

# The (Arrested) Development of UK Special Forces and the Global War on Terror

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**Abstract.** The use of force in international relations by the West is increasingly witnessing a greater reliance on Special Forces. This trend has profound implications for state action because Special Forces represent a very different kind of soldier and they possess the inherent ability to transgress traditional boundaries in peace and war. The development and participation of UK Special Forces in the Global War on Terror provides a microcosm of the positive and negative dimensions of using secret military units as the force of choice against insurgents and terrorists in Afghanistan, Iraq and indeed on the streets of London.

## Introduction

The application of force by the West has increasingly involved the use of Special Forces (SF) and Britain has been very much at the forefront of the development of these highly secretive military units. This growing trend possesses quite profound implications for international affairs because Special Forces represent a different kind of soldier who can operate overtly and covertly, not only on the battlefield and behind enemy lines, but also – when necessary – undercover within civil society. As the sharpest end of state military action, the activities of SF raise pressing foundational questions about the ethics of using secret military forces that transgress so many traditional boundaries in peace and war. Surprisingly, vital debates and discussions about these issues have been curtailed by governments on the basis of ensuring national security and protecting the *modus operandi* of SF. Yet, knowledge and interest about Special Forces has never been higher in popular culture, from cinema to television (Rambo IV to *The Unit*), these soldiers are an important part of our social landscape. This is the inherent contradiction of official policy on SF: by stifling informed debate it encourages ignorance (myths replace reality) that can affect, not just the general public, but more worryingly, conventional soldiers who may end up working with/commanding these units in war. Nevertheless, the emergence of a significant body of serious scholarly work does provide an offsetting trend for much of the nonsense surrounding SF and also enables some of these broader concerns about their utility to be addressed.<sup>1</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> The serious literature on Special Forces, Special Operations Forces and Special Operations has been steadily growing since the mid-1990s. These include W. H. McRaven, *SpecOps – Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Presidio Press, 1996); S. L. Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare: Rebuilding U.S. Special Operations Forces* (Washington: Brookings

development of British Special Forces since World War II provides a microcosm of the generic trends associated with secret military units and the benefits/pitfalls of their utility in the Global War on Terror.

### Locating Special Forces

Within the landscape of ideas, Special Forces are often found in close proximity to two related but distinct concepts in the military lexicon known as Special Operations Forces (SOF) and Special Operations. The latter term covers a wide variety of non-conventional operations that includes in a broad sense the activities of SF whereas the former represent support units that contribute in some way to their operations. Locating them in physical and geographical terms necessitates a focus on areas of the operational theatre that have been historically out of bounds or on the margins of the fighting zone. SF are usually deployed deep behind enemy lines or within the littorals of the battlefield – areas between opposing armies that used to be called no man’s land – the dividing lines between conventional fighting personnel. Many popular definitions of Special Forces stress their distinctiveness and a common theme argues that they conduct activities that are in some way ‘beyond or outside’ the remit of conventional forces.<sup>2</sup> After all, why have them if conventional forces can fulfil the same task? This simple yet innocuous question actually provides the supreme existential litmus test for whether they are appropriate for a particular mission. In terms of physical character, Special Forces are ‘small-scale units with exceptionally demanding human entry requirements that place an emphasis on “people plus technology” (and not the other way around) to fulfil operational requirements’.<sup>3</sup> To further complicate issues, not all Special Forces possess the same abilities and so are categorised today into different ‘tiers’ of capability with Tier 1 being the highest and Tier 3 the lowest. Some scholars apply the tier system to the whole of SOF,<sup>4</sup> but it does offer a good measure of the different strengths of Special Forces by themselves. In contrast, Special Operations Forces can be disaggregated from Special Forces *per se* by either a specialised function (whether dedicated aviation or intelligence assets for example),

Institution Press, 1997); C. S. Gray, *Explorations in Strategy* (London: Praeger, 1998); J. Thompson, *The Imperial War Museum: War Behind Enemy Lines* (London: Pan Books, 1999); S. Biddle, *Special Forces and the Future of Warfare: Will SOF Predominate in 2020* (Carlisle: US Army War College, 2004); B. Horn, J. Paul de B. Taillon and D. Last (eds), *Force of Choice: Perspectives on Special Operations* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004); R. B. Andres, C. Wills and T. E. Griffith Jr., ‘Winning with Allies: The Strategic Value of the Afghan Model’, *International Security*, 30:3 (2005/6), pp.124–60; J. D. Kiras, *Special Operations and Strategy: From World War II to the War on Terrorism* (London: Routledge, 2006); B. Horn and T. Balasevicius (eds), *Casting Light on the Shadows: Canadian Perspectives on Special Operations Forces* (Kingston: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2007); D. Tucker and C. J. Lamb, *United States Special Operations Forces* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007) and A. Finlan, *Special Forces, Strategy and the War on Terror: Warfare by Other Means* (London: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> One of the first people to articulate this point was Field Marshal Sir William Slim. See William Slim, *Defeat into Victory* (London: New English Library, 1965), p. 537. See also Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare*, p. 7; Gray, *Explorations in Strategy*, p. 149 and Finlan, *Special Forces, Strategy and the War on Terror*, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Finlan, *Special Forces, Strategy and the War on Terror*, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Bernd Horn, ‘Special Operations Forces: Uncloaking an Enigma’ in Horn and Balasevicius, *Casting Light on the Shadows*, p. 30.

or simply a conventional orientation such as the US Rangers or the British Parachute Regiment. In the latter case, these soldiers are widely considered to be the elite of the infantry, but they are not special – a common error is to consider elite and special as synonyms. Special in a strict sense of the term should be equated to difference<sup>5</sup> whereas elite forces are not fundamentally different to other types of infantry – they are merely qualitatively better.

### **The (Arrested) Development of UK Special Forces**

The genealogy of these units worldwide is intimately bound up with the emergence of British Special Forces in World War II. The metaphoric primordial pool of the war produced a wide variety of Special Forces and while superficially homogenous as a category of soldier – in reality – many of these units often possessed very different cultures and roles. The point of origin is important because there were no Special Forces prior to World War II. The total war context was instrumental in the production of non-contiguous units with a significantly different relationship to military strategy than conventional forces. Special Forces evolved due to the confluence of a number of technological developments that were largely in existence prior to the start of World War II, but the demands of the conflagration brought them together to offer military planners a ‘third way’ with regard to the deployment of military units. The combination of reliable long-range transportation vehicles (lorries and jeeps), lightweight explosives (plastic) and personal weapons and man-portable wireless communication devices (Morse code sets) meant that, for the first time in warfare, soldiers could be deployed *behind enemy lines and their activities coordinated from headquarters*. This was the revolutionary development offered by the synergy of these technologies when combined with innovative human agency. Soldiers in the past had conducted reconnaissance missions against enemy forces (often quite shallow penetrations of front lines), but there was no way for commanders to conduct near real time command and control (C2).

The specific impetus for the development of UK Special Forces can be process-traced to numerous exogenous as well as endogenous pressures and trends. The most significant external factor stemmed from the altered parameters of modern warfare: World War II was conducted on a much larger and more mobile manner than World War I that created accessible areas around armies. In endogenous terms, the single most important influence that facilitated the birth of Special Forces was a context of desperation that provided the ideational and material space for such unorthodox units to emerge.<sup>6</sup> Equally, other bottom-up pressures stemmed from junior officers, many of whom were relatively new to the British Army and warfare in general.<sup>7</sup> Youth and a desire to do things differently to the ponderous and often suboptimal utilisation of other special units were strong

<sup>5</sup> Susan Marquis makes a strong case that ‘Special operators fight a different kind of “war”’ – see Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare*, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Bernd Horn highlights the crisis environment from which SF emerged. See Horn, “‘Avenging Angels’: The Ascent of SOF as the Force of Choice in the New Security Environment’ in Horn and Balasevicius, *Casting Light on the Shadows*, p. 160.

<sup>7</sup> This was particularly the case with the SAS – one of the key founders, David Stirling was just 24 when the war broke out – see Gavin Mortimer, *Stirling’s Men: The Inside History of the SAS in World War II* (London: Cassell, 2005), pp. 2–3.

drivers in the early formation and success of Special Forces.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, of critical importance to their establishment was the enlightened patronage of a small number of very senior military officers such as Generals Wavell and Auchinleck who were the ‘godfathers’ of British Army Special Forces. This last point is of great significance because the development of Special Forces was ‘ad hoc’ and contingent to specific theatres and military leaders. There was no overarching framework or universal understanding within British military elites about how to use these forces effectively – to many conventional commanders their activities and roles were a source of puzzlement and subject to inadvertent misuse.

Three key roles emerged for UK Special Forces in the course of the Second World War and covered a spectrum of tasks from the passive to the active.<sup>9</sup> The unifying element was the operational environment deep behind enemy lines, but inevitably the more active tasks (taking the fight to the enemy) carried more kudos than the passive ones (observing them). Nevertheless, in historical terms, the first task that emerged for Special Forces concerned gathering strategic (sometimes referred to as special) reconnaissance (SR) on enemy dispositions. The unsung progenitor of UK Special Forces was a unit called the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG) set up in the summer of 1940. The LRDG operated from a variety of trucks and conducted operations (road watching for example) deep within Libya behind Italian lines while directed from their HQ in Cairo, Egypt.<sup>10</sup> This unit could, if necessary, conduct offensive missions in addition to providing first-hand information to British staff planners in Egypt. Watching enemy roads seems like an unexceptional task, yet throughout the history of warfare and, even today, the large-scale movement of enemy forces to and from the front line provides evidence for either of the two constant variables of war: attack or retreat.

The second and better known role for Special Forces was direct action or raiding military targets deep behind the enemy’s front line. The most famous Special Forces’ unit in this role was the Special Air Service (SAS). It was created in 1941 in North Africa to fulfil a very specific task: to destroy enemy aircraft on their airfields behind the front lines because the RAF was too weak to do it in the air. The SAS was given the green light because it appeared to offer a cost-effective means of redressing the balance using men armed with high explosives dropped off near their targets by lorry or jeep (the initial plan was to parachute them in but this was abandoned very quickly because it was unreliable).<sup>11</sup> The SAS soldiers would then penetrate the airfields, plant explosives on the aircraft, fuel facilities and ammunition dumps and, occasionally target the pilots as well, before escaping back to their transport vehicles. Using this technique, the SAS managed in just fifteen months to destroy between 250–400 aircraft on the ground in addition to

<sup>8</sup> The Army Commandos were one such unit that contained excellent well-trained personnel but suffered constantly from poor employment by higher command staffs. See David Thomas, ‘The Importance of Commando Operations in Modern Warfare 1939–82’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 18 (1983), p. 696.

<sup>9</sup> This fits very much with Thompson’s analysis – see Thompson, *War Behind Enemy Lines*, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Chevrolet and Ford trucks – see T. Jones, *SAS Zero Hour: The Secret Origins of the Special Air Service* (London: Greenhill Books, 2006), p. 117.

<sup>11</sup> The cheapness of the SAS proposal is often cited as an important element in the creation of the unit. See Kiras, *Special Operations and Strategy*, p. 86.

other targets of opportunity.<sup>12</sup> These operations carried with them not just material effects against enemy forces, but also psychological ones as well because the very presence of hostile units operating in the traditionally 'soft' rear lines meant that no operating area (or military personnel for that matter) was truly safe.<sup>13</sup>

The third major role for Special Forces was working with resistance/indigenous forces behind enemy lines, predominantly in Europe and Asia. It was a natural extension to the activities of Special Forces (they shared the same operational space) that they should link up with resistance fighters such as the French Maquis or the Italian partisans (to name just two) to provide material support and training. Special Forces demonstrated the viability of conducting operations behind enemy lines through parachute deployments which by 1944 included the means to drop all-important vehicles such as jeeps to preserve the vital mobility element that had proved so successful in North Africa and Italy.

### **The Rebirth**

The vast majority of regular British Special Forces were disbanded at the end of World War II, thus terminating an interesting albeit brief developmental phase that witnessed major successes in North Africa, but increasingly, a less effective role in the final stages of the war as the need for them reduced with the build-up of massive conventional capabilities. It is important to recognise that the marginal utility of Special Forces in the Second World War rested on two dependent elements: urgent operational need and the inability of conventional forces to fulfil the same tasks. Once the war stabilised after 1943, these units increasingly suffered from the condition of diminishing returns.<sup>14</sup> For many, the orientation or association with a specific single role was a major contributor to their eventual demise, especially when the activities of conventional forces either carried more value in a theatre (regular forces versus resistance fighters in France) or they encompassed the same tasks as Special Forces, albeit conducted in a different way.

Nevertheless, within a matter of years and another military campaign (the Malayan Emergency from 1948–1960), UK Special Forces re-emerged once more in the order of battle. In Malaya, the impetus for the creation of Special Forces stemmed from a specific requirement for a new type of unit that could engage in deep penetration missions in a jungle environment to conduct both strategic reconnaissance and direct action missions against enemy forces waging revolutionary guerrilla warfare. It was – once more – a task beyond the capabilities of conventional forces and so Special Forces, eventually in the form of the newly

<sup>12</sup> The difference in figures is reflected in the literature on the SAS. One of the earliest accounts by Virginia Cowles in *The Phantom Major: The Story of David Stirling and the S.A.S Regiment* (London: The Companion Book Club, 1958), p. 9. gives the figure of over 250 whereas Philip Warner, who wrote the official history of the regiment – see Philip Warner, *The Special Air Service* (London: Warner Books, 1994), p. 73 makes the claim for almost 400 and includes other material destruction to the Axis Air Forces in the desert theatre.

<sup>13</sup> British Commandos famously attacked Rommel's headquarters in November 1941, but the great commander was away at the time.

<sup>14</sup> Bernard Brodie illustrated the application of these concepts to strategy in his famous article, 'Strategy as a Science', *World Politics*, 1:4 (1949) which has been recently faithfully reproduced in T. G. Mahnken and J. A. Maiolo, *Strategic Studies: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 14.

reformed 22 Special Air Service Regiment (SAS) from 1951 onwards, started to conduct long-range patrols that lasted weeks and months deep in enemy territory with some significant success.<sup>15</sup> A key characteristic of the development of UK Special Forces in the post-war years was the close coordination/synergy of their activities with theatre-based conventional forces so that they literally became the ‘eyes and ears’ of these larger formations during campaigns. There was also a noticeable shift in the SAS of the Cold War away from the autonomous character of the wartime unit with a much greater emphasis placed on human agency (individual soldiers) as opposed to the heavy reliance on vehicles (technology) in World War II. To some extent, the post-war conflicts did not lend themselves to vehicle-based operations and therefore necessitated a greater reliance on physical stamina and endurance. These operational requirements led directly to the creation of the fearsome ‘selection’ procedure that has set the standard for modern Special Forces around the world.<sup>16</sup>

### **State Action and Special Forces**

Increasingly during the Cold War, the British state began to view the SAS as a favoured force option that could be deployed quietly and discretely as opposed to their more visible and cumbersome conventional colleagues. A good example of this utility occurred in 1981 when a coup erupted in Gambia, a country with close ties to Britain. The British government sent three SAS soldiers to deal with the situation who flew to Gambia in civilian clothes with bags stuffed with weapons and a portable satellite communications set via Air France. Within days, they had (still in civilian clothes) rescued the President of Gambia’s wife and child from the rebels and organised friendly troops provided by Senegal to crush the coup.<sup>17</sup> In terms of other operations, the SAS played a notable role in some remarkable military victories throughout this period such as neutralising a threat to the British-sponsored Sultanate of Oman in 1958 (the Jebel Akhdar assault), fighting Indonesian forces in their own territory in Borneo in the 1960s and winning a remarkable yet secret counter-insurgency war in Oman (Operation Storm) in the 1970s.<sup>18</sup> They were also very successful in working in concert with British conventional forces in the Falklands campaign of 1982. By the end of the 1980s, the organisational basis of UK Special Forces was gradually being transformed into a mini-fourth branch of the armed forces. All of them had been brought together in an organisational sense under the rubric of the Special Forces Group<sup>19</sup> (headed by a Brigadier) that included the SAS, the newly renamed Special Boat

<sup>15</sup> Warner, *The Special Air Service*, p. 217.

<sup>16</sup> John Woodhouse is widely acknowledged as the officer who created the SAS selection process in 1952. Michael Asher provides a good insight into the influences on Woodhouse when he created the system that was centred originally on Snowdonia in Wales before being transferred to the Brecon Beacons. See M. Asher, *The Regiment: The Real Story of the SAS – The First Fifty Years* (London: Viking, 2007), pp. 328–9.

<sup>17</sup> J. Adams, *Secret Armies: The Full Story of the SAS, DELTA FORCE and SPETSNAZ* (London: Pan Books, 1989), pp. 172–5.

<sup>18</sup> See T. Jeapes, *SAS Secret War: Operation Storm in the Middle East* (London: Greenhill Books, 2005) for the best account of this campaign.

<sup>19</sup> Adams, *Secret Armies*, p. 199.

Service (formerly the Special Boat Squadron) that was now deliberately reformulated physically along SAS lines with soldiers broken down into 16-man troops, instead of the traditional 'sections' and the 14th Intelligence Detachment (an SOF unit).<sup>20</sup> This logical amalgamation has significantly reduced the dependency of UK Special Forces on parent formations, especially in terms of budgets, and massively expanded the number of people associated with them.

The impetus for employing secret military units overtly and covertly in civil society came from within British Special Forces seeking another operational string to their bow. The constantly adapting endogenous drive within the SAS led them to acquire an interest in counter-terrorism activities that culminated in the creation of the Counter-Revolutionary Warfare Wing in the late 1960s. In the bloody aftermath of the Munich Olympics of 1972, the initiative of the SAS paid off and the British Prime Minister, Edward Heath, gave them formal permission to establish a dedicated counter-terrorism team with no expenses spared.<sup>21</sup> Alongside the growing commitment to combating terrorism in Northern Ireland, this role solidified in Britain, but the ethical implications of state military forces being used against terrorists within the warp and weft of civil society have not been fully grasped. The displacement of the primacy of the police, the issue of accountability to citizens and the preference for deadly force (as they are trained to do on the battlefield) create a legal and moral minefield that the British state appears unwilling to formally and publicly discuss. In addition, much of this debate has been stifled by the apparent success of SF against terrorists and their post-war legend emerged after the extraordinary rescue of hostages in the Iranian Embassy in 1980. In just 11 minutes, the SAS clad in black overalls, wearing the now trademark respirators and submachine guns, literally exploded their way into the embassy and killed the majority of the terrorists while unsuspectingly being filmed in the process.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the concerns about using undercover military forces in civil society remain exigent and the line between heroic anti-terrorist forces and state-sanctioned death squads is a very fine one.

## **The Global War on Terror**

The current campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq under the auspices of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) have drawn a sharp focus on the merits of Special Forces as the cutting edge of a state's response to terrorism and insurgency. Britain's experience in this area has strongly mirrored that of the United States due to the extraordinary levels of intimacy and co-operation between its secret military units and their American counterparts. The heavy operational requirements of the GWOT have highlighted the downside of having high quality, but small numbers of Special Forces. Britain's approach to the shortfall was to create two new units – a remarkable feat in terms of the speed with which these formations were set up. On paper, it would appear in the light of the creation of the Special

<sup>20</sup> Ken Connor provides a strong critique of the problems this integration of SF and SOF components generated. See *Ghost Force: The Secret History of the SAS* (London: Cassell, 2004), pp. 509–10.

<sup>21</sup> Connor, *Ghost Force*, p. 314.

<sup>22</sup> Adams, *Secret Armies*, p. 170.

Reconnaissance Regiment (SRR) in 2005 and the Special Forces Support Group Regiment (SFSG) in 2006 that Britain now has four dedicated SF units available. In reality, however, a disaggregation of them along functional lines is quite revealing: the two new units are not actual Special Forces units and fall more clearly under the wider rubric of Special Operations Forces (SOF). The soldiers of the Special Reconnaissance Regiment (men and unusually women too) are better described, in fact, as Special Intelligence Forces as the unit is derived from the unsung, yet very effective 14th Intelligence Detachment or 'Det'.<sup>23</sup> This shadowy unit specialised in undercover operations in Northern Ireland in which soldiers armed with 9mm pistols and their wits would conduct close reconnaissance of known terrorists by mingling with them in pubs and on the streets. Members of the SRR, it has been claimed, were involved in surveillance operation that led to the shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes on the London Underground in 2005.<sup>24</sup> To what extent their participation contributed to the militarised – shoot to kill – process that caused the death of an innocent man remains open to question. However, intimate co-operation between police and military personnel carries with it many risks, not least of all, the potential migration of tactics and techniques designed for the battlefield on to the streets of the United Kingdom.

The SFSG is a SOF unit centred on predominantly 1 PARA with some Royal Marines and RAF components and has adopted a US Ranger type role whereby they offer dedicated Special Forces missions a security component/cordon/quick reaction force role to lock down a street or area where the SAS or SBS are conducting a mission. This is a good example of military emulation or how military organisations from one nation can copy the activities of another.<sup>25</sup> In the case of the SAS and Delta Force, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that a common transatlantic Special Forces culture is in existence as the latter was modelled explicitly on the former and that the flow of influence goes both ways. It has been claimed that members of the SFSG were operating in Baghdad in this role wearing US uniforms and carrying US equipment so not to be identifiable as British forces.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, it is questionable as to whether the development of a 'Ranger' SOF option is actually the best way forward. US experience of using Rangers in this role (in association with Delta Force) has not always been terribly successful, partly because the asymmetric mixture of elite infantry forces (often young and inexperienced) with more mature SF units has often proved to be 'combustible'.<sup>27</sup>

The need for more Special Forces has been a common issue to both Britain and the United States during the Global War on Terror.<sup>28</sup> However, the nub of the problem (quick expansion) stems from the traditionally high failure rate of those

<sup>23</sup> See Finlan, *Special Forces, Strategy and the War on Terror*, p. 7.

<sup>24</sup> R. Norton-Taylor, 'New special forces unit tailed Brazilian', *The Guardian* (4 August 2005).

<sup>25</sup> See T. Farrell and T. Terriff (eds), *The Sources of Military Change: Culture, Politics, Technology* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2002), p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> T. Harding, 'US calls in Paras for Baghdad secret war', *The Telegraph* (24 April 2006).

<sup>27</sup> Finlan, *Special Forces, Strategy and the War on Terror*, p. 24.

<sup>28</sup> The Bush administration increased the budget of Special Operations Command by almost 30 percent to \$5.2 billion and that has included expanding the size of the Green Berets and creating a special operations capability within the US Marine Corps. See *Testimony before the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities – The Honourable Thomas W. O'Connell, Assistant Secretary of Defence (Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict)*, 8 March 2006.

seeking to transfer into the SAS and their American equivalent, Delta Force, which can often be around the 90 per cent mark.<sup>29</sup> This system has without question produced extremely good quality SF personnel in relatively small numbers and, while appropriate in peacetime, it is simply not practical in times of extended hostilities. It is easy to forget that during the Second World War, none of our most famous SF operatives had to endure such a long drawn-out entry process and yet they performed their roles effectively. In times of war, it is inescapable that a Special Forces-lite soldier – in far greater numbers – will be the norm rather than the exception. Under the pressure of wartime commitments, training time is heavily constrained so more accidents are statistically more likely (such as the death of an SAS officer in 2005 in a quite avoidable parachute accident)<sup>30</sup> and more casualties will probably occur in the field. The dilution of quality will also mean that upper spectrum operations such as counter-terrorism operations or missions on the outer reaches of the battlespace will be more hazardous, but sheer numbers may offset the heightened risks. So, in essence, the future for both the SAS and SBS might possibly be less well-trained soldiers (with more operational experience) and perhaps of a lesser quality to the ranks that dominated the units during the Cold War, but more of them. The unfortunate converse position would be all of the above, but less of them, which is also a very likely scenario.

### **The Dark Side**

Special Forces can conduct operations in support of conventional forces that are openly acknowledged and these are often referred to as ‘white’ operations. Equally, they can carry out missions that are deniable or deliberately hidden from the public due to political sensitivities and such activities are known as ‘black’ operations. Black operations represent the dark side of military affairs in which secret units conduct missions with little or no public accountability and often in isolation to conventional forces. Without tight control and oversight, there are great dangers in such operations because inevitably legal and moral boundaries as well as rules of engagement become worryingly flexible. What has become clear over the course of the GWOT is that British Special Forces have become heavily committed to operations that exude US preferences and, under the influence of Donald Rumsfeld, the former Secretary of Defense, these were expressed in a predilection for black operations and direct action missions against suspected terrorists and insurgents.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, in Operation Iraqi Freedom, the SAS and SBS were used in this role to the detriment of other perhaps more important roles such as SR and working with indigenous forces. In the ongoing insurgency in Iraq, the SAS used to be part of what used to be called Task Force 145 (the name of this unit has changed several times over the last five years) as a component called

<sup>29</sup> See A. Kemp, *The SAS: The Savage Wars of Peace 1947 to the Present* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 183 for an insight of the failure rate in the SAS and Eric L. Haney, *Inside Delta Force: The Story of America's Elite Counterterrorist Unit* (London: Corgi Books, 2003), p. 123 for Delta Force.

<sup>30</sup> Steve Bird, ‘A radio would have saved SAS man from parachute leap death’, *The Times* (15 March 2008).

<sup>31</sup> See S. Hersh, ‘Moving Targets: Will the counter-insurgency plan in Iraq repeat the mistakes of Vietnam?’ *The New Yorker* (15 December 2003).

Task Force Black working with the SFSG.<sup>32</sup> Even in the latest operations in Afghanistan, British SF are heavily allocated to a new ‘decapitation’ strategy against the leaders of the Taliban.<sup>33</sup> Black operations of this nature are essentially kill missions and it begs the question of whether killing in itself wins wars or merely retards the overt counter-insurgency operations being conducted by conventional soldiers. The autonomy of Special Forces means that dead of the night raids often occur in the operating area of conventional soldiers (and without their knowledge) and merely stir up resistance to these troops the following day. Stephen Grey describes such a mission occurring in November 2007 in Helmand when US Special Forces (SEALS) conducted a night mission in a village called Toubé against suspected Taliban fighters. 18 people were killed – a number of young men with their throats cut – and yet the British conventional forces in the vicinity (1 Royal Gurkha Rifles) knew nothing of the mission, but had to deal with its aftermath.<sup>34</sup> This is a good example of where the activities of SF and conventional forces are clearly out of step and working towards incompatible ends: the former towards killing the Taliban; the latter towards gaining the trust of the population in which the Taliban reside. It also creates friction between SF and their conventional colleagues. This skewed emphasis on direct action missions is ultimately unprofitable with regard to tackling the root causes of the insurgency and represents to a significant degree a misdirected effort.

A number of additional negative dynamics have resulted from this close co-operation with the US. The first concerns the heavy UKSF involvement in extraordinary rendition. Ben Griffin, a former SAS soldier who quit the British Army over his revulsion of US tactics in Baghdad was gagged in 2008 by the High Court for revealing the true extent of UKSF involvement.<sup>35</sup> Griffin has alleged that significant participation took place in Afghanistan and Iraq. Moreover, the heavy emphasis on black operations means that it is highly likely that Griffin’s disclosures are just the tip of the iceberg with regard to UKSF participation in unlawful activities. This is a legal time bomb that will *at some stage* explode in same manner as revelations about the Phoenix programme in Vietnam or SF involvement in covert action in Latin America in the 1980s, perhaps with far more serious consequences than either of the latter two controversial cases.<sup>36</sup>

The second negative dynamic revolves around the US predilection for private military companies such as Blackwater (now renamed Xe). The proliferation of these businesses, both British and American, has led to a draining of valuable manpower from Special Forces as a result of the fantastic salaries on offer (which some claim is as much as \$250,000 dollars a year and more).<sup>37</sup> Never in the history

<sup>32</sup> See S. Naylor, ‘SpecOps Unit nearly nabs Zarqawi’, *Army Times* (28 April 2006) and also T. Harding, ‘Secret work of SAS in Iraq exposed’, *The Telegraph* (11 August 2008) which highlights their operations in Baghdad.

<sup>33</sup> K. Sengupta, ‘SAS spearheads new surge against Taliban’, *The Independent* (19 August 2008).

<sup>34</sup> S. Grey, *Operation Snakebite* (London: Viking, 2009), pp. 132–5.

<sup>35</sup> See ‘Former SAS soldier blows apart Miliband denial of UK torture involvement’ *Stop the War Coalition Online*, {[www.stopwar.org.uk](http://www.stopwar.org.uk)} accessed on 11 March 2008.

<sup>36</sup> Very little literature exists on the role of US Special Forces in countries such as El Salvador and Honduras, but a small chink of light is thrown on some of the murky activities by Eric Haney in his memoirs – see Haney, *Inside Delta Force* pp. 434–4 on his mission to kill a ‘guerrilla’ leader who turned out to be a former Green Beret.

<sup>37</sup> See P. Chatterjee, ‘Ex-SAS Men Cash in on Iraq Bonanza’, *Corp Watch*, {[www.corpwatch.org](http://www.corpwatch.org)} accessed on 11 March 2008.

of British Special Forces has the SAS and SBS, in particular, faced such competition for trained resources and this was underlined in 2007 when the Colonel commanding the SAS left his unit to join a PMC.<sup>38</sup> Inevitably, this negative recruitment dynamic may leave SF and SOF units struggling to retain their personnel and could potentially lead to a rapid shrinkage of the size of units with all the concurrent loss of corporate memory and experience.

### **Conclusion: The GWOT Legacies**

Britain's participation in the Global War on Terror encapsulates the positive and negative dimensions of using Special Forces as the unit of choice against terrorists and insurgents in Afghanistan, Iraq and on the streets of London. In the context of white operations and conducting their traditional roles on the battlefield, the participation of the SAS/SBS in the early phases of Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001 demonstrated their worth in a remarkable military effort. However, since the end of 2001, the overwhelming emphasis on black operations raises more concerns than plaudits because an extended journey on the dark side of the GWOT carries with it a significant price. First, units become structurally geared towards these operations and spend less time training and doing their traditional conventional roles – their skill set atrophies. The SAS started off a predominantly single role, direct action unit and this ultimately caused its downfall when the war ended because there was no longer a perceived justification for them. Today, it faces a similar situation with a modern twist due to a heavy concentration on direct action roles in an unconventional/black operational environment and the GWOT cannot last forever.

Second, the participation of UKSF in alleged illegal activities begs the question of whether their reputations will survive intact when the fighting stops or will a Vietnam-style slump in the public perception of Special Forces occur not only within society, but also amongst their conventional colleagues. Third, regardless of the latter two cases, the inevitable downsizing of the units as the British armed forces as a whole shrink means that numbers alone may reinforce concentrations on specific roles.<sup>39</sup> Consequently, whether publicly acknowledged or not, a gap in capabilities is widening which perhaps explains why US Green Berets were allocated to assist British conventional forces during the invasion of Iraq in 2003.<sup>40</sup> The shortfall in capabilities with regard to other traditional SF roles will have to be filled either by outsourcing these tasks to willing coalition partners or, alternatively, to migrate these roles to conventional forces. Of more concern for UKSF, if such solutions proved workable then it offers the prospect of a limited future role for them and, more importantly, skews the existential litmus test for

<sup>38</sup> T. Harding, 'SAS chief quits to take security job', *The Telegraph* (17 July 2007).

<sup>39</sup> The British armed forces are nearly 6000 personnel below strength – see G. Wilson, 'Troops shortfall overstretches Armed Forces', *The Telegraph* (3 July 2007).

<sup>40</sup> See the official history of US Special Operations Forces in Iraq (such a publication on British SOF in Iraq would be unthinkable in the current climate of government censorship) by C. H. Briscoe, Kenneth Finlayson, R. W. Jones Jr., Cheryl A. Walley, A. Dwayne Aaron, M. R. Mullins and J. A. Schroder, *All Roads Lead to BAGHDAD: Army Special Operations Forces in Iraq* (Fort Bragg: USASOC History Office, 2006), pp. 154–63.

retaining them in favour of their conventional colleagues. Finally, using undercover SF in civil society brings battlefield norms and values to the table in the fight against terrorism and unwittingly militarises civil responses (including the police) to suspected cases. In sum, the legacies of the Global War on Terror may be quite challenging, not just for the units themselves, but also for the British state.