

MC-130P and MH-53J  
refueling over RAF  
Mildenhall.



# Special Operations Forces after Kosovo

100<sup>th</sup> Communications Squadron (Rashawn A. Douglas)

By CHARLES J. DUNLAP, JR.

**T**o many observers the NATO air campaign against Serbia in the spring of 1999 represents the future face of war. The long-distance, high-tech application of force is an attractive template as the United States and other nations become ever more casualty-averse. Indeed, Allied Force was the first major operation in which aircraft achieved victory without the need for a land campaign. What really encouraged airpower enthusiasts was the apparent vindication of decades-old theories that air attacks could

achieve a psychological effect on an enemy that would force it to yield even when its military remained in the field able to resist.

Allied Force was a manifestation of the revolution in military affairs (RMA). Several types of aircraft dropped precision-guided munitions (PGMs) on urban areas with astonishing accuracy, save for a few well-publicized miscues. In fact, PGMs constituted the bulk of the weapons used, continuing an RMA-derived trend begun in the Persian Gulf War. Advanced command and control platforms such as the airborne warning and control system (AWACS) and joint surveillance target attack radar system (JSTARS)—pre-viewed during Operation Desert Storm—allowed perceptions of the battlespace to reach new levels, especially when combined with information

**Colonel Charles J. Dunlap, Jr., USAF, is staff judge advocate at Air Education and Training Command and served with U.S. Central Command in both Somalia and the Middle East.**

SEAL team members,  
Northern Edge '01.



U.S. Air Force (Brian Snyder)

from surveillance satellites and augmented by unmanned aeronautical reconnaissance vehicles such as Predator.

At first blush the achievements of high-tech warfare demonstrated during Allied Force may be troubling for Special Operations Forces (SOF). Of the principal SOF missions, three of the most im-

portant and most legendary could face technological shrinkage if not obsolescence: direct action, special reconnaissance, and unconventional warfare. What is

the role of the special operator when PGMs can strike high-value targets with relative impunity and effective and pervasive surveillance systems can produce battlefield intelligence without risking lives? Likewise, technology may have a serious impact on traditional SOF peacetime missions. Although other nations once viewed SOF trainers as essential in improving their armed

forces, technology may render that need superfluous. This is particularly true as inexpensive, user-friendly software makes operating complex weapons systems relatively simple, thereby obviating the need for training. Software innovations bring self-paced computer-assisted instruction within reach of poor countries. Basic infantry skills can be learned from a computer program which costs less than \$50.

Although Special Operations Forces will not disappear any time soon, one cannot assume that they will be unaffected by new technology or the post-Cold War landscape. They will change or atrophy. It is not enough to inculcate new devices piecemeal into existing mission concepts to meet such challenges; instead, the SOF community needs to fundamentally reconsider how it will fit into the 21<sup>st</sup> century security architecture.

### In Search of the Warrior Ethos

Since the Persian Gulf War, much SOF dynamism has gone to what may not be considered classic warfighting. Nonwarfighting missions have grown in scope and importance. While these missions are critical, they cannot maintain Special Operations Forces as organized today. Despite interservice squabbling, the Armed Forces are bonded in the end by the mutual respect of comrades who go into harm's way together. Special Operations Forces lose relevance when alienated from the defense community. Absent a realistic warfighting role, they could become marginalized.

At the same time, the American way of war today suggests that SOF combat missions may be a thing of the past. Few commanders will seriously contemplate ordering a direct action mission against a high-value target if it can be destroyed with standoff systems. As Allied Force illustrates, commanders will readily look to other options in the future, including robotic platforms.

While strikes by Special Operations Forces against command and control nodes and similar targets will become increasingly rare, it does not necessarily follow that the end of the fabled direct action missions is at hand. No matter how casualty-averse decisionmakers have become, there are times in any conflict when American lives are in jeopardy. Allied Force highlighted such an occasion—a prisoner of war rescue. Three soldiers captured early in the conflict became pawns in a diplomatic game. Although they were eventually released, intense media exposure demonstrated a tool which an enemy can use to mold public opinion. Given the manipulation of American prisoners by North Vietnam, clumsy efforts by Saddam Hussein to leverage captives in

### Special Operations Forces lose relevance when alienated from the defense community

1<sup>st</sup> Combat Camera Squadron (Efrain Gonzalez)

**Special Forces and Thai airborne troops, Cobra Gold '01.**

the Gulf War, and the recent detention by China of EP-3 crew members, the United States should anticipate similar episodes.

Decisionmakers must prevent an enemy from gaining advantage with captives. An obvious solution would be a robust rescue capability. Theoretically, Special Operations Forces can perform such missions through combat search and rescue (CSAR). But what is required is not necessarily an operation with the immediacy of CSAR, but rather one of greater dimensions aimed at rescuing incarcerated personnel. But when such operations have been mounted, organization and planning were done on an ad hoc basis and the results were usually disastrous. Large-scale operations have not been the centerpiece of focused, dedicated SOF assets, but forces should be organized, trained, and equipped for that

mission now. Such raids may require new capabilities such as non-lethal weapons to minimize friendly casualties and encourage inventive ingress and egress methods.

A parallel benefit to a stronger snatch capability would be a potential to hold enemy leaders at risk, not necessarily through physical destruction but rather by enforcing the rule of law. Many observers agree that one reason no pro-Nazi resistance movement emerged in Germany after World War II was the Nuremberg trials. Trying Nazi leaders and exposing their evil deeds to the German public in detail aborted any nascent defiance of the Allied occupation. The same effect can be noted in Panama with the capture and trial of Manuel Noriega on drug charges.

Conversely, putting enemy leaders to death can create martyrs and further resistance. The death of Che Guevara at the hands of Bolivian troops in 1967 turned him into a cult hero who is still revered by leftists. Obviously, the capture of well-guarded enemy leaders deep in their territory is a challenging task demanding an extraordinarily disciplined and skilled force. This capability is especially valued when Western interests are served by bringing villains to trial. Moreover, it plays to the existing strengths of Special Operations Forces.

### Shadow War

Facilitating unconventional warfare is another SOF core competency that some might think has been superseded by Allied Force. Political imperatives curtailed the role Special Operations Forces might otherwise have played. The decision was made to minimize contacts with the Kosovo Liberation Army. Similar constraints may be anticipated in the future. The Nation will be reluctant to align itself with groups that pursue controversial agendas, especially when fueled by ethnic or religious hatred. This factor, along with a growing desire to not risk SOF losses unless absolutely necessary, means there will be relatively few opportunities to organize indigenous forces behind enemy lines.

Nevertheless, unconventional warfare is pertinent to commanders of conventional forces. The Air Force, for example, expended considerable resources in developing small footprint forward air operations centers (AOCs). Replacing people with such technology means deploying much faster and beginning air operations sooner. But flexibility comes at a price. The smaller numbers make AOCs—the critical linchpins of air campaigns—less durable and thus extremely vulnerable as high-value targets. As attacks on the





1st Combat Camera Squadron (David D. Underwood)

SOF working with Senegalese soldiers.

Marine barracks in Beirut, Khobar Towers, and *USS Cole* demonstrated, even weak enemies can strike defended targets. Surprisingly, few AOCs are hardened or have plans to be.

Role playing also can help identify limitations and vulnerabilities. Red teaming by Special Operations Forces could draw not only on its generic unconventional warfare proficiency but also on its expertise in the culture and mindset of specific threats, providing a realistic assessment of a too-often overlooked aspect of modern air operations.

Such factors suggest an enhanced SOF role in intelligence analysis and strategic planning. For example,

getting the right kind of insight into enemy thinking has bedeviled airpower planners for years. Consider the following remark by Lieutenant General Charles Horner, who commanded U.S. air forces during the Gulf War:

*Our peacetime-trained intelligence organizations are taught never to be wrong. They like numbers and don't like to talk about what the other guy is thinking. They don't predict, they just give you the rundown, like TV news anchors. Yet as a commander I had to think about what the other guy was thinking. I needed to get inside the other guy in order to find ways to spoil his plans and make his worst fears come true.<sup>1</sup>*

Failures in this regard result in the misapplication of airpower.

**there is no indication that traditional intelligence organizations can meet analytical needs of decisionmakers**

There is no indication that traditional intelligence organizations can meet analytical needs of decisionmakers. Special Operations Forces, however, are peculiarly well situated to fill the void. They are trained to think like an adversary and are adept at infusing their analysis with the historical and cultural context of a particular enemy worldview. This point of view would be invaluable to conventional warfighters, especially when facing unconventional threats.

As a case in point, one purpose of deploying Apache helicopters during Allied Force was to create fear of a ground assault in the minds of the enemy, driving it to coalesce its forces into lucrative targets for air attacks and other standoff fires. Regrettably, there is little evidence that it had that effect. Imbued with an understanding of the Serb mind, Special Operations Forces might have suggested that NATO organize the deployment or exercise of Turkish troops. That might have genuinely alarmed Belgrade, for whom defeat at the hands of the Turks in 1389 is not just an historical footnote but part of the Serb psyche. Most conventional commanders think in terms of what makes sense in modern, parochial contexts; the unconventional warrior readily draws upon historical and cultural analogies that are all but invisible to others.

## A Different Path

To make unique contributions in the future, Special Operations Forces must participate in the planning process. Beyond CSAR, they are largely limited to responding to the targeting plans produced by others rather than actively deciding what should be targeted. Yet they have the clearest understanding in the military of warfare as essentially imposing one's will on an enemy. Much conventional strategic thinking by airpower advocates overemphasizes coercion through denial, which in essence requires reducing capabilities to the point where an enemy can no longer use force. The viability of such strategy in 21<sup>st</sup> century warfare is plainly suspect.

The oft-understated lesson of Allied Force is that the quantum of combat power that must be brought to bear on the adversary to render his military capability physically ineffective simply may not be politically possible. Walter Boyne predicted as much, stating that the American public demands that "we must win our wars with a minimum of casualties inflicted upon the enemy."<sup>2</sup> Thus the SOF expertise in identifying psychological vulnerabilities that may not require the same level of destruction as coercion through denial is exactly the kind of talent conventional commanders will need in politically sensitive conflicts.

Similarly, psychological operations (PSYOP) must be reexamined in light of Allied Force.



Airman Magazine (Dave Nolan)

**MH-53M on training mission over Florida.**

Many experts believe the Serbs won the information war.<sup>3</sup> The reasons for this conclusion include the fact that SOF resources were relatively limited. The inventory of Commando Solo aircraft, the platform that broadcasts radio and television programming into enemy or denied areas, is only four planes. But more critical is finding the creative personnel with expertise for the PSYOP mission. It is not clear that it is feasible for Special Operations Forces to recruit and retain the talent needed to produce effective 21<sup>st</sup> century PSYOP products even within the Reserve components.

PSYOP is clearly a function in which America should dominate. The United States created Madison Avenue and the advertising techniques that have proven effective worldwide. Special Operations Forces must develop better ways to tap into what should be an obvious asymmetrical advantage for this country. That may require greater reliance on contractors and other commercial sources to produce media that work against modern and modernizing societies. Even if much of

the development of material is contracted out to private vendors, the process must remain under the aegis of Special Operations Forces.

Thus to the extent SOF units engage in information operations in the psychological warfare context, continued emphasis on this area makes sense. However, it would be improper for Special Operations Forces to create a capability to conduct computer network attack operations, a mission recently and appropriately given to U.S. Space Command.

### **Engagement Blues**

As Special Operations Forces seek to enhance their warfighting utility, the pull of military operations other than war remains powerful. The question becomes one of prioritization. Although it is difficult to anticipate the next hot spot, there is no value in expending resources on a training mission simply because it offers an opportunity for military-to-military engagement. Nevertheless, Special Operations Forces may come under pressure from the Department of State to continue or even increase their presence in certain



nations. Ambassadors and country teams working on the margins of national interests have little chance of competing for foreign aid. Thus SOF assets may represent the best, perhaps only, opportunity for U.S. representatives to provide host nations with American largess. If those resources were unconstrained, there could be merit in honoring such requests under some kind of expanded global scout concept, but not in an era of fiscal austerity. Pressures to do more with less and place a premium on engagement must be resisted.

Beyond resources, there is the issue of focus. Diffusion of energy is a continuing threat to the small SOF community. Accordingly, its leaders may want to exercise considerable discipline regarding the scope and intensity of peacetime operations. For example, Special Operations Forces

**if there ever was a function worthy of civilianization and privatization, civil affairs is it**

should be relieved of counterdrug missions when possible. The reasons include the fact that U.S. policy may be headed toward a less aggressive interdiction mode.

More importantly, it is the risk of military participation in what is essentially a law enforcement effort. There are relatively few historical cases of military organizations that have successfully performed law enforcement missions without compromising either warfighting ability or democratic liberties. Counterdrug missions, which are inherently tied to a rights-oriented criminal justice system, leave SOF assets vulnerable to losing the public support they need.

Likewise, the civil affairs mission deserves to be reconsidered. Conceptually, the capability exists to administer occupied enemy territories as required by international law. In practical terms, it has become the preferred diplomatic fix for a range of failed and failing states. The problems of such states are deeper and longer-term than civil affairs can be expected to solve. If ever there was a function worthy of civilianization and privatization, civil affairs—beyond those needed for bona fide military purposes—is it. Besides practical issues, remarkably little consideration is given to the concept of civil affairs at present. The message America sends to fledgling democracies should not be to put the military in charge. But this seems to be the case when civil affairs units are tasked to rebuild broken countries.

Notwithstanding the changes that Allied Force portends, Special Operations Forces do have a bright future so long as they show the flexibility to accept change. That future may be tied more to direct action and other warfighting competencies than a cursory analysis of the operation might imply. Like any enterprise, the SOF community has its own constituencies, clans, and rice bowls.

Furthermore, having evolved in a larger, often unfriendly military environment, SOF capabilities, including those earmarked here for either deemphasis or elimination, are adept at self-preservation. Consequently, change may not come easily, and fierce bureaucratic struggles loom.

Nevertheless, change must come. Even staunch advocates realize that technology is creating new challenges and opportunities for every component of the military. Those that refuse to change may find themselves caught in a tailspin of decline. Special Operations Forces were established as an innovative solution to global military and political conditions. In important respects, therefore, their very roots are founded in adaptability.

The revolution in military affairs has stimulated change and Special Operations Forces must evolve once again. The stakes are high; only by leveraging these special capabilities can the Nation fully meet the security demands of the new millennium. **JFQ**

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Tom Clancy with Chuck Horner, *Every Man a Tiger: The Gulf War Air Campaign* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1999), p. 560.

<sup>2</sup> Walter J. Boyne, *Beyond the Wild Blue: A History of the U.S. Air Force 1947–1997* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy L. Thomas, "Kosovo and the Current Myth of Information Superiority," *Parameters*, vol. 30, no. 1 (Spring 2000), pp. 13–29.

**This article is adapted from the prize-winning entry in the first annual Special Operations Forces Essay Contest sponsored by U.S. Special Operations Command. See page 111 for details on this year's contest.**