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# Relentless Strike: The Secret History of Joint Special Operations Command, by Sean Naylor

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This book provides the perspectives and experiences of social scientists who, embedded with military teams, shared their knowledge and cultural expertise to help military leaders make informed decisions within culturally diverse environments. This volume will prove to be an invaluable resource for military leaders, as it highlights the importance and impact of understanding the role of cultural diversity in military operations. McFate and Laurence have performed a service to the military by providing a valuable resource for all military leaders to guide them in future military operations. In addition, this book applauds those scientists who were daring enough to join in the human terrain effort and share their experiences with us. The ability to achieve cultural competence must be viewed as a war-fighting imperative and as a prerequisite for all future military leaders. This volume is informative and inspiring—a must-read for all those interested in the cultural and human dimensions of multinational warfare. The detailed bibliography provides recommendations for further reading to enhance the reader's knowledge of this topic.

YVONNE R. MASAKOWSKI



*Relentless Strike: The Secret History of Joint Special Operations Command*, by Sean Naylor. New York: St. Martin's, 2015. 560 pages. \$29.99 (paperback \$17.99, Kindle \$14.99).

Once again, Sean Naylor has produced an authoritative and well-written book. *Relentless Strike* chronicles the history of the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), America's top-tier special operations military unit. To the benefit

of history and the reader, and most likely to the consternation of the Pentagon, Naylor's knowledge of special operations and his extensive contacts reveal the temperaments and competencies of key individuals and the details of numerous clandestine missions and organizational capabilities. Many will condemn Naylor for revealing these secrets, but the fault is not with Naylor; it is with those who talked. The book also, perhaps unintentionally, exposes flaws in how the United States wages war, as well as the limitations of special operations.

The book begins by recounting the creation of JSOC after the failed Iranian hostage rescue operation in 1980. New threats to national security required a new military organization that had the resources and capabilities to respond quickly to crises and apply specialized military capabilities to rescue hostages, kill terrorists, and neutralize weapons of mass destruction. Naylor reminds us that senior military leaders opposed the new command, but the failure in Iran trumped parochial thinking. The second and more interesting part of the book addresses the expansion of JSOC as one result of the momentous impact of the 9/11 attacks.

From the beginning, JSOC had significant advantages over both conventional military organizations and nonaffiliated special operations units. The units placed under JSOC's direct control were the best-trained and best-resourced units in the military. Each of these units had its own sophisticated—and grueling—selection process. Remarkably, JSOC headquarters had nothing that mirrored such careful processes for selecting its staff. Also oddly, the Pentagon had no process for selecting a JSOC commander whose experience

and temperament matched the requirements of a national force. To be sure, some of JSOC's early commanders were excellent—but that was the exception. This deficiency became clear in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. The 1980s and '90s were a period of steady growth in terms of structure, budget, and formalized relationships throughout the interagency world. JSOC was required to be ready to launch a task force within four hours for a variety of missions of national importance. Although specific mission requirements ultimately would dictate the task force's composition, significant mission "enablers" from inside the Defense Department and external to it always had to be on standby. It required dedication of a dozen Air Force transport aircraft to deploy the JSOC staff, operators, helicopters, ground-assault vehicles, and other necessary equipment for initial operations. This initial package often would encompass five hundred people, and more people and equipment frequently would follow. Additionally, being ready for every contingency required JSOC to have a comprehensive liaison network throughout many government agencies, especially the Intelligence Community. This formulaic approach to every mission resulted in a large task force being deployed for almost every problem. As a result, JSOC unintentionally undermined its ability to deploy clandestinely and remain agile. During this time frame, JSOC deployed to war alongside conventional forces in Panama and during Operation DESERT STORM. It also deployed in response to the hijacking of the Italian cruise ship *Achille Lauro*, which had eighteen Americans aboard, and to Somalia in 1993 in what would become the "Black

Hawk Down" debacle. Other, less-known operations took place as well. The results of JSOC's work before 9/11 were mixed, at best. While the quality of operators in JSOC's subordinate units was superb, the JSOC command and staff—and "Washington"—often underperformed. Some of these deficiencies would be addressed after 9/11. The 9/11 attacks produced a sense of vulnerability for Americans. They also created a need to respond quickly with force against those directly and indirectly responsible. No one was more frustrated by the military's inability to strike back quickly than Donald Rumsfeld, the Secretary of Defense. Rumsfeld looked to General Charles Holland, commander of the U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), for a plan. He was bitterly disappointed: Holland was unprepared, and therefore was reluctant to seize the opportunity to take the war to America's enemies. However, JSOC's reputation, built in part by its extensive liaison network in Washington and its sophisticated exercise program, now grabbed Rumsfeld's attention. JSOC easily was able to sell its unique capabilities to an anxious buyer. JSOC's boundless self-confidence would lead to an expanded role, because the administration in Washington desperately needed to go after Al Qaeda and its supporters. Although JSOC was a subordinate command of USSOCOM, General Holland was happy to stay on the sidelines. JSOC would become "almost an independent military force for Rumsfeld," under the command of Major General Dell Dailey. Everything seemed to be in place for JSOC to destroy those responsible for the 9/11 attacks. The leadership in Washington empowered JSOC to do whatever was necessary. The superbly

trained operators were anxious to make Bin Laden and his lieutenants pay with their lives for their actions. But, for the second time, a leadership deficiency on the part of a senior commander hampered JSOC. General Holland, and now Major General Dailey, both aviators, did not have what was necessary to unleash JSOC's special operations capabilities. Both were conservative, conventional thinkers unable to adapt to a new type of warfare. The triad necessary for successful action had two elements in hand—Washington sponsorship and competent operators—but still lacked a key element: a proper JSOC commander. Major General Stanley McChrystal would fix this shortcoming, and with gusto.

McChrystal commanded JSOC for almost five years, transforming it into a killing machine in Iraq, Afghanistan, and beyond. To McChrystal and many in Washington, JSOC was the “nation's main effort in the war on terror.” He was in charge of a global enterprise, but the enterprise needed better intelligence and a better scheme to respond rapidly to that intelligence. JSOC would expand its liaison network within the Intelligence Community and to other organizations operating in the region. Capturing and interrogating enemy operatives now would be preferred to killing them. JSOC began running agent networks as well as putting its own operators on the ground, even in places such as Benghazi, to develop situational awareness. JSOC also demanded extensive aerial reconnaissance assets. Likewise, war in the information age pushed JSOC to develop a cyber capability to hack into social media and cell phone communications. Then JSOC's subordinate units needed to retool to respond to the growing clarity about the disposition

of the enemy networks that the intelligence process was producing.

General McChrystal's force of personality fused all these disparate parts of the enormous intelligence apparatus together. Retooling Delta Force, the Rangers, and SEAL Team 6 was relatively easy; the troops instinctively knew they needed to operate in small teams and in unorthodox ways to defeat enemy networks. They welcomed McChrystal's aggressiveness and willingness to take risks. The war was an obsession for the JSOC commander. It became McChrystal's life, and he wanted his men to understand that the war, and nothing else, should be their life too. His single-minded determination was infectious to some and repellent to others. The JSOC commander had perfected a process that became known as F3EAD (“Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Analyze, Disseminate”), and the JSOC operations center was called the “Death Star.” “Strike to develop” intelligence became the task force catchphrase. McChrystal had perfected the F3EAD machine, and the process had become self-sustaining. Naylor claims that in the U.S. military's darkest days in Iraq, JSOC was the only American force achieving success. This depends on how you measure success, especially in light of the contemporary situation in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Under McChrystal's leadership, JSOC's operators efficiently and effectively found, fixed, and captured or killed high- and midvalue targets and anyone else they deemed appropriate. Often they fought their war disconnected from other U.S. and coalition forces that were fighting the same war. JSOC's size, an issue in the 1980s and 1990s, grew from about eight hundred to more than 2,300 in 2008, not including

a six-hundred-man JSOC intelligence brigade added in late 2008. JSOC demanded and received a disproportionate share of assets, including taking control of other military units not only when necessary but when convenient—to the dismay of commanders also charged with fighting the war. But JSOC did kill Zarqawi and Bin Laden and many, many other very bad people. Leaders in Washington declared, “JSOC is awesome.” Our enemies needed killing, and no military unit did it better than JSOC.

Naylor tells us that before 9/11 several key figures described JSOC as “a Ferrari in the garage.” General McChrystal, with the full support of leaders in Washington, took the Ferrari out of the garage and created a killing machine whose performance was unparalleled. Unfortunately, a discerning reader easily could conclude that the Ferrari actually was still on the same road as the rest of the U.S. military—and that road would lead to nowhere.

HY S. ROTHSTEIN



*Ghost Fleet: A Novel of the Next World War*, by P. W. Singer and August Cole. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2015. 416 pages. \$28 (paperback \$14.95, Kindle \$9.99).

No author today will argue with Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s perspective that any work of fiction requires the reader to engage in a willing suspension of disbelief. The wording of the concept is important because it goes beyond the idea of a reader just pushing the “I believe” button. The concept requires the reader to be an active participant: he or she must willingly enter a world

known to be false. It is the job of the author to maintain that world, to hold the reader suspended throughout the entire book, and to prevent him or her from falling out of the fictional world with an ungraceful “whump.”

For the author of a techno-thriller, holding the reader suspended in this alternate reality requires even more finesse than for other types of fiction. The world of a techno-thriller is relatively close to the world in which the reader lives. Both the technology and the environment of the story are set in a future near enough that all the governmental and organizational structures, global and domestic relationships, and technical capabilities showcased in the story must be close enough to what the reader knows today to be believable.

This is the challenge P. W. Singer and August Cole set for themselves in *Ghost Fleet*. It is a herculean task. The international backdrop today is far different from that of the techno-thriller heyday of the 1980s and early 1990s. The U.S. cultural setting of *Red Storm Rising*, published in 1986, was influenced by forty years of the Cold War. Dominated by baby boomers and gen Xers, the general population of the United States during that time had limited access to international news and perspectives, had grown up with the threat of nuclear war, and had been indoctrinated with the ideological vilification of Communism. Today the cultural backdrop for the U.S. population is as mixed and varied as the people themselves. International news and perspectives are available to anyone, quite literally at the touch of a finger; the threat of nuclear war has been replaced with a threat of terrorism; and ideological vilification