

# THE SPECIAL FORCES OPERATOR

By Charles H. Briscoe

1959



In the last fifteen to twenty years, the practice of calling a Special Forces (SF) soldier an 'operator' has caused considerable rancor within Army special mission units (SMU), the original of which adopted that appellation in the late 1970s. Today, all U.S. military service special operations forces and their higher headquarters apply that moniker to their sea, land, and air warfighters. Even staff personnel adopt that term for themselves. In the warfighter units this distinction clearly delineates and separates staff and support personnel from those assessed to undergo a mentally and physically tough selection course. Those that successfully achieve the rigorous standards must satisfy a leaders' board to qualify for advanced training that could lead to operational assignments. In some SMUs psychological, physical, and mental assessments and re-evaluations are constant, hence the phrase, 'Selection is an ongoing process.' Regardless of the rigor applied by Special Operations Forces (SOF) elements, feelings of rancor in the 'ranks' of Army SOF towards the popular use of 'operator' are unwarranted.

SF did not misappropriate the appellation. Unbeknownst to most members of the ARSOF community, that moniker was adopted by Special Forces in the mid to late 1950s. SF-qualified officers and enlisted soldiers voluntarily

subscribed to the provisions of the 'Code of the Special Forces Operator' and pledged themselves to its tenets by witnessed signature.

This document, signed by SF-qualified Infantry Captain (CPT) Albert V. 'Jake' Clement, an FA Team Leader [an Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) today] in 1<sup>st</sup> Company, 77<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group (SFG), and witnessed by John J. Hanretty on 2 April 1959, substantiates original ownership. According to Provision 10 of the SF Operator Code, the signed certificate was to be filed in one's Official Military Personnel Records (OMPR). The original was found in the OMPR of retired Major (MAJ) 'Jake' Clement, second-in-command of the 10<sup>th</sup> SFG Congo Rescue Mission in 1960.<sup>1</sup>

Cross-referencing sources is a standard practice of the USASOC History Office. It is critical to verify information in interviews, memoirs, and secondary source works. Primary documentation provides official, factual information to reinforce statements and/or disprove claims. Credibility is key to USASOC historical publications 'standing the test of time.' And, sometimes official records have surprises like the Special Forces Operator Code. It reinforced 'silent professionalism.' This document ought to stir memories of early SF veterans and reduce the angst among serving 'special operators.' †

**ENDNOTE:** 1 Retired MAJ Albert Valentine 'Jake' Clement, Official Military Personnel Record (OMPR), National Personnel Records Center, St. Louis, MO.



## CODE FOR THE SPECIAL FORCES OPERATOR

I, ALBERT V. CLEMENT, Captain, a member of the US Army Special Forces, certify that:

1. I volunteered for duty with Special Forces, fully realizing that Special Forces teams will be deployed immediately on the outbreak of hostilities deep behind enemy lines to organize, train, and exploit guerrilla forces and to perform other missions as directed in the service of my country. I fully realize the hazards involved.

2. I know, as a member of the team, I must keep myself mentally and physically fit at all times and shoulder my full share of the tasks required of my team.

3. Once committed behind enemy lines, I will conduct myself at all times in such a way as to bring honor to my team, service and country.

4. I am aware that the mission of my team must be accomplished against all odds.

5. I will live up to the "Code of Conduct" for the American Fighting Man.

6. I realize it is my responsibility as a Special Forces Operator to undergo more intense and more rugged training than is required of the average soldier of the United States Army.

7. I understand that to carry out my mission, language and specialist training are required, and that attendance at such schools will be regarded as an opportunity for personal development. I will gladly accept such assignments and will apply myself to achieving the maximum instruction therefrom.

8. I understand that failure to achieve satisfactory progress in training, demonstration of poor judgement, immaturity or misconduct of such nature as to bring discredit on myself or Special Forces, will be proper cause for immediate reassignment and a permanent bar from future duty with the Special Forces.

9. It is my intention to remain in the Special Forces for a minimum of six years.

10. I have voluntarily subscribed to the provisions of this document and am aware that it will be made a part of my permanent records.

Ft Bragg, N.C.  
(EXECUTED AT)

Albert V. Clement Capt USF  
(NAME)  
John J. Hanretty  
(OPERATIONAL LEADER-WITNESS)  
2 April 59  
(DATE)