

GAO

Report to the Chairman, Subcommittee  
on Military Readiness, Committee on  
National Security, House of  
Representatives

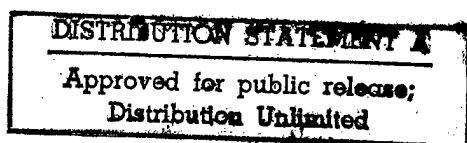
May 1997

SPECIAL OPERATIONS  
FORCES

Opportunities to Preclude  
Overuse and Misuse



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**National Security and  
International Affairs Division**

B-276593

May 15, 1997

The Honorable Herbert H. Bateman  
Chairman, Subcommittee on Military Readiness  
Committee on National Security  
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Chairman:

U.S. special operations forces (SOF) are considered highly capable, elite forces that are trained and maintained to address critical U.S. national security objectives. SOF's versatility, speed of deployment, and capabilities make SOF ideally suited for today's security environment, where significant dangers are created by regional conflicts, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and transnational threats. Thus, it is important for the Department of Defense (DOD) to ensure that SOF are ready to perform their intended missions and are used in ways that capitalize on their unique capabilities.

During our review, which was done at your request, our overall objective was to determine whether SOF are being used in a manner that best supports national security objectives. Specifically, we determined (1) whether there is general agreement on the priorities for the use of SOF by the regional commanders in chief (CINC) and SOF unit commanders; (2) the pace of SOF operations and how SOF units' senior officers and enlisted personnel view the impact of that pace of operations on readiness, morale, and retention; and (3) in those cases where the pace of operations is perceived to be degrading SOF readiness, whether opportunities exist to reduce that pace.

The primary bases for the information in this report are our discussions with and documents obtained from officials at the five major commands, visits to numerous special operations units, and responses to a questionnaire from over 200 senior officers and enlisted personnel at CINC headquarters and SOF units.

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**Background**

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1987<sup>1</sup> called for the establishment of a joint service special operations capability under a single command. In April 1987, the Secretary of Defense established the U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), whose mission is to provide

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<sup>1</sup>Public Law 99-661 (Nov. 14, 1986), codified at 10 U.S.C. section 167.

trained and combat-ready special operations forces to the five geographic CINCS. The law listed 10 activities over which the Command would exercise authority as they relate to special operations: (1) direct action, (2) special reconnaissance, (3) unconventional warfare, (4) foreign internal defense, (5) civil affairs operations, (6) psychological operations, (7) counterterrorism activities, (8) humanitarian assistance, (9) theater search and rescue, and (10) other activities as may be specified by the President or the Secretary of Defense (see app. I). Consequently, SOF are used for a wide range of military activities and other activities that include augmenting embassy staffs, conducting counternarcotics activities, and training local law enforcement and U.S. government agency personnel.

SOF differ from conventional forces in that they are specially organized, trained, and equipped to achieve military, political, economic, or psychological objectives by unconventional means. Special operations are conducted independently or in coordination with conventional forces during peacetime—operations short of declared war or intense warfare—and war. Political and military considerations sometimes shape special operations and often require clandestine, covert, or low-visibility techniques. Special operations also significantly differ from conventional operations because of their enhanced physical and political risks, operational techniques, mode of employment, independence from friendly support, and dependence on detailed operational intelligence and indigenous assets.

USSOCOM comprises a wide variety of units: Army Special Forces (Green Berets), Rangers, special operations aviation units, civil affairs units, and psychological operations units; Navy Sea-Air-Land (SEAL) units and Special Boat units; and an Air Force Special Operations wing and a Special Tactics Group (see app. II). To create a force capable of proficiency across this wide range of special activities, USSOCOM provides extensive and expensive training. Although most personnel entering SOF have already undergone basic military training, they must be further trained to accomplish special operations missions. The qualification training for SOF personnel is provided through USSOCOM's service component commands. The cost for such training varies greatly by military specialty. For example, the cost of SOF qualification for an MC-130H aircrew varies from about \$536,000<sup>2</sup> for the pilot to about \$181,000 for the loadmaster; the approximate cost of the entire five-man crew is \$1.4 million. Similarly, the cost of SOF qualification for a six-man MH-53J helicopter crew is about \$1.7 million. The estimated

<sup>2</sup>This cost includes about \$215,000 for aircraft simulator time. Although the other crew members all receive training along with the pilot, the costs are allocated for pilots only, since they drive the use of simulators.

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cost of qualifying an Army Special Forces officer was \$79,000 in fiscal year 1995, and according to Navy personnel, the cost of the basic training for a Navy SEAL is about \$33,000, exclusive of jump school and SEAL tactical training. These costs do not include the cost of the continual in-unit training that takes place once the SOF servicemember is assigned.

With its own budget, which has averaged about \$3 billion per year since fiscal year 1990, USSOCOM manages a force of almost 47,000 personnel—30,000 active duty servicemembers, 14,000 reserve and National Guard personnel, and 3,000 civilians. Of the 30,000 active duty servicemembers, 14,000 are special operations qualified personnel assigned to deployable units. (See app. III.) The rest serve in functional areas such as maintenance or logistics.

During an average week, between 2,000 and 3,000 SOF personnel are deployed on 150 missions in 60 to 70 countries and are under the command of the respective theater CINC. SOF units based within the continental United States are under the command of USSOCOM and have a worldwide orientation or are oriented toward a specific theater of operation. All these forces continuously train to deploy and meet CINC needs.

To perform missions in support of the regional strategy, the theater CINC employs SOF that are forward based in the theater or that are in the theater on routine deployments (the Navy SEALs' 6-month deployments, for example). If insufficient forces are available in theater, the CINC will make a request for USSOCOM forces to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Once a deployment has been approved by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Secretary of Defense, specific SOF units or individuals are deployed to the theater of the requesting CINC and, with a few exceptions, are under the CINC's operational control. Upon completing the deployment, the specific SOF units or individuals return to USSOCOM's operational control.

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## Results in Brief

SOF are considered an essential element for achieving U.S. national security objectives. In general, there is a common understanding of and agreement on primary SOF mission priorities between the CINCS and SOF unit commanders assigned to each of the CINCS, and the CINCS often consider SOF their force of choice for many diverse combat and peacetime missions. However, there is some disparity on the priorities for collateral activities for SOF, such as embassy support and antiterrorism activities.

Little reliable data is available on the frequency and types of SOF missions that would allow an analysis of SOF missions relative to CINC priorities and regional strategy requirements, and historical data on deployment days for all SOF elements are not available. Nevertheless, responses to our questionnaire from almost 200 senior-level officers and enlisted personnel in SOF units indicated that they believe the deployments of SOF units have increased to the point that SOF readiness has been, or threatens to be, degraded. Specifically, 60, 56, and 86 percent of the Army, Navy, and Air Force respondents to our questionnaire, respectively, said they believe readiness has been, or threatens to be, adversely affected by the current level of unit deployments. In addition, SOF unit leaders believe that SOF are performing some missions that could be handled by conventional forces.

Opportunities exist to reduce the perceived high pace of operations, according to responses to our questionnaire. There may be opportunities to use conventional forces instead of SOF for some collateral missions, such as embassy support, and for missions that are already the responsibility of conventional forces, such as combat search and rescue. However, without basic, reliable, quantifiable information on the nature and extent of actual SOF missions, the way in which SOF personnel are deployed, and the impact of unit deployments on SOF readiness, USSOCOM cannot identify such opportunities to achieve the appropriate levels of deployment and ensure that SOF are properly used. Therefore, we believe that action is needed to complete a system that will allow (1) the pace of SOF operations to be measured and assessed relative to national security objectives and SOF training needs and (2) the identification of the factors that cause SOF personnel to be deployed in excess of established deployment goals.

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## Operations Provide Valuable Support to Regional Strategies

SOF are considered to be an essential element for the CINCS' successful implementation of U.S. national security objectives. SOF have come to be the CINCS' force of choice in many instances. In two of the five theater commands we visited, CINC officials and SOF unit leaders oriented to those theaters agreed on the top three mission categories SOF should conduct to support the CINCS' regional strategies. There was, however, some disparity between the views of CINC officials and SOF unit leaders on mission priorities in the remaining three theaters, and there was less agreement overall on the priorities of collateral missions performed by SOF, such as embassy support and antiterrorism activities.

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Officials at the major commands we visited expressed a high degree of satisfaction with SOF support of their regional requirements. They said the CINCS consider SOF the force of choice for many diverse combat and peacetime missions. For example, officials at the European Command said that SOF are critical to the CINC's ability to conduct engagement activities with an increasingly smaller force. For crisis response in the current low-intensity security environment, the staff considered SOF as the most important. Officials in both the European and Pacific Commands said they plan to employ SOF first when a potential crisis develops, forming a joint SOF task force to assess the situation, advise the CINC, and prepare the area for follow-on action, if necessary.

More significantly, officials at the Southern Command said that nothing could be done militarily in the theater without SOF. They stated that the Command's area of responsibility, which comprises many countries that do not commit much funding to their militaries, was "made for SOF." The primary activities in this theater are the training of foreign military officials, counternarcotics operations, and miscellaneous other-than-war operations—activities in which SOF excel. Officials said that SOF are also good ambassadors for the United States.

The CINCS use SOF as one of the elements available to them to support their regional strategies. Because of their extensive training, relative maturity, and in most cases language skills and cultural orientation, SOF are well-suited to perform a wide variety of missions, ranging from direct action, rapid response missions, to foreign internal defense missions<sup>3</sup> that support the CINCS' peacetime strategies. Table 1 shows each CINC's top three SOF mission priorities, as reported to us, and highlights how priorities vary among the theaters.

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<sup>3</sup>These missions include training, advising, and helping host nation military and paramilitary forces to combat subversion, lawlessness, and insurgency.

**Table 1: Top Three SOF Mission Priorities at the Major Commands**

Major command	SOF mission priority		
	First	Second	Third
U.S. European Command	Counterproliferation	Foreign internal defense	Special reconnaissance
U.S. Pacific Command	Special reconnaissance	Counterterrorism	Counterproliferation
U.S. Atlantic Command	Foreign internal defense	Special reconnaissance	Counterterrorism
U.S. Central Command	Counterterrorism	Counterproliferation	Special reconnaissance
U.S. Southern Command	Foreign internal defense	Special reconnaissance	Counterterrorism

### Extent of a Common Understanding of Regional Priorities for SOF Missions

To ensure that regional priorities are understood and addressed by SOF, each of the CINCs has a subunified command to serve as an executive agent for SOF use. The theater Special Operations Commander advises the geographic CINC regarding SOF use and capabilities and plans and coordinates joint SOF activities within the command. He also exercises command and control over the SOF forces assigned, which generally do not include Army civil affairs and psychological operations personnel. These assets are generally controlled directly by the geographic CINC.

The theater special operations commanders appear to have had some, albeit not complete, success in establishing a common understanding of primary SOF mission<sup>4</sup> priorities in the theaters. Responses to the "primary SOF missions" segment of our questionnaire show that in the European and Southern Commands, CINC officials and the leaders of Army SOF units oriented to those theaters agree on the top three mission categories for supporting the CINCS' regional strategies. Our questionnaire results showed disparities in primary mission priorities in the Pacific, Central, and the Atlantic Commands, as shown in table 2.

<sup>4</sup>Primary missions are those for which SOP were organized, trained, and equipped.

**Table 2: Priorities for Primary SOF Missions**

	Primary SOF mission					
	Foreign internal defense	Special reconnaissance	Unconventional warfare	Counterterrorism	Counter-proliferation	Direct action
European Command						
CINC	2	3	6	4	1	5
10th Special Forces Group	1	2	4	5	3	6
Pacific Command						
CINC	4	1	5	2	3	6
1st Special Forces Group	1	2	3	4	5	6
Atlantic Command						
CINC	1	2	5	3	6	4
3rd Special Forces Group	1	3	2	6	5	4
Central Command						
CINC	4	3	5	1	2	6
5th Special Forces Group	2	1	3	6	4	5
Southern Command						
CINC	1	2	6	3	4	5
7th Special Forces Group	1	3	5	2	6	4

It should be noted that table 2 displays only Army Special Forces units that are forward deployed in a theater or oriented to it. The CINCs also have available to meet their priorities Navy SOF deployed in theater on a rotating basis, Air Force SOF to support special operations activities in the theater, and other Army SOF. Additionally, some disparity between CINC and SOF unit priorities may be attributed to differences in the service's vision of mission employment and the larger joint service view of regional requirements.

Navy SOF unit leaders' responses also indicated priorities similar to the priorities indicated by the three CINCs in whose area they are forward deployed. They did, however, differ on the priorities of foreign internal defense and direct action missions. For example, the leaders of SEAL units oriented to the European and Southern Commands reported that foreign internal defense missions should be low in priority for their units, while

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CINC officials reported that foreign internal defense was a high priority. Unlike the Army Special Forces, SEALs generally do not receive language or cultural awareness training. According to SEAL officers and noncommissioned officers we talked to, potential problems with language are typically resolved by augmenting SEAL personnel with interpreters. However, officials from both SEAL Groups expressed concern that increased involvement in foreign internal defense missions may be having a detrimental effect on the SEAL community. They said that such involvement may be altering the expectations of younger SEALs and causing them to consider leaving the community because SEALs have traditionally been a direct-action force. They also said they believed that SEAL units engaged in foreign internal defense activities had lost some proficiency in war-fighting skills due to a lack of training opportunities and, because foreign internal defense activities are often done by smaller contingents, the unit integrity of the SEAL platoon had been disrupted.

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## Collateral Duties

According to responses to our questionnaire, CINCs and SOF unit leaders do not always agree on the priority of collateral missions<sup>5</sup> that SOF personnel and units are routinely assigned. For example, CINC officials at the European Command ranked embassy support as their number two priority for SOF collateral activities. However, the leaders at the two Army Special Forces Groups and the Naval Special Warfare Group oriented to the theater ranked embassy support their number six priority out of nine collateral activities. Similarly, in the Pacific Command, CINC officials ranked antiterrorism their number one priority for collateral activities, while Army and Navy unit officials consider it their number seven and four priority, respectively. Moreover, leaders at the Special Forces Group and the Naval Special Warfare Group assigned to the Pacific Command prioritized personnel recovery activities as numbers one and two collateral activities, respectively, while CINC officials ranked personnel recovery as number seven.

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## Pace of Operations and the Impact on SOF Readiness

In 1995 SOF commanders began to express concern about high levels of unit deployments (referred to as operating tempo, or OPTEMPO) and their effect on personnel who were repeatedly away from home for prolonged periods. As one commander stated in a memorandum to his subordinate commands, these deployments “have an adverse impact on retention, create problems for families, and erode our ability to maintain the training

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<sup>5</sup>Collateral missions include activities other than those for which SOF are organized, trained, and equipped.

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edge required to fight and win on the battlefield." Accordingly, USSOCOM initiated efforts to manage OPTEMPO, including efforts to improve usage data and the development of a system to monitor the extent to which SOF individuals are deployed away from home (known as personnel tempo, or PERSTEMPO).

During our review, we obtained data on current PERSTEMPO rates but found that prior years' information was not collected or was not maintained. The data available revealed that PERSTEMPO varied widely among SOF units and that some military specialties had high deployment rates. Perhaps more important, however, according to USSOCOM officials, there was no valid data on OPTEMPO to allow for identification of the factors driving the deployment rates, that is, what types of activities (for example, training, exercises, and contingency operations) were increasing and to what degree.

Although the lack of data did not allow for verification or quantification of OPTEMPO increases, we did determine that SOF commanders and staff at the unit level perceive that the increased rate is adversely affecting their units. In response to our questionnaire, the majority of the SOF commanders, staff officers, and senior enlisted personnel who responded said they believe that OPTEMPO increases have caused or threatened to cause adverse effects on readiness.

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### Empirical Data on SOF Activities Is Inaccurate or Incomplete

Although all commands could provide general information on the types of missions for which SOF were used, little data were available on the actual missions and the extent to which they were performed. Officials at USSOCOM and the service component commands told us they have not collected and maintained accurate and complete information on the numbers of actual missions categorized by mission type. Therefore, we could not analyze actual SOF use relative to CINC priorities.

USSOCOM develops weekly information on the number of personnel deployed in total and by country. This information is used primarily to develop status briefings for the Commander, USSOCOM. Officials told us, however, that data collected prior to fiscal year 1996 were highly inaccurate due to a lack of consistent definitions for the different types of missions and incomplete reporting by the SOF component commands. USSOCOM officials told us they are still working to develop standardized mission categories for mission reporting.

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Of the three SOF service component commands, only the Army Special Operations Command maintains force utilization information by mission type. Officials said they maintain information from 1993 to the present on the number of deployments by type of mission (for example, counternarcotics and Joint Chiefs of Staff exercises), personnel deployed by mission type, and the number of personnel deployed to each CINC. However, officials told us that inconsistent mission-type reporting has distorted the categories in which missions are recorded and that trying to develop a trend on SOF use over time by mission type could produce misleading results.

Officials at the Navy Special Warfare Command and the Air Force Special Operations Command said they do not maintain complete information on the types of missions fulfilled by their personnel. Navy officials told us they are not required to keep such information, and since their personnel are under a CINC's command and control, they had not recognized a need for this type of information. Air Force Special Operations Command officials told us their job is to provide the needed support, such as clandestine infiltration, and they had no need to maintain records on the overall purpose of the mission.

USSOCOM officials told us they recognize the need for information on SOF use by mission category, and the Command is developing standard mission definitions as an essential first step toward quantifying missions and identifying the mission areas that are increasing. These definitions were finalized during the second quarter of fiscal year 1997, and USSOCOM officials said that the first information using these definitions could be available at the end of the fiscal year.

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### USSOCOM Has Monitored Some Deployment Statistics, but Actual Rates for Some Personnel Are Understated

In October 1995, USSOCOM implemented a system for collecting information on personnel deployment rates. The system requires commanders to submit quarterly information on officer and enlisted personnel and job position categories. USSOCOM officials use this data to identify the personnel categories with higher than desired deployment rates.

The reporting system requires unit officials to determine the total number of days that personnel in each category were deployed during the quarter and divide the total by the number of personnel assigned in each category to derive an average deployment rate for each category. These rates are compared with USSOCOM and service component deployment goals to identify personnel groups that have exceeded established deployment

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goals. USSOCOM officials said that the Army's goal for the maximum number of days deployed per year is 179, and the Air Force's goal is 120 days. The Navy's goal is 180 days over an 18-month period. USSOCOM has not officially established a goal, but officials told us that the informal goal was not to exceed 180 days per year.

The methodology that USSOCOM has directed its units to use in calculating personnel deployment rates results in an understatement of the actual rate for some categories of personnel. The figures reported are understated because they are an average of all SOF personnel, including staff personnel who do not routinely deploy. For example, through June 30 in fiscal year 1996, the reported average of the number of days officers on one SEAL team were deployed was 115. However, if only the officers in the operational platoons are included, the average is 158 days. Similarly, for all enlisted members, the reported average number of days deployed was 122, while the average for those assigned to the operational platoons was 163 days.

Ignoring this deficiency, however, the system does provide USSOCOM with an awareness of deployment activity by specific unit, personnel categories, and military specialties. However, USSOCOM lacks, as noted above, specific data on the actual use, which would allow it to determine the causes of excessive deployments. And unless the causes are identified, it is difficult for USSOCOM to identify alternatives for alleviating the situation.

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### Unit-Level Commanders and Staff Believe Increases in OPTEMPO Affect Readiness

Because reliable data on historical OPTEMPO rates were not available, we interviewed SOF unit leaders and used our questionnaire to determine whether unit-level commanders and staff believed increasing OPTEMPO rates had affected, or threatened to affect, readiness, retention, and morale. The interview results were contradicted by the questionnaire results. During meetings with unit-level leaders, we were told that OPTEMPO has historically been high but has not increased significantly in recent years. According to Army officials, the number of days deployed had stayed about the same, and the Navy SEALs said that, because their deployments are for the most part based on long-standing commitments to the CINCS, the rate had remained fairly stable. Air Force officials said that OPTEMPO had remained at high levels, especially in units performing combat search and rescue and in special tactics units.

The results of our questionnaire indicated that some SOF unit leaders held opinions quite different from those expressed during the interviews. The results show that the majority of respondents believed that OPTEMPO

increases had caused, or threatened to cause, adverse effects on readiness. Table 3 shows the percentage of those responding who believe that OPTEMPO increases have adversely affected readiness, morale, and retention.

**Table 3: SOF Unit Responses to Our Questionnaire on the Effect of OPTEMPO**

Percent of responses			
Views of SOF commanders and staff	Army	Navy	Air Force
OPTEMPO increases have adversely affected unit	60	56	86
OPTEMPO has adversely affected readiness	45	44	67
OPTEMPO has adversely affected morale	45	34	86
OPTEMPO has adversely affected retention	40	32	81

Table 4 provides the percentages of responses from particular Special Operations Forces leaders who believe that OPTEMPO has affected unit readiness.

**Table 4: SOF Unit Responses to Our Questionnaire on the Effect of Increased OPTEMPO on Readiness**

Unit	Percent of respondents who said that OPTEMPO had adversely affected readiness
Army Unit A	50
Army Unit B	30
Army Unit C	88
Army Unit D	53
Air Force Unit E	50
Air Force Unit F	67
Navy Unit G	58
Navy Unit H	32

Note: The SOF units included are coded to protect the confidentiality of the respondents.

Nothing in our review indicates the extent to which readiness has been affected, and the impact of the perceived increased OPTEMPO on SOF readiness is not readily apparent in DOD's current readiness reporting system. For example, over the past 3 years, the Status of Resources and Training System (SORTS)<sup>6</sup> reports submitted by Army SOF unit commanders have continually reported high levels of readiness. However, SORTS, as we

<sup>6</sup>SORTS measures the extent to which units possess the required resources and are trained to undertake their wartime missions. These measurements, called C-ratings, are probably the readiness indicator most often cited.

have reported previously and the Joint Chiefs of Staff agrees, does not capture all the factors that DOD considers critical to a comprehensive readiness analysis.<sup>7</sup> For example, SORTS does not provide information on factors such as mobility, OPTEMPO, morale, and leadership. As a result of the lack of supporting data, we were unable to substantiate the concerns of unit officials regarding readiness.

SOF unit leaders also believe that increased OPTEMPO has affected personnel retention and morale. Table 5 shows the percentage of responding SOF unit leaders who told us that retention and morale had been adversely affected.

**Table 5: SOF Unit Responses to Our Questionnaire on the Effect of Increased OPTEMPO on Retention and Morale**

Unit	Percent of responses	
	OPTEMPO has adversely affected retention	OPTEMPO has adversely affected morale
Army Unit A	65	55
Army Unit B	50	60
Army Unit C	63	63
Army Unit D	33	47
Air Force Unit E	75	75
Air Force Unit F	100	100
Navy Unit G	32	42
Navy Unit H	32	27

Note: The SOF units included are coded to protect the confidentiality of the respondents.

## Opportunities Exist to Reduce SOF OPTEMPO

Given USSOCOM's concern about OPTEMPO and the widespread belief that it is affecting SOF readiness, retention, and morale, we examined the potential for reducing OPTEMPO. According to CINC and SOF unit officials, conventional forces could handle many activities routinely assigned to SOF personnel. These officials generally agreed that the missions that offer the greatest potential for the use of conventional forces are humanitarian assistance, embassy support, and support to other government agencies. Additionally, some SOF leaders told us that the use of SEALs in Navy Amphibious Ready Groups does not constitute good use of these forces, and Air Force SOF are used for combat search and rescue missions that are the responsibility of conventional forces.

<sup>7</sup>Army Training: Evaluations of Units' Proficiency Are Not Always Reliable (GAO/NSIAD-91-72, Feb. 15, 1991); Military Readiness: DOD Needs to Develop a More Comprehensive Measurement System (GAO/NSIAD-95-29, Oct. 27, 1994); Military Readiness: Improvements Still Needed in Assessing Military Readiness (GAO/T-NSIAD-97-107, Mar. 11, 1997).

Because reliable data by type of mission were not available, we could not determine the magnitude of opportunity offered by these missions. However, USSOCOM publications and data provided by Joint Chiefs of Staff officials confirm that SOF personnel are deployed for these types of missions. For example, in fiscal year 1996, SOF personnel were assigned to embassy support duties in all theaters of operation and were used on humanitarian assistance missions in the Pacific and European Commands.

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### Air Force SOF Are Used for Conventional Combat Search and Rescue Missions

Although conventional combat search and rescue missions are the responsibility of conventional forces, Air Force SOF have been continually used for these missions. Currently, Air Force SOF are performing 70 percent of conventional combat search and rescue missions worldwide, which contributes to the OPTEMPO and PERSTEMPO problems experienced by Air Force SOF units. And as we reported in 1994, these missions also reduce the readiness of the SOF units involved because crews lose proficiency due to restrictions imposed by host nations and the lack of training opportunities.<sup>8</sup>

The legislation that created USSOCOM identified theater search and rescue as a SOF activity insofar as it related to special operations.<sup>9</sup> Under joint doctrine, each service must provide for combat search and rescue in support of its own operations; however, Air Force SOF are routinely tasked to perform conventional combat search and rescue operations. SOF assets have been continually used for these operations since about 1990, and Air Force Special Operations Command officials told us that they expect that SOF will continue to be tasked to perform the brunt of the combat search and rescue mission for conventional forces in the foreseeable future.

Although Air Force SOF are considered extremely capable of performing these missions, they do so at the expense of unit and joint training in special operations skills, the availability and sustainability of their limited forces, and an acceptable OPTEMPO and PERSTEMPO. Unit leaders told us that crews assigned are frequently unable to train in the full range of required capabilities because they are restricted by host nations. For example, the flying hours, flight duration, and flight profiles (night and low-level flights, for example) of the crews deployed to Turkey in support of Operation Provide Comfort were restricted. One commander told us that his personnel were limited to a 50-mile training radius. Officials said the host nations expect SOF to arrive there trained, not to train while there.

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<sup>8</sup>Special Operations Forces: Force Structure and Readiness Issues (GAO/NSIAD-94-105, Mar. 24, 1994).

<sup>9</sup>Public Law 99-661 (Nov. 14, 1986), codified at 10 U.S.C. section 167(j).

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Similarly, the availability of assets is limited by a requirement to maintain an alert posture for combat search and rescue missions. Officials at the Air Force Special Operations Command in the European Command said that about 20 percent of their force must be on alert status at all times for combat search and rescue missions. Further, officials said the SOF crews assigned to support this conventional mission suffer high levels of PERSTEMPO, which keeps them deployed near or above the 120-day goal the Air Force has established.

Who should perform Air Force combat search and rescue missions has been an issue since 1990 when the Air Force Special Operations Command was created from the 23rd Air Force, which had been tasked with the missions. The transfer left the Air Force without the specialized aircraft or aircrews trained to conduct the missions. The capability to do combat search and rescue was to be developed within the Air Force's Air Combat Command, and the Command was expected to assume the combat search and rescue role by the end of fiscal year 1994. However, this never occurred. USSOCOM is presenting a proposal to the Air Force that would continue to have the Air Force Special Operations Command perform combat search and rescue missions, but the Air Force would fund them. Nevertheless, performing these missions will continue to generate high levels of PERSTEMPO for SOF crews performing these conventional missions.

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### SEAL Officials Believe Shipboard Deployments Adversely Affect Proficiency and Readiness

At all times, the Navy SEALs have a platoon deployed with each of the three Amphibious Ready Groups. The Group includes a Marine Expeditionary Unit and provides the CINC with a mobile, rapid-response force under his operational control. Both the Marine units and the SEAL platoons rotate to the continental United States after a 6-month deployment. The SEAL platoon is intended to provide the Group with a special operations capability, including the capability to survey and reconnoiter potential landing sites in a clandestine manner.

SEAL unit commanders told us that they consider the 6-month deployment to be a "less than efficient" use of the highly trained SEAL platoon. Because of the limited space and assets on ships, training opportunities are extremely limited and the platoon loses proficiency. Moreover, the SEAL unit has to compete for the limited operational opportunities with the Marines, particularly the Marine Reconnaissance Unit, which possesses many of the same skills as a SEAL platoon.

SEAL officials at the Naval Special Warfare Group and team levels told us that to reduce OPTEMPO and provide better training opportunities, they have proposed alternative methods of providing the Group with the SEAL support, but no action has been taken. They maintain that the Amphibious Ready Groups' most pressing need for SEALs is the hydrographic survey of landing sites and that with today's air transportation capabilities, SEALs based in the United States or ashore in a specific theater could be at a proposed site well ahead of the Group and provide the surveys in a more timely manner.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

SOF are considered an essential element for the CINCs' successful implementation of national security objectives, and in less than a decade these forces have proven themselves the CINCs' force of choice for many types of missions. SOF's reputation has been earned by their acceptance and accomplishment of a wide variety of missions.

We cannot determine precise increases in SOF activity due to the lack of reliable quantitative and qualitative data collected over the years. For the same reason, we cannot determine the specific ways in which SOF have been used. Many SOF unit leaders that responded to our questionnaire are convinced, however, that OPTEMPO has adversely affected readiness, retention, and morale.

SOF unit leaders also believe that SOF are being used for missions that do not require their skills and that in some instances degrade their skills. In addition, unit leaders and CINC officials believe that conventional forces could fulfill missions routinely performed by SOF. Consequently, USSOCOM and the services may have opportunities to manage SOF OPTEMPO, with the CINCs' concurrence, if conventional units can be tasked to perform those missions.

To maintain the readiness of SOF to support national security objectives and help ensure that readiness is not degraded through overuse or improper use of SOF, we recommend that the Secretary of Defense direct the Commander, USSOCOM, to

- complete the Command's efforts to develop an information system for monitoring how the Command's forces are used and establish a methodology for periodically comparing SOF usage with the CINCs' priorities and SOF training needs and

- exploit potential opportunities to reduce some SOF deployments that do not prepare SOF to perform SOF-unique missions in support of national security objectives and that can be performed by conventional forces.

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## Agency Comments

In commenting on a draft of this report, DOD agreed with its accuracy. DOD stated that the report discusses the various components of SOF in a way that provides a comprehensive view of the potential for overuse and misuse.

DOD concurred with both of our recommendations and stated that it has already initiated actions that focus on deployments for SOF and other low-density/high-demand forces. For example, DOD indicated that the Global Military Force Policy, instituted in July 1996, is expected to help senior leaders establish peacetime priorities for low-density/high-demand assets. The first data available for interpretation from the policy is to be available during fiscal year 1998, according to DOD. Also, DOD stated that while the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff already reviews the use of all U.S. forces to ensure proper employment, USSOCOM must retain the latitude to ensure that SOF users are carefully consulted to preclude elimination of deployments where SOF involvement could have significant impact on mission objectives.

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## Scope and Methodology

We developed a data collection instrument using the Analytical Hierarchy Process (see app. IV) to rank the most valuable missions for SOF. The instrument was distributed to all the theater CINCs' staffs, the special operations commanders in each theater, and SOF units worldwide. It was used to obtain information concerning CINC priorities for SOF activities by theater of operations, SOF unit-level leaders' understanding of regional priorities, perspectives on the best missions for SOF in each theater, and a prioritization of activities that could be accomplished by conventional forces. The instrument also included questions to obtain unit-level staffs' opinions on OPTEMPO increases and the resulting effect on readiness, retention, and morale in their units.

To obtain additional supporting data, we visited four of the five theater CINCS, the USSOCOM CINC, the three service component headquarters, four of five Special Forces Groups, both Navy SEAL Groups, and two Air Force Special Operations Groups. (See app. V for a complete list of sites we visited.) We also interviewed officials from the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict

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and the Special Operations Division of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Because we were interested in the extent to which SOF are deployed and how they are used, our review primarily focused on active duty units, which are normally deployed first to meet mission requirements. We did, however, meet with psychological operations and civil affairs personnel from SOF reserve units during our visits to the European and Pacific Commands. The purpose of these meetings was to gain an understanding of OPTEMPO and PERSTEMPO challenges faced by these low-density/high-deploying personnel.

In addition, we examined the legislation that established USSOCOM, Joint Chiefs of Staff publications, and historical publications provided by the services.

Our review was conducted from October 1995 through March 1997 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

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We are sending copies of this report to the Chairmen and Ranking Minority Members of the Senate and House Committees on Appropriations and the Senate Committee on Armed Services; the Secretaries of Defense, the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force; the Commander of the U.S. Special Operations Command; and the Director, Office of Management and Budget. We will also make copies available to others upon request.

Please contact me at (202) 512-5140 if you or your staff have any questions concerning this report. Major contributors to this report are listed in appendix VII.

Sincerely yours,



Mark E. Gebicke  
Director, Military Operations and  
Capabilities Issues

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**Abbreviations**

CINC	Commander in Chief
DOD	Department of Defense
OPTEMPO	operating tempo
PERSTEMPO	personnel tempo
SEAL	Sea-Air-Land
SOF	Special Operations Forces
SORTS	Status of Resources and Training System
USSOCOM	U.S. Special Operations Command

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# Activities Assigned to Special Operations Forces

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Title 10 U.S.C. section 167(j) lists 10 activities over which the U.S. Special Operations Command exercises authority as they relate to special operations. These activities and a brief description of each activity follow:

Direct actions are short duration strikes and other small-scale offensive actions to (1) seize, destroy, or inflict damage on a specified target or (2) destroy, capture, or recover designated personnel or material.

Special reconnaissance is conducted to obtain or verify, by visual observation or other collection means, information concerning the capabilities, intentions, and activities of an actual or potential enemy or to secure data concerning the meteorological, hydrological, geographic, or demographic characteristics of a particular area. It includes target acquisition, area assessment, and post-strike reconnaissance.

Unconventional warfare is a broad spectrum of military and paramilitary operations, normally of long duration, predominantly conducted by indigenous or surrogate forces that are organized, trained, equipped, supported, and directed in varying degrees by an external source. It includes guerrilla warfare and other direct-offensive, low-visibility, covert, or clandestine operations as well as the indirect activities of subversion, sabotage, intelligence collection, and evasion and escape.

Foreign internal defense is conducted to assist another government to free and protect its society from subversion, lawlessness, and insurgency. Special operations forces train, advise, and otherwise assist host nation military and paramilitary forces.

Counterterrorism is the application of highly specialized capabilities to preempt or resolve terrorist incidents abroad, including (1) hostage rescue, (2) recovery of sensitive material from terrorist organizations, and (3) direct action against the terrorist infrastructure.

Civil affairs operations are to establish, maintain, influence, or strengthen relations between U.S. and allied military forces, civil authorities, and people in a friendly or occupied country or area.

Psychological operations are to support other military operations through the use of mass media techniques and other actions to favorably influence the emotions, attitudes, and behavior of a foreign audience on behalf of U.S. interests.

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**Appendix I**  
**Activities Assigned to Special Operations**  
**Forces**

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Humanitarian assistance is provided to relieve or reduce the results of natural or man-made disasters or other endemic conditions such as human pain, disease, hunger, or deprivation that might present a serious threat to life or loss of property. This assistance supplements or complements the efforts of host nation civil authorities or agencies that may have the primary responsibility for providing this assistance.

Theater search and rescue is performed to recover distressed personnel during wartime or contingency operations.

Other activities are specified by the President or the Secretary of Defense, such as counterproliferation, which was specified in May 1995.

# U.S. Special Operations Command's Major Subordinate Commands and Units

## Army Special Operations Command

The Command is responsible for all U.S.-based active and reserve Special Forces; Rangers; Special Operations Aviation, Psychological Operations, Civil Affairs, and support units; and selected special mission and support units assigned by the Secretary of Defense.

Special Forces (Green Berets) are organized into five active and two National Guard groups. The groups are organized, trained, and equipped to conduct the five primary special operations missions of direct action, special reconnaissance, unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, and counterterrorism. Special Forces soldiers train, advise, and assist host nation military or paramilitary forces.

Rangers are organized into a regiment that contains a headquarters company and three battalions. There are no reserve Ranger units. The Rangers are rapidly deployable, airborne, light infantry units that are organized, trained, and equipped to conduct complex joint strike operations. These units can also operate as light infantry in support of conventional missions.

Special Operations Aviation is organized into an active regiment with three battalions, a detachment in Panama, and a National Guard battalion. These units provide dedicated specialized aviation support to other special operations forces. Their missions include armed attack; inserting, extracting, and resupplying personnel; aerial security; medical evacuation; electronic warfare; mine dispersal; and command and control support.

Psychological operations forces are organized into one active and two reserve psychological groups that vary in number and types of subordinate units depending on their mission and geographic alignment. Their mission is to study and be prepared to influence the emotions, attitudes, and behaviors of foreign audiences on behalf of U.S. and allied interests. They operate with conventional and other special operations forces to advise and assist host nations in support of special operations missions such as counterinsurgency, foreign internal defense, and civil affairs programs.

Civil Affairs units comprise 3 Army reserve commands, 9 reserve brigades, 24 reserve battalions, and one active battalion. The units' primary function is to establish favorable relationships between the U.S. military and foreign governments and populations. Moreover, civil affairs forces assist military operations through population or refugee control and support to other U.S. agencies.

The reserve civil affairs units provide professional civilian skills such as police, judicial, logistical, engineering, and other civil functions that are unavailable in the one active unit.

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## Air Force Special Operations Command and Forces

The Command has one Special Operations Wing, two Special Operations Groups, and one Special Tactics Group in its active force and one Special Operations Wing in its reserve force.

The Command's primary missions are to organize, train, and equip its units, but it may also train, assist, and advise the air forces of other nations in support of foreign internal defense missions. The Command operates uniquely equipped fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft for missions that include inserting, extracting, and resupplying personnel; aerial fire support; refueling; and psychological operations. Its aircraft are capable of operating in hostile airspace, at low altitudes, under darkness or adverse weather conditions in collaboration with Army and Navy Special Operations Forces (SOF).

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## Naval Special Warfare Command and Forces

The Command has two naval special warfare groups, one naval special warfare development group, and two special boat squadrons split between the east and west coasts of the United States. Each special warfare group includes three Sea-Air-Land (SEAL) teams and one SEAL delivery vehicle team. Each squadron includes subordinate special boat units (three on the east coast and two on the west coast). Naval special warfare forces deployed outside the United States receive support from permanently deployed naval special warfare units located in Panama, Germany, Puerto Rico, Guam, Spain, and Bahrain.

The six active SEAL teams are organized into headquarters elements and ten 16-man operational platoons. Navy SEALs, like Army Green Berets, are organized, trained, and equipped primarily to conduct direct action, special reconnaissance, unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, and counterterrorism missions. They conduct these missions primarily in maritime and riverine environments. SEALs can also directly support conventional naval and maritime operations.

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## Joint Special Operations Command

This Command is a joint headquarters designed to study special operations requirements and techniques; ensure interoperability and

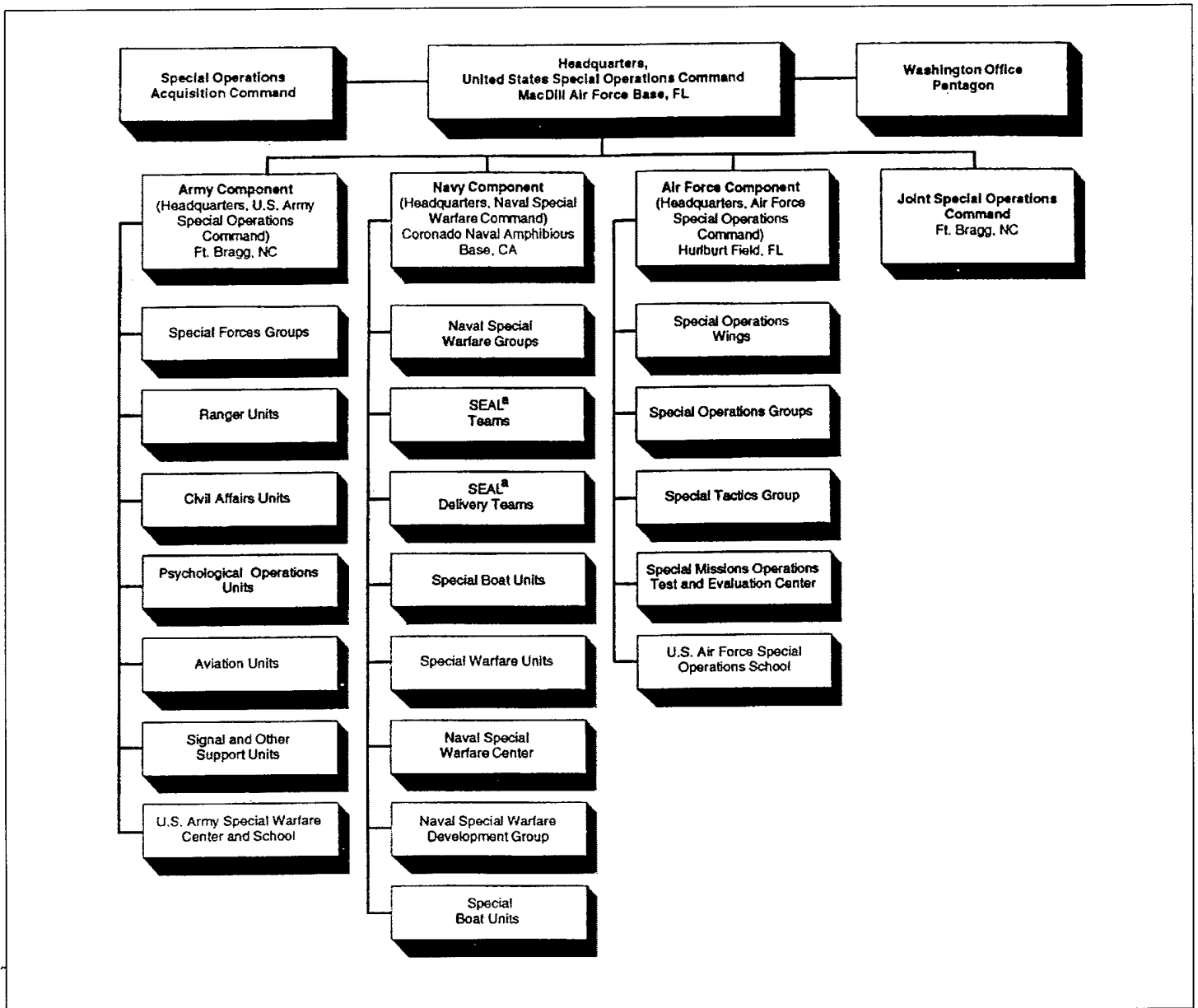
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**Appendix II  
U.S. Special Operations Command's Major  
Subordinate Commands and Units**

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equipment standardization; plan and conduct special operations exercises and training; and develop joint special operations tactics.

# Active and Reserve Special Operations Component Forces Assigned to the U.S. Special Operations Command



<sup>a</sup>Sea-Air-Land units.

Source: Special Operations Command.

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# Description of Analytical Hierarchy Process Model

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The Analytical Hierarchy Process model is an organized way to evaluate research questions. It allows a researcher to divide an issue by its major elements. These elements are then organized into levels, which move from the general to the specific. To implement the model in this review, we used the commercial software package Expert Choice by Expert Choice, Incorporated, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. This software allows the researcher to evaluate the respondents' judgments as to which elements in the model are more important than others and derives prioritized listings for elements within each level.

In typical practice, a panel of persons knowledgeable about the subject under review is asked to evaluate one element against another in paired comparison fashion. For example, in a three-element evaluation, the panelists are asked to evaluate A versus B, A versus C, and B versus C. In other words, regarding the goal, is element A more important, preferred, or more likely than element B, or is element B more important, preferred, or more likely than element A? Once the panelists reach consensus on which element of a pair is preferred over the other, they are asked how much more important, preferred, or more likely is the dominant element of the pair over the other. Therefore, both the preference and its intensity are measured.

Alternatively, the model can be used in a questionnaire mode, which is how we employed the model during this review. We developed a series of one-level comparisons to reduce the workload on the respondents. Convening typical panels would not have been practical because we wanted to cover as many units and individuals as possible.

For each pair-wise comparison of our questionnaire, we collected our respondents' judgments on a coded numerical form that measured not only the intensity but the direction of the relationship. In other words, if element A was moderately preferred to B, then the value of that judgment for that pair for that individual was entered into our database.

To summarize the data, we calculated the geometric mean for each paired comparison, stratified by SOF units. The geometric mean dampens the effect of extremely low or extremely high judgments. The resulting averages were entered into the Expert Choice software, which calculated the priorities for each set of elements for each Commander in Chief (CINC) and SOF unit. We printed the results for each set of paired comparisons and analyzed the differences between units within a service and also between services.

# List of Locations Visited

We visited the following locations during our review of SOF's activities:

## Washington, D.C., Area

- Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict
- Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Special Operations Division
- Washington Office, U.S. Special Operations Command
- Naval Sea Systems Command

## Fort Bragg, North Carolina

- Headquarters, Army Special Operations Command
- U.S. Army Special Forces Command
- U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School
- Third Special Forces Group
- Seventh Special Forces Group
- 528th Special Operations Support Battalion

## Florida

- Headquarters, U.S. Special Operations Command, MacDill Air Force Base
- Air Force Special Operations Command, 16th Special Operations Wing, 8th Special Operations Squadron, 16th Special Operations Squadron, 20th Special Operations Squadron, and 720th Special Tactics Group, Hurlburt Field
- Air Force Special Operations Command, 9th Special Operations Squadron, Eglin Air Force Base

## Coronado, California

- Headquarters, Naval Special Warfare Command
- Naval Special Warfare Center
- Naval Special Warfare Group One
- SEAL Teams One, Three, and Five

## Virginia

- Headquarters, U.S. Atlantic Command, Special Operations Command-Atlantic, Norfolk
- Naval Special Warfare Group Two, SEAL Teams Two and Four, Little Creek

## Fort Carson, Colorado

- Headquarters, 10th Special Forces Group

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Appendix V  
List of Locations Visited

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Fort Lewis,  
Washington

- Headquarters, 1st Special Forces Group
- Headquarters, 2nd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment

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Hawaii

- Headquarters, U.S. Pacific Command
- Special Operations Command Pacific
- Headquarters, U.S. Pacific Fleet

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Panama

- Headquarters, U.S. Southern Command
- Special Operations Command South

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Germany

- Headquarters, U.S. European Command
- Special Operations Command Europe
- 1st Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group
- Naval Special Warfare Unit Two
- 352nd Special Operations Group

# Comments From the Department of Defense



SPECIAL OPERATIONS/  
LOW-INTENSITY CONFLICT

THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-2500

MAY 2 1997

Mr. Mark E. Gebicke  
Director, Military Operations and Capabilities Issues  
National Security and International Affairs Division  
U.S. General Accounting Office  
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Gebicke:

The Department of Defense (DoD) has reviewed the General Accounting Office (GAO) draft report, dated March 26, 1997, entitled "Special Operations Forces: Opportunities to Preclude Overuse and Misuse," (GAO Code 703112), OSD Case 1326. The draft report reflects thorough research and unbiased reporting by your analysis team. In particular, the report reflects a careful consideration of the various components of Special Operations Forces in order to provide a comprehensive view of the potential for overuse and misuse.

The Department concurs with the findings and two recommendations presented in the draft report. Enclosed are comments regarding initiatives taken to help ensure that SOF are properly employed to prevent any overuse or improper use of the force. Technical comments have been provided separately to your staff.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft report. Your continued interest in and support of SOF are appreciated.

Sincerely,

Brian E. Sheridan  
Principal Deputy

Enclosure:  
As stated

GAO DRAFT REPORT DATED MARCH 26, 1997  
(GAO CODE 703112) OSD CASE 1326

“SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES: OPPORTUNITIES TO  
PRECLUDE OVERUSE AND MISUSE”

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS TO  
THE GAO RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1: To maintain the readiness of U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) to support national security objectives and help ensure that readiness is not degraded through overuse or improper use of the SOF, the GAO recommended that the Secretary of Defense direct the Commander-in-Chief (CINC), U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) to complete the Command's efforts to develop an information system for monitoring how the Command's forces are used and establish a methodology for periodically comparing SOF usage with the priorities of the commanders-in-chief and SOF training. (p. 25/GAO Draft Report)

Now on p. 16.

DOD RESPONSE: Concur. USSOCOM continues to develop and refine its Deployed Forces Reporting System and Deployment Report that provide useful data for understanding the impact of deployments on personnel and readiness levels. Further, the information provided will assist USSOCOM to better utilize and manage the force. Additionally, the Global Military Force Policy, instituted in July 1996, established peacetime prioritization of Low Density/High Demand assets to assist senior leaders in allocating assets for crisis, contingencies, and long-term Joint Task Force operations. This policy has further focused attention on the proper employment of critical assets, such as SOF, when deployment decisions are considered.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The GAO also recommended that the Secretary of Defense direct the Commander, USSOCOM, to exploit potential opportunities to reduce some SOF deployments, which do not prepare the SOF to perform SOF-unique missions in support of national security objectives and which can be performed by conventional forces. (p. 25/GAO Draft Report)

Now on p. 17.

DOD RESPONSE: Concur. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is currently reviewing the use of all U.S. forces in order to ensure proper management of force employment practices. As a force provider, USSOCOM must retain the latitude to ensure that regional commanders-in-chief are carefully consulted to ensure that deployments which have significant impact on theater strategic objectives are accomplished.

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# Major Contributors to This Report

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