

CRS Report for Congress

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Special Operations Forces in Operation Enduring Freedom: Background and Issues for Congress

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Summary

Special Operations Forces (SOF) are elite, specialized military units that can be inserted behind the lines to conduct a variety of operations, many of them clandestine. U.S. and allied SOF units have played a significant role in U.S. military operations in Afghanistan and other countries as part of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), the U.S. military campaign against terrorists. This short report provides background information and issues for Congress on U.S. SOF forces and their role in OEF. It will be updated as events warrant.

Background

Overview. Special Operations Forces (SOF) are elite military units that, in the words of DoD, are characterized by “combinations of specialized personnel, equipment, training and tactics that go beyond the routine capabilities of conventional military forces.” SOF units can be inserted behind the lines through land, sea, or air to conduct a variety of operations, many of them clandestine. SOF personnel are carefully selected and undergo highly demanding training. U.S. SOF units total roughly 45,000 active and reserve personnel in the Army, Navy, and Air Force, or about 2% of all U.S. active and reserve forces. The U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) – a unified command – oversees the training, doctrine, and equipping of all U.S. SOF units.

U.S. SOF Operations in OEF. U.S. SOF units have played a significant role in U.S. military counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan and other countries. For the first several weeks of the war in Afghanistan, U.S. SOF units accounted for most of the U.S. military ground-forces presence in the country. At various points in the war, U.S. SOF units worked closely with leaders of local anti-Taliban/anti-al Qaeda forces, designated targets for U.S. bombers and strike aircraft armed with precision-guided munitions (PGMs), led or participated in joint U.S.-Afghan ground-attack operations against Taliban and al Qaeda forces (including some well-publicized horse-mounted cavalry charges), engaged in unilateral combat operations against Taliban and al Qaeda forces, interdicted Taliban and al Qaeda convoys, and searched caves and tunnels for Taliban and al Qaeda fighters, equipment, supplies, and intelligence. U.S. SOF forces were joined in many of

these operations by SOF forces from Britain and (particularly in later stages) other allied countries, such as Canada, Australia, and Germany. On April 25, 2002, the *Washington Post* reported that U.S. SOF forces were conducting clandestine operations in Pakistan to seek out and attack Taliban and al Qaeda fighters who fled there from Afghanistan.

The combination of U.S. SOF forces on the ground and U.S. aircraft armed with PGMs flying overhead has been characterized by many observers as a creative and revolutionary form of warfare and given much of the credit for the rapid collapse of Taliban control over Afghanistan. DoD leaders and some other observers view the SOF-aircraft combination, and the effective use of U.S. SOF forces in general, as a validation of proposals for carrying out a transformation of U.S. military forces.¹

U.S. SOF forces are also being used as part of the U.S. counterterrorist effort in other countries, such as the Philippines. U.S. SOF activities in these other countries include training local forces in counterinsurgency techniques – a role that U.S. SOF forces have traditionally played in many countries over the years.

Funding. USSOCOM is the only unified command in the Department of Defense (DoD) that is directly responsible for determining its own force structure and related material and funding requirements. The dedicated FY2002 budget for USSOCOM is \$3.97 billion, or a bit more than 1% of the total FY2002 defense budget. This figure includes some additional funds for USSOCOM that were included in the Emergency Terrorism Response supplemental appropriations act (P.L. 107-38 of September 18, 2001). It does not, however, include additional FY2002 funds for USSOCOM that are requested as part of the FY2002 emergency supplemental appropriations bill that was submitted to Congress in March 2002.

For FY2003, the Administration is requesting \$5.26 billion for USSOCOM – a 32.5% increase over the FY2002 figure above. This FY2003 requested figure does not include additional FY2003 funding requested for USSOCOM in the Defense Emergency Response Fund (DERF) – a “second” part of the FY2003 defense budget request totaling roughly \$20 billion that was not rolled into the totals shown for the “regular” part of the FY2003 defense budget request. Funds for USSOCOM requested in the DERF include, among other things, \$60 million to convert two C-130H cargo planes into AC-130U gunships. Much of the increase in funding requested for USSOCOM for FY2003 is for increased counterterrorism activities.

SOF Capabilities. Special operations forces and predecessor U.S. units have played a role in most U.S. conflicts. Congress noted in 1985 that SOF provide the United

¹ For more on transformation of U.S. military forces, see CRS Report RS20787, *Army Transformation and Modernization: Overview and Issues for Congress*, by Edward F. Bruner; CRS Report RS20859, *Air Force Transformation: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Christopher Bolkcom; and CRS Report RS20851, *Naval Transformation: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke.

States an “immediate and primary capability to respond to terrorism.”² Specific U.S. SOF capabilities include the following:

- **Direct Action.** Short-duration, small-scale offensive actions such as raids, ambushes, hostage rescues, and “surgical strikes.”
- **Strategic (Special) Reconnaissance.** Clandestine operations in hostile territory to gain significant information.
- **Unconventional Warfare.** Advising and supporting indigenous insurgent and resistance groups operating in the territory of a common enemy. (For example, the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan.)
- **Foreign Internal Defense.** Assisting host nation military capabilities to forestall or defeat insurgent activities.
- **Civil Affairs.** Promoting civil-military cooperation between U.S. military forces and the foreign governments and populations within their area of operations.
- **Psychological Operations.** Influencing the attitudes and behavior of relevant populations to assist in accomplishing security missions.
- **Counterterrorism (CT).** Operations conducted by Special Mission Units to resolve or preempt terrorist incidents abroad and activities to assist or work with other CT-designated agencies in the United States.
- **Humanitarian Assistance.** Providing various rudimentary services to foreign populations in adverse circumstances.
- **Theater Search and Rescue.** Finding and recovering pilots and air crews downed on land or sea outside the United States, sometimes in combat or clandestine situations.
- Such other activities as may be specified by the President or Secretary of Defense.

Command Structures. Congress in 1986 expressed particular concern for the status of SOF within overall U.S. defense planning and consequently legislated measures to strengthen their position. These actions included the establishment of USSOCOM as a new unified command. The Commander in Chief of USSOCOM, or CINCSOC, is a four-star General or Admiral who may be from any service. USSOCOM is headquartered at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, FL. CINCSOC reports directly to the Secretary of Defense, although an Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) provides immediate civilian oversight over many of USSOCOM activities. Although CINCSOC may command SOF operations anywhere – when specifically directed by the Secretary of Defense – it is more normal for CINCSOC to organize and provide SOF to fight under the command of a regional CINC.

U.S. military operations in and around Afghanistan are conducted by the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM). CINCCENT, whose primary headquarters coincidentally is also at MacDill AFB, has a permanent SOF subordinate command. This command, known as SOCCENT, would plan for, coordinate use of, and command all SOF forces provided to CINCCENT by CINCSOC. Most SOF units have trained with SOF units from other services.

² Current authorities and definitions for SOF are found in Title 10, United States Code, Section 167. The statement of SOF importance to counter-terrorism was made in P.L. 99-145; 99 Stat.760.

Army Special Operations Forces.³ U.S. Army SOF (ARSOF) include 26,000 soldiers from the Active Army, National Guard, and Army Reserve who are organized into Special Forces units, Rangers units, special operations aviation units, civil affairs units, psychological operations units, and special operations support units. ARSOF Headquarters and other resources, such as the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, are located at Fort Bragg, NC.

Five active Special Forces Groups (Airborne) are stationed at Fort Bragg and at Fort Lewis, WA, Fort Campbell, KY, and Fort Carson, CO. Special Forces soldiers – also known as the Green Berets – are trained in various skills, including foreign languages, that allow teams to operate independently in designated regions of the world. Two Army National Guard SF groups are headquartered in Utah and Alabama. An elite light infantry, airborne combat force, the 75th Ranger Regiment, is at Fort Benning, GA.

Army special operations aviation units feature pilots trained to fly the most sophisticated Army rotary-wing aircraft in the toughest environments, day or night. The 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne) is stationed at Fort Campbell, KY. The regiment's aircraft include MH47-E, MH60-L, and MH-6M helicopters.

The most frequently deployed SOF assets are civil affairs (CA) units, which provide experts in every area of civil government to help insure that the administration of civilian affairs in the theater poses a minimum hindrance to U.S. military objectives. The 96th Civil Affairs Battalion (Airborne) is the only active CA unit; all other CA units reside in four Army Reserve Civil Affairs Commands located in Pensacola, FL, Mountain View, CA, Riverdale, MD, and Bronx, NY. Psychological operations units provide communications to large foreign audiences through mass media. Soldiers must have technical and language skills paired with knowledge of regional cultures. The 4th Psychological Operations Group (Airborne) is stationed at Fort Bragg, and two Army Reserve groups are located in Cleveland, OH, and at Moffett Federal Airfield, CA.

Finally, Fort Bragg is also home to specialized supporting units and Special Mission Units that support a variety of ARSOF and joint missions. Notable among these is the 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment-Delta, often called Delta Force, which reportedly is based at Fort Bragg and trained specifically for counterterrorism missions, including hostage-rescue and snatch-and-grab operations.

Air Force Special Operations Forces.⁴ The Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) includes about 10,000 active and reserve personnel, of which about 22% are stationed overseas. AFSOC is headquartered at Hurlburt Field, FL, which is also the home of most of AFSOC's active units, including the 16th Special Operations Wing, the 720th Special Tactics Group, the 18th Flight Test Squadron, and the U.S. Air Force Special Operations School. The 352nd Special Operations Group is at RAF Mildenhall, England, and the 353rd Special Operations Group, is at Kadena Air Base, Japan.

³ Information about current Army SOF was taken from an article by Lieutenant General Bryan (Doug) Brown, "U.S. Army Special Operations: Focusing on People – Humans are More Important than Hardware," *Army*, October 2001, pp. 157-162.

⁴ For additional information on Air Force SOF units, see Wall, Robert. Conflict Could Test Special Ops Improvements. *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, October 1, 2001: 30.

Reserve AFSOC components include the 193rd Special Operations Wing, Air National Guard stationed at Harrisburg, PA, the 280th Combat Communications Squadron, Air National Guard stationed at Dothan, AL., and the 919th Special Operations Wing, Air Force Reserve stationed at Duke Field, FL.

AFSOC units are trained for direct action, unconventional warfare, special reconnaissance, foreign internal defense, and counter terrorism operations. AFSOC's Core Tasks are grouped into four mission areas: Forward Presence and Engagement, Information Operations, Precision Employment/Strike, and Special Operations Forces Mobility. AFSOC personnel deploy with specially trained and equipped forces from each service. The U.S. Special Operations School provides special operations-related education to personnel from all branches of DoD, other government agencies, and allied nations.

AFSOC's three active-duty flying units are composed of more than 100 fixed and rotary-wing aircraft, many of them specialized variants of the basic C-130 cargo airplane, that are organized in composite wings and groups. These aircraft include:

- MC-130E Combat Talon I and MC-130H Combat Talon II aircraft, which infiltrate, resupply, and exfiltrate U.S. and allied SOF units during day and night and in adverse weather.
- MC-130P Combat Shadow aircraft, which fly clandestine (low-visibility), low-level, single- or multi-aircraft missions, primarily at night, penetrating politically sensitive or hostile territory to refuel other aircraft. MC-130Ps can also deliver SOF and equipment by airdrop.
- AC-130H Spectre and AC-130U Spooky gunship aircraft, which conduct close air support, interdiction and force protection operations.
- EC-130 Commando Solo aircraft, which conduct psychological operations and civil affairs broadcasts in radio, TV, and military communications bands. Secondary missions include information warfare, electronic attack, and some intelligence gathering.
- MH-53J/M Pave Low helicopters, which conduct low-level, long-range, undetected penetration into denied areas, at day or night, and in adverse weather, for infiltration, exfiltration, and resupply of SOF.

The V-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft, a Marine Corps priority, is also being developed for AFSOC. If procured, SOF CV-22s will conduct long-range vertical takeoff and landing infiltration, exfiltration and resupply missions. The Osprey may provide increased speed and range, low-altitude adverse-weather penetration, a state-of-the-art electronic warfare suite, and maneuverability to perform missions that would normally require fixed wing and rotor wing aircraft.

Naval Special Operations Forces.⁵ The naval special warfare command is located in Coronado, CA, and includes about 4,950 active and almost 1,200 reserve

⁵ Sources for information in this section: Waterborne Commandos. *Armed Forces Journal International*, January 2000: 31-33 (an interview with Rear Admiral Eric T. Olson, Commander, U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command); Gourley, Scott R. Setting The Seal On Maritime Special Operations Forces. *Jane's Navy International*, June 1999: 18-21, 23. See also, Worthington, George. Whither Naval Special Warfare? *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, January 1996: 61-63; Nolan, Mary I. Warriors Who Come From the Sea. *Sea Power*, February 1995: 38-40; Waller, Douglas C. Hell Week. *Newsweek*, January 10, 1994: 28-33.

personnel. Navy special warfare forces are organized into SEAL teams (SEAL stands for Sea, Air and Land), Special Boat Units (SBUs), and SEAL Delivery Vehicle (SDV) teams based on both coasts. The 4,950 active personnel include about 2,500 SEAL commandos and SEAL-qualified medical corpsmen, about 500 combatant craft crewmen, about 1,500 fleet support technicians, and about 200 SDV personnel.

SEAL teams are maritime multipurpose combat forces trained and equipped to perform various SOF missions. SEAL commandos are considered the best-trained combat swimmers in the world, and can be deployed covertly from submarines or from sea-based aircraft. Although Afghanistan is a landlocked country hundreds of miles from shore, SEALs appear to have formed a significant portion of the total U.S. SOF presence in Afghanistan. The Navy testified in March 2002 that a Navy SEAL – an admiral – participated in the 800-man cavalry charge backed by four Navy F-14 strike-fighters that defeated Taliban/al Qaeda forces at the city of Mazar-e-Sharif.

The Marine Corps has no dedicated SOF units, but Marine Expeditionary Units (MEUs), which contain roughly 2,000 Marines, can receive training in specific special operations prior to deploying, in which case they are certified as special-operations-capable (SOC) for the duration of their deployment and are referred to as MEU(SOC)s.

In late 2001, the aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk deployed to the Northern Arabian Sea with only a partial complement of fixed-wing aircraft, where it reportedly was used as a launch and recovery platform for helicopter-borne SOF units.

Issues for Congress

Potential issues for Congress regarding U.S. SOF include the following:

Funding, Equipment, and Organization. Have U.S. SOF units been funded adequately in recent years? Is the Administration proposing the right amount of funding for USSOCOM in FY2003? Is the size and organization of U.S. special forces appropriate in light of the campaign against terrorism and other 21st-Century security challenges? Should U.S. SOF units be expanded so as to make up a greater share of U.S. ground forces, and if so, how difficult might this be, given the very high standards of selection and training for U.S. SOF personnel?

SOF and Defense Transformation. What does the experience with U.S. SOF in Afghanistan reveal concerning possible directions for transforming U.S. defense forces, particularly ground forces? To what extent are the lessons of the war in Afghanistan concerning U.S. SOF applicable to the current war on terrorism in other countries, or to other potential conflicts in the future?

SOF Operational Tempo. With significant numbers of U.S. SOF personnel currently deployed to Afghanistan, the Philippines, and other countries, some observers are concerned that U.S. SOF forces are being stretched too thin, and that the current stress on the U.S. SOF force would be exacerbated if the United States were to deploy SOF forces as part of an additional military operation in Iraq or some other country. What is the current operational tempo of U.S. SOF forces? What might be the potential impact on the readiness and retention of U.S. SOF forces of maintaining current levels of SOF activity over the longer run? How easily could U.S. SOF forces take on a significant additional activity in Iraq or some other country?