



THE MYTH OF SPECIAL FORCES IMPORTANCE IN A CONVENTIONAL WAR

Description

USA/UKRAINE: NY Times is out with a new article, In Ukraine, US Veterans Step In Where the Military Will Not, touting the magical powers of veterans of U.S. Special Operations units signing up to go train Ukrainians and help turn the tide of the war. I am not discounting their bravery and skill, but U.S. Special Operations forces have little role to play in the conventional war unfolding in Ukraine. They lack the equipment and, frankly, the knowledge required to deal with the kind of ground combat underway. Let me explain.

The average person, American and otherwise, use the term “Special Forces” interchangeably with “Special Operations Forces”. That is a mistake. Special Forces, in U.S. military parlance, [refers to Green Berets](#).



The Green Berets are geared towards nine doctrinal missions: [unconventional warfare](#), [foreign internal defense](#), [direct action](#), [counterinsurgency](#), [special reconnaissance](#), [counterterrorism](#), [information operations](#), [counterproliferation](#) of [weapons of mass destruction](#), and [security force assistance](#). The unit emphasizes language, cultural, and training skills in working with foreign troops; recruits are required to learn a foreign

language as part of their training and must maintain knowledge of the political, economic and cultural complexities of the regions in which they are deployed.

The qualification process to become a Green Beret is rigorous and most who apply fail to pass. That is why it is called “Special”. The distinguishing feature of Special Forces is that they are like lethal Peace Corps volunteers in terms of their mindset—they are supposed to be fluent in at least one language and they see their mission as working with foreigners to train and equip them to operate as guerrilla fighters.

Then you have your Army Rangers. Also an elite branch that puts aspiring recruits through a grueling qualification course. Rangers are not inculcated with the priority of “going native”, i.e., learning the culture and habits of a foreign people and trying to fit it. That is a [Green Beret approach](#).



In a broader and less formal sense, the term “ranger” has been used, officially and unofficially, in [North America](#) since the 17th century, to describe [light infantry](#) in small, independent units—usually [companies](#). The first units to be officially designated Rangers were companies recruited in the colonies of [New England](#) by the [British Army](#), to fight in [King Philip’s War](#) (1676). Following that time, the term became more common in official usage, during the [French and Indian Wars](#) of the 18th century. The US military has had “Ranger” companies since the [American Revolution](#). British units later called “Rangers” have often also had historical links of some kind to [British North America](#).

A Ranger is not automatically a Green Beret and vice versa. However, some inspired men end up getting both qualifications. One of the current Ranger specialties is taking and seizing an airfield. I have witnessed that first hand. Quite impressive.

Special Operations is a completely different cat from Green Berets and Rangers. On the U.S. Army side of the house you have the most “famous” Special Operations unit, [Delta Force](#). Just because you have a Green Beret tab or a Ranger tab does not automatically qualify you to join Delta. That is a whole other level of qualification. Most Green Berets and Rangers who try to qualify for Delta usually wash out. This does not mean they are weak or bad soldiers. They simply lack the skill set that Delta

requires.

But Special Operations extends beyond just the Army. The Navy has its Special Operations forces too. Perhaps you have heard of them—the SEALs. Getting into the SEAL community is no cake walk either. You can pull up a Youtube video showing hell week during BUDS training to get an idea of what has made SEALs “special”.

Air Force has its own collection of “special operators” ([Wikipedia offers a great overview](#) of the various units in all services). The Marines were late to the game. They always believed they were special and relished the memory of having to rescue a squad of besieged [SEALS on Grenada in 1983](#). Nonetheless, the Marines wanted in on the Special Ops game and established MARSOC on 25 November 2005:

The potential participation of the Marine Corps in SOCOM has been controversial since SOCOM was formed in 1986.^[7] At the time, Marine Corps leaders felt that their [Force Reconnaissance](#) (FORECON) units were best kept in the Marine Corps’ [Marine Air-Ground Task Force](#) command structure and that the detachment of an elite Marine special operations unit would be to the detriment of the Marine Corps as a whole. A re-evaluation following the [September 11 attacks](#) and the [Global War on Terrorism](#), along with new policy established by Secretary Rumsfeld and Commandant General [James L. Jones](#) at [The Pentagon](#), caused the Marine Corps to work towards integration with SOCOM. The establishment of MARSOC represented the most significant step towards that goal and followed the establishment of Detachment One ([Det One](#)), a small Marine Corps detachment formed as a [pilot program](#) to test Marine Corps integration into SOCOM. It was made up of mostly Marines from [1st](#) and [2nd](#) Force Reconnaissance Batalions along with other hand-picked support men and served with [Navy SEALs](#) under [Naval Special Warfare Group One](#).

Here is the problem with Special Operations forces—they do not have armor and crew served weapons. Yeah, they are smart guys and can learn quickly (because they are intelligent and resourceful) how to operate such systems, but those particular weapons are not part of their order of battle. If you want to raid Bin Laden’s hide out in Pakistan, you call on Special Operations forces (it was a choice between Delta and Seal Team Six and Admiral Bill McRaven, who was a SEAL, gave the mission to his guys). They are flown to the target by Army Air Special Operations units.

But these guys (yes, the vast majority are men) are not trained to operate in a conventional ground war. I was struck particularly by the crap presented in the opening paragraphs of the New York Times piece:

A democracy came under attack. The United States saw a threat to an ally and also to the entire world order, but it feared that sending troops could spark a nuclear war. So, instead, it supplied weapons. And a small number of American Special Operations trainers started quietly working with the local military.

That was the situation in South Vietnam in 1961, a few years before full-blown U.S. military

involvement, when the American presence was limited to a “military advisory group.”

It is also the situation in Ukraine today. As a bloody conflict churns on, small teams of American Special Operations veterans are training Ukrainian soldiers near the front lines and, in some cases, helping to plan combat missions.

For starters, there were NO Special Operations forces in Vietnam. There were Green Berets. And there were no SEALs, at least as we know them now. The SEALs of that era began with UDT, who acted as advisors from 63-66. SEALs (from the only two teams that existed – 1 & 2) began combat deployment there in earnest in 66. At that point, UDT took a back seat. Both the Army Green Beret and the UDT bubbas were great at training guerrillas and promoting insurgency. That is their skill set. They know how to plan an ambush or launch a kill capture raid. But they are not skilled in sketching out fields of fire for artillery nor are they up to snuff on organizing and launching an attack by a tank battalion.

I pray that Perry Blackburn Jr., the retired “Special Ops” vet headed to Ukraine comes to his senses and stays in Tampa. The harsh reality is this—the United States does not have living veteran that understands and has experienced organizing attacks by a tank battalion. Those guys, the ones who served under General Patton, are either dead or way too old to get back into the fight. This nonsensical piece in the NY Times is but one more example of a reporter’s ignorance about the current state and operation of our military. More importantly, he does not have a damn clue about what is happening on the ground in Ukraine. A Special Ops ambush is not going to save the day.

by Larry Johnson

Category

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