



Updated November 16, 2018

Defense Primer: Special Operations Forces

Overview

Special Operations Forces (SOF) are those active duty and reserve component forces of the military services designated by the Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) and specifically selected, organized, trained, and equipped to conduct and support special operations. Special operations frequently require unique modes of employment, tactics, techniques, procedures, and equipment. They are often conducted in hostile, politically, and/or diplomatically sensitive environments, and are characterized by one or more of the following: time-sensitivity, clandestine or covert nature, low visibility, work with or through indigenous forces, greater requirements for regional orientation and cultural expertise, and a high degree of risk. SOF's core activities are listed below.

- Direct action
- Special reconnaissance
- Countering weapons of mass destruction
- Counterterrorism
- Unconventional warfare
- Foreign internal defense
- Security force assistance
- Hostage rescue and recovery
- Counterinsurgency
- Foreign humanitarian assistance
- Military information support operations
- Civil affairs operations
- Preparation of the environment

Selection of SOF Operational Personnel

SOF operational personnel (often referred to as “operators”) undergo a rigorous screening and selection process characterized by a low selection rate. After selection, they receive mission-specific training to achieve proficiency in a variety of special operations skills. SOF operators tend to be more experienced personnel and many maintain competency in more than one military specialty. Selected operators have regional, cultural, and linguistic expertise. Some SOF personnel require highly technical and advanced training for anticipated missions such as Military Freefall training, Combat Diver training, and Sniper training.

Command Structure and Components

In 1986, Congress, concerned about the status of SOF within overall U.S. defense planning, passed legislation to strengthen special operations' position within the defense community and to strengthen interoperability among the

branches of U.S. SOF. The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) of 1987 (P.L. 99-661, Part B –Special Operations Matters), established a new four-star command to prepare Special Operations Forces (SOF) to carry out assigned missions and, if directed by the President or SECDEF, to plan for and conduct special operations.

U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM)

Activated on April 16, 1987, and headquartered at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, FL, USSOCOM is the unified Combatant Command (COCOM) responsible for organizing, training, and equipping all U.S. SOF units. As of February 2018, USSOCOM had 771,698 (57,478 active duty, 7,668 reserve and 6,552 civilian) personnel assigned to its headquarters, its service components, and sub-unified commands. HQ USSOCOM consists of about 2,500 military and civilian members. The USSOCOM commander is four-star general officer from any Service, who reports directly to the SECDEF. After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, USSOCOM's responsibilities were expanded in the 2004 Unified Command Plan (UCP), which assigned USSOCOM responsibility for coordinating the Department of Defense (DOD) plans against global terrorism and conducting global operations as directed. Since 2016, USSOCOM has also been assigned the roles coordinating authority over countering violent extremist operations (CVEO) and counter weapons of mass destruction (CWMD) operations.

USSOCOM Service Component Commands

Army Special Operations Command (USASOC)

On December 1, 1989, USASOC was established at Fort Bragg, NC, as a major Army command to enhance the readiness of Army SOF in the active and reserve components. With an allocated strength of approximately 33,000 soldiers, USASOC consists of Special Forces (Green Berets), Rangers, Special Operations Aviators, Civil Affairs Soldiers, Military Information Support Operators, Training Cadre, and Sustainment Soldiers. USASOC has four major subordinate commands: the 1st Special Forces Command (Airborne) (Provisional), U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, U.S. Army Special Operations Aviation Command, and the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment.

Naval Special Warfare Command (NSWC)

Established on April 16, 1987, and based in Coronado, CA, the NSWC is responsible for organizing training and equipping six Naval Special Warfare Groups (NSWG), the Naval Special Warfare Center (NSWC), and the Development Group (DEVGRU). With approximately 10,000 personnel, the NSWC consists of Sea, Air, Land

(SEAL) Teams and Special Warfare Combatant Craft Crewmen (SWCC) as part of Special Boat Teams (SBTs). Enablers, including logistics, communications, intelligence, and explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) personnel, are also part of NSWC.

Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC)

Established May 22, 1990, with its headquarters at Hurlburt Field, FL, AFSOC is responsible for organizing, training and equipping seven Special Operations Wings (SOW), one Special Operations Group (SOG), and the Air Force Special Operations Air Warfare Center. AFSOC consists of about 19,500 personnel comprising Special Operations Aviators, Special Tactics Airmen—including Combat Controllers, Pararescuemen, Special Operations Weather Airmen, Tactical Air Control Party Airmen, and Air Support Commandos, who provide a wide variety of mission support service. The command’s active duty and reserve component flying units operate specially equipped fixed and rotary-wing aircraft.

Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC)

Headquartered in Camp Lejeune, NC, and established February 24, 2006, MARSOC consists of the Marine Raider Regiment, the Marine Raider Support Group, and the Marine Special Operations School. MARSOC’s almost 3,000 personnel consist of Critical Skills Operators, Special Operations Officers, Special Operations Capability Specialists, and Special Operations Combat Services Specialists.

Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC)

Activated in 1980, JSOC is a sub-unified command of USSOCOM and is charged to study special operations requirements and techniques, ensure interoperability and equipment standardization, plan and conduct special operations exercises and training, and develop joint special operations tactics. Members of JSOC have previously served in the following operations: Desert One in Iran (1980), Grenada (1983), the Mediterranean Sea during the *Achille Lauro* hijacking (1985), Panama (1989), the Mideast during the Gulf War (1991), Somalia (1993), Haiti (1994), the Balkans (1996-2002), Afghanistan (2001-present), and Iraq (2003-present).

Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs)

U.S. SOF frequently operates with the conventional forces of the Joint Force. SOF theater-level command and control responsibilities are vested in Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs). TSOCs are sub-unified commands under their respective Geographic Combatant Commanders (GCCs). TSOCs are special operational headquarters elements designed to support a GCC’s special operations logistics, planning, and operational command and control requirements, and are normally commanded by a one- or two-star general officer from any Service. Current TSOCs include:

- Special Operations Command South (SOCSOUTH), Homestead Air Force Base, FL; supports U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM).
- Special Operations Command Africa (SOCAFRICA), Stuttgart, Germany; supports U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM).
- Special Operations Command Europe (SOCEUR), Stuttgart, Germany; supports U.S. European Command (USEUCOM).
- Special Operations Command Central (SOCCENT), MacDill Air Force Base, FL; supports U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM).
- Special Operations Command Pacific (SOCPAC), Camp Smith, HI; supports U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM).
- Special Operations Command Korea (SOCKOR), Yongsang, Korea; supports U.S. Forces Korea (USFK).
- Special Operations Command U.S. Northern Command (SOCNORTH), Peterson Air Force Base, CO; supports U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM).

Relevant Statutes

Title 10, U.S. Code, Section 162 – Combatant Commands: Assigned Force, Chain of Command.

Title 10, U.S. Code, Section 167 – Unified Combatant Command for Special Operations Forces.

CRS Products

CRS Report RS21048, *U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF): Background and Issues for Congress*, by Andrew Feickert.

Other Resources

Department of Defense, Joint Publication 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, March 25, 2013, Incorporating Change 1, 12 July 2017:

http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp1_ch1.pdf

DOD, Joint Publication 3.05, *Doctrine for Special Operations*, July 16, 2014, at

http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_05.pdf

United States Special Operations Command, *USSOCOM Fact Book 2018*, at

<https://www.socom.mil/FactBook/2018%20Fact%20Book.pdf>

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