

The Last A-Team: Special Forces Aren't Special Anymore

Description

Editor's Note: This is part one of a two-part article assessing the past, present, and future of U.S. Army Special Forces.

The operating environment has evolved faster than the United States Army Special Forces. Green Berets did not fail at their assigned missions; they failed to sufficiently adapt to modern warfare. As a result, Green Berets moved from [Jedburghs](#) to irrelevance. Once the United States military's premier irregular force, Special Forces (SF) are now a campaign afterthought. The modern battlefield demands forces able to survive in hyper-contested digital environments without a signature, deliver multidomain effects at all levels, and operate with genuine cultural fluency inside the world's most closed and surveilled [societies](#). The current Special Forces model cannot meet those demands. It was not built for them.

I have been privileged to serve in the Army and Special Forces for a quarter century. I am practiced and educated in irregular warfare and recently retired as a Special Operations Command Europe Deputy Commander. I am proud of our unassailable legacy. That legacy includes the foundational principle that truth in reporting is an obligation of Green Berets at every level, including me.

The environment now demands at least three capabilities the current Special Forces model cannot provide. First, survivability in hyper-contested places. The current model was built for permissive and semi-permissive environments with low technology adversaries and limited surveillance. The adversary environment is the opposite: mega-cities with [dense surveillance](#), [ubiquitous sensors](#), [facial recognition](#), [biometric databases](#), [pattern of life analysis](#), and [electromagnetic spectrum dominance](#). A twelve-person A-Team with American equipment and American biometrics will not survive infiltration into China, Russia, North Korea, or Iran.

Second, multidomain capabilities at echelon. The modern battlefield requires fusion of space, cyber, electronic warfare, precision fires, and information operations down to the tactical level. That is a fundamentally [different soldier](#) than what the Special Forces Qualification Course produces.

Third, genuine cultural expertise. Basic introductory training and [six-month rotations produce](#) cultural familiarity. The adversaries SF would need to penetrate have the most closed, controlled, and surveilled populations on earth. The gap between what [SF claims](#) and what true expertise requires cannot be closed by Green Berets with improvisation, training, or rotational deployments.

Revolutionary redesign, repurposing, and restructuring are required. I recommend immediately consolidating one Special Forces Group, one Civil Affairs Company, and one Psychological Operations Company within Joint Special Operations Command. These forces inside the global strike complex will, for the time being, retain the combat train, advise, assist, and accompany capability for the joint force, inside a command apt to employ it.

The remainder of U.S. Army Special Operations Command's (USASOC) special operations forces should then be focused on a full-scale sprint to design, build, train, and test an updated model relevant to the contemporary and future environment. Once ready, elements can be brought back online for employment based on global priorities, not global force management Tetris.

Built for a World That No Longer Exists

Army Special Forces are the B-52 of the United States Army: designed in the 1950s, continuously upgraded, still flying, still capable in certain environments, but never fundamentally redesigned for the world it now operates in. The airframe is sound. The mission has changed.

In the 1950s, World War II veterans [created the United States Army Special Forces](#) for guerrilla operations in remote, rural, and analog environments. The A-Team was largely self-sufficient, deriving security and combat power from partner indigenous forces. Their purpose was to clandestinely infiltrate, make contact, organize, and fight to destabilize adversarial or strengthen friendly governments.

In [Vietnam](#), A-Teams partnered with an assortment of forces including, Montagnard tribes and South Vietnamese strike forces. Units operated in remote locations, requiring jungle survival skills. They lived, trained, and fought in places conventional units did not prioritize or could not reach. During the [Cold War](#), A-Teams enabled proxy conflicts in peripheral locations, allowing the United States and Soviet Union to contest each other without risking nuclear Armageddon. Vietnam and the Cold War cemented the structure and operating model. The A-Team advisor construct became the institutional identity of Special Forces, and it appeared to work for that environment.

Between [1991 and 2001](#), the force first contracted and then expanded again, primarily employed in South America and other peripheral locations conducting theater security cooperation and joint

combined exchange training. These were presence activities, not strategic missions. The Cold War was over. The existential threat justifying the original design had dissolved. For a brief window, the institution had the opportunity to ask a fundamental question. What is Special Forces for now? Instead, it continued executing the familiar mission set and waiting for the next demand signal to find it.

[After September 11th](#), Special Forces expanded rapidly to meet combat train, advise, assist, and accompany missions in [Iraq](#), [Afghanistan](#), and the [Philippines](#). Simultaneously, theater security cooperation events across every geographic combatant command continued.

As Salafist terrorism spread globally, [SF counterterrorism](#) efforts grew with it, spurring strike operations across multiple theaters simultaneously. [Rotations accelerated](#). Dwell time collapsed. Missions were mixed indiscriminately across active and National Guard groups. [Marine Raiders](#), [SEALs](#), and Green Berets became fungible. They were deployed [interchangeably](#) by U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM). The institution answered the demand signal, but at a cost it has never honestly accounted for.

While Special Forces were consumed by the Global War on Terror, adversaries were not standing still. [Russia and China developed largely uncontested](#), emerging in the 21st century as legitimate global threats. Paired with North Korea and Iran, they studied American capabilities on display in Iraq and Afghanistan, [building strategies](#) designed to defeat them.

The digital age accelerated exponentially. Asymmetric warfare became a household term. Adversaries adapted. Special Forces did not. The institution that had expanded to meet the Global War on Terror (GWOT) demand signal found itself in the post-GWOT world with the same force structure, the same rotation model, the same A-Team advisor construct, and the same unanswered question from 1991.

Too Big to Fail?

Currently, the United States Special Operations Command fields an estimated [70,000](#) personnel. For context, the entire [British Army fields 73,847 regular full-time soldiers](#). Of those 70,000, the largest contingent belongs to USASOC at approximately 36,000. Within that, the largest single element is the Special Forces Regiment. Special Forces did not arrive at that size overnight. The growth was demand driven.

Before September 11th, Army special operations maintained approximately [15,000 active-duty billets](#). By 2022 that number had more than doubled to over 31,000. An additional fourth battalion augmented each Special Forces group. A Special Troops Battalion and Military Intelligence Battalion followed. Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations each added over 1,000 personnel. Army Special Forces now

consists of five active component groups, each commanded by a colonel, and [19 total general officers](#).

The former head of CIA covert operations [understood](#) that [large organizations](#) and large operations [cannot be truly secret](#). Secrecy is a requirement of special operations. A 36,000 Army Special Operations enterprise is not special. It is visible, predictable, and known to our adversaries.

The [SOF Truths](#) the regiment was founded on demand quality over quantity, warn that competent special operations forces cannot be mass produced, and remind us they cannot be created after emergencies occur. The current force violates all three principles.

Paths Not Taken

The institution has been aware of its own dysfunction. In 2013, Lieutenant General Charles Cleveland, then commander of USASOC, published [ARSOF 2022](#), a ten-year transformation roadmap that diagnosed the problem with striking candor. Cleveland acknowledged that the most critical gap in Army special warfare capability existed in the unconventional warfare (UW) mission set, specifically the ability to conduct UW in denied areas for extended periods. He acknowledged that the current force structure, manpower, and equipment were not optimized for the dispersed operational footprint future operations would require.

Cleveland communicated the correction would require a paradigm shift, but that many in the force would resist reorienting away from the force's more publicized role of the past decade. Cleveland diagnosed the disease correctly. He prescribed the cure. The institution proved incapable of taking it. Thirteen years later the structural problems he identified have not changed. They have worsened. ARSOF 2022 was not a vision for the future. It was an indictment of the present, written by the institution's own commander, filed and forgotten.

The harder truth beneath the history of Special Forces operational record across seven decades tells a different story than the force tells itself or the public. The strategic record is why Special Forces must change. It is not a story of American victory. It is a story of American presence: [expensive](#), [persistent](#), and [largely inconclusive](#).

Presence is Not Strategy

I have witnessed the skills and valor of Green Berets first-hand; they are the best of the best and they make everyone around them better. But tactical excellence in service to flawed strategy is not a military asset, it is a tragedy. The campaigns best known for Green Beret heroics; [Vietnam](#), [Afghanistan](#), [Iraq](#),

[Mali](#), and [Niger](#) were all strategic defeats. [El Salvador](#), [Colombia](#), the [Philippines](#), and [Syria](#) saw partial success, but [brutal regimes](#), [narco-terrorists](#), [guerilla war](#), and [chaos](#) remain today.

American Special Forces regularly [deploy to approximately 70 percent of the world's countries](#). In a single year, they conduct joint combined exchange training missions in nearly 90 nations. Green Berets are continuously deployed to every geographic combatant command, meeting a merciless deployment demand. However, a [RAND study found](#) security cooperation correlates with stability improvements primarily in already-stable, democratic states. Correlation was weak or nonexistent in fragile states.

Special Forces units are in constant deployment across every geographic combatant command simultaneously. The [Global Force Management Allocation Plan](#) and its customers have an insatiable appetite for forces. There is always a theater security cooperation event, a joint combined exchange training rotation, a combat train, advise, assist and accompany mission, a counterterrorism task force that needs augmentation. The demand signal never stops. The force never stops answering it.

The only constraints on this cycle are dwell ratios and budget. Dwell ratios exist not to enable transformation but to support retention and prevent combat ineffectiveness, as Iraq circa 2006 and 2007 demonstrated when the force was ground down to the point of institutional dysfunction. Budget cycles constrain the pace but not the direction. Neither constraint creates the conditions for fundamental redesign; they simply regulate the speed at which the force continues doing what it has always done.

The pattern is consistent. Tactics and presence [do not produce strategic outcomes](#). The force was optimized for the former and deployed in hopes of the latter. Special Forces did not evolve their mission to meet a clearly defined joint force need. Instead, it filled the seams. It took assignments no one else wanted, operating in the spaces conventional forces did not prioritize.

Special Forces' Value Proposition Has Been Lost

This is precisely why Special Forces remain an afterthought in operational planning to this day. The joint force does not recognize SF as a critical component to operational success because it never did. The niche that SF occupies was never valued by the institutions who plan and resource war. It was tolerated and marginally useful. But it was never essential to how the joint force conceived of winning. An institution optimized for missions the joint force does not value cannot advocate effectively for its own transformation. It can only wait to be called, do what it is asked, and hope someone notices.

This is the institutional trap. An organization in constant deployment cannot conduct deliberate experimentation, honest assessment, and radical redesign transformation requires. The self-

perpetuating Global Force Management process becomes the strategy rather than serving it. The institution optimizes for presence rather than capability. Cleveland saw this trap, but the Special Forces institution was not ready to change.

Process and tradition have consumed the force while the operational environment evolved into a new world. Special Forces cannot meet the demands of the new environment. They have insufficient capability to survive in hyper-contested digital environments, deliver multidomain effects at all levels, and operate with genuine cultural fluency inside the world's most non-permissive spaces. It is time to bury the beret and build what comes next.

Ned Marsh is a United States Army Special Forces Colonel (R); he led elite American military units over 26 years. Educated and experienced in irregular warfare, his purpose now is leadership and guiding organizations into the future by challenging assumptions and embracing uncertainty.

The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, Princeton University's Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, the Modern War Institute at West Point, Department of the Army, Department of War, or the United States Government.

Main image is of Special Forces soldiers donning their Green Berets, taken from [DVIDS](#).

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