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Command, Control and Integration of Special Operations Forces into the General Purpose Force

By

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Maritime Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Introduction

With the ever-increasing number of “non-traditional” missions the United States military is faced with in the twenty-first century, operational commanders will be required to form unique joint organizations designed to complete these missions. While not a new problem, joint force commanders of General Purpose Forces (GPF) must identify the appropriate way in which to integrate Special Operations Forces (SOF) into their plans. More specifically, GPF and SOF Commanders must agree upon the proper command and control structure for Special Operations that meets the needs of the GPF Commander, while ensuring that the SOF element is utilized correctly.

Current joint and SOF doctrine specifies proposed command relationships between SOF and the GPF Commander, yet we continually face problems within this arena.¹ Because of the unique nature of Special Operations, many conventional commanders and planners are not familiar with SOF capabilities, limitations, roles and missions. As a result, the conventional planning staff typically expects more than the SOF unit can deliver or conversely under utilizes the SOF unit’s capabilities.

A revived command and control architecture rich with liaisons designed to assist joint force planners and commanders would help the United States military take a large step in the right direction of maximizing our joint capabilities, while minimizing mismanagement in a time of shrinking forces and expanding missions.

¹ Joint Pub 3-05, “Doctrine for Joint Special Operations,” 17 April 1998, Chapter III.

Genesis of the Problem

The ambiguity that occurs when combining GPF and SOF is a result of some long-standing rifts between the two organizations, as well as current military policies and training procedures as illustrated below.

SOF operations are often shrouded in secrecy due to the frequent delicacy of the given mission. Planning is conducted in a compartmented environment, and as a result a large majority of military personnel have little knowledge of how Special Operations are planned and conducted. For example, in 1980 during the conduct of Desert One, planning was very compartmented. A request went out to the USS Nimitz to provide RH-53 pilots to take part in the operation. The cover story presented to the USS Nimitz was that the RH-53s were being used for minesweeping. Unfortunately, the helicopter pilots were chosen based upon this mission and the decision was to use inexperienced pilots to give them experience on what was considered to be a routine mission. Multiple problems with the helicopters contributed in part to the abortion of the Iranian hostage rescue.²

On a more personal note, having participated in many joint operations that included both conventional and Special Operations Forces, our current training exercises tend to placate the mistakes commanders make when employing SOF. At the Army's Joint Readiness Training Center, a Brigade Commander is automatically given Special Forces for his employment during the unit's rotation. He has a large say in the mission profiles and the deployment of each Special Forces Operational Detachment (Alpha)

² Harry S. Brown, "The Command and Control of Special Operations Forces," Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, 1996, p. 13-23

(SFODA),³ more commonly referred to as an A-Team. This is a great force multiplier for the brigade commander, yet it is one he probably will never have in a real world combat situation. Control of these assets would normally be retained at a much higher level (more like JTF Commander). Furthermore, mission profiles and deployment would more than likely be controlled by a SOF command and control element.⁴

The Army's Battle Command Training Program (BCTP) creates a similar misconception in the minds of division commanders and their staffs. A division commander is arbitrarily given 18 SFODAs to employ as he sees fit, within some guidelines enforced by the BCTP staff. As a result we often see SFODAs employed on Special Reconnaissance missions that have tactical value only to that division commander, when these missions are better suited for the division's organic reconnaissance element. We teach the division commander to use limited and primarily strategic or operational forces such as an SFODA as a tactical force multiplier.⁵

Having participated in two Joint Task Force Exercises (JTFEXs), I have seen similar mistakes made even at the 3 star level. In order to make the exercise run smoothly, and at the same time include a plethora of all different types of forces, sometimes SOF units are given missions that are unrealistic. In some cases the SOF unit is successful, cementing in the mind of the JFC that this was a good SOF mission. In other cases, the SOF unit is unsuccessful, leading the conventional force commander and his subordinates to feel that SOF is over-rated. As an example from JTFEX 98-2, an

³ SFODA is a twelve-man team consisting of experts in weapons, demolitions, medical training, and communications.

⁴ MAJ Kurt Sontag, SOF Observer Controller, JRTC, interview by author, 5 JAN 00, Naval War College, Newport, RI.

⁵ I participated in 8 BCTP exercises from 1995 to 1998 to include every Division in XVIIIth Airborne Corps and two Reserve Division rotations. Duty was as a SOF observer controller.

SFODA with a chemical recon detachment was tasked with finding, infiltrating, getting a chemical sample, and exfiltrating undetected from a simulated Iraqi chemical site. All this was to occur within 48 hours on a facility with a well trained and disciplined opposing force of 200. The SFODA was compromised, and as a result, the troops at the facility went to an increased level of security, making a future conventional attack on the facility that much more difficult.⁶

All of the above elements have contributed or currently contribute to the gap between Special Operations Forces and the conventional force. This gap has led commanders and staffs of both forces to misunderstand the utility of integrated operations between the two. Furthermore, we have created an environment in which commanders and staffs fail to understand the appropriate command and control (C2) structure necessary to make integrated operations successful.⁷

The end results of these facts are some trends that are very disturbing. Compartmentalization, while often necessary, can be very dangerous. It leaves little room for flexibility or adaptation to a fluid situation. Furthermore, this rigid design leaves little or no flexibility for other military forces to reinforce a potentially floundering mission.⁸ Additionally, commanders tend to utilize assets with which they are familiar or comfortable with employing. This promotes harboring of missions for one's own service or functional component. Finally, expectations for mission accomplishment tend to be either over exaggerated or underestimated.

⁶ JTFEX 98-2, XVIIIth Airborne Corps serving as the JTF Headquarters.

⁷ Michael M. Kershaw, "The Integration of Special Operations and General Purpose Forces," Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, DEC 1994, p.125.

⁸ Brown, p. 23.

Current SOF Organization

Given the above bleak portrayal of the ability of SOF and GPF to integrate under a single command with an appropriate command structure, one must ask if GEN Carl Stiner's vision in 1992 is achievable. He stated that "SOF is cost effective and when coupled with GPF, Special Operations Forces offer the National Command Authorities and defense policy makers a low-cost capability for expressing US interest and resolve in every region of the world."⁹ In the end, this vision can come to fruition, but changes are required in the way we integrate SOF into the GPF. To fully understand the current problems, we must first briefly define what SOF does and how they do it.

The United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) was created after the failed Iran hostage rescue attempt in 1980 to serve as the governing headquarters for all SOF in the military.¹⁰ The Army, Navy and Air Force all have SOF components that serve as an intermediate command between actual units and USSOCOM. Inherently SOF missions are joint, involving at least two or more of the above components, and they can conduct missions unilaterally or as a part of a larger conventional force.¹¹

Joint Pub 3-05 defines Special Operations Forces as "specially organized, trained and equipped military and paramilitary forces conducting Special Operations to achieve military, political, economic, or psychological objectives by generally unconventional means in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive areas."¹² The missions these units conduct are wide ranging to include, counterproliferation, combatting terrorism, foreign

⁹ Carl W. Stiner, "US Special Operations Forces: A Strategic Perspective", Parameters VOL. XXII no. 2, Summer 1992, p. 2-13.

¹⁰ Congress created USSOCOM in 1987.

¹¹ Joint Pub 3-05, Chapter II.

¹² Brown, p. 8.

internal defense, special reconnaissance, direct action, psychological operations, civil affairs, unconventional warfare, and information operations. SOF also conducts eight collateral activities that include coalition support, combat search and rescue, counterdrug activities, humanitarian demining, humanitarian assistance, peace operations, security assistance, and special activities.¹³

To further command and control SOF throughout the world, each Regional CINC and the Sub-Unified Command in Korea have a Special Operations Command, or SOC. SOCs in themselves are sub-unified commands that are responsible for the forward-deployed SOF within the CINC's AOR. SOCs become an important facet to this research paper, as they are the primary tools around which a Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF) is often built.¹⁴

Current SOF C2 and Liaison Elements

Having described the SOF community briefly, the next area to examine with regard to C2 problems is the current tools available to assist GPF Commanders in properly integrating SOF with the conventional force.

As mentioned above, theatre SOCs often form the nucleus around which a JSOTF is built. The JSOTF Commander, often the SOC himself,¹⁵ commands all SOF task organized for any given operation.¹⁶ A JSOTF can operate alone, but for the purposes of this paper we will assume they are working within a JTF. The JSOTF will undoubtedly provide a JSOTF LNO element to the JTF Headquarters. The LNO's responsibility is to keep the JTF Commander and staff current on all SOF activities and advise the

¹³ United States Special Operations Forces Posture Statement, 1998, p. 3-4.

¹⁴ Joint Pub 3-05, p. III-2.

¹⁵ SOCs are in the grade of O6 or O7, depending upon which region they are assigned.

¹⁶ Joint Pub 3-05, p. III-3 and III-4.

commander on appropriate missions for SOF. This can be a very positive tool to integrate Special Operations into the overall conventional scheme of maneuver. JSOTF LNO teams, coming from the JSOTF headquarters, can be very joint in nature, and capable of adequately advising the JTF Commander and his staff on the entire spectrum of SOF operations.¹⁷

Unfortunately, what tends to happen is that a small element, usually just recently briefed about SOF plans and missions for the operation, is dispatched to the JTF headquarters to serve as the liaison team. Often the officers sent to serve as the LNOs are junior, at least with regard to the other service or functional LNOs.¹⁸ The JSOTF LNOs are immediately placed at a disadvantage when dealing with either a 3 or 4 star JTF commander or his staff. The end result is a disregard for SOF operations, further widening the gap between the two forces.

Another liaison element that the Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) has employed comes closest to achieving harmony between SOF and the GPF commander. This element is called a Special Operations Coordination Element, or SOCOORD. USASOC realized the problem that existed when attempting to integrate SOF into conventional operations and decided to form SOCOORDs at each active Army Corps. The SOCOORD consists of one Special Forces (SF) O5, one SF O4, one Ranger (Regiment) O3, and one SF E9. These personnel are assigned and have duty on a daily basis at the perspective Corps headquarters, 365 days a year, during peace and war.¹⁹

¹⁷ Joint Pub 3-05, p. III-7.

¹⁸ My experience is that officers in the grade of O3 often serve as LNOs. However, I have seen O5s as LNOs, but frequently they were not totally familiar with the entire SOF concept.

¹⁹ Joint Pub 3-05, p. III-8.

The strengths of the SOCOORD element are that they live, work and plan on a daily basis with the Corps staff and Corps Commander. They are assigned to the Assistant Chief of Staff (ACofS), G3 or operations section on the Corps staff. As a result, this element builds bonds with the Corps planners and staff and can advise and educate the conventional warrior on special operations. They provide an excellent starting point for a SOF unit to begin their integration into the Corps or possibly JTF and they also are "friendly faces" for the Corps staff to approach when unsure about a SOF issue.

However, being assigned to the conventional Corps staff does not come without its shortcomings. USASOC has questioned the utility of the SOCOORD. Having to give up three officers and one senior enlisted soldier per Corps is a heavy price to pay to be prepared for SOF integration, if it happens. During those times in peace and times when there are no joint (SOF and GPF) exercises, one wonders what the SOCOORD element does to earn its paycheck. Unfortunately, the GPF staff feels the same way. The end result is one of two things, neither being productive for the liaison element. First, the ACofS, G3 may task the SOCOORD element with duties not related to their job description. This allows the G3 to task a section that is "under-worked," and not one of his organic sections that is more heavily employed. The SOCOORD officers often resent the tasking, as they aren't keeping current on modern SOF operational techniques. The other unfortunate result of the "perceived down time" the SOCOORD has during times when there are no joint operations, is a refusal from USASOC to man the element, or at least certain positions within the element. As one can imagine, this totally breaks down

the liaison effort between the SOF community and the supported Corps.²⁰ Finally, with the SOCOORD element stationed at the Corps Headquarters, the officers tend to lose touch with the current SOF doctrine and procedures. As a result, the SOCOORD loses credibility in the SOF community.

Another liaison element peculiar only to Army SF is an element called a Special Operations Command and Control Element or SOCCE. A SOCCE is dispatched to a conventional force when Special Forces are operating within the conventional force area of operations. This is a small element tailored to each mission, but usually consists of an O4 Special Forces commander, his E9 Command Sergeant Major, a communications expert, and a warrant officer.²¹

The SOCCE's strengths are that they are familiar with the SOF operations being conducted in the area of operations, as they emanate from the same unit that is conducting the operation. They are familiar with the team operating on the ground and have compatible communications equipment, allowing a perfect liaison match between the SOCCE and the deployed SF team.

Unfortunately, the SOCCE usually has limited knowledge of the conventional force command and staff procedures. Even the most knowledgeable SF O4 must learn the peculiarities of the staff he is now supporting. This becomes a large problem when Special Forces are already deployed within a conventional force area of operations and there is little, if any time, to become familiar with the conventional staff.

The above mentioned liaison elements are not an exhaustive list of all possible

²⁰ I served as the Ranger Plans Officer within the SOCOORD at XVIIIth Airborne Corps from 1995 to 1998.

²¹ Joint pub 3-05, p. III-5.

liaison structures, yet they are the most common and doctrinally supported in joint and Army publications.²² Ad hoc liaison elements can be formed and tailored to meet the demands of each separate mission, but one can certainly make the argument that these organizations would suffer from some of the same problems that plague the more typical liaison structures mentioned above.

Past Recommendations to Solve the Issue

Given the failure of both the SOF community and the conventional force to properly integrate operations, there are those who feel that the best possible solution is to separate missions by either time or space. COL Steve Fondacaro, MAJ Fondacaro at the time he wrote his master's thesis, feels that (Ranger) forces are an "irreplaceable light infantry unit, which should be utilized exclusively by the theater commander only under special circumstances."²³ He goes on to state that lower level commanders (Corps and below) have a limited and narrow focus which prohibits them from properly applying Ranger units to targets that correlate with their capabilities.²⁴

COL Fondacaro's approach certainly eliminates most of the concern about SOF and GPF integration, but seems antiquated when we are faced with a smaller force tasked with more missions. Furthermore, SOF often requires external support from a larger conventional force if the operation becomes protracted. For example, a Ranger unit can only operate 72 hours before resupply from some source is required.

LTC Michael Kershaw, an Army officer who has served as a Ranger at all levels of command and staff from O2 to O4, proposes some other options in his 1994 thesis

²² Joint Pub 3-05, Chapter III.

²³ Steve A. Fondacaro, "U.S. Army Ranger Force Utilization: A Continuing Inability to Correlate Missions with Capability, US Command and General Staff College, FT Leavenworth, KS, DEC, 88, p.39.

²⁴ Fondacaro, p. 39.

from the Naval Postgraduate School. LTC Kershaw realized the need for SOF and GPF integration based upon past history. We saw in Grenada, for example, that the Rangers required the follow-on force from the 82nd Airborne Division to free them up from Point Salinas Airfield.²⁵

Kershaw proposes three alternative command structures designed to better integrate SOF and GPF operations. One option is to reduce the size of SOF and assign the bulk of SOF to the GPF commander. Special Mission Units (SMU) would be retained under the control of a SOF specific headquarters, while “white” SOF would be under the control of the GPF commanders.²⁶

While this idea might have its merits, it doesn’t solve the problem. The SMUs would undoubtedly become more proficient at their assigned missions, as they would only do those tasks. However, the “white” SOF may lose some proficiency for Special Operations and face the same problems as the previously mentioned SOCOORDs. They would de facto become less specialized and more conventional. Additionally, funding and training could suffer for the units assigned to the conventional force.

In a similar vein, Kershaw proposes a bilateral SOF community. One command would include the SMUs who would be purely dedicated to unilateral SOF missions. The other would be a “white” SOF command. Units would fall under SOF control for training and administration but would become OPCON to select GPF commanders for operations. Kershaw points out the tools already available to help with the white SOF integration such as the SOCOORD, SOCCE, and JSOTFs.²⁷

²⁵ Kershaw, p. 120-130.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 132.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 132-133.

This alternative is not much of a departure from the current system. We have already examined the shortcomings of the current liaison options available. This alternative does little more than “fence” a portion of the SOF community from use by the GPF commander.

Kershaw’s final proposal is a Special Operations Group (SOG) consisting of Special Forces and Rangers OPCON to the theater CINCs. This would be a force that the CINC would control and could be used to meet his Special Operations requirements.²⁸ However, once again, this proposal places SOF forces in an arena with GPF where emerging SOF techniques and skills would be non-existent. The CINC would have to devote disproportionate time and money to maintain a highly trained force. From a cost/benefit standpoint, USSOCOM can accomplish SOF training collectively at a better price to the American taxpayer.

Author’s Recommendation for the Future

One can clearly see that a problem exists when integrating SOF into conventional operations. Furthermore, the opinions and proposed solutions are varied throughout the services. One organization that has seemed to serve as a productive tool when forming JTFs or other ad hoc organizations comprised of various services or functional components, is the Deployable Joint Task Force Augmentation Cell (DJTFAC). This is a section on the CINC’s staff that “plugs into” a newly formed JTF, preferably early on in the planning process, and assists the JTF planners and operators.²⁹

Using the DJTFAC as a model, USSOCOM and the respective SOF service

²⁸ Ibid., p. 133.

²⁹ I operated with “then” USACOM DJTFAC on two JTFEXs, one Unified Endeavor Exercise and one TBM Defense exercise from 1995 to 1998.

components could develop a similar organization. These notional Special Operations Liaison Cells (SOLC) would exist at USSOCOM and in each of the SOF service components. When a theater CINC needed a SOF element, or even envisioned a SOF mission within his AOR, the SOLC would deploy to the CINC headquarters and become OPCON to the CINC or the JTF that had been formed. Members of the SOLC would integrate into both the J5 and J3 sections of the JTF, and help both planners and operators develop and execute appropriate SOF missions.

This proposed SOLC would be comprised of former operators from all SOF backgrounds, giving them the experience to advise the commander and staff on a variety of SOF missions, as well as the best force to employ for the mission. Members of the SOLC would be rotated frequently so they were kept abreast of emerging SOF tactics, techniques and procedures. If the operation was limited to one SOF service (say purely USASOC forces), the subordinate service specific SOF headquarters could fill the SOLC role instead of USSOCOM.

At first glance, one may claim this is already the job of the theater SOCs. However, the SOLC proposal allows the SOC to perform duties as a JSOTF, while the SOLC is free to serve as members on the GPF commander's staff. This provides a more robust SOF cell to the GPF commander, while allowing the JSOTF to command and control his component. As was suggested earlier, the typical JSOTF LNO package provided to a JTF commander from the SOC is usually not adequate to properly integrate SOF into the GPF scheme of maneuver.

The notional SOLC overcomes many of the shortcomings presented by the current liaison packages available to the GPF commander. SOLCs live and work in the

Special Operations community, and therefore remain current on SOF techniques. SOLCs, unlike their counterparts, become a part of the GPF commander's staff for the duration of the operation. This provides an advantage over the SOCOORD because they are not permanently assigned to the conventional staff, but are robust enough, and remain integrated long enough to ensure proper SOF utilization.

Of course, any new concept such as the SOLC requires study and research to ensure success. This is just a proposal for a method to help alleviate problems that have occurred and will continue to present themselves as military missions become more diverse. Whatever the solution, a prudent step in the right direction is an element that can easily be inserted into the GPF commander's staff. This element must be robust enough to fill positions in both the J5 planning staff as well as the J3 staff. The liaison package must contain SOF personnel that have knowledge of current SOF techniques and preferably personnel that are familiar with the joint planning process. This should be a temporary attachment of personnel for a specified mission, as opposed to a permanent assignment of SOF advisors to the GPF staff.

One could make the counterargument that there are more prudent ways to integrate, or at least deconflict, SOF and GPF operations. As in the case of COL Fondacaro, some are proponents of a total separation of the forces and allocating SOF only to the theater CINCs. LTC Kershaw points out that maybe a distinction between types of SOF is a solution, allocating "white" SOF to the CINCs and maintaining SMUs for certain Special Operations. Others may say that the current liaison structure with minor modifications can handle the integration problem. However, given the diverse missions the military faces in the very near future, one would think that SOF and

conventional forces must find a way to integrate while still maintaining unity of command.

As an example, SOF may very well be involved in information warfare in this century. The implications involved in areas such as computer network attack make integration even more urgent. A typical SOF element may have the expertise to infiltrate into a foreign country's most sensitive computer network location, but they will need an expert that can disable the system. The expert that can accomplish the mission may well be a conventional soldier, sailor, marine or airman. As missions evolve and the environment around us changes, we must be prepared to work as a joint team under a single command structure with the versatility to adapt to whatever situation our adversaries present.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the United States military is faced with a plethora of new and evolving missions. All of our services have a great deal to offer the smaller force faced with new challenges. The lines between Special Operations and conventional operations are beginning to blur, and as a result we must have the capability to integrate the two forces. Past techniques used to aid the General Purpose Force Commander have been less than successful. Compartmentalization of Special Operations, while often necessary for reasons of national security hampers the ability for conventional commanders and their staffs to fully understand the nature of Special Operations. Our training should be more realistic with regard to SOF employment. Utilizing SOF in an exercise as a tool to train conventional commanders often leads to poor lessons learned and develops misconceptions for commanders and staff officers alike. Proponents of a separate Special

Operations Force that conducts operations only on a unilateral basis push integration the wrong way. A robust liaison element that is up-to-date on current SOF doctrine and can rapidly deploy to the joint force commander's headquarters may very well be the answer to evolving missions that both SOF and the conventional force will face in the twenty-first century.

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