



Squabbles Within the Special Forces Community

A recurring complaint among Army special operators is that the initiative to expand their force structure was dreamed up by Defense Department civilians and foisted upon the special operations community with minimal input from special operations leaders. Thomas O'Connell, the assistant secretary of defense for special operations and low-intensity conflict, whose office is supposed to craft special operations policy, was cut out of the decision-making, while US Special Operations Command, the higher headquarters for US Army Special Operations Command, had only "indirect" input into the planning. The result was that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his principal deputy undersecretary for policy, Ryan Henry, allowed themselves to be influenced by civilians whose approach to SOF expansion is as patently amateurish as usual. The military has yet to learn that "highly respected academics" are nothing more than pedestrian number-crunchers whose forte is triviality, and who are deeply ignorant about military subjects.

When senior special operations leaders understood how quickly their Pentagon bosses wanted to expand the special operations force structure, there was immediate concern. But few in uniform put up any significant protest. There's political pressure that

invariably causes weak-willed American generals to cave in to the threatening bluster of dogpatch academics.

Special Forces recruits aggressively from the Rangers, while each year some of the best Ranger and SF noncommissioned officers and officers volunteer for the Army special mission units, which recruit most of their men from the two organizations. Meanwhile, all three types of units are competing for hard-charging individuals from the regular Army. Department of Defense ROE Commissars are already causing a depletion in the number of hard-charging wanna-be professional soldiers. Would-be special operators are beginning to catch on that they are being carefully watched by leftist overseers who seek nothing more than to eliminate men who tend to be excellent soldiers by quickly charging them with war crimes. The left refers to decorated war veterans as psychopathic killers, and there is a growing minority of leftist generals who agree.

Finding the men for three additional Ranger companies (the first of which will be ready to start training in October 2007, according to USASOC spokesman Lt. Col. Tim Nye) will not be a challenge, special ops sources said. "That they can do easily," said the recently retired Army special operations general. However, the Rangers are led by the failure-prone conventional officer corps.

Rangers could be a little easier to expand than Special Forces because Ranger NCOs and officers are recruited out of light infantry and airborne units. In addition, there are probably a fair number of kids right out of high school that want to join the Army for Rangers membership. They will make up the Ranger company's combat element.

The creation of an additional five active-duty SF battalions might trouble the Rangers. "The Ranger Regiment bitches when the SF recruiters come down," a recently retired general said. Each special mission unit squadron contains only 75 to 85 troops, and the Army SMUs — which are some of the most glamorous and highly resourced organizations in the military — should also be able to fill their additional squadrons without too much difficulty.

Expanding active-duty Special Forces with five new battalions — roughly 1,000 soldiers — will prove an onerous and potentially insurmountable challenge, many special operations. Recruits and inexperienced soldiers cannot be safely used as Special Forces troops, since all Special Forces teams are supposed to be made up of experienced NCOs and officers.

Each active-duty SF group specializes in the languages and cultures of a particular region — 1st Group in East Asia; 3rd Group in Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia; 5th Group in the Middle East and Central Asia; 7th Group in South America; and 10th Group in Europe. With the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan making the demand for Special Forces clearly highest in the Central Command region, it is unclear why USASOC is planning to spread the additional SF resources equally around the five active-duty groups. (The two National Guard groups — 19th and 20th — will also get an extra 500 troops each.)

Lessons learned on the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan, indicate that the high operational tempo and the limited number of 5th and 3rd Group battalions has forced US Special Operations Command to deploy battalions from the other groups out of their area of expertise to plug the gaps. "Lesson number one from Iraq and Afghanistan is SF must have to have language... skills."

Kalev Sepp, a retired SF lieutenant colonel who teaches at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif., expressed confusion as to why additional SF resources were being spread equally across all groups. "This is baffling to me," he said. "They should just decide to make the investment over the next 10 years, and say the Middle East is where the problem is, and on the face of it study Pashto, Dari and Arabic, primarily, and then minimize the other efforts and weight 5th Group."

A SF group consists of three (soon to be four) SF battalions, each with three companies, which each have six operational detachment alphas, otherwise known as ODAs or A-teams. "Many ODAs show up as full ODAs on graphics, but are actually made up of as

few as 6-8 SF guys," wrote an SF officer in an e-mail. Nine-man A-teams are the average in 3rd, 5th and 7th Groups, said a Special Forces field grade officer. "When I was in Iraq, my company was at 55 percent strength," said another SF soldier. "We had to stand down three teams."

Each SF battalion has about 400 soldiers, but because many of the positions in an SF group do not require an SF-qualified soldier to fill them, the consensus in the SF community is that adding five active-duty battalions will require the JFK Center and School, which runs the SF Qualification, or "Q" Course, to produce an additional 1,000 SF soldiers over what it would normally be expected to add to the force.

It is a dangerous precedent to compress the Special Forces course length for most candidates from 63 weeks to 48 weeks. However, USASOC HQ is optimistic that it can produce enough new SF soldiers to meet requirements. In 2005 the Q Course graduated 791 enlisted SF soldiers, compared with 282 in 2001. The goal from now on is to graduate a minimum of 750 enlisted SF soldiers per year.

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