

Factors Affecting ARSOF Preparation for Operation Iraqi Freedom

by Charles H. Briscoe

THE Army special operations forces (ARSOF) missions and supporting roles during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF) are best understood in context of the U.S.'s prior commitments to combating terrorism worldwide. After the major terrorist attacks on New York and Washington DC on 11 September 2001, President George W. Bush declared a Global War on Terrorism (GWOT).¹

Intelligence sources revealed that the 9/11 terrorist attacks on America had been organized, funded, and directed by Osama bin Laden, the leader of the international terrorist organization al-Qaeda. When the radical Muslim Taliban government of Afghanistan refused to surrender bin Laden, to whom they had granted asylum, the collapse of that regime and destruc-

tion of al-Qaeda forces therein became the mission of U.S.-led coalition military forces. Army special operations forces began offensive operations in Afghanistan in November 2001, launching America's first GWOT campaign: Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF).

While U.S. military efforts primarily focused on Afghanistan, other regional combatant commands found themselves involved in GWOT operations. Fifth Special Forces Group (SFG) led Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force (CJSOTF)-North (Task Force

Dagger) in prosecuting OEF in Afghanistan for U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM). U.S. European Command (EUCOM), already committed with NATO in the Balkans, focused on the "Horn of Africa" Muslim countries, and ongoing operations in Bosnia and Kosovo.

The U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) concentrated on the criminal/terrorist Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), which was responsible for multiple kidnappings for ransom of

U.S. citizens in the Philippines. ASG terrorist activities were linked to Libyan leader Mu'ammar Qaddafi, as well as to Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia, the leader of which was Osama bin Laden's brother-in-law.

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02. First SFG assumed major training and advisory roles, helping the Philippine military combat the ASG on Basilan Island and rescue the Burnhams on Mindanao.² A joint U.S. Navy-Marine Corps Engineer Task Group also supported Humanitarian/Security Assistance (H/SA) programs in the conflicted areas.³

By the time these events played out in the Philippines, CJSOTF-North, led by 5th SFG teams and lacking conventional forces, had helped bring about the collapse of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Estab-

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In spite of these commitments in Afghanistan and around the world, Army planners looked ahead and developed plans to deal with other possible threats. Well before President Bush declared the end of combat operations in Afghanistan, CENTCOM and Special Operations Command-Central Command (SOCCENT) had already begun planning in Tampa, Florida, for offensive operations to topple the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq.⁴

CENTCOM's primary war plan since the 1991 Gulf War was named Operations Plan (OPLAN) 1003. OPLAN 1003 was essentially Operation DESERT STORM II, and called for a combined U.S. defense of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia against an Iraqi attack. Since OPLAN 1003 had not been updated since 1998, CENTCOM planners worked several variants allowing the commanding general flexibility.⁵

The final "variant" of the OPLAN, 1003V (pronounced "Ten-O-Three Victor" by the military) was a "middle-of-the road" option, between the original 1003 Generated Start and the "flow-and-go" football play of Running Start. Sufficient combat power would be pre-positioned forward to fulfill the plan's objectives. Then, as forward staging areas emptied, more conventional forces would flow in to "backstop" initial force packages. Even as the OPLAN underwent debate and revision, the SOF role remained consistent.⁶

Initial SOCCENT planning was quite rudimentary because, in accordance with a strict security regimen, only OPLAN 1003 force-listed elements were invited to send unit planners. The CENTCOM-oriented 5th SFG played a significant role in OPLAN 1003, but the conventional Army headquarters assuming command of Afghanistan was reluctant to release ARSOF forces. Third SFG was released from its EUCOM "Horn of Africa" mission in

order to relieve 5th SFG in Afghanistan, thereby freeing 5th SFG to assume the Iraq mission. Third SFG assumed the Afghanistan mission as the unconventional warfare (UW) campaign in Afghanistan was replaced by a counterinsurgency mission against remaining Taliban and al-Qaeda elements and their key leaders who escaped capture or death, namely Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden. The 5th SFG left equipment for 3rd SFG to use, including organic military and captured civilian vehicles, as well as mounted heavy weapon systems.

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the Army, the U.S. Army Reserve (USAR), the National Guard Bureau and several state Adjutants General over SOF Army National Guard (ARNG) units faced major resourcing challenges. Money could not solve all the equipment, munitions, and personnel problems in the time allotted to prepare for the next war. The industrial war base of America had severely eroded since Operation DESERT STORM in 1991, and weak commercial competition for individual high-tech combat equipment (night vision goggles, secure radios, satellite communications, body armor) critical to SOF personnel further

delayed deliveries to military units. U.S. National Security Agency (NSA) controls on satellite friendly force trackers, and limited access to U.S. classified materials and secure

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computer systems further complicated arrangements for allied support. All the above were across-the-board needs based on active Army, USAR, and ARNG support

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to Afghanistan, the Philippines, and potentially Iraq.

In order to provide adequate ARSOF support to current and future campaigns, vehicles, aircraft, and heavy weapons had to be replaced; equipment refurbished; critical maintenance checks accomplished; mission support adjusted to the realities of current operations; and personnel shortfalls corrected. The task of preparing 5th SFG alone for the next fight was tremendous. “The 5th had to ‘recock’ for 1003V,” stated 5th SFG’s commander, Colonel (COL) John Mulholland.⁷ Specifically, 5th SFG had to be refitted with vehicles and heavy weapons.

On the command level, the harsh weather and environment of Uzbekistan and Afghanistan had significantly reduced the life span of 5th SFG’s computer systems, and its radios needed extensive maintenance. Adding to the supply challenge, environmental and combat losses of MH-47E helicopters in Afghanistan and the Philippines required these vital ARSOF air assets to be micromanaged. “The 5th Group refit costs—amounting to almost \$300 million—caused USSOCOM to do major funding reprioritization. Time became an enemy. New equipment—radios as well as computers, weapons, and vehicles—were procured and fielded to allow the 5th SFG soldiers to train before being deployed into combat again. Thus, the money flow—slow or fast—impacted readiness for combat,” stated COL Patrick Higgins, J3, SOCCENT.⁸

Highly trained personnel are the most important assets in Army SOF, and the deficit in their availability could not be offset by Army “Stop-Loss” declarations, major recruiting efforts, and shortened programs of instruction (POI). This proved especially true for Civil Affairs (CA) and Psychological Operations (PSYOP) training for Army Reservists. OEF revealed the true readiness of USAR and ARNG units, and a grossly antiquated mobilization system. The two-year mobilizations of Army Reserve and National Guard personnel

and units to support ARSOF in OEF-Afghanistan had been plagued with problems. OEF had placed serious demands on ARNG Special Forces, and USAR Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations units whose operational readiness standard—personnel and equipment—had been maintained at peacetime levels for almost thirty years. In addition, by the time planning for OIF began, those activated personnel and units were entering their second year of mobilization.

The mobilization situation highlighted the fact that Joint Manning Documents (JMDs), which provide the lifeblood for combatant commands, their special operations commands, and subsequent joint special operations task forces (JSOTFs), needed to be rejuvenated. The warfighting SOCCENT headquarters staff was more than 80 percent manned by Reservists from all Department of Defense (DoD) services. The pattern for assigning personnel had been set by OEF—the higher headquarters working the JMDs were filled before the field JSOTFs—which meant that field headquarters for OIF were left needing vital manpower.

In spite of the personnel challenges, the JSOTFs saw improvement over their experiences in Afghanistan. This time coalition forces would provide staff officers to the JSOTFs, making them truly combined (CJSOTFs). The dysfunctional coalition alignment in Task Force K-Bar (CJSOTF-South) during OEF and the subsequent *ad hoc* fixes made by COL Mark Phelan

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for CJSOTF-Afghanistan were addressed. The JMDs included coalition personnel in key staff positions. COL Mulholland had a British lieutenant colonel as his J3 (operations officer) and an Australian colonel as his deputy. The British and Australian military filled all of their assigned billets with top quality personnel.⁹

Relatively unnoticed during OEF was the state

of America's industrial capability for warfighting. The major demand for arms and munitions—to support Afghan warlord armies—had been supplied by non-Department of Defense (DoD) agencies using foreign weapons and munitions. This type of solution would not work for any campaign against Iraq, which would involve tens of thousands of U.S. troops. Only Operation ANACONDA in the post-combat operations phase had stressed the DoD materiel system, and that was short-lived. Ammunition for training requirements in the Philippines and Colombia were delayed, but eventually supplied. Elation at the rapid collapse of the Taliban in Afghanistan masked these basic logistical problems from planners considering their options for future military missions.

The victory-induced euphoria also led many government officials and military leaders to ignore changing governmental attitudes in the cooperative countries of the Middle East, Europe, and Asia regarding America's GWOT. As Washington officials sought United Nations support for a coalition effort against Iraq for possessing weapons of mass destruction, only Great Britain, Poland, and Australia committed coalition military forces to the U.S.-led effort. The reluctance of

neighboring countries to become involved in expanded military operations against terrorism made it more difficult for the U.S. military to forward-base troops in theater. Basing rights, military overflights, temporary staging airfields, and border crossing sites all became hot issues. As various countries denied access, CENTCOM and EUCOM and their respective special operations command (SOCCENT and SOCEUR) planners had to begin developing contingencies for contingencies. It was this final phase of planning that led the two regional combatant commands to end up in competing roles.

Several complicating factors were linked to unspecified command relationships between CENTCOM and EUCOM at the tactical level, and changing attitudes in the world. The European Command would have to live with Turkey after the war, while CENTCOM would not. Thus, two different attitudes developed. Expectations as to what Turkey would support—politically

and militarily—proved unrealistic and non-supportable; i.e., access to and the capacity of eastern Turkey Lines of Communications to handle conventional armored forces. The competition between combatant commands to “get in the fight” plagued planners at multiple levels and further complicated resourcing.

While Iraq was clearly in the CENTCOM area of operations (AOR), key staging areas for the northern campaign—first Turkey, and subsequently, Romania—were in the EUCOM AOR. Since Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld never specified that CENTCOM would be the *supported* combatant command and EUCOM would be *supporting* combatant command, the European Command continued to compete for resources and appropriate combat missions for its forces. Meanwhile, SOCCENT had decided early on that the SOF campaign would be prosecuted by two CJSOTFs: one responsible for northern Iraq and Kurdish forces, and a second for SCUD missile suppression and organizing of

Shia resistance in the western and southern deserts of Iraq. The primary focus of the CENTCOM conventional force was Baghdad, which naturally led SOCCENT to further concentrate on the SCUD and resistance missions in the west and south. When EUCOM-dedicated

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forces joined the fight in the north, command and control of the northern SOF campaign surfaced as an issue.

ARSOF's participation in OIF took place in context of commitments to OEF in Afghanistan, and to ongoing operations and training in the Philippines, Kosovo, and Colombia. Continued responsibility for the CJSOTF in Afghanistan meant rotating an SFG headquarters and SF battalions every six months to support the conventional task force. Having left its vehicles and heavy weapons in Afghanistan for that mission, 5th SFG had to undergo a refit of Ground Mobility Vehicles (GMVs) and weapons while its communications and computer equipment underwent extensive maintenance and refurbishing. With the ARNG SFGs picking up more ARSOF missions, they, too, had to be equipped with compatible communications, computer systems, armored GMVs, and crew-served weapons. The 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR) had major aircraft

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inspections and scheduled maintenance to perform while still supporting ARSOF operations in Afghanistan and the Philippines. MH-47Es lost in Afghanistan and the Philippines had to be replaced, and other aircraft repaired. Availability of training ammunition affected U.S. support in the Philippines and Colombia, as well as necessary training for future overseas combat missions. All these factors affected USASOC's ability to fulfill mission requirements for other supported commands.

First SFG headquarters and an SF battalion were charged with the Joint Task Force (JTF)-510 mission in the Philippines, while 10th SFG had an element in Kosovo, and 7th SFG continued to provide an SF battalion to Colombia. Reserve personnel for new JMDs became scarce in the midst of continuing GWOT requirements for USSOCOM, CENTCOM, SOCCENT, USASOC, US Army Special Forces Command (USASFC), US Army Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations Command (USACAPOC), CJSOTF-Afghanistan, and JTF-510. The pool of mobilized PSYOP and CA battalions had been heavily tapped for Afghanistan, yet many of these same units were force-listed for OPLAN 1003.

Allies to support a U.S.-led war against Iraq as part of GWOT had also become hard to find. As the primary warfighter, CENTCOM had priority for individual and unit mobilizations, but the DoD mobilization system was very antiquated. Even when the soldiers were taken care of, their families often suffered since family benefits for the federalized Army Reserve and National Guard were not yet fully worked out and applied. The realities of operational readiness and historical maintenance of USAR and ARNG units at Authorized Levels of Organization (ALO) 2 and 3 caused commanders to fill requirements for battalion units from all available assets. From stateside mobilization to field CJSOTFs, personnel problems continued to worsen.

ARSOF planners had to take into account USASOC's GWOT commitments around the world as they assigned units and filled JMDs. DoD-wide resource constraints also affected planning and mission fulfill-

ment. Lack of direction led to competition between EUCOM and CENTCOM for valuable equipment, personnel, and even TPFDD (Time Phased Force Deployment Document) slots. OPLAN 1003V called for 5th SFG's involvement, which required it to regroup and refit on the heels of its OEF activities in Afghanistan. All these factors, and more, provided the context in which ARSOF planned and played out its missions and roles during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM.

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Endnotes

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