

Military special operations are military operations that are outside the conventional box.

In this monograph, volume two of three, Dr. Tom Searle articulates a general theory of special operations. In his view, robust special operations are not niche specialties, but unconventional operations that may range to the full extent of military authority and capability. He argues that this thinking reduces friction and clarifies the nature of special operations such that conventional forces are free to focus on fewer tasks. Searle also dedicates an appendix to illustrate how his general theory relates to other efforts. Readers are encouraged to examine all three volumes (Rich Rubright, Ph.D., Tom Searle, Ph.D., and the compendium edited by Peter McCabe, Ph.D.) with an open mind. These three volumes provide an opportunity for the reader to challenge their own preexisting positions, incorporate fresh perspectives, and perhaps think differently about what is necessary and sufficient for a special operations theory.



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# Outside the Box: A New General Theory of Special Operations

Tom Searle, Ph.D.

JSOU Report 17-4



## Joint Special Operations University and the Center for Special Operations Studies and Research

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**On the cover.** The Trojans pull a huge wooden horse left outside their gates presumably as a victory trophy, into their city. Later that night, a select force of Greek troops creep out of the horse and open the gates for the rest of the Greek army who enter and destroy the city of Troy, ending the 10-year war. PHOTO BY FINE ART IMAGES HERITAGE IMAGES/NEWS.COM.

**Back cover.** The author illustrates that military special operations are military operations that are outside the conventional box.

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# Foreword

In April 2017, the U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) celebrated its 30th anniversary as a combatant command. Throughout history, but certainly since USSOCOM's formation, researchers and doctrine writers have argued for and against a specific theory of special operations. Advocates argue that theory can be essential in determining and explaining the appropriate roles and missions for Special Operations Forces (SOF) and for building and sustaining the forces assigned to USSOCOM. They argue that a theory should explain the strategic utility of SOF, bolster the strategic art within SOF, and inform doctrine. Those opposed to a specific theory argue that existing military theories are necessary and sufficient for special operations. They acknowledge that special operations have a strategic value and can generate strategic effects, but insist such characteristics are inadequate for a distinct theory. They also worry that a formalized theory may be coopted to serve an institutional objective or otherwise substitute for deep, critical thinking that is a hallmark of special operations.

The Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) dedicated several monographs to the discussion of special operations theory and two events intended to bring the discussion to an academic culminating point. JSOU Press monographs by Robert Spulak, Ph.D. and Rich Yarger, Ph.D. supplemented seminal works on the subject by Navy Admiral (retired) William McRaven and James Kiras, Ph.D. In 2011, JSOU hosted a SOF-Power Workshop: A Way Forward for Special Operations Theory and Strategic Art. Attendees concluded that a healthy strategic culture and the practice of a special operations strategic art required the development of a suitable, feasible, and acceptable special operations theory. However, the topic languished as overseas operations, cyber power, and countering weapons of mass destruction dominated USSOCOM attention.

Despite these myriad of issues, JSOU chose to engage once more in the discussion in August 2016 when it hosted a symposium titled, "Special Operations Theory." The symposium addressed the full landscape of opinion for and against formation of a special operations theory. Event organizers from the JSOU Center for Special Operations Studies and Research proposed publication of two studies and a compendium of chapters relevant to the

discussion. JSOU professors, Dr. Richard Rubright and Dr. Tom Searle agreed to offer two studies to further stimulate thinking after the symposium, and Dr. Peter McCabe, a resident senior fellow, was designated lead for a compendium of shorter works to bring the conversation to an academic conclusion.

In this monograph, volume two of three, Searle articulates a general theory of special operations. As in the first volume, Searle asserts that a special operations theory is necessary but approaches the argument from a different perspective. He abandons the search for an idealized view of special operations. Rather, he flips the discussion by describing special operations as everything that is not within the box of conventional operations. In his view, robust special operations are not niche specialties, but unconventional operations that may range to the full extent of military authority and capability. He argues that this thinking reduces friction and clarifies the nature of special operations such that conventional forces are free to focus on fewer tasks. Searle also dedicates an appendix to illustrate how his general theory relates to other efforts.

Readers are encouraged to examine all three volumes (Rubright, Searle, and the upcoming compendium edited by McCabe) with an open mind. As a former SOF senior leader observed during the August symposium, “one of the beautiful things about SOF is the ability to change our minds, take a different turn, figure out a different approach, [and] solve a problem that arises that we didn’t think about because of an innate cognitive agility.” These three volumes provide an opportunity for the reader to challenge their own preexisting positions, incorporate fresh perspectives, and perhaps think differently about what is necessary and sufficient for a special operations theory.

Francis X. Reidy  
Interim Director, Center for Special Operations Studies and Research

## About the Author

**T**om Searle, Ph.D. is a course director in the College of Special Operations, Joint Special Operations University (JSOU), United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), MacDill AFB, FL.

He retired from the Army after 23 years as a special forces officer. During his military career he deployed to combat with every active and reserve Special Forces Group, the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) and all its components, and most Air Force Special Operations Command, and United States Naval Special Warfare Command elements. He also deployed forward to work with every Theater Special Operations Command (except Special Operations Command North). In addition to Permanent Change of Station tours to Germany and Korea, he participated in many overseas operations including Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, Operation ENDURING FREEDOM-PHILIPPINES, Operation WILLING SPIRIT, Operation ALLIED FORCE, Operation JOINT ENDEAVOR, and Operations DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM. As a civilian he served as a research fellow at the Air Force Research Institute and as an intelligence subject matter expert at U.S. Central Command before joining the JSOU faculty.



Dr. Searle holds a Ph.D. in history from Duke University, a master of strategic studies degree from the U.S. Army War College, and a bachelor of science and engineering degree from Princeton University. He co-authored two unclassified books published by Air University Press and is the author of many classified studies for the USSOCOM History Office and the JSOC History Office. His unclassified articles and book reviews have appeared in the *Special Operations Journal*, *Joint Forces Quarterly*, *The Journal of Military History*, *Air and Space Power Journal*, *Airpower History*, and *Armor Magazine*.



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I would like to thank the senior fellows at the Joint Special Operations University for the key role they played in this project. They all provided encouragement and insightful suggestions, but Peter McCabe, Ph.D., Dave Ellis, Ph.D., and Mr. Will Irwin were particularly helpful. Pete's vision for a Special Operations Theory Symposium, followed by a multi-volume collection of theories of special operations, will advance our understanding of special operations theory more than this volume, or any single volume, could.

I would also like to thank the rest of the JSOU community for their assistance. Richard Rubright, Ph.D. in particular has been working on related issues for a long time and his views have certainly influenced my own. I also need to thank my students for their patience as I tried out various early versions of these ideas on them. Of my students, I would particularly like to thank Army Captain John "JK" Karlsson for his engagement with these ideas and his insight into how they can help the entire U.S. military and particularly the special operations community.

In spite of the best efforts of all these people, and many not mentioned, some errors will remain in the monograph. These are, of course, entirely my fault.



## Introduction

Special operations have long been seen as “handfuls of heroes on desperate ventures.”<sup>1</sup> As the phrase implies, special operations provide the material for great stories, filled with amazing characters, attempting nearly super-human feats against impossible odds. The legendary stories have generated a steady stream of books, movies, and video games, and guaranteed special operations, and the people who conduct them, a large place in the popular imagination. This same view of special operations has, however, generated relatively little in the realm of theory. After all, why would one develop a theory of “desperate ventures?” Would it not be better to spend our time improving theories of diplomacy, conflict, and war to the point that we stayed out of “desperate” situations? Special operations, as “desperate ventures” seem to take place only when our theories fail. The handful of heroes help us survive our previous mistakes, and buy us time to improve our theories, but do not seem like promising objects for their own theory.

The logic of the previous paragraph is appealing, but mistaken. The growing role of special operations in our national security strategy suggests that special operations are not merely “desperate ventures” the nation turns to when all else fails.<sup>2</sup> Instead, special operations have become a powerful tool the nation routinely employs, along with all the other available tools, to achieve our national security goals. As such, special operations need a theory every bit as much as other military operations do, and it is desperately important that the theory be correct. To date, the special operations community has muddled along with theories for specific types of special operations, and some official doctrine that tries to codify basic common sense concerning special operations. But the community has lacked a clearly stated and widely accepted understanding of what special operations are, how they relate to conventional operations, and how special and conventional operations combine to address the challenges facing the U.S. military.

The pages that follow provide a new and general theory of military special operations based on the notion that special operations are “outside the box.” As the name suggests, this theory is best presented through a visualization which is presented on the back cover of this document.<sup>3</sup> The outside the box theory sees military special operations as those operations within the large

circle of military operations, but outside the conventional military operations box. The theory thus starts from a definition of special operations as different from conventional operations. The specific tasks the military is authorized to conduct evolve over time as do the types of operations considered conventional. In terms of the outside the box theory, changes in what the military is authorized to do are represented by changes in the size and shape of the large circle depicting military operations. Changes in what constitutes a conventional operation are represented by changes in the size and shape of the conventional box.

Other authors recognize that special operations are different from conventional operations, however, they still tend to see the world from inside the box.<sup>4</sup> The inside the box point of view leaves them burdened with the assumption (usually implied) that conventional tasks represent the essence of military responsibilities and authorities. These authors tend to see special operations as useful because they support conventional operations, or because they execute conventional tasks (sink a battleship, capture a fortress, destroy the enemy's port facilities, etc.) in unusual ways and thus accomplish conventional tasks when conventional forces cannot.<sup>5</sup> From outside the box things look different.

From outside the box it becomes obvious that conventional operations are not all the military can do, or should do. In fact, conventional operations are merely a portion of what the military is responsible for, and authorized to do. The military, as an institution, chooses to define a certain portion of its responsibilities as normal, or conventional, and devotes the vast majority of its attention to building conventional forces to handle conventional tasks in conventional ways. From outside the box we see how arbitrary and risky any definition of conventional is, and how potentially disastrous it would be to bet everything on our ability to correctly guess the challenges of the future and successfully tailor conventional responses to those challenges.

A variation on the conventional box mistake is to see all special operations as somehow related to one particular type of special operation. Some view all special operations as variations on a commando raid, others view them all as somehow related to psychological operations, or efforts to assist insurgents in driving out an occupying power or conducting a revolution. While each of these is a type of special operation, when one views one type as the archetype for all special operations, the conventional box is swapped for a different box that limits the ability to see the full range of special operations

and hinders the way that special operations and conventional operations can and should evolve. The outside the box visualization helps guard against this mistake. From outside the conventional box, and occupying all of the special operations space, we see that special operations may be special for many different reasons, and that there is no single, ideal type of special operation.

Organizationally, this paper starts by considering whether we need a theory at all. This discussion is necessary because some thoughtful scholars of special operations believe we are better off without an explicit theory, or need multiple small theories, one for each type of special operation, rather than a large general theory. These views deserve a counterargument before a general theory is presented, but readers who already accept the need for a general theory may prefer to skip this section. Next, the monograph defines what “special” means and does not mean, in the context of special operations, so that we can develop a solid definition of special operations. With special operations defined, the paper moves to the heart of the argument and presents a new general theory of special operations to visualize the relationship between special and conventional military operations. This visualization also sheds light on the relationship between military special operations and the international and interagency partners who are simultaneously conducting their own operations that interact with military special operations.

The visualization reframes our understanding of special operations and considers the implications of this reframing for the military, special and conventional operations, and Special Operations Forces (SOF), and those who lead them. These implications are the most important results of the general theory, but this monograph can only begin to explore all the implications of the theory. For those who accept the outside the box theory of special operations, there will be a great many additional implications of the theory that will only become apparent over time and with the input of more observers. The monograph concludes with an appendix that considers other attempts at a general theory of special operations, how these theories relate to one another, and how the outside the box theory compares with prior theories.<sup>6</sup>

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The outside the box theory focuses on U.S. military special operations. There will be some references to the term “special” outside the U.S. military, and the author hopes that the theory will be useful in understanding non-military “special” operations, such as police Special Weapons And Tactics (SWAT) teams, but the monograph does not attempt to prove the universal applicability of the outside the box theory. The theory is based on the U.S. experience and may or may not be fully valid for the military forces of nations that have a very narrow definition of special operations and an expansive view of conventional operations.

# 1. Why the SOF Community Needs a General Theory of Special Operations<sup>7</sup>

Special operators seem to have muddled along so far without a broadly accepted general theory of special operations and some intelligent observers have concluded that SOF are better off without a theory.<sup>8</sup> Even among those who accept that special operations need theory, some believe that two or more small theories encompassing certain types of special operations are needed, rather than a single overarching theory that tries to encompass all of special operations.<sup>9</sup> Since the value of a general theory of special operations is in question, it is necessary to consider what a theory of special operations might do for the special operations community, and the dangers of an imperfect theory. To do so one could consider various scientific theories, such as Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection or Sir Isaac Newton's third law of motion, and then examine how they changed the fields of study they addressed, in these cases biology and physics. However, U.S. military special operations are military activities, not part of a natural science, or a social science. The theories that explain other military operations are the ones that provide the best examples of what a theory of military special operations should look like, what it can do for SOF, and the dangers of getting it wrong. With that in mind, we shall examine some theories about other types of military operations to determine what those theories do for different communities of interest, and the dangers of bad theories.

## Sea Power Theory

Naval warfare was the first to be graced with its own theory. The essence of sea power theory is that even though wars are about people, and people live on land rather than at sea, control of the sea gives you enormous influence over what does, and does not happen ashore.<sup>10</sup> Specifically, the country that controls the seas between the land masses can move freely between different land masses, trade easily with anyone, raid or invade anywhere along the entire coast of a hostile power, and can prevent hostile powers from trading or moving forces between different land masses. The globalization of the world economy in recent years has radically increased overseas trade

reinforcing the argument that access to the sea is a vital and growing economic interest to virtually everyone.

Naval forces existed for thousands of years without a sea power theory. For island nations, like Japan or Great Britain, the sea was their only neighbor, making the balance of naval power between themselves and their potential adversaries an issue of obvious and vital concern, independent of any explicit theory of sea power. However, the existence of large navies and a long history of naval warfare seem to have increased rather than decreased the need for a theory. When Alfred Thayer Mahan first popularized his sea power theory in the late nineteenth century, he became an instant celebrity in Great Britain and the U.S., and his book was added to the library of every high school in Japan.<sup>11</sup> Navies all over the world felt that the sea power theories expressed in the writings of Mahan and others helped them do their jobs better and understand more clearly their role in the security of their nations.<sup>12</sup>

The general theory of sea power described above has been widely popular since the late 19th century, and there is plenty of room under this general

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*Sea power theories have also influenced technological development since navies fund the research that theory suggests will be most useful.*

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theory for more detailed theories about how best to achieve the benefits of sea power. These more detailed theories have been hotly-debated for more than a century and have often been influenced by technological developments, such as the emergence of submarines, airplanes,

guided missiles, aircraft carriers, etc. Sea power theories have also influenced technological development since navies fund the research that theory suggests will be most useful.

Recent variations on the basic theory of sea power have emphasized demographics, specifically the fact that a large and growing portion of the world's population lives on or near the coast and hence is accessible to the U.S. Navy and the amphibious capabilities of the U.S. Marine Corps.<sup>13</sup> Through more than a century of changes in politics, demographics, economics, and technology, the general theory of sea power described above has served the world's navies remarkably well.

This is not to say that Mahan had all the answers. On the contrary, there were plenty of flaws in his detailed views about how best to achieve sea power. These flaws provided opportunities for those who did not follow Mahan, and

created dangers for those who followed his recommendations too closely. For example, Mahan emphasized the importance of concentrating one's own fleet and using it for offensive operations against the enemy fleet. However, in WWI German submarines were able to pose an existential threat to Great Britain by avoiding the British fleet and instead focusing their attacks on British merchant shipping. The British initially responded to this threat by sending their ships on ineffective offensive operations to hunt submarines and were slow to provide naval escorts for merchant ships because this dispersed and defensive use of naval forces violated the principles laid down by Mahan.<sup>14</sup> Thus, holes in Mahan's specific theories led to holes in ships, even though his fundamental theory—that sea power provides enormous economic and military advantages—held true.

### **Air Power Theory**

Air power theory is related to, but not identical with, sea power theory. Air power theory claims that control of the air not only enables you to put all of the enemy's assets at risk (within the range of your weapons) but also enables you to observe the enemy from above and prevent him from observing you. This can be summarized as the Zeus fantasy under which airpower enables us to stand, Zeus-like, upon a cloud, invulnerable but all-seeing, and able to hurl thunderbolts as needed to smite the wicked. As with the general sea power theory described earlier, this theory of air power leaves plenty of room for arguments over the best way to achieve it (space-based systems, or ballistic missiles, or manned aircraft, or unmanned aircraft, etc.). Since airpower is expensive and limited and can reach more potential targets than land or sea power, there is plenty of room for arguments over what should be targeted (enemy surface forces, or enemy air forces, or economic targets, or the enemy's political leadership, or enemy civilians, etc.). These arguments have often been heated and even acrimonious, and they have important implications for the sort of air power a nation chooses to build. However, all parties to these arguments agree that the side with superior air power has an enormous advantage over the side that has no air power, or inadequate air power.

The version of air power theory described above is a consensus description of what air power can and should do. The classic "Airpower Theorists," from Billy Mitchell and Giulio Douhet writing in the aftermath of WWI,

through John Warden in the post-Cold War era, emphasized attacks on vital centers far in the rear of enemy ground and naval forces (so called “strategic bombing”), over other uses of air power.<sup>15</sup> However, this theory nearly led Britain to disaster in the early stages of WWII. Following strategic bombing theory, the British Royal Air Force overemphasized strategic bombing and bomber aircraft before the war, and underemphasized fighter aircraft; it barely corrected this error in time to avoid defeat in the Battle of Britain.<sup>16</sup> Strategic bombing theories have had other weaknesses as well. For example, from our current perspective, Douhet’s enthusiasm for using chemical weapons against civilians seems troubling, to say the least; and Warden’s five-rings seem unhelpful when confronting decentralized networks of non-state actors.<sup>17</sup> The bureaucratic politics of strategic bombing has also created unhelpful incentives since strategic bombing can potentially be done entirely by the U.S. Air Force and, if successful, might make the other military services irrelevant. This gives strategic bombing an obvious appeal to the Air Force and makes it less appealing to the other services. The consensus theory of air power, on the other hand, has had virtually no detractors, and has ensured that even the services that distrust strategic bombing agree that the U.S. needs plenty of air power.

## Combined Arms Theory

Interestingly, while theories of sea power and air power are broadly accepted in the U.S. Navy and Air Force, there is no comparable “land-power” theory that animates the U.S. Army.<sup>18</sup> This is partly due to the fact that, until Mahan,

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*Combined arms theory holds that real military power comes from the synergy of different types of assets (arms) rather than the perfection of any one type of asset.*

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theories about war could often be treated as synonymous with theories about armies. From Sun Tzu and Thucydides through Machiavelli, Jomini, and Clausewitz, theorists typically did not feel a need to discuss, separately, the nature of military power on land and sea.<sup>19</sup>

In spite of recent efforts by the U.S. Army to develop a theory of land power, the central idea that still drives the U.S. Army is “combined arms.”<sup>20</sup> Combined arms theory holds that real military power comes from the synergy of different types of assets (arms) working together rather than the perfection of any one type of asset. Thus the U.S. Army believes

that the key to success is the skillful orchestration of different arms (e.g., infantry, tanks, and artillery all working together) rather than the ruthless exploitation of a single arm (e.g., vast numbers of state-of-the-art tanks operating with minimal support from anything else). The great strength of this theory is that, conceptually, it is easy to expand it to include the rest of the U.S. Army, other military services, other U.S. government agencies, allies, nongovernmental, or intergovernmental organizations, etc. The great weakness of combined arms theory is that it does not provide much guidance as to how to prioritize among the seemingly infinite number of potential assets that could be combined. As a result, combined arms theory has not explained the Army's value to Congress and the public the way the other theories described above have helped the Navy and the Air Force. On the other hand, combined arms theory has done an excellent job of explaining to each part of the Army how it fits in with all the other parts, and it has also made the Army more receptive than it might otherwise have been to the advantages of integrating non-Army elements into Army activities.

There are, of course, many other theories that inform many other government and military organizations, but the purpose here is not to list every theory animating every organization. The purpose in considering these theories is to see what theories do for organizations and determine whether the U.S. government, and particularly the United States Special Operations Forces (USSOF) would benefit from a theory of special operations. Theories of sea power and air power have clearly informed how seamen and airmen see themselves, how they understand their roles in the world, and how they explain themselves to others. Combined arms theory has helped the Army understand how it needs to function as a system on the battlefield and how it can work with other organizations. Note also that all of these broad, general theories have room for smaller sub-theories. For example, there is plenty of room for a theory of close air support under the general air power theory. Clearly all of these general theories have been enormously valuable to the institutions that have adopted them. On the other hand, theories are not risk-free. The wrong theory can be dangerous, as Mahan's focus on offensive operations was when confronting German submarines and the Royal Air Force's enthusiasm for strategic bombing was when it became the victim of strategic bombing during the Battle of Britain.

These examples indicate that a theory of special operations has the potential to help the special operations community understand itself better and

explain itself more clearly to those outside the community. The danger of an inaccurate or incomplete theory is that it can lead to misunderstandings and ultimately, failure. Interestingly, from the examples above, it seems that a general theory is the most likely to have lasting value whereas more detailed theories that claim to offer a shortcut to achieving the aims of the general theory are more likely to prove incomplete, inaccurate, and even dangerous.

## 2. Defining Special Operations

Any theory of special operations needs to start with a definition of special operations, but before defining special operations we have to consider what “special” means, and what it does not mean.

### Special, not Elite

Special is not the same as elite. Too often, special operations attract inordinate attention in the media and a certain mystique due to the perceived elite-ness of the SOF that conduct these operations. The general public are not the only ones who make this mistake; Robert G. Spulak, Jr. builds an entire theory of special operations on the elite-ness of SOF, and my friend and colleague Richard Rubright also puts undue emphasis on the elite-ness of SOF in his theory of special operations.<sup>21</sup>

To highlight the difference between elite and special, consider the way the terms are commonly used. An elite organization does the same things as a regular organization of that type, it just does them better. Thus, an elite university does all the things that a regular university does, it just does them better. By the same token, an SS Panzer Division was an elite unit in that it did the same things a regular Panzer Division did in World War II, it just did them better. Special, on the other hand, implies different rather than merely better. Therefore, Special Prosecutors are not just normal prosecutors who do normal prosecutions better than everyone else, they are a different and unusual sort of prosecutor who does unusual, special prosecutions that are different from normal prosecutions in important ways. The Special Prosecutors may appear elite because they are likely to be at least better-than-average prosecutors, and are almost certainly not extremely inexperienced or utterly incompetent in normal prosecutions. Moreover, the selection for unusual assignments as a Special Prosecutor may cause them to be treated with the same deference shown to elite prosecutors. But they are not conducting normal prosecutions and their performance will probably be judged by different metrics from those used to evaluate normal prosecutors. (For example, normal prosecutors might be expected to handle

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*Special, on the other hand, implies different rather than merely better.*

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a large number of cases in a short time and produce a high conviction rate, whereas special prosecutors might handle a much smaller number of cases, and take a much longer time to handle them, and conviction rate might not be the measure used to evaluate their ultimate performance.)

The special-equals-elite error is so common, that correcting it requires another example. Special education teachers are not elite teachers, but rather teachers with the unusual skills needed to handle the same mission (teaching) but under unusual conditions (unusual students). Teachers are not elite because they are not the best teacher in the school at teaching normal children. But they have received training and education that the other teachers lack, and are accorded more respect than the average teacher (and may be paid more as well) because they can do things other teachers cannot do (such as teach deaf children to read).<sup>22</sup> Note that, by the metrics used to measure other teachers: scores on standardized tests; reading skills above normal for the student's age; graduation rate; progression to college; etc., special education teachers may produce some of the worst statistics in the school; statistics that might get other teachers fired. No one holds those low statistics against them because everyone realizes they are doing a different job that should not be judged by the same criteria used to evaluate other teachers.

To provide a military example, let's consider U.S. Navy SEALs. They are certainly naval forces who conduct special operations, but are they elite sailors? SEALs are elite sailors only in the sense that they go through a more demanding selection process than most sailors do, and because they receive more training than most sailors. This puts them in the same category with Navy fighter pilots, Navy doctors, and other carefully selected and highly trained sailors. But in the more important sense of elite, SEALs are not elite sailors because they do not perform normal Navy tasks—such as operating large, grey-hulled combat ships—markedly better than other Navy sail-

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*What makes SEALs important is that they are special, rather than elite, because they do things normal sailors do not do.*

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ors. What makes SEALs important is that they are special, rather than elite, because they do things normal sailors do not do. Normal sailors operate aircraft, large surface ships, and large submarines. SEALs lock-out of

submarines, jump out of planes, leave large ships, operate mini-submarines, swim to meet the enemy, and SEALs often fight the enemy on land. All these are very different, unusual, and special activities for sailors.

U.S. Army Rangers illustrate the difference between special and elite by trying to do both at the same time. They are explicitly charged with being the best light infantry in the world (i.e. elite conventional forces) and are also counted among the nation's SOF tasked with performing special, i.e. non-conventional operations.<sup>23</sup> This bifurcated role for the Rangers has a long history as indicated by the title of the best academic history of the Rangers: *Raiders or Elite Infantry? The Changing Role of the U.S. Army Rangers from Dieppe to Grenada* by David W. Hogan, Jr. If SOF and elite forces were synonymous, the Rangers would have had no problem filling both roles (i.e., there would be no need for the word "or" in the title of Hogan's book) but the Rangers are instead continuously pulled in two directions trying to do all conventional infantry tasks better than any other conventional infantry unit (i.e., be elite) while at the same time doing things that are quite different from what conventional infantry does (i.e., be special). While it is enormously challenging to reconcile the Rangers' elite conventional responsibilities with their special operations responsibilities, those who succeed in the Ranger Regiment often gain unique skills in both conventional and special operations. That experience has enabled leaders like Army General Joseph Votel to succeed in conventional roles, such as Deputy Commander 82nd Airborne Division, and in special operations roles such as Commander Joint Special Operations Command, and Commander United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). In his subsequent role as Commander of United States Central Command, he is responsible for both conventional and special operations in his geographic area of responsibility.

## **Special, not Specialized**

The special-equals-elite misunderstanding is not the only one that plagues discussions of SOF and special operations. Another serious misunderstanding is the common view that SOF are somehow more specialized than conventional forces. This view is neatly summarized in the way some people use the term "general purpose forces" as a synonym for conventional forces, implying that SOF are so specialized as to be unsuited for "general" purposes.<sup>24</sup> This view, on the surface, seems reasonable since specific examples of SOF, such as a Military Information Support Team (MIST) seem highly specialized, i.e. great for certain tasks but ill-suited for virtually anything else.<sup>25</sup> However, this view ignores the level of specialization in the conventional

force. Consider some typical conventional forces, such as a squadron of F-15C fighter aircraft or an artillery battery armed with the Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS). The F-15Cs are great for the highly specialized task of shooting down enemy planes, but ill-suited for almost anything else. By the same token, the MLRS battery is great at performing artillery's traditional, highly specialized mission of "putting steel on target" (i.e. killing everyone and destroying everything in a target area miles away from the firing battery) but ill-suited for other tasks. Of course the MLRS battery could use its tracked vehicles to pull stranded motorists out of snow drifts, or park its major weapons systems and retrain and reequip its personnel for counterinsurgency (COIN) or other missions, but any "general purpose" advantage the MLRS battery has over the MIST is the result of its size advantage rather than any inherent difference between SOF and conventional forces. In short, SOF are no more specialized than conventional forces, though they may appear specialized to someone who has focused on conventional operations for so long that conventional operations appear to be the general purpose of all military forces.

Having shown that special means different, rather than elite or specialized, we still have to define special operations. Put another way, if special means different, then what are special operations different from? In the case of military special operations, they are different from conventional military operations. So, the definition of military special operations is: Special operations are operations outside the conventional operations box. The term "operations," as used here, is defined broadly to include actions, activities, tasks, missions, etc. (This is roughly congruent with the current, 15 October 2016, edition of *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* which defines "operation" as "A military action or the carrying out of a strategic, operational, tactical, service, training, or administrative military mission.")

The outside the box theory of special operations follows from this definition, but before we can visualize the theory we must defend this definition against its detractors and see how closely it tracks with current U.S. military doctrine. Defining special operations as outside the conventional operations box defines special operations in relation to something else. Some people find this definition of special operations (and variations on it) intellectually

unsatisfying because it does not define special operations in terms of a fixed ideal of what all special operations have in common.<sup>26</sup> Instead it defines them in opposition to conventional operations. Worse yet, since the definition of conventional operations changes over time, it follows that whether or not a particular operation counts as “special” in a particular era is a dependent variable determined by the then-current nature of conventional operations. This seems to leave special operations on very shaky footing and without the solid and static (or nearly static) definition some people would like to impose on it.

Their concerns are misplaced on two counts. The first is that evolving definitions are just fine. If the term “conventional operations” can be useful even though it applies to different activities in different historic eras, then there is no reason the term “special operations” needs to be rigid and fixed for all time in the operations to which it refers. The second is that this definition is accurate. Whether or not a particular operation counts as a “special” operation, in fact, evolves over time based on the evolving definition of conventional operations. For example, throughout the 19th century, military government (later re-named civil affairs) was an absolutely routine part of conventional U.S. military operations. It was conducted in peace and war by ordinary infantry, cavalry, and artillery soldiers without any specialized training for the task. (Though they had received specialized training to become infantry, cavalry, or artillery soldiers.) By the 1990s, however, civil affairs (CA) had become a special operations core activity for which selected troops received specialized training.<sup>27</sup> Thus, during the 20th century, CA tasks transitioned from being conventional operations to being special operations.

While some conventional operations have become special operations, it has been even more common in recent years for special operations to become conventional. For example, flying helicopters at night using night vision devices was once considered the essence of special operations in the helicopter community. In fact, the nickname of the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (160th SOAR) is the “Night Stalkers,” a name that dates back to the predecessor organizations of the 160th SOAR in the early 1980s.<sup>28</sup> Back then, nighttime helicopter operations were indeed special operations, but during the intervening decades training and equipment for night flying have become a normal part of conventional operations across the U.S. military. One can even imagine a future where night flying equipment and training have become so common, and the daylight air defense threat to helicopters

has become so great that all conventional helicopter combat operations are done at night, and daylight helicopter combat operations become the “special” missions conducted by specially trained and equipped SOF aviators.

In defining special operations as military operations outside the conventional operations box we are staying fairly close to the definition of special operations used by the current (2014) edition of Joint Publication (JP) 3-05 Special Operations. JP 3-05 states that “Special operations require unique modes of employment, tactics, techniques, procedures, and equipment.” Since “unique” means different from everything else, JP 3-05 reinforces the point that special operations are different from conventional operations. JP 3-05 is a little more restrictive than outside the box in its definition of special operations, since it specifies only five reasons an operation might be special rather than conventional (modes of employment, tactics, techniques, procedures, and equipment). However, terms like “modes of employment” are vague enough that the JP 3-05 definition remains nearly as flexible and expansive as outside the box.

The outside the box theory also covers the various lists of different types of special operations found in law and doctrine. For example, our definition of special operations includes all the special operations activities listed in Title 10 U.S. Code § 167 (direct action, strategic reconnaissance, unconventional warfare (UW), foreign internal defense (FID), CA, military information support operations, counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance, theater search and rescue, and such other activities as may be specified by the President or the Secretary of Defense), but is not limited by that list. It likewise includes all the special operations core activities listed in JP 3-05 (direct action, special reconnaissance, countering weapons of mass destruction, counterterrorism, UW, FID, security force assistance, hostage rescue and recovery, COIN, foreign humanitarian assistance, military information operations, CA operations, and other such activities as may be specified by the President and/or Secretary of Defense), but is not limited by this list either. The current (2011) edition of USSOCOM Publication 1, Doctrine for Special Operations, provides yet another, unique list, this time broken down into Core Operations and Core Activities, and including many items not found in the other two lists.<sup>29</sup> Together, the fact that all three lists are in effect, the fact that they differ from one another, and the fact that the lists often include escape clauses about “other activities” that are not listed, suggest the truth: no list of special operations could be complete.

### 3. The “Outside the Box” Theory of Special Operations

Satisfied with our definition of special operations, let’s consider the outside the box theory of special operations it generates. Visually, we can understand the way special operations fit into the spectrum of military activities by starting with a large circle. This represents the entire range of operations that the military is responsible for and legally authorized to conduct (see fig. 1). The large circle contains an enormous variety of activities the military may need to conduct in situations ranging from peaceful cooperation to thermonuclear war.

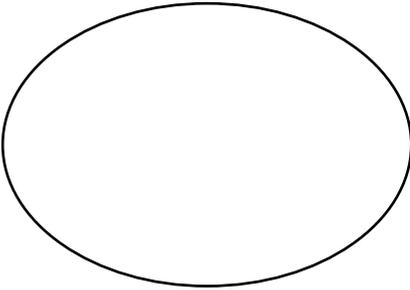


Figure 1. All DOD Responsibilities and Authorities.

The entire U.S. military cannot hope to be highly proficient at every possible type of operation. Rather than spreading its resources evenly over every possible task, the civilian and military leaders of the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), with plenty of guidance from Congress and the President, allocate resources based on national strategic goals and expectations about the future. They define conventional operations as operations that the DOD will focus its resources on and put the vast majority of its resources into conventional forces to conduct conventional operations. Visually, this is depicted in figure 2 by the shaded box representing conventional operations within the large circle of all possible military operations.

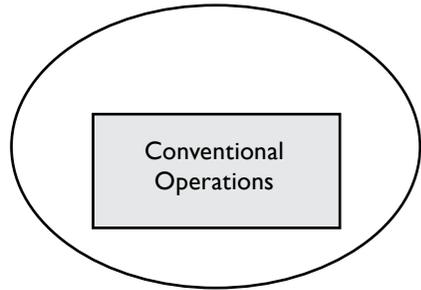


Figure 2. Conventional Operations within DOD Responsibilities and Authorities.

Since military special operations are all military operations that are not purely conventional operations, everything inside the circle of military

responsibilities and authorities, but outside the conventional operations box, is a special operation (see fig. 3).<sup>30</sup>

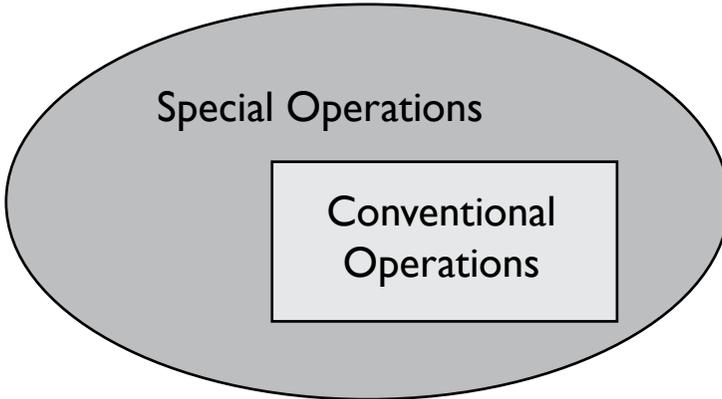


Figure 3. Military special operations are military operations that are outside the conventional box.

This visualization of the relationship between special operations and conventional operations emerges naturally from our definition and it helps us understand several important aspects of the relationship between special and conventional operations. The first thing to emphasize is that a narrower definition of conventional operations allows conventional forces to become better at those operations (since they are dividing their training time among fewer different activities).<sup>31</sup> However, narrowing the definition of conventional operations also makes the conventional box smaller causing more activities to fall outside the conventional box and become special operations. As a result, efforts to focus conventional forces on a smaller range of tasks, and thus increase their proficiency, should be coupled with expanding special operations capabilities since the DOD will still need to maintain some capability in the areas that are no longer considered conventional operations.

Figure 3 demonstrates that special operations capabilities must be a sacred trust within the DOD. Neglecting special operations leaves us unable to perform tasks that have been assigned to the department and would thus constitute professional negligence and dereliction of duty on the part of the DOD leadership.

Another way of looking at figure 3 is to see special operations capabilities as insurance against the possibility that our leadership has guessed wrong

and that conventional operations are not the only things the DOD needs to do. Furthermore, the insurance provided by competent and robust SOF allows the rest of the force to concentrate on conventional operations, thus indirectly enhancing conventional capabilities while directly mitigating risks.

Insurance against guessing wrong is desperately important. As Navy Admiral (retired) Michael Mullen admitted when he was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: “We’re pretty lousy at predicting the kind of warfare we’ll be in.”<sup>32</sup> Competent SOF are the insurance that protects us against “lousy” predictions. Fortunately, the U.S. has purchased this insurance at a startlingly low cost since USSOF receive a tiny portion of DOD resources: less than 5 percent of the total and often closer to 1 percent of the total, depending on the resource in question.<sup>33</sup>

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*Competent SOF are the insurance that protect us against “lousy” predictions.*

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In addition to mitigating the unforeseen problems of guessing wrong about enemy threats, special operations capabilities also create new options and unanticipated opportunities. For example, in late 2001, when the U.S. found itself preparing for a totally unexpected war in Afghanistan, it was enormously helpful that the nation already had units organized, trained, and equipped to link up with irregular indigenous forces and assist them in liberating their country. (In U.S. military doctrine this type of operation is called “unconventional warfare” or UW.) These units were, of course, the Army Special Forces and other special operations personnel who helped topple the Taliban government. The existence of this special operations capability before the conflict began made it possible for the U.S. to drive the Taliban and their al-Qaeda allies out of Afghanistan much sooner, and with many fewer U.S. casualties than might have been achieved by conventional operations alone.<sup>34</sup>

Ironically, special operations capabilities are just as important when we guess right, as they are when we guess wrong. Our preference is to deter conflict rather than fight wars, and we build conventional forces to deter our potential enemies. But what happens when we correctly assess the way an adversary wants to confront us, and we respond correctly by building and deploying conventional forces that successfully deter that adversary? Some potential adversaries might abandon confrontation in favor of cooperation, but others might abandon conventional military confrontation in

favor of an approach that evades our conventional deterrence. In such cases, special operations capabilities may be vital to countering the adversary's non-conventional approaches. Therefore, the better we are at conventional operations, the more successful we will be in deterring the enemy from confronting us conventionally and the more likely we will have to conduct special operations. Arguably, this is exactly what has been happening on NATO's eastern flank where NATO conventional forces seem to be successfully deterring Russian conventional operations, but rather than cooperating with NATO, Russia has chosen to pursue a confrontational approach using what some call "hybrid warfare."<sup>35</sup> To date, this approach has successfully advanced Russian interests by force without justifying NATO conventional operations in response. If NATO conventional operations cannot counter Russian "hybrid warfare," then special operations may become NATO's main military option.<sup>36</sup>

## **The Conventional Error—"Specialized" Forces**

The definition of special operations as military operations that are not conventional operations may seem obvious, and figure 3 may seem like basic common sense, but they serve a vital purpose in helping us avoid the trap many conventional-minded troops fall into. Too often conventional forces see only the conventional box in figure 3 and imagine that box is the entire role of the DOD in the world, instead of merely the more than 95 percent of DOD resources that are not devoted to special operations. From inside the box, and seeing only the box, some conventional forces come to believe that special means "specialized" and that special operations are quirky little tasks within a conventional operation that require specialized forces to handle them. This is an easy mistake to make since many types of special operations forces, such as the MIST mentioned earlier, are specialized and can handle a quirky task within a large conventional operation. What these conventional troops miss is that special operations are not just niches within a conventional operation but also the vast array of things that are not conventional operations, i.e. outside the box, because DOD has a vast array of responsibilities and authorities outside the conventional box and someone has to handle them.

Figure 3 helps explain the origins of USSOCOM and the Major Force Program (MFP)-11 SOF funding. Congress defined the large circle of activities

it wanted the military to be able to conduct, but the conventional-minded service chiefs chose to see their duties as confined by the much smaller conventional box. As a result, when Congress authorized funding to address concerns associated with special operations as depicted in figure 3, i.e. inside the military circle but outside the conventional box, the military services consistently redirect those funds to address conventional priorities inside the box. The failed attempt to rescue hostages from Iran in 1980 provided objective proof that this approach was leaving the U.S. military unprepared for hostage rescue missions, counterterrorism more generally, and by extension, all special operations outside the conventional box. Congress finally lost patience. In 1986, over the objections of all the services, Congress created a funding stream, MFP-11, outside the control of the services. Congress also created a combatant command, USSOCOM, with service-like responsibilities, to manage MFP-11 funds and address the special operations challenges that the services had neglected for so long.<sup>37</sup> Figure 3 highlights the gap between what Congress saw: the whole circle; and what the services saw: the conventional box; and thus helps clarify the disagreements between Congress and the services over special operations.



## 4. Implications of the Theory for Conventional and Special Operations

The definition of special operations depicted in figure 3 has a host of important implications. One is that, since special operations extend to the boundaries of what the DOD is authorized to do, special operations will be unusually sensitive to changes in DOD authorities. Another important implication is that, as depicted in figure 4, extending to the outer edges of what DOD is authorized to do means special operations are much more likely than conventional operations to overlap with the authorities and activities of other U.S. government agencies such as the Department of State, Department of Justice, Central Intelligence Agency, etc. (Overlapping authorities are much better than gaps between authorities, and they provide vital flexibility and options to the President, but overlaps create challenges for all the agencies involved.) For example, the now-famous raid on Abbottabad, Pakistan,

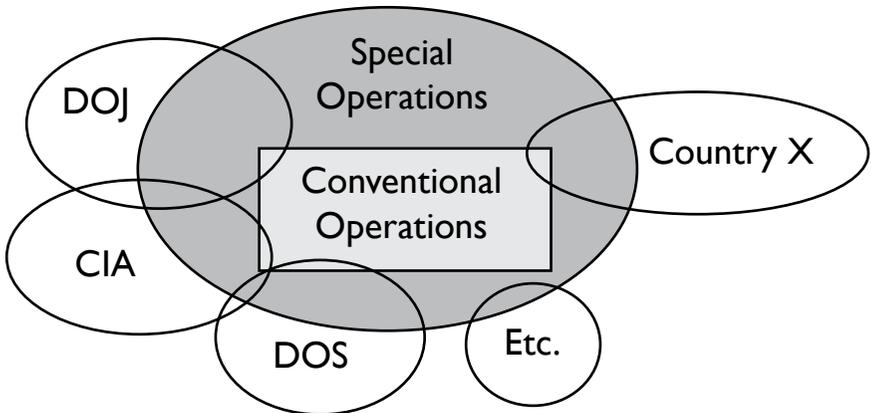


Figure 4. Relationship between conventional operations, special operations, international partners and interagency partners.

that killed Osama bin Laden in May 2011 could have been a military mission given to the DOD, but the President chose to give it to the CIA instead. The CIA could have used its own personnel as the raid force, but with the approval of the DOD and the President, the CIA employed military SOF as the raid force on this CIA mission.<sup>38</sup> In this case overlapping authorities

between DOD and CIA gave the president two options instead of one, and both the CIA and DOD could employ SOF to accomplish the mission.

As depicted in figure 4, special operations are more likely than conventional operations to involve not just other U.S. government agencies, but foreign governments as well. For example: a SOF team in Colombia working on a FID or Security Force Assistance mission might be working side by side with personnel from the U.S. State Department, including the U.S. Agency for International Development; U.S. Justice Department, including the Drug Enforcement Administration; the Colombian military, including both conventional forces and Colombian SOF; the Colombian Police, including police antinarcotics commandos; and many other U.S. and Colombian government agencies.<sup>39</sup>

As one might expect, from figure 4, the primary customers for special operations are those responsible for all U.S. military operations (i.e., the entire circle containing both special operations and conventional operations). Specifically, special operations are typically conducted on behalf of a U.S. Ambassador or the Commander of a Geographic Combatant Command (GCC).<sup>40</sup> Ambassadors are in charge of all U.S. government activities in their assigned country, including all military operations, both special and conventional. GCCs are responsible for all military operations (i.e., the entire circle, including both special and conventional operations) within their geographic areas of responsibility. Oddly, since GCCs are staffed almost entirely with personnel whose previous assignments were in conventional forces, many people think of these commands as conventional commands supported by SOF. They are in fact joint commands equally responsible for both conventional and special operations. (They are not conventional commands supported by SOF any more than they are Army commands supported by the Air Force.)

The routine overlap between special operations and the activities of other U.S. government agencies and other governments means that the forces who conduct special operations need to develop unusually good skills in inter-agency and international operations. Figure 4 also suggests that forces who routinely conduct special operations occupy a middle ground between U.S. conventional forces and non-DOD agencies, both foreign and domestic. As a result, forces who routinely conduct special operations will often serve as liaisons between U.S. conventional forces and both international and inter-agency partners. This liaison role will come naturally, since other nations

and agencies will often encounter forces conducting U.S. special operations before they encounter those conducting U.S. conventional operations. Fortunately, forces conducting special operations will often have the necessary international and interagency skills already due to their previous experience in special operations.

This is not to say that conventional operations do not frequently overlap with the activities of other U.S. government agencies and especially foreign militaries. For example, U.S. Forces Europe and U.S. Forces Korea are overwhelmingly conventional forces and their conventional components have been working closely with foreign conventional forces for generations. But these are exceptions. Conventional U.S. military operations are usually defined with the intention of creating a gap between military operations and the activities of other U.S. government agencies, and foreign forces tend to be given a geographic slice of a ground operation to handle on their own, rather than incorporated within conventional U.S. military thinking. By contrast, special operations such as FID, UW, CA, etc., are tightly integrated with other U.S. government agencies and with the activities of friendly foreign governments and organizations.

### **What Happens as Conventional Operations Evolve?**

Some authors have been uncomfortable defining special operations as different from conventional operations because this definition means that what constitutes a special operation changes in response to changes in the definition of conventional operations. Their mistake is to see such changes as a problem to be solved or a trap to be avoided rather than a fact to be acknowledged and accepted.

To understand how the evolution of conventional operations affects special operations we need to consider some of the many types of special operations. Figure 5 depicts five types of military operations: FID; CA; UW; Psychological Operations (PSYOP); and counterinsurgency (COIN). The first four were among the “Principle Special Operations Missions” listed in USSOCOM Pub 1 dated 25 January 1996, and that list was still current on 11 September 2001.<sup>41</sup> The term COIN was still out of favor in the DOD, as it had been since Vietnam. It is, however, included with an asterisk in figure 5 because if the term had been acknowledged, it would almost certainly have been listed as a special operations core activity, as it was later in the

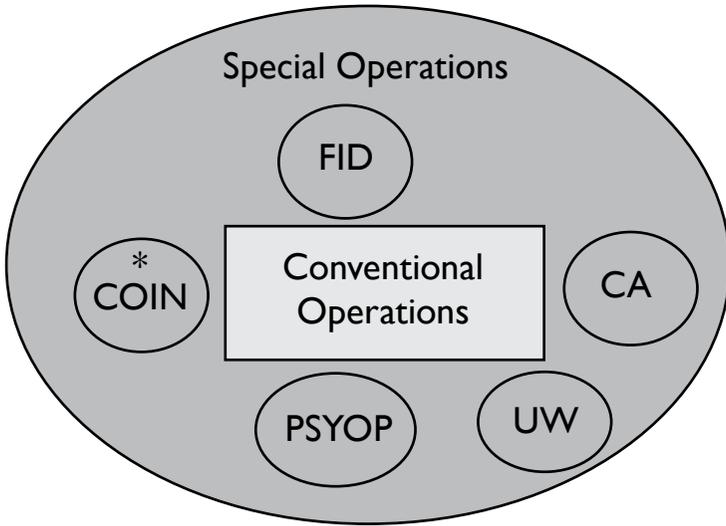


Figure 5. Some of the principle Special Operations Missions.

2014 edition of Joint Pub 3.05 “Special Operations.”<sup>42</sup> (The five missions depicted in figure 5 are, of course, a severe oversimplification of the true diversity of special operations, but including more activities and missions associated with special operations would make the figure more confusing without advancing the argument.) Figure 5 depicts specific missions that were considered special operations rather than conventional operations in 2001.

Now compare figure 5 to the situation at the height of the Iraq War, in about 2008, depicted in figure 6. Several things have changed. COIN has been reinstated as an accepted doctrinal term, and has even become fashionable in some circles. It has also been identified as a special operations core activity. PSYOP has been renamed Military Information Support Operations (MISO). Most importantly, the long occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan by U.S. conventional forces has forced U.S. conventional operations to expand into areas that had previously been considered special operations. By 2008, parts of the CA, MISO, FID, and COIN missions were all routinely conducted by conventional forces and there were prominent conventional officers, such as Army General (retired) David Petraeus, who were trying to permanently expand the U.S. Army’s view of conventional operations to include elements of COIN, FID, CA, and MISO. UW, on the other hand, remained strictly

a special operation. In terms of visualization, the conventional operations box expanded to include parts of CA, FID, MISO, and COIN, but not UW.

The expansion of the conventional operations box depicted in figure 6 may prove to be temporary. Certainly there are conventional officers who want to narrow the scope of conventional operations (shrink the box) back to pre-9/11 size, and there are special operations personnel who want to keep these missions, and the forces who conduct them, entirely within the special operations camp.<sup>43</sup> But the fact remains that in recent years the conventional operations box did expand and change its shape to include things that had previously been strictly special operations. This sort of evolution in the size and shape of the conventional operations box is both natural and desirable.

The precise list of what is, and is not a conventional operation has changed over time and should continue to change as the world changes. Figure 6 helps explain the implications of those changes for both SOF and conventional forces. The fact that the conventional operations box expanded after 9/11 to include, for example, some portions of CA, does not mean that CA was never a real special operation. It means instead that the situation changed and CA, which had previously seemed peripheral to success in conventional

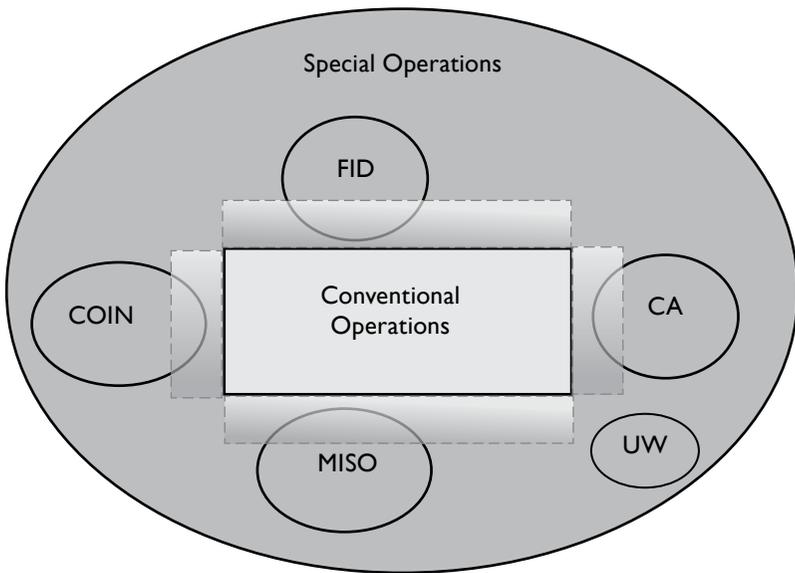


Figure 6. Changing Nature of Special Operations. The situation at the height of the Iraq War with the conventional operations box expanding to include parts of CA, MISO, COIN, and FID, but not UW.

operations before 9/11, now seemed more central to conventional success. Fortunately for conventional forces, prior to 9/11 the DOD did not put 100 percent of its resources into conventional operations as defined at that time and instead invested a small, but prudent amount in maintaining a CA capability within the special operations community. That pre-9/11 investment in special operations CA meant that when conventional operations required CA, a capability already existed and could be brought into conventional operations and expanded as needed to meet the new, and unexpected requirements. If there had been zero CA capability pre-9/11, then the post-9/11 expansion of CA would have been vastly slower, more difficult, and less effective. The same holds for FID, COIN, and MISO.

Thus, SOF not only create and maintain capabilities outside the conventional box, they also serve as scouts preparing the way in case the conventional

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*This scout role requires SOF to share their techniques and expertise with their conventional brethren and not guard their roles and missions with the jealousy that too often characterizes the military services.*

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box needs to expand into those areas. This scout role requires SOF to share their techniques and expertise with their conventional brethren and not guard their roles and missions with the jealousy that too often characterizes the military services. Of course, figure 6 also disproves any theory of special operations that seeks

to develop a static and permanent list of special operations that can never become conventional operations.

## **Implications for Theories of Specific Types of Special Operations**

Figure 5 (principle Special Operations Missions) shows that the outside the box theory of special operations described above is an umbrella theory under which separate theories need to be developed to understand each type of special operation. For some specific special operations, such as COIN and Direct Action, a body of theoretical literature has already emerged. For others, the theoretical literature is much leaner. One obvious next step in developing the outside the box theory of special operations will be to refine existing theories of specific special operations and develop new ones to create a mature family of specific theories under this general theory.

Some thoughtful observers, following Army Lieutenant General (retired) Charles Cleveland's division of special operations into "special warfare" and "precision strike," have claimed that the special operations community needs two theories: one for special warfare and another for precision strike.<sup>44</sup> There is certainly room for these theories under the outside the box theory the theories covering more narrowly defined types of special operations, such as UW and direct action.

Figure 6 (Changing Nature of Conventional Operations) shows that no type of special operation is permanently and inherently special rather than conventional because every type of special operation could, potentially, become a conventional operation under the right circumstances. Failure to recognize this has led some theorists astray. For example, Navy Admiral (retired) William McRaven, in his famous book *Spec Ops, Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice*, proposes a theory of special operations based on case studies of direct action raids.<sup>45</sup> His approach implies that the direct action raid is the archetype or ideal special operation and that other types of special operations are special because they are somehow related to direct action raids. (Many in the Army Special Operations community make a similar mistake by claiming that UW or Psychological Warfare is the ideal from which all other special operations are derived. They seem to base this on the fact that psychological warfare troops were the first U.S. Army SOF established after World War II and the fact that the largest element within Army SOF is the Special Forces whose original mission was UW.) Figure 6 illustrates that there is no single ideal special operation. No particular type of operation

is inherently special, because special is defined negatively by what special operations are not (they are not conventional operations).<sup>46</sup> Special

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*Special operations are outside the conventional box, regardless of the reason why a particular type of operation is outside that box, and the operation remains special only so long as the conventional box does not expand to include that type of operation.*

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operations are outside the conventional box, regardless of the reason why a particular type of operation is outside that box, and the operation remains special only so long as the conventional box does not expand to include that type of operation. In other words, anyone who develops a theory for a particular type of special operation, and then tries to expand it to cover all

special operations, is looking through the wrong end of the telescope. The small theories for particular types of special operations can develop under the umbrella of a general theory, but the outside the box theory explains why the small theories cannot be expanded to cover the entire spectrum of special operations.

## 5. Implications for SOF

Figures 1-6 above depict operations, missions, tasks, or techniques, but not forces. There is, however, a connection to forces, since certain forces are commonly associated with specific tasks. For example, Civil Affairs (CA) Teams are routinely assigned CA missions depicted by the CA circle that is entirely outside the conventional operations box and inside the special operations area in figure 5 (representing the U.S. military in 2001). In figure 6 (representing the U.S. military in 2008), the CA circle is partly inside the expanded conventional operations box, and partly still outside that box in the realm of special operations. As the situation changed between figure 5 (2001) and figure 6 (2008), some CA Teams that had been SOF became conventional forces, or special operations forces who routinely support conventional operations, rather than special operations. At the same time, conventional infantry, armor, and artillery units that would have been conducting conventional combined arms maneuver inside the conventional box in figure 5 (2001) had their mission set expanded into FID and COIN in figure 6 (2008). This might have started out as conventional forces performing a special operation on a temporary basis, but later (as the situation changed from figure 5 in 2001 to figure 6 in 2008) transitioned into conventional forces conducting a conventional operation that used to be a special operation. The conventional portion of the U.S. Army embraced FID and COIN to such an extent that entire Advise and Assist Brigades were organized, trained, and equipped, within the conventional force, for the specific tasks of FID and COIN.<sup>47</sup>

These examples should dispel any notion that only SOF can conduct special operations, or that all the operations conducted by SOF are special operations, or that conventional forces can only conduct conventional operations. However, writing without the benefit of the visualizations provided above, some authors have raised these issues and they need to be addressed in more detail. For example, authors anxious to exaggerate the gap between special operations and SOF have been quick to point out that special operations have been conducted since ancient times, long before institutionalized special operations forces existed.<sup>48</sup> They also point out that successful special operations have been conducted by conventional forces, and that SOF often

conduct conventional operations. None of these facts call into question the value of SOF, or the intimate connection between SOF and special operations, but they do require explanation within the context of our outside the box theory of special operations.

SOF can, and often do, conduct conventional operations. In the past this has led to complaints that SOF were being “misused” and such complaints are likely in the future when SOF are again ordered to conduct con-

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*If the task and method of execution are conventional, they remain conventional, regardless of whether the task is performed by SOF or conventional forces.*

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ventional operations. If the task and method of execution are conventional, they remain conventional, regardless of whether the task is performed by SOF or conventional forces. And SOF are “special” based on their intended use, regardless of the missions they actually conduct. The real question about the “misuse” of SOF should be the opportunity cost. When SOF are performing a conven-

tional task, is there a special operation SOF could be performing instead that would contribute more to the war effort or national security? The fear among SOF is that conventional commanders, viewing the world from inside their conventional box and not always able to see all the possibilities outside the conventional box, ignore opportunities and use all resources, including SOF, only to accomplish tasks inside the conventional box. The conventional commanders’ fear is that SOF define their appropriate missions so narrowly that they become irrelevant and sit around forever, doing nothing, while waiting for the perfect task which never comes.<sup>49</sup> In this argument each side has a valid point but in making it they need to avoid losing sight of the equally valid concerns on the other side.

Based on the outside the box visualizations presented in the figures above, instances when conventional forces have undertaken special operations can be understood as the result of either defining conventional operations too narrowly, or putting too many resources in the conventional box and having inadequate resources left over for special operations outside that box. This was, arguably, the case in 2001 (fig. 5) and the problem was partially corrected by 2008 (fig. 6) through a redefinition of “conventional” facilitated by small, preexisting SOF that could share their expertise with conventional forces. But what about special operations that are conducted by conventional forces on a temporary, ad hoc basis and do not result in a standing SOF capability

to perform that mission? What do such cases tell us about the relationship between SOF and special operations? These questions are best answered by considering several cases where a special operation did, and did not, result in a standing SOF capability.

Let's start with the ancient Greek myth of the Trojan Horse. The myth claims that after a ten-year siege of Troy, the Greek besiegers built a huge, hollow, wooden horse, filled it with their best soldiers (elite forces), while the rest of the army boarded their ships and moved out of sight of Troy. They then conducted an elaborate deception and psychological operation to convince the Trojans that the Greeks had fled and that the horse should be dragged inside the walls of Troy. (This psychological operation was so successful that the Trojan Horse was incorporated into the crest of the U.S. Army Psychological Operations Command and remains part of the crest now that the command has been renamed the U.S. Army Military Information Support Operations Command.) The Trojans dragged the horse inside the city, and that night, as they got appropriately drunk celebrating their triumph after ten long years of war, the Greek heroes snuck out of the horse, hacked and stabbed their way to the city gates, opened the gates, and allowed the rest of the Greek army to enter and sack the city.

The Trojan Horse was an extremely high risk operation. If the Trojans had not dragged the huge wooden statue inside the city, but had instead surrounded it with their army and set it on fire, the Greeks inside would have been rapidly exterminated. This would certainly have doomed the Greeks' efforts to conquer Troy. Furthermore, given the political prominence of the Greek heroes inside the horse, their deaths would almost certainly have caused simultaneous political revolutions

in city states all over Greece. For our purposes, the key fact is that the Trojan Horse was a ruse that could only work once. Anyone who had heard the story of the horse would immediately set fire to any

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*For our purposes, the key fact is that the Trojan Horse was a ruse that could only work once.*

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giant wooden statue the Greeks might leave in the future, so it could not be the basis for institutionalized SOF capable of perfecting and repeating the techniques used in that operation.

The famous "Doolittle Raid" was another special operation that did not result in a standing SOF element designed to repeat its performance.<sup>50</sup> To review the history of the raid, immediately after the humiliating U.S. defeat

at Pearl Harbor (December 7, 1941) the U.S. was very impatient to strike back at Japan, particularly at Tokyo. However, the U.S. had no airbases remotely within range of Tokyo and could not risk bringing its few aircraft carriers close enough to Japan to attack Tokyo with the short-range Navy planes designed for carrier operations. The solution was to protect the aircraft carriers by launching the planes from farther away. Since normal Navy planes lacked the range, U.S. Army medium bombers were modified to increase their range and launch off an aircraft carrier. The catch was that the medium bombers could not land on aircraft carriers and would have to try to land in China and find their own way home from there. James Doolittle, then a Lieutenant Colonel, led the raid on Tokyo which took place in April 1942.<sup>51</sup> The raid did minimal physical damage to Japan but had a significant psychological impact in both Japan and the U.S., and the carriers survived to fight in subsequent battles. All the aircraft were lost, but most of the crews survived. (Doolittle received the Congressional Medal of Honor and went on to become a Lieutenant General and command the Eighth Air Force bombing Germany.) The minimal damage inflicted on Japan, the 100 percent loss rate for aircraft participating in the raid, and the enormous risk to the aircraft carriers if the U.S. tried to repeat the stunt, all conspired to make the Doolittle Raid a one-and-done operation. There was no point in building a training pipeline to institutionalize the production of Doolittle Raiders (i.e. create standing SOF based on the Doolittle model) because the Doolittle Raid was not a model the U.S. wanted to repeat.

The case of the Night Stalkers (160th SOAR) was the opposite of the Greek heroes and the Doolittle Raiders. From November 1979 until January 1981 American Embassy staff were held hostage in Iran. In response, conventional U.S. Army helicopter personnel created a temporary, ad hoc organization to develop the equipment, tactics, techniques, and procedures to facilitate a rescue attempt. The U.S. launched a rescue mission, but it used longer-range Marine helicopters and failed due to problems with the helicopters.<sup>52</sup> Rescue planning ceased when the hostages were released, but the U.S. Army was left with a question: Should it institutionalize a special operations helicopter force so that one would be available for future special operations, or should it shut down the existing effort and start from scratch if another contingency occurred? The U.S. Army decided to institutionalize a special operations helicopter capability which has become the 160th SOAR.<sup>53</sup>

What was the difference? Why did the somewhat successful Doolittle Raid not lead to institutionalized SOF, while the failed Iran hostage rescue mission, and efforts to prepare for additional rescue attempts that never took place, led to an entire regiment? The issue was whether there was an enduring requirement for the new capability. Institutionalizing the Doolittle Raid capability did not make sense because the risk versus reward calculations for repeating that raid were not promising and there were other, more promising means of fighting Japan. On the other hand, in 1981, the recent U.S. failure to rescue hostages from Iran might make hostage-taking look like an attractive option for those who opposed U.S. foreign policy. This made a hostage rescue capability look like a handy tool to have, and helicopters were understood to be part of that capability, since they were the part that failed during the rescue attempt in Iran. However, making hostage rescue a mission for conventional U.S. forces (i.e., expanding the conventional box to include hostage rescue) did not make sense, since hostage rescue operations required extensive specialized training and would never require a large percentage of the entire U.S. Army helicopter fleet. The solution was to institutionalize the capability, but not incorporate it into the conventional force, i.e. create standing SOF with the required capability.

As these examples demonstrate, deciding whether or not to institutionalize a new and different “special” capability is highly-dependent on the details of the specific special operation and the institution’s expectations about future challenges. The cases above differ in the repeatability of the specific operation, but the same operation might be a repeatable model for some institutions, at some times, but not repeatable for other institutions at a different time. For example, the capture of Emilio Aguinaldo in 1902 was one of the most successful special operations in U.S. history, but it did not lead to a standing SOF capability whereas similar operations did lead to standing SOF in other cases. From 1899 until 1902 Aguinaldo led the Philippine insurrection against U.S. occupation of the Philippines following the 1898 Spanish - American War. In the spring of 1902, Brigadier General Frederick Funston and a small group of his officers captured Aguinaldo by pretending to be prisoners of their own Filipino scouts who were in turn pretending to be guerrillas. As guerrilla reinforcements bringing back captured U.S. Army officers, the group was able to enter Aguinaldo’s camp, meet with him, and capture him. The Philippine Insurrection was nearly defeated by 1902.

Aguinaldo's capture, and his subsequent agreement to give up the fight and encourage his followers to surrender, pretty much ended the insurrection.<sup>54</sup>

Funston's action was clearly a special operation, since the elaborate ruse was well outside the normal conduct of U.S. military operations at the time, but it was seen by the U.S. Army as a one-time-only attempt to capture a uniquely important target and it did not lead to institutionalized SOF capable of repeating this success. However, about forty-five years later, faced with the Huk Rebellion, the newly independent Philippine government institutionalized a small special operations unit known as Force X to conduct "false-flag" operations like Funston's by pretending to be anti-government insurgents.<sup>55</sup> The Rhodesians went even further and built a 1,500 man force, the Selous Scouts, to conduct their "false-flag" or "pseudo" operations in the 1970s.<sup>56</sup>

Why did the U.S. Army not feel the need to institutionalize this sort of special operations force in the Philippines in 1902 while the Filipino security forces institutionalized them on a small scale in 1948 and the Rhodesian security forces institutionalized them on a much larger scale in 1973?<sup>57</sup> A vast number of reasons come to mind but certainly one critical difference was that the U.S. Army was finishing a COIN campaign in 1902 whereas the Filipinos in 1948, and especially the Rhodesians in 1973, understood that they might be at the beginning of long COIN fights and would have a continuing need for this type of special operations capability. (The Huk Insurrection did not end until 1955 and the Rhodesians eventually lost their war in 1980.)

Thus there is no inherent connection between the "specialness" of the mission and the creation of standing SOF to conduct that mission. Instead, the decision on whether or not to institutionalize a particular kind of SOF, i.e. create a standing force to conduct a particular type of special operation, is based on the perceived enduring need for that capability. For one-time-only missions, a nation will typically have to create an ad hoc force after the mission is identified, just as the Greeks did with their Horse outside Troy, and Doolittle did with his Raiders.<sup>58</sup> For enduring missions, like helicopter infiltration deep into enemy territory, a standing special operations force, like the 160th SOAR, might be created. If, when the new mission appears, there are no standing special operations forces with appropriate skills, then the troops who conduct the unique special operation will be drawn from the forces that do exist, and since most available forces are conventional forces, they may be given the special mission. But the special operation is special because it is outside the conventional box, regardless of whether the troops

who conduct it are conventional or SOF and regardless of whether permanent SOF are created to conduct similar missions in the future.

One additional nuance in the relationship between standing SOF and special operations needs to be captured. It will be considered through the example of 617 Squadron of the British Royal Air Force in World War II. The squadron was organized, trained, and equipped in early 1943 for the famous “Dam Busters” mission, code named Operation Chastise. The squadron used heavily modified aircraft to approach the dams from the lake side with each aircraft dropping a single bomb from an altitude of 60 feet and a speed of 220-240 miles per hour. The bomb, code name Upkeep, was a unique cylindrical design, five feet long and weighing more than 9,000 lbs. It was dropped with a backspin of 500 revolutions per minute and designed to bounce several times before reaching the dam and then sinking to the desired depth, in contact with the dam, so that the water behind the dam would enhance the explosive effect on the dam. The mission was a success destroying two major dams in the Ruhr Valley, but the weapon and tactics were never used again and eight of the nineteen bombers were lost with their entire crews.<sup>59</sup>

Operation Chastise was thus a classic one-and-done special operation and 617 Squadron, like the Doolittle Raiders, was an ad hoc SOF element created for a single mission out of volunteers from the larger conventional force.<sup>60</sup> The Royal Air Force (RAF) could have disbanded 617 Squadron after the mission, and that was considered. Instead, the RAF decided to keep the 617 Squadron as a standing SOF element to conduct other special operations for the RAF that required unique weapons and tactics. The experience of 617 Squadron is far from unique since SOF elements established for one type of special operation often see their roles expand as new types of special operations emerge. (For example, U.S. Army Special Forces were established to conduct UW but soon saw their mission expand into COIN.)

## **Implications for those Leading SOF**

The outside the box theory of special operations, as laid out in figures 1 through 6, has some interesting implications for the personnel who lead and conduct special operations. The first is that the people who volunteer to join the special operations community have decided to join the DOD, but have also volunteered to be members of the small force that does unusual things rather than the much larger conventional force that does what DOD

considers normal and important things. Such people are thus conformist enough to join, and remain in DOD, but too non-conformist to be happy at the center of what DOD considers its main tasks. They are likely to have atypical views within the DOD and will thus add a different perspective to any team of conventional planners they join. Such people are also likely to be unusually independent minded, highly motivated, and perhaps stubborn, since they chose not to be a part of the conventional forces that the DOD focuses its resources on. Thus people who volunteer for special operations are likely to be unusually imaginative and creative, but may also be less cooperative when they disagree with a course of action.<sup>61</sup>

People who choose a life in special operations are choosing to be near the edges of DOD rather than the center. Such a choice suggests that they are not entirely comfortable in DOD but also suggests they may be more comfortable than their conventional peers when working with foreign governments and other U.S. government agencies. Out on the fringes of DOD, in special operations, everything is likely to be less structured than it is at the conventional center. People who choose to work where the bureaucratic structures are weaker and the rules and regulations are less clear are likely to be people who are unusually comfortable dealing with unstructured problems, in situations of high uncertainty, with only vague guidance. They are probably also self-motivated enough to work hard without the expectation that their performance, good or bad, will receive much attention from the institution. This may make them less sensitive to the rewards and punishments that motivate conventional forces and their leaders may have to find other, more unconventional means to motivate them.

In short, the people who volunteer for special operations training and assignment are likely to have strengths and weakness that do not match those of their conventional peers. Leading them will likely involve somewhat different challenges from the challenges of leading conventional forces, or elite forces that perform conventional operations. Understanding the outside the box diagram helps us predict some of these challenges and the previous paragraphs have attempted to do so.

Figure 5 (depicting different types of special operations) suggests that even though we may be able to predict some general characteristics of people who volunteer for special operations units, the field of special operations consists of a wide variety of different sub-specialties that might attract very different sorts of people. The common characteristic across SOF is only that

the operators have chosen not to focus on conventional operations, beyond that they may have very little else in common. This means that leading a Special Operations Task Force (SOTF) combining many different tribes of SOF might appear to pose the challenge of leading several groups with incompatible cultures. However, it might actually pose the very different challenge of leading groups that are good at concealing their actual cultures within a larger, potentially hostile culture. For example, a small SOF

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*The common characteristic across SOF is only that the operators have chosen not to focus on conventional operations, beyond that they may have very little else in common.*

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element working with a foreign army, or a large conventional task force, will only be effective if it can assimilate with the much larger cultural context it finds itself in. However, it will simultaneously work diligently and quietly to maintain its own internal culture. Convincing these disparate groups to pursue the commander's goals might be unusually challenging since they are uncommonly adept at pursuing their own goals while paying lip service to the goals of their superiors and the larger institution.

## Conclusion

The outside the box theory of special operations starts from a definition of special as different, not merely specialized and not necessarily elite. It proceeds to define military special operations as different from conventional operations. Specifically: "military special operations are military operations outside the conventional operations box." This definition is depicted as a large circle containing all the operations the military can, and should conduct, and a small box within that circle depicting conventional operations. By definition, military special operations are everything inside the military operations circle but outside the conventional box. This theory sees special operations not as niche capabilities within the conventional box but expansively, as everything outside the conventional box, out to the limits of military responsibilities and authorities. Special operations can support conventional operations directly, but their most important role is to cover all the tasks the military must be prepared to accomplish that are not conventional, i.e., outside the box. In so doing, robust special operations capabilities indirectly support conventional capabilities by allowing the military to use a

tighter definition of conventional operations and thus achieve higher levels of proficiency in those operations by focusing on fewer tasks.

The theory explicitly recognizes that the edges of the military circle expand and contract as military responsibilities and authorities change over time, and that the conventional box within that circle also changes its size and shape as the definition of conventional operations evolves. The visualization makes it obvious that special operations will be extremely sensitive to changes in the size and shape of the circle and that out at the edges of military authorities and responsibilities, special operations will frequently overlap with the activities of other U.S. government agencies, and with the activities of friendly foreign and non-governmental actors. Special operations will also be extremely sensitive to changes in the size and shape of the conventional box since special operations expands when the conventional box shrinks, and special operations roles and missions become conventional operations when the conventional box expands.

The outside the box theory of special operations provides a new vantage point from which to view and understand special operations, conventional operations, special operations forces, conventional forces, and the relationships among them. It also provides a clear understanding of how these relationships evolve. (See fig. 5 and 6 comparing 2001 and 2008). It does this by abandoning the search for a single, ideal special operation and embracing both the inherent diversity of special operations and evolving definitions of conventional and special.

## Appendix: Outside the Box vs. Other Theories of Special Operations

The previous pages explained the outside the box theory of special operations. The explanation included some passing references to other theories but kept that discussion to a minimum in the interest of brevity and to maintain the focus on outside the box. In order to do justice to the previous theories it is important to mention here that they have been invaluable to the current author and to the development of the outside the box theory. To advance the scholarly debate it is necessary to discuss where the new theory fits among the various existing attempts at a general theory of special operations. Though every book, article, and movie about special operations includes at least an implied theory of special operations, only a few authors have offered an explicit and general theory of special operations. Four of the most prominent are Navy Admiral (retired) William McRaven, Dr. Robert G. Spulak, Dr. Harry R. Yarger, and Dr. Richard Rubright.

### Admiral McRaven

Admiral William McRaven published the first explicit theory of special operations in his book *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice*.<sup>62</sup> At the time of writing, Admiral McRaven was a mid-career Navy SEAL officer fully conversant with U.S. military doctrine and the writings of various military theorists, including Carl von Clausewitz. (Admiral McRaven went on to be a four-star Admiral and command USSOCOM.) Admiral McRaven developed his theory to answer an apparent paradox. Defense has an advantage over offense, and large forces have an advantage over small forces, and yet direct action raids sometimes succeed even though they involve small forces attacking larger forces. He builds his theory on eight detailed case studies of direct action missions (all but one of them a raid) and hopes, rather than proves, that his theory of direct action raids can be expanded to cover other types of special operations.

The reflexive answer to the paradox that bothered Admiral McRaven is that the small direct action raiding force has the advantage of surprise on its side, and once it loses that advantage, the raiding force is likely to be

in serious trouble. Admiral McRaven went beyond this and developed a concept of “relative” superiority that is necessary for a “special operation” (really direct action) to succeed, and six “principles of special operations” that are key to developing relative superiority. His six principles are simplicity, security, repetition, surprise, speed, and purpose. He finds that “special operations forces are able to achieve relative superiority over the enemy if they prepare a simple plan, which is carefully concealed, repeatedly and realistically rehearsed, and executed with surprise, speed, and purpose.”<sup>63</sup>

Admiral McRaven depicted relative superiority on a graph with time as the X-axis, probability of success as the Y-axis, and relative superiority being the horizontal line representing 50 percent chance of success (see fig. 7).<sup>64</sup> The probability of successful mission completion changes over time and is drawn on the graph. Admiral McRaven acknowledges that the moment when the clock starts on this relative superiority graph is somewhat arbitrary but he starts it from the moment the raid force reaches the first enemy defenses and calls this point the “point of vulnerability.” His graph leads Admiral McRaven to focus on the area above the probability of success line which he

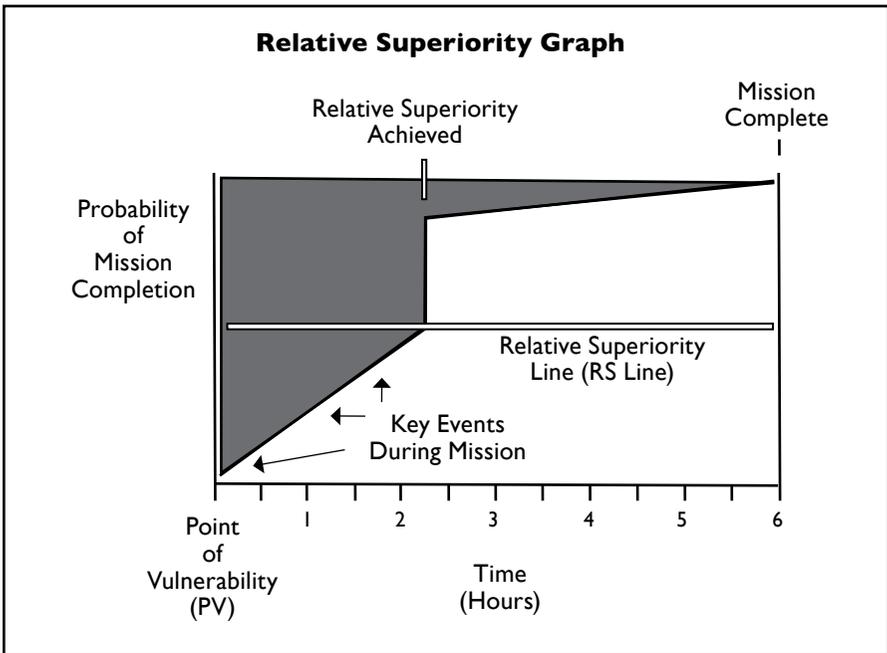


Figure 7. McRaven's Concept of Relative Superiority

calls the “area of vulnerability.” If the raiding force can shrink this area of vulnerability, its probability of success improves. He points to three ways to shrink the area of vulnerability. The first is to move the point of vulnerability up by improving infiltration methods so that the force is closer to relative superiority before it becomes vulnerable to the enemy. The second way to shrink the area of vulnerability is to achieve relative superiority sooner. The third way to shrink the area of vulnerability is to complete the mission sooner, perhaps by changing the objective to one that can be achieved more quickly.<sup>65</sup> The graph is also helpful because it emphasizes the moment when relative superiority is achieved, i.e. when the probability of success becomes greater than 50 percent. This is the critical moment and special operations planners can use this graph to help identify the critical actions that gain relative superiority so that those actions can receive the extra attention they deserved and not get lost among the less important items that clutter the execution check list.

As already mentioned, the most obvious weakness of Admiral McRaven’s theory for special operations is that it really only applies to direct action raids and is much less helpful to other special operations such as CA, COIN, FID, MISO, etc.<sup>66</sup> For example, speed and surprise are great principles for direct action but may be virtually impossible in CA and FID activities that can continue for years. Furthermore, in claiming that his theory is a theory of special operations he implies that all surprise attacks by small forces against larger defending forces are special operations when in fact such operations can be, and often are, a routine part of conventional operations. A further weakness is that this theory focuses only on single operations that can be rapidly completed. It has nothing to say about campaigns involving a series of operations arranged and conducted in a way that achieves a larger objective, and most operations (whether conventional or special) achieve their greatest operational and strategic results within a campaign rather than in isolation. (To his credit, Admiral McRaven has acknowledged these weaknesses.)

On its own terms, as a theory of direct action, Admiral McRaven’s theory has one major weakness and that is his assumption that large-scale conventional reinforcements will not be available to back up a raid force that gets in over its head. He states that: “If relative superiority is lost, it is difficult to regain” and “An inherent weakness in special forces [sic] is their lack of firepower relative to a large conventional force. Consequently when they lose relative superiority, they lose the initiative, and the stronger form of warfare

generally prevails.<sup>67</sup> He uses the example of the British commandos who had to surrender at Saint-Nazaire to prove this point, but their experience was not universal. For example, in the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, direct action raids have routinely been backed up by conventional airpower and reaction forces capable of regaining relative superiority, and that was the case in Vietnam as well. In fact, it happened so often in Vietnam that SOF actually got a reputation for dragging conventional forces into fights by getting in trouble and needing help (i.e. losing relative superiority and requiring conventional assistance to extricate themselves).

This flaw in Admiral McRaven's theory would be of only academic interest except that in Mogadishu, Somalia, in 1993, Task Force RANGER conducted a direct action raid, made famous by the book and movie titled "Blackhawk Down," in which it lost relative superiority and got pinned down inside the city. Eventually superior conventional forces were assembled and successfully extracted the task force, but the theoretical assumption that overwhelming conventional force would not be available to back up the raid force may have led to inadequate planning and coordination for such an eventuality. The loss of relative superiority by Task Force RANGER not only contributed to the loss of American lives but also contributed to the failure of the entire U.S. mission in Somalia with dramatic implications for Somalia, Africa, and the United States. Thus a weakness in the theory behind the operation (in this case that the raid force should conduct operations alone and not expect to bring in overwhelming conventional force the moment it lost relative superiority) led to a strategic failure that could have been avoided. Admiral McRaven's theory did not explicitly drive Task Force RANGER's operations (Admiral McRaven was in Monterey, California writing the thesis that explained his theory when the task force ran into trouble) but his theory was congruent with the task force's failure to rapidly regain relative superiority by immediately bringing in the overwhelming conventional force that was available nearby.

The outside the box theory is quite different from Admiral McRaven's theory. Outside the box tries to understand special operations and SOF in terms of how they differ from the conventional. McRaven tries to explain how, when, and why a particular type of operation (direct action) succeeds in order to conduct such operations with more consistent success in the future. Thus outside the box provides no prescriptions comparable to Admiral McRaven's "principles of special operations" or assessment tools like the

relative superiority graph to explain success or failure but instead provides a larger umbrella theory of special operations under which theories like Admiral McRaven's can address specific types of special operations. To make an analogy with the airpower theory mentioned earlier, outside the box is comparable to the general theory of airpower whereas the McRaven's theory would correspond to a theory of close air support, i.e. one particular way of using certain airpower assets.

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*Outside the box tries to understand special operations and SOF in terms of how they differ from the conventional.*

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### Spulak<sup>68</sup>

Dr. Robert G. Spulak's theory of special operations was published a decade after Admiral McRaven's. Spulak worked for Admiral McRaven and, according to Spulak, Admiral McRaven asked him "to think about a 'theory' for the employment of SOF to help guide [Admiral McRaven's] visionary efforts to design Naval Special Warfare forces for the future."<sup>69</sup> The resulting theory accepts Admiral McRaven's theory of special operations described above as a theory of direct action and attempts to "generalize this idea to provide a theory of SOF based on the enduring limitations of conventional forces, based in turn on the immutable nature of war itself."<sup>70</sup>

Spulak states his theory on page 1. According to Spulak:

Special operations are missions to accomplish strategic objectives where the use of conventional forces would create unacceptable risks due to Clausewitzian friction. Overcoming these risks requires special operations forces that directly address the ultimate source of friction through qualities that are the result of the distribution of the attributes of SOF personnel.<sup>71</sup>

He claims: (a) special operations accomplish strategic objectives, (b) special operations are those which Clausewitzian friction prevents conventional forces from conducting, and (c) that SOF are able to overcome Clausewitzian friction (and thus conduct these missions) because of "the distribution of attributes of SOF personnel." His claim that special operations accomplish strategic objectives is more of a hope or a wish than a fact since special operations have often been directed at tactical or operational goals. For example,

SOF conducted many thousands of direct action raids in Iraq and virtually all of them were tactical. Like Admiral McRaven, Spulak also neglects campaigns in favor of single operations. (It can be argued that all those SOF raids in Iraq were part of a campaign to achieve strategic objectives, but the same can be said of tactical conventional operations and thus does not distinguish one from the other.)

Spulak insists on a static definition of special operations and thus cannot define special operations by exclusion as operations that are not conventional since he sees improvements in conventional forces allowing them to take on missions that had previously been special operations. In his words, “special operations (and SOF) cannot theoretically be defined in terms of *specific* and unchanging missions, skills, or capabilities.”<sup>72</sup> [emphasis and parenthetical in the original]. To retain a static definition of special operations he defines them as requiring “special men,” i.e. SOF, who can overcome Clausewitzian friction when others cannot. The result is a theory of special operations based on a theory of SOF and, according to Spulak, “a theory of SOF and a theory of special operations cannot be separated.”<sup>73</sup>

Spulak’s states: “It is not the missions that define special operations but rather the personnel” which threatens to become circular—special operations are whatever SOF does—but he avoids this by stressing that special operations are also tasks that conventional forces cannot perform. In his words: “If the conventional forces can accomplish the mission, it is time for SOF to move on.”<sup>74</sup>

Spulak explains that the key to understanding SOF is the “distribution of attributes” depicted in figure 8.<sup>75</sup> He uses this graph to illustrate how SOF differ from conventional forces. This graph is a schematic representation rather than the plotting of empirical data (though he did draw the area under the SOF curve to be 3.8 percent of the area under the military curve, reflecting SOF’s approximate size within the U.S. military.) The graph assumes that everyone in the military has been tested and scored for some individual attribute for which SOF are selected and trained. The key point he is trying to get across is that the selection and training process gives SOF a much higher average score for that attribute, and a much narrower distribution of scores for that attribute. Therefore, even though conventional military forces contain plenty of people with high scores for the attribute in question, their average score is lower and their wide range of scores makes performance lower and much harder to predict, increasing risk and friction. This graph

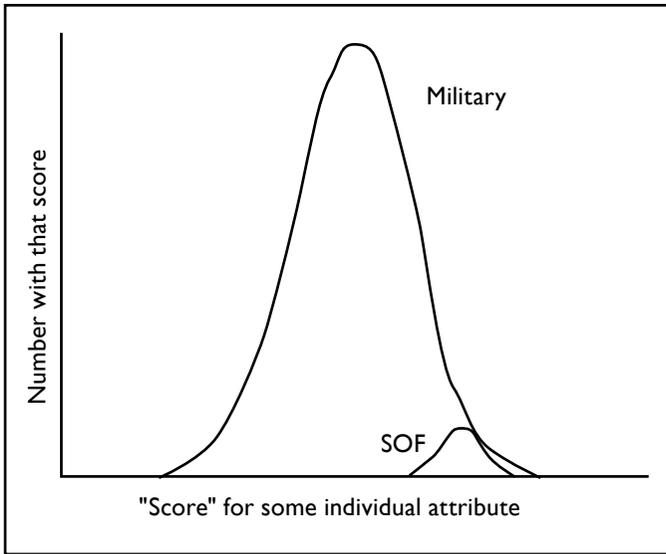


Figure 8. Spulak's distribution of attributes

is a very helpful way of understanding the relationship between elite forces and the larger force from which they are drawn.

Spulak claims that the distribution of attributes depicted in figure 8 explains why SOF can overcome friction and conventional forces cannot. Spulak (following Barry Watts) lists three “ultimate sources of friction: (a) constraints imposed by human physical and cognitive limits, (b) informational uncertainties and unforeseeable differences between perceived and actual reality, and (c) the structural nonlinearity of combat processes.” Spulak lists three characteristics of SOF that enable them to overcome these three sources of friction. To cope with the first source of friction, SOF are “elite warriors” who can exceed the physical and cognitive limits typical of conventional forces. To overcome the second source of friction, SOF are also “flexible” which enables SOF to deal better with “uncertainties” and differences between perception and reality, than conventional forces. Finally, to surmount the third source of friction SOF are “creative” which enables them to exploit the unpredictability and “nonlinearity” of combat and also create more friction for the enemy.<sup>76</sup> For Spulak, SOF are both different (due to superior flexibility and creativity) and elite.

Spulak's emphasis on friction is an interesting and valuable advance on Admiral McRaven's theory which mentions friction only in passing.

Focusing on the Clausewitzian idea of friction appears to have the advantage of immediately joining his theory to centuries of previous military thought. But, on closer examination his claim that SOF are relatively immune to friction seems to parallel the outside the box theory in suggesting that centuries of theories of conventional operations have limited utility in understanding special operations.

Focusing on the three “ultimate sources of friction” he borrows from Barry Watts leads Spulak to understate the role of size in friction and thus give up one of his best arguments. Anyone who has grabbed the car keys and dashed out to the store (very little friction), and also arranged a multi-family, multi-generational picnic, with pets (plenty of friction), understands that doing anything with a larger force is more challenging than doing the same thing with a smaller force, even if the same people are involved. And the same holds true for flexibility. (Compare the small challenge of adding an extra stop to your trip to the store with the much larger challenge of changing the time and place of the multi-family picnic.) Note that the advantage small groups have over large groups holds for both friction and flexibility, even if the attributes of the members of the small group are the same as those of the larger group. Since SOF operate in much smaller units than conventional forces, SOF would enjoy significantly less friction and greater flexibility than conventional forces even if the “distribution of attributes” were identical. Unfortunately, Spulak ignores this point.

Spulak’s theory is weakened by an inadequate examination of what he means by “elite warriors.” For example, in an Air Force fighter squadron, the elite warriors would include pilots who can stay in formation while conducting radical maneuvers involving high G-forces. On the other hand, AC-130s, the classic Air Force SOF aircraft, do not fly in formation and do not perform high-G maneuvers. In short, the skills of AC-130 crews (SOF) seem to be different from those of fighter pilots rather than better, i.e. special but not elite. In terms of the “distribution of attributes” Spulak emphasizes, the skills of the AC-130 pilots do not obviously represent the far right portion of the graph of the skills of all pilots of strike aircraft. Even within SOF, the nature of an organization’s elite-ness varies. For example, Air Force Pararescuemen (PJs) and Navy SEALs clearly have elite swimming skills. They are selected and trained for these skills and it is clearly part of their elite-ness, but SOF aviators do not have comparable swimming skills. Is SOF elite-ness closely connected with swimming skills (as the SEALs and PJs might claim) or

nearly unrelated to swimming skills (as the aviators might claim)? If there are different types of elite-ness which overcome different human physical and cognitive limitations, then the “elite warrior” aspect of SOF is much more complicated than Spulak’s graph suggests.

The claim that SOF are uniquely flexible and creative also requires closer examination than Spulak offers. As mentioned above, flexibility is related to the size of the organization at least as much as the attributes of the personnel inside the organization. The same can be said for creativity. For example, many highly flexible and creative small firms become much less flexible and creative when they become big firms, even if the characteristics of the people inside the firm do not change. Spulak seems to short change the flexibility and creativity of conventional forces. For example, he acknowledges that, as technology and techniques are disseminated, conventional forces can take on missions that were formerly special operations, but does not acknowledge the flexibility conventional forces show in rapidly adopting new equipment, tactics, and techniques. As for creativity, the development of amphibious doctrine, aircraft carrier doctrine, and airpower doctrine between the first and second world wars showed enormous creativity. And it was done by conventional Marines, sailors, and airmen. This same creativity was also visible among the Army officers who developed air assault doctrine between Korea and Vietnam, and their successors who developed Air-Land Battle doctrine after Vietnam. In all these cases, conventional forces showed remarkable creativity, contrary to what Spulak’s theory suggests.

Spulak’s theory has an obvious appeal to SOF personnel. SOF love being told they are elite warriors who overcome normal human physical and cognitive limitations, and demonstrate flexibility and creativity conventional forces cannot match. Furthermore, Spulak tells SOF they are the only ones who can conduct special operations. But SOF must be careful of ideas that appeal to egos, and outside the box is a less complimentary, but more accurate, theory.

The outside the box theory captures the difference between special and elite that Spulak misses. Spulak’s focus on elite-ness implies a ratchet effect where special operations may become conventional, but conventional operations may not become special operations (unless conventional forces become radically less capable). The outside the box theory, on the other hand, allows missions to move back and forth between special and conventional operations, as CA, COIN, security assistance, and other missions have. Outside the

box also offers more useful suggestions for leading SOF than Spulak provides. For example, the narrow range of abilities Spulak posits for SOF implies fewer leadership challenges with SOF than with conventional forces whereas outside the box more accurately suggests different leadership challenges.

### Yarger<sup>77</sup>

Dr. Harry R. Yarger, writing after Admiral McRaven and Dr. Spulak, was certainly influenced by their ideas but he had a different goal. Admiral McRaven believed he was providing something new and explaining the theory of special operations.<sup>78</sup> (He subsequently came to accept that his theory was not as powerful as he had at first hoped.) Spulak was trying to achieve Admiral McRaven's original goal with an eye on how SOF (particularly U.S. Navy SOF) should evolve. Yarger wrote *21st Century SOF: Toward an American Theory of Special Operations* after a 2011 Joint Special Operations University workshop titled "SOF-Power Workshop: A Way Forward for Special Operations Theory and Strategic Art." His goal was to assemble in one place the collective wisdom of the entire special operations community. He does not claim to offer anything dramatically new and different, but instead his "definitions and 26 premises and 14 principles encapsulate what American special operations and SOF are and how they function together in an American model to serve national security."<sup>79</sup> His hope is that this will provide "the foundation for a unified theory and school of thought for American special operations."<sup>80</sup>

Unfortunately, Yarger's definitions are unconvincing. After reviewing historic U.S. military definitions of special operations, he laments the inconsistencies and ambiguities among them and advocates a simple solution: "simply accepting that only SOF conduct special operations as the U.S. military defines them."<sup>81</sup> The first sentence of his 189-word definition of special operations is: "Military operations conducted by Special Operations Forces."<sup>82</sup> This would appear to be both inaccurate and unhelpful. Inaccurate because SOF can and do conduct conventional operations, and conventional forces can and do conduct special operations. Unhelpful because defining special operations as whatever SOF happen to do makes SOF, rather than special operations, the subject of study in a book offering a theory of special operations rather than SOF. He tries to solve the first problem by stating: "conventional forces may be called upon to conduct special missions

that require unique preparation and arrangements, but ‘special operations’ involve SOF.” This implies that “special missions” can only be conducted by conventional forces, since anything SOF does automatically becomes a “special operation” instead of a “special mission.” Unfortunately he does not explain the difference between a “special mission” (conducted only by conventional forces) and a “special operation” (conducted only by SOF). This leaves his definition at best confusing and incomplete and puts all the onus for understanding special operations onto his definition of SOF. His definition of SOF repeats the definition found in the *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*. It states that SOF are: “Those Active and Reserve Component forces of the Military Services designated by the Secretary of Defense and specifically organized, trained, and equipped to conduct and support special operations.” This creates a circular definition in which special operations are military operations conducted by SOF, and SOF are forces organized, trained, and equipped to conduct special operations. The non-circular aspect is his insistence that SOF are “designated by the secretary of defense.” This seems unhelpful and overly legalistic. It implies that no form of special operation can exist until the Secretary of Defense designates a force to conduct that type of operation, and also designates the force to be SOF. On the whole, Yarger’s definitions appear over-long and do not seem to advance our understanding.

Yarger goes on to list his 26 premises, or propositions, for American SOF. He claims that “collectively the offered premises explain the whole of American special operations and SOF from a theoretical perspective, and that the 26 premises are inclusive, and that each premise is required.”<sup>83</sup> In this his ambition seems truly breathtaking, and we should not be surprised if he falls a bit short. His premises are:

1. Special operations represent a distinct military capability of strategic value to national security.
2. Special operations have strategic utility.
3. SOF are an instrument of military power.
4. SOF are part of the larger American military profession and subject to the obligations of the profession to the nation.

5. Special operations and SOF exist on the cutting edge of change and continuity in the security environment.
6. Military special operations can be conducted unilaterally, in support of, or supported by conventional, interagency, whole of government, and coalition operations, or in concert with all of the above.
7. SOF and conventional capabilities are complementary, integrative, and mutually supportive.
8. Natural tensions exist between special operations and SOF and the greater American political system and conventional military.
9. Special operations and SOF evolve over time according to strategic context.
10. Special operations and SOF are applicable at all the levels of war and interaction—strategic, operational, and tactical.
11. Special operations missions are defined by the strategic, operational, and tactical contexts.
12. Special operations and SOF's relative value increase as direct strategic utility is approached.
13. Special operations can be conducted overtly, covertly, clandestinely, or mixtures thereof; however, any choice is associated with potential political, legal, moral, and operational risks.
14. SOF organizational culture champions creativity, adaptability, flexibility, competency, and performance in SOF personnel and organizations.
15. Special operations are enhanced by selectivity in personnel, expressed in the SOF Truth that quality is better than quantity.
16. The proficiency of SOF personnel and the applicability of special operations are enhanced by the degree of cross-cultural competence of the forces involved.
17. Special operations are enhanced by horizontal and particular organizational structures and practices.
18. Special operations are enhanced by selectivity in technology and equipment.

19. Special operations make use of and are dependent on enablers.
20. Special operations benefit from diversity within SOF and among enablers.
21. Special operations inform and improve conventional forces.
22. Special operations depend on vertical, horizontal, and competency hierarchies, and their simultaneous interaction, to achieve mission success.
23. Special operations success centers on the human aspects of warfare.
24. Extraordinary relationships exist between SOF and intelligence activities, other interagency organizations, and multinational partners.
25. In special operations, an organization's effectiveness is inversely proportional to the complexity of the organization's size, structure, and mechanisms of control.
26. Organizations dedicated to special operations are inherently precarious.

His claim that all 26 are necessary seems overstated. For example, premise 1 (Special operations represent a distinct military capability of strategic value to national security) seems to imply premises 2 and 3 (Special operations have strategic utility, and SOF are an instrument of military power). He also neglects the apparent tensions between competing premises. For example, premise 15 (Special operations are enhanced by selectivity in personnel, expressed in the SOF Truth that quality is better than quantity) is in obvious tension with premise 20 (Special operations benefit from diversity within SOF and among enablers) since a larger group, not selected for specific attributes is less SOF-like (according to premise 15) but will produce greater diversity (a requirement according to premise 20). He calls into question his claim that the 26 premises "explain the whole of American special operations and SOF" by following them with an additional 14 "principles of special operations."

Yarger's principles of special operations, like the principles of war, are supposed to lead to success when followed and explain failure when they are ignored. Yarger's principles of special operations are listed as follows:

1. Relative superiority
2. Direct action
3. Purpose
4. Understanding
5. Initiative
6. Surprise
7. Simplicity
8. Security
9. Risk management
10. Warrior ethos
11. Mobility
12. Integrated operation
13. Asymmetrical operations
14. Preparedness

Yarger borrows his first principle, relative superiority, from Admiral McRaven. However, McRaven sees relative superiority as the goal that his six principles of special operations (simplicity, security, repetition, surprise, speed, and purpose) achieve. Yarger, on the other hand, sees relative superiority as another principle alongside and separate from simplicity, security, surprise, and purpose. His decision to summarize each precept in a single sentence and each principle in one or two words makes the two lists appear less similar than they actually are. For example, he lists “asymmetric operations” as a principle but instead he could easily list the same idea as a precept such as “special operations achieve success through asymmetric operations.” The precepts and principles are sometimes overlapping making one of them redundant. For example, precept 23 (Special operations success centers on the human aspects of warfare) seems awfully similar to principle 10 (warrior ethos) because he says “Warrior ethos is the ability to capitalize on the human dimension in warfare.”<sup>84</sup>

Overall, Yarger's 26 precepts and 14 principles represent his attempt to summarize the collective wisdom of the entire special operations community. These 40 ideas include a lot of good sense, but in his effort to be comprehensive Yarger has included some redundancy and some unexamined conflicts between his various ideas. The result is a somewhat ungainly compilation based on an unsatisfactory definition of special operations as military operations conducted by forces designated as SOF by the Secretary of Defense. His insistence on a hard distinction between special missions and special operations, and his failure to define the difference, leaves the reader profoundly uncertain as to exactly what Yarger means by special operations.

### Rubright<sup>85</sup>

The most recent effort to publish an explicit theory of special operations comes from Dr. Richard Rubright in his 2017 monograph *A Unified Theory For Special Operations*. His goal is to provide "a theory that is holistic in nature, timeless, focused solely upon special operations, and serves as an umbrella framework for other theories about special operations and Special Operations Forces."<sup>86</sup> Rubright offers a "lexical semantic" theory (i.e. one focused on the definitions of words). Since the term "special operations" does not include or necessarily imply the term "military," he believes that his lexical semantic theory applies to all "special operations" by any organization, not merely military special operations. In this he is even more ambitious than Spulak.

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*Rubright offers a "lexical semantic" theory (i.e. one focused on the definitions of words).*

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Rubright claims to offer "the first comprehensive theory of special operations" and, given the weaknesses of the theories mentioned above, he is probably correct. His theory focuses on a one-sentence definition of special operations. According to Rubright, "special operations are extraordinary operations to achieve a specific effect."<sup>87</sup> This definition is radically different from those used by Admiral McRaven, Spulak, and Yarger, and this is what makes it more comprehensive. Rubright's definition is similar to, but not identical with, the definition used in the outside the box theory. Specifically, both Rubright and the outside the box theory rely on a negative definition, i.e., defining "special operations" in relation to what they are not. Rubright says they are "extraordinary," which can only be understood in opposition

to whatever was “ordinary” for that organization, at that time. Outside the box defines “special operations” as different from “conventional operations.”

Rubright defines special in opposition to “ordinary” (i.e., as “extraordinary”) rather than in opposition to “conventional” in order to make his theory applicable to non-military contexts where the term “conventional” is rarely used. Rubright concedes that “special operations are simply unusual when compared to conventional operations” but does so only once.<sup>88</sup> The frequent repetition of “extraordinary” and the single mention that this means “unusual when compared to conventional” leaves his theory open to misinterpretation and confusion. After all, in the common use of the term, a conventional operation can be extraordinarily large, and hence extraordinary; and a particular type of special operation could be conducted so routinely that it no longer seems particularly extraordinary. There are significant drawbacks to relying on the term “extraordinary” and this author believes that the term “conventional” captures what special operations are not, better than “extraordinary” captures what special operations are.

The term “extraordinary” immediately begs the question: extraordinary to whom? Interestingly, the exact same things that make something a special operation to one community might make it quite ordinary to another community. For example, a police SWAT unit will typically employ military equipment such as assault rifles and armored vehicles. These same pieces of equipment are special in a police context but entirely ordinary or conventional in a military context. This leads to the paradox that once one has standing SOF developing detailed doctrine and training intensively for specific types of special operations, and even conducting them routinely, those types of special operations would seem to stop being extraordinary for that standing SOF community. In fact, conventional operations would be extraordinary for the SOF community and special operations would be the normal and ordinary to them.

Rubright does not pursue this line of inquiry but many friends of SOF and special operations worry that the existence of large, standing, and permanent SOF, with all the bureaucracy, doctrine, and institutionalization they require, makes special operations and SOF less special, and hence less effective. Jessica Turnley, for example, describes the challenge SOF face in *Retaining a Precarious Value as Special Operations Go Mainstream*.<sup>89</sup> In a similar vein, Lieutenant General Charles T. Cleveland, Army Major General James Linder, and Army Chief Warrant Officer 3 Ronald Dempsey felt it necessary

to co-author a recent article defending the need for special operations doctrine against those who prefer a more ad lib approach.<sup>90</sup> In Rubright's terms, extraordinary operations have a certain inherent creativity, flexibility, and level of innovation that can never be matched by ordinary operations, conducted routinely, according to published official doctrine, by ponderous, bureaucratic structures. With USSOCOM commanding close to 70,000 people, guided by volumes of joint and service doctrine, and conducting dozens of special operations every day in scores of foreign countries, special operations seem to be ordinary and normal for the USSOF community. Are they still "extraordinary," and if not, what have we lost?

None of the theories of special operations discussed in this paper directly addresses the potential costs of expanding and institutionalizing SOF. Admiral McRaven and Yarger do not acknowledge the issue. Spulak implies that the flexibility and creativity of SOF personnel will overcome any ossifying effects of institutionalization. Rubright sidesteps the issue by defining all special operations as "extraordinary" and hence not routine, ordinary, or mundane, regardless of how large the organization might be that conducts the special operation. The outside the box theory comes down in favor of institutionalization. It stresses the value of operations that are outside the conventional box and implies that a standing, professional SOF designed to conduct a particular type of special operation will outperform a more ad hoc force.

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*The outside the box theory comes down in favor of institutionalization.*

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Rubright uses an admirably brief definition. He says "special operations are extraordinary operations to achieve a specific effect." But the second half of the definition is even less clear than the first. One would hope that all operations, not just special operations, are conducted to achieve some effect, and one suspects that the desired effect could be specified in a way that made it specific. Rubright claims that he is using "specific effect" because he believes SOF overstate their case when they claim to achieve "strategic effects." He doubled the length of his definition by adding "to achieve a specific effect" and thus seems to imply that there must be "extraordinary operations" that are not special operations because they are conducted to achieve no effect, or an unspecific effect. Unfortunately, he does not provide examples of extraordinary operations that are not special operations and

without examples the reader is ultimately left uncertain what he gained by adding the “specific effect” clause to his definition.<sup>91</sup>

In direct opposition to Spulak and Yarger, Rubright emphasizes the difference between special operations and SOF, making it clear his theory is about special operations, not SOF. Rubright insists that, from the perspective of his theory, SOF “have nothing to do with special operations.”<sup>92</sup> Spulak and Yarger, on the other hand, claim that SOF and special operations are inseparable. The outside the box theory takes a middle path. It recognizes that special operations can be conducted by non-SOF units, and that SOF can conduct conventional operations. However, outside the box also recognizes that SOF are organized, trained, and equipped to conduct specific special operations which means SOF have a connection with special operations.

Rubright’s focus on the word “extraordinary” is congruent with the outside the box theory’s use of “special” to mean different rather than elite or specialized. However, Rubright insists that “special” only truly applies to the operations, not to SOF. In his view: “It is not the people conducting the mission [SOF] that are special; they are elite.”<sup>93</sup> Outside the box, on the other hand, sees SOF as special and not necessarily elite.

## Conclusion

The summary of previous theories of special operations should demonstrate the enormous debt this author owes Admiral William McRaven, Dr. Spulak, Dr. Yarger, Dr. Rubright, and many others. This work has benefited enormously from both the strengths and weaknesses of their work and would have been impossible without their prior efforts. It is hoped that outside the box continues to advance and refine our understanding of special operations. The author also believes that the visualizations provided in figures 1-6 provide a new perspective on special operations and their role in advancing national security. ↑

## Endnotes

1. Colin S. Gray, "Handfuls of Heroes on Desperate Ventures: When do Special Operations Succeed?" *Parameters*, Spring 1999.
2. Colin S. Gray, the author of the "handfuls of heroes on desperate ventures" quote later acknowledged that his title had misrepresented the full range of special operations. James Kiras, *Special Operations and Strategy* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), xii.
3. A theory that is summarized by a picture may seem inherently less sophisticated than one summarized by an equation, but many powerful theories are best remembered through a visualization. For example, John Warden's "Five Rings," Abraham Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs," and Benjamin Bloom's "Taxonomy of Educational Objectives" are all best understood and presented in visual form.
4. For example, the vast majority of the special operations case studies William McRaven considers in his book *Spec Ops* (New York: Presidio, 1996), concern special operations conducted in support of conventional operations and attacking conventional targets like battleships and fortresses. James Kiras, in *Special Operations and Strategy* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), makes the argument that special operations are most effective when conducted as campaigns, rather than single operations, and when those campaigns support conventional campaigns in achieving conventional objectives.
5. Robert G. Spulak, Jr., *A Theory of Special Operations: The Origin, Qualities, and Use of SOF* (Hurlburt Field, FL: JSOU Press, 2007), takes this approach quite explicitly.
6. The four theories addressed in the Appendix are William McRaven, *Spec Ops: Cast studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Presidio, 1996); Robert G. Spulak, Jr., *A Theory of Special Operations: The Origin, Qualities, and Use of SOF* (Hurlburt Field, FL: JSOU Press, 2007); Harry R. Yarger, *21st Century SOF: Toward an American Theory of Special Operations* (MacDill AFB, FL: JSOU Press, 2013); and Richard Rubright, *A Unified Theory of Special Operations* (MacDill AFB, FL: JSOU Press, 2017).
7. Oddly, there are still a few old timers who insist that, because Title 10 U.S. Code only uses "special operations" as a noun only once, the term can only be used as an adjective and thus there are no special operations that need a theory. This view is disproved by the fact that Title 10 includes a use of "special operations" as a noun, and includes no legislation declaring that the term "special operations" can only be used as an adjective. This view also begs the question whether special operations, as adjective, noun, verb, or anything else, could have existed before it was mentioned in Title 10, U.S. Code, and what to do about all the other words that might not yet be included in Title 10, U.S. Code.
8. James D. Kiras, "A Theory of Special Operations: 'These Ideas Are Dangerous,'" *Special Operations Journal*, Volume 1, No. 2, 2015, pp. 75-88.

9. Christopher Marsh, Mike Kenny, and Nathanael Joslyn, "SO What? The Value of Scientific Inquiry and Theory Building in Special Operations Research," in *Special Operations Journal*, Volume 1, No. 2, 2015, pp. 89-104.
10. Two of the earliest, and most important works of sea power theory were Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*, published in 1890, and *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire, 1793-1812*, published in 1892. As the titles indicate, these books attempt to prove that events like the Seven Years' War, the American Revolution, and the Napoleonic Wars, which had traditionally be seen in terms of political history and land warfare, were in fact decided by sea power.
11. By 1890 Britain had been the world's dominant naval power for a century but it did not have a sea power theory. Mahan's books explaining sea power theory made him an instant celebrity in Britain, indicating how much the British yearned for a theory of sea power. Philip A. Crowl, "Alfred Thayer Mahan" in Peter Paret, ed. *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1986), p. 447. The Japanese were almost equally impressed with Mahan and made his book, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, a text book in all Japanese naval and military colleges. Philip A. Crowl, "Alfred Thayer Mahan" in Peter Paret, ed. *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1986), p. 474.
12. Of course, some non-sailors were less taken with Mahan and sea power theory. Henry L. Stimson, U.S. Secretary of War from 1940-1945, famously claimed that, during World War II the Navy Department "frequently seemed to retire from the realm of logic into a dim religious world in which Neptune was God, Mahan his prophet, and the United States Navy the only true Church." Henry L. Stimson and McGeorge Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War* (New York: Harper, 1948), p. 506.
13. John H. Dalton, Secretary of the Navy; Admiral J.M. Boorda, Chief of Naval Operations; and Gen Carl E. Mundy, Jr., Commandant of the Marine Corps, *FORWARD ... FROM THE SEA*, 1994.
14. Martin Gilbert, *The First World War: A Complete History* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1994), p. 329.
15. Giulio Douhet, *The Command of the Air* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama, 2009, originally published in Italian between 1921 and 1930); William Mitchell, *Winged Defense* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2006, original copyright, 1925); David R. Mets, *The Air Campaign: John Warden and the Classical Airpower Theorists* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 1998).
16. David MacIssac, "Voices from the Central Blue: The Air Power Theorists" in Peter Paret, ed. *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1986), p. 633.
17. Giulio Douhet, *The Command of the Air* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama, 2009), p. 187-207. Consider the ineffectiveness of Warden's "five rings" model (as described in his famous article: "The Enemy as a System," *Airpower Journal* 9 Spring 1995, p. 40-55) in attacking a "starfish" opponent like the Apache Indians

described by Ori Brafman and Rod A. Beckstrom in *The Starfish and the Spider* (New York: Penguin, 2006), p. 11-27.

18. *Parameters: The U.S. Army War College Quarterly*, describes its subject as “Contemporary Strategy & Landpower” but it does not offer a theory of landpower. <http://strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/parameters/>.
19. This oversight is somewhat surprising since Thucydides was abundantly aware of the asymmetry between Athenian naval power and Sparta’s superior army. Machiavelli was similarly aware of how Venetian naval power distinguished her from army-centric Florence. For their part, Jomini and Clausewitz knew that the British navy and the Russian army each had an enormous, but very different, role in the defeat of Napoleon.
20. The U.S. Army’s Combined Arms Center (a three-star command) was established in 1973 but the idea of combined arms warfare has dominated U.S. Army thinking since at least World War II. [www.usacac.army.mil](http://www.usacac.army.mil).
21. Spulak, *A Theory of Special Operations*.
22. "Average Teaching Salary in Florida." *2015's Top Teaching Degrees: Compare Programs by Cost, Location, Size*. Accessed 28 June 2017, <http://www.teachingdegree.org/florida/salary/>. Special education teachers in Florida have an annual mean wage slightly higher than non-special education teachers.
23. John Alvarez, Robert Nalepa, Anna-Marie Wyant, and Fred Zimmerman, ed.s, *Special Operations Forces Reference Manual, Fourth Edition, 2015* (MacDill AFB, FL: JSOU Press, 2015), p. 3-24.
24. The term General Purpose Forces is not defined in JP 1-02 DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms and is generally used as a synonym for conventional forces, i.e. those forces capable of operations using nonnuclear weapons and not designated as special operations forces. However, General Purpose Forces are funded by Major Force Program (MFP) 2, distinguishing them from: MFP-1, Strategic Forces; MFP-3, Command, Control, Communications, Intelligence, and Space; MFP-4, Mobility Forces; MFP-5, Guard and Reserve Forces; MFP-6, Research and Development; MFP-7, Central Supply and Maintenance; MFP-8, Training, Medical, and Other General Personnel Activities; MFP-9, Administration and Associated Activities; MFP-10, Support of other Nations; and MFP-11, Special Operations Forces. Glossary of Defense Acquisition Acronyms and Terms, <https://dap.dau.mil/glossary/pages/2192.aspx>, accessed 1 Dec 2016.
25. At the current writing, a Military Information Support Team (MIST) is a detachment (usually three to nine soldiers trained in Military Information Support Operations (MISO)) that provides support to a U.S. Ambassador and the U.S. Embassy country team. John Alvarez, Robert Nalepa, Anna-Marie Wyant, and Fred Zimmerman, ed.s, *Special Operations Forces Reference Manual*, p. 3-10, 3-11.
26. Spulak, *A Theory of Special Operations*, p. 1-2.
27. Stanley Sandler, *Glad to See Them Come and Sorry to See Them Go: A History of U.S. Army Tactical Civil Affairs/Military Government, 1775-1991* (Ft Bragg, NC:

- U.S. Army Special Operations Command History and Archives Division, 1994), pp. 1-139.
28. John Alvarez, Robert Nalepa, Anna-Marie Wyant, and Fred Zimmerman, ed.s, *Special Operations Forces Reference Manual*, p. 3-29, 3-31.
  29. USSOCOM Pub 1, “Doctrine for Special Operations” 5 August 2011, p. 20-28.
  30. Some authors use or imply a one dimensional line to depict the range of operations from special operations at one end to conventional operations at the other. For example, Charles T. Cleveland, James B. Linder, and Ronald Dempsey, in “Special Operations Doctrine: Is it needed?”, *PRISM* Volume 6, Issue Number 3, p. 13, includes a linear depiction of the U.S. Army Range of Military Operations to show which types of operations U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) develops doctrine and training for, which types of operations are under the doctrine and training responsibility of Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) and Forces Command (FORSCOM) and which types of operations are under shared responsibility of all three commands. The problem with the linear depiction is that it implies a strict hierarchy of specialness and conventional-ness whereas the two-dimensional box-in-a-circle depiction captures the innumerable whys that an operation might be special.
  31. The author is reminded of his role in training and advising a heavy-mech task force in the Royal Saudi Army during DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM. The initial mission of the task force, before large coalition conventional forces arrived in the kingdom, was “delay defense,” and that was what we helped them train for. As coalition forces built up, the mission changed to “deliberate defense.” Later still it changed to “deliberate attack” through minefields and prepared defenses. The repeated changes of mission meant that the task force never achieved the level of proficiency it could have achieved if we had trained for just one mission the entire time.
  32. Quoted in Micah Zenko, “100% Right 0% of the Time: Why the U.S. military can’t predict the next war,” *Foreign Policy* October 16, 2012, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/10/16/100-right-0-of-the-time/> accessed December 8, 2015. Mr. Zenko also includes similar quotes from Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, Commander U.S. Central Command Gen. James Mattis, and other prominent DOD leaders.
  33. For example, USSOCOM contains about four percent of U.S. Active Duty military personnel (56,000 out of 1.3 million in DOD), less than one percent of the DOD civilian work force (6,600 out of 742,000 in DOD), and less than one percent of National Guard and Reserve personnel (7,400 out of 826,000 in DOD). Figures taken from USSOCOM 2016 Posture Statement, Statement of GEN Joseph L. Votel, Commander USSOCOM before the House Armed Services Committee March 1, 2016, and “About the Department of Defense,” on the U.S. Department of Defense website, <http://www.defense.gov/About-DOD> accessed 3 May 2016.
  34. The most complete account of what SOF did to facilitate the liberation of Afghanistan from the Taliban is Charles Briscoe, et al., *Weapon of Choice: ARSOF in Afghanistan* (Ft. Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2003).

35. For a good introduction to how Russia has kept its aggression against Ukraine below the level of conventional warfare see “*Little Green Men: a primer on Modern Russian Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine 2013-2014*” (Ft Bragg, NC: United States Army Special Operations Command, 2015).
36. Combating Terrorism Exchange (CTX) vol. 6, no. 4 (November 2016).
37. USSOCOM History Office, *United States Special Operations Command History: 6th Edition*, (MacDill AFB, FL: USSOCOM History Office, 2008), pp. 5-7.
38. Leon Panetta, *Worthy Fights* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), p. 289-331.
39. Mark Moyer, Hector Pagan, and Wil R. Griego, *Persistent Engagement in Colombia* (MacDill AFB, FL: JSOU Press, 2014).
40. Joint Pub 3-05, “Special Operations” (16 July 2014), ix.
41. United States Special Operations Command, *USSOCOM Pub 1: Special Operations in Peace and War*, 25 January 1996, pp. 3-2, 3-3.
42. Joint Pub 3-05 “Special Operations” (16 July 2014), xi. Shortly after Vietnam the term Foreign Internal Defense, or FID, was invented to describe COIN when the term was being expunged from official Army doctrine after Vietnam.
43. For a conventional officer calling for a rush back to the old definition of conventional operations, see Daniel P. Bolger, *Why We Lost* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2014). For a SOF officer who wants SOF to retain primacy in advising foreign militaries, see Tim Ball, “Replaced? Security Force Assistance Brigades vs. Special Forces” Waronthrocks.com 2/23/2017 <https://waronthrocks.com/2017/02/replaced-security-force-assistance-brigades-vs-special-forces/> accessed 16 March 2017.
44. Christopher Marsh, Mike Kenny, and Nathanael Joslyn, “SO What? The Value of Scientific Inquiry and Theory Building in Special Operations Research,” in *Special Operations Journal*, Volume 1, No. 2, 2015, pp. 89-104.
45. William McRaven, *Spec Ops: Cast studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice*, (New York: Presidio, 1996), pp. 1-3.
46. Former SOCOM Commander, ADM (Ret) Eric Olson, made this point during his remarks to the Special Operations Theory Symposium on 31 August, 2016.
47. U.S. Department of the Army, “Deploying Brigade to Test Advise and Assist Concept,” U.S. Army, <http://www.army.mil/-news/2009/05/01/20528-deploying-brigade-to-test-advise-and-assist-concept/> (accessed March 16, 2017).
48. Richard Rubright, *A Unified Theory of Special Operations* (MacDill, AFB, FL: JSOU Press, April 2017), Report 17-1, p. 25-26.
49. Perhaps no one makes the conventional case better than Field-Marshal William Slim, the hero of the Burma campaign, does in his famous book, *Defeat into Victory: Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942-1945* (UK: Cassell and Co., 1956).
50. The Doolittle Raid is often listed as an example of a special operation and is included as such in the Introduction to Special Operations course given by the Joint Special Operations University.

51. Wesley Frank Craven and James Lea Cate, eds., *The Army Air Forces In World War II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948) Vol. I, pp. 438-444.
52. Col. James H. Kyle, *The Guts to Try* (New York: Orion Books, 1990).
53. John Alvarez, Robert Nalepa, Anna-Marie Wyant, and Fred Zimmerman, ed.s, *Special Operations Forces Reference Manual*, p. 3-29, 3-31.
54. Brian McAllister Linn, *The Philippine War: 1899-1902* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2000), p. 275-276.
55. Lawrence E. Cline, *Pseudo Operations and Counterinsurgency: Lessons from Other Countries* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2005), p.1, available at, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubid=607>.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 8-13.
57. False flag operations are a violation of the Laws of Armed Conflict, but they also have much in common with routine, and entirely legal, “undercover” operations by law enforcement agencies. Thus the level of enthusiasm for “false flag” operations is partly influenced by attitudes toward war crimes and whether the conflict is seen as a domestic law enforcement task or a military operation in a foreign country.
58. Of course there are other operations, such as global thermonuclear war, that might be one-time-only and are well covered by standing conventional forces.
59. James D. Kiras, *Special Operations and Strategy: From World War II to the War on Terrorism* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 35-57; and Paul Brickhill, *The Dam Busters* (London: Evans Brothers, 1951).
60. Paul Brickhill, *The Dam Busters* (London: Evans Brothers, 1951), p.87.
61. Stanley McChrystal, *My Share of the Task* (London, UK: Penguin, 2013), p. 153.
62. McRaven, *Spec Ops*.
63. *Ibid.*, p. 381-2.
64. William H. McRaven, “The Theory of Special Operations,” Thesis for the Naval Postgraduate School, 1993, Thesis Advisor: Russel H.S. Stolfi, p. 10.
65. McRaven addresses all three of these in his conclusion.
66. In fairness, many authors have used special operations as a synonym for direct action raids. For example, Colin S. Gray’s explanation of when special operations succeed is titled: “Handfuls of Heroes on Desperate Ventures” which certainly conjures up images of direct action raids rather than FID or MISO. Colin S. Gray, “Handfuls of Heroes on Desperate Ventures: When do Special Operations Succeed?” *Parameters*, Spring 1999.
67. McRaven, *Spec Ops*, p. 6.
68. Spulak, *A Theory of Special Operations*.
69. *Ibid.*, p. xi.
70. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
71. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
72. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

73. Ibid., p. 21.
74. Ibid., p. 13.
75. Ibid., p. 11.
76. Ibid., 19-21.
77. Yarger, *21st Century SOF*.
78. Hy Rothstein remarks at Special Operations Theory Symposium, MacDill AFB, FL, 30 Aug 2016.
79. Yarger, *21st Century SOF*, p. 75.
80. Ibid., p.4.
81. Ibid., p. 21.
82. The entire definition is: "Military operations conducted by Special Operations Forces. Special operations are overt, covert, and clandestine operations of an unorthodox and frequently high-risk nature, undertaken to achieve or support significant political or military objectives in support of national security and foreign policy. Such operations range across the spectrum of conflict from peace to war and make use of unique modes of employment, tactical techniques, equipment, and training. They are often conducted in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments where the use of conventional forces is either inappropriate or infeasible. They are characterized by one or more of the following: subtlety and imagination in planning and execution, time and political sensitivity, low visibility, support of indigenous forces, discriminate use of violence, need for regional expertise, oversight at the highest levels, and a high degree of risk. Special operations may support or be supported by conventional operations, or they may be prosecuted independently. Military and nonmilitary resources, including intelligence assets, may be used in concert or as enablers. Special operations doctrinal missions evolve with the changing context of the strategic environment, the needs of national security, and roles and missions of conventional forces." Ibid., p. 21-22.
83. Ibid., p.47.
84. Ibid., p. 66.
85. Richard Rubright, *A Unified Theory of Special Operations*.
86. Ibid., p. 1.
87. Ibid., p. 6.
88. Ibid., p. 24.
89. Jessica Glick Turnley, *Retaining a Precarious Value as Special Operations Go Mainstream* (Hurlburt Field, FL: JSOU Press, 2008).
90. Charles T. Cleveland, James B. Linder, and Ronald Dempsey, "Special Operations Doctrine: Is it Needed?" *PRISM* Vol. 6, No. 3., Dec. 2016, p. 5-19.
91. Ibid., p. 29-31.
92. Ibid., p. 17.
93. Ibid., p. 20.

