

The spec ops stretch

Expansion plans leave many in Army Special Forces uneasy

BY SEAN D. NAYLOR

The impending expansion of Army special operations forces laid out in this year's Quadrennial Defense Review is spreading waves of unease throughout the Special Forces community.

The 10,000 soldiers in the Army's five active and two National Guard Special Forces groups make up the largest component of the U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) and are the U.S.' pre-eminent exponents of unconventional warfare (working with guerrilla groups to overthrow an enemy regime) and foreign internal defense (training friendly governments to defend themselves against insurgencies). But many SF officers feel that U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) has left them in the dark about how it plans to deliver on the QDR's promise to expand the number of SF battalions by a third over the next several years. They are deeply concerned that, despite the generals' protestations to the contrary, a rushed expansion of Army special operations forces will result in an SF contingent that, while bigger on paper, will contain half-filled units manned by troops who are less mature, less experienced and less skilled in languages and foreign cultures than SF soldiers traditionally have been.

Ultimately, active and retired Special Forces officers said, any attempt to expand Army special operations without a corresponding increase in the size of the regular Army from which the special ops units recruit is doomed to failure and risks pushing Special Forces away from its unconventional warfare and foreign internal defense missions toward the direct-action role that is already the specialty of the Rangers, Delta Force and Navy SEALs.

The 2006 QDR, released in February, states that starting in fiscal 2007, the number of SF battalions will increase by a third, as part of an overall 15 percent increase in U.S. special operations forces. The publicly released version of the QDR mentions neither the Army's 75th Ranger Regiment nor "special mission units" (SMUs) such as the Navy's SEAL Team 6, the Army's 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment - Delta (more commonly referred to as Delta Force) and a third unit based on the East Coast that specializes in "operational preparation of the battlefield." However, in June 29 testimony to the House Armed Services Committee's subcommittee on terrorism, unconventional threats and capabilities, Michael Vickers said, "The number of special mission unit squadrons will be increased by one-third" and a "fourth company will be stood up within each Ranger battalion, increasing Ranger operational capacity by one-third." Vickers, the director of strategic studies at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, a Washington think tank, is a former Special Forces officer who consults with the Pentagon on special operations issues.

A recurring complaint among Army special operators is that the initiative to expand their force structure was dreamed up by Defense Department civilians and foisted upon the special operations community with minimal input from special operations leaders. Thomas O'Connell, the assistant secretary of defense for special operations and low-intensity conflict, whose office is supposed to craft special operations policy, was cut out of the QDR decision-making, while U.S. Special Operations Command, the higher headquarters for U.S. Army Special Operations Command, had only "indirect" input to the document, according to a Pentagon source. The result, the source said, was that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his principal deputy undersecretary for policy, Ryan Henry, allowed themselves to be influenced by civilians whose approach to SOF expansion was, "Yeah, that's what's needed, it can be done — just snap your fingers."

When senior special operations leaders understood how quickly their Pentagon bosses wanted to expand the spec ops force structure, there was immediate concern. "You can't get there from here" — that was the overriding comment in SOCOM headquarters when this thing came forward," said a recently retired Army special operations general.

But few in uniform put up any significant protest, spec ops sources said. "There's political pressure to say 'Hey, they gave us money to do this, and we're going to do this,' because all the major generals want to be lieutenant generals, and the all lieutenant generals want to be full generals, so they'll make it happen regardless of the pain, regardless of whether or not it makes sense," a retired SF colonel said. "Unfortunately, success [for special operations generals] is defined by budget and force structure increases and not battlefield effects," an active-duty SF officer said.

COMPETING FOR PEOPLE

By planning for all the Army's combat-oriented ground special operations forces — Rangers, Special Forces and the special mission units — to grow their operational capacity by a third roughly simultaneously, the QDR all but guarantees a fierce competition for personnel among the different types of units, according to special ops sources. Special Forces recruits aggressively from the Rangers, while each year some of the best Ranger and SF noncommissioned officers and officers volunteer for the Army special mission units, which recruit most of their men from the two organizations. Meanwhile, all three types of units are competing for hard-charging individuals from the regular Army.

Finding the men for the three additional Ranger companies (the first of which will be ready to start training in October 2007, according to USASOC spokesman Lt. Col. Tim Nye) will not be a challenge, special ops sources said. "That they can do easily," said the recently retired Army special operations general.

Andy Feickert, a retired Army officer who covers special operations forces for the Congressional Research Service, and who served in Special Forces in the 1980s, agreed. "The Rangers could be a little easier to expand [than SF], because if you want to put an additional Ranger company in a Ranger battalion, yeah, you've got to come up with the NCOs and officers. Those will primarily come out of your light infantry and airborne units, but there's probably a fair number of kids right out of high school that want to join [the Army] for Rangers," he said.

"Initially, [each] company will be filled internally by on-hand personnel," Nye wrote in an e-mailed response to questions. (USASOC refused permission for interviews with any of its commanders or subject-matter experts and provided only e-mailed answers to questions late in the writing process.) "All other replacements will be centrally managed by the Regimental Headquarters. Battalions will be filled based on identified manning shortfalls."

On the other hand, the creation of an additional five active-duty SF battalions might trouble the Rangers. "The Ranger Regiment bitches when the SF recruiters come down," the recently retired general said.

Because each special mission unit squadron contains only 75 to 85 troops, the Army SMUs — which are some of the most glamorous and highly resourced organizations in the military — should also be able to fill their additional squadrons without too much hassle.

But expanding active-duty Special Forces by five battalions — roughly 1,000 soldiers — will prove an onerous and potentially insurmountable challenge, many special operations sources said. "At the battalion level, there's a lot of concern," said an SF officer with recent Iraq experience.

Plans call for one battalion to be added annually for five years, beginning in fiscal 2008, Nye said. The first will go to 5th Group, followed by 3rd Group, 1st Group, 7th Group and 10th Group.

The directive to add a battalion to each group forced Army Special Forces Command, which is subordinate to USASOC, to scrap its own plan for expansion. Anticipating a higher demand for Special Forces in the wake of the 2002 overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, in 2004 Special Forces Command evaluated multiple courses of action on how to expand the force structure, according to an SF field-grade officer familiar with the deliberations. Rejecting a proposal to add a battalion to each group, the command opted instead to expand each group by a single company, a plan that has gone by the wayside in the wake of the QDR.

"What [the Office of the Secretary of Defense] and SOCom have pushed down on Special Forces is 'You've got to come up with two more companies per group than you had planned for,'" the officer said.

MYSTERY PLAN

Each active-duty SF group specializes in the languages and cultures of a particular region — 1st Group in East Asia; 3rd Group in Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia; 5th Group in the Middle East and Central Asia; 7th Group in South America; and 10th Group in Europe. With the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan making the demand for Special Forces clearly highest in the Central Command region, it is unclear why USASOC is planning to spread the additional SF resources equally around the five active-duty groups. (The two National Guard groups — 19th and 20th — will also get an extra 500 troops each.)

Nye did not directly answer a question about why SOCom and USASOC did not add to or clone 5th Group at the expense of SF groups that focus on other parts of the world. "We must continue to build the force proportionately so we are trained and equipped with skilled Soldiers who possess pertinent skills to conduct operations worldwide, and across the USSOCOM core functions," he wrote.

But the recently retired Army special ops general attributed the decision to flag-officer "politics." When it became clear that Congress and the administration were willing to expand active-duty Special Forces by five battalions, each regional combatant commander wanted his share of the "largesse," he said.

That approach seems to run counter to lessons learned on the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan, where the high operational tempo and the limited number of 5th and 3rd Group battalions has forced U.S. Special Operations Command to deploy battalions from the other groups out of their area of expertise to plug the gaps. "Lesson number one [from Iraq and Afghanistan] is you have to have language and cultural skills," Feickert said.

Kalev Sepp, a retired SF lieutenant colonel who teaches at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif., expressed confusion as to why additional SF resources were being spread equally across all groups. "This is baffling to me," he said. "They should just decide to make the investment over the next 10 years, and say the Middle East is where the problem is, and on the face of it study Pashto, Dari and Arabic, primarily, and then minimize the other efforts and weight 5th Group."

Exactly how SOCom and USASOC intend to accomplish the expansion of Army special operations forces remains shrouded in mystery for many SF officers and others with a professional interest in the subject. Feickert, the Congressional Research Service SOF expert, said he had seen no timeline for the expansion. One SF officer, asked about the expansion, said he had no idea how USASOC was planning to accomplish it. "If you find out what the plan is, please let us know," he told a journalist.

In the absence of clear information from USASOC, rumors are swirling in the SF officer community. An SF field-grade officer said he had been told that the entire expansion was to be completed within three years.

"What I was told is not all groups are going to get an additional battalion," said another SF field grade officer.

Several SF officers said that any plan to rapidly expand the groups would run directly counter to the community's revered "SOF Truths":

- **Quality is better than quantity.**
- **Special operations forces cannot be mass produced.**
- **Competent special operations forces cannot be created after emergencies occur.**
- **Humans are more important than hardware.**

Nye, the USASOC spokesman, said that his command continued to adhere to the SOF Truths.

Active-duty and retired SF officers also said that if new SF troops become available, Special Forces Command's first order of business should be to fill the force structure it has now, before standing up any new battalions. An SF group consists of three (soon to be four) SF battalions,

each with three companies, which each have six operational detachment alphas, otherwise known as ODAs or A-teams.

"The average active-duty fill across the five SF groups is above 100 percent," Nye wrote. "This is an upward trend... due primarily to the increased production [of SF soldiers by the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, Fort Bragg, N.C.] in preparation for the fielding of the fourth battalions across the command." Each A-team is supposed to have 12 SF soldiers. "Most ODAs have 10 to 12 members," Nye added.

But this description of an SF force that is comfortably full was not consistent with the experiences of many SF soldiers interviewed for this article. "Many ODAs show up as full ODAs on graphics, but are actually made up of as few as 6-8 SF guys," wrote an SF officer in an e-mail forwarded to AFJ. Nine-man A-teams are the average in 3rd, 5th and 7th Groups, said a Special Forces field grade officer. "When I was in Iraq, my company was at 55 percent strength," said another SF soldier. "We had to stand down three teams."

With 5th Group scheduled to add a battalion beginning in summer 2007, and with little guidance coming from USASOC, the group's command group — presently deployed to Iraq — has established a working group to figure out how to make it happen, said a Special Forces source familiar with the group's plans. "There's so much concern over this that Group has started leaning forward in the foxhole and thinking 'how are we going to do this?'" he said. "It's a significant emotional event."

He said at least three possible courses of action are being discussed:

- Forming the new battalion from individual augmentees culled from the rest of the group. This has two obvious downsides: It would leave other teams short of personnel, and every team and company headquarters in the new battalion would be created from scratch, meaning there would be no unit cohesion.
- Taking "a couple of teams from every company" in the three battalions and forming them into the fourth battalion, the source said. The disadvantage is that "the fourth battalion would be weak at the company and battalion level."
- Taking "a couple" of the group's nine companies and building the fourth battalion around them. A key advantage here is that no equipment would have to be transferred, because property books are maintained at the company level, the source said.

"My sense is that that is what the group is leaning toward," he added, describing the choice as "the best option of a lot of not-good options."

Each SF battalion has about 400 soldiers, but because many of the positions in an SF group do not require an SF-qualified soldier to fill them, the consensus in the SF community is that adding five active-duty battalions will require the JFK Center and School, which runs the SF Qualification, or "Q" Course, to produce an additional 1,000 SF soldiers over what it would normally be expected to add to the force.

Official statements indicate that by drastically ramping up the number of candidates admitted into the Q Course and compressing the course length for most candidates from 63 weeks to 48 weeks, USASOC is optimistic that it can produce enough new SF soldiers to meet requirements. In 2005 the Q Course graduated 791 enlisted SF soldiers, according to Nye, compared with 282 in 2001. The goal from now on is to graduate a minimum of 750 enlisted SF soldiers per year.

THE NCO CATCH-22

But active and retired SF officers had several concerns about this approach. Expanding the number of students means expanding the cadre of SF NCOs who run the course, they said. But the only place to find experienced SF NCOs is the groups, so USASOC finds itself in the ironic position of pulling some of its best NCOs away from the groups in an effort to expand the groups. "It's Catch-22," said an SF lieutenant colonel. "You can't get the E-8s and E-7s back to the schoolhouse because we don't have the numbers in the field." Feickert suggested that one way USASOC might mitigate this would be to contract with retired SF NCOs to serve as classroom instructors in the Q Course.

But according to Nye's written comments, these concerns are ill-founded.

"Instructor positions have not increased drastically or instantaneously because we did not need to do that," he wrote. Without directly answering a question about whether more private contractors would be hired to fill positions previously held by active-duty SF NCOs, Nye continued: "The composition of our cadre is not as important to understand as the fact that [the JFK Center and School] has been well postured and fully resourced to meet the growth of SOF in all areas. Before the growth for SF was announced, we were already on a path to increase our production of SF soldiers to meet current authorizations and fill all ODAs. Our projections show that if we can maintain this momentum and resource this requirement for the long term, we can in fact achieve the growth ... without any significant increase in the training cadre that was not already planned."

A constant refrain of senior uniformed leaders in USASOC and SOCom over the past few years has been that any growth in Special Forces will not come at the expense of the traditionally high standards required to pass the Q Course. But there is widespread concern among SF NCOs, officers and retirees that the USASOC chain of command is already pressuring the cadre to lower standards.

"Many fear ... that active-duty enlisted is a numbers game ... and that standards are at risk of dropping [because] of pressure for numbers from the top," wrote an SF officer in an e-mail forwarded to AFJ.

"The cadre is already saying 'They're lowering the requirements, guys are getting through who shouldn't be getting through,'" said the recently retired Army special operations general.

"The expansion is not going to happen without lowering standards," said a field-grade SF officer, who added that this was not just his opinion, but the "overwhelming view" of his peers.

The Pentagon source said the message he hears from "those guys at the colonel and below level" at USASOC and SF Command was, "There's pressure to lower the standards, [but] we don't want to do it." However, the Pentagon source added, it was worth asking the question, "Are these [changes] really lowering the standards, or are these just a modification of standards that may not have really been relevant to getting the right person anyway?"

The change to the Q Course that prompts some of the bitterest criticism is the revamped language program. Previously, SF candidates graduated from the Q Course and received their coveted Green Beret before taking an immersion-style language course at Fort Bragg. The length of the course varied between four and six months, based on the difficulty of the language. Now the language instruction is divided into segments throughout the course, with students required to do some study at home. Those studying the most difficult languages, such as Arabic, receive 18 weeks of instruction, divided into two two-week blocks and one 14-week block. Students of easier languages get 12 weeks of instruction.

SF officers, active and retired, lit into the change. "That's not the way to do business," said the field grade officer with recent Iraq experience. "It definitely gives me cause for concern."

"It looks good to a person who doesn't teach languages ... but it doesn't work well in reality," a retired SF colonel said. One problem with the new system is that it is harder to find qualified language instructors, because much of the work is essentially part time, he added. "People aren't going to sit around waiting for a job where you're working three days every two weeks, and one of those days happens to be a Saturday," he said. "It's just not going to happen."

Not everyone in the SF community agreed. Feickert said the changes would "absolutely" improve Q Course graduates' language skills.

The only reason USASOC can even think of expanding the number of SF battalions by a third is the SF Initial Accession Program, also known as the 18 X-ray program, which recruits would-be SF soldiers straight out of the civilian world, rather than from elsewhere in the Army. USASOC began the program in 2002 out of necessity. "The 18 X-ray program was an acknowledgment that we could no longer staff Special Forces by just going to Army bases and getting people to try out," said the recently retired Army special operations general.

In fiscal 2005, 375 of the 791 active-duty enlisted graduates of the Q Course were products of the 18 X-ray program. This year the equivalent numbers were about 280 out of 750, according to Nye, who noted that USASOC had reduced the 18 X-ray recruiting goal for 2006 and again for 2007.

Many SF soldiers were skeptical when the program was initiated, but some have come around, convinced that the influx of new blood into the force is worth the risk, so long as it is carefully managed.

"I was originally not a fan of the 18 X-ray program," said the field-grade officer with recent Iraq experience. "I thought it would be one of the worst things that could happen to us. In retrospect, that was too negative." The 18 X-ray graduates added a youthful vitality to A-teams whose more senior soldiers were in danger of becoming physically worn down and mentally jaded, he said. "It's not the best situation, but there's no other way to bring up your numbers," he said.

However, the picture was not entirely rosy. "There have been some catastrophic failures where a lack of experience has led to bad things," he said.

The 18 X-ray graduates' lack of experience, and the way the program has been vastly expanded, means some in the SF community have yet to be convinced. The program was intended to produce a trickle of exceptional "off the street" talent into the force, but the ever-increasing demand for SF soldiers has turned that trickle into a flood, the retired SF colonel said. To achieve the goal of enlisted 750 Q Course graduates per year, USASOC figures it has to put about 2,800 soldiers into the course annually. Of those, about 1,000, or about 36 percent, are 18 X-rays. "The X-ray program is succeeding beyond their wildest expectations," said the recently retired special operations general.

But as more 18 X-rays show up on A-teams, they lower the level of maturity and experience of the SF force in the field. A field grade SF officer who said he had communicated with "scores" of SF soldiers on this issue said the consensus of opinion was the X-rays "were physically fit, their language skills were average, but there were concerns that they didn't have the tactical experience on a par with a typical prior service military guy." He said that as experienced SF NCOs left the force in large numbers to work for private security firms, they are being replaced by 18 X-rays, which he described as "not a one-for-one trade."

"One of the big [advantages] that Special Forces brings over SEALs and Rangers is maturity, and maturity is tied to age," the field-grade SF officer said. By recruiting younger, less mature soldiers, and then downgrading the importance of cultural and language skills, he said, it was worth asking: "Are you replicating SEALs, [but with people] who can't swim as well?"

SF officers worry that U.S. Special Operations Command and USASOC — which are dominated by generals and admirals who forged their careers in the special mission units, the Rangers and the Army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, which fall under Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) — are pushing all special operations forces, including SF, toward more of a direct-action approach, even as those senior leaders protest that is not the case. Exhibit A for the aggrieved SF officers is what they regard as the unnecessary expansion of all JSOC elements.

"How many JSOC officers did it take to determine [that] what was needed was a larger JSOC?" wrote an SF officer in an e-mail forwarded to AFJ.

JSOC's principal mission in Iraq and Afghanistan is to hunt down and kill or capture "high value" enemy individuals such as Osama bin Laden and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. But in Iraq, the proliferating JSOC task forces also go after many lesser individuals in al-Qaida in Iraq's foreign-fighter network.

"These units have expanded who and what they are going after to keep themselves busy," wrote another SF officer in an e-mail forwarded to AFJ. "Maybe a better strategy would be to rein in their mission creep and use the money and other assets to support the expansion of White [i.e. non-special mission unit] SOF."

Several SF sources said that while the SMUs and other JSOC assets were tactically superb, their strategic impact was negligible. "The insurgents in both areas are not rallying around these high-profile [enemy] leaders," the SF officer wrote. "Sure, the leaders are moral figureheads, but the

insurgents rally around the idea. Look at the data from when key leaders were captured or killed in either area. Sometimes (though not always), you will see a drop in activity. But it comes right back after only a short period. These units have been killing and capturing guys for five [years in Afghanistan] and three-and-a-half years [in Iraq]. What are the results?"

The Pentagon source agreed that when taken together, the move to expand SF quickly, the surge in 18 X-ray recruits, the expansion of the Rangers, the 160th and the special mission units, and the apparent willingness to have SF battalions operate outside their geographic areas of specialization seemed to indicate that SOCom continued to prioritize direct action over unconventional warfare.

"The folks in Special Forces and USASOC are very attuned to that, and they don't like it," he said. "SOCom wants to tell you that is not happening. I've heard [SOCom commander Gen. Bryan] 'Doug' Brown get up and talk ad infinitum about the need for the balance, and that it's not all about the SMUs, but I know clearly the SecDef doesn't understand anything other than direct action."

Although special operations leaders talk of fighting a global counterinsurgency, SOCom's actions have persuaded many SF officers that it is more interested in little more than killing and capturing enemy leaders. "SOCom has embraced the global manhunt," said a field-grade SF officer, who said he was relaying the views of the overwhelming majority of his peers. "SOCom will continue to drift toward the global manhunt because they have no other option. It's the only thing they can do."

The retired SF colonel said he spoke regularly with field-grade and general officers still in uniform about the expansion of Special Forces. "The general feeling is that we cannot increase the number of [SF] soldiers unless we increase the size of the Army," he said. Other special ops sources agreed.

The recently retired Army special operations general was one of many interviewed for this article who expressed skepticism that the QDR's vision could be realized.

"I don't think you can get there from here," he said, adding that Special Forces is paying the price for SOCom's eagerness to take the resources offered by Congress. The attitude of those in charge at SOCom at the time was "We'll take it and worry about the details later," the retired general said. "Now we're at the details stage, and some poor group commander is going to have to take a brick and make it fly."