



# AUSA BACKGROUND BRIEF



---

No. 80

March 1999

---

## Special Operations Forces: An Overview

### Introduction

An increasingly critical part of the U.S. armed forces is made up of special operations forces (SOF) of the Army, Navy and Air Force. These specialized forces are comprised of special operations, psychological operations and civil affairs units.

The enduring, overarching purposes of SOF are derived from historical experience, congressional legislation, and the evolving security environment. During the development of joint doctrine for special operations, certain legislated special operations activities were refined into the principal special operations missions. Other legislated activities and missions frequently assigned by geographic combatant commanders in chief (CINCs), which SOF can perform as tasked because of their unique training and equipment, fall under the heading of collateral activities. SOF may conduct several missions and collateral activities at the same time in a single campaign.

### Principal Missions

SOF principal missions are as follows:

*Direct action:* Short-duration strikes and other small-scale actions to seize, destroy, capture, recover, or inflict damage to designated personnel or material.

*Special reconnaissance:* Actions to obtain or verify, by visual observation or other collection methods, information concerning the capabilities, intentions and activities of an actual or potential enemy; or to secure data concerning the characteristics of a particular area.

*Foreign internal defense:* Participation by civilian and military agencies of a government in any of the action programs taken by another government to free and protect its society from subversion, lawlessness and insurgency.

*Unconventional warfare:* Support to military and paramilitary operations, normally of long duration, predominantly conducted by indigenous or surrogate forces. This includes guerrilla warfare and other offensive low-visibility operations.

*Combating terrorism:* Actions including antiterrorism (defensive measures taken to reduce vulnerability to terrorist acts) and counterterrorism (offensive measures taken to prevent, deter and respond to terrorism), taken to oppose terrorism throughout the entire threat spectrum.

*Counterproliferation:* Actions taken to seize, destroy, capture or recover weapons of mass destruction.

*Civil affairs:* Activities that establish, maintain, influence or exploit relations between military forces and civil authorities and the civilian population to facilitate military operations.

*Psychological operations:* Operations to convey selected information to foreign audiences to induce or reinforce foreign attitudes and behaviors favorable to the originator's objectives.

*Information operations:* Actions taken to achieve information superiority in support of national military strategy by affecting adversary information systems while leveraging and protecting U.S. information and information systems.

## **Collateral Activities**

SOF collateral activities include:

*Coalition support:* Actions to improve the ability of coalition partners to coordinate and synchronize combat activity, including providing training on tactics and techniques, providing communications to integrate forces into overall coalition command and intelligence structure, and establishing liaison to coordinate battle support and combat service support.

*Combat search and rescue:* A specific task performed by rescue forces to effect the recovery of distressed personnel during wartime or contingency operations.

*Counterdrug activities:* Those active measures taken to detect, monitor and counter the production, trafficking and use of illegal drugs.

*Countermine activities:* Activities to reduce or eliminate the threat to noncombatants and friendly military forces posed by mines, booby-traps and other explosive devices.

*Humanitarian assistance:* Programs conducted to relieve or reduce the adverse effects of natural or man-made disasters, or other endemic conditions such as disease, hunger or privation, that present a serious threat to life, or that can result in widespread human suffering or loss of property.

*Security assistance:* Programs that provide defense articles, military training or other defense-related services in furtherance of national policies and objectives.

*Special activities:* Actions conducted abroad in support of national foreign policy objectives, that are planned and executed so that the role of the U.S. government is not apparent or acknowledged publicly. Such actions require a presidential finding and congressional oversight.

## **Tailoring the SOF**

To accomplish its mission, SOF provides its customers rapidly deployable, flexible, joint task forces composed of a tailored mixture of units and organizations for use anywhere in the world across the entire spectrum of warfare in support of U.S. national security objectives. SOF can be employed as a force multiplier to support conventional forces in low-, mid- and high-intensity conflict. However, they are particularly effective at the lower end of the conflict spectrum, to include military operations other than war.

The language and regional expertise of SOF operators are particularly well suited to allied and coalition operations support, foreign internal defense missions, and any other mission where in-depth knowledge of the people and the region is an important component of mission success.

SOF can also be employed in an economy-of-force role — to provide presence and to reinforce host nation capabilities in strategic areas of the world when large conventional U.S. forces are deployed elsewhere. Most often, SOF are used to complement operations conducted by conventional

forces, before, during, and after an operation. Under some circumstances and for narrowly tailored operations, SOF also can be employed to conduct stand-alone operations where a small, discrete force provides the nation's leaders with an option that falls between diplomatic efforts and the use of high-profile conventional forces.

The small size and the capability of highly trained, joint SOF teams to react rapidly to such threats increase the range of options available to the National Command Authority for dealing with such situations short of escalation that might result from a commitment of conventional forces.

In addition, during peacetime SOF are continuously engaged in deployments around the world to assist developing nations in creating the conditions for stable social, economic and political development, thereby precluding or reducing the risk of internal discontent and armed conflict. By training indigenous forces to provide for their own security, and using integrated psychological operations programs to strengthen government infrastructures, small SOF teams can help prevent local problems from developing into threats to internal and international stability.

### **U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM)**

The United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) is one of nine unified commands in the U.S. military's combatant command structure. The formation of the command was a result of the Cohen-Nunn Amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1987. The command was activated 16 April 1987, and has approximately 47,000 active, Reserve and National Guard forces of the Army, Navy and Air Force.

USSOCOM's current overall mission is to prepare special operations forces to successfully conduct worldwide special operations, civil affairs and psychological operations in peace and war in support of the regional combatant commanders, American ambassadors and their country teams, and other government agencies.

### **USSOCOM Component Commands**

The United States Special Operations Command is comprised of three component commands and one subunified command.

**U.S. Army Special Operations Command.** Army Special Operations forces comprise Special Forces (SF), Ranger, psychological operations (PSYOP), civil affairs (CA), special operations aviation (SOA), and headquarters units organized under the U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) at Fort Bragg, NC. Four major subordinate commands of USASOC are also at Fort Bragg. The U.S. Army CA/PSYOP Command controls all PSYOP and CA units. The U.S. Army SF Command controls five active and two Army National Guard SF groups, each with more than 1,400 personnel organized in three SF battalions, a support company and a headquarters company.

The U.S. Army Special Operations Support Command (Airborne), activated 8 December 1995, is the newest major subordinate unit in the U.S. Army Special Operations Command. Its activation realigned the command and control organizational structure of the signal, support and material management functions.

The mission of the U.S. Army Special Forces Command is to plan, prepare for and, when directed, deploy soldiers to conduct unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, and special reconnaissance and direct-action missions in support of U.S. national policy objectives within designated areas of responsibility. The 12-man A-Team is the key operating element of SF groups.

Soldiers of the 75th Ranger Regiment are the masters of special light infantry operations. The missions of the regiment's 1,600 personnel include conducting attacks to temporarily seize and secure key objectives, and other light infantry operations requiring unique capabilities. Like their Special Forces counterparts, Rangers can infiltrate an area by land, by sea or by air.

The 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment is a unique unit, providing support to SOF on a worldwide basis with three types of modified helicopters. Capabilities of the 160th include inserting, resupplying and extracting U.S. and allied SOF personnel. They also assist in SOF search and rescue, and escape and evasion activities.

Psychological operations forces are currently organized into one active and two reserve groups. They disseminate truthful information to foreign audiences in support of U.S. goals and objectives. PSYOP units accomplish their mission by circulating messages in the form of leaflets, posters, broadcasts and audiovisual tapes. Each unit has its own intelligence and audiovisual specialists.

The civil affairs forces, 97 percent of which are in the Army Reserve, consist of three CA commands and eight brigades. CA units are designed to prevent civilian interference with tactical operations, to assist commanders in discharging their responsibilities toward the civilian population, and to provide liaison with civilian government agencies.

The U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School has the two-fold mission of developing doctrine and providing training. Based at Fort Bragg since 1952, this organization conducts training courses for SF, CA, PSYOP and foreign area officers as well as training for survival, evasion, resistance and escape. It is also responsible for developing doctrine and new equipment for Army SOF.

**Naval Special Warfare Command.** Naval special warfare (NSW) forces conduct maritime special operations in support of numbered fleet commands and theater special operations commands (SOCs). Some NSW forces directly support national missions. Mission priorities are determined by the needs of theater CINCs.

Commander, Naval Special Warfare Command, exercises administrative and operational control of all U.S.-based NSW forces, sets policy and provides guidance and resources for carrying out assigned missions.

Naval special warfare consists of:

- ◆ SEAL (Sea-Air-Land) teams, which conduct direct-action, special reconnaissance, unconventional warfare, and foreign internal defense activities. They also conduct security assistance, counterdrug operations, personnel recovery and hydrographic reconnaissance.
- ◆ SEAL delivery vehicle (SDV) teams, which operate and maintain submersible systems that deliver and recover SEALs in hostile areas. SDV teams also conduct reconnaissance and direct-action missions.
- ◆ Special boat units and patrol coastal ships, which operate in support of maritime special operations. NSW special boat operators employ several high-speed, high-performance craft in their primary mission of insertion/extraction of SEALs from low- to medium-threat environments. Patrol coastal ships conduct maritime interdiction operations, forward presence, escort operations, noncombatant evacuations and other special operations support as required.
- ◆ Naval special warfare units, which are permanently deployed and located outside the continental United States to support other NSW forces assigned to theater SOCs or components of naval task forces.

- ◆ Naval Special Warfare Development Group, located in Little Creek, VA, which provides centralized management for the test, evaluation and development of current emerging technology applicable to naval special warfare forces. It also develops maritime, ground and airborne tactics for NSW and possible Department of Defense-wide applications.
- ◆ Naval Special Warfare Center, located in Coronado, CA, which conducts Basic Underwater Demolition/SEALs (BUD/S) training, provides U.S. and allied military personnel with advanced instruction, and has additional classes under development.

**Air Force Special Operations Command.** Air Force Special Operations forces consist of uniquely equipped fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft operated by highly trained aircrews whose missions include inserting, extracting, resupplying, aerial fire support, refueling and PSYOP. Under the oversight of Air Force Special Operations Command at Hurlburt Field, FL, Air Force SOF are organized into one active component special operations wing; two active special operations groups; one Reserve special operations wing; one Air Force special operations wing; and one active special tactics group, which operates expeditionary airfields, conducts classified missions, and flies combat rescue missions.

Units include the following:

- ◆ Three active and one Reserve squadron with MC-130P Combat Shadow aircraft used to refuel SOF helicopters and to support limited insertion, extraction or resupply missions.
- ◆ Four active and one Reserve squadron with MC-130 Combat Talon aircraft used for long-range insertion, extraction or resupply missions deep within hostile territory. They can also conduct PSYOP leaflet drops and deliver 15,000-pound BLU-82 bombs.
- ◆ Three active squadrons with MH-53J Pave Low III helicopters used for medium- to long-range insertion, extraction or resupply missions in hostile territory.
- ◆ One active squadron with MH-60G Pave Hawk helicopters for short- to medium-range insertion, extraction or resupply missions.
- ◆ Two active squadrons with AC-130 Spectre gunship aircraft for aerial fire support or armed escort missions. The aircraft support both SOF and conventional forces.
- ◆ One Air National Guard wing equipped with EC-130E Commando Solo aircraft to support psychological operations. These aircraft are equipped to broadcast television and radio signals.
- ◆ One active aviation foreign internal defense unit. Its members provide U.S. military expertise to other governments in support of their internal defense and development.
- ◆ The Special Tactics Group, with seven active-duty squadrons, consists of combat controllers, pararescuemen and combat weathermen uniquely trained and equipped to establish and control air-ground interface for SOF operating in austere and hostile environments, and to provide combat search and rescue, trauma care and coordinate evacuation staging of the wounded. Combat weathermen generate mission-tailored forecasts for ingress, employment and egress of air, land and sea forces and conduct special weather reconnaissance.

**Joint Special Operations Command.** The fourth organization, a subunified command under the Commander in Chief, U.S. Special Operations Command (USCINCSOC), is the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) at Fort Bragg, NC. Established in 1980, JSOC headquarters and staff oversee matters pertaining to joint special operations and missions. JSOC's prime directives are to:

- ◆ Study joint special operations requirements and techniques.
- ◆ Ensure interoperability and equipment standardization.

- ◆ Plan and conduct joint special operations exercises and training.
- ◆ Develop joint special operations tactics.

## **Conclusion**

Special operations forces play an increasingly significant role in meeting the nation's security needs. The flexibility and availability of SOF for immediate deployment offer the national command authority a wide range of viable alternatives.

Among the threats to U.S. security are terrorism, extremes of nationalism and ethnic fundamentalism, and illegal drug activities, in addition to significant conventional threats and weapons of mass destruction. In addition to the conduct of operations, SOF can in many cases deter or mitigate threats through peacetime military assistance programs.

###

The information in this *Background Brief* was extracted from the USSOCOM Web site ([www.dtic.mil/socom/](http://www.dtic.mil/socom/)).