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By Order of the Secretary of the Army:

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Official:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "M. Sannito".

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2619603

Humans are more important than hardware. As ARSOF Soldiers, we know this. Because the mind is our sharpest weapon, we know the value of tactical and technical competence, and our ability to think critically. We question and learn through honest professional discourse. The *Special Warfare Journal's* goal is to host this professional discourse to share knowledge, revisit history, and challenge beliefs.

The Army is changing. Force modernization, transformation, and continual development impact our training and operations. We are integrating technology to refine our tactics. We're changing how we train and fight. Those changes are reflected in the spring issue of *Special Warfare Journal*. In this issue, you will find articles on international and interagency integration, mobility, training, artificial intelligence, civil affairs, innovation, and the future battlefield. The authors are challenging us to think harder and move faster.

We hope you enjoy the selection of articles and perspectives this quarter. We also hope you accept the challenge and submit your article, rebut claims from a previous edition, and engage in professional discourse as we advance our profession. Your words can ignite new strategies, strengthen our culture, and ensure that ARSOF remains agile, adaptive, and lethal.

- Veritas et Libertas -

- *Special Warfare Journal* Editors-in-Chief



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HISTORICAL EXAMPLES OF MODERN WARFIGHTING TERMS



Originally Published: April 1, 2026

Historical Examples of Modern Warfighting Terms

By Chief Warrant Officer 2 Kristopher Carroll

Clear definitions are crucial for enabling a shared understanding as we adapt to modern times. This article argues that simply rebranding old military concepts with new terminology, without critically examining and learning from history, risks creating the illusion of innovation and leads us to repeat past mistakes. Without grounding our terminology in historical understanding, we risk repeating failures and overlooking successes from prior conflicts. It also presents examples of conventional forces - special operations forces integration, interoperability, and interdependence (CF-SOF I3) employed in the 20th and 21st centuries. The key argument is that effective adaptation to contemporary challenges requires both doctrinal clarity and historical insight.

Recent decades have seen major shifts in U.S. military focus and terminology. From 2001 to 2021, efforts centered on nation-building, counterterrorism, and counterinsurgency in Afghanistan and Iraq during the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). Now, as great power competition (GPC) has risen in prominence, China and

Russia challenge the U.S. across political, military, economic, and informational domains. New doctrinal terms such as large-scale combat operations (LSCO), multi-domain operations (MDO), and joint forceable entry operations (JFEO) are prevalent. Conventional forces (CF), special operations forces (SOF), and multinational partners are collaborating for GPC. Many of these concepts have historical counterparts, reinforcing the need to learn from the past as we adapt to current challenges.

Strategic Competition

Strategic competition refers to the strategic rivalry between major world powers, particularly the United States, China, and Russia, characterized by competition for global influence across political, military, economic, and informational domains. The Cold War lasted from 1947 to 1991, where there were prolonged periods of geopolitical tension between the United States and the newly formed North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members, pitting them against the Soviet Union. It was characterized by ideological conflict

between capitalism and communism, nuclear arms races, espionage, proxy wars, and political propaganda. While it did not escalate into direct large-scale warfare between the superpowers, it significantly influenced global politics, economics, and military strategy. Key events included the Berlin Blockade, Cuban Missile Crisis, Korean and Vietnam Wars, and the eventual dissolution of the Soviet Union, which marked the end of the Cold War (Gaddis, 2005).

GPC has strong similarities to the Cold War. Today, major peer adversaries include China and Russia, with Iran and North Korea contributing to nuclear proliferation and regional instability. China, a political, economic, informational, and military peer, threatens U.S. partners in the Indo-Pacific and expands influence in Africa. Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and 2022 invasion of Ukraine have heightened tensions, testing the U.S. and NATO's resolve. Russian misinformation has targeted U.S. elections. Iran's support to Hezbollah, Hamas, and the former Assad Regime destabilizes the Middle East. Recent events include Hamas's attack on Israel and U.S./Israeli airstrikes on Iran's nuclear sites. The end of the GWOT and rising threats push the U.S. to focus on LSCO and modernize forces for MDO.

Large-Scale Combat Operations

Extensive joint combat operations in terms of scope and size of forces committed, conducted as a campaign aimed at achieving operational and strategic objectives. (U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, 2019).

The 2003 invasion of Iraq was a LSCO

campaign marked by the rapid, integrated use of air, land, maritime, and special operations forces to seize critical terrain and enable follow-on operations. The campaign began with air strikes known as "shock and awe," followed by the ground offensive from Kuwait, led by Army and Marine Corps units, supported by Air Force strikes and Navy cruise missiles (Gordon & Trainor, 2006). Simultaneously, U.S. SOF played a critical role by conducting deep reconnaissance, seizing airfields, disrupting Iraqi command structures, and linking up with Kurdish forces in the north. Notably, SOF helped facilitate the 173rd Airborne Brigade's parachute assault into northern Iraq, opening a crucial front and diverting Iraqi troops (Scales, 2004; Robinson, 2008). These actions demonstrated LSCO principles by overcoming access challenges, establishing lodgments, and rapidly deploying combat power to collapse Saddam Hussein's regime on 9 April 2003.

The invasion of Iraq in March 2003 is also a great example of MDO and JFEO. There are still some within our ranks who were part of the Iraq invasion, and we must harness their experience for GPC. A major push for many years has been CF-SOF I3, especially with the renewed emphasis on LSCO, where SOF typically plays a supporting role to the CF commander. Historical examples include Operation Just Cause in Panama, Urgent Fury in Grenada, Desert Storm in Iraq, and the Normandy landings in WWII. It is vital that SOF units participate in Comat Training Center rotations and Joint Chiefs of Staff exercises so that both CF and SOF understand how to incorporate capabilities on today's rapidly evolving battlefield. Major threats today include China invading Taiwan or Russia escalating tensions by attacking a NATO partner. Both situations

could necessitate U.S. involvement in LSCO, for which we must be prepared to execute if required.

Multi-Domain Operations

Operations conducted across multiple domains and contested spaces to overcome an adversary's (or enemy's) strengths by presenting them with several operational and/or tactical dilemmas through the combined application of calibrated force posture; employment of multi-domain formations; and convergence of capabilities across domains, environments, and functions in time and space to achieve operational and tactical objectives. (U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, 2018).

Blitzkrieg, or "Lightning War", is known by U.S. doctrine as a combined arms maneuver in which multi-domain coordination is a key element (FM 3-0, 2025). Blitzkrieg used the land and air domains to conduct rapid, coordinated attacks that disrupted and overwhelmed enemy defenses. Forced modernization was a key factor that enabled the German Army to capture Western Europe. It integrated fast-moving mechanized infantry, tanks, and close air support to break through enemy lines and encircle forces (Citino, 2004). A key enabler of Blitzkrieg's effectiveness was Germany's advanced use of radio communication. Radios were installed in tanks and aircraft, allowing real-time coordination between ground and air units (Zaloga, 2006). This capability enabled German commanders to mass fires quickly, direct artillery and air strikes with precision, and adapt tactics on the battlefield, creating chaos among slower, less-coordinated enemy forces (U.S. Army Command and General Staff College).

As a prelude to war, German forces aided Franco's Nationalists in the Spanish Civil War. From 1936 to 1939, German forces employed combined-arms maneuver, employing Panzer I tanks, Ju 87 Stuka dive bombers, 88mm anti-aircraft guns, and close air support. This combat experience honed Luftwaffe doctrine and armored tactics, which were vital to Germany's early World War II successes (Alpert, 2013; Corum, 2020).

Within the Maritime domain, the German Navy wreaked havoc in the Atlantic. German U-boats sank approximately 2,779 Allied ships, totaling around 14.1 million gross registered tons of war supplies bound for the United Kingdom and other allied nations, severely threatening their war logistics, especially during the early years of the conflict (Blair, 1996). Due to technological advances, allied forces adapted tactics and gained air and maritime dominance, defeating German U-boats through convoy escorts, improved sonar and radar, long-range aircraft, and breaking Enigma codes. These innovations enabled effective tracking, interception, and destruction of U-boats, turning the tide in the Battle of the Atlantic by mid-1943 (Hinsley, 1993; Blair, 1996).

Unlike World War II, space and cyberspace domains are a dominant part of the 21st-century landscape. Advanced communication systems are quickly defeated, making their use less of an option. Information warfare is on the rise due to social media's ability to rapidly disseminate messages. Innovation cannot come fast enough, as our competitors in GPC are rapidly adapting. The winner of the space and cyberspace domains will only

maintain their dominance if they can outpace their adversary's innovation.

Although these two domains are consuming a significant amount of our attention, we must avoid becoming target fixated. It is equally vital that we maintain our ability to dominate the land, air, and maritime domains and work in tandem with our multinational partners to integrate new capabilities in space and cyberspace.

Joint Forcible Entry Operations

Seizing and holding of a military lodgment in the face of armed opposition or forcing access into a denied area to allow movement and maneuver to accomplish the mission (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018).

The invasion of Normandy on June 6, 1944 (D-Day for Operation Overlord) stands as a textbook example of JFEO. Operation Overlord combined land, air, and naval forces to breach German defenses along the heavily fortified French coast and establish a crucial Allied foothold in Western Europe. Over 156,000 troops were transported across the English Channel by an immense naval armada, while U.S. and British airborne divisions conducted nighttime parachute assaults to seize key terrain, disrupt enemy movements, and isolate the beaches (Ambrose, 1994). These airborne forces enabled the amphibious landings on Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno, and Sword beaches, fulfilling core JFEO principles of seizing entry points under fire and rapidly deploying combat power inland (Hastings, 1984).

On D-Day, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the British Special Operations Executive (SOE), and French elements

supported Operation Overlord by coordinating with the French Resistance to conduct sabotage and intelligence operations. The OSS gathered vital intelligence and supplied resistance fighters to disrupt German communications. The SOE parachuted agents to train and arm local resistance elements for sabotage missions. The French carried out guerrilla warfare and sabotage behind enemy lines, hindering German reinforcements. These combined efforts delayed German responses and aided the success of the Allied landings (Foot, 2004; Kern, 2009).

There are many similarities between the Normandy invasion and how we operate today. The Allies operated as a joint and combined force, with General Eisenhower serving as the Supreme Commander Allied Expeditionary Force, similar to modern terms like Joint Force Commander (JFC) and Supreme Allied Commander. The Normandy invasion included U.S. forces from the Navy, Coast Guard, Army, and the Army Air Corps. Allied participation included the U.S., British, French, Canadian, and Polish Forces, among others. Allied SOF played a key role in setting conditions for conventional forces while supporting resistance forces. Joint Publication 3-18, Joint Forceable Entry Operations, emphasizes the need for rapid deployment, synchronization across domains (land, air, maritime, space, and cyber), and the integration of the amphibious force, air assault force, airborne force, and special operations force, comprising U.S. and multinational forces. This was relevant on 6 June 1944 and remains true today.

Conclusion

History shows that every breakthrough,

such as advanced radios, submarines, aircraft, and satellites, was once a new technology that only became decisive when paired with lessons from past conflicts, training, and trial and error. The Taliban understood mine warfare and quickly adapted by learning to build and use improvised explosive devices. Today's rapidly evolving technology feels like someone threw a monkey wrench into the system. In Ukraine, we are learning from history every hour by applying lessons learned within hours. By grounding our

knowledge in history and lessons learned, we can integrate emerging technologies more effectively, adapt faster than our adversaries, and avoid repeating costly mistakes. To remain the dominant force and protector of the free world, we must study history, apply its lessons, and ensure that the strategist, operational planner, and rifleman are equally equipped to have a seat at the table. Learning and understanding history will ensure you are relevant at that table.

Author's Note: Chief Warrant Officer 2 Kristopher Carroll is a Regular Army Special Forces Officer with more than 26 years of service. He wrote this as part of the Warrant Officer Advanced Course graduation requirements. The view, opinions, and analysis expressed do not represent the position of the U.S. Army or the Department of War.

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The Impact of Synchronization vs. Scrutinization in TSOC Operations

By Chief Warrant Officer 2 Greg Settle

Introduction

In recent years, some theater special operations commands (TSOCs) have tended to focus more on scrutinizing the actions of tactical units than on synchronizing resources and activities to support broader campaign goals. This approach puts tactical elements under constant observation, often with unclear goals, limited resources, and restrained initiative. Operational success at the subordinate level often happens despite TSOC processes, not because of them. Units sometimes deliberately operate below the level one concept of operations (CONOP) threshold to avoid TSOC interaction and preserve momentum.

The main issue is the imbalance between oversight and synchronization. Scrutiny is needed to identify risks, ensure compliance, and maintain safety, but excessive or misplaced scrutiny can cause delays, erode trust, and stifle initiative. Effective synchronization aligns resources, actions, and objectives, maximizing operational effectiveness, fostering unity of effort, and enabling subordinate units to act decisively.

This article argues that a TSOC's operational success depends on shifting focus from excessive scrutiny to robust synchronization. To realize these benefits, TSOCs must not just sustain oversight, empower commanders, simplify approvals, and build a culture of trust. They must actively commit to transforming their processes, prioritizing synchronization at every level to achieve campaign goals more efficiently and with greater impact.

Defining Synchronization and Scrutinization

Synchronization in military operations, per Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Operations*, means arranging actions in time, space, and purpose to create maximum combat power at the decisive point. It is a key part of unified action. Unified action means synchronizing, coordinating, and integrating activities across government and non-governmental entities to achieve unity of effort. This ensures that joint forces operate as a cohesive team under a single commander, thereby improving effectiveness and efficiency.

Synchronization allows individuals or systems to achieve outcomes greater than their separate efforts. Synergy comes from combining diverse skills and strengths through coordinated action. This enhances creativity, problem-solving, and innovation. Synchronized teams compensate for weaknesses and amplify strengths, leading to superior performance, more efficiency, and greater adaptability.

The international support to Ukraine after Russia's 2022 invasion shows synergistic effects. The U.S. avoided direct war and instead gave funding, supplies, lethal aid, and later, intelligence. Other countries with smaller economies could not match this level of materiel aid but did provide other forms of support to Ukraine. Neighboring nations offered facilities and materials to train Ukrainian soldiers. Alone, these actions would not have stopped Russia. Combined with Ukrainian heroism, the international community's efforts halted the Russian advance.

Operational scrutiny is the critical examination of processes, procedures, or systems in an organization. It ensures they function effectively and efficiently and comply with standards or regulations. This close inspection verifies accuracy, quality, and adherence to policy. Operational scrutiny applies to business management, government oversight, and legal investigations. The term implies a close, detailed review, like the verb "scrutinize," meaning to examine closely. This process is essential for uncovering inefficiencies, errors, and operational risks.

Scrutiny, when used properly, identifies risks to the operation, the individuals involved, or the command. It is vital for

synchronization to identify key tasks and pitfalls, so resources are allocated at the right time. Scrutiny ensures subordinates do the work and avoid just repeating approved formulas. It can also course-correct if operations lose focus or address the wrong problems.

Scrutiny advances operations when focused on real improvement. It eliminates distractions and competing requirements and helps identify gaps. Overly strict scrutiny only finds faults or nitpicks details unrelated to execution or results. Excessive scrutiny causes delays and, eventually, demoralizes subordinates who must adapt to arbitrary demands from higher levels.

Measures of performance are criteria developed to ensure the correct execution of a task, whereas measures of effectiveness are criteria developed to assess whether the actions taken have affected the target in the desired way. Similarly, scrutiny assesses the action for correctness, while synchronization enables it to occur.

Impacts of Synchronization and Scrutinization on Operations

Ideally, synchronizing an organization like a TSOC increases tempo and efficiency. For example, Special Operations Command – Europe (SOCEUR) has a unique position as the U.S. European Command (USEUCOM) Special Operations Directorate. And the Commander's dual role as the North Atlantic treaty Organization (NATO) SOFCOM Commander can greatly improve situational awareness. SOCEUR can synchronize for stronger interagency and multinational collaboration. They are well placed to lead information sharing among

partners. Better synchronization provides more adaptability and improves resource use.

However, Excessive scrutiny can lead to operational friction. Friction refers to any obstacle or resistance that impedes smooth operations, communication, or transactions within an organization. It includes inefficiencies, delays, errors, and increased costs. These often come from outdated processes, insufficient automation, poor resource allocation, or systemic issues. Friction from excessive scrutiny slows innovation, reduces productivity, and lowers employee morale. TSOCs may experience operational friction through system failures, siloed departments, and overly complex processes.

With time, excessive scrutiny and the resulting friction hurt subordinate organizations. The most obvious effects are slow decision-making and lower operational tempo. Delays from 'analysis paralysis' cause missed opportunities. Eventually, trust between leaders and subordinates erodes, reducing initiative and risk-taking. This leads to lower morale and unit cohesion.

The following vignettes show recent examples of excessive scrutiny and its effects: A detachment planned military freefall operations with partner forces to rebuild relationships. The partner forces specifically requested this critical event to restore credibility and relations among different units. The concept had to be submitted as a sub-concept to the main deployment concept. The deployment concept sat at the TSOC for over a month. This delayed the timely submission of the military freefall sub-concept. The

detachment submitted the concept documents and briefed the task group (TG), special operations task force (SOTF), and combined joint special operations task force (CJSOTF). The CJSOTF Commander quickly approved the training and praised its balance of safety and objectives. Once the sub-concept reached the TSOC, new requirements meant it needed the general's approval, adding further delays. Ongoing staff scrutiny changed nothing in the concept but led to late approval. The TSOC's excessive scrutiny cost the detachment two days of training, degraded training objectives, and almost led to mission failure.

Another detachment developed a horsemanship concept to help partner forces incorporate nonstandard transportation options over restrictive terrain in the event that roads become denied. The concept required an American civilian instructor to travel into the country to provide training using local facilities and livestock. This concept was novel, which caused friction among the staff. The staff was unwilling to bring the concept to higher levels due to anticipated ridicule stemming from assumptions about how the commander would feel about it. At one point during the staff's excessive scrutiny, they objected to the training event *because the horses didn't speak English and were, therefore, incompatible with the American instructor*. Eventually, after persistent pressure from the TG, SOTF, and CJSOTF commanders, the event reached the operations sync, where it was received positively by senior staff and the commander. This set of events resulted in a delay in payment to contracted resources, a loss of confidence in Army special operations forces, and it put the whole

operation at risk.

On a separate occasion, after a crisis in international waters, partner forces asked the detachment and TG for assistance with intelligence sharing, planning, and resources. The TG swiftly began to generate a concept requesting permission to advise and assist our partners. At that point, requesting advise-assist permissions was new to certain TSOC staff members, and so the staff was averse to it. This aversion resulted in months-long delays in providing answers, let alone support for our allies and partners. Ultimately, this resulted in a loss of confidence in U.S. special operations forces and a pivot away from the U.S. as the partner of choice.

Potential Solutions

TSOC staff (particularly new or inexperienced staff) should be reminded that they are not commanders and that concepts have been reviewed and approved at multiple levels before they reach them. Low-risk operations with an approved line of accounting should not require a second authorization from the TSOC but rather from the TG. Clear lines of communication and rapid decision-making protocols should be established and followed. CONOPs are scrutinized to the point that intermediate command levels require the detachment to brief the TSOC because they are not confident in answering questions posed with requisite detail. Proactive monitoring, coupled with clear objectives and defined criteria for success, would nearly eliminate the need for constant approval requests because the elements would not have to generate policy through CONOPs. The TSOC should promote battlefield circulation of staff officers in the J-35 and J-5 to foster

open communication and timely feedback between the TSOC and subordinate units. Exposure to ground truth would also help emphasize shared understanding of campaign goals and objectives. The TSOCs would benefit by recognizing and rewarding initiative and innovation at the tactical level.

Conclusion

Operational effectiveness of TSOCs hinges on the right balance between scrutiny and synchronization. Scrutiny, when applied appropriately, protects the mission and ensures standards are met. However, when it devolves into excessive fault-finding or micromanagement, it creates operational friction that slows momentum, diminishes morale, and erodes trust. Synchronization, by contrast, enables unity of effort, efficient resource allocation, and the timely execution of missions in alignment with campaign objectives.

A deliberate shift in TSOC culture and processes is required to prioritize synchronization while retaining the necessary safeguards of oversight. Empowering subordinate commanders with greater autonomy, fostering open communication, and establishing clear and efficient decision-making protocols will reduce delays and strengthen operational agility. By trusting the judgment of units that have already undergone multiple layers of command approval, the TSOC can transform from a bottleneck into a force multiplier.

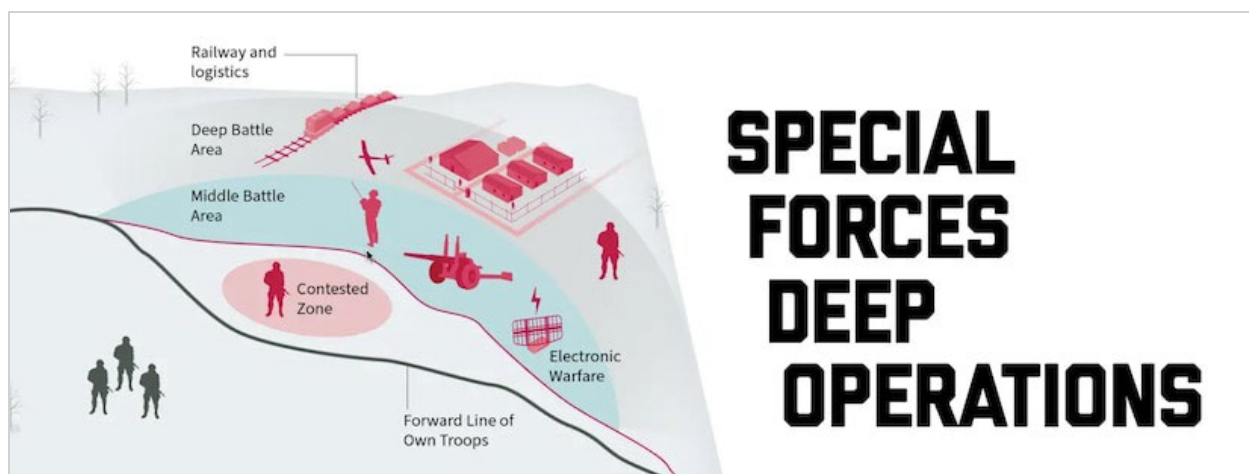
Ultimately, the TSOC's strategic objectives will be best served when resources, operations, and objectives are synchronized across the force, allowing tactical units to act decisively and effectively. This approach

not only enhances mission success but also
strengthens the TSOC's credibility and

partnership capacity.

Author's Note: Chief Warrant Officer 2 Greg Settle is a Regular Army Soldier and Special Forces Officer with more than 27 years of service. He wrote this as part of the Warrant Officer Advanced Course graduation requirements. The view, opinions, and analysis expressed do not represent the position of the U.S. Army or the Department of War.





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Special Forces Deep Operations

By Major Bryan King

Introduction

Not long after open-source reporting on Operation ABSOLUTE RESOLVE (OAR) broke, to include the article “The Medvedev Corollary” shared by the 1st Special Forces Command (Airborne) Commanding General, our soldiers began dissecting the operation. They discussed the implications for Special Forces (SF) deep operations in large-scale combat operations (LSCO). During a battalion forum, an 18-series Soldier raised a concern he and his team had been pondering. They had trained for infiltration and target development against integrated air defense systems (IADS) components, and enabling joint strikes, assuming air access would be contested or denied. Yet OAR showed that the U.S. could rapidly defeat air defenses through integrated air, cyber, and electronic warfare assets, leveraging a joint conventional force (CF) and special operations force (SOF) force package.⁰¹ The follow-up question was blunt: If this can be done without SF, what exactly is SF’s mission in LSCO?

Simply put, if the joint force can, at times,

penetrate anti-access / area denial (A2/AD) systems, how does that affect the necessity and purpose of SF deep operations in LSCO? What elements remain essential to SF’s mission?

Purpose

This white paper examines how Operation ABSOLUTE RESOLVE impacts the role of Special Forces in LSCO. It asks: What, if anything, truly shifts about SF’s mission set and necessity when the joint force can defeat integrated air defenses? It further identifies the conditions where SF deep operations remain critical, despite advances in A2/AD defeat by the broader joint force.

Scope

This paper focuses on SF deep operations in LSCO as they relate to enabling the main battle area. It does not address steady-state competition or crisis response, nor does it examine peripheral operations or operations intended to open new fronts (e.g., Task Force Viking), though both remain critical.

Key Insights

The following key insights frame the analysis and inform recommendations:

Scalability: OAR is neither routine nor scalable in LSCO; massed, highly integrated national-level effects will be allocated infrequently and at high-opportunity cost.

Framing: In LSCO, SF's relevant frame is enabling the supported corps / division deep fight.⁰² The ground CF commander is primarily concerned with preventing effective enemy employment in the close area by shaping when, where, and in what condition the enemy can commit combat power.⁰³ Therefore, SF deep operations should be framed around enabling the supported commander's close fight, not anchored on national-level targets.

Target Serviceability Drives the SF

Requirement: The enduring need for SF deep operations in LSCO hinges less on A2/AD penetration and more on which targets can be reliably prosecuted. Corps / division commanders prioritize and allocate limited deep fires and aviation under constraints (time, mobility, rules of engagement, collateral risk, prioritization). SF adds the most value where constraints prevent reliable prosecution by other means.

Strategic Effect is Cumulative: SF's strategic value in LSCO is persistent pressure and delay that shape the close fight and prevent effective enemy employment over time, rather than a single decisive raid.

Operation ABSOLUTE RESOLVE: Why It's Not the LSCO Model and What it Might Change

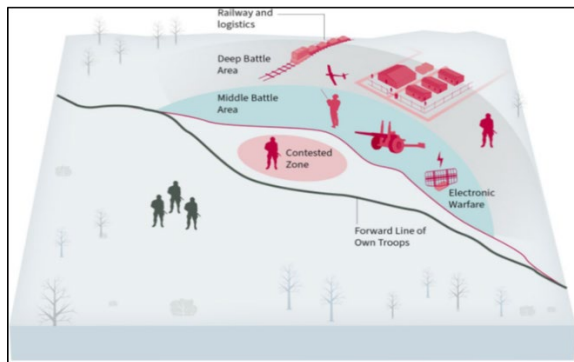
Assuming that the capabilities described in "The Medvedev Corollary" are factual, OAR's force package reflected an exceptional concentration of national-level capabilities and preparation. The article notes that the operation involved "over 150 aircraft launched simultaneously from 20 locations across the Western Hemisphere" and that the cyber access enabling the air defense collapse was "likely established months before the kinetic operation."⁰¹

These two details are the core reason that the operation should not be treated as a repeatable LSCO model for the majority of SF's likely mission sets. A peer LSCO fight demands simultaneous deep effects over a much broader battlespace, and for sustained periods. Even if technically possible, such asset allocation and months of preparation cannot be routinely replicated while supporting a corps or division-scale campaign that requires continuous targeting, shaping, and protection across depth.

Stated plainly: OAR demonstrates what is possible when the joint force can assemble a unique combination of time, access, mass, and integration. LSCO, however, typically lack those conditions at scale.

What might change: while OAR is not a scalable LSCO model, it may still shape how we think about LSCO in two ways. First, it suggests that the joint force can, under the right conditions, create rapid windows of access through A2/AD. Second, it could imply that SF should avoid anchoring their target focus on A2/AD systems alone. As covered in a recent RUSI Insight Paper, "Emergent Approaches to Combined Arms Manoeuvre in Ukraine," SF could be

uniquely postured to provide a strategic advantage to the close fight by focusing on deep area war-sustaining targets that drive the enemy's ability to commit and sustain combat power—particularly reserves, logistics nodes, and industrial targets.⁰⁴



*Figure 1: Ukrainian Battlefield Geometry, Source: Watling, Emergent Approaches to Combined Arms Manoeuvre in Ukraine, 2025. Graphic design: Alex Whitworth Art & Design.*⁰⁴

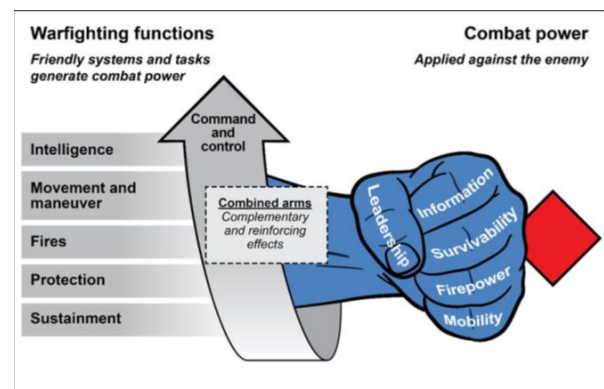
As the author notes, unmanned aerial vehicle and artillery capacity are heavily consumed in the contested zone and 'middle battle area,' where reconnaissance and 'middle-strike' effects are concentrated to isolate close objectives.⁰⁴ In LSCO, the joint force will likely prioritize scarce intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets and fires assets in similar fashion, leaving war-sustaining nodes of the deep areas less reliably prosecuted by standoff means. This gap is a natural lane for SF deep operations. These service support areas are also likely to sit in and around population centers and civil infrastructure, where target discrimination becomes all the more important.

Where SF Deep Operations Matter

SF deep operations matter most where high-payoff deep targets are not reliably

served by fires or aviation alone. This 'gap' is clearest in the enemy's logistics support zone—the deep area enabling sustainment, movement control, reserves, and repairs. With priority ISR, fires, and aviation consumed elsewhere, these nodes are less reliably targeted but often determine if enemy formations arrive, refit, and fight as planned.

The enemy logistics support areas (e.g., Corps Support Area, Division Support Area, etc.) are ideal for SF deep operations, as they are where disruption most directly shapes the enemy's ability to commit combat power and where other means are least reliable. SF deep operations should focus on shaping when, where, and in what condition the enemy can commit combat power.



*Figure 2: Generating Combat Power, Source: ADP 3-0, Operations*⁰⁵

The Army defines combat power as “the total means of destruction and disruptive force which a military unit / formation can apply against the opponent at a given time.”⁰⁵ If the enemy cannot move reserves, fuel formations, delivery ammunition, repair losses, or maintain command and control, it cannot commit combat power in usable conditions to the close fight. *This* is the deep problem SF should own.

Within that problem set, SF is thus uniquely suited to enable effects against three types of targets:

Targets Requiring Discrimination: SF deep operations are most relevant where the operational environment demands high discrimination, especially in and around population centers, where collateral risk may limit the use of massed fires and aviation. This also includes targets where the effect required does not justify expensive munitions but still matters operationally when applied repeatedly at scale.

War-Sustaining Systems: SF deep operations are uniquely suited to pressure the enemy's ability to commit and sustain combat power by focusing on lines of communication, logistics nodes, repair capacity, and select industrial infrastructure. Effects against these targets delay and disrupt an enemy's timing, tempo, and sustainment of the close fight.

Targets that are Hard to Find, Fix, or Hold: SF adds disproportionate value against mobile or time-sensitive targets because teams can get eyes on, maintain contact, and cue strikes when windows open. Without persistent contact, these targets often displace before fires or aviation can be applied.

Taken together, this is consistent with SF's historical role as an "economy of force [element] employed to delay, disrupt, or harass hostile reinforcing forces or divert them to secondary areas of operations to later the momentum and tempo of hostile operations," and one not "structured for attrition or force-on-force warfare."⁰³

Our guerrilla operations history provides useful operating logic for LSCO deep operations: small, mobile forces who can create outsized, cumulative effects against a numerically superior force. Accordingly, SF deep operations should—

- Emphasize "preservation of their military forces and attack at points most disadvantageous to the enemy."⁰⁶
- Direct attacks "against isolated outposts, weakly defended locations, or enemy patrols."⁰⁶
- Raids should follow conventional raid principles "with additional emphasis on ensuring surprise and survivability of the raiding force."⁰⁶

Recommendations

These recommendations translate the paper's key insights into potential changes to how detachments train and prepare for their wartime mission.

- 1. LSCO Exercise Redesign:** Use LSCO-focused exercises to reflect the deep fight of an enemy logistics support zone. This means population centers, civilian patterns, infrastructure rather than a "no man's land" deep area dominated by IADS and other fires assets. Build the exercise around war-sustaining systems (e.g., fuel, ammo, maintenance, movement control, communications nodes, rail, and road infrastructure) and untasked reserve forces.
- 2. Training Guidance Adjustments:** Evaluate advanced operations bases (AOBs) / operational detachments – bravo (ODBs) on how they employ their operational

detachments – alpha (ODAs) to generate cumulative effects. AOBs should be evaluated while managing their ODAs signature and survivability across the deep fight over time, not just primarily on singular, consolidated decisive actions. Evaluate ODAs on their ability to move decentralized to an objective area, control their electromagnetic spectrum signature, and displace rapidly after going kinetic. Equally incentivize SF detachments to achieve effects through standoff or delayed effects that reduce exposure and preserve the force. For raids, shift evaluations towards movement to the objective, signature management, and survivable exfil. Make survivability a first-order task that must be trained.

3. Increase Targeting Literacy and Sustainment Architecture Analysis: Build a deeper understanding of corps and division deep targeting and enemy sustainment architecture as the primary LSCO problem set. Train staffs and detachments to understand how supported commanders

prioritize targets and allocate limited deep fires and aviation assets. Develop a standard framework for analyzing enemy support zones and sustainment networks: What enables the close fight, where the system is vulnerable, which nodes are high payoff. Use that framework to drive detachment mission planning and operational design and target selection.

Closing

Operation ABSOLUTE RESOLVE does not invalidate SF deep operations—it clarifies the difference between what is possible and what is repeatable at scale. In LSCO, SF's value is not a single decisive raid; it is the persistent, survivable disruption and discrimination against targets that shape when, where, and in what conditions the enemy can commit combat power. Implementing the changes above will better align training and evaluation with the targets and constraints we should expect in a corps or division deep fight.

Author's Note: Major Bryan King is a career Regular Army Soldier and Special Forces Officer with more than 13 years of service. He currently serves as an Executive Officer for a Special Forces Battalion. The views, opinions, and analysis expressed do not represent those of the U.S. Army or the Department of War.

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Institutionalizing Artificial Intelligence Integration in Special Forces: The Case for a Group-Level AI Cell

By Chief Warrant Officer 3 Ernie Hansen

Artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, and large language models are no longer emerging technologies; they now reshape global military, commercial, and informational areas. For Special Forces Groups (SFG), the question is not adoption but method: Will it be synchronized and institutional, or fragmented? Special Forces excel at decentralized execution. Special Forces operational detachments - alpha (SFOD-As) innovate in contact, adjust to local conditions, and solve problems with limited direction. This culture is a strength. Yet with complex technologies like AI, decentralized experimentation alone falls short. Without institutional focus, modernization is uneven. Some battalions advance while others lag. Tools multiply without standards, and security measures differ. Lessons learned remain isolated.

A small, dedicated two-person AI Integration Cell at the SFG level institutionalizes innovation, enables decentralized execution, synchronizes AI initiatives, and ensures competitiveness as

adversaries rapidly integrate AI.

The Modernization Gap

Across the joint force, modernization initiatives may begin at higher echelons or within specialized technical communities. At the SFG level, implementation often rests on individual initiative. An SFOD-A might experiment with AI-assisted planning tools. An SF battalion might test machine learning-enabled data analysis software. Another unit may invest in enhancements to autonomous systems tied to drones or robotics. Each effort may be well-intentioned. Yet without coordination, several risks emerge:

- Duplication of effort across SF battalions
- Inconsistent training standards
- Divergent tool sets
- Unvetted commercial software adoption
- Uneven security compliance

This may create disparities within the same SFG; SFOD-As may deploy with different technologies, and leaders may lack a clear picture of the group's capabilities. Innovation stays episodic, not institutional,

without an AI cell to provide coherence.

Why the SFG Level is the Right Echelon

The SFG is the operational headquarters that coordinates resources and training priorities for SF battalions, and it balances decentralized execution with centralized intent. Placing the AI Integration Cell at this echelon helps to ensure alignment with the SFG commander's modernization vision and provides reach across the entire formation. At the SF battalion level, personnel turnover and deployments hinder continuity. At higher headquarters, distance from SFOD-A realities reduces practical relevance. The SFG level balances operational proximity and authority. A dedicated cell at this level can:

- Synchronize implementation timelines across SF battalions.
- Serve as the authoritative advisory body to the SFG commander.
- Maintain continuity during leadership handovers.

Institutionalization at the SFG level prevents modernization from becoming a chain of disconnected initiatives.

Supporting Existing Capabilities

The AI Integration Cell is not meant to replace existing technical experts. The SFG has defined roles for robotics, signal, intelligence, and cyber professionals. The two-person cell serves as an integrator, ensuring coordination rather than competition. It can evaluate emerging AI, machine learning, and large language models tools for SFG-level applicability. The cell would also oversee the integration of approved AI capabilities with existing

communications, intelligence, and autonomous systems, ensuring technical compatibility, effectiveness, and security compliance for all SF battalions.

The intent is to work directly with robotics and unmanned systems staff to standardize AI-enhanced hardware and software across battalions, and document best practices, technical guidelines, and recommendations for SFG-wide implementation. Additionally, it would advise SF battalions on approved tools and best practices, while capturing and disseminating lessons learned across the formation. Rather than creating another stovepipe, the cell serves as connective tissue between existing specialties.

Standardization Across SF Battalions

Uniform capability does not eliminate tactical creativity. Instead, it provides a shared technological foundation for SFOD-As to operate from. An SFG-level AI Integration Cell ensures that all SF battalions use vetted and approved AI tools. Security guidelines would be consistent across the formation, training requirements would be synchronized, and field innovations would be evaluated and, if effective, standardized. Software updates and system improvements would be implemented and communicated group-wide.

Without such coordination, technological advantage risks being uneven across the formation. Uneven modernization creates operational vulnerability in an era where adversaries leverage AI-enabled targeting, ubiquitous technical surveillance, and influence operations.

Maintaining Competitive Advantage and Continuity

Near-peer and peer adversaries are investing in AI applications, including autonomous systems, data analysis platforms, and information operations. They are not waiting for deliberate doctrinal cycles to adapt. They are rapidly integrating commercially available technologies at scale. SFGs must compete in this environment. The advantage is not just new tools, but coherent, rapid integration.

A dedicated cell can track global trends in military and commercial AI and identify technologies with operational relevance. It can also recommend adoption or mitigation measures while reducing the time between the emergence of technology and its operational implementation. This shortens modernization cycles and preserves decision advantage. SFGs operate in a high-operational tempo environment. Personnel rotate frequently. Leaders transition. Institutional knowledge can dissipate quickly. A standing two-person AI Integration Cell provides persistent subject-matter expertise, a stable modernization focal point, lessons learned, and a single AI point of contact for SF battalions. This continuity prevents repeated trial-and-error and helps ensure that progress builds over time.

Oversight, Security, and Discipline

The AI and large language models have unique security and compliance considerations. Commercial platforms may store data externally, machine learning tools may require integration among existing networks, and autonomous systems may have policy and ethical concerns. In the

absence of clear oversight, well-intentioned experimentation can introduce new risk. The group-level cell can establish approved-use frameworks, data / information management standards, vetting procedures for commercial software, and coordination with legal, information security, and operational security authorities. Structured governance does not inhibit innovation. It protects it.

A Small Footprint with Outsized Impact

A small cell ensures agility and avoids bureaucratic expansion by focusing on integration and synchronization—not program management or acquisition. Two knowledgeable professionals, aligned with the SFG commander and empowered to coordinate across staff sections, can influence modernization across hundreds of Soldiers and multiple battalions. The return on investment is substantial: minimal manpower yields group-wide standardization, continuity, and modernization.

Special Forces' advantage lies in human relationships, cultural understanding, and adaptive leadership. AI does not replace but augments these strengths. The purpose of institutionalizing AI integration is to enhance the SFOD-A's effectiveness, not change its identity. By deliberately managing adoption, the group ensures that technology supports the force rather than distracts from its core competencies.

Conclusion

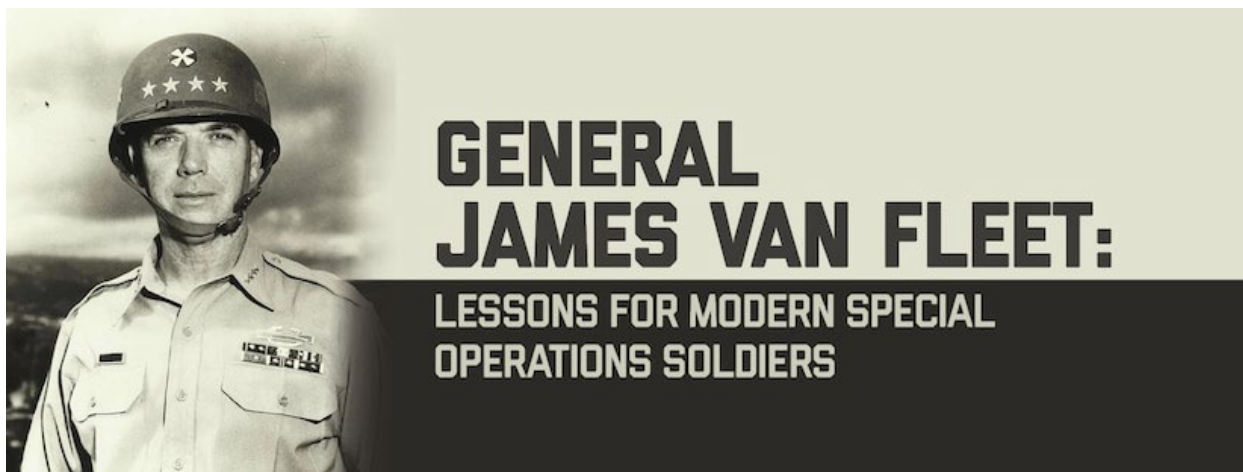
AI, machine learning, and large language models are reshaping the operational environment. As adversaries move quickly, SFGs must lead with equal discipline and

speed. A two-person AI Integration Cell at the group level institutionalizes modernization and enhances standardization. It unifies adoption,

complements expertise, and maintains continuity, offering a key advantage for the future fight.

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General James Van Fleet: Lessons for Modern Special Operations Soldiers

By LT. Col. Marshall McGurk

One can be forgiven for not associating Gen. James Van Fleet with special operations or Special Forces. He is best known as the commander of the U.S. Eighth Army from April 1951 to February 1953 during the Korean War. The majority of Van Fleet's career was spent in traditional infantry roles, as a machine gun battalion commander in World War I and as a regimental, division, and corps commander during World War II. However, his assignment as head of the Joint United States Military Advisory Group, Greece (JUSMAG-Greece) in 1948, and his leadership and design of "Operation Rat Killer" during the Korean War, should grab our attention.⁰¹

This article argues that Gen. Van Fleet's operations in Greece and Korea hold historical weight to modern-day special operations and explores why he was considered a special operations expert by his foreign peers.⁰² Modern special operations doctrine is used as a framework of analysis. U.S. policy implemented what could be argued as foreign internal defense, security cooperation, security force

assistance, and counterinsurgency in the early days of the Cold War, prior to the doctrine becoming commonplace.

General James Van Fleet and the SOF Truths

General Van Fleet already surpassed what most officers would consider the pinnacle of a military career. He'd commanded a regiment, division, and an Army corps in arduous combat since landing at Utah Beach in June 1944. As fate, or rather the Army, would have it, there were two more wars ahead of Van Fleet before his retirement in 1953.

The selection of Van Fleet points to SOF Truth #1: Humans are more important than hardware, and SOF Truth #2: Quality is better than quantity.⁰³ At the time, few senior officers had experience with special missions, special operations, or leading coalition forces. Most of the Army's special operations seed corn were still at field-grade rank when the Second World War ended. What made Van Fleet the top pick for JUSMAG-Greece was his reputation in

combat and in training forces for combat. George C. Marshall, then Secretary of State, wrote to the chief of the American mission for aid, Dwight P. Griswold, and called Van Fleet “one of the outstanding aggressive fighting corps commanders of the campaign in Europe.” Army Chief of Staff Dwight D. Eisenhower said Van Fleet was “...direct and forceful and has a fighting record that would make anyone respect him.”⁰⁴ Greece needed the military hardware of the U.S. to beat back the communists, but they needed to improve the quality of their Army even more.

Security Cooperation and Counterinsurgency in Greece, 1947-1949

Lieutenant General James A. Van Fleet was serving as deputy Chief of Staff of the U.S. European Command when he was nominated by President Harry S. Truman to take over the JUSMAG-Greece, with Senate confirmation on Feb. 18, 1948.⁰⁵ Truman had two days earlier stated “that economic recovery in Greece must await the establishment of internal security.”⁰⁶ A communist guerrilla movement ravaged Greece, its economy, and civilian populace. At the time Van Fleet was confirmed, the U.S. committed \$172 million to the military aid program to support the formation of 100 National Defense Corps Battalions. The local battalions would protect local villages and recruitment, “thereby freeing the Greek National Army to conduct a more offensive warfare.”⁰⁷ Van Fleet oversaw the whole project from recruiting, organizing, and training the National Defense Corps Battalions to advising and assisting the Greek Army against communist guerrillas.⁰⁸

President Truman’s request to Congress and the creation of JUSMAPG-Greece as part of

the Marshall Plan marked the beginning of U.S. security assistance efforts in Europe. Currently, Security Force Assistance is defined as “activities that support the development of the capability and capacity of foreign security forces and their supporting institutions.”⁰⁹ This capacity building was bought for the price of nearly \$400,000,000 and less than 700 American military personnel.¹⁰ The communist insurgency was defeated through a variety of means, however unified U.S. assistance enabled the legitimate Greek government to reassert control.

Unity of effort and command was reinforced at the national level through the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, and the creation of various advisory groups. JUSMAG-Greece served as a security cooperation platform—using modern doctrine—that gave a war-weary U.S. options to address communist guerrillas, nascent independence movements, and power struggles left by receding European empires. It both supported a campaign plan and acted upon U.S. national strategy while “[demonstrating] commitment to partner nations and [building] relationships to counter adversaries and major global powers.”¹¹ While U.S. Army Special Forces were not officially founded until 1952, the U.S. was familiar with special operations through its World War II experience.

Van Fleet’s leadership, advice, and assistance to the Greek Army foreshadowed the special forces remit that would emerge. JUSMAG-Greece aligns with the modern definition of security force assistance: “activities based on organizing, training, equipping, rebuilding, and advising various components of Foreign Security Forces.”¹² Aside from 200,000 soldiers in the

Greek Army, the infusion of capital, weapons, and training brought about “50,000 militiamen and 21,000 more in the tiny Greek navy and air force.”¹³ His natural tendency to get along with his foreign colleagues is a natural fit for the cultural alignment of today’s Special Forces. He expressed love and admiration for his Greek partners, demanding that training, aggressiveness, and strong leadership become part of their military culture.¹⁴ His Greek counterpart, Field Marshal Alexandros Papagos, “shared Van’s will to win.”¹⁵

Operation Rat Killer: Joint Counterinsurgency During the Korean War

The Korean War was not just fought on the front lines along the 38th parallel. It was a brutal civil war that saw communist guerrillas establish freedom of movement zones across the southern peninsula. North Korean and Chinese-supplied guerrilla units endangered Korean civilians and allied supply lines. The insurgents operated out of the Chiri Mountains, close to major Allied units in Pusan, Taegu, and Taejon.

What is notable about Operation Rat Killer is that Van Fleet did not lead it. He resourced it, supported it, and provided mentorship to the overall commander, Gen. Paik Sun Yup. 8th Army pulled two Republic of Korea (ROK) divisions from the front lines for “Task Force Paik,” which was supported by the ROK Air Force, Korean National Police, and U.S. Psychological Operations support from Tokyo.¹⁶ Advising the force on Van Fleet’s behalf and led by one of his most trusted subordinates was the Korean Military Advisory Group, 60 soldiers who were “experts at operational liaison, communications, air-ground liaison,

reconnaissance, or psychological warfare.”¹⁷ The joint, combined nature of a major operation in the rear area should not be understated. It is an example of future special operations where field-grade officers would advise generals.

Counterinsurgency is defined as the “comprehensive civilian and military efforts designed to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and address its root cause.”¹⁸ The counterinsurgency operation began on Dec. 2, 1951, and ended in February 1952 after approximately twelve weeks of hard fighting. Although he does not cover civil government efforts in the short operational history of Rat Killer, Gen. Paik repeatedly emphasizes that local popular support was paramount to winning the battle. Local civilians provided intelligence, defections, and proved to be valuable force multipliers to his counterinsurgency efforts.¹⁹ The communist guerrillas in the rear area were ultimately neutralized.

Training, detailed planning, and operational ownership mattered to Van Fleet. His Korean counterpart, Gen. Paik Sun Yup, met his challenges with aplomb. Even as Gen. Paik struggled to achieve tangible results in the initial phases of Rat Killer, Van Fleet remained a steadfast partner, providing joint forces support and handling the media while Gen. Paik handled the operational details.²⁰ It is noteworthy that Van Fleet co-authored the forward to Gen. Paik’s memoir when he was nearly 100 years old.²¹ Van Fleet maintained a strong relationship with the Republic of Korea until the end of his life. Current special operators should aspire to such life-long relationships with partners and allies.

Insights

A few insights arise from studying Gen. Van Fleet and his leadership of JUSMAG-Greece and the 8th Army during the Korean War. First, we see a clear case of special operations contributions during war. Special operations forces amplify joint capabilities, especially through fires, and enhance warfighting functions, particularly in sustainment, intelligence, and mission command. Under Van Fleet, JUSMAG-Greece trained and resourced a growing Greek Army with U.S. weapons and equipment and reorganized its command and control structure.²² Security force assistance and training gave the Greek Army mass and fires, and mobility gave them an advantage over their communist guerrillas. SOF assistance is even more robust when coupled with economic aid and aligned with strategic priorities.

Second, we see clear roles for special operations during security force assistance and during war. The former is a SOF core activity that can be interposed with deterrence, coercion, counterinsurgency, or foreign internal defense. As one Greek Army private told Time magazine in 1949, “We have the heart,” he told an American correspondent, “you have the means.”²³ The latter is the role of special operations to ensure the success of the main effort and to provide solutions to operational and strategic problems.

A tertiary insight into Gen. Van Fleet's experiences is his relentless focus on training and the establishment of training

centers. As special operators, we should consider ourselves master trainers and professional soldiers. This quest for mastery is designed, structured, and organized to generate combat power during peace, conflict, and war. A noteworthy aspect of Van Fleet's career is his previous experience as an instructor at Fort Benning's Infantry School. Many famous World War II generals cut their teeth as instructors at various company-grade, field-grade, and senior service college schools. Do modern general officers and senior enlisted leaders have similar instructor experiences? If not, is that to our collective detriment or the detriment of our allies and partners? Mastery of the fundamentals is what our Army and our foreign partners expect of us.

Finally, studying Gen. James A. Van Fleet shows that special operations expertise is not just the purview of graduates from the Special Warfare Center and School. Special operations is an Army core competency²⁴ and **any** Army leader must be prepared and capable of leading complex security force assistance, foreign internal defense, or counterinsurgency operations. Army leaders must be comfortable with leading and employing special operations. The right leaders don't just show up; they are trained and prepared, through rigorous schooling and self-discipline, and with “the will to win” for such an eventuality.²⁵ Prior to leaving Greece, General Van Fleet said, “We must therefore be keen on diligently studying guerrilla warfare and never assume that our lesson is learned and school is over.”²⁶ We would do well to study his example.

Marshall McGurk is a Regular Army Special Forces Officer. He is a graduate of West Point (2005), the School of Advanced Military Studies (2023), and a 2025 Irregular Warfare Initiative Fellow.

Endnotes

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The Relentless Pursuit of an Exceptional Experience

By Captain Robert Haggerty

The most meaningful similarity between my time as a collegiate baseball coach and my time as an Army officer is not the presence of hierarchy, discipline, or standards—it is the responsibility to cultivate an exceptional experience for the people entrusted to me. In both professions, performance is inseparable from experience. Leaders who pursue experience deliberately and relentlessly are rewarded not only with better outcomes but with stronger teams, deeper trust, and organizations capable of sustaining success over time.

Ownership sits at the center of that experience. Players and Soldiers must own their experience just as leaders own outcomes. Life is not fair, effort does not guarantee reward, and good people are sometimes dealt bad hands. When leaders over-dictate experience—when roles, outcomes, and value are prescribed without input—creativity is stifled and belonging erodes. Individuals begin to question whether they matter, whether their leader values their perspective, and whether they truly belong to the organization.

In both coaching and command, I found that ownership grows when individuals are given the opportunity to articulate what they want from the experience and are empowered to add value where they believe they can contribute. This requires regular, genuine communication. It requires leaders to show—not say—that they want their people to succeed. When that relationship exists, difficult conversations become easier. A baseball player who once defined himself solely by his on-field skillset can be guided to see value in preparation, leadership, and culture. A lieutenant who expected immediate platoon command can be reframed from a mindset of being wronged to one of opportunity—recognizing how staff time builds competence and contributes meaningfully to the battalion. In both cases, the realization is often surprising to the individual, but transformative once internalized.

Relationships Create Roots

Relationships establish roots within an organization, and those roots are a key

component of an exceptional experience. As coaches, we intentionally encouraged players to build relationships beyond the athletic department—with cafeteria staff, athletic trainers, professors, and other campus personnel. The more relationships they built across the university, the more they felt they belonged to the whole institution, not just to the baseball program. That sense of belonging gave us credibility and flexibility when what a player wanted on the field wasn't what we could give him.

I applied the same philosophy in the Army. I encouraged junior Soldiers to build relationships with Holistic Health and Fitness (H2F) personnel, motor pool staff, civilian medical employees, physical therapists, and Morale, Welfare, and Recreation personnel. Expanding their network widened the spectrum through which a Soldier could find fulfillment, mentorship, and enjoyment. This does not diminish a leader's responsibility for extreme ownership or battlefield care—it reinforces the truth that a Soldier who feels valued, connected, and fulfilled is far more willing to endure hardship, accept risk, and perform under pressure.

Individualized Opportunity Within Structured Standards

Opportunities within an organization must be individualized while remaining bound by clear standards and philosophy. Equity does not mean equality. Not every player receives the same playing time, and not every Soldier receives the same schools or assignments. However, leaders who fail to creatively address experience gaps risk disengagement. The responsibility lies with the leader to find alternate avenues for growth, contribution, and success when

traditional pathways are unavailable.

Some of the individualized opportunities I leveraged extended beyond the traditional chain of command. For example, the Armed Forces Blood Program on post awarded Army Achievement Medals to Soldiers who donated blood six times within a calendar year. We encouraged participation not only as a form of service but also as a pathway to recognition, pride, and tangible benefits, such as offsetting uniform and supply costs through free items from the center.

We also used community service hours tied to blood drives and volunteer efforts to help Soldiers earn the Military Outstanding Volunteer Service Medal. These initiatives tied Soldiers to the local community, strengthened peer cohesion through shared service, and provided visible recognition for positive behavior. They were especially useful in promotion board scenarios, allowing Soldiers to stack the deck in their favor through effort they controlled — not through award backlogs or reliance on administrative processes. Most importantly, they empowered Soldiers to own their success on their own time and to fuel their career trajectory.

Collaboration Builds Ownership and Confidence

Collaboration is another force multiplier in building ownership. Regardless of rank or seniority, there are always problem sets appropriate to an individual's level of experience and credibility. Leaders who delegate meaningful, low-risk problems to junior personnel increase ownership, confidence, and perceived value.

This collaboration can be simple:

establishing a standard operating procedure for loading equipment in a vehicle, structuring a motor pool binder, editing a form, designing a logo, improving a physical therapy submission process, or building a team resource. These low-threat opportunities allow junior personnel to solve real problems in a controlled environment. The best leaders I have worked for found creative ways to give junior people meaningful problems to solve — problems commensurate with the level of trust and capital they had earned within the organization.

Belief, Identity, and the Winner's Mindset

One universal truth I observed across both environments is that everyone wants to be a winner. The rarest individual on a collegiate team or in a platoon is someone who genuinely wants to lose. Everyone possesses an ego that can be ignited if approached correctly. At the University of Charleston, the baseball program had won fourteen games the year before our staff arrived. In our first year, we won 17. In the second, 34. In the third, 36 games, a conference championship, and the school's first NCAA tournament appearance. That progression did not begin with talent alone—it began with belief.

Our head coach, Andrew Wright, instilled a belief that we were winners before results confirmed it. He had lived that identity at multiple levels and brought it with him. Our players believed it completely. I have seen the same dynamic in military units. Leaders often inherit underperforming platoons or organizations they believe are beneath them. This is precisely where belief matters most. Convincing people they are winners is the first step; aligning personnel and

processes to make that belief real is the leader's responsibility.

Identity and symbolism play an outsized role in reinforcing belief. Whether through a motto, a logo, or a shared narrative, people want to belong to something they are proud of. Pride matters—especially to young people. Experiences that resemble the stories they admire reinforce the idea that they are part of a winning team. No one proudly shares images of themselves because they believe they belong to a losing organization.

In the modern era, identity is reinforced through visibility. Young Soldiers want to show friends and family the meaningful and exciting aspects of their profession: the weapons systems, aircraft, vehicles, and training. We deliberately used social media to reinforce pride and a sense of belonging. We captured photos of Soldiers in training, featured them in sitreps and unit updates, and ensured they were represented in official posts. That visibility served as indirect positive feedback—communicating that they were valued, trusted, and doing important work.

Adding Value Beyond Primary Roles

While everyone wants to win, everyone also wants to add value—even if they cannot be the most valuable performer. As a coach, we emphasized value through education, leadership, community service, and development. In the Army, I gave junior Soldiers ownership beyond repetitive labor. A private skilled with technology could design a logo for a training event. A junior Soldier could lead a motor pool engagement under NCO supervision. These moments mattered because they

communicated trust, competence, and relevance.

Visible work reinforces value. Tangible contributions and community projects allow individuals to see the impact of their efforts. Conversely, isolated or thankless work erodes morale and a sense of belonging. Leaders must constantly assess whether their people feel optimistic and engaged—or disconnected and undervalued.

Development Culture and Ownership at the University of Charleston

From a coaching standpoint, the player development program at the University of Charleston was second to none. We approached development team games with the same intensity, professionalism, and standards as varsity and Mountain East Conference games. From walkout songs to batting practice structure to meticulously clean uniforms, everything mirrored the varsity experience.

We intentionally communicated that these games were not lesser opportunities; they were individualized opportunities. The experience was sold, structured, and executed as a legitimate proving ground. Players were encouraged to own it, maximize it, and treat it as a direct pathway to advancement.

To reinforce authenticity and emotional investment, we scheduled games in regions where players' friends and family could attend. Competing in front of people who mattered increased pride, urgency, and effort. Over time, strong performance in these environments directly translated into varsity opportunities. It was common for a player to perform at a high level midweek

and earn a starting spot by Saturday. That credibility fueled belief, hunger, and commitment to excellence.

One example that stands out was a pitcher who arrived throwing roughly 75 mph—a reality in small college baseball. Instead of writing him off, we offered a long-term development plan: redshirt, commit to strength training, pursue academic growth, complete summer development programs, and allow time for natural physical maturation. The plan was honest—grow from a teenager into a man, trust the process, and maximize potential. By age 22 or 23, that same athlete was throwing 89+ mph, holding a degree, and positioned for long-term success. Belief, patience, and structure reshaped both identity and performance.

Individualized Communication Builds Trust

From the moment a leader encounters someone, opportunities exist to build a connection. Clothing, accent, interests, and demeanor all offer insight into who a person is and where a relationship can begin. Effective leaders notice these details, find common ground, and deliberately build upon it through consistent, individualized communication. Over time, those small interactions compound, strengthening trust, capability, and resilience.

The best leaders I have known personalize communication—even with people very different from themselves. They ask about lives, interests, goals, and aspirations. They listen. They remember. That understanding allows leaders to tailor opportunities when time, mission, and resources permit.

If a Soldier wants to reclassify, reenlist, and

stay in the Army but lacks the required GT score, a leader can connect him with the Basic Skills Education Program (BSEP). If a player aspires to become a sports broadcaster, a leader can link him with conference officials, university communications staff, or local media outlets. These opportunities may sit outside the primary mission or on-field performance, but they directly support identity, motivation, and long-term buy-in.

Leadership is not always about the mission in the moment—sometimes it is about the individual. These periods of personalized communication accumulate over time, creating a foundation for trust. When that foundation exists, mission-driven communication becomes easier, harder tasks become acceptable, and commitment deepens under pressure.

Moments That Cement or Evaporate Trust

“Do-or-die” moments belong to the person experiencing them—not the leader observing them. What seems routine to a commander can feel life-altering to a young Soldier or athlete. The best leaders recognize that reality and act decisively in moments that matter.

One defining moment in my life occurred on October 18, 2012, during a Division II baseball scrimmage in southern West Virginia. A fastball struck me in the face, knocking me to the ground. I swallowed blood, nearly passed out, and the medical staff feared I had broken my jaw and required emergency evacuation. My head coach reached me before anyone else. When medical personnel transported me to the hospital, he handed practice to an assistant and rode in the ambulance with

me. At 2:30 a.m., when imaging confirmed my jaw was intact, he remained by my side. That moment cemented lifelong trust. I knew he would always act in my best interest.

I have witnessed the opposite. A teammate once learned he had torn his labrum and rotator cuff—a potential career-ending injury. When he told his head coach, the coach replied, “That’s tough,” and walked away. The moment vanished, along with trust.

These trust-defining moments occur everywhere: promotion ceremonies, medical crises, family emergencies, pregnancy notifications before major training events, or when junior leaders must advocate upward for their people. Leaders who step forward build loyalty. Leaders who ignore these moments quietly lose credibility.

Ironically, these moments rarely happen under fire—but the trust built during everyday seasons carries teams forward when a real crisis arrives.

Constant Feedback Reinforces Confidence and Course Correction

The best leaders I have worked for consistently provided feedback to every member of their organization. Some preferred formal written feedback; others used informal conversations. Both are effective when done consistently.

Positive feedback reinforces the belief that individuals add value:

- *You did a great job cleaning the motor pool.*

- *I saw the effort you put into collecting equipment.*
- *That Humvee came back in excellent condition.*
- *The weapons inspection looked outstanding.*

Hearing consistent positive reinforcement helps people believe they are competent, valuable, and capable—reinforcing the broader belief that everyone wants to win.

Constructive feedback is just as critical. When individuals begin drifting toward poor decisions, disengagement, or isolation, timely correction can prevent long-term negative outcomes. Feedback becomes a real-time tool to keep people on the path toward growth, contribution, and a positive experience.

Recruitment, Retention, and the Infectious Nature of Culture

An exceptional experience does more than retain people—it attracts the right people. Retention keeps strong teammates in the organization, but recruitment determines who joins in the first place. The best ambassadors for any team are the people already on it. When individuals feel respected, challenged, and valued, that energy becomes contagious. An infectious culture draws in like-minded performers who want to be part of something meaningful. Conversely, poor experiences

replicate themselves—bad environments attract the wrong people, just as strong environments attract strong ones.

Leadership Balance and Accountability

A critical balance in leadership is recognizing that everyone is special—and that no one is. Every individual deserves the opportunity to pursue an exceptional experience, but no one's experience supersedes the team. Talent does not exempt someone from discipline or accountability. When the hardest worker is also the top performer, leadership is easy. When the best performer becomes the greatest challenge, leadership is required. The solution is not an exemption, but the redistribution of responsibility and the elevation of others.

Conclusion

Ultimately, if we ask young people to sacrifice for the greater good, they deserve clarity on the end state. They must understand what they are working toward and why it matters. The relentless pursuit of an exceptional experience is not a basic leadership concept—it is a strategic one. When leaders commit to it fully, the dividends appear everywhere: in performance, in culture, in recruitment, in retention, and in the quiet confidence of teams who believe they belong to something worth giving themselves to.

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Masters of Chaos Theory: Why SOF Thrives in Ambiguity

By Chief Warrant Officer 2 Michael Wood

Special Operations Forces (SOF) thrive in ambiguous, chaotic environments because the principles of chaos theory directly enable and accelerate innovation in modern warfare. To understand this connection, it is important to explore the interconnections between chaos theory and innovation. This analysis defines their key principles, highlights their similarities, and shows how SOF uniquely leverages these dynamics to create operational advantages.

Chaos theory is defined as a “branch of mathematics that studies complex systems whose behavior appears random and unpredictable yet is governed by underlying patterns and deterministic equations” (Harris, 2021). Principles of chaos theory study the behavior of dynamic systems that are highly sensitive to initial conditions. Specific principles of chaos theory include nonlinear dynamics, sensitive dependence on initial conditions, attractors, bifurcations, fractals, strange attractors, and phase space.

Warfare is inherently unpredictable, especially in its early, volatile stages.

Outcomes depend on a series of actions and inactions, with chaotic systems responding sensitively to initial conditions. Even minor inputs can cause varied results. Gonzalo (2023) notes that nonlinear processes shape enemy systems, suggesting campaign planners should focus on shaping processes rather than snapshots of an enemy's state.

Innovation involves developing new ideas, methods, or products to solve problems and enhance organizational effectiveness. In military contexts, innovation relies on collaboration, rapid ideation, and value creation to counter threats and maintain strategic advantage. Unconventional tactics and technological advances play key roles, allowing smaller forces to capitalize on adversary vulnerabilities. Rapid innovation enables success against larger opponents, as shown in modern conflicts (Long, 2019).

There is a correlation between chaos theory and innovation, as innovation often occurs in the most complex environments with rapid and continual inputs. “Creativity and innovation are intertwined with chaos due to their ability to bring together different

elements, ideas, and approaches in unique and fresh ways. Creative chaos inspires people to think outside the box, to explore new avenues, and to experiment with new ideas. At the heart of it, creative chaos is about pushing boundaries, taking risks, and embracing the unknown to create better outcomes” (Evryt, 2023). Minor changes or inputs can yield unexpected outcomes. Fluid conditions create opportunities and space for innovation by encouraging adaptability, unconventional problem-solving, critical thinking, and the fusion of diverse perspectives. Organizations continually operating in a paradigm between structure and disorder create space to uncover unique approaches, methods, and products that sustain success and competitive advantage.

SOF are vital to the Army's innovation. The new ideas, methods, and technologies are tested in the SOF environment. SOF soldiers facilitate this innovation through their maturity, adaptability, and willingness to accept and appropriately mitigate risk to test and refine new capabilities in real-world, ambiguous situations. SOF's global saturation affords opportunity to engage in a variety of different irregular warfare missions, including strategic reconnaissance, counterterrorism, direct action, and foreign internal defense. This allows SOF to develop and strengthen relationships with partner forces, creating presence and opportunity to experiment with and adapt solutions across a wide variety of high-pressure environments (Blanken 2020). SOF are smaller in size, highly proactive, and provide unique acquisition opportunities; they can secure and deploy emerging technologies faster than other elements of the Department of War. This speed ensures they can confirm

that new products, methods, or ideas are not only cutting-edge but also viable options for the mission (Starling, 2024). Linking the global reach of SOF, the agility of its operations, and a simplified acquisition process, SOF serves as the premier testing ground for innovation, taking new concepts and creating operational advantages in ambiguous, geopolitically sensitive landscapes.

The relationship between chaos theory and innovation becomes evident in modern conflict. The unpredictable, rapidly changing conditions of warfare foster creative thinking and adaptation, both of which are essential for gaining a strategic advantage. SOF are positioned to seize these moments, using their flexibility, global presence, and agility to refine, test, and implement new methods, tactics, and technologies. In chaotic situations, SOF plays a central role in turning unpredictability into creative, effective outcomes. Recognizing how chaos theory drives innovation highlights the necessity of adaptability and problem-solving in contemporary military operations.

SOF are selected for physical, technical, and cognitive skills, as well as for creative thinking and adaptability needed in high-pressure, ambiguous environments. Their deliberate selection and training focus on navigating disorder—as described by chaos theory—and on exploiting opportunities for innovation. By embracing uncertainty and leveraging adaptability, SOF transforms chaos into operational advantages, using innovation in tactics and technology to support the commander's strategic vision. This link between chaos and innovation highlights SOF's unique ability to bridge chaotic conditions and deliver operational

solutions.

Author's Note: Chief Warrant Officer 2 Michael Wood is a pseudonym for a regular Army Special Forces Officer with more than 16 years of service. He wrote this as part of the Warrant Officer Advanced Course graduation requirements. The views, opinions, and analyses expressed do not represent the position of the U.S. Army or the Department of War.

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Relationships Forged in Fire

By Chief Warrant Officer 4 William Bryant

Editor's Note: This is the first time that this story has been documented from the U.S. side. The Soldiers in this story were never recognized for their actions; they did it selflessly because it was the right thing to do. This historical vignette is applicable to every Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF) Soldier in our formation, especially as members of the Army's premier partner force.

2009, Colombia. It was a hot August morning at the International Police Training School of Colombia (CENOP) in Tolima. The last thing we expected was that we would soon be surrounded by a blazing inferno as we prepared to conduct a graduation ceremony for a class of Colombian Carabinero Police Officers. Over the three weeks prior, we conducted an assessment and selection course for our Carabinero partners, and this was the day they would receive their U.S. Special Forces foreign training insignia. But in less than an hour after we set up the venue, we were battling 15-foot-high flames, breathing in thick smoke and ash, burning our boots and uniforms, and coughing out dark black soot.

That day, a severe wildfire hit the Tolima area during a harsh dry season that left the region primed for disaster. The massive flames – fueled by the wind and extreme heat – burned through forests and farmland, putting homes, families, water supplies, training areas, an ammunition supply point (ASP), and other critical infrastructure at risk. The CENOP base stood in the fire's path. Our small U.S. Special Forces split team (Green Berets from ODA 736) mobilized fast as the dangerous situation demanded immediate action. We pivoted from the graduation ceremony and took our graduating students (Carabineros) to rapidly shift into firefighting assessments and task organization. As ARSOF Soldiers, our initial focus was to save lives, contain the rapidly approaching fire, and protect the base's infrastructure alongside our partners.

Our small group of Green Berets linked up with our Colombian partners, and we jumped into firefighting action without hesitation. One of the SF NCOs contacted our leadership via cellphone, who then relayed it to the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá.

With notifications made, the three of us on the ground quickly organized into firebreak teams and began clearing flammable vegetation around vital structures to prevent the fire from destroying the base. We grabbed every available tool: shovels, picks, sandbags, water buckets, portable sprayers, and whatever else was available to create barriers to stop the advancing flames. Several of our partners were designated to spot wind shifts and identify new flare-ups in the surrounding mountains and hills, while our frontline firefighting teams coordinated the rapid construction of firebreaks.



Colombian National Police work quickly to build an expedient fire break, as the flames rapidly engulf the training area. Photo courtesy of Sergeant Major Treviño.

Thick smoke and falling ash made it incredibly hard to breathe and see. It was intense and dangerous, but we kept pushing through as the fire raged, destroying more than 150 acres. The fire put water systems and crops at risk, leaving thousands worried about basic needs. On the ground, we fought the flames directly, building numerous firebreaks (often within inches of towering flames), evacuating people, and protecting vital infrastructure. The heat was

intense, hindering our crews as we worked just a few feet from fast-moving fire lines and huge flames. The dangers of working the fire line were constant: Shifting winds, fast flames, and oppressive heat made conditions unpredictable, but our team was right in the middle of it. The Colombian and U.S. ad-hoc firefighters worked shoulder to shoulder, drenched in soot and sweat as we cleared brush and dug firebreaks. The risk of severe burns, heat exhaustion, and even death was constant. To this day, many of us still have breathing issues from this incident.

One of the most critical moments came when we were alerted to a dangerous flare-up that was quickly approaching the ASP. With the fire spreading rapidly, flames came dangerously close—less than 10 feet from the ASP's Conex containers. Inside, there were thousands of rounds of pistol, rifle, and belt-fed ammunition, along with C4, demolition charges, and other high explosives. Evacuating the ASP was incredibly risky, but we quickly put together a team of volunteer police officers, knowing that failure would mean catastrophic consequences. Had we not acted swiftly, the fire would have set off the rounds in the ASP. We moved quickly and decisively to evacuate the two Conex containers, all while being surrounded on three sides by fast-moving flames, smoke, and ash. We shuttled all the ammo and explosives up to the top of the clearing in the middle of the base and left a guard, while the rest of us continued firefighting. These actions protected lives and prevented a disastrous explosion and loss of life.



A Green Beret assists in building one of many expedient fire breaks around the CENOP training area. Photo by Sergeant Major Treviño.

The Colombian Air Force joined the fight and supported the firefighting efforts with Bell 212 helicopters, dropping water and fire retardant on the worst hotspots. This was critical to the overall operation, as much of the mountainous terrain was inaccessible by ground forces. Air and ground teams stayed in constant contact. While the helicopters worked above, police, Green Berets, and local crews tackled the flames directly—digging, cutting, and hauling equipment through stifling heat, flames, and thick smoke. Breathing was tough, exhaustion set in quickly, but we never quit. Stopping the fire was our only option.



A Colombian Air Force Bell 212 prepares to drop water over a burning area on day 2 of the fire. Photo by author.

The blaze raged on into the night and the second day. By the time additional help arrived, the scale of the damage was staggering: Nearly 500 acres had been destroyed, and more than 5,000 people in local villages were impacted. The relief in the local villages was critical; if the Air Force helicopters and additional fire crews hadn't shown up, the fires would have continued to sweep through the area and local towns. Once the fire was under control, attention shifted to the surrounding communities. Helicopter teams continued water drops while ground teams shored up gains from the previous day.

Even with all this destruction, we held fast. At the CENOP, not a single life was lost, which was a testament to the speed and efficiency of the volunteer emergency crews. As smaller fires continued to burn on the second day, crews continued their firefighting efforts. Without the local responder's quick response time, things would have been far worse. The impromptu firefighters' skill, selflessness, and bravery made all the difference, saving lives and infrastructure.



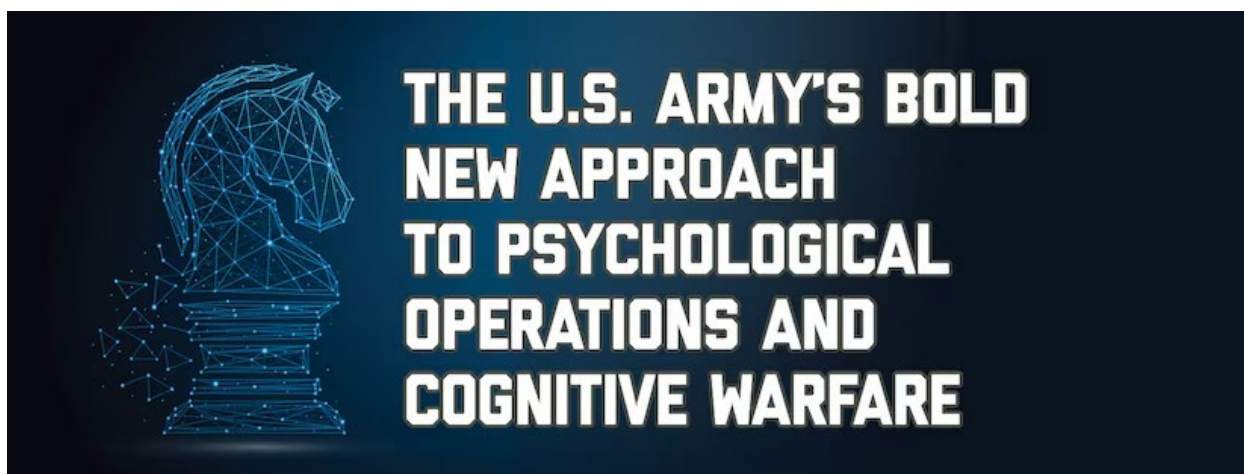
Part of the aftermath on day 2, showing a portion of the south side of the training area. Photo by author.

In the end, what truly stood out to me was the unwavering partnership and trust among the Colombian National Police, U.S. Special Forces, local firefighters, and air

crews. Our teams didn't just fight the intense, searing flames. We stood by each other, combining our skills and experience when every second mattered. It took grit, split-second decisions, and a deep sense of responsibility to protect the people and the local area. Each of us knew what was at stake, and nobody hesitated to step into danger for their teammates or the community. The professionalism and dedication on display went far beyond routine duty; it was a testament to how much can be accomplished when partners trust each other and work toward a common goal.

Thanks to fierce determination and seamless teamwork, what could have been a tragedy instead became a powerful example of partnership and courage in the face of disaster. For ARSOF Soldiers, the fire response revealed a critical aspect of ARSOF operations: the innate ability to support our partner forces in the most demanding conditions, without hesitation. Relationships, figuratively and literally, forged in fire.

Author's Note: Chief Warrant Officer 4 William Bryant is a career Regular Army Soldier and Special Forces Officer with more than 24 years of service. He is a graduate of the School of Advanced Military Studies, How the Army Runs Course, and the Air Command and Staff College. He also holds three graduate degrees (MA, MS, and MA) and an FAA commercial pilot certificate, and he currently serves as a Battalion Senior Warrant Officer Advisor. The views, opinions, and analysis expressed do not represent the position of the U.S. Army or the Department of War.



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The U.S. Army's Bold New Approach to Psychological Operations and Cognitive Warfare
By Major George Wasickanin

On April 2, 2026, the SOCoE graduated 44 its first class in the initial transformation of Psychological Operations, as part of the Total Army solution to cognitive warfare. The new graduates included PSYOP service members from all three components, Regular Army, National Guard, and Army Reserve, as well as members of the Joint Force.

The push for modernizing Psychological Operations stems from the realization that adversaries are outmaneuvering the U.S. in the information environment. A recent example is the widespread use of disinformation campaigns during the 2025 Black Sea tensions, in which hostile actors manipulated social media platforms to sow confusion among NATO partners and influence public opinion against U.S. policy goals. This incident highlights how adversaries have leveraged information superiority to gain tangible strategic advantages, underscoring the urgent need to contest and regain the initiative in this domain. This initiative aims to contest our adversaries' current information superiority.

The current Army structure, with its information capabilities spread across various commands, branches, and centers of excellence, does not sufficiently address sophisticated threats. To bridge this gap and regain the initiative, the Army announced a major transformation of the Information Forces: consolidating the Psychological Operations (CMF 37) and Information Operations (FA30) communities into a single branch.

The HQDA EXORD 083-26, titled "Information Warfare (IWAR) Initiatives," directs the consolidation of proponents under the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, also known as the Special Operations Center of Excellence (SOCoE). This officially designates SOCoE as the lead for modernizing Psychological Operations, which includes developing the curriculum, executing pilot courses, and overseeing the force modernization effort. The mission, as stated in these directives, is to transform information activities across the competition continuum. The SOCoE cadre and instructors constantly adapt and modernize training scenarios that test our

new Psychological Operations Officers. We're learning from global conflicts and adapting to the continuously changing character and conduct of war.

The Psychological Operations Qualification Course curriculum transitioned from a Global War on Terrorism focus to Large-Scale Combat Operations, shifting from large-population messaging and counter-radicalization to countering peer adversaries: how they fight, how they make decisions, and how to influence the adversary commander's next move. For example, instead of designing messaging campaigns aimed at deterring insurgent recruitment, the course now trains students to analyze and counter peer and near-peer adversarial information. In one scenario, students practice developing influence strategies that disrupt an enemy commander's decision-making cycle during a simulated large-scale combat exercise, employing techniques to exploit cognitive vulnerabilities.

With the consolidation of FA30 into CMF 37, the new qualification course curriculum focuses on providing the maneuver commander greater lethality. The modernized training curriculum bridges the two career fields together, strengthening the integration of information with warfighting functions at the corps and division levels. Students now have a better understanding of how to use the other information forces for an influence effect. They also now have a better understanding of how to integrate PSYOP into the targeting cycle and operational planning for a maneuver commander.

These new graduates will be able to integrate information effects with the same

rigor the Army applies to integrating fires and maneuver, providing Army Senior leaders with a blueprint for how information can maximize combat power. The new qualification course showcases new concepts in employment, the application of cutting-edge technology and software, and an updated training scenario to reflect the current threat landscape. The modernized qualification course also integrates emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence to help generate relevant solutions at speed, enabling combat power for the Army and the Joint Force.

The cognitive dimension is a key part of the battlefield, and our adversaries are outmaneuvering us at the strategic level with low-cost, high-impact information activities. Integrating into the maneuver commander's operations and targeting cycle is where PSYOP can provide lethality. They can create advantageous conditions for the commander by understanding the adversaries' behavior and decision-making calculus. The modernized course teaches about human behaviors, motives, and vulnerabilities that shape decision-making. PSYOP recognizes how the adversary thinks and processes information, and how this affects their behavior on the battlefield, which can be influenced. Bringing that understanding to the staff and the commander enables more effective targeting.

Previously undertaken as Information Warfare (IWAR), the name has now officially reverted to Psychological Operations. The name change does not affect the initiatives and modernization efforts that the SOCoE has implemented over the past year. The revamped Psychological Operations branch

modernizes a career field that leverages information to benefit the entire Army and the Joint Force. This evolved branch creates an agile force capable of weakening enemy combat power and providing our commanders with a decision-making advantage in multidomain operations.

This transformation directly enhances the lethality and combat power of the entire Joint Force. It ensures we can compete, deter, and win against any adversary in

today's complex information environment. The 2026 graduation of the Army's first class under the transformed Psychological Operations curriculum marks a significant milestone in Army modernization and operational readiness. By equipping Soldiers with advanced cognitive warfare capabilities, this initiative strengthens the Army's ability to effectively compete in the information environment and maintain a strategic edge.

Author's Note: Maj. George Wasickanin is a career Regular Army Soldier and Public Affairs Officer with more than 16 years of service. The views, opinions, and analysis expressed do not represent the position of the U.S. Army or the Department of War.



PERSPECTIVE

CIVIL AFFAIRS IN THE CIVIL-MILITARY COORDINATION CENTER, ISRAEL



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Civil Affairs in the Civil-Military Coordination Center, Israel

By Sergeant Major Arturo Balsa

Introduction

This article examines how Civil Affairs operates within the Civil-Military Coordination Center (CMCC) in Israel, highlighting the interplay with intergovernmental, international, and non-governmental organization (NGO) stakeholders. It underscores why understanding these dynamics are essential to effectively support humanitarian efforts and operational goals.

Civil Affairs is the Army's primary capability for engaging in the civil aspects of the operational environment. Following the activation of the CMCC, Civil Affairs elements played a vital role in linking networks, creating and strengthening connections among various entities. This includes establishing early relationships among U.S. forces, host-nation representatives, humanitarian organizations, and other multinational stakeholders. By fostering these connections, Civil Affairs facilitated collaboration, enhanced communication, and ensured a coordinated approach to

addressing stakeholders' needs and objectives.

Within weeks of the CMCC's maturation, the operational landscape became saturated. Senior decision-making, resource allocation, and daily coordination increasingly moved under the purview of general officers, ambassadors, and high-ranking civilian directors. In this setting, Civil Affairs retains presence but not primacy—the Civil Affairs role has evolved from a coordinating hub to a subtle yet vital connective presence.

Understanding the Unique Operational Environment

The Israel–Gaza context presents significant challenges due to the absence of a direct U.S. military presence within Gaza. The reliance on contractors, NGOs, independent observers, and indirect sources of information complicates the operational landscape and requires deliberate Civil Affairs engagement across multiple channels. Regional and global variables impact the area, requiring continual

monitoring and assessments. An initial assessment conducted in early November 2025 required reevaluation after the United Nations Security Council's approval of Resolution 2803 on November 17, 2025.

This resolution endorsed President Trump's comprehensive Peace Plan for Gaza, catalyzing increased participation by partner governments, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), and NGOs. These organizations have demonstrated a deeper commitment to CMCC processes, further underscoring the importance of developing robust civil networks, sustaining atmospherics, and leveraging relationships to generate actionable civil understanding. The integration of civil knowledge into operations is vital, as Civil Affairs remains the military's integrator of the civil dimension—ensuring leaders are informed about civil expertise, civil networks, and the emerging dynamics that affect humanitarian and security outcomes.



U.S. Army Soldiers assigned to U.S. Army Central, multinational armed forces, and representatives of Non-Government Organizations (NGO) attend a briefing inside the Civil-Military Coordination Center (CMCC) on Nov. 23, 2025, in Israel. The CMCC is designed to facilitate the flow of humanitarian, logistical, and security assistance into Gaza and monitors the

implementation of the ceasefire agreement and the transition to civilian governance. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Aiden Griffiths)

Situational Analysis & Ground Engagement Network (SAGE-NET)

To better operate in a non-permissive environment such as Gaza, I recommend establishing the SAGE-NET framework. The SAGE-NET—Situational Analysis & Ground Engagement Network—emphasizes systematic network mapping, atmospheric collection, and civil terrain analysis to anticipate future operational requirements. The SAGE-NET is intended as a forward-looking structure designed to: map civil influence networks; understand decision-making hierarchies on the ground; develop civil terrain approximations through proxy reporting; organize atmospherics by region, community, and theme; and prepare a baseline for future operational access should conditions change.

Preparing the civil landscape proactively improves command readiness, strengthens interagency coordination, and positions Civil Affairs to navigate the complex web of interests and agendas present in the CMCC.

Enhancing Information-Sharing Mechanisms

Improving information-sharing systems remains a central requirement for effective civil-military coordination. To do this, the U.S. military must explore commercial solutions capable of offloading Army Cyber or Department of War products into accessible, secure commercial platforms. The CMCC currently operates under a framework designed for unclassified data sharing among the U.S. and partner

organizations. This system integrates data from various working groups operating under the Gaza ceasefire agreement, enabling collaboration with partner nations, IGOs, and NGOs.

To optimize this system or any similar platform, the U.S. should establish contractual mechanisms enabling seamless data sharing while maintaining security standards. Additionally, streamlining the intake of digital information from non-U.S. entities would significantly enhance situational awareness, particularly in monitoring humanitarian operations, community impact, and progress on the 20-point plan. Internal information-sharing gaps—particularly between Special Operations Forces (SOF) and non-SOF elements—should also be addressed to ensure unified understanding across the force.



Trucks carrying humanitarian aid are staged at the Zikim Crossing Point on Nov. 25, 2025, in Israel. The U.S. is working with the international community to facilitate the flow of humanitarian assistance to civilians in Gaza. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Mike Ito)

Technological Integration and Persistent Training

U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) and U.S. Army Central (USARCENT) are accelerating the formation of innovative teams to onboard emerging commercial technologies. Despite the abundance of

tools—commercial off-the-shelf, government off-the-shelf (GOTS), and SOF innovation kits—Civil Affairs continues to face challenges in effectively adopting, retaining, and operationalizing these technologies.

Persistent training, long-term sustainment plans, and a clear operationalization pathway are required. Without sustained investment, Civil Affairs risks falling behind organizations that already specialize in these capabilities. Technology must be accompanied by training pipelines, employment concepts, and accountability structures that ensure continuity despite personnel turnover.

Developing Civil Environment Snapshots

Developing and disseminating civil environment snapshots for senior leaders within USARCENT and USCENTCOM is essential. Other units play a significant role in collecting humanitarian assistance distribution data; however, detailed visibility on civil dynamics, civil influence networks, and ground-level decision-making remains limited. This information typically emerges from: personal narratives, observational reporting, proxy sources, NGO or IGO assessments, and third-party monitors.

Verifying this data is inherently difficult, as multiple perspectives may all be correct depending on their vantage point. Civil governance structures, local decision-makers, and influence networks in Gaza vary significantly by location and controlling authority. Because Civil Affairs is no longer physically present, the ability to triangulate and validate civil information is further constrained, increasing the risk of assumptions entering the planning and

operations process.

Even indirect snapshots of the civil environment can help identify potential influencers or friction points near humanitarian distribution nodes. Snapshots can also address surface community-level concerns, provide context to operational or diplomatic decisions, and bridge tactical humanitarian reporting with strategic communication requirements. While Civil Affairs cannot confirm every detail without being on the ground, it can still provide value by synthesizing perspectives, highlighting discrepancies, and presenting commanders with the most accurate civil approximation available.

Addressing Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response

Civilian harm mitigation and response (CHMR) remains a critical consideration, even in a highly constrained operational environment. Civil Affairs does not serve as the primary proponent for CHMR, but it does provide significant and direct support through:

- Understanding the civilian environment: Civil Affairs can contextualize population behavior, community expectations, and second-order effects of military or humanitarian actions.
- Data collection and reporting: Civil Affairs can collect atmospheric, document civil patterns, and relay emerging concerns from partner organizations or proxy networks.
- Integration and coordination: Civil Affairs can help align humanitarian

actors, military elements, and civil governance authorities by synchronizing and deconflicting information.

- Training and education: Civil Affairs can support awareness efforts, helping units understand civilian considerations and minimize inadvertent harm.

Challenges include limited physical access to Gaza, reliance on second-hand information, conflicting reporting from humanitarian actors, heavy operational tempo within the CMCC, and difficulty validating or cross-checking information. However, opportunities include developing proxy-based civil sensors—formalized reporting of NGOs, IGOs, and partner nations—to identify lightweight risk indicators. Civil Affairs can propose simple, low-burden risk indicators of civilian harm to help commanders understand when local conditions may be shifting. These contributions help maintain humanitarian credibility and operational legitimacy without overstating Civil Affairs' formal CHMR authorities.

Conclusion

The integration of Civil Affairs within the CMCC remains an evolving and adaptive process. Despite personnel reductions and the absence of Civil Affairs teams on the ground, meaningful contributions can still be made through deliberate information integration, civil analysis, and partner engagement. By focusing on the areas outlined—civil network development, proxy-based civil understanding, improved information sharing, refined technological adoption, and enhanced CHMR support—

Civil Affairs can strengthen the civil-military interface and add durable value to ongoing humanitarian and diplomatic efforts. These four recommended actions offer a solution to the issues previously discussed:

1. Institutionalize civil terrain proxy reporting. Establish a consistent methodology for collecting, verifying, and presenting civil insights derived from external partners.
2. Develop a CMCC civil knowledge continuity book. Capture institutional memory, patterns, networks, and recurring issues to support future personnel rotations.
3. Implement SAGE-NET as a standing framework. Even without ground access, Civil Affairs can structure

atmospherics, network mapping, and civil trends into a coherent product line.

4. Expand access to digital sharing tools by removing all classification barriers when appropriate, enabling personnel from the U.S. and partner nations to freely receive, share, and process civil information. This collaborative approach will enhance transparency and efficiency in humanitarian efforts while ensuring that all stakeholders can contribute effectively.

The objective is not only to inform immediate operations but also to lay a foundation for future stability, improved coordination, and long-term regional outcomes.

Author's Note: Sergeant Major Balsa recently served as the Senior Enlisted Advisor to the CMCC Commander, U.S. Army Central Command. The views, opinions, and analyses expressed do not represent the position of the U.S. Army or the Department of War.





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The Joint Force in the Jungle: The Alamo Scouts Blueprint for Special Forces in Large Scale Combat Operations

By Chief Warrant Officer 2 David Mueller

Over the last 20 years, the U.S. military has been highly focused on counterinsurgency operations as we engaged in the Global War on Terror (GWOT). This focus, along with expertise in irregular warfare and partner force operations, enabled Special Forces to take a predominant role in Afghanistan and Iraq. Today we face a different world. Competition among the great powers is increasing, requiring the U.S. military to shift focus to prepare for LSCO undertaken against a peer enemy. This transition is a natural fit for the conventional force as tankers prepare for armored clashes, naval officers plan fleet engagements, and pilots contemplate a world without airspace supremacy. For Special Forces, this shift can be more confusing. As divisions and corps become the units of action, where does a small team of Green Berets fit?

The answer to this question may rest with a little-known, highly classified U.S. Army special operations unit that operated in the Southwest Pacific during WWII. The 6th Army Special Reconnaissance Unit, better

known as the Alamo Scouts, lacks the glamour and present-day name recognition of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) sponsored Jedburghs. However, their operational history provides an outstanding framework to conceptualize and articulate the value of modern Special Forces, particularly in the Pacific. Throughout WWII, the Alamo Scouts completed special reconnaissance, deep sensing, partner force liaison, and direct-action missions to accomplish theater campaign objectives and enable conventional force maneuver.

Who were the Alamo Scouts? In 1942, the Imperial Japanese military raised the Rising Sun banner over the Philippines and steamrolled through Papua New Guinea on their way to Australia. General MacArthur licked his wounds in Brisbane and planned his drive back through New Guinea to the Philippines. Operationally frustrated, Gen. MacArthur refused to allow any forces in theater that were not under his control; he perceived defeat as a personal humiliation and craved victory to receive personal glory. In this spirit, Gen. MacArthur viewed the

OSS as an outside entity that would steal credit and undermine him politically in Washington. Lt. Gen. Krueger, Gen. MacArthur's field commander leading the 6th Army, still saw a need for pre-invasion and deep-area intelligence gathering and special operations. In the absence of the OSS, Lt. Gen. Krueger is forced to develop his own capability.

Lt. Gen. Krueger knew that the campaign to drive the Japanese out of New Guinea and the Philippines will require unprecedented levels of Army-Navy cooperation to amphibiously maneuver throughout the archipelagos. Lt. Gen. Krueger knew that timely, accurate intelligence on terrain and enemy force composition was vital to the 6th Army's success. He issued direct orders to establish the Alamo Scouts to fulfill these goals. He termed the tasks "raider work", which consisted of amphibious special reconnaissance in the jungles, mountains, and swamps of the South Pacific.

The Alamo Scouts were organized into small, 6- or 7-man teams with minimal staff superstructure. Their training was conducted in-theater, first on New Guinea and later in the Philippines. The training focused on amphibious infiltration, special reconnaissance, and jungle survival and patrolling. Once formed, Alamo Scout teams reported directly to Lt. Gen. Krueger. As a result, the Alamo Scouts were extremely responsive to 6th Army requirements. Subordinate commanders were unable to sideline or misallocate them. When the Alamo Scouts deployed, it was in support of 6th Army's priority intelligence requirements to accomplish tasks from the highest level of command in the theater.

The Alamo Scouts' specialty throughout the

war was special reconnaissance. Prior to amphibious operations, they infiltrated to provide critical intelligence that shaped the operational maneuver plan. They worked closely with Navy and Army Air Force elements. Their missions directly impacted major operational decisions throughout the theater. On Luzon, in response to guerrilla reports of massive concealed Japanese artillery emplacements blocking 6th Army's planned advance route, Alamo Scout teams deployed into the deep area. Operating in small teams behind enemy lines, the scouts identified Japanese artillery and reported target coordinates for airstrikes and long-range artillery fire. This contribution directly enabled the 6th Army to break through Japanese defenses and drive toward Manila.

As the war continued, the Alamo Scouts' portfolio expanded to include unconventional warfare and indigenous force liaison. In the Philippines, guerrilla forces fought valiantly for years, either independently or under U.S. officers. However, many of these units had been disconnected from Gen. MacArthur's headquarters and were critically short of resources and munitions. Capitalizing on expertise in maritime operations, jungle patrolling, and military mountaineering, Alamo Scout teams infiltrated behind enemy lines to coordinate with guerrilla formations. Their ability to resupply, advise, and lead the guerrillas directly supported the 6th Army's operational plan.

The Alamo Scouts efforts are perfectly exemplified by their legendary 1945 raid to rescue Allied prisoners of war (POW) from the Japanese POW camp at Cabanatuan. In response to a highly time-sensitive tasking, Alamo Scout teams infiltrated the area and gathered timely intelligence on camp

defenses and Japanese disposition and activities. Simultaneously, they coordinated Filipino guerrilla operations to support the 6th Ranger Battalion assault on the camp itself. Highly trained and equipped with state-of-the-art communications equipment, the Alamo Scouts provided crucial command and control linkages between Philippine guerrillas and U.S. commanders.

In the current operational environment, the joint force faces a daunting prospect as it contemplates LSCO in the Pacific. Naval and air elements will predominate, and conventional ground operations will require island hopping and contested maneuver through unforgiving terrain. Just getting to the fight will require accurate intelligence and targeting data. Of necessity, ground combat scenarios will depend heavily on indigenous forces due to resource constraints. The time, difficulty, and danger involved in getting U.S. divisions and corps to the area of operations will further complicate operations.

In this operational environment, Special Forces will find themselves essential to joint force commanders. However, their role may require a mindset shift. During the GWOT, Special Forces frequently operated as the main effort. In LSCO, Special Forces must understand that their job is to enable conventional maneuvers at the division, corps, or higher echelon. Special Forces are built to operate in the deep area; conduct special reconnaissance and terminal guidance operations (TGO); train, advise, and lead indigenous partner forces; and execute or facilitate direct action strikes on high-priority targets. Special Forces exist to create dilemmas for adversaries through the indigenous approach. Their unique

selection, equipment, and training allow them to plan and conduct operations forward of the conventional force, in sensitive and resource-constrained environments.

However, these missions must be tied to joint force maneuver objectives. Ultimately, special operations victories do not matter if the conventional force cannot defeat the enemy, achieve ground dominance, or receive critical information. Special operations forces (SOF) must avoid rendering themselves irrelevant through stove-piped, cumbersome command structures that lead to provincialism and niche taskings. The Alamo Scouts were successful because they reported directly to Lt. Gen. Krueger. Further, they filled a specific gap and Lt. Gen. Krueger ensured that Alamo Scout efforts directly supported 6th Army campaign plans.

Throughout the war, the Alamo Scouts maintained a lean and operationally focused structure. They accomplished objectives with minimal staff and intermediate commanders, unlike the massive superstructure of staff and layers of subordinate command that burden and slow modern SOF. When faced with a dilemma requiring a Scout team's capabilities, Lt. Gen. Krueger provided the scouts with his intent and the priority intelligence requirements. The Alamo Scouts, in turn, conducted their mission planning, deployed, and executed the mission within a responsive timeline—sometimes in a matter of days rather than weeks.

The Alamo Scouts were responsive and successful because of two-way trust and respect between the Alamo Scouts and Lt.

Gen. Krueger. This trust allowed for extremely rapid results because of the direct link between Lt. Gen. Krueger and his operators. Orders, Concept of Operation(s) (CONOP(s)), and reporting were not delayed due to layers of bureaucracy, but were streamlined to allow Lt. Gen. Krueger (or a direct, trusted deputy) and an Alamo Scout team leader to discuss operations while standing over a map together.

This personal command relationship—and minimized staff insulation—will be difficult to replicate in the modern military structure. To mitigate, special operations command and control elements should be present at high-level operational headquarters to ensure that joint force commanders task Special Forces with operations that are suitable for their skillset. This will ensure that Special Forces planning and operations accurately reflect joint force requirements and support the commander's campaign plan.

SOF integration should not stop with the Army. Integration should be a priority across the joint force. Particularly in the Pacific, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force commanders often have primacy in planning and operations. SOF must build iterative, integrated relationships with these force providers and operational headquarters at the fleet and Marine expeditionary force level. This coordination will ensure the commander and staff fully understand the capabilities best way to utilize a SOF element.

A key ingredient in building these integrative relationships will be partnering to train special operations-conventional force integration at a much deeper level than is currently practiced. Special Forces

companies and operational detachment alphas (ODAs) must grow accustomed to working for conventional force commanders, and those commanders must learn to use Special Forces to best effect. The incredibly lean and direct command relationship between Lt. Gen. Krueger and the Alamo Scouts was effective because of trust and familiarity between commander and operators.

Lt. Gen. Krueger was intimately familiar with the Alamo Scouts' capabilities. He developed their selection and training. This led to a level of trust and mutual respect that was reinforced with every successful mission. Lt. Gen. Krueger knew what his Alamo Scouts could do, and he gave them the independence to do it. In turn, the Alamo Scouts gave him unparalleled results, successfully executing at least 100 known missions over their two years of existence while never suffering a POW or KIA.

Today, the greatest barrier to interoperability is unfamiliarity. While the doctrine guiding Special Forces exists in field manuals and joint publications, limited joint training between conventional and special forces prevents the ingrained understanding of the capabilities and limitations of Special Forces. To overcome this current status quo requires a persistent, iterative partnership in garrison and field exercises. Combat training center rotations and international partnered exercises are an excellent venue to test integration, but SOF and conventional units must build and maintain those relationships prior to deployment.

Virtually all Special Forces groups and forward-stationed battalions are co-located with major conventional forces. While conventional and SOF daily training is

conducted in their own compounds, the Army does not exist in a vacuum. Conventional and SOF elements should reach across their respective fences to collaborate for training exercises. This ground-level approach to joint training should include conventional Army units, Marines, Sailors, and Airmen as often as possible to foster mutual understanding and trust.

While many Special Forces units and conventional units already attempt to build relationships; these initiatives should be encouraged and resourced at the highest level possible to build trust and familiarity across the entire force. It is rare to see a conventional infantry exercise at battalion level or higher that could not benefit from Special Forces expertise, and vice versa.

Beyond the immediate benefit of exercise collaboration, there are opportunities to cross-pollinate knowledge and expertise between leaders in Special Forces and conventional force formations. A junior Non-Commissioned Officer(s) (NCO(s)) on an ODA is highly trained, but that NCO(s) can learn from a veteran infantry platoon sergeant. While these exercises at home station may be small scale, they are important as sets and repetitions to build trust and confidence between conventional and Special Forces leaders. This in turn leads to better results as units partner at combat training center rotations and multinational exercises, and ultimately to seamless integration in combat.

Forging these relationships across the force will require humility from Special Forces and conventional force commanders as well as a

high level of professionalism from operators. At ground level, operators must project professionalism, discipline, and competence. At the command and staff level, Special Forces companies and battalions must work to demonstrate value in joint force exercises which bring together multiple services. Special Forces leaders who have been accustomed to conventional forces supporting their operations must not balk as the role is reversed. Instead, they must educate their conventional counterparts and senior leaders on how they can best be utilized. Special Forces must continuously work to reestablish their reputation as an elite, specially trained unit that can go places and do things the conventional force cannot.

As the U.S. military prepares for LSCO across the archipelagos of the Pacific, we must leverage historical lessons from the last successful archipelagic campaign against a peer adversary. The Alamo Scouts' operations are not just legends and war stories, but rather a blueprint for Special Forces' role in LSCO, particularly in the Pacific theater. The Alamo Scouts' ingenuity, flexibility, and ability to excel in special operations tasks, all enabled by their integrated link with 6th Army Headquarter(s) (HQ) and Lt. Gen Krueger's objectives, provide a case study for the future fight encapsulating the need for full integration and painting a picture of that integration in action. The Alamo Scouts achieved massive successes through audacity, flexibility, and by aligning their unconventional skills with conventional force objectives; as their 21st century heirs, we must follow their example to win the next war.

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What's Old is New: Venezuela, Access, and the Structure of Hemispheric Competition

By Chief Warrant Officer 3 Trevor Mayfield

Introduction: Structural, Not Political

Venezuela has figured in U.S. strategic thinking for more than a century because it repeatedly sits at the intersection of access, energy, and regional competition. It has done so across administrations, ideologies, and international systems. The pattern spans European imperial rivalry, U.S. regional consolidation, Cold War competition, and today's great-power contest. Historian Sean A. Mirski traces this continuity in his book *We May Dominate the World*, showing how Venezuela repeatedly emerged as a site of U.S. concern regardless of the global order.

It has surfaced under monarchies and republics, during unipolar moments and multipolar competition, and under socialist governments and market reformers alike. The political labels change. The attention does not.

This recurrence is often explained in political terms: failed leadership, ideological alignment, or hostile intent. That lens falls short, and it cannot explain why Venezuela

keeps returning to crisis, regardless of who governs. Structural theories of international politics start from a less forgiving place. Geography, natural resources, and power relationships persist even as regimes change. John J. Mearsheimer makes this case in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, arguing that structure constrains choice long before ideology enters the picture.

Venezuela's strategic importance stems from enduring conditions rather than episodic political failure. This article argues that Venezuela's presence in U.S. strategy lies at the intersection of three variables: proximity to maritime corridors, concentrated energy reserves, and a fragile internal order. Geography turns domestic instability into maritime exposure, energy magnifies the stakes, and weak governance lowers the cost of access for external actors. Together, these conditions trigger enforcement behavior that has remained consistent even as tools and language have changed. This older hemispheric logic now has a modern operational expression: access denial without territorial control.

The SOF Mandate: Access, Denial, and Irregular Competition

For Special Operations Forces (SOF), Venezuela and similar environments are not problems to be solved; rather, they are environments to be understood and conditions to be managed. Structural drivers constrain what political change can achieve and shape how military force can be applied. In this setting, irregular competition is not a transitional phase between wars; it is the operating environment.

Structural vulnerability explains why Venezuela repeatedly attracts external pressure. Political agency explains how quickly those vulnerabilities metastasize. Leadership decisions under Chávez and Maduro, including the centralization of power, the politicization of the state-owned oil and gas company, Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A (PDVSA), and the erosion of institutional checks, did not cause Venezuela's fragility. They did, however, sharply accelerate it. The result is not a unique state but an exposed one, rendered acutely unstable by destructive political choices.

Viewed this way, Venezuela's importance to hemispheric security helps explain why U.S. policy oscillates without resolution. It helps explain why external rivals emerge and why enforcement prioritizes access denial over territorial control. This logic aligns with the 2025 National Security Strategy's renewed emphasis on homeland defense, hemispheric security, border control, migration pressure, hostile foreign influence, drug and human trafficking, and protection of transportation networks.

SOF's role follows directly from that constraint. The task is not regime conversion or comprehensive stabilization; it is access management. SOF activity concentrates at access points that are becoming contested or unstable: maritime approaches, resource and logistics networks, financial and influence nodes, and partner capacity at critical seams. For SOF, this means the decisive work is not dramatic intervention but persistent access mapping: identifying external networks, strengthening partner maritime and border capacity, improving intelligence sharing, and keeping rival leverage reversible before it hardens into permanent footholds.

The Strategy: From Exclusion to Enforcement

The Monroe Doctrine emerged from President James Monroe's 1823 address to Congress as a declaration of exclusion. Its purpose was to deter European powers from reasserting colonial control or establishing new footholds in the Western Hemisphere. The concern reflected early U.S. fears of great-power encroachment and is well documented in historical studies of Pan-Americanism and U.S. foreign policy.

Legally, the doctrine never constituted binding international law. Instead, it functioned as a unilateral policy assertion, deriving its force from power and practice. *Oxford Public International Law* notes that the doctrine endured because it was enforced and widely accepted under U.S. material dominance, rooted in naval power, economic leverage, and geographic proximity, rather than treaty obligations or international consensus.

The Olney interpretation expanded exclusion into authority. During the 1895 Venezuela–British Guiana boundary dispute, Secretary of State Richard Olney asserted that the United States had the right not only to object but also to interpret and enforce the Monroe Doctrine when European actions threatened regional order. In Washington, Britain’s refusal to arbitrate the entire boundary was treated not as a technical disagreement but as an attempt to convert proximity into leverage. Mirski identifies this functional concern with access hardening as central to U.S. hemispheric behavior.

Britain’s eventual acceptance of arbitration did little to advance Venezuela’s territorial claims, but it mattered strategically. Winning the argument over the arbitration process mattered more than the final map. In that moment, the United States established itself as the arbiter of hemispheric disputes, shifting Monroe from a declaratory warning to an operational doctrine.

The Roosevelt Corollary completed the transition from exclusion to enforcement. President Theodore Roosevelt argued that instability itself could invite foreign intervention and that preventing European leverage might require U.S. action short of annexation. Economic instability and sovereign debt shifted from domestic concerns to strategic indicators, serving as early warnings that access might soon follow disorder.

This enforcement logic emerged from a practical crisis, and Venezuela served as a catalytic test case. European debt collection backed by naval force exposed the limits of exclusion alone and revealed a gap

between doctrine and credible enforcement. That gap pushed U.S. policy from interpretive authority toward active order management. What mattered was not territorial seizure but access to, and control of, sea lanes, ports, and approaches, consistent with the maritime logic outlined by retired Adm. James Stavridis in *Sea Power: The History and Geopolitics of the World’s Oceans*.

The Three Variables: Energy, Access, and Order

Geography translates resource density into exposure. Venezuela sits at the hinge of the Caribbean Basin and the northern shoulder of South America, facing maritime corridors linking the Gulf of Mexico, the approaches to the Panama Canal, and Atlantic sea lanes. Ports, approaches, and shipping routes make that exposure unavoidable. Maritime strategists have long observed that instability in such locations tends to spill outward rather than remain contained.

This exposure helps explain why access, not territory, has historically governed U.S. hemispheric behavior. Maritime access and permanent basing operate on different strategic logics. Access governs movement and denial; basing entails sovereignty and occupation. Throughout its hemispheric rise, the United States consistently favored access control over territorial acquisition, keeping sea lanes open and rivals out rather than holding land indefinitely.

Venezuela holds the world’s largest proven oil reserves, a fact cited in U.S. government and international energy assessments and alluded to in the *National Security Strategy*. U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) data and Center for Strategic and

International Studies (CSIS) analysis show that, historically, those reserves underwrote the core functions of the Venezuelan state, accounting for the majority of export earnings and public revenue needed to sustain baseline fiscal capacity. While this has devolved into a system of discretionary wealth for the ruling elite in the current era, its historical function was foundational to the state's survival.

Energy alone is not sufficient to explain Venezuela's recurrence in U.S. strategic thinking. These factors are not merely additive; they are mutually amplifying, creating a feedback loop of escalating instability.

Over time, Venezuela's oil sector has imposed mounting environmental and institutional costs that compound instability. Chronic underinvestment, mismanagement, and degradation have damaged infrastructure, ecosystems, and human capital. A CSIS analysis found that environmental damage has weakened the state's capacity to translate energy wealth into a durable order. The result is increased reliance on external financing and access arrangements, enabling conditions that heighten strategic exposure rather than restore sovereignty.

Venezuela's fragile internal order is a primary driver of U.S. strategic anxiety. A collapsing state on its doorstep exports instability directly into the American hemisphere. The mass migration crisis has placed immense strain on regional partners like Colombia. At the same time, the proliferation of transnational criminal networks engaged in drug and human trafficking creates direct threats to U.S.

domestic security. Furthermore, the existence of ungoverned spaces within Venezuela offers a potential foothold for extra-hemispheric rivals or non-state actors. The U.S. concern, then, is not only oil or freedom of navigation. It is preventing state failure from spilling across a strategically vital region.

Historically, enforcement relied on overt, legible force. Offshore gunboats, selective blockades, and forward presence shaped behavior through visibility and risk without annexation. The objective was compliance without conquest, a pattern documented across Caribbean interventions.

Over time, overt coercion became increasingly costly as legal norms hardened, global visibility intensified, and escalation risks increased. Institutions adapted by elevating sanctions, financial controls, and diplomatic pressure as more sustainable tools. The logic did not change. The tools did. As Mearsheimer's work on international deception suggests, states often conceal coercive behavior behind more acceptable political language.

Today, enforcement relies on a blended set of instruments. Military presence, economic pressure, and legal authorities work together to compel compliance without occupying or administering the regime. These measures are calibrated to avoid open-ended commitments, consistent with competition below the threshold of armed conflict.

Structural Competition and Recurrence

When energy, geography, and weak governance converge in one state, recurrence is more likely to reflect

underlying pressures than discretionary choice. Venezuela is the most transparent case in the hemisphere.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the United States treated European empires as hemispheric challengers not because of who they were, but because of what they did. Britain, France, and Germany followed a repeatable pattern: naval squadrons off Caribbean ports, debt enforcement through coercion, and commercial access converted into leverage through proximity. Washington responded by blocking footholds, mediating disputes, and intervening when necessary to remove leverage before it hardened into permanence. An external power became dangerous by performing a function, not by professing an identity.

That functional logic persists. Contemporary rivals engage Venezuela not through coordination, but through convergence. As Mearsheimer and Sebastian Rosato argue in *How States Think*, states respond to incentives created by power and position rather than shared intent or ideology. Venezuela's energy endowment, maritime exposure, and weak internal order create permissive conditions that different actors exploit in distinct ways. While the variables are constant, the strategies vary.

China approaches Venezuela primarily as an energy and infrastructure issue. Venezuela's concentrated hydrocarbon reserves create long-term resource incentives, while its geographic position provides access to Caribbean approaches and regional logistics corridors. Weak governance lowers entry barriers, enabling Beijing to pursue arms sales, aerospace infrastructure, intelligence cooperation, and digital systems without

assuming security obligations. The result is leverage without responsibility and access without alliance.

Russia treats Venezuela less as an energy node than as a platform for disrupting order and signaling geopolitically. Maritime access and permissive governance enable episodic military presence, arms exports, and energy investment at relatively low cost. These activities do not aim at territorial control but at demonstrating reach and imposing friction on U.S. regional dominance. Access is as symbolic as it is operational.

Iran's engagement reflects survival rather than power projection. Venezuela's energy infrastructure and governance gaps create opportunities for sanctions evasion, fuel exchange, and limited military cooperation. Geography matters less for access than for insulation, enabling Tehran to extend its economic and security networks beyond the Middle East. The relationship is pragmatic, narrow, and driven by mutual vulnerability rather than strategic alignment.

These approaches differ in method and ambition, yet they respond to the same structure. Energy raises the stakes. Geography enables access. Weak order lowers costs. No actor created these conditions, and none fully controls them. U.S. strategy follows from this reality. The task is not to counter rivals individually but to manage the variables that make access profitable in the first place.

Instability as the Activation Mechanism

Instability acts as a catalyst, transforming Venezuela's geographic location from a simple fact into a source of active strategic

pressure. As internal order erodes, energy assets shift from national resources to contested prizes, raising the stakes for external actors reliant on predictable flows.

When these stakes increase, control over maritime access turns pressure into leverage. For SOF, those leverage points appear in ports, logistics firms, illicit finance channels, partner-force gaps, maritime patrol seams, and influence networks. For the U.S., presence, interdiction, and assurance enable influence without occupying territory, changing order enforcement from a partnership to a coercive approach. While stabilization rhetoric may suggest reconstruction, it often masks efforts to control access rather than genuinely rebuild sovereignty.

Over time, this approach reproduces the system it aims to manage. Instability invites intervention, which reshapes order without resolving underlying conditions. Unresolved structure, in turn, recreates instability. Venezuela occupies a sensitive position in this cycle, where geography, energy, and weak governance intersect, demanding

persistent management. This is not fixation; rather, it is geopolitical convergence at work.

Conclusion

Venezuela is not an episodic problem; it is a recurring geopolitical pressure point due to its geography, energy sector, and weak governance. Strategic friction arises when recurrence is mistaken for failure. Persistent engagement is often seen as drift rather than a necessity, even though neither expansion nor withdrawal changes the underlying structure. Persistence reflects operational demand, not mission creep.

The access-denial mandate gives SOF a strategic role: regulate access, manage instability at its source, and prevent Venezuela's vulnerabilities from becoming advantages for America's rivals. Success is measured by containment rather than resolution. Access is regulated, leverage is kept reversible, and escalation pathways are bounded. The task is prevention: quiet, persistent, and often invisible.

Author's Note: Chief Warrant Officer 3 Trevor Mayfield currently serves as an All-Source Intelligence Technician with over 19 years of experience supporting Special Operations and Conventional Forces. He is currently pursuing his Bachelor of Science in Library Science at the University of Nebraska-Omaha with a goal of becoming an elementary school librarian. The views, opinions, and analyses expressed do not represent those of the U.S. Army or the Department of War.

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SOF Sustainment for Denied Area Operations in LSCO

By Chief Warrant Officer 2 Yuwei Lee

Denied-area operations in large-scale combat operations (LSCO) require Green Berets to provide their own sustainment. For this article, the focus is only on food procurement, as the saying often attributed to Napoleon goes, “An army marches on its stomach.” In 20 years within the special operations community, I have never practiced or trained on sustainment operations during pre-mission training, especially for deployments in support of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). We have always prioritized tactical training, and rightfully so. The GWOT Era rarely required sustainment training as we had staging bases throughout the area of operation.

Particularly for the Special Forces Operational Detachment- Alpha (SFOD-A) located on a large base, there were multiple dining facilities offering four full meals a day. For SFOD-As operating in austere environments, regular air drops delivered all classes of supply. Currently, SFOD-As are training for LSCO. We will no longer dominate the air domain as we had during GWOT, and as a result, air and ground

resupply will not be possible. If SFOD-As are to be successful in LSCO, they must allocate training time towards sustainment operations in three forms: local procurement, battlefield recovery, and foraging.

My vision of LSCO, as it applies to an SFOD-A, is that teams will operate in denied areas where air and ground resupply is impossible. Teams will be expected to remain in these denied areas for extended periods—weeks, months, and maybe even years. In a training event at the Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center-Hawaii, teams attempted to replicate these conditions in a warm environment. Teams packed the usual Robin Sage rucksack with overpacked MREs, batteries, and Class 5 (ammunition). Teams discovered that without a reliable food resupply method, their operational duration was only a few days. Water was easy to find and filter—especially if individuals had personally

purchased water filtration systems. However, food was the limiting factor.

So, how should an SFOD-A procure food? For a Green Beret who experienced Robin Sage, local procurement, battlefield recovery, and foraging are known methods. Local procurement might be as simple as personally buying food or having someone else buy it. Battlefield recovery is another method, but it carries significant risk, as it puts teams in direct confrontation with the enemy. Finally, teams could forage their own food by fishing and hunting.

How do we train these procurement methods? For local procurement, the Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) is the primary training method for unconventional warfare. Teams on a JCET should focus on area familiarization, exploring local foods and cooking methods, and preparing meals from local ingredients. We all know teammates who only eat safety food—predominantly Western-style cuisine—on a JCET, but we need to get them away from this mentality. The counterargument is, “We have too much going on with training.”

While tactical training is paramount, a detachment that cannot feed itself is not

tactically useful beyond a few days. For battlefield recovery, full mission profile scenarios should be longer to stress the sustainment aspect of operations. We need to test and validate that teams can sustain long-term operations. Training scenarios should not end after “actions on objective.” Technically, they are only halfway done. Finally, foraging may be unpopular with commands. But teams must train in procuring food from plants, fish, and game animals. Unless the individual Green Beret hunts and fishes on the weekends, the majority of modern Green Berets are untrained when it comes to food procurement, processing, and preparation for consumption in an austere environment.

SFOD-As are generally proficient in their tactical skills. Of course, we can always do better, but we should not forget that people need to eat. If we are expected to operate for “extended periods of time,” we must train to sustain the fight. Higher echelons have directed SFOD-As to operate in denied areas during LSCO. Resupply simply isn’t going to happen the way it did during GWOT. Detachments must be fully self-sufficient if they are to survive long-term in a denied area.

Author’s Note: Chief Warrant Officer 2 Yuwei Lee is a Regular Army Soldier and Special Forces Officer with more than 27 years of total service. He wrote this as part of the Warrant Officer Advanced Course graduation requirements. The views, opinions, and analyses expressed do not represent the position of the U.S. Army or the Department of War.

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