

Establishing Joint Special Forces : Tasks, Training and Equipping Philosophies

Commander Shankar Man Rai

INTRODUCTION

Amongst the majority of security forces in the world there are small units of highly motivated and unswerving professionals that have the unique ability to conduct military actions that are beyond the capability of conventional military forces. The men from these units are selected from thousands of applicants and are intensely trained, exceedingly fit and totally committed group of true professionals. They are expected to execute operations under varying circumstances and in conditions that often seem humanly impossible to cope with. These small units of volunteer men are termed as Special Operation Forces (SOF) or Special Forces (SF).

Specialised units have played an important role throughout the history of warfare by inflicting disruption upon the enemy by "hit and run" or sabotage tactics rather than more traditional face to face combat. During the Napoleonic wars, rifle and sapper units existed which were not committed to the formal lines that made up most battles of the day. Instead, these were employed on more specialised roles in reconnaissance and skirmishing. It was during World War II that the concept of specially trained troops, organised into specialist units for conducting raids behind enemy lines, was mooted. This led to the birth of SF units such as the famed British Special Air Service (SAS) and the US 1st Special Service Force, that was the antecedent of the present US Army Special Forces. The later half of the 20th century saw SF gain increasing prominence for non-military tasks in anti-hijacking and anti-terrorist operations. Two notable operations that received worldwide publicity and set the stage for use of SF in non-military tasks were, the Iranian Embassy siege in London in 1980, and the Entebbe Raid in 1976. Even the military concept of SF employment underwent a sea change within this period when it became clear during the Vietnam

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War that the US SF would play a role quite different from the role foreseen for it when it was created in the 1950s. At that time, the SF units were organised so as to be capable of waging unconventional war under conventional war conditions. This war saw the concept of employment of SF in conflict situation being developed and adjusted on a "let's-try-it-and-see-what-happens" basis. These were later refined by the SAS against the Irish Republican Army (IRA) during the Northern Ireland conflict. Thus, governments around the world came to realise the importance of SF for enforcing resolution in every complicated situation, military or non-military.

The genesis of the Indian SF was in the mid-1960s when 9 Para Battalion was established comprising volunteers from various infantry units. Over the years, additional battalions were raised in consonance with the growing security needs. The para battalions now renamed SF, undertook special operation tasks during Op Pawan (1987) in Sri Lanka and Op Cactus (1988) in Male. The naval component of SF, Marine Naval Commandos (MARCOS), was raised in the late 1980s and is structured on the US's Sea Air Land Force (SEAL), specialising in underwater demolition and marine oriented missions. The other Indian SF units include the counter-terrorist National Security Guards (NSG) raised in 1985, the Special Frontier Force (SFF) and the little known Special Security Bureau (SSB).

SF differ from the conventional forces in their special training, cohesive organisation and superior equipment that enable them to achieve military, political, economic, or psychological objectives by unconventional means. The SF teams can conduct operations in hostile, denied or politically sensitive environments to achieve military, diplomatic, informational, and/or economic objectives for which there is no broad conventional force requirement. Special operations are almost always covert and clandestine due to political and military exigencies and significantly differ from conventional operations because of their enhanced physical and political risks, operational techniques, mode of employment, independence from friendly support and dependence on detailed operational intelligence and indigenous assets. Thus, SFs require a different command and control structure, weapons, equipment, training, intelligence support and funding than conventional forces.

THE NEED FOR JOINT INDIAN SPECIAL FORCES

The Indian SF Situation

Existing SF Structure. The Armed Forces arm of the SF structure comprises the Army units of Para SF and the Naval MARCOS, each operating independent of the other and under the operational control of their respective Service Chief. The Cabinet Secretariat arms of the SF structure are the SFF and the NSG. The NSG was raised by the Cabinet Secretariat as an armed force under the National Security Guard Act of 1985. Although the composition of the personnel staffing the offensive wing of the NSG, the Surface Action Group (SAG) is exclusively from the Army, it remains outside the Army chain of command. This is similar in the case of SFF too. Thus, both SF units draw upon the resources of the Armed Forces for manning but are devoid of their control. This is indicative of the haphazard growth of SF, without any long-term perspectives or clear-cut objectives.

The animating principle of our SF units is different than that what is generally understood for Western SF units. The American Delta Force or the British SAS are trained and equipped to perform hazardous missions normally limited to specific strategic targets while the Indian SF is considered primarily as a highly trained, light infantry, schooled in airborne or waterborne insertion. It is this perception that has seen the Army SF units often being employed in situations where a conventional force would be suitable, and the employment of a Para battalion during the Kargil conflict for tactical tasks is a case in point.

The Problem. Lack of clear-cut and identifiable roles and missions compounded by a non-unified command structure have made the employment of Indian SF rudderless. In the age of low intensity conflicts and complex unpredictable threat environment, there has been scarce upgradation in the capabilities of the Indian SF beyond securing tactical objectives in support of division or corps mission requirements. Our capability to accomplish strategic requirement is very limited when compared to the US or British SF, due to the absence of delivery, logistical and organisational support systems that are critical to the successful accomplishment of any SF mission. The last and only strategic exposure of the Indian SF was during the 1988 Op Cactus at Male that was a runaway success, wholly because of a handful of ineptly trained rebels. Besides demonstrating the national resolve to intervene, the

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operation also brought to light numerous shortcomings in long-range SF deployment. The intervening years that could have seen our SF units consolidating and overcoming their shortfalls have been squandered away due to the lack of politico-military direction and organisation. The SF units still remain disparate in their tasking, training and equipping philosophies and, most critically, are still devoid of a central command structure. Lack of a unified command and control primarily affects the optimum applicability of this scarce resource and, secondly, adversely impacts their training and development.

Centralised Command

The greatest adverse effect of such a compartmentalised SF setup is that individual units have imbibed a speckled training pattern and tactics that precludes the SF units to be interoperable with each other. Compartmentalisation is at complete variance with the SF trait of cohesive organisation and forestalls the SFs potential capabilities to be fully employed or fully synchronised with each other or with conventional forces. As a consequence, the planning and execution process will be clouded and there will be a greater probability of risking failure during complex operations. In the decision making process, the absence of a centralised command lays the government's decision-making body bereft in the judgement and advise on the assignment of SF for securing national or strategic objectives. A top-domain SF command structure that links directly to the National Command Authority (NCA) or the Crisis Management Group (CMG), could provide counsel to the Government that the SF expertise matches the mission tasking and what are its intrinsic limitations. Such a counsel would be most valuable in crisis response situations during peacetime where time is the overriding factor, and since the advice would come from an organisation with SF personnel, it would be most relevant and accurate. The central SF command would also oversee the training of SF, its integration and employment to prevent valuable SF resources being frittered away on inconsequential tasks. It must be understood that SF units are national contingency assets and the central supervision and monitoring of their operational readiness is essential to ensure a high state of mission preparedness. Unifying the SF would also remove the myopic vision that plagues our disparate SF units and provide the much-needed collective farsightedness that they presently lack.

The different SF units should never be structured into a combined SF for that would erode the specialist structure of the units. Special Forces are lethal instruments of war and specialised in their realm of operation. It is a known fact that pooling and augmenting each other ensures mission success rather than homogenising, which makes SF lose its cutting edge. Thus, restructuring the diverse units under a unified command structure will allow effective utilisation, supervision and application of this specialist force.

TASKING PHILOSOPHY

The versatility of SF in aiding to secure military or political objectives can lead to its over-exploitation and a "silver bullet" syndrome. In addition to their obvious military value and responsiveness to political situations, it is little realised that the SF has the ability to provide a psychological effect as well. During crisis response actions at peacetime, they publicly reaffirm the government's commitment in protecting its citizens. During wartime, the fear of having such units operating behind their lines can cause enemy commanders to tie up large number of forces in a counter-guerrilla type operation. However, the failure of SF in declared situations has a fallout that is far greater politically than what the controllers would expect. The botched up attempt to rescue hostages from the American Embassy in Tehran, in 1977, led to major loss of national prestige for the United States. In October 2002, the rescue of hostages held in the Moscow Theatre, which resulted in 129 casualties due to the use of an opiate narcotic gas by the Russian Spetsnaz SF, drew criticism from all quarters. The majority of the populace questioned the actions of the government that valued lives of its own citizens no more than lives of the very terrorists it was trying to defeat. Therefore, the uniqueness of SF requires that the tasking philosophy consider certain employment imperatives and tasking tenets before undertaking any mission.

Employment Imperatives

Recognition of Political Implications. In peacetime and conflict situations, the employment of SF is a military solution for an overall non-military objective. In such a case, the political ramifications of the actions and failure must be considered. Wartime mission may also have similar complications and, therefore, the

issue of employing SF when, where and how must be carefully weighed.

Coordination. Crisis response situations often present a complex mission structure that may be vague, with opposing interests and objectives and a lack of unity of command. Such operations require coordination with conventional forces or government security agencies that must be ensured and facilitated to achieve success.

Legitimacy and Credibility. In the present age of media awareness and activism, it is essential that SF employment must be credible and legitimate as viewed by the international community and the populace. Legitimacy is a guiding factor for SF employment especially in operations where support is provided to a government or a resistance organisation.

Sufficient Intelligence. A pre-requisite for any special operation is intelligence. SF teams lack the combat power, reinforcement capabilities and sustainment like the conventional forces and are critically dependent on intelligence to accomplish their mission. The employment of SF with sketchy intelligence should be avoided till sufficient intelligence is gained.

Operational Security. SF missions, due to their covert nature, exploit the element of surprise to achieve success. Implementing a high degree of operational security in the planning and execution phase can only ensure surprise. Too much security could leave key issues out of mission planning with other agencies, leading to failure because of lack of coordination. Compromising security would compromise the mission.

Feasibility. The likelihood of success of a mission is a vital criterion that dictates the commitment of SF troops for that mission. This may be as a consequence of the other five factors or a resultant of limited SF resources in the form of force capability, equipment constraints or accessibility.

Tasking Tenets

SF units are valuable resources that can be used to support conventional military operations at the time of war or serve as a minimum-escalation option in politically sensitive situations. They

are ideally suited in instances where national interests are threatened but the commitment of conventional forces is not warranted. The peacetime tasking of SF could be in circumstances requiring special military skills when declarations of war are undesirable or when there is concern that the introduction of conventional force operations may exacerbate a crisis. SF success in all such cases depends upon application of the four tenets of agility, depth, initiative and synchronisation.

When SF operations follow the four tenets, they succeed, but in case of non-compliance of even one, it results in mission failure. Operation Kingpin, the Son Tay raid in 1970 to rescue 470 American POWs from Hanoi, observed the tenets of initiative, agility, and depth but failed in synchronisation. Theoretically, the raid was a success but failed in its aim because the SF operation was not synchronised with the intelligence operation. It was known that the prisoners were no longer at the POW camp but the raiders were sent anyway. Operation Eagle Claw, the Iran hostage rescue in 1980, followed only one tenet – initiative – and was a total failure. The changes to operational environment were unnoticed and procedures for applying resources to control the change or 'agility' was lacking in the operation, when three helicopters went out of action even before Stage I. 'Depth', the extension of operations in time, space and purpose was the other missing tenet wherein a hopscotch method of ground refuelling was undertaken rather than mid-air refuelling. Finally, lack of 'synchronisation' delayed the RH-53 helicopters to rendezvous the C-130 tankers and in the melee, an RH-53 collided with C-130 on ground leading to loss of, both, the aircraft and eight crewmen. The lessons from the debacle at Desert One later revolutionised US SF operations and led to the establishment of the central United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM).

The classic SF operation that followed all the tenets and was a resounding success was *Operation Thunderbolt*, the Israeli raid at Entebbe airport in 1976. The plan was unthinkably brash and had complete 'initiative'. It had 'depth' of being executed 2400 nm away; the 'agility' was evident in the entire operation from touchdown to takeoff with rescue of hostages completed in 51 minutes, and 'synchronisation' with the demolition teams ensured destruction of 11 Ugandan MiGs and a safe getaway.

Broad Mission Structure

SF provide the Commander the wide opportunity to accomplish his goals across the operational continuum but its overuse must be guarded against. SF with their long and extensive training period cannot be quickly replaced and neither can their capabilities be expanded rapidly. Squandering scarce SF resources on inappropriate missions or inordinately dangerous tasks runs the risk of depleting the SF inventory early in a conflict. Military strategies should not try to exploit the use of SF to achieve success nor consider SF as a substitute for conventional forces. It must be recognised that SF is actually a combat multiplier providing different capabilities that expand the option of the employing commander. Simply speaking, SF should be employed for special tasks alone and never in operations where conventional forces can accomplish the mission. Its application in high risks, high payoff tasks and achieving politico-military objectives is the biggest strength of SF.

The mission structure for employing SF units is best covered by the USSOCOM guidelines. It lays down nine activities designated as SF principal missions. These are : Direct Action, Combating Terrorism, Foreign Internal Defence, Unconventional Warfare, Special Reconnaissance, Psychological Operations, Civil Affairs, Information Operations and Counter Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction. The activity classification is sufficiently broad based that it encompasses every conceivable SF mission. Diverse SF activities like Maritime Interception Operations (MIO) or Extra-Judiciary Options authorising kidnapping or assassination, will form a part of one of these nine missions.

Direct Action (DA). DA operations are short duration strikes and other small-scale offensive operations principally undertaken to seize, destroy, capture, recover or inflict damage on designated personnel or material. In the conduct of these operations, SF may employ raid, ambush or direct assault tactics. DA includes emplacing of mines and other munitions, conducting stand off attacks by fire from air, ground or maritime platforms and providing terminal guidance for precision weapons, independent sabotage and anti-ship operations.

Combating Terrorism (CBT). CBT activities include Anti-Terrorism (AT) and Counter Terrorism (CT) missions for the

recovery of hostages or sensitive material from terrorist organisations, attack on terrorist infrastructure, anti-hijacking and reduction of vulnerability to terrorism. CBT operations are typically at a short notice and SF units specialising in CT need to be at a high state of readiness.

Foreign Internal Defence (FID). FID is participation by civilian and military agencies of our government in any action programme of a host government to combat subversion, lawlessness and insurgency within the foreign state. The contribution of SF in this interagency activity is to organise, train, advise and assist the host nation's military and para-military forces. This is mostly an overt activity. The 1988 Male operations can be considered as the most visible illustration in this regard.

Unconventional Warfare (UW). UW includes guerrilla warfare, subversion, sabotage, intelligence activities, evasion, escape and other activities of a low visibility, covert or clandestine nature. When UW is conducted independently, its primary focus is on political and psychological objectives; when it supports conventional military operations, the focus shifts to primarily military objectives.

Special Reconnaissance (SR). Information gathering activities of strategic or operational significance is called SR. SR complements intelligence collection systems by obtaining specific, well-defined and time-sensitive information when other systems are constrained by weather, terrain-masking hostile counter measures or conflicting priorities. SR tasks include environmental reconnaissance, armed reconnaissance (locating and attacking targets of opportunity), coastal patrol and interdiction, target and threat assessment and post-strike reconnaissance.

Psychological Operations (PSYOP). PSYOP induces or reinforces the target audience's attitude and behaviour favourable to own objectives. This is achieved by conducting planned operations to convey selected information to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning and ultimately the behaviour of foreign governments, organisations, groups and individuals.

Civil Affairs (CA). CA facilitates military operations and consolidates operational activities by assisting commanders in establishing, maintaining, influencing or exploiting relations between

military forces and civil authorities, both governmental and non-governmental and the civilian population in a friendly, neutral or hostile area of operation.

Information Operations (IO). IO refers to actions taken to affect the adversary's information and information systems while defending own information and information systems. DA, SR, PSYOP and CA activities support the IO mission.

Counter Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (CP). CP refers to the actions taken to seize, destroy, render safe, capture or recover Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD).

TRAINING PHILOSOPHY

Special Forces units rely on stealth, speed, self-reliance, specialised skills and close teamwork that is honed by years of continuous training to achieve their status as a combat multiplier. Crack SF teams cannot be created overnight nor mass produced. Besides mastering war-fighting techniques, SF personnel must also be proficient and able to apply initiative and creativity to find a solution to problems and challenges that they may face in the course of their isolated deployment. Thus, not only training to perfect military tactics and techniques but also education to develop military judgement, is essential for creating high calibre professionals. This training credo of the SF is in contrast to the training of the conventional troops who are trained to develop only procedures. The necessity of military judgement in the troops is not an essential prerequisite. Therefore, SF training profile needs to be broad based and includes concepts that define the modern battlefield, scenarios from doctrine and foreign policy, cross-cultural communications skills and language training in order to produce a situationally aware warrior.

Personnel

The personnel forming the Special Forces are the organisation's greatest asset. These men are mature professionals with intelligence, mental toughness, problem-solving skills, stamina, flexibility, integrity, determination and extraordinary strength of character and will. Stringency in the recruitment process for the selection of high quality, motivated and dedicated personnel that can be trained into SF personnel is an absolute necessity. The importance of having the right people in SF will grow in the future

as they are employed against increasingly hostile and challenging environments. Operating independently and in arduous environments, SF personnel will need to have exceptional character and highest level of fitness. Military judgement, knowledge and self discipline are needed to be developed in the SF men as they may be called upon to make critical on-scene decisions. In addition, SF troops will need to be highly intelligent to operate increasingly sophisticated equipment and to perform operations in, both, a technologically advanced threat environment, as well as low and no-technology environment.

The Army SF units are scattered among the four Para battalions and the SFF. It may perhaps be advantageous to reorganise and relocate the various Army SF in order to prepare a focussed SF organisation. Issues such as review of HRD policies regarding retention of SF personnel, and the creation of an elite SF team culled from the best personnel within the units could also be examined.

Training and Exercises

Basic Joint Training. SF units must have a common basic training that reflects joint doctrine and tactics, techniques and procedures. Common and elementary SF techniques such as survival techniques, basic unarmed combat, map reading, PSYOP etc could be included in this course. This will ensure future interoperability of units with each other and allow the planners to achieve flexibility and optimisation in their employment. An institutionalised common training will allow the training assets to be resourced together and the joint command to closely supervise training and effect quick changes when required to reflect current doctrines.

Specialist Training. Service-specific specialist training can be imparted on completion of the basic joint training. SF units will pursue their environmental/role specialisation in this phase that would impart unit specific consummate skills ie anti-terrorist operations in the case of NSG or underwater demolitions for MARCOS. The increasing sophistication of the terrorist attacks requires this part of the training to be constantly reviewed and refined.

Interoperability/Integrated Joint Operations. In order to improve and perfect joint operations with conventional troops or

other SF units or government agencies, it is vital that SF units exercise with each other and build relationships and operational synergy. Joint training allows complementary capabilities to emerge that enable the planner to expand his options and process new doctrines. Joint competition amongst SF units in the fields of marksmanship or physical tests could also be a method to forge such integration and interoperability. Multilateral exercises with foreign SF units need to be conducted regularly in order to develop cross-cultural skills, regional orientation and exposure to contemporary SF tactics. The importance of multilateral exercises is best exemplified by the United States that exercised their SF with an astounding 152 nations during the year 1999 under the SF Joint Combined Exercise Training (JCET). The JCET is an SF specific programme that permits their training anywhere abroad by the CINC USSOCOM without Congressional sanction or public debate.

Support Training. SF require more support than conventional units if deployed for extended periods. The team depends upon air support for sustenance, and extraction if detected by a larger force that they cannot break free from. Quite a few missions require extra planning and intelligence, sometimes including fabrication of mock-ups for practice assaults. The higher state of readiness these units possess call for an aggressive training regimen that is more taxing and expensive than a peacetime infantry training.

EQUIPPING PHILOSOPHY

Due to the nature of their employment and operation, SF need to maintain a technological edge to ensure initiative and lethality. The issue of maintaining and improving material capabilities is the SF's most difficult challenge. These material capabilities empower the SF to gain surreptitious access to the target, enhance intelligence about the target, neutralise with all-purpose weapons and maintain command and control through information exchange systems. Failure to equip adequately translates to loss of war fighting resources that will cause the mission to founder. A broad overview of what the SF equipment would require, is as follows:-

Personal Survivability. Equipping for personal survivability should flow from the dictum that SF personnel are precious and difficult to replace. These include equipment for environmental protection and body armour. Lightweight survival kits, sustainment

packs and personal equipment alongwith lightweight power supply, storage and generation technology would be the areas to be explored.

Sensory Enhancements. These equipment enable the SF to collect and evaluate information by various means from standoff positions to augment information on the target for own action or relay in case of special reconnaissance missions. Image intensifiers, long range cameras, remote monitoring devices, keyhole cameras etc are few of the sensory enhancement equipment. Success in urban counter terrorist operations hinge on the capability of such equipment to provide visual, aural or IR clues about the enemy. On the battlefield, equipment that exploits space and UAV resources, target locating, tracking and marking equipment are needed by our SF.

Delivery Vehicles. Accessibility to the target is an employment imperative that dictates whether participation is feasible or not. Our SF presently lacks air mobility for strategic deployment and no dedicated air delivery vehicle exists with any SF unit. The IAF without a distinct SF airlift organisation undertakes delivery assignments of SF troops on a case-to-case basis. There is a pressing need for an all weather medium lift long-range helicopter for strategic insertion/extraction tasks and for maintaining sustenance and logistical support. Inception of a dedicated airlift organisation that exercises in tandem with SF units and under central SF command will allow mobility and flexibility to SF units to access strategic targets. Extensive night operations and mid-air refuelling techniques would form a part of the training of the airlift organisation. The importance of small All Terrain Vehicles (ATV) and off road motorcycles for surface movement that can be easily transported in helicopters needs to be acknowledged and procured. The versatility of these high-speed, low-detectable, all-weather mobility platforms has been proven by the SAS during Desert Storm and presently all premier SF units of the world are equipped with these. Water delivery platforms could include underwater transport vehicles and low visibility surface crafts. It is essential that SF have the mobility in denied areas to conduct undetectable ground, air and sea mobility operations, and equipment facilitating this is required to be possessed.

Information Exchange Systems. Lightweight and efficient equipment for Information Warfare (IW) and Command and Control

Warfare (C²W) systems enable SF units on ground to be globally linked with the controlling command. Tactical video system, secure digital communication and real time access from the controller to the SF unit would provide timely intelligence support to all echelons.

Weapon Versatility. SF require superior weaponry that is lightweight and precise allowing increased lethality and enhanced target acquisition by both day and night, in close quarters combat or at extended ranges. Acquisition of multi-role/multi-purpose weapons with a broader range of effects and ordnance such as improved mines, demolition kits and remote mine clearance vehicles would allow SF to maintain a lethal edge.

CONCLUSION

The challenge facing the military is to field forces that can fight and win against threats ranging from nations with their complex infrastructure, to such non-state entities as terrorists, ethnic factions and religious radicals. These diverse and contradictory environments require flexible and versatile forces that can function effectively, with speed and precision across the full range of military operations to secure our national objectives. The need for SF will be increasingly felt as the war on terror has made the world profoundly different and pre-emptive self-defence is slowly gaining acceptance as a doable doctrine. And, the instruments of power that can strike precisely, pre-emptively and with minor fallout would be the call of the hour. The Indian Special Forces need to reorganise, firstly, by acquiring a joint character and then adding value, technological edge and most importantly, mobility to self. This is the only way it can keep itself 'special' and prove itself to be a viable instrument of force for conflict resolution.

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