

# Inter Populum

Journal of Irregular Warfare and Special Operations



# Special Operations in the 21st Century

## Revisiting The Falklands War

by Matthew Miller

**Ten Surprising Lessons for Special Operations Forces**

by Thomas R. Searle, Christopher Marsh, and Brian Petit

**Like a Bolt from the Blue**

by Michael J. Mooney

**Fighting Danger at Sea: The Quest for Speed in Special Operations**

by Rikke Haugegaard

**Dynamic Ethical Decision-Making and its Importance to Special Operations**

by Robert M. Mitchell

**Counterterrorism is Strategic Competition**

by Thomas R. Searle

# **INTER POPULUM:**

## **The Journal of Irregular Warfare and Special Operations**

*Inter Populum: The Journal of Irregular Warfare and Special Operations*, published by Arizona State University, is an academically rigorous, peer reviewed publication focused on furthering studies, thought, and discussion on irregular warfare and special operations topics. It is published once a year in print (ISSN: 2329-6151), and twice a year online (ISSN: 2372-2657).

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## ***Letter from the Editors***

Welcome to the inaugural issue of *Inter Populum: The Journal of Irregular Warfare and Special Operations*. A product of the Competitive Statecraft Initiative at Arizona State University, this publication aims to be a central voice in the scholarly literature on issues related to special operations, irregular warfare (IW), and importantly, the intersection between the two. *Inter Populum* is a peer-reviewed academic journal for the scholar and practitioner—a place to explore everything from lessons learned through historical case studies, to current best practices, to the nature of future conflict. We are very excited to introduce what we hope will become the central medium for discussion, debate, and the collegial exchange of ideas among the IW and special operations communities of interest.

*Inter Populum* is Latin for “among the people.” In 2005, General Rupert Smith coined a phrase when he postulated that rather than large-scale, interstate wars between nation-states, the twenty-first century would be dominated by “wars among the people.”<sup>1</sup> Of course, there have been wars among the people as long as there have been people, and it remains to be seen whether we can avoid a great power war in this century, but the human domain is the principal concern of both IW and special operations, and is therefore the particular focus of this journal.

U.S. doctrine has long recognized that the defining feature of IW is the struggle for control over or support of relevant populations. Most recently, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff defined IW as “a struggle among state and non-state actors to influence populations and affect legitimacy.”<sup>2</sup> The 2020 Summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy emphasized the relevance of IW in great power competition as well as its economic aspect, and committed the Department of Defense (DOD) to mastering it as a core competency.<sup>3</sup> A more expansive definition of IW, one perhaps better suited to current and future strategic competition, is offered by defense expert Seth Jones. He states that IW “refers to activities short of conventional and nuclear warfare that are designed to expand a country’s influence and legitimacy, as well as to weaken its adversaries.”<sup>4</sup> We encourage and look forward to vigorous debate on the scope and continually evolving character of IW in future issues of *Inter Populum*.

Special operations—from direct, time-sensitive, and discrete “surgical strikes” to indirect, longer-term “special warfare”—have long been considered critical to conducting or countering IW. However, as the Summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy<sup>5</sup> made abundantly clear, one myth in need of shattering is that IW is coterminous with counterterrorism (CT), that Special Operations Forces (SOF) own the CT mission, and therefore SOF are the only ones who can play a meaningful role in IW. Nothing could be further from the truth. CT is only one of the military missions under the IW umbrella, and conventional forces play a critical role in all of them. More broadly, IW can be considered the military contribution to competitive statecraft, which demands a coordinated and synchronized whole-of-government/whole-of-society approach in which interagency and cross-sector partners play a central and, in many cases, leading role. Thus, *Inter Populum* intends to focus on the nexus between IW and special operations, as well as the integration of these military activities with those of other government agencies, civil

society, and the private sector. In doing so, Inter Populum will drive the analysis, reflection, and conversations necessary to reconceptualize IW for an era of strategic competition

*Inter Populum* will publish two online issues per year, with both issues combined into one printed volume annually. Copies will be made available across the DOD, to other government agencies, academic institutions, and many other stakeholders. We look forward to establishing Inter Populum as the locus of professional exploration, discussion, and debate on IW, special operations, and their role in strategic competition. But we cannot do it without support from readers and contributors. Please consider submitting your own work for publication in an upcoming issue. Thank you, and welcome to the discussion.

*Christopher Marsh, Fort Liberty, NC*

*James Kiras, Maxwell AFB, AL*

*Ryan Shaw, Tempe, AZ*

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Warfighting: Reference Copy, JP 1, Volume 1* (Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2020), GL-4.

<sup>3</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Warfighting: Reference Copy, JP 1, Volume 1* (Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2020), GL-4; Department of Defense, *Summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2020), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Seth Jones, *Three Dangerous Men: Russia, China, Iran and the Rise of Irregular Warfare* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2021), 11.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Defense, *Summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex*.

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## Like a Bolt from the Blue: Relative Superiority and the Coup de Main Assault on the Caen Canal and River Orne Bridges, 6 June 1944

Michael J. Mooney, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island, USA

### ABSTRACT

On 6 June 1944, a force of 181 British soldiers conducted Operation Deadstick—a daring glider-borne *coup de main* assault which captured two vital bridges behind the left flank of the D-Day invasion beaches in Normandy. Although the assault force was not composed of special operations personnel per se, the success of Operation Deadstick was a result of the correct application of the six principles of special operations and the theory of relative superiority as formulated by Admiral William H. McRaven, United States Navy (Ret.) in his seminal study on special operations, *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice*. The results of this renowned action in the opening hours of D-Day clearly illustrate the applicability of McRaven's principles and the theory of relative superiority for non-special operations forces. This historical case study additionally offers object lessons on how friction can be countered by the moral factors of war, as well as the outsized effect a successful special operation can play in enabling conventional forces to achieve operational level objectives on the battlefield.

### KEYWORDS

special operations principles, relative superiority, McRaven, *coup de main*, Operation Deadstick, D-Day, John Howard, Pegasus Bridge, D-Day, Horsa glider

*The bravest are surely those who have the clearest vision of what is before them, glory, and danger alike, and yet notwithstanding, go out to meet it.*

*-Thucydides*

As the six Horsa gliders carrying British army Major John Howard and the 180 men of his assault force cut through the night sky over the English Channel towards the French coast, one thing was for certain: the soldiers crowded within those wooden gliders had a clear vision

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of both the glory and danger that awaited them. It was a few minutes after midnight on 6 June 1944 and Howard and his men had been training two years for this moment. What they would accomplish in the following two hours—the capture of two vital bridges in a swift *coup de main* operation named Operation Deadstick—would be crucial to the success of the Allied invasion of Normandy. In examining this operation, another thing is for certain: that although Howard’s assault force was not comprised of special operations personnel, per se, the success of their daring assault on D-Day was a result of the correct application of the six principles of special operations and the theory of relative superiority as formulated by Admiral William H. McRaven, United States Navy (Ret.) in his seminal study on special operations, *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice*.<sup>1</sup> The results of this renowned action in the opening hours of D-Day clearly illustrate the applicability of McRaven’s principles and the theory of relative superiority for non-special operations forces. This historical case study additionally offers object lessons on how friction can be countered by the moral factors of war, as well as the outsized effect a successful special operation can play in enabling conventional forces to achieve operational level objectives on the battlefield.

### **McRaven’s Theory of Special Operations**

Before we examine in detail the *coup de main* (French, literally meaning strike or blow of the hand) assault conducted by Howard and his men on the River Orne and Caen Canal bridges, it is necessary to first gain an appreciation for the details of McRaven’s theory of special operations, as it is the framework for our analysis. The concept of “relative superiority” is the linchpin of McRaven’s theory regarding the ability of Special Operations Forces (SOF) to defeat enemy forces in the defense, an area which is inherently the strongest form of warfare.<sup>2</sup> Relative superiority is achieved when “an attacking force, generally smaller, gains a decisive advantage over a larger or well-defended enemy.”<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1 is a graphic representation by McRaven of the concept of relative superiority using time and probability of mission completion as the X and Y axes. One can see that once relative superiority is gained, the probability of mission completion dramatically rises, and conversely, the longer it takes to do so, the greater the vulnerability to the attacking force. The intersection of the axes is labeled as the point of vulnerability (PV), defined by the author as the point in time “when the attacking force reaches the enemy’s first line of defenses.”<sup>4</sup>

In summary, it is crucial for the attacking force to gain relative superiority as quickly in the action as possible. The quicker one reaches relative superiority, (i.e., achieves a decisive advantage over the enemy) the smaller the area of vulnerability, the less danger to the attacking force, and the greater the probability of mission success. On paper, this is a very neat and clean proposition.

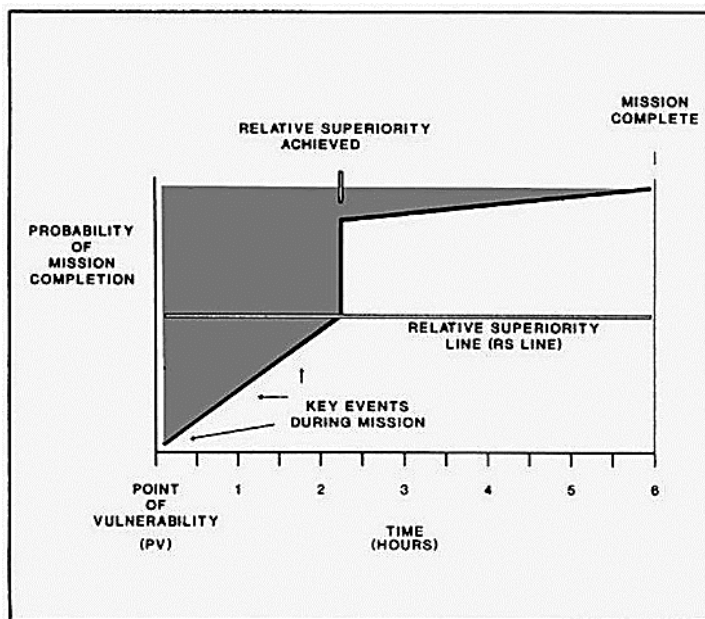


Figure I. Relative superiority graph. Credit: William H. McRaven/The Theory of Special Operations/ Naval Postgraduate School master's thesis/1993/used with permission

Nevertheless, as acknowledged by McRaven and numerous military historians, war is by nature a complex, bloody, and chaotic affair. It is a place where, as the renowned 19th century Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz astutely observed, everything is simple, and the simple is extremely difficult.<sup>5</sup> Clausewitz went on to posit that the cumulative effect of myriad unforeseen difficulties and chance<sup>6</sup> (things such as uncertainty in the commander's mind, unexpected enemy reinforcements, bad weather, misunderstood orders, failed communications, erroneous intelligence, broken equipment, missed timetables, unintended effects of one's plan, etc.) amass over time to produce what he labeled "friction" which lowers performance and makes one fall short of their goal, i.e., can quickly result in mission failure or defeat.<sup>7</sup>

Friction is a constant in war; it "creates the gulf that so often exists between what commanders intend to happen and what actually happens in battle."<sup>8</sup> In practice, friction makes "activity in war ... movement in a resistant medium" which prevents one from quickly achieving relative superiority.<sup>9</sup> Since friction cannot be escaped, the goal according to McRaven is to reduce or mitigate its caustic effects on military operations as much as possible. In his examination of special operations, he maintains that the correct application of the six principles of special operations—namely simplicity, security, repetition, surprise, speed, and purpose—will reduce the frictions of war to an acceptable level, thereby allowing a smaller SOF assault force to achieve relative superiority over the enemy and gain victory.<sup>10</sup>

McRaven contends that these principles are inextricably linked to each other and presents them as part of a “special operations model” (fig. 2) in the shape of an inverted pyramid consisting of three distinct phases of an operation: planning, preparation, and execution. Although SOF missions are high-risk, they can succeed despite the long odds when relative superiority is gained “through the use of a simple plan, carefully concealed, repeatedly and realistically rehearsed, and executed with surprise speed, and purpose.”<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, it is essential that once achieved, relative superiority must be maintained in order to guarantee victory.<sup>12</sup>

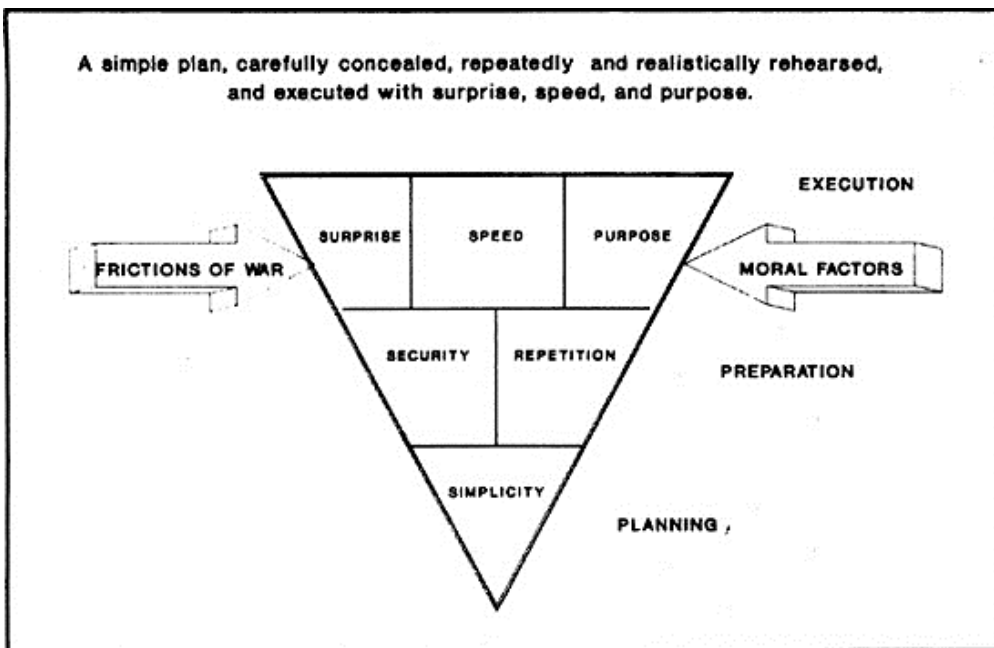


Figure 2. McRaven’s Special Operations Model. Credit: William H. McRaven/The Theory of Special Operations/used with permission

It is important to understand that the mere achievement of relative superiority does not in itself guarantee success.<sup>13</sup> The dynamic, uncertain character of war and its ever-present friction continually threaten to unhinge the pyramid from its base if not for intangible moral factors such as “courage, intellect, boldness, and perseverance” which serve to neutralize friction’s negative effects on mission accomplishment.<sup>14</sup> If these intangible moral factors cannot overcome the detrimental effects of friction the model collapses, relative superiority is lost, and defeat ensues.<sup>15</sup> Thus, by correctly linking these principles together, supported by the moral fortitude required to counterbalance (or neutralize) friction, SOF can maintain their advantage and emerge victorious against a stronger, more numerous, better equipped and supported foe.

## **McRaven's Principles of Special Operations**

In the planning phase, the principle of simplicity is the foundation of a successful SOF mission. The three elements of simplicity are “limiting the number of objectives, good intelligence, and innovation.”<sup>16</sup> More often than not, a complicated or overly intricate plan creates too many opportunities for failure. Clausewitz warns that, “every complex operation takes time, and this time must be available without a counterattack on one of its parts interfering with the development of the whole ... rather than try to outbid the enemy with complicated schemes, one should, on the contrary, try to outdo him in simplicity.”<sup>17</sup> Plans inevitably become complicated when additional objectives are added as the operational plan develops. Keeping objectives to a minimum reduces the combat power needed and time on target, as well as focuses training.<sup>18</sup> Good intelligence “reduces the unknown factors and the number of variables that must be considered,”<sup>19</sup> while innovation, exercised via new technology or tactics, helps to reduce or remove obstacles that would prevent surprise or the achievement of relative superiority.<sup>20</sup>

Security and repetition comprise the next layer of McRaven's model: preparation. Security, regarding SOF missions, refers mainly to the timing, and means of insertion of the assault force rather than the actual identity of the target.<sup>21</sup> Repetition is a timeless element of combat preparedness. The more often a force thinks through, trains, and practices for every foreseeable scenario (within reason), the better the probability the force will be able to fight through friction to execute the mission thanks to countless full-dress rehearsals and tough, realistic training. Just as importantly, repetition produces confidence, speed, and reveals flaws in one's plan.<sup>22</sup>

The final level of the SOF model links the elements of surprise, speed, and purpose, which come to fruition during the execution phase of the mission. Because the target of a SOF mission is almost always cognizant of its importance and value, surprise is manifested through deception, timing, and exploiting the enemy's vulnerabilities; in other words, “catching the enemy off guard.”<sup>23</sup> For McRaven, speed is the ability to reach the objective as quickly as possible once the attacking force crosses the point of vulnerability.<sup>24</sup> Success in a SOF operation is time-dependent; the quicker relative superiority is reached the less danger to the attacking force and greater probability of mission accomplishment. Finally, there is the principle of purpose. This means a clear, unambiguous mission statement which is understood by all hands, from the assault force commander to the last rifleman in the last fireteam. It also means a personal commitment to mission success.<sup>25</sup>

### **Prelude to the Assault: Situation**

A fundamental weakness of an amphibious assault is that it takes time to build significant combat power ashore. Although doctrinally the landing force is supported by both naval gunfire support and close air support, the first assault waves essentially touch down on their assigned landing beaches facing the enemy defenses with only the firepower that they can carry on their backs. It is during these initial phases of the landing that a seaborne assault

force is vulnerable to being driven back into the sea by massed enemy fires or local counterattacks. Well before 1944, Adolf Hitler and his generals had correctly deduced that the Allies were planning to open a second front in Northwest Europe.<sup>26</sup> Stopping the invasion on the beaches was the only way to successfully defeat it in the view of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, the German operational commander in charge of Army Group B, comprised of the Fifteenth and Seventh Armies running from the Loire River in Brittany northward to Holland. “It is on the beaches that the fate of the invasion will be decided,” said Rommel, “and, what is more, during the first 24 hours.”<sup>27</sup> The way he envisioned to defeat any Allied landing was through a rapid and decisive counterattack on D-Day by panzer and mechanized infantry positioned within the immediate vicinity of the landing beaches. For Rommel, any delay in unleashing his counterattack would spell disaster for Germany.

In the spring of 1943 as the Allied planners drew up their concept for the Normandy landings, they were posed with a serious problem. They too recognized the initial vulnerability of the seaborne assault force, especially on the extreme left flank of the invasion beaches (namely the British-assigned “Sword Beach”). This was due to the fact that the Germans had positioned the majority of their panzer forces assigned to defend against the invasion to the east of the proposed landing beaches, beyond Le Havre.<sup>28</sup> If the Germans could quickly move their armor to the west and send it crashing into the exposed Allied left flank at Sword Beach as Rommel desired, they could possibly roll up the lightly-equipped seaborne infantry like a carpet, with the invasion beaches falling like dominoes: first Sword, then Juno, Gold, and Omaha.<sup>29</sup> The result would be obvious: a failure of the invasion as a whole.

The quickest and most direct route for such a German armored counterattack on the invasion beaches would be east over the River Dives, then straight across the River Orne bridge at Ranville and Caen Canal bridge at Benouville. These two final bridges at Ranville and Benouville were only 300 meters apart, separated by a thin strip of land between the two waterways. Once over these water obstacles, the highly mobile German panzers would be at Sword Beach in a matter of minutes. The British solution to this problem was to land the approximately 12,000 men of their 6th Airborne Division between the River Dives and the bridges at Ranville and Benouville to prevent this from happening (see fig. 3).

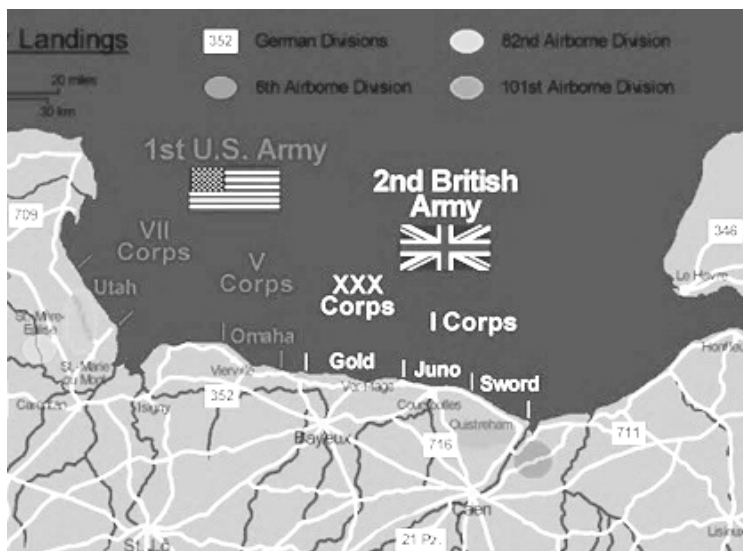


Figure 3. This map shows D-Day invasion beaches and the area of operation for the 6th Airborne Division (the circle between the Caen Canal/River Orne and the River Dives). Credit: Mark Hickman/The Pegasus Archive/The 6th Airborne Division in Normandy/used with permission

### Operation Tonga: The Plan

The plan, codenamed Operation Tonga, was for the British paratroopers (or “paras”) to descend en masse into the Normandy countryside at drop zones between the Caen Canal/River Orne and the River Dives during the hours of darkness prior to the invasion. Once on the ground, the paras’ primary tasks were to destroy the main bridges across the River Dives to halt or significantly delay any German counterattack headed towards the beaches and form a defensive perimeter to protect the bridges over the Caen/Orne waterways.<sup>30</sup> Destroying the bridges over the Caen Canal at Benouville and River Orne at Ranville, or allowing the Germans to destroy them, was not an option, however. This would isolate and leave the lightly armed and equipped 6th Airborne Division east of the invasion beaches without any means to reinforce them with vital armor and anti-tank assets against the advancing German panzers. Outnumbered and cut off from reinforcements, the division would be decimated in detail by German forces.<sup>31</sup> So, having solved the problem of halting or delaying the German panzers from attacking into the British flank at Sword Beach, the Allied planners faced another quandary; it was now an imperative that those bridges over the Caen Canal and River Orne (see fig. 4) be seized intact and defended until the seaborne infantry and armor could push inland from Sword Beach and reinforce the 6th Airborne paras to the east.

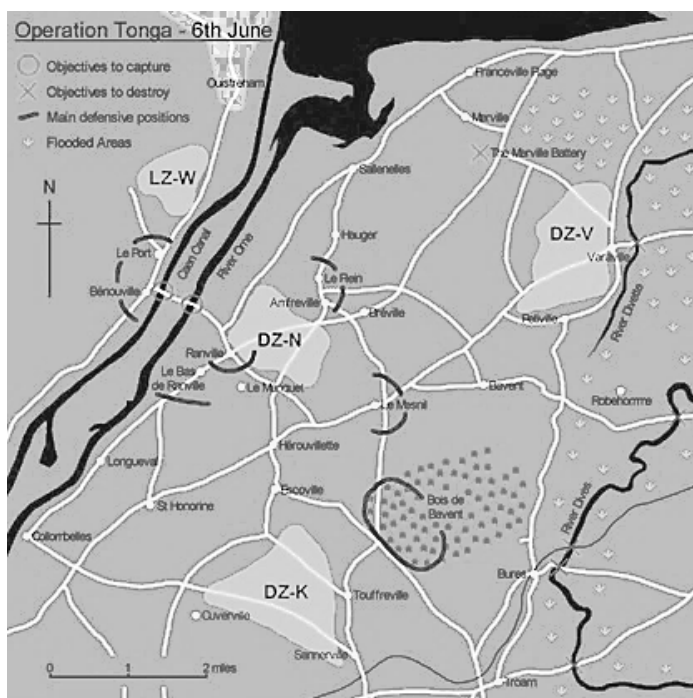


Figure 4. Operation Tonga. The Caen Canal and River Orne bridges designated for capture by Howard are circled just to the west of DZ-N. The DZs shown were designated for the paras of the 6th Airborne, who would land shortly after the *coup de main* gliders and move to reinforce Howard and secure their other objectives (Xs marking bridges and the Merville Battery to the east). Credit: Mark Hickman/used with permission

Intelligence reports from aerial reconnaissance and the French underground stated that a garrison of approximately 50 German soldiers from the 736th Grenadier Regiment of the 716th Infantry Division were guarding the Caen Canal and River Orne bridges, armed with light machine guns, one anti-aircraft machine gun, an anti-tank gun, and a pillbox mounted heavy machine gun set in fighting positions around the bridges.<sup>32</sup> Most critically, “both bridges were prepared for demolition by explosives in the event of an Allied invasion.”<sup>33</sup> Mission analysis by British planners determined that a conventional force of air-dropped paras would take too long to organize to move on the bridges once they hit the ground, virtually guaranteeing that the Germans would be able to destroy the bridges before the paras could reach them. There was no alternative: they had to be seized intact. It would be a task that, “would demand bold and unorthodox tactics.”<sup>34</sup> From this necessity was born Operation Deadstick, and where Major Howard and his 180-man assault force enter the picture.<sup>35</sup>

## The *Coup de Main* Assault Force

It is important to recognize at the outset of our examination, that the men who executed Operation Deadstick were not officially designated within the British military as SOF. They were not commandos nor part of the British military's Special Operations Executive. Howard's reinforced D Company (D Coy), 2nd Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry ("Ox and Bucks") were in fact glider-borne infantry, part of the 6th Airlanding Brigade of the British 6th Airborne Division. However, as McRaven observes, special operations can be executed by forces who are not SOF, per se.<sup>36</sup> "A special operation," states McRaven, "is conducted by forces specifically trained, equipped, and supported for a specific target whose destruction, elimination, or rescue (in the case of hostages) is a political or military imperative."<sup>37</sup> This perfectly describes Howard, his men, and his mission.

Howard had been in command of D Company since early 1942.<sup>38</sup> The company's table of organization was four rifle platoons and the company headquarters for a total of six officers and 128 enlisted soldiers.<sup>39</sup> Each rifle platoon, designed to fit into a single glider, consisted of two rifle sections, a scout section, and platoon headquarters. Being a glider-borne unit, Howard and all his men were volunteers. From the minute he assumed command he set out to make the company "into a family and into a first-class combat unit."<sup>40</sup> He trained them extensively in light infantry tactics, weapons, and demolitions. Howard put an emphasis on quick thinking and action. He drilled into them the notion that they were elite.<sup>41</sup> Described by a fellow officer from the Oxs and Bucks as a "physical-fitness fanatic," Howard's mania for physical training produced warriors who had the endurance and confidence to face anything the enemy threw at them.<sup>42</sup> Howard and all his officers did everything the troops did – there was no favoritism because of rank.<sup>43</sup> The company's documented tactical excellence and physical toughness gained Howard incredible autonomy in devising his training. They conducted live fire urban training, and extensive training during periods of darkness. Month after month, the company worked and trained at a pace that "bordered on fanaticism."<sup>44</sup>

Howard was informed in April 1944 that his company was selected to carry out an extremely important mission during the coming invasion of Europe. In general terms he was told that he was to capture two bridges intact, about a quarter of a mile apart, and hold them until relieved. He also was told that D Coy would spearhead the invasion and be the first British fighting force to land on the continent.<sup>45</sup> By this time, the company had been training together for over two years.<sup>46</sup> Considering the scope of the mission, Howard was reinforced with two platoons from B Coy, Oxs and Bucks, and thirty Royal Engineer sappers. Including himself and the twelve glider pilots, his *coup de main* assault force numbered 181 men.

### Mission and Concept of Operations (CONOPS)

On 2 May 1944, Howard received his official operations order from Brigadier Nigel Poett, commanding the 5th Parachute Brigade of the 6th Airborne Division, to whom Howard's command was attached for D-Day. They read:

Your task is to seize intact the brs [bridges] over R Orne and canal at Benouville and Ranville, and to hold them until relief by 7 Para Bn...the capture of the brs will be a *coup de main* op [operation] depending largely on surprise, speed, and dash for success. Provided the bulk of your force lands safely, you should have little difficulty in overcoming the known opposition on the brs. Your difficulties will arise in holding off an enemy counterattack on the brs, until you are relieved.<sup>47</sup>

As a glider-borne unit, the Oxs and Bucks were transported in Horsa gliders—wooden, high-wing aircraft 67 feet in length and with a wingspan of 88 feet that carried 28 combat loaded soldiers—into their landing zones, instead of using parachutes to insert into battle.<sup>48</sup> As such, Howard's troops were especially suited for a *coup de main* operation. The Joint Publication 1-02, U.S. Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms defines a *coup de main* as an “offensive operation that capitalizes on surprise and simultaneous execution of supporting operations to achieve success in one swift stroke.”<sup>49</sup> This swiftness of action is purposely designed to overwhelm and defeat the enemy in one lightning-fast stroke. The strategy was to use the stealth and shock effect of the massed glider-borne force to swiftly descend on the German garrison holding the bridges, capture the bridges intact, and hold them until reinforcements could arrive from the paras of the 6th Airborne landing to their west, and ultimately, British seaborne forces pushing inland from Sword Beach.

Howard's tactical plan was simple. The assault force would be transported in six Horsa gliders to their objectives. Two groups of three gliders, each carrying a platoon reinforced with sappers, were to land at separate landing zones (LZs) adjacent to each bridge. Once on the ground the men would quickly disembark and overwhelm the German defenses, ensuring that the Germans could not detonate the bridges. At the Caen Canal bridge, three men were specifically designated to lead the assault by dashing forward and dropping hand grenades into the machine gun pillbox that contained the trigger device to blow the bridge.<sup>50</sup> The sappers were to rush immediately to the undersides of the bridges to cut the wires and dismantle the explosive devices that were reported to be on each bridge.

Howard would lead the first group of three gliders assigned to capture the Caen Canal bridge at Benouville, while his second-in-command (2IC), Captain Brian Priday, commanded the troops in the second group of three gliders. Priday's objective was to capture the River Orne bridge at Ranville. Landing the gliders as close as possible to the objectives was critical to the success of the mission. As it was very likely that the German defenders would hear the heavy, overloaded Horsas skidding and screeching to halt in the dead of night, landing too far away from the bridges would diminish the shock effect of the assault, providing the alerted Germans time to detonate the bridges. Howard's orders to Staff Sergeant Jim Wallwork, the pilot of the lead glider (in which Howard himself would ride),

were likewise simple. Howard recalled: “He [Wallwork] had cheekily asked me where I wanted the glider to finish up and, never imagining that he would take me seriously, I had told him, ‘Ideally Jim, right through the wire defenses of the bridge!’”<sup>51</sup>

Once the company was put into pre-mission isolation in late May 1944 at RAF Tarrant Rushton, a British airfield approximately 100 miles west/southwest from London, the entire force settled in and was briefed on the true nature and objectives of their mission at the beginning of June. With them were the glider pilots and the crews of the Halifax bombers that would tow them. “Here, for the first and only time, we were crewed with our tug and stayed together through the training and final run-in,” said Wallwork. “This was a most important move, as we developed confidence and friendships,” during the challenging and dangerous training prior to execution of the mission.<sup>52</sup> All members of the assault force fully understood the greater purpose of their mission – the success (and survival) of the 6th Airborne (as well as the larger requirement to protect the left flank of the invasion beaches should the German panzers get through the paras) depended on capturing those bridges intact.<sup>53</sup> When the Horsa gliders lifted into the air just prior to midnight on 5 June 1944, Howard and his men had as complete a picture of the location, composition, and disposition of enemy forces defending the bridges, as well as most likely courses of action and arrival times of enemy reinforcements, as could possibly be obtained thanks to accurate intelligence reports and analysis of the enemy. Most importantly, the cohesion built during two years of difficult training and shared hardships imparted a sense of confidence within the assault force that they would be able to successfully complete their mission.

### **Operation Deadstick: The *Coup de Main***

As the afternoon sun slowly set on 5 June 1944, Howard’s assault force mustered on the airfield at Tarrant Rushton, donned their combat equipment, conducted last minute checks, and boarded the six gliders that would carry them to their objectives. At 2256, 5 June 1944, the Halifax bomber towing Glider #91 (containing Howard and a reinforced platoon) took off, pulling the Horsa into the night sky. The other “tugs,” towing their assigned gliders, followed in trace at one-minute intervals behind him.<sup>54</sup>

Once they were all airborne, the aircraft separated into their two groups (Glider #91, 92, 93 under Howard’s command and gliders #94, 95, 96 under Priday’s command) and headed south towards France. Their entry point to the continent was a gap in the German anti-aircraft defenses, approximately 3 km east of the mouth of the Orne.<sup>55</sup> At 0007 on 6 June 1944, Glider #91 crossed the French coast and cast away from their Halifax, beginning the invasion of Normandy.<sup>56</sup> Gliders #92 and 93 followed closely behind. Once their tow ropes were cast off, each glider pilot was on their own, depending solely on their training and air navigation skills to guide their individual Horsa to their objectives.

Silently they descended “like huge bats” towards their targets.<sup>57</sup> Howard and his three gliders were headed for LZ “X”, southeast of the Caen Canal, while Priday and his men were bound for LZ “Y”, northwest of the River Orne bridge (see fig. 5). After crossing the

coast, Howard and the platoon commander, Lieutenant Den Brotheridge, opened the troop door on their glider to facilitate a quick exit once on the ground. “Suddenly,” Howard recalled, “we were all aware of the sweet, damp night air over the Normandy countryside as it filled the glider and we all breathed in, for the first time, the smell of France.”<sup>58</sup> At 0014, Wallwork told Howard and his men to get ready to land—he had LZ “X” and canal bridge in sight and was closing fast.<sup>59</sup> Behind him, gliders # 92 and 93 were also steady on course.

Yet the same could not be said for the second group of gliders. It was here that the friction of war struck first, even before the troops were on the ground. The heavy cloud cover over the Normandy coast resulted in two of the Halifax bombers (towing gliders # 94 and 95) to cross the French coast farther east than intended. The lead glider (# 94) of the group was “ordered to make a blind release a mile east of Houlgate, beyond the River Dives.”<sup>60</sup> Once visibility cleared, the glider pilots quickly scanned the area, searching for their objective. They saw two bridges close together, steered for them, and landed their glider only 35 yards from the one they thought was the River Orne bridge.<sup>61</sup> It was not until Friday and his men got out of the glider that he released that they were at the wrong bridge; they had landed on the River Dives near the Varraville bridge.<sup>62</sup> Subsequently, one-sixth of Howard’s combat power and his 2IC were approximately six miles too far east of their true objective, and would not play a role in the action that night. Effectively, even before the first shot was fired, Howard had suffered approximately 15 percent casualties.

Events went better for Glider #95. As the clouds cleared, the Halifax pilot towing them recognized the error and quickly consulted with the glider pilots via radio who confirmed his suspicions. The River Orne was indeed in the distance to their east. The pilot turned hard to starboard, quickly got back on course and headed straight for LZ “Y.”<sup>63</sup> Due to these errors, Glider #96, who had not been victim to the same initial mistake as the others in their group, was now the lead glider and would land first LZ “Y,” with Glider #95 not far behind.

Finally, at 0016, Wallwork eased Glider #91 on to French soil, breaching the German barbed wire encirclements with the nose of the Horsa just as Howard had requested. In a feat of incredible airmanship, Wallwork placed the first echelon of the assault force less than fifty yards from the canal bridge.<sup>64</sup> The landing was extremely rough thanks to their speed (just under 100 mph.) and sudden stop due to crashing into the bands of barbed wire, but they had achieved complete surprise. Amazingly, not a single German sentry raised the alarm. Although momentarily knocked senseless from this controlled crash landing (Howard recalls “the tremendous impact caused me to pass out”),<sup>65</sup> the men immediately regained their bearings and quickly disembarked from the glider.

Like a well-oiled machine they sprang into action, led by Brotheridge. As three soldiers sprinted with grenades toward the pillbox containing the trigger device, the remainder of the platoon raced toward the bridge. Simultaneously, as the pillbox was destroyed, the platoon overwhelmed the sentries, rushed over the bridge, and secured the far

bank. They quickly became engaged in a firefight with the remaining defenders at the western end of the bridge. Simultaneously, Gliders #92 and 93 were landing only meters behind Glider #91. To the east, Gliders #96 and 95 were on short final to LZ “Y”. Within the next few minutes, the five gliders were all safely on the ground. Glider #96 landed 100 meters from the River Orne bridge, while Glider #95 hit an air pocket which forced the glider down much farther away from the objective than planned (700 meters).<sup>66</sup> Figure 5 illustrates the disposition of the assault force upon touchdown.

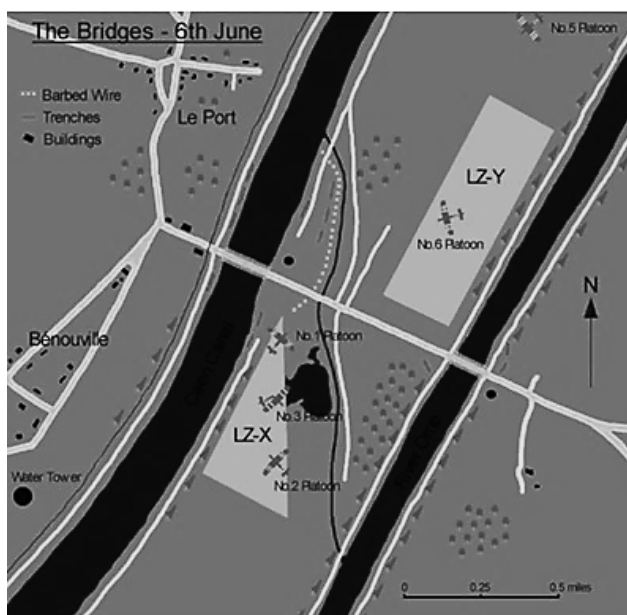


Figure 5. The Assault Force Upon Landing. Gliders #91, 92, 93 in LZ “X” and Glider #96 in LZ “Y”. Glider #95, which landed short, is at top right. The “T” road junction where Sergeant Thornton destroyed the lead German tank during the enemy counterattack at 0130 on June 6 is seen at left between the villages of Le Port and Benouville. Credit: Mark Hickman/The Pegasus Archive/used with permission

Considering the dangerous nature of glider operations, incredibly only one soldier had died in the landings; he drowned in the pond immediately adjacent to where his glider (# 93) had landed.<sup>67</sup> There was limited resistance at the canal bridge as the disorganized and surprised Germans reeled from the shock effect of D Coy’s assault. At 0021, only five minutes after Glider #91 touched down, the three platoons around the canal bridge had eliminated most of the German resistance in the trenches and firing pits surrounding the bridge.<sup>68</sup> Howard had his prize—the bridge over the Caen Canal—but anxiously waited for word of the successful capture of the River Orne bridge.

In the interim Howard made a quick assessment of his situation. All three platoon commanders in his group were casualties (one killed in action [Brotheridge], two others wounded in action), and unbeknownst to him, a sixth of his combat power (Glider #94) was missing in action.<sup>69</sup> As his men transitioned into the defense around the approaches to the bridge, the sappers accompanying the assault force informed Howard that the canal bridge, although wired for demolition, was not rigged with the explosive charges.<sup>70</sup> Finally, at 0026

the report from the men at the river bridge reached Howard—they had captured it intact “without firing a shot.”<sup>71</sup> Howard and his force had swiftly and decisively accomplished the first part of their mission. Yet the fight was not over—all would be for naught if the bridges could not be held. “What you gain by stealth and guts, you must hold with skill and determination,” warned General Richard Gale, the Commanding General of the 6th Airborne Division, to Howard during the planning stages of the operation.<sup>72</sup> Now was the time for Howard and his men to do just that.

Twenty-four minutes later, at 0050 6 June, the 6th Airborne Division began landing in the drop zones to the east<sup>73</sup> of Howard’s bridges, which meant that reinforcements were hopefully not long in coming to his position. Recognizing that the main German threat would come from the west of the canal, Howard placed all his combat power except one platoon in defense of the canal bridge. Within short striking distance of the bridges were plentiful German forces, including motorized infantry, artillery, and most consequentially to Howard, a half-dozen tanks who mobilized quickly and moved to attack Howard.<sup>74</sup> Although disorganized by D Coy’s *coup de main*, the Germans, as predicted, mounted a determined counterattack at 0130 to retake the canal bridge. Waiting in their hasty defensive positions for the coming German counterattack, they could hear the enemy tanks approaching before they could see them.<sup>75</sup> Then, emerging from the darkness, three panzers came into view. Howard recalled: “One of them began slowly and menacingly to grind and clank its way down the road towards us.”<sup>76</sup> At the “T” road junction just west of the canal bridge (see fig. 5) the lead tank in the German assault was destroyed,<sup>77</sup> thanks to a single well-placed shot from a distance of only 30 yards by Sergeant “Wagger” Thornton via the sole undamaged and operable 83 mm PIAT (Projector, Infantry, Anti-tank) left in the assault force.<sup>78</sup> With the lead tank destroyed, the other tanks in the advance “quickly retreated.”<sup>79</sup> The Germans continued to probe and attack the British defenses west of the canal bridge with infantry, but Howard’s men tightened their defensive lines closer to the head of the bridge, moving Bren guns up and down the line, firing from different positions to deceive the enemy.<sup>80</sup> D Coy’s aggressive defense convinced the Germans that the British were present in far greater strength than they actually were. In fact, one of the German tank commanders who fled from the “T” junction reported to his superiors that the British forces at the bridge possessed powerful six-pounder towed anti-tank guns.<sup>81</sup> This confusion paralyzed the local German leadership and bought Howard the precious time for the first airborne reinforcements to arrive at 0200 and accomplish his mission.<sup>82</sup>

Although the Germans continued to attempt to retake the canal bridge numerous times in the following hours, they were continually beaten back by D Coy and the paras. The final chapter in Howard’s saga came at 1300 on D-Day, as the first British troops from Sword Beach, Lord Lovat’s Commandos, made contact with the paras and D Coy at the Caen Canal bridge, thereby completing the critical link up with the seaborne infantry.<sup>83</sup>

### Relative Superiority Analysis: Operation Deadstick

After the war in Europe was over General Gale stated that in studying the problem of capturing the Caen Canal and River Orne bridges that he “got the idea of a *coup de main* by studying the German glider landings at Fort Eben Emael in Belgium in 1940 and the Corinth Canal in Greece in 1941.”<sup>84</sup> Just as the Germans had achieved in their operations, he was counting on the speed and shock of the *coup de main* (provided via the gliders landing undetected next to the bridges) to allow the assault force to quickly establish relative superiority. General Gale recalled:

We knew that virtually all the enemy would have to do would be to press a button or move a switch and up would go these bridges. There is always or nearly always a slip between the cup and the lip; orders are vague; there is uncertainty; has the moment arrived or should we wait? Who is the individual actually responsible both for working the switch or for ordering the bridges to be blown? These questions are age-old, and on the doubts that might exist in some German mind or minds at the critical moment I based the plan. But a moment or two was all that I knew we would get. The assault on the bridges must therefore come like a bolt from the blue.<sup>85</sup>

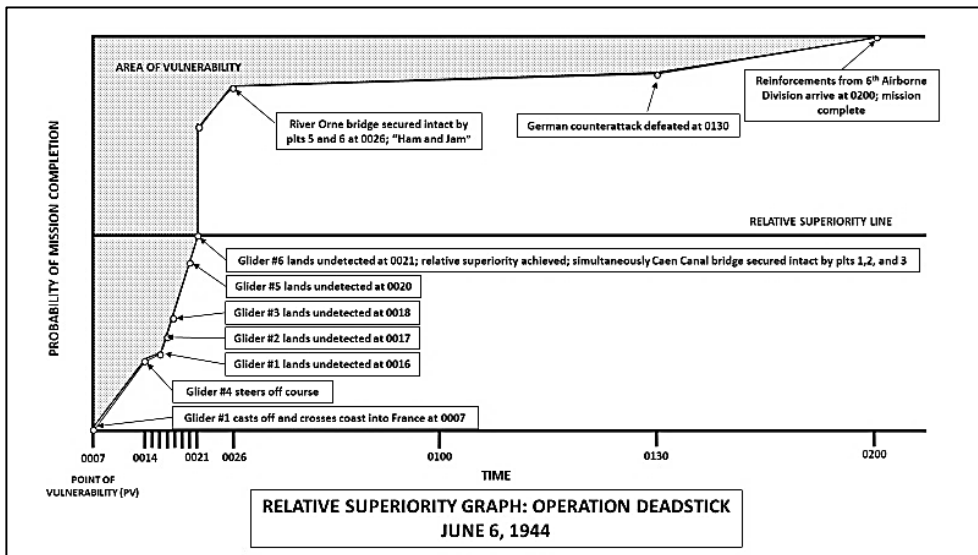


Figure 6. Relative Superiority Graph: Operation Deadstick. Credit: Created by author/ based on William H. McRaven/The Theory of Special Operations/ Naval Postgraduate School master’s thesis/1993/used with permission

However, striking “like a bolt out of the blue” is, as the old saw points out, easier said than done. D Coy, as the attacking force, was at a distinct disadvantage and faced numerous obstacles to overcome to achieve mission success. The key was to achieve relative superiority as quickly as possible. Figure 6 illustrates how Howard’s force achieved relative superiority quickly (within 14 minutes) once they reached their PV.

An examination of the sequence of events using McRaven’s framework for relative superiority reveals that Howard and his men reached their PV at 0007 on the 6th of June, the moment they crossed the French coast and the gliders cast away from their tows.<sup>86</sup> From then on, they were at the mercy of the winds, German anti-aircraft gunners, and the skill of the glider pilots. With each passing minute their probability of mission completion increased as they neared their LZs undetected.

As discussed earlier, friction is commonplace in war, and Howard’s force was not immune to such unforeseen difficulties. One can observe that their probability of success decreased slightly when Glider #94 went off course and headed for the River Dives instead of the River Orne. At this minute, Howard lost a sixth of his assault force and his 2IC. Regardless, their probability of mission completion again increased as Glider #91 and each subsequent glider landed. With five gliders safely on the ground undetected, Howard had achieved relative superiority over his adversaries at 0021.<sup>87</sup> In fact, due to the echeloned nature of the landings, by the time the final glider of five landed at 0021, Howard and his three platoons from gliders # 91, 92, and 93 had already seized the canal bridge intact. Minutes later at 0026, when the men from gliders # 95 and 96 informed Howard that they too had seized their bridge intact, the probability of mission completion again increased.

However, as we have seen, the mission was still far from accomplished. As outlined by Poett in his mission statement, “Your difficulties will arise in holding off an enemy counterattack on the brs, until you are relieved.”<sup>88</sup> So, while Howard had both bridges in his possession, this by no means meant mission success. As illustrated in figure 6, merely capturing the bridges did not significantly increase his probability of success given the certainty that the Germans would try to recapture the bridges; swift and decisive counterattack was a doctrinal pillar of the German Wehrmacht.<sup>89</sup> McRaven specifically addresses the problem with such holding actions for SOF, as the requirement to hold over an extended period of time (instead of quickly striking and withdrawing) means a greater area of vulnerability, “and owing to limited sustainability, SOF are placed in a difficult tactical situation.”<sup>90</sup> Despite this, Howard needed to maintain his relative superiority over an enemy that was getting stronger and more organized by the minute. The increased area of vulnerability is clearly annotated in figure 6 as being the time from when both bridges were captured at 0026 to when reinforcements from the 6th Airborne arrived at 0200. In fact, the most tenuous period of the operation occurred within the period of this increased area of vulnerability.

As recounted previously, in the distance, Howard and his men could hear the rumblings of truck and tank engines to the west in the villages of Benouville and Le Port as the Germans prepared to drive Howard's men from the bridges.<sup>91</sup> The repulse of the German counterattack at 0130 created uncertainty and hesitation within the German chain of command, increasing the probability of mission success for Howard with each tick of the clock, thereby allowing paras from the 7th Battalion, 5th Parachute Brigade to reach the bridges at 0200. This reinforcement ensured the successful completion of his mission as annotated in his orders: seize the bridges intact and hold until relieved.

### **Application of the Principles of Special Operations**

McRaven's theory of special operations states that SOF succeed "when they are able to gain relative superiority through the use of a simple plan, carefully concealed, repeatedly rehearsed, and executed with surprise, speed, and purpose."<sup>92</sup> This was indeed the case with Operation Deadstick. Although executed by non-special operations personnel, the correct and integrated application of the principles of special operations resulted in complete success for Howard and his assault force. How each of these principles specifically applies to this case is outlined below.

#### **Simplicity**

The three elements of simplicity are "limiting the number of objectives, good intelligence, and innovation."<sup>93</sup> Operation Deadstick had two objectives: the Caen Canal bridge and the River Orne bridge, and these objectives were virtually within a stone's throw of each other. This allowed for the two assault groups to mutually support each other, if the need should arise. Having both landing zones between the two waterways also assured that neither group would be cut off from the other. The more numerous tasks of destroying the bridges over the Dives were left to the paras.

Likewise, the scheme of maneuver (SOM) and CONOPS were simple. The SOM was for two groups of glider-borne troops to insert in LZs immediately adjacent to their objectives, attack and defeat the enemy forces defending them, and defend against counterattack until relieved by the paras. There was not a complicated lift plan or long movement to the objective once they inserted. Of note was the fact that Howard was given the latitude to craft his SOM and tweak his plan throughout the process—it was his plan.<sup>94</sup> Early on in training Howard realized that it would be impossible for him to command the assault on both bridges once he saw (via realistic rehearsals) the potential friction due to assaulting at night and the distance between the two spans. As such he quickly decided that the capture of the River Orne bridge would be controlled by Captain Friday—it would be his show.<sup>95</sup> The CONOPS was to use the speed and shock effect of a *coup de main* to overwhelm the German defenders controlling these vital bridges. In Gale's words, the assault must "come like a bolt from the blue."<sup>96</sup> The simplicity of the SOM and CONOPS permitted flexibility in the execution of the plan, so that the loss of Glider #94 even before the force landed had no effect on the outcome of the mission.

“War is the realm of uncertainty,” Clausewitz opines, where “three quarters of the factors on which action in war is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser uncertainty.”<sup>97</sup> This is known commonly as the “fog of war or fog of battle.” Although this is a term Clausewitz never explicitly uses in his writings, nevertheless it has entered the vernacular when describing the unreliability of information in war and how that information may mask and distort one’s vision of events on the battlefield. How is this “fog,” this uncertainty mitigated? One certain way is through intelligence that is tailored, timely, and relevant, which is what Howard and the assault force enjoyed. Thanks to the photographic reconnaissance provided by the Royal Air Force, they constantly had current imagery of the objective area. The French Resistance provided a detailed order of battle for the German forces in the vicinity of the objectives. Howard knew the location, composition, and disposition of the German defenders on the objectives, and what was their combat effectiveness. He knew who the local Resistance leaders were, and who the collaborators were. The swiftness of the intelligence getting back to England was amazing in an age prior to satellite communications. As late as 2 June 1944, the Resistance discovered that the button to trigger the destruction of the Caen Canal bridge was located in the machine gun pillbox at the west end of the bridge.<sup>98</sup> This information led Howard to tweak his plan and detail three men whose sole job upon landing was to sprint forward and neutralize the pillbox with grenades.<sup>99</sup> The assault force had detailed topographical reports of the objective area and knew almost immediately when the German defenses were changed or modified. Wallwork was amazed at the detail of the terrain model that he and his fellow glider pilots studied:

We saw and studied the most magnificent relief model of the coast up to the bridges, covering every lane, bush, and house ... Intelligence was superb. Daily overflights by photographic reconnaissance Spitfires brought the target up to date, even to such details as when a house by the canal was demolished stone by stone and the pillbox across from it reinforced stone by stone. We could almost see the Germans working at it. Such attention could only generate supreme confidence in all of us.<sup>100</sup>

On 30 May 1944, it was observed that the defenders had begun to dig holes to emplace anti-glider poles to foul potential LZs in vicinity of the bridges.<sup>101</sup> Howard’s final intel report before boarding the gliders for Normandy confirmed that the holes were dug, but the poles had still not been emplaced.<sup>102</sup> This phenomenal level of detail mitigated the number of unknown factors on the battlefield, all of which ultimately produce friction in the mind of a commander. If knowing yourself, the enemy, the ground, and the weather ever meant total victory, then Operation Deadstick perhaps is the object lesson of Sun Tzu’s oft-quoted aphorism.<sup>103</sup>

The parameters of the mission necessitated that innovation play a role in simplifying the plan. As stated, the scattered nature of a traditional airborne drop would not produce the

speed and shock needed to accomplish the mission. The innovative use of the Horsa gliders permitted the assault force to silently approach the objective area, then deposit D Coy virtually right on top of their objectives. Ingenious modifications were made to the gliders to ensure they delivered the assault force safely on target. Specifically, toward the end of May 1944 it was realized that there was a problem with the total weight of the loaded gliders—they were simply too heavy. Too heavy meant too fast on landing, which could be catastrophic for the wooden Horsas, especially on the short LZs around the bridges.

To alleviate this, individual soldiers' loads were (somewhat) reduced, the total number of men per platoon was reduced, and most consequentially, all gliders were fitted with arrester parachutes, which were not standard equipment on Horsas.<sup>104</sup> Installed in the rear of the glider, the parachute would be deployed at the second of landing by the co-pilot via pulling toggle switches mounted in the cockpit. The parachute would act to momentarily slow the glider down, then quickly be released and jettisoned by the co-pilot. On D-Day these parachutes worked perfectly for all six gliders and were instrumental to getting the still heavily-loaded Horsas down safely.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, because the group of gliders landing at the Caen Canal would be executing right hand turns as they descended toward LZ "X", the pilot's seat was switched from the left side of the cockpit to the right side and extra window panels were cut so the pilot could almost look down vertically at the ground, thereby keeping the LZ in sight at all times.<sup>106</sup>

To additionally aid the pilots, a color film was produced which simulated the path each glider group would follow from cast off to landing. The film was made by moving a camera down an angled wire over the relief model; this provided the pilots with a view of what they would be seeing as they made their descents into their respective LZs. The pilots viewed the film with tinted glass over the projector lens or through darkened pilot's goggles for additional realism. In the end, the overall simplicity gained via limiting the number of objectives, good intelligence, and innovation paid huge dividends on the ground, permitting D Coy to achieve relative superiority within minutes of the gliders landing.

## **Security**

Operational security was deemed to be paramount during the planning and preparation phases of Operation Deadstick. The operation was classified top secret, and among D Coy, only Howard knew the true nature of their mission. Even then he did not know the exact location of his objective until 2 May 1944, when he received his orders from Poett.<sup>107</sup> Howard was briefed on the entire Allied plan for D-Day, the 6th Airborne's part in it, and permitted full access to imagery and intelligence reports, but could not take anything from the secure spaces at Gale's headquarters.<sup>108</sup> Although Howard's men had been training for months to capture two bridges, the soldiers and sappers in the platoons did not know the precise details and locations. In late May 1944, D Coy was placed in pre-mission isolation at Tarrant Rushton, and on 1 June 1944, Howard finally briefed his men on the exact details of mission and location of their objectives.<sup>109</sup>

As recounted above, the Germans knew the Allies were preparing to invade Europe from England, but not when or where. “The enemy must not know where I intend to give battle,” counsels Sun Tzu. “For if he does not know where I intend to give battle he must prepare in a great many places. And when he prepares in a great many places, those I have to fight in any one place will be few.”<sup>110</sup> This was indeed the case of the Germans in trying to defend against what they knew was the inevitable assault into Fortress Europe. Taken on a smaller scale, had word leaked out regarding the Caen Canal and Orne River bridges being photographed or studied, or of glider-borne troops training to seize bridges, it would have definitely changed the outcome of the operation, allowing the Germans to increase their alert levels, garrison, and physical defenses of the bridges. Even so, the Germans were already in the process of digging holes for anti-glider poles in the LZs around the objectives.<sup>111</sup> In fact, during the early morning light of 6 June, after the bridges were seized, D Coy captured two Italian laborers who were observed in LZ “X” actually installing the anti-glider poles into the ground; they were under strict orders to have them all in place by the evening of 6 June.<sup>112</sup> Without a doubt, had the Germans been able to piece together the true nature and objectives of D Coy, those glider poles would have been in place long before the evening of June 6, forcing the gliders to land much farther from the bridges, complicating the plan and losing the speed and shock achieved by landing immediately adjacent to the bridges. Had the Germans known the time of the *coup de main*, or of the larger invasion, the defenders would have been more alert, with anti-aircraft batteries scanning the sky for the first sign of the gliders crossing the Channel into Normandy.<sup>113</sup> Needless to say, the results of which would have proved catastrophic to Howard and his men.

### **Repetition**

Howard was a fanatic when it came to tough, realistic training. Even before his company was selected as the *coup de main* force, he instituted a thorough training regimen to build his company into an outstanding glider-borne light infantry unit. Once Howard was informed of his mission, he relentlessly pursued every opportunity to conduct training as close to the actual conditions D Coy would experience on the battlefield. He drove the men relentlessly in “a constant quest to be better, faster, sharper.”<sup>114</sup> Each exercise revealed problems, which enabled him to adjust his plan, but also convinced Howard and his superiors that the plan was solid and would work.<sup>115</sup> Once Howard got his official orders in May 1944, he began to devise a more detailed plan for training his force and the seizure of the bridges. Although not permitted to tell his men the details and actual objective of their mission, he nonetheless began training in earnest:

[Howard] used tape to lay out a river and a canal, with two bridges between them, all the exact distances of his real targets. Day and night, his platoons practiced capturing them; sometimes one platoon, sometimes three, sometimes all six. Howard felt that above all his plan had to be flexible. If only one glider hit the target, that platoon

had to be prepared to do the job of all six platoons.<sup>116</sup> Howard ordered up German opposition for his exercises—that is, the bridge defenders wore German uniforms, used German weapons and tactics, and insofar as possible shouted out their orders in German. He got captured German rifles, carbines, and machineguns, German mortars, German hand grenades, so that all his men were thoroughly familiar with what these weapons could do, and how to operate them.<sup>117</sup> Howard asked the topographical people to search the map of Britain and find him some place where a river and a canal ran closely together and were crossed by bridges on the same road. They found such a spot outside Exeter. Howard moved his company down there, and for six days, by day and night, attacked those Exeter bridges.<sup>118</sup>

Howard's training was extensive, exhaustive, and thorough. D Coy practiced the assault over and over, and each time Howard saw something he overlooked.<sup>119</sup> Above all he learned that his plans must be flexible, that events on the objective would occur incredibly fast, and that there was no guarantee what order the gliders would land or who would carry out what task.<sup>120</sup> Every soldier learned the sappers' jobs and were taught the basic skills to accomplish them should the sappers be casualties; the sappers learned what the platoons were to accomplish, and every officer was prepared to assume command of the entire operation.<sup>121</sup> To that end each platoon learned to accomplish every tactical task assigned across the assault force, "so no matter who landed where and in what order, they would all automatically know what to do. They practiced it over and over again until they could do it with their eyes shut," recalled Howard.<sup>122</sup>

Mimicking the intensity of D Coy's training syllabus, the glider pilots embarked on an equally demanding regimen. They knew that they were the critical element of the entire operation—the glider pilots had to precisely land their Horsas virtually on top of their objectives. With that guidance, the glider pilots began non-stop training flights flying the exact mission profile that they would on D-Day. They flew at night, using compasses and stopwatches to guide them, and in all kinds of weather. In all, they completed forty-three training flights.<sup>123</sup>

Their intensive training and countless full mission profile rehearsals enabled the assault force to fight through the friction they encountered once they landed in Normandy. Howard's men "automatically unbuckled [from their damaged gliders], cut their way through the smashed up door" and began their assault.<sup>124</sup> All Brotheridge had to say to his platoon was, "Come on, lads," to begin the assault.<sup>125</sup> Lieutenant Sandy Smith, commanding the platoon in Glider #93 stated that in the initial confusion and chaos of the landing, the men still knew what to do—move towards their objective. "And this," he recalled with pride, "is where the training comes in."<sup>126</sup> The value of rehearsals was stated by Private Denis Edwards who landed in Glider #91. Even with his platoon commander mortally wounded, and

enveloped in the fog and friction of battle, he and his mates still knew what to do after the initial assault. “We expected the Paras to reach us within an hour and, with the bridges now in our hands, we had to defend them against whatever counter-attack might be made,” said Edwards. “Still operating to the detailed plan rehearsed at the briefings before our departure, we took up our prearranged defensive positions. Our seven-man section moved a short distance down to the west side of the canal and took up positions astride a single-track railway that ran from Ouistreham to Caen along the top of the embankment.”<sup>127</sup> The confidence, initiative and speed born of the countless rehearsals proved to be decisive for the assault force on D-Day.

## Surprise

The essence of a *coup de main* assault comes down to two elements: surprise and speed. Clausewitz states that “surprise lies at the root of all operations without exception ... for without it superiority at the decisive point is hardly conceivable.”<sup>128</sup> Because the target of a SOF mission is almost always cognizant of its importance and value, surprise is manifested through deception, timing, and exploiting the enemy’s vulnerabilities. One must, in the words of Sun Tzu, be “as unfathomable as the clouds,” and “move like a thunderbolt.”<sup>129</sup> As McRaven simply states, “catching the enemy off guard.”<sup>130</sup> Sun Tzu goes on to emphasize that the strike of a hawk breaks the body of its prey as a result of timing, because it waited for the right moment to strike.<sup>131</sup> This is exactly what the *coup de main* achieved. Although some effort was being made to upgrade the physical defenses around the bridges, the Germans were still physically, and more importantly, mentally unprepared for an attack that evening. The Germans, in fact, recognized the value of the bridges; the garrison commander, Major Hans Schmidt, was told that “the two bridges were the most critical points in Normandy”<sup>132</sup> and had begun to prepare defenses against a glider-borne assault such as Howard’s. Yet a thorough study of the enemy, possible via the detailed reports from the Resistance, revealed that the garrison manning the bridges was lackadaisical in their duties, lulled into complacency by years of easy occupation duty and Allied bombers flying daily overhead enroute to targets inland. Again, Sun Tzu exhorts commanders to “attack where he [the enemy] is unprepared; sally out when he does not expect you.”<sup>133</sup> The timing of the assault ensured that the defenders would be at their least alert and vigilant—many were dozing in their bunkers or otherwise occupied in local brothels.<sup>134</sup> Indeed, Schmidt believed that the recent bad weather and high winds ruled out any parachute drop that evening, and that his location five miles inland would provide him plenty of warning before any airborne force could organize and move upon his positions.<sup>135</sup> Unluckily for him, he was dead wrong in his estimate of the situation.

The deception plan for Operation Deadstick called for the Halifax bombers towing the gliders to fly at an altitude of 6,000 feet (instead of the typical 2,000 feet used during glider operations) and continue on inland and bomb Caen after releasing the gliders. The rationale was that German radar operators, seeing enemy bombers flying so low (for bombers)

over the coast then suddenly turn around without appearing to do anything, would be aware that something was up and alert the German defenders in the area.<sup>136</sup> In fact, one of the two German sentries on the canal bridge, Private Helmut Romer, heard the noise of Glider #91 landing, “but assumed it was a piece of wing or tail from a crippled British bomber.”<sup>137</sup> The young German soldier simply was not properly trained, mentally prepared, or in a state of alert to even consider that what he had heard was the beginning of an attack on the bridge. The next thing he saw, as he walked his post, was twenty-two British airborne troops in full combat kit charging across the bridge straight at him.<sup>138</sup> Howard was amazed at the silence around the bridge after landing: “Above all, and this was the tremendous thing, there was no firing at all, in other words we had been a complete surprise. We had really caught old Jerry with his pants down.”<sup>139</sup>

### **Speed**

“Speed is the essence of war,”<sup>140</sup> and is critical to achieving relative superiority. Delay means increased vulnerability and danger to the assault force. Every additional second the assault force is on the ground without achieving relative superiority gives the enemy time to react to the assault and negate the effects of surprise and shock. “It is a fact that time which is allowed to pass unused accumulates to the credit of the defender,” Clausewitz warns his readers. “He [the defender] reaps where he did not sow. Any omission of attack—whether from bad judgment, fear, or insolence—accrues to the defenders’ benefit.”<sup>141</sup>

Howard and his men fully understood Clausewitz’s warning and the need for speed once they hit the ground. The bridges were reported to be wired for demolition, and any delay in eliminating the Germans manning the defenses could permit them to blow them, resulting in mission failure as the bridges had to be taken intact. Both Gale and Poett repeatedly emphasized<sup>142</sup> that the bridges must be captured within minutes of landing, “so quickly that the Germans would be left stunned, flat-footed and unable to react in time.”<sup>143</sup> For Howard, the speed of his assault was largely dependent on the glider pilots. If they put the men within 400 meters of the objective, he thought they could capture the bridges intact. Any farther away significantly decreased the odds for success.<sup>144</sup>

As previously noted, Howard’s glider landed approximately fifty meters from the canal bridge and smashed through the barbed wire defenses surrounding the bridge perimeter, courtesy of Wallwork’s superb airmanship; this negated the need to utilize bangalore torpedoes to breach the wire further increasing the speed with which they assaulted the bridge.<sup>145</sup> With similar skill, gliders # 92 and # 93 skidded to a halt directly behind Wallwork, allowing for Howard to immediately reinforce the success of Brotheridge’s men with two more platoons (see fig. 7).



Figure 7. Aerial photograph taken 6 June 1944, of (left to right) gliders # 91, 93 and 92 at the Caen Canal bridge. The bridge tower is seen at lower left, with the German defensive trenches (the dark line running left to right) just off the port wing tip of Glider #91. The precise landing of these gliders so close to the objective allowed Howard and his men to utilize surprise and speed to quickly achieve relative superiority and overwhelm the German defenders. Credit: © IWM MH 2074/Used Under “Accepted Non-commercial use” /<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205313873/>

With relative superiority achieved at the Caen Canal bridge, Howard’s men sprang into action. During training Howard had insisted that every platoon learn each other’s missions and had created a brevity code concerning each mission task. The idea was that all Howard had to do was simply order the platoon commander “Number One task,” or “Number Two task,” etc., thereby saving precious seconds, allowing the men to immediately move into action. This system worked perfectly on D-Day. As an example, Howard recalled: “When David Wood [2d platoon commander] came up [after landing] ... I just said, ‘Number Two task’ and he automatically went to do it ... He [Wood] didn’t have to issue any orders, he just said, ‘Number Two’ to his leading section.”<sup>146</sup>

The speed, shock, and violence of action of the assault is captured well by Cornelius Ryan in his classic study of D-Day, *The Longest Day*:

Someone [Brotheridge] yelled, “Come on, lads!” and men came scrambling out [of Glider #1], some piling through the door, others tumbling down from the stove-in nose. Almost at the same time and only yards away, the other two gliders skidded to a crashing halt and out of them poured the remainder of the assault force. Now everybody stormed the bridge. There was bedlam. The Germans were shocked and disorganized. Grenades came hurtling into their dugouts and

communications trenches. Some Germans who were actually asleep in the gun pits woke to the blinding crash of explosions and found themselves gazing into the business ends of Sten guns. Others, still dazed, grabbed rifles and machine guns, and began firing haphazardly at the shadowy figures who seemed to have materialized from nowhere.<sup>147</sup>

The second group of gliders (# 95 and 96) which landed at the River Orne bridge was not as precise in landing as the first group; Glider #96 landed first in LZ “Y”, about 100 meters from their objective.<sup>148</sup> Regardless, just as they had trained, the men swiftly exited the glider and were able to rapidly close on the river bridge, permitting Lieutenant Dennis Fox and his platoon and capture it intact without a shot. Glider #95 landed approximately 700 meters from the bridge, well short of LZ “Y”. Once the platoon commander, Lieutenant “Tod” Sweeney, gained his bearings, he and his men moved as quickly as they could to the objective, arriving about five minutes after Fox had taken the bridge, reinforcing the men from Glider #96 (see fig.8).<sup>149</sup>



Figure 8. Aerial photograph which shows the bridge over the River Orne and the landing position of Glider #96 in LZ “Y”, approximately 100 meters from their objective, which carried Lieutenant Dennis Fox and the men that captured that bridge. At the top right edge of the photograph sits Glider #95, which landed short of LZ “Y” after hitting an air pocket and forced them to land prematurely. Credit: © Airborne Assault Museum/ Imperial War Museum Duxford/ “Airborne Assault/ParaData”/The Museum of the Parachute Regiment and Airborne Forces/ accessed 9 November 2022/ <https://www.paradata.org.uk/media/2371>. Part of the Imperial War Museum Duxford, UK, this tremendously detailed website (<https://www.paradata.org.uk/>) documents the history of British airborne forces from their inception to the present day/used with permission

## Purpose

The task and purpose placed before Howard left no room for ambiguity. His task was to capture the bridges intact. The purpose was twofold: first, to protect the left flank of the

invasion beaches from German counterattack forces, and secondly, to keep open the ground lines of communication between the seaborne invasion forces and the paras of the 6th Airborne Division located between his objectives and the River Dives. Once sequestered at Tarrant Rushton, Howard fully briefed the entire assault force on the mission, objectives, and criticality of their success. Every man knew that if his was the only glider to successfully land in Normandy, it was expected that they must do the job of all six platoons. If priority had to be given between the two bridges due to insufficient assault forces, Howard made it clear that the canal bridge was most important as that was the bridge at which the seaborne reinforcements would first need to cross to relieve the 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division.<sup>150</sup> The men were fully aware of “the crucial nature of their task, and at the idea of being the first men to touch the soil of France.”<sup>151</sup>

### **Friction and the Moral Factors**

The nature of war is timeless and enduring.<sup>152</sup> Chance, uncertainty, and the unforeseen difficulties that make Clausewitzian concept of friction is an ever-present element in war made their presence felt during all phases of Operation Deadstick. The detrimental or caustic effect of each of these instances of friction varied. Some certainly had a greater effect than others. However, it is most always the cumulative, multiplicative effect of seemingly minor problems and errors that bring operations to fail. As emphasized by McRaven, despite the correct application of the six principles of special operations, mission failure occurs when the frictions of war are unable to be overcome by the moral factors of courage, intellect, boldness, and perseverance of the assault force.<sup>153</sup> “Success in war counts more on moral than on physical qualities,” states the 1909 British Army *Field Service Regulations*. “Skill cannot compensate for want of courage, energy, and determination ... The development of the necessary moral qualities is therefore the first of the objects to be attained,” it concludes.<sup>154</sup> In the contest for the bridges on D-Day, Howard and his men admirably exhibited these qualities. A few select examples of the unforeseen difficulties encountered by the assault force, and how they were mitigated by moral factors, are discussed below.

In the preparation phase friction reared its head when it was discovered during training exercises, that in the chaos of assaulting the bridges in the dark, Howard’s platoons were unable to identify friend from foe, resulting in “friendly fire” casualties being assessed on the assault force by the exercises’ umpires.<sup>155</sup> The lesson learned resulted in a simple method of recognition to prevent this: once the assault began, each man would continually shout a codeword as they moved to and across the bridges, ‘Able’, ‘Baker’, ‘Charlie’, ‘Dog’, ‘Fox’, and ‘Easy’ to let everyone know which platoon was rushing forward, and prevent fratricide.<sup>156</sup>

Yet another example was the overloading of the gliders, which came about innocently enough by individual soldiers adding things such as extra ammunition and grenades to their fighting load. The officer in charge of the attached sappers discovered this problem only on 30 May 1944, when he weighed one of his men in full combat load to find

that the man weighed 300 lbs., a full 60 lbs. over the allowed weight of 240 lbs. per sapper. He reported this to Howard, who upon weighing one of the assaulters found out that this man weighed 250 lbs. instead of the allowed weight of 210 lbs. After quickly reducing the loads and cutting the number of men per glider by two,<sup>157</sup> the total weight of the gliders was still too heavy (by 1,400 lbs.)<sup>158</sup> for the short LZs in Normandy. They simply would be going too fast and would not be able stop in time, which meant crashing into the embankments and trees at the end of each LZ or into already landed assault force glider. This problem was solved by the innovative solution of fitting the Horsas with non-standard arrester parachutes. In each instance these “frictions,” which could have been catastrophic had they not been addressed, were solved via intellect and finding an imaginative and bold solution.

A greater, potentially more catastrophic friction occurred during the execution phase, which was more consequential because unlike in training, there was limited to no time to debate or brainstorm because the solution needed to be instantaneous else the friction immediately would adversely impact the outcome of the mission. Although every participant in war experiences friction regardless of rank, it is perhaps most severely felt by those in positions of command and leadership. “Moreover, every war is rich in unique episodes,” Clausewitz instructs, “Each is an uncharted sea, full of reefs. The commander may suspect the reefs’ existence without ever having seen them; now [in combat] he has to steer past them in the dark.”<sup>159</sup> Once on the ground in Normandy, Howard had many reefs around which to steer in the dark. The first unforeseen difficulty Howard had to conquer was that all three of the platoon commanders in his group at the Caen Canal were wounded less than ten minutes into the fight. Brotheridge was mortally wounded leading the initial charge across the bridge, and soon after the two other platoon commanders were wounded and out of action. Compounding problems was the fact that there was no word to Howard from the group assigned to attack the river bridge, which obviously was a cause for concern to Howard, and increased the friction and uncertainty he was already experiencing.<sup>160</sup>

The fog and friction of battle also plagued the group assigned to capture the River Orne bridge. There, Lieutenant Fox found himself landing first in LZ “Y” in Glider #96 instead of being the final glider of three, and then having to capture the bridge with his lone platoon when he fully expected the mission to be completed by the time they reached the bridge.<sup>161</sup> Glider #95 and Lieutenant Sweeney’s platoon found themselves far short of their designated LZ. One of Sweeney’s men recalled: “Out we clambered ... I remember [seeing] huge hedges all over the places, loads of trees in the dark, completely lost.”<sup>162</sup> Likewise, the pilot of Glider #96 was just as confused, saying, “we received a shock as we climbed out through the door of the glider into the field. Where were the other gliders? We had been No. 6 and should have been the third glider to land in our field. Yet apart from a herd of cows which had panicked in front of us as we landed, we were quite alone ... alone in front of the whole invasion force which was not to land on the beaches six miles away until daybreak, and ahead of the main parachute drop by a half-an-hour.”<sup>163</sup>

One can only venture at the uncertainty and doubt in the minds of the men at that moment. At that moment, fog and friction of battle threatened to upend the well-conceived plan as drafted on paper.<sup>164</sup> When Howard did finally establish communications with the River Orne bridge group, he was told that only two platoons were on the objective; there was no sign of Glider #94 and Priday, creating even more uncertainty about the fate of his 2IC and men. A final example of friction concerns stopping the counterattack of the German tanks at the “T” junction. The only anti-tank assets the assault force carried were one PIAT per platoon.<sup>165</sup> With the German tanks and trucks audibly preparing for the assault to the west in the villages of Benouville and Le Port, only one (along with just two explosive projectiles) could be located that survived the landings undamaged.<sup>166</sup>

In each case above, the moral factors of courage, intellect, boldness, and perseverance of the assault force triumphed over the corrosive effects of friction. Their performance that evening was even more impressive in that the *coup de main* assault was the first time in combat for Howard and his men.<sup>167</sup> One of Howard’s men said that the proposition of a night landing in the wooden Horsas “filled us with gloom straight away because we knew that the chances of surviving crash landings in gliders at night was pretty hopeless.”<sup>168</sup> Yet, the confidence in their training and leadership steeled the assault force, enabling them to “screw their courage to the sticking post,” endure the trials and friction of combat and show courage in the face of what was a very dangerous mission. Additionally, their comprehension of the consequences of the success or failure of their mission down to the individual soldier, and devotion and loyalty to each other certainly helped them persevere after several key leaders were killed or wounded during the initial assault, as well as during the German counterattacks later that morning. Howard’s well-prepared men stayed vigilant in the early morning hours and did not fall victim to the physiological parasympathetic backlash that often cripples a fighting unit after coming down from the powerful and intense action of combat.<sup>169</sup>

Howard not only possessed superior physical speed in executing his mission than his German counterparts, but he also trumped them intellect-wise in mental speed and agility. The months of training toward the singular purpose of capturing those bridges bred confidence and a degree of boldness in him and his men. In the darkness and confusion of the crucial fight at the “T” junction, Howard “was in his element, in the middle of the night, fresh, alert, capable of making snap decisions, getting accurate reports from equally fresh and alert men. The German commanders were confused, getting conflicting reports, tired, and sleepy.”<sup>170</sup> Using the well-known military decision-making process known as the Boyd Cycle, Howard “outcycled” his enemy—that is he went through the sequence of observing and orienting himself to the changing conditions around the bridges, making decisions, and acting on them much faster than his enemy.<sup>171</sup>

As a fighting unit, the core of the D Coy had been together two years preparing for this moment, and they felt they had earned this extraordinary responsibility. The long hours

spent together enduring tough and demanding training had forged a sense of personal commitment to the mission for the men of D Coy, as well as their reinforcements from B Coy, the Royal Engineers, and the glider pilots. This intangible commitment is what Sun Tzu called “moral influence,” meaning, “that which causes the people to be in harmony with their leaders, so that they will accompany them in life and unto death without fear of mortal peril.”<sup>172</sup> Every man understood completely the urgency and necessity of the hardships and danger they were enduring and gave themselves wholeheartedly to the mission. Later in *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu complements the importance of the concept of moral influence with this succinct observation: “He whose ranks are united in purpose will be victorious.”<sup>173</sup> This dedication to mission greatly increased their combat power beyond that of merely a reinforced company on that June day in 1944. It was only through mental fortitude, intellect, boldness, courage, and perseverance that Howard and his force were able to counter the detrimental effects of these frictions in each of the instances recounted above and accomplish their goal. The powerful moral factors, combined with the lightning-quick strike of the *coup de main* enabled through the correct application of the principles of special operations, proved to be a lethal combination for his enemy.

## Conclusion

In the storied history of the British Airborne forces, the *coup de main* assault on the Caen Canal and River Orne bridges conducted by the 181 men of D Coy, Ox and Bucks Light Infantry stands out as their crowning achievement in World War II.<sup>174</sup> Their contribution to the successful D-Day landings cannot be overstated. Although not designated SOF, Howard’s men were specially trained, equipped, and supported to accomplish a mission with much greater consequences both at the operational and strategic levels of war than the simple tactical task of capturing two bridges. It was a military necessity that the bridges were captured intact; failure had the potential to sentence the 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division to annihilation by German panzer forces. Stephen Ambrose, in his definitive work *Pegasus Bridge*, points out that if Howard’s men could not hold back the German counterattack right then and there at the “T” junction west of the canal bridge, the river bridge would also have easily been recaptured, and the ten thousand men of the 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne would be isolated and at the mercy of the German panzers. And the stakes went even higher when one considers that the local German panzer commander was convinced that if he could have been able to cross those bridges unfettered and join in the late-afternoon counterattack by elements of the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer Division on the D-day beaches, they would undoubtedly have been able to reach the beaches and decimate the unloading Allied divisions.<sup>175</sup> The success of Operation Deadstick denied the Germans the opportunity to repel the invasion via swift armored counterattack, and enabled the conventional seaborne assault forces to establish a beachhead and begin to build combat power ashore during a very vulnerable period of the invasion (see fig. 9). Failure by Howard and his men would have, at a minimum, made D-Day more costly for the Allies, and possibly resulted in the entire invasion failing.<sup>176</sup>



Figure 9. The Caen Canal bridge photographed on 9 June 1944 (D+3) which shows seaborne British forces using the secured bridge to move combat power inland. In the background are visible the three Horsa gliders (#91, 92, 93) in LZ “X”, with Howard’s closest to the bridge. The picture provides another excellent perspective of how the skilled landing of these gliders significantly contributed to Howard and his men achieving relative superiority and capturing this objective within five minutes. Credit: Christie (Sgt.), No 5 Army Film & Photographic Unit/ Public domain via Wikimedia Commons

Using the inverted pyramid of McRaven’s special operations model, one can see how the successful application of the six principles of special operations as executed during Operation Deadstick resulted in mission completion. At the foundation, the *coup de main* CONOPS devised by Gale was a simple, innovative, and daring solution to the problem confronting the Allies as they planned the D-Day operation. Howard’s SOM was simple in its execution, as well as flexible. The intelligence on the enemy and objective area was superb, and innovation was used to eliminate barriers to mission accomplishment.

The preparation phase, with security and repetition as its pillars, provided the next stepping stone to success for Howard. The true objectives of the mission were not disclosed to the assault force until late May 1944, which provided excellent operational security against constant German counterintelligence efforts throughout Britain as the Allies prepared for D-Day. The training regimen instituted by Howard was tough and realistic, including fully integrated rehearsals for both the assaulters, sappers, and glider pilots. Finally, as the assault force executed their simple, carefully concealed, and thoroughly rehearsed plan, they

descended on their objectives with speed, surprise, and purpose and quickly achieved relative superiority over the defenders. The unforeseen frictions of war that emerged during the operation were mitigated by the intangible moral factors that every professional, well-trained fighting force possesses. In their first combat, at the point of contact, at that moment of truth when everything was on the line for the assault force, the moral factors were, “the real weapon, the finely-honed blade,” that enabled them to endure and succeed.<sup>177</sup> The results speak for themselves: Howard was able to achieve relative superiority in only five minutes from the time Glider #91 touched down; after a total of ten minutes, the assault force had accomplished their initial task of seizing both bridges intact. Furthermore, they were able to maintain relative superiority, fight through the friction of war and hold what they had won with “skill and determination” against an enemy that outnumbered and outgunned them.

Operation Deadstick is a superb example of the value and applicability of the principles of special operations and the theory of relative superiority. If applied correctly they can be a template for success for non-special operations forces charged with executing a mission that is a political or military imperative. It also offers powerful lessons on how friction can be countered by moral factors, as well as the outsized effect that a special operation can play in enabling conventional forces to achieve operational objectives on the battlefield. In the early morning hours of D-Day, “like a bolt from the blue,” Howard and his men bravely met the danger that awaited them and emerged victorious thanks to the correct application of the principles of special operations and the ability to achieve relative superiority over their foe.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> William H. McRaven, “The Theory of Special Operations” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 1993), <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a269484.pdf>; William H. McRaven, *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare Theory and Practice* (New York: Presidio Press, 1996). His book is based on his thesis.
- <sup>2</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 358.
- <sup>3</sup> William H. McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 4.
- <sup>4</sup> McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 7.
- <sup>5</sup> Clausewitz. *On War*, 119.
- <sup>6</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 102. “War is the realm of chance ... Chance makes everything more uncertain and interferes with the whole course of events. Since all information and assumptions are open to doubt, and with chance at work everywhere, the commander continually finds that things are not as he expected.”
- <sup>7</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 119. “Countless minor incidents – the kind you can never really foresee—combine to lower the general level of performance, so that one always falls far short of the intended goal.”
- <sup>8</sup> Martin Samuels, “The ‘Finely-Honed Blade’: Clausewitz and Boyd on Friction and Moral Factors,” Marine Corps University Press Expeditions, February 2020, <https://doi.org/10.36304/ExpwMCUP.2020.01>.
- <sup>9</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 120.
- <sup>10</sup> McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 1.
- <sup>11</sup> McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 11.
- <sup>12</sup> McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 5.
- <sup>13</sup> McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 10.
- <sup>14</sup> McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 11.
- <sup>15</sup> McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 11.
- <sup>16</sup> McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 11.
- <sup>17</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 229.
- <sup>18</sup> McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 12.
- <sup>19</sup> McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 12.
- <sup>20</sup> McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 13.
- <sup>21</sup> McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 14.
- <sup>22</sup> McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 16.
- <sup>23</sup> McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 17.
- <sup>24</sup> McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 19.
- <sup>25</sup> McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 21-23.
- <sup>26</sup> H.R. Trevor-Roper, *Blitzkrieg to Defeat: Hitler’s War Directives 1939-1945* (London: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), 111. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hitler foresaw the increased threat to his Western Front with the United States entering the war; accordingly on 14 December 1941, he directed that the entire Atlantic coastline be fortified into a “new West Wall, in

order that we can be sure of repelling any landing attempt.” In his specific directions as outlined in “Fuhrer Directive No. 40”, dated 23 March 1942, Hitler begins with the statement: “The coastline of Europe will, in the coming months, be exposed to the danger of an enemy landing in force.” Fuhrer Directive No. 51, dated 3 November 1943, goes on to reemphasize that, “The danger in the East [the Soviet Union] remains, but a greater danger now appears in the West: an Anglo-Saxon landing!” H.R. Trevor-Roper, *Blitzkrieg to Defeat* *Blitzkrieg to Defeat*, 149.

<sup>27</sup> Stephen E. Ambrose, *D-Day June 6, 1944: The Climatic Battle of World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 116.

<sup>28</sup> Stephen E. Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge: June 6, 1944* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), 47. The consensus view of the German leadership was that the Allied invasion would occur in the vicinity of the Pas de Calais, the shortest distance between the UK and the continent.

<sup>29</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 182.

<sup>30</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 56.

<sup>31</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 182. This was the fate suffered by their sister division, the 1st Airborne Division, a few months later at Arnhem, during Operation Market-Garden in September 1944.

<sup>32</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 17, 84.

<sup>33</sup> John Howard and Penny Bates, *The Pegasus Diaries: The Private Papers of Major John Howard, DSO* (Barnsley, Great Britain: Pen & Sword Military, 2006), 94.

<sup>34</sup> Napier Crookenden, *Dropzone Normandy: The Story of the American and British Airborne Assault on D-Day 1944* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1976), 164.

<sup>35</sup> Neil Barber, *The Pegasus and Orne Bridges: Their Capture, Defence, and Relief on D-Day* (Barnsley, Great Britain: Pen & Sword Military, 2014), 28. “Although the operation was officially called *Coup de Main*, Tommy Grant gave it the training title *Deadstick*.” Grant was a Flight Lieutenant in the Royal Aircraft Establishment, Farnborough, who was a well-respected pilot who had gained attention for his skilled performance towing gliders during the Sicily invasion and his detailed after action of the operation, “which was highly critical of the training that the pilots had received.” He was called upon to devise the specialized training the glider pilots would need to successfully land in such small LZs at night.

<sup>36</sup> McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 3.

<sup>37</sup> McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 2.

<sup>38</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 36. Howard, a former enlisted soldier in the pre-war British Army, had rejoined the army after war was declared and in five months had risen from corporal to regimental sergeant major. Soon after he was offered the chance at a commission. To volunteer for service in the Airborne he had to accept a demotion from Captain to Lieutenant according to Howard and Bates, *The Pegasus Diaries*.

<sup>39</sup> “Battle Order,” British Air Landing Rifle Company (1943-1945), accessed 2 April 2020, <https://www.battleorder.org/uk-glider-1943>.

<sup>40</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 38.

<sup>41</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 42.

<sup>42</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 42.

<sup>43</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 43.

- <sup>44</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 51.
- <sup>45</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 58.
- <sup>46</sup> Howard and Bates, *The Pegasus Diaries*, 18. “By the end of February 1942, I had started the training schedule for ‘D’ Company of the 52d Ox & Bucks, now part of the Airborne Force, that would take my company right up to D-Day.”
- <sup>47</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 185-186.
- <sup>48</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 52.
- <sup>49</sup> Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 08 November 2010 (Amended as 15 November 2014). *Coup de main* is also addressed in the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joint Military Operations Historical Collection, 15 July 1997, <https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/History/Monographs/JMO.pdf>
- <sup>50</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 77.
- <sup>51</sup> Howard and Bates, *The Pegasus Diaries*, 119.
- <sup>52</sup> Barber, *The Pegasus and Orne Bridges*, 28.
- <sup>53</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 73.
- <sup>54</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 87.
- <sup>55</sup> Barber, *The Pegasus and Orne Bridges*, 299.
- <sup>56</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 21.
- <sup>57</sup> Cornelius Ryan, *The Longest Day* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1959), 110.
- <sup>58</sup> Howard and Bates, *The Pegasus Diaries*, 117.
- <sup>59</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 28.
- <sup>60</sup> Crookenden, *Dropzone Normandy*, 185.
- <sup>61</sup> Barber, *The Pegasus and Orne Bridges*, 166.
- <sup>62</sup> Howard and Bates, *The Pegasus Diaries*, 139.
- <sup>63</sup> The co-pilot of Glider #6, SSgt Roy Howard, stated with certainty that he landed in LZ “Y” at 0009 on June 6 (Barber, *The Pegasus Diaries*, 74.) while Stephen Ambrose in his classic work, *Pegasus Bridge*, has them landing at 0020 on June 6. (Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 98.) In the many historical accounts of the actions that day there is much conflicting information regarding the timeline of events. I have primarily used the timeline put forth by Ambrose.
- <sup>64</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 90. In his private papers, Howard says that the first thing he saw upon climbing out of the glider was the large water tower of the bridge, “50 feet away from where I stood.” (Howard and Bates, *The Pegasus Diaries*, 120.)
- <sup>65</sup> Howard and Bates, *The Pegasus Diaries*, 120.
- <sup>66</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 98-100.
- <sup>67</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 93.
- <sup>68</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 100.
- <sup>69</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 104.
- <sup>70</sup> Howard and Bates, *The Pegasus Diaries*, 104.

- <sup>71</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 104.
- <sup>72</sup> Howard and Bates, *The Pegasus Diaries*, 89.
- <sup>73</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 109.
- <sup>74</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 116.
- <sup>75</sup> Barber, *The Pegasus and Orne Bridges*, 131.
- <sup>76</sup> Howard and Bates, *The Pegasus Diaries*, 127.
- <sup>77</sup> The lead tank was identified by Sgt. Thornton himself as a Panzerkampfwagon IV, which mounted a 75mm main gun along with two 7.92-mm MG-34 machine guns. “The first tank, a Mark IV, had begun moving slowly down the road. I pulled the trigger on the PIAT. It was a direct hit.” Shilleto, *Pegasus Bridge*, 64.
- <sup>78</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 116-118.
- <sup>79</sup> Howard and Bates, *The Pegasus Diaries*, 128.
- <sup>80</sup> Barber, *The Pegasus and Orne Bridges*, 135-136.
- <sup>81</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 119.
- <sup>82</sup> Howard and Bates, *The Pegasus Diaries*, 128. “I reflected later,” recalled Howard, “that the successful destruction of just this one tank certainly bought the *coup de main* force precious time holding up the German counterattack at the bridges.”
- <sup>83</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 145.
- <sup>84</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 57. The action at Eben Emael is arguably the marquee example of such an assault; McRaven features it prominently as the first case study analyzed in his study of special operations theory. The similarities between it and Operation Deadstick are undeniable.
- <sup>85</sup> Barber, *The Pegasus and Orne Bridges*, 2-3.
- <sup>86</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 21. Again, I have primarily used the timeline put forth by Ambrose.
- <sup>87</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 99. 0021 June 6 was the time Ambrose states Glider #5 touched down at the River Orne bridge.
- <sup>88</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 186.
- <sup>89</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 115.
- <sup>90</sup> McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 385-386.
- <sup>91</sup> Howard and Bates, *The Pegasus Diaries*, 126.
- <sup>92</sup> McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 11.
- <sup>93</sup> McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 11.
- <sup>94</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 78.
- <sup>95</sup> Barber, *The Pegasus and Orne Bridges*, 18.
- <sup>96</sup> Barber, *The Pegasus and Orne Bridges*, 2-3.
- <sup>97</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 101.
- <sup>98</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 16.
- <sup>99</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 77.

- <sup>100</sup> Barber, *The Pegasus and Orne Bridges*, 46.
- <sup>101</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 81.
- <sup>102</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 84.
- <sup>103</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971) 129. “And therefore I say: ‘Know the enemy, know yourself; your victory will never be endangered. Know the ground, know the weather; your victory will then be total.’”
- <sup>104</sup> Barber, *The Pegasus and Orne Bridges*, 52.
- <sup>105</sup> Barber, *The Pegasus and Orne Bridges*, 53. The arrester parachutes were installed on the six gliders during the evening hours of 2 June 1944, only 72 hours prior to take off; SSgt Wallwork stated that the pilots’ suggestion to have one of the gliders complete a test run at Tarrant Rushton prior to D-Day was overruled in horror by higher headquarters because it was too dangerous, which Wallwork thought was “hardly encouraging.”
- <sup>106</sup> Barber, *The Pegasus and Orne Bridges*, 47.
- <sup>107</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 63.
- <sup>108</sup> Howard and Bates, *The Pegasus Diaries*, 93.
- <sup>109</sup> Howard and Bates, *The Pegasus Diaries*, 112.
- <sup>110</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, 98.
- <sup>111</sup> Howard and Bates, *The Pegasus Diaries*, 109.
- <sup>112</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 134.
- <sup>113</sup> Crookenden, *Dropzone Normandy*, 77-78. As it was the Allies were the beneficiaries of good fortune in that a BBC radio message to the French Resistance intercepted and decoded by the German Fifteenth Army headquarters on the evening of June 5 revealing that the invasion would commence within 48 hours never reached the Seventh Army in Normandy. So, whereas others in France were on heightened states of alert, “along the Normandy coast, and in the Cherbourg Peninsula, the normal night guards and sentries were posted, officers and men finished the ordinary business of winding up a day’s work, had their supper and went to bed.”
- <sup>114</sup> Alex Kershaw, *The First Wave: The D-Day Warriors Who Led the Way to Victory in World War II* (New York: Dutton Caliber, 2019), 34.
- <sup>115</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 61.
- <sup>116</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 67.
- <sup>117</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 75.
- <sup>118</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 76.
- <sup>119</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 78.
- <sup>120</sup> Howard and Bates, *The Pegasus Diaries*, 91.
- <sup>121</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 76.
- <sup>122</sup> Howard and Bates, *The Pegasus Diaries*, 101.
- <sup>123</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 62.
- <sup>124</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 90.

- <sup>125</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 92.
- <sup>126</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 93.
- <sup>127</sup> “The Pegasus Archive,” accessed 30 April 2020, [http://www.pegasusarchive.org/normandy/denis\\_edwards.htm](http://www.pegasusarchive.org/normandy/denis_edwards.htm).
- <sup>128</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 198.
- <sup>129</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, 106.
- <sup>130</sup> McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 17.
- <sup>131</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, 92. “When the strike of a hawk breaks the body of its prey, it is because of timing. *Tu Yu*: Strike the enemy as swiftly as a falcon strikes its target. It surely breaks the back of its prey for the reason that it awaits the right moment to strike. Its movement is regulated.”
- <sup>132</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 17.
- <sup>133</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, 69.
- <sup>134</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 97; Crookenden, *Dropzone Normandy*, 78.
- <sup>135</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 17. This rationale by Major Schmidt was the precise reason that the paras of the 6th Airborne were NOT selected to conduct the *coup de main*.
- <sup>136</sup> Barber, *The Pegasus and Orne Bridges*, 27.
- <sup>137</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 89-90.
- <sup>138</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 94.
- <sup>139</sup> Barber, *The Pegasus and Orne Bridges*, 82.
- <sup>140</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, 134.
- <sup>141</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 357.
- <sup>142</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 73.
- <sup>143</sup> Kershaw, *The First Wave*, 13.
- <sup>144</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 22.
- <sup>145</sup> Howard and Bates, *The Pegasus Diaries*, 82.
- <sup>146</sup> Howard and Bates, *The Pegasus Diaries*, 87.
- <sup>147</sup> Ryan, *The Longest Day*, 111.
- <sup>148</sup> Barber, *The Pegasus and Orne Bridges*, 74.
- <sup>149</sup> Barber, *The Pegasus and Orne Bridges*, 97-98.
- <sup>150</sup> Barber, *The Pegasus and Orne Bridges*, 43.
- <sup>151</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 80.
- <sup>152</sup> This is opposed to the character of war, which is dynamic, fluid, and evolves with changes in the things such as the political, military, economic, societal, and technological arenas. The area which arguably is most often cited with changing the character of war is technology.
- <sup>153</sup> McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 11.
- <sup>154</sup> *Field Service Regulations, Part I: Operations*. His Majesty’s Stationary Office, London, 1909, 13.

- <sup>155</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 60-61.
- <sup>156</sup> Barber, *The Pegasus and Orne Bridges*, 45. Howard and Bates, *The Pegasus Diaries*, 101.
- <sup>157</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 83.
- <sup>158</sup> Howard and Bates, *The Pegasus Diaries*, 108.
- <sup>159</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 120.
- <sup>160</sup> Howard and Bates, *The Pegasus Diaries*, 122.
- <sup>161</sup> Barber, *The Pegasus and Orne Bridges*, 76.
- <sup>162</sup> Barber, *The Pegasus and Orne Bridges*, 97.
- <sup>163</sup> Carl Shilleto, *Pegasus Bridge/Merville Battery* (Pen and Sword Books, South Yorkshire, 1999), 54-55.
- <sup>164</sup> Regardless, we know that the superbly trained men executed their task flawlessly. Thanks to through training, the men in that glider had thought through and rehearsed every possible scenario and knew there could be a chance that they would be the only glider to actually land safely in France; as such they were primed and ready to carry out the tasks of the entire assault force if need be. Because of this, within minutes the River Orne bridge was also captured.
- <sup>165</sup> “Battle Order,” accessed 16 January 2023, <https://www.battleorder.org/uk-glider-1943>.
- <sup>166</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 113.
- <sup>167</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 20.
- <sup>168</sup> Barber, *The Pegasus and Orne Bridges*, 17.
- <sup>169</sup> David Grossman and Loren Christensen, *On Combat: The Psychology and Physiology of Deadly Conflict in War and Peace* (PPCT Research Publications, 2004) 15. Grossman discusses in depth the role of the autonomic nervous system plays in warriors dealing with danger, and the parasympathetic backlash that occurs when the human body, after intense expenditure of energy during times of high stress (i.e., combat), “shuts down for maintenance” as soon as the danger passes. He provides an example from the Korean War when well rested soldiers conducted a dawn attack on the enemy and secured the objective. As they awaited the counterattack they knew was sure to come, the leadership had to walk the defensive lines struggling to keep their soldiers awake and alert. “The parasympathetic backlash after battle had been so powerful that the men had fallen into an exhausted sleep, though they knew they would soon be attacked.”
- <sup>170</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 116.
- <sup>171</sup> “On the Making of History: John Boyd and American Security,” accessed 5 May 2020, <https://www.usafa.edu/app/uploads/Harmon54.pdf>. As stated by Boyd scholar Grant T. Hammond in the cited work above, the OODA loop as normally illustrated (as a circular loop) “is a very simplistic and shallow representation of an important and richer set of ideas,” a sentiment with which I fully agree. Nevertheless, the use of the OODA loop to describe Howard’s decision making that day, even in its reduced form, is a useful analytical tool for our purposes.
- <sup>172</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, 64.
- <sup>173</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, 83.
- <sup>174</sup> On 26 June 1944, the bridge over the Caen Canal captured by Howard and his men was renamed as “Pegasus Bridge” after the divisional shoulder patch of the British airborne forces which featured a winged Pegasus horse. The original bridge was replaced by a newer replica in 1994; the original sits

on the grounds of the *Memorial Pegasus*, a museum opened in 2000 located on the land between the Caen Canal and River Orne.

<sup>175</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 114.

<sup>176</sup> Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 183.

<sup>177</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 185. “The moral elements are among the most important in war. They constitute the spirit that permeates war as a whole...Unfortunately, they will not yield to academic wisdom. They cannot be classified or counted. They have to be seen or felt ... Consequently, though next to nothing can be said about these things in books, they can no more be omitted from the theory of the art of war than can any of the other components of war...One might say that the physical [elements] seem little more than the wooden hilt, while the moral factors are the precious metal, the real weapon, the finely-honed blade.”

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## Ten Surprising Lessons for Special Operations Forces from the First 20 Months of Putin’s Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine

Thomas R. Searle, Christopher Marsh, and Brian Petit

### ABSTRACT

This article provides ten surprising lessons for Special Operations Forces (SOF) from the first year-and-a-half of Russia’s criminal and ill-advised full-scale invasion of Ukraine. These lessons range from the tactical to the grand strategic, and collectively help explain how Ukraine and NATO managed to “boil Putin’s frog” in the years between 2014 and 2022. This strategic success does not change the fact that tragic mistakes have been made and that SOF continue to be misused despite all the efforts to learn from previous misuse of SOF and prevent the repeat of earlier mistakes. These lessons also explain why, paradoxically, the largest conventional war in Europe since 1945 has made future large-scale combat operations by conventional forces less likely and gray zone operations by SOF more strategically relevant than ever before.

### KEYWORDS

special operations, Ukraine, Special Operations Forces, lessons learned Ukraine, Ukraine war, Putin Ukraine

The 20 months since Russian President Vladimir Putin launched his full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 have been full of surprises and there will doubtlessly be more surprises in the months and years to come, as this conflict is far from over. Certain lessons are starting to emerge, however, especially for U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF). While these lessons can be drawn both from Ukraine’s successes and failures, the extraordinary performance of the Ukrainian people and their armed forces is worthy of acknowledgement; Ukrainians are the true heroes of the current war. Yes, Kyiv has received training and assistance from many of its allies and partners, but the lion’s share of the credit for thwarting Putin’s war goes to the people of Ukraine.

Ukraine’s successes have taken place within the context of a systematic, long-term effort to assist this nation—an effort that began in earnest after Russia’s 2014 seizure of Crimea. This effort included the Defense Security Cooperation Agency’s (DSCA) Minister of Defense Advisor (MoD-A) program, which helped train and educate the Ukrainian armed forces on everything from NATO doctrine to operational art and strategy. More specifically

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to the discussion here, U.S. SOF committed top-tier forces to assist Ukraine, including Army Special Forces, civil affairs, and psychological operations soldiers, as well as U.S. Navy SEALs and other SOF elements. These forces were deployed and employed by Special Operations Command Europe (SOCEUR) with rotational forces that executed a “365” engagement model measured in years, not months. U.S. SOF were not employed forward into the then-static conflict zone of the Donbas in a combatant role. Instead, as described by the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) Commanding General in his Congressional testimony,<sup>1</sup> the U.S. SOF effort focused on the professionalization of Ukrainian SOF defined as the steady arc of building a special operations capability, culture, and joint warfighting organization.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the U.S. SOF investment was orchestrated by select U.S. SOF personnel, on long-term assignments, acting as ministerial-level advisors who assisted in crafting Ukraine’s national security methods—again often with the assistance of DSCA’s MoD-A advisors. This effort included working with Ukraine on Black Sea appropriate applications of the *Resistance Operating Concept* which is a doctrine-like roadmap for pre-building a national resilience and resistance effort.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, U.S. SOF and select NATO SOF have worked within a larger, multinational effort to reform the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Nothing stimulates reform quite like failure, and Ukraine’s military failure when Russia attacked in 2014 provided an enormous stimulus to Ukrainian armed forces to reflect and rebuild. U.S. SOF played a key role in this larger reform effort. On 29 July 2021, seven months before the invasion, Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed a law, “On the Foundations of National Resistance.”<sup>4</sup> He signed this law on the compound of the Ukrainian SOF to signal, legislatively and emotionally, that Ukrainian SOF would be one of the leading organizations for in extremis citizen resistance operations. Indeed, less than seven months after the signing ceremony, Ukrainian SOF were launched on that very role: plan, lead, direct, and conduct special operations both in conventionally contested areas as well as in enemy rear areas.<sup>5</sup> U.S. SOF had a direct hand in developing the tactical skills, warfighting methods, and doctrinal outlines that prepared Ukrainian forces to conduct guerilla-style warfare. Ukraine, with its history of partisan warfare and experience in combatting Russian regulars and proxies from 2014 to 2022, benefited from this training and conversely imparted to U.S. SOF Ukrainian experiences and lessons.<sup>6</sup>

Each of the ten lessons that follow came as a surprise to U.S. SOF and need to be incorporated into future SOF plans and operations.

### **Lesson 1: The Gray Zone is back (or the Gray way is still the best way).**

When thousands of Russian tanks stormed across the Ukrainian border, it looked like the definitive end of the post-9/11 focus on special operations and the explosive beginning of a new era focused on large-scale conventional combat operations. If Putin had succeeded, it might have been the beginning of a new era, but Putin’s spectacular, catastrophic, and undeniable failure will send rogue and revisionist states back to the gray zone.<sup>7</sup>

The comparison between Russian gray zone tactics against Ukraine in 2014 and its large-scale conventional combat operations against the same adversary in 2022 is unavoidable and the lessons are stark. In 2014, using gray zone tactics, Putin grabbed Crimea at almost no cost, and then he grabbed half of the Donbas, at a very low cost, and he might have held them indefinitely. This time around, using large-scale conventional combat operations, Putin has grabbed a bit more terrain than he did in 2014. But it isn't clear how much he can hold, or for how long. More importantly, unlike 2014, Putin's 2022 land-grab has been astronomically expensive in terms of Russian blood and treasure, expanding and unifying NATO, shattering the reputations of Putin and the Russian military inside and outside Russia, causing heretofore unimaginable open criticism of Putin's leadership inside Russia. And the situation gets worse every day as Ukraine's armed forces continue to improve and Russia resorts to ever more desperate measures to stay in the fight. When he relied on gray zone tactics and techniques, Putin rose to the height of his power, but after resorting to large-scale conventional combat operations, he will be lucky to keep his position and hold the Russian Federation together.

Gray zone activities don't always succeed, but sometimes they do. And when they succeed, they provide an impressive return on investment. If they fail, gray zone tactics do so at low cost in terms of lives and treasure, and they can be denied, lowering the political and reputational cost of failure. On the other hand, large-scale conventional combat operations don't always succeed either, but when they fail, the costs are enormous, and deniability is out of the question.

Conventional invasions will still be cost-effective against small, unprotected neighbors like the Republic of Georgia was when Russia invaded it in 2008 (Georgia had no allies and a population of under 4 million). But against nations of any significant size or with great power allies—like the Baltic states—conventional invasion will not be cost effective for Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, or any other revisionist power, and they are rapidly realizing it. None of them will likely repeat Putin's 2022 mistake anytime soon. Instead, they are much more likely to pursue their goals in the gray zone, and U.S. SOF need to be ready to counter them there.

## **Lesson 2: The SOF/Counter-SOF fight is decisive in the initial phase of a large-scale conventional war.**

The sheer size of large-scale combat operations seemed to eclipse SOF and special operations as decisive factors in major conventional wars, but SOF proved to be decisive in the initial—and arguably most important—phase of the current war, as we will see by examining the war first in the south, and then in the north.

### Special Operations Success in the South

The initial stage of Putin's February 2022 full-scale invasion focused on a northern offensive from Belarus south toward Kyiv, and a southern offensive from the Crimean

Peninsula north through Kherson toward Mykolaiv and Odesa. Ukraine knew these were possible invasion routes and had defensive plans to oppose both Russian axes of advance by (among other things) blowing up bridges and opening dams to create impassable water obstacles for Russian forces. In the south, the routes north from Crimea are few and narrow, and the Dnipro River is an enormous obstacle, but the Russians were spectacularly successful. This appears to have been due to successful operations by Russian SOF (including the Federal Security Service, the GRU [Russia's military intelligence agency], and the SVR [Russian Foreign Intelligence Service]),<sup>8</sup> in preventing the destruction of bridges and dams. In U.S. military doctrine such operations are called Operational Preparation of the Environment (OPE) and can include direct action (DA).<sup>9</sup> The exact mix of bribes, intimidation, deception, and DA used by Russian SOF and intelligence units to clear the way for follow-on conventional forces is not clear, but the results were spectacular with Russian troops breaking out of Crimea, driving 100 km north, crossing the Dnipro, and entering the city of Kherson on the first day of the invasion.<sup>10</sup> The one exception to Russian success in the south was the bridge near Henichesk where a Ukrainian sapper, Vitaly Skakun, became a national hero when he died while blowing the bridge.<sup>11</sup>

The city of Kherson fell, and the Russians entered Mykolaiv before the Ukrainian forces regrouped, recovered, stopped the Russian advance, and started pushing the Russians back. The damage, however, was done. Ukraine has spent eighteen months and thousands of lives struggling to recapture a small part of the ground it lost in a few days due to Russian SOF's ability to prevent bridges and dams from being blown. Ukraine may never liberate all the land it lost in the south during the first few days of the invasion. Even if those areas are liberated, it will require years of hard fighting and tens of thousands of additional Ukrainian casualties. Those rapid and perhaps irreversible Russian successes in the south were only possible due to OPE by Russian SOF and may represent Russia's greatest (and certainly its cheapest) strategic successes in all of 2022.

#### Counter-SOF Success in the North

The situation in the north was completely different. Russian SOF failed in their efforts to capture or kill key Ukrainian targets, like President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, in the opening minutes, hours, and days of the invasion. The potential water obstacles on the road to Kyiv were unimpressive compared to the ones in the south, but the bridges and dams were blown, as planned, stranding the Russian invasion force in the famous forty-mile-long convoy and allowing Ukrainian forces to pick them off over a period of days.<sup>12</sup> The exact role of Ukrainian SOF (including Ukrainian intelligence services) in Ukraine's successful counter-SOF campaign in the north has not been revealed, and the role of U.S. and NATO advice and assistance may never be fully declassified, but the results are obvious: Russian forces failed to enter Kyiv or capture any major cities in the north.

The success of Russian OPE in the south is a reminder of what might have happened in the north and the decisive role SOF can play in large-scale conventional combat operations.

The successful Ukrainian counter-SOF campaign in the north reminds us that countering enemy SOF are still a critical task and one in which U.S. SOF advice can be essential.

### **Lesson 3: Resistance can be decisive even before occupation.**

We usually think of capital-R Resistance, such as the French Resistance, starting after the conventional fight is lost, when foreign occupation forces are trying to control the population. That was the vision for the *Resistance Operating Concept*<sup>13</sup> and predecessor documents developed by and for SOCEUR and used when U.S. and NATO SOF advised Ukrainians before the February invasion. However, the Russian forces that swept through northern and north-eastern Ukraine never got the chance to establish themselves as traditional occupation forces because Ukrainian resistance made their occupation untenable almost before it started.

In preparing the Ukrainian public to resist an occupying power, the Ukrainian government (with years of advice and assistance from U.S. and NATO SOF) helped citizens develop the skills and mindset for small-unit (even individual and two-person) guerrilla warfare in their local urban and rural environments. These were the places Ukrainians lived and worked and where they had an enormous advantage over the invaders in knowing the human and physical terrain. The net effect was that as Russian forces dashed toward Kyiv from the north and east, their long supply lines exposed Russian supply trucks to guerrilla attacks by Ukrainians. Destroyed Russian tanks generated the best photos, but without the trucks the tanks cannot survive, and the trucks had to drive hundreds of miles every day, whereas the tanks could hunker-down in defensive positions. This helped make Ukrainian guerrilla attacks on Russian trucks decisively effective against the Russian invaders.

By mid-March the Russian offensive toward Kyiv had pushed deep into Ukraine but had stalled along every axis of advance and Ukrainian forces were counterattacking.<sup>14</sup> The Russians still held a substantial advantage in quantity and quality of military equipment, since High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) and other high end Western equipment would not arrive for months. Most outside observers expected the Russians to defend their gains and the Ukrainians certainly had not assembled the conventional forces necessary to drive the Russians out. Instead, Russia abandoned all the territory in the north and northeast that it had grabbed in the first few weeks of the war—some 45,000 sq km—without a fight and redeployed its forces to reinforce offensives elsewhere.<sup>15</sup>

The redeployment did allow Russia to make gains elsewhere, but it certainly appears that guerrilla attacks on Russian supply lines—conducted by irregular local forces and by Ukrainian SOF and conventional forces operating as guerrillas—made the Russian position in the north and northeast untenable. Long before Ukraine had assembled the conventional forces and heavy equipment necessary to conduct a major conventional counter offensive, 45,000 sq km of Ukraine were liberated because guerrilla attacks on Russian supply lines made the Russian position shaky. Thus, infantry weapons and small-unit tactics by a large number of local civilians and reservists with a resistance/resilience mindset and limited

assistance from professional forces can have strategic offensive effects operating behind enemy lines against enemy logistics.

#### **Lesson 4: Traditional SOF raids are still viable against the homeland of a great power.**

In the twenty-first century, authoritarian great powers have become extremely hard targets for traditional SOF raids. Air, maritime, and ground defenses around their military facilities and critical infrastructure appeared so comprehensive and technologically advanced that traditional SOF raids looked, to some, like suicide missions. That is, until Ukraine successfully executed such missions inside Russia and Crimea.

Russia has some of the most sophisticated air defense systems in the world and both China and Iran rely heavily on Russian-made air defense systems.<sup>16</sup> And yet, Ukraine was able to conduct a successful strike with attack helicopters 35 km inside Russia to destroy a key logistics hub at Belgorod,<sup>17</sup> and Ukrainian drone strikes have repeatedly hit Russian air bases, Moscow, and even the Kremlin itself.<sup>18</sup> These successes indicate that SOF helicopters and drones can successfully penetrate the home airspace of a great power in wartime to conduct strikes or insert troops.

Even more impressive were Ukrainian attacks (presumably SOF raids) on Russian military installations in Crimea that destroyed nine Russian fighter jets on the ground and several ammunition storage sites.<sup>19</sup> In addition to state-of-the-art air and maritime defenses in Crimea, Russia had eight years to implement the most advanced and intrusive population control measures to prevent insurgent activity and catch any Ukrainian SOF who try to infiltrate Crimea. Ukraine's most spectacular strategic success in its raids on Russian infrastructure was the destruction of the Kerch bridge between Crimea and Russia on 8 October 2022.<sup>20</sup> At the time of this writing in June 2023, Ukrainian forces continue successful sabotage operations against Russian rail lines inside Russia and in Crimea and other Russian occupied areas of Ukraine proving that after eighteen months of war Russia still cannot prevent these SOF raids.<sup>21</sup>

It is now clear that traditional SOF infiltration is still possible against state-of-the-art countermeasures by a great power in wartime. It is worth noting that, except at the very beginning of the invasion, Russian SOF have not been able to conduct comparable DA strikes on Ukrainian military installations. The superior capabilities of Ukrainian SOF are a testament to their skill and courage, but also to the advice and assistance Ukrainian SOF have received from U.S. and NATO SOF.

In an unclassified forum it is inappropriate to reveal how much of Ukraine's capability in Crimea and elsewhere comes from Ukrainian SOF infiltrated after February 2022, how much from partisans who were already in Crimea and elsewhere before February 2022, how much comes from Russian agents and saboteurs working for Ukraine, and how much comes from other sources. It is also inappropriate to discuss technological details of

these operations. But it is fair to point out that Ukraine, with a pre-invasion annual defense budget of about \$6 billion, has relied on mastery of fundamentals like planning, training, and tradecraft, rather than exotic technology. It is also noteworthy that the early attacks focused on targets such as ammunition storage, where flames or a small number of explosives could have a large effect. With the attack on the Kerch bridge, Ukraine also demonstrated the capability to deliver large explosives via SOF techniques to critical infrastructure targets.

It is also worth noting that Ukraine is using SOF raids to compensate for the long-range air and missile strike capabilities it lacks. A nation like the U.S. that has such capabilities could combine SOF raids with other long-range strike capabilities to create gaps in Anti-Access, Area Denial (A2AD) systems and produce exponentially greater effects.

**Lesson 5: There will be political limitations on SOF raids inside the homeland of a great power.**

Before February 2022, concern about the feasibility of SOF raids inside the A2AD bubble of a great power caused SOF to focus on overcoming those challenges. As the previous lesson indicates, the practical problems were overcome. However, while SOF were developing tactics, techniques, and procedures to conduct SOF raids deep inside the homeland of a great power, SOF were not studying the political risks of such operations.

Large-scale combat operations against nuclear powers armed with intercontinental ballistic missiles always run the risk of escalation to nuclear war and to areas outside the current theater of armed conflict. Escalation risks must therefore be considered when approving SOF raids deep inside the homeland of a great power. Furthermore, it is difficult to motivate Russian soldiers or mobilize the Russian nation in support of an obvious war of aggression like Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. However, attacks deep inside the Russian homeland risk reframing the war as one in defense of Russia and necessary to eliminate an unacceptable threat to the safety of both Russia and individual Russians. Without the attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. government would have found it difficult to mobilize the nation for a war against Japan, but after the attack, both political parties and the vast majority of Americans were fully committed to do whatever was necessary to defeat Japan. SOF raids deep inside the homeland of a great power need to consider the risk of a Pearl Harbor effect when the goal is merely to force the enemy to abandon his war of aggression.

Prior to February 2022, U.S. SOF did not routinely consider the risk of escalation or the risk of a backfire Pearl Harbor effect when considering DA raids deep inside the homeland of a great power. In the future these strategic risks will need to be considered because the authorities who approve such missions will need to be confident the risks are manageable, and the SOF briefers will need to be prepared to answer their questions.

**Lesson 6: Misuse of SOF is still a problem well into the twenty-first century.**

After the end of the Cold War, and particularly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the position of SOF dramatically improved within the military hierarchies of many nations. There has been a global proliferation of headquarters, vaguely analogous to that of USSOCOM, with Ukraine and even Russia creating a Special Operations Forces Commands (KSSO).

The new SOF prominence was intended to get better strategic results from these forces but also provided reason to hope the routine misuse of SOF that had been so common during the twentieth century would be coming to an end. The fighting in Ukraine shows those hopes to have been premature since both Russia and Ukraine seem to have misused their SOF more often than they should have. While exact casualty figures for both sides are closely guarded secrets, available information suggests that SOF on both sides have suffered great and that these heavy losses have been suffered when SOF were used as conventional forces.<sup>22</sup>

This is a repetition of past mistakes that a more prominent role for senior SOF leaders was supposed to prevent. SOF have exceptional small unit tactical skills, but they typically lack the firepower, armor protection, and ground mobility of conventional forces, and as a result, they suffer excessive losses when used as assault forces or in static defensive positions. Excessive losses among SOF personnel are a serious problem in a long-term war of attrition like the one underway in Ukraine because competent SOF require a much longer training period than conventional forces so losses can only be replaced slowly. Furthermore, excessive losses among pre-war SOF can leave the force without the mid-level leaders needed to lead and mentor the new SOF personnel recruited and trained after the heavy fighting began. Without these mid-level leaders, the force may never regain its pre-war levels of effectiveness. Hopefully the Ukrainians have learned from their earlier mistakes and built up sufficient conventional forces to meet their conventional needs without throwing SOF into the line and will limit SOF operations to those that only SOF can do while keeping SOF casualty rates within sustainable limits, but the experience in the early stages of the war indicate that crisis situations—like that facing Ukraine in the early stages of the full-scale invasion—will still encourage senior leaders to waste SOF even when there is a Special Operations Forces Command available to recommend otherwise.

**Lesson 7: Traditional resistance activities are politically vital and remain viable in the twenty-first century.**

Before Putin's war, it was not clear that traditional resistance was still viable. The lack of effective Ukrainian resistance in Crimea and the occupied portions of the Donbas since 2014, and China's apparent success in crushing resistance in Hong Kong after 2020 suggested that twenty-first century authoritarian great powers could prevent or crush traditional resistance movements. The ongoing success of Ukrainian resistance, 20 months into the occupation, suggests that traditional resistance is still possible and strategically effective today.

Putin has expanded the Russian Federation by annexing foreign regions controlled by Russian troops (as he did in Crimea) and by recognizing and protecting contested regions of foreign countries that declare independence or autonomy (as he did in Georgia, Moldova, and the Donbas region of Ukraine immediately before he launched his full-scale invasion in February 2022). In contested regions, a vital aspect of this expansion technique is the installation of hand-picked pro-Moscow leaders and governing cliques who can pose as legitimate governments entitled to declare independence. Annexation is legitimized through a referendum that, no matter how dishonestly conducted, appears to prove the local population has freely chosen to join the Russian Federation.

In newly occupied portions of Ukraine, resistance forces have successfully conducted traditional resistance activities including intimidation and assassination of local officials who support the occupiers,<sup>23</sup> attacks on occupation forces, attacks on occupier logistics, sabotage of various kinds,<sup>24</sup> and anti-occupation propaganda.<sup>25</sup> While the official website of the Ukrainian Resistance<sup>26</sup> would have been new to the members of the French Resistance, most of Ukraine's resistance in occupied areas would look very familiar to them.

Ukrainian resistance activities have achieved strategic effects by severely disrupting governance in occupied areas. Most importantly, resistance activities forced the Russians to postpone referenda legitimizing Russian occupation due to security concerns.<sup>27</sup> The Kremlin eventually rushed through sham referenda, but Ukrainian resistance delayed them for months. That action continues to cast doubt on the validity of those votes and helps justify Ukraine's continued efforts to liberate occupied areas. These are high strategic priorities for Ukraine and its supporters, and the ongoing success of Ukrainian resistance proves that traditional resistance is still possible and strategically effective today. However, one important caveat is that resistance infrastructure has been more effective facilitating attacks by Ukrainian SOF than by conducting attacks themselves because SOF usually conduct more effective attacks and resistance cells are more likely to be captured after an attack, they conduct themselves than after a SOF attack they facilitate.<sup>28</sup>

### **Lesson 8: Preplanned resistance requires more secrecy than normal government activities.**

In anticipation of a potential Russian invasion, Ukraine developed an extensive resistance infrastructure before the 2022 full-scale invasion. Unfortunately, lists of resistance personnel were in local government databases and therefore captured when the Russians overran towns and cities in southern Ukraine. The Russian intelligence services also worked hard to find traitors within the Ukrainian government and resistance organizations who could provide the Russians with lists of names. Thus, when Russian occupation forces implemented filtration operations in occupied Ukraine modeled on those used by Stalin, the Russians had the benefit of more extensive kill-lists than they should have had. This lesson needs to be learned by every nation developing a resistance infrastructure. Pre-invasion resistance-organizing

activities need extraordinary security measures that sacrifice some government transparency and accountability to protect against the threat of traitors and captured databases.<sup>29</sup>

### **Lesson 9: Frogs can be boiled.**

There is a story that if you drop a frog in a pot of boiling water, the frog will realize the danger and immediately jump out. But if you drop the frog in a pot of cool water it will sit there, and you can slowly heat the pot and boil the frog without it noticing the gradual change in temperature until it's too late. Essentially, Ukraine, NATO and the U.S. were trying to use this method to “cook” Putin’s military domination over Ukraine. By the time the frog (Putin) noticed he was getting boiled and jumped to a full-scale invasion, it was too late.

Recall that in 2014 the Russian military was vastly superior to the Ukrainian military and could easily stop a Ukrainian offensive in the Donbas with a few thousand troops who Russia claimed were not active-duty soldiers and were simply on vacation. Ukraine responded to this humiliation by reforming and rebuilding its military with the intention of creating a force that could defeat, or at least deter, a full-scale Russian invasion. NATO and the U.S. supported Ukraine in this effort, but all three parties saw rebuilding the Ukrainian military as a long-term project that must proceed slowly so as not to provoke an overwhelming Russian response. The U.S. and NATO were very careful to “boil the frog” slowly by strictly limiting the weapons they provided to Ukraine. Instead, NATO and the U.S. focused on training, education, and reform efforts that were less visible and hence more likely to escape Russian notice or raise Moscow’s ire, like IMET (eventually training Ukrainian soldiers at some of the West’s premier professional military education [PME] institutions and training schools such as SAMS and Special Forces Qualification course). They also emphasized concepts like resistance that might deter a Russian invasion but posed no offensive threat to Russia, and hence were less likely to provoke an invasion.

Putin, the “frog,” eventually noticed the temperature was rising and realized he could not stop it from rising further. Putin saw Ukraine shifting toward the West and his ability to intimidate Ukraine slipping away. He decided to jump out of the pot and re-establish his dominance over Ukraine through a full-scale invasion while he still had the chance. The results indicate that he waited too long. Putin’s frog in Ukraine was already boiled and it jumped out of the pot and into the fire, losing not only the ability to influence and intimidate Ukraine but risking the ability to influence and intimidate Russians, as he gradually loses control of Russia itself.

Putin’s response to gradual failure has important implications for SOF because SOF are a premier frog-boiling force. Other forms of Security Force Assistance (SFA), such as selling F-16s or HIMARS to a partner nation, are highly visible and provide the recipient with obvious offensive capabilities. This makes them poor choices for slowly boiling a frog. On the other hand, long-term, small-footprint, unpublicized SOF engagement is an excellent way to increase the temperature without being noticed by the enemy. Based on Putin’s response to the slow boil technique, SOF planners need to remember that no matter how

slowly you raise the temperature, the frog will eventually notice the rising temperature in the pot. However, if SFA is done carefully and correctly, the frog will notice too late, as Putin did.

**Lesson 10: SFA and SOF are vital parts of integrated deterrence because they can defeat competitors even when nuclear and conventional deterrence are abandoned.**

As Russia prepared for a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the U.S. and NATO took their nuclear and conventional forces off the table by announcing that the U.S. and NATO would not participate in direct combat operations against Russia in Ukraine. However, both the U.S. and NATO indicated that a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine would lead to a dramatic increase in SFA to Ukraine and support to various forms of resistance by Ukraine's population.

Vladimir Putin was not impressed, but he should have been. When he launched his invasion against Ukraine, he was confident the Russian military would rapidly and completely defeat Ukraine's armed forces, that Russian security services could cope with whatever resistance might later emerge, that NATO and U.S. assistance to Ukraine would not make a difference, and finally, that Ukrainian special operations would not make a difference either. He was mistaken on every point.

Putin built an impressive military force through the "New Look" reforms he initiated in the aftermath of Russia's August 2008 attack on Georgia, but that force is being devoured by a Ukrainian military Putin held in contempt. Ukrainian courage and competence have been a major factor in Ukraine's success, but Western assistance, training, and advice helped build Ukrainian competence and courage before the full-scale invasion and have bolstered them since. Putin readily admits that Western SFA is preventing him from achieving his goals.<sup>30</sup> He claims Western SFA is merely delaying the inevitable, but everyone can see that SFA is also dramatically increasing the cost to Russia and decreasing the chance of an outcome in Russia's favor.

When the West made SFA, in all its SOF and non-SOF forms, the main effort to assist Ukraine and thwart Russia, Putin scoffed. He should have been deterred. Western SFA has radically changed the costs and benefits of invading Ukraine. Putin was not deterred, but future aggressors will have his grim example to ponder. For example, the Chinese Communist Party and President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping held the Russian military in high regard at the end of 2021 and had little-to-no respect for the Ukrainian military. However, they can see that NATO and U.S. SFA transformed the battlefield from one where Russian victory seemed assured, to one where Russian forces are being destroyed while failing to achieve any of their strategic goals, despite repeated declarations by Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov to the contrary.

Putin's misfortune stands as a warning to other would-be aggressors that the U.S. and Western SFA can decisively flip the correlation of forces against an aggressor. As a

result, SFA should join nuclear and conventional deterrence as a key part of integrated deterrence in the future. Deterrence theorists should take note.

### **Preliminary Conclusions**

It is risky to announce lessons from the current Russo-Ukraine War, since it will continue to evolve, but the ten lessons above will likely stand the test of time and be joined, rather than replaced or overturned, by any additional lessons as the war continues. Assessing the direct impact of a multi-year, force and institution-building engagement strategy is difficult. The importance of SFA can easily be overstated or mistakenly overlooked. U.S. SOF investments in Ukraine were based on the persistent presence of a light footprint and focused on Ukrainian SOF within a larger defense reform effort. That larger effort inculcated NATO-compatible methods, practices, and perspectives with an emphasis on Ukrainian homeland security. These investments represent a major success for U.S. SOF in strategic competition and a way—though not the only way—for U.S. SOF to contribute to integrated deterrence. U.S. SOF brought lessons to Ukraine on national resistance and took home Ukrainian views on contesting Russian regulars and irregulars, thus benefiting both nations at great expense to our adversaries.<sup>31</sup>

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## Special Operations in the 21st Century: Revisiting the Falklands War

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### ABSTRACT

As we passed the 40th anniversary of the Falklands War, this conflict still offers valuable insights for the special operations community as an applied historical case study. The British Special Forces conducted special operations missions at great distance from the United Kingdom, against a capable enemy under tremendously difficult environmental conditions. If the Falklands conflict is examined as an example of a strategic node in global competition, or conflict, it offers numerous insights for the requirements and utility of 21st century Special Operations Forces.

### KEYWORDS

special operations, Falklands War, Special Operations Forces, Falkland Islands, Operation Paraquet, Operation Prelim

On 2 April 1982, Argentina’s military, led by General Mario Menendez, invaded the Falkland Islands, a British overseas territory in the South Atlantic, known for its difficult terrain and “weather characterized by blowing snow, constant drizzle, squalls of freezing rain, and gusting wind.”<sup>1</sup> The Argentinean military deployed forces 300 miles across the South Atlantic to conduct an amphibious landing on both the Falkland Islands and South Georgia. After light resistance from the small detachment of British Royal Marines, the Argentines had firm control of the islands and immediately set upon the militarization of airfields, ports, and building fortifications around urban areas. The Argentines would hold the island for 72 days.

On 5 April, the British Special Forces, the 22nd Special Air Service (SAS) Regiment and Special Boat Squadron (SBS) deployed for Operation Corporate, with the greater British naval task force to conduct special operations missions across the islands and potentially inside Argentina.<sup>2</sup> The British military knew surprisingly little about the Falklands and South Georgia Islands and the majority of the soldiers who deployed could not find the Falklands on a map. The British conventional military, as part of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), had been focused on a looming Cold War battle with the Warsaw Pact in West Germany’s Fulda Gap. Despite this, the SAS and SBS had both participated in several military actions over the previous decades, often far from the British Isles and NATO. In the

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early days of the Falklands War, the Ministry of Defence called on British Special Forces to provide the much-needed tactical intelligence experience and to conduct direct action in support of the British amphibious landings.<sup>3</sup>

To support the recapture of the South Atlantic dependencies, D and G Squadrons, SAS, of approximately 128 soldiers, along with 84 members of SBS, embarked with the Naval Task Force. An additional troop from B Squadron joined the task force after the loss of 18 men in a helicopter crash on 19 May.<sup>4</sup> The SAS' primary initial role was strategic reconnaissance against Argentine troop strengths and locations, as well as key aspects of the defense: airlift and close air support capability, ammunition and fuel sites, and the location of Argentine special forces. The SBS would focus on the amphibious reconnaissance of potential beach landing sites and coastal defenses to provide the Naval Task Force the best opportunity for a successful amphibious landing.<sup>5</sup> As intelligence collected by the SAS and SBS informed the British strategy, both organizations were prepared to conduct direct action and guerrilla warfare in support of the expeditionary landing force.

### **Operation Paraquet**

The British Naval Task Force's first mission was the recapture of the South Georgia Islands 810 miles east of the Falkland Islands, and 7,800 miles from the United Kingdom. Operation Paraquet was conducted by a Naval Task Force which consisted of the destroyer HMS Antrim, the frigate HMS Plymouth, the fleet oiler Tidespring, and the frigate HMS Brilliant joined later. The amphibious landing force consisted of M Company, 42 Commando Royal Marines, 19 (Mountain) Troop, D Squadron SAS, and 2 detachments of SBS which were embarked on the submarine HMS Conqueror. The Argentine garrison consisted of 133 Marines and 57 civilians who were on the islands to salvage scrap metal from abandoned whaling stations.

Operation Paraquet was planned to be carried out in three phases. First, the SAS would conduct a helicopter insertion onto Fortuna Glacier from where they would perform reconnaissance of outpost Leith, Husvik, and Stromness. Second, the SBS would be inserted by helicopter into the area of Hounds Bay to assess the avenues of approach for the assault on the Argentine garrison at Grytviken. After the completion of the SAS and SBS reconnaissance, the 42 Commando Royal Marines would land and coordinate an assault on the Argentine forces at Grytviken securing the island.

The SAS decision was made to insert onto Fortuna Glacier despite disagreement among the planners due to the difficulty in terrain.<sup>6</sup> The insertion was complicated by the onset of a South Atlantic storm, which threatened the task force at sea, and turned the reconnaissance mission into a survival situation. After the first night on the glacier, 19 Troop called for an extraction; however, in the extreme weather, two of the three Wessex helicopters crashed in a whiteout. The third Wessex, equipped with radar and a new computerized flight control system, made it as it was better suited to navigate the weather and mountainous terrain.<sup>7</sup> The third upgraded Wessex was able to pick up the SAS and the

two downed flight crews and return the entire force to the *Antrim* safely, but the reconnaissance mission would have to be rethought.

With the loss of two Wessex helicopters, the SAS opted to conduct its infiltration by sea in five Gemini inflatable boats. The combination of unreliable motors, and an icy sea, resulted in only three Geminis arriving at the landing site. Two boats were adrift at night in high seas. One of the Geminis ran ashore up the coast and the last Gemini crew was rescued, 60 miles out to sea by the same advanced Wessex helicopter that pulled them off the glacier a few days earlier. The SBS reconnaissance mission ran into its own environmental challenges. The SBS's efforts to infiltrate by water via Cumberland Bay were hampered by a large calving of Nordenskjold glacier which created innumerable icebergs that made the bay impassable to small boats.<sup>8</sup>

On 25 April, the task force helicopters, cued by intelligence reports, sighted the Argentine submarine *Santa Fe* leaving the harbor at Grytviken to confront the British ships around South Georgia. The submarine attempted to return to the safety of the harbor only to be disabled by helicopters with depth charges, torpedoes, and machine guns. This alerted the Argentines to the British task force's presence, but it also left the small defensive force in Grytviken without their only means of challenging the British Naval Task Force at sea.

With the loss of surprise and the Royal Marines still at sea, the SAS and task force leadership launched a joint force which included the advanced party of Royal Marines, D Squadron SAS, and SBS by helicopter to assault the Argentine garrisons on South Georgia. The ad hoc assault force confronted the Argentines with the British destroyer *Antrim*'s guns in plain view offshore. Without a fight, the commander of the Argentine forces at Grytviken surrendered on 25 April. The last small garrison at Leith, despite vowing to fight to the death after the fall of Grytviken, surrendered the next day.

The British task force hobbled together for the 7,800-mile journey to South Georgia and managed to recapture the islands without any prior intelligence about enemy forces. South Georgia's geography, terrain, and weather had put both the Argentines and British at the limits of their military capabilities, but also demonstrated the ability of the SAS to adapt after failures and near catastrophe, to seize the initiative when it presented itself at Grytviken. Operation Paraquet, as the first special operations mission of the Falklands, reinforced the need for modern SOF maritime and aviation platforms capable of supporting the unique mission requirements of British Special Forces.

South Georgia, a small inhospitable island, with no permanent residents, was strategic in the battle for the Falklands. For Argentina, it had always been synonymous with its claim to the Falkland Islands, despite having never occupied the islands. For the British, the island's recapture was an enormous strategic political victory for the United Kingdom, which helped maintain public support for the Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's decision to use military force.

## Operation Prelim

With the British Naval Task Force in route, the Argentines established a forward base at the small airfield on Pebble Island, north of West Falkland Island. The Pebble Island airfield's Pucara ground-attack aircraft was within range of Foul Bay and the Falkland Sound, both of which contained potential landing sites for the British task forces. This obvious threat to the British landing and potential beachhead had to be addressed. An initial plan to bombard the garrison with aircraft and naval gunfire was ruled out due to the risk of civilian casualties and damage to property, but since the airfield could not be bypassed, D Squadron, SAS was given task of conducting a raid to destroy any attack aircraft on the airfield.

On 11 May, 17 (Boat) Troop, D squadron, was inserted by helicopter and canoe, and over the next four days managed to establish surveillance positions around the airfield determining troop strengths, disposition, and security procedures. Additionally, they discovered the airfield was being used for C-130 resupply missions from mainland Argentina to troops throughout the Falkland Islands.<sup>9</sup> With the need to protect the landings and the opportunity to disrupt Argentina's logistics flow to the islands, the order was given for the deployment of the remainder of D Squadron to conduct a raid on the airfield.

The British Navy's helicopters, equipped with new night vision goggles, flew in near hurricane force winds to insert D Squadron on Pebble Island.<sup>10</sup> With 17 Troop already in place to serve as guides, D Squadron would deploy 18 (Mobility) Troop as the raid force for the airfield, 16 (Air) Troop would screen off the settlement, and 19 Troop would serve as the reserve.<sup>11</sup> The darkness, distance, terrain, and bitter cold slowed the movement, and with 18 Troop late to arrive on the airfield, 19 Troop was given the primary task of destroying the Pucara aircraft.<sup>12</sup>

The SAS had a hard exfiltration deadline of 0730 due to the threat to the carrier HMS *Hermes*, which had to come in close to Pebble Island to launch and recover the helicopters. Without alerting the Argentines, 19 Troop affixed demolition charges onto the aircraft in a way that parts could not be recovered from one damaged aircraft, to put another damaged aircraft back into service.<sup>13</sup> Once the charges were set, the squadron engaged the airfield with machine guns, 40mm grenades, and LAW rockets. The destroyer, HMS *Glamorgan*, provided naval gunfire which largely kept the Argentine forces at bay while the SAS completed the assault on the airfield's infrastructure. The *Glamorgan* support was limited by nautical twilight, due to the Argentine air force, which had sunk the HMS *Sheffield* a week earlier.

The SAS' ability to execute a short-notice clandestine insertion, and use speed and surprise to destroy eleven aircraft, was reminiscent of the SAS' earliest missions in North Africa during World War II. D Squadron, SAS, with three injured, met the helicopters on time, and were successfully returned to the HMS *Hermes*. The mission resulted in the destruction of six Pucarás, four Beechcraft T-34 Mentor reconnaissance aircrafts, a skyvan cargo plane, as well as the ammunition and fuel dumps on the airfield.<sup>14</sup> Although the Argentines were able to bring four replacement Pucara from Argentina the next day, the SAS

raid on Pebble Island, and the SBS airstrikes on the Argentine helicopter squadron six days later, had a significant impact on General Menendez's ability to prevent the establishment of a British beachhead.

### **Strategic Reconnaissance**

The near total lack of intelligence on the strength, disposition, and location of Argentine military forces across the Falkland Islands, called for an extensive SAS and SBS ground reconnaissance mission. Ground and amphibious reconnaissance held the best hope to identify Argentine forces and key centres of gravity to allow for a swift recapture of the islands. The longer British forces were at sea, the greater the risk of the Argentine Air Force and its Exocet missiles crippling the landing force before it could be put ashore. To collect this time sensitive intelligence, eight patrols of G Squadron SAS and two from the SBS began insertions and patrols across the East and West Falkland Islands on 30 April.<sup>15</sup>

The reconnaissance patrols moved at night and quickly began to map the 30,000 Argentine troops on the Falklands, most of which had garrisoned in and around the major population centres on the islands. Suspecting the British were on the islands, Argentine troops conducted numerous patrols and employed signal intelligence techniques to locate the small reconnaissance team.<sup>16</sup> The SAS and SBS managed to avoid detection through traditional reconnaissance skills to include night movements, camouflage, and communication discipline.

Across East Falkland, which held most population centres and Argentine troops, the SBS conducted traditional amphibious reconnaissance to provide hydrographic surveys and enemy troop locations of potential landing sites to include San Carlos, Port San Carlos, and Ajax Bay. The task force leadership would choose San Carlos as the site of its amphibious landing. On the West Falkland Islands, the three SBS reconnaissance teams successfully located, tracked, and harassed an Argentine force estimated at over 1000 troops, which prevented any movement to counter the British landing across the narrow Falkland Sounds at San Carlos.<sup>17</sup>

The Argentine commander, Major General Mario Menendez, planned for an air mobile defense of the islands and to challenge the British on the beach. Although his troops were garrisoned in central population centres, his helicopter force moved nightly to avoid detection. Once the British landing site was identified, an air assault would be conducted with 15 helicopters delivering troops to the beachhead to repulse the British landing force. The air assault would be covered by air support from the mainland and Pucara light attack aircraft from Pebble Island.

On 20 May, one of the SAS teams located a portion of the helicopter force and called in an airstrike from carrier-based Sea Harriers. The attack resulted in the destruction of Argentina's only two heavy lift Chinooks, and two of the six medium lift Puma helicopters. This loss of lift capability, compounded by maintenance and weather, would limit

Menendez's ability to move the bulk of his troops from Port Stanley to challenge the landing at San Carlos.<sup>18</sup> However, the fight for the Falklands was far from a one-sided affair. Four days later, the Argentine's sank the British cargo ship SS *Atlantic Conveyor* with two French Exocet cruise missiles. The ship had been carrying the bulk of the British heavy lift helicopters and resulted in the loss of 6 Wessexes, 3 Chinooks, and 1 Lynx, which in turn limited British mobility on islands.

With limited airlift, the Argentine forces were left to confront the British on the beach with units that had already been forward deployed. The 62-man "Eagle Detachment" was deployed forward to conduct reconnaissance and harass any landing force until Menendez's air assault could arrive to push the British back into the sea.<sup>19</sup> On 21 May, the SBS reconnaissance teams located the Eagle Detachment dug in at Fanning Head north of San Carlos. The Argentines were armed with an assortment of small arms to include 105mm wheeled recoilless anti-tank guns, which could be used from shore against British landing craft as they approached the beach.<sup>20</sup>

The small SBS reconnaissance team—equipped with the advantage of night vision and thermal imaging—mapped Argentine positions and, reinforced by an additional 20 members of 3 SBS, launched an assault on Fanning Head. Naval gunfire from HMS *Antrim*, and direct fire from the SBS with machine guns and LAW rockets delivered a heavy toll. By the time the SBS had closed with Argentine positions, the majority of the Eagle Detachment had fled leaving 11 dead and 3 wounded.<sup>21</sup> Although displaced and no longer a threat to the landing, the Eagle Detachment would bring down two British Wessex helicopters with surface-to-air missiles in later engagements.<sup>22</sup>

The strategic and amphibious reconnaissance conducted on the East and West Falkland Islands by small SAS and SBS provided naval and ground task force commanders with key intelligence on the force strengths, locations, and general poor disposition of Argentine force across the islands. The British task force, which had sailed from the United Kingdom without any practical intelligence, used these small unit traditional reconnaissance missions to map the Argentine forces, target its key defense, and choose the best site for its amphibious landing.

### **Deception at Darwin**

On 19 May, days after the Pebble Island raid, the threat to capital ships was considered so great, the *Hermes* was to be kept farther out to sea. As a result, the SAS would be administratively relocated to other ships of the amphibious landing force. It was during this movement that a Sea King helicopter crashed either due to mechanical failure or bird strikes, while attempting to land on the *HMS Intrepid*. The crash killed 22 Service members, to include D and G Squadron SAS, both squadron sergeant majors.<sup>23</sup> This was the largest loss of life in the SAS since World War II and would require the reinforcement from B Squadron SAS already en route to the Falklands theater.<sup>24</sup>

The day after the helicopter crash, D Squadron was tasked with conducting a diversionary raid against the Argentine garrison at Darwin to support the amphibious task force landing. D Squadron flew by helicopter into Darwin/Goose Green areas at night and successfully moved to the Darwin garrison undetected. As the amphibious task force prepared to land the bulk of the invasion force 20 miles north at San Carlos, D Squadron launched a diversionary assault with machine guns, mortars, LAW rockets, and naval gunfire against the Darwin garrison. The surprise and intensity of the fire resulted in the leadership of the garrison reporting to the Argentine headquarters in Port Stanley that the British landing was at Darwin.

The mission was to divert as many Argentine troops as possible from the amphibious landing at San Carlos. In practical terms, the mission was a success. General Menendez's headquarters believed Darwin was the primary landing site, which confirmed his assumptions that San Carlos' terrain was too difficult for an amphibious landing. Later, interrogations by the 2nd Battalion Parachute Regiment revealed the garrison believed it was under attack by an entire battalion.<sup>25</sup> Subsequently, Menendez did not deploy the Darwin garrison to confront the British beachhead at San Carlos. This decision, combined with the SBS route of the Eagle Detachment, and the loss of heavy lift helicopters to SAS directed airstrikes, created a long enough window of opportunity for the safe initial landing of the expeditionary force.

Although the SAS deception prevented ground forces of the Argentine military from attacking the beachhead, the battle of San Carlos at sea continued until 25 May. The morning after the initial landings, it became clear to General Menendez that San Carlos was the site of the British beachhead and the Argentine Air Force attacked with a force that consisted of 90 fighter-bombers from Argentina and 10 attack aircraft, which operated from the Falklands. The battle of San Carlos resulted in the British loss of 1 destroyer, 2 frigates, 8 ships damaged, 4 helicopters lost, and 49 service personnel killed. Conversely, the Argentine Air Forces lost twenty-two aircraft with eleven killed. Despite never achieving air superiority and the loss of several ships, the British landed over 4,000 troops to include 2nd and 3rd Battalions, Parachute Regiment, and 40, 42, and 45 Commando Royal Marines.<sup>26</sup>

### **Special Forces versus Special Forces**

As the landing took place at San Carlos, the small reconnaissance teams of G Squadron closed in on the bulk of the Argentine forces at Port Stanley. The SAS was surprised to find Mount Kent, a piece of key terrain 1,500 feet tall overlooking the avenues of approach to Port Stanley, largely unoccupied. This was likely due to the difficult terrain and abysmal weather conditions on Mount Kent. In the campaign plan, 3 Commando Brigade was scheduled to assault Mount Kent in preparation for the final assault on Port Stanley, but similar to South Georgia, intelligence derived from ground reconnaissance offered the opportunity for the British Special Forces to seize the initiative.

The order was given for D Squadron to reinforce the reconnaissance team from G Squadron by helicopter, seize Mount Kent, and hold it until relieved by 3 Commando on 30 May. Once relieved, G Squadron would proceed with guerrilla operations in support of the final assault on Argentine headquarters at Port Stanley. On 29 May, Menendez ordered his own special forces—602 Commando Company (established four years prior in 1978)—to retake Mount Kent. The 602 Commando was one of the few units in the Argentine Army trained for fighting at night in difficult terrain. This was to be the first engagement of the two countries' special force units in the conflict.

During the night of 29 May, the 3rd Assault Section, 602 Commando, advanced up the steep terrain of Mount Kent until ambushed by the SAS with small arms and mortars. Despite advantages of the British on the high ground, the exchange was significant, with injuries on both sides. Later that night, on the morning of 30 May, the 2nd Assault Section attacked a group of SAS soldiers resulting in another prolonged exchange with more casualties on both sides. Two of the Argentine commandos were awarded the second highest Argentine award for valour (posthumously) for actions during the engagement. Despite the determined attacks—uphill in freezing weather conditions which continued into the morning—602 Commando withdrew from the area at dawn.

During the night, 42 Commando Royal Marines had been airlifted with a field artillery battery, and relieved D Squadron on Mount Kent in the morning. The fighting on Mount Kent resulted in two Argentine commandos killed and six captured. The SAS suffered three wounded but had held the strategic terrain necessary for the final battle in recapture on the Falkland Islands. However, the final battle for Port Stanley would never come. After several days of negotiation, General Menendez surrendered all the Argentine forces and the Falkland Islands to the British. Operation Corporate lasted 54 days from the start of operations on 24 April on South Georgia to the Argentine surrender in Port Stanley on 14 June 1982.<sup>27</sup>

### **The Falklands War as Applied History**

Applied military history is an “attempt to illuminate current challenges and choices by analysing historical precedents and analogues.”<sup>28</sup> The Falklands War represents the last conflict where SOF were faced with an arguably near-peer enemy, who in spite of the poorly trained conscripts, possessed air support, surface to air and anti-ship missiles, airlift capabilities, mechanized vehicles, special operations units, and professional military leadership. Additionally, neither force fought on its home soil, and neither government committed to all-out war. The Argentine landing force with its air support from Argentina versus the British Naval Task Force. Both were calculated force structures put together on what the respective countries believed would be necessary for the fight without putting other national security challenges at risk.

The Falklands War, as a window into global competition or conflict, offers several keen points of observation. Today, strategic competitors are expanding their reach using

foreign military basing, maritime ports, proxies, and private military companies—all in the pursuit of natural resources, markets, and influence. The scope of these activities covers the globe to include South America, Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Pacific. The Falkland Islands, although largely politically strategic to the Argentines and British, is not unlike these modern nodes of strategic competition. Today, China and Russia have and continue to establish far-flung economic and military nodes that need to be watched and possibly interdicted in future competition or conflict.

The scope of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative is by any definition enormous, but that means the Belt and Road's nodes are spread out over great distances, with limited resources. These factors make them vulnerable to SOF. In the Falklands War, the British employed the core activities of SOF against military nodes and infrastructure across the occupied islands. The SAS and SBS conducted special reconnaissance, deception, and direct action against the key aspects of the larger Argentine force with enough speed and surprise to disrupt General Menendez's plans for the defense or reinforcement of the islands.

Russia's operations abroad, such as military operations and basing in the disputed areas of Georgia, Ukraine and Crimea, and its military and private military activities in the Middle East and Africa, could hold its entire national security strategy at risk in strategic competition or conflict. In the case of Russian aggression in Europe, the use of SOF against these outlying Russian nodes would force military leadership to make tough decisions about the cost in blood and treasure and the value of these strategic nodes. Like the British and Argentines, Russia would have to decide what level of resources could be dedicated to defense of these aforementioned nodes held at risk by Western SOF.

The Argentines deployed forces to the Falklands based on their perceived risk. In remote locations, such as Pebble Island and South Georgia, they believed the geography, terrain, and weather would deter British attacks. However, the unique capabilities of British Special Forces, such as special operations particular equipment, physical and mental toughness, surprise, and conventional support, still held those targets at risk. Much of China and Russia's overseas infrastructure includes ports, major rail and air hubs, energy facilities, military sites, and rare earth mineral mines. To complicate these nodes further, many are staffed with civilian host nation workers, in remote locations with difficult terrain and weather. Unlike conventional forces, these complex factors make them more vulnerable to Western SOF, as was demonstrated in the Falklands.

The Falklands case study does not however demonstrate a capability of SOF to conduct advance force operations with impunity. British Special Forces suffered from extreme weather, the loss of personnel, and high casualties in its conventional support to include the sinking of ships and downing of aircraft in support of these special operations missions. The Falklands also made it clear that future special operations units will undoubtedly face foreign special operations units and well-trained proxies on the battlefield. Although Western special operations may have a technological advantage, as the British did

in 1982, physical and mental toughness, as well as tactical competency can be achieved at a relatively low cost and should not be underestimated in the enemy force.

Russia's operations abroad, such as the military special operation Ukraine, the occupation of the disputed areas of Georgia and Crimea, and its military and private military activities in the Middle East and Africa, could hold its entire national security strategy at risk in strategic competition or conflict. In the case of Russian aggression in Europe, the use of SOF against these outlying Russian nodes would force military leadership to make tough decisions about the cost in blood and treasure and the value of these outlying strategic nodes. Like the British and Argentines, Russia would have to decide what level of resources could be dedicated to defense of these aforementioned nodes held at risk by Western SOF.

## **Conclusion**

As an applied historical case study, the Falklands War offers a window into the role of SOF in a fight over a single strategic node in strategic competition or great power conflict. In a war gaming room, the Argentines had numerical superiority and all the geographic advantages. The British had a smaller force, with extremely long supply lines, and a difficult timeline to avoid the South Atlantic winter. The advance force operations conducted by the SAS and SBS in support of the British landing force were key in the Falklands War. Strategic reconnaissance identified Argentine formations, while direct actions at Pebble Island, Fanning Head, and Mount Kent paired with deception at Darwin, and airstrikes against the Argentine helicopter force, opened the beachhead for a successful British landing.

The British Special Forces in the Falklands War reaffirmed the practical necessity of the five "Special Operations Forces Truths" in any crisis or conflict.<sup>29</sup> The British deployed a highly trained mentally and physically tough force, experienced in contingency deployments, equipped with special operations particular equipment, and integrated into the conventional force at a short notice. This allowed for the successfully conducted core special operations activities at the maximum logistical range of the forces, while challenged by the enemy, terrain, and weather in an unforgiving South Atlantic.

In global nature of strategic competition and the technological advancements of the last 40 years, as in the Falklands War, militaries will struggle with distance, weather, terrain, countermeasures, and civilians on the battlefield. SOF are uniquely capable in environments plagued with vast mountain ranges, Arctic weather, desert sandstorms, and regions like the Southwest Pacific, where "it rains for 150 days and then the monsoons start."<sup>30</sup> The Falklands War demonstrated the need for a modern emphasis on traditional SOF core activities, mental and physical toughness, and special operations particular equipment as a key component in countering or dismantling the far-flung nodes of strategic competition or great power conflict.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Raymond E. Bell Jr., "The Falklands Islands Campaign of 1982 and British Joint Forces Operations," *Joint Force Quarterly*, Issue 67, 4th Quarter (2012): 102.
- <sup>2</sup> The Special Boat Squadron was renamed the Special Boat Service after the formation of United Kingdom's Special Forces Group in 1987. The formation of a "joint" special force group was in part a result of special operations lessons learnt in the Falklands Islands conflict.
- <sup>3</sup> Robert Redding, Anna Beier-Pedrazzi, Gina Salvia, Stefanie Mitchell and James George, "War in the Falklands: Case Studies in British Special Operations," *Special Operations Journal*, 6:1 (2020), 22.
- <sup>4</sup> Alastair Finlan, "British Special Forces in the Falklands War of 1982," *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 13:3, (2002): 84.
- <sup>5</sup> Finlan, "British Special Forces," 84.
- <sup>6</sup> Fortuna Glacier is the same famously difficult glacier crossed by explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton in April 1915 to reach help for this stranded crew in Antarctica. He was buried in Grytviken, South Georgia.
- <sup>7</sup> Cedric Delves, *Across an Angry Sea: The SAS in the Falklands War* (London: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers Ltd., 2019), 43.
- <sup>8</sup> Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, 63.
- <sup>9</sup> Redding et al., "War in the Falklands," 27.
- <sup>10</sup> Finlan, "British Special Forces," 85
- <sup>11</sup> Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, 156.
- <sup>12</sup> Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, 163.
- <sup>13</sup> Redding et al., "War in the Falklands," 27.
- <sup>14</sup> Lawrence Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands campaign, Vol. II: War and Diplomacy* (New York, NY: Taylor & Francis, 2007).
- <sup>15</sup> Michael Rose, "Ten Years On: The British Army in the Falklands War," *Advance Force Operations: The SAS*, National Army Museum, London, (1992): 58.
- <sup>16</sup> Rose, "Ten Years On," 58.
- <sup>17</sup> Rose, "Ten Years On," 59.
- <sup>18</sup> Finlan, "British Special Forces," 89.
- <sup>19</sup> Steve Paget, "Chapter: Target San Carlos, British Deception during the Repossession of the Falkland Islands," in C. M. Rein (Ed.), *Weaving the Tangled Web: Military Deception in Large-Scale Combat Operations*, (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Army University Press, 2018), 199.
- <sup>20</sup> Paget, "Chapter: Target San Carlos," 203.
- <sup>21</sup> Finlan, "British Special Forces," 85.
- <sup>22</sup> Paget, "Chapter: Target San Carlos," 203.
- <sup>23</sup> Rose, "Ten Years On," 58.
- <sup>24</sup> Finlan, "British Special Forces," 84.
- <sup>25</sup> Rose, "Ten Years On," 58.

<sup>26</sup> Bell, "The Falklands Islands Campaign," 102.

<sup>27</sup> Finlan, "British Special Forces," 85.

<sup>28</sup> The Applied History Project at Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, <https://worldwide.harvard.edu/applied-history-project>, last accessed 30 December 2020.

<sup>29</sup> USSOCOM SOF Truths: 1. Humans are more important than hardware. 2. Quality is better than quantity. 3. Special Operations Forces cannot be mass produced. 4. Competent Special Operations Forces cannot be created after emergencies occur. 5. Most special operations require non-SOF support. <https://www.socom.mil/about/sof-truths>, last accessed 1 January 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Edward J. Drea, New Guinea, "The US Army Campaigns of World War II," U.S. Army Center of Military History, 3.

## Fighting Danger at Sea: The Quest for Speed in Special Operations

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### ABSTRACT

This article aims to contribute to the understanding of speed as a form of security in special operations warfare. The research is based on anthropological field studies of military assistance conducted by the Danish Maritime Special Operations Task Group (the Frogman Corps) in Nigeria and Ghana. Speed is an essential social temporality when maritime Special Operations Forces are fighting danger at sea. The article shows how the training involves the routinization of body techniques, the handling of weapons, and familiarization with the ubiquity of risk.

### KEYWORDS

military acceleration, anthropology, Danish Frogman Corps, Ghana Navy, military assistance, naval special warfare, speed

*In Lagos, soldiers from Nigeria, Ghana, Benin, and Togo are training with instructors from the Frogman Corps. A few of them are right now rehearsing how to board and take control of a model ship. Three instructors are watching as the soldiers climb a ladder and continue to walk on deck, proceeding towards the bridge of the ship. But there is something wrong here; they are doing it too slowly. The instructor gets impatient, he shouts and demonstrates how it should be done: with increased speed. After the session, the impatient instructor tells them: “Speed is [Special Operations Forces] SOF.” According to him, the West African soldiers were too slow in their body movements. Every second counts when you are boarding a ship, otherwise your enemies will have time to take their precautions. It is as simple as that: Speed can defeat the enemy.<sup>1</sup>*

The situation described above occurred as part of a training session during fieldwork in Nigeria, where I was studying an international U.S.-led Naval exercise called “Obangame Express 2020.” I observed the Special Operations Forces (SOF) component training conducted by instructors from the Danish Maritime Special Operations Task Group, known

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as the Frogman Corps<sup>2</sup> (established in 1957). Their tasks are “to perform Direct Action, Special Reconnaissance, and Military Assistance missions. The unit can conduct insertion and infiltration by sea, air, and land, with its primary expertise in maritime operations.”<sup>3</sup>

This article aims to contribute to the understanding of speed in the training of SOF. It asks two principal questions: How is speed formed as both a perception and a teamwork technique in a cross-cultural learning environment? And how do (different) perceptions of speed affect the training of teamwork techniques?

In this article, the analysis is based on two months of fieldwork, primarily on training sites in Nigeria (spring 2020)<sup>4</sup> and in Ghana (autumn 2020). In addition, I followed meetings and other preparations in Denmark before deployment to the exercises. In preparation for the field studies, the instructors briefed me about their task before departure. I conducted background interviews in the Danish Special Operations Command to understand all the facets of military assistance. In addition, interviews were also conducted with operators with experience of Military Assistance in West African countries.

As a participant-observer, I followed the training and produced video recordings of training sequences and interviews with the Danish instructors. During training in Nigeria and Ghana, I conducted interviews with ten instructors. After the training in Ghana, two instructors were interviewed using photos and video recordings as prompts for reflection. My research will thus contribute to new empirical knowledge about military training missions conducted by SOF. Simons,<sup>5</sup> Danielsen,<sup>6</sup> and Mayland; Haugegaard and Shapiro<sup>7</sup> have conducted anthropological field research with special operations units. However, these researchers were studying aspects of the home organization of a Studies and Observations Group in the U.S., Norway, and Denmark. My research is innovative in the sense that I follow forces out in the field when they are conducting ongoing training missions.

The article is divided into four sections. First, I will discuss speed as a theoretical concept in the social sciences<sup>8</sup> and the related concept of “social acceleration.”<sup>9</sup> These concepts will frame special warfare training theoretically as a series of temporal, social processes and will discuss the relevance of the concepts of speed and acceleration to my empirical data.

The second section describes the context of the military assistance activities conducted by the Danish Frogman Corps. This section will introduce the definition of military assistance as a NATO concept and will briefly clarify Danish and Ghanaian national interests in the Gulf of Guinea.

In the third section I will discuss how speed is relevant to the work of SOF. As concepts in my field data, “speed” and “flow” derive from observation of training in close-quarters battle. The section presents empirical material from observations of training and reflections from interviews with the Ghanaian commander and the Danish instructors. In addition, the section examines how speed and flow are linked to perceptions of the body.

The training is seen as both a form of apprenticeship<sup>10</sup> and as bodily imitation.<sup>11</sup> Finally, in a short concluding section I will unfold the perspectives my empirical data bring to the discussion on acceleration and speed.

### Speed as a Concept in the Social Sciences

For decades, social scientists have analyzed and criticized modernity and civilization. Few theorists have used speed as the center of gravity in their criticism of modernity, though there are a few exceptions. Virilio's publication "Speed and Politics"<sup>12</sup> argues that modernity can be defined by motion and "logistical time."<sup>13</sup> The concept of dromology<sup>14</sup> was a turning point in the socialist and Marxist theoretical wave of the 1970s in the social sciences. Virilio's analytical approach is "logistical. It doesn't directly deal with war, but with everything that makes it possible."<sup>15</sup> Dromology derives from the Greek word *dromos* which means "race course."<sup>16</sup> Hence, dromology denotes Virilio's refined concept for the study of speed.

For Virilio, dromology is the new strategic engine of the modern state: "States employ dromological techniques to exercise power."<sup>17</sup> In his rather pessimistic views on modern society, Virilio argues that speed has become an engine of destruction: "Dromocratic intelligence is not exercised against a more or less determined military adversary, but as a permanent assault on the world, and through it, on human nature."<sup>18</sup> What is of interest to this project is that Virilio discusses speed as a factor in relation to colonialism: "Western man has appeared superior and dominant, despite inferior demographics, because he appeared *more rapid*. In colonial genocide or ethnocide, he was the survivor because he was in fact *super-quick (sur vif)*."<sup>19</sup> Not every battle in colonial times led to genocide or ethnocide, I would argue. The superiority of "Western man" in relation to colonial war is possibly also a question of the West's dominance in the development of weapons technology.

Probably, Virilio would not agree to disconnect "speed" from "politics." Here, it is my choice to frame the concept of speed as security and as a collaborative effort conducted by a team of soldiers. The focus here is speed as "processual matter,"<sup>20</sup> rather than a discussion of speed as political power. I seek to understand how speed is taught in the training of SOF in Nigeria and Ghana and how soldiers learn to operate at speed. However, Virilio<sup>21</sup> is right that speed is a very important factor in warfare, especially in special warfare. Virilio uses metaphors and images of war to describe modernity, with its bunkers, soldiers, and high-speed technology. He argues that speed is the primary force contributing to the formation of society: "With the supersonic vector (airplane, rocket, and airwaves), penetration and destruction become one."<sup>22</sup> Supersonic airplanes allow humanity to exceed what was previously thought possible, but inherent in that achievement, says Virilio, is the potential destruction of human society. It is, in his words, "the defeat of the world as a field, as distance, as matter ... since from any given spot we can now reach any other, no matter where it may be, in record time and within several meters."<sup>23</sup> Virilio wrote the original text in 1977, when drone technology had recently (in 1973) been deployed in the Vietnam War by the United States.<sup>24</sup> Virilio's vision predicted how the military technology of today is able

to hit targets within a few meters anywhere in the world. With this technology, the world as a field, as space, is no longer the same. Speed becomes more important than space.

In 2003, the sociologist Hartmut Rosa discussed speed and acceleration in his article “Social Acceleration: Ethical and Political Consequences of a Desynchronized High-Speed Society.” Inspired by Koselleck<sup>25</sup> and Adam,<sup>26</sup> Rosa states that “the concept of acceleration still lacks a clear and workable definition and a systematic sociological analysis. Within systematic theories of modernity or modernization, acceleration is virtually absent.”<sup>27</sup> The lack of a theory of acceleration reflects “the neglect of the temporal dimension and processual nature of society in twentieth-century sociological theory.”<sup>28</sup> Rosa’s critique of the absence of the temporal/processual dimension in sociology applies to the discipline of anthropology as well. The temporal dimension does not have a strong position in anthropology, but it appears in ethnographic studies, or in reflections on the construction of “the other.”<sup>29</sup> The research on speed is therefore an emerging field, connected to the development of worldwide digitalization (of e.g., trade, payment solutions, transport, and work).<sup>30</sup> Duclos et al., state:

It is our conviction that an anthropological engagement with speed can open new theoretical directions and empirical terrains. We seek to ask: How can anthropology engage with speed as a processual matter that permeates our theoretical and descriptive accounts of practices, processes, and realities? In what way would it allow us to study them otherwise?<sup>31</sup>

The aim of this article is to search for new empirical insights by focusing on speed and acceleration as principles of social interaction in SOF training. Rosa claims “that we cannot adequately understand the nature and character of modernity and the logic of its structural and cultural development unless we add the temporal perspective to our analysis.”<sup>32</sup> In order to discuss my data from field studies among soldiers training for special warfare, the temporal dimension is necessary. As stated above and using the development of drone technology as an example, it is evident that social developments and the development of military technology are reflections of each other. Trends in society and trends in military operations are interconnected, especially when we study the concept of speed.

Rosa argues that social change is driven by forms of acceleration, and he calls for a definition of “what it could mean for a society to *accelerate* and of the ways in which Western societies can be understood as acceleration societies.”<sup>33</sup> This point echoes Lévi-Strauss’ distinction between “hot” and “cold” societies.<sup>34</sup> According to Rosa, acceleration is not omnipresent in modern society. We see “possibly unrelated processes of acceleration, e.g., in sports, fashion, video editing, transport, job-succession, as well as some phenomena of social deceleration.”<sup>35</sup> In search of a workable definition of what he calls “social acceleration,” Rosa writes: “social acceleration is defined by an increase in the decay-rates of the reliability of experiences and expectations and by the contraction of the time-spans

definable as the “present.”<sup>36</sup> Experiences are subject to decay and often quickly become outdated. Somehow, timespans are shorter and time is contracted, Rosa argues. This point recalls what Virilio writes about the law of speed: every new industrial machine is short-lived, often being replaced by a faster machine before it can even enter the market.<sup>37</sup>

The striving of athletes to achieve faster results, the development of computers working at ever higher speeds, and increasingly rapid forms of transport and communication cannot be brought directly under the same analytical concept of social acceleration.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, Rosa suggests that social acceleration can be divided into three dynamics: 1) technological acceleration, 2) acceleration of social change, and 3) acceleration of the pace of life.<sup>39</sup> Technological acceleration is “the speeding up of intentional, *goal-directed* processes of transport, communication, and production that can be defined as *technological acceleration*.”<sup>40</sup> Virilio argued that the Industrial Revolution should be rethought as a “dromocratic revolution.”<sup>41</sup> His “dromology” was what inspired Rosa’s first category of technological acceleration.<sup>42</sup>

Rosa contributes to this debate an understanding of technological acceleration that is highly relevant to my empirical data. The training programs for special warfare I observed in Nigeria and Ghana fall most appropriately into this category. The procedures that are trained are goal-directed (e.g., boarding a ship, controlling a site, rescuing hostages). The body techniques used by the soldiers can be seen as drivers of technological acceleration—their body is their technology.<sup>43</sup> The sequences in the training can be measured in time, and the procedures can be improved through faster and sometimes slower speeds.

Following Rosa’s premise that society develops different forms of acceleration, we can also identify different patterns of social deceleration.<sup>44</sup> He mentions physical processes, cultural islands/niches/sects, and slow-downs as unintended effects from traffic jams to financial crises.<sup>45</sup> Also, intentional forms of deceleration like retreats and social movements can shape time differently and create the effect of deceleration. Rosa argues further:

There are natural and anthropological speed limits. Some things cannot be accelerated in principle. Among these are most physical processes, like the speed of perception and processing in our brains and bodies, or the time it takes for most natural resources to reproduce.<sup>46</sup>

Rosa’s work has prefigured a number of actual developments, yet perhaps we need to question the idea of “speed limits.” In my field studies in Nigeria and Ghana, the instructors are pushing the soldiers towards their limits of quick perception and their processing of brain-to-body coordination in order to obtain speed. They are trying to accelerate the process of team coordination. The close-quarters battle training discussed later is an example. During these training sessions, soldiers train to develop quick mental response patterns, so perception is sharpened, and results are achieved within a shorter time span. In

addition, during the Danish instructors' basic training in the Frogman Corps, they are tested during several months of training with few hours (or no) sleep, lack of food, and hard physical workloads. The training regime is a conscious effort to exceed normal sleep patterns and the limits of physical and mental restitution. Theoretically, Duclos calls for the need to study these "more-than-human temporalities as complex objects of inquiry."<sup>47</sup> The Danish naval special warfare operators are shaped through their basis training to be able to exceed the "speed limits" of physical and mental performance and cope with uncertainty and stressful situations.

### **Military Assistance: National Interests in the Gulf of Guinea**

According to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) doctrine, special operations "create strategic or operational-level effects or are executed where significant political risk exists."<sup>48</sup> The SOF portfolio has three main components: direct action, special reconnaissance, and military assistance (MA). In this article, the focus is on military assistance, a concept defined by NATO as follows:

Military assistance (MA) is a broad category of measures and activities conducted by SOF [special operations forces] that support, enable, and influence critical friendly assets through training, advising, mentoring, partnering, or the conduct of combined and other operations ... SOF may also conduct MA in support of security sector assistance, stability policing activities, security force assistance and/or stabilization and reconstruction missions.<sup>49</sup>

As can be seen here, the types of tasks SOF can conduct are varied: "our operators are flexible like a Swiss knife."<sup>50</sup> NATO states like Denmark have national commercial interests in the regions where they select partners. In recent years, Denmark has engaged in military assistance activities with selected international allies such as the United States, United Kingdom, and France. These international partners are "allies that count"<sup>51</sup> to the Danish government.

In the Gulf of Guinea, the current local security situation is fragile, with the international shipping industry experiencing threats from pirates at sea. "Kidnappings in the Gulf of Guinea increased significantly in 2019, when 121 seafarers were kidnapped. This is an increase of more than 50 percent compared to the 78 kidnappings in 2018."<sup>52</sup> In 2020, 195 kidnapping attacks on ships and their crew were conducted by pirates worldwide, an increase of 20 percent in attacks compared to 2019.<sup>53</sup> Later, in 2021, we saw a significant decrease in piracy attacks in the Gulf of Guinea.<sup>54</sup> Denmark is the world's sixth largest shipping nation. In 2019, Danish shipping companies exported goods worth more than DKK 207 billion.<sup>55</sup> Denmark, a nation with commercial interests in the Gulf of Guinea, therefore finds it relevant to build security partnerships with coastal states like Nigeria and Ghana in order to protect national shipping interests and Danish seafarers against piracy attacks. On

the homepage of Ghana Armed Forces, the following text outlines the national interest of Ghana in the training with the Frogman Corps:

Although the training is aimed at sharpening the skills of the SBS (Special Boat Squadron), it also serves as a platform for collaboration and establishment of close relations between the Ghana Navy and the Danish Defence so that in the event of attack on any ship in Ghana's maritime domain or any other forms of insurgence, help can be sorted from highly professional, well-trained, credible and dependable SBS, who are capable of responding swiftly and aggressively in all terrains.<sup>56</sup>

Here, the Ghana Navy expresses a wish to establish close relations with Danish Defense. In May 2021, the Danish Parliament decided to deploy a frigate to help patrol the Gulf of Guinea, with the intention of assisting national governments in the area.<sup>57</sup> The deployment of the frigate is a deterrence operation, the aim of which is to reduce attacks on international ships and their crews. The frigate was scheduled to be deployed from November 2021 to March 2022,<sup>58</sup> however, due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the frigate returned to Denmark earlier than planned.

In Ghana, at the training event, a Ghanaian government representative expressed gratitude for Denmark's assistance. The (then) Chief of Naval Staff in Ghana, Rear Admiral Seth Amoama, said in a speech when he visited the training conducted by the Frogman Corps on 4 November 2020:

This training is very timely. It is very timely because we in Ghana Navy are confronted with the menace of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, and in our maritime domain. Until now, our waters have been relatively safe, as compared to other regions in the Gulf of Guinea. But lately, they are re-locating to Ghana's maritime domain, and we have experienced an increase in the level of kidnappings of foreign crew – pirates attacking fishing fleets and kidnapping the expatriate staff for ransom. This is not very good AT ALL. It is up to the Ghana Navy to prevent such occurrences.<sup>59</sup>

However, deployment of the Danish frigate to assist West African countries in preventing piracy is only part of the solution. In the Gulf of Guinea, the problems with armed robbery and piracy at sea reflect problems on land. Ghanaian professor Dr. Kwesi Aning points to three main problems as root causes on land for the development of piracy: "Petro-piracy" (illegal theft, refining and the distribution of oil), corruption (politicians and bureaucrats connected to criminal groups) and a fishing industry under pressure from Chinese vessels.<sup>60</sup>

## **Speed as Security in Close-Quarters Battle**

The task of SOF is to be ready to solve problems at short notice, a readiness that reflects the ability to increase speed when necessary, for instance, if a hostage situation develops on board a ship. Speed is “the one factor that overrules every other principle we work with.”<sup>61</sup> “What we are trying to do is to create something which is new, surprising and unexpected for our opponent.”<sup>62</sup> The NATO doctrine states:

High tempo is normally essential to SOF’s ability to conduct special operations. Rapid execution of a mission allows SOF to mass precisely tailored combat power at the critical place and time, accomplish the mission and withdraw before the adversary can react ... a high tempo provides security through speed, allowing acceptance of a higher degree of risk than would be otherwise possible.<sup>63</sup>

The high tempo is the signature of special operations. Working in small teams with limited combat power, it is their speed and flexibility in execution and the greater risk of their operations that separates special operations forces from conventional military forces.

During fieldwork, I watched the soldiers rehearse movements and team coordination of speed:

Today’s training in Close-Quarters Battle (CQB) takes place outside in the exercise terrain of the Nigeria Navy. The temperature is around 30 degrees Celsius. I walk together with the instructors Jack and Balder and a group of West African soldiers. We see a small, simple building of brick walls. There is an entrance, a narrow corridor and a few small rooms. Limited space, just like on ships. Some soldiers have trained in the procedures before, others are beginners. How to move through the corridor, how to scan the rooms for enemies or hostages. It is a coordination of body movements, weapon positions and signs. It is rehearsal of the same sequence again and again. The goal is to rescue hostages, kept somewhere in this model corridor of a ship. Speed and constant movement is the most important parameter for the soldiers’ success. Every second counts in order to rescue the hostages.<sup>64</sup>

In close-quarters battle, small teams engage the enemy at very short range (within a room), potentially to the point of fighting with hand weapons. In the training in Nigeria, the soldiers rehearsed a hostage situation. Timing, silence, and precise body language between team members is vital for the group to succeed. In the words of Jack, a Danish instructor:

You have to walk so you do not make noise. As quiet as possible. Like a lazy cat. You have to move the torso, in order to be ready for shooting. The legs are more stationary. It has to be easy to read for the team. It is a dangerous situation. The enemy has got the hostages, and we have to rescue them. Therefore, speed is essential for our own safety, as well as theirs. When we are in a hostage rescue situation, their lives are at risk. It is a matter of minutes or seconds. Their lives are more important than our safety.<sup>65</sup>

Again, the operators underline the importance of speed in hostage rescue operations. Such operations are goal-directed tasks that require acceleration—technological acceleration.<sup>66</sup> It is a game of life and death, which gives urgency to the operation. When the soldiers rehearse a hostage rescue operation, they must be able to deal with the pressure and gain time through speed in order to save the lives of the hostages.

### **How to Hit the Door**

In autumn 2020, I conducted fieldwork in a two-week training mission in Ghana. Instructors from the Frogman Corps were invited to conduct training for the Ghana Navy's Special Boat Squadron. The Danish instructors taught close-quarters battle, tactical combat casualty care, operational planning, and shooting. The Ghanaian officers assisted in planning the lectures and acted as instructors for some of them. The training was a bilateral agreement between the two nations and was the first of its kind. During fieldwork in both Nigeria and Ghana, I watched several hours of close-quarters battle training. One sequence often rehearsed was "how to enter a room." In interviews with Danish operators, this was called "how to hit the door," or "how to open the door."<sup>67</sup> During interviews, most operators would get up and demonstrate how it is done. Before I turn to the specific training sequence, here is a short introduction:

The Ghana Navy's Special Boat Squadron (Ghana Navy SBS) is a new unit, formed in 2016. In recent years, their basic training to become SBS operators has taken place in Nigeria. As of 2022, the Ghana Navy have established their own Ghana Navy SBS Basic Operative Course, in collaboration with the U.S. Navy and the Danish Special Operations Command.

The training sequence used as an example below is conducted by "Hero" and "Nice." "Hero" is one of the best soldiers in the Ghana team. He had several years of experience in the Ghana Navy before being accepted into the SBS. In the training he often takes the role of leader of the smaller teams. "I had a civilian position in the Ghana Navy, but later I proceeded to learn how to shoot and other military skills."<sup>68</sup> Hero is also the best shooter on the team, which earns him respect from his teammates.

"Nice" is quiet and not as experienced as Hero. He joined the Ghana Navy SBS due to his extraordinary skills in sport, especially running.<sup>69</sup> Nice often works together with Hero,

when pairs are formed in the team. In the following, I will show how the two operators go hit the door, rehearsing in a house in a military exercise area (recording by the author, October 2020). The grasshoppers were singing loud and clear, as a contrast to the silent concentration among the soldiers:

‘Hero’ and ‘Nice’ are rehearsing how to enter through a doorway. They are both wearing bulletproof vests on top of their uniform shirts. They are ready with their weapons pointing forward. Hero is in front, Nice is right behind him. Gently, Nice is touching his buddy’s thigh – as a sign for him to start moving. Hero starts walking slowly forward. He steps sideways as he passes the doorway. Hero is looking for possible enemies in the room behind the doorway, and his weapon is pointing inside the room as he moves towards the left. Hero is now standing on the left side of the doorway.

Simultaneously, Nice has proceeded towards the doorway, but stays on the right side. As Hero walks towards the left side, Nice is leaning his torso as much as he can towards the left, in order to look into the room and scout for enemy activity. They have to move as a team, and they adjust their own steps by sensing their buddy’s movements and watching out of the corner of their eyes. Now they are facing each other, pausing for a moment at each side of the doorway. They have eye contact. A few seconds later, Nice elevates his weapon as a sign to Hero to start entering the room. Hero is in doubt, he asks silently: ‘Go?’ Nice confirms by nodding. Hero enters the room, with speed, crossing from the left side of the doorway to the right side of the room. Then Nice follows from the right side of the doorway to the left side of the room. The sequence is over, and next team is ready for rehearsal.

The sequence took 24 seconds in total. An instructor said the performance was “too slow, they could have been faster.”<sup>70</sup> Twenty-four seconds to enter a room in a simulated high-risk environment involves choreography, teamwork, and trust in your buddy—a dangerous dance with danger or death. The soldiers must accelerate their movements and their communication to be able to conduct this sequence at higher speed. Rosa defines acceleration as “quantitative growth or increase in quantity per unit of time.”<sup>71</sup> In communication, acceleration refers to “the number of signs transmitted per microsecond.”<sup>72</sup> Microseconds and seconds are exactly what the instructors are trying to gain when they teach close-quarters battle. This involves the optimization of every sign and movement in order to accelerate one’s speed when the situation becomes dangerous. However, the operators have

to learn to apply the right pace at the right moment. High speed is not always an advantage, as David, a Danish instructor explains:

The Ghana soldiers have to learn to focus on speed, so things do not develop faster than their technique can keep up with the pace. When they enter a room, they have to analyze the room and the enemies there ... whether it is an enemy or a civilian ... from their analysis, they have to be able to take many decisions. If they move too fast, if their speed is accelerating, then they are not able to do a proper analysis. Then civilians can be shot by accident, or you can be shot in the back, because you've overlooked somebody hiding there in the corner.<sup>73</sup>

According to David, technique and pace need to be balanced, so the soldiers work in a constantly shifting mode between analysis and decisions/actions. Sometimes they move fast, at other times more slowly. This delicate balance of speed gives the team their safety in a high-risk operation. Ken explains the difference between two types of pace:

'safety with low speed' is what we call CQC—combat clearings—which is the slow version, where we keep a high level of safety, and with slower speed. If we enter a room, we try to look inside the room from a distance as far as possible. We try to look through all the windows ... maybe we open the door first. We keep our distance, we watch carefully. All right, what is happening? Anybody inside? Before you enter the room, you watch as carefully as possible...so if anything is there, you can shoot it from a distance. This procedure takes a little longer. So, if we run HRO—"hostage rescue operations"—then time is a factor in the sense that ... when they [the enemy] know we are here, there is a risk that they will kill the hostages. So here, we work with higher risk, and we enter the rooms faster. Because we want to speed up the procedure.<sup>74</sup>

The procedure is made up of several sequences, each trained and rehearsed repeatedly. The above example of hitting the door is an example of how the soldiers concentrate on an unknown, possible enemy in the next room. How do the Danish operators prepare for this task? Ken explains:

the simple answer is that we just rehearse the same procedure endlessly again and again and again. We make small adjustments, re-design the rooms, place different things in the rooms, in different sizes—maybe change how a door is placed. The purpose is that you learn how to flex, according to which room you enter.<sup>75</sup>

It is a process with focus and concentration. Jack says operators apply a certain “battlemind.” “You are ready to react if in danger, you release adrenaline. Continually, you are very focused on the position of your team members.”<sup>76</sup> Battlemind is both a focus on your immediate surroundings and a biological state in the body, fueled by the release of adrenaline. Another operator, Watson, explained that these sequences in close-quarters battle “is standard work, which needs to be over-trained, in order to create safety for the operators.”<sup>77</sup> The routinization of body movements among the team provides safety for the soldiers. Dealing with danger is their job. The more they rehearse the standard procedures, the more flexibility and speed they have in a real-life operation. Applying the right pace through the corridors is also about “flow.” Flow in special operations is a collective effort of concentration and coordination. The importance of flow and its relation to speed will be discussed below. Flow with speed was explained by Jack and Balder as follows:

Flow is when things are running smoothly, and there is no insecurity. Team members are like a living organism, not a machine. It is easier to read a person in motion. If one person stops, everything stops. So, flow is when we move on, we are on track, there is no stalling. You have to follow the team and the body movements of your buddy. The most important thing in close-quarters battle is body language. When we know ourselves well in the team, we know each other’s body language.<sup>78</sup>

Maintaining a constant speed through the corridors, with flow and clear signs from each team member, is the ideal. In order not to reveal to one’s opponent that a SOF team is nearby, every movement has to be as quiet as possible. Stalling is the instructor’s nightmare. With the clock ticking, if a team stalls or stops time is lost, and the goal of rescuing the hostages seems to move further away.

“Flow comes when we have been training for years together,” says Carl.

because each person has a unique body language. Even at night, I can still see who is in front of me by looking at the way he walks. As a newcomer to the team you often hesitate—and when you hesitate you are spoiling the flow. When we move forward, we are like dogs being whipped, but our leader can stop us if we are moving too fast. But, if you stop totally, you place yourself in the kill-zone.<sup>79</sup>

To the instructors, flow is synchronization of team body language and a collaborative effort to achieve the same speed in their movements. Studies in psychology situate flow in individual action and the individual mind. In psychological terms, flow

tends to occur when a person’s skills are fully involved in overcoming a challenge that is just about manageable ... when high challenges

are matched with high skills, then the deep involvement that sets flow apart from ordinary life is likely to occur ... Because of the total demand on psychic energy, a person in flow is completely focused. There is no space in consciousness for distracting thoughts, irrelevant feelings. Self-consciousness disappears, yet one feels stronger than usual. The sense of time is distorted: hours seem to pass by in minutes.<sup>80</sup>

These reflections are relevant when we consider what happens in the close-quarters battle training. High challenges matched with high skills—and here high-risk—are characteristics of high-performance teams such as SOF. My material points to an understanding of flow as social microprocesses in groups. Flow is not only an individual experience of cohesion with the surroundings, as argued by Csikszentmihalyi.<sup>81</sup> My empirical findings suggest that flow is also a collaborative effort in the team—a synchronization of body language, concentration, and intention. Flow is established when the team succeeds in their *group* effort.

In the Nigeria field study, the team dynamic of the soldiers was corrected again and again in the close-quarters battle training. The team task requires intense concentration and advanced control of the body. Therefore, lack of concentration and imprecise body signs make instructors intervene, asking the team to stop, and then starting the drill all over again. They rehearse it once more, twice and several times until they reach perfection, or team fatigue. The sequence—how to proceed through a corridor, or how to hit the door—has to be adopted by all team members as a routine, as muscle memory. Here, the interesting effect of the routinization of body movements is an ability for soldiers to switch on a different type of thinking. They can respond quickly—accelerate their reactions—to the emerging threats around them, balance their efforts, and select the right speed, without losing precision. It is their ability to accelerate speed when needed which makes them succeed—their bodies and weapons work as advanced acceleratory technologies.<sup>82</sup>

### **Speed in the Learning Processes: Why so Slowly?**

During training in Ghana, a small conflict developed concerning the speed in the learning process. The then Commander of the Ghana Navy SBS said that he wanted “more knowledge” and “higher speed” in the training—“we want to be challenged.”<sup>83</sup> The leader of the Ghana team had high ambitions for progress with learning during the two weeks of training.

During training in Nigeria, an instructor asked the Ghanaian soldiers where they learned their basic skills. They answered: “We have seen it in movies. We watch a lot of these action movies.”<sup>84</sup> Apparently, they use the movies as lectures in close-quarters battle and try to copy the movements of the movie heroes. “We actually made more difficult tasks for the Ghana soldiers during training. They solved everything. They were very good and

worked with discipline.”<sup>85</sup> In recent years, the Ghanaian soldiers have received training from different international partners. However, they used movies as the reference for their skills. This led to a culture clash of perceptions. The instructors do not appreciate the idea that their expertise—obtained through many years of repetitive training of sequences and procedures—can be compared to an actor acting in a movie. When the Ghanaian SBS commander wanted “higher speed” in the learning process, it might be because he has acquired a perception of the competent and well-trained soldier from watching movies. Whether this perception has its reference in movies or training with international partners or a combination of the two, the impatient commander wanted his team of soldiers to develop high combat skills as quickly as possible. The Danish instructors disagreed with introducing a higher speed in the learning process. The instructors wanted many repetitions of the same sequence and a more gradual and slower progression. Many repetitions ensure that the procedures become body routine. In Ken’s words:

We talked a lot about this issue. You have to be able to crawl before you can walk. But the Ghanaian soldiers would like to start by running! So, culturally, we designed lectures somewhere in between. We had to slow things down in order to be sure they understood the underlying principles and the focus on details.<sup>86</sup>

What the instructors describe above is what Downey calls an “ad hoc scaffolding of imitation,”<sup>87</sup> which often rises spontaneously in close-quarters battle training. Students adjust to the demands of their instructors, and the Danish instructors improvise themes and skills training according to how fast the students learn and their level of competence in military skills. However, some of the instructors think that this affects the learning process due to the time pressures in the few weeks they have been allocated. “At home [in Denmark], we proceed gradually, step by step. Here, we have to do quantum leaps. It is very difficult to change body routines, and this type of battle training is very stressful because you have to concentrate so much and you get very tired.”<sup>88</sup>

Reflecting on Downey’s concept of ad-hoc scaffolding introduced above, I suggest that imitation in close-quarters battle training is not only about the role of the instructor. The scaffolding learning aid can also be established by the buddy or the peers in the group. Several instructors underline how “a high-level team can ‘lift up’ a newcomer to become better than he actually is, while conversely a less competent team can ‘pull down’ a good soldier.”<sup>89</sup> In close-quarters battle, improving body language—constantly rehearsing to refine one’s control of one’s body and weapon—is the key to a successful outcome of the battle through the corridors. To be successful in close-quarters battle, you need to rehearse the details with the utmost precision and make many repetitions of the same sequence. In the following section, Ken explains how this is done.

## Precision and Control of the Body

Ken explains how precision and detail are vital for the team to succeed. His expectation is that the training in Ghana will increase the soldiers' awareness of details.

I think the Ghanaians are less detail oriented. For instance, when you have to open a door. You have to be fully aware about:

Where is your finger placed on the trigger? How tight you hold on to the weapon, which foot is closest to the door, which angle your foot position is.

At home [in the Frogman Corps], when we start a day with close-quarters battle, we can easily use two full hours just to train how to open a door. It is our mindset—you have to rehearse with a lot of repetitions. You can always become a little bit better ... Down to the smallest detail, you have to be in control of your body. If I can see from the body language of my team buddy that he will be entering through the door very soon ... then it means something to me: I have to make my hip ready to go in right after him ... maybe I will shift my foot position. So, when he enters, I am already behind him ... I will almost touch him on our way through the door. That would be the perfect entry, so you can minimize things [the risks] – you almost clash ... you cross each other very fast, which would be the perfect one.

To be able to do that, I have to see by his body language that he is preparing to enter that door, and I make myself ready. So, when he takes his first step, I follow right behind him. So, one person enters, and he is watching one side of the room. Then his buddy has to watch the other side, where the first cannot see because he has turned his back. So, his whole life will then depend on the fact that his buddy will enter a split second later. Otherwise, he will be shot in the back.<sup>90</sup>

Ken explains that entering through the door together with his buddy within a split second would be perfect. This will minimize the risk and ensure that they will shoot the enemy before the enemy has time to shoot them. Speed provides security.

Above, I discussed how Csikszentmihalyi<sup>91</sup> refers to flow as an individual experience of cohesion with one's surroundings or a given task. His argument is that a person can only obtain flow when psychic energy is focused. In this field of soldiering skills, the primacy is given to the team. In close-quarters battle, flow is a *collective* effort: minds are focused and in sync. Everybody has an eye and an ear on his colleague behind, at the side or in front of him. "The team needs to cooperate as one body, otherwise they will fail. To fail

during CQB missions means they will die.”<sup>92</sup> “SOF works with a minimum—if any—back-up. Everybody on the team works together—shoulder to shoulder. Stand firm together, or we will all die.”<sup>93</sup> As we have seen above, the soldiers are interdependent when they perform in high-risk environments. They have to be legible in body positions and intentions, so team members can read their signs. Stalling will spoil the flow of movement and risk the lives of the team members.

### **A “Communitas” of Brothers**

The team of soldiers is a band of brothers performing the art of Naval special warfare. The Danish instructors are born from the same legendary entrance exam in the Frogman Corps. The Ghanaian operators have graduated from a similar entrance exam in Nigeria. During breaks in the training, the Ghanaian operators told me how they survived the ultimate test during the entrance exam—the so-called “Hell Week.” Deprived of sleep and food, they had to push their bodies to the limit, but they handled it and passed successfully. In the entrance exam for the Frogman Corps, a similar “Hell Week” tests the soldiers’ endurance and willpower. Often, the instructors referred to the entrance exam when they were explaining where they learned their basic skills. During the entrance exam, the aspirants are shaped as future operators while also establishing very deep social ties to the group.

Victor Turner writes about “communitas,” or the bonds that are developed during such transition periods.<sup>94</sup> Turner focused on rites of passage and liminality in sacred rituals where young boys are tested in order to elevate their status and become men. The aspirants in these transitional phases “tend to develop an intense comradeship and egalitarianism.”<sup>95</sup> Because of the nature of this transition—with extreme pressure being placed on the initiands—they “submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders.”<sup>96</sup> The challenge here, the entrance-exam period to become a Frogman is an “anti-structure” in relation to the normal world outside the transition phase.<sup>97</sup> During the entrance exam, the soldiers are pushed beyond their personal mental limits in order to shape them as “new” individuals who are closer team members. This social bond of “communitas”<sup>98</sup> is unbreakable and lasts throughout their lifetime serving as operators in the Frogman Corps, as well as beyond their identity as professional members of the SOF. In conversation during fieldwork in Ghana, some of the instructors said that they consider their colleagues in the Frogman Corps as their “real family” or “my brothers.” My fieldwork data show that the operators have a strong sense of responsibility for the team members and their well-being. It is this feeling of “brotherhood” that enables them to conduct successful, speedy operations. Across national boundaries and other differences, the Ghanaian and Danish soldiers share features of the same type of training. This is the foundation reference for SOF operators’ international “brotherhood.” The group coherence creates an open atmosphere and an amenable learning environment for cross-cultural training events. Between team members, their “mutuality of being”<sup>99</sup> is rooted partly in the common experience of being “born” from the same type of entrance exam, when they had to go to “hell” and back.

## **Learning Body Positions: Apprenticeship and Imitation**

The conclusion from the close-quarters battle training is clear: in order to obtain the right speed, it is essential for the soldiers to follow the team and their buddy's body movements.

In 1935, Mauss published an essay entitled "Techniques of the Body."<sup>100</sup> Mauss reminds us that body movements are learned from others—body techniques are inherently social, biological, and psychological. Mauss's contribution was to develop the social perspective, arguing that all body techniques are acquired through education. Mauss writes: "The body is man's first and most natural instrument."<sup>101</sup> As for mankind in general, the soldier's body is his own instrument in warfare. To understand how we learn our culturally determined body language, Mauss argues:

In every technique, there is an apprenticeship.<sup>102</sup>...What takes place is a prestigious imitation. The child, the adult, imitates actions which have succeeded and which he has seen successfully performed by people in whom he has confidence and who have authority over him. The action is imposed from without, from above, even if it is an exclusively biological action, involving his body. The individual borrows the series of movements which constitute it from the action executed in front of him or with him by others. It is precisely this notion of the prestige of the person who performs the ordered, authorised, tested action vis-à-vis the imitating individual that contains all the social element.<sup>103</sup>

The close-quarters battle training can be seen as a cross-cultural apprenticeship. SOF instructors from abroad, in this case Denmark, teach Ghanaian apprentices. In this two-week course, the Danish instructors have the authority. But they are themselves apprentices, having learned their body techniques from other instructors in both the Frogman Corps and international training exercises. In his study on imitation in the martial art known as Capoeira, Downey writes how

novices carefully watch experienced players, haltingly try to copy techniques, rehearse movements over and over again until they become expert, and, in turn, become models for other novices. They tend to learn the art's movements and musical techniques by seeing and doing them rather than by talking about them – even when instructors and students share a language.<sup>104</sup>

This description fits the close-quarters battle training. I observed how the instructors often rehearsed a small detail with, for example, handling a weapon. Weapons handling is a prerequisite for the ability to conduct close-quarters battle operations. Instructors would demonstrate movements and sequences taken at a slower pace in order for the students to follow. According to Downey, the instructor "might repeat the movement more slowly or

break a sequence into smaller, easier-to-grasp component steps.”<sup>105</sup> As we have seen, Downey refers to this as “scaffolding,” as an aid that allows a learner to perform tasks that are initially beyond his or her ability alone.<sup>106</sup>

However, the imitation that takes place is not only based on observation. Downey argues that an imitative learning process is a “complex, two-way form of interaction”<sup>107</sup> and that imitation is “interactive rather than uni-directional.”<sup>108</sup> The Ghanaian soldiers give feedback to the Danish instructors and/or their own commanders. The soldiers ask questions and talk quietly among themselves about the training elements. They process the learning in different ways. The instructors try to read the student’s body language: “sometimes we think the students lose concentration.”<sup>109</sup> Or the instructors might use

physical contact such as a pat on the back, in order to create mutual dialogue and a safe learning environment ... we constantly evaluate the students during training. If they master a skill already, we skip that part and teach them something different, with more challenges.<sup>110</sup>

When teaching in this cross-cultural environment, the Danish instructors often start the learning process with a “zero-drill.”<sup>111</sup> The instructors ask the students to perform a simple task in order to assess their levels of competence. In doing so they establish a baseline that is sensitive to the cultural context and the trainees’ skills levels, adjusting their plans for the training accordingly. They sketch a plan for the lectures but are also flexible and ready to change it in order to create the best learning environment.

### **Conclusion: Speed and Acceleration Revisited**

In this article, the aim has been to contribute to an understanding of speed as “processual matter.”<sup>112</sup> The empirical findings suggest that speed is a collaborative effort involving concentration and the coordination of body language between soldiers. The concept of speed was introduced by means of Virilio’s critique of modern society and his argument about the supremacy of the “Western man” in colonial times.<sup>113</sup> In the training observed in Ghana, we learned that the “African man” criticized his Western instructors for progressing too slowly with the learning process. Hence, my data calls for further exploration of nuances in the understanding of speed as “performed pace,” especially in cross-cultural environments where different perceptions of speed will clash. Observation of and reflections on close-quarters battle training revealed how finding the right speed is a collaborative effort. The smallest team unit in special operations is two soldiers. The soldiers are highly dependent on each other, and their buddy’s ability to apply the right speed makes the difference between success and failure—between life and death. Rosa’s concept of technological acceleration<sup>114</sup> was also helpful in analyzing the processes of training for special warfare. The procedures being trained are goal-directed sequences fluctuating between fast and slow speed. The body techniques of SOF soldiers are drivers of technological acceleration—their body is their technology. It is their ability to accelerate during the quick, secret insertion of troops or the quick reaction to evolving threats that gives them their operational advantage. In addition, it

is the SOF's ability to *control* speed and acceleration that make them succeed in warfare. Rosa also considered processes of social deceleration<sup>115</sup>—things slowing down acceleration, or even hindering acceleration. My field data show how SOF are trained to overcome and exceed deceleration, thus testing the body to its physical and mental limits and beyond. In close-quarters battle, only a team member (lacking speed/stalling), a smart enemy, or fatal injuries can slow down the team through the corridors. This article argues that speed is not an abstract principle of modern society. Rather, speed is a social temporality in the risky environment in which West African and Danish Naval SOF are training to fight. In future studies, a focus on speed can open up new perspectives on team processes. So far, the concept of speed seems to be under-researched in anthropology and sociology, due to the long-term focus on traditions and stability in social dynamics. In my view, social science and war studies can benefit from studying speed as practice, as a process fluctuating between fast and slow.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Field notes, Obangame Express exercise, Nigeria March 2020.
- <sup>2</sup> Hereafter, for brevity referred to as ‘the Frogman Corps.’ To protect the work of the Frogman Corps and their partner units in West Africa, I agreed to comply with their rules for operational security. In this study, it was a condition for access to the training missions that I did not disclose the exact number of instructors or students. Names of locations are not mentioned, and the names of both African and European operators have been changed in order to protect their identity.
- <sup>3</sup> Birger E Soerensen and Martin Madsen, “A Remedy to Crises: Danish Special Operations Forces in Whole-of-Government Stabilization Engagements” (Defence Analysis Capstone Project Report, Master thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2016).
- <sup>4</sup> The training in Nigeria was scheduled for three weeks. However, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a government order to withdraw the Danish instructors from the training after only one week.
- <sup>5</sup> Anna Simons, *The Company They Keep: Life Inside the U. S. Army Special Forces* (New York: Free Press, 1997).
- <sup>6</sup> Tone Danielsen, *Making Warriors in the Global Era. An anthropological study of institutional apprenticeship: selection, training, education, and everyday life in the Norwegian Naval Special Operations Command* (Oslo: University of Oslo, Faculty of Social Sciences, 2015).
- <sup>7</sup> Karina Mayland, Rikke Haugegaard and Allan Shapiro, “Thinkers at the Cutting Edge: Innovation in the Danish Special Operations Forces” in ed. Gitte H Christensen, *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Special Operations Forces*, Conference Proceedings, no. 4. (Copenhagen: Royal Danish Defence College, 2017), 88-107.
- <sup>8</sup> Virilio, *Speed and Politics* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1986).
- <sup>9</sup> Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).
- <sup>10</sup> Marcel Mauss, *Techniques of the Body* (New York: Taylor & Francis Online, 2006), <http://doi.org/10.1080/03085147300000003>.
- <sup>11</sup> Greg Downey, “Scaffolding Imitation in Capoeira: Physical Education and Enculturation in an Afro-Brazilian Art,” *American Anthropologist* New Series, Vol. 110, No. 2 (2008): 204-213.
- <sup>12</sup> Virilio, *Speed and Politics*.
- <sup>13</sup> Bratton quoted in Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, 7.
- <sup>14</sup> Virilio, *Speed and Politics*.
- <sup>15</sup> Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, 7.
- <sup>16</sup> Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, 8.
- <sup>17</sup> Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, 14.
- <sup>18</sup> Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, 14.
- <sup>19</sup> Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, 70.
- <sup>20</sup> Vincent Duclos, Thomás Sánchez Criado and Vinh-Kim Nguyen, “Speed – an introduction,” *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 32, Issue 1 (2017): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca32.1.01>.

- <sup>21</sup> Virilio, *Speed and Politics*.
- <sup>22</sup> Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, 149.
- <sup>23</sup> Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, 150-151.
- <sup>24</sup> William Wagner, *Lightning Bugs and other Reconnaissance Drones; The can-do story of Ryan's unmanned spy planes* (Fallbrook, CA: Aero Publishers, 1982).
- <sup>25</sup> Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 3.
- <sup>26</sup> Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 4.
- <sup>27</sup> Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 3.
- <sup>28</sup> Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 4.
- <sup>29</sup> See e.g., Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983) or Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. Routledge Classics, (New York: Routledge, 2004).
- <sup>30</sup> Judy Wajcman and Nigel Dodd, ed. *The Sociology of Speed: Digital, Organizational and Social Temporalities*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- <sup>31</sup> Duclos et al., "Speed," 2.
- <sup>32</sup> Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 4.
- <sup>33</sup> Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 5.
- <sup>34</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (New York: Modern Library, 1997).
- <sup>35</sup> Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 5.
- <sup>36</sup> Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 7.
- <sup>37</sup> Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, 70.
- <sup>38</sup> Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 6.
- <sup>39</sup> Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 6-10.
- <sup>40</sup> Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 6, emphases in original.
- <sup>41</sup> Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, 69.
- <sup>42</sup> Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 6.
- <sup>43</sup> See discussion of Mauss' treatment of techniques of the body later in the article, cf. Mauss, "Techniques."
- <sup>44</sup> Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 14-16.
- <sup>45</sup> Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 14-16.
- <sup>46</sup> Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 15.
- <sup>47</sup> Duclos et al., "Speed," 7.
- <sup>48</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *NATO Standard Allied Joint Doctrine for Special Operations*. Edition B, version 1. Final Draft. (NATO Standardization Office: Allied Joint Publication, 2019).

<sup>49</sup> NATO, Joint Doctrine, 7.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with manager, the Frogman Corps, September 2019.

<sup>51</sup> Olivier Schmitt, *Allies that Count: Junior Partners in Coalition Warfare*. (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2018).

<sup>52</sup> “Annual Report”, Danish Shipping, 3, accessed 15 March 2021, <https://www.danishshipping.dk/2020/en/>.

<sup>53</sup> “2020 satte rekord i kidnapninger af søfolk i Guineabugten”, Shippingwatch newsletter, accessed 18 January 2021, [www.shippingwatch.dk](http://www.shippingwatch.dk).

<sup>54</sup> According to ICC International Maritime Bureau, year 2021 saw a decrease in piracy attacks worldwide. However, the Gulf of Guinea remains a hotspot for this type of crime, with 57 crew kidnapped in seven incidents. Source, accessed 6 February 2023: <https://www.icc-ccs.org/index.php/1314-caution-urged-despite-lowest-reported-maritime-piracy-incidents-since-1994>.

<sup>55</sup> “Annual Report,” Danish Shipping, 2, accessed 15 March 2021, <https://www.danishshipping.dk/2020/en/>.

<sup>56</sup> “Special Boat Squadron sharpens skills,” Ghana Armed Forces, accessed 18 March 2021, [www.gafonline.mil.gh/news](http://www.gafonline.mil.gh/news).

<sup>57</sup> Folketinget (Danish Parliament), “Resolution B295,” accessed 27 May 2021, <https://www.ft.dk/samling/20201/beslutningsforslag/b295/spm/1/index.htm>.

<sup>58</sup> ”Danmarks militære indsats mod pirateri og anden maritim kriminalitet i Guineabugten 2016-2022” [“Denmark’s military engagement to counter piracy and other maritime crime in the Gulf of Guinea 2016-2022”], fact sheet handout, press briefing, (Copenhagen: Danish Ministry of Defence, 16 March 2021).

<sup>59</sup> Audio recording by author.

<sup>60</sup> Kwesi Aning, Peter Albrecht and Anne B. Nielsen, *West Africa Security Perspectives. Kwesi Aning explains*. DIIS Report 2021:03 (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies), 51-56.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Jack and Balder, instructors Danish Frogman Corps, March 2020.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Head of Branch, Danish Special Operations Command, April 2019.

<sup>63</sup> NATO, Joint Doctrine, 2.

<sup>64</sup> Field notes, Nigeria, March 2020.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Jack and Balder, March 2020.

<sup>66</sup> Rosa, Social Acceleration.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with Watson, team leader Danish Frogman Corps, August 2019; interview with Ken, instructor Danish Frogman Corps, February 2021.

<sup>68</sup> Conversation with Hero. Ghana, November 2020.

<sup>69</sup> Conversation with Nice, Ghana, November 2020.

- <sup>70</sup> Field work observation, Ghana October 2020.
- <sup>71</sup> Hartmut Rosa, “De-Synchronization, Dynamic Stabilization, Dispositional Squeeze: The Problem of Temporal Mismatch”. In: Judy Wajcman and Nigel Dodd, ed. *The Sociology of Speed: Digital, Organizational and Social Temporalities*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 35, emphases in original.
- <sup>72</sup> Hartmut Rosa, “De-Synchronization”, 35.
- <sup>73</sup> Interview with David, instructor Danish Frogman Corps, February 2021.
- <sup>74</sup> Interview with Ken, instructor Danish Frogman Corps, February 2021.
- <sup>75</sup> Interview with Ken, February 2021.
- <sup>76</sup> Interview Jack and Balder, March 2020.
- <sup>77</sup> Interview with Watson, August 2019.
- <sup>78</sup> Interview with Jack and Balder, March 2020.
- <sup>79</sup> Interview with Carl, instructor Danish Frogman Corps, March 2020.
- <sup>80</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life* (New York: BasicBooks, 1997), 30-31.
- <sup>81</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow*.
- <sup>82</sup> Hartmut Rosa, “De-Synchronization”, 41.
- <sup>83</sup> Interview Wilfred, Commander Ghana Navy SBS, November 2020.
- <sup>84</sup> Interview with Carl, March 2020.
- <sup>85</sup> Interview with Carl, March 2020.
- <sup>86</sup> Interview with Ken, February 2021.
- <sup>87</sup> Greg Downey, “Scaffolding Imitation,” 207.
- <sup>88</sup> Interview Jack and Balder, March 2020.
- <sup>89</sup> Interview with David, February 2021; interview with Ken, February 2021.
- <sup>90</sup> Interview with Ken, February 2021.
- <sup>91</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow*.
- <sup>92</sup> Tone Danielsen, *Making Warriors*, 218.
- <sup>93</sup> Conversation with Head of Branch, Danish Special Operations Command, June 2020.
- <sup>94</sup> Victor Turner, “Liminality and Communitas.” In: *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, (Chicago: Aldine Publishing 1969), 94-113.
- <sup>95</sup> Turner, “Liminality,” 95.
- <sup>96</sup> Turner, “Liminality,” 96.
- <sup>97</sup> The “anti-structure” might become more permanent, so that the period in which it is established actually becomes the foundation for a flipped perspective. The anti-structure might develop into a permanent normality, with society outside it. I thank my colleague Anders Klitmøller, Royal Danish Defence College, for this interesting point.

<sup>98</sup> Turner, "Liminality."

<sup>99</sup> Marshall Sahlins, *What Kinship is – and is not* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>100</sup> Marcel Mauss, *Techniques*.

<sup>101</sup> Marcel Mauss, *Techniques*, 75.

<sup>102</sup> Marcel Mauss, *Techniques*, 71.

<sup>103</sup> Marcel Mauss, *Techniques*, 73-74.

<sup>104</sup> Greg Downey, "Scaffolding Imitation," 205.

<sup>105</sup> Greg Downey, "Scaffolding Imitation," 207.

<sup>106</sup> Greg Downey, "Scaffolding Imitation," 206.

<sup>107</sup> Greg Downey, "Scaffolding Imitation," 206.

<sup>108</sup> Greg Downey, "Scaffolding Imitation," 206.

<sup>109</sup> Interview with David and Christian, instructors Danish Frogman Corps, November 2020.

<sup>110</sup> Interview, Simon and Michael, instructors Danish Frogman Corps, March 2020.

<sup>111</sup> Interview with Simon and Michael, March 2020.

<sup>112</sup> Duclos et al., "Speed," 2.

<sup>113</sup> Virilio, *Speed and Politics*.

<sup>114</sup> Rosa, *Social Acceleration*.

<sup>115</sup> Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 14-16.

## Dynamic Ethical Decision-Making and its Importance to Special Operations

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### ABSTRACT

The article considers the process of ethical decision-making in the unique and ever-changing world of special operations. This is accomplished by initially reviewing the evolutionary development of Western thinking about ethics and summarizing aspects of the three classical schools of ethics therein: deontological, consequentialism, and virtue ethics. The article illustrates the broad, varied, and evolving scope of activities demanded of military special operations, as well as describes the concept of employing a dynamic approach to ethical decision-making incorporating facets of all three classical schools in a systematic manner. The author discusses the potential positive impact of the dynamic ethical decision-making model on special operations and explains how it fits with other ethical efforts being pursued in the special operations community. Finally, the author recommends a potential path to implementation via multiple reinforcement methods, especially practical ethical decision-making scenarios threaded throughout training and education programs for those in special operations.

### KEYWORDS

special operations, ethics, decision-making, ethical decision-making, SOF, Special Operations Forces ethics

While reasonable people may argue about how the term “ethics” is defined and even more about what ethical conduct is, few would argue that the concept of ethics and behaving in an ethical manner is meaningless or relatively unimportant. A look across a panoply of reference sources would result in a broad number of definitions for the term. However, at least half of those formal descriptions, regardless of whether found in electronic form or in old dusty books on a shelf, would mention the terms morals or morality. How important is moral ethical behavior? Albert Einstein once said that “the most important human endeavor is the striving for morality in our actions. Our inner balance and even our very existence depend on it.”<sup>1</sup> In its simplest terms, ethics is the consideration of right and wrong in human

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behavior, be it actions or inactions, and its importance could even be considered existential in nature.

At least in the Western world, the subject of ethics has evolved through the ages of human history into three competing schools of thought. While some ethicists might add another category or two, virtually all agree with the three classical views of ethics. A look around the globe will reveal similar schools of thought in other regions, albeit with different names but similar approaches to how to decide right from wrong. This is likely because evaluation is driven by measuring sticks such as publicly known rules and what the effects are on individuals and society in general.

Over human history, a few different approaches have evolved to determine right and wrong in the conduct of human affairs. While other names could be used, the three primary schools are deontology, consequentialism, and virtue ethics.<sup>2</sup> Before advancing into the application of ethics to special operations, a discussion of each approach is prudent. Therefore, we will review the three classical schools of ethics, the idea of a dynamic approach incorporating all three, the impact on special operations, and a potential path to implementation.

### **The Three Classical Schools of Ethics**

#### ***Deontological (Duties Derived from Rules)***

The most basic and fundamental concept of ethical behavior is that people must fulfill their duties imposed by the rest of society. These duties could be derived from a variety of sources. This ethical approach could be simply described as following the rules. The rules could come from statutes, laws, codes, or other legal decrees. They could be embodied in regulations, directives, governing doctrine, or mandatory policies. They could simply be the fruit of relationships in one's family, business, or community. The rules might even be unwritten traditions or social mores which are time honored and routinely accepted as imposing duties on members of a society. Finally, these duties could arise out of the rights a person has in their society. The bottom line is that the rules that exist demand compliance by the members of society and, in the deontological approach, one is ethical if he or she complies with these rules.

The problem with this approach is that neither human society nor the environment in which it exists are static. Time changes people and the world in which they live, while at the same time, the creation of rules is reactive and suffers from a time lag. This has been especially true in recent times as technology and globalism have pushed boundaries and changed the substantive center at a geometrically increasing pace. Moreover, even if some activities being considered by a person or group of people are in an area that has not seen much recent change, the rules rarely cover all the potential aggravating and mitigating facts and circumstances that could arise and confront a person making ethical decisions.

#### ***Consequentialism***

A second classical school is based on consideration of the impact that human actions (or, as always, inactions) may have on the people involved. This approach to ethics is akin to the economic concept of utilitarianism. In considering the consequences of the spectrum of potential actions, what is right is determined by which conduct results in the greatest good to the greatest number of people who are involved or impacted. This makes the ethical decision something of an equation. Using the consequentialist approach to ethics, the right thing is what is most beneficial to the majority of the people.

The concern with this view of ethics is obvious almost directly on its face. The primary focus is exclusively the majority. What happens when the negative impact to the minority is monumental such as death, dismemberment, or other life altering harm? Under this form of ethical analysis alone, the enslavement of the minority for the benefit of the majority would be ethically acceptable. This is not to say that taking actions which benefit most of the people is inherently bad, but rather it is just too simplistic when used in isolation.

### ***Virtue Ethics***

The last category is primarily attributed to the ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle. Although he has provided foundational ideas for many aspects of the Western World, none have had a more influential impact than his thoughts on ethical decision-making from how it is developed, what keeps it honed, and how it will fade and die in the absence of use. Like most of Aristotelian thought, the idea of virtue ethics is focused on the concept of balance. Finding the ethical path is the result of aiming for a virtue or set of virtues which sits on a spectrum between extremes. One of the best examples, especially in the context of discussing military actions, would be the virtue of bravery. Being brave is finding the right balance between cowardice and recklessness ... not being too frightened to act when needed, but also not being too rash in acting nor excessive in action.

While the other two classical schools have a more concrete functionality because they consist of knowing the rules or accomplishing a rough equation, practicing virtue ethics is much more of an art form. Instead of coldly knowing a duty or calculating potential consequences, one must feel his or her way to the right course of action. One of the most important elements of Aristotle's thought on the concept is that it is the practice of doing the balancing act which allows a person to develop ethical behavior, and the continued regular use of the practice which embeds and sharpens the skill. However, without practice the skill withers which is what today could be called moral fading.

### **The Application for Special Operations Forces (SOF)**

Some might say that any one of these approaches to making ethical decisions is not adequate exclusively for human activity in general and that is a very valid point. However, the inadequacy of any one of these classical schools is particularly true for the world of special operations. This is because of the breadth and unique nature of the special operations mission.

The U.S. Congress has directed that United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) be responsible for the activities listed below.<sup>3</sup>

- (1) Direct action
- (2) Strategic reconnaissance
- (3) Unconventional warfare
- (4) Foreign internal defense
- (5) Civil affairs
- (6) Military information support operations
- (7) Counterterrorism
- (8) Humanitarian assistance
- (9) Theater search and rescue
- (10) Other activities as may be specified by the President or the Secretary of Defense

Moreover, recent doctrine modified the statutory list above by specifically adding security force assistance, counterinsurgency, and countering weapons of mass destruction to that list.<sup>4</sup> It would be difficult to find a broader, more diverse set of missions in the U.S. military or any governmental agency for that matter. Moreover, many of these activities are done in an environment which is both complex and constantly changing, often at a relatively high speed. Therefore, the idea that any one single classical approach would suffice in guiding ethics for the SOF community is not realistic in any fashion.

### ***Dynamic Ethical Decision-Making***

If no singular classical school is able to truly supply the guidance for SOF ethical decision-making, what should be used? The answer is a dynamic model which utilizes all three of those standard approaches. While this may sound complex, it really is not. In fact, there is a logical progression which can be followed.

The most direct way to employ a dynamic ethical decision-making model is to proceed step-by-step logically through the three classical approaches. The most rational way is to move from the most concrete and certain, through to the most abstract and emotive of those approaches. Hence, one would start with the duty-based rules. In the situation at hand, what rules can the decider see that apply ... what laws, treaties, regulations, directives, orders (written or unwritten) are germane to the potential actions to be considered. It is likely that there are some rule-driven duties that must be weighed and, although quite unlikely, they may even be determinative because they cover all of the facets of the situation.

The second logical step would be to consider the potential circumstances of any of the options in the range of actions being considered. The considerations in the SOF world could include issues like the potential collateral damage to noncombatants, both lives and property. It also could include the relationship with partner nations, be they host nations or countries with whom we are allied or would like to be. Consequential considerations to weigh could include public image elements both at home and abroad. These potential

consequences must also extend beyond the immediately direct results, but also involve consideration of potential secondary and tertiary effects, as well.

Finally, the third step would be to employ Aristotle's balancing of the extremes to hone the decision for just the right touch. This final segment is admittedly the most esoteric of the three as it is admittedly relying on emotive wisdom to reach the action (or possible inaction) decided in any given situation. Think of it in this manner. After going through the first two steps, a person facing an ethical decision might see the rules and the "greater good" met through two or three possible actions. It is the final polish on the decision to sense which of the actions feels to be the best based on the entirety of the circumstances and leaves one at the best location between the undesirable extremes on the ends of the spectrum.

This concept of employing all three of the classical schools of ethics is not a new idea. Dr. Deane-Peter Baker, currently teaching ethics in support of Australia's SOF community has described it as using "triangulation" in the process of ethical decision-making.<sup>5</sup> Although Dr. Baker uses some different terminology, he also suggests the same order to the employment of the classical ethical schools ... deontological, then consequentialism, with virtue ethics at the end.

#### *A Final Vital Value to the Dynamic Model*

There is one last aspect of employing a dynamic ethical decision-making model which is extremely valuable. Few people would deny that the culture in which people are born and raised is the germination point for most of the hallmarks of a society, including the ethical underpinnings of that society. The same could be said of the microcosm that is the corporate culture that permeates organizations big and small. If you want to have a healthy society that behaves in an ethical manner, you must cultivate the ethical behavior which is desired. Therein lies the beauty of the dynamic ethical decision-making approach.

Aristotle taught in his concept of virtue ethics that people are not born with a high standard of ethics, but rather are taught by their family and greater society to act in an ethical manner. The young are trained to pursue a virtuous life. Moreover, as noted above, Aristotle referred to living a virtuous life as not only learned, but something that is refined and embedded through continual practice. Therefore, an important added benefit of following this dynamic ethical decision-making process, including the last virtue ethic step, is that it will sprout and grow in the people who practice it and be visible to those around them.

#### *The Way Forward*

The SOF community is an expansive enterprise, headed by USSOCOM which consists of a variety of components which have special operations missions and authorities. These components exist within and are dramatically guided and influenced by the military services: Army, Navy, Air Force, and the Marine Corps. Within the components are smaller units. So, the greater SOF culture has within it multiple subcultures which have considerable sway with their SOF professionals. The challenge presented to this entire community is to find a

way to foster a healthy greater collective culture of ethics while having it be complementary with the long-standing subcultures within the components and smaller units. The answer could be the broad and deep use of dynamic ethical decision-making. It could be the tie that binds without cutting healthy tissue below.

Relatively recently, academicians in the SOF world have speculated at some ethical decision-making truths. Members of the faculty at USSOCOM's Joint Special Operations University in Tampa have derived a list which they believe will help SOF professionals think through important decisions with ethical implications. In short, Dr. Kari Thyne and Dr. Joseph Long have noted that tools and attitudes such as ethics education, realism, flexibility, diligent situational awareness, and ethical problem-solving skills are required for development of ethical operators, and that the corporate culture must be conducive to discussion of ethical decisions as a routine and natural occurrence.<sup>6</sup> This list hints at some of the elements within each of the three classical schools described above.

The special operations community already has a set of what has been referred to as the SOF Truths and the five tenets related to SOF's unique place in the military and interaction with other national and international security professionals, as well as the population at large.<sup>7</sup> Each of these five truths is focused on the people who comprise SOF and those with whom they operate, including fellow U.S. forces, and speak to the importance of quality, competence, and interoperability. However, none of those truths directly speak to ethical conduct per se, even if one could say it is implicit in the list.

While the full list of ethical truths noted above is filled with solidly positive and useful ideas, possibly the collection could be boiled down into a singular tenet. If the underlying importance of SOF employing its considerable prowess with the careful adroitness and delicacy one would expect for their operations, that credo could take its place beside the five SOF Truths which are known and honored through the SOF community. It is possible that a mantra like "SOF competence is dependent on quiet professionals who complete missions not only with courage, but also with creativity and ethical integrity" could be such an undeniable truth. Standing in granite beside the other well-known SOF tenets would be the commitment to highly regard ethical decision-making in the conduct of U.S. special operations activities. Then, what remains to be done is to make dynamic ethical decision-making the model to be practiced and weave it into all training, education, and operational environments in which SOF toils.

## **Conclusion**

As noted earlier, when the rules embodied in any form ... law, regulation, code, directive, orders, even unwritten but widely accepted doctrines or principles ... are clearly and completely decisive on all of the facts and surrounding circumstances in a situation, they would govern what action a person or group of people should take. However, most people would agree that this simple equation is rarely the case. Professor Max Bazerman of the Harvard Business School submits that "When ethical lapses occur, they rarely happen in

situations when what is right versus what is wrong is clear. They more typically occur when what is morally right is less clear.”<sup>8</sup> The world is constantly evolving and so are the situations in which people find themselves. Also, while the concept of trying to ensure that one’s actions would apparently bring about the greatest good for the largest number of people would come with a measure of satisfaction, it is far from assuring a truly ethical conduct as the equation is too simple. It could literally provide an excuse for atrocities, especially in the world of military warfare. Finally, although the continual use of virtue ethics is extremely vital in creating and fostering a culture and subcultures which highly value ethical conduct, it is insufficient as a singular approach because simply trying to balance between extremes in addressing ethical considerations is a fairly nebulous exercise without being cognizant of the rules pertinent and weighing the potential consequences as well.

What is needed is an approach which involves thinking through ethical dilemmas in a dynamic manner utilizing all of the three classical schools. By consciously doing so and practicing it with regularity, the mind is kept sharp, and the heart softened, without becoming flaccid. Thus, the SOF community, the operators, and all who support them can be adept at the science and art of ethical decision-making, avoid most ethical lapses as well as moral fading, and be the ethical force which they want to be, and their nation needs them to be.

## Endnotes

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. House of Representatives, Office of the Law Revision Counsel United States Code, Unified Combatant Command for Special Operations Forces, 10 U.S.C. § 167 (2012).

<sup>4</sup> Joint Publication 3-05, *Special Operations* (Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Deane-Peter Baker, *Key Concepts in Military Ethics* (Sydney, Australia: University of New South Wales Press, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Kari Thyne and Joseph Long, *SOF Ethical Considerations* (Tampa, FL: Joint Special Operations University Press, 2020), [https://jsou.libguides.com/ld.php?content\\_id=52624909](https://jsou.libguides.com/ld.php?content_id=52624909).

<sup>7</sup> United States Special Operations Command, “SOF Truths,” accessed 29 January 2023, <https://www.socom.mil/about/sof-truths>.

<sup>8</sup> Max E. Bazerman, “Evaluating Your Business Ethics; A Harvard Professor Explains Why Good People do Unethical Things,” *Gallup Business Journal* (12 June 2008), <https://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/107527/evaluating-your-business-ethics.aspx>.

## Counterterrorism is Strategic Competition

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### ABSTRACT

The Trump and Biden administrations loudly proclaimed the end of the counterterrorism era and its replacement with a new era of competition. Following these new priorities, both administrations have slashed resources to support counterterrorism by friendly foreign nations. This is a serious strategic error because counterterrorism is not a distraction from competition but is instead at the center of competition. By slashing support to counterterrorism, the Trump and Biden administrations have started down a five-step path to disaster: (1) U.S. withdraws counterterrorism support to nation X; (2) terrorists destabilize nation X; (3) nation X turns to an authoritarian U.S. competitor for counterterrorism support; (4) nation X becomes more stable and less democratic; (5) nation X is locked into authoritarian governance and opposition to the U.S. Thus, one nation X at a time, slashing counterterrorism resources leads to exactly the anti-U.S. authoritarian world order the U.S. is trying to prevent.

### KEYWORDS

counterterrorism, violent extremist organizations, authoritarianism, democracy, strategic competition, governance, CCP, Wagner Group

Under the Trump and Biden administrations, U.S. national security priorities shifted dramatically and decisively away from counterterrorism (CT) (often described as countering violent extremist organizations [VEOs])<sup>1</sup> and toward strategic competition against authoritarian nation states, particularly Russia and China. This bipartisan shift is one of the few things that President Joe Biden, President Donald Trump, and their respective supporters, all agree on. Russia's large-scale combat operations in Ukraine, starting in February 2022, seem to vindicate this shift since Russian aggression and potential future Chinese aggression are clearly greater threats to U.S. interests than terrorists.

Unfortunately, the dramatic spectacle of Russian firepower unleashed on Ukraine is distracting us from subtler forms of strategic competition. On closer examination it will become apparent that CT and strategic competition are not mutually exclusive. In fact, CT

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is a vital aspect of strategic competition and abandoning CT puts the U.S. on a five-step path to defeat in strategic competition with China and other authoritarian nation states.

We shall start by describing the five-step path to defeat, assess how far the U.S. has gone down this path, and then develop recommendations to get off the path to defeat.

### **The Five-Step Path to Defeat in Strategic Competition**

**Step 1:** The five-step path to losing in strategic competition begins with the U.S. (and the West more generally) withdrawing support for a nation in its fight against violent extremists. We will call the unfortunate U.S. partner nation X, since it could be any number of countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, or the Middle East. Most governments in the developing world face some sort of violent opposition every day,<sup>2</sup> and while few of them are fully democratic, neither are they fully authoritarian. The U.S. government justifies the withdrawal of CT support from nation X based on the need to concentrate U.S. resources for competition with China, Russia, and authoritarianism more generally, and U.S. leaders imagine this justifies shifting resources away from countering VEOs.

**Step 2:** The withdrawal of support leads to the second stage where the terrorist threat to nation X increases since local VEOs continue, or increase their terrorist and insurgent activities, and the government of nation X responds less effectively due to decreased outside support. Note that the actual decrease in effectiveness and increase in threat need not be substantial, it only must change the level of confidence in the government and expectations about the future. The loss of outside support will make the government of nation X feel less confident and secure, and it will embolden the local terrorists and insurgents, and both sides will see even a small increase in terrorist success as confirmation that the future is looking brighter for the insurgents and darker for the government.

**Step 3:** The third step is when the government of nation X loses confidence that it can handle the threat on its own, recognizes that the U.S. (and the West) will not provide the assistance it needs, and turns to China (or another authoritarian state). Aid from authoritarian sources was already appealing in certain ways. For example, China often brags that its aid comes “with no strings attached” because it does not demand the kinds of human rights, accountability, and anti-corruption reforms that the U.S. and other Western nations typically require.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the temptation to look for support from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and other authoritarians was already significant, even before the West withdrew support.

**Step 4:** In step four, China (or another authoritarian power) answers the call and provides an authoritarian, CCP-style solution to the challenge posed by VEOs. This authoritarian solution might include facial recognition software, social credit scores, and legal “reforms” that address terrorism by outlawing all opposition. It will certainly include heavy-handed repression applied not only to the violent extremists, but to other forms of dissent as well. This combination of technology and technique helps convince the government of nation X that it can violently crush all opposition and that it attempts to do so. President John F.

Kennedy famously said: “Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable.”<sup>4</sup> As predicted by President Kennedy, when the government of nation X responds violently to all opposition, it forces all opponents to join the violent extremists. The U.S. and other Western nations will respond to the violent authoritarian turn in nation X by further decreasing support and even placing diplomatic and economic sanctions on nation X that increase its dependence on China and force it further into the authoritarian camp.

**Step 5:** In the fifth and final step, the threat to nation X from terrorists and VEOs has receded, but the newly authoritarian government remains and refuses to return to its more-democratic, pre-crisis form. It retains its authoritarian character partly due to continuing Chinese (Russian, Iranian, etc.) support, partly due to continuing U.S. and Western hostility, but mainly because dictators intuitively understand what Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out back in 1856: “the most dangerous time for a bad government is usually when it begins to reform.”<sup>5</sup> De Tocqueville could have added that the worse the government, the greater the danger from reform, and the newly authoritarian government of nation X has gotten much worse through the five steps. By stage five, the government of nation X finds democratic reform unnecessary (since China and other authoritarian powers assist friendly dictators) and dangerous (as de Tocqueville pointed out) locking it into its new form: authoritarian, pro-China, and anti-United States.

The Trump and Biden administrations thought the shift away from CT would strengthen the U.S. in strategic competition with China, but it can instead put us on a five-step path to defeat in strategic competition. This path takes us from the current liberal, democratic, and U.S.-led world order to a new, authoritarian, CCP-led world order, one nation X at a time.

### **Is the U.S. on the Five-Step Road to Defeat?**

The five-step road to an authoritarian world order is possible, since the world contains scores, perhaps hundreds of nation Xs in danger of heading down this path, but is it taking place and if it is, how far down this path has the world traveled? Let’s consider each step.

**Step 1:** Stage one is where the U.S. and other Western nations start shifting away from countering violent extremists overseas in a (shortsighted) effort to counter China, Russia, and other nation-state strategic competitors. This shift has been widely publicized and is undeniably underway. In the words of the Trump administration’s 2018 National Defense Strategy: “Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security.”<sup>6</sup> The top priorities of Mark Esper, as Trump’s Secretary of Defense, were often described as “China, China, China.”<sup>7</sup> Esper and Trump pushed for dramatic reductions in CT resources to facilitate the shift in focus to China.<sup>8</sup> The Biden administration endorsed and expanded this shift away from CT/countering VEOs, and toward strategic competition with China and Russia.<sup>9</sup> Biden completed Trump’s withdrawal from Afghanistan and

continues to look for ways to shift resources away from CT and toward strategic competition with China and Russia.<sup>10</sup> The Biden administration is under continuing pressure to speed up the shift away from countering VEOs overseas to devote additional resources to the China problem.<sup>11</sup> Other Western powers, such as France, are following the U.S. example in places like the African Sahel region.<sup>12</sup> Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine beginning in February 2022 has reinforced these trends by drawing U.S. and Western attention and resources into Eastern Europe and potentially leaving countless nation Xs outside Europe to fend for themselves.

**Step 2:** In stage two, the withdrawal of Western support leads to decreased local effectiveness against VEOs and expansion of the terrorist threat. This one is also underway. Afghanistan in 2021 was, of course, the poster child for local government collapse when Western support ended, but Afghanistan was exceptional. In most places, local government performance decreases more gradually and there is usually a significant time lag between the loss of outside support and any obvious increase in terrorist threat. However, recent global assessments of terrorism, including those published by the U.S. government, have noted the diffusion of terrorist organizations into more countries as the threat has "metastasized" in the words of President Biden.<sup>13</sup> According to one recent assessment "the global jihadi terrorist movement now has more fighters in more countries than ever before."<sup>14</sup> While it is difficult to prove a causal connection in every case, it is at least a very unfortunate coincidence that the terrorists are fielding more fighters in more places at exactly the moment the U.S. and its allies are shrinking the breadth and depth of their support to CT. As more countries feel the terrorist threat, they will look for more CT assistance. If that assistance is not coming from the U.S. and other democracies, then they will look elsewhere.

**Step 3:** Stage three is where beleaguered governments turn to China, Russia, and other authoritarian sources of support. This stage is also well underway. China has been building security assistance programs in Africa and elsewhere for years, actively working to replace U.S. influence and security cooperation.<sup>15</sup> There is talk of future Chinese military bases in Mozambique and elsewhere in Africa, and Chinese support against local insurgents will certainly help those basing arrangements come to pass.<sup>16</sup> In the Pacific, the Government of the Solomon Islands announced in December 2021 that it had accepted a Chinese offer of riot control equipment and police trainers to assist the Solomon Islands Police in response to rioting there the previous month. In the words of the official announcement by the government of the Islands: they accepted the Chinese offer of assistance "mindful of the urgent need to strengthen Royal Solomon Islands Police Force capability and capacity to respond to future unrest."<sup>17</sup> The expectation of "future unrest" suggests the government has limited interest in reforming to address the causes of the unrest and is instead turning to authoritarian solutions as China's influence continues to grow.<sup>18</sup> (The Solomon Islands have no military forces making the police the only armed security force on the islands.)

The Russians, often under cover of the Wagner Group, have been even more aggressive than the CCP in replacing the West as a provider of counterterrorist assistance. Readers of this journal are already well aware of the Wagner Group, its connections to the Russian government, and its activities across three continents from articles by Tor Bukkvoll and Åse G. Østensen, and by Christopher Spearin.<sup>19</sup> Since those articles came out, the role of the Wagner Group and Russia has continued to increase. In Mali, where the French (with U.S. assistance) had long been the CT partner of choice, the Russians have largely replaced them.<sup>20</sup> Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group have also conducted CT operations on behalf of the governments of Mozambique, the Central African Republic, Syria, factions in Libya, and elsewhere.<sup>21</sup> All this new and varied foreign CT experience will make Wagner Group and similar Russian forces even more capable of providing CT assistance—in the authoritarian model—to likeminded nations anywhere in the world.<sup>22</sup> The current war in Ukraine has forced Russia and the Wagner Group to refocus their efforts on Eastern Europe, but it is too early to tell how long that shift will last and whether China will fill any vacuum that might result. In considering the possibility of Wagner Group retrenchment, it is important to remember that the Wagner Group has a completely different business model from Western security force assistance. The Western model assumes that security force assistance represents a one-way transfer of resources from the U.S. (and/or other Western nations) to the receiving nation. The Wagner Group provides security assistance for a fee and turns a profit on its activities. The intensity of the Russo-Ukraine war in 2022 has forced the Wagner Group to shift its limited resources to Ukraine, but the quest for profit will probably draw Wagner back to Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America when the fighting in Ukraine becomes less intense.

**Step 4:** Stage four is where authoritarian assistance and an authoritarian approach to countering violent extremists turns the tide in favor of the government. Fortunately, this stage has not been reached in many places. Syria is the obvious success story for authoritarian assistance in countering violent extremists, but the Assad regime was not receiving CT assistance from the U.S. and other Western nations, so it falls outside the five-stage model. Other clear successes for authoritarian assistance replacing U.S. and Western assistance are not yet apparent. However, clear and objective proof that authoritarian methods brought success is not required. All that is required is for the government to believe its authoritarian approach worked, and the government will already be inclined to believe it made the right choices and that even its most authoritarian actions were both necessary and appropriate. If the government starts to waiver in its commitment to authoritarian approaches, there will be abundant Chinese and Russian propaganda encouraging it to stay on the authoritarian course. Thus, anything short of being overthrown will probably be regarded by the newly authoritarian government as proof of authoritarian effectiveness.

**Step 5:** Stage five is where an authoritarian approach to countering violent extremism locks in an authoritarian government hostile to the United States. For example, in Syria, the way Bashar al-Assad handled the 2011 protest movements was the defining

moment for his regime and appears to have made reform impossible for at least a generation. Similarly, the way his father crushed the uprising in Hama in the 1980s helped define his regime. Authoritarian methods of countering opposition are not yet the global norm, but China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and other authoritarian regimes are working to change those norms and democratic reform after a truly authoritarian response to violent extremism is extremely rare.

Clearly, the world has taken some steps down the five-stage road to an authoritarian world order led by the CCP, but there is still time to change course.

### **How Should the U.S. Change Course?**

To solve a problem, one must first recognize that there is a problem, and then accurately define the problem. The Trump and Biden administrations correctly identified strategic competition with China and Russia as the gravest foreign policy challenges facing the nation, but they have been groping toward an accurate definition of the problem. The Trump administration recognized the direct threat from agents of the CCP, such as Chinese People's Liberation Army, Chinese State-Owned Enterprises, and China's Maritime Militia, but they did not embrace the governance aspect of strategic competition. They criticized the authoritarian nature of the CCP, but they did not embrace the need to advance democracy and counter authoritarianism generally. The Biden administration is getting closer. They correctly identified the strategic competition between the U.S. and China as part of a larger global competition between democratic and authoritarian governance. That realization helped them see the need to advance democracy and counter authoritarian governance globally. However, the Biden administration has thus far failed to recognize that CT and countering VEOs is a core function of government, that there are fundamental differences between democratic and authoritarian responses to terrorism and VEOs, and that how a government responds to the existential threat from violent extremists can define whether that government is authoritarian or democratic.

The U.S. approach to strategic competition and countering VEOs still assumes these are two unrelated problems and that the U.S. can remove resources from countering violent extremists without impacting strategic competition. This is an easy but fatal mistake. It is an easy mistake because the terrorists are not agents of Russia or the CCP and therefore appear to be a different and separate problem. Fatal because scores of countries are threatened by VEOs. Failing to help them in their hour of need concedes the competition for influence in those states to Russia and the CCP by forcing the threatened government to accept assistance from authoritarian sources. Authoritarian assistance will lead to authoritarian actions that will lock the government into an authoritarian mold, beholden to authoritarian patrons.

Accurately defining the challenge from the CCP and other authoritarians requires the U.S. to recognize that the way a nation responds to terrorism and other forms of organized extremist violence largely determines whether that nation is democratic or authoritarian. To compete with authoritarianism, the U.S. must not only advance democracy in principle, but

also provide specific CT and counter violent extremism assistance, in the democratic mode, to threatened nations. This does not mean the U.S. must invest extravagant resources to compete everywhere. There will be places where the costs are too high, the rewards are too small, and the U.S. will have to concede the competition to the CCP and other authoritarian forces. However, this must be a conscious choice made with full understanding that withholding CT assistance will impact strategic competition with the CCP and other authoritarians.

Presidents Trump and Biden tell us the shift away from CT will help free up resources for strategic competition but abandoning CT support to imperfect democracies risks forfeiting the competition to the CCP one nation X at a time, guaranteeing exactly the authoritarian, CCP-dominated world order the U.S. is trying to prevent.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In moving away from the George W. Bush administration's Global War on Terrorism, the Obama administration also tried to correct Bush's overreliance on the terms "terrorist" and "terrorist organization" by replacing them with "violent extremist organizations" (VEO) in most DOD documents and that trend has continued. For example, in place of a Global War on Terrorism the DOD now has a Global Campaign Plan to Counter Violent Extremist Organizations. In U.S. national policy documents outside DOD terms like "terrorism" and "violent extremism" are often used interchangeably. See, for example, President Joseph R. Biden, Jr., Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, March 2021, (Unclassified), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Various projects attempt to monitor the number and scale of ongoing terrorist and insurgent conflicts around the world. Two of the best known are the University of Maryland's START (Study of Terrorism And Response to Terrorism) <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/access/> and the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) run by Uppsala University Department of Peace and Conflict Research, <https://ucdp.uu.se/encyclopedia>.

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<sup>7</sup> Tom Rogan, "Defense Secretary Mark Esper: It's China, China, China" Washington Examiner, 28 August 2019, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/defense-secretary-mark-esper-its-china-china-china>.

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<sup>10</sup> Jim Garamone, "Official Talks DOD Policy Role in Chinese Pacing Threat, Integrated Deterrence" DOD NEWS, 2 June 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2641068/official-talks-dod-policy-role-in-chinese-pacing-threat-integrated-deterrence/>.

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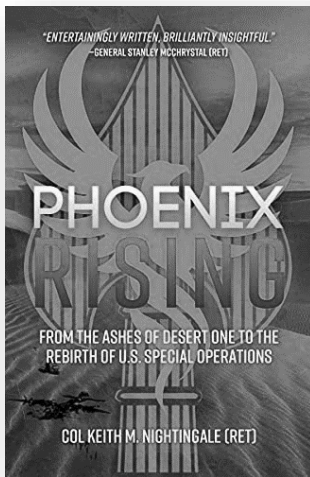
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## BOOK REVIEWS

### ***Phoenix Rising: From the Ashes of Desert One to the Rebirth of U.S. Special Operations* by Keith M. Nightingale (COL, USA Ret.)**

ISBN 1612008771, Casemate Publishers, July 2020, 337 pages, \$20.50

Reviewed by: William “Stone” Holden, U.S. Marine Corps



If you're looking for an action-packed, guns-blazing, door-kicking account of a special operations raid, *Phoenix Rising: From the Ashes of Desert One to the Rebirth of U.S. Special Operations* is not for you. Keith Nightingale's book is a thoughtful peek behind the curtains at one of the most ambitious special operations missions ever conceived. It is presented humbly, from the eyes of the junior members of the planning team, with no airs or attempts to make it something that it wasn't. For those very reasons, this book is almost impossible to put down. *Phoenix Rising* is a unique and engaging read, providing a new perspective into the well-documented Operation Eagle Claw. The book focuses on the dramatic build-up to the raid and the whirlwind it left behind in U.S. national security policy

and the special operations community. Even for those familiar with the events and the subsequent impact on the special operations community, this book is worth the read.

U.S. Army Colonel Keith M. Nightingale (Ret.) was the junior member of the Joint Task Force Eagle Claw planning team. He served as the Deputy Operations Officer as the team developed and executed options for resolving the Iranian hostage crises of 1979-1981. The book proceeds in three main sections. The first chronicles the author's time in the lead-up to Operation Eagle Claw, the second section discusses the actual raid itself, and the final section is an in-depth review of the impact on the structure of the special operations community and national defense policy overall.

The planning details are taken almost entirely from Colonel Keith Nightingale's journal entries during that time and cover a wide range of daily topics that would accompany such a unique position. The style and content evoke familiar memories of hastily jotted notes in little green notebooks during mind-numbing meetings and the frustration that comes with trying to plan the impossible. This has the effect of drawing the reader in and making it a profoundly personal read at times. His journal entries reveal some gripping elements of the

incredible intelligence work required to lay the foundation for the operation, including some harrowing moments on the path to a viable plan for a hostage rescue attempt. Scattered throughout the heavier passages are lighter moments that most readers will find easy to chuckle at, having been in similar shoes at some points in any military career. With a dry wit, he describes receiving instructions that (even under the most intense scrutiny) simply contradict themselves; the pains of working through the twisted logic of trying to procure food and drinks for some of the world's most elite service members; accomplishing everything needed without leaving a paper trail (or even having a budget). Across the entire work, the reader can feel the sheer weight of the responsibility of making the impossible possible, all with dozens of lives on the line.

The raid itself serves as the pivot point for the book, receiving only a relatively brief description before the transition to the resulting policy battles. The book does not go very deeply into the details of the raid on the ground. Still, it focuses on the coordination and maintenance issues that ultimately made the mission non-viable. The author repeatedly focuses on the failure of the Navy to fly the flight profiles requested with their helicopters, designed to stress the platforms before the mission. This was undoubtedly a critical factor that may have contributed to the failure of some of the aircraft during the mission, but the author repeats his concerns almost verbatim in multiple areas in the book, becoming distracting. Nightingale uses the mission's failure to then dive into the battles that rippled through the heights of the Pentagon and the halls of Congress after the catastrophe.

The book proceeds into a deep examination of this inflection point in U.S. defense policy. The capabilities needed to confront the most pressing threats of the time were known but could not be coordinated in a way that would make them successful. The author uses the last section of the book to chronicle the back and forth between Service chiefs, Congress, and those involved with the Special Operations Forces (SOF) community. Petty bureaucracy and territorial politics drove senior leaders to hoard resources and personnel, driven unintentionally by the rules of a system built to encourage just that. Most of the pieces needed to do the job existed, but the organizational structure and the processes left them scrambling to assemble for the task at hand. Out of the tangled mess described by Nightingale, some fascinating details surrounding the foundations for the modern SOF structure emerge.

The author is clear from the beginning that this is a personal narrative and not an academically sourced piece. For much of the book, that makes sense because he draws from the pages of his own journals. While this style benefits the reader by making it more engaging, the downsides become increasingly evident in the book's latter half. Descriptions of the policy battles to create the modern SOF infrastructure are provided. At this point, the supporting references would have significantly strengthened the arguments that the author makes and provide greater clarity for where he sourced some of the information. A large number of meetings and decisions are mentioned, without much to back up the author's insights into them. Additionally, it is easy for a reader to find themselves wishing that the

author—with many more years of experience since his days as a Major in the book—would have provided more depth and discussion to his entries. What would he have gone back to change in the way he supported the development? Was there some hindsight that he developed from his later years of Service? What lessons does he feel are critical to take away for the next generation. Unfortunately, the book is silent in that regard, and there were a lot of opportunities left on the pages to educate Service members through his story.

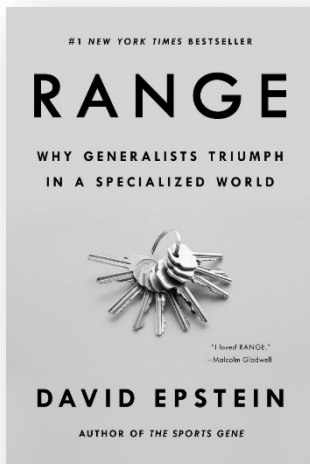
Overall, this book is a fascinating read covering a critical pivot point for the U.S. defense enterprise as a whole and the SOF community in particular. Colonel Nightingale delivers the story from a unique perspective, presented in a style that feels intimate and instantly recognizable. This serves as an excellent tool for understanding the history of the SOF community and a reflection point on what changes tomorrow's conflicts will require. The U.S. finds itself in another historical inflection point, where a shift away from the Global War on Terror and back to great power competition will demand different responses and capabilities than those relied upon over the last two decades. This book is a testament to how messy the fights to develop exceptional capabilities can be and the painful cost of waiting for failure to make the point that change is needed. With states like China and Russia rapidly pursuing modernization of their forces, and with that modernization including significant investments in unmanned and artificial intelligence-driven capabilities, this book is more relevant than ever.

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## **Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World by David Epstein**

ISBN 9780735214507, Riverhead Books, May 2019, 368 pages, \$15.50

Reviewed by: Luke Talian, U.S. Army



As the world continues its march of technological advancement, the need for ever-increasing specialization in more narrow fields seems self-evident. In David Epstein's *Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World*, he provides a counterargument for this trope, questioning the common assumption of neat and tidy story arcs of archetypes like golf phenom Tiger Woods or the chess grandmaster Polgar sisters. Trained almost from birth in pre-determined, specialized fields, these competitors in what is now a commonly lauded style of parenting after Yale Law Professor Amy Chua released her 2011 best-seller *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. However, does this kind of hyper-specialization apply to all fields? As a self-professed

generalist, Epstein has transitioned professional careers in environmental science into a senior writer for *Sports Illustrated*. As a microcosm to the book itself, Epstein's diverse background makes him distinctively qualified to breakdown the argument that individuals and teams with more broad backgrounds have better chances to solve more complex problem sets.

There is no novel research within *Range* and most of the arguments are derived from anecdotally selected studies or popular public figures. However, this does not make it a half-cocked, journalistic pseudo-science book. There are several hundred references for further study and *Range* remains compelling and readable throughout. Using his sports background, Epstein pits the likes of narrowly focused athletes like Tiger Woods against octogenarian CEO Frances Hesselbien and sets up one of the most important distinctions within the book: the difference between "kind" and "wicked" problems.

Based on research by Psychologist Robin Hogarth, kind learning environments are like chess and golf which have defined rules and do not change over time. The mistakes that participants make have feedback that is clear. This is opposite to wicked learning environments where there exists a layer cake of obfuscated rules, timelines, players, and inaccurate feedback. This is where Epstein argues that broad individuals with professional "range" are better suited to address these problems. Through the first few chapters of the

book, the author uses several vignettes from the sports and music domains that defy the cult of 10,000 hours of deliberate practice. From the meanderings of jazz greats like Duke Ellington and Django Reinhardt to late bloomers like Roger Federer, Epstein focuses on the fact that the hero or origin story that is not exceptional will not be lauded by the public and will subsequently be discarded. Moreover, most success stories do not appear as linear until historians are able to retrospectively superimpose the perfect hindsight.

From there, the book continues to provide examples at a larger scale. Epstein focuses on desirable difficulties in teaching environments and how sacrificing current performance for future progress is necessary for deep learning. This then bleeds into abstract problem solving and the risk of professionals being taught overly specialized tools that are not interdisciplinary. He also touches on the idea of “match quality” and when quitting may be appropriate. The book presents several examples of studies that show individuals who continue to pursue different careers will outpace their peers in aptitude, once they stick to a vocation. One of the most clear-cut examples of this sampling period is Vincent Van Gogh. Throughout his early professional life, Van Gogh stopped and started many careers including being an art dealer, a teacher and tutor, an almost missionary, a bookstore clerk, and a would-be pastor. Ultimately, Van Gogh experienced success because of his diversity and self-confidence in the face of a reluctant art world. Epstein argues this is not an example of a late developer, but their prior experience was integral to their eventual achievement.

The last third of the book then focuses on organizations and teams with success stories such as early Nintendo, Frances Hesselbein, and Eli Lilly. Conversely, the author focuses on the dangers of overlearned behavior by using the vignette of Morton Thiokol and the 1986 Challenger disaster where a lack of data or quantitative analysis created an environment where no engineer could question the process.

From a special operations perspective, almost all individuals within their field have a previous military occupation before they transitioned into special operations. This creates an expectantly diverse pool of experiences and personalities. While some rigid tracks demand a level of specialization and training within aptly named domains of “special” operations, *Range* highlights the concerns for leaders, planners, and practitioners who are too inflexible in methodology and execution. He claims outside experience is necessary to avoid repeating the same patterns. Additionally, Epstein illuminates research which demonstrates diverse individuals cannot be replicated by diverse teams of specialized individuals. Some of these tropes can be seen in Epstein’s experience with the Pat Tillman Foundation, where some of the nation’s finest warfighters are concerned that they do not fit a mold and are concerned they do not have the time to change careers.

Given this knowledge, what is a reader supposed to take away from all of this? If you believe Epstein’s argument is compelling, then essentially, the book’s message is to not panic. While a specialized “Tiger Path” may be tidy and prescriptive, Epstein provided countless examples where this is not the only case and individuals with broad backgrounds

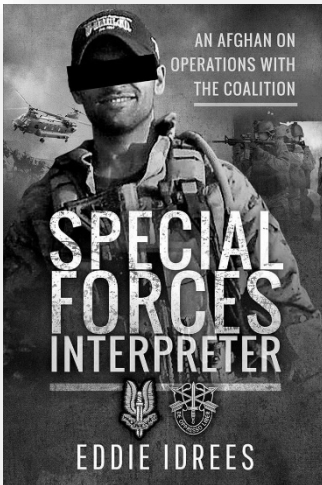
provided the necessary breakthrough in their field. As a veteran of many leadership development programs that espouse the “get rich quick” self-help styles that have worked for their authors, *Range* gives options. Whether for individuals ready to make a change or leaders who need assurances of team diversity or outside-the-box hires, *Range* delivers in this ever-crowded space.

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## **Special Forces Interpreter: An Afghan on Operations with the Coalition by Eddie Idrees**

ISBN 978-1526758507, Pen & Sword Books, May 2021, 160 pages, \$10.50

Reviewed by: Laura Stenger, Joint Special Operations University, Tampa, Florida, USA



*Special Forces Interpreter* by Eddie Idrees is a firsthand account of the life of an Afghan special forces interpreter. Raised by a father who was a colonel in the Afghan army and a mother who was a university lecturer, he and the rest of his family were forced to flee Afghanistan in the early 1990s to Peshawar, Pakistan. The book details Idrees’s journey from a young refugee in Peshawar, to working with the world’s premier U.S. Special Operations Forces in the fight against the Taliban in Afghanistan from 2004–2012.

The opening chapter grabs the reader’s attention as Idrees describes one mission performing his “call out” role as an interpreter to coax suspected Taliban to surrender. The men emerge armed with one holding a child—his own daughter, a toddler—as a shield. Snipers kill the armed men; the girl is covered

in blood. Idrees, overcome with emotion, runs to her rescue pulling her from under her father’s limp corpse.

In Chapter 2, Idrees describes life as a refugee in Pakistan, pursuing an education and studying the English language at his father’s direction. His father was not overly religious but believed “To be good you did good, and a religion, or an interpretation of a religion, that told you to do bad things was a bad religion.” Between his father’s influence and an excellent English teacher, Idrees is given an expanded perspective that would serve him later in the fight against the Taliban.

In Chapters 3 and 4, Idrees provides a brief history of the Taliban and firsthand accounts of Taliban brutality—once as an interpreter recounting an experience interrogating a 70-year-old man who had an 11-year-old wife, and the other as a youth witnessing a public execution in the football stadium while visiting extended family in Kabul. He returns to his family and his routine life in Pakistan when the news of his hero Ahmad Shah Massoud, leader of the Northern Alliance, is assassinated by al-Qaeda, and two days later the Twin Towers fall in the United States. Idrees’s yearning to serve his country, to free the country from the oppressive Taliban, begins to burn strong.

In Chapter 6, Idrees conveys his desire to liberate Afghanistan from the Taliban to his family and reluctantly they allow him to return, with the rest of the family following soon after. Finding work as part of a construction crew detailed to Bagram Air Base, Idrees creates an opportunity to join the fight. Literally chasing down an American military officer, he announces his desire to be an interpreter. The American officer asks one question, “Will you kill Taliban if you see one?” Emphatically, he answers “Yes.”

Chapters 7-11 describe Idrees’s journey as an interpreter, physically and cognitively. Initially, he does so well working with the U.S. military that he is assigned to the Counter Insurgency Academy in Kabul. Then, after some interpersonal challenges arise during his service with the U.S., he shifts to work with the British Special Forces. Both experiences shape his ontology—his perspective on politics and Western culture expands. Firsthand, Idrees experiences the concepts of fairness and impartiality; he observes arguing with logic and reason instead of emotion. Idrees begins to have a vision for his country, but with all this, there comes conflict with his friends and family. His perspective grows while theirs remains fixed. They cannot see what he sees.

On a mission to capture a high-level Taliban—deep into Taliban territory—the team is pinned down after securing the objective. Left behind due to intense fire, the team painstakingly makes its way through a valley and over a ridge line to make way for a new extraction point. In Chapter 12, longest chapter in the book, Idrees expertly describes the intensity, bringing the reader along on the mission. Here, the reader will walk away with a sincere appreciation of the impressive abilities Idrees and other skilled interpreters have developed—listening to Taliban communications in one ear, friendly communications in the other, all the while physically hanging out with the best the British Army has to offer.

In Chapter 13, Idrees illuminates the spectrum of motives for becoming an Afghan interpreter: an only son looking to support his aging parents; an entrepreneur looking to make enough (in one case millions) to start a business and employ thousands of Afghans; the insurgents whose true colors shone through their destructive actions against U.S. and British forces; and finally, those like Idrees—individuals who believed their country could be stable, free of corruption, and terror. Idrees states, “It was us who stood in the middle between all parties, domestic and international, who fought to contain and defeat the Taliban.”

In Chapter 14, Idrees describes a prison break of Afghan soldiers, police officers, and government officials being held by the Taliban. Chapters 15 and 16 layout the role of corruption in preventing progress towards a stable and prosperous Afghanistan. Idrees comes to realize the biggest threat to Afghans comes from his own side. Idrees’s refusal to betray his employers makes his situation untenable; he begins to receive death threats. To keep him safe, he is asked to go to the UK to train soldiers preparing to go to Afghanistan; while there, he makes the decision to stay and seek asylum. Chapter 17 concludes the book with Idrees providing his personal experience as a detainee and his interaction with other Afghan asylum seekers in the UK. With a new country he has a new mission: fighting the battle of the mind.

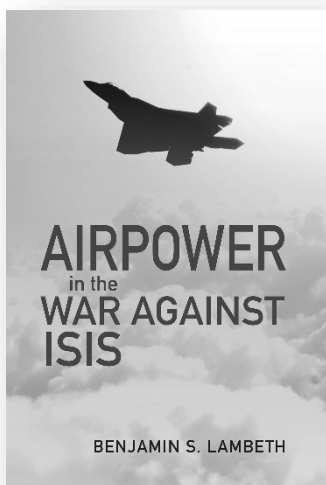
Idrees brings to life the forgotten and little known “man in the middle,” giving a voice to interpreters who were never recognized—the numbers killed in action were never revealed; the forgotten heroes who played a significant role in the war on terrorism. In the first few chapters, the reader may find themselves a little disoriented regarding the timeline of events, but this is a small distraction. Specific details were omitted, understandably, to protect his identity and safeguard his family. Published in 2021, this firsthand account of life as an Afghan interpreter provides the reader with the unambiguous evidence of the power of education and the expanded independent thinking that goes with it. It is an expose on the human condition, what drive can discover, what education can empower, and what expanded perspective can achieve. Written before the tragic events of August 2021 surrounding the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the reader cannot help but wonder about the impact on the author. At 146 pages, *Special Forces Interpreter* is a quick read, but the perspective gained is long-lasting. According to the book, Idrees lives in Britain now and routinely tells immigrant parents to let their children make their own choices and not send them to a mosque to be taught by another “idiot with a beard.”

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## **Airpower in the War Against ISIS by Benjamin S. Lambeth**

ISBN 978-1682475577, Naval Institute Press, March 2021, 352 pages, \$55.00

Reviewed by: James Kiras, School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, Montgomery, Alabama, USA



The potential for aircraft to change methods and modes of fighting has existed since the dawn of powered flight more than a century ago. Over that period, vociferous arguments have occurred based on two basic questions: (1) Who should control and direct the use of airpower? (2) How is airpower used to its greatest potential? This recent addition to works on airpower contains forthright answers to both questions that will satisfy some and affront others.

Ben Lambeth brings impressive credentials to the task of narrating and assessing how airpower was used in Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR). He is presently a senior fellow at both the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments and the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies, with nearly four decades prior to that spent as a senior analyst at RAND, during which time he published more than a dozen studies on air and space power. He is perhaps best known for serving as an unofficial historian for the U.S. Air Force, chronicling and assessing its modern air campaigns from Kosovo through Afghanistan and Iraq since 2001. His depth of knowledge and understanding of the modern use of the air instrument is unmatched and the parallels he draws to those campaigns in this work are insightful and valuable. Given his track record and reputation, he has access to numerous senior Air Force leaders. Their thoughts and insights breathe life into what could easily turn into a stuffy, analytical exploration, as is the case with the recent RAND report on the same air campaign, *The Air War Against the Islamic State*.

Lambeth is at his best when discussing the employment of air forces at the tactical and operational level. He paints a picture of talented professionals at work: aircrews, planners, and leaders overcoming considerable obstacles to conduct strikes and other missions. Lambeth brings forward the activities of the mobility community delivering personnel and supplies—an aspect often overlooked in favor of actions by fighters and bombers in airpower narratives. The parallels he draws between daily combat action patrols and emergency close air support, and General Chuck Horner’s concept of “push-CAS” during Operation Desert Storm are deftly handled. A constant doctrinal source of friction

between the Air Force and the U.S. Army, and the establishment of the Fire Coordination Support Line, is explained by Lambeth crisply and concisely in a very accessible manner.

He is less so when discussing matters of airpower strategy and its connection to politics. Two themes characterize these discussions. The first is a steady drumbeat against using airpower incrementally. More than a dozen times throughout the book Lambeth excoriates the shackling of airpower; he compares the early use of airpower against the Islamic State to the unsuccessful Rolling Thunder campaign in Vietnam. Airpower should be unleashed with all its weight and fury in an unrelenting campaign of compellence. Liberal quotations of observations and critiques from an Air Force captain throughout bearing witness to the constraints and a lack of strategy are unconvincing given their source. He ascribes the reluctance to use airpower to a lack of political resolve, lack of vision, or both. At times his discussion of decisions made by the Obama Administration is so repetitive and critical that it borders on the partisan and vitriolic, reflecting perhaps the recency of events as well as the current state of national political discourse. Other possible explanations for decisions or behavior he sweeps aside in pursuit of his two themes. The fact that early airpower decisions were being made within a Combatant Command headquarters—deprived of local intelligence due to the withdrawal of American forces in 2011—cannot be explained as a form of sensemaking and a reticence to do more harm than good with airstrikes in a new and dynamic environment populated by thousands of non-state actors in a complex civil war. In Lambeth's depiction, the decision to withdraw from Iraq in 2011 was callow and the subsequent constraints imposed on airpower were the result of feckless executive leadership.

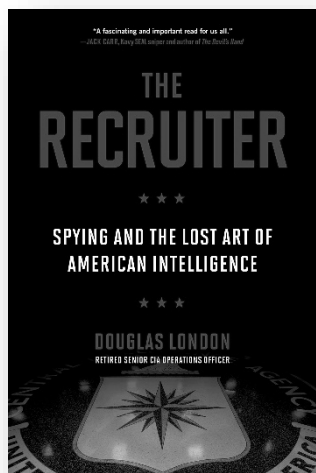
On special operations specifically, Lambeth is more objective. Special Operations Forces (SOF), however, serve mostly as background scenery in the overall narrative. Given the book is focused on airpower, this is understandable. OIR, however, was the seeming return of the so-called "Afghan model," linking together airpower with local proxy forces through SOF. Given SOF enable both proxy forces and airpower and take advantage of the strengths of each while mitigating their weaknesses, it is surprising Lambeth does not explore this subject further. Alleged SOF innovations in the field, including the use or modification of proxy handheld devices to improve their situational awareness, as well as airpower targeting, are not discussed, nor is the role played by SOF air, which is invisible. Rather than examining SOF as a ground maneuver interface for airpower, Lambeth mostly relegates their role to raids against notable Islamic State leadership in passing.

Overall, Lambeth's work provides valuable insights, and its arguments—even if some of the latter related to airpower have become clichéd or tainted by partisan political rhetoric—warrant consideration. As one of the first works on this most recent military campaign, it will likely remain the standard reference work for some time, as official U.S. Air Force or U.S. Special Operations Command histories will be highly classified and unlikely to see the light of day any time, if they are ever written at all. This is all the more unfortunate scholastically and professionally as air and SOF campaigns against the Islamic State are rich with potential insights for future conflicts against non-state actors involving strategic competition between states.

## ***The Recruiter: Spying and the Lost Art of American Intelligence*** **by Douglas London**

978-0306847318, Hachette Books, September 2021, 432 pages, \$16.00

Reviewed by: David P. Oakley, Joint Special Operations University, Tampa, Florida, USA



Doug London's *The Recruiter: Spying and the Lost Art of American Intelligence*, is an enjoyable read that multiple audiences will find entertaining and useful. The memoir chronicles the author's CIA career that began during the bipolar Cold War, when terrorism was a secondary concern (but rising) and ended in 2019 as the United States transitioned the bulk of its attention away from counterterrorism, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and towards China, Russia, and other states. The book's main theme is that, in the aftermath of 9/11, the CIA made certain decisions that not only took it off-course from its original purpose but also changed its organizational culture and identity. It is an engaging read, split into thirty-two short chapters, each providing insight into the life of a CIA case officer and the challenges he faced handling assets and navigating bureaucracy.

The greatest value of the book is in gaining the perspective of a seasoned professional with vast experience at the “pointy end of the sphere.” During his thirty-four years of service, the author experienced at least four significant transition points in CIA and U.S. national security history: 1) the waning years of the Cold War which included the CIA's resurgence in the 1980s following the tumultuous 1970s; 2) the end of the Cold War and the 1990s “peace dividend;” 3) 9/11 and the subsequent operational shift to the Global War of Terrorism and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; and 4) the initial “tilt towards the Pacific” and the subsequent focus on “strategic competition.” Although the book is not a history of these periods, the author provides numerous vignettes from his tenure that illuminate how one practitioner experienced these key transitions and how he observed them affecting his organization.

The author's onboarding, training, and operational stories provide a glimpse into the life of a HUMINT officer and is reason enough to buy the book, but the book is not merely a pleasurable read for spy genre enthusiasts. The book also helps practitioners grapple with important leadership and ethical decisions, while simultaneously providing scholars with a better appreciation of the issues and challenges practitioners face. For example, the author's self-criticism regarding his hesitancy to raise personal concerns about an asset's emotional

state is relevant for practitioners reflecting on their own professional and personal responsibilities. The numerous stories about leaders the author experienced throughout his career and how he navigated their idiosyncrasies are good vignettes for leadership courses designed to challenge students to consider how to approach different leadership styles and personalities. Although the book seems intended for a popular audience, there are elements of the book that scholars studying the CIA and other organizations will find informative. For example, the author's view on certain CIA leaders points to the influence of individuals in shaping organizations. His personal insight into the post-9/11 cultural changes to the CIA highlights how external factors shape organizations. These institutional, psychological, and ideational explanations are useful for scholars trying to appreciate not only how the CIA has evolved, but why.<sup>1</sup>

Being a memoir, the book is often anecdotal and open to contestation by other CIA officers who served during the same period. This fact does not detract from the value of the book, both as a first-person account and a captivating read, but the reader should appreciate that this is a personal account and not an academic treatment of the topic. Although I thoroughly enjoyed the book, there are some areas where the author strides to do too much in a short space and drifts away from the theme of the book. For example, chapter 32's discussion of counterterrorism policy is a lot to unpack in such a small chapter. The author undoubtedly has observed the failure of U.S. counterterrorism firsthand and has some great points, but it is impossible to cover such a complicated topic in a handful of pages.

Although the reader should appreciate this book is one practitioner's experience and opinion and that experiences and opinions differ, it raises important considerations and is a worthwhile read for multiple audiences. The general population will enjoy the firsthand insight into an organization everyone has heard of but few outside truly know or understand. National security practitioners will appreciate the author's reflective consideration of his career and the challenges he faced. Although other practitioners might disagree with some of the author's views, they can probably identify with his ambivalence toward an organization that he loves but wants to improve. The scholar will appreciate the first-person account and observations from an officer who experienced the CIA during significant historical transition periods. No matter which category the reader falls within, all will gain a better appreciation of the challenges a CIA officer experiences by reading *The Recruiter*.

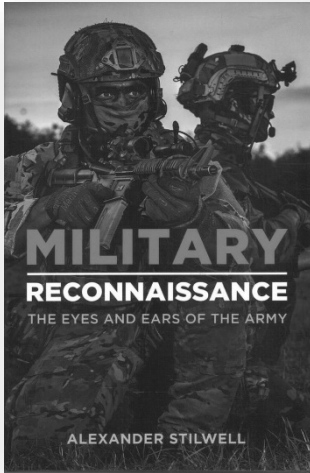
## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Craig Parsons, *How to Map Arguments in Political Science* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University, 2007). See Parson's for definitions of "institutional," "psychological," and "ideational."

## **Military Reconnaissance: The Eyes and Ears of the Army by Alexander Stilwell**

978-1612009506, Casemate, June 2021, 192 pages, \$16.00

Reviewed by: Hugh Sutherland, Joint Special Operations University, Tampa, Florida, USA



*Military Reconnaissance: The Eyes and Ears of the Army* by Alexander Stilwell is an easy-to-read study of scouting and reconnaissance from ancient times through the conflicts of today and predictions for the future of scouting and reconnaissance. In the introduction, the author asserts that reconnaissance has long been a key tool enabling military commanders to visualize the environment in order to make informed decisions. Stilwell explains that reconnaissance throughout history has been made up of scouts, sundry organizations on the field of battle that can gather information, and in modern times that tool incorporates technology. He backs up his observations with numerous examples throughout history on how reconnaissance and scouting have led to victory and how the lack of reconnaissance has led to defeat.

In Chapters 1-3, Stilwell examines the role of scouting and reconnaissance in Ancient Warfare, Medieval Warfare, and the Revolutionary Years respectively. Ancient Warfare is examined in the context of ancient Greece and Rome while Medieval Warfare is primarily focused on conflicts in Europe with some study of the conflict between the Byzantines and Muslims in the 10th and 11th centuries. Chapter 3 looks at the development of scout and reconnaissance organizations in the 18th and 19th centuries and the role of those organizations in the revolutionary wars in Europe, the Americas, and the Napoleonic conflicts.

In chapter 4, “Beyond the Frontiers,” Stilwell studies the expansion of imperialism in the 19th century and how scouting and reconnaissance were an integral part of what he calls “exploratory reconnaissance” aiming to give competing nations the advantage in the quest for new lands and the defense of the same. As perhaps the most interesting chapter of the book, this chapter looks closely at the famous scouts of the 19th century with an examination of the requisite skills required for successful reconnaissance. Stilwell then gives numerous examples of both victory and defeat in conflict, largely resulting from either proper or improper application of scouting and reconnaissance.

Chapters 5: “The First World War,” and 6: “The Second World War,” are true contrasts of how different situations lead to the development of different tools. In this case, the static nature of trench warfare in World War One is contrasted against the mechanized maneuver warfare of the Second World War. Though World War One started with varying degrees of horse cavalry usage, it soon bogged down to trench warfare and the need for observation of the enemy from static positions. This observation was done by troops patrolling between the lines, snipers and “Battle Observers,” whose function was to track and report developments during the fighting. Working with scouts, the Battle Observers would cue the scouts to areas of interest in preparation for offensive or defensive action. Though Stilwell did not go into great detail, he does briefly cover the development of aerial reconnaissance from the early days of balloons to the use of aircraft for reconnaissance in depth of the enemy forces. Stilwell concludes chapter 5 with an examination of the inter-war period of 1918–1939 in which he explores the shift to aerial, motorized, and then armored reconnaissance by the belligerents of the soon to be fought Second World War. In chapter 6, Stilwell begins with a brief study of the development of tactics, techniques, and procedures used by the reconnaissance forces of the Germans, French, British and then later, the American forces. In this chapter, he also goes into a fascinating examination of the role of specific scout and reconnaissance units that were instrumental to success in several key battles in both the European and Pacific theaters.

Chapter 7: “The Cold War Years, 1950–1982,” is a global look at military reconnaissance from the Korean War through the British experience in the Falklands War in 1982. In this global look over time, Stilwell starts with conventional reconnaissance assets like the Marine 1st Reconnaissance Battalion in the Korean War and finishes with Special Operations units like the Special Boat Service in the Falklands. Using multiple vignettes throughout the chapter, Stilwell notes that the different reconnaissance units and personnel manning them have different capabilities and requirements that are based upon their expected employment and areas of operation.

The final chapter, “Military Scouting, the Global War on Terror and Beyond” is followed by the author’s conclusions. In the final chapter, Stilwell looks at conflicts from The Gulf War of 1990–1991 to Operation Enduring Freedom (2001–2014) and concludes with Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003–2011). This chapter is mostly a series of vignettes that detail the employment of SOF and conventional forces in several of the battles that were key to the three conflicts, but the chapter concludes with an examination of the units, equipment, and organization of many of the military reconnaissance units.

The author’s conclusions start with an example of the United States Army deactivating most of its long-range surveillance companies and the equipping of a Parachute Infantry Battalion with miniature reconnaissance drones as technology increasingly enables the force to better accomplish its mission. He then gives examples and an explanation of the value of using Special Operations Forces for reconnaissance because of their placement and

function on the battlefield. To be clear, Stilwell does not advocate abandoning traditional reconnaissance forces, but he does advocate the use of technology to better perform the mission whether it is done by conventional or special forces.

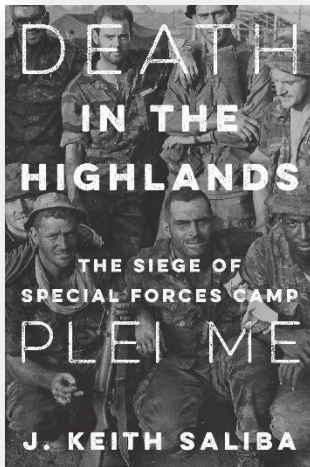
While this book is an easy to read, interesting exploration of the history and critical role of military reconnaissance, it has a few faults that detract from its credibility. Throughout the book, there are numerous spelling errors, typographical mistakes, and disjointed paragraphs that leave the reader wondering why they were included. These problems should have been noted and corrected during editing. When the complete absence of citations of any kind is also considered, the reliability of the content and the accuracy of the bibliography are brought into question. While there was much to be gained from the book, because of the aforementioned faults in the book I cannot recommend it as an authoritative research source on the topic.

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## **Death in the Highlands: The Siege of Special Forces Camp Plei Mei** by **J. Keith Saliba**

978-0811738811, Stackpole Books, September 2020, 280 pages, \$29.95

Reviewer: Timothy Heck, Modern War Institute at West Point, West Point, New York, USA



By the fall of 1965, the mountainous borderlands in Pleiku province stretched the Republic of Vietnam’s governmental control abilities. Infrastructure was lacking, provincial officials were few and far between, and ethnic divisions between the Vietnamese and the Montagnard populations made governance difficult along the Cambodian border. Furthermore, the North Vietnamese threat required a robust military presence in the area. That presence, however, was lacking. A Special Forces camp Plei Mei in II Corps Tactical Zone, held by a dozen Green Berets and their partnered forces, was “the western-most island of [South Vietnamese] influence in Pleiku.” In October 1965, the North Vietnamese besieged the camp. Masterfully retold by J. Saliba in *Death in the Highlands: The Siege of Special Forces Camp Plei Mei*, the book is both a historical

analysis of the battle and a primer for Special Operations Forces (SOF) conducting foreign internal defense against a robust conventional force.

Saliba, a journalism professor at Jacksonville University, delivers an engagingly written tactical analysis of the battle, while keeping its operational and strategic impacts front and center. The book starts with the larger strategic picture and the role of Special Forces in South Vietnam before narrowing the focus to the October 1965 siege. The weak South Vietnamese presence in Pleiku was a tempting target for the North Vietnamese high command. The Special Forces camps along the border were valuable and a source of frustration to the North Vietnamese. While far from population centers and more militarily important locations, the North Vietnamese believed that eliminating these camps would result in South Vietnamese military and political collapse. Their 1965 Monsoon Offensive in the Central Highlands and the Tay Nguyen (Western Plateau) campaign were specifically designed to wipe them out. The North Vietnamese forces—two main force regiments with attachments—were well-led, well-equipped, and had a clear mission and purpose in besieging the camp. One regiment laid siege while the other waited to ambush the expected relief column. Wiping out the camp and annihilating the would-be rescuers would be a bold

tactical stroke that the North Vietnamese expected to have strategic and political consequences. Saliba covers their deployment, strength, and preparations in well-researched and well-written detail without becoming overly pedantic or dry. While focusing on the American and South Vietnamese forces, one of the strengths of the book is the perspective of the North Vietnamese.

Holding Plei Mei was a contingent of Green Berets from Operational Detachment-Alpha (ODA) 217, Montagnard Civil Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) troops, and a small South Vietnamese Special Forces troop. While nominally advisors to the South Vietnamese who in turn commanded the CIDG forces, ODA 217's commander, Captain Harold M. Moore was the senior commander on the ground. When the North Vietnamese attacked on 19 October, their force was almost overwhelming. Moore's outposts were quickly overrun.

Help was forthcoming, but it was a slow and halting process. Intelligence out of the camp was spotty due to weak communication links. Eventually, the full weight of American military power was brought to bear, but the opening hours and days of the siege were a close-run affair for the Green Berets at Plei Mei. A mixed American and South Vietnamese rescue force, with Major Charles "Charlie" Beckwith leading Project DELTA troopers, was launched toward the camp, as the North Vietnamese expected.

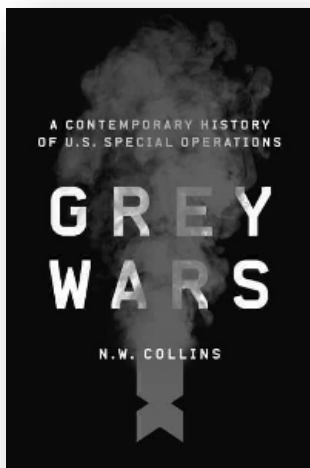
Once the siege commences, Saliba moves the reader around the battlefield and with the rescue column in an efficient and illuminating manner. The siege becomes more important than just being a battle over a border fort. Senator Edward Kennedy requests to visit the camp. President Lyndon B. Johnson radios with a message for Beckwith and Moore. While these larger-than-life personas play a role, the book remains focused on the tactical battle for the camp and the rescue mission. Whether it is the American helicopter crews or the forces that came to Plei Mei's relief, the book demonstrates the interplay of the combined arms operations and intelligence picture as they unfolded.

*Death in the Highlands* is an easy-to-read history that could serve as a primer for SOF working with partners conducting foreign internal defense operations, while facing large-scale threats in remote areas. Saliba covers the role of aviation, combat search and rescue, fires, irregular forces, and partner conventional forces in detail not commonly found in military histories. While there are some minor errors (the H-34 helicopter is presented as having skids instead of wheels), the book is strongly researched and written. Supplemented by detailed maps and photos of the siege, Saliba's *Death in the Highlands* is well-worth reading by both historians and practitioners alike.

## **Grey Wars: A Contemporary History of U.S. Special Operations** by **N.W. Collins**

ISBN 9780300198416, Yale University Press, June 2021, 320 pages, \$28.00

Reviewed by: Angelica Vallario, Harvard University Extension School, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA



N.W. Collins defines grey wars as “not large-scale wars of annihilation, of steel on steel. Instead, [they] are marked by protracted and persistent struggles, without a beginning and an end, without a victor and a vanquished.” They take place in the “grey areas” of the map, not against industrialized countries’ militaries, but against subversives, insurgents, guerrillas in locations without infrastructure. These locations provide places to hide and grow, where they can fight according to their own playbook. The problem is getting global strategy to shift focus from the Cold War Era industrialized zones and focus on these “grey areas” that “maybe ... aren’t so dark after all.” In Collins’ addition to the world of special operations literature, *Grey Wars: A Contemporary History of U.S. Special Operations*, she weaves her background in U.S. defense

and military technology with an extensive primary and secondary source list full of interviews, news articles, an array of books in the field, and military documents. She uses these to map out how the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), in support of the geographic combatant commands, fought “the grey wars” over the last five decades amidst an ever-evolving threat. Collins argues that the way Special Operations Forces (SOF) strategically approach insurgents and those acting within the “grey areas” has not necessarily changed post-9/11; the public perception of grey wars has changed based on an increasing speed and access to the release of information as technology progresses.

The first half of the book alternates between a 9/11 Coalition Warfare Research trip Collins took to MacDill Air Force Base in 2010 to learn about the workings of USSOCOM and U.S. Central Command with the events from the late 1970s to the 1990s that led up to the creation of these institutions and their specific goals. After the failure of a joint special operation during the Iran Hostage Crisis, public policy driven by safety requirements necessitated the creation of USSOCOM. USSOCOM is tasked with combating global terrorism through unconventional operations, foreign military training, and crisis missions, by working in the so-called “grey area.” During the restructuring of special operations

because of Congressional oversight to deal with the problems that came to light in Iran and questions regarding how large their role should be, Collins points out that al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden acted on what they saw as “U.S. impotence” and began building into a concerning threat that culminated in the 9/11 terrorist attacks. This “crisis [acted] as a catalyst” leading to a sizeable increase in USSOCOM’s personnel, budget, and deployments.

With the 2002 Authorization for the Use of Military Force, the U.S. would call upon the core competencies of special operations (namely their quick reaction time) making them the first military entrants into Afghanistan in this new “long war, from everlasting waged” that eventually would span decades and many other countries. Special Forces operators would adapt the “Lawrence Method” laid out in the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* acting as “nation builders as well as warriors ... [helping to] re-establish institutions and local security forces ... [assisting] in the rebuilding of infrastructure and basic services ... [facilitating] the establishment of local governance and the rule of law” in their attempts to root out terrorism in the Middle East.

The bin Laden raid is the turning point in the book that mirrors what Collins lays out as a defining moment in public interest in special operations, thrusting them into the media with a certain level of star power most are uncomfortable with. As former USSOCOM Commander, William McRaven put it, “it was a standard raid and not really very sexy.” The certain level of “star power” that came because of this event would overshadow coverage of a downed helicopter, Extortion 17, that killed thirty-eight a few months later, but unlike previous failures would not result in a questioning of special operations abilities. They would continue to be integral to U.S. strategy in the fight with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria in the late 2010s. With the withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, Collins’ claim of an unknown future seems to ring true but may miss the mark because it is inconclusive in a time of uncertainty. It could have used this opportunity to provoke discussion in applying this grey war methodology to where special operations are heading and whether the creation of USSOCOM improved upon the problems in earlier engagements it had been created to fix.

Regardless, Collins’ writing is easily digestible to the reader with an innate understanding of the special operations community. Pulling on her background in military technology, the “tangible instruments of a special operator’s physical battlefield,” each chapter begins with technological imagery (a helicopter made of bolts for Iran, a compass made of knives for Extortion 17, and a target puzzle piece for the coalition). Each image stands as a thought-provoking representation of the chapter’s message. The writing also provides a level of detail focusing on space, specifically items in relation to each other, reading almost as a sort of map of special operations and its inner workings. Though Collins acknowledges “a lot is missing from the book—deliberately,” beyond a brief mention, it may have benefited from a differentiation between the special operations commands (i.e., Joint Special Operations Command, U.S. Army Special Operations Command [USASOC], Air Force Special Operations Command, U.S. Marine Forces Special Operations Command, and

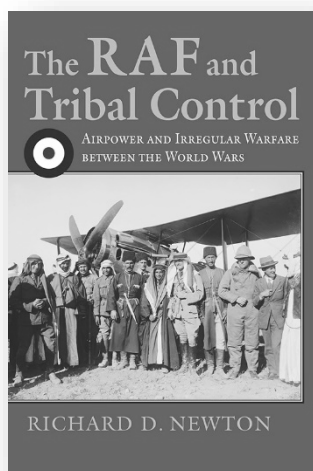
U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command [NAVSPECWARCOM] and their identified capabilities. Though their overall missions may overlap, they can be decidedly different in terms of direct action, unconventional warfare, and foreign internal defense. Their unique mission requirements allow them to be tasked by USSOCOM to do different things in responding to these “grey areas.” For example: USASOC, created in 1989, includes not only the Green Berets, who use their language and cultural skills to carry out their nine principal tasks including specifically unconventional warfare and coalition warfare/support, but also Civil Affairs Units, who focus on populace/resources control and foreign humanitarian assistance. NAVSPECWARCOM, created in 1987, like USASOC, includes principal tasks such as counterterrorism and unconventional warfare, but their Navy SEALs have a distinct specialization in maritime special operations. Through grouping together, Collins is able to keep the book concise; however, differentiating may have provided the reader with more of a framework towards understanding the connection between the events discussed and the larger policy implications in terms of funding and future use. This is key in looking at what the future potentially holds, amid funding cuts in the USSOCOM community. Overall, Collins succeeds in providing a deeper understanding of the inner workings of how USSOCOM works in approaching and suppressing counterterrorism as it appears within the “grey areas” of the world.

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## **The RAF and Tribal Control: Airpower and Irregular Warfare Between the World Wars by Richard D. Newton**

978-0700628711, University Press of Kansas, November 2019, 240 pages, \$40.00

Reviewer: Joseph Whittington, Joint Special Operations University, Tampa, Florida, USA



Since its inception, airpower has had a variety of applications, outcomes, and effects. Initially, airpower was merely a contributing enabler. However, with time, it matured into a more independent effort. The condition and manner airpower assets were employed by politicians and military planners has strongly shaped opinion as to whether its application was ultimately successful or not. In this well-researched book, framed between World War I and II, Richard Newton chronicles how the British government used the British Royal Air Force (RAF) as a low-cost, personnel and resource-reducing option to maintain order and provide response within its global empire.

One theory Newton explores in this book is that airpower, as an equal substitute to ground power, can influence the behavior and actions of those on the ground. He recounts how, during the interwar period, British politicians, via the RAF aircraft and its airmen, influenced indigenous tribes. Through coercion or persuasion, they ensured compliance to British mandates and promoted order among the inhabitants, local government, and British representatives. The experimental method was termed “air control scheme” or “air control method.” Newton defines air control as “the sum total of air-oriented actions taken to influence the behavior of local population and adversaries to conform to desired standards of conduct.”

Following World War I, Great Britain faced significant economic challenges. The nation needed to address war debt, reduce costs of policing the empire, and care for its war veterans and citizens. Of these priorities, policing the empire was mainly performed by the British Army. To reduce expenses, manpower, and resources, the idea of air control was promoted as a viable policing option. This was initially applied in remote, open areas and was more affordable than what the Army historically provided. Spearheading the concept was Sir Winston Churchill, Secretary of State for War and Air and later Secretary of State for the Colonies, and Sir Hugh Trenchard, the chief of the Air Staff.

The air control scheme gained political support and was successfully launched in Mesopotamia (now Iraq). Leaflet drops disseminated threats of precision bombing and

strafing to inhabitants on the ground. Consequently, forty-two insubordinate tribal leaders yielded to British directives without a shot fired or a bomb dropped. Air control was then introduced and had equal success in Transjordan (now Jordan) and Aden (now Yemen). However, campaigns executed in Palestine and the North-West Frontier of India yielded less successful results due to the urban setting and mountainous terrain. Still, the effort reinforced the efficacy of the air control approach as a means for Britain to control their colonies without having to fully occupy them.

Newton's research affirms that irregular warfare was and remains inherently a land-centric endeavor. He notes, "Successful tribal control required 'some boots' on the ground maintaining situation awareness and providing a personal reminder that colonial authorities could and would use airpower to punish should the locals fail to comply with political officers' requirements." To demonstrate power and influence, the British combined airplanes and armored cars—high-tech items at the time—to, "strike targets when necessary, reconnoiter and map large areas, transport people and supplies where they were needed, and provide visible evidence of the government's ability to go where it wished whenever it chose." However, the key integrator of this air-ground function—essentially the linkage between technology to task—was the ground-based Strategic Service Officer (SSO).

Newton highlights that this critical function was not existent in the RAF prior to 1920. To build a cadre of SSOs, the RAF recruited pilots, observers, and soldiers that were fluent in or willing to learn Arabic. Ultimately, SSOs were equipped with cultural, psychological, social, and economic understanding. When deployed, they combined functional skills within their area of responsibility to communicate and orchestrate the full range of airpower options during operations. Being on the ground proved to be an inherent benefit because it allowed SSOs to gather and share intelligence. This deliberate approach has similarly been modeled and utilized within the American military—particularly within the Special Operations Forces (SOF) to include Army Green Berets and Air Force Combat Aviation Advisors. It has also been further extended to the conventional forces during the Global War on Terror.

A common saying within the SOF community is "relationships matter." Newton emphasizes that SSOs built connections through "communicating with community leaders, adaption to local habits and customs, and building relationships with significant individuals, they developed the ability to sense when something was amiss. Day to day, the SSOs' presence served as a stabilizing influence among the tribes." Furthermore, they were able to directly communicate the potential use of force and apply measured kinetic and non-kinetic actions to restore order while seeking to minimize potential casualties.

Newton concluded that airpower alone could not be the sole decisive factor in irregular conflicts. Rather, if coupled with ground-based capabilities, it can promote more success. Further, he identifies the airman on the ground as the element that maximized airpower's success. "It was the SSOs who made the air control scheme work, serving as the

‘eyes, ears, and mouths’ of the civilian administration in areas too dangerous or isolated for political officials and bringing the appropriate elements of airpower to bear if, when, and where needed.”

I highly recommend this book to the strategist, analyst, and planner. One century later, the lessons Newton captured regarding air control and use of SSOs still have relevance and value. Today, the United States focuses on integrated deterrence against near-peer adversaries and tempering violent extremist organizations. Thus, soft skills like language, cultural knowledge, negotiation, and mediation can be as equally impacting as the threat of kinetic options when seeking to influence both friend and foe. While technology is an enabler and enhancer, it lacks a human component. Essentially, the first SOF truth still applies, “Humans are More Important Than Hardware.”

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