

# Special Warriors Have Growing Ranks and Growing Pains in Taking Key Antiterror Role

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Special Warriors Have Growing Ranks and Growing Pains in Taking Key Antiterror Role

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 1 - The military's Special Operations Forces, which played a pivotal role in toppling the Taliban government in Afghanistan and in capturing Saddam Hussein in Iraq, are now grappling with proposals to give them an expanded and more complex mission in the global campaign against terrorism, senior commanders and top Pentagon officials say.

While their ranks are growing and their budget is increasing even faster, Special Operations Forces have yet to fulfill completely Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld's order 18 months ago to take control of the military's counterterrorism mission.

The command has restructured the staff at its headquarters at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Fla., to meet the new assignment managing the military's mission against terror. But it has been deliberately slow in taking on operations of its own in Iraq, Afghanistan and other hot spots, as Mr. Rumsfeld directed. Instead, its troops there are subordinated to the overall regional commander. "The Special Operations Command has some growing pains that it has to work on," said Newt Gingrich, the former House speaker who is a member of the Defense Policy Board, an advisory panel to Mr. Rumsfeld.

Now, the Special Operations Command may be given even greater responsibilities, because the bipartisan 9/11 commission has recommended that it take over from the Central Intelligence Agency the authority for all of the nation's paramilitary operations. "Lead responsibility for directing and executing paramilitary operations, whether clandestine or covert, should shift to the Defense Department," the report concluded. "There it should be consolidated with the capabilities for training, direction and execution of such operations already being developed in the Special Operations Command."

The recommendation for the C.I.A. to cede to the military the lead role for covert strikes to capture or kill terrorists and disrupt their cells in coordination with local allied fighters would expand an effort already under way at the Pentagon. The effort, however, has run into the very bureaucratic resistance feared by the panel. "The United States cannot afford to build two separate capabilities for carrying out secret military operations, secretly operating standoff missiles, and secretly training foreign military or paramilitary forces," the report concluded.

The C.I.A. has resisted surrendering its historic domain of paramilitary missions, despite successful cooperation with elite military commandos in Iraq and Afghanistan, Pentagon and Congressional experts said. The State Department has restricted the intelligence-gathering activities of Special Operations Forces assigned to some American Embassies, fearing that service members will bypass diplomatic channels and report directly up a military chain of command, lawmakers and senior officers said.

The Special Operations Command was created in 1987 by Congress, in a landmark bill reorganizing the military's top commands, over the objections of many within the Pentagon. It operates like a miniature armed service, ordered to organize, train and equip the nation's premier warriors. It was given unique budget and procurement powers to develop and buy quickly the weaponry and communications gear needed by such specialized fighters as Army Green Berets or Navy Seals.

Senior Pentagon officials and military officers say the regional combatant commanders all want those elite warriors to be committed to their areas of responsibility, even as they are aware of their limited numbers. But those commanders have been reluctant in some cases to support giving missions over to the Special Operations Command, or Socom, especially on their turf. "Socom's true mission hasn't truly been tested yet," said Representative Martin Meehan of Massachusetts, the ranking Democrat on the House Armed Services subcommittee on terrorism, conventional threats and capabilities, which oversees Special Operations Forces. "If anything, Socom has erred too much on the side of caution by being too deferential to regional commanders."

In one recent week, 6,500 Special Operations Forces were deployed around the world, about 80 percent of them in the Central Command's region, which includes Iraq and Afghanistan, working under the regional combatant commander and his senior battle staff. In the past four months, those elite warriors have carried out just under 200 missions in Iraq, virtually all under the traditional chain of command.

Discussions among commanders have been particularly pointed as the Special Operations Command has sought to follow Mr. Rumsfeld's orders across the military to reshape the global footprint of overseas

forces. The command is coming up with new designs to rotate its troops overseas temporarily, deploy them and join in training missions with foreign forces in locations that give it greater agility to strike at terrorists.

"We want to be postured where we're most needed, not just where we've been, and that's not always easy," Gen. Bryan D. Brown, the Special Operations commander, said in a recent interview.

The command wants to hand off to conventional troops such tasks as training foreign troops in conventional missions, dealing with chemical and biological weapon threats, and even many house-to-house raids of the sort carried out daily in Iraq and Afghanistan, leaving commandos to pursue only the most important insurgents. Senior Special Operations commanders say they are well aware that terrorists like Osama bin Laden and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi remain at large, and that the terrorists' networks cross national and regional boundaries. "Since 9/11, we can no longer deal with this threat in pieces," said a senior Defense Department official. "You've got to have a global perspective, and that's what Socom is responsible for."

Mr. Rumsfeld remains personally involved in shaping the command's expanded duties and specific missions, senior Pentagon officials and military officers say.

The 9/11 commission report clearly agrees with Mr. Rumsfeld's overall design for the Special Operations Command and, indeed, pushes it farther and faster. John F. Lehman, one of the commissioners and a former secretary of the Navy, said the commission's recommendation stemmed from the conclusion that C.I.A.-run paramilitary operations were inevitably "ad hoc" and could be carried out more efficiently by Special Operations Forces. The Special Operations Command "is so improved and so capable that it has the ability to do almost any kind of special operation, from largest to smallest, more effectively than an ad hoc arrangement by the C.I.A.," Mr. Lehman said.

Richard Shultz, a scholar who specializes in issues of terrorism, intelligence and special operations at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, said Mr. Rumsfeld's efforts have not been welcomed at the C.I.A.

"It's turf," said Mr. Shultz. "I think the report has it right when it says that we have two capabilities here, potential capabilities, and what we really need to do is have one. The report is right in saying this is something that should go to the military."

Shifting more covert missions to the military would no doubt place new strains on the armed forces at a time with the troops already stretched thin. As the Special Operations Command is growing to meet these new demands, it is facing a potential exodus of its most seasoned enlisted forces for higher-paying civilian security jobs in places like Baghdad and Kabul.

Senior Army Green Berets and Navy Seals with 20 years or more experience now earn about ,000 in base pay, and can retire with a ,000 pension. But private security companies are offering, in some cases, up to ,000 a day to the most experienced Special Operations Forces. To address that, General Brown last December gathered 20 senior members of the Navy Seals, Army Green Berets and Air Force commandos - and their spouses - at his headquarters for a weeklong session to discuss career-extending incentives, pay bonuses and additional education benefits.

The command's noncommissioned officers are the backbone of a relatively small force in which only one-third of the 49,848 personnel budgeted this year are "trigger-pullers" or "operators," from Green Berets to civil units coordinating reconstruction to the super-secret Task Force 626, formerly known as Task Force 121, specifically charged with hunting high-level insurgents. Of the more than 730 Americans killed in action in Iraq and Afghanistan, 48 have been from the Special Operations Forces.

With the backing of Congress, the command's forces will grow over the next five years to 52,559. The command's annual budget has been growing steadily, and rose 35 percent in the last year, to .8 billion.

The command is still wrestling with several challenges. Any attempt at transforming how the nation strikes out at terrorists, for instance, is more dependent than ever on gathering precise information on an adversary's movements. Passing the job of planning and carrying out such missions to the military from the C.I.A. cannot guarantee success without dramatic improvements in intelligence, according to Special Operations commanders and troops.

"It's too early to tell how this thing is going," said Gen. Wayne Downing, a retired head of the Special Operations Command. "The question is, how successful will this be after Rumsfeld leaves, because to carry this out will require the absolute, total support of the top levels of the Defense Department."

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