

The background of the cover is a photograph of soldiers in silhouette, walking across a field at sunset. Two helicopters are visible in the sky. The text is overlaid on this image.

**Defense  
One**

EBOOK // MAY 2021

# **SPECIAL OPERATIONS TECHNOLOGY**



# Empowering the Special Operations Forces to Support the Mission

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## CHAPTER 1

# HOW SPECIAL OPS BECAME THE SOLUTION TO EVERYTHING

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THEY'VE BECOME A MAJOR MILITARY  
PLAYER—AND MAYBE A SUBSTITUTE FOR  
STRATEGIC THINKING.

BY MARK BOWDEN



**W**ithin the span of a few decades, the United States has utterly transformed its military, or at least the military that is actively fighting. This has taken place with little fanfare and little public scrutiny. But without any conscious plan, I have seen some of the evolution firsthand. One of my early books, *Black Hawk Down*, was about a disastrous U.S. Special Ops mission in Somalia. Another, *Guests of the Ayatollah*, about the Iran hostage crisis, detailed an abortive but pivotal Special Ops rescue mission. U.S. Special Operators were involved in the successful hunt for the drug lord Pablo Escobar, the subject of *Killing Pablo*, and they conducted the raid that ended the career of Osama bin Laden, the subject of *The Finish*. By seeking out dramatic military missions, I have chronicled the movement of Special Ops from the wings to center stage.

Big ships, strategic bombers, nuclear submarines, flaring missiles, mass armies—these still represent the conventional imagery of American power, and they absorb about 98 percent of the Pentagon’s budget. Special Ops forces, in contrast, are astonishingly small. And yet they are now responsible for much of the military’s on-the-ground engagement in real or potential trouble spots around the world. Special Ops is lodged today under the Special Operations Command, or SOCOM, a “combatant command” that reports directly to the secretary of defense. It’s acquired its central role despite initially stiff resistance from the conventional military branches, without most of us even noticing.

It happened out of necessity. We now live in an open-ended world of “competition short of conflict,” to use a phrase from military doctrine. “There’s the continuum of absolute peace, which has never existed on the planet, up to toe-to-toe full-scale warfare,” General Raymond A. “Tony” Thomas, a former head of SOCOM, told me last year. “Then there’s that difficult in-between space.”

SOCOM, whose genealogy can be traced to a small hostage-rescue team in 1979, has grown to fully inhabit the in-between space. Made up of elite soldiers pulled from each of the main military branches—Navy SEALs, the Army’s Delta Force and Green Berets, Air Force Combat Controllers, Marine Raiders—it is active in more than 80 countries and has swelled to a force of 75,000, including civilian contractors. It conducts raids like



TECH. SGT. GREGORY BROOK / U.S. AIR FORCE

the one in Syria in 2019 that killed the Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and carries out drone strikes like the one in Iraq in 2020 that killed Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani. It works to locate hidden nuclear-missile sites in North Korea.

Using conventional forces is like wielding a sledgehammer. Special Ops forces are more like a Swiss Army knife. Over the years, the U.S. has found out just how versatile that knife can be; the flexibility and competence of Special Ops have proved invaluable. At the same time, the insularity and elitism of these units have bred a culture with elements that some of their own leaders, to their credit, have described as troubling, and that have, in certain instances, evidenced contempt for the traditional values of America's armed forces. Much of SOCOM's action takes place in secret. Most Americans are unaware that it has been



SPC. RYAN LUCAS / U.S. ARMY

active in a country until the announcement that its forces are being withdrawn. Or until something goes wrong—as in Niger in 2017, when four Special Ops soldiers were killed in an ambush.

Notably, its continued growth has been spurred by both success and failure. And perhaps because Special Ops is such a flexible tool, that growth has enabled the U.S. to multiply the way it uses force abroad without much consideration of overarching strategy. The advent of nuclear weapons, in the 1940s, presented leaders with urgent ethical and strategic imperatives. Defining the purpose of such weapons automatically demanded fresh thinking about the bedrock values of a democracy, the nature of multilateral alliances, the morality of warfare, and the scope of U.S. ambitions in the world. Because of its sub-rosa nature, Special Ops has not compelled the same kind of reckoning—and, in fact, may foster the illusion that a strategic framework is not necessary. It's good to have a Swiss Army knife. And yet even a versatile knife can do only so much.

[\*Read the rest\*](#) at *Defense One*. **D**

## CHAPTER 2

# KEY OFFICIAL: DEFENSE INFORMATION OPERATIONS 'NOT EVOLVING FAST ENOUGH'

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CHINA WILL SOON HARNESS AI TO SUPPLANT  
RUSSIA AS THE WORLD LEADER IN INFORMATION  
WARFARE, A DIA LEADER SAID.

BY PATRICK TUCKER



**T**he U.S. military isn't keeping up with information-warfare threats from Russia, Iran, and China, defense officials told lawmakers on Tuesday, adding that the military needs to prioritize information operations, diversify its information-ops units, and relearn how to coordinate IO across units, forces, and services.

"We're evolving as a country and a force from a heavy focus on counter...violent extremist organizations to a much more diverse threat environment where information is one of the tools they're using," said Christopher Maier, the acting assistant defense secretary for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict. "We've got to be able to play their game against them and beat them in some respects on their own playing field."

Right now, the job of conducting information operations as part of broader military operations falls primarily to U.S. Special Operations Command or SOCOM. In April 2019, the command [stood up a new Joint Web Ops Center](#) to better tackle information operations.

The Army, too, is making information ops a key component of its future cyber operations. Last July, Lt. Gen. Stephen G. Fogarty, who leads the Army Cyber Command, or ARCYBER, [outlined](#) how the Army plans to integrate information operations into exercises and eventually operations over the coming decade. "Internally, ARCYBER will work to build information capabilities



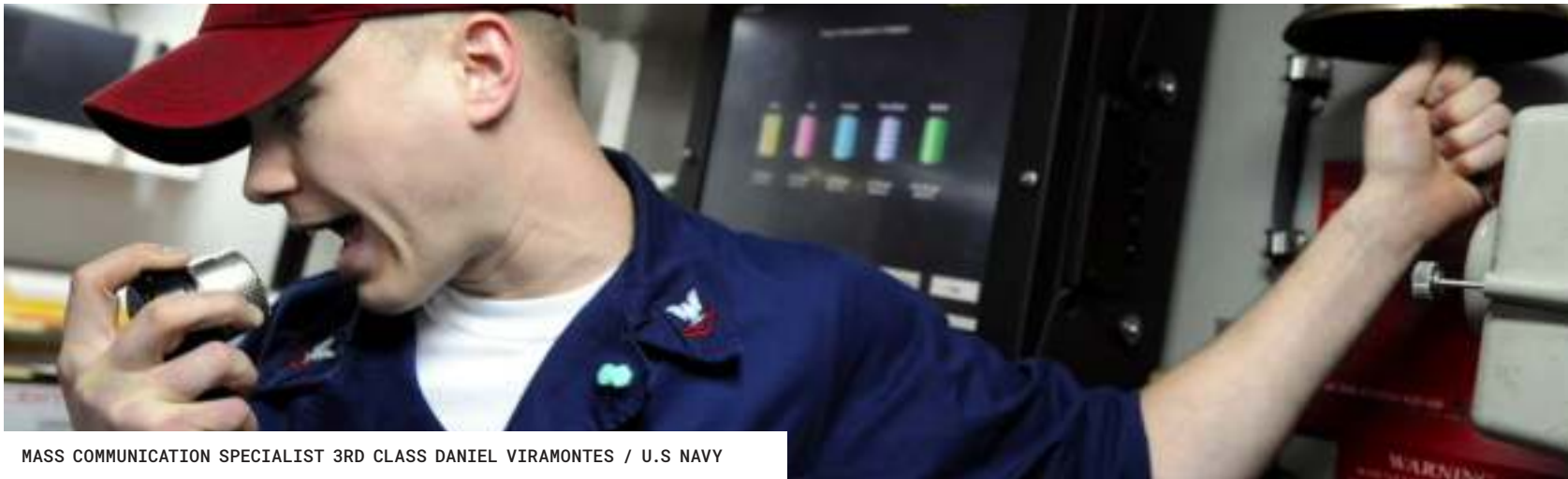
AIRMAN 1ST CLASS JEREMY BURNS / DOD

into combined arms teams with converged cyber, influence, and electromagnetic capabilities that deploy to bring immediate, turn-key informational combat power to maneuver commanders," Fogarty wrote.

Still, Maier told a House hearing on information operations, SOCOM "would say that they are not evolving fast enough. And as you know, in training special operations forces, it really requires recruitment and training far down the line."

Maier said that diversity in recruitment, seeking applicants with different language backgrounds, would play a key role in helping the military.





MASS COMMUNICATION SPECIALIST 3RD CLASS DANIEL VIRAMONTES / U.S NAVY

Neill Tipton, the Director of Defense Intelligence said, that U.S. agencies and offices were once better at coordinating information operations.

“We’re rebuilding muscle memory that we haven’t had since the Cold War as we operate in this kind of information domain. Clearly, there are gaps in how we do that,” Tipton said.

One former senior defense official familiar with the Department’s efforts and capabilities in information warfare applauded Maier’s acknowledgement that SOCOM needs to adapt their recruiting and training for better information operations. But the official said the problems go deeper.

“DoD is poorly prepared to conduct influence operations,” which

the official said are “viewed as an afterthought and something the combatant commanders, especially after kinetic operations, rather than something that the E-ring must be engaged in 24/7/365. They are more concerned with countering disinformation rather than going on the offensive. All of this needs to change.”

A second former senior defense official said SOCOM’s IO woes are “largely due to a lack of civilian oversight of the command,” which is the role of the assistant defense secretary for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, or ASD SOLIC. “In the absence of effective civilian oversight, SOCOM has focused on what they wanted to focus on, not necessarily what they should. To be clear...this is not the fault of anybody in the SOLIC office, past or present. It is because DoD has failed to follow the law and SOCOM has actively resisted it.”

The second former official noted that the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act elevated the position of ASD SOLIC, but this law was **implemented** only in the final days of the Trump administration. Acting Defense Secretary Chris Miller moved ASD SOLIC from the office of the defense undersecretary for policy; its incumbent now reports directly to the defense secretary. Miller also gave ASD SOLIC formal control over SOCOM's budget.

"I would argue had this been done, in addition, to properly resourcing the office, when the law was enacted, Chris Maier's statement at this week's hearing would have been much different," the second former official said.

At the hearing, Maier said that decision to elevate the position was currently under review by the Secretary of Defense.

A military official involved in influence operations told Defense One that they agreed with Maier and noted that psychological operations are rooted within special operations forces because of the extreme difficulty of training soldiers in behavioral science, culture, language, traditional and emerging digital media, and the skills required to operate with indigenous forces in difficult and sometimes hostile settings. It also takes a lot of time. "What would help? Overall, we have adequate authorities - the limiting factor at this point is personnel. Growing influence experts with the requisite combination of skills - behavioral science, language, culture, data analytics- is not a fast process."

Also yesterday, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence released an **unclassified version** of a report that looked at foreign influence operations. The report details Russian efforts to sway U.S. public opinion during the 2020 election toward President Donald Trump. It also describes Iranian actions to hurt Trump's re-election chances.

The report concludes that China "did not" attempt to influence the election, contradicting a claim made repeatedly by **Trump on the campaign trail**.

James Sullivan, the defense intelligence officer for cyber at the Defense Intelligence Agency, said at the hearing that Russia right now is clearly "ahead," and the more aggressive and practiced operator in information operations. But, Sullivan said, "China will grow into that role. China will use machine learning and AI faster than the Russians will do it."

The most important takeaway, he said, is that information operations are going to be a permanent fact of life for the U.S. military, the government, and citizens.

"The threat in the information domain is here to stay. Because it really comes down to conventional military overmatch in which neither country has that against the United States. Cyber is a great equalizer in that nobody is 100-percent mature in this domain and information dominance is effective. It is cheap. It is quick." **D**

## CHAPTER 3

# NEW PLANE KEY TO SPECIAL OPS VISION FOR AFRICA, GENERAL SAYS

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AIR FORCE SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND IS  
PLANNING FLIGHT DEMONSTRATIONS  
IN COMING MONTHS.

BY MARCUS WEISGERBER



**A** new aircraft that can fly reconnaissance missions and bomb enemy forces is key to U.S. special forces' future in Africa, the head of Air Force Special Operations Command said in February.

Lt. Gen. James Slife spoke as the Biden administration [reviews the U.S. military's global footprint](#) and prepares to advise Congress on reorienting American forces for future conflicts.

"I would suggest to you that if we want to maintain pressure on those violent extremist organizations that pose a threat to the United States — that pose a threat to the homeland — we may need to remain engaged in portions of Africa against very specific threats and not just broadly, anywhere where there's an extremist, but specifically where those that pose an external threat are," Slife said Tuesday during a Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies Zoom event.

Called Armed Overwatch, the new planes are the Air Force's [latest attempt](#) to field counterinsurgency aircraft that are cheaper to fly than high-performance fighter jets. But lawmakers [aren't sold on the project](#); they've cut millions of dollars that would have allowed the Air Force to start buying planes this year.

"Ultimately, I believe that SOCOM will be able to demonstrate to the Congress that this is a viable program, and it's required for the future operating environment," Slife said.



STAFF SGT. EBONI PRINCE / U.S. AIR FORCE

U.S. Special Operations Command plans to conduct flight demonstrations of "a handful of aircraft" in the coming months. The results of those trials will determine the path ahead, but the general said he hopes to "be in a procurement" of a commercial aircraft that doesn't require a lengthy development in fiscal 2022.

"I think we can do that at relatively low risk based on what we've seen from the vendors who have indicated that they intend to bring platforms to demonstrate for us in the coming months," he said.

The new armed plane is envisioned to replace an aging fleet of unarmed U-28 reconnaissance planes. U.S. Special Operations command is planning to hold a demonstration of commercially available planes that could be used for the missions "in the coming months," Slife said.



“We need to get through this demo to see what industry can produce at low risk in a short order,” he said.

Air Force Special Operations Command flies [unarmed U-28s](#), [militarized Pilatus PC-12s](#), and [MC-12Ws](#), [militarized Beechcraft King Air 350s](#) for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance missions. It also flies armed MQ-9 Reaper drones. Special ops leaders are planning to retire the U-28 when the new Armed Overwatch aircraft arrives.

For years, the Air Force has considered buying a fleet of propeller-driven light-attack planes, but never moved past the demonstration phase. The latest effort is different, Slife said.

“This is not a rehash of the Air Force light-attack program,” he said. “SOCOM envisions this as more of a multi-role platform that can perform level delivery of precision munitions.”

The general said the planes are not likely to have ejection seats, like those included in more expensive attack aircraft.

“If we’re trying to fly airplanes that require ejection seats, we’re probably focused on the wrong thing as the Air Force component of SOCOM,” Slife said.

His comments would seem to exclude the Sierra Nevada/Embraer Super Tucano, Beechcraft AT-6B, Textron/AirLand Scorpion and

[Leidos/Paramount Bronco II](#), which are all considered light-attack planes and all have ejection seats. That could leave planes like the [Air Tractor AT-802U](#) or [Cessna AC-208 Armed Caravan](#) as options. The Iraqi Air Force flies single-engine Cessna Caravans armed with Hellfire missiles.

During the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, fighters, bombers, electronic attack aircraft, intelligence planes and refueling tankers would fly over a target in a “stack” over one another between 10,000 and 25,000 feet. This “is not viable for the future [and] it’s not cost-effective” for combating violent extremist organizations, Slife said.

“We need to collapse the stack...into a smaller number of platforms,” he said.

That means a plane that can gather intelligence and strike enemy targets on the ground.

“It’s really a multirole airplane that’s capable of operating with a very light logistics footprint in small disaggregated teams...in very austere regions,” Slife said. [D](#)

## CHAPTER 4

# TEAMWORK LED US TO BIN LADEN AND CAN KEEP AMERICA SAFE

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AS WE LOOK BACK ON THE  
OSAMA BIN LADEN RAID OF A DECADE AGO,  
THREE LESSONS STAND OUT.

BY LEON E. PANETTA & JEREMY BASH



**O**sama bin Laden didn't have time to react. At 12:30 a.m. local time on May 2, 2011, bin Laden and his family were sound asleep when two dozen operators from America's elite counterterrorism teams swooped into his compound and made their way up to his bedroom on the third floor of a large villa in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Within moments, America's most wanted terrorist was dead, the culmination of a 10-year manhunt by U.S. intelligence that pinpointed his precise location on that moonless night.

CIA had converted the director's Seventh Floor conference room into a command center where we watched the raid unfold. When the initial helicopter lost lift and crash landed into the compound, our hearts were in our throats. The conference room fell dead silent. But the professionals of the teams working for Joint Special Operations Command's Adm. Bill McRaven didn't hesitate, carrying out the mission as if nothing had gone wrong. A backup helicopter was called in and the mission was carried out successfully. As we look back on the events of late April and early May a decade ago, three lessons stand out.

First, the operation was the result of unprecedented cooperation between our military and intelligence agencies. We have had the honor of helping to lead at both CIA and the Pentagon, and we can vouch for the fact that they are very different organizations — one is small and tightknit; the other is huge with 3 million people and thousands of offices under one department. They are different



MASS COMMUNICATION SPECIALIST 2ND CLASS KYLE D. GAHLAU / U.S. NAVY

culturally, organizationally, bureaucratically, and operate under differing authorities, policies, and rules of engagement.

Yet, for this particular operation to work, CIA and DOD had to work together — and they did. Pentagon leaders had to agree to let the CIA command the operation; but CIA had to let the military execute it. CIA found Bin Laden — with help from partners at National Security Agency and National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency — but only the special operations community had the training, experience, and skill to fly 150 miles into Pakistan at night and raid the compound, kill Bin Laden, his adult son, and his couriers, protect women and children, and leave without any casualties.

We should never take this kind of teamwork for granted. It doesn't flow organically from the goodwill of people sharing one goal.

It has to be designed into any government endeavor, demanded by leaders, and rewarded when done right.

Second, this operation needed and received bipartisan support. We briefed congressional leaders in the fall of 2010 about the intelligence on the compound. Democrats ran the House. During the 2010 midterms, Democrats lost the House, and so we quickly briefed the new Republicans in charge. We needed them on board because we needed resources for surveillance, but more importantly we wanted the bipartisan leadership to be partners in supporting this critical mission.

To their credit, members of Congress briefed on the mission never breathed a word of it. Bipartisan cooperation is absolutely essential in America's high stakes missions overseas. We believed in the tradition of partisanship stopping at the water's edge, and in this mission, it did.

Third, if not for the skill and professionalism of the intelligence and military personnel involved in this mission, bin Laden might still be alive today. CIA officers meticulously combed through evidence about bin Laden's courier network and followed every lead for 10 years. The special operations teams that undertook the mission risked their lives based on incomplete information about the compound's residents and the knowledge that if they got pinned down in Pakistan, it was going to be hard to rescue them. We have the fortune of being able to tell the American



MASS COMMUNICATION SPECIALIST 2ND CLASS JOHN SCORZA / U.S. NAVY

people about this mission, but the quiet professionals from the intelligence community and DOD who really deserve the credit will take most of the details to their grave.

Though we were not sure at the time, bin Laden's killing was the beginning of the end of al Qaeda's status as America's preeminent threat. The Abbottabad raid deprived al Qaeda of its inspirational leader, pierced the organization's sense of invincibility, and sent other lieutenants into deeper hiding. Within months, other senior al Qaida leaders were killed, more plots were disrupted, and before long the stream of threats against U.S. homeland targets emanating from Afghanistan and Pakistan began to dry up as the group further splintered.

Today, with most of its leaders captured or killed, most of its money gone, and most of its foot soldiers absorbed by other





STAFF SGT. CHRIS GRIFFIN / U.S. NAVY

radical groups, al Qaeda is a shadow of its former self. No longer is this terrorist organization considered the biggest threat to the United States. Though they remain dangerous, we have been able to focus resources elsewhere. The recent Worldwide Threats briefing published by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and presented on Capitol Hill contained 23 pages of information about the global threat landscape but devoted just three sentences to al Qaeda.

The teamwork from 10 years ago has allowed America to pivot to the next threats — from China, Russia, nuclear proliferators, and cyber attackers. The dual crises facing America today of the unprecedented pandemic and resulting economic downturn demand teamwork, bipartisanship, and professional leadership. The bin Laden mission from a decade ago should serve as a

template on how to work together to keep America safe. **D**

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## CHAPTER 4

# THE FORGOTTEN PEOPLE FIGHTING THE FOREVER WAR

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A DEVASTATING INCIDENT IN AFGHANISTAN SHOWS  
THE PERILS OF RELYING ON SPECIAL OPERATIONS  
ALONE TO FIGHT THE NATION'S BATTLES.

BY JESSICA DONATI



**B**oth the Trump and Obama administrations relied heavily on highly trained Special Forces units to keep Afghanistan from collapse. The strategy has kept recent episodes of the 21-year Afghan War out of the public eye, but it is failing to stabilize the country and is straining the United States military's elite troops, who serve back-to-back combat tours without an end in sight and disproportionately give their lives in service of a war the public knows almost nothing about.

*When Kunduz, a major city in northern Afghanistan, fell to the Taliban in 2015, U.S. Special Forces were dispatched on a secret mission to help Afghan commandos recapture it. Under-resourced and unprepared, the soldiers found themselves in the midst of a pitched battle with conflicting orders. The story of how it led to one of the U.S. military's worst disasters in Afghanistan shows the perils of relying on Special Operations alone to fight the nation's wars.*

Major Michael Hutchinson, a Green Beret with the 3rd Special Forces Group, was in charge of the secret operation to help Afghan commandos recapture Kunduz. It was his fifth combat deployment, counting three tours in Afghanistan and one in Iraq, yet he had never experienced such intense fighting.

The mission had been scrambled together after Kunduz had come under attack four days earlier. The Afghan army and police, plagued by corruption and poor leadership, had abandoned their

posts and left the city to the Taliban with barely a fight. [It fell within hours.](#)

Hutch, as the other soldiers called him, worried that the slightest mistake or miscalculation could end in disaster. The Green Berets had reached the area by air and lacked armored vehicles. Some had driven into Kunduz on quad bikes. They had a single map between them, and no one had set foot in the city before.

After four days of fighting, they were still hunkered down at the city's police headquarters, where the American and Afghan teams had set up a command center. That wasn't the original plan: They were supposed to have established a foothold at the governor's office, but got lost in the dark. They were under attack from all sides, and only air strikes and the snipers on the walls were preventing the Taliban from overrunning the base.

Hutchinson was in contact with an AC-130 gunship, which was circling overhead, to provide air support to his Afghan colleagues who were preparing to hit a building believed to be a Taliban command and control center.

The Afghans didn't have radios, though, and were relying on limited cellphone coverage to make contact with Hutchinson. Communications were patchy, but this process had become routine. After hearing gunfire erupt, Hutchinson's interpreter was able to reach them and confirm they needed air support

for the building they were attacking. Hutchinson ordered the gunship to fire.

A series of technical and communication failures aboard the aircraft had prevented the crew from preparing for the mission. It didn't help that Hutchinson's team had run out of the batteries needed for the video receivers typically used to communicate with the aircrew.

That meant he didn't know that things had gone seriously wrong. The building he had ordered the AC-130 gunship to strike was not a Taliban control center, but a trauma hospital run by Médecins Sans Frontières.

There, Evangeline Cua was in between surgeries. She had her own practice in the Philippines, her home country, but had taken a break to work for the aid group over the summer. It had been an intense several months, but nothing compared with the past four days. The hospital had been flooded with patients since the city had fallen, and health-care workers were using hallways and offices to create space for makeshift beds. Her heart broke when entire families came in, and she couldn't save them all.

The first rounds from the AC-130 struck the hospital's emergency room. The operating theaters shook and the windows rattled. Cua looked up and exchanged glances with an assistant surgeon who had finished suturing a patient's wound. The doctors had



PETTY OFFICER 2ND CLASS PATRICK KELLEY / DOD

grown used to the sounds of explosions and gunfire. They laughed uneasily. It was probably just another clash, she thought, exhausted.

But then a second blast struck with terrifying force. All three theaters were in use when it hit. The surgeons leapt up and fled down the hallway, leaving their anesthetized patients on the operating tables. The doctors and nurses gathered across the hall, dragging tables together for cover, but it was too hard to breathe through the acrid smoke, so Cua groped her way back to the operating theater.

Her mind raced to understand what was happening. The hospital was supposed to be protected. All sides had recognized its impartiality. An air strike? Why? Another deafening blast shook



the building, and the ceiling came crashing down, plunging them into darkness. She saw her patient's heart monitor flatline. We're going to die, she thought. Rounds hammered the building.

She imagined her remains being delivered to her parents in the Philippines in an urn. Or worse, what if her body was never found? She tried to focus on the patients' lives she had saved during her time in Kunduz, but all she could think of were her parents. I'm sorry, Mom, she thought. I'm sorry. Nearby, she heard her colleague praying softly. "Pray with me," he told her.

MSF's country director, Guilhem Molinie, was in Kabul when he received a call from the hospital reporting the air strike. He immediately dialed Bagram Airfield, praying for a quick response. He felt sick to his stomach.

"The trauma center is under attack," Molinie told the U.S. officer who picked up. "You're bombing the hospital!"

The officer ran to the joint-operations center, pulled the battle captain aside, and told him about the call in a whisper. But Lieutenant Colonel Jason Johnston, the 3rd Group battalion commander, who was sitting in the next row, heard and leapt up. He asked the officer to repeat himself. None of them was aware the air strike was under way.

They tried reaching Hutchinson, but couldn't get through for

several minutes. They identified a plume of smoke rising from the center of Kunduz over a video feed and pulled the coordinates to check them against the ones provided by the hospital. When Hutchinson called back, Johnston told him about the report. Hutchinson stopped to process the message. He replayed the past hour and didn't see how it could have happened.

"No way," he said. "That's not possible."

Hutchinson ordered the aircraft to stop shooting, but didn't mention the report to anyone else. As hardened as the other Green Berets were, it would deliver a terrible blow to morale, adding to the stress of the ongoing battle for the city. He told himself there must have been a mistake.

But in the first morning light, the destroyed hospital building was smoldering. Cua and the other doctors and nurses who survived the bombing set to work trying to save the wounded as the sun came up. In the end, [42 people, including 14 staff members](#), would be reported killed in the strike.

After a week-long battle, Kunduz was more or less [back under government control](#). Afghan soldiers cheered as the Americans drove past. Hutchinson hadn't heard anything more about the air strike and, because he and his team had not visited the site of the blast, assumed the report was a mistake.

Hutchinson was elated. This was what he had secretly dreamed of since childhood: participating in a battle for survival with a small band of brothers. Every emotion he had suppressed during the battle hit him at once. His men were high with the feeling of being alive. They felt like heroes in a movie. They had saved a city from ruin against the odds. They weren't prepared for the news.

On TV back at the camp, the world's attention was indeed focused on Kunduz—but not on the Taliban's defeat. Every major outlet was covering the U.S. bombing of the hospital, and asking whether the air strike was a war crime.

Hutchinson still believed he and his men had done the right thing by going into the city, and tried to console Ben Vontz, the young Green Beret responsible for communicating with the gunship that night, who was distraught. If the mission had failed, the Taliban would be entrenched in Kunduz by now, he told Vontz, and a door-to-door battle to drive them out would have yielded an even higher human cost.

It had been 10 years since Hutchinson's first tour in Iraq. A decade was a long time to learn how to process the horrors of war. To him, it was clear the bombing was a mistake caused by equipment failure, exhaustion, and human error. Everyone had done their best in a situation they should never have been put in, he told Vontz. The combat controller was 25, and it had been his first time in battle. He was inconsolable.



ELIZABETH FRASER / U.S. ARMY

By this point, an investigation team had reached Kunduz; they wanted to see Hutchinson immediately. The investigators stared at him uncomfortably. The media were describing Hutchinson as a potential war criminal. He refused to flinch and promised to help with the inquiry.

Hutch called home. His wife answered.

"Is everything okay?" Tina asked. "Because they're calling it a war crime."

Hutchinson was relieved of his duties and sent to Bagram Airfield to await the results of the inquiry. He felt confident that the investigating officers would realize the soldiers had done their

best. The strike was an unfortunate mistake made in the heat of battle. He planned to bravely accept whatever punishment the military saw fit to administer and move on.

When a chaplain visited from Kabul, he was shocked to find Hutchinson in good spirits. He had been assessed to be a suicide risk. "I'm fine," Hutchinson told him, trying to sound upbeat.

But he had started to hear that some in the Army's headquarters believed he had violated the rules of engagement and wanted him to stand trial for murder. He tried to stay positive and kept to his gym routine to fight off the depression and negative thoughts nagging at him.

He couldn't tell Tina much over the phone, but he tried to reassure her that everything would be fine once the investigation had run its course. She was on her own, pregnant and juggling two kids.

Tina knew not to ask questions, but she was scared about what was going to happen to them. "I'm not going to jail," he promised her. She was worried. The images from the hospital were etched on her mind. She couldn't help but read the stories about the staff and patients who had survived, even if in her heart she knew that her husband had done his best.

The military changed its official story several times. The secrecy surrounding the investigation fueled the public's worst suspicions,

that the hospital had been struck on purpose. Hutchinson felt that people would understand if they heard firsthand how the mistake had occurred. He asked to be allowed to explain publicly what had happened. The battalion told him it wasn't a good idea.

The investigators called Hutchinson in for questioning over and over again. Eventually, the investigating officer, Brigadier General Richard Kim, approached him. He didn't believe Hutchinson's version of events, he said. He thought that Hutchinson had broken the rules of engagement and illegally used pre-assault fire. "Would you like to change your story?" he asked.

Hutchinson was shocked. He could accept having made a mistake and that civilians had died as a result. He could accept that the tragedy was preventable. He was prepared to accept whatever punishment was meted out. But to be accused of trying to cover up a deliberate act? That was too much. It couldn't be real. **D**

*This post was excerpted from Donati's upcoming book, [Eagle Down: The Last Special Forces Fighting the Forever War](#).*

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Leon Edward Panetta is an American politician who has served in several different public office positions, including the Secretary of Defense, Director of the CIA, White House Chief of Staff, Director of the Office of Management and Budget, and as a U.S. Representative from California.



A photograph of five soldiers in silhouette, walking across a grassy hill. They are wearing helmets and carrying gear. In the background, two helicopters are visible against a bright, hazy sky. The scene is bathed in a warm, golden light, suggesting sunrise or sunset. A semi-transparent yellow rectangle is overlaid on the center of the image, containing the text "Defense One".

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