

Semper Paratus and Special Forces: Why the Coast Guard Should be Part of the SOCOM Enterprise

Description

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The idea of Coast Guard Special Forces is a foreign concept to most people, counterintuitive to some, and outright offensive to the remainder; however it was a reality. • [Matthew Mitchell](#)

Introduction

The U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) has a longstanding history of engagement in special operations, demonstrating its versatility and effectiveness in unconventional missions. During World War II, the [Office of Strategic Services \(OSS\) recruited USCG personnel](#) for their expertise in swimming, diving, boat handling, and signaling. These highly skilled Coast Guardsmen were deployed across the European, China-Burma-India, and Pacific theaters, where they conducted seaborne reconnaissance, infiltration, and sabotage operations critical to the war [effort](#).

In the 1980s, the USCG once again played a pivotal role in specialized operations. With the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) lacking maritime and riverine capabilities and the U.S. Navy restricted to training partner nation forces, the Coast Guard established the [Drug Interdiction Assist Teams \(DIAT\)](#). Comprised of U.S. Army Ranger School graduates, these elite teams embedded with host nation forces to execute joint offensive operations targeting cocaine production networks and laboratories in [Colombia, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, and Panama](#).

Today, the USCG maintains three unique Deployable Specialized Forces (DSF) that can enhance the U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) enterprise through their specialized capabilities and operational flexibility.

Counterterrorism (CT) Terms

The U.S. Coast Guard maintains two elite counterterrorism units: the Maritime Security Response Teams (MSRT) East and West. These highly specialized forces are globally deployable within four hours, providing rapid response capabilities to emerging threats. MSRT's Direct Action teams are expertly trained in Close Quarters Combat (CQC) and include precision marksmen, explosive detection canines, and small boat tactical delivery teams. Equipped for high-risk operations, they are capable of helicopter and boat assault force insertion and extraction across the full spectrum of conflict. Additionally, they are capable of operating in chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and high-yield explosive (CBRNE) environments, ensuring mission effectiveness in even the most challenging conditions.

Counterdrug (CD) Terms

In 1982, the U.S. Coast Guard established [Law Enforcement Detachment Teams \(LEDETs\)](#) to enhance maritime interdiction capabilities. These highly trained teams deploy aboard U.S. Navy, NATO, and allied surface vessels to intercept and interdict drug-smuggling operations. LEDET personnel undergo a rigorous, physically and mentally demanding course covering high-risk maritime interdiction, CQC, maritime law enforcement, treaties, regulations, and international [law](#).

Over time, LEDET missions have expanded beyond counterdrug operations into gray zone and low-intensity conflict environments. Notably, LEDETs have deployed with the U.S. Navy's Combined Task Force 151 to combat piracy off the coasts of Somalia and Oman, enforced sanctions in the Persian Gulf against Iraq, and supported NATO vessels in upholding United Nations embargoes against former [Yugoslav republics](#). These operations demonstrate the LEDETs' adaptability and critical role in global maritime security.

Costal Riverine Forces

The U.S. Coast Guard's [Port Security Units \(PSUs\)](#) play a critical role in maritime security, operating as an integral component of the U.S. Navy's Expeditionary Combat Command (NECC) within the Coastal Riverine Forces. These highly capable units conduct maritime security operations across all phases of military operations, ensuring the protection of strategic ports, waterways, and high-value assets in both combat and contingency environments.

The *Semper Paratus* Value to SOCOM

U.S. Coast Guard DSF personnel can significantly enhance Special Operations Forces (SOF) capacity across a wide range of mission sets. The MSRTs and LEDETs can provide the Joint Force with additional counterterrorism CT and CD capabilities, respectively, while PSUs can support Coastal Riverine Units in the infiltration and exfiltration of SOF personnel—missions historically conducted by [Coast Guard forces in Vietnam](#).

Beyond direct action roles, all three units can contribute to U.S. Special Operations Command's (SOCOM) Security Force Assistance (SFA) mission. As a humanitarian service, the Coast Guard brings extensive subject matter expertise to Foreign Humanitarian Assistance (FHA) operations. While the DIATs have been disestablished, Coast Guard personnel have demonstrated their value in Foreign Internal Defense (FID) missions. Today's MSRTs, LEDETs, and PSUs possess the knowledge, skills, and operational experience necessary to support and enhance FID efforts worldwide.

The number of nations establishing [coast guard forces has risen](#) exponentially in the 21st century, driven by the post-9/11 security landscape, increasing piracy, illegal fishing, drug smuggling, and irregular maritime migration. Embedding U.S. Coast Guard Deployable DSF personnel within SOF Liaison Elements (SOFLE) could serve as a force multiplier, enabling partner nations to better enforce sovereignty over their territorial waters. Such integration fosters peer-to-peer relationships with local coast guards, navies, and maritime law enforcement agencies, enhancing regional security cooperation.

Despite these advantages, some may argue against integrating USCG capabilities into SOCOM. Skeptics may contend that Coast Guard missions are inherently law enforcement-focused rather than military in nature, that USCG training does not match the standards of other SOF units, or that the current process—where the Department of Defense (DoD) issues a Request for Forces (RFF) to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) when Coast Guard support is needed—remains sufficient.

However, USCG personnel bring unique advantages, operating under both Title 10 (military) and Title 14 (law enforcement) authorities, which extend their capabilities beyond traditional law enforcement roles. CT and CD operations span multiple agencies, including DHS, DoD, and the Department of Justice, making the Coast Guard's expertise highly transferable to DoD missions. For example, At-Sea Space Accountability (ASSA), a specialized capability of LEDETs, can be critical in enforcing international sanctions and embargoes. Additionally, MSRTs provide advanced capabilities to support global anti-piracy and CT operations.

DSF personnel undergo rigorous training, including the U.S. Coast Guard's Tactical Operator Course (TOC), which demands exceptional physical and mental resilience and has a high attrition rate. USCG personnel have successfully completed the [U.S. Navy's Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL](#)

[\(BUD/S\)](#) training and the [U.S. Army Ranger School](#) in the past. MSRT personnel also routinely train alongside U.S. Navy SEALs, further refining their combat and operational effectiveness.

Conclusion

Maintaining the status quo introduces an unnecessary interagency step that delays response times during international crises. By fully integrating into the SOCOM enterprise, DSF units could dedicate a team specifically to SOF missions, ensuring rapid, specialized support without bureaucratic delays.

About The Author

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