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Defense Primer: U.S. Special Operations Forces

Overview

U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) are active duty and reserve components of the military services that are designated as SOF by the Secretary of Defense, who is using "Secretary of War" as a "secondary title" under Executive Order (EO) 14347, dated September 5, 2025. SOF are 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 conduct special operations in hostile, politically, and/or diplomatically sensitive environments. Special operations are characterized by one or more of the following: being time-sensitive and/or clandestine, occurring in low-visibility conditions, happening with or through indigenous forces, requiring regional orientation and cultural expertise, or carrying 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 resulting in a low selection rate. After selection, they receive mission-specific training to instill proficiency in a variety of special operations skills. 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 (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 1987 (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, to plan for and conduct special operations.

Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (ASD (SOLIC))

The ASD (SOLIC), who is using Assistant Secretary of War for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict as a secondary title under EO 14347, is the principal civilian advisor to the Secretary of Defense 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 for Policy. Congress, wanting the ASD (SOLIC) to exercise greater oversight of U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), enacted Section 922 of the FY2017 NDAA (P.L. 114-328) to strengthen and provide resources for the 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. As of 2026, Headquarters, USSOCOM, consists of around 3,500 military and civilian personnel, and overall, the command has approximately 70,000 personnel assigned to its headquarters, service components, and sub-unified commands. The USSOCOM commander is a four-star general from any service who reports directly to the Secretary of Defense. After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, USSOCOM's responsibilities were expanded in the 2004 Unified Command Plan, assigning USSOCOM responsibility for coordinating Department of Defense plans against global terrorism and conducting global operations as directed. USSOCOM has also been assigned the roles coordinating authority over countering violent extremist operations and countering weapons of mass destruction 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 active duty 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 April 16, 1987, and based in Coronado, CA, the NSWC is responsible for organizing training and equipping five Naval Special Warfare Groups, the Naval Special Warfare Center, and the Development Group (DEVGRU). With approximately 11,000 personnel, the NSWC consists of Sea, Air, Land operators (SEALs), Special Warfare Combatant-Craft Crewmen (SWCC), and Combat Support and Combat Service Support personnel.

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 Component Special Operations Wings (SOWs), three Reserve Component SOWs, and the Air Force Special Operations Air Warfare Center. AFSOC consists of about 17,000 personnel, comprising Special Operations Aviators, Air Commandos, Special Tactics Airmen, and Support Air Commandos.

Marine 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 Group, and the Marine Raider Training School. MARSOC's almost 3,500 personnel consist of Marine Raiders, Marine Raider Officers, Special Operations Independent Duty Corpsmen, Special Operations Capabilities Specialists, and Combat Service Support Specialists.

Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs)

U.S. SOF frequently operate with conventional forces of the Joint Force. SOF theater-level command and control (C2) responsibilities are vested in TSOCs. TSOCs are special operational headquarters elements designed to support the National Command Authority, the Joint Force, and the Global Combatant Commands' special operations logistics, planning, and operational command and control requirements. Following are the current TSOCs.

Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC)

Established October 22, 1980, JSOC is a sub-unified command of USSOCOM. JSOC "prepares assigned, attached and augmented forces and, when directed, conducts special operations against threats to protect the homeland and U.S. interests abroad."

Special Reconnaissance and Enabling Command (SREC)

SREC is responsible for

> [s]ynchronizing, integrating, and enabling special reconnaissance (SR) capabilities across the joint force. It serves as a [C2] body that focuses on leveraging and optimizing SR assets, which include technical, environmental, and human intelligence collection, to support special operations. The command works to improve the network architecture, data sharing, and collaboration between special reconnaissance units and other elements of the joint force to enhance overall mission effectiveness.

Regionally Aligned TSOCs

There are seven regionally aligned TSOCs:

- Special Operations Command South (SOCSOUTH), Homestead Air Reserve 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 H. M. 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 Space Force Base, CO, supports U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM).

Recent Unit Inactivations and Establishments

- On September 29, 2026, the Army inactivated the 8th Psychological Operations Group (Airborne) at Fort Bragg, NC. Reportedly, "'inactivation' signifies that the group is being decommissioned for an indeterminate period during some form of restructuring and reorganization — not necessarily that it is being deactivated or dissolved."
- On October 21, 2026, the Secretary of Defense directed "the establishment of a new Air National Guard Special Tactics Squadron in Florida." There was no activation date provided for this unit, which is planned to be stationed at Hurlburt Field and MacDill Air Force Base.

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