site). This joint task force also included Army AH-64 Apache helicopters.[12] SOF platforms are traditionally used in this role, as MC-130 Combat Talons have led formations of dissimilar C-130s. Additionally, SOF placed navigation beacons at key F-111 ingress points allowing for critical radar

updates, thus improving bombing accuracy and reducing the possibility of collateral damage.[13]

Joint Air Enhancement Operations. Because of special personnel skills and platform capabilities, SOF assets can provide other unique capabilities which may enhance the overall air campaign. For example, during Desert Storm, SOF were tasked to provide the CENTCOM theater's CSAR capability.[14] Remember it is people who conduct CSAR, and not equipment. While SOF aircrews and aircraft (fixed-wing as well as rotary-wing) can extract the recovery forces and the recovered personnel from hostile territory, CSAR can also be conducted by Navy Special reconnaissance squads, Army Special Forces direct action teams, as well as AFSOF Special Tactics Teams (STT).

SOF can conduct other unique enhancement operations. During the Gulf War, EC-130 Volant Solo aircraft were instrumental in conducting psychological operations (PSYOP). The EC-130s were configured to Arabic national standards for both television and radio broadcasts within the Kuwaiti theater of operations and on Iraqi radio and television.[15] Combat Shadow HC-130s and Combat Talon MC-130s also played a key role in PSYOP by conducting massive leaflet air drops; they were credited for encouraging thousands of Iraqi soldiers to lay down their arms and surrender.[16] MC-130s were also used to deliver the world's largest conventional bomb, the 15,000 pound BLU-82 "Daisy Cutter," to create a significant psychological impression. Eleven bombs were dropped; this also resulted in the surrender of thousands of Iraqi soldiers.[17] The BLU-82 can also be used to create instant helicopter landing zones in a triple canopy environment, or almost any other environment. During the initial phases of Operation Desert Shield, AFSOF Special Tactics Teams (STTs) set up and managed airfield operations at King Fahd International Airport. During the first month alone, STTs controlled over 30,000 aircraft movements to include takeoffs, landings, and repositions.[18]

AOC Combat Operations. The SOLE also has representatives in Combat Operations within the AOC. In Combat Operations, the SOLE monitors each SOF mission, providing real-time deconfliction and apprising the JFACC's staff of any changes in the tactical situation. Because the air environment is so dynamic, SOF personnel work closely with Combat Operations planners. Case in point--during Desert Storm, a SOF team was compromised while hiding in a well. In the ensuing fire fight, the team radioed for help. The SOLE representatives in Combat Operations coordinated for F-16s to divert to the location to pin down Iraqi forces until SOF helicopters could arrive for the extraction.[19] On another occasion, the SOF liaison in Combat Operations may have saved numerous lives. Three SOF helicopters were sent behind enemy lines to "infil" three special reconnaissance teams. F-15 pilots flew constant combat air patrol above all ingress and egress routes. Receiving no identification, friend or foe (IFF) signal from the helicopter flight, the F-15 pilots requested permission to fire. A quick check with the SOLE confirmed they were friendly helicopters.[20]

Joint Search and Rescue Center (JSRC). Although not considered part of the JFACC's staff, the JSRC may collocate with the AOC because it is the most complete and up-to-date source of information on theater-level air operations. SOLE representation at the JSRC includes STT personnel who are knowledgeable in SOF mission areas and personnel recovery techniques and procedures. As in Combat Operations, SOF personnel monitor missions in the JSRC to assist in immediate personnel recovery planning, coordination, and execution. The close interface between the JSRC and Combat Operations was instrumental in the recovery of a downed Navy F-14 pilot during Operation Desert Storm.[21]

The Role of SOF in Military Operations Other than War

As we move further away from Operation Desert Storm, our military is constantly being challenged by a new phenomenon which has become known as military operations other than war (MOOTW). To meet today's ambiguous security challenges, the military strategy emphasizes the full spectrum of capabilities for the Armed Forces of the United States. The political challenge is to selectively use these unique military capabilities to advance US national interests in peace and crisis while simultaneously maintaining the readiness to fight and win our nation's wars.[22] Let there be no mistake--the fundamental purpose of the armed forces must remain to fight and win our nation's wars if deterrence fails. However, the armed forces must now also be prepared to conduct these "nonwar activities" which support US national interests.

Why SOF Participate in MOOTW

To meet the objectives outlined in our National Security Strategy, US military forces can no longer solely focus on war, but must also be prepared to conduct nonwar operations. Although US military forces train to fight as a team, this does not necessarily mean that all forces will be employed equally, but that all forces must be prepared to meet the Joint Force Commander's (JFC) objectives. The JFC chooses the appropriate capability (air, land, sea, space, special operations, *or any combination of these*) to meet each specific challenge.[23] The complex nature of MOOTW requires the combined efforts of all military forces for successful mission execution. The challenge for the JFC is to match the appropriate military capability to the specific requirements of each operation. The military can no longer express the attitude "We don't train to do that--it's not our mission." Therefore, all military forces, including SOF, must now be prepared to conduct MOOTW in support of national objectives. Unique training, specialized assets, and unique personnel capabilities make SOF ideally suited to support a wide range of activities other than its principal wartime missions. Just as basic SOF combat skills and support capabilities are easily adaptable to meet a wide range of collateral activities, they can also be used to meet the wide range of MOOTW explained in Joint Pub 3-07, *Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other Than War*.[24]

A New Model[25]

Joint Pub 3-07 describes MOOTW in two categories: military operations involving the use or threat of force, and military operations that do not involve the use or threat of force. While Joint Pub 3-07 adequately describes the 16 representative types of MOOTW, it fails to explain which category is applicable for which operation and the fact that these operations may transition from one category to the other. The lack of a framework makes the concept difficult to understand. The Air Force Doctrine Center recently developed a model which provides a framework that allows readers to more easily understand, and thus appreciate, US military involvement in MOOTW. The model focuses on combat operations and noncombat operations. It allows for the overlap of certain operations, a fluid transition from one operation to another, and the possibility that multiple operations may occur simultaneously. The model is depicted below.

The left side of the model (combat operations) consists of actions that are clearly intended to involve combat. This is military power in the classic sense. During these operations, SOF use the same combat skills as they would during war. In recent years, our military forces participated in all four of these type of operations. Because SOF train to meet demanding wartime requirements, basic mission training qualifies them to participate in all combat operations.

The right side of the model (noncombat operations) consists of actions that are clearly not intended to involve combat. These operations keep day-to-day tensions below the threshold of armed conflict. They also promote peace, maintain US influence in foreign lands, and provide appropriate capabilities to help enforce policies benefiting US national interests. If consistent with US law, these operations may also apply within the borders of the US as well as in US-controlled areas outside the continental US. In addition, SOF respond to humanitarian needs around the world and to certain emergency requirements of US civil authorities. Basic mission training does not automatically qualify personnel to conduct these operations. Personnel may need additional training in language, cross cultural communications, area orientation, security assistance law, self-protection, and general legal and human rights considerations.

The operations in the intersecting area are actions that, depending on the situation, may or may not involve combat. Therefore, SOF conducting these operations must be prepared to conduct combat. As an example, a noncombatant evacuation operation may be unopposed in one situation (noncombat), but opposed in another (combat). In some cases, the condition which brought about the operation may worsen; therefore, the use or threat of force, for other than self-defense, may be necessary. As another example, a peacekeeping operation (a component of peace operations), which is noncombat, may abruptly transition to a combat peace enforcement operation (also a component of peace operations).

Summary

USSOCOM organizes, trains, and equips SOF to conduct operations across the range of military operations. Because SOF and joint air share a common operating environment, their operations should be fully coordinated and integrated. To do this, the JFSOCC provides the JFACC a special operations liaison element with joint SOF expertise, capable of coordinating with all major functions at the JFACC's headquarters. As demonstrated during Operation Desert Storm, there are a number of operational synergies SOF and conventional air can offer each other. The SOLE works hand-in-hand with the JFACC staff monitoring the tactical situation to ensure mission success and prevent fratricide.

The likelihood of US involvement in nonwar activities, known as military operations other than war, has greatly increased over the past five years. As such, all military components, including SOF, must be prepared to meet these challenges. The JFC should rely on the advice of the JFSOCC to properly integrate SOF into joint operations during war and military operations other than war.

"...Special Operations doctrine must also focus on the coordinated integration of special operations capabilities with conventional forces to achieve maximum combat power and effectiveness."

General Carl Steiner (former USCINCSOC)

A Strategic Perspective

Jan 92 26

Endnotes

[1]Joint Pub 3-05.3, *Joint Special Operations Operational Procedures*, Pg I-1, 25 Aug 93. The quote was taken from a speech delivered by Admiral Crowe during the USSOCOM activation ceremony 1 Jun 87.