

The Rise of U.S. Army Special Forces in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries

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May 14, 2020

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## **Introduction**

From unconventional beginnings to the Global War on Terror, the need for US Army Special Forces has increased exponentially. With the fall of the Nazi regime in 1945 and the rise of the Iron Curtain across Europe, the U.S. Army recognized the need for specialized troops who were experts in foreign languages, friendly and enemy weapon systems, demolitions, airborne operations, counterinsurgency, and unconventional warfare. The Vietnam War provided a proving ground, for the newly formed Green Berets, to display their skills as masters of unconventional warfare. Their expertise in the science of warfare helped to train, advise, and assist South Vietnamese and CIDG forces. Operations in El Salvador, Colombia, and Panama further advanced the teams' credibility in direct action missions. Finally, Special Forces Groups' footprints in CENTCOM ensured regional stability in the fight against international terrorism. From the Horse Soldiers in the early days of Afghanistan to the Syrian Civil War, the Green Berets have established themselves as one of the most premier special operations units in SOCOM's arsenal. The purpose of this research is to shed light on the growing importance of US Army Special Forces moving into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. This paper is dedicated to them.

## **Unconventional Beginnings: The Birth of Special Operations**

As with many new organizations, weapons, and technologies, the special operations community traces its lineage to the onset of WWII. A considerable number of cross-service units contributed to the birth of the U.S. Army Special Forces, or Green Berets, such as the Philippine guerillas, the Jedburgh Teams, conventional airborne units, the Alamo Scouts, and several others.<sup>1</sup> However, two groups in particular heavily influenced the creation and formation of

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<sup>1</sup> Special Forces History." Special Forces Association. JFK Special Warfare Center.

modern Special Forces Groups (SFGs). These two organizations were the First Special Service Force (FSSF) and the Operational Groups (OGs) of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS).<sup>2</sup> Influenced by the rise in British special operations, the United States and Canada created the joint FSSF, on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1942, to combat Nazi heavy water and hydroelectric operations in Norway. FSSF training was conducted in Helena, Montana and consisted of parachuting, skiing, mountaineering, rock climbing, small arms training, demolitions, small unit tactics, hand-to-hand combat, and winter survival.<sup>3</sup> Following their rigorous training, the FSSF conducted special operations on the Aleutian Islands, Italy, Anzio, and France before being disbanded on December 5<sup>th</sup>, 1944. Several members transferred to airborne and Ranger units to help develop modern training curriculums within their respective organizations. The formation of the OSS operational groups was spearheaded by Major General William “Wild Bill” Donovan. A decorated WWI veteran, Major General Donovan championed the idea of a special operations force, and eventually was directed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to create the specialized units.<sup>4</sup> The OGs were 34-man elements trained primarily in Unconventional Warfare (UW), Direct Action (DA), and Special Reconnaissance (SR): three of nine modern Special Forces doctrinal missions. The teams were designed to operate in two sections and conduct guerilla operations, sabotage missions, and raids deep into enemy territory. The most notorious of all the OGs was OSS Detachment 101.<sup>5</sup> This detachment conducted operations in Asia, particularly Burma, against the Japanese. Beginning with only twenty Americans, Detachment 101 quickly

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<sup>2</sup> Department, USASOC History, and Troy J. Sacquety. “The OSS Influence on Special Forces.” ARSOF History. Office of the Command Historian.

<sup>3</sup> Special Forces History.” Special Forces Association. JFK Special Warfare Center.

<sup>4</sup> Special Forces History.” Special Forces Association. JFK Special Warfare Center.

<sup>5</sup> Department, USASOC History, and Troy J. Sacquety. “A Special Forces Model: Detachment 101 in the Myitkyina Campaign Part I-II.” ARSOF History. Office of the Command Historian.

began enlisting the help of the tribal Kachin people and forming local Ranger units. Typical operations of Detachment 101 consisted of harassing enemy patrols, intelligence gathering, ambushing supply lines, and rescuing downed Allied airmen. By the war's end and the deactivation of the unit, Detachment 101 had eliminated over 5,000 Japanese soldiers and rescued almost 600 Allied personnel.

After the establishment of the Special Operations Division of the Psychological Warfare Center, 10<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group was activated on June 11<sup>th</sup>, 1952 at Fort Bragg, under the command of Colonel Aaron Bank.<sup>6</sup> Being the first official Special Forces Group and consisting of only ten Soldiers, Colonel Bank began to lay the foundation for the U.S. Army's most elite unit. Recognizing the need for a highly trained and skilled Soldier, Colonel Bank began recruiting former OSS operators, Rangers, and paratroopers. Throughout the 1950s, Special Forces Soldiers began conducting operations that spanned from Korean peninsula all the way to West Germany. As the demand for Special Forces began to grow, in light of the communist threat, more groups began to form and activate. The 1<sup>st</sup> SFG, which today is still regionally responsible for operations in the Pacific, was activated on June 24<sup>th</sup>, 1957 at Camp Drake, Japan.<sup>7</sup> The 7<sup>th</sup> SFG, re-designated from the 77<sup>th</sup> SFG, was activated on June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1960. By the late 1950s, the basic operational SF unit emerged into a 12-man team, known as the Operational Detachment-A (ODA). Each team consisted of two officers (one commissioned and one warrant), two operations/intelligence sergeants, two weapons sergeants, two communications

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<sup>6</sup> Department, USASOC History, and Kenneth Finlayson. "Colonel Aaron Bank: 1902-2004" ARSOF History. Office of the Command Historian.

<sup>7</sup> Special Forces History." Special Forces Association. JFK Special Warfare Center.

sergeants, two engineers, and two medics.<sup>8</sup> The ODA was crossed-trained in each other's specialties and every Soldier could speak at least one foreign language. This configuration enabled each ODA to split into two sections, if necessary, similar to the former OSS teams. This composition, with slight modifications and adjustments, forms the basis of modern Special Forces ODAs.

The history of the Green Beret itself dates back to 1953. Major Herbert Brucker, a former OSS operator and SF Soldier, designed the headdress. Popularized by First Lieutenant Roger Pezelle and Captain Frank Dallas and their respective ODAs, the Green Beret began to appear throughout 10<sup>th</sup> and 77<sup>th</sup> SFGs. The Army and Fort Bragg post commander, General Paul Adams, refused to officially recognize the new beret, although members continued to wear it. On October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1961, President John F. Kennedy visited Fort Bragg to meet with the Special Warfare Center commander, Brigadier General William Yarborough.<sup>9</sup> Upon seeing the potential of this new fighting force and recognizing their ability to conduct unconventional operations, President Kennedy authorized the Green Beret as the official headwear of the Special Forces. "A symbol of excellence, a badge of courage, a mark of distinction in the fight for freedom."

### **Vietnam: The Testing Ground**

U.S. Army Special Forces began operations in Vietnam in 1957. This was the first trial of the new, specialized unit in an organized manner. 1<sup>st</sup> SFG, based on Okinawa, began training the

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<sup>8</sup> Special Forces History." Special Forces Association. JFK Special Warfare Center.

<sup>9</sup> Department, USASOC History, and Charles H. Briscoe. "JFK Visits Fort Bragg" ARSOF History. Office of the Command Historian.

first Vietnamese Special Forces units at the Commando Training Center in Nha Trang.<sup>10</sup> These South Vietnamese soldiers would become the first to engage with the North Vietnamese insurgents known as the Viet Cong. With exponentially growing South Vietnamese skirmishes with the Viet Cong, the United States recognized the developing need for additional Special Forces in the country. In May 1960, thirty more Special Forces instructors were sent to Vietnam and 5<sup>th</sup> SFG, who was later tasked with overseeing all Special Forces operations in Vietnam, was activated at Fort Bragg on September 21<sup>st</sup>, 1961.<sup>11</sup> That same year, Special Forces teams began enlisting the help of Vietnamese minority groups in an effort to bolster the strength of South Vietnamese local militias. Additionally, senior military leaders recognized the need to prevent the Viet Cong from recruiting those same minority groups in their communist insurgency operations. This U.S. program became known as the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG).<sup>12</sup>

Just as the Special Forces Groups became the unit of choice in the early days of the Vietnam War, the CIDG groups became the cornerstone of the Special Force's foreign internal defense mission. Green Berets primarily trained two different types of fighters in the CIDGs. A two-week training program produced village defenders, while a six-week training curriculum formed the strike force. The village defenders, later known as the hamlet militia, were often assigned to garrison fortification, camp security, equipment maintenance, mortar positioning, etc.<sup>13</sup> The strike force troops were trained in various Ranger tactics and techniques. They were

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<sup>10</sup> Kelly, Francis J. "Vietnam Studies: U.S. Army Special Forces 1961-1971." U.S. Army Special Forces, 1961-1971 - U.S. Army Center of Military History. Department of the Army.

<sup>11</sup> Kelly, Francis J. "Vietnam Studies: U.S. Army Special Forces 1961-1971." U.S. Army Special Forces, 1961-1971 - U.S. Army Center of Military History. Department of the Army.

<sup>12</sup> Fischer, Joseph R. 2008. "US Special Forces and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam: Military Innovation and Institutional Failure, 1961-1963

<sup>13</sup> Kelly, Francis J. "Vietnam Studies: U.S. Army Special Forces 1961-1971." U.S. Army Special Forces, 1961-1971 - U.S. Army Center of Military History. Department of the Army.

tasked with reconnaissance, intelligence collection, patrolling, and Viet Cong supply line ambushes. At first, there was confusion on the command structure of the CIDGs. Technically, the South Vietnamese officers were in direct command of the minority groups, but often times the CIDGs viewed the Green Berets as the command authority because of their tactical expertise and combat proficiency.<sup>14</sup> Undoubtedly, this initially created mistrust and distain within the ranks which lasted until the extensive buildup of U.S. conventional forces in 1965.

As military operations expanded into 1962 and 1963 with Operation Switchback, the conventional Army began taking over Vietnamese training programs, particularly the CIDGs. Command and control were shifted from Vietnamese Special Forces commanders and U.S. Special Forces advisors to the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV).<sup>15</sup> From 1961 to 1965, over eighty CIDG camps and training centers had been established throughout Southeast Asia. These CIDG camps became the prime location for conventional unit commanders to seek domestic military support, such as scouts, Rangers, translators, interrogators, and general intelligence.<sup>16</sup> While the increased MACV engineer and logistical support strengthened the overall capacity and presence of the camps, the CIDGs began to lose their unconventional edge. CIDGs were beginning to be used in regular Vietnamese Army units, in positions for which they had not been trained. In addition, the expansion of the CIDGs and the placement into conventional units led to ethnic and religious conflict. Minorities such as Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and

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<sup>14</sup> Howard, John D. 2019. "THE REVOLT OF THE MONTAGNARDS." *Vietnam*, 04, 30-37.

<sup>15</sup> Kelly, Francis J. "Vietnam Studies: U.S. Army Special Forces 1961-1971." U.S. Army Special Forces, 1961-1971 - U.S. Army Center of Military History. Department of the Army.

<sup>16</sup> Department, USASOC History, and Eugene G. Piasecki. "Civilian Irregular Defense Group" ARSOF History. Office of the Command Historian.



Montagnards faced persecution within the regular South Vietnamese Army units. These tensions would develop into conflict years later.<sup>17</sup>

Conventionalization and discrimination were not the only challenges that the Green Berets faced in the jungles of Vietnam. Incompetent South Vietnamese leadership weakened the operational abilities of the CIDGs. CIDG commanders often refused to operate at night or with a force of less than a company.<sup>18</sup> With squad and platoon movements and operations off the table, offensive maneuvers became essentially impossible. To add insult to injury, South Vietnamese commanders often lacked confidence in decision-making and defaulted to their American counterparts. This greatly added to the lack of respect and confidence shown by their own CIDG subordinates. This disconnect between Vietnamese commanders and their minority group subordinates would eventually erupt into the Montagnard Uprising, in which the Montagnard ethnic group rose up against their leaders in September 1964.<sup>19</sup> Several CIDG commanders were killed, Green Berets taken hostage, and the Vietnamese government forced to meet some of their demands. To make matters even worse, the Viet Cong often used the isolation of the CIDG camps to their advantage. With reinforcements unable to reach and support neighboring villages for sometimes days on end, the Viet Cong attacked and overran several small camps.

Additionally, the Viet Cong would pose as loyal indigenous fighters in order to collect inside

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<sup>17</sup> Howard, John D. 2019. "THE REVOLT OF THE MONTAGNARDS." *Vietnam*, 04, 30-37.

<sup>18</sup> Kelly, Francis J. "Vietnam Studies: U.S. Army Special Forces 1961-1971." U.S. Army Special Forces, 1961-1971 - U.S. Army Center of Military History. Department of the Army.

<sup>19</sup> Howard, John D. 2019. "THE REVOLT OF THE MONTAGNARDS." *Vietnam*, 04, 30-37.

information and undermine the loyalty of the garrison.<sup>20</sup> Obviously, this greatly strained CIDG recruiting operations.

Despite these periodic setbacks, the Special Forces Groups conducted many civic action operations to maintain the popular support of the local people. These activities included logistical, engineer, and medical services. By far, the most impactful was the medical support because the benefits to the villagers were direct and tangible.<sup>21</sup> Within the CIDG camps, the local inhabitants, specifically children, could receive general health and dental care that they desperately needed and had never had access to before. Local support for the American-sponsored camps soared.

As the CIDG program began to mature in the middle years of Vietnam, 1965-1968, Special Forces detachments began taking a much more offensive approach towards the Viet Cong, under a direct order of the 5<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group (Airborne) Headquarters.<sup>22</sup> The operational groups' main objectives were border surveillance and control, operations against infiltration routes, and operations against Viet Cong warzones and bases. Although the increased presence of conventional Army units impaired the groups' ability to collect intelligence and build CIDG camps, it did help with their offensive operations. Special Forces began employing the use of Navy river patrol boats. With the increased speed and firepower of the airboats, the Green Berets were seeing great success in their offensive operations. Finally, the war was being

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<sup>20</sup> Kelly, Francis J. "Vietnam Studies: U.S. Army Special Forces 1961-1971." U.S. Army Special Forces, 1961-1971 - U.S. Army Center of Military History. Department of the Army.

<sup>21</sup> Sasser, Charles W. 2010. "From Torching to Teaching." *Vietnam*, 10, 32-39.

<sup>22</sup> Kelly, Francis J. "Vietnam Studies: U.S. Army Special Forces 1961-1971." U.S. Army Special Forces, 1961-1971 - U.S. Army Center of Military History. Department of the Army.

carried to enemy territory. Between 1966 and 1967, almost all CIDG camps had eradicated the enemy to the point of free access into and out of the camp.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, over 7,000 enemy Viet Cong were killed, while the irregulars only lost 1,600 of their own. These increased operations were such a success that the U.S. Army began considering full transfer of CIDG camp authority to the South Vietnamese Army. Unfortunately, the Tet Offensive changed everything on January 30<sup>th</sup>, 1968.

The Tet Offensive was a rude awakening to American forces in Vietnam. Although the CIDG camps had proven to be extremely effective, the coordinated enemy attacks showed the need for increased U.S. support in both defensive and offensive operations. Areas that were once thought to be free of Viet Cong, were now back into the hands of the enemy. To once again remove the enemy from CIDG camp territory, the Special Forces Groups began directly working with the conventional maneuver units in their assigned operational area. This helped reestablish U.S. and South Vietnamese control of the CIDG territory. As the war progressed into the late 60s, military officials again wanted to start transferring CIDG authority to Vietnamese commanders. MACV eventually converted all 37 remaining CIDG camps to Vietnamese Army Ranger training camps, ending all Special Forces program participation.<sup>24</sup> As many CIDG camp commanders were familiar with this type of instruction, they became the first Ranger battalion commanders, thus making the transition very smooth. However, Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army operations began picking up speed in 1970 and many CIDG camps came under siege or were destroyed outright. As the tide of the war had already begun to shift, this did

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<sup>23</sup> Department, USASOC History, and Eugene G. Piasecki. "Civilian Irregular Defense Group" ARSOF History. Office of the Command Historian.

<sup>24</sup> Kelly, Francis J. "Vietnam Studies: U.S. Army Special Forces 1961-1971." U.S. Army Special Forces, 1961-1971 - U.S. Army Center of Military History. Department of the Army.

not signal better times ahead for the novel South Vietnamese Ranger battalions. The CIDG program officially ended on December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1970 and control was moved entirely to the South Vietnamese government.<sup>25</sup> Despite the conflict's outcome, the Green Berets had trained, equipped, advised, and led the most capable host-nation force of the Vietnam War.

### **SF in the Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

In the years immediately following Vietnam, Special Forces saw their units, training, and budget slashed. 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> SFGs were deactivated following the war. As tensions with the USSR and other members of the Eastern Block increased, the Pentagon's focus shifted away from Special Forces in favor of large conventional units in Central and Eastern Europe. Given their language and cultural proficiency and skills, the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Groups found themselves working with the Native American population.<sup>26</sup> While providing engineer and medical support to the various Native American tribes was meaningful and noble, it was not the original intent of the Special Forces.

Although the Green Berets faced some unfavorable budget and organizational restrictions following Vietnam, the groups gained experience in another one of their primary missions: direct action. While SF teams maintained their largely successful foreign internal defense and unconventional warfare operations in El Salvador, Honduras, and Colombia, the groups were called upon in Operation Just Cause.<sup>27</sup> As tensions rose between the United States and Manuel

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<sup>25</sup> Kelly, Francis J. "Vietnam Studies: U.S. Army Special Forces 1961-1971." U.S. Army Special Forces, 1961-1971 - U.S. Army Center of Military History. Department of the Army.

<sup>26</sup> Special Forces History." Special Forces Association. JFK Special Warfare Center.

<sup>27</sup> Yates, Lawrence A. "The U.S. Military Intervention in Panama: Origins, Planning, and Crisis Management June 1987-December 1989." Center of Military History / Library of Congress.

Noriega, the corrupt dictator of Panama, the SF teams were tremendous assets because of their experience in the Central and South America during the early 1980s. As the invasion commenced during the dark hours of December 20<sup>th</sup>, 1989 with the airborne insertion of the 75<sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment and 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division, the 7<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group became an integral part of the larger operation.<sup>28</sup>

According to the USASOC History Office at Fort Bragg, elements of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> battalions of the 7<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group, already stationed in Panama, seized the Pacora River Bridge in the eastern part of the country. Twenty-four Green Berets, infiltrated by Black Hawk helicopters, landed as a Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) quick reaction force (QRF) was responding to the main invasion. These PDF elements were posted at nearby Fort Cimarron and were attempting to thwart American operations at Tocumen Army Airfield, Omar Trujillos International Airport, and Las Tinajitas Army base.<sup>29</sup> Armed with only small arms, these Green Berets initiated their hasty ambush with 66mm light antitank weapons (LAWs). By destroying the lead truck, the Green Berets were able to halt the convoy and engage the other vehicles with AT-4s and machine guns. In addition, MAJ Kevin M. Higgins, the mission commander, called for fire from an encircling AC-130 Spectre gunship. The aircraft engaged the remaining enemy targets with pinpoint accuracy. Recognizing their hopeless endeavor, the remaining Panamanian soldiers dismounted their trucks and surrendered to the Green Berets. The Special Forces team suffered no casualties, while the enemy forces lost five trucks, four KIA, one wounded, and

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<sup>28</sup> Yates, Lawrence A. "The U.S. Military Intervention in Panama: Origins, Planning, and Crisis Management June 1987-December 1989." Center of Military History / Library of Congress.

<sup>29</sup> Krivdo, Michael E. "'Hold That Bridge,' the 7th Special Forces Group and Operation JUST CAUSE." [www.army.mil](http://www.army.mil). USASOC History Office.

seventeen captured.<sup>30</sup> The fast and lethal actions of the 7<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group enabled the conventional units to carry on with their assigned missions.

During the Persian Gulf War during the early 1990s, more specifically Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, the 5<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group was pivotal in procuring crucial enemy intelligence.<sup>31</sup> Again, the Green Berets expanded their knowledge and experience in the realm of Special Reconnaissance. The SF teams deployed with their Arab allies to the Iraq-Kuwait border where they established forward observations bases, patrolled the border, and decisively engaged Iraqi forces.<sup>32</sup> Their long-range reconnaissance efforts and Arab liaison operations were so valuable that General Norman Schwarzkopf described the SF teams as the eyes and ears of the conventional force that held the coalition together. These CENTCOM operations, in addition to the SF groups' missions throughout the Horn of Africa, helped establish a foothold in the region's strong Islamic culture and practices, which would later pay dividends in the Global War on Terror.

### **The Horse Soldiers: U.S. Invasion of Afghanistan**

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the 5<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group was once again called upon. With the rapid U.S. response, the SF teams had received their orders and left Fort Campbell, KY on October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2001 to advise and assist the commanders of the Northern Alliance in unconventional warfare in order to render the area unsafe for Taliban activity. As a

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<sup>30</sup> Krivdo, Michael E. "“Hold That Bridge,” the 7th Special Forces Group and Operation JUST CAUSE.” [www.army.mil](http://www.army.mil). USASOC History Office

<sup>31</sup> Johnson, William M. “U.S. Army Special Forces in Desert Shield/Desert Storm.” U.S. Army Command and General Staff College.

<sup>32</sup> Special Forces History.” Special Forces Association. JFK Special Warfare Center.

result, Task Force Dagger was formed around the CIA's Special Activities Division (SAD), the 5<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group, the 160<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR), and Air Force combat controllers.<sup>33</sup> Seven operatives of the SAD team were the first element to be inserted into Afghanistan. Their mission was to buy support from the Northern Alliance generals so the ODA teams could immediately begin their unconventional warfare operations upon arrival.

On October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2001 ODA 555 and 595 were infiltrated, via MH-47E Chinook helicopters, into Afghanistan from the Karshi-Khanabad Air Base in Uzbekistan. After the treacherous flight over the Hindu Kush mountain range, ODA 555 was inserted 20 miles north of Kabul where they fought with the ethnic Tajik fighters, led by warlord Fahim Khan.<sup>34</sup> ODA 595, led by CPT Mark Nutsch and with which the Hollywood film "12 Strong" is based, inserted 100 miles from the city of Mazar-e-Sharif. They fought with the infamous General Abdul Rashid Dostum and his army of ethnic Uzbeks.<sup>35</sup> Being a former Communist general during the Soviet occupation of the country, ODA 595 was hesitant in trusting the future vice president of Afghanistan. In addition, the ODAs were so extremely isolated, even from each other. This meant extraction and support was hours, if not days away. As if unpredictable allies and limited support weren't enough, General Dostum's army consisted of 1,500 infantry and 1,500

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<sup>33</sup> Correll, Diana Stancy. "How the 'Horse Soldiers' Helped Liberate Afghanistan from the Taliban 18 Years Ago." *Military Times*.

<sup>34</sup> Myers, Meghann. "Green Berets Who Liberated Afghanistan from the Taliban Tell Their Stories in New Documentary." *Army Times*.

<sup>35</sup> "Interviews - U.S. Special Forces ODA 595 | Campaign Against Terror | FRONTLINE." PBS. Public Broadcasting Service. Accessed April 4, 2020.

horseback cavalymen, while the Taliban had access to Soviet-era tanks, armored personnel carriers, mortars, artillery, RPGs, and machine guns.<sup>36</sup>

Despite what seemed to be an unfair fight, ODA 595 used coordinated B-52 bombing strikes to soften the defenses of Bishqab, a heavily fortified Taliban village, to clear a path for the mounted Northern Alliance force. Just days later, on October 22<sup>nd</sup>, ODA 595 attacked and defeated the Taliban hold-out of Cobaki, making them one step closer to Mazar-e-Sharif. Mazar-e-Sharif, the capital of the Balkh province and fourth largest city in Afghanistan, is strategically located in the Darya Suf Valley and less than 40 miles south of the border with Uzbekistan.<sup>37</sup> Located only 180 miles north of Kabul, the city was historically known as the gateway to the capital of the country. In addition, Mazar-e-Sharif possessed a key airfield in which the U.S. could increase their supplies and operations into the country. On November 10<sup>th</sup>, after defeating a string of Taliban villages on the way towards Mazar-e-Sharif, ODA 595 and its Northern Alliance allies liberated the city and eradicated the Taliban and Al-Qaeda insurgents. In just two months from the 9/11 attacks, Task Force Dagger had defeated the Taliban and Al-Qaeda forces in the northern part of the country.<sup>38</sup> By November 18<sup>th</sup>, ten ODAs from 5<sup>th</sup> SFG were operating with various elements of the Northern Alliance to take back more parts of the country. According to CNN and PBS interviews with the men of ODA 595 years later, the successfulness of the operation was due to the application of the Northern Alliance. Instead of occupying and

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<sup>36</sup> Correll, Diana Stancy. "How the 'Horse Soldiers' Helped Liberate Afghanistan from the Taliban 18 Years Ago." Military Times.

<sup>37</sup> Zimmerman, Dwight Jon. "21st Century Horse Soldiers - Special Operations Forces and Operation Enduring Freedom - The First 49 Days." Defense Media Network.

<sup>38</sup> Correll, Diana Stancy. "How the 'Horse Soldiers' Helped Liberate Afghanistan from the Taliban 18 Years Ago." Military Times.



controlling the force, the ODAs assisted and enabled their Afghan allies to execute their own internal plan.<sup>39</sup>

## **The Global War on Terror**

According to the Special Forces Association, Operation Enduring Freedom continued with subsequent rotations from all of the SFGs, with the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Groups forming the core of the task force. Following the initial invasion of the country, advising and training the Afghan National Army and local police became the primary mission of the SFGs. In addition, certain SF teams were being used in direct action operations, in the search for high-profile Taliban and Al-Qaeda targets. Concurrent to SF operations in Afghanistan was OEF-Philippines.<sup>40</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> SFG, whose area of expertise was PACOM, was tasked with training the Armed Forces of the Philippines to locate and destroy the Al-Qaeda elements on the island.

Concurrent with OEF was Operation Iraqi Freedom. The invasion of Iraq on March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2003 began the second major American campaign against terrorism. While conventional U.S. forces pushed further into Iraqi territory, the 5<sup>th</sup> SFG (Task Force Dagger) was focused on locating potential SCUD missile sites to prevent their use against coalition forces. Operating as Task Force Viking, the 10<sup>th</sup> SFG supplemented Kurdish militias to fix Iraqi conventional forces along the Green Line, a political boundary in northern Iraq, to prevent reinforcements from aiding Saddam Hussein's army in Baghdad.<sup>41</sup> Similar to the tactics used by 5<sup>th</sup> SFG used in the

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<sup>39</sup> Myers, Meghann. "Green Berets Who Liberated Afghanistan from the Taliban Tell Their Stories in New Documentary." Army Times.

<sup>40</sup> Special Forces History." Special Forces Association. JFK Special Warfare Center.

<sup>41</sup> Special Forces History." Special Forces Association. JFK Special Warfare Center.

early days of Afghanistan, 10<sup>th</sup> Group was able to drive Iraqi elements from the cities of Mosul and Irbil to allow freedom of maneuver for their partner forces. Following the end of major combat operations in Iraq, 5<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> SFGs have rebuilt and trained Iraqi army and police forces in order to defend from a possible terrorist resurgence.

As American military intervention escalated in the Syrian Civil War, following the height of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the need for Special Forces rose once again. With a focus on direct action and counterinsurgency, the Green Berets found themselves conducting an increased number of raids on high-value individuals within the ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) ranks, on top of their normal Syrian Democratic Forces advise and assist mission. Today, Special Forces operations are still being conducted within the country and region in order to support the Democratic Forces and Syrian Kurdish population.

### **Conclusion: The Growing Need for SF**

As the Green Berets continue to support Operations Inherent Resolve (OIR) and Freedom's Sentinel (OFS) in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, the various SFGs are training within their respective areas of responsibility (AOR) for a potential near-peer adversary. For example, 1<sup>st</sup> SFG has begun conducting mil-to-mil operations with partner nations, such as the Philippines, Mongolia, and Sri Lanka.<sup>42</sup> In addition to training against a near-peer enemy, these military exercises help alleviate the need for immediate U.S. support in the event of a host-nation crisis. The Special Forces Qualification Course, or 'Q-Course' for short, is undergoing large changes to its curriculum in order to facilitate the Pentagon's new strategy of competing for influence and

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<sup>42</sup> Rempfer, Kyle. "Looking for Friends: Green Berets Are Busy in China's Backyard." Army Times.

allies in the Indo-Pacific and Africa.<sup>43</sup> The Green Beret's foreign internal defense mission is a vital segment in accomplishing this National Defense Strategy.

Therefore, as the Special Forces Groups continue to evolve to better serve the needs of the Army and United States, it is important for American political and military leaders to study the unit's history. By examining the force's combat experience, commanders can incorporate the teams' special training and capabilities into the Military Decision-Making Process (MDMP), which they can then integrate into their planning efforts. By learning from the past, leaders can see what breeds success and what can cause failure. When they find themselves in situations similar to Vietnam, Iraq, or Afghanistan, they can use those past experiences to work within their areas of responsibility. Not only is the study of the Green Berets important to the leaders of the nation, but also for the American public. Tremendous sacrifices have been made by the elite members of this distinguished unit that must not be forgotten. By studying the operations and actions of these heroic teams, their memories are being carried-on, inspiring the next generation of silent professionals. This paper is dedicated to them.

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<sup>43</sup> Rempfer, Kyle. "Army Spec Ops Training Changes for Future Fights." Army Times.

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