The U.S. Army Special Forces’ relationship with the Republic of Korea is almost as old as Special Forces itself. In 1953, seventy graduates (officers and noncommissioned officers) of the second and third Special Forces qualification course were sent to Korea as individual replacements to the 8240th Army Unit, which was the backbone of U.N.-sponsored partisan operations during the war. That U.S. Army Special Forces presence ended shortly after the armistice, but the necessity to train foreign soldiers in unconventional warfare to combat insurgencies in the Pacific region did not. Wars of national liberation were being fought in countries of Southeast Asia and the southwest Pacific during the 1950s. The French had been fighting the Viet Minh in Indochina while the new Philippines government had been combating a HUK rebellion since 1946. The Viet Minh victory at Dien Bien Phu marked the beginning of the end of French colonialism in Indochina and by the end of 1955, the HUK revolt had been put down. Unrest in Indonesia emphasized the “domino theory” of Communist aggression during the Cold War. With 10th Special Forces Group focused on postwar Europe, the 77th SFG was initially responsible for the rest of the world. The 77th SFG spawned the 7th SFG oriented to Latin America and the 14th SF Operational Detachment (14th SFOD) for the Pacific region. The Army’s Special Forces, still in their infancy, were spread thin.

The decision to provide dedicated unconventional warfare support to American allies in the Pacific was made in 1956. In April of 1956, four regionally oriented Special Forces detachments were formed: the 14th Special Forces Operational Detachment (Area) (Airborne) (SFOD) at Fort Bragg, North Carolina; the 16th Special Forces Detachment (District B) (Airborne) with its two subordinate elements, the 12th and 13th Special Forces Detachments (Regimental) (Airborne) at Camp Drake, Japan. All four detachments were classified and had a cover designation: the 14th SFOD was openly referred to as the 8251st Army Unit and the other three SF detachments were collectively the 8231st Army Unit.

by Cherilyn A. Walley and Charles H. Briscoe
All four detachments were ultimately assigned to 1st Special Forces Group when it was activated in June 1957 on Okinawa, Japan.\(^3\)

The Republic of Korea (ROK) was in “the center of the radar screen” for U.S. Army Special Forces in the Pacific in 1957, when the Army decided to form an SF battalion. The first seventy ROKA Special Forces soldiers graduated from basic airborne training on Okinawa on 14 May 1958, and returned to Korea. 1st SFG Mobile Training Team (MTT) 12A conducted advanced SF training in Korea and graduated the first class of ROKA Special Forces on 20 August 1958.\(^4\) The 1st SFG teams rotated into Korea to help the ROK Army SF cadre conduct training and assess field training exercises during their formative years.

The first indication that the U.S. Army considered a formal SF liaison with the ROKA Special Forces appropriate was in 1959. Captain John G. Firth was reassigned from the 77th SFG at Fort Bragg to 1st SFG on Okinawa with duty station Korea, effective 16 September 1959. However, those orders were amended; CPT Firth’s assignment to Korea ended at the 1st SFG headquarters on Okinawa.\(^5\) Firth spent most of 1960 commanding FA-32 and FA-33 (FA = the old designation for ODA) and conducting MTTs and field training exercises in the region. Among them were several infiltration exercises in Korea in January, February, and May 1960, and Exercise Strike Back near Seoul from 11–16 July 1960.\(^6\) By the fall of 1960, 1st SFG planned to assign a dedicated American SF training cadre in Korea.

The first effort at permanence consisted of “stringing together” a series of temporary duty assignments for a split team (an officer and four enlisted men) led by Captain Firth that started 3 November 1960 and ended 8 June 1961.\(^7\) Despite this “TDY cobbled,” Department of the Army, in January 1961, had begun to assign personnel to 1st
SFDK soldiers provide flood rescue training (rappelling) to ROKA helicopter crews using the Dallas Towers in 1979.

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MAJ Frank Dallas and FA Detachment 40 provided submarine infiltration training to twenty-nine ROKA Special Forces using the U.S. Navy submarine, SS-395/AGSS 395 Redfish, 6–7 May 1962.

Honorary Submariner card given to MSgt Richard Schevchenko, MAJ Dallas, and SSG Paul Redgate (medic) after training with the SS-395 Redfish 6–7 May 1962.
tigation caused KMAG to assume administrative control from the Army Support Command and disciplinary authority over “B” 310 in Korea. As part of its SFLE mission, the detachment not only supported ROKA Special Forces training—submarine infiltration training, mountain climbing and rappelling, and airborne training—but because of political unrest, provided riot control training.

Detachment 40, then FB Detachment 310, then B Detachment 310, then Detachment “B” 310, and eventually B-310 by the late 1960s—performed the SFLE mission that the resident Special Forces detachment in Korea still fulfills. Although designated a “B” detachment throughout much of the 1960s, the team never grew beyond a twelve-man “A” detachment (ODA). Most often it fell below that “out of 1st SFG hide” level. While theoretically capable of acting as a B team headquarters that would command & control several “A” detachments teams, B-310 functioned as an “A” team with a SFLE mission. Independence, like that enjoyed by 46th SF Company in Thailand, almost killed the mission.

Being semi-independent from 1st SFG eventually was not sufficient for B-310. On 6 May 1969, Detachment B-310 (by then referred to as Special Forces Detachment, Korea) became U.S. Army Special Forces Detachment, Korea (SFDK) under the KMAG. Less than a year later, the KMAG began to question the value of the SF Detachment [having operational control and administrative support responsibilities (funding)] and suggested inactivation. Having lost KMAG support, the SFDK went to EUSA and convinced the G-3 of the viability of its SFLE mission in Korea. In mid-August 1971, SFDK was then reassigned from A Company, 1st SFG and KMAG to Headquarters, Eighth U.S. Army, under the staff supervision of the Assistant Chief of Staff, G3, and attached to 4th Signal Group for UCMJ and the Yongsan Garrison for administrative and logistical support. Functionally, the mission and responsibilities were the same, but the “out of hide” detachment for Korea was no longer part of the Special Forces permanent force structure.

The SFDK independent period lasted for nearly fifteen years. While there were
numerous orders and letters of instruction of detachment and reattachment within the EUSA, the most significant order was General Order 116, Headquarters, U.S. Army, Pacific, which organized Special Forces Detachment, Korea, as a TDA (Table of Distribution & Allowances) element. Effective 1 June 1974, the TDA authorized strength for U.S. Army SFD-K was one officer and eight enlisted men . . . to be assigned from locally available personnel. Once the reorganization was complete, SFDK was attached to the EUSA Headquarters Commandant for UCMJ and administrative and logistics support. SFDK was the only permanent SF presence in theater. Deactivation was raised again in 1980, but the detachment proved its continued value to the Army as a special operations coordinator for joint training exercises like FOAL EAGLE and TEAM SPIRIT.

It was U.S. Army Forces Command that brought SFD-K and the Berlin Detachment back into the fold. On 1 October 1985, U.S. Army Special Forces Detachment–Korea was reassigned from EUSA to 1st Special Operations Command, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, that a year later transferred it back to 1st Special Forces Group, Fort Lewis, Washington, a year later. After seven years as an “out of Ist SFG hide” element and almost thirty years as a TDA unit, SFD-K effective 16 October 2005, became a permanent TO&E (Table of Organization & Equipment) unit designated 39th Special Forces Detachment (Airborne). The 39th SFD (authorized one officer and fifteen enlisted personnel) is assigned to U.S. Army Special Forces Command, Fort Bragg, and attached to EUSA in Korea for UCMJ and the 1st SFG for Title 10 support. In the midst of organizations, reorganizations, activations, and inactivations the 39th Special Forces Detachment in Korea has certainly “enhanced ROK/US interoperability by providing liaison between U.S. SOF and ROKA SF during war, crises, and armistice” while providing a continuity of SF presence in the Pacific for over forty years.
MSG (E-7) Ruben Michel during Medical Capability (MEDCAP) with the ROKA Special Forces. Note master parachutist wings on beret ILO 1st SFG flash.

Temporary sign advertising the joint SFDK/ROKA SF MEDCAP exercise.

ROKA Special Forces pass out Psywar products during MEDCAP with SFDK.

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Endnotes


4. Stanton, 6–7; H. R. “Mike” Burns, M. Eugene Hall, Charles Randall, Dennis Veal, Al Gramando, Walter Cribbe, Craig Firth, and Choi Jang Hoon, interview by Dr. Cherilyn A. Walley, 3 June 2004, Yongsan Garrison, Republic of Korea, copy in USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

5. Extract, Paragraph 63, Department of the Army Special Order 183, dated 16 September 1959, copy in USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Amendment of Orders, AGPA-O 210.31 dated 30 September 1959, copy in USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC.


12. Local Order 5-1, Detachment 40, 1st Special Forces Group, dated 8 May 1962, copy in USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Major Frank J. Dallas, “Letter of Appreciation” to Staff Sergeant George-Paul Redgate, dated 30 June 1962, copy in USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

13. Special Order 122, Headquarters, 1st Special Forces Group, dated 20 August 1962, copy in USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC.


15. The change of UCMJ jurisdiction came after Major “Mike” Burns administered an Article 13 to the Det K sergeant for the DUI-related jeep accident before the Army Support Command received the daily MP “blotter report.” Sergeant Major Louis Brown recommended the action to preclude the automatic “one-stripe reduction” for DUI effectively ruining the SF soldier’s career. The UCMJ jurisdiction change and “strong verbal counselling” of Major Burns precluded future circumventions of policy. Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) H.R. “Mike” Burns, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 8 December 2005, Hope Mills, NC, digital recording, USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC.


SSGs William Bassett (demo sergeant) and Robert Maya (medic) and Specialist Four Powell (assistant demo sergeant) circa 1966–67. Note Powell is wearing original ROKA 1st Special Warfare Group patch on button tab.

SFC Walter Patterson (detachment operations sergeant) circa 1966–67.

Shoulder patches of the ROKA Special Operations units.