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Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century

Perspectives from the Social Sciences

Edited by
Jessica Glick Turnley, Kobi Michael
and Eyal Ben-Ari



Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century

This book sets out the major social scientific approaches to the study of Special Operations Forces.

Despite consistent downsizing, over the past two decades the armed forces of the industrial democracies have seen a huge growth in Special Operations Forces (SOF). Through increasing numbers of personnel and more frequent deployments, SOF units have wielded considerable influence in conflicts around the world, with senior SOF officers having led major strategic operations. This increased presence and unprecedented expansion for SOF is largely a result of the 'new' kinds of conflicts that have emerged in the 21st century. At the same time, even with this high profile in the military, policy and media and popular cultural arenas, there is relatively little social scientific research on SOF. This volume aims to fill this gap by providing a series of studies and analyses of SOF across the globe, since the end of World War II. Analysing SOF at the micro, mezzo and macro levels provides broad and diverse insights. Moreover, the volume deals with new issues raised by the use of such forces that include emerging modes of civilian control, innovative organizational forms and the special psychological characteristics necessitated by SOF operatives. It concludes with a discussion of a question which continues to be debated in today's militaries: what makes SOF 'special'?

Filling a clear gap in the literature, this book will be of much interest to students of strategic studies, civil–military relations, irregular warfare, security studies, and international relations.

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**Edited by Jessica Glicken Turnley,
Kobi Michael and Eyal Ben-Ari**

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1 Special operations forces (SOF) and social science

An introductory essay

*Jessica Glicken Turnley, Eyal Ben-Ari
and Kobi Michael*

Background

Although conventional militaries have seen consistent cutbacks over the past two decades, the armed forces of the industrial democracies have seen significant growth in the utilization and visibility of special operations forces (SOF) (Robinson, 2013a; Shamir and Ben-Ari, 2016). For example, the 2014 American Quadrennial Defense Review recommended increasing SOF personnel levels, while drawing down troop levels in all four military services (US Department of Defense, 2014; Jackson and Austin, 2009). Likewise the Israeli, British (King, 2009) and French (Ministère de la Défense, 2013) armed forces have seen very significant growth of SOF over the same period. Despite increased visibility and inherently problematic institutional position as a ‘service within services,’ trading on a felt but poorly defined ‘specialness’ and reputations developed by highly competitive recruitment, selection and assessment processes, there has been surprisingly little social science research on SOF – and what exists, focuses almost exclusively on American SOF. This volume addresses both concerns. First, its international contributors illuminate the SOF of several nations including the United States. This emphasis is important, since during the past two decades jihadi terrorism in the Middle East and other parts of the world has been a key reason for the dramatic increase in the use of SOF often in military interventions shared by a number of nations. Second, the chapters in this volume address a wide range of issues at the core of the social scientific study of the armed forces and extend their analyses to SOF. The volume thus intentionally takes on a multidisciplinary approach, since only such a compound perspective can uncover the full social, political and organizational complexities of SOF in the contemporary world.

SOF have been increasingly in evidence in domains ranging from the tactical to the strategic. Through increasing numbers of personnel and more frequent deployments, SOF units have wielded considerable influence in conflicts around the world, and senior SOF officers have led major strategic components in areas where armed struggles take place. General Stanley McChrystal, for example, served as Commander of the American Army Joint Special Operations Command, led the American forces in Afghanistan, and ultimately commanded all Coalition forces within the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Decision makers have frequently placed SOF at the forefront of the fight against terrorism and exploited this role through media reportage of such SOF-led activities as the killing of bin Laden and the hostage rescue operation around Captain Phillips and his crew off Somalia. As a consequence, SOF’s presence in the popular domain has also significantly grown with, for example, starring roles in films such as

Lone Survivor, long exposé-type articles in traditional news media (Mazzetti *et al.*, 2015), a plethora of SOF-related websites, blogs, popular press books about SOF, and physical training programs allegedly based on various SOF regimes. All of these have contributed to the SOF mystique and supported political investments in SOF personnel and materiel. Thus, in many ways SOF have become the public face of today's conflicts, a position only enhancing their effect upon policy.

This increased presence and unprecedented expansion for SOF is largely a result of the 'new' kinds of conflicts that have emerged in the twenty-first century, comprising non-state and state-based actors using terrorist and guerilla tactics, and often interweaving ideologically-based struggles with international criminal activities (Kaldor, 1998; Münkler, 2005). Classic force-on-force, state-based military models of conflict have come to be seen as less useful when confronting highly mobile and ever-changing adversaries in asymmetric conflicts. General Petraeus, successor to General McChrystal as Commander of ISAF, brought this approach to the coalition forces in the Middle East through, among other things, his interest in counterinsurgency evidenced through his authorship of the American counterinsurgency manual (Petraeus, 2007).

Operationally, SOF are seen to be ideally suited to counterinsurgency and missions in asymmetric conflicts that often include combinations of kinetic (direct action) and non-kinetic activities aimed at influencing populations in conflict zones. SOF's kinetic abilities, focusing on high-value or otherwise identified specific targets, support increased political emphasis on 'precision warfare,' addressing public and political concerns about collateral casualties. These targeted killings have also helped provide metrics of seeming progress in conflicts where the end game is unclear and adversaries often blend into local populations. Non-kinetic activities include gathering intelligence, training and advising a variety of national and local armed forces, and preparing and shaping pre-conflict and conflict environments through a strong focus on local engagement with, for example, civil affairs projects like medical aid or public infrastructure such as roads and schools (Kilcullen, 2010).

These kinetic and non-kinetic approaches are supported and enhanced by technological advances making equipment and weapons extremely lightweight. This increases SOF's abilities to work effectively without a long logistics support 'tail,' reducing the cost and risk of exposure of operations. All these factors allow small SOF units to potentially provide a disproportionately large military and political effect, allowing a relatively small investment to yield significant results. SOF's suitability for types of conflicts prevalent today, their seeming ability to minimize the ethical considerations associated with non-military or non-targeted deaths and injuries, the apparently clear metrics targeted killings can provide in an otherwise ambivalent conflict, and the relatively small investment required for these results, thus make SOF attractive to policy makers. SOF often appear as if they are used as a 'silver bullet,' deployed instead of more costly conventional military actions and when those actions fail.

At the same time however, even with this high profile in the military, policy, media, and popular cultural arenas, there is relatively little social scientific research on SOF, and what little there is focuses almost exclusively on the American SOF community (Simons, 1997; Turnley, 2008). This gap in research exists despite the fact that the institutionally problematic position of SOF in the armed forces raises fascinating issues for social scientific research. For example, what makes SOF 'special' is a topic of continued debate and has been addressed from the perspective of military theory (Kiras, 2006; Spulak, 2007; Yarger,

2013), but it is largely absent in the social sciences. Indeed, SOF pose a host of puzzles from the perspective of previous social scientific studies of the military. Although part of the armed forces, SOF inhabit rather autonomous spaces within them. Although seldom a separate 'service', like the army or the navy, SOF usually have their own recruitment systems and budgets. With relatively flat internal power structures and often direct access to decision makers – unlike their counterparts in the conventional military – enlisted SOF operators and junior officers can wield power disproportionate to their formal military position. Again, while these circumstances raise questions about civilian institutional control of SOF, there are few investigations into the political oversight and monitoring of such forces by elected officials.

Positioning and aims

The distinctiveness of our volume lies in how it differs from previous studies of SOF. The first and largest group of earlier studies includes historical, journalistic and biographical texts (Boot, 2013; Marquis, 1997; Naylor, 2015; Robinson, 2013b; Seaman, 2013; Tucker and Lamb, 2007). These studies trace the rise of SOF from the establishment of the British commando units during World War Two (precursors to the Special Air Service) and subsequent deployment in conflicts around the world (Malaya and Aden). Later studies focused on the American 'Green Berets' and their actions in Vietnam and other countries. Although their focus is heavily American and British, these studies provide useful historic and contextual information. As such, and as the chapters in this volume show, these accounts form a good basis for comparative analysis and provide data to contextualize individual studies.

The second array of studies deals with initial attempts to look at the political control of SOF (Cohen, 1978; Rothstein, 2006; Vandenbroucke, 1993). However, these studies tend to focus on formal institutional structures of control, and again almost exclusively consider American SOF. This volume, by contrast, extends the study of civilian control of SOF by looking both at institutional *and* extra-institutional means (including the media and producers of popular culture). It further broadens previous analyses by asking whether models of civilian control of the military applied to the regular forces are appropriate for SOF, and introduces popular culture as a policy-shaping tool. Additionally, this volume looks inside SOF to illustrate how civilian control is actualized by forces on the ground, examining both formal and informal internal structures in these units.

The third kind of investigations has addressed questions about how SOF are utilized. Most writings within this group are policy-oriented and include prescriptions for how to use SOF to achieve operational or strategic ends (Horn, Taillon and Last, 2004; Kiras, 2006; Robinson, 2012). This volume does not directly address this dimension of policy, but provides sound empirical and analytical bases shedding light on such questions. In addition, it extends questions about policy to the internal social composition and organizational structures of SOF.

The fourth cluster of analyses addresses the 'new' forms of warfare, and the role of SOF in prosecuting it (Fishel and Manwaring, 2006; House, 2001; King, 2013; Münkler, 2005; Shaw, 2005). These studies include investigations about the causes and dynamics of current-day conflicts and how they differ from many of the inter-state wars of the twentieth century. SOF, however, are only tangential to their scholarly focus. This volume by contrast, focuses specifically on how SOF have become an integral part of current-day conflicts.

Against this background, this volume aims to do three things. First, it explores many distinctive features of SOF in terms of classic social scientific questions about the armed forces while adding new issues for analysis. To emphasize, this is not a book about doctrine or military theory nor is it a handbook providing advice about how to improve the effectiveness of SOF. In addition, as explained above, this volume does not provide a historical overview of the development of SOF. Rather, using the concepts and arguments developed primarily in political science, sociology, anthropology and psychology, the contributions offer empirically-based studies that broaden our understanding of SOF and the military in general. Similarly, contributors to this volume take a critical stance towards SOF and their use. Rather than repeating flattering comments made by many external commentators, most chapters underscore that SOF *do not* provide some kind of sure-fire solution to current-day security problems. Instead, authors argue that only a grounded understanding of SOF can uncover what they are able to achieve, and, no less important, show how and why many decision makers have come to see SOF as the primary means to meet present-day challenges. Similarly, it is only on the basis of such analyses that we can comprehend how SOF and their various promoters and patrons have generated rather unrealistic public expectations about their actual and potential achievements.

Second, our volume extends the scope of analysis to non-American SOF communities in eight different countries (the United States, the United Kingdom, Israel, the Netherlands, Belgium, Canada, Sweden, and Norway) and often refers to units in other countries. The importance of widening the scope beyond the American and, to a degree, the British cases cannot be overemphasized. Just a look outside the American case can show the commonalities *and* differences among SOF in different contexts. In fact, such a view reveals that the very designation 'special' in SOF is itself dependent on national context. Such a perspective calls attention to the fact that in the United States the term refers to a variety of forces doing different things lumped together for bureaucratic reasons. Indeed as Anna Simons (personal communication) points out, in the United States 'SOF' glosses over profound differences among units/capabilities. At the same time, in the rest of the world, SOF converge around a much narrower model. Although Norway, the Netherlands, and Israel are marked by differences between maritime and ground SOF, when compared with the American case where civil affairs and psychological operations fall under the SOF umbrella, it can be argued that the SOF of other countries tend to be much more homogeneous. This point is also significant since American SOF work with SOF from other countries with their own capabilities and social and organizational characteristics. As such we hope the volume opens up new avenues for understanding especially for readers from the American context.

Third, the volume intentionally offers a multidisciplinary array of studies to cover the study of SOF from the macro (national and global) level, through the mezzo level of the organizational dynamics of SOF, down to the micro level of the psychological characteristics of individual operator. Accordingly, contributors to this volume include sociologists, political scientists, international relations scholars, anthropologists, psychologists and social psychologists, historians and experts in war studies. In fact because the social scientific study of the armed forces already has a rather large and sophisticated set of theories and methodologies, the chapters explicitly use existing ideas and extend and develop them in relation to SOF.

The chapters

The logic of the volume is the following: the broad integrative pieces (this introduction and the final chapter) frame the specific chapters. The chapters themselves can be likened to a line leading from the broad historical macro level down to the level of the individual SOF operators through the mezzo level of the units themselves. Thus we use the division into these three levels as an analytic strategy to map the clusters of issues addressed in the chapters (and to an extent addressed in the past elsewhere). This kind of analytic strategy allows us and the contributors to further ask questions about the issues that cross-cut the three levels.

Part I (Chapters 2 to 4) contextualizes SOF by charting out and analyzing the political and social worlds within which these forces operate. The core issues dealt with in Part II (Chapters 5 and 6) cover political control of SOF and the unique mechanisms needed for their oversight, relations between the new conflicts and use of such forces, and how public representations of SOF are created and used by actors. The central concerns of Part III (Chapters 7 to 12) are the particular internal social and organizational dynamics of SOF and their relations to the wider military institution and other units. Part IV (Chapters 13 to 16) deals with the organizational innovation and entrepreneurship marking SOF. Part V (Chapters 17 and 18) involves the individual level of SOF operatives and the unique psychological traits required of, and the training important for, the forging of SOF operatives. These psychological and social psychological studies apply questions that have been applied to other military forces in complex and stressful environments. Chapters 19 and 20, Part VI, integrate the issues raised by the volume as a whole and by the individual chapters dealing with the 'specialness' of SOF and setting out a social scientific agenda for their study.

Let us move on to the individual chapters. In Chapter 2, Bernd Horn, in his contribution *The evolution of SOF and the rise of SOF power*, provides the backdrop to the volume by charting out the move of SOF from the fringe of military institutions to their present position of power. Horn addresses the current strategic relevance and salience of SOF through what he calls SOF Power, the strategic effect SOF can achieve through the exercise of a wide range of specialized military and paramilitary activities supporting national security and foreign policy objectives. Horn argues that SOF derive their 'power' from their ability to provide governments with specific capabilities (i.e. exceptional personnel and a wide spectrum of operational options) and precision effects at a relatively low cost.

In Chapter 3, *The special operations forces mosaic: a portrait for discussion*, Emily Spencer considers SOF's public representations through a media studies approach. She introduces us to the increased presence of SOF in popular culture in the post-9/11 era, including tell-all books written by SOF operators, Hollywood movies, and major US network television shows. By examining varying yet intermingled images of SOF held by stakeholders – SOF practitioners, conventional force members, government officials, the media, Hollywood and the public – Spencer suggests elements combining into a mosaic within popular culture. While individual pieces of this mosaic may not offer any singular truth as to who, or what, SOF are, collectively they underscore key elements of the SOF operator. From the perspective of the social sciences, understanding how SOF appear in popular culture aids scholars in better understanding how SOF are used politically and strategically, that is, how different actors may utilize parts of this mosaic to further their own aims.

In Chapter 4, Jessica Glicken Turnley – in *Warrior-diplomats and ungoverned spaces: narratives of possibilities* – focuses on relations between SOF and contemporary conflicts through a

textual analysis of American policy documents. She argues that the term, ‘ungoverned spaces,’ prominent in American national security discourse since the 11 September 2001 attacks, created a strategic justification for using American SOF. If the government can argue that the adversary (terrorists) operate from spaces that are not (effectively) governed by any state, then returning governance to these areas is an important part of an effective counterterrorism strategy. Turnley argues that the intersection of danger and diplomacy in these spaces, contextualized by a counterterrorism mission, makes action in ungoverned spaces a natural assignment for SOF. In terms of the study of SOF, Turnley utilizes anthropological tools to uncover the discursive basis and practices through which the new conflicts are defined and acted upon.

In Part II, Kobi Michael and James Kiras offer analyses of one of the most important issues that has preoccupied political scholars of the armed forces – civilian control of armed force – and suggest that current civil–military relations theory is lacking in regard to SOF.

In Chapter 5, *Special operations forces as the ‘silver bullet’: strategic helplessness and weakened civilian control*, Michael provides an introduction to civil–military relations as it relates to SOF by pointing out that, when successful, special operations provide an immediate sense of impressive and measurable success. However, these ‘successes’ are often only an illusion and fade quickly. Michael describes how the impressive growth and use of SOF has raised socio-ethical and strategic dilemmas. Standard forms of civilian control have built-in weaknesses when applied to SOF, and the uniqueness of SOF requires special augmented mechanisms of civilian control, in the absence of which, there is a likelihood that decision makers will bypass existing oversight.

In Chapter 6, *‘Unintended acceleration’: the problematique of civil–military relations of special operations forces in the American context*, Kiras also argues that a modified civil–military relations theory is necessary given the unique place SOF occupy in the national security apparatus. He surveys predominant civil–military relations and makes a case for why special operations forces are sufficiently different and outside existing evaluative frameworks to offer a modified civil–military framework based on a principal-agent approach. He suggests that civilian control over special operations is subject to a paradox: because of their characteristics, instead of shirking, SOF will seek to exceed tasks given them. The nature of the agent, in this case, creates both a working and monitoring problem for the principal. For Kiras, this monitoring problem comprises the fundamental *problematique* of SOF within civil–military relations. He concludes by proposing a different model of control based on the concepts of acceding to or exceeding decision makers’ authority.

The chapters in Part III explore the internal social and organizational dynamics of SOF. It is here that we get glimpses into the SOF of several industrialized nations, seeing similarities as much as differences. Unlike the theoretical or textual approaches of the chapters in the first section, these chapters are based on primary data.

A number of studies have focused on the distinct organizational dynamics of American SOF (Simons, 1998; Turnley, 2008), which, when compared to the regular forces, provide them with unique forms of effective action. Tone Danielsen’s piece on the Norwegian Naval Special Operations Commando (the MJK), Chapter 7, *‘Seaman’s Council’: A SOFish way of making decisions*, extends this line of research. She uses rich ethnographic data to provide insights into their egalitarian and hierarchical decision-making processes. Ethnographic vignettes illustrate how collective decision-making in ‘Seamen’s Councils’ is practiced today in the Norwegian naval commandos, although similar practices are not common in the conventional military. She describes how operators learn the local

discourses, practices and meanings of MJK through institutional apprenticeship, and learn when and how to appropriately use their SOFish approaches. As such, she also contributes to scholarly understanding of how SOF around the world develop a unique sub-culture that is not only distinct from, but in many ways opposed to, that of the regulars.

Using an Israeli case, the next contribution develops these issues by asking how SOF join other units to achieve combined action. In Chapter 8, Uzi Ben-Shalom and Yuval Tsur, in their *Service cultures and collective military action: successful joint operations by the Israeli Air Force and special operations forces*, use interview data to analyze levels of cooperation between SOF and elements of the Israel Defense Force. They suggest that cooperation between Israeli SOF and the Israeli Air Force is far more successful and smooth than between the Air Force and other regular forces. Analysis of interviews with SOF commanders from SOF, air, and ground forces finds that differences in the scripts of successful joint operations are at the root of different levels of cooperation. Successful cooperation thus depends on shared scripts and routines that are manifestations of a deep-rooted service culture. They further argue that their conclusions are applicable to the militaries of other nations as well as the IDF.

In Chapter 9, Wout Jansen and Joseph Soeters' *Dutch Forward Air Controllers in Uruzgan: aspects of cooperation, courage, responsibility, legitimacy and... people getting killed* raises one of the most important issues in the study of the armed forces: their specialization in the management and handling of organized violence (Boene, 1990). This chapter describes the experiences of Dutch Forward Air Controllers (FACs) during deployment with the ISAF mission in Afghanistan between 2006 and 2010. Based on interviews with FACs, pilots, and ground force commanders, the authors discuss the world of this elite group of specialists with many characteristics similar to US SOF, and classified as SOF in many countries outside America. Referring to existing theory on violence and killing and earlier research on snipers, their contribution analyzes the experiences of Dutch FACs and their (sometimes unpleasant) feelings after wielding destructive armed force. The authors expand their analysis to organizational questions by investigating how differences in service culture frame the strict procedural way in which the Dutch FACs conduct their work through cooperation between themselves and Marine Corps units and Air Force pilots. They conclude by showing how interference by high-ranking commanders influences trust amongst FACs during missions.

The next chapters further broaden the comparative and organizational focus of the volume. In Chapter 10, *In search of intelligence: the Dutch Special Forces in Mali*, Sebastian Rietjens and Jelle Zomer analyze a taskforce of ninety Dutch SOF operators deployed to the UN mission in Mali in 2014 to gather intelligence through special reconnaissance. Using the intelligence cycle as a frame of reference, they investigate how the taskforce collected, analyzed and disseminated intelligence. Throughout the cycle, cross-cultural competencies and information sharing between SOF and other units were of great importance. However, while the SOF mastered cultural abilities, they lacked language skills and cultural knowledge of the conflict, the history of Mali and ethnic sensitivities. This situation limited their effectiveness, since they were not fully able to unravel the dynamics of the environment and address the information requirements they were tasked with. The authors conclude that obtaining situational awareness in a culturally complex environment such as Mali is extremely difficult.

Delphine Resteigne's work on the Belgian Special Forces explores the significant issue of separation between SOF and conventional military units (Horn, 2004). Chapter 11,

Aiming to punch above their weight: the Belgian Special Forces, describes the particularities of Belgian SOF and their socialization – or specialization – process. Resteigne evokes the seductiveness of SOF and points out that these high-status units have their own specific organizational culture based on secrecy and elitism – often preventing them from sharing information and building trust with members of the out-group (the rest of the military) and other partners. She also explains how the integration of SOF with national and international actors is a necessary prerequisite for efficient use of their capacities in current conflicts. This chapter is a useful introduction to the complexities of the military institution writ large, and the difficulties SOF's lauded 'specialness' may impose upon them and others.

Chapter 12, by Deborah Gibbons, Alan Nelson and Jim Suchan – *Integrating men and women within Naval Special Warfare combat teams* – should be read against the background of the challenges and potential benefits of increasing diversity in contemporary militaries by focusing on the integration of women with men in US Naval Special Warfare. Changes in United States' policy leading to required inclusion of women in combat units and specifically in SOF have raised questions about the effectiveness of integration. In SOF, concern has focused particularly on impacts on team cohesion and performance. The authors identify strengths women bring to SOF and explore ways to leverage those strengths. Data was gathered through interviews with Naval Special Warfare members and others who have relevant experience or expertise. The chapter outlines concerns expressed during the interviews, summarizes them and charts the potential benefits and solutions identified by the interviewees.

In Chapter 13, *The self and the mirror: institutional tensions and Canadian Special Operations Forces*, Eric Ouellet examines the institutional dynamics of the Canadian SOF, although, as in most chapters on particular nations, there is much that is generalizable here. Based on data gathered from students during his work as a professor at the Canadian Forces College (the joint staff and war college), his study illuminates the internal world of SOF. Ouellet's institutional analysis sheds light on the organizational dynamics of the Canadian SOF. He underscores three inter-related institutional tensions shaping the perception of SOF's legitimacy within the armed forces: the regulative difficulties linked to perceptions that SOF do not 'play by the book' while everybody else is expected to do so; how secrecy creates various cognitive distortions about SOF among the rest of the armed forces; and how the notion of being an 'elite' may actually impede joint action with other forces.

The next three chapters belong to an established arena in the study of the military, innovation (Murray and Millet, 1998), but extend it to the newly emerging field of entrepreneurship and innovation in SOF (following Pedahzur, 2016). Zeev Drory, Eyal Lewin and Eyal Ben-Ari in Chapter 14, *Special forces, ethos and technology: the case of Israel's Haruv Reconnaissance Unit*, take us inside one of Israel's elite units, the Haruv Unit (Sayeret Haruv), that existed between 1966 and 1974. It specialized in anti-terrorism, counter-terrorism and commando missions. The authors use this case to illustrate how SOF serve as semi-independent laboratories, with links to strategic-level decision makers and external contractors, allowing them to develop new technologies and practices that later spread to the broader force. The authors also use Sayeret Haruv to show the emergence of a unit reputation bolstered by rituals and symbols denoting its exclusiveness and thereby leading to its rise as an icon in popular culture. While marked by some features peculiar to the Israeli case, there is much that can be applied across militaries – particularly the idea of SOF as arenas for innovation.

In Chapter 15, *Organizational entrepreneurship and special forces: the Israeli Helicopter Squadron and the General Staff Reconnaissance Unit (Matkal)*, Lior Brichta and Eyal Ben-Ari use the lens of institutional entrepreneurship to explain the simultaneous emergence, bottom-up, of two Israeli SOF units, Sayeret Matkal and Helicopter Squadron 124. Both were established by highly entrepreneurial individuals who were rather junior officers who did not fit the usual mold of the IDF. These individuals invented the ‘necessity’ of their respective units and used each other as allies and amplifiers of operational capacities. Again, while there are some specifics that are limited to the IDF, examples of institutional entrepreneurs, identifying a need not covered by the military and mobilizing social networks and other resources to establish new units, and then successfully portraying them as suitable for meeting strategic and operational challenges, can be found in other national contexts.

In Chapter 16, *The diffusion of innovation: SOF in Iraq*, Rebecca Jensen explains that the conflict following the 2003 invasion of Iraq presented US forces with the unexpected on a number of levels, from the widespread use of improvised explosive devices to the rise of insurgency in the wake of the defeat of the Iraqi army. Adaptation to the unexpected was uneven, with some elements of the military recognizing and meeting new challenges, and others remaining locked in previous mindsets. The experience of SOF in Iraq provides an example of strategic adaptation in which existing capabilities were adapted to new threats and new approaches were created and implemented. The chapter examines theory on military change to identify elements facilitating wartime innovation and adaptation. Major factors that enabled SOF to adapt include an external environment requiring change, individual leaders with ability and willingness to bridge the military and civilian policy worlds, support for change at the most senior levels of the administration, and the presence of many characteristics of learning organizations.

Part V focuses directly on the micro level of analysis to connect the study of SOF to a long-standing interest of social sciences in the motivation, selection and training of soldiers (Bartone *et al.*, 2008). Marcus Börjesson, Johan Österberg and Ann Enander’s Chapter 17, *Profiling the Swedish Ranger: perception of motivation, profession and risk and safety issues*, is an explorative study examining Swedish Rangers as a force with many of the attributes of SOF. They are the army’s spearhead for gathering information behind enemy lines and comprise of soldiers who are specially selected, highly trained and specially equipped. As a result, these soldiers can operate in contexts and confront tasks that conventional military units cannot. From a psychological perspective, it is of key interest to understand their motivations to seek a high-risk profession and their perceptions of their roles. This study, accordingly, examines three main questions: What motivates these troops? How do they view their armed profession? What are their attitudes towards risk and safety? Results show that there are different sets of motivations for joining the Swedish Rangers, from helping people in need to personal development. The Rangers identified themselves as both peacekeepers and warriors, and scored high on risk propensity in combination with a more skeptical view of safety. The authors suggest that future studies should address dual identities among SOF to examine how military identities and perceptions regarding risk and safety are related to actual risk behaviors.

Chapter 18, by Irina Goldenberg and Mathieu Saindon, *The resilience of SOF personnel*, explains that SOF are highly-trained military units capable of operations in unstructured and ambiguous environments using unconventional military tactics. Although all military missions are difficult and potentially dangerous, missions assigned to SOF units tend to be particularly demanding, and often take place in hostile, uncertain, and complex

environments. This chapter reviews research on the mental and psychological resilience of SOF personnel, a theme of central concern for the armed forces. The authors compare the resilience and health outcomes of SOF and non-SOF personnel, and the factors contributing to these differences. Despite the demands placed on them, SOF operators report a lower incidence of mental health concerns and greater resiliency than non-SOF personnel. It appears that the highly-competitive selection system selects individuals best prepared for the challenges associated with SOF, and ensures graduates are equipped with the personal characteristics enabling them to cope with a variety of stressors. Moreover, their rigorous training acts as a further selection mechanism and serves to bolster and develop them. Finally, operators' satisfaction with their careers, and support received from the military and their units, may act as protective factors against operational stressors.

Part VI looks at another issue long at the core of work on the military: relations between the organizational make-up and actions of armed units and the armed conflict in which they are involved. Accordingly, these contributions link studies about current-day conflicts to questions about the special forms and actions that SOF bring to them. Chapter 19 by Anthony King, *What is special about special operations forces?*, introduces the institutionally problematic nature of SOF, focusing on the question of their purported 'specialness.' He argues that the distinctive status of SOF lies not in capabilities but in institutional location. He points out that since the 1970s, SOF have enjoyed a privileged location in the defense complex, occupying a position between ministries of defense and the armed forces, the intelligence services and government itself. At the same time, SOF are positioned in a transnational hierarchy of SOF. It is this location in both domestic and international structures that ultimately makes them special, and thus intimately linked to the international, interagency, and inter-organizational actions characterizing the 'New Wars'. In this way, the chapter also echoes many questions other contributors raise about the cooperation between SOF and other organizations.

Chapter 20, the concluding chapter by Eyal Ben-Ari, Jessica Glicklen Turnley, and Kobi Michael, *A social scientific agenda for the study of special operations forces*, sets out an agenda for the social scientific study of SOF. As it carefully explains, rather than adding another voice to debates about definitions of SOF, from a social scientific point of view it may be fruitful to suggest a Weberian ideal type of such units. The ideal type – or hypothetical concept – is not an ideal to be aspired to but an analytical tool that, when used by social scientists as a standard of comparison, enables scholars to see aspects of the real world in a clearer, more systematic way. The ideal type of SOF has three advantages. First, it allows scholars to ask questions from the micro-individual and small group level, through the mezzo level of organizational dynamics and on to macro-sociological level. Consequently, scholars can examine cases as diverging more or less from the ideal type with 'SOF-like' capabilities and to hypothesize about the reasons for these divergences. Second, the ideal type can be linked to questions about the historical circumstances leading to the expansion of SOF in many of the industrial democracies. Third, the construct facilitates systematic comparisons between different SOF (within and between national contexts) and between the ideal type of SOF and the ideal types of 'regulars', private security companies or, indeed, terror groups.

Conclusion

This volume provides a unique introduction to SOF worldwide that have heretofore been left virtually untreated in the social science literature. We claim that SOF are different

enough to command their own field of research and that some of SOF's biggest challenges may not be on the battlefield but within their own military institutions. Furthermore, it becomes apparent that SOF, if used effectively, can be a strong agent for change, again, both within their own militaries as well as within in the international community. As the force of choice for the conflicts of the twenty-first century, SOF will continue to maintain a high profile in arenas ranging from policy to popular culture. The studies in this volume are a step towards a better understanding of what is becoming an ever more visible institution on the world stage.

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Part I

The emergence of special operations forces



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2 The evolution of SOF and the rise of SOF Power¹

Bernd Horn

The military has always been a key instrument of national power. Its strategic utility for defending the nation and furthering the national interest through the use of direct military force, or by assisting friends, allies, coalitions and/or international organizations, has earned it a voice in national security policy formulation and implementation. The three traditional services – the Navy, Army and Air Force – have for a long time been recognized as key players in this strategic context. Special operations forces (SOF), however, do not share this long history.²

Historically, SOF have always filled a gap in times of crisis. They have been relied on, due to their innovation and pragmatic approach to operational challenges, to solve new and unexpected events or buy time for the larger conventional force to adapt and respond. However, on completion of the crisis, SOF have normally been shunted to the margins of their national military institutions.

Central to this marginalization of SOF has often been the lack of understanding of SOF's strategic utility. For the three services, the concept and theoretical framework of maritime, land and air power are well established, articulated and promulgated. Furthermore, the recognized domains for military operations – maritime, land, air, space and cyber space – similarly do not correlate uniquely to SOF. As a result, SOF's strategic utility and relevance has often been overshadowed by the larger establishment and the traditional services.

Notably, this state of affairs has changed. As a result of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York on 11 September 2001 (9/11) and the subsequent military campaigns across the globe, as well as the ambiguous, complex and volatile security environment, SOF have become a predominant military asset for national governments. This reality has led renowned strategist, Colin Gray (1996), to conclude that “special operations forces are a national grand-strategic asset: they are a tool of statecraft that can be employed quite surgically in support of diplomacy, of foreign assistance (of several kinds), as a vital adjunct to regular military forces, or as an independent weapon” (p.149).

In fact, the new millennium has proven Gray correct, and it has changed much of the old paradigm. The ascendancy of SOF in the post-9/11 security environment, where SOF have played key roles in the counter-insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as in the ‘war on terror,’ has caused scholars, military analysts and practitioners to generate new concepts to describe SOF's strategic relevance and saliency, namely, ‘Force of Choice’ and ‘SOF Power.’

In particular, the concept of SOF Power refers to the strategic effect SOF can achieve through the exercise of a wide range of specialized military and paramilitary activities

that support national security and foreign policy objectives. It also reflects an evolution in the contemporary operating environment (COE) and the critical role that SOF play within it. In essence, SOF have derived their 'power' from their ability to provide their governments with specific capabilities (i.e. very well-trained and capable personnel, and a wide spectrum of operational options) as well as precision effects, at a relatively low cost (i.e. in terms of fiscal expenditure and potential national commitment, as well as casualties, which is especially important in response to the sensitivity of Western societies with regard to the loss of life). As a result, SOF have evolved from the fringe of acceptance in military institutions to a place of prominence.

The evolution of SOF

It is generally accepted that the birth of modern SOF occurred during the Second World War. In this context, SOF was born in crisis from a position of weakness. In the immediate aftermath of the early German victories, the Allies found themselves devoid of major equipment, of questionable military strength, operating on defunct doctrine and not surprisingly on the defensive throughout the world. Nonetheless, the combative British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, gave direction that action be taken by "specially trained troops of the hunter class" to create a reign of terror along the coast of Occupied Europe based on the 'butcher and bolt' principle, scant days after the dramatic withdrawal from Dunkirk. Churchill realized that this offensive capability, as limited as it might have been, would be a tonic to public morale, maintain the Allied initiative, force the Germans to dedicate resources to the defense, and foment an offensive spirit in the military (Horn, 2005). And so, the ground was prepared for the birth, if not near explosion, of modern SOF.

The idea of specially organized and specially trained units, made up of intrepid individuals who reveled in challenging and highly dangerous small unit action that called forth innovation, individualism and independent action became more widely accepted, or at least tolerated, in an institution known for its conservatism and traditionalism. However, this limited, if not conditional acceptance existed largely only at the beginning of the war. During this chaotic period of despair, a few desperate men were able to fill a void – an ability to strike out from a position of seeming impotence. As such, special units were raised to cover for weakness, as well as to meet specific needs that conventional forces were seen as too unwieldy or poorly trained to accomplish.

Arguably, these SOF achieved great success. They tied down hundreds of thousands of enemy troops for defensive tasks; captured strategic materials such as German Würzburg radar components and enigma encryption equipment; destroyed enemy material (e.g. aircraft, ships, locomotives and railway cars) and infrastructure (e.g. factories, bridges, rail lines); shut down the German atomic weapon program; and raised, trained and equipped, as well as in some instances led, secret armies and resistance networks.³

Despite the accomplishments of Allied SOF, however, as the tide of the war shifted in 1942, so too did the emphasis of these specialist forces. Once the large conventional armies were established in Europe, particularly after the Normandy campaign in the summer of 1944, SOF overall were largely ignored and forgotten and relegated to the status of a nuisance to 'real soldiering.' Most conventional generals bridled at the thought of SOF, who were seen as aberrations, if not an embarrassment to professional soldiering. "To the orthodox, traditional soldier," Colonel Aaron Bank (1986), a founding member

of US Special Forces, explained, "it [SOF] was something slimy, underhanded, illegal, and ungentlemanly. It did not fit in the honor code of that profession of arms" (p.147). Predictably, most, if not all, SOF organizations were either disbanded or relegated to reserve status at the end of the war.

The post-war era did not provide the war-weary and debt-ridden governments or their publics with a prolonged period of peace and tranquility. The onset of the Cold War in 1948 necessitated the creation of large peacetime standing armies for Western nations. SOF, however, did not figure large in these organizations. The fact that the seemingly aggressive and very belligerent Soviet Union maintained a buffer of occupied territories and peoples between itself and the West, however, clearly presented an opportunity for unconventional warfare (UW).⁴ This prospect was not lost on some strategic planners, and as a result, SOF capability was once again mobilized, albeit in a very small effort due to institutional opposition, to fill this specialized requirement. The British and American examples provide a case in point. At the end of the war, the British Special Air Service (SAS) was transformed into a Territorial Army unit – 21st SAS Regiment (Artists) (Connor, 1998, pp.13–14; Kemp, 2001, pp.37–41). Their role was to provide lay-back patrols that would stay hidden as the Soviet forces swept by and then report on enemy movements and troop concentrations. The Americans resurrected their SOF capability in the same direction – strategic reconnaissance and UW (Adams, 1998, pp.47, 56; Simpson III, 1985, p. 35).

But this European focus, set in the context of a high-intensity conventional war akin to that of the Second World War, was somewhat misplaced. Indeed, the nature of conflict took on a completely different face. During the Cold War, wars of nationalism and communist insurgency, two concepts that were often not always properly delineated by the West, ushered in a period frequently referred to as the savage wars of peace. Once again, the complex nature of such conflicts, which were of long duration, and which required political and not simply military solutions, and which were normally conducted in complex terrain that provided cover, concealment and protection for the less heavily armed and equipped insurgents, overwhelmed the conventional capability. Regular soldiers were often unaccustomed to operating in hostile environments for prolonged periods of time. In addition, they had neither the training, nor the innovative, adaptable tactics or agility of thought to counter and defeat elusive, wily insurgents.

To the British, this lack of capability became evident during the Malaya Emergency from 1948 to 1960. The immediate unwieldy, unsophisticated and limited response of conventional forces failed to destroy the guerillas or increase the level of security within the country. As a result, the British resurrected the SAS, in the form of the Malayan Scouts (SAS) as a means to penetrate the jungle and chase down the guerillas (Geraghty, 1982, pp.23–39; Kemp, 2001, pp.15–35).

The success of the SAS in Malaya, combined with the growing realization that SOF, when employed correctly, revealed a 'comparatively low cost in lives set against results achieved' provided a new lease on life for SOF. Quite simply, frugal bureaucrats realized that SOF provided an inexpensive means of waging war against insurgents in distant jungles and deserts, often largely on their own. Savings realized by replacing generic capability backed with quantity, with specific skill sets reinforced by quality, became an attractive lure. Therefore, SOF began to evolve once again into a force that was concentrated on UW, counterinsurgency and foreign internal defense (FID).⁵ For example, SOF were utilized by a myriad of nations during low-level conflict in Malaya, Oman, Brunei, Borneo, Aden, Indo-China, Algeria, Korea and Chad, to name but a few.

But once again, despite the arguable success of SOF during this period, they were never fully accepted by the larger institution. Ironically, the very attributes that furnished SOF with its greatest strength also generated enmity from the conventional forces. The ability to respond to, and outwit, their adversaries, as well as endure austere and hostile environments inherently required unconventional tactics, an independence of thought and initiative by the operators, mental agility, specialized training, as well as a level of aggressiveness, fitness and general toughness that exceeded that found in regular army units. Quite simply, these were the secrets to SOF success.

However, their achievements continued to generate antagonism and jealousy between themselves and the conventional military (Horn, 2007). But ironically, it also produced the perception of a silver bullet. For instance, the eventual American involvement in Vietnam witnessed another explosion of SOF-type units as a component of the American response to the escalating and complex nature of the war. The conflict in Vietnam soon stymied conventional military commanders. As unique tasks such as UW, long-range reconnaissance, interdiction and riverine operations emerged in the politically restrictive and environmentally hostile theatre of operations, new SOF units were created, or existing ones expanded exponentially, to address the requirement.

The dramatic growth of SOF during this period was reflected in the fact that all three American services were getting into the SOF business. Unfortunately, the sudden spike in demand was met in many cases by lowering selection standards, where in fact they existed, which inevitably led to a diminution of the overall standard of individuals serving in those units. In theatre, the SOF culture of lax discipline and deportment, as well as 'unconventional' tactics, exacerbated by the type of inexperienced, and often immature, individuals who were now serving in SOF, created difficulties. Rightly or wrongly, the reputation of SOF suffered. They became viewed by the conventional military, as well as by much of the public, as largely a collection of ill-disciplined cowboys and soldiers of questionable quality and planning ability who were running amok without adequate control mechanisms.

This legacy haunted the special operators for decades. Nonetheless, SOF demonstrated, as it had always done, that it was in fact a force multiplier and a very economical tool. The Civil Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) program, funded by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) but staffed by special forces (SF) soldiers, as well as Special Operations Group (SOG) operations, for example, proved to be successful (Plaster, 1997; Gillespie, 2011; Moyer, 2007, p. 37; Nagl, 2005, p. 18–129; Boot, 2013, p. 419; Moore, 1965, pp. 99–119). Regardless, SOF units were still, if not increasingly, marginalized by the mainstream army.

A resurgence of SOF

Despite the overwhelming institutional prejudice, crisis forced conventional-minded military commanders to turn to SOF yet again. A fundamental shift in the threat picture to Western industrialized nations erupted in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and provided SOF with another area of specialization. Terrorism became recognized as a significant 'new' menace. Bombings, kidnapping, murders, and the hijacking of commercial aircraft seemingly exploded, and not just in the Middle East. European countries were thrust into a state of violence as both home-grown and international terrorists waged a relentless war that recognized no borders or limits. The murder of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Olympics in Munich, West Germany became one of the defining images of the crisis (Harclerode, 2000; Netanyahu, 1995).