

CHAPTER 1 : INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Special Operations Forces have been around for centuries, though they were known as elite units. The Roman Praetorians, the Swiss Guards, the Spartans and others have been some sort of elite military unit that serve their respective rulers and states with a proud tradition. However, the 'boom' in special operations forces saw its rise during World War II. We saw the birth of 'storm troops', paratroops and commandos. Later, the birth of the British Special Air Service (SAS) in 1941 created one of the earliest example of a modern special operations forces unit. The Americans being drawn into the war at a later stage followed the British examples and created their own elite units in the likes of Special Service Force, Darby's Rangers, Airborne troops, Air Force Commandos, US Marines Recon and Raider battalions, Merrill's Marauders and Chindits and US Navy Underwater Demolition Teams.

Since the end of the Second World War, special operations have become more widespread. However, in their early days after the Second World War, there was dislike and mistrust towards special operations forces units until reaching the stage where a few units were disbanded. Soon, the threat of communism caused the world being threatened again by war. However, the presence of the nuclear deterrence prevented a third world war, but led to many localized and small-scale conflicts.

Special operations forces have played a central role in a number of major conflicts, ranging from the Malayan Emergency of 1948-60, the Arab-Israeli

conflicts, the Vietnam War, the Falklands Campaign, the Gulf War and until recently the Balkan wars which are still simmering at this time of writing.

The rise in international terrorism in the 70s had also prompted further growth in special operations forces units and their special skills were widely tasked in many terrorist situations. Images of West Germany's elite GSG9 rescuing the hijacked *Lufthansa* Boeing 737 in Mogadishu in 1977, the Israeli paratroops rescue of hostages at Entenbbe airport in 1976, the British SAS rescue of hostages in the Iranian Embassy siege in London, 1980 which was carried out with live TV coverage, and just recently, Operation Babaras, where the SAS again executed a classic rescue mission in Sierra Leone, managed to capture the imagination of the public on these elite troops.

The United States Army (US Army) has a special operations force unit known as the Special Forces or 'the Green Berets', being formed in 1952 with its origins from its World War II predecessor, the Special Service Force. But prior to that, before the term commando or special operations were coined, there already existed some sort of special operations units in the history of America. The earliest example was perhaps the first Rangers formed in American history. This early Rangers were formed by John Gorcham in 1750 to wage an anti-guerilla war for the British against American Indian and French forces. Then in 1754, Robert Rogers formed a ranger unit famously known as Rogers' Rangers. They scouted for the British Army during the French and Indian War. They developed the stealthy, daredevil tactics of the Indian, which have since been associated with the name ranger. These are some of the earliest examples of small specialized units trained in guerrilla and anti-guerilla warfare. These

units have long been in the American history, and in the later days, these early experience would prove to be useful in future units.

In the 1960s, the Green Berets were heavily involved in the Vietnam War. At that time the US Navy has also formed their special operations forces unit known as the SEAL Teams (or Seals), the acronym for Sea-Air-Land Teams. The US Marine Corps also has its own special operations forces unit known as Force Recon. Most modern US elite units are products of World War II experience. It was the need for specialist troops to mount raids on Nazi-occupied Europe that produced the 1st Special Service Force, forerunners of the Special Forces, in 1942. In the same year, the problems of establishing bridgeheads during large amphibious operations saw the creation of the first of six US Army Ranger Battalions¹.

Similarly, the value of airborne troops, as demonstrated by the German forces in 1940 and 1941, resulted in the creation of the US 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions. The Special Service Force and the Ranger Battalions were all disbanded by the end of 1945 but the airborne formations survived World War II and in 1952, the US Army Special Forces revived the concept of irregular forces within the US military establishment. The existence of the Special Forces or “Green Berets” was only guaranteed by the widening global commitment to resisting communist insurgency, associated with the administration of President John F. Kennedy.

¹ Rosignoli, Guido; Army Badges and Insignia of World War 2; Blandford Press, London, 1972; pp191- 206.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Since the post-war era, the use of special operations forces by the United States government has seen mixed results of both successes and failures. Some of the impressive successes were cases in Vietnam (despite the US withdrawal), the Grenada intervention in 1983 during Operation Urgent Fury, the arrest of drug lord Noriega during the attack into Panama in 1989 and Operation Desert Storm in 1991. Thus, the understanding of US Special Operations Forces (US SOF) has been always seen in a positive, constructive sense. Most studies have exaggerated the achievements of US SOF.

However, special operations forces have also seen major failures with loss of manpower and machinery. Examples such as the attempted rescue of American hostages in Teheran, Iran in 1980 and the failure of Task Force Ranger in Somalia in 1993. There is a need for a systematic study of this special branch of warfare in depth. There is an important question which many of us have been asking as we reflect on the big dividends paid by some unorthodox operations and the disappointing results of others. Do special operations forces have a role to play in modern warfare? This dissertation will try to study some of the success, failures, strengths and weaknesses of special operations forces. Over the years, special operations forces have attracted substantial attention, both positive and negative, from journalists, politicians, professional officers and the public but very few from scholars.

There is a lack of systematic, comparative analyses on the effectiveness of the roles and functions, advantages and disadvantages, of this type of military formation. The term special operations forces immediately brings to mind a variety of images and controversial issues. The issues are important and this dissertation will try to identify and examine them. The existing studies on the US SOF have also failed to look at the effectiveness of their role in a balance way, covering both the success and problems in special operations. Most studies reveals tendencies for biasness in support of US SOF. This dissertation will not be historical in covering all the types of missions and forces but it will in a modest way look at specific missions of the US SOF in demonstrating the above.

1.3 OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study of Special Operations Forces is that it is an important element or tool in the military's arsenal that needs to be understood of its capabilities and limitations. By using US Special Operations Forces and its missions as case studies, this dissertation will try to examine the effectiveness of these units. By learning from these, this dissertation will be of great value to future studies of modern warfare so as not to forego the study of such an important element in our arsenal.

The mere mention of the SAS, the Green Berets or US Navy SEALs will conjure up images of balaclava clad troops raiding an enemy position. But who are they? What do they do? Too many writings on strategy had been noted in the study of modern warfare and security studies. However, the strategic value of Special

Operations Forces has been academically studied only in a limited way in a one sided manner.

This dissertation studies the uniqueness of the US Special Operations Forces and their applications in the contemporary period, so as not to let such a useful and powerful tool to be misused. This study uses United States Special Operations Forces as a main focus to study the effectiveness of its role by choosing two main cases. These would be the experience of US Special Operations Forces in Somalia (1993) and the US intervention into Grenada Island (1983). The purpose of the analysis is also to examine why certain US SOF missions were successful and why some failed. The strategic reasons behind the effectiveness of US SOF will also be looked at in a critical manner.

1.4 DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS

There are many definitions as to the concept of Special Operations Forces. Some would call them as elite units but the word elite units would cover the whole genre of light infantry units, for example the British Household Guards (which are more for ceremonial purposes).

The first discussion on methods for deploying elite troops appears in Sun-Tzu's *The Art of War*, written in the sixth century.² Many Western analysts confront a conceptual quandary in attempting to define special operations. They work within a Western philosophical framework which has tended to draw a clear distinction

² Cohen, Eliot A. ; Commandos and Politicians; Harvard Studies, International Affairs; Center for International Affairs, Harvard University; 1978; p19.

between peace and war and, quite mistakenly, between political and military affairs. The US Department of Defense (DOD) has drafted its own definition of special operations as follows: Military operations conducted by specially trained, equipped and organized DOD forces against strategic or tactical targets in pursuit of national military, political, economic or psychological objectives. They may support conventional operations or they may be used independently when the use of conventional forces is either inappropriate or infeasible. Sensitive peacetime operations, except for training, are normally authorized by the National Command Authorities (NCA) and conducted under the direction of the NCA or designated commander. Special operations may include unconventional warfare, counter-terrorist operations, collective security, psychological operations and civil affairs measures.³

1.5 LITERATURE REVIEW

There are several studies on the US Special Operations Forces. The main scholars on these studies are limited but among the more well known are John M. Collins, John Pimlott and Cohen. There are a few main works which is useful for the purpose of review. Among them is Collins's (1994) study on US Special Operations Forces. He analysed the current command structure of US Special Operations Force, its role and operational tasks. He speaks with the authority of one who was literally present at the birth of the "low intensity conflict" era. His long-term, intimate and direct contact with the esoteric world of special operations has few parallels. (see Appendix A for further information)

³ US Department of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Publication 1, Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms (Washington, DC: June 1979, Revised); adapted from Special Operations in US Strategy; Frank R. Barnett, B. Hugh Tovar, Richard H. Shultz; National Defense University Press, 1984.

His study assessed the developments of Special Operations and continued in his efforts to educate the public and the military concerning the capabilities and limitations of special operations and the forces involved⁴. He said the roots of special operations forces go back in time and history considerably farther, but today's special operations forces are largely products of the past three decades. Their development has been in response to the pressures of world wide situations perceived to bear upon or which actually do affect American strategic interests. He stressed that the use of raw military power may not provide solutions to the complex problems involved and may even be counter-productive. He however failed to assess the failures of these forces. He never stressed on the operational failures of these forces. Collins, however, mentioned only some limitations of these forces

Another major study is *Commandos and Politicians: Elite Military Units in Modern Democracies*; by Eliot A.Cohen (1978). Cohen studied on the origins of the elite units in the United States, Britain, France and Israel. He briefly mentioned on some of their successful operations⁵. However, his main focus was on the civilian-military relationship between politicians and elite troops. He focuses on the attempted coup in France in 1961 against de Gaulle's government. The failed coup involved rebellious French crack paratroops and French Foreign Legion. He studied the danger of giving too much independence in command to elite troops and did not analyse strongly the usefulness of special operations forces and their current roles in defending a state's sovereignty. Prior to this study, serious literature on this subject was almost non-existent. Cohen's study analyzed the issues of civil-military relations with respect to light infantry units but it also provides a model for parallel studies which might be

⁴ Collins, John M. ; *Special Operations Forces, An Assessment*; National Defense University Press; Washington;1994.

⁵ Cohen, Eliot A. ; *Commandos and Politicians*;Harvard Studies, International Affairs, 1978.

done for other types of military formations. This writing was concerned mainly with the history, sociology and the politics of military forces and of civil-military relations in democratic societies.

Another important study on special operations of US strategy was by Frank R. Barnett, B. Hugh Tovar and Richard H. Shultz (1984). This study was a published proceedings of a Special Forces symposium held at the National Strategy Information Center, the National Security Studies Program at Georgetown University in March 1983. This symposium was two folded. First, to examine how special operations can complement an effective conventional defense capability. Secondly, to determine the means by which special operations could be legitimized as a crucial element in national security policy⁶. The authors studied the decline of the Special Forces community after the Vietnam War.

The purpose of this particular study was to examine how special operations can complement an effective conventional defense capability and to determine the means by which special operations could be legitimized as a crucial element in national security policy. As this study was performed during the Cold War period, it could not look at the role of special operations in the post Cold War period.

Meanwhile, Alfred H. Paddock, Jr (1982) studied on the origins of US Army Special Warfare. Paddock traces the origins of Army special warfare from 1941 to 1952, the year the Army's special warfare center was established. He studied the origins of special Warfare by tracing US's experience in unconventional warfare during

⁶ Barnett, Frank R. ; Tovar, B. Hugh; Shultz, Richard H. ; Special Operations in US Strategy; National Defense University Press, 1984.

World War II⁷. Paddock cited that many Army leaders, trained and experienced in conventional warfare, hesitantly accepted special warfare as a legitimate weapon in the Army's wartime arsenal, but questioned the validity and appropriateness of the Army's adoption of unconventional operations. The continuing tensions of the cold war and hostilities in Korea at that time resolved the ambivalence in favour of coordinating a single operations of the techniques of both types of warfare.

Specifically, Paddock examined the US Army's activities in psychological and unconventional warfare during and after World War II to determine the impetus and the origins of special warfare capability. He noted that an understanding of these historical roots should provide a more enlightened perspective from which to assess the subsequent evolution of special warfare in the US.

Otto Heilbrunn in 1963 studied on warfare in the enemy's rear. It studied on the armed forces that fight behind enemy lines. The forces concerned in his study are airborne troops, the Special Forces, the partisans and certain elements of the air forces of the belligerents of the Second World War. The war in the enemy's rear from 1939 to 1945 was not conducted in accordance with a recognized general doctrine because no such doctrine had been developed, nor has any attempt been made since to present a study of the theoretical aspects of the war in the rear as a whole and of front and rear warfare as an entity. Otto's book tries to initiate the search for such a doctrine and to make a contribution towards its formulation⁸.

⁷ Paddock Jr., Alfred; US Army Special Warfare, Its Origins; National Defense University Press; Washington, 1982.

⁸ Heilbrunn, Otto; Warfare in the enemy's rear; George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London, 1963.

Otto's study deals with the war against the enemy in the rear of one's own forces. Otto concedes that the subject is complex. There is so many forces that undertakes a great variety of tasks with different means and aims, operating too in such widely separated areas that the many aspects of rear warfare hardly seem to have a common denominator. The author treats the subject by following three guiding lights that is each force has a specific task, the nature of the task is often conditioned by the zone in which the force operates and the rear operations must be geared with those of the front. Generally, most of the existing main literatures have neglected focussing or only look at very marginally on the effectiveness of US SOF's role or the special operations in general.

1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

While there are several studies looking at special operations forces from various dimensions, this dissertation will provide a good comparison of both the failures and successes of special operations forces in demonstrating the effectiveness of their role. This study while looking at the above, will specifically look into US Special Operations Forces in a contemporary sense. There is too many fantasizing of Special Forces as superheroes or superhumans. They were known to be able to handle the most impossible missions. But are there really that successful? There has been too much writing on the heroics and also the foolhardiness of these troops. But not much studies had been made on its strategic use. This dissertation will provide a broader understanding of special forces.

Two case studies will be used to provide a study of both successes and failures of US Special Operations Forces. The first case study will look into the successful use of US SOF in the US intervention in Grenada (1983) and the success of US Special Operations Forces in rescuing the medical students held hostage there. The second case study will look into the failure of US Special Operations Forces in Somalia (1993).

The strategic implications of these special operations forces are tremendous as will be illustrated in the later chapters. Special operations forces have multi-roles that are equally important in both peace and war. In peace, they are involved in training foreign friendly government troops and guarding US interest both abroad and domestically, counter-terrorism, provide intelligence gathering and aiding in peacekeeping and humanitarian operations. In war, special forces are used in intelligence gathering, raiding, rescuing hostages and various other missions deemed necessary. It is widely understood of the importance of special forces that the US government had formed an umbrella called Special Operations Command (SOCOM) to overlook all special operations forces in US⁹.

1.7 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted by using both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources involved documents and writings from US government bodies. Interviews with US military personnel and Malaysian security personnel who have worked with the Special Forces community will be conducted. Official

⁹ Interview with Major C. Douglas Dawson; United States Air Force, Deputy Chief, Security Assistance Office, Embassy of USA, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 22nd May 2001.

information released from US government information agencies, radio broadcasts, government defense whitepapers and verifiable memoirs of Special Operations Forces personnel will also be used. Newspapers articles and magazine articles which are considered raw information are also used as primary research. This research also involved liaison with the US National Defense University to gather information and the US Special Forces Association to gather first hand information.

Secondary resources were mainly gathered from library research. Sources from journals, books, video tapes, video compact discs, magazine articles, newspaper articles and other published sources were used. Reliable sources from the Internet were also used in this research and this encompasses both primary and secondary research materials.

1.8 CHAPTERISATION

Chapter Two will look at the background of the US special operations forces. It briefly discuss the origins of US Special Forces in a contemporary sense, from the Second World War to the present day. The nature of special operations forces, its tasks, operational roles and missions are covered briefly to provide a sufficient background.

Chapter Three will look at a case study on the role of US Special Operations Forces in the Grenada intervention in 1983. It will provide a background to the conflict while looking at a coordinated joint special operations forces assault into the island. It saw the special operations forces of the US Army, US Navy and US Air

Force conducting a coordinated assault and rescue onto the island. The outcome of the mission is also covered in this chapter.

Chapter Four will look into another case study demonstrating the failure of the US special operations forces in the Somalia. While providing a brief background on the conflict, it will focus on the Bakara Market incident where the US special operations forces involving Delta and Rangers were engaged to arrest some wanted Somalian warlords including the infamous General Aideed. This case will demonstrate the typical nature of the failure of US SOF.

Chapter Five will assess the role of the US Special Operations Forces. It will assess the effectiveness of the US SOF on some missions. Challenges to US SOF will also be looked at in this section. Its role will also be viewed from the emerging trends in special operations.

Chapter Six will conclude the study by highlighting the continued relevance of US SOF.