



## Special Operations Forces

**Point #1** Special Operations Forces are unique not only in their use of force, but because of their training in languages, cultures, and regional expertise.

**Point #2** Special Operations Forces are not a substitute for conventional forces, but a necessary adjunct to regular military capabilities.

**Point #3** Special Operations Forces are highly-trained military personnel that engage in difficult, often secret, missions.

**Special Operations Forces (SOF)** encompass the use of small units in direct or indirect military actions focused on strategic or operational objectives. They require elite teams with highly capable personnel, as well as specialized training and equipment that exceeds the routine capabilities of conventional military forces. SOF missions are characterized by certain attributes that distinguish them from conventional operations. These operations are politically sensitive missions, where only the best equipped and most proficient forces can be deployed to avoid detection and possible mission failure that can result in damage to U.S. prestige and interests. U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) oversees the training, doctrine, and equipping of all U.S. SOF units.

### Characteristics of Special Operations Forces

SOF are unique because they are trained with a broad and unique range of capabilities for specialized missions. What also makes SOF “special” is their linguistic proficiency, cultural expertise, and area familiarization. SOF are not a substitute for conventional forces, but a necessary adjunct to existing conventional capabilities. The demands of Special Operations require forces with attributes that distinguish them from conventional forces:

SOF personnel undergo careful selection processes and mission-specific training beyond basic military skills. Because the training process is rigorous and time-consuming, and because selection criteria are extremely demanding, it is difficult to quickly expand personnel or capabilities.



SOF personnel maintain a high level of expertise in more than one military specialty. Selected SOF are oriented for employment in specific regions of the world (such as the Middle East), while cross cultural communications skills are a routine part of training.

SOF operations are frequently classified in order to ensure mission success. Much of the equipment used by SOF has been designed or modified to meet specific operational requirements.

SOF maintain a very high level of pre-conflict readiness, and are often in the first echelon of any commitment of U.S. forces.

Special Operations Forces (SOF) are not the same as Special Forces (SF); Special Forces (a.k.s. “Green Berets”) are a specific type of SOF unit that focuses on Unconventional Warfare (UW) operations.



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## Special Operations Principal Missions

Nine activities have been designated as Special Operations Principal Missions. These are: Direct Action (DA), Counter Terrorism (CT), Foreign Internal Defense (FID), Unconventional Warfare (UW), Special Reconnaissance (SR), Psychological Operations (PSYOP), Civil Affairs (CA), Information Operations (IO), and Counterproliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (CP). SOF are organized, trained, and equipped specifically to accomplish these nine tasks.



**Direct Action (DA):** DA operations are short duration strikes and other small scale offensive operations principally undertaken by SOF to seize, destroy, capture, recover, or inflict damage on designated personnel or material.

**Counter Terrorism (CT):** CT is a highly specialized, resource-intensive mission which includes recovery of hostages or sensitive material from terrorist organizations, attack of terrorist infrastructure, and reduction of vulnerability to terrorism.

**Information Operations (IO):** IO refers to actions taken to affect adversary information and information systems while defending one's own information and information systems.

**Foreign Internal Defense (FID):** FID is participation by civilian and military agencies of a government in any of the action programs taken by another government to free and protect its society from subversion, lawlessness, and insurgency. SOF's primary contribution in this interagency activity is to organize, train, advise, and assist host nation military and paramilitary forces.

**Unconventional Warfare (UW):** UW includes guerrilla warfare, subversion, sabotage, intelligence activities, evasion and escape, and other activities of a low visibility, covert, or clandestine nature. When UW is conducted independently during conflict or war, its primary focus is on political and psychological objectives.

**Special Reconnaissance (SR):** SOF conduct a wide variety of information gathering activities of strategic or operational significance. SR complements national and theater intelligence collection systems by obtaining specific, well-defined, and time-sensitive information when other systems are constrained by weather, terrain-masking, hostile countermeasures, or conflicting priorities.

**Psychological Operations (PSYOPs):** PSYOPs induces or reinforces foreign attitudes and behaviors favorable to the originator's objectives. This is done by conducting planned operations to convey selected information to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, 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 and the civilian population in an area of operation. Some of the most frequently deployed SOF forces are Civil Affairs units, most of which (90%) are in the reserves.

**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).



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## Organization of Special Operations Forces

Special Forces are organized within each military branch, and in a joint “Special Operations Command” that ensures interoperability and develops joint tasks across branches. The term “Special Operations Forces” indicates a variety of different specialized forces within each military branch. They include the following:

**Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF):** consist of Special Forces (Green Berets), Ranger, Special Operations Aviation, Psychological Operations, Civil Affairs, as well as Signal and Combat Service Support units. Army Special Operations Command trains, equips, deploys and sustains Army special-operations forces for worldwide special operations supporting regional combatant commanders.

**Naval Special Warfare (NSW):** the major operational components of Naval Special Warfare Command include Naval Special Warfare Groups ONE and THREE in San Diego, CA, and Naval Special Warfare Groups TWO and FOUR in Norfolk, VA. These components deploy SEAL Teams, SEAL Delivery Vehicle Teams, and Special Boat Teams world wide to meet the training, exercise, contingency and wartime requirements of theater commanders.



**Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC):** Including Pararescuers, AFSOC is America’s specialized air power. AFSOC’s core tasks have been grouped into four mission areas: forward presence and engagement, information operations, precision employment and strike, and special operations forces mobility.

**Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC):** As the U.S. Marine Corps component of US-SOCOM, MARSOC trains, organizes, equips and, when directed, deploys task organized, scaleable, and responsive U.S. Marine Corps special operations forces worldwide in support of combatant commanders and other agencies.

**Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC):** Joint Special Operations Command is a joint headquarters designed to study special operations requirements and techniques; ensure interoperability and equipment standardization; plan and conduct joint special operations exercises and training; and develop joint special operations tactics.

**Joint Special Operations University (JSOU):** Joint Special Operations University’s primary purpose is to teach the integrated and synergistic application of these service SOF functions in accordance with joint special operations doctrine and to ensure the future leaders of SOF understand the joint employment of this potent force to satisfy operational and strategic objectives.



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## Special Operations Forces: Sources

US Special Operations Command: Official Website.

“Introduction to Special Operations,” Global Special Operations.

“Special Operations Center,” Military.com.

“Special Operations Forces,” Center for International Policy .

