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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. The Department of Defense (DOD) is presently examining options for creating a dedicated Marine Corps special operations unit. A recently approved a series of retention bonuses for selected SOF non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and warrant officers is currently being offered in an attempt to keep senior SOF personnel in service longer. DOD is reportedly also considering transferring some Civil Affairs units from the U.S. Special Operations Command (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. By the end of FY2006, SOF is expected to grow to an end-strength of almost 53,000 personnel.¹ 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 key insurgents. Approximately 1,000 SOF troops — primarily from Europe — will reportedly train African troops from Senegal, Niger, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Algeria, and Tunisia during June 2005 in a variety of military skills that can be used in counterterror and counterinsurgency

¹ 2005 Annual Report, United States Special Operations Command, p. 17.

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operations.² U.S. Naval Special Forces have also recently conducted small-scale counterterrorism training exercises with Indonesian forces.³ U.S. SOF continue their involvement in the Philippines and Colombia where their role is strictly limited to training the armed forces of those respective countries in counterterror and counterinsurgency tactics.

SOF Enhancements. As a result of DOD transformation initiatives and lessons learned in Afghanistan and Iraq, SOF is undergoing a number of enhancements in personnel, organization, 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 Teams)⁴ and 192 to National Guard A Teams.⁵ The Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) is also planning to add additional combat controller and combat aviation advisor personnel.⁶ U.S. Special Operations Command is also reportedly planning on adding two active duty Civil Affairs (CA) companies, two Reserve Civil Affairs (CA) battalions, and two active duty Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) companies to SOCOM over the next few years.⁷

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.⁸ AFSOC reportedly anticipates replacing 34 MH-43 Super Stallion heavy lift helicopters with about 50 CV-22 tilt-rotor Osprey aircraft sometime in FY2009.⁹

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. commanders, USSOCOM will more often be a supported command capable of planning and conducting operations in its own right.¹⁰ To facilitate this new authority,

² Charlie Coon, "U.S. Special Ops Troops Preparing to Train Foreign Soldiers in Africa," *European Stars and Stripes*, May 15, 2005.

³ "U.S. Navy SEALs in Indonesia Anti-Terrorism Drill," *Reuters.com*, May 9, 2005.

⁴ An A Team consists of twelve multi-skilled Army SOF soldiers and is the basic operating unit for Army Special Forces ("Green Berets").

⁵ Joshua Kucera, "U.S. Boosts Special Forces to Meet Iraqi Challenge," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, Feb. 18, 2004.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Hearing of the Terrorism Subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee, FY2005 National Defense Appropriations Act, Mar. 11, 2004, p. 14.

⁸ Joshua Kucera, *op.cit.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ 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.

USSOCOM reportedly reorganized its headquarters to better conduct collaborative planning with DOD, the Intelligence Community, and various government agencies.¹¹

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.¹² 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 airborne light 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.

¹¹ Harold Kennedy, “SOCOM Creates New Hub for Fighting War on Terror,” *National Defense*, Feb. 2004.

¹² 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.

Air Force Special Operations Forces.¹³ The Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) includes about 10,000 active and reserve personnel, of which about 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.

Naval Special Operations Forces.¹⁴ The Naval Special Warfare Command (NSWC) is located in Coronado, CA. The major operational components of NSWC include Naval Special Warfare Groups 1 and 3 stationed in San Diego, CA, and Naval Special Warfare Groups 2 and 4 in Norfolk, VA. These components deploy SEAL Teams, SEAL Delivery Vehicle Teams, and Special Boat Teams world wide to meet the training, exercise, contingency and wartime requirements of theater commanders. NSWC has approximately 5,400 total active-duty personnel — including 2,450 SEALs and 600 Special Warfare Combatant-craft Crewmen (SWCC) — as well as a 1,200-person reserve component of approximately 325 SEALs, 125 SWCC and 775 support personnel. SEALs are considered the best-trained combat swimmers in the world, and can be deployed covertly from submarines or from sea-based aircraft.

Issues for Congress

Creation of Marine Special Operations Forces. The Marine Corps will reportedly form a new organization, tentatively named the Foreign Military Training Unit (FMTU), to support USSOCOM and regional commanders in the training of regional militaries.¹⁵ The Marines have been involved in a number of training missions in recent years in places such as Chad, Niger, and the former Soviet republic of Georgia and these new units will be built in partnership with Army SOF and the U.S. Special Operations Training Command. According to reports, there will be 24 FMTU teams, consisting of 13 members each, who will receive special training in foreign languages and cultures, and these teams

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ Information in this section is from the U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command's Official website, [http://www.navsoc.navy.mil/navsoc_missions.asp], accessed on May 26, 2005.

¹⁵ Information in this section is from Jon R. Anderson, "Marine Corps Creating Training Unit to Aid Local Militaries in Foreign Hot Spots," *Stars and Stripes*, Feb. 25, 2005; "Marine Corps to Support U.S. SOCOM in Training Foreign Militaries," *Inside the Navy*, Apr. 25, 2005; and Bradley Graham, "Larger Special Operations Role Being Urged on Marines," *Washington Post*, May 8, 2005.

will be aligned to four regions: the Middle East, Europe, the Pacific, and Latin America. The Marines reportedly plan to have the FMTU fully operational by the end of 2005.

DOD, USSOCOM, and the Marines are reportedly considering options for developing a Marine unit of approximately 3,000 Marines to be permanently assigned to USSOCOM to participate in combat missions in support of the war on terror.¹⁶ According to reports, DOD, USSOCOM, and Marine Corps leadership have met to discuss this proposal on several occasions, but a decision has yet to be reached. If such a unit is agreed upon, some argue that by taking 3,000 or so of the Marine Corp's best Marines away permanently to form this unit, that the Marines Corps could suffer an appreciable loss of leadership which could have operational ramifications for conventional Marine forces.

If such a course of action is decided upon, Congress might act to review how such a proposal might impact Marine Corps conventional combat forces, particularly if this proposed Marine Corps special operations unit is non-commissioned officer (NCO) and junior officer-heavy — as are Army SOF A-Detachments and SEAL Platoons. Such a loss of some of the Marine's best leadership could have a more pronounced impact on the smaller Marine Corps than it does on the much larger Army and Navy.

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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ USSOCOM also reported that they were ahead of their recruiting schedule for the first quarter of FY2005.¹⁹ 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

¹⁶ Information in this section is from Bradley Graham, "Larger Special Operations Role Being Urged on Marines," *Washington Post*, May 8, 2005 and Jason Sherman, "Rumsfeld Eyes Marines to Boost Commando Ranks for Terror War," *InsideDefense.com*, May 19, 2005..

¹⁷ Information in this section is taken from Thom Shanker, "Pentagon Sets Bonuses to Retain Members of Special Operations," *New York Times*, Feb. 6, 2005 and Associated Press, "Incentives Offered to Retain Special Forces," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 5, 2005.

¹⁸ U.S. Army Special Operations Command, "Special Forces Recruiting Exceeds Year-End Goals," U.S. Army Special Operations Command News Service, Jan. 7, 2005.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

jobs.²⁰ Some suggest, however, that private sector demand for experienced SOF personnel from all services may be softening some after the initial surge of hiring in 2003-2004.²¹ Even if this is indeed the case, USSOCOM personnel experts maintain that it is still too early to tell if these new bonuses will have an impact on retention.²²

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.²³ 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 better funding under USSOCOM which some argue makes them ultimately more effective.

²⁰ Information in this paragraph is taken from Rowan Scarborough, "Green Berets' Numbers Fall Short," *Washington Times*, Feb. 8, 2005, p. 1.

²¹ Richard Lardner, "Senior Soldiers in Special Ops Being Lured Off," *Tampa Tribune*, Mar. 21, 2005.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Information in this paragraph is taken from Thomas Ricks, "Army Contests Rumsfeld' Bid on Occupation," *Washington Post*, Jan. 16, 2005, p. 6.