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Special Operations Forces—An NCO Perspective

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American special operations forces (SOF) have an important and growing role as our nation is challenged by a changing world order. SOF face more regional instability, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, transnational dangers and asymmetric threats, as well as an increasing demand for SOF from the regional unified commanders.

Whether fighting in the streets of Somalia, working to reestablish a city's destroyed electrical grid, conducting demining training in Bosnia, developing integrated civil affairs and psychological operations programs for an ambassador, or conducting a noncombative evacuation operation in Liberia, SOF NCOs are deployed on the world's front line. In 1997, SOF deployed to 144 countries with an average of 4,760 personnel deployed per week—three times the number of missions in 1991.

The key to success has been and will continue to be SOF NCOs who are selectively recruited and assessed, culturally aware, language qualified and politically sensitive, and who, above all, maintain the warrior ethos—warriors trained *how* to think, not just *what* to think. Given the unique nature of special operations, SOF leaders

work very hard to find the right men and women to enter our extensive training programs.

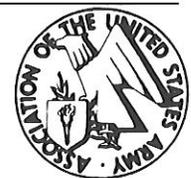
Special operations is defined as “the use of small units in direct and indirect military actions focused on strategic and operational objectives.” These actions require units with combinations of specialized personnel, equipment, training and tactics that go beyond the routine capabilities of conventional military forces. “Special” does not mean SOF personnel are better than conventional troops—only that they have received specialized training and have proven they are the “right” personnel with SOF-unique skills.

SOF men and women believe in four SOF Truths:

Humans are more important than hardware. In SOF, the mindset is “equip the man, don't man the equipment.” Weapons or air platforms didn't earn the Medals of Honor or Silver Stars in the streets of Mogadishu; it was human sacrifice and the courage of the warriors behind the tools of war that carried the day.

Quality is better than quantity. In Somalia, Army Rangers, Special Forces soldiers, Navy

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SEALs and Air Force Special Tactics personnel fought side by side, supported by Army special operations aircraft. All had gone through a SOF assessment and selection process, had received specialized training and were a known quality—commanders didn't doubt their willingness to fight. SOF NCOs are looking for mature, experienced individuals with a strong desire to learn and, most importantly, the ability to think and figure things out. We firmly believe it's better to go into a fight with a handful of people you know you can count on than with dozens you are unsure of.

Competent special operations forces cannot be created after emergencies occur. Entry-level requirements for SOF start with three to five years of basic military experience followed by a 12- to 18-month training pipeline after successful completion of the assessment and selection course. An additional 18 to 24 months of SOF-unique experience in an operational unit is required before an individual is considered fully mission qualified. We have a considerable investment in time and training dollars in our people.

Two events in 1996 were prime examples of the return on our investment. When Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown's aircraft crashed in Croatia, SOF were the first Americans on the scene and conducted the recovery operation under very severe weather and terrain conditions. As they were finishing the recovery operation, SOF commanders received a call for help from the U.S. Ambassador in Monrovia, Liberia. Within 48 hours of being on a mountain in blizzard conditions, the same Green Berets, Navy SEALs, Air Force Special Tactics personnel, and Army and Air Force special operations aircraft were in Liberia conducting a noncombative evacuation operation. SOF troops had secured the embassy and evacuated more than 2,000

persons by the time the U.S. Marines arrived in force. It's no accident SOF can react quickly from widely-dispersed locations, under the most austere conditions, and without the need for time-consuming training. Our investment in the "right" people has paid and will continue to pay big dividends!

Special operations forces cannot be mass-produced. With a much smaller overall force from which to recruit and competition from a strong civilian job market, troops with SOF skills and experience are in short supply and big demand. Recruiting and retaining experienced SOF personnel is a continuing challenge. The attrition rate for the SOF assessment and selection process averages between 50 and 80 percent depending on the particular unit of assignment.

We have a saying in SOF: "Selection is a continuous process." Individuals must maintain the SOF standard of excellence throughout their assignment. All personnel, regardless of rank, are expected to carry a full load and lend a hand where and when needed. It takes a lot of time, hard work and strong personal desire to succeed to produce a competent SOF warrior. Lowering the standard to get more people faster produces an unacceptable drop in quality.

We must remember that SOF NCOs are the most important part of all special operations—weapon systems, platforms and technology only help them accomplish difficult missions. We don't know our next challenge or what we will be asked to do in the future. However, we are certain we *will* be asked and that SOF will continue to provide our nation with a flexible, mature, experienced force that is manned by warriors with strong legal, moral and ethical values, ready to respond to our country's needs.