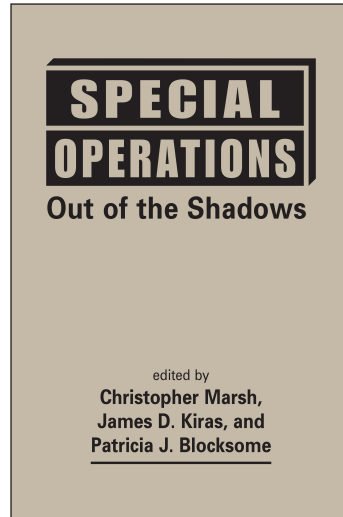


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Special Operations: Out of the Shadows

edited by
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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
1 Special Operations: Out of the Shadows <i>Christopher Marsh, James D. Kiras, and Patricia J. Blocksome</i>	1
Part 1 Special Operations in Theory and Concept	
2 The Dangers of Theory <i>James D. Kiras</i>	11
3 The Value of Theory <i>Christopher Marsh, Mike Kenny, and Nathanael Joslyn</i>	27
4 The Human Factor <i>Kevin L. Parker</i>	47
5 The Resurgence of Special Warfare <i>Homer W. Harkins</i>	53
6 Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare <i>Dan Cox</i>	61
7 Design Thinking for Special Operations <i>Ben Zweibelson</i>	73
8 Design Thinking for Leadership of Special Operations Forces <i>Ben Zweibelson</i>	83

1

Special Operations: Out of the Shadows

*Christopher Marsh, James D. Kiras,
and Patricia J. Blocksome*

Special operations can be traced back in time to the earliest recorded accounts of warfare. This lethal form of competition can be seen in battlefield exploits from Thermopylae and the Trojan War through the Middle Ages and all the way to today's battlefields (Arquilla 1996). The conduct of modern special operations and the formation of specially trained and equipped units—what we call special operations forces (SOF), as distinct from conventional operations and general-purpose forces—is typically traced to World War II (Thomas 1983). During World War II, all the major players were involved in the creation and use of special operations forces, including the United States, Britain, Germany, and the Soviet Union (Thomas 1983).

Most special operations units created during that war were subsequently disbanded and re-created as needed. That need came with the Cold War and as early as the Korean War. Later, as President Kennedy phrased it in a speech at West Point in 1962, the world was becoming characterized by a form of warfare “new in its intensity, ancient in its origins—war by guerrilla subversives, insurgents, assassins. War by ambush instead of by combat; by infiltration instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him” (Kennedy 1962). This type of warfare would require “a whole new kind of strategy, a wholly different kind of force, and therefore a new and wholly different kind of military training.”

The answer to this requirement was the formation of special operations forces. Officially created in 1952, US Army Special Forces were given a tremendous boost under President Kennedy and during the Vietnam War. These forces included the “Green Berets” (Special Forces); the

Sea, Air, and Land (SEAL) teams of the US Navy; and the US Air Force's 1st Special Operations Wing. The United States was not alone in its development and institutionalization of special operations forces during the Cold War; depending on the country, such specialized forces were either created, reactivated, or, for the units that had not been disbanded following World War II, given more institutional attention (Thomas 1983). Despite this history, the large-scale investment in and restructuring of SOF into a stable, efficient, and interdependent organizational structure occurred in the US context only in the early 1980s, particularly after the creation of the US Special Operations Command (SOCOM) in 1987. SOCOM is the headquarters for all US special operations forces and is based out of MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida. Each service's special operations forces are organized under a component command, including the US Army Special Operations Command (the largest), the Air Force Special Operations Command, the Naval Special Warfare Command, and the Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command.

Since the development of SOCOM, special operators have proven their ability to conduct critical missions with speed and precision, or patience and discretion, and their tactical actions often result in strategic consequences. Beyond the United States, there has been a proliferation of SOF across the globe over the past twenty years as all major powers—and some lesser powers as well—seek to gain the capabilities and status that come from the possession of such elite units (Marsh 2017). This has been seen not only among allies of the United States, but among near-peer competitors as well, such as Russia (Marsh 2016) and China (Cheng 2012).

Special operations can be broken down into several different types of mission sets, including the very familiar operations of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism. These two missions have recently become the subject of intense academic research and there exists for each a wide variety of publications. Special operations comprise other types of missions as well, including unconventional warfare, security force assistance, and humanitarian assistance, as well as surgical strike and direct action operations.

Military historian Simon Anglim has identified three sets of tasks that most SOF have been given across countries and throughout time: surveillance and reconnaissance, offensive actions against important targets, and support and influence (2011:17). This classification of tasks is almost identical to the official US doctrine on special operations, which distinguishes between special reconnaissance, direct action, and military assistance (Joint Chiefs of Staff 2014a). Special reconnaissance is centered on gaining intelligence in sensitive and denied areas through covert means. Direct action is just another way of saying the use of kinetic military force. Finally, military assistance consists of training both the legitimate military forces of a foreign state as well as training resistance fighters and

proxy forces that may be either resisting an occupying force (or preparing to do so) or working to dislodge a government in power. But this is not all that special operations forces do. In addition, there is humanitarian assistance and countering weapons of mass destruction, two other very critical mission sets of US—and many foreign—special operations forces. The official list of US special operations core activities is the following:

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

In the pages that follow, many of these core activities will be discussed and analyzed, primarily direct action, counterterrorism, unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, security force assistance, counterinsurgency, and psychological operations.

Much of the literature on special operations has focused on unit or national histories, or individual “kill and tell” memoirs (the value of which is cogently defended in Pettersson and Ben-Ari 2018), but has been largely neglected by the academic community. Moreover, there is much to be gained by studying special operations and SOF holistically, rather than in a piecemeal fashion, because these missions often occur simultaneously and the roles and capabilities of SOF evolve over time (e.g., from conducting security force assistance and counterterrorism to eventually fighting counterinsurgency).

While the importance of special operations today seems quite apparent, academic study and professional research into special operations are still in a nascent stage. It is a rare find to see a course on special operations in college curricula, or faculty members with any direct background in special operations. The fact remains that despite media attention and public fascination, there is no real research community on special operations as a field of study. One factor critical to the formation of a research community in any area is a forum for the exchange of ideas, and this is no less true for special operations than it is for particle physics. It was the strong conviction about this idea among the authors

of this book that led to the establishment of the *Special Operations Journal* in 2013, the first academic and professional journal devoted solely to the study of special operations and special operations forces.

The general aim of this book is twofold. First it seeks to introduce nonspecialists to some of the many areas of special operations, and second it seeks to delve deeper into some of these areas for the specialist interested in the debates and cutting-edge research being done in the field, ranging from theoretical debates to critical case studies. The initial area we cover, both chronologically and in terms of priority, is that of a theory of special operations. Several excellent studies have been done on this topic (Luttwak, Canby, and Thomas 1982; Gray 1992; McRaven 1996; Kiras 2006; Finlan 2007; Spulak 2007; Celeski 2011; Yarger 2013; Marsh, Kenny, and Joslyn 2015), but the debate is far from over. The Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) even held a conference on the theme a couple years ago, with an excellent three-part series of publications emerging from the event (Rubright 2017; Searle 2017; McCabe and Lieber 2017).

Not only is there no general theory of special operations, but there is not even agreement among the field as to whether there should (or can) be a theory of special operations. Part 1 of our volume begins with two chapters on special operations theory. Chapter 2 is written by Professor James Kiras of the US Air Force School of Advanced Air and Space Studies at Maxwell Air Force Base, who argues that the critiques of special operations forces after World War II are applicable to the current quest to produce a theory of special operations today. A specific theory may be unwarranted, as other existing military theories may already prove necessary and sufficient for special operations. There are a number of individual and institutional impediments to overcome in the writing of special operations theory. Although special operations have a strategic value and can generate strategic effects, this does not necessarily translate into a need for theory. Institutional imperatives are likely to favor pragmatic over pure theory and co-opt such theory in the pursuit of bureaucratic agendas. In the worst possible case, such co-opted theory can become dogma, or a substitute for deep, critical thinking—the very *raison d'être* of theory.

Chapter 3 is a response, of sorts, to Kiras, wherein Christopher Marsh, along with retired Special Forces officer Mike Kenny, and the 10th Special Forces Group's Nathanael Joslyn, team up to argue that the pursuit of theory is required for a scientifically rigorous body of research on special operations. Following a review of the nature of theory and its role in the study of war and warfare, the authors argue against the development of a single, overarching meta-theory of special operations. Instead, they propose that efforts at theory development should be aimed at a level below that of special operations, and suggest that focusing on the

doctrinal division between surgical strike and special warfare offers great promise for developing a theory of special warfare in particular.

Concepts are the building blocks of theory, and the remainder of the chapters in Part 1 focus on various conceptual issues in special operations research. Chapter 4 looks at the topic of locating the human in doctrine. As US Air Force officer Kevin Parker notes, in 2013 top US Army, Marine Corps, and Special Operations Command military leaders chartered the Strategic Landpower Task Force to examine the concept of a human domain and inform whether to adopt it into doctrine. The Department of Defense (DoD) should not adopt human domain into doctrine. Examining human in war, however, illuminates opportunities to improve joint doctrine by developing precise terminology for the many facets of humanness in war. This chapter explores the concepts of the human domain, human dimension, human factors, and human capital. It also proposes reevaluating defeat mechanisms to consider human factors and how military operations influence adversary decisions. Human domain concepts have gained attention in the land services and special operations, especially in population-centric conflicts, but the importance of human factors goes beyond these limited viewpoints.

Next, the reader is offered a brief introduction to some conceptual issues and design thinking. In a similar vein to Chapter 4, JSOU's Homer Harkins in Chapter 5 points out that the United States has participated in special warfare for decades, but that the concept has only recently entered formal SOF doctrine. Special warfare differs from traditional warfare principally in its involvement of the human domain and the importance of psychological operations. It occurs across the spectrum of conflict and in both irregular and conventional warfare. To be successful, Harkins argues, special warfare efforts should cooperate with other military organizations, particularly those with intelligence and security assistance capacity, and must be adequately supported by the joint force. Special warfare efforts must also be synchronized with the efforts of interagency partners, quite often through the auspices of diplomatic missions because of the involvement of foreign populations. Special warfare has been a tool used by the United States in conflicts around the world for decades, and future SOF warriors will continue to engage in it. To be successful, it is critically important that these professionals understand this other type of warfare.

Further delving into the area of concepts, Dan Cox of the US Army School of Advanced Military Studies argues in Chapter 6 that even defining the term *terrorism* is a highly contentious act. The lack of an agreed-upon definition or even an agreed-upon set of concepts that every definition should encompass creates rifts between scholars and potential confusion among practitioners of counterterrorism. This chapter attempts to examine the difficulty of conceptualizing terrorism juxtaposed against the practice

of unconventional warfare. Given that special operations forces help foment insurgencies when conducting unconventional warfare and because insurgencies often resort to terrorism, it is important for practitioners of unconventional warfare to understand what terrorism is, how to detect it, and perhaps how to steer insurgents away from this tactic. This chapter explores these concepts as well as the potentiality that the intersection of terrorism and unconventional warfare produces a new type of collateral damage not fully covered in the existing international law of warfare.

The next two chapters offer the reader a brief introduction to “design thinking,” particularly as seen by SOCOM. Both chapters are written by JSOU’s Ben Zweibelson, who in Chapter 7 first tackles the issue of special operations and design thinking. As he argues, over the past decade the US military has developed various forms of design thinking for complex problem solving in military conflicts. US Special Operations Command recently developed two operational design and design practitioners courses in an effort to integrate design thinking across all levels of SOCOM. While the conventional Army uses one form of design, the organizational composition, mission, and high level of tacit knowledge production require special operations to pursue other design concepts, design education options, and organizational improvements. This chapter outlines how and why special operations needs a different organizing philosophy for design in context, where the unique qualities of special operation missions require designing differently than conventional approaches.

In Chapter 8, Zweibelson looks at change agents for the SOF enterprise and the design considerations for SOF leadership. As the author points out, the military design movement in the past generation has generated much discussion on why, how, and when to apply design thinking in military organizations. Further, there is significant debate on how design and traditional linear planning ought to integrate and complement within a military enterprise confronting a complex, adaptive environment. Although there are multiple design schools, programs, as well as methodologies available across the US Department of Defense and internationally in other militaries, the lack of research and materials for military senior leaders is of paramount concern. For special operations leadership in particular, design requires different consideration when set in the context of SOF unique missions as well as the composition of SOF forces in larger coalition and joint activities. This chapter provides some of the leading design theory tailored specifically for senior military leaders to provide deeper appreciation of how to foster design activities, innovation, and operational planning integration within complex special operations contexts.

In Part 2 we turn to special operations in action. These chapters are examples of work focusing on some of the most pressing concerns to

the special operations enterprise today, from the discourse of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to US strategy and Russia's countering of the new Western way of war. We begin with a contribution by Richard Rubright, who argues in Chapter 9 that the United States faces a strategic paradox where values conflict with the ability to develop and implement coherent strategies in the complex and dynamic world of today and the future. Special operations forces' ability to be effective in the contexts of foreign environments, he argues, may mean future reliance on proxy forces that offer plausible deniability for US policymakers. Such opportunities, however, come with a potential of heightened strategic risk that must be carefully managed and judged. Rubright provides examples of historical cases of effective use of third-party proxies, which may become a template for partner nations and special operations forces to effectively meet future challenges while coping with the strategic paradox that currently limits capabilities.

Next, in Chapter 10, we turn our attention to the festering problem of Crimea and eastern Ukraine through an examination of Russia's response to the "new" Western way of war. Charles Bartles of Fort Leavenworth's Foreign Military Studies Office lays out the context in which General Valery Gerasimov's often cited article "The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying Out Combat Operations," was written. Furthermore, Bartles explains why Gerasimov's "doctrine" (if it is a doctrine at all) is not a new Russian development, but is a response to the West's new way of war, and a description of the future of war in general. Bartles shows that the use of proxy forces, covert operations, and special operations forces is in fact a reflexive response by Russia to US operations across the globe.

In Chapter 11, JSOU's Paul Lieber along with the US Air Force Academy's Peter Reiley look at the complex issue of countering ISIS's social media influence. The success of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in recruiting and sustaining foreign fighter flow is seen by many as a product of the organization's potent social media efforts. The authors of this chapter argue, however, that a different approach to both problem analysis and measures of effectiveness can potentially counter ISIS's influence efforts. This includes adopting a whole-of-government approach to synchronize efforts and voice.

Next, Chapter 12 looks at the core SOF missions of foreign internal defense and security force assistance, with a particular focus on the new Security Force Assistance Brigades. James "Mike" DePolo highlights the necessity for the US Department of Defense to increase focus and commitment of resources toward foreign internal defense and security

force assistance capabilities. DePolo, the director for special operations studies at Fort Leavenworth's Command and General Staff College, analyzes reductions in defense resources among simultaneous emergent threats, which predicates the need for increasingly efficient and persistent force multiplication effects abroad. He utilizes a vignette of a successful security cooperation operation to conceptualize the potential impacts of effective foreign internal defense efforts, which further enabled export of security cooperation strategy through third-party partnerships. This chapter explores various modern approaches, utilized by the service components to help illustrate challenges and opportunities, that are helping to shape future partner capacity-building platforms across the armed services.

The last of the case studies, in Chapter 13, turns our attention to the role of US special operations forces in combating transnational organized crime as an evolving threat to international security. Steven Johnson argues that transnational organized crime is evolving and diversifying activities globally, presenting persistent threats to security and governance. Growth in transnational organized crime parallels globalization trends including technology, communications, and transportation advances that facilitate geographically dispersed connected networks. The combating of transnational organized crime, Johnson argues, requires integrated approaches that incorporate diverse resources, authorities, and permissions across elements of national power. Constraints related to political will, interoperability, and capacity continue to limit multilateral cooperative activities. Johnson suggests that the US government should take a leadership role, forging international cooperation through efforts to build capacity and integrate diverse capabilities toward common objectives while integrating US special operations forces' capabilities into efforts to combat transnational organized crime globally.

Finally, in Chapter 14, Christopher Marsh, James Kiras, and Patricia Blocksome look to the future of special operations and special operations research, focusing on the role of SOF in an era of "great power competition," to use the words of James Mattis, former US secretary of defense, from the 2018 National Defense Strategy. As the world's great powers begin to align and China and Russia continue to counter US interests globally, the role of SOF might be more important than ever, especially as Special Forces return to their original mission of unconventional warfare (now under the guise of training for resistance). Such a move, however, has not and will not go unnoticed, much less uncoun-tered, by competitors with the United States. Whatever the role of special operations in the future, one thing is for certain: it will be a critical contribution to the ability of the powers great and small to protect their interests and project power locally, regionally, and globally.