

# What's So Special About Special Forces?

Since 9/11, there has been significant discussion on the need for America's conventional military forces to be more like Special Forces or "SOF Like"<sup>1</sup>. I completely endorse this proposition, assuming it is not a knee-jerk reaction to our current conflicts but a conclusion drawn from our potential 21<sup>st</sup> century adversaries. There have been numerous forecasts describing our future environment- an environment without any peer or near-peer competitors, one in which our most likely threats will resort to an alternative to conventional military confrontation such as irregular warfare. Special Operations Forces are specifically trained and equipped to combat irregular warfare, so I can't argue with our military commanders when they propose the requirement for more small combat and advisory teams along the Special Forces model or that we need more troops who are culturally adept and comfortable working outside the conventional structures of the Army or Marine Corps. Joint Forces Command recently created a Joint Irregular Warfare Center, headed by a Special Forces officer, to guide their efforts in shifting general purpose force capabilities more towards a Special Operations Forces approach to fighting. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff reinforced the necessity for more SOF-like forces when he said, "The one requirement that jumps off the page is the requirement for all services to be SOF-like--to be netted, to be much more flexible, adaptive, faster, lethal, and precise"

From my vantage, that of a career Special Operations Officer currently assigned as the Deputy Commanding General of the Army's John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, the organization charged with assessing, selecting and training the Army's Special Forces (Green Berets), I thought it would be helpful to describe the complexities associated with creating Special Forces Soldiers and the unique role they will play in the execution of American foreign policy both now and in the post-Iraq/Afghanistan environment. I chose Special Forces as a representative example of SOF because they are the largest single component assigned to the United States Special Operations Command.

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<sup>1</sup> *SOF or Special Operation Forces describes forces of all services that are specifically organized, trained and equipped to conduct special operations. These forces are assigned the United States Special Operations Command of which the largest component is Army Special Forces, otherwise known as Green Berets.*

One common denominator in the SOF community is the requirement to pass a challenging pre-selection screening process and/or qualification course. In order to attend our Special Forces Qualification Course, for example you must first pass a rigorous 19-day Assessment and Selection process where we evaluate three important qualities: Character, Commitment and Intellect. Character goes to a candidate's moral and ethical foundation; commitment determines the soldier's level of physical and mental preparation, and intellect is indicative of their ability to conceptualize and solve complex problems.

Those few Soldiers who eventually become Green Berets have demonstrated the highest standards of discipline, dedication, integrity and professionalism. That is why approximately 73% of the young men who try out for the challenging year-long, Special Forces Qualification Course rarely make it past the first few months. We demand that each Special Forces Soldier master hundreds of tasks specific to his specialty, plus an array of advanced war-fighting skills that are critical for survival on today's complex battlefields. For example, our Special Forces Weapons Sergeants are trained to repair any known weapon, foreign or domestic, and are able to make it work properly in our indigenous partners hands. They are also trained to survey our battlefields, to identify the threats and to leverage the proportional force necessary to defeat the enemy, protect the team and accomplish the mission. Our Special Forces Engineers can precisely calculate and employ any type of explosives with the precision necessary to destroy enemy forces or structures without injuring their teammates who are usually in close proximity to the blast. Our Special Forces Communication Sergeants can design networks and establish communications with Air Force or Navy close air support aircraft, medical evacuation helicopters, higher headquarters, and adjacent military units both foreign and domestic. Our Special Forces Medics provide medical and trauma care to coalition troops, host-nation personnel, and enemy combatants. They can treat one patient with pneumonia, and perform a lifesaving field surgery the next, such as performing a tracheotomy or insert a chest tube into a casualty. When immediate medical evacuation is not possible, they have the skills to treat, and stabilize the wounded, keeping them alive until evacuation is possible. They also routinely establish local clinics where they offer free medical care to our indigenous partners and their families. Some consider our Medics provision of care as one of our most effective methods in building host nation rapport. And all of our Special Forces Soldiers have the mental discipline to perform their duties under any conditions, in any type of weather, in or out of

enemy gunfire. They possess the physical strength to carry their 90 pounds of assigned individual gear into battle, and if required, carry their wounded teammates to safety, because we never leave our brothers behind.

If this was not enough, every single Green Beret learns a foreign language – hard languages like Russian, Chinese, Korean, or Arabic, and then demonstrates proficiency in this language before they graduate. But most importantly, Green Berets must demonstrate maturity, judgment, courage, initiative, self-confidence, and compassion beyond what we expect from members of any other profession.

In order to appreciate why these qualities are so important, we need to put them in the context of our assigned mission which is to win the War of Terrorism. Recently, the Secretary of Defense, the Honorable Robert Gates said that “The most important military component in the War on Terror is not the fighting we do ourselves, but how well we enable our partners to defend and govern their own countries.” The true beauty of Special Forces is that we are a fighting force inherently designed to execute the Secretary of Defense’s guidance. In other words, Special Forces Soldiers are specifically trained and equipped to assist the indigenous security forces of troubled countries and to build their capacity to defeat terrorism before these conditions become a threat to our country. This has been a core task of Special Forces since our inception in 1952 and nobody does it better. However, in order to accomplish this task, we need access to these troubled countries, and this access requires a continued policy of Global Engagement - the strategic use of development, diplomacy, and defense to advance our political agenda in areas like economic prosperity and international cooperation.

As I alluded to earlier, the intelligence community agrees that our foreseeable future guarantees to be one of persistent conflict between third world countries, insurgencies and terrorist organizations, fueled by poverty, illiteracy, injustice, expanding Islamic extremism, as well as competition for energy, food, water, and other resources. Although our homeland has not been attacked recently, international terrorism is still spreading, and, similar to the Cold War, there will never be one decisive battle that will win the war and bring stability to the world. But I believe that a strategy of Global Engagement, employing Special Forces Soldiers, may be our best bet at winning this War. Terrorist organizations like the Taliban, Al-Qaida, Hamas,

and Hezbollah must be defeated at the local, grass roots-level by a combination of development, diplomacy and defense, hence Global Engagement.

Green Berets are the United States' only trained warrior-diplomats, the only force we have that intuitively understands the balance between diplomacy and force, and the only force that possesses the judgment to determine which actions are most appropriate in any given situation. We specialize in coaching, teaching, mentoring, motivating, and training local security forces, and we do this with the patience of a diplomat and in their native tongue. Special Forces Soldiers understand that the key to success is through "the indirect approach" - working "by, with, and through" host-nation forces, because ultimately the most powerful message is one delivered by our partners to their own people. Additionally, it is the ability to instinctively understand the equilibrium between the two opposite notions of diplomacy and force that makes our Soldiers so remarkably valuable and quite possibly our best military solution to the War on Terror.

In Afghanistan, less than 8% of our overall force structure belongs to a Special Operations Task Force. In one recent 6-month rotation, these Special Operators conducted hundreds of operations, engaging and killing thousands of Taliban insurgents. However, what is most noteworthy is that they also medically treated more than 50,000 Afghans, delivered over 1.4 million pounds of aid, and established over 19 radio stations. They also distributed 8,000 radios, so the country's populace can now listen to an Afghani voice of reason as opposed to the extremists' ranting of anti-American, Taliban rhetoric. Granted, most of these activities were in conjunction with other United States government agencies, but Special Forces Soldiers were instrumental in both the planning and execution of these activities and are usually the first ones on the scene. It is not just food and radios, either; our Soldiers facilitate the construction of bridges, schools, clinics, wells, and other critical engineering projects in places where other government agencies would not dare to go without Green Berets by their side.

This effort is but one example of what is being duplicated around the world by other Special Forces Soldiers. As of March 2009, we have Special Forces Soldiers conducting various Global Engagement activities in 39 countries. Special Forces soldiers are not just training host-nation forces, but they are teaching their military personnel about democracy, human rights, freedom and dignity; while eating,

sleeping, living, working, planning, and, if necessary, fighting with them. Our Soldiers, our warrior diplomats, are building a coalition of partner nations around the world to help share the burden of global stability.

We send our Special Forces Soldiers to the far corners of the world, working in their 12- man operational detachments, isolated and far removed from any support or protection, other than that provided by the forces they are training. Consider that responsibility - consider the trust required to train those who provide the blanket of security under which you live, work, and sleep. The men of the Green Beret live that reality every single day. This is the expectation that our country places upon our Special Forces Soldiers, and this is what them special.

I would like to offer just one last thought on the uniqueness of Special Forces; one characteristic that resonates above all others; Special Forces is a family business. Our Soldiers develop powerful relationships with the men on their teams. This bond drives them to train harder, fight harder, and go further than they ever would have on their own. They are born into the family that begins during the Special Forces Qualification Course and continues long after retirement. This fraternity is inclusive of our wives and our children, as well as the wives and children of our fallen. In many respects, it is also inclusive of our indigenous partners that we train with and their families also.

Our future may produce more challenges than Special Operations Forces alone can effectively respond, hence the critical requirement for more SOF or SOF-like forces. However, despite the doomsday forecast we see in the media, the United States remains the most prosperous; power nation in the World and with this greatness come responsibility. Many Americans believe that our continued engagement in the affairs of our foreign partners is counterproductive. However, our security and prosperity, as well as, the safety of our families and our homeland are inextricably linked to the international community who consistently turn to the United States for their own security guarantees. Right or wrong, the mantle of leadership has been thrust upon us and there is no other nation more trusted, more suitable, or more capable to assume that role than the United States. It is also in our best interest to serve as the guardians of democracy, while protecting trade, promoting finance, and maintaining our own access throughout the world. This all translates into a sustained and continuous process of Global Engagement and nobody in any military does this better than the United States Special Forces.