

*An Unconventional Look at Training and Education to Improve
Conventional and SOF Integration*

by

WILLIAM J. CARTY
MAJ USA

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Recent operations employing Special Operations Forces (SOF) and Conventional Forces, which relied heavily on increased cooperation and mutual support, make it necessary that JFCOM, USSOCOM and the Services change their current planning and training frameworks to better reflect present and future operational employment scenarios. Previously, joint SOF and Conventional Forces planners properly focused on deconfliction of operations when needed, but combat operations in OIF and OEF demonstrated that there was also a great degree of SOF/Conventional Force integration at all levels as well.

The capstone manual for employment of SOF is Joint Pub 3-05, Doctrine for Special Operations Forces. It serves as the overarching reference for application of SOF capabilities, and provides detailed information on SOF command and control, employment, and support at the operational level. As such, Service and subordinate manuals refer to JP 3-05 when developing added guidance for SOF employment, as well as being the reference for Theater and JTF commanders and below for SOF implementation. The newest edition of JP 3-05, released 17 December 2003, has gone a long way in addressing doctrinal shortcomings in the previous version, but areas in need of greater emphasis still remain, as well as means of implementation for planning and training considerations in the joint and Service communities.

Joint Pub 3-05 states that, among other things, SOF missions are conducted independently or in conjunction with operations of Conventional Forces. Also on this topic, JP 3-05 states Special Operations can be conducted in support of a conventional

force's tactical objectives when doing so will be critical to the achievement of strategic or operational objectives by that conventional force.

Another change to the role of SOF in conflicts is the direct result of September 11th. USSOCOM transformed from a supporting command to a supporting and supported command, with the Commander, USSOCOM now having full responsibility for the conduct of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). Within this context in JP 3-05, Special Operations are conducted as an independent campaign, as an overarching strategy incorporating the geographical combatant commander's individual theater campaign plan. However, doctrine for conventional force support to SOF as conducted in Afghanistan is lacking or non-existent.

Throughout OEF, assets from Conventional Forces that SOF would have traditionally played a supporting role to regularly supported SOF. Army forces were used to secure SOF bases¹, and a US Navy aircraft carrier served in direct support of SOF operations². Special Forces and Air Force SOF employed strategic and operational-level air assets in tactical roles. Rangers parachuted into objective Rhino long before the Marines occupied it as their base, and Army Special Forces seized the US Embassy and used an Explosive Ordnance Disposal detachment attached from the Army 10th Mountain Division to clear it prior to turning it over to the Marines³.

Lessons learned from SOF actions in Afghanistan were applied in Iraq, parceling out large portions of the Area of Operations (AO) to SOF forces, but this time in support of the Combined Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC). Western Iraq fell almost exclusively to SOF, with SOF in the north again working with indigenous forces to set

¹ (Infantry Conference 2003)

² (Goodman 2001)

³ (Moore 2003; pp. 28, 253)

conditions for introduction of Conventional Forces. In the north, SOF and Peshmerga fighters routed terrorists and Iraqi forces alike, and went on to secure an area sufficient for the airborne introduction of the Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade.

To facilitate these activities, SOF in theater is, by doctrine, placed under a Joint Force Special Operations Component Commander (JFSOCC), or under a Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF) for command and control (C2). JP 3-05 details the various levels of liaison that SOF is responsible for to better employ SOF C2 at all levels of command within the JTF. These include a Special Operations Coordination (SOCOORD) Element to Army Corps and Marine Expeditionary Forces (MEF), Special Operations Command and Control Elements (SOCCE) at the Division Level, and added liaison elements below these levels as necessary. All references to the role of these elements in the Joint Pub state that the purpose of these elements is to advise, deconflict and coordinate SOF activities with Conventional Forces command elements, and when necessary serve as a C2 element within the AO, exercising Operational Control (OPCON) or Tactical Control (TACON) of SOF. JP 3-05 addresses liaison between SOF and Conventional Forces as a SOF responsibility at all levels of the Joint Force, but has little information on reciprocal conventional liaison to SOF, which is needed when the supporting-supported roles are reversed as they were in OEF.

Current conventional Service doctrine on employment of SOF is limited. The most significant problem with current doctrine and recommend employment methods, at the joint and Service levels, both from SOF and Conventional Forces perspectives, is that the majority of doctrine and traditional planning has primarily focused on coordination and deconfliction of SOF and Conventional Forces assets. No official reference, traditional training, or formal planning framework exist that address true SOF and Conventional

Force integration within the theater in any significant detail. Following current published doctrine and training within a JTF, SOF and Conventional Forces operations are conducted primarily in parallel, but this is not how it is occurring today, and current doctrine and training needs to reinforce what has been learned on the battlefield.

Even beyond the role of major combat operations, there were many changes to SOF and Conventional Forces integration, again indicating a shift in thinking at the operational level. All over Iraq and Afghanistan, SOF and Conventional Force Areas of Operation are overlapping, if not identical. SOF and Conventional Forces missions are regularly carried out in the same AOs. In cases where routine operations are occurring, a common operating picture of the presence of SOF and Conventional Forces in a single AO can prove very useful beyond just deconfliction and fratricide prevention. For instance, a SOF element confronted by an enemy threat that exceeds its capabilities to reduce could call upon a local Conventional Force unit rather than call for its present headquarters to launch a Quick Reaction Force (QRF) for reinforcement.

Correspondingly, a Conventional Force that runs into problems as a result of a cultural or language barrier could call upon a local SOF element to help resolve the situation.

Augmentation for specific missions is also becoming more common in both directions. This augmentation has resulted in task organizations and command relationships not traditionally exercised in the past. Sensitive Site Exploitation and raids as special operations missions, and conventional raids and Cordon and Search Operations differ little in Tactics, Techniques and Procedures. Where they diverge is in the nature of the target and the level of associated risk. With the vast number of physical objectives, targets, and unique skill sets SOF and Conventional Forces possess, more of these missions are being conducted in Iraq and Afghanistan by combined Conventional Forces

and SOF, either in supporting roles or as a fully integrated force⁴. Without a doubt, the very best example of this is the efforts to capture all three Husseins in Iraq. In the attempted capture of Uday and Qusay Hussein in Mosul (during which they fought to the death), the 101st Airborne provided the cordon force, while SOF initially served as the search force.⁵ In the capture of Saddam Hussein, the 4th ID provided the cordon force, and again the search force came from SOF.⁶

Doctrine, as previously discussed, reflects a traditional attitude of cultural separation and institutionalizes it. The premise that SOF liaison is for deconfliction and coordination, and not integration, indicates that regular or long-term integration of SOF and Conventional Forces below the JTF is not seriously considered an operational method. The lack of detailed discussion in conventional force manuals reinforces this shortfall, compounded by the assumption that SOF/Conventional Force liaison is a SOF responsibility, based on SOF doctrine and a lack of it for Conventional Forces. A clear example of this disconnect is in the Army's newly published Stryker manuals where SOF liaison is specifically stated *not* to be for physical integration⁷.

Recent examples of SOF and Conventional Force integration have met with success, but at the same time have not been without problems. Issues of organizational culture, lack of understanding of roles and capabilities, doctrinal shortcomings, and training deficiencies have created friction between SOF and Conventional Forces resulting in failures to exploit potential, missed opportunities, and in some cases, fatal errors.

Anyone who reads current news articles or popular accounts of SOF in history will

⁴ (Afghanistan 2003, p. 26)

⁵ (Thomas August 2003, pp. 26-27)

⁶ (Thomas December 2003, pp. 26-27)

⁷ (FM 3-31.31 2003, p. E-18)

quickly find that a gap, if not a chasm, can exist culturally between SOF and Conventional Forces. By their nature, the two are fundamentally different, with one primarily focused on unconventional warfare, and the other on conventional. As such, the communities of conventional and unconventional warriors view each other at times with unease, and in worst cases, disdain. However, in a world of scarce resources, cultures must adapt.

Resourcing is significantly impacting how SOF and Conventional Forces work together. SOF's small numbers and high degree of specialization make it difficult to allocate internal resources for their own physical security. SOF elements find it necessary to locate within Conventional Force bases or use Conventional Forces in an attached or OPCON role for security purposes. This has created challenges for both elements when mission execution becomes necessary and many times informal relationships result in employment problems. A Conventional Force platoon sent to secure the base of an Army Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) in Afghanistan was given OPCON to the ODA. The ODA instructed the platoon that as part of the defense of the location, the platoon was to conduct local security patrols outside the perimeter, a requirement of this role. This proved completely unacceptable to the Conventional unit's headquarters and the patrols were discontinued. Another Conventional Force unit was sent to serve as the Quick Reaction Force (QRF) for a SOF command element, but the release authority for the QRF was retained at the higher command of the Conventional Force element, and not delegated to the SOF unit it supported⁸. Also in these cases, giving OPCON of these Conventional Forces to SOF

⁸ (Butler 2003)

took them away as an option for employment under the CFLCC, a burden not identified in prior planning⁹.

Additionally, there are times when SOF and Conventional Forces just do not understand what the other does, and thus do not seek to communicate and subsequently integrate capabilities. After Action Reviews from both Iraq and particularly Afghanistan indicate that had the Conventional Forces better understood SOF capabilities and employment considerations, they would have integrated them more and earlier¹⁰. SOF also has seen more non-traditional integration of Conventional Forces, as indicated in efforts to capture the Husseins, and they should not disregard this employment option for future operations. The focus needs to be on capabilities that will contribute to unity of effort and act as force multipliers at all levels. Merely understanding what the other force can and will do can go a long way to improving effectiveness.

The first step to fixing problems and capitalizing on successes lies simply in awareness. Better communications between SOF and Conventional Forces on capabilities, limitations and employment options that are not only mutually supporting, but also integrated when the mission calls for it, will start a process for awareness and training that will better facilitate current and future operations. Joint Forces Command, USSOCOM, and the Services are aware of these issues and are seeking means to address them. However, traditional planning and employment for integration at the JTF level, with deconfliction and coordination at lower levels is no longer the reality. Training driven by the old doctrine of assumed separation of operations below the JTF level is not meeting the realities and needs of current operations.

⁹ (Preysler 2004)

¹⁰ (Preysler 2004; Afghanistan 2003, pp. 29, 117)

This issue of integration stems from one of the greatest challenges confronting SOF, as with any other high demand/low density organization--there just are not enough assets to meet all the demands. The SOCOORD at the MEF or Army Corps level has the capacity for C2 of SOF, but only when augmented. A SOCCE at a division is often comprised of an augmented Army Special Forces company command element Operational Detachment Bravo (ODB), or a Naval Special Warfare Task Unit or Group (NSWTU/NSWTG). Traditionally in a Geographic Theater of Operations, there may only be at most two NSWTU/NSWTGs, and in an entire theater only nine SF companies are allocated under a regionally oriented Special Forces Group. Each NSWTU/NSWTG or ODB assigned as a SOCCE with its augmentees takes these already scarce resources out of operational roles and places them in a coordination and deconfliction role to serve as C2 elements with Marine or Army divisions. Parceling out these elements as SOCCEs has a significant manning and operational impact--the assets are just not available to meet demand.

SOF and Conventional Force integration of complementary capabilities is occurring in ways not seen before, yet is still not effectively addressed in doctrine. As such, with identified strengths and weaknesses and lessons learned from operations, this knowledge must be institutionalized. Situations where lack of knowledge resulted in less effective employment are not acceptable. On the job training and discovery learning while conducting operations is a worthy reflection of the US Armed Services' agility and flexibility, but other mechanisms exist to better prepare commanders at all levels for what they will confront on current and future battlefields.

Knowledge of capabilities and employment methods must be shared. All Services have professional military education systems that will support this. As most integration

of SOF and Conventional Forces occurs within the land component, Marine, Army, and SOF training needs to incorporate instruction on this at all levels as it applies. Junior and mid-level Non-Commissioned Officer and Initial Officer Entry education courses should be teaching the basic capabilities and missions of SOF forces with whom they will interact with on the battlefield. The Marine Amphibious Warfare School and Army Captains Career Courses, particularly in the combat arms, need to reinforce this instruction and further discuss how units at their level may be employed in an integrated role with SOF (to include Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations units). This instruction could be as little as an hour, and reinforced with incorporation of SOF assets in practical planning exercises. The same holds true for instruction of SOF at this level at the Special Forces Course, Navy SEAL Course and AFSOC training of Special Tactics Squadron personnel. When a SOF element is placed under Tactical Control of a rifle company on the battlefield, or vice versa, it is late in the game to be figuring out how it should work.

Command and Staff Colleges should place greater emphasis on the role of integrated SOF employment not only at the JTF level, but examine employment options for integrated SOF and Conventional Forces at lower echelons as well. Additionally, consideration in planning exercises for attaching Conventional Force elements to the JSOTF should be included. This could be further reinforced in Pre-Command Course training of battalion and brigade command designees. Conventional Force cultural beliefs that SOF do not understand employment of Conventional Forces in a combined arms role are hard to validate given SOF unit performance with indigenous ground forces in Afghanistan. With awareness and prior formal training, a Conventional Force brigade commander could do the same with an SFODA or SEAL platoon. As reorganized

packaged forces within the Army are implemented, Stability and Support Operation deployments of Conventional Forces may include SOF elements, while as Non-Combatant Evacuation Operations or other crisis intervention scenarios arise, a SOF command for these missions can be task organized with Conventional Force elements for security and firepower. Integrated Security, Cordon and Search, and Sensitive Site Exploitation missions are already happening. All of these scenarios lend themselves to altered planning considerations in training institutions.

Beyond instruction, practical training must also take place. Brigade Combat Training Program exercises to train brigade staffs, and Division Warfighter exercises in the Army can incorporate aspects of these scenarios for planning purposes, as can Mission Readiness Exercises. Potential exists for full practical implementation of SOF and Conventional Forces at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) and the Army's National Training Center (which is moving towards becoming the Joint National Training Center). The scenarios addressed throughout this paper can be trained in peacetime at these facilities, with SOF and Conventional Forces still able to achieve individual training objectives during rotations, but with the opportunity for integrated operations. Challenges to manning Observer Controller (OC) positions can be mitigated through the use of existing JRTC OCs, joint augmentation by Air Force and Navy SOF personnel, as well as contracted retired SOF personnel for "focused rotations" on SOF integration as necessary, similar to those used for training the initial Stryker Brigade. Providing JSOTF and CFLCC forces to each other in theater, even at the tactical level, is still a joint, Service and SOF operational concern that must be addressed in doctrine and training.

Additionally, options exist to gain a second order effect through the use of role players for indigenous force personnel in these exercises. SOF can be employed to train these

personnel for integration and employment by the Conventional Force rotational units. If support personnel who traditionally do not train on battlefield combat tasks were used as role players, the SOF personnel would have the comparable challenge of training non-combat forces for combat employment, while the Conventional units would have this element as a planning and employment consideration. Drawing these role players based on rotational schedules from division, corps, and theater support units (similar to the 507th Maintenance Company), or even Reserve Officer Training Corps and Service Academy Cadets, would provide the added benefit of training these units in combat tasks and field craft to which they would not otherwise be exposed. This would be consistent with the Chief of Staff of the Army's (GEN Peter Schoomaker, former USSOCOM Commander) Warrior Ethos initiative and the Marine Corps principle that "Every Marine is a Rifleman". Conceptually this has been going on for years, as these are the exact types of units currently used in this capacity as "guerillas" at Fort Bragg for Special Forces students training in unconventional warfare. It is an issue of scale.

With this greater knowledge of SOF units and procedures, Conventional units could send liaisons to SOF command elements, lessening the burden on the already high demand SOF elements to provide liaisons "out of hide." This would give the added benefit to the Conventional Force providing headquarters of having access to information and resources that they normally would not. When the idea of Conventional Forces sending liaisons to Special Operations forward bases was raised recently at the JFK Special Warfare Center, despite Operational Security considerations the idea received wide acceptance¹¹. A possible solution to provide consolidated training for conventional force personnel designated as potential SOF liaisons is to have a course on the topic

¹¹ (Afghanistan, p. 122)

offered at the Joint Special Operations University, or taught by mobile Joint Training Teams from SOC JFCOM. The target audience for these courses is the MEF and Corps headquarters and their subordinate operational planners. Another option is to use SOCOORD personnel in Army Corps to provide this training “in house.” Any steps taken to improve interoperability of SOF and Conventional Forces will pay dividends on the battlefield.

Integration of SOF and Conventional Forces is happening on the battlefield now. Recent changes to doctrine necessitate changes in education and training to reinforce the successes and mitigate shortcomings and risks found in current SOF and Conventional Force integration. JFCOM can drive this with initiatives in these areas with the support of the Services, USSOCOM, and the training proponents and centers. Implementation of this training and education will increase employment options for Combatant Commanders, JTF Commanders, and unit leaders at all levels. The changing nature of conflict under the GWOT, limited resources, broad operational scope, and increased operational tempo require all assets be employed to the greatest effect and as efficiently as possible. More effective integration of SOF and Conventional Forces is a step towards this end.

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