

CRS Report for Congress

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U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF): Background and Issues for Congress

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Summary

Special Operations Forces (SOF) play a significant role in U.S. military operations and the Administration has given U.S. SOF forces greater responsibility for planning and conducting worldwide counterterrorism operations. Despite a recommendation from the 9/11 Commission, a recent study reportedly recommends that paramilitary operations should not be shifted from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). The Department of Defense (DOD) has recently approved a series of retention bonuses for selected SOF non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and warrant officers in an attempt to prevent them from leaving the service for higher paying civilian positions. DOD is reportedly also considering transferring Civil Affairs from USSOCOM to conventional forces. This report will be updated as events warrant.

Background

Overview. Special Operations Forces (SOF) are small, elite military units with special training and equipment that can infiltrate into hostile territory through land, sea, or air to conduct a variety of operations, many of them classified. SOF personnel undergo rigorous selection and lengthy, specialized training. U.S. SOF units total roughly 34,000 active and about 15,000 reserve personnel in the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force, or about 2% of all U.S. active and reserve forces. The U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) oversees the training, doctrine, and equipping of all U.S. SOF units.

Operations in the Global War on Terror. SOF forces continue to operate in Iraq and Afghanistan where they are actively pursuing former regime leadership targets. Some estimates suggest that about 80 percent of deployed SOF units are currently operating in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹ SOF units operating with Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) are involved in training selected regional armed forces in

¹ Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker, "Special Warriors Have Growing Ranks and Growing Pains In Taking Key Antiterror Role," *New York Times*, Aug. 2, 2004.

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counterterror and counterinsurgency tactics as well as assisting in the apprehension of terrorists operating in the region. U.S. SOF involvement in the Philippines and in Colombia is strictly limited to training the armed forces of those respective countries in counterterror and counterinsurgency tactics.

SOF Enhancements. As a result of Department of Defense (DOD) transformation initiatives and lessons learned in Afghanistan and Iraq, SOF is undergoing a number of enhancements in personnel, organizations, and equipment. During the next three to four years, two additional SEAL teams will be added to the existing five teams; in 2008 the U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) plans to add 550 special forces soldiers to its active duty Operational Detachment-Alphas (A Teams²) and 192 to National Guard A Teams.³ The Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) is also planning to add additional combat controller and combat aviation advisor personnel.⁴ U.S. Special Operations Command is also reportedly planning on adding two active duty and two Reserve Civil Affairs (CA) battalions and two active duty Psychological (PSYOPS) companies to SOCOM over the next few years.⁵

USASOC also plans to form a new MH-47 Chinook battalion and AFSOC plans to convert four C-130H Hercules transport aircraft into AC-130U gun ships.⁶ AFSOC reportedly anticipates replacing 34 MH-43 Super Stallion heavy lift helicopters with about 50 CV-22 tilt-rotor Osprey aircraft, if those aircraft successfully complete testing, sometime in FY2009.⁷

Authority for Planning Operations. In January 2003 DOD gave USSOCOM greater responsibility for planning and directing worldwide counterterrorism operations. Instead of being primarily a supporting command that provides forces to other regional U.S. combatant commanders, USSOCOM will more often be a supported command capable of planning and conducting operations in its own right.⁸ To facilitate this new authority, USSOCOM reportedly reorganized its headquarters to better conduct collaborative planning with DOD, the Intelligence Community, and various government agencies.⁹

² An A Team consists of twelve multi-skilled Army SOF soldiers and is the basic operating unit for Army Special Forces (“Green Berets”).

³ Joshua Kucera, “U.S. Boosts Special Forces to Meet Iraqi Challenge,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, Feb. 18, 2004.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Hearing of the Terrorism Subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee, FY2005 National Defense Appropriations Act, Mar. 11, 2004, p. 14.

⁶ Joshua Kucera, op.cit.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jefferson Morris, “SOCOM Changing From ‘Supporting’ To ‘Supported’ Command, Official Says,” *Aerospace Daily*, Apr. 2, 2003; Rowan Scarborough, “‘Special Ops’ Gets OK To Initiate Its Own Missions,” *Washington Times*, Jan. 8, 2003, p. 8; Rowan Scarborough, “Rumsfeld Bolsters Special Forces,” *Washington Times*, Jan. 6, 2003, p. 1.

⁹ Harold Kennedy, “SOCOM Creates New Hub for Fighting War on Terror,” *National Defense*, (continued...)

Command Structures. Congress in 1986 expressed concern for the status of SOF within overall U.S. defense planning and passed measures to strengthen its position. These actions included the establishment of USSOCOM as a new unified command. USSOCOM is headquartered at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, FL. The Commander of USSOCOM is a four-star officer who may be from any service. Commander, USSOCOM reports directly to the Secretary of Defense, although an Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) provides immediate civilian oversight over many USSOCOM activities.

Army Special Operations Forces.¹⁰ U.S. Army SOF (ARSOF) include 26,000 soldiers from the Active Army, National Guard, and Army Reserve who are organized into Special Forces units, Ranger units, special operations aviation units, civil affairs units, psychological operations units, and special operations support units. ARSOF Headquarters and other resources, such as the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, are located at Fort Bragg, NC. Five active Special Forces Groups (Airborne) are stationed at Fort Bragg and at Fort Lewis, WA, Fort Campbell, KY, and Fort Carson, CO. Special Forces soldiers — also known as the Green Berets — are trained in various skills, including foreign languages, that allow teams to operate independently in designated regions of the world. Two Army National Guard SF groups are headquartered in Utah and Alabama. An elite light airborne infantry unit, the 75th Ranger Regiment, is headquartered at Fort Benning, GA and consists of three battalions specializing in direct action operations. Army special operations aviation units, including the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne) at Fort Campbell, KY, feature pilots trained to fly the most sophisticated Army rotary-wing aircraft in the harshest environments, day or night and in adverse weather.

The most frequently deployed SOF assets are civil affairs (CA) units, which provide experts in every area of civil government to help administer civilian affairs in the theater. The 96th Civil Affairs Battalion (Airborne) is the only active CA unit; all other CA units reside in four Army Reserve Civil Affairs Commands located in Pensacola, FL, Mountain View, CA, Riverdale, MD, and Bronx, NY. Psychological operations units disseminate information to large foreign audiences through mass media. The 4th Psychological Operations Group (Airborne) is stationed at Fort Bragg, and two Army Reserve groups are located in Cleveland, OH, and at Moffett Federal Airfield, CA. Finally, Fort Bragg is also home to specialized supporting units and Special Mission Units that support a variety of ARSOF and joint missions. Notable among these is the 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment-Delta, often called Delta Force, which reportedly is based at Fort Bragg.

Air Force Special Operations Forces.¹¹ The Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) includes about 10,000 active and reserve personnel, of which about

⁹ (...continued)
Feb. 2004.

¹⁰ Information in this section was taken from General Bryan Brown, “U.S. Army Special Operations: Focusing on People — Humans are More Important than Hardware,” *Army*, Oct. 2001, pp. 157-162.

¹¹ For additional information on Air Force SOF units, see Robert Wall, “Conflict Could Test Special Ops Improvements,” *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, Oct. 1, 2001, p. 30.

22% are stationed overseas. AFSOC is headquartered at Hurlburt Field, FL, which is also the home of most of AFSOC's active units, including the 16th Special Operations Wing, the 720th Special Tactics Group, the 18th Flight Test Squadron, and the U.S. Air Force Special Operations School. The 352nd Special Operations Group is at RAF Mildenhall, England, and the 353rd Special Operations Group, is at Kadena Air Base, Japan. Reserve AFSOC components include the 193rd Special Operations Wing, Air National Guard stationed at Harrisburg, PA, the 280th Combat Communications Squadron, Air National Guard stationed at Dothan, AL., and the 919th Special Operations Wing, Air Force Reserve stationed at Duke Field, FL. AFSOC's three active-duty flying units are composed of more than 100 fixed and rotary-wing aircraft. The V-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft, a Marine Corps priority, is also being developed for AFSOC. If procured, SOF CV-22s will conduct long-range vertical takeoff and landing infiltration, exfiltration, and resupply missions.

Navy and Marine Corps Special Operations Forces. The Naval Special Warfare Command (NSWC) is located in Coronado, CA, and includes about 4,950 active and almost 1,200 reserve personnel. Navy special warfare forces are organized into SEAL teams, Special Boat Units (SBUs), and SEAL Delivery Vehicle (SDV) teams based on both coasts. SEALs are considered the best-trained combat swimmers in the world, and can be deployed covertly from submarines or from sea-based aircraft. Although Afghanistan is a landlocked country hundreds of miles from shore, SEALs formed a significant portion of the total U.S. SOF presence in Afghanistan.¹²

About 100 Marines that were formed into a Marine Special Operations Unit and deployed with Naval Special Warfare Task Unit 1 for six months to conduct operations have returned from operations overseas and have been stood down as a unit.¹³ This six-month operation was part of a proof of concept demonstration to examine the merits of forming a permanent Marine Special Operations Unit along the lines of the SEALs or U.S. Army Special Forces. A decision from DOD on whether or not to permanently establish such a Marine unit is expected in the near future.

Issues for Congress

SOF and Paramilitary Operations.¹⁴ The 9/11 Commission's recommendation that CIA paramilitary clandestine and covert operations should become the responsibility the U.S. Special Operations Command was not included in the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act (P.L. 108-458). On November 23, 2004, President Bush issued a letter requiring the Secretary of Defense and the Director of Central Intelligence to review matters relating to the 9/11 Commission's recommendation and submit their

¹² Sources for information in this section: "Waterborne Commandos," *Armed Forces Journal International*, Jan. 2000, pp. 31-33; Scott R. Gourley, "Setting The Seal On Maritime Special Operations Forces," *Jane's Navy International*, June 1999, pp. 18- 23.

¹³ Information in this paragraph is from a conversation with the USSOCOM Congressional Liaison Office, Washington D.C., February 7, 2005.

¹⁴ For a detailed discussion of this issue see CRS Report RS22017, *Special Operations Forces (SOF) and CIA Paramilitary Operations: Issues for Congress*.

advice to him by February 23, 2005. This review directs the examination of all aspects including legal, funding, operational, and supporting infrastructure.

Reports suggest that a recent Pentagon-contracted study recommends that paramilitary operations should not be shifted from the CIA to USSOCOM.¹⁵ According to the study, there appears to be “an emerging consensus among current and former defense, military, and intelligence officials that it is more logical for the CIA to retain its relatively modest paramilitary force.” One senior DOD official reportedly stated, regarding paramilitary operations, that “nobody in DOD wanted to take it over, and nobody in the CIA wanted to give it up.” One concern supposedly was that if USSOCOM did take over paramilitary operations, that “pressure would probably grow in Congress to subject military covert operations to the same requirements for presidential findings imposed on the CIA ... that would unnecessarily tie the hands of military forces.” The 109th Congress may decide to examine this issue, bearing in mind that a report on this matter from DOD and the CIA is due to the President on February 23, 2005.

SOF Retention Bonuses and Recruiting. In response to the growing number of senior special operations personnel leaving the service for higher paying security jobs in the private sector, DOD reportedly approved a series of retention bonuses aimed at senior sergeants, petty officers, and warrant officers — offering up to a \$150,000 bonus if they sign up for an additional six years of service.¹⁶ Shorter service extensions also are eligible for bonuses, down to \$8,000 for one year. Reportedly, about 1,500 special operations personnel qualify for these bonuses. In addition, about 7,000 mid-level special operations personnel will get an additional \$375 a month in pay and senior operators with 25 years or more of experience will get \$750 a month more.

According to USSOCOM, U.S. Army Special Forces recruiting exceeded its FY 04 recruiting goal of 1,600 soldiers by recruiting 1,628 soldiers.¹⁷ USSOCOM also reported that they were ahead of their recruiting schedule for the first quarter of FY2005.¹⁸ Army officials credit the creation of three-man recruiting teams to conventional Army units, which were either preparing to deploy or that just returned from deployment, for helping to exceed FY2004 recruiting goals.

Although recruiting in FY2004 exceeded its goals, U.S. Army Special Forces Groups are reportedly operating under the authorized strength, allegedly due to high attrition rates in the lengthy and demanding Special Forces Qualification Course and also because of senior special operations forces personnel leaving the Army for higher paying civilian

¹⁵ Information in this paragraph is taken from Ann Scott Tyson, “Study Urges CIA Not to Cede Paramilitary Functions to Pentagon,” *Washington Post*, February 5, 2005.

¹⁶ Information in this paragraph is taken from Thom Shanker, “Pentagon Sets Bonuses to Retain Members of Special Operations,” *New York Times*, February 6, 2005 and Associated Press, “Incentives Offered to Retain Special Forces,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 5, 2005.

¹⁷ U.S. Army Special Operations Command, “Special Forces Recruiting Exceeds Year-End Goals,” U.S. Army Special Operations Command News Service, January 7, 2005.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

jobs.¹⁹ According to reports, the five active duty special forces groups are currently manned at 98 percent — up from 94 percent just prior to the September 11, 2001 attacks. These additional soldiers are the result of increasing the number of soldiers put through the Special Forces Qualification Course - although officials maintain that the course's high standards (only about one third of the soldiers who start the course successfully complete it) have not been compromised.

It is possible that Congress may explore the effectiveness of this new retention program and continuing efforts to recruit and train new special operations personnel. Such an examination could possibly prove useful in potential deliberations regarding expanding the size of special forces, as some in Congress have suggested.

Civil Affairs Units Transferred to Conventional Forces. According to a report, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld is considering shifting Army Civil Affairs units from under USSOCOM to the conventional Army.²⁰ The reported rationale behind this possible move is to improve the Army's security and stabilization efforts which have been criticized by some as ineffective, largely because conventional Army commanders do not understand how best to employ USSOCOM's civil affairs units. Another result of this move is that it would permit USSOCOM to focus more exclusively on direct action missions designed to kill or capture terrorists.

The Army reportedly opposes this proposal, stating that it would “undermine the systems and relationships carefully developed between the Army and USSOCOM since the mid-1980s,” and “would not be wise, given our involvement in current operations and the Global War on Terrorism.” Some civil affairs officers suggest, however, that their relationship with special operations forces has never been particularly comfortable and that they might fit in better with conventional forces.

Congress might act to review the merits and drawbacks of this proposal. While such a move might, over time, improve the Army's ability to conduct security and stabilization operation, some suggest that civil affairs units enjoy greater freedom of action and funding on USSOCOM which some feel makes them more effective.

¹⁹ Information in this paragraph is taken from Rowan Scarborough, “Green Berets’ Numbers Fall Short,” *Washington Times*, February 8, 2005, p. 1.

²⁰ Information in this paragraph is taken from Thomas Ricks, “Army Contests Rumsfeld’ Bid on Occupation,” *Washington Post*, January 16, 2005, p. 6.