SOF 2030

An NPS Defense Analysis Seminar Report

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In spring 2011, an office in the Pentagon presented 14 of us with the opportunity to address “SOF 2030” – what should decision makers be thinking about today in order to prepare SOF for 2030?

Members of our group included 4 SEALs; 4 Special Forces officers; 1 Special Forces Warrant Officer; 1 Combat Controller; 1 Marine; 1 Air Force pilot (who’s flown both B-1s and Predators); and an Electronic Warfare Weapons School graduate. These 13 graduate students brought their considerable tactical and operator-level experience to bear: 82 deployments since 9/11. That includes 30 OEF deployments and 22 OIF deployments, along with others to SOUTHCOM, PACOM, and elsewhere.

Our ‘deliverable’ was a 50 minute-long unclassified briefing. We did not venture into the specifics of certain DoD programs (and won’t here). We also did not presume to offer a singular set of solutions to decision makers. Instead, we concentrated on the kinds of choices current operators hope decision makers will consider, if for no other reason than to highlight what requires fixing from operators’ perspective.

Consequently, we spent a lot of time wrestling with how SOF 2011 could, and arguably should, be enhanced and re-oriented to guarantee the best possible SOF for 2030. With this approach SOF would build on its core competencies.

But we also took a second approach and explored the idea of “shedding.” With shedding, SOF would develop cutting edge capabilities and hand off as many of these as possible to the General Purpose Forces (GPF).

Irregular Warfare (IW) drew much of our attention because we considered the fixes to the Direct Action (DA) side of the house to be (perhaps not uncoincidentally) much more straightforward than those required to build proficient 21st century IW forces. Our takeaway for DA? Concentrate on retention. Our takeaways for IW? Recruitment, assessment, and selection need to be improved; the pool needs to be broadened; SF, in particular, needs to be more honest about what “by, with, and through” requires; more robust regional expertise has to be built in; and SOF-Interagency relations need to be rethought.

**Defining the challenge**

Because plenty of books already survey potential future threats and the impact of rampant uncertainty on the nature of war, we opted to conclude that SOF will simply have to become more effective and efficient at being able to adjust and readjust. This means USSOF will need to stay positioned to out-innovate the competition at every turn, while if SOF can foster innovation in innovative ways it should not only retain the talent it already attracts, but guarantee itself a steady flow of recruits eager to keep pushing the edge of the envelope.

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1 Participants: Walter Allman, Paul Brister, Dennis Castellanos, Jon Fussell, Jason Murtha, Melanie Olson, Kate Nelson, Matt Peterson, Damon (Sam) Robins, Aaron (Christian) Sessoms, Timothy (Ryan) Shaw, Marty Timmons, and Nate Whitfield. Professor Anna Simons was the team leader. The views presented in this article do not necessarily reflect the views held by individual team members, and they certainly don’t represent the official views of any entity in the U.S. Army, U.S. Navy, U.S. Air Force, U.S. Marine Corps, or the Department of Defense.
As for today’s youth – tomorrow’s recruits – SOF needs to pay greater attention to how differently they are wired. They can impressively multi-task. They also tend to be more family-oriented than their SOF elders. At the same time, they are more concerned with job satisfaction and personal growth and fulfillment. Add to this their recent combat experience, which is bound to have changed their outlook on the future, if not on life in general, and it seems safe to say that members of Generations X and Y will not always or necessarily be satisfied with the same kinds of careers that motivated yesterday’s senior leaders, or even today’s. Profound shifts in sensibilities that go far beyond the usual inter-generational differences will increasingly affect SOF recruitment, selection, and retention.

This is why, beyond just actively seeking those interested in belonging to an ever more selective and capable force, we concluded that one thing SOF should do is make more rather than less of competition. Giving young operators additional rings – or areas of excellence – to shoot for, rather than just more rungs to climb, will help keep SOF 2011 leaning forward. Think DEVGRU in relation to the SEALs. Not only would the creation of more select elements give operators additional levels to strive for, but striving to reach them would ratchet up the competition to join the best of the best and make the best better; it would help keep fast-trackers within the fold.

Of course, adding new high-performance options would require some structural adjustments. But these are in order anyway. Just a cursory look at the allocation of SOF’s roles and missions should reveal that SOF’s internal division of labor is not nearly as neat or tidy as it could be. Too many overlaps have created too much unnecessary friction, friction that is further compounded as soon as you look outside SOF.

However, here is one way to re-conceive what SOF does: SOF brackets the GPF. General Purposes Forces are great for force-on-force engagements, designed as they are for sustained combat operations. In contrast, SOF has units that excel at unilateral, short duration, high intensity direct action missions. It also has the opposite – units that work by, with, and through indigenous forces. Special Forces, for instance, has long been our preeminent force when it comes to Foreign Internal Defense.

One can equally well conceptualize where SOF fits by re-examining the Interagency. The CIA develops its assets individual by individual in a covert manner, while the State Department and USAID engage in overt diplomacy and development. SOF’s role, in contrast, is to deal with armed Others – whether foreign militaries or anti-state actors.
Among the many things clarifying SOF’s roles and missions would do is achieve greater clarity for individuals both inside and outside SOF. This would have positive effects across the board.

**SOF 2011 > SOF 2030**

Direct Action
At present, the U.S. military has an entire generation of combat-honed, tactically proficient leaders on the cusp of moving into operational and strategic level positions. If this transition is facilitated, there is potential to elevate DA capabilities to never before seen levels. The challenge lies in the finite window available for execution.

DA units have been engaged in sustained combat operations for 10 straight years. Historically, numerous SOF operators (officers especially) have chosen to separate from the military around the 10-years-of-service mark, as they are moved out of tactical positions and into desk jobs. In years gone by it was rare for these service members to take away with them 10 years of combat knowledge. But today, this is exactly what the military stands to lose. Worse, under the current system, the most forward leaning tactical leader on the battlefield and the most lackluster underachiever stashed stateside take home and retire on nearly the exact same pay. Single O-3s are, literally, more financially stable than their 0-6 bosses with kids in college. All of these combine to add to the frustrations of mid-grade leaders.

There is no innovative entity on the planet that succeeds without doing as much as it can to incentivize its talent. Not only do SOF’s current incentive structures need to be revamped, but they need to include the kinds of things that will most appeal to today’s operators who, after all, are the individuals poised to become tomorrow’s mid-career teachers, trainers, and staff officers and NCOs – the individuals who will most directly shape the next generation. Incentives might include spending time at a corporation,

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2 The subject of a forthcoming NPS thesis by Walter Allman, Jonathan Fussell, and Marty Timmons which will examine how to identify, groom, and retain high potential individuals.
university, different government agency, and/or learning a new skill, or might consist of whatever it takes to keep families happy since, while money can buy a lot it can’t buy everything.

The bottom line for the DA side of the house is: get retention right, keep your hardest charging most innovative leaders, and you’ll draw in recruits who are cut from the same cloth because they want to work with and for innovative leaders. Deploy sub-par or toxic leaders, on the other hand, and the exodus of top talent will only increase.

Irregular Warfare

The argument regarding Irregular Warfare is that SOF has to be much more aggressively honest about the nature of Irregular Warfare so that the right individuals self-select. All SOF units recruit in extremely physically fit, motivated males, most of who join in order to conduct DA. When SOF then asks these individuals to do Irregular Warfare stuff, that is too much like telling a prized young NHL player he’s headed for Wimbledon.

SOF needs to quit the ‘bait and switch’ of selling the allure of DA strike missions to any but those being streamed into units responsible for unilateral DA missions. At the same time, SOF needs to get much more serious about who it needs for its ‘by, with, and through’ forces: namely, physically fit puzzle solvers – not just strong, but highly adaptable thinkers with a depth and breadth of life experience, some of which should probably come from ventures outside the military.

It is an understatement to say that populations are getting increasingly sophisticated abroad. For all the tea-drinking that’s been done with village elders recently, a lot of tea-drinking has also been done with politicians who have Swiss bank accounts and villas in Dubai, whether young American captains and sergeants interacting with them realize it or not.

Because the aim going forward needs to be to develop a more sophisticated human sensing capability, getting the right people with the right training (and sensibilities) into the right SOF units is critical. No question, Special Forces was brilliantly well-designed to operate in 20th century Cold War Eastern Europe. But, 60 years later, Europe is not our main focus. SOF’s task today is to concentrate on the non-West, which means SOF needs ‘by, with, and through’ operators who are good at working with non-Westerners.

If, meanwhile, cross-cultural astuteness matters, then that’s what needs to be assessed. Since the inception of BUD/S, NSW has used the ocean as an assessment and selection tool, assessing who has what it takes to cope in dark, cold water at night. Similarly, Special Forces has used night land navigation as a screening mechanism: who can cope in unlit woods on his own? Which is great when it comes to physical terrain. But what does SOF use to determine who has the ability to function well in foreign human terrain?

Special Forces, for example, needs more than just Robin Sage as a culminating UW exercise. It needs to determine who has cross-cultural people skills – with actual foreigners, not ersatz role players – well

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before anyone PCSs to attend the Q Course. Candidates should be run through a cross-cultural human terrain nav. They should be assessed again, later, in the cross-cultural equivalent of Ranger School. Amazing Race-like courses should be set up, but not in Western settings. Instead, SF should consider Indian reservations, or Puerto Rico, or Haiti.

Right now, no serious probation for newly tabbed individuals exists; selection isn’t backstopped through real world vetting. SF needs to develop ways to assess and de-select those who turn out to be ill-suited to work with non-Western non-Americans.

At the same time, enablers, enhancers, and support staff also need to go through a rigorous assessment and selection.

Special Forces and SEAL Platoons are already engaging in split-team operations. Teams in the future will likely be smaller, with a core of IW-experienced operators assisted by enablers. It is not inconceivable that for some missions enablers might even outnumber operators. The local environment (i.e. desert, maritime), the threat environment, and the mission should dictate teams’ composition. Significantly, this means that no two teams may end up being configured the same way, and none may look like Cold War-era ODAs.

To turn such a tailorable approach into reality, teams could end up sourcing from all Services and tapping civilians as well, much as the OSS did. Accurate databases and a mechanism that can pull up pre-qualified experts from outside SOF (to include retired SOF) will be essential, which is yet another reason assessment and selection, and pre-vetting, matter so much.

Two different methods suggest themselves for ensuring operators develop serious regional familiarity.4 Option One: Special Forces units could remain permanently aligned with high-interest regions. Personnel could then be rotated through their AO on a regular basis. Option Two: operators could be sent on multi-year deployments. The impediment here would be families – unless they, too, were posted abroad.5

In both these scenarios, SOF’s cross-culturally expert backbone would consist of operators. Alternatively, this backbone could consist of cross-culturally expert enhancers and enablers. In other words, operators might need to concentrate on operational tradecraft so intensively that enablers should be the ones responsible for more refined technical, linguistic, and cultural expertise. There are advantages and disadvantages to both courses of action. Regardless, for either persistent engagement or sustained contact to work, SOF will need to commit to supporting a core element of individuals who

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5 A cogent argument can be made that SOF forces should always be forward-deployed, and at least one recent NPS graduate has argued that, for this very reason, all Special Forces Groups should be stationed abroad, just as 1/1 currently is in Okinawa, 1/10 is in Germany, and 3/7 used to be in Panama. For more on this see Christopher Pratt, “Permanent Presence for the Persistent Conflict: An Alternative Look at the Future of Special Forces,” NPS Masters thesis, June 2009 (http://edocs.nps.edu/npspubs/scholarly/theses/2009/Jun/09Jun_Pratt.pdf).
are given the tools and time to develop fluency in local sensibilities. These will need to be individuals who are interested in learning everything they can about the local area and the region, know how to identify the right locals to plug into, and can do so in the local language(s). Since not everyone in SOF today has these capabilities, SOF will have to expend considerably more effort on identifying individuals who have what it takes to develop such long-standing, and not just ‘three cups of tea’-type, ties.

**Some further synergies**

Of course, there is also something else SOF could do to ensure it has who it needs, but doesn’t become watered down in the process. Doctrine could be rewritten to indicate when SOF should be the *supported* command – which, arguably, it should be in all IW environments. Then, rather than trying to mass produce SOF, SOF could make up for shortfalls in its personnel both by and through indigenous forces, and in some cases by and through GPF units advised and assisted by SOF. Essentially, GPF could serve as SOF’s IW force multipliers, much as they’ve recently been doing in places like the Arghandab in Afghanistan.⁶

While it makes little sense to discuss publicly the many other things a SOF 2011 retailored for 2030 would be capable of doing abroad, less problematic to discuss in an open forum is what SOF might be called upon to have to assist with inside the United States. It is no longer unreasonable to think that a transnational criminal organization might pose a significant domestic threat. Take MS-13. It is better armed than most police departments. Because the day may come when domestic law enforcement agencies find themselves needing to ask SOF for assistance, it would be prudent to begin laying the groundwork for that now. Of course, changes to *posse comitatus* won’t be up to SOF. But ‘train and assist’ opportunities with local law enforcement could help highlight areas where police and sheriff’s departments find SOF expertise with ISR, SIGINT, etc. to be of use.

Among things SOF could work toward are strengthening links between local law enforcement agencies and SOF National Guard and Reserve units. 19th and 20th Special Forces Groups have developed good habitual relations with the FBI and with certain other local jurisdictions. Reserve SEAL Teams 17 and 18 could do the same, while both Special Forces and the SEALs could further broaden and deepen their linkages through joint training events and exchanges. Members of local law enforcement might even be incentivized to join the Guard/Reserve, while exchanges that enable SOF operators to serve with local First Responders might prove a welcome off-ramp from deployments, and could serve as a retention incentive for some.

**Shedding**

No matter what kind of future scenario one considers, SOF will always need to think about deconflicting with other actors at the same time it will increasingly need to fuse intelligence and coordinate

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operations with them.\textsuperscript{7} But – there is also another way to handle the deconfliction/fusion challenge. Maybe SOF 2030 shouldn’t have set competencies. Yes, SOF should continue to bracket the GPF; it should still specialize in precision, in-and-out missions, as well as ‘by, with, and through’ activities. But – by adopting shedding, SOF 2030 would be able to do for the GPF what the Rangers do for the Infantry, what the Weapons School does for the Air Force, and what the Marine Aviation Weapons and Tactics School does for the Marine Corps.

Essentially, with shedding, SOF’s purpose would be to develop capabilities and purposely shed whatever it can – and as much as it can – to GPF. With shedding, special capabilities, resources, and authorities mandated by National Command Authority stay SOF. Otherwise, everything else that GPF proves able to do, GPF gets to do.

GPF are becoming more SOF-like in certain areas as it is. Shedding would simply help accelerate this process in a controlled manner. As GPF improve, SOF would then be free to keep pushing the edge of the envelope. This would help SOF stay small, specialized, and highly proficient.

The tricky question is: what could be shed? While shedding might work for some kinds of DA missions, it would not be suitable for high end, discriminating precision assaults. Certain sensitive Unconventional Warfare operations would likely also need to remain with SOF. But many indirect and shaping functions could be shed.

To be clear: unlike structural readjustments to get SOF 2011 to 2030, shedding would require a substantive overhaul. SOF would have to become a new kind of command, probably broken into Service-immaterial sub-units. Severing legacy relationships to Service-specific SOF would reduce inefficiencies, redundancies, and counter-productive frictions. Everyone, initially, would receive the same SOF training. But schools thereafter would be specialty, not Branch, specific.

The important point is that most operators would not stay in SOF for their entire careers (with exceptions, again, to include operators, pilots, and support personnel in highly specialized/non-sheddable functions).

One possibility for how such a system might work is that task forces would be comprised of SOF operators and support personnel alike. Task forces would be coterminous with however much time is required to complete the task. With the mission accomplished, the task force would then be dismantled and personnel would return to the pool of available/unassigned SOF personnel for the remainder of their SOF tour.

It would be up to major commands to select who to send to SOF; SOF would run its own assessment and selection, and retain final approval over who to slot into which positions (operator, staff, support). Because all candidates would return to GPF after their SOF tour, there would be an incentive to send to SOF only quality performers who could come back and help improve the overall force. The strongest performers might be selected to stay for fifth year SOF billets, and these individuals would then be eligible to compete to return to SOF later in their careers. As for those who, for whatever reason, are

not cut out for SOF, they could be cut away with no lasting harm done to either SOF or the GPF (something that doesn’t occur now).

Consider some of the other benefits to shedding: a pool of senior leaders in SOF would have intimate familiarity with GPF capabilities (and some senior leaders in GPF would be equally familiar with SOF). That would benefit both forces. So would continual cross-pollination of TTPs, concepts, experience, and expertise. Streaming SOF-qualified personnel back into the GPF would provide a broader, deeper pool of SOF-experienced individuals who could be called on to work special programs requiring mature SOF-qualified operators should the need arise. But even better, by reorganizing SOF as an ‘in-and-out’ entity, individuals wouldn’t be the only ones to move. The entire innovate-evolve cycle would accelerate, and the military as a whole would improve at an ever faster rate.

More quantum leaps

No question, the speed with which change is occurring these days is itself speeding up. Adapting force structures, training, manning, and equipping is going to have to keep pace. At the same time, not all changes will be incremental or easy to accommodate. Some will amount to quantum leaps.

Yet, from an operator’s perspective, technology is usually a mission enhancer or a complication. It should never be considered a substitute for what SOF will always need: a highly discriminating, unilateral behind-the-lines capability and/or a cross-culturally astute ‘by, with, and through’ force. It will always take human ingenuity, augmented by technology, to plan, change plans, outfox the adversary’s plans, or, as a commander in Iraq recently put it, “screw with their heads.” Machinery or technology will never replicate or surpass human wile.

Certain sensitive missions may become less dangerous. For instance, if reports are accurate, the President’s decision prior to the recent UBL mission boiled down to a selection of weapon systems: SEALs or Cruise Missiles. Fast forward to 2030, when the president is bound to have a wider array of options to choose from. In addition to SOF and Cruise Missiles, the choice could include something like a single individual armed with half a dozen remotely piloted hummingbird-sized UASs. Or, what if this past April, instead of the single military dog the SEALs had with them on the raid, they had robot sentries to cover their backs and watch for enemy squirters?

As Peter Singer points out, the Iraqi battlefield was robot-free in 2003. By 2008, there were over 12,000 robots performing a myriad of military tasks. Some were actually integrated into patrols, creating mixed robot-human teams. In the not so distant future there will be robotically enhanced humans. And that only represents one form of human performance enhancement.

Already what once lay in the realm of science fiction is no longer so far-fetched. But that also only proves the broader point: adjustments to technological developments won’t prove all that difficult. Much more difficult to countenance right now are certain kinds of organizational changes – changes that don’t get broached because they rub certain stakeholders the wrong way. For instance:

SOF could jettison TSOCs. One way to mitigate GPF/SOF friction would be to integrate the SOCs into the COCOMs. The SOC commander could be made the Deputy for the theater commander, with a SOF officer as the Intel Officer. Alternatively, a SOF liaison could be incorporated as COCOM staff.
Or, SOF could be rendered rankless. This would help redress the inevitable conventionalization of the unconventional, which is what a careerist zero-defect mentality fosters. In Special Forces alone right now, the scramble to get back to one of the five operational SF Groups is turning the best intentioned officers into non-stop politicians.

Or, there is the Norwegian model. In Norway, officers have to apply for the jobs they want, and then they pin on the rank that goes with the job that they apply for.

Or, maybe all SOF should simply be made DoD civilians – with their own SOF-specific ‘grades.’ This would require special legislation, but a new SOF-specific Title would allow SOF to manage its personnel according to SOF-specific and not Service-wide needs.

Alternatively, maybe the best way for SOF to be able to develop and assign its own personnel according to its own unconventional needs is to revisit the idea of SOF as its own Service.\(^8\)

Other ideas that would doubtless rock the boat are:

Experiment with an unmarrieds-only expeditionary force. Typically, servicemen and women marry at younger ages than their civilian peers. This puts the military in the business of having to support families, which is certainly not bad, but is always costly. What about a nudge in the other direction? Let a Company or Battalion of unmarried operators do riskier things for long periods of time. At the very least that would help with combat readiness.

Similarly, different crossflows and more sensible divisions of labor between National Guard, Reserve, and Active Duty SOF deserve attention. Admittedly, there are state and Congressional politics involved, but while some roles and missions make a lot of sense – 20\(^{th}\) Special Forces Group has built extremely useful relations in Latin America, for instance – others, like sending relatively inexperienced National Guard JFSOCs to war zones, might not.

Then, there is the issue of women. Sooner or later, Congress and/or policy makers will tell SOF it is time to accept females. SOF should anticipate this now by incorporating women where and when appropriate, so that it can control how and where they play a value-added role. The aim should always be to make SOF units more rather than less effective. For instance, no one disputes that women would be invaluable on certain kinds of missions in certain settings. Thus, one way to integrate women into SOF would be via an all-female SOF Selection and Training. Graduates could then be streamed to NSW, the Rangers, Special Forces, and other units, to include a small all-Female Tactical Unit. This would provide a core group of females, already pre-vetted through rigorous, standardized training, available to augment teams that need women’s special access or skills without disrupting the proven effectiveness of all-male pipelines.

Is an all-female DA unit realistic? Possibly. But as is true for much that went into our 50-minute long “SOF 2030” briefing, we 14 participants didn’t all agree on all aspects of any of these approaches. The devil, we learned time and again, lurks in all of the details.

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Conclusions

Here, however, are takeaways we did agree on:

Looking to 2030, SOF faces a series of choices which may not necessarily be either/or. SOF can retain set specializations and clear expertise – and do a far better job of making sure everyone better understands these. There are multiple ways for SOF to do this. But, along the way, some reorganizing will need to be done. This includes figuring out how to retain those who, with combat under their belts, are now ready to move on from ‘hunter-killer’ mode to the next level.

Alternatively, SOF could reconfigure itself for the 21st century by becoming an altogether different kind of cutting edge entity. It could much more consciously test, hone, and shed. That would make it quite a bit different from the SOF 2012 we’re used to. But, in some regards, by doing so SOF would simply be reprising its original role, when it was the pioneer of all things unconventional, and when no one yet had written doctrine, or elaborate guidance, or anything else that might have constrained SOF’s potential for innovative excellence.

As for topics we would have liked to, but weren’t able to address:

International SOF. The U.S. has more and more allies building SOF capabilities. Indeed, NATO SOF now exists thanks to work undertaken, in part, by U.S. and allied graduates of the Defense Analysis department at NPS. What will the future hold for NATO SOF – and could it be expanded to include others who are likewise developing robust SOF capabilities? Over time, might we even see the development of an InterSOF, akin to InterPol?

Are we there yet when it comes to SOF profiling? Can we take the current top performers and devise profiling tools based on their most successful attributes to shorten the timeline for assessment and selection? To some of us, this seems unlikely. Others remain optimistic – which is itself reflective of what transpired over the course of our study in Monterey: lots of vigorous discussion.

Corollary to this, what would be our allies’ or even our own GPF’s or the CIA’s view of USSOF circa 2030? What would they want? What can they envision? – which suggests perhaps the greatest value in any 2030 exercise. The more often today’s operators can be asked for their conceptions of SOF 2030, the more this will tap into what all the best mid-career officers, Warrants, and NCOs always do: take what’s already good and try to figure out how to make it even better.