

Running Head: SPECIAL FORCES FIRST SERGEANT: THE TRANSITION FROM TEAM
LIFE

Special Forces First Sergeant: The Transition from Team Life

SGM Robert L. Loudon Jr.

Transition to 1SG Position, Ft. Bragg, NC, March 2004 – June 2004

18Z5VW7QB, First Sergeant, 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne)

5 October 2006

Class 57

Abstract

The transition to becoming a First Sergeant in Special Forces (SF) is much different from many other Army units. Most SF Master Sergeants have spent multiple years working in 12 man teams with ranks ranging from Staff Sergeant to Captain. Having led basically a squad size element of seasoned professionals for multiple years, the move to First Sergeant can be overwhelming. Most senior enlisted Soldiers throughout the Army have not been exposed to the organizational structure of a Special Forces Battalion and do not understand the extreme difference between team life and that of a First Sergeant. Furthermore, many Special Forces Soldiers do not realize the maturity and leadership requirements needed to successfully transition from team life to being a First Sergeant.

Special Forces First Sergeant: The Transition from Team Life

In the beginning of 2004, I was starting my third year as the Team Sergeant for Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) 765, 2d Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne). We were working in Colombia, South America, training Air Assault tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) to an infantry company and a graduating class of Colombian helicopter pilots. This was to be my last deployment on an ODA as I had been selected to become the First Sergeant for the battalion's Headquarters Support Company (HSC) upon my return to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The organization of an ODA, the duties and responsibilities of the team sergeant, and general day to day life are much different than that of a conventional army unit. Because of this, moving to a position as an HSC First Sergeant can be extremely challenging. I am not talking of the inherent challenges of training and leading Soldiers as the senior Non-commissioned Officer (NCO) in the company. More so is the challenge of transitioning from a small 12 man team of Staff Sergeants and above, to a company of 150+ men; half of them being below the rank of Staff Sergeant. I found quickly that I could not continue with the same Leadership Philosophy used on the ODA. I had to make immediate adjustments, falling back on prior experiences as an infantry man in the 82d Airborne Division, to grow into a leader worthy of both a Command Sergeant Major's and a Private's respect.

Team Sergeant Position

The ODA in Special Forces is organized much different than most army units. As shown in FM 3-05.20 (2001), it is composed of a Captain as the Commander and a Warrant Officer as the Assistant Detachment Commander. The remaining ten Soldiers are NCOs of the rank of Staff Sergeant to Master Sergeant. There is a Staff Sergeant and Sergeant First Class respectively for each specialty: weapons, engineer, medical, and communications. There is also a Sergeant First

Class serving as the Assistant Operations and Intelligence Sergeant. The senior NCO is the Master Sergeant, which holds the position of Operations Sergeant, or what we commonly refer to as Team Sergeant (see appendix A). Even though each SF team only has 12 individuals, its purpose is much larger. FM 3-05.20 (2001) states that “The SFODA is designed to organize, equip, train, advise or direct, and support indigenous military or paramilitary forces engaged in UW or FID activities” (para. 3-117).

By the end of my time as the Team Sergeant for ODA 765 I had spent more than 11 years working on these small 12 man teams. From the rank of Staff Sergeant to Master Sergeant I had lived and grown in my leadership abilities under the shelter of dealing with only a handful of men, all of them being stellar performers. FM 3-05.20 (2001) para. 3-125 explains my Duties and Responsibilities as:

“The operations sergeant is the senior enlisted member of the detachment. He is responsible for the day-to-day activities of the detachment. With guidance from the commander, he assigns specific tasks, supervises the performance of detachment tasks, and prepares plans, orders, and reports. The operations sergeant oversees individual and collective training and the preparation of briefbacks, OPLANs, and OPORDs. He writes daily training schedules and maintains the responsibility for short-term training. He can organize, train, assist, advice, direct, or lead indigenous combat forces up to battalion size.”

The responsibilities of the position can be very daunting at times, especially when working directly with other country’s militaries or embassies. Because of the high profile of the missions SFODAs are involved in, there was a high need for mature NCOs. However, due to this maturity, I found I was rarely tested on my ability to lead and mentor young Soldiers. I had become an

effective leader in the world of small teams and green berets, but to lead and mentor a company full of support Soldiers, that was to be a greater challenge.

Team Life

To truly understand the difference between leading an ODA and being a HSC First Sergeant I need to further elaborate on the leadership philosophy needed on the ODA. The maturity level of the Soldiers on an ODA creates a unique type of leadership atmosphere. When there was a mission to accomplish I could always count on the team to give it 110%. Any task that was assigned to a team member would be completed above standard with little supervision. When it came to mentoring it was done more on a peer basis than as a superior counseling a junior Soldier. We were a family and had to respect and trust each other as such.

I found that the best leadership style on the team was to give ownership to the team. We would plan in depth as a team before any training cycle or deployment. Our final plans were never just the ideas of the team leadership; it was a group effort. I found this to be especially helpful to ensure that we maintained effective cross-training. Everyman felt it was his personal responsibility to learn the team's mission inside and out, and to cross-train other team members to do his job as well. For example, the communications sergeant would plan training on a radio system. The team members refused to just learn in a lecturing style, they had to take ownership of the information. It was understood that at anytime you could be responsible to operate the system without the communications sergeant's assistance.

A large portion of my leadership style had to be hands-off. As the team sergeant, I had to trust each man to do the right thing when I was not there. On some deployments we would be authorized rental cars and cell phones, placed in high dollar apartments, paid full per diem, and expected to work directly with senior officials from other countries. Other deployments, to

include combat, we were expected to train and lead up to a battalion size element of foreign Soldiers. Many of the deployments were not team inclusive and the team would be split into smaller elements. Every deployment was different. During my time as the team sergeant we worked in civilian clothes in an embassy, trained infantry tactics in the jungles of South America, and fought the Taliban in the high deserts of Afghanistan. Needless to say, team life was a great experience and had its share of leadership challenges. However, it did not prepare me for my next challenge.

Headquarters Support Company First Sergeant

In each Special Forces battalion, there is a Headquarters Support Company (HSC) much like that of other units (See Appendix A). It is composed of all ranks, from the Lieutenant Colonel as Battalion Commander, to the Private in the motor pool. One difference that is worthy of note is that the HSC was the only company in the battalion that had a 1SG position (FM 3-05.20, 2001). Each of the other three companies in the battalion, all of which are operational companies, are maintained by their own Company Sergeants Major. Because of this, the Battalion Command Sergeant Major could select his HSC First Sergeant from 22 MSGs within the battalion. Because of the uniqueness of there being only one 1SG per battalion, it made the position very competitive.

When a MSG is being considered for promotion his records go before a board like all other units. What most SF Soldiers don't realize is that the board is composed of both 18 and 11 series SGMs and CSMs (Board Briefings, 2006). Consider that a MSG in the regular infantry is usually in a staff position as opposed to SF where the MSGs are operational team sergeants. Furthermore, in the infantry a Staff Sergeant leads a squad of 13 men (FM 3-21.10, 2006), equal to the size of an ODA. It is easy to see that to an 11 series board member, an SF NCO must have

something more the just team time to show his leadership abilities before being selected for SGM. This is why an SF 1SG position is desired by many SF MSGs, however, just wanting the position is not enough. A team sergeant must be aware of the struggles transitioning from team life to 1SG can have. I believe that no other position prepares a Master Sergeant better for promotion to SGM than that of 1SG but it is no walk in the park.

Transition from MSG to 1SG

The transition from Team Sergeant to First Sergeant was, to say the least, a culture shock. As noted above, the life on an ODA is much different then that of a conventional unit. Taking on the responsibility of a HSC 1SG was a new challenge that many SF MSGs are not truly prepared for. It goes far beyond the simple understanding of the different sections and their responsibilities to the battalion. It is the leadership style needed to work with staff officers, mentor junior NCOs, and lead junior enlisted Soldiers. It is not something that can be learned in books, it has to be experienced.

Battalion Staff

As the HSC 1SG the battalion staff was part of my company. I had to learn how to give them the latitude needed to support the battalion while still making sure they trained on warrior skills. This was not always an easy task, especially considering that most of them were my pay grade or higher. Organizing something as simple as an APFT or weapons qualification could be a serious problem. All company level events had to be scheduled for multiple days to insure the battalion was fully operational. For example, only half of the staff would be at a rifle range while the rest worked in their offices. Then the next day it would be the other half at the range. Even still I had to, at times, get the Commander's involvement when certain officers felt their staff jobs were more important then maintaining their warrior skills. This is where the Battalion

Commander and CSM had to give the 1SG full support. Without their support, the staff would have continued to live in their own world.

Mentoring

When it came to mentoring junior NCOs a standard had to be immediately established. Special Forces Soldiers are known for being very close knit and relaxed in their way of dealing with each other. Unfortunately, this relaxed atmosphere can carry over to the Soldiers in HSC if not careful. Junior NCOs had to be taught how to lead young Soldiers professionally. If they maintained an environment that was too relaxed it would set up a young enlisted Soldier for failure. To an enlisted Soldier assigned to SF as his first duty station, he believes the rest of the Army works in the same relaxed fashion. Imagine if a private moves through the ranks to Specialist or Sergeant, then he is assigned to the 82d Airborne Division. It would be extremely difficult for that Soldier to adjust and could cause major problems for himself and his new unit. That is why I enforced the standards as much like a conventional infantry unit as possible. I felt we would be doing an injustice to the junior enlisted if we did not teach them proper military customs and courtesies. This inevitably forced the NCOs to work at a different level of professionalism. I had to insure proper counseling was done, that NCOs were setting the example to their Soldiers, and that standards were being enforced.

Leadership

The greatest challenge was adjusting my leadership style to properly guide the enlisted Soldiers. I took the responsibility very personally of ensuring they were taught correctly. Leadership had to be established from the top and during my first week as 1SG I realized that many NCOs were not committed enough. To assist me in demonstrating my level of commitment I utilized a statement printed on the bottom of a motivational picture hanging in my

office. The picture was of a wolf standing powerfully on a snow covered knoll with other wolves behind him. The statement is entitled “The Power of a Leader” and reads as follows:

True Leaders are not those who strive to be first but those who are first to strive and who give their all for the success of the team. True Leaders are the first to see the need, envision the plan, and empower the team for action. By the strength of the Leader’s commitment, the power of the team is unleashed (The Power of a Leader, n.d).

At that Monday morning formation I read the above statement, repeating multiple times the final line, “By the strength of the Leader’s commitment, the power of the team is unleashed.” I wanted there to be no doubt of my commitment so I immediately moved them into an extended rectangular formation and personally led Physical Training (PT). I wanted there to be a complete understanding of my level of commitment to the power of the company and that I would lead from the front and set the example. I led PT everyday that week and it was a huge learning experience, not only for the Soldiers, but also for me. What I found was that many of the NCOs did not care for the PT program, however, the enlisted Soldiers, for the most part, loved it. I had many enlisted Soldiers comment on how they enjoyed a good PT session, and I could see the motivation in their eyes. That confirmed what I knew to be true, that young Soldiers need to be pushed, and that my NCOs were not doing it. Soldiers of every rank want a leader they can look up to and respect. A young Soldier in HSC does not need a teammate on a first name basis as the senior NCO, they need, and want, a leader that will push them. Not just one that will bark orders but will lead from the front and expect them to keep up.

The Reward

Not everyone in SF has the desire, or the ability, to become a 1SG. It is one of the most challenging positions I have ever held, however, it is also one of the most rewarding. Far beyond the reward of looking more favorable than your peers for possible promotion was the reward of what I learned along the way. I learned more about leadership than I would ever learn from continuing as an ODA Operations Sergeant. I learned not only how to lead other NCOs but how to guide them to be better leaders themselves. I learned how to give superb support to the ODAs and operational companies, while maintaining the warrior skills needed by every Soldier. Most of all, I learned how to be a better senior NCO myself. I can think of no other position that would better prepare a SGM for becoming a Battalion CSM than that of a 1SG. It is easily the closest thing to on the job training you can receive. All SF MSGs should be so fortunate to have served as a 1SG in a Special Forces Group.

References

- Headquarters Department of the Army. (2001). Field Manual No. 3-05.20. *Special Forces Operations*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Headquarters Department of the Army. (2006). Field Manual No. 3-21.10. *The Infantry Rifle Company*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Board Briefing*. (n.d.). Retrieved September 12, 2006, from US Army Enlisted Records and Evaluation Center Web Site: <https://www.hrc.army.mil/site/erec/index.htm>
- The Power of a Leader. (n.d.) Received from Successories Motivational Products, (2004)

Appendix A: Organizational Structure (FM 3-05.20, 2001)

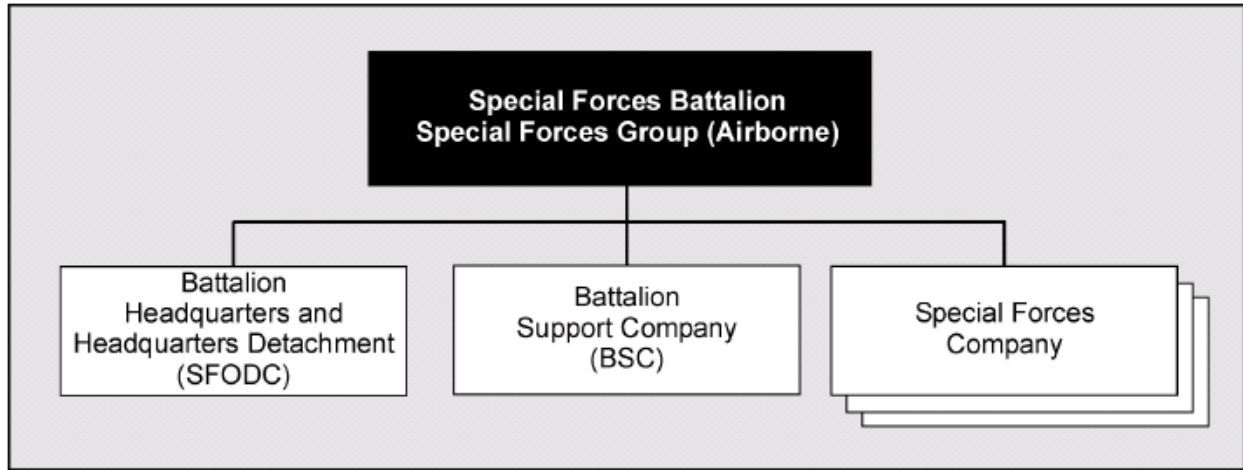


Figure 3-5. SF Battalion SFG(A) (TOE 31-805LO)

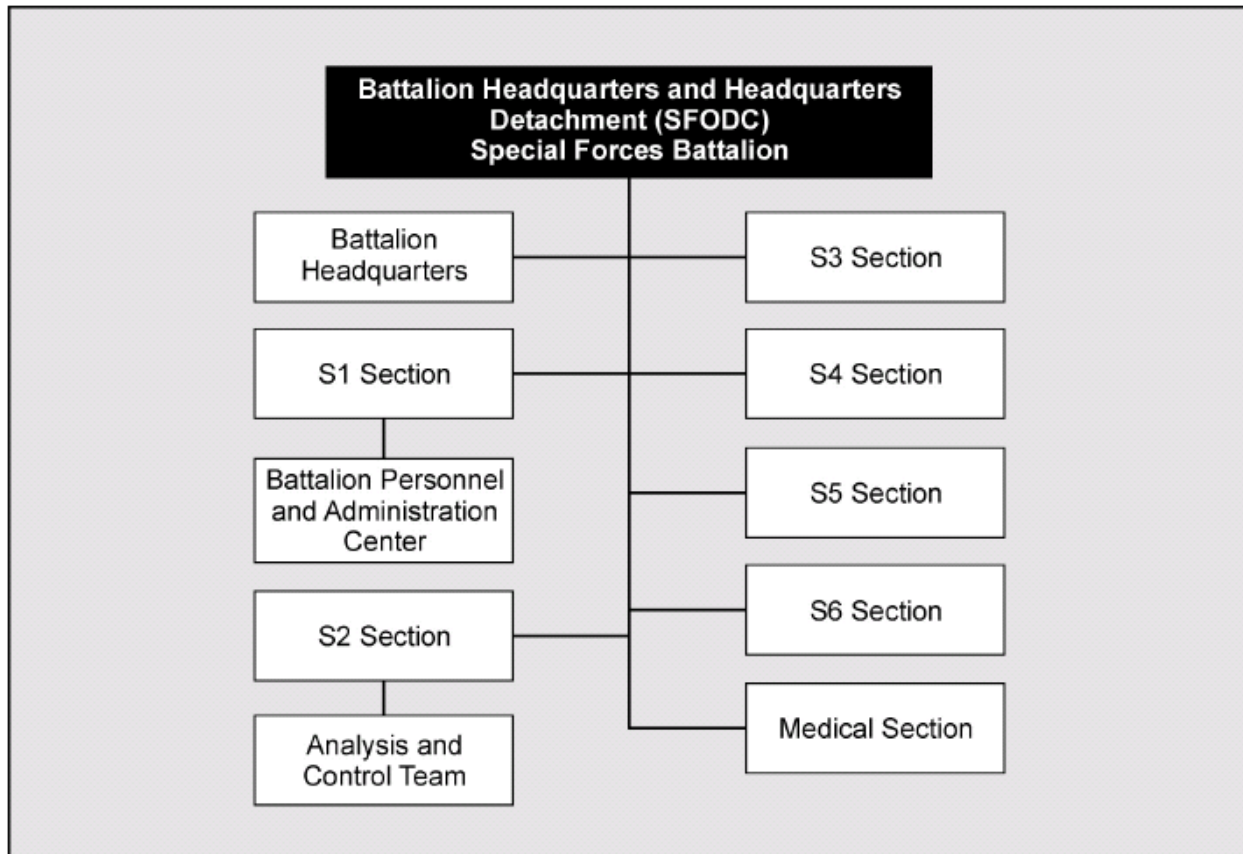


Figure 3-6. Battalion HQ and HQ Detachment (SFODC), SF Battalion (TOE 31-806L0)

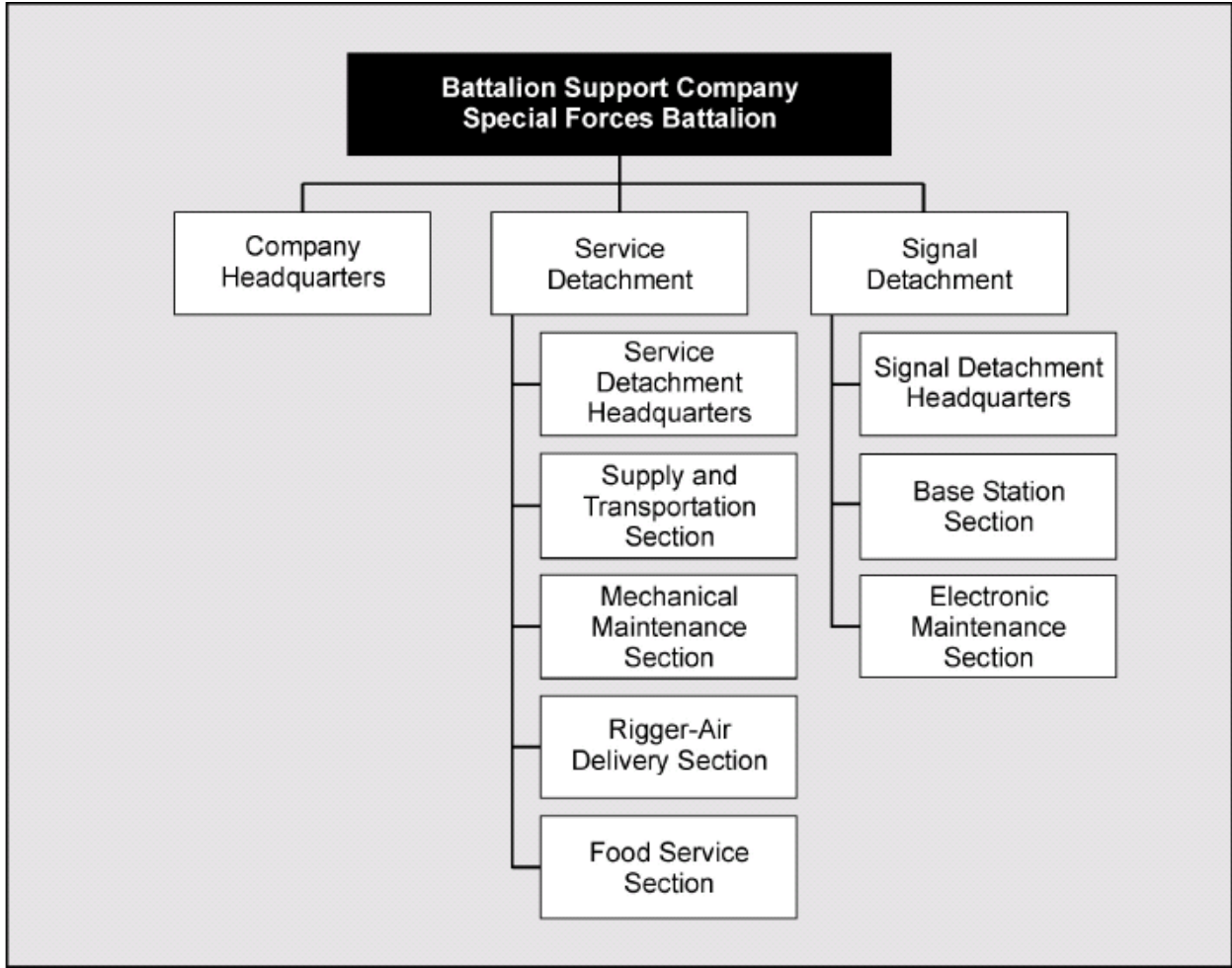


Figure 3-7. BSC, SF Battalion (TOE 31-808LO)

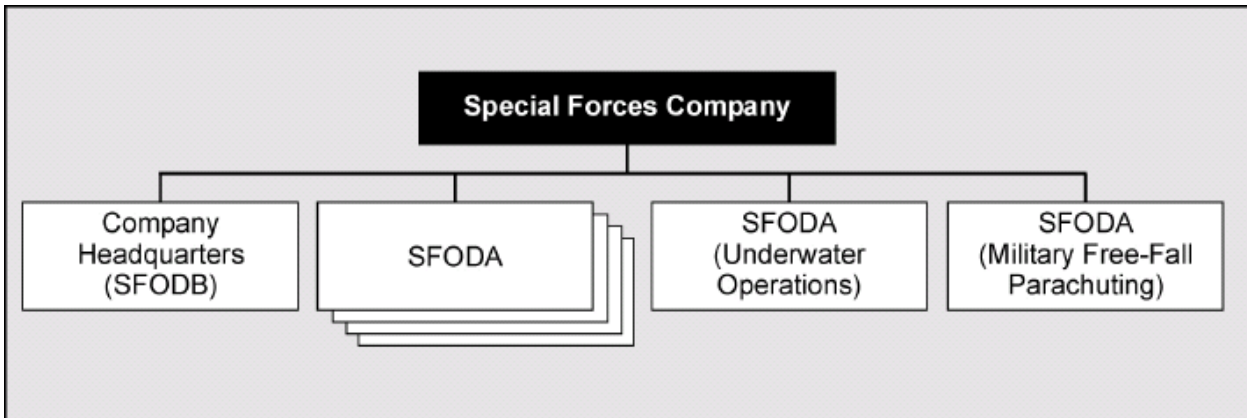


Figure 3-8. SF Company (SFOB)

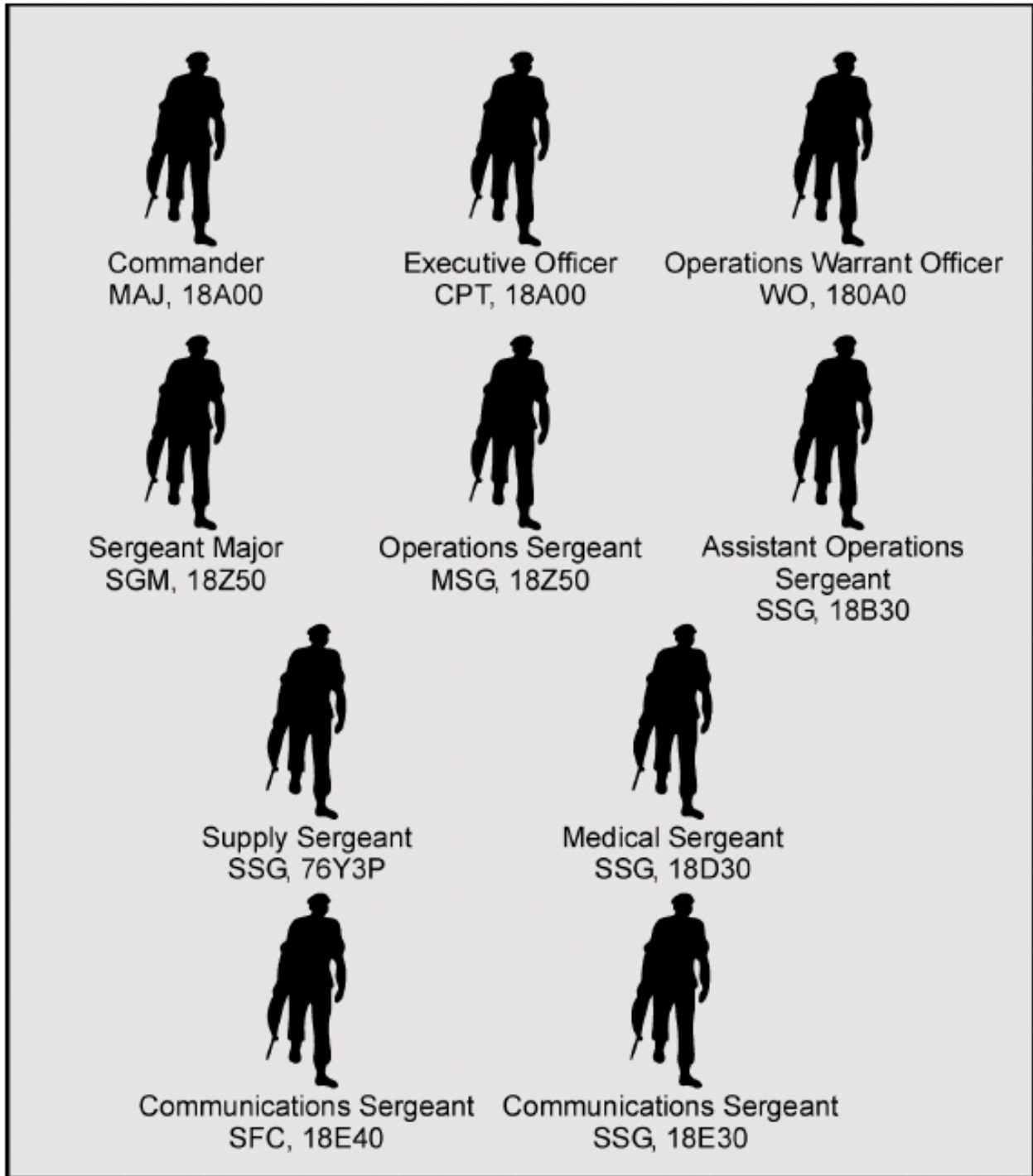


Figure 3-9. Composition of an SFODB



Figure 3-10. Composition of an SFODA