

The Illustrated Directory of

SPECIAL FORCES



David Miller

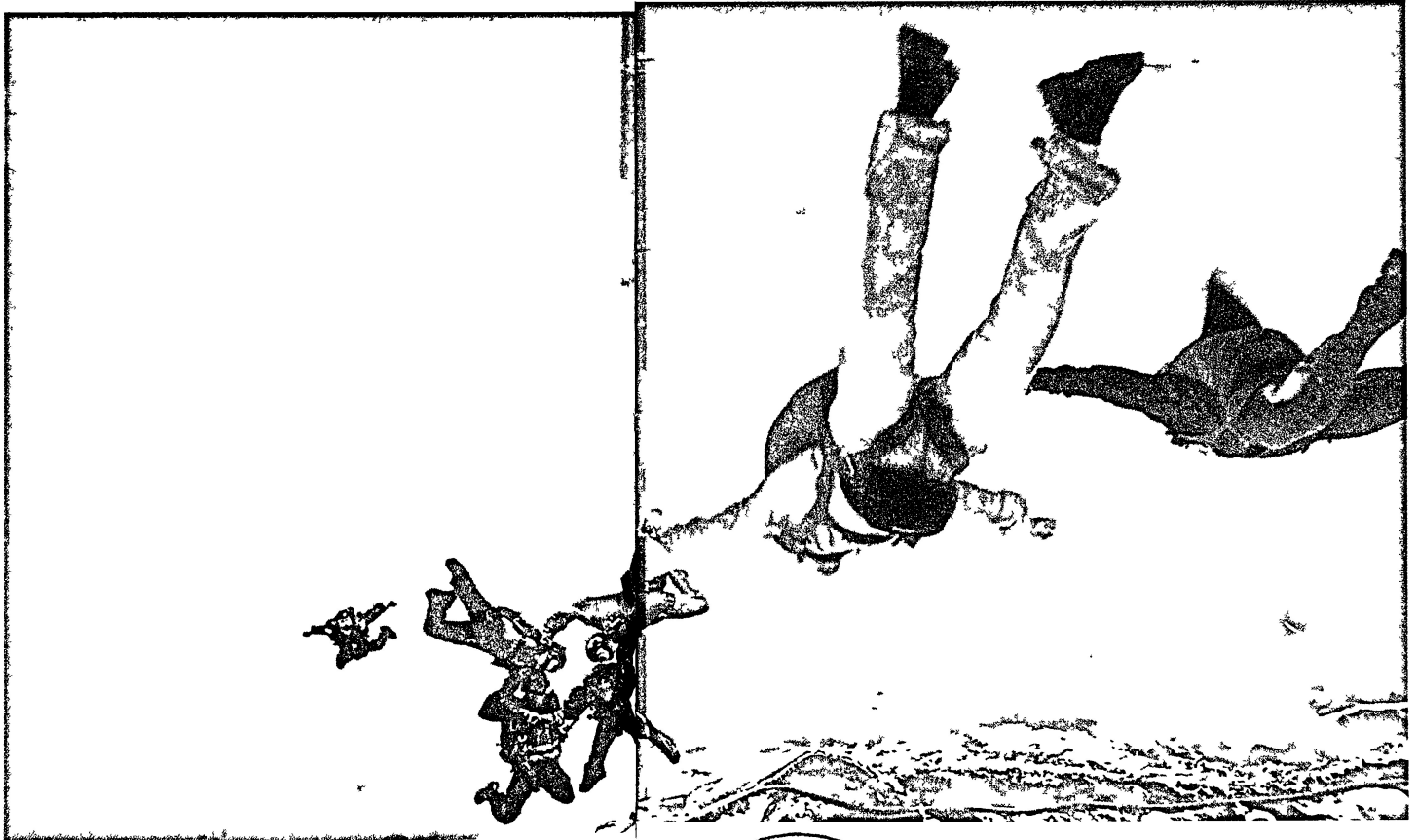


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**SPECIAL
FORCES**



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Introduction

"Special forces" give rise to somewhat ambivalent feelings in others. On one side there is an aura of military glamor about the deeds of warriors who carry out short, sharp raids deep inside enemy territory, wreak havoc and then return to base to prepare for yet another foray. It is the stuff from which legend springs. These warriors – usually members of "special units" – are greatly admired by some, but are viewed somewhat skeptically by others, who question whether their activities justify the resources of manpower, money and specialized equipment devoted to them. Thus, when such special forces are successful, they are praised, but when they are not, then there is no shortage of people only too willing to condemn them. But, it cannot be disguised that, particularly in democracies, there is an inherent distrust of such "special" operations and those associated with them.

Various terms are used to describe these forces, including commando, elite, paratrooper, irregular, guerrilla, or simply – and perhaps more embracing – special forces. Whatever the choice of designation, however, these forces have always had an important role to play in their nations' defense forces, and their historical legacy is particularly rich.

Modern special forces have their origins in World War II and among the most famous is the British Special Air Service (SAS), which was raised in 1941 to carry out reconnaissances and attacks deep in the rear of the German/Italian forces in the Sahara desert. In fact, it was one of several such forces with similar missions – others included the Long-Range Desert Group and the romantically named Popski's Private Army – but they all were disbanded with the end of the war in North Africa. The SAS continued to operate in Italy and France, but was disbanded in 1945, as no further need for such an organization was foreseen in "peacetime." Without a war, it was argued, there was no mission and the critics, particularly those elsewhere in the regular forces, were only too happy to see them disappear.

By the 1950s, however, there was an epidemic of "wars of national liberation" and some World War II special forces such as the SAS were reformed, while a few new units were raised. But, over the past 50 years various types of conflict have led to violent changes of government in many countries. Some of them, like the Vietnam War, were on a large scale, although the need to avoid global conflict in the overall setting of the Cold War, resulted in strong pressures to localize their impact. Once the Cold War had ended, however, and, in particular, with the demise of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the United States as the only, albeit sometimes reluctant, Superpower, such constraints have been lifted and conflicts continue unabated, some of them traditional in nature, others, such as the attack of 11 September 2001, of a completely novel nature.

Some observers argue that World War III has already started and that instead of military operations on the traditional, well-understood pattern, this new conflict is characterized by brush-fire conflicts, assassinations, terrorist bombings, attacks on civilian targets, coups, revolutions, and civil strife. There is no clean and easy way to categorize these crises and the types of conflict they represent. However, it is clear that terrorism, what is known as "low intensity conflict" and special operations need to be considered together.

There are literally hundreds of special and elite formations in existence—some number dozens, others several thousand members. Many, despite the sensitive nature of their missions, are relatively easy to identify, explain, and describe in a reasonable degree of detail; the French Foreign Legion, for example, and the British Special Air Service. In some cases, the mission of an elite force is strictly military in character – like the U.S. Army Rangers, and their operation in Grenada in 1983. In other cases, the mission is strictly counter-

terrorist, such as that of the German GSG 9 and the French GIGN.

There is no agreed definition of elite forces beyond the fact that, generally speaking, they have quite different missions from those of conventional forces. Also, these units are constantly being formed, disbanded, and realigned to meet individual circumstances. One vital consideration is that of security, as the great majority of these forces are, for excellent and well-understood reasons, reluctant to discuss their mission, organization, tactics and equipment, and the British SAS, for example, was very embarrassed when their most famous operation, the Iranian Embassy Siege in 1980, was played out in front of the world's TV cameras.

This book is divided into three main sections, which describe, respectively, the special and elite forces, some of the major operations in which they have been involved, and a selection of their weapons. However, it must be appreciated that this coverage cannot be comprehensive: some elite units are so secret that even their very existence is totally unknown to the general public, while a number of operations, even by publicly identified units, remain highly classified. Similarly, some weapons and techniques are secret in order that an elite unit can achieve tactical surprise over its opponents.

Nor can it be forgotten that special forces have a firm place in conventional war, as was demonstrated by SAS participation in the Falklands War and of many special forces, including Delta and the SAS, in the Gulf War.

In such conflicts, special forces' ability to conduct clandestine operations in the enemy's rear enables them to attack targets which cannot be reached by any other means, and to exert an influence out of all proportion to their actual numbers.

Elite forces involved in the counter-terrorist mission face a unique set of contradictions. Their successes dissuade their opponents from trying again, often leading to long periods without action, which has two consequences. First, it makes it harder to maintain the essential high degree of training and readiness, known colloquially as "the cutting edge." Secondly, protracted periods of apparent inactivity result in politicians and government financiers starting to question the large expenditure necessary, sometimes even resulting in cutbacks. It is then that the terrorists strike again, often using some totally new technique.

There is a high degree of lateral cooperation between special forces, ranging from exchanging information, through conducting joint exercises and the exchange of personnel, to actually taking part in each other's operations.

Finally, the great majority of special forces traditionally find their recruits from elsewhere in their country's armed forces. This ensures that their operators have experience of the armed forces as a whole and are a known quantity when they start the selection process. This can, however, lead to complaints from units that their best, brightest and most promising young men and women are being "poached" by elite units. Also, the rapid down-sizing of many military forces since the end of the Cold War means that the size of the manpower pool from which such volunteers can be found is also diminishing.

As this book shows, elite units have a very important task in modern society, their value lying not just in their capability in conventional warfare, but also in the clandestine world of counter-terrorism, where they must be ready to meet any threat at any time. In addition, while most counter-terrorist forces are confined to their national homelands, some others, like those of the USA, UK, France, and Israel, may be committed anywhere in the world. They face a daunting challenge.

The Forces

There are now well over one hundred autonomous "special forces" units around the world and this section describes most of them. There are undoubtedly more than appear in these pages, whose existence is known only in military circles, but these are carefully screened from public scrutiny. Indeed, there are probably even more, which are known only to a very carefully selected few, even within the armies, navies or air forces to which they belong.

Most of these special forces units belong to the national army, but in some countries both navies and air forces also operate their own special units. Other countries have formed special units specifically for the domestic counter-terrorist role and these are part of the police, or, in the case of the German GSG-9, the border police, while a few have formed special forces units within their para-military police forces, such as the GIGN and GIS, which are part of the French Gendarmerie and the Italian Carabinieri, respectively. One notable limitation on both police- and border police-based units is that, except in the most exceptional circumstances, their jurisdiction is limited to within their national borders, rendering their personnel potentially open to legal consequences if they kill or wound someone on foreign soil in the course of an operation. This is an issue which, despite the operation's success, became apparent with the GSG-9 action at Mogadishu and special forces units have since been formed within the German armed forces to undertake foreign deployments.

Sources of Manpower

Almost all military and police special forces recruit from volunteers from those already enlisted or conscripted, and then only after a specified minimum period of service, usually between one and three years. This ensures that such volunteers are already well-trained and used to military discipline, and that they will normally have had some operational experience. As the size of most military forces decreases this means that the special forces are recruiting from a diminishing manpower pool, but, even so, this method is still seen as preferable to direct recruiting from civil life.

The Israeli armed forces, however, have an altogether different problem, since they depend to a very large extent on three-year conscripts. But, as the great majority of special forces units have selection and training periods lasting well over a year, and in some cases up to 20 months, the men have little enough time with the operational forces. As a result, there is no option but to make initial selections as the men start their mandatory service and then to start their training immediately; as a result they do not have even a minimal period of service with line units.

Inevitably, there are some special units which do not fit into any general pattern. The French Foreign Legion, for example, has a unique composition and military ethos, being an integral part of the French Army, but composed predominantly of foreigners of any nationality. The Gurkhas, on the other hand, are an integral part of the British Army, but are composed entirely of men from certain tribal groups in Nepal.

Special Cases

Some countries deserve special mention. Most countries are secretive to a greater or lesser extent about their special forces units, but two countries stand out. The first is North Korea, which is known to have a huge special forces organization, but it is certain that there are many more units than is public knowledge; indeed, the sheer numbers of men in such units brings into question the term "special". The second country is the People's Republic

of China, and almost nothing is known about its special forces, although it is self-evident that they must exist. At the least these must include a counter-terrorist unit, responsible for dealing with hijacking and hostage-taking situations, but it is also highly probable that there are also special forces units similar in organization, training and missions to the Soviet Spetsnaz units of the Cold War era.

The Israeli special forces are given separate treatment in this book, because this country makes very wide use of such units. Many of these units tend to have a single mission, which is primarily due to the problems of a conscript army, where the vast majority of soldiers are only in full-time service for three years and there is simply insufficient time to train them for a wider range of tasks.

The Soviet Army's Spetsnaz units caused major alarm in western Europe during the 1980s when their high degree of training and large numbers were seen as a major threat. With the end of the Cold War these units have been drastically reduced in numbers but it is highly probable that the expertise is retained.

British special forces have established a high reputation for daring, initiative and success. These consist of the army's Special Air Service (SAS) and the Royal Marines' Special Boat Service (SBS), which are both controlled by the Director of Special Forces.

The United States currently has the largest special forces community, which is scattered around the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps and various federal and state police forces. Not surprisingly, in comparison to those of other countries, US special forces have huge budgets and their facilities are positively lavish, particularly where weapons, equipment and transportation are concerned.

Close Relationships

There is a close relationship between many special forces units, who realize that they face many common problems. For example, while each hostage-rescue situation will have its own unique characteristics, there will always be some common complexities and dangers, and it is clear that sharing knowledge and experience will be of mutual value. Thus, it is known that forces like the Australian, British and New Zealand SAS have a very close relationship with each other and each also has ties with the US Special Forces Operational Detachment - Delta. Similarly, the British Special Boat Service (SBS) and the US SEALs are close. There are also bilateral relationships between the larger units and most of the smaller special forces units, which is of particular value in the training field, as it enables the smaller units to gain access to facilities which they are not able to afford themselves. There have been several reports that relations between Israeli SF and some of their counterparts in Western Europe were cool in the 1980s and 1990s; it is not clear what caused this but it seems to have been overcome.

The Future

There can be no doubt that the great majority of countries will continue to maintain the units described in these pages. Indeed, as the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 show, the threat is steadily increasing rather than diminishing. This will call for units which are not necessarily larger, although most could benefit from an increase in strength, but which are more versatile and even better trained, because only then will they be able to outfight the terrorists, as well as to take a full part in warlike operations.

**Spectacularly illustrated details
of the world's major special forces,
including expert analysis of their
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