

Creating A MARSOF MOS: A Lesson in History
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Creating A MARSOF MOS: A Lesson in History

On 24 February 2006, 20 years after refusing a seat at the special operations table, the United States Marine Corps activated a component to the United States Special Operations Command (SOCOM) at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. A small cadre of leaders spent the previous months in Quantico, VA planning and building what was to become U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC). While those individuals' efforts were commendable, much work is still required before long-term manpower stability is achieved. A new special operations force (SOF) military occupational specialty (MOS) and SOF career progression model should be created for MARSOC because of its different mission sets, its need to provide a return on investment, and its responsibility to ensure an opportunity for continued service.

Background:

- **Career Progression**

Modern Army SOF was officially created in 1952, but did not become a career field in the Army until 1984 for enlisted men and a career branch for officers until 1987.¹ Until 1987, SF-qualified soldiers and officers served outside their

¹ United States Army Special Operations Command Directorate of History, Archives, AOHS, Library, and Museums. *Sine Pari: The Story of Army Special Operations*. Ft Bragg, 1997. 7, 16

occupational field while in a SF billet. Still competing for promotion and command with soldiers from their “primary” occupational specialty, many of these SF-qualified troops were overlooked for command and promotion because of a perceived lack of occupational experience. Opportunities existed to command SF units, but this was seen as command “outside” of a soldier’s occupational field and temporarily extended a soldier’s opportunity to serve his nation.

- **Mission**

Special Forces were established, according to the United States Army Special Operations Command (USASOC), because “...there were areas in the world not susceptible to conventional warfare...but which would make ideal targets for unconventional harassment and guerilla fighting.”² Those same tenets hold true today as the service SOF components train to SOCOM’s core tasks.³

² Sine Pari., 7

³ See Table 1.0

Table 1.0 Core Task Description⁴

Unconventional warfare	A broad spectrum of military and paramilitary operations, normally of long duration, predominately conducted through, with, or by indigenous or surrogate forces that are organized, trained, equipped, supported, and directed in varying degrees by an external source.
Counterterrorism	Offensive measures taken to prevent, deter, and respond to terrorism.
Counter proliferation of weapons of mass destruction	Actions taken to locate, seize, destroy, render safe, capture, or recover weapons of mass destruction.
Civil affairs operations	Operations that establish, maintain, influence, or exploit relations among military forces, government and nongovernmental civilian organizations and authorities, and the civilian populace in friendly, neutral, or hostile areas of operations in order to facilitate military operations and consolidate and achieve U.S. national objectives.
Psychological operations	Planned operations to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals.
Information operations	Actions taken to affect adversary information and information systems while defending one's own information and information systems.

▪ **Return on Investment**

After creating a service branch for Special Forces in 1987, the Army ensured that SOF personnel would serve as "SOF for Life". The creation of a service branch benefited the Army because USASOC would not have to invest so heavily in the training of a soldier only to see him serve his tour in SF and then move back to a conventional unit to gain MOS credibility.

▪ **Full Circle**

MARSOC faces the same challenges today that SF has overcome in the past twenty years. The Marine Corps should learn from the

⁴United States Government Accountability Office. *Report 07-1030 to Congressional Committees. Special Operations Forces: Management Actions are Needed to Effectively Integrate Marine Corps Forces into the U.S. Special Operations Command.* Washington D.C., 2007., 9,10.

Army's mistakes and put the work into creating what will become the SOF force of choice by creating a SOF career field.

Same Marine, Different Mission

Since the War on Terror began, the Marine Corps and her sister services have developed new tactics, techniques, and procedures to deal with the unconventional threat that resides on the battlefield of today. While training evolutions such as Mojave Viper have dramatically improved the ability of a Marine unit to succeed in Iraq, SOF has trained from the beginning of their profession to thrive in an unconventional environment.

As stated in FM 7-20, *The Infantry Battalion*, the mission of the infantry battalion is, "...to close with the enemy by means of fire and maneuver to destroy or capture him or repel his assaults by fire, close combat, and counterattack..."⁵ The publication goes on to delineate the types of operations an infantry battalion conducts. Nowhere within the pages of FM 7-20 does it mention the SOF core tasks as outlined in Table 1.0. The Government Accounting Office (GAO) report 07-1030 further delineates SOF from conventional forces by stating:

These [SOF] forces differ from conventional forces in that they are specially organized, trained, and equipped to conduct operations in hostile or politically sensitive

⁵ Headquarters, Department of the Army. *FM 7-20: The Infantry Battalion*. Washington, D.C., 1992. 1-3

environments and they employ military capabilities that are not present in conventional military forces.⁶

The gap between SOF and conventional forces is not wide, but neither is it easily bridged.

From the inception of SF as an organized unit, 34 years elapsed until a separate SF MOS was established.⁷ Few would argue that Army SOF is the premier special operations organization in the world. The Marine Corps should take a lesson from her SOF sister service and take the necessary steps now to create a successful MARSOF warrior today as the Army did twenty-one years ago.

Bang for Your Buck

Not only do the tasks assigned a SOF unit differ greatly from a conventional unit, but also the cost of training SOF personnel vary greatly as well. According to an internal SOCOM study, the cost of training one Green Beret, one Seal, and one Air Force Para-rescue man is approximately \$60K/year, \$100K/year, and \$125K a year respectively.⁸ Additionally, the

⁶ GAO Report 07-1030. 1

⁷ Sine Pari. 7, 16

⁸ United States Special Operations Command. *SOF Training Costs (3 Aug 07) for SOCOM*. Tampa, FL, 2007.

initial training length for each is approximately 20 months, one year, and two years.⁹

Comparatively, a basically trained Marine infantryman spends approximately 52 days learning his MOS before receiving orders to his first battalion.¹⁰ Additionally, the cost associated with training this Marine is a meager \$17,765 when compared to SOF personnel.¹¹

Currently, MARSOC and USMC Manpower have agreed on a five-year tour for all MARSOF operators.¹² This means that a Marine will report to MARSOC, undergo assessment and selection (A&S), and then report to a unit for assignment with approximately four years of operational time remaining. MARSOC, still in its infancy, has not had the necessary time to associate a monetary amount with operator training costs. The command has, however, taken parts of the Army, Navy, and Air Force SOF training and incorporated it with the Marine Corps' process of making force reconnaissance Marines.¹³ While the initial cost of training these Marines will be lower than other SOF services, the amount will be significantly higher than the cost to train a Marine infantryman.

⁹ O'Toole, John Maj. Phone Interview on 4 January 2007.

¹⁰ Delgaudio, Andrew Maj. Email Dated 4 January 2007.

¹¹ Miller, L.F. LtCol, Infantry Training Battalion Cost Analysis Paper

¹² Isocol, Z. J. Captain, USMC. MARSOC Recruiting, Screening, Assessment, and Selection Information Paper. Camp Lejeune, 2007, 2

¹³ GAO Report, 28

In addition to training a Marine receives upon attending A&S, significant time and money is invested after graduation to further the Marine's SOF knowledge and skills. According to MARSOC officials as cited in GAO Report 07-1030:

...a substantial investment of time and resources is required to train personnel in special operations forces units on the critical skills needed to perform special operations mission.¹⁴

This training not only includes the various tactics, techniques, and procedures used by SOF, but in depth cultural and language proficiency as mandated by DOD for all SOF forces.¹⁵ Some of this training requires at least four years operational experience to be considered proficient by SOCOM doctrine.¹⁶

For the Marine and MARSOC, the current agreement creates a problem. As a Marine checks into his unit after A&S, only four years remain before that Marine rotates back to conventional forces or executes orders to a B-billet. At this point in the Marine's SOF career, proficiency in certain SOF skills are just now being achieved. Creating a SOF MOS and career field would allow the Marine to be assigned to an operational unit for the time required to become proficient in his craft.

¹⁴ GAO Report, 24

¹⁵ GAO Report, 24

¹⁶ GAO Report, 24

SOF for Life

A majority of SOF soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines have one thing in common: the desire to serve their country. While the soldier, sailor, and airmen have a secure future as SOF has become the force of choice in conducting the GWOT, the Marine's future career is in jeopardy. Unless a SOF MOS and a career field are established, a Marine that chooses continued service inside SOF will make himself less competitive for promotion and selection to command at the battalion level.

Currently, all services providing forces to SOCOM have a manpower system in place that allows their SOF personnel to remain a SOF operator for the entirety of his career. The Marine Corps, however, views its SOF operators as essentially on a B-billet. A Marine captain, for example, would execute orders to the Command after his first fleet tour. After his five-year tour had ended at MARSOC his opportunity for company or battery command would have elapsed.

While company or battery command is essential for Marines choosing the conventional path to battalion command, the SOF world is different. Captains completing A&S would report to MARSOC and receive command of a platoon or team vice company command in a conventional unit. Instead of filling an executive officer or operations officer billet as a major, SOF Marines

would serve as company commanders. Based on a Marine's performance in those key billets, an individual would be selected to battalion command.

In choosing SOF, that same captain would compete for promotion and command selection in a board filled with senior officers of whom the majority have never served in or worked with SOF. Fewer of those senior officers would have a solid understanding of what a SOF platoon or company commander's responsibilities are while most will have commanded a conventional company during their careers. As these Marines, who have performed well in their responsibilities, go before promotion and command selection boards, an inherent bias will be present and fewer of them will be selected.

All Marines are guided through their careers by a set of established criteria that identify the requirements for advancement.¹⁷ No such model exists for MARSOF. Without it, Marines who desire continued service inside SOF will be judged according to a conventional standard that makes no distinction between their unique skills and those of conventional combat arms.

¹⁷ GAO Report, 23

Counterarguments

▪ More Experience for Conventional Forces

If the agreement with USMC Manpower of five-year tour lengths continues, many of those operators will return to conventional forces and pass on their skills and lessons learned. This will increase the overall knowledge of the Marine Corps.¹⁸ The problem in this shared knowledge is that Marines will miss key billets within the regular forces and be considered less promotable. If a Sergeant goes through A&S after his first fleet tour and spends five years in MARSOC, he will emerge on the other side as a Staff Sergeant (SSgt). Following the traditional model, that SSgt will spend another three to four years on a B-billet considered essential to continued service, and return to a conventional or SOF unit still a SSgt since he did not have any conventional platoon sergeant time while his peers have already been promoted to the next rank.

▪ Less Competitive for Command Selection

Opponents to a SOF MOS and career model will tell you that if a MOS is created, the Marines in that specialty will have less chance to command since the slots for commanders in that organization are fewer. This is simply untrue. As MARSOC continues to evolve, it has modified its structure to include a

¹⁸ GAO Report, 24

3.5 to 1 ratio of company commanders to battalion commanders.¹⁹ Conventional Marine infantry has a 5 to one ratio (6 to 1 if an assistant operations officer is included). The lower ratio of captains to battalion commanders means that there are more command opportunities per captain inside MARSOC.

- **Not Enough Diversity**

Every career Marine comprehends that the pillars to continued service are MOS credibility, diversity, and evaluation. None of these pillars will change with a SOF MOS. Just as Marines in conventional forces rotate out of operational units to assume a B-billet, so will SOF Marines. After an initial tour in SOF, a Marine will be eligible for recruiting, the drill field, joint billets at other SOF headquarters, or service as an instructor at the Marine Special Operations School (MSOS). The additional joint billets will actually make the Marine more diverse instead of less.

Conclusion

The majority of Marines recognize and accept that SOF is, in fact, different from conventional forces. Few in Iraq or Afghanistan who have witnessed SOF on the battlefield would

¹⁹ Nalor, Chris. LtCol, USMC. Phone Interview dated 4 January 2007.

argue that their level of training and education is far different than that of the basically trained rifleman graduating from the School of Infantry. SOF is not better or worse...just different.

There is no quick fix to create a SOF MOS and career progression model for Marines. The Marine Corps, however, is not without historical precedence in pursuing this option. The Army recognized over two decades ago that to be truly successful at special operations, you have to invest in people. Because of the disparity in the missions assigned to SOF versus conventional forces, the amount of money invested in SOF training, and the requirement to ensure that quality Marines are allowed continued service, the Marine Corps should establish a MOS and career progression model for MARSOF operators. This will ensure long-term viability and success on today's battlefield that few would argue is far from conventional.

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