

Special Ops pave the way

Veterans of Foreign Wars Magazine

January, 1 2002

Milton R. Copulos

The war in Afghanistan was ready-made for elite counter-terrorist units. And they have already proved their worth in conducting covert missions against the Taliban and al Qaeda.

An enduring symbol of America's war on terrorism was created last October when night-vision cameras filmed Army Rangers parachuting into Afghanistan. The eerie, green-tinted pictures of canopies opening silently as the soldiers jumped into harm's way demonstrated that the slogan, "We own the night" was more than an empty boast.

This operation said that a strategic decision had been made to rely on special operations forces in Afghanistan—a decision that has implications for the war on terrorism that go far beyond current tactical considerations.

Andy Messing, a veteran of 17 years with Army Special Forces, put the U.S. strategy in perspective: "Early on, the top brass were uncertain whether they should rely on general-purpose forces supported by special operations, or special operations elements supported by general-purpose forces.

"This choice of a strategy involved far more than a mere tactical decision. It established the fundamental philosophy that would govern our overall approach to the war on terrorism. The importance of the strategic approach selected cannot be overstated. In the end, it determines the degree of risk and expense the conflict will entail and ultimately its duration."

In the case of the war on terrorism, however, using special operations forces may be the only approach that makes sense. Often working in small cells, or from sanctuaries in nations hostile to the West, terrorist groups are not readily susceptible to conventional military operations.

So unconventional forces must be employed. Fortunately, they have been training for such a fight for more than two decades. But who are these shadow warriors, and what makes them the ideal weapon to fight this new war?

Although for most Americans, the term "special operations" immediately conjures up visions of the legendary Army Special Forces, or "Green Berets," the term actually encompasses a broader range of military units.

The U.S. Special Operation Command (USSCOM) includes units such as the U.S. Army Rangers, Special Forces, 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, Navy SEALs, Air Force's 16th Special Operations Wing, combat controllers and pararescue men, as well as the Army's super-secret Delta Force. All told, they number 30,000 troops.

Though the Marine Corps does not have units under the Special Operations Command, it has anti-terrorism capabilities. It recently reactivated the 4th Marine Expeditionary Brigade, which combines various special elements, including a fleet anti-terrorism team.

What all these units have in common is that they are the best of the best-America's fighting elite. More important, each has a unique capability particularly suited to America's war on terrorism.

RANGERS LEAD THE WAY

U.S. Army Rangers are the most venerable of U.S. special operations forces, with a history predating the American Revolution. The world's finest light infantry, Rangers undergo a grueling eight-week training course that prepares them to operate independently in a wide variety of terrains, ranging from mountains to jungles.

Just getting into Ranger school is an accomplishment. In order to be selected, a candidate must be a qualified parachutist, meaning they are already among the best the infantry has to offer. They must also successfully complete a week of rigorous tests that further winnow the applicants before being accepted.

But even being selected is no guarantee of success. Indeed, fully two-thirds of the candidates fail to complete the course. For those who do, winning the coveted Ranger tab is a source of justifiable pride, signaling that they have been selected to take on the toughest missions.

Rangers are America's shock troops, sent in ahead of the main force to scout, gather intelligence, seize strategic objectives such as airfields, and set up ambushes behind enemy lines. They are trained to hit hard, fast and with devastating deadlines.

"You have to be a driven, goal-oriented person," ex-Ranger vet of Somalia Mike Goodale told the Christian Science Monitor. "You have to be willing to sacrifice everything you have to get the job finished."

The tragic loss of 18 Rangers in Mogadishu, Somalia, in October 1993 led to intensified training in urban warfare, making them the best house-to-house fighters in the world. These skills make them an ideal force for quick, hard strikes against terrorist strongholds.

INTELLECTUAL WARRIORS

The legendary Special Forces-"Green Berets"-based at Ft. Bragg, N.C., are even more highly trained than the Rangers. Applicants must have attained at least the rank of E-5, be on their second enlistment, be airborne qualified and hold one of the family of Special Forces specialties.

Like Rangers, candidates for Special Forces training must first successfully complete a selection phase that tests both physical and mental skills. Indeed, for Special Forces, intelligence is more coveted than sheer strength.

Bruce Hazelwood, a veteran of 17 years with Special Forces, characterizes them as "intellectual warriors." Messing agrees: "It's about brains, not brawn. You have to be able to think and analyze, and you have to be able to do it in a foreign culture!"

This is not to say, however, that the Special Forces soldier lacks combat skills. Their combat training is every bit as rigorous as that of the Rangers, but it is augmented with far more sophisticated training to teach them how to work in foreign environments with indigenous forces as well.

Indeed, depending on the specialty, a Green Beret's initial training can take as long as two years. The reason for this is simple. As Hazelwood notes, "Special Forces soldiers must have the ability to demonstrate cross-cultural communications." This is because "their primary mission is to work with indigenous forces, often behind enemy lines."

SUPER-SECRET ELITE

Getting the Special Forces behind enemy lines takes a unique breed of flyer. This task falls to the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment based at Ft. Campbell, Ky. Initially formed after the failed attempt to rescue Iranian hostages in 1980, the unit drew on the best pilots in Army aviation. It was reorganized in 1990 and nicknamed the "Nightstalkers." The 160th's specially modified helicopters can perform a variety of missions, including extraction, command and control and armed escort.

Although not now directly employed in Afghanistan, Navy SEAL teams add yet another layer to U.S. special operations capabilities. Like other elite forces, SEALs are airborne-qualified, but also are skilled in using underwater gear.

SEALs undergo a grueling training and selection process. They are prepared to perform counter-guerrilla and clandestine operations.

They can strike deep within enemy territory, often reaching their objective by swimming in from submarines or small boats. They are considered the world's best combat swimmers, and also are capable of performing underwater demolition assignments.

Besides more widely publicized special operations forces, the Army and Navy each maintain a specialized unit for highly classified operations. The Army's Delta Force and Navy's SEAL Team 6 are the most secretive units in today's military.

Delta Force has only 360 men, according to the Oct. 11 USA Today. They seldom receive recognition. Few Americans know that the two Medal of Honor recipients from Somalia were Delta operatives.

Indeed, the Army doesn't even officially acknowledge the existence of Delta Force, or its operations. Both of these units comprise the most highly qualified and trained counter-terrorist forces in the world. Still, their training, personnel and assignments are among the nation's most closely guarded secrets.

But there is even one more phantomlike outfit. On Sept. 27, a team (a halfdozen men) of the CIA's Special Activities Division—which fields secret paramilitary units—was the first on the ground in

Afghanistan. They reportedly work "hand in glove with the special forces and notably have provided a critical eyes-on-the-ground capability." An operative of this outfit was the first U.S. KIA of the war.

DEADLY EFFECTIVENESS

In Afghanistan, special operations forces have already proven their worth, accompanying Northern Alliance troops as they battle the Taliban.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the danger that accompanies this task. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld put it simply: "You take several handfuls of Americans and place them with elements that are fighting on the ground, and you can begin to imagine the kind of circumstances they're in." (On Dec. 4, three Americans were killed by "friendly fire.")

Capt. T.C. Bennett, a wing commander on the carrier Carl Vinson, agrees. "Close air support is a very, very dangerous mission," he said. "Any time you're dropping ordnance from a high altitude in close proximity to friendly forces, it's very dangerous. These people are not from this planet. I've got to believe they've brought them in from Mars or something--I wouldn't do it"

Green Berets have acted as advisors and forward air controllers. They also used hand-held laser devices to "paint" targets for precision munitions, a task perfected during the Persian Gulf War.

Their roles have been downright bizarre. "In Afghanistan, a country we think of in somewhat medieval terms," said Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, "our Special Forces have taken a page from the past, from the history of the horse cavalry with our soldiers armed with swords and rifles, maneuvering on horseback."

Wrote one commando in a declassified report: "I am advising a man on how best to employ light infantry and horse cavalry in the attack against Taliban T-55 (tanks), mortars, artillery, personnel carriers and machine guns-a tactic which I think became outdated with the invention of the Gatling gun."

No matter what the outcome in Afghanistan, it is clear that the war on terrorism will continue for the foreseeable future. The al Qaeda network is only one of more than 60 terrorist groups that currently operate across national boundaries.

The war is destined to be deadly, too. Pat Traeger of the Special Operations Warrior Foundation points out that the casualty rate for special ops units is nine times that of conventional outfits.

The Army Special Operations Memorial Wall, at Ft. Bragg, alone lists 56 names beginning in 1983. They cover Grenada, Panama, Persian Gulf, Somalia, Northern Iraq, Haiti, Latin America, Asia, Middle East and Kosovo. At least five new names will be added for Afghanistan.

Air Force and Navy special operations units also have taken their share of casualties. SEAL Team 6 had four men drowned off Grenada (1983) and Team 4 lost 4 KIA in Panama (1989). The 16th Special Operations Squadron sustained 14 KIA in the Persian Gulf War (1991). Then it lost eight more in an accidental crash in the Indian Ocean during Somalia (1994).

As Canadian Foreign Minister John Manley recently said, "This is a battle like no other. The enemy is unconventional and so must be our response. We will win because we have to win. But it will be a long campaign, and it will challenge our resources-and our resourcefulness."

MILTON R. COPULOS is head of a defense research institute and was medically retired from the Army. He carried out special operations in Vietnam, 1967-69.