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Defense Primer: U.S. Special Operations Forces

Overview

U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) are those active duty and reserve component forces of the military services designated by the Secretary of Defense, who is using “Secretary of War” as a “secondary title” under Executive Order 14347, dated September 5, 2025. These forces are 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. SOF often conducts special operations in hostile, politically, and/or diplomatically sensitive environments, and are characterized by one or more of the following: time-sensitivity, clandestine or covert in 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

- direct action,
- special reconnaissance,
- unconventional warfare,
- foreign internal defense,
- civil affairs operations,
- counterterrorism,
- military information support operations,
- counter-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction,
- security force assistance,
- counterinsurgency,
- hostage rescue and recovery, and
- foreign humanitarian assistance.

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 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 parachute 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 and budgeting, enacted 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 for Fiscal Year 1987 (NDAA; P.L. 99-661), established an Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (ASD [SOLIC]) and a new four-star command to prepare SOF to carry out assigned missions and, if directed by the President or Secretary of Defense (Secretary of War), to plan for and conduct special operations.

Assistant Secretary of Defense (War) for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict

The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict (ASD [SOLIC]), who is using Assistant Secretary of War for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict (ASW [SOLIC]) as a secondary title under E.O. 14347, is the principal civilian advisor to the Secretary of Defense (Secretary of War) on special operations and low-intensity conflict matters.

The ASD (SOLIC) has, as their principal duty, overall supervision (to include oversight of policy and resources) of special operations and low-intensity conflict activities. The ASD (SOLIC) falls under and reports to the Under Secretary of Defense (War) for Policy (USD [P]). Congress, wanting ASD (SOLIC) to exercise greater oversight of USSOCOM, enacted Section 922 of the FY2017 NDAA (P.L. 114-328) to facilitate and resource ASD (SOLIC), as originally intended, to assume Service Secretary-like authorities.

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 responsible for organizing, training, and equipping all U.S. SOF units. Headquarters, USSOCOM consists of around 2,500 military and civilian personnel, and overall, the command has approximately 70,000 personnel assigned to its headquarters, its service components, and sub-unified commands. The USSOCOM commander is a four-star general officer from any Service who reports directly to the Secretary of Defense (Secretary of War). After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, USSOCOM’s responsibilities were expanded in the 2004 Unified Command Plan (UCP), assigning USSOCOM responsibility for coordinating the Department of Defense (Department of War) 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 36,000 personnel, USASOC consists of Special Forces (Green Berets), Rangers, Special Operations Aviators, Civil Affairs Soldiers, Psychological Operations soldiers, training cadre, and sustainment soldiers. USASOC has three major subordinate commands: the 1st Special Forces Command (Airborne), U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, and the U.S. Army Special Operations Aviation Command.

Naval Special Warfare Command (NSWC)

Established on April 16, 1987, and based in Coronado, CA, the NSWC is responsible for organizing training and equipping five Naval Special Warfare Groups (NSWG), the Naval Special Warfare Center (NSWC), and the Development Group (DEVGRU). With approximately 11,000 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, and intelligence 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 five Active Duty Special Operations Wings (SOW)—the 24th SOW was disestablished in May 2025—three Reserve Component Special Operations Wings, and the Air Force Special Operations Air Warfare Center. AFSOC consists of about 17,000 personnel comprising Special Operations Aviators, Special Tactics Airmen—including Combat Controllers, Pararescue Airmen, Special Operations Weather Airmen, Tactical Air Control Party Airmen, and support Air Commandos, who provide a wide variety of mission support services.

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 3,500 personnel consist of Critical Skills Operators, Special Operations Officers, Special Operations Capability Specialists, Special Operations Combat Services Specialists, and Special Operations Independent Duty Corpsmen.

Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC)

Established October 22, 1980, JSOC is a sub-unified command of USSOCOM. JSOC prepares assigned, attached, and augmented units to conduct special operations against threats to the homeland and U.S. overseas interests.

Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs)

U.S. SOF frequently operates with conventional forces of the Joint Force. SOF theater-level command and control

responsibilities are vested in Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs), which 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. Current TSOCs include the following:

- Special Operations Command South (SOC SOUTH), 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), Camp Humphreys, Republic of Korea; supports U.S. Forces Korea (USFK); and
- 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.

Title 10, U.S. Code, Section 138 – Assistant Secretaries of Defense.

CRS Products

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

Other Resources

United States Special Operations Command, *USSOCOM Fact Book 2025*, at <https://www.socom.mil/FactBook/2025%20Fact%20Book.pdf>.

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