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A Study of Military Change: The Transformation of Army Special Forces and Naval Special Warfare in the Vietnam War

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A Study of Military Change: The Transformation of Army Special Forces and Naval Special
Warfare in the Vietnam War

by

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A THESIS

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Abstract

This work serves to investigate the nature of the changes experienced by the Army Special Forces (Green Berets) and Naval Special Warfare (NSW; Underwater Demolition Teams, and Sea, Air, Land [SEAL] Teams) during the Vietnam War, using contemporary military change literature to evaluate the processes and results. In conducting the research, this thesis used a combination of primary and secondary sources for a qualitative analysis of military change.

The result of this investigation was two clear examples of military innovation that resulted from different processes in environments that were vastly different in terms of leadership conditions and mission requirements. Naval Special Warfare experienced innovation through the inception of the SEAL Teams, which gave them increased capabilities not seen before by a permanent Navy Special Operations Force unit. This revolutionary innovation was not directly impeded by Navy bureaucracy due to intervention by the Kennedy Administration on behalf of NSW. The Army Special Forces underwent a different kind of innovation; because of their open mindset, high level of training, and misappropriation by Army leadership, the Green Berets adapted to multiple new roles in the Vietnam War. As a result of these multiple smaller changes, the entirety of their existence was altered and they became a force transformed over 14 years of sustained adaptation, rather than the rapid changes experienced by Naval Special Warfare. These lessons of these two case studies are significant as they demonstrate different learning processes in similar combat environments as a result of variables in leadership, demands, experience, unit culture, skills, and relationships with external agencies.

Preface

This thesis is an original, independent, and unique work by the author Patrick Cooper-Takada. Portions of Chapters 4 and 6 were presented to fellows of the Canadian Network on Information and Security in 2022, but this alternate work has yet to be formally published. This thesis contains information from two primary camps of literature: the analytical methodologies are taken from military change literature; while the content that is being analyzed comes from military sources, both primary and secondary. The primary sources of military change literature stem from Theo Farrell, Sten Rynning, Adam Grissom, Nina Kollars, James Russell, and Terry Terriff, the latter of which served as thesis supervisor to the author of this paper. The military literature primary sources that are analyzed include Christopher Ives, Charles Briscoe, Shelby Stanton, Francis Kelly, and a number of YouTube content creators who were able to interview Vietnam special operations veterans that would have otherwise been unable to have their stories heard and their lessons incorporated into historical analyses.

Acknowledgements and Dedication

This work is less an effort of mine and more an effort of those who supported me through it. For that, I am thankful in ways that extend beyond the constraints of language to my partner Hannah, and to my supervisor, Dr. Terry Terriff. I also owe a debt of gratitude to my friends who let me think out loud and process the vast amount of information that I over analyzed and certainly over collected.

The thesis, however, is dedicated to the men who served in Special Operations Forces in the Vietnam War, both American and South Vietnamese. Never have I experienced such inspiring, horrific, beautiful, and jaw-dropping histories of men who were asked by their society and leadership for so much and given so little in return. I hope this thesis resonates with the past and present members of both the Armed Forces and academia, as there are lessons to be learned in these pages about the consequences of miscommunication and poor leadership.

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Abbreviations

ARVN—Army of the Republic of Vietnam

CIA—Central Intelligence Agency

CIDG—Civilian Irregular Defense Group

DA—Direct Action

F3EA—Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Analyze

FID—Foreign Internal Defense

IAD—Immediate Action Drill

LDNN—Lien Doan Ngươi Nhai (ARVN Navy SEALs)

LLDB—Lực Lượng Đặc Biệt Quân Lực Việt Nam Cộng Hòa (ARVN SF)

LRRP—Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol

MAAG—Military Assistance Advisory Group

MAC-V—Military Assistance Command, Vietnam

MAC-V SOG—Military Assistance Command, Vietnam Studies and Observations Group

NSW—Naval Special Warfare

NVA—North Vietnamese Army

ODA—Operational Detachment Alpha

ODB—Operational Detachment Bravo

OSS—Office of Strategic Services

POW—Prisoner of War

QRF—Quick Reaction Force

RSSZ—Rung Sat Special Zone

SAF—Special Action Force

SEAL Team—Sea, Air, Land Teams

SF—Special Forces

SFG(A)/SFG—Special Forces Group (Airborne)/Special Forces Group (terms used interchangeably, refers to same element)

SOF—Special Operations Forces

SR—Special Reconnaissance

UDT—Underwater Demolition Team

UNPIK—United Nations Partisan Infantry Korea

UW—Unconventional Warfare

VC—Viet Cong

VCI—Viet Cong Infrastructure

Epigraph

Fighting soldiers from the sky
Fearless men who jump and die
Men who mean just what they say
The brave men of the Green Beret

Silver wings upon their chest
These are men, America's best
One hundred men will test today
But only three win the Green Beret

Barry Sadler, *The Ballad of the Green Berets*¹

¹ Barry Sadler was a Green Beret who was injured on a patrol in Vietnam in 1965 and wrote number one hit *The Ballad of the Green Berets* while recovering.

Introduction

During the Vietnam War (1957-1973) the United States attempted to prevent the infiltration of communist ideology and communist state-aligned military forces from deposing the American allied government of South Vietnam. Hundreds of thousands of American servicemen and women were deployed to South Vietnam to perform various roles in containing communism. The Vietnam War does not stand alone in the annals of American Low-Intensity Conflicts (LICs), but it was the most significant that occurred until the Global War on Terror. Throughout the Vietnam War, a small group of men were increasingly turned to as an answer to all problems. These men belonged to Special Operations Forces (SOF) units that performed unique operations more suited to the irregular warfare environment that was unfolding in Southeast Asia. Due to their expertise, the ineptitude of the conventional forces they worked with, and a combination of other factors explored in this project, the men of SOF were disproportionately relied upon to resolve the various issues that emerged in the counterinsurgency campaign undertaken by American forces in Vietnam. This project seeks to clearly demonstrate how three SOF units changed as a result of the Vietnam War.

Understanding how SOF changed during the Vietnam War involves scrutinizing what changes were undertaken, who was responsible for the changes, where the changes took place, when the changes took place, and why these changes were necessary for the operators to perform their roles. This analysis of the Vietnam War uses contemporary military change literature based around innovation—a transformative, permanent military change that sees a new or reoriented military force; or adaptation—a short-term change to address operational requirements in a specific setting. The purpose of this is to both study the changes that were experienced by SOF during the Vietnam War, and to further an understanding of military change literature through the evaluation of relationships in observed changes. This evaluative framework is applied to the various changes that Army Special

Forces (SF), also known as Green Berets, and Naval Special Warfare (NSW) units underwent during their participation in the Vietnam War. By way of books, reports, articles, and interviews, there is a significant amount of information that is available about SOF during the Vietnam War. This thesis is unique in that it used non-traditional sources for some of the information presented, namely through interviews available on YouTube. These unconventional sources allowed the paper to have first-hand, primary source information from veterans of the Vietnam War that was key for contextualizing and enriching findings of literature-based analysis. The interviews selected were conducted by more recent military veterans, and the resulting discussions shed new light on institutional learning processes and the relationships between actors in the Vietnam War. Without the information given by Vietnam SOF veterans through this avenue, this project would be left with unanswered questions and contextual gaps that were essential to address for a complete analysis of the various intersecting factors that comprise military change.

This investigation produced demonstrable cases of innovative changes for both Special Forces and Naval Special Warfare, although the processes and results of said changes differed significantly between the two units. The changes are significant for military analysts because the innovation undertaken by SF and NSW demonstrate means by which forces become more effective in operational environments beyond their doctrinal purview, while documenting the processes by which both units learned and evolved into their modern incarnation. The findings are also significant for military change academics because these transformations demonstrate unique relationships developing between similar units from differing service branches, different contexts for the furthering or stifling of change, the interaction of Special Operations Forces with their conventional branch leadership, and a case of multiple adaptations compounding into an innovative transformation. This thesis generated further questions about the nature of relationships within SOF by way of challenging the traditional means of

examining intra and inter-service relationships between SOF units and the conventional services from which they ostensibly share an identity.

Chapter 1: Analytical Framework and Primary Definitions

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Analytical Framework Introduction

This project seeks to examine the changes experienced by US Army Special Forces (also known as Green Berets) and Navy Underwater Demolition Teams/SEALs from their original mission doctrine during the Vietnam War and to study these changes using techniques found in military change literature to increase the reader's understanding of the processes of change. As such, key concepts to be established prior to the body of examination are: the doctrines of the units in question, when exactly the Vietnam War took place (as the beginning of the War is contentious), and most importantly, what military change means. While some writers argue that doctrine is not always a relevant metric for an examination of acts like innovation, in the case of the Vietnam War, doctrine is a useful measure of change.² This is because the services pushed Special Operations Forces (SOF) to perform roles outside of their established doctrine, and the doctrine, especially for Army Special Forces (SF), changed radically in response. If the manual that outlines what a unit did in 1950 is different from the manual produced in 1970, one can ascertain that a change has occurred.

Military Change

² James A. Russell. *Innovation, Transformation, and War: Counterinsurgency Operations in Anbar and Ninewa Provinces, Iraq, 2005-2007*. California: Stanford University Press. 2011. P.29

There are two primary camps of military change literature: one that focuses on innovation and one that focuses on adaptation. Innovation is a transformative process where the unit in question changes what it does, and by consequence of that, how it performs its missions. If the unit in question is only changing the way in which it does something, then, as a rule of thumb, it is adaptation.

In order to qualify what constitutes change, a baseline must be established for what the units in question were created to do. Two units, Army Special Forces (SF) and Naval Underwater Demolition Teams (UDTs), predate the Vietnam War. Therefore, to quantify what their “baseline” was, the period examined must be expanded to their years of creation, 1952 and 1943 respectively, while also accounting for their doctrine immediately prior to the Vietnam War.³ This examination will be kept to a minimum in terms of presence in the thesis, but the research is thorough and in depth to ensure validity for conclusions found in the rest of the work. The baselines for the units will be established in the following Chapter titled “Baselines.”

Military change as defined in this thesis is *deviation from the baseline in terms of mission statement, intent, organizational revision, significant revisions to their goals, or how they achieve their goals, deriving from their experiences in Vietnam.*

Theo Farrell suggests that change should be defined as “change in the goals, actual strategies, and/or structure of a military organization.”⁴ While this paper has adopted its own definition of military change, the elements given by Farrell are given additional emphasis in the chapters where they are relevant. That is to say, not all change will be as Farrell has defined it, but Farrell’s definition still constitutes change in this paper.

Innovation

³ Col. Alfred H. Paddock (Jr.), “Major General Robert Alexis McClure Forgotten Father of US Army Special Warfare.” *Psywarrior.com*. No date given.; No Author. “SEAL History: Origins of Naval Special Warfare-WWII.” *Navy SEAL Museum*. No date given.

⁴ Farrell, Rynning, and Terriff. *Transforming Military Power Since the Cold War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2013. P.5

The primary work that this thesis cites for concepts regarding the evaluation of innovation come from Adam Grissom's "The Future of Military Innovation Studies," which focuses on where the field was in 2006 and where it would go in the future. Many additional sources have been considered to expand the concept of innovation to be appropriately literature inclusive. Innovation as defined by Grissom is centered around three points that must be met to qualify. The points state that innovation (i.) "changes the manner in which military formations function in the field"; (ii.) "is significant in scope and impact"; and (iii.) "is tacitly equated with greater military effectiveness."⁵

As the second point establishes, innovation is "significant in scope and impact," this regarding the scale of the changes undertaken by the unit in question. This implies that innovation would inform SOF doctrine for a period beyond the scope of the conflict in question. For example, SFs lessons learned through Direct Action missions in the Vietnam War existed in doctrine published after the war, thus satisfying Grissom's second qualifier. Most writers who have focused on innovation have looked at transformative processes that affect branches of the Armed Forces or the Armed Forces in its entirety. This project examines SOF, which are much smaller in number than their conventional force counterparts. While innovation in those examinations has addressed transformations for large units, this work will examine changes of the significance, scope, and scale of large transformations, but studies to smaller units.

Innovation is further explained in Farrell, Rynning, and Terriff, where a strong emphasis is given to the point Grissom identifies as (ii.) "significant in scope and impact."⁶ There is some disagreement in the field; whereas Grissom seems to weigh the three innovation qualifiers as equally important and, while all certainly are important, Farrell et al. place additional emphasis on the scope and scale of innovation. Their work on military innovation is centered around the networking and

⁵ Adam Grissom. "The future of military innovation studies" *Journal of Strategic Studies*. 29:5. 2006. p.907

⁶ Farrell, Rynning, and Terriff. *Transforming Military Power Since the Cold War*. 2013.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in the late 1980s/1990s that resulted in an RMA for the US military, and left both allies (Britain and France), and near-peer competitors struggling to attain parity. They write that the US military was pushing for greater efficiency in the field through the use of technology, which they achieved (point (iii.) of Grissom being satisfied), changing the way in which US military units functioned in the field (point (i.) having been satisfied), and it was so significant in scope and scale that, not only did it change the US, but it changed three militaries within NATO. They state that innovation is a process, and that process has no definitive end point, which complicates examining transformation as a static, or contained, metric.⁷ This is seen in many changes examined in this thesis, but due to the constraints of the work, end points must be established or the examination would ultimately continue to the modern era.

Farrell et al. do, however, note that there is difference in the use of innovation as a term, with both “sustaining innovation” and “disruptive innovation.”⁸ The former outlines changes that qualify as innovation that seek to improve the conduct of conventional warfare, the later outlines changes that challenge institutional priorities and “ultimately involve acts of institutional destruction.”⁹ This means when change is discovered in the Vietnam War, examination and qualification of that change as innovation will require a broad lens to determine long-term impacts of said change.

Additionally, Farrell et al. question the validity of innovation making a force more effective.¹⁰ This thesis maintains that innovation should *eventually* make a force more effective by at least some reasonable metric. As Farrell et al. state, innovation is a process, and until that process is completed, or at least distinct from the motivating factors that initiated it, effectiveness is both relative and subjective. However, their point that military innovation can fail, or decrease effectiveness cannot be

⁷ Ibid. P.7

⁸ Farrell, Rynning, and Terriff. *Transforming Military Power Since the Cold War*. 2013. Pp.8-9

⁹ Ibid. P.9

¹⁰ Ibid. Pp.7-8

ignored, as there are cases of military change that do not achieve what they set out to accomplish. If that is discovered in this research, it will be considered failed military innovation, distinct from the conventional parameters that qualify innovation as a positive change for a military. Innovation should also change what a unit is doing, not only how they are going about doing it. This aspect is a unique part of the larger picture of innovation in contrast to the smaller scale of adaptation.

It is worth noting Stephen Rosen's contentions that: (i.) military doctrine does not serve as a good metric of change; and (ii.) innovation mostly happens in peacetime.¹¹ Rosen's arguments also advocate that the civilian side of government does not play as significant a role in driving peacetime organizational innovation, rather that senior military leadership does. This thesis rejects that theory, as the role that civilian leadership played in the formation of SEALs and the changes undertaken by Army SF was direct, clear, and irrefutable (although these changes were in the early stages of Vietnam, a period somewhere between war and peacetime). Rosen also argues that innovation transpires more easily in peacetime than while a military is conducting war.¹² It should be noted that Rosen does stipulate that when military institutions do change in warfare it is because they are pursuing an inappropriate strategic goal or due to misunderstanding between military operations and the goal they are pursuing.¹³ While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to argue for or against Rosen's points as a rule of thumb across the spectrum of military change, within the context of Vietnam it is clear that there were a number of inappropriate uses of SOF stemming from misunderstanding that contributed to innovative changes experienced by the studied units.

Williamson Murray offers additional insight into innovation in that it can take place in two main ways: "revolutionary innovation," a process largely exerted top-down by leadership that is

¹¹ Russell. *Innovation, Transformation, and War: Counterinsurgency Operations in Anbar and Ninewa Provinces, Iraq, 2005-2007*. 2011. P.28

¹² Ibid. P.30

¹³ Ibid. P.31

technically and conceptually informed about the nature of the change they are pushing for; and “evolutionary innovation,” a process that takes a longer period of time, as the entity experiencing change learns from a past or ongoing conflict.¹⁴ In the case of Vietnam, elements of both revolutionary and evolutionary innovations would intersect for Special Forces, as they experienced change pushed on them from President Kennedy, and the lessons they learned during combat operations in Vietnam. This is explored further in Chapters 4 and 5.

Murray also gives a chart to help delineate the factors that contribute to change. They are given as:

RELATIONSHIPS IN INNOVATION

Context	Technological change	Strategy
Procedures	Operational change	Operations
Equipment	Technical change	Tactics ¹⁵

Murray asserts that the innovations that have the greatest influence are those that change the context in which war is conducted. That is a major factor for this thesis, as the context of the Vietnam War was vastly different (and saw changes to all the factors given under “relationships in innovation”) from the conventional land war in Europe that the US Armed Forces had been prepared to fight.

Grissom gives four lenses through which military innovation can be perceived: the Civil-Military model of innovation; the Interservice model of military innovation; the Intraservice model of military innovation; and the Cultural model of military innovation.¹⁶

The Civil-Military model revolves around interactions between the civilian branches of government and the military, which results in innovation.¹⁷ This lens is extremely useful for examining

¹⁴ Williamson Murray. *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2012. Pp.306-10

¹⁵ Ibid.. P.305

¹⁶ Grissom. “The future of military innovation studies” 2006. Pp.908-919

¹⁷ Ibid. P.909

SOF, as they have historically had a unique relationship with the civilian side of the US government. SOF, due to the covert or clandestine nature of their work, have, in many ways, had comparatively less civilian government interference with their operations than the conventional side. SOF are told to do their job, not how to do it, unless specific political actors seek to interfere and manipulate outcomes. However, overall, government leaders largely understood that SOF had specific capabilities, even if these civilians did not understand how to use them as effectively as senior special operations leaders. An example would be the relationship between the Kennedy Administration (particularly Kennedy himself) and SOF, in which he helped lay the groundwork in terms of creation (SEALs) and expansion (SF).

Interservice focuses on interactions between services from the same Armed Forces as a ground for innovation, usually as the services compete for resources.¹⁸ The model postulates that a service believes it will benefit from an increased budget as a reward by addressing an emerging issue, this in turn, produces innovative changes.¹⁹ This lens was originally used by the author of this thesis when comparing the relationship of Army SF and SEALs, as they originate from different service branches. However, during an examination of their cross-training, a relationship was exposed that flipped the roles found in the Interservice and Intraservice lenses.²⁰ The Intraservice model, according to Grissom, looks like a new idea coming about within a service, and then being promoted by a group of patrons within that service, often resulting in the establishment of a new branch of service.²¹ The Intraservice model also postulates that a military service is not a unitary actor, and instead has functioning organs within it that advocate for or against this new establishment, in which these organs compete to address an issue.²²

¹⁸ Ibid. P.910

¹⁹ Ibid. Pp.910-1

²⁰ Ken Dockery. *Navy SEALs: A History Part I*. New York: The Military Book Club. 2002. Pp.236, 337-8

²¹ Grissom. "The future of military innovation studies" 2006. Pp.913-4

²² Ibid. P.913

In the examination of SF-SEAL relations, found in Chapter 3, SF acted in support of the SEALs in a manner more in line with what Grissom postulates is found in the Intraservice model. This suggests that SOF are perhaps better examined as a combined unit, with the conventional forces acting as the other service, as opposed to being separated by their heritage as Naval and Army units. SF and SEALs hail from separate services, which results in different cultures and histories, but the two have more in common with one another operationally (what they do and how they do it) than they do with the conventional. During the Vietnam War, conventional military leaders had no real grip on special operations, resulting in the misuse of SOF elements as conventional units/shock troops, or leaving them to direct themselves. The main examples of this found in this thesis are the introduction of SEALs to combat in Vietnam, where their senior Navy leaders gave them no direction, or the consistent misuse of SF by Army leadership who had no idea what SF actually did or could do. The SEALs' relationship with Big Navy does reflect what can be seen in Intraservice models, whereas the SF-Big Army reflects more of an Interservice relationship. In Chapters 4 and 5 it is demonstrated that the conventional forces' leadership so greatly opposed the mission set of Unconventional Warfare, or any sort of warfare that challenged the identity they had forged in the Second World War, that the leadership misused the Green Berets with very little afterthought. One of the points argued by this thesis is that the innovative transformation that Special Forces underwent during Vietnam was partially due to their misuse by the conventional leadership, which in turn forced SF to adapt to new roles and responsibilities. Once the situation in Vietnam was spiraling out of control, due in part to the conventional Army's misunderstanding of the conflict, they horned in conventional ground forces as a means of gaining increased influence over the situation. The manner in which the conventional handled the emerging scenario in Vietnam was not centered around the solution advocated by the civilian leadership (who wanted more Special Forces in Vietnam). Instead, the conventional Army incrementally increased their influence and presence over three years. The conventional Army

effectively competed with SF, despising their existence and culture, while simultaneously increasing SF's use in a supporting role. This is more in line with what is pursued in Interservice relationships than Intraservice. This is not to say that Intraservice relationships cannot be characterized by conflict or opposition, but rather the extent to which the conventional Army opposed Special Forces, the role of resources, and the conflict in identity, are so extreme that it contravenes the spirit of the relationship found in normal Intraservice relationships. Again, Intraservice relationships between branches can be seen to be somewhat hostile or result in the blocking of change, but the hostile nature of the relationship between the conventional Army leadership and Special Forces was much more extreme than what is usually seen in an examination of this sort.²³ Further demonstrating the necessity of the re-examination of the application of the Interservice and Intraservice lenses, is that the conventional Army never truly tried to change to meet the requirements of Vietnam, and instead prioritized the theoretical conventional warfare scenario that could have played out in Europe. They stymied Special Forces, involved themselves in Vietnam to gain resources and influence, without addressing the problem SF was trying to solve.

The point must be made that this reversal of the Interservice and Intraservice models for SOF has only been found to be the case during the Vietnam War. Whether the lenses in question remain more appropriately applied with SOF being seen as a separate service beyond the Vietnam War requires further research into the relationship between SOF and the conventional, which is beyond the scope of this thesis.

The Cultural model uses an examination of the culture, which is comprised of “intersubjective beliefs about the social and natural world that define actors, their situations, and the possibilities of action,” to examine how militaries change.²⁴ This model will be used throughout to contextualize

²³ Ibid. Pp.916

²⁴ Ibid. Pp.916

decisions made by those SOF elements that can be elaborated on through the examination of what makes them behave in a certain manner. For example, when Special Forces behave in a way that takes into account local traditions and customs better than the conventional military, this model will be used to provide insight. It is also a useful lens when examining behavioral patterns of SOF elements that do not align with the expected behaviors of conventional elements, such as disobeying orders or pursuing ends through unconventional means. A major component of this is the cultural clash seen between Special Forces and the conventional Army leadership.

One of the notes from Farrell et al. is the downside to the testing of theories, as this can lead to confusion more than illumination.²⁵ The approach taken by this thesis is one that prioritizes clarity and comprehension. A straightforward examination of the use of SF, UDTs, and SEALs during the Vietnam War is the objective, and the four lenses will be used, albeit with the knowledge that if their use curtails or complicates the objective of the analysis, their use will be limited.

The final point for innovation is whether the innovation is determined to be top-down, or bottom-up. A simple way of characterizing the two models is that there are “top” actors, in this case military or civilian leadership, and “bottom” actors, for the purposes of this paper, Army SF, SEALs, and UDT frogmen at an operational level. The differences between the two is which actor is initiating a change on the other, for top-down, the military leadership enforces change on the SOF, for bottom-up, the SOF develop protocols that become more prevalent amongst their units until it is accepted and imparted as standard, or at the least, commonplace, by the leadership. Farrell et al. qualified bottom-up innovation as “new means and methods” for an entire service branch or organization (as opposed to adaptation, which are adjustments made to correct an error, elaborated on further in this section).²⁶

²⁵ Farrell, Rynning, and Terriff. *Transforming Military Power Since the Cold War*. 2013. P.8

²⁶ Nina Kollars. “War’s Horizon: Soldier-Led Adaptation in Iraq and Vietnam.” *Journal of Strategic Studies*. 38.4. 2015. P.533

As established by Grissom, there is a “conceptual void” with regards to bottom-up innovation.²⁷ The gaps identified by Grissom are: (i.) a lack of empirical understanding due to the bottom actors having less formal authority, and being greater in number than their top counterparts; and (ii.) the inability to determine the conditions necessary for the undertaking of bottom-up military innovation.²⁸ The examination of SOF lends itself to examining bottom-up changes because many SOF units were used in a decentralized fashion that often left them far from command structures or conventional policy, thus creating a situation where changes could transpire unobstructed. The nature of special operations calls for conventional doctrine to be mindfully set aside in favor of pragmatic adaptation to the conflict at hand, centered around SOF’s ability to react on the spot to meet their operational requirements.²⁹ This thesis found that several of these adaptive changes compounded through an evolutionary innovation process which resulted in a transformed Special Forces. Many military change writers are steadfast in their belief that top-down innovation is the most prominent form of innovation, as the military leadership enjoys the most powerful position in a hierarchical structure.³⁰ For SOF this is not necessarily the case, as it is part of the culture of SOF to rebel against authority (within limits) and possess individualistic, problem-solving abilities that the conventional forces do not enjoy culturally or doctrinally.³¹ These traits were specifically pursued by the leadership who established SOF culture, and SOF units in the field would experiment, adapt and change in ways the conventional senior leadership would not have approved.

Addressing the first of Grissom’s gaps will ideally be relatively easy, due to the volume of work available at operational levels for SOF in Vietnam, and the increased authority given to the often

²⁷ Grissom. “The future of military innovation studies” 2006. P.925

²⁸ Ibid. P.925

²⁹ Wes Kennedy. “SPECIAL OPERATIONS TIPS: THE VALUE OF BOTTOM-UP PLANNING.” SOFREP. January 28 2020. Retrieved January 28 2020.

³⁰ Russell. *Innovation, Transformation, and War: Counterinsurgency Operations in Anbar and Ninewa Provinces, Iraq, 2005-2007*. 2011. P.34

³¹ Kenneth Finlayson. “Lieutenant General William P. Yarborough.” *Veritas*. Vol. 2 No. 2. 2006.

decentralized units. The second of Grissom's gaps is essentially outside the scope of this thesis, although there is a substantial amount of information present that would enable a further investigation into the conditions of bottom-up innovation with SOF in Vietnam.

Adaptation

Adaptation is a military change process when a military adjusts what it is already doing to better suit the circumstance.³² Nina Kollars' works on gun trucks and survival will be the primary works for citing adaptation. Adaptation is, as defined by Kollars, much smaller in scale and scope than innovation and reflects a change undertaken for a specific conflict, that does not continue afterwards.³³ This is usually seen in areas where there is little oversight, and is characterized by "a new organizational structure arranged according to the skills of relevant actors, who were gathered into freely constructed teams."³⁴ The creation of a new organizational structure suggests that those at mid and high-level command posts would be aware of the change. According to Murray, an indication that adaptation is taking place is institutional resistance to the changes units are trying to undertake at a low level.³⁵ This difference in writing about a key identifier of adaptation suggests that if an institution or bureaucratic element is aware of the change, it will resist it, but if it is not aware, due to the low level nature of adaptation, the institution cannot resist what it is unaware of. Due to the nature of the prolonged, often semi-autonomous deployments of Army SF and SEAL platoons during the Vietnam War their structures and the requirements of completing their operations were conducive to adaptation.

Kollars' work on Iraq will also be cited, as it notes a different approach to the "bottom-up" perspective, writing that the bureaucracy is curious to learn, and the resistance comes from "struggling

³² Theo Farrell and Terry Terriff. *The Sources of Military Change: Culture, Politics, Technology*. London: Lynne Rienner. 2002. P.6

³³ Nina Kollars. "Organising Adaptation in War, Survival." *Global Politics and Strategy*. 57:6, 2015. pp.111-126

³⁴ Ibid. P.117

³⁵ Williamson Murray. *Military Adaptation in War: With Fear of Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2011. Pp.18-19.

with knowledge generated by its practitioners.”³⁶ That is not to say that adaptation does not occur at higher levels, as noted by Farrell, Osinga, and Russell, adaptation can occur on a strategic level, in addition to the military operational level.³⁷ They also state that “[m]ilitaries may misunderstand the character of the conflict, or may be caught off guard by new technologies or tactics employed by opponents. Thus, the imperative for adaptation is often a product of strategic, technological, or tactical surprise.”³⁸ This response to misunderstanding the character of a conflict is imperative to understanding why SOF was misappropriated by conventional commanders throughout the war, as the conventional forces’ adaptation to the Vietnam War was to misuse SOF and further entrench existing problems in the conventional-SOF divide. Also of note is Robert Foley’s case study of German Army learning in WWI, which focused on a decentralized structure and “horizontal learning.”³⁹ Foley’s work demonstrated the spread of information and new tactics between the combat units of a military, as opposed to up the chain of command. The horizontal learning and dissemination of information across SOF field units before reaching command structures is common, as the operators have unconventional communication avenues, such as discussing lessons while at a bar.

Adaptation does not have the reach of innovation. Innovation becomes a fixture for the future of an entire military structure, while adaptation is typically limited to the confines of a specific military organization, as seen by Kollars’ work on the gun trucks. What started as a policy for some gun trucks became widespread amongst those who manned them. This is addressed by Farrell, Osinga, and Russell, who state that “[e]ven adaptation at the lowest operational level, such as adapting tactics,

³⁶ Kollars. “War’s Horizon.” 2015. P.534

³⁷ Theo Farrell, Frans Osinga, and James A. Russell. *Military Adaptation in Afghanistan*. California: Stanford University Press. 2013. P.2-3

³⁸ Ibid. P.4

³⁹ Robert T. Foley. “A Case Study in Horizontal Military Innovation: The German Army, 1916-1918.” *Journal of Strategic Studies*. 35:6. 2012.

techniques, and procedures (TTPs), can add up to significant change in a military's capabilities or approach to operations."⁴⁰

Farrell and Terriff argue that adaptation, perhaps multiple adaptations, over a period of time, can become innovation.⁴¹ Russell has suggests similar findings, with his study of the US Army in Iraq determining that localized adaptation by small Army units paved the way for fundamental changes in standard operating procedures that constituted organizational innovation.⁴² As has been discussed in the innovation subsection, the examination of SF revealed this to be the case.

⁴⁰ Farrell, Osinga, and Russel. *Military Adaptation in Afghanistan*. 2013. P.7

⁴¹ Farrell and Terriff. *The Sources of Military Change: Culture, Politics, Technology*. 2002. P.6

⁴² Russell. *Innovation, Transformation, and War: Counterinsurgency Operations in Anbar and Ninewa Provinces, Iraq, 2005-2007*. 2011. P.8

Primary Definitions

The lesser concepts of the paper revolve around relatively simple definitions which carry less weight and complexity than the nature of military change. As stated earlier in this section, they include the Vietnam War, Army SF, UDT, SEALs, SOF, and others.

Operator is a contentious term within the SOF community. It describes someone who is performing special operations, “to operate.” Today it usually denotes SOF personnel heavily involved with killing or capturing enemy forces through gunfighting, whether it is long-range or close-quarters battle. It is a term in common parlance within the military, and as such, it will be used to describe sailors, soldiers, airmen, and Marines in SOF units performing SOF roles.

The Vietnam War by this paper’s definition took place from 1957 to 1973, as 1957 is when the first detachments of Army SF were deployed to Vietnam.⁴³ The beginning of the Vietnam War is contentious, but as this paper focuses on SOF during the commonly accepted Vietnam War time period, the period from which the units examined were present, to the time they left, will be taken as the Vietnam War.

Covert refers to actions or operations that (to those the operation is targeting) have an unknown sponsor, but a known effect. For example, if SF teams were secretly deployed to a country to train insurgents, and the Green Berets were posing as contractors of various backgrounds, the operation would be covert. The sponsor behind the training remains unknown, while the insurgency itself is a visible outcome knowingly experienced by the target.

⁴³ John Prados. *The US Special Forces: What Everyone Needs to Know..* New York: Oxford University Press. 2015. P.35

Clandestine refers to actions or operations that have an unknown sponsor and unknown effect. For example, if a SEAL Team were to work with the CIA, enter into a denied state and emplace a sensor in a harbor that would collect information for the CIA. Neither the sponsor nor effect is experienced by the target.

Special Operations Forces (SOF) are units that are trained in a manner more intense and detailed than conventional forces, for the purposes of performing unconventional roles. Currently, if a unit falls under US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), they are categorically SOF. As SOCOM did not exist until 1987, far post-Vietnam, the definition for this paper will be broader. The term SOF will include Army SF, UDTs, SEALs, Marine Force Recon, CIA paramilitary forces, and units assigned to Military Assisted Command, Vietnam—Studies and Observations Group (MAC-V SOG).

The forces who are not SOF are called **Conventional Forces** (also known as “**Big Army**” or “**Big Navy**”). The conventional armed forces seek to close with, and destroy the enemy through traditional combined arms tactics usually employed en masse. A historic example of conventional warfare would be the Battle of Normandy in the Second World War, where hundreds of thousands of soldiers invaded occupied France in a large operation that featured many units and means of assault. This is contrasted with unconventional operations, that may feature small teams performing assassinations or acts of sabotage. It is important to note that at higher levels in SOF command structures, during the Vietnam era, many of the senior officers were not qualified members of their units, for example, the senior leadership of Special Forces Provisional Command were rarely actual Green Berets who had gone through the Special Forces Qualification Course and earned their SF tab. Rather unqualified conventional officers filled these positions and brought with them attitudes based in established doctrine. It is also important to note that the SOF command structures were also placed under

conventional command structures, as SEALs were organized under the conventional Naval Forces, Vietnam, thus introducing more non-SOF leadership into decision-making processes regarding the use of SOF.

Army Special Forces (SF) refers to a unit commonly known as the “Green Berets.” This is a SOF unit organized into Special Forces Groups—Airborne (SFG[A]). During Vietnam the numbers swelled from a handful up to seven Groups with four National Guard elements. These Groups are organized into battalions, then companies, which are further organized into Operational Detachment Alphas (ODAs), a combat team of 12 soldiers, and Operational Detachment B’s (ODBs), a training team that serves as component commands for the ODAs.⁴⁴ The origins and mission profiles of the SFG(A)s will be examined further in the “Origins” section of the thesis, but they were created to operate behind enemy lines in Soviet-occupied Europe (particularly Western Europe should it be overrun) and lead partisan resistance.⁴⁵ Each member of an ODA is trained as an expert in a field or trade (medic, weapons, demolition, intelligence, communication), and the ODA as a whole has a very high level of cultural, as well as combat training.

Navy Underwater Demolition Teams (UDTs) were teams formed as the offspring of the Naval Combat Demolition Units (NCDU) during the Second World War. They existed as “frogmen,” swimmers versed in naval reconnaissance and demolition capabilities and served through the Korean War and the Vietnam War before their deactivation in 1983.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Ibid. P.25

⁴⁵ Joseph D. Celeski. *The Green Berets in the Land of a Million Elephants*. Havertown: Casemate Publishers. 2019. P.6-7

⁴⁶ No Author. “Genesis of the U.S. Navy’s Sea, Air, Land (SEAL) Teams.” *Navy SEAL Museum*. No date given. Retrieved November 5 2019.

Navy Sea, Air, Land (SEAL) Teams are teams organized as a Navy SOF unit, today assigned to SOCOM. They were formed as an alternative to the UDTs, expanding the skill base to include direct combat and inland capabilities not found in the UDTs.⁴⁷ Although much historical literature sees the two units as interchangeable, the direct combat capabilities seen in the SEAL teams differentiates them substantially from the UDTs. As seen in 1983 with the dissolution of the UDTs, their responsibilities were largely assumed by the SEALs, and in a broad historical sense can be seen as their successors, but it is erroneous to equate them during the Vietnam War. When they are referred to together during the paper they will be written as **UDT/SEALs** or **Naval SOF** or **Naval Special Warfare (NSW)**, but referring to one does not refer to the other, as the UDT and SEALs are separate entities.

Unconventional Warfare (UW) for this paper refers to the training of foreign armies/paramilitary organizations, and then being led, by, through, and with, American advisors in guerrilla operations. This is the bread and butter of Special Forces, who train forces and then lead them into battle. This paper exposed a definitional challenge with this term, due to the lineage of SF writings. In the 1958 version of FM 31-21, the Special Forces manual, SF performs guerilla activities in support of conventional forces, largely by way of interrupting communication and supply lines, with certain other parameters being given. In the 1961 SF manual UW refers to all activities that SF undertakes, such as Special Reconnaissance, Psychological Warfare, information warfare, economic warfare, assassinations, essentially anything relating to counterterrorism or counterinsurgency or outside the realm of conventional warfare—even activities that do not involve leading by, through, and with advisors. UW, in the 1961 SF manual, is simply the role of SF, and whatever they do. Therefore, by that logic, whatever SF does is UW. Following the War, this was changed to reflect the missions that accompany UW, rather than UW being an all-inclusive term. Today UW implies, to some degree,

⁴⁷ Ibid.

advisors and proxies are conducting guerilla/insurgency operations. More on this is available in the SF section of the Baselines Chapter, and Chapters 3 and 4 of the thesis. It is also important to note that SF was assumed in FM 31-21 to be linking up with pre-existing guerilla elements and training them, acting as a support element (that would likely face massive casualties) to the conventional forces pushing into Soviet-occupied Europe. During the Vietnam War, they would raise their own forces organically.

Direct Action (DA) in SOF today generally implies Close-Quarters Battle raids, but in this thesis, it will refer to American forces undertaking combat operations, whether close-quarters or not. For SF, this fell under the definition of Unconventional Warfare until revisions were made to SF's mission statement after the War. DA operations conducted for the purposes of counterterrorism, as will be covered in Chapter 5, specifically refer to Close Quarters Battle operations against a fixed target.

Foreign Internal Defense (FID) refers to American advisors training foreign military or paramilitary personnel for a role in counterinsurgency. For the purposes of this paper, and the constraints of the Vietnam War (forces like Army of the Republic of Vietnam's Special Forces and Civilian Irregular Defense Forces were both guerilla and counterinsurgents), FID will refer to the act of Americans engaging in a stabilization effort against an insurgency.

Reconnaissance refers to advanced scouting, **Special Reconnaissance (SR)** refers to very advanced scouting, often deep behind enemy lines, in order to relay information for SOF or conventional military purposes, direct airstrikes or artillery, or collect Human Intelligence (HUMINT). With requirements to be stealthy, mature, experienced, and infrequently, deadly, SR is essentially a SOF-only mission set.

Tactics refers to the ways in which combat elements, usually on a small level, win fights against the enemy forces, the **tactical level** of evaluation is the evaluation of the techniques and procedures used in conducting the tactical level operations. Tactics inform strategy and vice-versa, this especially being the case with SOF who are used in small numbers and therefore very reliant on tactical excellence in order to achieve their overall goal, which can be a strategic-level objective.

Strategy refers to the means used to achieve high-level goals of a military or a state. The **strategic level** of analysis seeks to examine whether the ultimate goals of the nation are being reflected in the operations of a military in a conflict. Strategic effects are something that SOF has struggled to achieve due to their limited size, misappropriation, and incompetence at leadership levels, despite excellence at a tactical level.

Chapter 2: Baselines

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Baselines Introduction

This chapter seeks to set a baseline for the units examined in this thesis. Doing so is critical, as it allows for an examination to take place to determine if the units deviate from what is given in this section, and therefore have undergone change. These baselines include the who, what, where, when, how, and why of the SOF units in question. As deviation from these baselines is how change is defined in this thesis, a clear understanding of the SOF elements in question is essential. These baselines seek to provide the reader with the necessary understanding to move forward in the examination of SOF in the Vietnam War. The histories of the units presented are not complete and comprehensive, but rather allow the reader to have a basic understanding of SOF prior to the analysis.

Smaller changes outside the scope of the founding documents referenced in this section will also be included but, due to the small scale and lack of doctrinal reference points, are generally assumed to be adaptation, as they are small enough in scale to not have a baseline established by available doctrine. For this section, Special Forces are covered in much greater depth than their Navy counterparts, due to the complexity of their history and structure as well as the straightforwardness of Naval Special Warfare.

Army Special Forces: the “Green Berets”

This section begins with a historical analysis of the Special Forces, then proceeds into a breakdown of their 1958 Field Manual, which serves as their baseline for this paper. Finally this section acknowledges shortcomings and changes to the Field Manual that result from unclear definitions of Unconventional Warfare and the role of SF, as both changed as a result of the Vietnam War. It is important for the reader to keep in mind that SF was not a well-received addition within the Army, due to bureaucratic opposition and identity issues (the conventional Army did not like SF's techniques, or the drain it created on their Non-Commissioned Officer corps), and was treated as an inferior, unworthy element that inherited missions that the conventional Army saw as beneath itself or even immoral.

United States Army teams focused on partisan resistance have a long history. Adjacent to SF's creation there were operations in Korea, but more importantly, the Second World War, that informed the US of the capabilities of Unconventional Warfare—the use of specialized soldiers to train militias to fight as guerrillas on the US' behalf. A benefit of performing a mission like this is force multiplication; a small amount of Americans can train a much larger force to act on their behalf. In the Second World War the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) had “Jedburgh Teams,” groups of clandestine soldiers who would work with local resistance forces to fight Axis forces behind enemy lines. After the war the OSS was disbanded, with its offspring being the CIA and the Office of the Chief of Psychological Warfare, the precursor to Army Special Operations Command. The joint history of the CIA and SF is an important theme throughout this paper.

Army Special Forces as they exist today date back to 1951, with the creation of the Office of the Chief of Psychological Warfare.⁴⁸ This office was given the objective to "formulate and develop psychological warfare and special operations plans for the Army in consonance with established policy and to recommend policies for and supervise the execution of Department of the Army programs in these fields."⁴⁹ The commander, Major General Robert McClure, divided the office into psychological warfare, requirements (logistics), and special operations. As McClure lacked experience with long-range patrols or guerilla warfare, he brought on experts to fill the void in his command. At the same time, there was the creation of United Nations Partisan Forces Korea (UNPIK), a partisan resistance group that was led by US trainers to lead raids and conduct Unconventional Warfare (UW) in North Korea.⁵⁰ While this did not create SF, the temporary UNPIK reinforced the need for a dedicated and permanent SF branch.

McClure's efforts resulted in the creation of the 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) (10th SFG[A]) in 1952, for the purposes mentioned above. Staffing the SFG(A) was done through intaking soldiers from the disbanded Ranger units in Korea.⁵¹ At the initial time of creation, SF were designed for Unconventional Warfare and, if needed, long range patrols. Prados specifies that this was with the intention of a European deployment should the Soviets expand their influence.⁵² Specifically, SF would be used to capitalize on partisan resistance in Europe if the USSR invaded (or in the alternative event if the US launched a war against the USSR). A point that reinforces the "stay-behind" nature of SF was the *Code of the Special Forces Operator*. This document, written in the mid-1950s, was signed by men becoming Green Berets, who acknowledged their role in staying behind during an invasion to

⁴⁸ Col. Alfred H. Paddock (Jr.) "Major General Robert Alexis McClure Forgotten Father of US Army Special Warfare." *Psywarrior.com*. No date given.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ John Prados. *The US Special Forces: What Everyone Needs to Know*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2015. P.23

⁵¹ Paddock. *Psywarrior.com*. No date given.

⁵² Prados. *The US Special Forces*. 2015. P.25

coordinate guerilla activities.⁵³ This baseline of being a stay-behind force created a situation where all of SF's activities in Vietnam were outside of this aspect of the baseline, as they were not organizing partisan resistance in Soviet-occupied Europe. As can be expected, massive changes both during and following their involvement in Vietnam came as a result of this different use-case scenario.

SF teams were organized around the concept used by the Office of Strategic Services Jedburgh teams in the Second World War, with a captain leading, a lieutenant serving as executive officer, and 13 NCOs.⁵⁴ These men were given specialized training in a variety of skills, and cross-trained amongst themselves to be proficient in each skill. The training pipeline was roughly a year to two years. This formed the basis of the unit that the Special Forces Command (Airborne) still use today, the 12-man Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA), also known as an "A-Team."⁵⁵ While SF in the very early years used a slightly different system for team structure, by 1960 SF had modernized and introduced the current 12-man ODA structure.⁵⁶

In September 1953, another SFG, the 77th, was raised, which served as the "reactionary" force that could respond to global crises while the 10th SFG(A) remained in Germany.⁵⁷ Also in 1953 91 SF soldiers were deployed to Korea, assigned to work with the 8240th Army Unit advisors of UNPIK.⁵⁸ This was not a Special Forces deployment, as the Green Berets sent to Korea were assigned to a conventional Army unit, the goal being to get SF more practical experience in instructing guerrillas.

In his extremely thorough work on SF, Joseph Celeski notes that SF was originally designed exclusively by Colonels Bank and Volckmann for Unconventional Warfare—distinct from Rangers

⁵³ Charles H. Briscoe. "The Special Forces Operator." *Veritas*. 14:1. ARSOF, Office of the Command Historian. 2018.

⁵⁴ Paddock. *Pymwarrior.com*. No date given.

⁵⁵ No Author. "FM 31-21: Guerilla Warfare and Special Forces Operations." *Department of the Army*. September 29 1961. P.22

⁵⁶ Eugene G. Piasecki. "The A Team Number System." *Veritas*. Vol. 5 No.4. 2009.

⁵⁷ Mark Lloyd. *Special Forces: The Changing Face of Warfare*. London: Arms and Armour Press. 1995. P.14, and Eugene G. Piasecki. "Training the Trainers: Donald D. Blackburn and the 77th Special Forces Group (Airborne). *Veritas*. Vol. 5 No. 1. 2005.

⁵⁸ Piasecki. "Training the Trainers." 2009.

and Raiders.⁵⁹ However, through the 1950s, 10th SFG was deployed in Europe, and, with a lack of partisan forces to cooperate with, began to practice for commando operations instead.⁶⁰ It is also worth noting that due to the requirements of the A-Teams—they would be on their own in a hostile country—the teams were given extremely thorough combat training suitable for any environment (from arctic to jungle), aquatic training, small unit tactics, ambushes, directing air support, directing air resupply, among others.⁶¹ These were taught to not only enable the SF to teach their Unconventional Warfare counterparts, but also to enhance the team's organic capabilities. It is important to note that SF are not commandos, they are force multipliers that can perform commando operations (and today perform them quite often). SF's capabilities were enhanced by the Lodge Act of 1950, which allowed foreign nationals to join the US military, many from Finland or Germany came and brought foreign capabilities and knowledge with them to SF.⁶²

SF culture is also unique and very different from their conventional Army counterparts. While the culture certainly changed during the Vietnam War, which was the first major conflict that involved SF, a constant was the desire to have educated, mature individuals who could be trusted to covertly operate in denied areas. The Vietnam War killed many SF members and produced the most casualties of any conflict the US has been involved in post-Second World War, reshaping much of the US' military and political identity. SF was no exception. The Special Warfare School (SWS) was created to train SF, which has pre-training, assessment and selection, and the qualification, or "Q" course.⁶³ Additional training courses were available from the Department of Defense if soldiers desired, and Green Berets received further training once they reached a team. The Special Warfare School in the

⁵⁹ Joseph D. Celeski. *The Green Berets in the Land of a Million Elephants: US Army Special Warfare and the Secret War in Laos 1959-74*. Havertown: Casemate. 2019. P.7

⁶⁰ Prados. *The US Special Forces*. 2015. P.26

⁶¹ Celeski. *The Green Berets in the Land of a Million Elephants*. 2019. P.8

⁶² Shelby L. Stanton. *Green Berets at War: US Army Special Forces in Southeast Asia 1956-1975*. California: Presidio Press. 1985. P.3

⁶³ Christopher K. Ives. *US Special Forces and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam: Military Innovation and Institutional Failure, 1961-63*. New York: Routledge. 2007. P.39

1950s regularly had guest speakers who were experts in their fields talk to Green Berets, which reinforced an attitude of open-mindedness, unconventional problem solving, and saturating the men with a knowledge base spanning many topics that might help them on their global journeys.⁶⁴ This created men who were free-thinkers, something not encouraged in Big Army, ready and willing to act in unconventional ways. There were also issues between Special Forces and the conventional Army that dated to SF's inception. As stated by Major General Edward Partin:

In the early fifties, Special Forces groups were not a recognized part of the Army. They were seen as outsiders, great warriors, but they could not live comfortably within the peacetime regimental system. You had people of the sort that you wished you could deep freeze on the last battlefield and thaw out on the next battlefield of the next war. It was a rough group.⁶⁵

Special Forces did not have the culture or mission set that attracted men who felt compelled to follow Army traditions and procedures that did not make sense to them, as these features of Army life did not ultimately address the mission at hand. SF was culturally oriented for problem-solving at any cost. Thus, many in the conventional Army deemed the Green Berets “snake eaters, miscreants, and rogues.”⁶⁶ What actions Green Berets saw as necessary or a prioritization of efficiency, the Army saw as an affront to the institution.

The Baseline: FM 31-21

The 1958 edition of FM 31-21, the Field Manual on guerilla warfare and Special Forces, is used as a baseline for SF in this thesis. It must be noted that a classified version, FM 31-21A, exists for all the editions/revisions of FM 31-21, but this classified manual remains unavailable. FM 31-21A largely covers the small-unit SF tactics and methodologies that are not publishable, while the

⁶⁴ Ives. *The Green Berets in the Land of a Million Elephants*. 2007. P.38

⁶⁵ Annie Jacobsen. *Surprise, Kill, Vanish: The Secret History of CIA Paramilitary Armies, Operators and Assassins*. New York: Hatchette Book Group. 2019. P.60

⁶⁶ Ibid. P.61

unclassified version takes a high-level examination of SF to enable SF Group commanders, and conventional commanders above them, to understand the capabilities and high-level methodologies for the employment for SF.

A key component of SF in this thesis is their relation to counterinsurgency/counter-guerrilla operations. While this thesis will prove that SF was not doctrinally oriented towards fighting counterinsurgency prior to 1961, there were key moments SF had with the concept prior to that date. One example was that Col. Volckmann, one of the founders of SF doctrine, had written Field Manuals on both guerrilla and counter-guerrilla operations prior to joining the Special Warfare Centre.⁶⁷ Additionally, the 77th SFG(A) had been formed to respond to crises outside of Europe, whatever the crises may be, although it was found to be inefficient and woefully underprepared until it underwent revised training in 1958.⁶⁸ It is likely that at these stages counterinsurgency became a discussion point, but was not actionable.

There was a strange version of FM 31-21 from 1955 that was drastically different from the 1951/52 and 1958 versions. It was titled “Guerilla Warfare” and makes no references to Special Forces as a unit whatsoever, only referring to American guerrilla and counter-guerrilla forces. It seems that for this edition, instead of producing a Special Forces manual like was seen before (1951/52) or after (1958), the Department of Defense made a generic guerilla/counter-guerrilla manual that lacked much of the content of the earlier or later editions, and went to great lengths to avoid the use of the term Special Forces. Even stranger is that it superseded the 1951/52 editions that contained much more information pertinent to Special Forces, while the 1951/52 and 1958 editions are much more similar to one another than the 1955 edition. This edition of the manual might serve as the response to a request General John E. Dahlquist, Chief of Army Field Forces, made to the Special Warfare Centre

⁶⁷ Mike Guardia. *American Guerrilla: The Forgotten Heroics of Russell W. Volckmann*. Philadelphia: Casemate. 2015. P.135

⁶⁸ Piasecki. “Training the Trainers.” 2009.

to develop Army counterinsurgency doctrine, tactics, techniques, and procedures, and training literature on guerilla warfare to educate the entire US Army.⁶⁹ In this regard, it is possible that FM 31-21 (1955) was seen as an introductory manual for all soldiers in the Army, and was not intended to serve as an SF manual at all.⁷⁰ In this case, as it superseded 1951/52's edition of the FM, perhaps there was a push to eliminate SF and have all US forces be capable (on paper) of guerrilla and counter-guerrilla activities. Again, all references to counter-guerilla activities were removed in the 1958 edition (which was definitively a Special Forces' manual) that replaced the 1955 installment. It was also possible that the 1955 edition served as a psychological operation, or PSYOP, to discourage insurgencies, in that it advocated hostage taking and seemed to suggest public executions as means of counterinsurgency.

Given that the references to counter-guerilla warfare did not exist in the 1951/52 or 1958 SF manuals, this capability was likely a consideration that they disregarded in order to focus on their role in conventional war in Europe, or this edition was never designed to be an SF manual. It is also important to note that SF, during the early years in Vietnam (1957-58), were not there in a counterinsurgency role, but rather to raise Vietnamese SOF counterparts to resist Russian or Chinese invasion. Because of this, SF never undertook counter-guerrilla operations while in Vietnam prior to the 1958 version of the manual being released. Due to a combination of the lack of references to SF, the lack of material found in every other edition of the SF manual, and the fact that SF did not conduct counterinsurgency/counter-guerilla operations prior to the replacement of the manual, the 1955 version is not considered relevant or applicable for a baseline within the scope of this thesis.

The 1958 FM 31-21 made clear that SF were designed to operate largely in conventional warfare while functioning as guerillas, and the primary role given for guerilla operations was to

⁶⁹ Eugene Piasecki. "The History of Special Warfare." *Special Warfare*. Vol. 28 No. 2. April-June 2015. P.10

⁷⁰ Department of the Army. "FM 31-21: Guerrilla Warfare." 1955. P.2

“interdict enemy lines of communication, installations, and centers of war production in support of conventional military operations.”⁷¹ The secondary roles of guerilla forces (for which SF were a part of) were given as:

- 1.) Intelligence
- 2.) Psychological warfare
- 3.) Evasion and escape operations
- 4.) Subversion against hostile states (resistance)⁷²

This reinforces the point that SF was designed as an unconventional force-multiplier for combat operations in support of conventional forces in an overall conventionally conducted operation. The manual elaborates that SF’s intelligence roles came in the form of local intelligence systems that provide them with early warnings of attacks on them, as well as strategic intelligence roles of collecting target locations and damage assessment, with a note that this intelligence role should never come at the cost of the offensive capabilities of the SF unit in question.⁷³ This “targeting capability”—the identification of sensitive, potentially mission relevant points of interest (heavily emphasized in the 1961 edition of the manual)—is important for the discussion of SF in this paper, as it was a major role undertaken by the Green Berets in Vietnam.⁷⁴ The manual stated that guerilla units have “limited capabilities for defensive or holding operations,” and “the degree of control and supervision of guerilla forces which can be exercised by commanders who do not have representatives present with the guerillas is limited.”⁷⁵ This final point is especially relevant for the Vietnam War, where a divide between conventional commanders and the SF Groups reached all-time highs due to the misappropriation of SF that resulted from the poor understanding conventional commanders had of Green Berets.

⁷¹ No Author. “FM 31-21 Guerilla Warfare and Special Forces Operations.” *Department of the Army*. 1958. Pp.6-7

⁷² Ibid. Pp.6-7

⁷³ No Author. “FM 31-21 Guerilla Warfare and Special Forces Operations” 1958. P.9

⁷⁴ Ibid. P.9, and Celeski. *The Green Berets in the Land of a Million Elephants*. 2019. P.8

⁷⁵ No Author. “FM 31-21 Guerilla Warfare and Special Forces Operations” 1958. Pp.9-10

The 1958 manual made it clear that the role of SF was to degrade an enemy's conventional military force through the use of subversive guerilla warfare actions in territory either occupied or owned by said opposing force, to support the operations of a friendly "army, corps, or division."⁷⁶ Some ambiguity is created by later statements in the 1958 edition that a secondary role of SF was to "[p]erform such other missions as may be directed by the theater commander," and that an SF operational team had the secondary capability of "assisting in the execution of theater policies in the conduct of political, economic, and psychological operations."⁷⁷ These points institute catch-all's of sorts, but can be assumed, within reason, that they allowed for SF's occasional use outside of the given parameters. It was stated that after link-up with friendly forces, guerrilla elements would be used in friendly or controlled areas to apprehend enemy collaborators or spies, while conventional forces conducted combat operations against the enemy state.⁷⁸ The manual also stated that if there were outlaw bands that were not part of the guerrilla movement, SF should try to get them to work with the guerrillas for a common end.⁷⁹ If the outlaws would not work with the guerrillas, they would have to be destroyed, lest their outlaw actions become associated with the guerrillas and turn the civilians against said guerrilla movement. This was as close as the manual got to discussing counterinsurgency, and this description of operations does not qualify as such.

Differences from Modern Literature and the Influence of Kennedy

The outline of SF given in the previous sub-section contradicts what most modern writers cite as the core mission sets of SF prior to the Vietnam War. Most writers, including US Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) define the baseline for the SFG(A)s prior to the Vietnam War as Unconventional Warfare (UW), Direct Action (DA), Foreign Internal Defense (FID), and

⁷⁶ Ibid. P.11

⁷⁷ Ibid. Pp.18-9, 30-1

⁷⁸ Ibid. P.63

⁷⁹ Ibid. P.106

reconnaissance (long range patrols). According to US Army Special Operations Command, this originally included Counter-Terrorism as well.⁸⁰ These aspects are the main focus of SF today, although their terminology has been refined.

The question must be asked, how is the historical framework so misrepresented? The answer is somewhat simple: according to SF Colonel Francis J. Kelly, the doctrinal capabilities of SF were rewritten after the Vietnam War to reflect the multitude of SF mission sets given by most writers, as Unconventional Warfare was a catch-all term during the Vietnam War.⁸¹ Prior to Vietnam, certain mission sets, such as FID, were not considered in the 1958 manual, as UW in that document was considered to be disrupting enemy supply/communication lines, escape and evasion, psychological warfare, and limited intelligence gathering. This changed as SF was given more and more responsibilities in situations outside of conventional peer-peer conflict, and the main source of those operations was the Vietnam War. This was acknowledged in the 2014 edition of the SF Manual (then FM 3-18), which stated “...based upon lessons learned and formation used in guerilla warfare during World War II, its [Special Forces] sole purpose was UW. The experience in Vietnam gave SF a second purpose: countering a subversive insurgency.”⁸²

The deployment of SF in certain roles emerged in the early Vietnam-era. These deployments were likely logically folded under the point in FM 31-21 that states that SF would “Perform such other missions as may be directed by the theater commander,” despite the contingency in the FM that stated that SF use in Unconventional Warfare was limited to a conventional war.⁸³ For example, when SF deployed to train South Vietnamese Special Forces, a deployment of this nature was *technically* not in SF’s doctrinal capabilities at the time, as they were not linking with a preestablished resistance

⁸⁰ No Author. “USASOC Headquarters Fact Sheet” USASOC. 2016.

⁸¹ Col. Francis J. Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. Washington DC: Department of the Army. 1973. P.173

⁸² No Author. “FM 3-18 Special Forces Operations.” *Department of the Army*. May 2014. P.1-1

⁸³ No Author. “FM 31-21 Guerilla Warfare and Special Forces Operations” 1958. Pp.18-9

movement in occupied Europe.⁸⁴ With that being said, preparing volunteer counterparts for a resistance movement was not at all removed from SF capabilities. Another example of an SF deployment that was not doctrinally given was their role in evacuating Americans from the Congo in 1960.⁸⁵ Escape and evasion for downed pilots behind enemy lines where SF would be conducting guerrilla warfare is doctrinally different from inserting SF to retrieve American doctors and missionaries, even if certain capabilities to complete the missions overlap. Because of this, it is not possible to say that the baseline given in the manual actually limited the undertakings of SF, as they were being used to perform operations that they were not doctrinally oriented towards, but were theoretically capable of performing as directed by theatre commanders. It is clear that SF increasingly lumped the various activities that supported or could be conducted alongside UW (or operations the conventional Army simply did not want or could not perform) as components of UW, as was suggested by Kelly. This is apparent in the differences between the 1958 manual (which had a limited scope of UW) and the 1961 edition (which had a broader definition with more activities being performed under the umbrella definition of UW). Today, DA, FID, Special Reconnaissance (SR), etc., are their own unique mission sets and in most literature that has been retroactively applied to Vietnam.

A key note of FM 31-21 was the nature of the evolution of the document. Most military documents are subject to revision periodically. While militaries are, in general, very opposed to change, FM 31-21 took a radically different approach, likely due to SF's culture that fostered acceptance of change and adaptation, in conjuncture with their use in a large unconventional conflict outside of their established doctrinal capabilities. In the 1969 revised version of FM 31-21, it advocated a living document approach for the future of the manual, stating "[u]sers of this publication are encouraged

⁸⁴ Prados. *The US Special Forces: What Everyone Needs to Know*.. 2015. P.35, Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. 1973. P.4

⁸⁵ Charles H. Briscoe. "Congo Rescue: 1960." *Veritas*. Vol.14. No.1. 2018.

to submit recommended changes and comments to improve the publication.”⁸⁶ Essentially, their culture in combination with the Vietnam War resulted in a mentality that was open for change.

One final point must be made regarding the evolution of FM 31-21, prior to the evaluation of the Naval side of this thesis: By 1961, a new edition of the FM had been released that included much more detail and looser definitions pertaining to the employment of SF, particularly in regards to how they supported conventional forces. However, during this time SF was already active in Vietnam, and had for some time been performing operations outside the scope of either the 1958 or 1961 editions of FM 31-21. Simultaneously President Kennedy began a push for forces that were relevant in “bush wars,” which he saw as being the future of conflict. SF’s retrospective study on its history in Vietnam reinforces this point, in that it noted that in the Fall of 1961 Kennedy began expressing interest in using SF as a counterinsurgency tool beyond training counterpart SOF elements as they had been doing in Vietnam for years.⁸⁷ During his October 1961 visit to the Special Warfare School at Fort Bragg Kennedy stated:

Just because you give a soldier a pistol does not mean that you are doing away with the artillery. The purpose is to give this nation all the tools—not just some of the tools—that it needs to protect freedom...we are paying more attention to the growing threat—and the growing exercise—of conventional warfare which includes guerilla warfare, anti-guerilla warfare, counter-insurgency action, and psychological warfare. I look forward to hearing and seeing the report and demonstrations of the Special Warfare School here at Fort Bragg.⁸⁸

While the 1961 edition of the FM had been completed in September, prior to the visit of Kennedy, the backroom conversations between the Army and Kennedy had encouraged SF leadership to expand their formal repertoire to include these operations. This expansion transpired while SF was already deployed to Vietnam, performing roles beyond what was outlined in any edition of FM 31-21

⁸⁶ No Author. “FM 31-21 Special Forces Operations.” *Department of the Army*. 1969. P.1-1

⁸⁷ Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. 1973. Pp.5-6

⁸⁸ Charles H Briscoe. “JFK Visits Fort Bragg: a Photo Essay.” *Veritas*. Vol. 14 No. 2. 2018.

that existed at the time (Foreign Internal Defense). General William Yarborough also became head of the Special Warfare Centre in 1961. Prior to his SWC tenure he had served as the head of the 66th Counter Intelligence Corps Group, where he had extensively studied guerilla warfare and insurgencies.⁸⁹ Yarborough associated the direction he was told to take SWC, which involved building Special Forces' ability to fight "slow burn" wars, came from Kennedy himself.⁹⁰ On May 25, 1961, in a State of the Union address, Kennedy ordered his Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara "to increase and reorient Special Forces and unconventional warfare units."⁹¹ Despite the fact that UW is what SF does, the entire US Armed Forces (including the conventional forces) would undertake these unconventional operations during their participation in the Vietnam War, so to some extent, Kennedy's goal was seen through, even if only Special Forces truly specialized in these roles and folded them into their doctrinal capabilities.

The purpose of raising this point is not to obfuscate the roles of SF or Unconventional Warfare, rather raise awareness that as SF was finding its role in the scope of US military operations, SF was simultaneously dealing with political pressures faced by the entire military to become more relevant for the emerging unconventional conflicts that were seen across the globe. As has been discussed at length, the entirety of the US military was in a state of confusion about what constituted Unconventional Warfare (this lasting until the 1970s) and at this stage, in practicality, Unconventional Warfare was what Special Forces did, and conventional warfare was what Big Army did. By that logic, operations conducted that were not conventional were by default unconventional, and therefore SF inherited them, regardless of doctrine. While the logic obviously has gaps, this transfer of responsibilities and roles was repeatedly demonstrated during Vietnam, and changes to FM 31-21 as

⁸⁹ Kenneth Finlayson. "Lieutenant General William P. Yarborough." *Veritas*. Vol. 2 No. 2. 2006.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Piasecki. "The History of Special Warfare." P.11

time went on would reflect the capabilities of SF as they learned what they were capable of in the jungles of Southeast Asia.

Navy Underwater Demolition Teams (UDTs)

The history of the Naval UDTs trace back to the Second World War, where amphibious landings were far more common than in today's modern warfare. The UDTs were originally conceived as Naval Combat Demolition Units (NCDU), which had grown out of the Naval Demolition Units (NDU), all units considered to be a part of the Naval Special Warfare (NSW) community.⁹² Originally, the NDU/NCDU originated from a need for a unit consisting of men who would go ahead of an amphibious invasion and clear the beaches of mines or obstacles, enabling the invasion through naval or amphibious landing craft.⁹³ NCDU/UDTs would receive fire support from coastal ships, and be largely unarmed, going ashore as swimmers.⁹⁴ Though originally small in number, the UDTs grew through the Second World War, with about 3,500 personnel by its end in 1945. During the Korean War their roles remained the same, but the UDT developed specialized missions, such as cutting North Korean fishing lines, going inland on demolition raids (they would act as the explosive experts and not raiders), and rescuing downed pilots.⁹⁵ It is important to note that they experimented with direct action during their raids, but for the vast majority, they focused on demolition—Marines were attached to provide security while the UDT personnel were the demolition experts.⁹⁶ Some rare UDT missions had then go inland with no support, carrying a submachinegun and no spare ammo as it was too heavy to swim with.⁹⁷ While the Direct Action raids had seen success, the Navy prevented these operations from becoming UDT doctrine, as they feared it would decrease their capabilities in the areas in which the UDTs specialized.⁹⁸ Collins also notes that this was the first instance of the newly formed CIA

⁹² Ken Dockery. *Navy SEALs: A History Part I*. New York: The Military Book Club. 2002. P.30-33

⁹³ Ibid. P.27

⁹⁴ Ibid. P.38

⁹⁵ Ibid. 2002. P.214, 225

⁹⁶ James W. Collins. "Blue and Purple: Optimizing the Command and Control of Forward Deployed Naval Special Warfare." *Faculty of the US Army Command and General Staff College*. Thesis. 1997. P.47, 54

⁹⁷ Dockery. *Navy SEALs: A History Part I*. 2002. P.197-8

⁹⁸ Collins. "Blue and Purple." 1997. P.52

working with the UDTs/NSW.⁹⁹ During Korea the UDTs also specialized in Explosive Ordinance Disposal to deal with the high numbers of anti-ship mines they encountered, and began carrying more small arms on infiltration boats, whereas the WWII UDTs had largely been armed with knives.¹⁰⁰ Their roles did not change dramatically until the Vietnam War, and the baseline for their mission parameters for the purposes of this report are demolition; combat swimming/diving; beach clearing; and naval reconnaissance (hydrographic surveys).

Navy Sea, Air, Land (SEAL) Teams

The Navy Sea, Air, and Land (SEAL) Teams presented significant obstacles for the formatting of this paper. The issue stems from their creation being motivated by the increasing conflicts in Southeast Asia, and their utility led to the deactivation of the UDTs from which they spawned. Defining the exact operational parameters of the SEALs is difficult, because they were established during the Vietnam War, but for the purposes of this paper, their baseline is taken from their original mission statement and changes to said statement prior to their deployment to Vietnam.

The SEALs are very similar to the OSS Special Maritime Unit/Operational Swimmers, who were naval combat swimmers trained by Marine Raiders, and deactivated at the end of WWII.¹⁰¹ They primarily performed reconnaissance and demolitions in the same guise as the UDTs but had additional training for guerilla warfare. SEALs also hail, conceptually, from the WWII-era Amphibious Scouts and Raiders (a joint unit of Army Raiders and Naval boat personnel) and the Sino-American Cooperative Organization, a Naval advisory unit that conducted Unconventional Warfare with

⁹⁹ Collins. "Blue and Purple." 1997. P.47

¹⁰⁰ Dockery. *Navy SEALs: A History Part I*. 2002. Pp.222-4

¹⁰¹ Bryan K. Whitley. "LAST LIVING WWII OSS MARITIME FROGMAN RELIVES HISTORY" *marsoc.marines.mil*. October 12 2017.

Chinese proxies in Japanese-occupied portions of China.¹⁰² However, the deactivation of these units ended their legacies as standalone units, as the UDT were the only naval SOF element active after the war concluded. Almost all of the interviews with the founders of the SEALs revolved around the UDT's influence on the SEALs, with very little mention of the OSS, and for that reason, this paper will focus on the legacy of the UDT and the SEALs. It seems that most of the lessons learned by OSS swimmers were not passed down to the UDT/SEALs, unlike the lessons of the OSS to Special Forces.

Created in 1961, the SEAL Teams were designed to be the UDTs plus Unconventional Warfare—essentially increased combat capabilities added to UDTs.¹⁰³ This was done because of the increasing pressure in Vietnam, but also because Cuba was seen as a likely target for a US invasion, and the ability to have frogmen who were also combat qualified was an undeniably attractive option. They were given much more training than their UDT counterparts, including mountain warfare training and language training.¹⁰⁴ A detailed account of how the UDTs and SEALs differ will be given in the main component of this work, as the change from UDT to SEAL is a major focal point for this thesis regarding SOF change during the Vietnam War.

While the previously mentioned capabilities were given for the SEAL Teams after their creation, upon their inception, the baseline documents show that the two commands (one Pacific, one Atlantic), were given three simple directives:

1. Develop a specialized Navy capability in guerilla/counter-guerilla operations to include training of selected personnel in a wide variety of skills
2. Development of doctrinal tactics
3. Development of special support equipment¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² No author. "SEAL History: Origins of Naval Special Warfare-WWII." *Navy SEAL Museum*. No date given. Retrieved May 10, 2022.

¹⁰³ No Author. "Genesis of the U.S. Navy's Sea, Air, Land (SEAL) Teams." *Navy SEAL Museum*. No date given. Retrieved November 5 2019.

¹⁰⁴ Dockery. *Navy SEALs: A History Part I*. 2002. P.229

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. Pp.275-6

This was expanded in Rear Admiral Allan Reed's 1961 publication "SEAL Teams in Naval Special Warfare" (NWIP 29-1) to include the following points:

1. Primary: to develop a specialized capability to conduct operations for military, political, or economic purposes within an area occupied by the enemy for sabotage, demolition, and other clandestine activities conducted in and around restricted waters, rivers, and canals and to conduct training of selected US, allied and indigenous personnel in a wide variety of skills for use in naval clandestine operations in hostile environments.
2. Secondary: to develop doctrine and tactics for SEAL operations and to develop support equipment, including special craft for use in these operations.
3. Tasks: tasks may be overt or covert in nature.
 - a. Destructive tasks: these tasks may include clandestine attacks on enemy shipping, demolition raids in harbors and other enemy installations within reach; destruction of supply lines in maritime areas by destruction of bridges, railway lines, roads, canals, and so forth; and the delivery of special weapons (Special Atomic Demolition Munition) to exact locations in restricted waters, rivers or canals.
 - b. Support tasks: the support tasks of SEAL Teams include protecting friendly supply lines, assisting or participating in the landing and support of guerilla and partisan forces, and assisting or participating in the landing and recovery of agents, other special forces, downed aviators, escapees and so forth.
 - c. Additional tasks:
 1. Conduct reconnaissance, surveillance, and intelligence collection missions as directed.
 2. In friendly areas train US and indigenous personnel in such operations as directed.
 3. Develop equipment to support special operations.
 4. Develop the capability for small boat operations, including the use of native types.¹⁰⁶

Unlike much of the mentality of modern SEALs, it is clear from an examination of NWIP 29-1 that SEALs were created with the intention of being advisors, just like SF. They were originally created to, essentially, be Army SF in the water, but had no actual experience in training counterparts or partisans, or the components of land warfare that they would participate in. The mission set given

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. Pp.289-90

in NWIP 29-1 is somewhat similar to FM 31-21 (the 1961 edition), but more directly relates to the stated goals of President Kennedy regarding brush wars. Much like SF's mission sets which changed, this was done to alleviate the political pressure faced by the entire US military to ready itself for the conflicts Kennedy saw as being the defining features of the 20th century.

This section is not designed to be an all-inclusive history lesson on the units involved. Rather, it outlines the basic framework of the origins of the Special Operations being examined in this paper and provides the reader with a sufficient amount of information to enable them to understand the analysis presented. These baselines are broad, and reflect a period where SOF, and Special Operations as a concept, were being refined and better understood. Definitions, methods, and the SOF elements themselves have changed quite a bit since most of the manuals and frameworks were established, and this thesis will cover some of those changes that occurred as a result of the Vietnam War.

Chapter 3: SEALs Innovate and Adapt

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Introduction

This chapter will serve as an overview of Naval Special Warfare (NSW) in the Vietnam War. The chapter will begin with an evaluation of the innovative transformation that took place within NSW, then examine how the SEALs, the spawn of that innovation, changed to better fill their roles as a result of lessons learned in the Vietnam War. While the SEALs would learn further lessons as a result of their participation in the CIA-led Phoenix Program, a cyclical targeting/intelligence program, those lessons are included in Chapter 6. This section serves to introduce the reader to why the SEALs were needed, how they were created, why their creation was innovative, and the ways in which the Vietnam War served as a learning opportunity for the young SOF unit.

SEALs to UDT

This section goes in depth on the subject to examine the change from the original mission parameters of the Underwater Demolition Teams (UDTs), and how the creation of the SEALs transformed Naval Special Warfare (NSW). As has been referenced in the preceding sections, a major shift for SOF during the Vietnam War was the introduction of the SEAL teams to substitute and augment the capabilities of the UDTs.

It was ultimately discovered that the creation of the SEALs represents a unique example of Murray's revolutionary innovation.¹⁰⁷ Revolutionary innovation is a process of rapid change promoted through a top-down leadership push, where the leadership involved is properly informed about what they are pushing for and how to implement said change. This examination found a strange amalgamation of factors that ultimately constitute revolutionary innovation, but with certain abnormalities. There was both civilian and military leadership pushing for the creation of UW-capable Naval Special Warfare units, but until Kennedy was elected, the Navy did not bother to actually create a unit capable of addressing this. That is because Big Navy, outside of Admiral Arleigh Burke, was never interested in pursuing this capability, but their obligations to fulfill the President's wishes created the SEALs as institutional spawn from the UDTs.

The UDTs brought naval SOF experience to the new community, while the initial combat training was provided by Army Special Forces. Thus, a situation was created where the civilian leadership of the country, which created the impetus for change, was well-informed about the requirements of future conflicts, and the Naval SOF community, with external support, was able to fulfill the wishes, but the senior bureaucratic elements of the Navy had no knowledge on what was being created, or the Unconventional Warfare role the SEALs performed. This chapter outlines how the SEALs differed from the UDT, and represented drastic change from their predecessors. Unlike the major changes experienced by Army SF, this was a relatively straightforward and simple transition, as a new unit was created, rather than the reorientation of an existing institution.

The UDTs in Vietnam, as a separate entity from the SEALs, did not change much from their original mission parameters, or at least the missions they had become used to in Korea. The UDTs largely performed reconnaissance missions, such as hydrographic reconnaissance up the various rivers of Vietnam. However, as stated in the baselines, Unconventional Warfare was a primary concern for

¹⁰⁷ Williamson Murray. *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2012. Pp.306-10

the Kennedy Administration, which played a great role in furthering the Special Forces and promoting their use. While NSW had toyed with concepts around UW prior to Kennedy, it was his election that provided the Navy with the impetus and ability to create the SEALs.

To have a role in the increasingly unconventional conflicts around the world, but particularly in Southeast Asia, the Navy moved to create teams that would be able to fulfill these capabilities, in addition to the roles performed by the UDTs. This is not to say the UDTs were completely useless in asymmetric conflict/UW, rather, on an institutional level, they were barred from performing amphibious combat operations, as the areas inland from the beach were designated Marine Corps territory. In the Korean War the UDT had performed inland demolition raids, but as the explosives experts, usually alongside Marine forces.¹⁰⁸ According to Lieutenant Commander Ray Boehm, there was a team within UDT-21 that would occasionally get orders directly from the President to perform aquatic commando missions, as a sort of proto-SEAL team.¹⁰⁹ He does not state where these actions took place, but the timeframe described (late 1950s, early 1960s) suggests it probably was in the Mekong Delta or reconnaissance in North Korean waters. Again, this was the exception, not the norm, and Boehm's special mission team within UDT-21 gave rise to the SEALs, which he was responsible for originally training.¹¹⁰

Prior to the 1962 establishment of the SEALs, there had been discussions within the Navy regarding the development of an unconventional capability. In 1958 Admiral Arleigh Burke, Chief of Naval Operations, ordered a study into the creation of a small covert Navy force "to keep the Communist powers off balance," that would require a doctrinal reorienting of the UDTs.¹¹¹ What was

¹⁰⁸ Ken Dockery. *Navy SEALs: A History Part I*. New York: The Military Book Club. 2002. Pp.206, 220-222, 225, 292; and James W. Collins. "Blue and Purple: Optimizing the Command and Control of Forward Deployed Naval Special Warfare." *Faculty of the US Army Command and General Staff College*. Thesis. 1997. P.47, 54

¹⁰⁹ Ken Dockery. *Navy SEALs: A History Part I*. 2002. P.292

¹¹⁰ Ibid. P.292

¹¹¹ No Author. "Genesis of the US Navy's Sea, Air, and Land (SEAL) Teams." *Navy SEAL Museum*. No date given.

found was that shifting the UDT to these roles would have hampered their ability to perform their traditional missions, which they were doctrinally obligated to maintain as part of a conventional amphibious warfare role. Because of this, the Navy was unwilling to make any changes, despite the realities of the Cold War becoming apparent by this period.¹¹² Admiral Burke knew that Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy were interested in pursuing Unconventional Warfare as an avenue to combat communism, and this motivated his pro-UW stance.¹¹³ Nothing materialized or significantly progressed until 1960, when crises in Cuba and Laos forced the Navy leadership to acknowledge that they had a significant gap in capabilities should they be required to be involved in these conflicts.¹¹⁴ In May of 1961 Admiral Burke had ordered the creation of the SEAL teams, just a few weeks before President Kennedy's speech directing the Armed Forces to create UW capable teams. In Burke's order there were 4 points, 3 of which referenced Army Special Forces and how the SEALs would have to rely on them for training, doctrine, and specialized equipment.¹¹⁵ The order has a general theme of reluctance and confusion, while acknowledging that the Navy writ large would likely find UW to be unpalatable. The Navy SEAL Museum suggests the timeline of these events indicate that Kennedy did not actually influence the creation of the SEAL teams, as Burke had pushed for a UW capacity before Kennedy took office.¹¹⁶ This fails to take into account that the Navy did not develop the UW force prior to 1961, and that Kennedy had been pushing for a UW capability long before his speech—he had conversations regarding UW with the Joint Chiefs of Staff on February 23, 1961.¹¹⁷ Dockery notes that until Kennedy was elected, there was insufficient socio-political backing and funding to create new UW elements.¹¹⁸ Further demonstrating Kennedy's importance is a declassified report from 1972

¹¹² Ibid.; and No Author. "History of the Navy SEALs: UDTs in Korea." *Navy SEAL Museum*. No date given.

¹¹³ Tom Hawkins. "US Navy SEAL Teams: Origins and Evolutions 1942-1962." *Defense Media Network*. April 14 2021.; and No Author. "Genesis of the US Navy's Sea, Air, and Land (SEAL) Teams." No date given.

¹¹⁴ No Author. "Genesis of the US Navy's Sea, Air, and Land (SEAL) Teams." No date given.

¹¹⁵ Ken Dockery. *Navy SEALs: A History Part I*. 2002. Pp.272-3

¹¹⁶ No Author. "Genesis of the US Navy's Sea, Air, and Land (SEAL) Teams." No date given.

¹¹⁷ Ken Dockery. *Navy SEALs: A History Part I*. 2002. Pp.273-4

¹¹⁸ Ibid. Pp.272-3

on the SEAL teams that states that President Kennedy was a “principal initiator” of counter-guerilla and Unconventional Warfare forces in reference to the founding of the SEAL teams.¹¹⁹ Also of note was the extremely small size of the initial SEAL teams—only 100 SEALs per team, of which there were two.¹²⁰ The small size was likely due to the fact that the Navy did not want their UW capability to interfere with their traditional role, or the capabilities of the UDTs in supporting conventional amphibious warfare. Diverting resources for more SEALs would have sapped those resources from their conventional warfare priorities.

To the Navy, the establishment of the SEALs represented a complete shift in mentality, even within Naval Special Warfare (NSW). The use of Unconventional Warfare, counterinsurgency, and Direct Action were so vastly different to the Navy establishment that it took a large amount of convincing to get the material needed to equip the fledgling SEAL teams.¹²¹ Getting the SEALs to the development stage such that they existed on paper was supported by senior leaders in the Navy—once that had been completed the actual changes needed to get the new unit off the ground, like new materials and operational methods, confused them.¹²² A commander of SEAL Team Two, Lieutenant John Callahan suggested that their initial support was due to the fact expanding NSW got the Navy a larger budget, in addition to fulfilling obligations to Kennedy.¹²³ Callahan also stated that the initial commanding officers of the SEAL teams were low in rank because Kennedy wanted to avoid having senior conventional Navy officers, whom Callahan considered “brainwashed,” obstruct the SEALs with conventional Navy methodologies.¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ Ken Dockery. *Navy SEALs: A History Part II*. New York: The Military Book Club. 2002. P.35

¹²⁰ No Author. “Genesis of the US Navy’s Sea, Air, and Land (SEAL) Teams.” No date given.

¹²¹ Ken Dockery. *Navy SEALs: A History Part I*. 2002. P.261

¹²² Ibid. P.283

¹²³ Ibid. 2002. P.314

¹²⁴ Ibid. 2002. P.316

The conventional Navy still found ways to obstruct the SEALs in their infancy. The officer who purchased the equipment for the SEAL teams had five boards of investigation launched against him (each a potential court-martial), because he was purchasing equipment (AR-15s, crossbows) that the Navy did not understand or approve of.¹²⁵ Vice-President Johnson and President Kennedy got word of this, met the officer, and ensured the “stonewall[ing] bureaucrats” of Big Navy did not further interfere with SEAL acquisitions.¹²⁶ Again, to Big Navy, the inland areas were for the Marine Corps and Army, while the Navy, being a navy, fought at sea with ships and planes. Commandos were not part of the repertoire of the admiralty, and aside from the increased budget they got, there was no motivation to understand the SEALs or UW. The Intraservice competition between NSW and the conventional Navy would take a unique shape, as rather than further obstructing the newly-created entity, the conventional Navy simply ignored them. This is explainable through the Civil-Military lens. The Navy had been directed to address a problem by the President and could not be seen as opposing a mandate he had set forth. Ignoring NSW, rather than opposing or actively impeding them, became the de facto standard for Big Navy in Vietnam.

The men who were pulled away from the UDTs to become SEALs were largely reliant on the already established US Army Special Forces schooling. They learned how to conduct basic patrolling, use foreign weapons, conduct reconnaissance, “stealth operations,” advanced combat surgical procedures, High-Altitude, Low Opening (HALO) parachute training, among other specialized tactics and techniques.¹²⁷ The knowledge base that existed in the UDT in these areas was simply too small to be able to train two SEAL teams. It is also important to note that SEALs would likely not exist if it were not for the pre-existing Special Forces Groups, who had much more training and experience in the areas of instruction. The shortened development time of the SEALs was largely due to the fact

¹²⁵ Ibid. 2002. P.303-4

¹²⁶ Ibid. 2002. P.304

¹²⁷ Ibid. Pp.262, 313, and Dockery. *Navy SEALs: A History Part II*. 2002. P.48

that the Special Forces helped cut down their institutional learning processes in the areas UDTs were unfamiliar. Then-Lieutenant Commander William Hamilton Jr., the original commanding officer of the SEAL teams said that SF counterparts were “as supportive as they could be,” and “[t]hey came through and gave me everything I could possibly have imagined wanting.”¹²⁸ With this information, it is clear that the SEAL teams were just as reliant on the SFGs as they were the UDTs in their formation, as they directly pulled personnel (and thus experienced frogmen with naval SOF knowledge) from UDTs, and combat training from SF.

While Interservice lenses of examination would typically lead one to believe that Army SF would be opposed to the creation of a Naval counterpart, the nature of SOF lends itself better to an Intraservice model, as Army SF and SEALs had more in common with one another than their conventional service counterparts. Because of their similarities, SF actually advocated on behalf of helping the SEALs develop, a factor much more in line with a typical Intraservice relationship. It is for this reason that this paper suggests that the typical utilization of the lenses in question are actually reversed: SOF units, despite not being organized into a formal branch, actually more closely resemble one another than their host service. This is not necessarily the case for all traits of the SOF units in question, as there are cultural differences between the two that stem from their host services, but for the majority of the “who, what, where, when, why and how” of the two groups, SEALs and Green Berets had and continue to have more in common with one another than they do with their host service. And while the “who” in question is different in terms of the men they produce through training and indoctrination to their respective cultures, SEALs and SF typically recruit from similar pools of motivated, physically fit, intelligent young/middle-aged men who at the end of their service’s SOF training are still similar to one another (outside of service cultural differences seen between any Army/Navy personnel). The nature of the relationships between conventional/SOF and SEALs/SF

¹²⁸ Ken Dockery. *Navy SEALs: A History Part I*. 2002. P.281, 284

are limited by the scope of this work, but future examinations focused on the interpretation of these relationships could present a new lens to further the understanding of the unique relationship developed among SOF units in comparison to their host conventional service. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine this relationship past Vietnam, but for the examination of the creation of SEALs, the relationships typically found in the Intra/Interservice lenses are reversed.

Intraservice as a lens applied to SEALs would typically mean the branch being examined in conjuncture with the naval operators would be Big Navy. To some extent it does not matter what lens or model is applied to examining the relationship of Big Navy to the SEALs, because the relationship was largely nonexistent following the SEAL's creation.

Aside from doctrinal orientation and combat capabilities, an important difference between the UDTs and SEALs were the opportunities for advancement, and the appeal to the men. Whereas UDTs had very few billets for officer promotion, which essentially led to prolonged time in Naval Special Warfare being a “career killer,” the introduction of the SEALs offered new opportunities for advancement.¹²⁹ Additionally, the new teams brought out a new mentality amongst the men assigned to them. Captain Thomas Tarbox notes that after transitioning from a UDT to SEAL Team Two in 1962 (when he began commanding Team Two), the same men who were “conservative operators” during their time in the UDTs became open to new ideas, practicing operational concepts the UDTs had never been able to.¹³⁰ The ability of a unit to adapt to change and innovation are hallmark and critical notions for maximizing SOF effectiveness. During their conceptual formation in 1961, under Kennedy's Administration (at the direction of Admiral Arleigh Burke), they were given the objective of eventually deploying to Vietnam—particularly the Mekong Delta and Saigon River, despite the UDT presence in those areas at those times.¹³¹ That indicates that those in positions of power were

¹²⁹ Ibid. Pp.268-9

¹³⁰ Ibid. Pp.269

¹³¹ Ibid. Pp.273

already becoming aware that the SEALs were able to fill roles and perform operations the UDTs could not. While the SEALs were conceptually formed in 1961, they were formally recognized and first deployed in Vietnam in 1962 to conduct reconnaissance in the provinces and areas of Quang Tri, Da Nang, Nha Trang, Cam Ranh Bay, Vung Tau, and Qui Nhon.¹³²

The SEALs second mission, only months later, was to cross train with South Vietnamese forces (and train US UDTs on commando operations, who apparently never conducted DA, or if they did, it was extremely rare), however, they were limited in their actions as they were forbidden to cross into North Vietnam with their South Vietnamese counterparts.¹³³ This illustrates a point of change within the UDTs and their training as commandos, even if they never performed missions as such. Although minor, it demonstrates that the missions and capabilities of UDTs were inadequate for the operations of NSW in Vietnam, and the war forced changes on their doctrine and employment. The creation and deployment of the SEALs by NSW indicates that there was a need for NSW within Vietnam that the UDTs could not fill. Even with additional training for deployed UDTs, the SEALs, who were much more versed in combat activities than the UDTs, performed the commando missions for which they had been created. UDTs operated throughout Vietnam, but performed reconnaissance, naval support, and demolition raids, rather than the Direct Action/UW operations of the SEALs.¹³⁴ At times, the UDTs would “get bored” and attach themselves to conventional forces to perform riverine or inland demolitions.¹³⁵ As Roger Hayden, who served on UDT-12 and SEAL Team One said about being a UDT frogman performing demolition raids alongside conventional forces, “screw this naked warrior shit” (all he had was a grenade launcher, a swimsuit, his boots, a flak jacket, and

¹³² Tim Dyhouse. “NAVY SEALs GOT THEIR START 50 YEARS AGO OFF CUBA, VIETNAM” *Veterans of Foreign Wars Magazine*. 99:4. 2012.

¹³³ Dwight Jon Zimmerman. “U.S. Navy SEAL Teams from Establishment through Operation Urgent Fury: 1962-1983.” *Defense Media Network*. December 28, 2011.; and Dyhouse. 2012.

¹³⁴ Jocko Podcast. “Jocko Podcast 37 w/ Vietnam Vet Navy SEAL Roger Hayden.” *Youtube*. August 24, 2016. Timestamp: 12:30

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* 18:10

sometimes a helmet), “give me a 16 (M16), cammie (camouflage) me up, and let me go hunt these guys at night.”¹³⁶ He later added, with regards to the combat/commando capabilities of the UDT men, “Our heart was there, you know what I mean? But UDT you just weren’t trained to operate on land. You didn’t have the prerequisite skills you learn in SQT (SEAL Qualification Training).”¹³⁷ Still, the UDTs’ ability to destroy log dams, recon beaches, and perform EOD was extremely useful through the war, and eventually some of the frogmen carried M16s.¹³⁸ This was most likely for personal protection as opposed to offensive commando-like actions.

During the Vietnam War the SEALs never completely replaced the UDTs, which survived as late as 1982. However, this initial UDT-SEAL shift clearly delineates a change for the UDTs. While the SEALs were created for a different purpose than the mission the UDTs could perform, they were sapping manpower out of the UDTs, and performed missions that the UDTs could not. Simultaneously, the SEALs could perform all the missions of the UDTs. SEALs were, in effect, the replacements for the UDTs, even if it took a decade after the conclusion of the Vietnam War for this to become fully realized. Ray Boehm’s (among others) original dream of creating UDTs with increased combat capabilities—capable of taking orders directly from the Presidential Administration to perform operations—was realized. This creation required the orders of a President, the sapping of manpower from the UDTs, reliance on Army SF to train the original SEALs, and the lessons from a massive asymmetrical war, all of which culminated in the 1982 dissolution of the UDTs. But the SEALs live on and to this day enjoy a prestigious position within Special Operations Command (SOCOM), participating in every major war the US has since fought and producing high-quality naval operators.

¹³⁶ Ibid. 28:35

¹³⁷ Ibid. 38:28

¹³⁸ Captain Robert A. Gormly. *Combat Swimmer: Memoirs of a Navy SEAL*. New York: Penguin Group. 1998. P.40

It is clear the UDT-SEAL shift demonstrates a change in the UDT baseline, derived from the needs for capabilities beyond what the UDT baseline offered. There was a need for a naval unit capable of Direct Action (DA), counter-terrorism, Special Reconnaissance, while maintaining their UDT/EOD capacity. The alternatives for policy makers/senior military officials were either giving SF a dedicated naval element (they had aquatic training and teams capable of this role, but it was not and never has been a true SF specialty), which the US Navy would obviously campaign against, or drawing from their current manpower to create a new team. There was an identified flaw with their then-current (baseline) UDT capabilities that the Navy had to address lest they fail the civilian administration, the SEALs being the solution.

The process of creating the Navy SEALs was revolutionary innovative transformation as defined by Murray, but the analysis of this transformation begins with demonstrating the qualifiers of innovation as given in Grissom's "Future of Military Innovation Studies." Grissom's qualifiers require that the change that has been undertaken: (i.) "changes the manner in which military formations function in the field"; (ii.) "an innovation is significant in scope and impact"; and (iii.) "innovation is tacitly equated with greater military effectiveness."¹³⁹

The creation of the SEALs beyond a doubt altered how military formations functioned in the field. They provided an alternative force to Army SF that had a specialized amphibious capability not seen in the Army, inland, riverine, and coastal DA, reconnaissance, and Counter-Terrorism beyond what was seen for the UDTs. They functioned in both the same roles as the UDT, but with increased capability, and provided a skillset that the Navy and MAC-V depended on during the Vietnam War. Any Direct Action/commando operation, airborne operation, ship or oil derrick seizure, inland special reconnaissance operation that NSW has undertaken (and these make up a major portion of their mission sets) is solely due to the creation of the SEAL teams. Clearly, their creation changed how units

¹³⁹ Adam Grissom. "The future of military innovation studies" *Journal of Strategic Studies*. 29:5. 2006. p.907

functioned in the field. Another way in which the SEALs changed how units functioned in the field was their role in the institutional destruction of the redundant and obsolete UDTs, which did not reduce the capabilities of NSW, but did remove a unit as an alternative available for NSW commanders.

The creation of the SEALs was also significant in scope and impact. Today's SOCOM relies heavily on the SEAL teams, who have undertaken operations across the world, most famously, Operation Neptune Spear.¹⁴⁰ As special operations have been increasingly relied upon during the 21st century, and SEALs make up a large contingent of Special Operations Command (SOCOM), this is clearly significant: SEALs have been used in every conflict the US has entered into since their inception, and they have been relied on as both naval forces and inland operators. SEALs were also heavily used in the Vietnam War, during which they plotted the course for the future of Naval Special Warfare. Today, Naval Special Warfare Command has 10,000 personnel assigned to it, most of which are not SEALs; rather they are either DA enablers (such as Special Warfare Combatant Class Crewmen), or passive enablers (logistics, training cadre), centered around SEAL teams.¹⁴¹ Between the creation of SOCOM to enable SOF operations, of which SEALs represent a significant proportion of, to their use in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and throughout Africa, their creation has been important for the country's military operations. The creation of the SEALs was by far the most important change undertaken by Naval Special Warfare post-Second World War and, arguably, in the entirety of the 20th century. The SEALs serve as the first permanent direct-action Naval element capable of performing hydrographic reconnaissance, demolition (aquatic, coastal, and inland) and Unconventional Warfare missions which included Direct Action. NSW today is entirely centered around the SEALs. The culture and capabilities of the SEALs have become what "is" NSW.

¹⁴⁰ David A. Wallace. "Operation Neptune's Spear: The Lawful Killing of Osama Bin Laden." *Israel Law Review*. 45:2. 2012. Pp 367–377

¹⁴¹ USSOCOM Office of Communication. *2020 Fact Book: United States Special Operations Command*. 2020. P.22

Perhaps the most obvious of the three qualifiers for innovation that the creation of the SEALs represents is increased military effectiveness. The SEALs were the offspring of a unit that was already valuable (but not suited to modern demands) and increased their capabilities to suit the needs of the 20th century. This research has repeatedly shown that all persons involved in the UDT/SEAL community during the Vietnam War believed the SEALs to be a superior force to the UDT in terms of qualifications and utility.

Farrell, Rynning, and Terriff's work on military innovation distinguishing between sustaining innovation and disruptive innovation is useful here.¹⁴² The creation of the SEALs can be considered both, as their creation both increased capabilities in warfare, but also resulted in the institutional destruction of the UDT.

The innovation of SEALs can also be viewed through a number of lenses, beginning with the Civil-Military Model. While the civilian branch of government usually does not influence tactics directly, the SEAL teams were created at the behest of the Kennedy administration to address strategic shortfalls within the Navy's tactical counterinsurgency capabilities, as the administration predicted that bush wars would become the predominant model of conflict in the nuclear era. The end result of teams that employ different tactics results in a strategic change, has been illuminated, but it is worth noting the interaction between enhancing a team's tactical capabilities and the corresponding strategic results.

Competition between the Army and Navy did not produce functional SEAL teams, cooperation between Army SF and NSW did. Usually, the Interservice lens focuses on competition for resources, and at a flag officer level the services may have competed, however in this case the Army SF teams were eager to enhance their Naval brethren's combat capabilities and welcomed them

¹⁴² Farrell, Rynning, and Terriff. *Transforming Military Power Since the Cold War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2013. P.8-9

into their advanced training.¹⁴³ In that regard this relationship is more akin to Intraservice than Interservice. Perhaps that is due to the culture of Army SF, as opposed to Big Army, but the primary characteristic of this viewpoint of innovation is noticeably lacking. That is not to say the results from using this lens hold no value, as it is quite the opposite, and helps inform the culture of pragmatism in SOF in the pre-Vietnam and Vietnam eras. It is also important to examine the relationship from this low-level, because if Army SF had not trained the SEALs in combat techniques, they would have struggled to learn them independently, and potentially failed as a new creation. SF training being essential for SEAL success is something supported by SEALs of the early-Vietnam period.¹⁴⁴

The Intraservice lens taken to NSW perhaps suits this evaluation best, as the SEALs were the offspring of the UDT. As demonstrated, Roy Boehm, Thomas Tarbox, a number of other UDT frogmen, along with Arleigh Burke, took the idea they had dreamed of even before the Kennedy administration, used the political climate to achieve support, and created perhaps the most well-known SOF unit of all time. This complicates the top-down/bottom-up analysis as the impetus that allowed for the creation of the SEALs came from the UDTs, beyond a doubt, but the Kennedy administration was the essential governmental force that allowed the SEALs to become reality. The fact that within UDT-21, as stated by Roy Boehm, there was a presidential authority-based team for special missions that served as the true precursor to SEAL teams, as well as a desire for more DA capabilities indicates that it was bottom-up, but rather than facing institutional resistance from the higher echelons of government, the creation of the SEALs were enabled by said upper echelons. This is not to say there was no institutional resistance from the higher branches of the Navy, but rather the UDTs (who were on the lower end of Navy priorities) and the Kennedy administration (the highest end of government) saw eye-to-eye on the necessity of expanding NSW capabilities, while the senior Navy leadership got

¹⁴³ Adam Grissom. "The future of military innovation studies" *Journal of Strategic Studies*. 29:5. 2006. p.909

¹⁴⁴ Ken Dockery. *Navy SEALs: A History Part I*. 2002. P.337-8

a larger budget so were in favor of the change. Thus, it appears to be a sort of hybrid bottom-up/top-down innovation, where the bottom and the top are working in conjuncture towards an agreed upon and understood change, contrasted with the middle positions of power that pursue and enjoy the outcome of the change (increased budget) but dislike the change itself (acceptance of UW).

As the civilian leadership had pushed for a change and NSW met the goals of the Kennedy Administration, the process of revolutionary innovation was initiated. As stated, this was an atypical example of the model, as the admiralty was uninformed and outside of agreeing to fulfill the goals of the presidential administration, irrelevant to the process. Thankfully, due to the authority of civilian leadership in Western liberal democracies, the Navy bureaucracy was forced to comply with the creation of the SEALs, even if they were not particularly relevant for the establishment and maintenance of the new force. Evidence of this is seen in their founding doctrine, NWIP 29-1, which effectively states that SEALs do special operations and conduct Unconventional Warfare—whatever these may be.

Overall, it is clear that the UDT-SEAL shift that begun in Vietnam was an innovative change for the NSW community. The future of NSW was determined in the murky waters of the Mekong Delta, with the current structure, capabilities, and conceptual underpinnings of modern NSW hailing from the evolution of the SEAL teams. That does not mean the changes for NSW stopped at this point in Vietnam, as there were plenty of adaptive changes undertaken by the SEAL teams in the war. The remainder of this chapter will be dedicated to investigating the adaptations the SEALs undertook while operating in Vietnam.

SEALS Shoot, Move, and Communicate

Despite how the SEALs of today see themselves as almost exclusively assaulters, their second operational deployment (the first was reconnaissance) was to train South Vietnamese naval

commandos in 1962, and they also saw non-combat use in the Cuban Missile Crisis.¹⁴⁵ That first mission to Vietnam in 1962 set the stage for many of the activities the SEALs would carry out for the remainder of the Vietnam War. During that training deployment, the SEALs worked with Military Assistance Advisory Group-Vietnam (MAAG-V), which would serve as the predecessor to Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MAC-V), the regional command which oversaw the war.¹⁴⁶ As discussed in greater detail in the following chapter, Operation SWITCHBACK (1962-63; an effort to transfer the paramilitary programs being run in Vietnam from the CIA to the Army) reduced the influence of the CIA on the war, and therefore the Agency's influence on SOF. From that point on, SEALs would be engaged in the war until its end, learning and refining their capabilities in asymmetric warfare. This section will evaluate how they improved their capabilities.

Noted by interviews with Captain Tarbox, Commander of SEAL Team Two, the first time SEALs were actively sent into a combat scenario was in 1965 in the Dominican Republic, alongside Army SF, far from the bush war unfolding in Vietnam.¹⁴⁷ During this time it was still common for a man to go to the SEAL teams after having served in the UDTs—as established earlier, the UDTs were proto-SEAL teams—SEALs would be recruited out of the UDTs where they had time to mature. Still, the majority of the work that SEALs would carry out during the Vietnam War was combat-oriented. As James Andrews said, regarding the change from the UDTs,

[T]he difference in the kind of warfare just grew. From just underwater reconnaissance and beach blowing of obstacles to going into the jungle, swimming up the rivers and streams of Vietnam, and going ashore to seek out the VC (Vietcong). Hit them first rather than let them ambush you. Regular forces had to go into an area, dig in, and wait. They secured an area and pacified it. The SEALs would slip into an area and seek out the enemy, and either capture the leadership or just wipe them out.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ Austin Long, Helmus, Zimmerman, Schnaubelt, and Chalk. *Building Special Operations Partnerships in Afghanistan and Beyond*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation. 2015. P.55; and Zimmerman. 2011, and Dockery. *Navy SEALs: A History Pt. II*. 2002. P.67

¹⁴⁶ Graham A. Cosmas. *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-67*. Washington, DC: Center of Military History. 2007. P.21

¹⁴⁷ Dockery. *Navy SEALs: A History Part I*. 2002. P.271

¹⁴⁸ Dockery. *Navy SEALs: A History Part I*. 2002. Pp.264-5

It is important to note that the examination of NSW change in this portion of the thesis will be predicated around the fact that change for SEALs in Vietnam does not necessarily mean a change in their mission statements as outlined in either the mission intent outline or the mission statement document NWIP 29-1, which were both broadly defined, giving the SEALs room to find their doctrinal niche. Rather, the changes are in how they achieved their ends, or what the end state looked like: these components of small-scale change relegate the changes transpiring to adaptation. Innovation does not stem from small-scale changes of this nature. The politically-motivated nature of the creation of the SEALs (appeasing the Kennedy administration) creates a more difficult to navigate situation when determining baselines, as NWIP 29-1 was simply a net thrown over everything the conventional Navy and UDTs could not do (with the exceptions of civil affairs and leading SOF PSYOPS), with no real afterthought from Big Navy about how they would follow through on their goals. Rather Big Navy wanted the SEALs to do *something* (that ‘thing’ not being understood by Big Navy) to meet a checklist set out by the civilian heads of government.

The first official combat actions undertaken by SEALs in the Vietnam War was the deployment in February 1965 to Rung Sat Special Zone (RSSZ), where they were used in a DA role to eliminate Vietcong in the riverine and coastal environments.¹⁴⁹ Although deployed as part of the larger US Naval Forces, Vietnam (COMNAVFOR), their commanders did not understand how to employ the SOF units, so they were given orders such as “Patrol until contact is made. Kill as many enemies as possible. Extract after mission is complete.”¹⁵⁰ According to SEAL Roger Hayden, when his unit was assigned to Naval Forces, Vietnam his platoon’s orders were to “pacify the Vinh Long province” with no Rules of Engagement given, and with no oversight—the platoon did as they saw

¹⁴⁹ James W. Collins. “Blue and Purple: Optimizing the Command and Control of Forward Deployed Naval Special Warfare.” *Faculty of the US Army Command and General Staff College*. Thesis. 1997. P.60

¹⁵⁰ Collins. “Blue and Purple.” 1997. P.61

fit to accomplish their mission, under their own command without senior Naval leadership.¹⁵¹ Ironically, this inability for conventional commanders to properly direct SOF re-occurred some 40 years later in the US' next major counterinsurgency conflict, the Iraq War.¹⁵² Contrasted with the misuse of SF covered in the following 2 chapters, SF had conventional commanders who were too involved, assigning SF to missions they were not created for, SEALs had the opposite result from the same problem. The conventional commanders who had no idea how to use SEALs simply removed themselves from any decision-making or commanding role. The tempo for SEAL operations was set entirely by SEALs. The conventional Navy continued to reject NSW in most aspects—on one of Hayden's deployments to Dong Tam his SEAL platoon was stationed at a Vietnamese Naval base in between a US Army base and US Navy base, because neither the US Army nor Navy wanted SEALs in their installation.¹⁵³

Following SEAL Team One's success in RSSZ, SEAL Team Two was deployed in 1966 to the Mekong Delta.¹⁵⁴ Collins notes that, initially, the SEALs had no strategic imperative or command directive. While technically under the command of a conventional forces officer, they generally did what they wanted, forming their own insular society within platoons.¹⁵⁵ Lack of direction from commanders did not limit the SEALs from performing what they thought were appropriate operations that fit their niche. For example, then-Lieutenant Gormly would take his platoon deep into the Mekong Delta and ambush VC who were using small, otherwise unnoted canals, or areas known as "Secret Zones."¹⁵⁶ He felt this achieved a strategic psychological effect in that the VC routine, which

¹⁵¹ Jocko. "Jocko Podcast 37 w/ Vietnam Vet Navy SEAL Roger Hayden." 2016. 35:22; and Jocko Podcast. "Jocko Podcast 77 with Roger Hayden: War Stories. Mental Toughness and Clever Tactics" *Youtube*. 2017. Timestamp: 1:20:00

¹⁵² Bruce R. Pirnie, and O'Connell, Edward. *Counterinsurgency in Iraq (2003-6): RAND Counterinsurgency Study Volume 2*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation. 2008. P.76

¹⁵³ Jocko. "Jocko Podcast 37 w/ Vietnam Vet Navy SEAL Roger Hayden." 2016. 35:58; Jocko Podcast. "Jocko Podcast 77 with Roger Hayden: War Stories. Mental Toughness and Clever Tactics" 2017. 1:22:09

¹⁵⁴ Gormly. *Combat Swimmer: Memoirs of a Navy SEAL*. 1998. P.43

¹⁵⁵ Collins. "Blue and Purple." 1997. Pp.61-2

¹⁵⁶ Gormly. *Combat Swimmer: Memoirs of a Navy SEAL*. 1998. Pp.72-3, 78-83

had likely gone uninterrupted for years, was forced to change, thus promoting an aura of fear. Given their extremely small size, this fear was probably one of the greater operational accomplishments the SEALs were capable of in the Vietnam War.

What emerged from the SEALs efforts was perhaps one of the most substantial changes in SOF history, the “SOF package,” in this case, a “SEAL package.”¹⁵⁷ The SEAL package was a concept, executed in full in Vietnam, that a SEAL platoon (16 operators, usually split into two eight man squads) should have inter-unit support that enabled the operators to conduct their missions to the fullest. A SEAL platoon on its own is a useful tool, but it must be able to reach the areas it is set to operate in and can require assistance if it is in danger of being overrun by an oft-numerically superior enemy. Support for these scenarios in Vietnam came in the form of Boat Support Units (BSUs); Mobile Support Teams (MSTs); and naval aircraft—these units enabled the infiltration and exfiltration of SEALs, and provided fire support.¹⁵⁸ SEAL Master Chief Gary Smith, who served a total of five tours in Vietnam, wrote about how essential the helicopter support was throughout his memoirs.¹⁵⁹ In one instance, his platoon was able to destroy a VC battalion headquarters solely because of their gunship support.¹⁶⁰ The gunships that supported the SEALs came from Helicopter Attack Squadron (Light)-3 (HA(L)-3), more commonly known as the “Seawolves,” also provided a change from the basic gunships that existed previously, as their helicopters were the first to be armed with multiple miniguns and rockets.¹⁶¹ Increasing the amount of firepower on HA(L)-3 gunships gave the SEALs access to much more effective support. The use of helicopters in ground insertions increased through the war, as noted by Harry Constance, who saw the change take place from 1968-9, and by the time of Smith’s

¹⁵⁷ Collins. “Blue and Purple.” 1997. P.61

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. P.61

¹⁵⁹ Gary R. Smith. *Master Chief: Diary of a Navy SEAL*. Ballantine Books. New York. 1996.

¹⁶⁰ Smith. *Master Chief: Diary of a Navy SEAL*. 1996. P.110

¹⁶¹ Jocko Podcast. “Jocko Podcast 193 w/ Kirby Horrell: The Last Vietnam SEAL to be on Active Duty” *Youtube*. 2019. Timestamp 43:12

1971 deployment it seemed most SEAL operations (at least for his platoon) were airborne.¹⁶² Their ground-support fixed-wing aircraft were flown by Light Attack Squadron 4 (VAL-4), flying Rockwell OV-10A planes armed with M60 machineguns, a 20mm autocannon, miniguns, and rockets.¹⁶³

The development of dedicated close air support cannot be understated in significance to modern SOF. Integrated air support enables, possibly more so than any other attribute, the ability of SOF to engage in massive battles with small friendly forces, as the aircraft give them disproportionate firepower far above the 12-16 man teams in which they usually operate. This was also seen in SF, where as early as 1965, SF were operating in very small teams of two operators, two South Vietnamese SF, and a platoon (24) of Civilian Irregular Defense Group paramilitaries to conduct assaults with orbiting Air Force assets.¹⁶⁴

When it came time to navigating the jungle, the SEALs employed a strategy similar to their Green Beret counterparts and hired locals with knowledge of the jungle to assist them in navigating the hostile terrain safely. SEALs would often have VC agents switch sides (these men were known as Kit Carson scouts) and work for the SEALs, informing them of local areas and going with them to find booby traps.¹⁶⁵ While this was not exactly the traditional Unconventional Warfare model of Special Forces, they still used local counterparts and increased their numbers and effectiveness through unconventional, paramilitary means. The development of the supporting elements that go into a Naval Special Warfare package today did not and do not change the mission/doctrinal orientation of the SEALs but enhanced their ability to accomplish their already-defined objectives. The SEALs would be doing the same reconnaissance and ambush missions they employed in Vietnam,

¹⁶² Harry Constance and Randall Fuerst. *Good to Go: The Life and Times of a Decorated Member of the US Navy's Elite SEAL Team Two*. New York: Harper Collins. 1997. P.275

¹⁶³ Smith. *Master Chief: Diary of a Navy SEAL*. 1997. P.16

¹⁶⁴ Billings Gazette. "I'll give you \$20 for a team going to 'Nam'" *Youtube*. December 12 2015. Timestamp: 16:36

¹⁶⁵ Jocko. "Jocko Podcast 37 w/ Vietnam Vet Navy SEAL Roger Hayden." 2016. 49:20; and Smith. *Master Chief: Diary of a Navy SEAL*. 1997. P.87

but the package enabled them to do so far more effectively and target more hardened targets. This adaptation continues to this day, as the SEALs continue to use their enabling support elements to hit targets, although the SOP for the modern era is to bring more SEALs than would likely be required, including doubling up platoons into combined “Task Units.”

The development of the SEAL package is a change limited to NSW, and did not affect the larger SOF community, although eventually it would metastasize into the creation of the Special Warfare Combatant-class Crewman (SWCC), a modern rendition of the Boat Support Units/Mobile Support Teams. Once the formal SEAL package was developed with dedicated NSW elements that were integrated into the command structure, innovation could be more plausibly argued. The formal creation of SWCCs did not occur until 1987, and as such, they are outside the scope of this paper (as they are not UDT/SEALs), and even then, innovation would be a stretch for a change that merely enabled NSW to be more efficient at missions it already pursued. Therefore, the creation and use of the BSUs/MSTs, and the SEAL package in the Vietnam War were adaptations. HAL-3 and VAL-4 were deactivated in 1972, but NSW elements today still operate with a large air presence from a variety of supporting units, from multi-service SOF aircraft to conventionally flown rotary and fixed-wing airpower.

The SEALs also had the advantage of operating without many SOPs or big-unit doctrines that would act as obstacles to on-the-fly adaptation. The key to the SEALs ability to survive and adapt to Vietnam, according to Hayden, was the use of Immediate Action Drills (IAD) in their qualification training, that enabled the platoons to function smoothly as they knew exactly what their teammates would be doing, even if they could not see them.¹⁶⁶ IADs are essentially programed responses to enemy contact, battle drills executed reflexively and instinctively according to the situation at hand. If enemy contact was made, each SEAL had a job to do and would perform it immediately. Stateside,

¹⁶⁶ Jocko. “Jocko Podcast 77 with Roger Hayden: War Stories. Mental Toughness and Clever Tactics” 2017. 1:34:06

returning SEALs were interviewed and what could be learned about enemy tactics in Vietnam was incorporated into SEAL training.¹⁶⁷ But this still was not doctrine in that the IADs were not written down. Whereas this can be harmful in some ways, it also allowed the SEALs to be adaptable as there was no written doctrine for them to be limited by.¹⁶⁸

One of their SOPs that was of great benefit was the use of filling out “barn dance” cards at the end of a mission or patrol where they organized what they found, who they saw, how many gunfights they encountered for future operations in the same area either by them or by a replacement platoon.¹⁶⁹ The cards were not filled with highly valuable intelligence the CIA was after, they were essentially reminders about what to expect the next time they operated in an area.

By 1967, the SEALs had produced new tactics that allowed them to operate more effectively, one such tactic being the “stay behind ambush.”¹⁷⁰ This was conducted by SEALs to allow an effective withdrawal. It consisted of a conventionally executed ambush, usually at night, followed by the withdrawal of half the team. The other half would remain in place to ambush any survivors who may have escaped and rallied a larger VC/NVA element to return and kill the retreating SEALs, while those that had withdrawn to the SEAL Team Assault Boat provided fire support from the boat’s grenade launchers and miniguns.¹⁷¹ Additionally, after a friendly fire incident, the hammer-and-anvil tactic that characterized certain earlier deployments became unused.¹⁷²

These were adaptations that remain in place today, and in particular, the IADs have been used by all SOF in the post-Vietnam era. The reason these changes (IADs, barn dance cards, and stay behind ambushes) are adaptive, rather than innovative, in that they did not and do not affect what

¹⁶⁷ Dockery. *Navy SEALs: A History Pt.II*. 2002. P.50

¹⁶⁸ Jocko. “Jocko Podcast 37 w/ Vietnam Vet Navy SEAL Roger Hayden.” 2016. 32:00

¹⁶⁹ Jocko. “Jocko Podcast 77 with Roger Hayden: War Stories. Mental Toughness and Clever Tactics” 2017. 1:45:23

¹⁷⁰ Dockery. *Navy SEALs: A History Pt.II*. 2002. Pp.219-221

¹⁷¹ Ibid. Pp.219-225

¹⁷² Ibid. P.240

missions SEALs/SOF perform, but rather how they respond to certain situations. IADs simply make them better at responding to ambushes or performing ambushes they would have done, albeit less successfully, without IADs. Barn dance cards were certainly adaptive, in that they spread information, but again, like stay behind ambushes, were not prominent, large-scale changes to SEAL operations. Rather, they facilitated those that were already taking place. These changes were undoubtedly beneficial to the SEAL community, and modern SEALs owe their heritage, tactics, techniques, and procedures regarding Unconventional Warfare and Direct Action to the developmental phase of Vietnam, even if those TTPs have evolved today.

Conclusion

Naval Special Warfare was transformed through the Vietnam War. The development of the SEALs laid the groundwork for novel naval special operations, and this new unit gave the US new capabilities that it did not have prior to their inception. At the time of their birth, the SEALs were a diamond in the rough. They needed operational experience—experience they would get in the Vietnam War. Through this conflict they would learn new tactics, techniques, and procedures that enabled them to perform their missions as assaulters more effectively, refining their skills and building their unit culture. Because of the lessons learned in the Vietnam War, the SEALs became the premier SOF element of NSW, replacing the UDT which would be shut down as a result of the SEALs' capabilities. The SEALs changed techniques for infiltration, assault, the types of support they had access to, but did not change in terms of the missions they performed or *raison d'être* as an operational element of the US Navy. Innovative change on that scale has not been seen within the SEALs since, as the defining innovation for NSW thus far in the history of naval special operations was the expansion to include the SEALs as an element.

Chapter 4: Unconventional Warfare/Foreign Internal Defense

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Introduction

This section is designed to outline the Unconventional Warfare (UW) and Foreign Internal Defense (FID) operations conducted by Special Operations Forces during the Vietnam War. Due to the differing mission sets of the SOF forces examined during this thesis, this means that Special Forces, the Green Berets, are the focus of this section. This is because the Army Special Forces (SF) began their innovative transformation as a result of adaptations undertaken in response to the demands of running paramilitary programs in the highlands of Vietnam. A prominent motivating feature described through this section is the conventional-SOF divide, the gap between the two that is usually characterized by frustration and contempt towards the SOF elements, as a result of the conventional forces misunderstanding SOF's capabilities and disdain towards SOF cultures. An understanding of that, particularly with regards to the Army, is essential for understanding the *why* behind many of the decisions that were made on SF's behalf by the conventional commanders who oversaw the war.

This section begins with an examination of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG), which was the largest paramilitary undertaking of the war, and saw SF's entry into the rural highlands of Vietnam as they attempted to secure the loyalty of the remote tribes to the South's government.

This loyalty program then transitioned into a paramilitary warfare campaign that saw the hybridization of UW techniques for the purposes of Foreign Internal Defense (FID). The development of FID as a mission set for SF was a tremendous change that allowed them to break out of the UW role they were limited to prior to Vietnam.

Basic Timeline

The purposes of this subsection are to give the reader an index to which they can refer should confusion arise surrounding dates or the order of events. SF's roles in Vietnam follow a rough timeline:

1957-1960: SF trains South Vietnamese SOF. They also deploy to Laos to train various elements to resist communist incursions.

1961-1962: SF works with the CIA's Combined Studies Group/Division to secure the loyalty of the rural highland tribes to the South's government. Introduction of Foreign Internal Defense (FID) capability to Special Forces. President Kennedy advocates on behalf of SF and gives them additional roles and responsibilities.

1963: SF's rural highlands project, known as the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) is reoriented from securing the tribal people's loyalty to using them as offensive and defensive guerillas. SF is now tasked with performing border monitoring duties along the Vietnam-Laos and Vietnam-Cambodia borders. Special projects of various natures are implemented. The conventional forces gain an increasing say due to President Kennedy's death and President Johnson's prioritization of conventional military leadership in Vietnam.

1965: The conventional forces arrive in number, SF begins performing more missions to address the conventional Army's needs. Reconnaissance programs are developed. The CIDG

begins performing Special Reconnaissance and sees increasing use as infantry line units. Special Forces are now running a host of programs to meet a variety of requirements.

1966: Expansion of programs. SF stretched thin across many efforts. The relationship with the conventional Army continues to deteriorate. Massive battles rage throughout the countryside as CIDG outposts are assaulted by Vietcong (VC)/North Vietnamese Army (NVA) battalions and regiments.

1971: 5th Special Forces Group leaves Vietnam.

Why Special Forces were in Vietnam: an Overview and Introduction

The first deployments of Green Berets to Vietnam were to create a counterpart force to the Special Forces Groups (SFGs) in the South Vietnamese military. Following their deployments in the late 1950s, the counter-communist civil war began to pick up in the early 1960s, necessitating an ever-increasing frequency of SF deployments to South Vietnam to limit the communist's ability to gain a foothold. This saw SF go from advisors raising counterparts to counterinsurgents, a clear change in their goals.

As a result of fears relating to Sino-Soviet pushes, on June 24, 1957, 16 Special Forces soldiers under the guise of the 8251st Army Unit were deployed to Southeast Asia, including Vietnam.¹⁷³ They were there initially in a quasi-UW role; the Green Berets were training South Vietnamese SOF counterparts to act as resistance in the face of a Soviet or Chinese invasion.¹⁷⁴ This deployment was simply to train forces, not a combat assignment. It is important to note that SF were there in a UW training/advisory role, as the concern was *invasion*, as opposed to *insurgency*. American SF in Vietnam

¹⁷³ Shelby L. Stanton. *Green Berets at War: US Army Special Forces in Southeast Asia 1956-1975*. California: Presidio Press. 1985. Pp.1-2, Col. Francis J. Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. Washington DC: Department of the Army. 1973. P.4

¹⁷⁴ Robert W. Jones. "Sidebar: SF Setup and Growth." *Veritas*. Vol.3 No.1. 2007.

trained the Vietnamese SF (LLDB or *Lực Lượng Đặc Biệt Quân Lực Việt Nam Cộng Hòa*).¹⁷⁵ While the creation of the LLDB and eventual inception of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) Rangers cannot be considered unique or innovative on their own, they can be considered a part of an ongoing, large-scale effort undertaken by SF to raise SOF counterparts in allied states.

One of five priorities for the US military in SE Asia at the time was to have local forces that were capable of cooperating with the Americans, this was a goal appropriate for SF.¹⁷⁶ The use or understanding of SF was not something conventional commanders had any interest in at this time. They considered SF to be “non-Army” in their methods, and simply a scheme to maximize enemy losses through a relatively cheap endeavor, which culminated in their misuse.¹⁷⁷ This misuse often takes form in conventional commanders trying to use small SF elements in lieu of an infantry company or battalion for infantry operations. As has been stated many times, Special Forces, while heavily trained for combat, are not maximized in their use exclusively through combat operations, instead their use should capitalize on their force multiplier skillset, which in turn can be exploited in combat.

By 1961 it was clear that South Vietnam required more direct American support in the face of insurgency, as opposed to outright invasion; this support would come from the Green Berets expanding their role into operations to counter North Vietnamese influence. It was also in March 1961 that President Kennedy established a Counter-Guerrilla Task Force headed by the CIA Deputy Director for Plans, that would begin pursuing a greater understanding of “overseas internal defense.”¹⁷⁸ This would set the stage for an increased push for what is today known as Foreign Internal Defense (FID), the foreign internal stabilization efforts against an insurgent threat.

¹⁷⁵ Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. 1973. P.4

¹⁷⁶ Stanton. *Green Berets at War*. 1985. P.2; Will Rodriguez. “SOF Backpack Nukes.” *SOFREP*. August 22 2019.

¹⁷⁷ Stanton. *Green Berets at War*. 1985. Pp.2-3

¹⁷⁸ US Department of State. “US Covert and Counter-Insurgency Programs.” *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume XXIV, Africa. Office of the Historian*.

In 1961, in response to Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's increased support for Communist activities worldwide, President Kennedy increased the number of SF soldiers in Vietnam to 400, and they began counterinsurgency training.¹⁷⁹ In 1960 Vietnam had seen some 7,000 Communist/Vietcong insurgents kidnapping or killing 15 village chiefs per week, creating chaos in the rural areas.¹⁸⁰ It was also during 1961, in September, that 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne) was formed at Fort Bragg.¹⁸¹ 5th Group shortly thereafter became the SF Group designated for Vietnam.

As SF's role expanded, a large part of its mission was identifying and working with minority populations who had been persecuted by the government, and bringing them into an alliance to fight against communist infiltration.¹⁸² Doing so would also prevent these disgruntled populations from becoming communist allies, and they occupied critical strategic areas. Ensuring their loyalty would help stabilize the rural areas. Special Forces in Vietnam were, after their initial deployments to raise Vietnamese SOF, used for "clandestine, para-military, and special unit projects."¹⁸³ SF was initially grouped under the CIA's Combined Studies Group/Division (CSG/CSD), until Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) was reorganized into Military Assisted Command-Vietnam (MAC-V) in 1963, and SF fell under the command of MAC-V.¹⁸⁴ Through a process known as Operation SWITCHBACK, the paramilitary work SF had been doing with the CIA/CSD was transferred to SF under the newly formed MAC-V. Once under MAC-V, SF had its own command (Special Warfare Branch/US Army Special Forces Vietnam [Provisional]) where they would ostensibly not have conventional commanders interfering in their goings on.¹⁸⁵ Those three areas (clandestine,

¹⁷⁹ Steve Balestrieri. "JFK Sends 400 Green Beret "Special Advisors" in May 1961 to Begin Vietnam Involvement." *Special Operations*. May 25 2017.

¹⁸⁰ Mark Lloyd. *Special Forces: The Changing Face of Warfare*. London: Arms and Armour Press. 1995. P.119

¹⁸¹ Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. 1973. P.5

¹⁸² Balestrieri. "JFK Sends 400 Green Beret "Special Advisors" in May 1961 to Begin Vietnam Involvement." 2017.

¹⁸³ Stanton. *Green Berets at War*. 1985. Pp.37, 48

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid. Pp.48,52

paramilitary, and special unit projects) would remain the focus of SF during the Vietnam War, and they used indigenous, non-ARVN forces to accomplish their missions.

Up until the early-mid 1960s it is clear that SF were still very much a part of a bureaucracy that was fluid in goals and structure but remained rigid in their military procedures. The shift from MAAG to MAC-V signaled the war's ongoing expansion, and set the stage for the use of SF to take on additional responsibilities, as the conventional leadership of the US Armed Forces grew to rely on SF to complete all unconventional assignments. The expansion of the war proved both to enhance SF's capabilities, but further burden them with increased projects within their roles (training clandestine and paramilitary forces, and special projects).

It is worth noting that some authors, such as former Green Beret Gordon L. Rottman (who served in 5th Group in Vietnam), believe the mission SF performed in Vietnam was the exact opposite of the one they were originally created for.¹⁸⁶ There is not a consensus amongst writers on the topic of the purpose of SF in Vietnam; many say SF's role fit their doctrinal obligations, while others feel SF were performing a mission set outside of their doctrinal purview. That is because much of what they were doing was Unconventional Warfare methodology (what they were trained for, the training or leadership of partisan forces for guerilla warfare) while conducting what would become known as Foreign Internal Defense (FID, a stabilization and counterinsurgency effort). Elements of truth are found in both positions: SF was capable of training paramilitary forces, with the context of such actions being in a conventional war; what was happening at this stage in Vietnam was SF training and raising a counterpart SOF element, but in an unconventional war. Essentially, both parties are right and wrong; SF was doing what they were trained to do on a micro-level, but on a macro/operational level they were employed in a new context, and in unprecedented scope and scale.

¹⁸⁶ Gordon L. Rottman, Chris Taylor (Illustrations). *Special Forces Camps in Vietnam 1961-70*. New York: Osprey Publishing. 2005. P.4

Adding to the position that SF was experiencing changes was the introduction of new regionally-focused SF Groups—no longer were they limiting themselves to Europe. The Vietnam War saw the growth of SF from a specialized “break glass in case of emergency” option for a European land war, to a unit capable of deploying Green Berets anywhere in the world for problems beyond conventional warfare. Additionally, Green Berets were not supposed to *create* guerilla forces in the areas they were working, rather they were supposed to link up with already established movements and “foster and organize” them through training, leadership, and structure—essentially enhancing an already existing movement for a desired political/military outcome.¹⁸⁷ Ultimately, SF did something resembling the job they were trained to do in a situation they were not prepared for changing the whole of SF through a series of adaptations.

CIDG and Adaptation within Paramilitary Forces

The largest and most prominent examples of change for Special Forces in Vietnam saw the unit reframe the goals it could pursue, and changes in how they pursued them. Faced with a massive problem—huge areas of uncontrolled (by either the South’s government, or the Vietcong proxies of the North) wilderness housing many primitive highland tribes—they set out in unique, new adaptive ways to achieve their end goals. It is important to remember that SF was created to sponsor and enhance militias behind enemy lines in the events the Soviets invaded Western Europe, not begin the guerrilla movements themselves.¹⁸⁸ In that context the paramilitary forces/partisans trained by SF would be short-term elements that would dissolve once the Soviet invasion had been repelled or rolled back in time. In essence, those paramilitary forces would exist for as long as they had to, but they were not envisioned as a long-term solution—this was substantially different for the paramilitary forces in

¹⁸⁷ No Author. “FM 31-21 Guerilla Warfare and Special Forces Operations.” *Department of the Army*. 1958. Pp.18-20

¹⁸⁸ Department of the Army. “FM 31-21 Guerilla Warfare and Special Forces Operations.” 1958. Pp.18-20

Vietnam. Additionally, the cultures SF would be dealing with in occupied Europe were more familiar to them than the rural highlands of Southeast Asia.

In order to pacify the wildlands of western Vietnam and lower the amount of terrorist activities undertaken by the VC, SF launched a new sort of program to reach the tribes of the central highlands. The goal was to secure the highlands through the recruitment of the indigenous populations into a paramilitary program, something SF was not originally created for (they were supposed to link up with pre-existing movements) but not removed from their capabilities. SF was certainly closer in capability and doctrine to performing this role than the conventional Army. The main group targeted were the *Montagnard* (French for “mountain men”), a collection of primitive tribes living in the highlands of central/western South Vietnam.¹⁸⁹ These tribes wore loincloths and fought with homemade crossbows. The initial group they worked with were the Rhade, beginning a long-term relationship between SF and the tribal groups. With a foreign culture that was largely unknown to them, SF decided to employ an exploratory program that had its roots in an empathetic model built around gaining the trust of those they were attempting to work with.

The pilot program was created in 1961, and undertaken by Sergeant First Class Paul Campbell, an SF medic (18-Delta) who decided medicine would be the way to get the rural areas on the side of the Americans.¹⁹⁰ He and another American, David A. Nuttle, of the International Volunteer Services, set out on behalf of the CIA-SF Combined Studies Division (CIA/CSD).¹⁹¹ The initial contact between the Rhade and SF was in late 1961 at Buon Enao in Darlac Province, which served as a FID/UW (and diplomatic) experiment.¹⁹² This was still during the CIA Combined Studies Division era, prior to SWITCHBACK. The program run by Campbell and Nuttle focused on assisting

¹⁸⁹ John Prados. *The US Special Forces: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2015. P.37

¹⁹⁰ Christopher K. Ives. *US Special Forces and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam: Military Innovation and Institutional Failure, 1961-63*. New York: Routledge. P.1, Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. 1973. P.12

¹⁹¹ Eugene G. Piasecki. “Civilian Irregular Defense Group: the First Years: 1961-1967.” *Veritas*. Vol. 5 No.4. 2009.

¹⁹² Ives. *US Special Forces and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam*. 2007. P.15

communities with their qualities of life, as opposed to conducting combat operations.¹⁹³ As stated in a Presidential decree, the CIA/CSD were to control the experiment, free from influence of either the South Vietnamese government or MAAG.¹⁹⁴ Most of what SF performed initially was digging wells and delivering babies. They established clinics and taught nurses, performing many roles of a Civil Affairs Team, which eventually joined them.¹⁹⁵ This was vastly different from the SF baseline, not just because of their development of counterinsurgency capabilities, but in the exercise of their skills. This was not truly change in terms of what SF was supposed to do on a small level (train, advise, assist); rather, it was a change in how they did it, the context in which they performed these operations (unconventional vs. conventional warfare as the backdrop for their use) and the end goals of their operations (stabilize vs. destabilize). Had this program not been launched, SF would have likely found another way to secure the highlands, but the Buon Enao experiment served as an accelerant to gaining a foothold and securing the loyalty of the Montagnards. In the 1958 FM 31-21, a positive side effect of “foster(ing) favorable relations with indigenous personnel” is provided as an incentive for undertaking medical projects, but this is within the context of a force that already wants to fight, and the positive psychological effects of medical treatments is not mentioned again.¹⁹⁶ Essentially, the use of medicine to gain favor with the locals was unfamiliar to SF doctrine at the time.

It was in 1962 that SF started bringing up the issues of village defense, which the Montagnards then took seriously, as they had built trust with SF, and now had firearms. As the numbers of ODAs grew, they quickly established a controlled rural area comprised of 40 villages, and had 1,000 militia members, and 300 offensive strikers.¹⁹⁷ The ongoing project had become known as “Area

¹⁹³ Ibid. Pp.15-22

¹⁹⁴ Piasecki. “Civilian Irregular Defense Group: the First Years: 1961-1967.” 2009.

¹⁹⁵ Ives. *US Special Forces and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam*. 2007. Pp.15-9

¹⁹⁶ Department of the Army. “Special Forces Operations.” 1958. P.113

¹⁹⁷ Balestrieri. “JFK Sends 400 Green Beret “Special Advisors” in May 1961 to Begin Vietnam Involvement.” 2017. and Ives. *US Special Forces and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam*. 2007. P.21

Development,” and expanded to 200 villages.¹⁹⁸ Simultaneously to Campbell’s adventure, other Green Berets established the mountain commando paramilitary unit in Da Nang, creating ARVN mountain raiders.¹⁹⁹ They also established the “trailwatchers,” later known as border surveillance, who watched for VC infiltrating into Vietnam from surrounding areas. The Area Development experiment, along with the units being trained at Hoa Cam, then became a unified project known as the Civilian Irregular Defense Group, or CIDG.²⁰⁰ Some of the personnel who filled CIDG slots were criminals recruited from jails, paid by the number of VC they killed.²⁰¹ All of the paramilitaries were minorities of Vietnam, many of whom were also ethnically Cambodian.²⁰²

This program demonstrates a major difference between the SEALs and SF, in that SF was able to form and enact a viable strategy that allowed for the conversion of a highly contested and vulnerable region into a somewhat stable portion of Vietnam. A large scale plan to stabilize, integrate, and make self-sufficient a contested area beyond the capabilities of Naval Special Warfare while it adapted to UW. This change also highlights the flexibility of SF, as they were never designed to *create* programs like the CIDG, only work alongside the men and women who were already willing to fight.²⁰³

The maintenance of a force like the CIDG was not exactly in SFs repertoire, for a number of reasons. They were not doctrinally oriented to be conducting guerilla warfare against guerilla opponents, nor were they expecting to engage in civil affairs activities while recruiting locals into a defensively-oriented militia. For these jobs and the long-term establishment of paramilitary forces, SF had to adapt to be able to meet the requirements of their operations in Vietnam. Christopher Ives notes SF’s “cognitive dominance,” their intellectual capacity coupled with operational skills that allows

¹⁹⁸ Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. 1973. P.32

¹⁹⁹ Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. 1973. P.32

²⁰⁰ Ibid. Pp.32-4

²⁰¹ The Team House. “Special Forces Vietnam: Mobile Guerrilla Force, Blue Light, w/ Ruben Garcia Ep. 53” *Youtube*. July 31 2020. Timestamp: 15:17

²⁰² The Team House. “John Mullins: MACV-SOG, Phoenix Program, Blue Light, and security consultant: Ep. 48” *Youtube*. June 26 2020. Timestamp: 12:50

²⁰³ Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. 1973. P.169

SF to have a disproportionate effect (relative to their size) on their taskings.²⁰⁴ Cognitive dominance allows a flexible mindset that readily takes on new skills to adapt to a changing landscape. This is what enabled SF to perform the variety of tasks they faced in Vietnam, allowing their continued adaptation to their new operational environment and roles in the CIDG. The relationship with the CIA also enabled them to pursue tasks beyond their doctrine that were still reasonable, as the CIA had a better understanding of special operations than the conventional Army, due to their shared heritage in the OSS and the nature of covert or unconventional assignments. This cooperation would be short lived, as once the conventional forces arrived in Vietnam, they would pull SF away from their civilian sister service and into the grip of Big Army.

SWITCHBACK and the Conventional: Political and Military Changes to FID

By 1962/63 UW/FID had gone from the ugly duckling of warfare to a desired and pursued capability, as SF and CIDG had proven to be a remarkable success, enough so that other branches (Air Force, Marine Corps) began pursuing the UW/FID capability.²⁰⁵ Some of this pursuit originated from Kennedy's ongoing pushes for broader acceptance of UW/FID. During peacetime SF were unwanted, and to remain relevant they had to adopt all the capabilities the conventional Army did not want to include. However, when those capabilities were needed for a conflict, the conventional commanders did not know how to properly use Special Forces, and conventional forces attempted to remain relevant and elbowed their way into SFs mission sets. Therefore SF simultaneously dealt with uninformed, inexperienced leadership and bureaucratic competition.

Innovation and adaptation for SF were not simply a means to increase efficacy, they were a means of survival in a bureaucratic environment that continually rejected them during the latter half of the 20th century. In keeping with the tradition of the conventional forces taking command over

²⁰⁴ Ives. *US Special Forces and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam*. 2007. P.2

²⁰⁵ Stanton. *Green Berets at War*. 1985. P.42

SOF, SWITCHBACK occurred from July 1962 to July 1963, and Special Forces stopped administering the CIDG under the CIA's CSD, and instead administered it through US Army Special Forces (Provisional) Vietnam, which was under MAC-V.²⁰⁶ In keeping with the accompanying tradition of misuse, conventional MAC-V commanders required that the CIDG would become front-line combat troops for search and destroy operations pursuant to the conventional military's counter-insurgency doctrine.²⁰⁷ SWITCHBACK had been motivated by the success of Area Development/CIDG, and the increasing resources the CIA had requested to administer the counterinsurgency/UW program. Once the program was successful the conventional Army seized their chance to take responsibility with their larger managerial capabilities and resources.²⁰⁸ Strandquist, who wrote a paper on the implications of SWITCHBACK, notes that Kennedy's Administration was motivated to reduce the paramilitary power of the CIA following the Bay of Pigs disaster, and that allocating SF/CIDG to MAC-V enabled Big Army to check a box pushed by the Kennedy Administration to do more for counterinsurgency.²⁰⁹ Thus, to the decision-making parties, the reassignment appeared as an ideal solution.

As a result of lessons learned from in Vietnam, as well as outside motivating factors (the spreading communist-insurgent wars), in 1963 a doctrinal concept called the Special Action Force (SAF) was implemented as a component of US counterinsurgency policy through FM 31-22. FM 31-22 explained how a rapid-response Special Action Force would be assembled from a Special Forces Group enabled by attached supporting SOF/conventional forces: PSYOPS, Civil Affairs, engineers, medical detachments, and military police.²¹⁰ Also present in the SAF would be Navy, Air Force, and

²⁰⁶ Ives. *US Special Forces and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam*. 2007. P.24

²⁰⁷ David Tucker and Christopher Lamb. *United States Special Operations Forces*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2007. Pp.91-3

²⁰⁸ Jon Strandquist. "Governmental Re-organization in Counterinsurgency Context: Foreign Policy Program Transfer and Operation Switchback in South Vietnam." *Small Wars & Insurgencies*. Vol.28 No.2. March 20th 2017. P.343; and Ives. *US Special Forces and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam*. 2007. P.28

²⁰⁹ Strandquist. "Governmental Re-organization in Counterinsurgency Context." 2017. P.344

²¹⁰ No Author. "FM 31-22 US Army Counterinsurgency Forces." Department of the Army. November 1963. Pp.11-16

Marine personnel to advise in areas outside of SF's expertise, and the document outlined the ways the SAF would work with the Department of State and US Agency for International Development (USAID). It also outlined how the SAF would become an action arm of Military Assistance and Advisory Groups (MAAGs) outside of Vietnam.

The SAF was designed to function as a new policy option available to Kennedy's Administration, which saw the previous nuclear-focused defense doctrine as lacking appropriate responses to low-level issues that did not warrant a massive retaliatory strike; the SAF was developed as a component of Kennedy's doctrine of "flexible response."²¹¹ FM 31-22 was written to further the "interdepartmental concept" of the Kennedy Administration, a methodology put forth to increase the capabilities of the US by encouraging cooperation and joint projects between the various institutions; the Department of State, USAID, and the Armed Forces.²¹² Kennedy and FM 31-22 envisioned the SAF (with SF as the primary combat component) as being an alternative set aside from the conventional forces, a separate option that enabled policymakers to have a dedicated response for counterinsurgency and special warfare, all of which he referenced in a 1962 speech.²¹³ Thus, the SAF was, in some respects, an effort to circumvent the involvement of conventional forces, and give an enhanced Special Forces Group a direct line to relevant agencies to resolve insurgent, unconventional, asymmetrical problems around the world that conventional forces were unprepared to respond to appropriately.

In FM 31-22 it was noted that the characteristics of the SAF were such that the element was "specifically trained and specifically available for special warfare missions including unconventional warfare, psychological, and counterinsurgency operations."²¹⁴ This was significant in two ways: (i) it

²¹¹ Eugene Piasecki. "The History of Special Warfare." *Special Warfare*. Vol. 28 No. 2. April-June 2015. P.11

²¹² Department of the Army. "FM 31-22: Counterinsurgency Doctrine." P.3

²¹³ Piasecki. "The History of Special Warfare." 2015. Pp.11-2

²¹⁴ Department of the Army. "FM 31-22: Counterinsurgency Doctrine." P.16

laid out a formal, doctrinal counterinsurgency role for Special Forces; and (ii.) it acknowledged that counterinsurgency was a separate role from Unconventional Warfare. The lessons of the CIDG were certainly influential in this regard, as the mission given for the SAF was “the counterinsurgency mission of special forces is to provide training, operational advice, and assistance to indigenous forces.”²¹⁵ These were the roles SF had performed in Vietnam since 1957, with the variable of indigenous forces represented by the host nation partner forces (LLDB, Vietnamese Rangers), or the more literal indigenous forces found in the CIDG. FM 31-22 was the codified change that acknowledged the lessons of early Vietnam, the new role of SF, and had the very optimistic perspective that the conventional forces they would work with would enable or cooperate with them to undertake counterinsurgency operations. In reality, SF would largely support the conventional Army, as had been established in FM 31-21 doctrinally, and was expected by the conventional commanders.

In his excellent work on Special Warfare history, Piasecki notes that after Kennedy’s assassination, President Lyndon Johnson’s Administration traded the “Internal Defense and Development” policies of Kennedy’s Administration that were focused on embracing the unconventional methods of SF, for an emphasis on conventional forces in Vietnam.²¹⁶ Thus, Kennedy had reduced the CIA’s role in Unconventional Warfare in 1962-63 with SWITCHBACK, which increased the role of the conventional by proxy. Once given the opportunity, the Johnson Administration also increased the role of the conventional forces.

Those paramilitary forces and special projects SF had been working on (and continued to work on) were ultimately overseen by the conventional forces after the influx of conventional military units following SWITCHBACK. An Interservice lens reveals most of the changes in the CIDG and SF projects following 1963 were initiated by conventional commanders, as opposed to SF unilaterally

²¹⁵ Department of the Army. “FM 31-22: Counterinsurgency Doctrine.” 1963. P.20

²¹⁶ Piasecki. “The History of Special Warfare.” 2015. P.12

developing their own new doctrines—their subservience to Big Army required them to adapt into what the Army needed/wanted them to be throughout South Vietnam, as opposed to what was appropriate for stabilizing the highlands. Further, the misappropriation by conventional commanders set in motion much of the adaptation that culminated in innovation for Special Forces. A key point to understand is that the conventional Armed Forces were woefully underprepared for Vietnam. They had maneuvered themselves into controlling SF, and by proxy the CIDG, but had no firm grip on most aspects of unconventional, guerilla, counter-guerrilla/counterinsurgency or asymmetric warfare.

Adopting UW as actionable doctrine in the 1950s had necessitated the creation of Special Forces because the conventional did not want to perform this mission. This stands in contrast with post-1963 that saw the same conventional force (that in the 1950s had intentionally limited their understanding of UW) in charge of all activities in Vietnam. This included appointing a non-SF officer to lead US Army Special Forces (Provisional) Vietnam.²¹⁷ Because the conventional were in command and control of SF following 1963, SF was expected to address the issues and shortcomings that stemmed from the conventional leadership's unfamiliarity and adaptation to Vietnam and UW. The conventional commanders were motivated to follow the doctrinal capabilities of SF, which emphasized their role in combat (as per the 1958 and 1961 iterations of FM 31-21) and pushed for the paramilitary projects to take a more active combat role.²¹⁸ Again, this did not consider how the context of the conflict they were operating in (conventional vs. unconventional, UW vs. FID) differed from the established doctrine, or the appropriateness of reorienting the CIDG. Military change expert Stephen Rosen believes that when military institutions change in warfare it is because they are pursuing inappropriate strategic goals, or that there is a fundamental misunderstanding between the military

²¹⁷ Ives. *US Special Forces and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam*. 2007. P.104

²¹⁸ Strandquist. "Governmental Re-organization in Counterinsurgency Context." 2017. P.344

and the goals they pursue.²¹⁹ While up until post-SWITCHBACK SF had pursued non-doctrinal goals through non-doctrinal means, there was a rationality and coherence to their undertakings, unlike what Rosen has postured. Rosen's points would become much more valid following the conventional Armed Forces arrival and their revision of the CIDG.

The CIDG functioned in the following way—an ODA would be deployed to an Area of Operations (AO), establish an “A-Camp” usually around a Vietnamese hamlet or in an area between several hamlets, and raise up a paramilitary force made up of two distinct types of combatants.²²⁰ The first type was a militia member who would respond when Vietcong forces would move into their area, with the rest of their time spent farming or doing their regular activities. The other type was a “striker” force, with a size equal to a US company, a little over 100 fighters, who would function as a Quick Reaction Force (QRF) to militia forces in trouble in the surrounding area, while also patrolling for Vietcong. The militia would eventually number 42,000, with an additional 18,000 strikers, a significant number when considering this number was raised by only 84 ODAs.²²¹

Ives considers this to be one of the most effective metrics in evaluating success in counterinsurgency, as the measure of people willing to fight the enemy, when used in combination with the amounts of contacts with insurgents, paints a more detailed picture as to the mindset of the people the effort is designed to win over.²²² In his excellent study on the impacts of SWITCHBACK, Strandquist notes three major changes once SF (and therefore MAC-V) took control of the project from the CIA: (i.) the CIDG conceptually changed; (ii.) the CIDG grew rapidly; and (iii.) the CIDG shifted focus from the remote population centres to the remote border regions.²²³ This section will

²¹⁹ James A. Russell. *Innovation, Transformation, and War: Counterinsurgency Operations in Anbar and Ninewa Provinces, Iraq, 2005-2007*. California: Stanford University Press. 2011. P.31

²²⁰ Balestrieri. “JFK Sends 400 Green Beret “Special Advisors” in May 1961 to Begin Vietnam Involvement.” 2017.

²²¹ Ibid, and Prados. *The US Special Forces: What Everyone Needs to Know*. 2015. P.38

²²² Ives. *US Special Forces and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam*. 2007. Pp.122-3

²²³ Strandquist. “Governmental Re-organization in Counterinsurgency Context.” 2017. P.349

deal with the first two changes while the impacts of the border program shift are located under the [A-Camps and Combat Adaptation](#) subsection.

One of the key aspects of SF was their ability to have a disproportionate effect on a campaign, as the force multiplier mission enabled the creation of covert/ clandestine armies through various means. Throughout the war, SF continued to undertake civic action projects, completing 50,000 economic projects, 34,000 educational projects, and 11,000 medical projects.²²⁴ After the creation of the CIDG through mostly civic actions, SF began taking them into combat against the Vietcong. During this phase, SF engaged in many battles, where enormous VC/NVA elements would try to overwhelm their camps. They would also perform reconnaissance missions (covered under “[Reconnaissance Efforts](#)” and Chapter 7), working with the CIA in many cases, as well as performing border surveillance and mountain commando missions.²²⁵ The Green Berets also undertook hunter-killer/search and destroy missions, albeit with local forces and usually in smaller number than the conventional US forces.²²⁶ These patrols or excursions happened quite frequently, but the SF/strikers would often be impeded by a lack of intelligence.²²⁷ This increase in combat tempo began in late 1962/early 1963 as ODA commanders had been ordered (as the first stages of SWITCHBACK commenced) to have half of their strike forces out patrolling for VC at all times.²²⁸

This expanded mission set beyond village stability and securing of the highlands was due to goals established by senior conventional leaders that did not match the capabilities of paramilitary/ guerilla forces. A CIA paramilitary operations officer believed the reorientation of the CIDG was motivated primarily by MAC-V Chief of Operations, General Richard G. Stillwell.²²⁹ In

²²⁴ Prados. *The US Special Forces: What Everyone Needs to Know*. 2015. Pp.38-9

²²⁵ Stanton. *Green Berets at War*. 1985. P.58

²²⁶ Team House. “John Mullins: MACV-SOG, Phoenix Program, Blue Light, and security consultant: Ep. 48.” Youtube. 2020. 23:00

²²⁷ Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. 1973. Pp.16-7

²²⁸ Strandquist. “Governmental Re-organization in Counterinsurgency Context.” 2017. P.349

²²⁹ Ibid. P.350

the span of SWITCHBACK the CIDG had gone from being a means of securing the loyalty of the highlands to the South Vietnamese government, to using the Montagnards as a combat element on behalf of the South Vietnamese government.²³⁰ The SF/CIDG paramilitaries would try to work with the LLDB, the Vietnamese Special Forces, with less success than SF had expected, due to a lack of cooperation on the part of the LLDB.²³¹ Racism from ethnic Vietnamese directed at the Montagnards played a large role in this lack of cooperation, recreating the problem that had led to the highland's susceptibility to Northern influence.

ODAs, as the advisor elements, had to shift with the required demands of CIDG revision—Special Forces had undergone a shift in focus from combat advisors performing pragmatic civil affairs to combat advisors performing the work of commandos. To give the additional combat capabilities required of the refocused CIDG, in 1965 the CIDG strikers were reorganized into “MIKE Forces,” 185-man battalion elements attached to ODAs tasked with responding to assaults on other villages—still serving the role as a Quick Reaction Force.²³² Once reorganized into MIKE Force, it appears the strikers were much more effective and served a critical role in responding to the A-Camps that were constantly assaulted. MIKE Forces were staffed by Vietnamese and minority groups, for example, most of the MIKE Forces in III Corps were Nung, rather than Montagnard or Vietnamese.²³³ Eventually some of the Striker units would be reorganized into BLACKJACK units or the later Mobile Guerilla Force and given better training and access to transport to allow coordinated strikes on NVA/VC establishments throughout Vietnam.²³⁴ Mobile Guerilla elements led by SF could be out in the field for a month, then rotate home.²³⁵ The new operations saw the CIDG hunter-killer forces

²³⁰ Ibid. P.349

²³¹ Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. 1973. P.17

²³² Prados. *The US Special Forces: What Everyone Needs to Know*. 2015. P.40; Kenneth Finlayson. “Colonel Mike: The Origins of the MIKE Force in Vietnam.” *Veritas*. 5:2. 2009.

²³³ Team House. “John Mullins: MACV-SOG, Phoenix Program, Blue Light, and security consultant: Ep. 48” 2020. 30:20

²³⁴ Stanton. *Green Berets at War*. 1985. Pp.238-43

²³⁵ Team House. “John Mullins: MACV-SOG, Phoenix Program, Blue Light, and security consultant: Ep. 48” 46:29

being deployed far from their homelands. No longer were they trained indigenous defending their homes in the highlands, they were paramilitaries searching for a fight.

The various striker organizations were used for search and destroy missions, as had been made the priority for SF following their reassignment under the conventional MAC-V command following SWITCHBACK. This adaptation set the stage for early Quick Reaction Forces (QRF). Today QRFs are mandatory for special operations as they enable a rapid response for emergencies. It is beyond the scope of this project to know exactly when the first QRFs were developed, but the MIKE Force/MGF were certainly a necessary adaptation SF undertook to protect A-Camps in Vietnam, and a very early example of SOF QRF. Despite the fact that paramilitary units are not designed to participate in large scale battles, the MIKE Forces had to be created because paramilitaries are also not designed for protracted defensive operations. Thus, QRFs were needed to save the under-prepared A-Camps. To compensate for the weaknesses of paramilitaries in protracted combat the MIKE Forces paid the men a higher rate to increase motivation and carried substantial firepower with few secondary supplies, thus maintaining mobility while increasing the amount of guns on hand.²³⁶

As a part of Vietnamization (the push for an independent South without American support) the CIDG was folded into the ARVN, which then collapsed as the North took the country. The CIDG and its impact on SF was sweeping. Green Berets, in the span of 2 years, had gone from digging wells and convincing Vietnamese mountain men to side with the local government, to performing a high tempo of hunter-killer operations with those recruited paramilitaries across wide swathes of Vietnam. Both roles were outside of their baseline, beyond the scope of mission sets they were originally conceived for, and both roles gave SF a better understanding of Unconventional Warfare and the burgeoning concepts of Foreign Internal Defense and counterinsurgency.

CIDG and SF Unconventional Warfare Change

²³⁶ Finlayson. "Colonel Mike: The Origins of the MIKE Force in Vietnam." 2009.

Prados notes how the use of the SFGs in creating and running the CIDG differs from their original missions, as the operators were not behind enemy lines in conventional war and were not improving a partisan resistance, rather the Green Berets were conducting FID alongside paramilitary forces they created and trained in a contested, unconventional environment.²³⁷ In 1958's FM 31-21, the baseline for SF, there was no mention of counterinsurgency as an operation that SF was doctrinally prepared for. However, clearly change was beginning to take hold as a result of the Vietnam War and Kennedy's desire to further UW capabilities, because by the 1961 edition of FM 31-21, the mission of SF was given as "The mission of special forces is to develop, organize, equip, train and direct indigenous forces in the conduct of guerilla warfare. Special forces may also advise, train and assist indigenous forces in counter-insurgency operations."²³⁸ This change by 1961 marked that the early war in Vietnam, in combination with Kennedy's Administration, were in fact forcing SF to change its self-perception. It also coincides with General William Yarborough, a man focused on addressing counterinsurgency on a doctrinal level, being appointed as head of the Special Warfare Centre.²³⁹

While the 1961 doctrine still largely reflected Special Forces use in the case of a conventional war, the burgeoning unconventional conflicts across the globe were potential Areas of Operations that could have (and would) become prime territory for SF. By 1963 the SAF and doctrine involving SF's use in counterinsurgency was published as FM 31-22. In the Army's retrospective study of SF in the Vietnam War the conflict in SE Asia is noted as being the place that demonstrated the utility of SF beyond the intended conventional conflicts.²⁴⁰ Therefore, the creation of the CIDG and SFs use as a counterinsurgency tool serve as a demonstrable change beyond SFs baseline.

²³⁷ Prados. *The US Special Forces: What Everyone Needs to Know*. 2015. P.41

²³⁸ No Author. "FM 31-21: Guerilla Warfare and Special Forces Operations." *Department of the Army*. September 29 1961. Pp.18-9

²³⁹ Kenneth Finlayson. "Lieutenant General William P. Yarborough." *Veritas*. Vol. 2 No. 2. 2006.

²⁴⁰ Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. 1973. P.10

As a result of the sweeping changes that took place between 1957 and 1963 it is tempting to argue that the CIDG and Paul Campbell's efforts were innovative. Some, such as Ives, argue that this was in fact innovation, but with the stipulation that the constraints emplaced by the conventional Army, along with failures of the Diem Administration, effectively halted the process in 1963.²⁴¹ This does not take into account a broader picture of the remainder of Vietnam, as the repercussions of conventional forces misunderstanding and the consequences of South Vietnamese ineptitude would extend beyond 1963. Ultimately, the CIDG, the establishment of a FID capability, and the advancements in understanding UW are muddled as innovation simply because the primary means of conducting combat operations (the core capability of SF) stayed the same; the use of paramilitary proxy forces to achieve a politically-motivated end state.

The context for SF's use was completely different—that does matter for establishing change, as do the scope and scale qualifiers of innovation, particularly when the influence of the CIDG is seen in the context of modern SF. SF's role in the establishment, then command of the CIDG was the largest adaptation that SF undertook during Vietnam, and the largest contributor to the ultimate innovation that SF experienced in Vietnam. But the CIDG and doctrinal inclusion of FID are not definitively innovation, despite clearly being change from the baseline. One could argue that this was innovative, but a much more comprehensive picture of SF innovation in Vietnam is established by considering the plethora of other changes that, when compiled with the addition of FID, resulted in a truly transformed force. Because of this, the changes undertaken by SF with regards to FID and the CIDG are adaptive for the purposes of this paper.

Farrell, Osinga, and Russell state that “Militaries may misunderstand the character of the conflict, or may be caught off guard by new technologies or tactics employed by opponents. Thus, the

²⁴¹ Ives. *US Special Forces and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam*. 2007. Pp.126-36

imperative for adaptation is often a product of strategic, technological, or tactical surprise.”²⁴² This is largely the story of SF in Vietnam in general, but particularly the CIDG. SF arrived in Vietnam to raise SOF counterparts, and as a result of the power vacuum of the rural highlands of Vietnam, were pulled into a conflict they did not quite understand, but adapted as required alongside the CIA. The conventional forces would do the same, but used SF as a tool for their own adaptation (more on this is found in the [Combat Adaptation](#) and [Misappropriation](#) subsections of the following Chapter).

Ultimately, the CIDG was not a typical case of horizontal adaptation, where one unit learns about a tactic, technique, or procedure and then disseminates it among corresponding teams. Rather, the CIDG was an experiment born from CIA and SF leadership who tried something new, and when it succeeded, assigned more ODAs to the task at hand. Horizontal learning for the conduct of counterinsurgency certainly transpired, as SF teams would inform one another about tactics, techniques and procedures, but this scale of combat adaptation was smaller than the initiation of a program like the CIDG. The case of the CIDG and the conceptual expansion of Unconventional Warfare and Foreign Internal Defense is not the typical case of adaptation in which, typically, the smallest organizational elements of a unit undertake limited change. The simultaneous inputs from the Kennedy Administration and the requirements of stabilizing Vietnam resulted in truly comprehensive change. Everyone in SF, from Sgt. Paul Campbell to the leadership of SF, understood they were operating outside the scope of what SF was familiar with, and all involved would have to learn and change according to their experiences in the jungle highlands. SWITCHBACK provided SF with further impetus for change, both in that SF ran the program without the CIA, and they adapted to performing roles issued by the conventional leadership.

²⁴² Theo Farrell, Frans Osinga, and James A. Russell. *Military Adaptation in Afghanistan*. California: Stanford University Press. 2013. P.2-3

These changes and experiences were reflected in their Field Manuals. Doctrinally SF was changed forever, and today their skills include counter-insurgency operations by way of proxy paramilitary forces, known as Foreign Internal Defense, when working with host nation approved counterparts. By the 1969 edition of FM 31-21, SF had officially expanded its repertoire to include working with paramilitary indigenous forces in insurgent controlled regions, as part of a comprehensive breakdown of their abilities.²⁴³ This was laid out in a table that clearly delineated the uses of SF in different scenarios (General War; Limited War; Cold War) in an attempt to enable conventional commanders to understand when it was appropriate to use certain capabilities of SF.

On a smaller scale of adaptation, the CIDG also set forth a new way of establishing paramilitary resistance movements through the use of medical assistance from the Special Forces medics. This being a smaller adaptation than the renovation of SF's doctrinal orientation and unit capabilities does not diminish the work of Sgt. Campbell and David Nuttle, who established a new working model for SF medics. The manner in which SF convinced the Montagnards to work with them was out of the box thinking, not along doctrinal lines, and was certainly enabled by CIA cooperation. It was not envisioned that SF in UW would be digging wells or performing civil acts for extended periods of time, but as was seen at Buon Enao, this approach worked, and resulted in a massive success for SF.

Today, SF 18D medics still primarily train for treating physical trauma, but have additional training in "dentistry, veterinary care, public sanitation, water quality and optometry."²⁴⁴ Many of their deployments are centered around civilian-medical related operations, and their ability to gain favor with locals through medicine remains in practice.²⁴⁵ Suffice to say, SF has changed in the way it

²⁴³ No Author. "FM 31-21: Special Forces Operations." *Department of the Army*. 1969. P.1-3

²⁴⁴ No Author. "Special Forces Medical Sergeant (18D)" *Go.Army.com*. Retrieved September 17, 2020.

²⁴⁵ No Author. "Exercise Balance Magic: 19th SF Group practices medicine in the heart of Asia." *Special Warfare*, vol. 15, no. 2, June 2002, P.31+

operates with regards to medicine. This medical program expanded much further than SF ever predicted under the constraints of UW.²⁴⁶

Laos

Prados notes that Special Forces' first *combat* deployment was not actually in South Vietnam, but rather in Laos to train the Laotian Army in 1959.²⁴⁷ These teams were from the 77th Special Forces Group (Airborne) (SFG(A)), and the unit commander, Colonel Donald D. Blackburn, advocated for their deployment over conventional Marine or Army units.²⁴⁸ Much like Vietnam, this deployment was beyond their doctrinal baselines. Here they posed as contractors (not in military uniform) training the Laotian military, as the French could not fulfill their obligated role in training their former colony's military.²⁴⁹ Much like Vietnam, Laos too was descending into chaos as the NVA ran supplies down the Ho Chi Minh Trail through the eastern side of the country. To circumvent the publicity and questionable legality of the deployment to Laos, the deployment was covert, as there were restrictions on foreign military presence in Laos.²⁵⁰ By becoming "civilian" contractors, rather than Army employees, the Green Berets effectively circumvented the Title 10 Authority of the US Armed Forces, the legal constraints under which the US Armed Forces operate.²⁵¹ The process of military personnel working under the CIA (in this case posing as non-American civilian contractors that work with the CIA) for the Agency's less restrictive Title 50 is referred to as "sheep dipping."

The Green Berets in Laos were doing stabilization work like the Green Berets in Vietnam would eventually assume, although the leading of tribesmen was still guerrilla in nature, unlike normal

²⁴⁶ Department of the Army. "FM 31-21: Guerilla Warfare and Special Forces Operations." 1961. Pp.101-2

²⁴⁷ Prados. *The US Special Forces: What Everyone Needs to Know.* 2015. Pp.35-6

²⁴⁸ Joseph D. Celeski. *The Green Berets in the Land of a Million Elephants: US Army Special Warfare and the Secret War in Laos 1959-74.* Havertown: Casemate. 2019. Pp.48-9

²⁴⁹ Jared M. Tracy. "Shoot and Salute: US Army Special Warfare in Laos." *Veritas*. Vol.14 No.1. 2018.

²⁵⁰ No Author. "Geneva Accords on Laos." *New York Times*. March 7, 1970. P.11

²⁵¹ Andru E. Wall. "Demystifying the Title 10-Title 50 Debate: Distinguishing Military Operations, Intelligence Activities & Covert Action." *Harvard National Security Journal*. Vol.3 No.1. 2011. Pp.86-7

post-Vietnam FID efforts. Laotian deployments of SF differed from Vietnam in that large swathes of time in Laos were covert, and the conventional forces never arrived. Laos was a semi-sustained Unconventional Warfare/FID campaign performed almost exclusively by the CIA, SF, and some aviation elements. The significant lessons and changes that SF learned from in Laos were: i.) that SF could run a sustained paramilitary campaign without conventional Army intervention; and ii.) that there were legal tactics they could use to deploy to areas of operation they were legally barred from. Both of these lessons were significant, but not on the scale of revolutionizing UW/FID. The ability of SF to run paramilitary campaigns distinct from the conventional would emerge in doctrine after the Vietnam War, while sheep dipping would continue as a common practice for SF and the CIA to circumvent the Title 10 Authority limitations.²⁵²

Conclusion

SF had numerous issues to overcome in their deployments to Vietnam while fulfilling their poorly defined role as America's unconventional soldiers. They had to adapt to fighting an unconventional conflict that did not have a conventional war in Europe as a backdrop, raising paramilitaries who were not destined to fight against the Soviet Union's invading forces, and stabilizing an area instead of being the destabilizers. The Green Berets had to learn to connect with completely foreign cultures like the Montagnards of Buon Enao, the Nungs, and Cambodians. Laos gave SF experience with deniable operations, teaching the unit about how to circumvent legal restrictions on military operations. These lessons meant that following the Vietnam War SF was able to perform their UW and newfound FID missions in a wider array of locations, with or without approval from oversight bodies. SF had new capabilities and new missions as a result of this reorientation. As a result, SF was a transformed force by the end of the conflict, and these adaptations, in conjuncture with

²⁵² Joe Pichirallo, Edward Cody, and others. "US Trains Antiterrorists" *Washington Post*, March 24, 1985.

other changes that are covered in the following chapters of this thesis, demonstrate innovation on the part of Special Forces.

Chapter 5: Special Reconnaissance, Combat Adaptations, and the Conventional-Special Forces Divide

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[Reconnaissance Efforts](#)

[Combat Adaptations and A-Camps](#)

[Misappropriation, Conventional-SOF Divide, and Lessons for SF](#)

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Introduction

Whereas the previous chapter covered the evolution of Special Forces' role in Unconventional Warfare transitioning into a Foreign Internal Defense capability, this chapter will cover two subtle but important adaptations for SF, and contextualize the relationship of SF to the conventional Army. The first adaptation covered is the transition of SF to the role as Special Reconnaissance operators, giving MAC-V theatre-level intelligence. For the more advanced SR efforts that involved SOF in Vietnam, Chapter 7 involves an advanced analysis of the Studies and Observations Group. The second adaptation relates to combat, changes in mindset, and a brief covering of the evolution of the SF 'A-Camp.' Finally, the continuously emphasized conventional forces-SF divide will be explored, as doing so is necessary for a complete understanding of why SF was misused and forced to take on the substantial roles they were responsible for in the Vietnam War..

Recondo and Photonic Alphabets: Sneaky SF Projects

As mentioned in the previous chapter, there was a requirement for increased reconnaissance capability during the Vietnam War, an ability to map and maintain an awareness over enemy presence in the country. To meet this need, the Marines along the Demilitarized Zone used their Force Reconnaissance companies, whereas 5th SFG(A) established programs to enable the Army to have a

specialized reconnaissance capability.²⁵³ These programs took shape with SF elements conducting both covert and clandestine reconnaissance operations and establishing training programs to give other US and Vietnamese elements a better understanding of reconnaissance. Stanton notes that this was one of the assignments that blurred Special Forces with ordinary military instructors; they were expected to create in-country Ranger schools not only for indigenous forces, but for American forces as well.²⁵⁴ The context for the use of SF as a reconnaissance element is interesting, as the conventional military, especially after they were more relevant post-SWITCHBACK, required increasing amounts of intelligence for the expanding war and developed a reliance on SF to resolve another issue they (the conventional military) had been unprepared to resolve independently. This section will be devoted to those efforts, including Recondo School, and the Recon Projects.

The baseline for reconnaissance as it relates to Special Forces is an interesting one. As per the 1958 version of FM 31-21, it was envisioned as a limited, secondary role. The primary mention of reconnaissance was in regard to performing it prior to a Direct Action raid, as a mission type guerrilla units can undertake.²⁵⁵ Regarding the larger reconnaissance/intelligence role of SF the 1958 manual stated:

The organization and operation of guerilla intelligence service creates a valuable source of information which can be effectively utilized by friendly conventional forces in time of hostilities. Because of their advantageous position, guerillas may be called upon to furnish intelligence in support of conventional forces. Military commanders and agencies concerned with intelligence must recognize that guerilla forces are not specially trained, organized, or equipped to function essentially as an intelligence agency. It must be emphasized that excessive intelligence requirements will overtax communications and manpower facilities and may seriously interfere with the guerillas primary mission. In situations requiring extensive intelligence efforts, trained personnel with adequate communications should be infiltrated into the guerilla area to enlarge the intelligence collection capability and to develop auxiliary communication channels for the dissemination of information.²⁵⁶

²⁵³ Prados. *The US Special Forces: What Everyone Needs to Know*. 2015. Pp.41-2

²⁵⁴ Stanton. *Green Berets at War*. 1985. P.36

²⁵⁵ Department of the Army. "Special Forces Operations." 1958. Pp. 69, 77-78, 94, 96.

²⁵⁶ Department of the Army. "Special Forces Operations." 1958. P.97

The point regarding SF as a limited intelligence asset is reinforced earlier in the manual in a paragraph about intelligence collection by SF for conventional commanders, “However, exploitation of this capability should not be allowed to impair the primary capability of offensive action.”²⁵⁷ A large component of the intelligence gathered by SF was envisioned in the 1958 manual to come from the “guerilla net,” the array of guerrilla forces and civilians working with SF, rather than Green Berets themselves performing the reconnaissance. The guerrilla net would essentially enable them to act more as intelligence collectors rather than operators conducting reconnaissance. To demonstrate how bizarrely mischaracterized SF’s envisioned role in intelligence would become, the 1958 manual indicated that ODAs should receive more intelligence from the conventional commanders and the Special Forces Operational Base than the ODAs behind enemy lines should provide intelligence back.

A major role SF would perform was damage assessment and target acquisition for the theatre commander, as was mentioned in the baseline.²⁵⁸ There is a note attached to this that states “normally, however, the security of the guerilla and special forces communications nets should not be endangered by lengthy intelligence reports which do not contribute anything material to the guerilla warfare mission.”²⁵⁹ It also states that once a friendly conventional force is in an area, the use of the UW elements will be decreased; most tasks would largely fall on conventional forces post-conventional arrival.²⁶⁰ This was the opposite of SF in Vietnam, where the arrival of the conventional forces created a massive intelligence requirement that the conventional forces were completely incapable of meeting, and the responsibility to gather intelligence fell on SF and their paramilitary counterparts. Despite Unconventional Warfare not being an appropriate avenue to gain long-term possession of an area, SF

²⁵⁷ Department of the Army. “FM 31-21: Guerilla Warfare and Special Forces Operations.” 1958. P.9

²⁵⁸ Department of the Army. “Special Forces Operations.” 1958. P.61

²⁵⁹ Department of the Army. “Special Forces Operations.” 1958. Pp.61-2

²⁶⁰ Department of the Army. “Special Forces Operations.” 1958. P.138

was expected to use their experience in long-range infiltration and patrolling to establish solutions to the theatre-wide problems faced by MAC-V. Special Reconnaissance projects were developed, primarily as a response as the conventional military's growing need for intelligence.²⁶¹

With the envisaged limitations of SF reconnaissance being stated, there was also an acknowledged requirement for SF to meet the needs of the theatre commander, and the theatre commander in Vietnam required intelligence to direct the increasing amounts of troops and responsibilities. This was reflected as early as the 1961 edition of the same FM, which showed a SF more concerned with "reconnaissance and security missions."²⁶² However, like the CIDG, the scope, scale, and use of SF in reconnaissance and intelligence roles went far beyond what was originally envisioned, especially with regard to the 1958 edition of FM 31-21. In Vietnam all doctrinal limitations for SF's role in reconnaissance that were given in the 1958 manual were ignored.

There were a variety of reconnaissance efforts undertaken by SF during the Vietnam War. Most of them were based around an Operational Detachment Bravo (ODB) training Vietnamese recon elements and then sending them out with Green Berets from either the ODB or an ODA to conduct reconnaissance or Special Reconnaissance (SR). The programs examined in this section were different than SF ODAs that were based out of A-Camps conducting reconnaissance with their CIDG/MIKE Force counterparts, although elements from those paramilitary programs would be given entry to the reconnaissance projects if they so desired. These reconnaissance projects were among the "special projects" SF undertook following 1963's SWITCHBACK.

Project GAMMA was a reassignment and renaming of Detachment B-57 and focused on reconnaissance into Cambodia.²⁶³ At its height, GAMMA produced 65% of the intelligence on NVA

²⁶¹ Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. 1973. Pp.81-2

²⁶² Department of the Army. "Guerilla Warfare and Special Forces Operations." 1961. Pp.12-3

²⁶³ Stanton. *Green Berets at War*. 1985. P.187

locations and strengths in Cambodia, and 75% of the intelligence on NVA facilities in Cambodia.²⁶⁴

It also produced massive intelligence scores from border reconnaissance inside of Vietnam.

Project OMEGA was run by Detachment B-50 and Project SIGMA by B-56, both of which were cross-border projects into Laos. They were run by 5th Group to establish the Group as the premier reconnaissance element in a bid to undermine MAC-V Studies and Observations Group (SOG), a Special Reconnaissance SOF element.²⁶⁵ Bureaucratic rivalry between 5th Group and SOG also characterized the race for Cambodian operations, and by 1967 OMEGA and SIGMA were transferred to MAC-V SOG. The increasing importance of high-level reconnaissance reflected this competition, as large elements of the NVA and VC were moving along the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Cambodia and Laos and infiltrating into South Vietnam.

Project DELTA (an evolution of the *Leaping Lena* program—*Leaping Lena* being a failed effort run by Det. B-52 to send LLDB squads into North Vietnam) was more of the same reconnaissance work, but with a higher emphasis on commando/hunter-killer operations partnering alongside the LLDB/Vietnamese Rangers.²⁶⁶ This Project, which operated throughout South Vietnam (as opposed to SIGMA and OMEGA) was run by B-52, and at one point, Major Charles Beckwith, founder of Delta Force.²⁶⁷ DELTA also saw the first integration of an Air Force Combat Control Team into a 5th Group unit in February 1967.²⁶⁸ They also had a Joint Tactical Air Control Party integrated with Mobile Guerilla Forces under DELTA.²⁶⁹ Adding to the adaptations undertaken by DELTA, an SF sergeant assigned to the program developed the McGuire Rig, a harness dropped from a helicopter that allowed the extraction of SF assets without a helicopter having to land and further compromise its safety.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁴ Ibid. P.188

²⁶⁵ John L. Plaster. *SOG: The Secret Wars of America's Commandos in Vietnam*. New York: Simon and Schuster. 1997. P.98

²⁶⁶ Stanton. *Green Berets at War*. 1985. Pp.194-5

²⁶⁷ Ibid. P.203

²⁶⁸ Classified Origin. "Secret Army Report on Special Forces." Department of the Army: Office of the Adjutant General. 1967. P.22

²⁶⁹ Classified Origin. "Secret Army Report on Special Forces." 1967. Pp.22-3

²⁷⁰ Donald J. Taylor. "The McGuire Rig." *ProjectDelta.net*.

Detachment B-52 would also establish Recondo School, a reconnaissance schooling initiative where experienced SF operators would train both Vietnamese and US Ranger/Long Range Reconnaissance Patrols (LRRP) to address the lack of intelligence they faced. This was because of the massive need for intelligence that could not be fulfilled by SF alone.

By 1968, as SF numbers dwindled in the face of reassignment and casualties, Recondo developed a 12-day indoctrination program for SF new to Vietnam, to try and raise the combat survivability of the new, now less-vetted, SF recruits.²⁷¹ This was certainly an adaptation and ad-hoc attempt at overcoming a real threat to 5th Group, that being the overextension of SF into reconnaissance. The stress placed on 5th Group was a consequence of bypassing the threshold given in 1958's FM 31-21 that SF should not undertake intelligence operations to the extent that they become a drain on the combat capabilities of the unit. The amount of SF casualties, as well as their expanding responsibilities within Vietnam induced a situation where the reconnaissance projects (as well as SOG) were a drain on the combat capabilities of SF. With that being said, these projects were necessary to compensate for the lack of intelligence that hampered US operations in South Vietnam.

The LRRP were directly a response to the conventional forces producing unsatisfactory amounts of intelligence. LRRPs were formed in each division to give it a standalone reconnaissance capability. Although some would claim that all LRRP members went through Recondo, it actually only taught those who were recommended by their LRRP commanding officers to attend the school.²⁷² Once trained up, the soldiers returned to their LRRP and brought in additional knowledge and patrolling experience, as a sort of "SF-lite." Late into the War, the LRRP units were organized under one unit, (rather than across the Army) as the 75th Infantry (Ranger), today known as the 75th Ranger

²⁷¹ Stanton. *Green Berets at War*. 1985. P.170

²⁷² Robert C. Ankony. *Lurps: A Ranger's Diary of Tet, Khe Sanh, A Shau, and Quang Tri*. Connecticut: Hamilton Books. 2009. Pp.170-5

Regiment.²⁷³ SF did not create the Rangers, as they (in various forms) predate the Green Berets, but the enhanced training given by SF did result in the modern Ranger Regiment.

Altogether SF reconnaissance projects were largely successful, especially given the unprecedented scale of the operations. A 1966 report from 5th Group's commander stated that Military Assisted Command-Vietnam's J-2 (intelligence section) found that over 50% of intelligence reports came from SF sources, including A-Camps and the projects given in this section.²⁷⁴ A declassified report emphasized that the ability of 5th Group to collect intelligence was based around their country-wide deployments, indicating the CIDG provided a substantial intelligence enhancement for MAC-V.²⁷⁵ Kelly also notes that the capability of Mobile Guerilla Force operators integrated with the Projects gave a unique UW response from highly trained individuals that could hunt and destroy the enemy very effectively in the jungles of Vietnam.²⁷⁶ Recondo represented another change for Special Forces, although small. While previously SF had been limited to training paramilitaries, Recondo required the Green Berets to instruct American students. This became a formal asset and role that SF could fill by the 1969 edition of FM 31-21, where it was acknowledged that SF could pass along special operations techniques to US personnel if they required SF tactics, techniques, and procedures.²⁷⁷

As a whole, reconnaissance is a difficult subject to ascertain with regards to an SF baseline—FM 31-21 establishes that SF and UW forces should perform reconnaissance, but gives little information as to how, other than stating it is a component of UW required before raids, and with a limited scale. Clearly the latter tenant was not followed, and SF devoted a tremendous amount of time to reconnaissance. The avenues for this were special projects and further reassignment of the CIDG, to the detriment of their ability to function as a combat unit because of mounting losses.

²⁷³ Prados. *The US Special Forces: What Everyone Needs to Know*. 2015. P.41-2

²⁷⁴ Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. 1973. P.87

²⁷⁵ Classified Origin. "Secret Army Report on Special Forces." 1967. P.8

²⁷⁶ Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. 1973. P.134-41

²⁷⁷ No Author. "FM 31-21 Special Operations." 1969. P.11-3

These programs constitute adaptation as the roles being performed by the CIDG/SF elements were not outlined in detail in FM 31-21, and it was the first case of advanced, formally run Unconventional Warfare recon/training programs being established by SF for both organic purposes (feeding into SF projects) and outside, conventional forces. Clearly the Field Manual used as a baseline favored the employment of SF as a supporting element for conventional forces, which stood in stark contrast to the political desires of President Kennedy, who saw SF and UW as a solution in and of itself.²⁷⁸ When SF was the primary combat element pre-1965 they developed solutions to their own problems, once the conventional forces entered en masse in 1965 SF then had to honor their doctrinal obligations. However, instead of SF functioning as auxiliary support supplied with intelligence by the conventional military, they became the primary source for intelligence (and with the CIDG they became the primary source for stabilization efforts). The small SF element in Vietnam was used as a primary solution for far too many problems given their acknowledged and disregarded limitations.

The appeal of SF intelligence in the baseline was that in conventional war the Green Berets were behind enemy lines and therefore had unique access to information—in theory this geographic advantage would be made redundant once conventional forces removed the enemy lines and took over most combat roles. In reality, SF's theorized location behind enemy lines was moot, because outside of the cross-border operations, SF was collecting information from inside Vietnam, where the conventional forces were also located. Until SF had raised the appropriate LRRP elements to undertake some of the internal reconnaissance, the conventional simply did not have the useful reconnaissance capability that had been assumed in doctrine.

Kollar's work on adaptation characterizes it as usually taking form through "a new organizational structure arranged according to the skills of relevant actors, who were gathered into

²⁷⁸ Tucker and Lamb. *United States Special Operations Forces*. 2007. P.89

freely constructed teams.”²⁷⁹ That largely describes the recon elements, except it omits the oft-found trait of adaptation in that institutional resistance did not exist—the higher bureaucratic elements were supportive of the changes, as they addressed Big Army’s weaknesses. As institutional resistance did not exist for SF in the reconnaissance role, Murray’s theory that bureaucratic resistance is a key indicator of adaptation does not apply to SF recon elements.²⁸⁰ This was one of many adaptations SF would undertake in Vietnam to address conventional requirements, rather than flaws in SF doctrine.

This speaks to the desperation of the US military in Vietnam; their near-hated and misunderstood Special Forces teams were beginning to be used as a remedy for all problems. Still, Green Beret authors such as John Plaster note that the conventional forces, usually officers, still presented difficulties for SF in their recon role, such as refusing to extract a team that was compromised.²⁸¹ In contrast to some of the more negative aspects of the projects, the special reconnaissance mission set is noted as having actually revitalized the CIDG in some ways. The primary benefit to the CIDG running SR (other than assisting the conventional Army) was that by contributing to the intelligence campaign they postponed what some in the conventional military had been pushing for—the integration of the CIDG to the ARVN.²⁸² Doing this may have saved the CIDG as a standalone branch for a time, but the reconnaissance efforts drained the ability of the Green Berets and the CIDG men involved in actually stabilizing an area.²⁸³

Regardless of the relationship with the conventional Army, clearly there was a learning process, and change in emphasis on how SF units performed reconnaissance, constituting adaptation as they adjusted to their new roles in Vietnam. By 1969 “providing combat intelligence support to US military

²⁷⁹ Kollars. 2015. P.117

²⁸⁰ Williamson Murray. *Military Adaptation in War: With Fear of Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2011. Pp.18-19

²⁸¹ John Plaster. *SOG: The Secret War of America’s Commandos in Vietnam*. 1997. P.98

²⁸² Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. 1973. P.81

²⁸³ Ibid. P.81

and civilian organizations and for host countries” was given as an operation SF under SF’s roster, and a primary capability of SF was deep penetration for the purposes of intelligence collection, this being concrete change in the role of SF prior to the conclusion of the war.²⁸⁴ In that same manual one of the primary roles of SF, to be performed without limitation, was direct action (which included Special Reconnaissance-type operations).²⁸⁵ The given restrictions on SR not impeding other UW activities is not found in the later manuals, as the capability had gone from a secondary role that SF could perform to a primary mission that SF specialized in and was doctrinally oriented towards. Today Special Reconnaissance is seen as a primary role for SF, and it continues to be an essential capability in the toolbox of operations undertaken by Green Berets.

Combat Adaptation and A-Camps

As a part of, and outside of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG), Special Forces held many combat roles. This section seeks to examine some of the combat adaptations SF undertook during the war. While less important than the development of new capabilities like FID (in the form of the CIDG) or SR (in the form of the recon projects), these combat adaptations were further vehicles for change for SF in the Vietnam War.

SFs early work with non-minority Vietnamese populations largely fell under the Strategic Hamlets Program (SHP), which sought to collectivize populations from spread out villages into larger defensible villages.²⁸⁶ The CIDG was also supposed to eventually become part of the SHP, although South Vietnamese government ineptitude impeded this, and many areas were likely never integrated.²⁸⁷ The SHP was Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem’s idea, and angered many of the Vietnamese, likely pushing them further into the ideological clutches of the VC. Fortunately for the South, the SHP

²⁸⁴ Department of the Army. “Special Forces Operations.” 1969. P.1-2, 1-3

²⁸⁵ Department of the Army. “Special Forces Operations.” 1969. P.2-17

²⁸⁶ Lloyd. *Special Forces: The Changing Face of Warfare*. 1995. P.120

²⁸⁷ Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. 1973. Pp.42-3

fell out of favor after Diem's assassination.²⁸⁸ During the SHP, CIDG, and reconnaissance projects, SF had to constantly adapt to the increasing combat tempo that characterized the early-mid 1960s in Vietnam. Among the more obvious adaptations that one would undertake while experiencing increasing combat tempo was to increase the armament of the fighters. SF addressed this by replacing their WWII-era firearms with AR-15's, carrying up to 25 magazines for the AR, and 28 grenades.²⁸⁹ Between new technology and a lot more of the old technology, they became very heavily armed, even by modern standards.

In combination with the increased firepower, the mindset of SF allowed for the Green Berets to become more effective operators in combat. The importance of an alert mind was continually reinforced in an interview with Green Beret Ruben Garcia, who served several tours in Vietnam.²⁹⁰ He stated that Green Berets had to think like their enemy, to smell like their enemy, and predict all aspects of the enemy's movement and tactics. Members of his team were not allowed to drink coffee, for example, as it gave off too much odor while being brewed, and they ate the same food as the Vietnamese, so their meals did not smell differently while being prepared. Kelly also notes that the Green Beret mindset was very open to adaptation—this was the US' first large-scale guerilla war and SF knew it.²⁹¹ Kelly said that SF would try a tactic, and if it worked, it became an accepted counterinsurgency tactic, if it did not work, it was discarded.²⁹² A learning process such as this is not especially significant on its own, as all militaries have learning processes like this in war, but the extremes that SF would go to outside of doctrine are key to this discussion. This mentality was exactly what lead to Buon Enao and the creation of the CIDG and lends weight to Christopher Ives'

²⁸⁸ Lloyd. *Special Forces: The Changing Face of Warfare*. 1995. P.121

²⁸⁹ Annie Jacobsen. "Surprise, Kill, Vanish: The Secret History of CIA Paramilitary Armies, Operators and Assassins." New York: Hatchette Book Group. 2019. P.152

²⁹⁰ Team House. "John Mullins: MACV-SOG, Phoenix Program, Blue Light, and security consultant: Ep. 48" 2020. 45:00 (in addition to the entire interview)

²⁹¹ Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. 1973. P.10

²⁹² Ibid.. P.10

previously mentioned theory of cognitive dominance in SF.²⁹³ Lessons garnered from combat in Vietnam were also likely taught to new SF recruits at the 12 day Recondo indoctrination crash-course. These sorts of small, rolling changes highlight the ongoing, natural adaptations that occurs in any war, but the open-minded SF community facilitated this mindset of adaptation.

This mindset of adaptation and free-thinking was contrasted with the inability uninformed leadership, in this case, Diem and his successors, to understand Special Forces. This is also seen throughout the Navy portions of this thesis, where it was clear that conventional commanders did not know how to use the tool they had in their hands. This confusion was evident in the projects SF conducted outside of the CIDG program, many of which were far stranger and more dangerous. SF's adaptability and free-thinking likely contributed to their misuse as the SFGs were demonstrated to be capable of undertaking new roles, and they, therefore, had new roles assigned to them.

One of those projects that saw SF misappropriation was border security, which SF was increasingly transferred to following the 1963 death of President Diem and Operation SWITCHBACK.²⁹⁴ This, along with the formation of centralized, offensive CIDG camps, is identified by Kelly as one of the two major shifts the CIDG program experienced, and is one of the three identified by Strandquist.²⁹⁵ Border "frontier" provinces went from "dark" areas to locations understood by MAC-V, as Special Forces and their indigenous counterparts were sent to the unknown areas to secure the borders with Laos and Cambodia. These pushes were more conventional in nature, despite attempts to frame them as Unconventional Warfare.²⁹⁶ Long-term defensive posturing was certainly not in SF's repertoire or even close to anything found in FM 31-21. In fact, it was widely known that guerillas lacked the ability to effectively hold land. The 1958 edition of the FM reinforced

²⁹³ Ibid.. Pp.14-5

²⁹⁴ Stanton. *Green Berets at War*. 1985. Pp.64-5

²⁹⁵ Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. 1973. P.34; and Strandquist. "Governmental Re-organization in Counterinsurgency Context." 2017. P.349

²⁹⁶ Stanton. *Green Berets at War*. 1985. Pp.64-6

that guerillas should “avoid static defensive operations” and the main positive attribute of the guerilla force, mobility for brief combat operations, would be harmed should defensive operations be undertaken.²⁹⁷ The manual does state that SF can establish defensive positions with guerrillas to secure guerrilla-controlled areas for short periods to allow for link up with the conventional forces.²⁹⁸ Again, this use of SF has stated limitations dependent on the use of the conventional forces to relieve them, and was given forth as doctrine to be used in conventional war. Unsurprisingly, this saw less success than the CIDG program’s initial village defense mission, as the camps were often far from the Montagnard’s homes, which removed their motivation to fight, and SF had no doctrinal experience or knowledge on prolonged defensive posturing.²⁹⁹

A year after the death of President Diem, there were 18 highly isolated (one every 30 miles) SF ‘A-Camps’ and 64 CIDG companies assigned to border operations.³⁰⁰ Eventually the number of A-Camps in Vietnam, including the border outposts and CIDG bases, would reach 254, many manned by a single ODA and their indigenous.³⁰¹ Because of their isolation, these A-Camps were attacked frequently, and the SF operators stationed there would leave the base for combat operations to harass the VC/NVA in the area. The camps limited SFs mobility, as they were often fortified inside permanent, concrete structures.³⁰² Camp defense became an enormous issue for SF in the War, and saw a prominent example of adaptation in response to changes implemented by uninformed leadership.

Following a spring 1963 offensive where 3 SF camps were assaulted, Special Forces Vietnam (Provisional) issued standard operating procedures on camp defense.³⁰³ As a result, SF tried to create

²⁹⁷ Department of the Army. “Special Forces Operations.” 1958. Pp.86-7

²⁹⁸ No Author. “FM 31-21 Guerilla Warfare and Special Forces Operations” 1958. Pp.85-7

²⁹⁹ Ives. *US Special Forces and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam*. 2007. Pp.102-3

³⁰⁰ Stanton. *Green Berets at War*. 1985. Pp.66-7, and Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. 1973. P.45

³⁰¹ No Author. “FM 3-18: Special Forces Operations.” Department of the Army. May 2014. P.1-8

³⁰² Jeffry J. Clarke. *Advice and Support: The Final Years: The US Army in Vietnam*. Washington DC: The Center of Military History: US Army. 1988. P198-9

³⁰³ Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. 1973. P.57

standardized A-Camps to ensure solid defense, experimenting with shapes and layouts. This is in line with the adaptation outlined in Kollar's work on gun trucks: operations being run without clear knowledge on how to achieve the best results, experimentation from bottom-up, and a final conclusion that was standardized on for the remainder of the conflict. In fact, that mold perfectly fits the development and construction of border security and CIDG SF A-Camps during the War.

While most SF camps began to use a star-shaped perimeter for overlapping fields of fire, what was standard, across every A-Camp, was an inner compound where the SF operators lived.³⁰⁴ The concept of having dual defenses in the form of an outer perimeter and inner perimeter became standard by 1966, in what was known as a "fighting camp" and was seen a reason for an increase in survivability of both the camps and wounded SF/CIDG personnel within them.³⁰⁵ Rottman specifies that no fighting camps were exactly alike, as they were designed for the specific terrain and threats each camp would face.³⁰⁶ Stanton notes that the use of SF challenged the guerillas in that the SF operations were relatively cheap, much like the VC/NVA operations. It was extremely costly for the NVA to overrun an A-Camp, usually a commitment of one or two battalions, with one to several hundred communist fighters dead, and at most 12 Americans and a handful of "easily replaceable indigenous irregulars" killed.³⁰⁷ Of course, this was not a comforting mentality for SF and indigenous paramilitaries occupying the camps and likely furthered the conventional-SF divide. Between 1963 and 1970 there were dozens, likely hundreds of assaults on A-Camps, each providing an opportunity for the Green Berets present to learn, but also sustain further losses. By 1967 CIDG camps began being

³⁰⁴ Stanton. *Green Berets at War*. 1985 Pp.179-80

³⁰⁵ Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. 1973. Pp.104-7 and Rottman. *Special Forces Camps in Vietnam 1961-70*. 2005. P.5

³⁰⁶ Rottman. *Special Forces Camps in Vietnam 1961-70*. 2005. P.5

³⁰⁷ Stanton. *Green Berets at War*. 1985. P.136

set up with grander strategic notions, fully employed to support the large-scale goals of the four tactical Corps zones in South Vietnam.³⁰⁸

The use of border reconnaissance A-Camps came from a political requirement to satisfy President Diem and subsequent South Vietnamese administrations. While having guards along the Laotian and Cambodian borders was certainly a desirable strategic defense undertaking, the widespread use of SF in those areas was unnecessary and a waste of their capabilities. It also served as a change from their baseline, as widespread defensive posturing of SF was not considered in FM 31-21. Still, it was a tremendous learning process for SF as a result of their misuse. Following this misuse, border defense was a new role folded into SF's capabilities in the 1969 edition of FM 31-21, demonstrating even further that they had formally adapted to fill roles that SF were previously inexperienced in.³⁰⁹

Both the border reconnaissance posts and the costly establishment of standardized A-Camps are classic examples of adaptation, the former a response to political pressures, the latter with regards to combat. The process of undertaking the border surveillance and ensuing A-Camp modernization serve as excellent adaptive counterparts to Rosen's theory that innovation in war stems from the pursuit of inappropriate strategic goals or misunderstandings relating to military operations. Russell, Farrell, and Osinga note similar motivators in adaptation, namely, that unexpected employment of units will result in them hastily adjusting to what is an inappropriate use. Simply staging in static defensible positions to guard a border was not something SF was envisioned as doing in the era of its creation, as this would be a waste of the specialized soldiers. For the United States to maintain its relationship with South Vietnam, it used diplomacy through political actions, and SF in Vietnam were seen as a political tool to advance US interests and maintain said relationship. The deployment of SF

³⁰⁸ Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. 1973P.108

³⁰⁹ No Author. "FM 31-21 Special Operations." 1969. P.10-3

to border recon fulfilled this political need, reflecting a requirement of international relations more than a proper use of SF. When specialized soldiers who are highly motivated, trained, and able to perform desirable mission sets are available, they will be subject to misuse through misappropriation of them as a versatile resource, both due to a lack of understanding, or the hope that they can fix any problem. This was certainly the case in the Vietnam War.

During this time in late 1964/early 1965, as the Marines landed in Vietnam and the War escalated, SF was increasingly used as a solution to every problem. Their new mission set was as follows:

(1) Filling in the gap between commitment of US combat troops and advisory influence, (2) adaptability for integration with US forces, (3) prompt, flexible, and sufficient response to variable requirements, (4) intensifying appropriate aspects of counterinsurgency effort by providing staying power in hot areas, or acting as the *spearhead* of rural reconstruction, or advancing re-construction in more pacified areas (rolling security), (5) maintaining a favorable kill ratio *if employed properly*, (6) conducting special operations, and (7) assuming command/operational control when appropriate.³¹⁰ [emphasis original]

SF performed these missions in support of the conventional forces. Conventional units would move through an area in large numbers, destroy Vietcong bases or establishments, then leave. SF would then arrive and perform guerilla combat operations. Vietcong messengers would go missing, snipers would assassinate VC/NVA officers, and patrols would be demolished.³¹¹ Kelly notes that the search and destroy and CIDG intelligence operations were not appropriate for skilled SF soldiers that had more nuanced abilities compared to conventional troops.³¹² Still, Kelly concludes that SF were effective in their new roles post-1965. So did the commander of 5th Group (who was not SF qualified), who wrote in 1966 “The “special” about Special Forces is simply that the non-commissioned officers are the finest to be found anywhere in the world. Their multiple skills and individual motivation are

³¹⁰ Stanton. *Green Berets at War*. 1985. P.90 emphasis original

³¹¹ Ibid. P.136

³¹² Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. 1973. P.81

exploited to the fullest in the combat environment of the A-Detachment in VC-dominated areas.”³¹³

At the time of this commander’s writing, an issue was emerging where the Green Berets were frustrated with the appointment of unqualified officers to lead 5th Group. The lack of SF-qualified officers holding senior officer positions in 5th Group was addressed in 1966 when it was made mandatory that the commander of the Group would be SF qualified (although those above him were still conventional).³¹⁴ Still, it seems obvious that SF would be an effective resource in undertaking search and destroy operations, as they had more training in combative techniques than conventional Army or Marine counterparts—the issue with those missions was the tempo of costly combat operations undertaken in a questionable role that ultimately sapped the ability of SF to maintain their standards and capabilities.

The global demand for SF also hampered US efforts in Vietnam, as there was a shortage of SF Sergeants. During Vietnam, other SF Groups (who had been sending personnel to do tours with 5th Group) had still been deploying to their assigned operational areas.³¹⁵ 1st SFG(A) had Green Berets deployed throughout SE Asia through their SAF model, and still sent ODAs to do rotations with 5th Group.³¹⁶ To counter the lack of Green Berets, in 1967 there were efforts to have non-SF qualified individuals augment SF ODAs to spread out the force, second tours of Vietnam were made involuntary, and time between tours was cut.³¹⁷ This was coupled with the fact that increased secret project tempo as well as high casualties (most Green Berets had a Purple Heart), reduced the amount of SF able to operate A-Camps further.³¹⁸ By 1969 there were 2,300 SF personnel assigned to the CIDG alone in Vietnam, almost six times the number at the beginning of the War.³¹⁹

³¹³ Ibid. P.86

³¹⁴ Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. 1973. P.166

³¹⁵ Team House. “John Mullins: MACV-SOG, Phoenix Program, Blue Light, and security consultant: Ep. 48” 2020. 42:40

³¹⁶ Eugene G. Piasecki. “Special Action Force Asia.” *Veritas*. Vol.13 No.1. 2017.

³¹⁷ Stanton. *Green Berets at War*. 1985. P.168

³¹⁸ Ibid. P.169

³¹⁹ Lloyd. *Special Forces: The Changing Face of Warfare*. 1995. Pp.123-4

Direct Action also doctrinally changed. By 1969 DA was listed a separate skill from Unconventional Warfare, whereas previously it had been folded under the umbrella definition of UW that was rendered obsolete in Vietnam.³²⁰ In fact, one of the key components of DA in the 1969 version of the Special Forces manual is the rescue of American POWs which, a year after publication, would take form with the Son Tay Raid.³²¹ As established in previous chapters, SF was historically primed for these roles because they were already behind enemy lines. As SOG had proven through Vietnam with *Bright Light* operations (covered in [Chapter 7](#)), SF was capable of filling roles that had traditionally employed this advantage, even if Special Forces were not behind enemy lines for a particular operation. Again, this was due to their training and willingness to undertake new roles.

In terms of SOF relevance, the Son Tay prison raid is one of the most important operations of the Vietnam War. Son Tay was a North Vietnamese prison camp (located in Northern Vietnam) suspected of housing American POWs. To free the prisoners, a select force of SF men was hand-picked in early 1970 to raid Son Tay. Unlike the previous SOG operations which used rehearsed IADs as a response to contact, this operation's preparation used a hand-made prison that replicated a North Vietnamese POW camp.³²² This enabled a degree of practice, and therefore precision, that was not seen in earlier SOF DA undertakings. This was a focused, rehearsed effort that required each Green Beret to perform his role perfectly, in sync with all the other assaulters and aviators. The SF operators practiced the raid over 170 times, perfecting their movements and memorizing buildings and likely routes of enemy movement. Again, unlike either SF guerilla raids or SOG patrols, in this operation every Green Beret had a very specific role in a mission that would unfold like a coordinated play, conducted such that the US forces involved enjoyed every advantage possible with ample support.

³²⁰ No Author. "FM 31-21 Special Operations." *Department of the Army*. 1969. P.2-1

³²¹ No Author. "FM 31-21 Special Operations." 1969. P.2-2

³²² Jocko Podcast. "Jocko Podcast 206 w/ Dick Thompson - The Stress Effect. Why Good Leaders Make Dumb Decisions" *Youtube*. December 9 2019. Timestamp: 17:15

Each operator was given the resources and time to perform their role perfectly. The luxury of this level of preparation and support was unique. The Green Berets were also working without foreign counterparts, rare in the annals of SF history in Vietnam.

The raid commenced as Operation Ivory Coast on November 21 1970, with 56 operators heading into North Vietnam.³²³ Most of the operators breached the compound with specialized equipment and proceeded to kill 50 guards and destroy a crash-landed helicopter.³²⁴ The operation was similar to Operation Neptune Spear, the mission to kill Osama Bin Laden, where hand-picked Development Group SEALs landed in a compound, crashed a helicopter, breached their target, and cleared their objective. Admiral McRaven, designer of Neptune Spear, studied Son Tay and described it as “the best modern-day example of a Special Operation.”³²⁵ This statement is contradicted by the success of the actual objective because the Son Tay raiders left without finding prisoners (who had just been relocated) as a result of intelligence failures. This, however, does not detract from the greater lesson or weight of Son Tay.

Modern DA is defined as:

[s]hort duration strikes and other small-scale offensive actions conducted as a special operation in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments and which employ specialized military capabilities to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover, or damage designated targets. Direct action differs from conventional offensive actions in the level of physical and political risk, operational techniques, and the degree of discriminate and precise use of force to achieve specific objectives.³²⁶

This concept of Direct Action emerged in the late 1960s, as the 1969 edition of FM 31-21 makes it clear that at times, SF might have to fill the role as the premier commando force for the US

³²³ Shelby L. Stanton. *Green Berets at War: US Army Special Forces in Southeast Asia 1956-1975*. California: Presidio Press. 1985.1985. P.272

³²⁴ Stanton. *Green Berets at War*. 1985. P.273

³²⁵ John Prados. *The US Special Forces: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2015. P.53

³²⁶ Department of Defense. “Joint Publication 1-02: Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms.” *Department of Defense*. 2001 (Updated August 19 2009). P.163

Army. SF was chosen to fulfill the DA role at this time because the units' skills with firearms, combat techniques, and specialized infiltration/exfiltration techniques were unique in the US Army.³²⁷ The ODAs chosen to perform DA were augmented with additional personnel to ensure suitability for combat, especially if the SF team were to act unilaterally, without indigenous support.

This is an outstanding example of a change that supports Rosen's theory that change in war results from the pursuit of an inappropriate goal or a military's misunderstanding of a force's capabilities. SF was capable of commando operations, but the breadth of its mission spectrum made it more suited to force-multiplier roles than to meeting the requirements of a solely-DA force. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to cover DA evolution beyond Vietnam, but this foray into incursion-based highly precise raids was an important impetus in the development of Delta Force, and numerous post-Vietnam close-quarters battle courses for SOF.

Misappropriation, Conventional-SOF Divide, and Lessons for SF

This section seeks to contextualize how and why the misuse of SF by the conventional Army continued after SWITCHBACK. The goal is to provide the reader with an understanding of how the issues that stemmed from the conventional-SOF divide manifested in command and control problems throughout the war. An understanding of these issues is essential, as the conventional Army and their mismanagement of SF served as primary motivators for why Special Forces changed both during and after the Vietnam War.

Kelly, a Vietnam Green Beret, stated that issues stemming from command and control were the result of "inbred convictions acquired during combat operations in WWII and Korea."³²⁸ He further elaborates that the Green Berets were being used inappropriately for tasks that were

³²⁷ No Author. "FM 31-21 Special Operations." 1969. P.11-1

³²⁸ Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. 1973. P.164-5

accomplishable by conventional troops; SF were used more as highly skilled soldiers than as a dedicated solution for a specifically identified problem.³²⁹ Whereas Kelly noted this as an issue, the commander of 5th Group believed this use was fantastic, because SF was able to accomplish more with less—unaware that this was a waste of SF as a resource.³³⁰ To an officer, particularly one with conventional convictions, it seems like a great resource to have a smaller number of soldiers (a 2-6 man split ODA, and some 20 paramilitaries) perform the role of a larger element (a 140-man company+) for combat operations. What the 5th Group commander was missing is that the SF soldiers are better used in a more prolonged guerilla role, as the 12-man element is not able to sustain casualties. Pushing smaller elements into a meat grinder, even if they get favorable results, will wear them out or render them combat ineffective quicker than a larger, conventional element.

This disconnect between the operators and the senior officers set the attitude which fostered the adaptations taking place at micro and macro levels across Vietnam. The use of both SF (especially in small ODAs) and the paramilitary forces as a stopgap between conventional large-scale operations was an inappropriate allocation of resources. The inappropriateness of this is especially evident when considering the CIDG was designed to secure the alliances of rural indigenous people, who, during the combat phase, were often sent far from their homes to perform search and destroy and commando/guerilla operations. Simultaneously, there was a requirement for increased operational tempo against the communist forces, and SF were the only experienced soldiers who could take the reins while the rest of the military went through their own period of not only physically entering the conflict, but adapting to a guerilla war. While Big Army adapted to the role and warfare SF had been fighting, SF had to adapt to a type of war Big Army wanted to fight, a paradox of mission sets. It has been demonstrated that Special Forces ultimately pulled through and adapted to their new roles. This

³²⁹ Ibid. P.85-7

³³⁰ Ibid. Pp.104, 137, 140

does not detract from the fact that adaptation towards goals established through the misappropriation of SF, however motivated SF may have been to accomplish their goals, ultimately hurt both SF and the overall war effort in the short-term.

Recommendations SF made for doctrine at the conclusion of the War included an expanded mission beyond UW, as UW had changed conceptually.³³¹ No longer was it tenable to claim UW was all elements of conducting a guerilla war—specific roles, such as Direct Action, Special Reconnaissance, and counterinsurgency had to be separated from UW so conventional commanders could understand missions and limitations of Special Forces in specific settings. They also recommended increased logistic capabilities, to increase variety of personnel, to “revise drastically the intelligence section,” and to increase the power of the non-commissioned officers.³³² Many of these recommended changes were present as early as the 1969 edition of FM 31-21, as SF tried to create a document that more clearly delineated their abilities and the circumstances in which it was appropriate to use Green Berets for a given role.³³³ SF learned that their own “baseline” and capabilities had to be more specifically stated and elaborated on, as having defined operational roles (rather than “we’ll do what is needed”) would help SF understand themselves better, and allow conventional commanders a better understanding of SF utilization. Despite the changes the 1969 manual also stated “The examples cited...are not the only additional missions that Special Forces are capable of performing. The types of military operations that Special Forces can conduct are limited primarily by the availability of personnel and material resources.”³³⁴ This is essentially provided another channel for misuse as it is a catch-all, that, in essence, stated that if enough Green Berets were thrown at a problem, they would solve it. Thankfully, it did acknowledge the personnel limitations inherent in SOF.

³³¹ Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. 1973. Pp.173-4

³³² Ibid. P.171

³³³ Department of the Army. “FM 31-21 Special Operations.” 1969. P.1-3

³³⁴ Department of the Army. “Special Forces Operations.” 1969. P.11-1

As was previously discussed, one of the major suggestions by Special Forces following the war was the revision of the intelligence section.³³⁵ This suggestion supports a central point of this thesis; that SF and SOF in general were used for many more intelligence gathering operations than had been established in the baseline. The ability of SOF to provide substantial intelligence in denied areas gave them a distinct advantage conventional forces did not have. This would be exploited in the coming decades.

Kelly also notes that SF, at the time, was a temporary assignment, as it had been prior to and during the War. This was more an issue for officers than NCOs (who often stayed in for long periods), and it prevented career-minded officers from staying and advancing their skills in special operations. This changed following the conflict, and SF would be less of a career-killer position, although it would take decades to be accepted as a legitimate component of the Army.³³⁶

Kelly acknowledges that not all issues that stemmed from conventional-SF command and control relationships in Vietnam were the fault of conventional officers. He notes that conventional officers, at both a staff and operational level presented issues for Special Forces, but Special Forces Group headquarters presented issues of their own.³³⁷ That is because the SFG headquarters (which was likely overworked) was able to pawn off responsibilities on conventional leaders, and some mid-level SF officers manipulated the command and control issues to their advantage. Kelly notes that the most effective use of SF was always when SF was controlled by the SF Group headquarters, and had this to say about SF being controlled entirely by the conventional in future conflicts:

A valid case could be made on an exception basis that the position of [Special Forces Group] group commander exceeded in terms of mission responsibility and liabilities the position of any U.S. brigadier in Vietnam. Should a future commitment of U.S. military forces require the same scale of investment of Special Forces as occurred in

³³⁵ Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. 1973. P.171

³³⁶ Ibid. P.173

³³⁷ Ibid. P.172

Vietnam, the feasibility and desirability of a general officer command of Special Forces should be examined at that time.³³⁸

This statement is partially Kelly passing the buck on making a definitive recommendation regarding SF command and control, while making it clear that SF was best led by SF officers, who ideally would hold a rank of general in the future. By having a general command a wartime SFG in the future, fewer senior officers would be able to have undue influence over a colonel-held billet. These recommendations, of course, originate from SF, as the conventional forces' following the conclusion of the Vietnam War essentially shrunk SF to limit their influence.

Special Forces were also involved in scandal in the war, which further damaged their relationship with the conventional. Project GAMMA, the Cambodian cross-border recon program run by 5th Group, found a Communist turncoat in its midst, followed orders from the CIA to “terminate the agent with extreme prejudice,” and dumped his body into the South China Sea.³³⁹ This created a publicity nightmare, and allowed General Creighton Abrams, head of MAC-V and known SF opponent, to do more damage to Special Forces. In 1969, 3 years after the position was mandated to be filled with an SF-qualified officer, Abrams appointed Colonel Alexander Lemberes to lead 5th Group, a man who was neither SF nor airborne.³⁴⁰ Lemberes tried to gain fraudulent accreditations to appear more qualified, which led to him breaking a leg while jumping out of a helicopter. This incident may have been intentionally caused by Green Berets because they despised Lemberes and the fact another conventional officer was in control of 5th Group.³⁴¹ Eventually the Army Chief of Staff,

³³⁸ Ibid. P.172-3

³³⁹ Stanton. *Green Berets at War*. 1985. P.186-91; and Steve Balistreri. “The “Green Beret Affair” Project GAMMA, a massive snafu for the Army.” *Special Operations.com*. August 30 2019.

³⁴⁰ Stanton. *Green Berets at War*. 1985. P.190-1

³⁴¹ Ibid. P.190-1

General Westmoreland, intervened and ensured Colonel “Iron Mike” Michael Healy, an officer with a special operations background, headed 5th Group.³⁴²

Other issues that angered the conventional officers in MAC-V was Special Forces’ general attitude towards authority, their lack of following Army traditions (such as grooming standards and reveille), and their use of non-standard tiger stripe uniforms.³⁴³ Today these traits, including the use of tiger-stripe uniforms, continue in Special Forces as they are seen as part of the culture, at least among the operators. Issues over what type of uniform Special Forces were wearing and their general disposition towards tradition created a situation where the priorities of Big Army, due to its culture, frequently clashed with SF, which was comprised of men who did not care about Big Army’s culture and focused their efforts on getting results in their various overtaxed programs.

FM 31-21 had clearly changed during the conflict. As SF began to conduct operations to support big Army throughout Vietnam, the confusion around UW and the role of SF was reflected in the manuals. In the 1969 edition of FM 31-21, the role of SF had shifted from developing and using guerilla elements for guerilla warfare in an overall conventional war (the 1958 mission of SF) to “the role of US Army Special Forces is to contribute within their capability to the accomplishment of whatever missions and responsibilities are assigned to the US Army.”³⁴⁴ SF was given three main missions: UW; stability operations (FID); and Direct Action (which includes reconnaissance). It was stated that “mission priorities are established in accordance with the planned employment.”³⁴⁵ No longer was UW held as a higher priority than reconnaissance or FID, the priority was whatever SF had been oriented towards in a given situation. While the rationale for the change from UW to the broader scope of SF’s mission is not stated in the manual, this paper has, and will continue to

³⁴² Stanton. *Green Berets at War*. 1985. P.191

³⁴³ Ibid. P.186-7

³⁴⁴ Department of the Army. “FM 31-21 Special Operations.” 1969. P.1-2

³⁴⁵ No Author. “FM 31-21 Special Operations.” 1969. P.1-2

demonstrate that this difference was due to their roles in supporting and enabling the conventional US Armed Forces during their time in Vietnam, along with their experiences functioning as ODAs in combat. The importance of SF's paramilitary capacity and intelligence gathering ability (covered further in Chapters 6 and 7) was reflected in this manual, which acknowledged that SF could be deployed as either tactical or strategic elements, due to their ability to "provide flexible responses."³⁴⁶ There was also more distinct separation of their roles within different environments than earlier editions. The manuals served more as a general outline of what SF did, namely UW. The 1969 edition, likely as a result of the conventional-SOF divide, has a clear chart of what SF teams can do according to the environment at hand (Figure 1).³⁴⁷

³⁴⁶ No Author. "FM 31-21 Special Operations." 1969. P.1-1

³⁴⁷ No Author. "FM 31-21 Special Operations." 1969. P.1-3

Figure 1: Special Forces Operational Abilities FM 31-21 1969

OPERATION	General V	Limited V	Cold War
Infiltration of an area and conduct of guerrilla warfare with indigenous forces.	X	X	X
Stay-behind element to work with, and provide limited support and direction to, isolated friendly military and paramilitary forces.	X	X	
Supporting the development, organization, equipping, and training of indigenous forces designed to operate in insurgent controlled areas (mobile guerrilla force).	X	X	
Assisting in evasion and escape.	X	X	
Economy of force missions.	X	X	X
Conduct direct unilateral operations against specific objectives.	X	X	
Supporting theater sabotage and other acts of subversion.	X	X	
Supporting US/host government stability operations with advisory detachments.	X	X	X
Providing mobile training teams.	X	X	X
Supporting, advising, and directing the operations of indigenous Special Forces.	X	X	X
Preparing for a later UW or war limiting capability within the area(s) concerned.	X	X	
Providing Special Forces staff advice and planning assistance to other US military and civilian organizations.	X	X	X
Provide combat intelligence support to US military and civilian organizations and for host countries.	X	X	
Employment of special weapons.	X	X	
Extraction of selected personnel from enemy controlled-areas.	X	X	
Air, sea, and mountain rescue.	X	X	X
Support of US space program.		X	X
Disaster assistance.	X	X	X
Provide training cadre for US forces.	X	X	X

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Figure 1-1. Type operations U.S. Army Special Forces.

Clearer communication between SOF and conventional forces was certainly a necessity demonstrated in Vietnam, and the 1969 FM 31-21 was written in a simpler, more concise tone with better defined roles and operational abilities for what SF did, rather than how SF itself conducted guerilla operations. FM 31-21 had always been intended to be a manual both for SF, and the conventional commanders in charge of them, but the 1969 edition was written in such a way that it is

³⁴⁸ No Author. "FM 31-21 Special Operations." 1969. P.1-3

heavily weighted towards informing the reader about what SF can and cannot do. This would give conventional commanders an ability to better understand exactly what SF did, as a preventative measure to stop them from sending SF on inappropriate missions. Still, UW was a largely lumped together concept in the 1969 edition of FM 31-21, with SF's given roles as UW, FID, and Direct Action.³⁴⁹ Different team structures according to which role an ODA was performing were experimented with during this time, likely in response to the Direct Action missions SF had increasingly performed following the conventional forces' arrival in 1965.³⁵⁰

The efforts of the Green Berets, while not as well-received by Big Army, who reverted to wanting to fight 'their kind of war,' were acknowledged in an internal Army report in 1973 as having performed well in their fields.³⁵¹ Specifically, they were noted by the author; "With the withdrawal of the Special Forces from Vietnam in 1971, the Army could honestly lay claim to a new dimension in ground warfare—the organized employment of a paramilitary force in sustained combat against a determined enemy."³⁵² That is one of many adaptations SF experienced during the Vietnam War, and the Special Forces of today much more closely resemble SF at the end of Vietnam than the Green Berets that started the war. Unconventional Warfare, Foreign Internal Defense, Special Reconnaissance, and the use of A-Camps today all hold their practical heritage in Vietnam, and the various adaptations Special Forces undertook during the war have informed their descendants.

Conclusion

As Special Forces underwent the transition from UW to FID, the conventional forces entered into the Vietnam War in increasing number. The conventional forces were completely unprepared for the kind of warfare emerging in Vietnam, and their capabilities were hampered by a rigid mindset that

³⁴⁹ Ibid. Pp.2-1, 2-2

³⁵⁰ Ibid. Pp.2-11 – 2-16

³⁵¹ Kelly. *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. 1973. P.v

³⁵² Ibid. P.v

failed to produce a model that generated sufficient intelligence for their own operations. To fill the void in knowledge the US faced, the Green Berets and their paramilitary “little people” were required to perform mass Special Reconnaissance operations in the form of special projects. SF was not prepared to perform reconnaissance operations that accounted for substantial proportions of theatre-wide intelligence, and their ability to adapt to this role gave the US a much better understanding of the war. The CIDG also saw a refocusing on intelligence operations, although they continued to perform the infantry role they had assumed in the post-SWITCHBACK era. SF also had to learn defensive operations. Throughout this period, the SF community and conventional forces were learning how to interact with one another in the battlespace and developing a new relationship built around the requirements of the conflict as it unfolded in Vietnam. Ultimately, SF benefited from Vietnam, as the unit left the war with new capabilities and experience in UW, FID, and SR.

The lessons of this section serve to highlight major differences between SF and SEALs that remain consistent throughout this thesis. Whereas SEALs self-assigned missions because inept and uninformed conventional leadership removed themselves from leading the SEALs in any meaningful way, SF was forced into performing roles it was unprepared for because of the inept and uninformed conventional leadership.

This section demonstrates several of many examples of how change was differently implemented and experienced by SOF in Vietnam. SF’s goals through the war would largely be paramilitary stability operations, which obviously centered around combat, and intelligence operations that took a variety of forms from Special Reconnaissance to the Phoenix Program (Chapter 6), and Studies and Observations Group (Chapter 7). SF’s adaptations to the Phoenix Program, Studies and Observations Group, and Direct Action serve as the remaining studies of adaptation in the Vietnam War presented in this thesis.

Chapter 6: The Phoenix Program

Phoenix

The Phoenix Program (1967-72) is a critical component of SOF change in Vietnam, as it saw the implementation of new tactics, techniques, procedures, and operational change for the units involved. It was an attempt to centralize intelligence gathering and processing, which took place with SOF handlers leading teams of Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRU; Vietnamese paramilitary mercenaries) to hunt down and dismantle a shadow communist government that was operating in South Vietnam. This section will go through the SEALs and SF involvement in the Program, which was highly classified until a leak made the Program public, resulting in long-term repercussions for both the SOF community and CIA. Today, while many who study Phoenix remember it as an assassination program of brutal efficiency, RAND has argued it was neither particularly brutal nor overwhelmingly effective.³⁵³ Outside the scope of efficiency, Phoenix provided significantly different methods of employment for SOF, and developed some of the modern tactics, techniques, and procedures used by modern SOF. Phoenix was conceived as a centralized intelligence program that would allow for faster intelligence processing while targeting Vietcong Infrastructure (VCI), the agents of the communist shadow government. This served as a precursor to the US Military's Network-Centric Warfare Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) in the 1990s and 2000s that was applied by General McChrystal in Iraq while leading Joint Special Operations Command.

Regarding change, there was nothing like the Phoenix Program in NWIP 29-1, and very little like it in FM 31-21. There are sections on reconnaissance, patrolling, targeting capabilities, and intelligence gathering, but the quasi-police nature of Phoenix was unprecedented. That is because

³⁵³ William Rosenau, and Austin Long. "The Phoenix Program and Contemporary Counterinsurgency" *RAND*. 2009. Pp.vii-2

neither SF nor SEALs were expected to be a long-term occupying force when conducting UW. FM 31-21 does have a section on counterintelligence, where it describes the need for SF to have programs in place to remove enemy intelligence agents that might be blended in with the locals in an area where they were conducting guerrilla warfare.³⁵⁴ Most of the counterintelligence in this document was preventative, relating to adequately screening guerrilla fighters to prevent infiltration. The goal of this was to secure the guerrilla forces and operations conducted by SF against a larger hostile force, for the limited scope of their involvement in a conventional war. Phoenix was destroying an enemy shadow government, as part of an overall FID effort to implement stability in South Vietnam. Whereas FM 31-21 envisioned SF as the guerrillas hiding from the government, in Phoenix SF acted on behalf of the government removing the guerrillas through a hunter/killer program.

This thesis demonstrates that the scope, scale, and context of the employment of SF was vastly different than what was proposed in doctrine. The Phoenix Program was no different: what was once doctrine SF would enact under certain limited circumstances became a full-time job, and the context for performing this task was completely different. As a result, the Program was a definite change from the baseline and the following examination further investigates its role in SOF adaptation.

Doctrine of Phoenix, Changes for SEALs, and Future Targeting Programs

The Phoenix Program, also known as “Phung Hoang,” was a joint program between the US and South Vietnam (including the various mercenary groups fighting for the South), to root out and “pacify” VCI communist cadre.³⁵⁵ These VCI cadre were forming a shadow government throughout the South to increase the influence of the North, based around collecting taxes and otherwise acting

³⁵⁴ Department of the Army. “FM 31-21 Guerilla Warfare and Special Forces Operations.” 1958. P.105

³⁵⁵ Graham A. Cosmas. *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-73*. Washington, DC: Center of Military History. 2007. P.230

as intelligence and political assets for North Vietnam. This challenged South Vietnam's stability and economic viability and required a specialized hand to remove the shadow government. To this end, the CIA was tasked with limiting the influence of the shadow government. The primary effort was the pacification push. In order to increase efficiency, the CIA established a centralized intelligence analysis area to process information the handlers would find.³⁵⁶ The final component of the Phoenix Program was the use of new sensors in remote areas, often in conjuncture with the Special Forces' border surveillance.³⁵⁷

The pacification portion of Phoenix took form by US handlers controlling various elements who would locate and destroy, interrogate, or "turn" suspected communists. The handlers were Special Forces, SEALs, and Marine Force Recon operators who were temporarily assigned to the CIA by way of sheep dip, the process of signing a form to temporarily work for the CIA to avoid legal limitations placed on the US Armed Forces. The SOF involved led their Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRUs) to 'run up the ladder,' working on progressive targeting of the VCI hierarchy based off intelligence gathered from previous raids.³⁵⁸ When they would perform a raid, they would seize people and intelligence, and use that to conduct subsequent raids. The raids and intelligence cycle continued until they were satisfied that the VCI in an area were pacified. Today this process is known as F3EA, or Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, and Analyze, still used in cyclical targeting programs in SOF.

The Interservice model is useful in examining Phoenix and the SEALs, as much of what they learned they took from the CIA, which controlled the program (and had learned this technique from police forces). This remains a constant in this paper, where SOF-CIA interactions helped the young SOF elements in Vietnam gain a better understanding of how they could maximize their potential in

³⁵⁶ Rosenau and Long. "The Phoenix Program and Contemporary Counterinsurgency" 2009. P.vii

³⁵⁷ Rosenau and Long. "The Phoenix Program and Contemporary Counterinsurgency" 2009. P.vii

³⁵⁸ Harry Constance and Randall Fuerst. *Good to Go: The Life and Times of a Decorated Member of the US Navy's Elite SEAL Team Two*. New York: Harper Collins. 1997. P.215

intelligence roles. Much of the intelligence came from former NVA or VC through the Hoi Chanh Program, which offered amnesty and rewards to those who defected against the North, so long as they provided intelligence.³⁵⁹

As noted in an interview with SF officer John Mullins, the PRU members were ethnic Vietnamese recruited out of their shared hatred of the communists: “[T]he biggest problem I had was keeping them from killing (the captured Vietcong Infrastructure).”³⁶⁰ Mullins also implied during an interview that VCI who were not useful were simply killed by the PRU members, which pushed the VCI into giving information to ensure they were not disposed of; “and once we started rolling them up...they sang their hearts out.”³⁶¹ Mullin’s PRU was responsible for dissolving the shadow government of Chuong Thien Province, and during this pacification VCI were turning themselves into police to avoid the PRU.³⁶² Phoenix had a psychological effect on the VCI and communist forces operating in the South, although this was a secondary effect of the violence employed by the Program, and not the primary intent.³⁶³ This was also not without consequence. The Program died during the 1971 Fullbright hearings (an anti-Vietnam War series of hearings in the United States Congress), which specifically called out “American Special Forces” and their “program of mass extermination,” as a result, the American handlers were sent back to the US.³⁶⁴ Ironically, after the handlers left, the Vietnamese PRU members became much more vicious and Phoenix more closely resembled the

³⁵⁹ Ken Dockery. *Navy SEALs: A History Pt. II*. New York: The Military Book Club. 2002. P.209

³⁶⁰ The Team House. “John Mullins: MACV-SOG, Phoenix Program, Blue Light, and security consultant: Ep. 48.” *Youtube*. 2020. Timestamp: 48:50

³⁶¹ Team House. “John Mullins: MACV-SOG, Phoenix Program, Blue Light, and security consultant: Ep. 48.” 2020. 48:30, 54:09

³⁶² Team House. “John Mullins: MACV-SOG, Phoenix Program, Blue Light, and security consultant: Ep. 48.” 2020. 55:25

³⁶³ Jocko Podcast. “Jocko Podcast 193 w/ Kirby Horrell: The Last Vietnam SEAL to be on Active Duty” *Youtube*. 2019. Timestamp: 34:24; and Cosmas. *Withdrawal*. 2007. Pp.230-1

³⁶⁴ Brian Benoit. “Sifting the Ashes of Counterinsurgency: The Role of America’s Phoenix Program in the Vietnam War” *Readex*. January 1, 2018.

Program that the American public had feared—one of torture, assassinations, and little to no oversight.³⁶⁵

There is an important constraint to note when it comes to the analysis of Phoenix in this thesis; The Phoenix Program ended towards the end of the Vietnam War. There was a definitive cessation of Phoenix activities, and to say the Phoenix Program changed names and lived on is erroneous. However, the *idea* of Phoenix, rather than the program itself, did live on spiritually in a number of programs and activities. The CIA and SOF learned from Phoenix and the activities in Vietnam, especially regarding the CIAs relationship with SOF. Conventional commanders, as has been elaborated several times in this thesis, did not understand what SOF was or how to use them. That was not the case with the CIA. Special Forces had been trained in subterfuge, assassinations, manipulation, political and economic warfare, not unlike the methods used by the CIA.³⁶⁶ SEALs performed similar roles, but with an maritime focus. The CIA had experience in all of these areas, and understood how to achieve their end goals, unlike the regular Army and Navy that were set in their doctrinal ways.

The Phoenix Program was adaptation that set the stage for innovation, but it is important to note that it is similar to a hybridization of SF's targeting capability role with their counterintelligence role, mixed with new tactics, techniques and procedures. The targeting capability was designed so SF behind the lines in Europe, or wherever they were operating, could feed information to commanders about who or what infrastructure was a target of interest, and eliminate a person or infrastructure if the commander saw fit. It was intended to be folded into what is now known as Advanced Force Operations which is characterized by Special Reconnaissance. In the case of Vietnam, the targeting capability, applied to the problem of counterintelligence, became a tool of counterinsurgency. The

³⁶⁵ Team House. "John Mullins: MACV-SOG, Phoenix Program, Blue Light, and security consultant: Ep. 48." 2020. 50:35

³⁶⁶ Department of the Army. "FM 31-21: Guerilla Warfare and Special Forces Operations." 1961.

Phoenix Program used a novel hybridization of paramilitary/police tactics, techniques, and procedures in the course of a sustained program. Because of that, one cannot say that the targeting capability or counterintelligence capability outlined in FM 31-21, is the same as the execution of Phoenix. Nothing like Phoenix was conceived of in either FM 31-21 or NWIP 29-1.

In the Navy SEALs baselines, NWIP 29-1, there are three points that could be misconstrued as suggesting the SEAL's ability to perform Phoenix operations: "1. Primary. To develop a specialized capability to conduct operations for... other clandestine activities conducted in and around restricted waters, rivers, and canals..." "2. To develop doctrine and tactics for SEAL operations..." and "3.c.1. Conduct reconnaissance, surveillance, and intelligence collection missions as directed."³⁶⁷ While one could argue that Phoenix collectively fell into these sections, and the program certainly taught the SEALs immensely, the Phoenix Program was not part of the SEAL baseline. Components of the Program, as was the case with SF, were in the baseline, but these parts coming together with the enhancement of police tactics certainly differed from the baseline. The generic terminology of point 1 serves as a catch-all, to say that SEALs could do "special operations" without outlining specifically what that is. That goes back to the founding of the teams and the desire of the Navy in the Kennedy era to simply meet a checklist given by the administration. Therefore, one could rationalize that Phoenix was a special operation, and because NWIP 29-1 says SEALs perform special operations, logically SEALs perform Phoenix. That is inherently false and does not take into account their specific unit capabilities or the political atmosphere at the time of their creation and the writing of NWIP 29-1. With that being established, SEALs learned greatly from Phoenix and their involvement in the program informed the young NSW element, much like point 2 had intended. Again, the conduct of Phoenix was not what was envisioned in point 2, but the SEALs participation in the program was significant in terms of developing SEAL doctrine and tactics. The use of lessons learned from Phoenix

³⁶⁷ Ken Dockery. *Navy SEALs: A History Part I*. New York: Military Book Club. 2002. Pp.289-90

allowed the SEALs to adapt to the requirements of Vietnam and become a much more effective Unconventional Warfare force.

While the random deployment of SEALs through Rung Sat Special Zone (RSSZ) succeeded in terms of the number of enemies they were eliminating, commanders eventually formed a coordinated dispersion of SEAL packages within the RSSZ. This coordinated deployment had a disproportionate effect on the VC guerrillas, who were now facing an enemy who fought back with guerilla tactics. As the VC began to avoid direct contact with SEALs and resort to more infiltration-based tactics within the RSSZ, SEALs began to try to capture more enemies than kill them in order to gain intelligence about where they could conduct their next raid.³⁶⁸ This F3EA technique was learned from Phoenix Program advisors returning to regular SEAL platoons, and became increasingly common within NSW through a horizontal learning process.

The SEAL-run portion of the Phoenix Program was located in the IV Corps area of operations, 16 provinces in total, and staffed almost exclusively SEAL Detachment Bravo.³⁶⁹ The SEALs assigned to the Phoenix Program would seize “high-level” communist elements in the middle of the night, place them on a sampan, and leave with them.³⁷⁰ According to SEAL Kirby Horrell, who ran Phoenix operations during his time in Vietnam, the Program was initially successful at eliminating turncoat Southern Vietnamese, but was compromised as time progressed because the Vietcong would pretend to be allies of the US, and implicate actual US allies for PRU removal.³⁷¹

Phoenix was successful for such a small organization, or at least was considered to be successful by MAC-V. In a declassified report, the small numbers of SEALs/PRU had killed 2,120

³⁶⁸ James W. Collins. “Blue and Purple: Optimizing the Command and Control of Forward Deployed Naval Special Warfare.” *Faculty of the US Army Command and General Staff College*. Thesis. 1997. P.62, and Jocko Podcast. “Jocko Podcast 37 w/ Vietnam Vet Navy SEAL Roger Hayden.” *Youtube*. August 24, 2016. Timestamp: 1:47:00 and 1:50:00, and Jocko. “Jocko Podcast 193 w/ Kirby Horrell: The Last Vietnam SEAL to be on Active Duty” 2019. 33:05

³⁶⁹ Dockery. *Navy SEALs: A History Pt. II*. 2002. P.210

³⁷⁰ Jocko. “Jocko Podcast 193 w/ Kirby Horrell: The Last Vietnam SEAL to be on Active Duty.” 2019. 32:32

³⁷¹ Jocko. “Jocko Podcast 193 w/ Kirby Horrell: The Last Vietnam SEAL to be on Active Duty” 2019. 34:00

enemy forces, and captured another 2,718, almost all VC Infrastructure, which the report notes were “the core of the enemy’s command and control structure.”³⁷²

For some SEALs, working for Phoenix was not necessarily time assigned away from normal SEAL duties but, rather, it augmented their operations. While (at the time) Petty Officer Second Class Harry Constance describes his time in the Phoenix Program as being full-time (and only for officers, as he bluffed his way in with the blessing of his CO), others, like Master Chiefs Gary Smith and Kirby Horrell, did it as NCOs, and seemingly on a basis that was less demanding.³⁷³ An excerpt from a declassified 1968 report states that the program was a great opportunity for enlisted men to gain leadership experience, and does not mention officer involvement.³⁷⁴ Constance’s experience was that individual SEALs involved in Phoenix were supposed to operate independently from their SEAL team, whereas Horrell, who deployed later, also seemed to work interchangeably with his SEAL team and Phoenix.³⁷⁵ This can likely be attributed to the fact that Smith and Horrell did their tours with Phoenix a year later than Constance, and changes may have been implemented in that time to allow for a more relaxed approach. In the case of Lieutenant Gormly, he stated that post-Tet Offensive, PRU advisors were stationed for a full deployment with Phoenix, but he assigned SEALs on a rotational basis to assist their colleagues in Phoenix.³⁷⁶ This certainly helped spread knowledge of tactics, techniques, and procedures from Phoenix to the regularly assigned SEALs.

These lessons were adopted by modern SEALs as their first foray into F3EA. As stated, Phoenix introduced selected SEALs to the practice, who taught their platoons on return, or by temporarily assigning SEALs to assist in Phoenix operations. This begun the horizontal learning

³⁷² Dockery. *Navy SEALs: A History Pt. II*. 2002. Pp.213-4

³⁷³ Constance and Fuerst. *Good to Go: The Life and Times of a Decorated Member of the US Navy’s Elite SEAL Team Two*. 1997. Pp.250-5

³⁷⁴ Dockery. *Navy SEALs: A History Part I*. 2002. P.210

³⁷⁵ Constance and Fuerst. *Good to Go: The Life and Times of a Decorated Member of the US Navy’s Elite SEAL Team Two*. 1997. P.282

³⁷⁶ Captain Robert A. Gormly. *Combat Swimmer: Memoirs of a Navy SEAL*. New York: Penguin Group. 1998. Pp.107-8

process that benefited SEALs external to the Program, enabling the lessons of the relatively small Program to spread across the larger community. The SEALs also worked with Vietnamese villages that were allied with the South's government, to identify and eliminate Vietcong Infrastructure even when they were not assigned to Phung Hoang.³⁷⁷ This practice increased throughout the War, as the non-Phoenix SEALs realized that simply killing everyone in an ambush was not as useful as taking prisoners.³⁷⁸ During the course of the War, as communication between platoons and intelligence sections improved, SEALs began reacting to intelligence the same night it was acquired.³⁷⁹

This practice of F3EA continues today, with SEAL elements feeding into their own intelligence cycle or as part of a larger network like JSOC task forces. This was, in fact, almost innovative for the SEAL teams, as it changed how they operated and became part of their counter-insurgency strategy. As Farrell and Terriff describe it, this resembled sustaining innovation driven by SEAL emulation of the CIA, but lacks the scope and scale seen in innovation. The SEALs performed a more effective technique on loan to the CIA and brought it back with them to the teams on a regular SEAL deployment. It altered the way in which they worked and improved the efficaciousness of their attempts to decapitate leadership but did not change their desired end state of counterinsurgency. For that reason, the development of F3EA in SEAL teams is adaptive. Counterinsurgency was not a new topic, but this way of going about it was novel for military operations, although not far-reaching enough to qualify as innovative transformation. As adaptation, the Phoenix Program gave teams operational abilities and methods beyond what was previously available. Specifically, retired SEAL Lieutenant Commander Michael J. Walsh, stated in an interview:

[a]nd as these individual SEALs came out of the Phoenix Program, and went back into platoons, our whole intelligence collection effort and smartness, just grew by leaps and bounds. It's like each platoon got smarter and smarter with each trip. That

³⁷⁷ Smith. 1996. Pp.40-1, and Constance and Fuerst. *Good to Go: The Life and Times of a Decorated Member of the US Navy's Elite SEAL Team Two*. 1997. P.98

³⁷⁸ Dockery. *Navy SEALs: A History Pt. II*. 2002. P.262

³⁷⁹ SOT Consulting. "US Navy SEAL Stoner 63 video." *Youtube*. August 17 2018. Timestamp: 23:50

kind of learning curve has never been repeated. We've never learned as much as fast. One platoon briefed another; the information transfer was enormous.³⁸⁰

What the Phoenix Program's pacification effort amounts to is a realization of SOF performing DA, extracting intelligence, and performing DA based around the intelligence gathered, with input from the CIA. That is the F3EA (Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Analyze) *modus operandi* of JSOC and other SOCOM elements today, barring the 1990's technological revolution in military affairs that enabled rapid intelligence processing.³⁸¹ Phoenix was an attempt to accomplish what JSOC implemented in Iraq, as Phoenix was based around a Combined Intelligence Center, Vietnam (CICV), essentially the "brain" of Phoenix where intelligence was collected and disseminated, much like JSOC's network-centric approach.³⁸²

Going too far down this path of examining intelligence gathering/processing runs the risk of derailing this section of the thesis from the focus on SF/SEAL participation in the program, but it is important to note for both the purposes of the argument this thesis is making regarding adaptation/innovation and for historical accuracy the similarities between Phoenix and modern counterterrorist/counterinsurgency strategy. Phoenix was just an early counterinsurgency attempt that was not the permanent establishment that network-centric warfare appears to be. Additionally, Phoenix and the F3EA concepts were by no means a widespread program or developed concept—thus limiting the scope and scale when the examination is contained to the Vietnam War. To claim Phoenix was large is erroneous, as Phoenix was a small, covert program—at no one point numbering more than 5,000 for the Vietnamese forces, 100 for the US military, and 5 American civilians.³⁸³ However, it was significant in terms of the impact it had in Vietnam; for the years of 1968-72 it

³⁸⁰ SOT Consulting, "US Navy SEAL Stoner 63 video." 2018. 22:30

³⁸¹ Jon R. Lindsay "Reinventing the Revolution: Technological Visions, Counterinsurgent Criticism, and the Rise of Special Operations." *Journal of Strategic Studies*. 36.3. 2013. Pp.441-2

³⁸² Rosenau and Long. "The Phoenix Program and Contemporary Counterinsurgency" 2009. P.9

³⁸³ Ibid. Pp.11-2

neutralized approximately 80,000 VCI.³⁸⁴ Therefore, one cannot call Phoenix an innovation, but rather adaptation in a line of counterterrorist/counterinsurgency attempts that amounted to innovation in mid-2000's Iraq. This use of joint CIA-SOF elements continues to this day, but their use is classified and the information about them is extremely contained.³⁸⁵

Conclusion

Ultimately, the lessons of Phoenix (centralized intelligence gathering and F3EA) were innovative, but not in scope of the self-contained Program. There is no doubt that Phoenix increased the effectiveness of the SOF units involved in it. A RAND study in 2009 assessed that Phoenix was very effective at eliminating VCI, but its overall utility was reduced by the terror Phoenix PRUs had with the US populace, who upon learning about the program were outraged.³⁸⁶ It eliminated huge scores of VCI, and pushed many to switch sides out of dread resulting from an inevitable conflict with the local PRU. Perhaps Phoenix was too effective, destroying itself through its brutal reputation and the subsequent domestic concerns about the morality of the program, even if the reputation as an assassination program failed to account for the overall goals. Requisite technological changes made in the 1990s and 2000s would enable innovation in the same manner where the Phoenix Program attempted and failed.

The Phoenix Program proved that SOF could adapt to fill roles in novel programs that experimented with new tactics, techniques, and procedures surrounding paramilitary operations. On a micro level, SOF gained experiences in covert operations and introduced now-prominent SOF techniques such as sheep-dipping and F3EA. Through their experience in Phoenix, the SEALs, in particular, gained a new tool that enabled them to more readily perform their Unconventional Warfare

³⁸⁴ Ibid. P.13

³⁸⁵ Jack Murphy. "OMEGA: THE JOINT CIA-JSOC HUNTER/KILLER TEAMS." *SOFREP*. June 7, 2015.

³⁸⁶ Rosenau and Long. "The Phoenix Program and Contemporary Counterinsurgency" 2009. Pp.13-5

missions. They used intelligence programs and connections with the CIA to learn new tactics, techniques and procedures when operating in Vietnam, lessons they still use to this day. As has been continually reinforced, Special Forces had started the war on more even footing than the young SEAL teams, who relied on the CIA for guidance in the absence of proper senior leadership. While SF certainly benefited from working with the CIA over the conventional commanders, the Green Berets existed as a more solid, experienced, and versatile unit in Vietnam. Through their work on the Phoenix Program, both SOF elements experienced significant adaptive changes in meeting their new roles and requirements.

Chapter 7: MAC-V SOG

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Introduction

Military Assisted Command, Vietnam's Studies and Observations Group (MAC-V SOG), is one of, and perhaps the most important, developments for SOF during the Vietnam War and beyond. SOG was the US' covert and clandestine SOF element that performed exclusively "black ops," operations that were completely deniable and classified for 20 years. This stands in contrast with "white operations," which are acknowledged by the US as being conducted by the Armed Forces. As described in this section, SOG became one of the first proto-tier one SOF forces in the US Military. It was not a unit so much as it was an assignment to a command; the SF and SEALs assigned to SOG maintained their Military Occupational Specialty but joined SOGs' chain of command and filled SOG billets. That meant that a Special Forces member serving in SOG was still a Green Beret, a SEAL was still a SEAL. They were operators working for a SOG detachment instead of their own service, this being a part of building SOG as a standalone entity separate from the Navy or Army.³⁸⁷ Outside of the scope of this project are the Marine Force Recon and Air Force elements that were assigned to SOG.

"Tier one" typically refers to units assigned to Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), the counterterrorist sub-command found within, but largely separate from, Special Operations Command

³⁸⁷ Richard H. Shultz. *The Secret War Against Hanoi: Kennedy's and Johnson's use of Spies, Saboteurs, and Covert Warriors in North Vietnam*. New York: Harper Collins. 1999. Pp.46-7

(SOCOM). Both commands were created well after Vietnam, JSOC in 1980 and SOCOM in 1987. The units under JSOC are regarded as being the most highly specialized and trained in the US Military because these units largely select from established SOF elements, performing a mission set where the skills required are beyond those of regular SOF units. JSOC units are the primary choice for black operations, whereas SOCOM elements primarily perform white operations (although SOCOM elements may also perform black operations). Tier one effectively describes black operation-capable counterterror elements, with an implication of a highly trained, commando-like, extreme-risk force, or highly developed, highly skilled and secretive aviation or intelligence units. Little is known about several elements of JSOC, much like SOG when it existed.

SOG served as one of the first joint special operations commands, essentially being what many could suggest amounts to a “task force” because it was a temporary institution, but this title and model were rejected for unknown reasons in the upper echelons of the Pentagon.³⁸⁸ Instead, SOG functioned much like a task force but with increased focus on it being a hybridization of the services involved, encouraging the Air Force, Army, Navy, and Marine elements involved to think of themselves as partners in a standalone element. Had SOG been a permanent establishment that functioned outside of Southeast Asia, it would have been the first joint special operation command in US military history, depending whether the Second World War Office of Strategic Services is considered a military or civilian structure.

Why did SOG Exist?

SOG was a secret command devoted to degrading, disrupting, and evaluating North Vietnamese and Chinese capabilities during the Vietnam War. Many of their activities took place

³⁸⁸ Richard H. Shultz. *The Secret War Against Hanoi*. 1999. P.46-7

around extremely high-risk strategic-level Special Reconnaissance (SR) cross-border operations in and outside of Vietnam. Prior to SOGs inception, the CIA had been running missions into North Vietnam with South Vietnamese forces. The Studies and Observations Group was created as a result of CIA failures to pursue general clandestine harassment operations against North Vietnam. SOG began pursuing this mission under the guise of OPLAN-34A, a program where SEALs and Marine intelligence officials trained Vietnamese Navy Lien Doan Nguoi Nhai (LDNN, South Vietnamese counterparts for SEALs) for cross-border operations.³⁸⁹ Due to OPLAN-34A failures, control of these covert operations shifted from the CIA to the Department of Defense, similar to the CIDG and SWITCHBACK. SOG was assigned to report to the Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities (SACSA), essentially giving it a direct line to the Joint Chiefs of Staff.³⁹⁰

When OPLAN-34A/SOG was shifted to SACSA command, SOG was headed by Colonel Clyde Russell, a veteran of the 82nd Airborne, as well as the 7th and 10th SFG(A)s.³⁹¹ Russell structured SOG like the WWII Office of Strategic Services (OSS); it was divided into air/ground, maritime, and psychological operations, he also ensured SOG as a whole was supported by the CIA's vast resources in Southeast Asia.³⁹² Stanton writes that SOG was organized around eight operational commands, with most SF being assigned to Ground Studies Group (SOG 35), Airborne Studies Group (SOG 36), and Training Studies Group (SOG 38).³⁹³ SOG had responsibilities in (then) Burma, Cambodia, Laos, North and South Vietnam, as well as portions of Southern China.³⁹⁴ The operators working for SOG became legends within SF, as the organization attracted the most thrill-seeking of the Green Berets.³⁹⁵

³⁸⁹ Shultz. *The Secret War Against Hanoi*. 1999. Pp.58-60, 177

³⁹⁰ John Plaster. *SOG: The Secret War of America's Commandos in Vietnam*. New York: Simon and Schuster. 1997. P.23

³⁹¹ Plaster. *SOG: The Secret War of America's Commandos in Vietnam*. 1997. Pp.23-4

³⁹² Plaster. *SOG: The Secret War of America's Commandos in Vietnam*. 1997. P.24, Shultz. *The Secret War Against Hanoi*. 1999. P.54

³⁹³ Stanton. *Green Berets at War*. 1985. P.208

³⁹⁴ Ibid. P.205

³⁹⁵ Shultz. *The Secret War Against Hanoi*. 1999. P.221

By 1965, SOG had four main roles: deception and agent handling operations; covert maritime raids; psychological warfare; and campaigns against the Ho Chi Minh Trail.³⁹⁶

Early SOG reconnaissance efforts failed. Secretary of Defense McNamara wanted additional recon efforts into Laos, requesting that Vietnamese Special Forces take the reins. Despite a warning from senior SF officers that the ARVN SF were unqualified, five teams of eight ARVN SF, under the program name of *Leaping Lena*, were organized and sent into Laos, where all but four soldiers were immediately killed.³⁹⁷ Cross-border operations were forbidden for Americans, as the State Department wanted to uphold the 1962 Geneva Accords (despite having sheep dipped SF there as outlined in [Chapter 4](#)). SOG operated in Laos despite instructions to the contrary abiding by the Geneva Convention only when doing so did not obstruct their ability to perform their missions, until cross-border operations into Laos were authorized in 1965.³⁹⁸

Following this, Green Berets began to perform cross-border reconnaissance operations to the Ho Chi Minh Trail.³⁹⁹ Operations into Laos were known as *Shining Brass*, later renamed *Prairie Fire* when the Area of Operations expanded to Cambodia. These operations consisted of reconnaissance teams comprised of Green Berets and tribal mercenaries (from the ethnically Chinese Nung tribe), which infiltrated by air across a border (“crossing the fence”) to an area of the Ho Chi Minh Trail they were to reconnoiter. The teams varied in size, at most they were 12 strong, with 3 Americans and 9 mercenaries, although the large teams were primarily used in Cambodia.⁴⁰⁰ In Laos, SF veterans such as John Stryker Myer ran teams of six; with three SF and three indigenous members.⁴⁰¹ As is often the

³⁹⁶ Shultz. *The Secret War Against Hanoi*. 1999. P.49

³⁹⁷ Plaster. *SOG: The Secret War of America's Commandos in Vietnam*. 1997. Pp.27-8

³⁹⁸ Shultz. *The Secret War Against Hanoi*. 1999. P.74

³⁹⁹ Plaster. *SOG: The Secret War of America's Commandos in Vietnam*. 1997. P.28

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid. P.30 and John Prados. *The US Special Forces: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2015. P.46

⁴⁰¹ Mike Glover Actual. “The Secret War in Vietnam: MAC-V SOG Veteran John Stryker Myer.” *Youtube*. April 29, 2022. Timestamp: 5:45

case in SOF environments, there was no hard and fast standard operating procedure, and the operators for any given mission were able to assemble their teams as they saw fit for the requirements at hand.

SOG Adaptation and Results

Special Forces, as outlined, had been created in part to perform Special Reconnaissance (SR) behind enemy lines (as all their tasks were originally designed for behind enemy lines activities). This included target-designating activities for airstrikes and artillery, conducting damage assessment from airstrikes, and creating target packages for the main conventional force to assault once they were active in the theatre.⁴⁰² Essentially, SF was doctrinally capable of performing roles involving Forward Air Control and limited intelligence collection. The assessment of the damage imparted by airstrikes is known as Bomb/Battle Damage Assessment (BDA). SOG also performed many operations known as *Bright Lights*, the rescues of prisoners of war, also outlined in FM 31-21.⁴⁰³ It is important to note that these three operational mission types (targeting, BDA, and rescue missions) were not the priority of SF in FM 31-21, which stated that these operations were not the bread and butter of SF and should never be performed if so doing detracted from the Green Beret's ability to perform their primary mission to support guerillas in acts against hostile states.⁴⁰⁴ It also stated that these operations should be largely performed by the guerilla intelligence net—the collection of guerrilla forces acting on behalf of SF through various areas where Green Berets are not present. In SOG the Green Berets did the work themselves.

The biggest lapse between FM 31-21 and what SF did under SOG was the context of the operations. When the roles that SF performed (targeting, BDA, rescues) were carried out as envisioned

⁴⁰² No Author. "FM 31-21 Guerilla Warfare and Special Forces Operations." *Department of the Army*. 1958. Pp.61-2

⁴⁰³ Department of the Army. "FM 31-21: Guerilla Warfare and Special Forces Operations." 1958. P.61

⁴⁰⁴ Department of the Army. "FM 31-21: Guerrilla Warfare and Special Forces Operations." 1958. Pp.9, 97

under FM 31-21, their location behind enemy lines was an advantage. The theoretical proximity of SF guerrilla units to enemy facilities for both designating and assessing damage, and their ability to establish escape and evasion routes for pilots, was the primary strength of SF in these roles.⁴⁰⁵ SOG performed these roles staged out of bases in South Vietnam for operations conducted behind enemy lines primarily in Laos and Cambodia. The Green Berets conducting these operations were not stationed behind enemy lines, they moved behind enemy lines for short-duration operations. This change in the scenario of SF usage also applied to the raiding forces that SOG would establish after 1965. This completely negated the primary asset that SF had in performing these missions, and required the Green Berets involved to rapidly adapt new and unfamiliar demands. It is worth noting that in 1957 Green Berets from 10th Group had been sent into Iran to recover the classified contents of a small plane that had crashed.⁴⁰⁶ This was a one-off mission, not the significant, sustained campaign of adaptation that occurred under SOG.

SOG saw SFs targeting capability used more in line with the doctrine of FM 31-21. SOG employed SF to target critical, strategic assets the enemy employed, such as the Ho Chi Minh Trail and large bases. Again, this use of Special Forces as a Special Reconnaissance element does not fit in line with their original mission intent, even if the role they were performing was a given doctrinal capability. The scope of SR under SOG, as well as the methodologies of attaining and maintaining the targeting capability, were unprecedented in all past SOF manuals and documents. A reminder of the limited scale of these intended SF operations during the Vietnam War is important, as SOG drastically altered the emphasis and energy undertaken by Special Forces while performing Special Reconnaissance as part of an Unconventional Warfare campaign.

The plan for *Shining Brass* had three elements working in tandem:

⁴⁰⁵ Department of the Army. "FM 31-21: Guerrilla Warfare and Special Forces Operations." 1958. Pp.9, 20, 61

⁴⁰⁶ Annie Jacobsen. *Surprise, Kill, Vanish*. 2019. P.63

- I.) SF recon teams would go into southern Laos to conduct targeting operations, intelligence gathering, and BDA.
- II.) SF would raise company-sized raiding forces in Southern Vietnam destined for Laos (Hatchet Forces);
- III.) using Laotian tribesmen to harass the VC.⁴⁰⁷

The teams were either referred to as Recon Teams (RT) or Spike Teams (ST).⁴⁰⁸ On October 18, 1965, RT Iowa led the first insertion; the mission was to investigate a possible launch source of rockets and mortars that constantly hammered Danang.⁴⁰⁹ The team crossed the border, stealthily infiltrated the base they found, were eventually discovered, and fled under fire, successfully air striking the launch site.⁴¹⁰ Missions like this continued, with the recon teams often killing the NVA patrols they encountered, then fleeing while hundreds of NVA maneuvered in pursuit of the Green Berets and their indigenous compatriots. The operations usually ended after the SOG men had discovered a base, shot it out or stealthily retreated, and called in airstrikes to destroy the NVA infrastructure they had found. The alternative was the loss of the team in combat. SOG Recon Teams would also be inserted to track down enemy divisions and corps to inform the Joint Chiefs or relevant Corps commander in Vietnam.

The airstrikes were directed by SOG men who rode with a Forward Air Controller (FAC) plane (from the 20th Tactical Air Support Squadron), this forming a relationship and adaptive behavior between the FACs and the SOG “Covey Riders.”⁴¹¹ Covey Riders were experienced SOG SF personnel who would ride along in Forward Air Controller planes to provide additional insight and

⁴⁰⁷ Plaster. *SOG: The Secret War of America's Commandos in Vietnam*. 1997. P.31

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid. P.33-4, and Jocko Podcast. “Jocko Podcast 204 w/ Dick Thompson: Don't Sign Up For SOG.” *Youtube*. Nov 21, 2019. Timestamp: 1:45:45

⁴⁰⁹ Plaster. *SOG: The Secret War of America's Commandos in Vietnam*. 1997. P.35-6

⁴¹⁰ Ibid. P.37

⁴¹¹ Ibid. Pp.39-40

control. Covey Riders would communicate with the SOG men on the ground, and the Close Air Support (CAS: planes/gunships firing from the air), while the SOG men would communicate with both.

The CAS was called in extremely close to the Recon Teams, as the NVA counter to CAS, by later periods in the War, was to charge SOG positions to either escape the bombs and napalm or to have American air support also hit the Green Berets.⁴¹² There were also times when SOG teams in danger of being overrun were hit by friendly airstrikes to either kill the overrunning NVA or wipe out the team and prevent the loss of information or capture of the Green Berets.⁴¹³ This was consensual and known by the SF teams. As the operational tempo for SOG increased, airpower became increasingly important, and SOG received more support than it originally had from just the 20th TASS. Colonel Jack Singlaub (the third commander of SOG) pushed for better relations with the service branches, resulting in CAS aircraft support from all military branches.⁴¹⁴ He also endorsed unconventional techniques for enhancing communication.⁴¹⁵

This is an example of the necessity of firepower for SOG SF, which like the SEALs, adapted to the combat requirements of the war through air power integration. This was not unique to Vietnam, or SOF, as FACs and CAS had been developed in the Korean War, but the assumption that air defense systems would overcome CAS served to limit the investment the Air Force put into programs supporting it.⁴¹⁶ Another support element came as a result of Kennedy's brush war push, the creation of the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron (CCTS), also known as Jungle Jim, to train and perform

⁴¹² Jocko Podcast. "Jocko Podcast 180 w/ John Stryker Meyer: Covert Lessons from "Across The Fence." *Youtube*. June 5, 2019. Timestamp: 56:05

⁴¹³ Cleared Hot Podcast. "Cleared Hot Episode 188 - John Stryker Meyer and Mike Glover" *Youtube*. July 5, 2021. Timestamp: 41:20

⁴¹⁴ Plaster. *SOG: The Secret War of America's Commandos in Vietnam*. 1997. P.74

⁴¹⁵ Ibid. Pp.74-7, 79

⁴¹⁶ Heath J Kearns. "FORWARD AIR CONTROLLERS IN THE VIETNAM WAR: EXEMPLARS OF AUDACITY, INNOVATION, AND IRREVERENCE" *US Air Force Academy*. Thesis. 2016. P.26

counterinsurgency air warfare on behalf of the Air Force.⁴¹⁷ Most of the helicopters that inserted SOG elements were Kingbee helicopters flown by South Vietnamese airmen, many coming from the 219th Special Operations Squadron.⁴¹⁸

By December 1965, squadrons of B-52s were operating in Laos, bombing suspected enemy installations, under the banner of the ongoing *Arc Light* operations.⁴¹⁹ Following each mission, the SF members flew to SOG headquarters in Saigon to debrief; from this the US gained much more insight into how the enemy were operating in Laos—including signs of trails, how the enemy moved, and how they camouflaged bases under the trees so as to be undetectable from the air.

SOG expanded as a result of its success, and SOG raiders/commandos took form in ‘Hatchet Forces.’⁴²⁰ Montagnards, ever the favorite of the SF, were brought into staff many of the new positions, their jungle expertise being invaluable. The projects were expanded because of the success of early SOG operations.⁴²¹ SOG SF were also augmented with limited elements of the 173rd Airborne, because of SF casualties. As casualties mounted, SOG would become desperate for recon operators, and would eventually ask the 101st for experienced soldiers.⁴²² The rank structure in SOG was essentially nonexistent, this too being an adaptation to ensure their survival. The teams were structured with American personnel filling roles as One-Zero (team leader), One-One (assistant team leader), One-Two (usually radio operator), and personnel of any rank could fill any position—One-Zero NCOs could have a lieutenant as their One-One.⁴²³ Whoever had lived the longest and was the most qualified filled the prized role as One-Zero, a tremendous responsibility in SOG.

⁴¹⁷ Kearns. 2016. Pp.41-2

⁴¹⁸ Mike Glover Actual. “The Secret War in Vietnam.” 2022. 6:22

⁴¹⁹ Plaster. *SOG: The Secret War of America’s Commandos in Vietnam*. 1997. P.40, and John T. Correll. “Arc Light” *Air Force Magazine*. January 1, 2009. Retrieved June 22, 2020, and Prados. *The US Special Forces: What Everyone Needs to Know*. 2015. P.46

⁴²⁰ Plaster. *SOG: The Secret War of America’s Commandos in Vietnam*. 1997. P.44

⁴²¹ Shultz. *The Secret War Against Hanoi*. 1999. P.230

⁴²² Mike Glover Actual. “The Secret War in Vietnam” 2022. 8:37

⁴²³ Jocko Podcast. “Jocko Podcast 204 w/ Dick Thompson: Don’t Sign Up For SOG.” 2019. 39:00

This disregarding of rank fits Kollar's model of adaptation. This was a limited occurrence that did not continue after the War, but it did continue in SOG's spiritual successors, as this informal chain of command allows SOF members to survive high risk operations through prioritizing experience over a somewhat arbitrary rank structure. The men who survived the longest were the men who knew, and therefore taught, the most. This specifically is bottom-up adaptation. The experience-based leadership model was practiced throughout the entirety of the institution until the institution no longer existed. This rejection of rank did not upset bureaucratic higher-ups and therefore avoided bureaucratic resistance because it only affected NCOs and junior officers far beneath their pay grade and attention span, or because the officers were sympathetic to the necessities of the extremely dangerous role. This helped SOG personnel survive the learning processes of each of its new missions, and was adopted by Delta Force in Iraq, as a means of increasing survivability.⁴²⁴

SOG also expanded its operations to include stationing men at the SF A-Camp at Khe Sanh to explore the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). SOG found success in the DMZ, despite heavy losses, and under Master Sergeants Jerry Wareing and Richard "Dick" Meadows, who began placing wiretaps provided by the CIA along NVA phone lines.⁴²⁵ Meadows' skills were enabled by methodical planning and rehearsal, and he ran his men through rigorous physical preparation.⁴²⁶ Meadows was also the natural choice to lead the first *Bright Light* operation, the rescue of downed pilots in North Vietnam, which in 1966 became OPS-80 (publicly known as Joint Personnel Recovery Centre), a section within SOG to track and rescue prisoners of war.⁴²⁷ As rescues were sometimes slow to organize, the teams

⁴²⁴ Jocko Podcast. "Jocko Podcast 223 w Pat McNamara: Be Skilled & Prepared to Take Care of Yourself & those Around You." *Youtube*. April 1, 2020. Timestamp: 1:39:05, 1:47:05; and The Team House. "Jamey Caldwell | Unit Operator | Ep. 109." *Youtube*. August 27, 2021. Timestamp: 1:46:15.

⁴²⁵ Plaster. *SOG: The Secret War of America's Commandos in Vietnam*. 1997. P.57 and Prados. *The US Special Forces: What Everyone Needs to Know*. 2015. Pp.46-7

⁴²⁶ Plaster. *SOG: The Secret War of America's Commandos in Vietnam*. 1997. Pp.58-9 and Prados. *The US Special Forces: What Everyone Needs to Know*. 2015. Pp.46-7

⁴²⁷ Plaster. *SOG: The Secret War of America's Commandos in Vietnam*. 1997. Pp.61-3, Shultz. *The Secret War Against Hanoi*. 1999. P.226

assembled a rotational stand-by squad of SOG men, ready at any time to perform *Bright Light* ops, often using advanced helicopter and plane extraction rigs.⁴²⁸ SOG also ran missions with new CIA tech in the form of cassette players that would record audio, which operators would place along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, or close to a camp.⁴²⁹ SOG expanded operations into Cambodia under Operation *Daniel Boone* in 1967 which had extremely tight rules of engagement.⁴³⁰

The NVA had many counters to SOG by mid-1967, from anti-aircraft guns to observers watching for helicopter insertions to increased patrols (about 50,000 NVA were protecting the Ho Chi Minh Trail, compared to 50 SOG personnel who harassed them). The most concerning was the formation of a SOF force by the NVA dedicated to hunting American operators, often with dogs, and Chinese and Russian advisors.⁴³¹ While not explicitly stated, it is likely that when Kirby Horrell's platoon went on a mission where they "went after a Russian advisor," they were operating under SOG as opposed to a stand-alone SEAL operation.⁴³²

To counter the NVA hunter force, SOG had to constantly adapt on microscopic levels to perform to higher standards than their previous mission.⁴³³ John Stryker Meyer states that the main source of learning for SOG was during post-mission bar outings where tactics were shared, along with ways of overcoming changes implemented by the enemy.⁴³⁴ It is also an example of the horizontal learning process, in which practicing a trade leads to learnings, followed by dissemination of information to others across the institution. Another counter was to perform "suicide missions" where two teams would be inserted, one would hide, while the other made contact and withdrew as quickly

⁴²⁸ Plaster. *SOG: The Secret War of America's Commandos in Vietnam*. 1997. P.68, 71

⁴²⁹ Jocko Podcast. "Jocko Podcast 180 w/ John Stryker Meyer: Covert Lessons from "Across The Fence." 2019. 37:35

⁴³⁰ Plaster. *SOG: The Secret War of America's Commandos in Vietnam*. 1997. P.97

⁴³¹ Shultz. *The Secret War Against Hanoi*. 1999. P.240, Plaster. *SOG: The Secret War of America's Commandos in Vietnam*. 1997. Pp.79-85, 92, 255, and Jocko Podcast. 204. 2019. 2:40

⁴³² Jocko Podcast. "Jocko Podcast 193 w/ Kirby Horrell: The Last Vietnam SEAL to be on Active Duty" *Youtube*. 2019. 57:37

⁴³³ Jocko Podcast. "Jocko Podcast 204 w/ Dick Thompson: Don't Sign Up For SOG." 2019. 59:38

⁴³⁴ The Team House. "MACV-SOG Team Leader John "Tilt" Meyer: Ep. 61." *Youtube*. September 25, 2020. Timestamp: 23:30

as possible—the enemy being unaware that another team remained.⁴³⁵ SOG in its entirety had also gone the route of Dick Meadows, and began rehearsing and planning every operation extensively before launching it, using extensive intelligence.⁴³⁶ Much like the SEALs, SOG instituted Immediate Action Drills (IADs).⁴³⁷ This including reflexive “hipfire” shooting, one of the most important skills SF SOG men had, and these IADs were essential for survival.⁴³⁸ The men learned how to be completely silent in the jungle, as maneuvering to avoid contact and accomplish the objective was a superior alternative to engaging and escaping. Meadows pushed the men he worked with to sharpen their combat skills to the highest level. Not all Green Berets could perform to that level, and he used what influence he had within SOG to refine the skills of the men beyond the apex of SOF at the time. What he was creating, knowingly or unknowingly, was a tier of skill within SOF that was otherwise unrecognized within American special operations, and he would do the same later while training Delta Force.

At times SOG had the highest casualty rate (over 100%) of any unit since the Civil War.⁴³⁹ For example, 16 SF soldiers assigned to SOG received 33 Purple Hearts in four days.⁴⁴⁰ By 1968 new recruits to SOG were considered “dead men walking.”⁴⁴¹ Many of their operations were essentially suicidal, such as the 1970 Hatchet Force raid into Laos where 10 Americans and 150 Vietnamese paramilitaries were inserted into Laos as bait for several NVA battalions.⁴⁴² In that operation SOG suffered 12 KIA and approximately 50 WIA, with some 500 NVA KIA. The adaptation described

⁴³⁵ Jocko Podcast. “Jocko Podcast 204 w/ Dick Thompson: Don't Sign Up For SOG.” 2019. 2:43:00

⁴³⁶ Plaster. *SOG: The Secret War of America's Commandos in Vietnam*. 1997. P.134

⁴³⁷ Ibid. P.138

⁴³⁸ Jocko Podcast. “Jocko Podcast 204 w/ Dick Thompson: Don't Sign Up For SOG.” 2019. 56:57, and Jocko Podcast. “Jocko Podcast 182 w/ John “TILT” Stryker Meyer: The Claustrophobic Reality of The Vietnam Jungle.” *Youtube*. 2019. 31:20

⁴³⁹ Plaster. *SOG: The Secret War of America's Commandos in Vietnam*. 1997. P.195, and Jocko Podcast. “Jocko Podcast 180 w/ John Stryker Meyer: Covert Lessons from “Across The Fence.” 2019. 2:09:53

⁴⁴⁰ Jocko Podcast. “Jocko Podcast 182 w/ John “TILT” Stryker Meyer: The Claustrophobic Reality of The Vietnam Jungle.” 2019. 9:18

⁴⁴¹ Jocko Podcast. “Jocko Podcast 204 w/ Dick Thompson: Don't Sign Up For SOG.” 2019. 30:15

⁴⁴² SOGSite. “Prairie Fire.” *History of MAC-V SOG*. 2022.

throughout this section was not without payoff, as SOG Green Berets became, at the time, the highest kill/loss ratio forces to ever exist in US military history. In Cambodia 1968 108 NVA were killed for each SF operator lost, by 1970 this was up to 153 NVA.⁴⁴³ SOG's 60-man recon detachment at Kontum was awarded five Medals of Honor, which Plaster estimates is the highest ratio of men to MoHs since the Civil War.⁴⁴⁴

After Americans were barred from operating in Cambodia following the 1970 invasion and withdrawal, SOG renewed its efforts to disrupt the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. SOG, under a Spike Team selected by Master Sergeant Billy Waugh, performed the first ever HALO parachute insertion in combat in November 1970.⁴⁴⁵ This insertion method was effectively silent, and performed at night so no NVA would detect them. A HALO school was opened in Camp Long Thanh, to enable a continuation of their new effective insertion method.⁴⁴⁶ McGuire rigs were also used in SOG, in addition to Project DELTA.

Perhaps the most shocking revelation regarding SOG was found in documents released in 2003, and not made well-known until Annie Jacobsen wrote *Surprise, Kill, Vanish* in 2019. Special Forces has long been known to have operated "Green Light Teams," ODAs who would deploy with a miniature tactical nuclear bomb to blow up Soviet infrastructure in the event of an invasion in Europe.⁴⁴⁷ This assignment was largely suicidal, as escaping the blast radius was very unlikely for the ODA. As part of Jacobsen's book, she travelled with now-retired Master Sergeant Billy Waugh to Vietnam to meet the son of a Vietnamese General (Vo Nguyen Giap) Waugh tried to assassinate during the Vietnam War.⁴⁴⁸ At the meeting Waugh revealed to Jacobsen and several of the Vietnamese

⁴⁴³ Plaster. *SOG: The Secret War of America's Commandos in Vietnam*. 1997. P.239

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid. P.339

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid. P.297

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid. P.301

⁴⁴⁷ Stavros Atlamazoglou. "How Green Berets prepared to carry 'backpack nukes' on top-secret one-way missions during the Cold War" *Business Insider*. March 1, 2021.

⁴⁴⁸ Annie Jacobsen. *Surprise, Kill, Vanish: The Secret History of CIA Paramilitary Armies, Operators and Assassins*. New York: Hatchette Book Group. 2019. P.442-3

he was there to meet, that in 1966 the US had seriously considered, to the extent that they prepared SOG to undertake this operation, the use of one of these miniature nuclear bombs against the Mu Gia Pass of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.⁴⁴⁹ SOG Green Berets would have been parachuted into the area of the pass, and then detonated the nuclear weapon to prevent the North's infiltration along the route. When the plan was evaluated by specialized scientific-advisory personnel, they concluded doing this would be a horrific mistake of incalculable gravity, and thus McNamara cancelled it.⁴⁵⁰ Needless to say, everyone present was shocked, and the Vietnamese in particular were horrified. If nothing else, this reinforces the nature of SOG operations and the importance of having a force like SOG. The roles and responsibilities given to this type of black operation unit are beyond what many can rationally conceive of, and there potentially remain institutional secrets that will never be revealed.

During the Vietnam War the SF men of SOG were effectively the reflexive, adaptable branch of the US military in Southeast Asia. SOG was another example of how SF became the response to a disproportionate number of problems the US Armed Forces encountered in Vietnam. SOG also marked one of the first times Green Berets were used on a strategic level in roles outside of guerilla warfare, as they informed the Joint Chiefs of Staff about the movement of large enemy forces in SE Asia.⁴⁵¹ This allowed large conventional units to move to intercept the NVA and VC forces moving in from the Trail, as well as inform the JCS about how their actions were affecting the enemy's ability, willingness, and capacity to fight. These are some of many cases of small-scale adaptation within SOG that would continue to inform SOF for decades afterwards.

SF recon men operating under SOG were not outside the scope of FM 31-21 in terms of broad conceptual theory, as Special Reconnaissance was outlined (in other terms) within FM 31-21. In practical terms however, the operations and missions of SOG were far beyond what was envisioned

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid. P.444

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid. P.444-5

⁴⁵¹ Stanton. *Green Berets at War*. 1985. P.211

when FM 31-21 was created, as the 1958 edition states “Normally, the guerilla information nets should not be endangered by lengthy intelligence reports which do not contribute anything material to the guerilla warfare mission.”⁴⁵² Not only did SOG perform Special Reconnaissance operations that went far beyond the guerrilla campaign conducted by SOG, but the guerilla intelligence “net” did not generate intelligence, dedicated SF/indigenous teams actively performed incursions into hostile territory to fill this role. This insertion-based model as opposed to long-term occupation was a shift from how SF had originally been oriented. An interesting difficulty in examining the previous statement on Special Forces limitations is whether SOG or the main SF effort in Vietnam was “the guerrilla warfare mission.” The efforts of SF in the CIDG and other paramilitary advisory activities were much closer to guerrilla warfare, but the activities pursued under SOG more closely resembled the Unconventional Warfare activities (albeit in shorter durations) that SF was designed to perform behind enemy lines. This begs the question, was SOG a drain on SF resources, or was the CIDG a drain on SOG? In either case, SF was stretched too thin, and the guerrilla warfare mission suffered due to the requirements of the theatre command.

One of the most critical aspects of this examination is the definition of Unconventional Warfare in FM 31-21. UW in that manual was stated as being what SF did, and the components of that (SR, DA, guerilla operations) being their bread and butter. While SR was a role covered in FM 31-21, it was to be executed as part of SF’s broad, theoretical UW campaign. SF under SOG were not practicing the entirety of UW—they had Montagnards with them, but they were not performing guerilla warfare as much as they were performing SR, which is in and of itself very guerilla-like, given that it takes place in denied areas. SOG SF men contributed towards a larger SF/UW campaign that was ongoing in terms of intelligence, but the men under SOG were not actively participating in what is considered UW today. So, while Special Reconnaissance was a component of FM 31-21, the

⁴⁵² Department of the Army. “FM 31-21 Guerilla Warfare and Special Forces Operations.” 1958. Pp.61-2

dedication of SF elements purely towards SR is beyond the baseline. This difference from the baseline does not stand true for the men of the Hachet Forces of SOG, as these Green Berets were performing true UW DA/commando operations with indigenous counterparts, albeit against an enemy force that was also guerilla in nature.

SF learned how important their role in SR could be, and by 1969 their doctrine had been changed to reflect that, as the operations performed by SOG (which was not named directly in the document) were proving to be essential to US Military operations in SE Asia. In the 1969 edition of FM 31-21, there was a specific section that outlined the strategic type missions SF could undertake, these being:

1. Reconnoitering critical strategic targets;
2. Locating and reporting activity/movement of major enemy forces;
3. Conducting target damage assessment;
4. Emplacing STANO devices, special weapons and other forces of equipment;
5. Conducting raids against critical strategic targets;
6. Recovering friendly personnel;
7. Conducting other operations of a sensitive nature that Special Forces units are best suited to perform by nature of their training, organization, and equipment.⁴⁵³

This quote directly describes SOGs missions in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia demonstrating that SOG was indeed, a strategic SOF asset, and SF knew that they were a very important part of the broader picture of operations being conducted in SE Asia. Aside from improvements in the tactics, techniques, and procedures regarding Special Reconnaissance, the most important aspect of SOG was the tier-one aspect, and the joint service model it was based around. Prados notes this teamwork as being essential for future projects.⁴⁵⁴ The fact that the creation of SOG was adaptation has been mentioned several times. It should be mentioned that SOG can be looked at through another light as outlined by Farrell, Rynning, and Terriff, and that is failed innovation. It is not failed in the sense that

⁴⁵³ No Author. "FM 31-21 Special Operations." *Department of the Army*. 1969. P.2-17

⁴⁵⁴ Prados. *The US Special Forces: What Everyone Needs to Know*. 2015. P.55-6

SOG decreased effectiveness, but rather that by not adopting SOG's joint SOF model as a long-term solution for the issue of combined SOF operations, the potential for innovation failed, and it cost the US dearly over the next decade. SOG failed in that it, and the ability provided through its structure to give the US the capability of joint SOF missions, did not exist beyond the Vietnam War.

A clear picture of the difference between normal SF and SOG is seen when the support elements of SF operating under SOG are taken into consideration. Like a modern SOF task force, SOG operated with massive supporting elements ranging from CIA intelligence, to air support, to infiltration and exfiltration methods enhanced by enablers, to naval craft. For example, when a "prairie fire emergency" (a SOG recon team being compromised), was declared all air support in the vicinity, was required to abandon its mission and go to the RT in trouble.⁴⁵⁵ The base mission of SF was to operate behind enemy lines, conduct UW and all that UW encompassed, with minimal support and assistance from the larger military. SOG flipped many of these parameters while performing its high-risk SR missions as it had support from all available resources that could be relied upon to maintain operational security and prevent SOG information from becoming public.

All elements of SOG were laid out in FM 31-21, but Green Berets prior to the inception and development of SOG would not have been able to perform operations at the level of SOG's requirements. As covered, this was not innovation as SOG ended, but rather adaptation, perhaps in a line of innovation leading up to the creation of Joint Special Operations Command.

Conclusion

Formed to provide intelligence for theatre-wide operations, SOG is the perennial example of a "black" SOF intelligence gathering assignment. SOG also served to provide SF with operations that took advantage of their skillset, training, tactics, techniques, and procedures more so than the

⁴⁵⁵ Plaster. *SOG: The Secret War of America's Commandos in Vietnam*. 1997. P.74

placement of SF behind enemy lines. Removing the advantage of SF's placement behind enemy lines while conducting UW assignments resulted in a force that had to compensate with increased skill in insertion/infiltration-based operations. SOG's operations "across the fence" also demonstrate the process by which SF learned; by becoming more in tune with Special Reconnaissance and close combat when necessary. SF performed the majority of SOG's cross-border operations (SEALs performed amphibious cross-border operations, but less frequently) and as the danger increased, so too did their fighting ability, but the focus remained on performing high-quality reconnaissance missions. SF-led Hachet Forces executed Direct Action missions, but again, the focus of SOG was on Special Reconnaissance (and PSYOPS, not included in this section) and in order to meet that mission, they got more effective in combat as a way of remediating the overwhelming odds they faced. Contrast this with the SEALs participation in Phoenix, and it is very clear how the two units differed in their learning process. Also of note, is that SEALs never commanded SOG; it was always an Army officer, usually of SF (or OSS) heritage. Again, the SEALs at this point had no senior commanders who could effectively fill this role, as they were too new to the contemporary SOF world to be able to effectively command a multi-service SOF element at this level. Although it is outside the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that today the SEALs frequently hold the command billets at both JSOC and SOCOM.

Chapter 8: The Case for Army Special Forces Innovation and

Conclusion

This thesis describes many changes to SOF during the Vietnam War. Some, such as the FID push that resulted in the CIDG, were adaptive, but large in scale, while others, such as the Phoenix Program, were smaller in scale but just as influential. The wide variety of topics covered sheds light on the secret world of Special Operations in Vietnam in a way that would not have been possible even five years ago. Interviews with men like Kirby Horrell, John Styker Meyer, and John Mullins, often by other SOF members, have provided new, illuminating insights into secret programs, operations, commands, and all facets of the war in Southeast Asia, enriching the discussion. The lessons learned by SOF in the Vietnam War are summarized below.

The Case for Army Special Forces Innovation

The core of this thesis regarding Army Special Forces has advocated that there were a number of adaptations undertaken by the Green Berets in the Vietnam era that are collectively an innovative transformation. This section seeks to compile the information that has been presented on the various adaptations of SF during the Vietnam War and demonstrate that the Green Berets were a vastly different force by the time the Vietnam War concluded. Each of the areas of change that Green Berets undertook (UW, FID, SR, secret projects, cross-border operations, and DA) are examined and compared to the metrics provided at the beginning of the thesis for what constitutes innovation in military change literature.

Army Special Forces began as a primarily stay-behind force designed to destabilize the Soviet Union should they invade Western Europe, working in tandem with conventional forces to assist in liberation operations. While the 77th Special Forces Group (Airborne) had been formed to respond to

global events, they were still doctrinally oriented to performing Unconventional Warfare operations against invading hostile states. Unconventional Warfare at this time was a loosely defined and poorly understood concept. It was essentially the missions that SF could undertake while performing their guerrilla warfare campaign in the occupied regions of Europe. This included guerrilla warfare, sabotage operations, rescuing downed pilots, establishing intelligence networks, and performing reconnaissance on targets that were relevant for their guerrilla raids and the conventional forces (mainly the Air Force through BDA) that SF supported.

In the late 1950s, more Special Forces officers aligned their priorities with the concerns of political opponents of the Eisenhower Administration. These opponents were concerned about the increasing Low-Intensity Conflicts sponsored by the Communists in the developing world. One of these critics was soon-to-be President John F. Kennedy, who, once President, immediately demanded that the Armed Forces reorient their capabilities to include counter-guerrilla and counterinsurgency operations. This was a push that was taking place and motivated by Special Forces and civilian leadership alike. The importance of the civilian role in this must be noted, because President Kennedy's involvement prevented the Army from denying Special Forces' mission expansion beyond their doctrinal purview.

When the Green Berets were deployed to Vietnam in 1957, they immediately performed a mission outside of their doctrine, but not outside the realm of reason for what they could do. This was the raising of counterpart SOF elements for the South Vietnamese government: SF were advisors and trainers, and their use in a peacetime setting doing these roles, while outside of doctrine, was not outside of scope. The Civil-Military lens reveals the importance of President Kennedy in the 1960s' reorientation towards stability operations, while the Intraservice lens highlights the role of senior SF leadership in securing early deployments that provided training and experience to SF.

The change that launched the transformation of SF was their work with the CIA as part of a stabilization effort of the South Vietnamese highlands. This area was home to primitive tribal peoples, far different from the counterparts with which SF had been created to work alongside. Using new methods developed with civilian agencies, Special Forces were able to connect with the tribal peoples, and eventually align them with the South's government. The goal of this was to deny the Communist North an ability to turn the tribal peoples against the South's government. After the CIA had its role reduced through Operation SWITCHBACK, Special Forces, and, by proxy, the conventional forces, took over this program, and began to use the tribal peoples to deny the communists entry into the area, beginning a program that blended guerrilla warfare techniques with an internal stabilization goal not previously envisioned. In so doing, Special Forces transformed from a guerilla force into a unit that could undertake stabilization efforts against insurgencies, a role that was eventually known as Foreign Internal Defense. Their active participation as combat advisors became a hallmark of the concept beyond mere training. The guerrilla role that Special Forces played still used Unconventional Warfare techniques and tactics, but the goal of trying to remove an insurgency was entirely new.

As conventional forces began to arrive in Vietnam, Special Forces were expected to perform intelligence operations to provide them with information. This was theoretically a role for which SF was oriented, as one of their missions prior to the Vietnam War had been limited intelligence work to inform the conventional forces that would liberate Europe. However, SF performed massive reconnaissance projects that drained their ability to conduct the primary guerrilla (in this case guerrilla warfare as a means of counterinsurgency) campaign, violating the reconnaissance limitations imposed in doctrine. The reconnaissance projects and Studies and Observations Group proved that SF had the ability to perform both guerrilla intelligence roles and infiltration-based reconnaissance/intelligence roles that could be as useful as their guerrilla warfare campaigns. During their time in Vietnam, SF endured an unsustainable number of casualties and had to augment non-Special Forces qualified

soldiers into ODAs to supplement their losses. Because of this, as well as their role in preparing conventional forces to perform reconnaissance missions, Green Berets were no longer seen exclusively as trainers for foreign militaries or paramilitary groups. They had to doctrinally adapt to teaching American forces special operations techniques to increase the conventional forces' efficacy and survivability in Vietnam. As SF's reconnaissance efforts continued to provide a disproportionate amount of intelligence for MAC-V, Special Reconnaissance was considered a separate ability from Unconventional Warfare. The nature of intelligence collection through these operations was so useful and played such a major role that it could no longer be justifiably limited to occurring only when Special Forces were conducting a guerrilla warfare campaign, upon which its doctrinal inclusion under UW had been predicated. The Vietnam War resulted in SR on a large scale as a new capability for SF, as previously they had never undertaken (nor were they doctrinally oriented to perform) a long-term SR campaign.

Much like SR, personnel recovery operations became understood as a mission set that was not under the UW umbrella. The ability for SF to recover downed pilots had been predicated on their proximity to the areas where pilots would be shot down (behind enemy lines). SOG operations proved that SF could rapidly insert and recover personnel in situations where the Green Berets were not behind enemy lines conducting UW.

SF also proved useful at conducting border surveillance operations, despite these missions being strictly against guerrilla doctrine for defensive operations. In these operations they were placed along extremely dangerous sections of the South Vietnamese border, where their A-Camps would be constantly assaulted by mass Vietcong and North Vietnamese elements. The danger posed to these camps was thought to be offset by the benefit of the casualties the ODAs could inflict on the enemy, even if the defense of a camp was doomed to failure. In adapting to this role, Special Forces learned

how to create defensively postured bases that offset the inherent inability of guerillas to defend territory.

Special Forces also performed many covert and clandestine operations throughout Vietnam. Their work in Laos allowed for a sustained secret UW/FID campaign, which transitioned between covert and overt, while introducing SF to techniques for running deniable operations in conjuncture with the CIA. Laos also provided them with an opportunity to run a sustained UW campaign with no conventional forces coming to relieve the Green Berets. Their work in SOG also gave them more experience running covert and clandestine operations in significant scale. This is not to say that SF had no experience or doctrine with regards to performing covert or clandestine operations (they were doctrinally oriented towards this work) rather, the missions and the context of their employment in these operations were outside of their doctrine. Their work with the CIA on the Phoenix Program introduced an entirely new type of counterinsurgency tool based around a cyclical targeting program. Phoenix was not something toward which SF had been doctrinally oriented, as they were never supposed to be the counterinsurgents, but used certain doctrinal concepts with which they had limited familiarity on a larger scale in a novel manner.

During their work with SOG, SF saw the employment of a Joint Unconventional Warfare Task Force, even if SOG was never recognized as such. This aspect of change is a somewhat failed innovation, as SOG was shut down even prior to the Vietnam War's conclusion, but still gave SF valuable experience in joint operations, black operations, SR, DA, PSYOPS, and in forming a tier-one asset, even if SOG was not recognized as such.

Direct Action was another mission that had originally been folded under UW and was demonstrated in Vietnam to be a separate requirement that would not always be performed in the context of a UW campaign. Special Forces had proven the necessity of the capability in the Son Tay raid which, when compiled with the emerging threats of international terrorism, resulted in an

institutional need for a dedicated Direct Action-capable, counterterrorism-oriented SOF element. The refinement of the concept of DA both changed SF training and doctrine, and, beyond the scope of this thesis, laid the groundwork for the creation of Delta Force. The creation of a counter-terrorist DA focused SOF unit was an inevitability due to the frequency of plane hijackings in the 1970s. Still, Vietnam provided SF (particularly the Green Berets who would go on to found Delta) with the opportunity to develop fundamental concepts, tactics, techniques and procedures for DA, and generate a reserve of men with ample combat experience. Son Tay in particular set the bar for successful commando operations, and initiated a learning process for DA that, external to Delta Force, still influences the Special Forces Groups through schooling initiatives started as a result of demonstrable successes in Vietnam. Modern Green Berets who go through the advanced close-quarters battle courses offered by Special Warfare Centre still benefit from the lessons of their forefathers in the jungles of Southeast Asia.

Throughout the Vietnam War, SF was misused by the conventional officers that commanded them. They were subject to misuse as SF did not have a completely clear understanding of their own capabilities as they developed into an FID-capable force. The resulting problems were exacerbated by the conventional forces, which inherently disliked SF and lacked the ability to understand the repercussions of the misuse of Special Forces. Change as it relates to Special Forces is often framed (intentionally or not) through a civil-military lens that stresses the role of President Kennedy, or an Intraservice lens that demonstrates how SF leadership pushed for new roles. The research gathered for this thesis has proven that the conventional forces-SOF divide was one of the main motivators for SF change because of the institutional misuse of Green Berets in Vietnam. It is well-known that SOF are ripe for abuse by uninformed political leaders, and this extends to the conventional forces when they are uninformed or disinterested in understanding the SOF option.⁴⁵⁶ While the lessons

⁴⁵⁶ Austin Long. "The Limits of Special Operations Forces." *PRISM*. Vol.6 No.3. 2016. P.44

learned through this misuse would inform Special Forces to the present era and reframe UW conceptually, it also had the detrimental effect of increasing tensions between SF and Big Army.

SF did not like working with the conventional forces, considering them dangerously uninformed and poorly motivated, whereas the conventional viewed SF as non-conformist cowboys who believed themselves to be above the rules, regulations, and traditions of the regular Army. The conventional forces' leadership never truly put their weight behind adapting to Vietnam, as the asymmetrical war was conducted with tactics and strategy foreign to their self-imposed conception of US Army identity. The consequences of this institutional resistance to change had far-reaching effects on SF. The conventional forces expected SF to carry the brunt of the work because they viewed SF as capable of doing everything that the conventional forces could not. As the Vietnam War was irregular in nature, 5th Group (which was considered to be smaller than a conventional brigade) was expected to run theatre-wide SR programs, perform cross-border operations, perform border surveillance, rescue downed pilots, conduct guerrilla warfare with paramilitaries, run kill programs, remove the North's shadow government with CIA assistance, run the Laotian campaign with CIA assistance, and all the other missions the conventional forces could not do because they were opposed to changing on a scale that would reduce the strain on SF. This cost SF greatly, and despite constant attempts to inform the conventional forces through manuals (and many heated conversations), Big Army never understood their SF counterparts. While adversity is the source of strength, and doctrinally SF was stronger and more diverse at the end of the Vietnam War than the beginning, the scale of loss endured by SF in Vietnam was the result of Big Army's rejection of UW/FID as concepts they were willing to embrace and understand.

In 1976, the Department of the Army published the Training Curricular (TC) 31-20-1, "The Role of US Army Special Forces," which sought to inform the reader about what Special Forces could and could not do. Its first text box is telling about the message of the document:

MYTH—Special Forces can do everything!

REALITY—There are those who believe Special Forces is some complicated, mysterious, all-powerful system which should be able to answer every need. **This is not true.** To do everything we would need all the assets in the world. It is true that Special Forces has the capabilities to conduct a wide variety of missions under circumstances and in environments not normally envisioned for conventional forces. However, there are some missions for which Special Forces is neither organized nor equipped, e.g., conduct offensive or defensive operations as a conventional maneuver unit.⁴⁵⁷ [emphasis original]

The Training Curricular outlines the roles of SF at the end of the Vietnam War and includes the new definition of Unconventional Warfare: “Operations which include but are not limited to guerrilla warfare, evasion and escape, subversion, and sabotage, conducted during periods of peace and war in hostile or politically sensitive territory.”⁴⁵⁸ This acknowledgement of UW as being a mission that can be conducted outside of conventional warfare is perhaps one of the largest changes possible to SF doctrine as it reframes the context for the unit’s use and even existence. UW transitioned from a supporting element of a conventional war to a standalone option that SF acknowledged it could perform without the conventional forces playing a role in combat operations. UW, as was the case in the baseline, is noted as being conducted where resistance already exists. The CIDG experiment of creating resistance was not present in the 1976 definition, an adaptation to Vietnam that did not survive doctrinally as a component of UW.⁴⁵⁹ Almost all of the components of UW found in the baseline remained, with Bomb Damage Assessment, escape and evasion, sabotage, and other supporting operations being present.⁴⁶⁰ The previous limitations on using SF as an intelligence tool were gone, other than acknowledgement that SF is not an intelligence collection agency and that radio transmissions from denied areas are limited for security reasons.

⁴⁵⁷ No Author. “TC 31-20-1: The Role of US Army Special Forces.” *Department of Defense*. October 22, 1976. P.ii

⁴⁵⁸ Department of Defense. “TC 31-20-1: The Role of US Army Special Forces.” 1976. P.2

⁴⁵⁹ Department of Defense. “TC 31-20-1: The Role of US Army Special Forces.” 1976. P.16

⁴⁶⁰ Department of Defense. “TC 31-20-1: The Role of US Army Special Forces.” 1976. P.19, 26-7

UW, operationally, was in many ways unchanged from the baseline given in the 1958 edition of FM 31-21. However, SF was no longer formally limited to UW, as in the baseline, as the context of UW had changed. Changes of this nature were evident in the various SF manuals published in Vietnam, but Training Curricular 31-20-1 was published after the war, cementing the legacy of the lessons learned in the war beyond short-term adaptation. Special Forces did not just change for the Vietnam War, Vietnam changed Special Forces. The Training Curricular describes three SF roles: UW, Special Operations, and FID.⁴⁶¹ UW, as always, is presented as SF's "raison d'être." Still, the creation and acknowledgement of FID as doctrine for SF was vastly different from the baseline, as are the roles given under "Special Operations."

Special operations, as described in the Training Curricular, are operations that can be conducted unilaterally by SF, jointly between SF and indigenous forces, or by indigenous forces trained and directed by SF.⁴⁶² It is under special operations that many of the lessons of Vietnam are present. The Training Curricular formally acknowledges that SF can conduct intelligence missions, strategic target missions, recovery missions, and anti-terror missions, each separate from a UW guerrilla campaign; rather, they can be conducted during peace or war.⁴⁶³ Intelligence missions include special reconnaissance type operations, the mission SF had proven useful at during the Vietnam War. No longer was SF expected to only perform Special Reconnaissance during a guerrilla campaign, and with limitations attached to their use, following Vietnam they had embraced their utility in the mission on a much wider scale. War or peace, conventional, asymmetrical, or unconventional, SF could penetrate and conduct SR to collect intelligence. They were not an intelligence collection agency, but the Green Berets had become a flexible SR asset capable of being used anytime, anywhere. It is noted in modern SF doctrine that the inclusion of SR as a mission type for SF enabled them to remain relevant in the

⁴⁶¹ Department of Defense. "TC 31-20-1: The Role of US Army Special Forces." 1976. P.15

⁴⁶² Department of Defense. "TC 31-20-1: The Role of US Army Special Forces." 1976. P.28

⁴⁶³ Department of Defense. "TC 31-20-1: The Role of US Army Special Forces." 1976. P.29

US' post-Vietnam refocusing on conventional warfare in Europe.⁴⁶⁴ The strategic target missions included the abduction of selected personnel, and while no further explanation of this is available, the experiences of the Phoenix Program likely influenced this capability being formally recognized. Recovery missions included those like the Bright Light operations of Vietnam; SF was acknowledged as being an asset capable of being inserted to recover downed personnel, despite not being behind enemy lines. Another recovery operation was the liberation of prisoners of war, a mission SF had tried to do in Son Tay that was then folded into their formal repertoire. The anti-terror missions are especially interesting, given that many of the roles assigned to SF were shifted to Delta Force upon its activation in 1979. This serves as another example of SF filling a role, even if it was not truly prepared for it, as a means of institutional survival following the Vietnam War. Not all of the changes originate from Vietnam (for example, one of the recovery missions given to SF was and continues to be retrieving lost nuclear weapons), but the majority of doctrinal changes are the result of SF's involvement in the Vietnam War.

The Training Curricular describes Foreign Internal Defense as the antithesis of guerilla or Unconventional Warfare. FID was described as the tasking for Special Forces to deploy to an area to work with host nation regular forces, paramilitary forces, or government agencies to increase the stability of the host regime against subversion, lawlessness, and insurgency.⁴⁶⁵ It is in this doctrine, as opposed to UW, that the CIDG lives on, given as Special Forces' ability for to work with isolated "ethnic, religious, or other isolated minority groups" for the purpose of establishing areas of government support that can then be used in counterinsurgency combat operations.⁴⁶⁶ This demonstrates that SF had begun to consider the CIDG more as a FID project than as a UW endeavor. It is also in this section when border control is mentioned, cementing it as SF doctrine that lived

⁴⁶⁴ No Author. "FM 3-18: Special Forces Operations." *Department of Defense*. 2014. Pp.1-8-1-9

⁴⁶⁵ Department of Defense. "TC 31-20-1: The Role of US Army Special Forces." 1976. P.30

⁴⁶⁶ Department of Defense. "TC 31-20-1: The Role of US Army Special Forces." 1976. Pp.30-1

beyond the Vietnam War, with the stipulation that this was not a role SF and their proxies should have to fill unless the host border patrol forces were weak.

The Training Curricular presents a fitting lesson that certainly hailed from the doctrinal and definitional challenges that arose from the Vietnam War. It states that the three concepts of UW, special operations, and FID can be combined in a matrix to fit an appropriate scenario.⁴⁶⁷ That is to say, Green Berets can be assigned a FID mission, in which they will employ UW tactics, such as guerrilla warfare, against insurgents.⁴⁶⁸ This represents a formal acknowledgement that the requirements of asymmetrical warfare are such that SF doctrine cannot be rigid and it is the choice of the Green Berets involved to make the decision on how they will handle a scenario. Through this matrix, and indeed, the Training Curricular as a whole, the reader is provided with a framework of SF limitations (UW, special operations, FID) for the conventional officers who employ them.

As the context of the use of SF changed—SF no longer only performed operations in support of the conventional forces and could be used in times of peace—so too changed their relationship with the conventional forces. Rather than the conventional forces supporting SF (via supplies and intelligence) in their UW activities during a conventional campaign, SF could now perform UW, special operations, or FID, and expect the conventional forces to support them in their covert or clandestine campaigns. Laos was an example of this, where SF operated independently of conventional forces (strategic airpower aside) and ran a hybrid UW/FID war with their proxies and the CIA for many years. This challenged the traditional power structure of the Army. The conclusion of the Vietnam War provided the conventional Army leadership an opportunity to cut SF's funding: they deactivated the 1st, 3rd, and 6th SFG(A)s, removed a significant amount of the officer corps from the

⁴⁶⁷ Department of Defense. "TC 31-20-1: The Role of US Army Special Forces." 1976. P.32

⁴⁶⁸ Department of Defense. "TC 31-20-1: The Role of US Army Special Forces." 1976. P.32

operational and senior command levels, and cut SF NCOs for ODAs in all groups.⁴⁶⁹ Despite this, they did not disband Special Forces, even though counterinsurgency and Unconventional Warfare had become “bad words.”⁴⁷⁰ This is likely because: (i.) SF had proven themselves too useful and the conventional forces could not disband SF; (ii.) it would be unpopular among elected officials; and (iii.) the conventional forces would then have to somehow address UW and FID themselves. The Green Berets were still despised by Big Army, but Special Forces had become a key part of the Army and they were much smarter and more capable at the end of the war than in their 1958 baseline, despite the post-Vietnam reduction in size.

These changes demonstrate that by the end of the Vietnam War, SF had learned from and been transformed by the conflict. They did not change from performing UW, but they changed in almost every other aspect, including their major use-case scenarios. Special Forces had gone from the force that conducted guerilla warfare and the missions that enabled guerilla warfare to the force that performed a wide variety of special operations, including counterinsurgency. The conventional Army’s goal of limiting SF to supporting them in the conduct of conventional warfare in the 1950s had shifted to understanding that there were a wider variety of roles for which SF were needed, as Vietnam had demonstrated Big Army’s operational limitations in many roles. Much of this was because of Big Army’s self-imposed unwillingness to truly adapt and change to the requirements of the Vietnam War, whereas SF had embraced every new role thrust upon them, perhaps to the detriment of the Green Berets on the ground. Following the Vietnam War, the conventional forces could no longer justify limiting SF’s role in Special Reconnaissance to the conduct of UW as per the 1958 definition of the doctrine, nor was it tenable to claim that SF was not a viable force to undertake FID. The ability for

⁴⁶⁹ Charles H. Briscoe. “Training on a Shoestring: Cheap, Practical SF Training in the post-Vietnam Turmoil.” *Veritas*. Vol.14 No.1. 2018.

⁴⁷⁰ Briscoe. “Training on a Shoestring: Cheap, Practical SF Training in the post-Vietnam Turmoil.” 2018.

SF to sustain a variety of operations in a variety of conditions with many purposes was the result of the innovative evolution resulting from the Vietnam War.

Regarding the claim of innovation, there is ample supporting evidence. As argued by Murray, there are several factors that provide a relationship in innovation, all of which changed for SF during the Vietnam War. The context of their use was changed dramatically; they no longer were limited to UW activities in Europe and were considered to be a viable alternative to address a variety of problems facing the United States both during and after the war. Their procedures changed dramatically as they adjusted to the new roles they were undertaking. Conducting FID required entirely new procedures, including using medical services as a means of gaining population trust. The Special Action Force concept was developed (although the Asia-oriented 1st SFG(A) SAF never saw use in Vietnam, all the elements that comprised a SAF were present in Vietnam, and 1st Group rotated forces to 5th Group in Vietnam) and the Kennedy Administration in conjunction with the Special Warfare Center had developed a means of tackling new problems. The change in the context of SF use also changed their strategic employment as they were freed from the doctrinal limitations of the 1950s interpretation of Unconventional Warfare. UW, as it was conceived in that era, had limited them to only operating in support of conventional operations. Following Vietnam, it was acknowledged that SF were capable of much more than UW, in a wider range of scenarios than had initially been envisioned. SF were capable of strategic-level Special Reconnaissance, FID, prisoner rescue operations, downed pilot rescue operations, and Direct Action raids, none of which remained intrinsically limited to the 1958 baseline that Vietnam challenged and changed. The introduction of new spectrums of warfare (both in terms of operations [DA, SR] outside of UW and the integration of FID to doctrine) not only changed the context of Special Forces use, it also changed the strategy of the entire US Armed Forces by providing a force doctrinally oriented towards FID and capable of performing other actions such as SR and

rescue operations. FID, in particular, provided a new capability in pursuing strategic security objectives.

The development of SF incorporating new capabilities is hardly surprising, given the Big Army's lack of motivation to include unconventional capabilities to their doctrine. In this regard, Grissom's first qualification for innovation is clearly demonstrated. The multiple adaptations undertaken by SF in response to Vietnam changed the manner in which military formations functioned in the field, across a spectrum of missions. These missions and the new manners in which SF could be employed were also significant in scope and scale: Not only did the Vietnam War reframe the conceptual underpinnings of Special Forces, it also produced a new capability for the US Armed Forces to perform stability operations with a dedicated and specialized force. This provided justification for the conventional Army to refocus on the conventional land war in Europe, as SF could take over the bush wars that continued to emerge throughout the world. The Vietnam War also transformed SF into a force capable of performing covert and clandestine operations in a much wider range of scenarios than in the baseline.

Special Forces equipment and the technology available to them changed dramatically, and SF were involved in experimenting with a number of new technologies. SF started the war with M1 Carbines and ended with M16s, M60s, and remote sensors destined for the Ho Chi Minh Trail. They worked with prototypes that would eventually become standard across the entire US Armed Forces. SF changed dramatically on an operational level; the Green Berets had to both balance the goals of the conventional forces that directed them with the tactical reality they faced in combat. As Special Forces were conducting new types of operations during Vietnam, they had to develop new tactics, techniques, and procedures to accomplish their ever-changing goals. The new technologies helped, and some, such as the McGuire rig, enabled them to perform their new roles much more efficiently than in the pre-war period. They had also developed defensive posturing techniques that addressed

the inability of paramilitary forces to conduct defensive operations. The improvements that resulted from combat lessons in the jungles of Vietnam provided the Green Berets with increased capabilities, as they had to choose between dying in the war or changing and adapting. Changes were so extensive that, between the increased combat effectiveness of SF on operational and tactical levels, in conjunction with the increased effectiveness they brought to the entirety of the Armed Forces through their strategic and conceptual evolution, these adaptations compound to innovative change by way of increased military effectiveness. This evolutionary innovative process was not immediate, like the creation of the SEALs, rather it happened as SF responded to the changing requirements of the Vietnam War.

Special Forces transformed in other ways as a result of the Vietnam War. The era of Special Forces functioning only as a near-suicide stay-behind guerrilla assignment was gone for good. The function of combat advising, combined with the additional capabilities that SF training provided, proved to be much more useful than initially conceived in the 1950s. A transformative event like Vietnam was necessary for SF, in two ways: (i.) inevitability: it was a matter of time before the US entered into an asymmetrical combat scenario where the conventional forces were under-prepared and SF, with its inherent capabilities provided through doctrine, structure, and training had to compensate and evolve to meet the requirements; and (ii.) survival: had the inevitable not occurred, and SF had not been given the opportunity to change and expand its role and effectively demonstrate a proof of function, it could have institutionally died. Special Forces soldiers at the end of the Vietnam War were smarter, more capable, and more efficient SOF than when the war had begun. They were drained, both exhausted and reduced in number, but the lessons they learned were immense, and the Vietnam War provided the young SOF element a chance to demonstrate their capabilities. In spite of their misuse and losses, the Vietnam War gave the Green Berets a footing to stand on and an opportunity to transform themselves into a more relevant force for the United States.

SEALs to UDT

While President Kennedy and his policies played a significant role in the transformation of Army Special Forces, the Navy experienced similar shifts in the Special Warfare community. This case study serves as a look at the evolution of Naval Special Warfare in response to Vietnam. The creation of the SEALs from UDT members serves as one of many examples of the disinterested Navy being pushed administratively to offer a counterpart to an Army offering. President Kennedy, always the proponent of a counter-bush war capability, appreciated Army Special Forces and the abilities they offered in countering the spread of communism that was being proliferated through the third world by Soviet-Sino sponsored militias. Their Navy SEAL counterpart was an almost forgotten entity within the Navy; they were created to meet a checklist and increase the budget so Big Navy could go back to doing proper naval affairs. As will be demonstrated, the creation of the Navy SEALs from the UDTs was an example of what Murray would describe as evolutionary innovation. This case is an outlier among cases of evolutionary innovation, which is usually characterized by an informed leadership.

In the case of the SEALs, the civilian leadership set policies that demanded they be informed about the changing requirements for Sino-Soviet confrontation and communist containment. The senior Naval leadership, however, was not technically or conceptually informed about how to conduct this new type of warfare. While these factors combining could have led to a civil-military clash over the quality of the product created, the Navy was able to draw experience from the established UDTs and fill gaps in knowledge by cross-training with Army Special Forces. It is because of the pre-existing capabilities in NSW and SF that the SEALs' creation was successful and disruptive in the global naval SOF environment.

The SEALs proved to be much more useful than Big Navy had anticipated. Trained by Special Forces and working with the CIA, the SEALs served early in Vietnam as advisors and reconnaissance personnel, rather than as commandos. As anticipated, however, they began filling commando roles by 1965 when the CIA was no longer serving as their de facto leadership and went to work in the field that SEALs would be known for. With limited experience in intelligence operations and little senior leadership with contemporary SOF experience, the SEALs began filling the command impetus by patrolling to contact in the Rung Sat and other Special Zones. With that limitation in mind for the SEALs, the UDT were not capable of performing these roles, and many of the UDT men, such as Roger Hayden, were frustrated with their limitations within Underwater Demolition. UDTs were used in the roles for which they had been created, demolitions and hydrographic reconnaissance. Likewise, SEALs were used in the roles for which they had been created: demolitions, hydrographic reconnaissance, Special Reconnaissance, commando operations, unconventional warfare, and the list goes on. The mission set of the SEALs simply proved to be more in line with the military-political requirements of the day. The era of combat swimmers who achieved their mission with a knife, explosives, and swim trunks came to an end with Vietnam, as the enemy no longer fought from hardened structures defending against amphibious assaults with concertina wire and landing ship barricades.

The SEALs creation and validation in Vietnam served to cement them as an innovative development within the US Military. They certainly increased the military effectiveness of NSW, as even their progenitors, the UDT, acknowledge. It was significant in scope and impact, as SEALs today are the primary force of NSW and one of the main tools of SOCOM, and their creation eventually led to the institutional destruction of the UDTs, whom they superseded. They also drastically changed the way in which NSW functioned in the field, as that was point of their creation. Following their inception, NSW's repertoire boomed from riverine/amphibious reconnaissance and demolition to

inland UW, advisory roles, inland reconnaissance, airborne operations, intelligence operations, and a much greater ability to work with the CIA and SF.

Concluding Thoughts

The Vietnam War challenged the United States' political-military self-perception. Prior to and after the war, the US Armed Forces saw themselves as the force that defeated the Germans and Japanese through conventional warfare and, once called upon to do so in Europe, would ensure the Soviet Union met the same fate. The reality of the emerging conflicts in the mid-late 1950s stood in contrast to the unrealized large-scale conventional European ground war. This failure to address the emerging conflicts created a situation where the true needs of the US were not addressed by the US military as a whole.

The unwillingness to reorient in any substantial way to the emerging warfare that was swallowing large sections of the globe into communist insurgency resulted in a situation where the Special Operations Forces of the US, originally designed and destined for the European battlefield, reoriented themselves to becoming America's premier force in fighting the small wars. Naval Special Warfare chipped away at their Underwater Demolition Teams, spinning off frogmen to become SEALs. The Army Special Forces, in conjunction with Central Intelligence Agency assets, reoriented to fighting for the objectives of Foreign Internal Defense by hybridizing their traditional guerrilla warfare skills with new techniques for stabilization. Under President Kennedy, SOF saw this reorientation and the beginning of shifts that were ultimately innovative, transformative processes resulting in modern SOF concepts and mission orientation. As a result of Kennedy's distrust of the CIA, in conjunction with his successors' reluctance to embrace the concepts of the unconventional, the conventional forces became more relevant, and the SOF elements had to adapt again to how their

skills in the small wars could benefit their “Big” counterparts. In doing so, the SOF communities, especially the Green Berets, had to undertake either completely new missions or missions they were not designed to perform as a primary role, in completely new contexts and with completely new techniques.

This thesis demonstrated how this relationship between conventional forces and SOF was different amongst the services. While the relationships of both Army and Navy counterparts to their special warfare units were characterized by ignorance, the Army’s ignorance played a more active role in the changes SF undertook to appease their conventional heads, while the Navy largely removed itself from the daily operations of Naval Special Warfare. With regard to their relationships to the conventional, the Green Berets evolved in a pressure cooker of sorts, whereas NSW evolved in a vacuum. These relationships were much more similar to those in a typical inter-service than typical intra-service relationships. A series of adaptations took place with the Army, which had to change from 1957 to the late 1960s as they found their new place, whereas Naval Special Warfare had a revolutionary change as the SEALs were rapidly grown out of a pre-existing SOF community. The adaptations that took place with the Army ultimately culminated in a process of evolutionary innovation that transformed the Special Forces. With differing conventional service attitudes, as well as the different missions the SOF units were undertaking, this transformative process was distinct between SF and the SEALs. Adaptations took place in both communities, and the ways the services undertook combat operations, Special Reconnaissance, black operations, Foreign Internal Defense, and other roles, completely changed. SOF’s own understanding of their capabilities was much better by the end of the war, and their doctrine, as well as the way they interacted with their conventional counterparts changed forever.

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