LOST IN TRANSLATION?

ASSESSING THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE SKILLS AND CULTURAL AWARENESS IN SPECIAL FORCES ADVISORY EFFORTS

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Abstract

One of the most vexing security challenges of the post-Cold War era has been how to stabilize failing states in an era of irregular warfare. A consistent component of the formula to address that problem has been for intervening powers to apply the salve of security force assistance. While there exists a considerable body of theoretical and empirical literature that address the macro-level of such programs, there is almost no research that covers the micro-level of those efforts. This dissertation explores that level across five case studies, examining *under what conditions have U.S. Army Special Forces been successful in building a combat effective partner force?* More specifically, it assesses the impact of five components of Special Forces advisory missions towards the creation of host nation units: language training and cultural awareness of the advising force, the partner force to advisor ratio, the advisors' ability to organize host nation forces, whether they are permitted to advise in combat, and the consistency in advisor pairing.

Based on the experiences of U.S. Army Special Forces in El Salvador (1981-1991), Colombia (2002-2016), the Philippines (2001-2015), Iraq (2003-2011), and Afghanistan (2007-2019), this study argues that the most crucial factors in producing combat effective partners are consistency in advisor pairing and maintaining a partner force to advisor ratio of an ODA (Special Forces Detachment of 12 soldiers) advising a company sized force or smaller. Counter to conventional wisdom, there is little evidence to indicate that combat advising is decisive in producing effective partners and conflicting evidence that language training and cultural awareness is important. Many of these findings, while focused on Special Forces operations and doctrine, have relevance and applicability to larger security force assistance missions.

Dedication

To the fallen of the Special Forces Regiment who gave the last full measure of devotion to our country

Acknowledgments

I am eternally grateful for the support, guidance, and mentorship of my dissertation panel: Professor Richard Shultz, Chair, Professor Abi Linnington, and Colonel Pat Howell. They consistently pushed me to ask and answer difficult questions and to make this dissertation better through their thought provoking questions and discussions. The value that there is in this study is a direct result of their dedication to pedagogy, scholarship, research, and perhaps most importantly, clear and concise writing.

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A friend once described writing a dissertation as walking through the desert for a thousand years by yourself. While the first part of that statement is certainly true (or at least it certainly felt like it), the second part is not accurate, or at least it was not for me. I was incredibly fortunate to have a veritable army of friends that helped me brainstorm, find sources, reviewed my draft chapters, kept me (mostly) sane, and sometimes talked me down from the proverbial ledge. While it would be impossible to list them all here, it would be negligent of me not to highlight Karst Brandsma, Stefan Tschauko, Jeremy Gwinn, Zoltan Feher, Scott McDonald, Meg Guliford, Lara Enien, Julie Zollmann, and Sarah Detzner.

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List of Abbreviations

AFEU *Agrupación de Fuerzas Especiales Anti-Terroristas Urbanas* (Urban Anti-terrorist Special Forces Group).

AFP Armed Forces of the Philippines

AFRICOM U.S. Africa Command

AFSOC U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command

AGLAN *Agrupación de Lanceros* (Lancero Group)

ALP Afghan Local Police

ANA Afghan National Army

ANASF Afghan National Army Special Forces

ANASOC Afghan National Army Special Operations Command

AOB advanced operational base (usually a SF company)

AOR area of responsibility

AQ *Al Qa'ida*

AQI *Al Qa'ida* in Iraq

ARMM Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao

ARSOF U.S. Army special operations forces

ASG Abu Sayyaf Group

BACOA *Batallón de Comandos Ambroseo Almaeda* (Ambroseo Almaeda Commando Battalion)

BDE brigade

BG Brigadier General

BIAP Baghdad International Airport

BIFF Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters

BIRI *Batallones de Infantería de Reacción Inmediata*

BN battalion

C2 command and control

CA civil affairs

CASEVAC casualty evacuation

CCOPE *Comando Conjunto de Operaciones Especiales* (Joint Special Operations Command)

CCOES *Commando Conjunto de Operaciones Especiales* (Joint Special Operations Command)

CDO commando

CENTCOM Central Command

CFSOCC-A Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command-Afghanistan

CIA Central Intelligence Agency (U.S.)

CIF CINC's in-extremis Force

CJSOTF Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force

CJSTOF-A Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force Afghanistan

CJSTOF-AP Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force Arabian Peninsula

CMO civil–military operations

COESE *Comando de Operaciones Especiales del Ejercito* (Colombian Army Special Operations Command)

COL Colonel

COLMIL Colombian Military

COLSOF Colombian SOF

CPA Coalition Provisional Authority

CSAR combat search and rescue

CSM Command Sergeant Major

CT counterterrorism

CTC Counterterrorism Command (Iraq)

CTC Commando Training Center (Afghanistan)

CTS Counterterrorism Service (Iraq)

Det detachment

DoD U.S. Department of Defense

EastMinCom Eastern Mindanao Command

EIFC Embassy Intelligence Fusion Center

ELN *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Army of Colombia)

ESAF El Salvadoran Armed Forces

EUCOM European Command

FARC *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)

FBI Federal Bureau of Investigation

FMLN *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front)

FOB Forward Operating Base

FWD forward

FY fiscal year

GAO *Grupos Armados Organizados* (Organized Armed Groups)

GCC Geographic Combatant Command

GEN General

GHQ general headquarters

GRP Government of the Republic of the Philippines

GWOT Global War on Terrorism

HQ headquarters

HMMWV High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle

HSP Human Subject Protections

HUMINT human intelligence

HVT High Value Target

ICTF Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Force

IED Improvised Explosive Device

IMINT imagery intelligence

INCTF-TT Iraqi National Counterterrorism Force Transition Team

IO information operations

IPSP Internal Peace and Security Plan

ISF Iraqi Security Forces

ISAF International Security Assistance Force

ISIL Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

ISIS Islamic State in Iraq and Shams (Syria/Levant)

ISOF Iraqi Special Operations Forces

ISR intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance

J-2 intelligence directorate

J-3 operations directorate

JAM *Jaysh Al Mahdi*

JCET Joint Combined Exchange Training

JI *Jemaah Islamiyah*

JITF-M Joint Intelligence Task Force—Mindanao

JOA Joint Operations Area

JSOAD Joint Special Operations Air Detachment

JSOG Joint Special Operations Group

JSOTF Joint Special Operations Task Force

JSOTF-P Joint Special Operations Task Force—Philippines

JTF Joint Task Force

JUSMAG Joint U.S. Military Assistance Group

LCE liaison coordination element

LEGAT Legal Attaché

LNO Liaison Officer

LRB Light Reaction Battalion

LRC Light Reaction Company

LRR Light Reaction Regiment

LTC Lieutenant Colonel

LTG Lieutenant General

MAJ Major

MEDCAP medical civic action program

MEDEVAC medical evacuation

MG Major General

MILF Moro Islamic Liberation Front

MILGP U.S. Military Group (Colombia)

MILGRP Military Advisor Group (El Salvador)

MNLF Moro National Liberation Front

MSG Master Sergeant

MSOT U.S. Marine Corps special operations team

MTT Mobile Training Team

NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NAVSOG Naval Special Operations Group

NCO Noncommissioned Officer

NDAA National Defense Authorization Act

NPA New People's Army

NSPD National Security Presidential Directive

NSW Naval Special Warfare

NVG Night-Vision Goggles

ODA Operational Detachment—Alpha (SF Team)

ODB Operational Detachment—Bravo (SF Company)

OEF Operation Enduring Freedom

OEF-P Operation Enduring Freedom—Philippines

OFS Operation Freedom's Sentinel

OIF Operation Iraqi Freedom

OIFT Operations and Intelligence Fusion Team

OPATT Operational Planning and Assistance Training Team

OTC Operator Training Course (for ICTF)

PA Philippine Army

PAF Philippine Air Force

PAT U.S. Pacific Command Augmentation Team

PATT Planning and Assistance Advisory Team

PCC *Partido Communista Colombiano* (Colombian Communist Party)

PGM precision guided munition

PLT platoon

PNP Philippine National Police

PSF Philippine Security Forces

PSYOP psychological operations

QRF quick-reaction force

ROE rules of engagement

SDO senior defense officer

SEAL Sea, Air, and Land

SF Special Forces

SFARTEC Special Forces Advanced Reconnaissance, Target Analysis, and Exploitation Techniques Course

SFC Sergeant First Class

SFG Special Forces Group

SFR Special Forces Regiment

SGM Sergeant Major

SIGINT signals intelligence

SOCOM Special Operations Command

SOCCENT Special Operations Command, Central

SOCPAC Special Operations Command, Pacific

SOCSOUTH Special Operations Command, South

SOTIC Special Operations Target Interdiction Course

SOUTHCOM U.S. Southern Command

SOF special operations forces

SOTF special operations task force

SOUTHCOM U.S. Southern Command

SRR scout ranger regiment

SSE sensitive site exploitation

SWCS Special Warfare Center and School

TDY temporary duty

TF task force

TSOC Theater Special Operations Command

UAV unmanned aerial vehicle

USAID U.S. Agency for International Development

USAJFKSWCS U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School

USARSO U.S. Army South

USASFC U.S. Army Special Forces Command

USASOC U.S. Army Special Operations Command

USPACOM U.S. Pacific Command

USSOCOM U.S. Special Operations Command

USSOUTHCOM U.S. Southern Command

VETCAP veterinary civic action program

VFA visiting-forces agreement

VSO Village Stability Operations

WestMinCom Western Mindanao Command

CHAPTER 1: Introduction, Literature Review, and Methodology

Introduction

The Puzzle of Language and Special Forces Advisory Missions

Since the end of the Cold War theorists have postulated that warfare has changed fundamentally, with the era of nation state against nation sate conflict ebbing, only to be replaced by a series of internal wars and "wars amongst the people."[1] As nation states struggle with this new security paradigm, a critical component of the prescription for these challenges has been strengthening the capabilities of states afflicted with these internal challenges, especially their governmental and military functions. Security Force Assistance (hereafter SFA), defined by the U.S. Department of Defense as "activities that support the development of the capacity and capability of foreign security forces and their supporting institutions,"[2] has been the cornerstone of the U.S. effort to buttress allied and partner force militaries. These efforts have been driven by the nature of the new security environment, by economic constraints, and by the casualty averse nature of many Western militaries in conflicts that are not seen as existential threats. Some theories argue that SFA should be a critical component of U.S. defense strategy because local security solutions, such as those forged through SFA, are thought to be more lasting and effective in the long run. In addition, as the long periods of large-scale interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan ended, SFA was seen as an efficient way to remain engaged in the world.[3] Others have noted that SFA is an integral portion of security sector reform, which is posited as essential

[1] Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*, Reprint edition (New York: Vintage, 2008), 5-6, 18-20.
[2] Joint and U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-20, Security Cooperation* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2017).
[3] Querine Hanlon and Richard H. Shultz, *Prioritizing Security Sector Reform: A New U.S. Approach* (Washington, D.C: United States Institute of Peace, 2016), 3–4.

to any type of donor engagement in war-torn countries and a tool to protect and promote the liberal order.[4]

The U.S. Army's Special Forces (SF), informally known as the Green Berets for their distinctive headgear and considered to be among the best military trainers in the world, have been at the forefront of that SFA mission.[5] Millions of dollars are spent annually to train these soldiers in language skills and cultural awareness, and they are regionally oriented throughout their careers to focus on one part of the world in order to maintain those perishable skills.[6] At times, that regional orientation was seen as sacrosanct, resulting in some groups deploying overseas significantly more often than others. Yet during America's post 9/11 wars, Special Forces soldiers have been in such high demand that they frequently deployed outside their normal regional orientation.

This mismatch between these soldier's linguistic and cultural skill sets and the countries where they deployed to conduct SFA has created somewhat of a puzzle. In Afghanistan, Special Forces soldiers whose regional skills and languages matched Africa and Latin America, as well as other regions to a lesser extent, were able to produce the most capable partner force in the country, the Afghan Commandos. In Iraq, less than half of the Special Forces trainers were oriented toward the Middle East with most of the remainder oriented towards Europe. Despite that, their partner force, the Iraqi Special Operations Forces, came to be known as among the best military forces in the Middle East and were instrumental in the defeat of the Islamic State in

[4] Mark Sedra, *Security Sector Reform in Conflict-Affected Countries: The Evolution of a Model*, 1st edition (Routledge, 2018), 20–23, 102–5.
[5] Robert D. Kaplan, *Imperial Grunts: The American Military on the Ground* (New York: Random House, 2005),40-42.
[6] Department of the Army, *Field Manual 3-05.20, Special Forces Operations* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 2011), 3–26. USSOCOM was budgeted for $51 million for language training in FY 2020 source: Department of Defense, *Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 Budget Estimates Operation and Maintenance, Defense-Wide United States Special Operations Command* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2020), TF36.

Iraq and Syria (ISIS).[7] Shifted from crisis to crisis, those Iraqi commandos fought in Tikrit in June 2014, then in Ramadi from November 2014 until May 2015, Fallujah in June 2016, and finally Mosul from October 2016 until July 2017. They also fought as the premier Iraqi partner force during the toughest battles of the American occupation: Tel Afr in 2005, Ramadi in 2006, Mosul in 2007, and Basrah in 2008.[8]

In other locations, there has been a clearer match between the regional orientation of the SF trainers and the host nation forces they advised: the Philippines, Colombia, and El Salvador. For each of these cases there was a direct match between language skills and cultural expertise. Yet in El Salvador and the Philippines, the consensus is that the Special Forces advisors improved their partner force marginally.[9] Such uneven performance begs the question as to why the U.S. continues to put considerable emphasis on regional orientation for its Special Forces troops and raises the issue of what are the key factors that cause SFA success at the unit level.

Even as the U.S. pivots to great power competition, there remains considerable interest in the importance of regional orientation and language training for Special Forces Groups. At the national level, there are questions regarding the role of Special Forces in irregular or unconventional warfare in peer to near peer competition.[10] The Irregular Warfare Annex of the National Defense Strategy of 2019 noted that the U.S. would preemptively conduct irregular warfare "as a means to help expand the competitive space, defeat our adversaries' competitive

[7] David Witty, *Iraq's Post 2014 Counter-Terrorism Service* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018), 1–2, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus157-Witty-2.pdf.
[8] Michael Knights and Alex Mello, "The Best Thing America Built in Iraq: Iraq´s Counter-Terrorism Service and the Long War Against Militancy," *War on the Rocks*, July 19, 2017, 4, https://warontherocks.com/2017/07/the-best-thing-america-built-in-iraq-iraqs-counter-terrorism-service-and-the-long-war-against-militancy/.
[9] Robert D. Ramsey, *Advising Indigenous Forces: American Advisors in Korea, Vietnam, and El Salvador* (Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2012), 101–3.
[10] Barnett S. Koven, "Competing with Great Powers through Competitive Strategy and Unconventional Warfare," *Special Operations Journal* 7, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 68–86, https://doi.org/10.1080/23296151.2021.1905227.

strategies, and set the globe for transition to crisis."[11] At the tactical level, the debate hinges both on whether language training is still relevant, given technological advancements and the perceived shift in Special Forces missions towards more direct-action operations (raids, ambushes, and kill/capture missions) as well as what level of language skills are necessary and appropriate to meet the needs of future Special Forces missions.[12] Although this study focuses on SFA and counterinsurgency, there are some relevant points on working with host nation forces and the importance of language training and cultural awareness that have applicability to unconventional and irregular warfare.

Primary Research Question

This dissertation seeks to explore that mystery, which is currently a gap in existing scholarship. There is considerable scholarship covering SFA, but almost all of it is at the nation state level or at the institutional level, such as a ministry of defense or interior. Almost none of the literature is focused on the tactical level explaining what factors affect why an SFA effort with one military unit outperforms the SFA effort with another unit and there is no peer-reviewed scholarship which considers the impact of language and cultural awareness. Therefore, the central question of this research is what factors best explain *under what conditions have U.S. Army Special Forces been successful in building a combat effective partner force?* Because the variety of existing theories fails to properly explain this tactical level question, I will propose and test a new theory called concentrated and sustained partnership. This new theory argues that the most critical elements in producing a combat effective SOF partner force is sustained partnership

[11] Eric Robinson, "The Missing, Irregular Half of Great Power Competition," Modern War Institute, September 8, 2020, https://mwi.usma.edu/the-missing-irregular-half-of-great-power-competition/.
[12] Tim Ball, "Talking the Talk: Language Capabilities for U.S. Army Special Forces," *War on the Rocks*, May 26, 2021, https://warontherocks.com/2021/05/talking-the-talk-language-capabilities-for-u-s-army-special-forces/.

with the same advisors consistently being paired with the same host nation forces in a partner force to advisor ratio that pairs an ODA with a company or fewer soldiers.

Literature Review

Introduction to the Literature and Existing Theories

This dissertation falls at the intersection of several different theoretical and intellectual schools: military effectiveness, military assistance, principal agent theory, counterinsurgency, military culture, and security sector reform. There is also a diverse set of first-person memoirs that recount the historical events associated with some of the missions as well as provide lessons learned for practitioners. While many of these theories provide building blocks to help explain the conditions under which Special Forces soldiers successfully construct combat effective partners, because most are focused on the macro-scale, there is a considerable gap in unit level SFA scholarly literature.

My dissertation advances two core arguments. First, I contend that there are a limited number of theories to help explain what factors contribute to whether an SFA mission is successful. For this dissertation I will examine the principal agent theory, the most prominent military assistance theories, and security sector reform literature. Second, I will assert that because all the current theories are primarily focused on the macro or nation state level, none offers a complete micro level explanation of what factors affect whether a particular Special Forces mission is successful in building a combat effective partner force. Therefore, this dissertation contributes to the current literature by advancing a micro-level theory of SFA known as concentrated and sustained partnership. This theory, a new and unique theory that I have created, argues that the most critical elements to producing a combat effective SOF partner force

is sustained partnership with the same advisors consistently being paired with the same host nation forces in a partner force to advisor ratio that pairs an ODA with a company or fewer soldiers. While nearly all the current SFA theory explores variables from the top down, there is considerable value in a theory that assesses SFA from the bottom up.

Principal Agent Theory

Principal agent theory originated as an economic concept but was rapidly adapted to a variety of other fields. It holds that an agent (or subordinate) in a firm or organization will make decisions that were less optimal than if he or she were the owner of the firm (the principal) because that agent is making decisions that are more optimal for himself or herself rather than for the objectives of the principal.[13] An imbalance in information usually gives the agent an advantage over the principal, as they often have greater access to the data required to assess whether or not they are meeting the principal's expectations. While the principal can structure the incentives for the agent to achieve their goals, such as additional funds, more training, or more support, it is often in the best interest of the agent to conceal the true status of those goals in order to achieve as many of the incentives possible that the principal offers with minimal effort. In essence, the objectives of those in the agent group have the greatest impact on the outcome because they are most able to control information and regulate their own group objectives and how hard they work toward them (which often do not match those of the principal).[14] Dambisa Moyo applied the theory to foreign aid, noting that as the amount of aid

[13] Michael C Jensen and Meckling, William H., "Theory of the Firm: Managerial Behavior, Agency Costs and Ownership Structure," *Journal of Financial Economics* V. 3, No. 4 (October 1976): 2–3.
[14] Mark Bovens, Robert E. Goodin, and Thomas Schillemans, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Public Accountability*, Reprint edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 90–93, 95–97.

increased it often led to increased corruption; an objective inverse what the principal intended, but often meeting the goals of the agents in power in the state receiving aid.[15]

In terms of security force assistance, principal agent theory was revised to reflect the divergence in interests that occurs between the country receiving assistance (the agent) and the country providing assistance, noting that it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for the donor country to achieve its objectives unless those objectives were also in concert with the objectives of the recipient. Case studies at the macro-level, such as Stephen Biddle, Julia MacDonald, and Ryan Baker's *Small Footprint, Small Payoff*, have applied the theory to the coalition security force assistance efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan noting that such efforts often fail unless they are both highly intrusive and conditional. The authors note that principal agent theory reflects the information and power disparity between an SFA donor and the recipient, and that such assistance efforts are very difficult because their very structure promotes large agency losses for the SFA donor.[16] The study also noted that most of the agents that needed SFA faced a determined insurgency, in part driven by issues of legitimacy, corruption, and other shortcomings of the agent- reflecting the principal/agent mismatch in objectives.[17] In *Assessing War*, Leo Blanken, Hy Rothstein, and Jason Lepore emphasize that because the objectives of the principal and agent are rarely congruous, the agent has a considerable incentive to control and

[15] Dambisa Moyo and Niall Ferguson, *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa*, Reprint edition (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 52–56.
[16] Stephen Biddle, Julia Macdonald, and Ryan Baker, "Small Footprint, Small Payoff: The Military Effectiveness of Security Force Assistance," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, no. 1–2 (February 23, 2018): 94–95, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2017.1307745.
[17] Biddle, Macdonald, and Baker, 97.

distort information. Because of this, it is extremely difficult for the principal to be able to accurately assess the effectiveness of their SFA efforts.[18]

Although principal agent theory is effective at helping to understand the inherent challenges of SFA and the donor/agent relationship, it does not explain why some units are able to overcome those barriers and become militarily effective. Indeed, while principal agent theory appears to lack an academic competitor that challenges it at the strategic level, it has considerable limitations at the tactical level. The theory fails to explain why there are variations in capability and effectiveness between different host nation units in the same country. It also implies that there is little the advisory force can do to change the outcome because the overall result is driven by how much of the principal's and agent's objectives are in alignment. In such a situation, the agent's aims are the driving force.

Practitioners are most concerned with determining what policy tools can be used to affect the outcome, even slightly. Does the quality of advisors matter? Or is the raw fiscal amount of military assistance more important? How long does a typical advisory mission last before it begins to show results? None of these questions are answered by principal agent theory. Principal agent theory also has a larger and more important concern: even if it is correct, uniformed services that have effective civil military relations in established democracies like the U.S. usually do not get to decide where and under what conditions they will be conducting advisory missions. Instead, it is much more likely that they will be ordered to a location by their elected civilian authorities where the conditions are not ideal, and they have will have to make

[18] Leo J. Blanken, Hy Rothstein, and Jason J. Lepore, eds., *Assessing War: The Challenge of Measuring Success and Failure* (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2015), 10–12.

the best of it. Principal agent theory does not help with concrete recommendations for that situation- it merely helps to recommend cases the principal should avoid.

Military Assistance Theories

While there is a variety of literature on military assistance, most is policy oriented based on non-academic reviews of lessons learned from military advisory efforts. Duncan Clarke, Daniel O'Connor, and Jason Ellis provide an example of this in their *Send Guns and Money: Security Assistance and U.S. Foreign Policy* where they call for structural reform within the executive and legislative branches to update security assistance from Cold War vestiges.[19] There are several, however, that are more academically oriented that include fully formed social science theories.

In *Building Militaries in Fragile States,* Mara Karlin argues that only two key variables are required to predict whether a security force assistance effort will be successful: the nature of U.S. involvement and the role of unhelpful external actors.[20] If the U.S. becomes deeply involved in their client's internal military affairs and there are few effects from unhelpful regional actors who aim to undermine those efforts, the overall program is likely to be successful. William Mott provides a different perspective on the criteria needed for successful SFA in *Military Assistance: An Operational Perspective*. He argues that four basic elements can predict success: the level of convergence in donor and recipient objectives, degree of donor control over resources transferred, whether donor combat forces are committed, and the whether

[19] Duncan L. Clarke, Jason D. Ellis, and Daniel B. O'Connor, *Send Guns and Money: Security Assistance and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1997), 192–94.
[20] Mara E. Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 2–3.

the donor military assistance is part of an integrated approach to foreign policy, military strategy, and economic policy.[21]

While both studies serve as useful primers on national-level decision-making that can help assess whether to become involved in an SFA operation, they do not help make micro-level assessments as to what makes one unit level advisory effort more likely to be successful than another. Because of their focus, they do not address important variables such as whether advisors are allowed to combat advise host nation forces and the consistency of advisor to trainee pairing. Even in the nation state level cases that Karlin assesses as failures, there are individual units that performed superbly. In Iraq, the clearest case is of the Iraqi Special Operations Forces, whose relative success is the subject of one of this dissertations' case studies. Similarly, while the larger security force assistance effort in Afghanistan is rightly judged to be a failure, individual units such as the Afghan Commandos, also a case study in this dissertation, proved to be highly capable in comparison to other Afghan units. Indeed, during the 2015 summer offensive fewer than two thousand Taliban fighters routed nearly five thousand Afghan Government forces, whose wholesale destruction was only prevented by the timely arrival of Afghan Commandos and their Special Forces advisors.[22] It is that gap in the literature, of what factors affect SFA efforts at the individual unit level, that this dissertation will answer.

The only peer reviewed assessment of micro-level SFA that I am aware of comes in Joseph Felter's chapter on post 9/11 operations in the Philippines included in Dan Reiter's *The Sword's Other Edge*. In Felter's view, a counterinsurgent force is effective if it has quality leadership, superior training and doctrine, and is allowed to operate with decentralized command

[21] William H. Mott IV, *Military Assistance: An Operational Perspective* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1999), 21–25.
[22] Carter Malkasian, "How the Good War Went Bad," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020

and control. He rates these criteria using Philippine Government data, a potentially problematic factor, by comparing the number of insurgents killed, the number of government soldiers killed, and the number of civilians killed in collateral damage.[23] While Felter addresses one of my case studies and provides interesting information with regards to a potential measurement of effectiveness, it does not answer my research question of what factors on the part of Special Forces trainers affecting the quality of the outcome in the units they build and train. Furthermore, while Felter's focus is at the micro level, his theory does not focus on the individual unit level. Instead, it compares general categories of units: special operations, regular, and local as part of its assessment.

Security Sector Reform

There is a plethora of literature on security sector reform, especially considering the policy community's efforts to address that challenge during the nation building efforts of the 1990s and the post 9/11 era. One category explores the topic from the viewpoint of case study comparisons across several countries. Derek Reveron's *Exporting Security* highlights the changed nature of the security environment and argues that it requires adjustments in U.S. military doctrine, training, and strategic focus that would prioritize security cooperation instead of more traditional military warfighting roles.[24] Querine Hanlon and Richard Shultz's *Prioritizing Security Sector Reform* offers concrete recommendations to holistically improve U.S. efforts, including creating an interagency hub to provide enhanced oversight, guidance, and leadership so as to ensure that the host nation government operates under the rule of law and

[23] Dan Reiter, ed., *The Sword's Other Edge: Trade-Offs in the Pursuit of Military Effectiveness* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 140–47.
[24] Derek S. Reveron, *Exporting Security: International Engagement, Security Cooperation, and the Changing Face of the US Military*, Second edition (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016), 11–13.

democratic principles.[25] Keith Mines' *Why Nation Building Matters* argues that the global security environment has been significantly altered since the end of the Cold War, and that rather than face nation states in global conflagrations like World War II, the U.S. and its allies' greatest security challenge for the near future will come from failed and fragile states. He argues security sector reform is a critical component of the appropriate strategy to address this challenge, but that newly created civilian agencies should take the lead on an effort that combines all elements of national power- especially diplomatic and economic.[26]

Another category addresses security sector reform at the nation state level, studying the massive post 9/11 efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Nora Bensahel, Terrence Kelly, and Olga Oliker follow the pattern of assessing SFA at the national level in their book *Security Force Assistance in Afghanistan*. They conclude that SFA in Afghanistan has been haphazard, with few in stride assessments to determine what has worked and what has not, and that different donor nations have applied different policies in the regions or ministries where they have SFA efforts.[27] National level defense reform within the U.S. is warranted, they argue, to improve SFA efforts in future missions. Anthony Cordesman studies security sector reform in Iraq in his book, *Iraqi Security Forces: A Strategy for Success*, and concludes that the U.S. has a moral and strategic responsibility to provide the necessary resources to produce capable security forces. To achieve that end he calls for an integrated whole of government strategy, balancing police development with military forces, emphasizing quality over quantity, and providing commitment

[25] Querine Hanlon, Richard H. Shultz, and Jr, *Prioritizing Security Sector Reform: A New U.S. Approach* (Washington, D.C: United States Institute of Peace, 2016), 235–241.
[26] Keith W. Mines, *Why Nation-Building Matters: Political Consolidation, Building Security Forces, and Economic Development in Failed and Fragile States*, Illustrated edition (Lincoln: Potomac Books, 2020), xiv, 317–26.
[27] Terrence K. Kelly, Nora Bensahel, and Olga Oliker, *Security Force Assistance in Afghanistan: Identifying Lessons for Future Efforts* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2011), xvi–xviii.

for an extended time as true reform takes decades, not years.[28] While all of these provide important policy recommendations on how to make macro-level improvements, they do not focus on providing a micro-level perspective on what factors contribute to successful security force assistance missions. The literature of security sector reform contributes greatly to the strategic and operational discussion at the nation state level, but like military assistance literature it has gaps at the tactical level.

First Person Memoirs

The is a large set of anecdotal memoirs within the larger pool of SFA literature. While many are hagiographic or filled with tales of adventure and excitement in seemingly an effort to sell books, others provide a useful series of lessons learned from the perspective of advisors who performed the mission firsthand. Many are from the British advisory experience, ranging from the oft quoted but less read T.E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* to Special Air Service Officer John Akehurst's recounting of his mission advising government forces in Oman, *We Won a War*. Both note the importance of having advisors that can culturally connect with the host nation forces, and Akehurst cites the fact that government forces were seen as fighting against an atheistic communist insurgent force greatly helped their efforts.

Some are from the U.S. experience in Vietnam, including Bing West's *The Village*, where he recounts his experiences on a Marine Combined Action Platoon which paired fifteen infantrymen with a South Vietnamese village of several thousand. West's account is iconic in American military circles and his experiences helped inform the SFA effort in Iraq. David Donovan's *Once a Warrior King* covers similar experiences with Vietnamese militia forces, only

[28] Anthony H. Cordesman, *Iraqi Security Forces: A Strategy for Success*, 1st edition (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2005), 332–41.

from an Army perspective. For a perspective on advising conventional South Vietnamese Army forces, Robert Amon's *Rice Roots* provides valuable insight.

The recent Iraq and Afghan wars, each with its own extensive effort to produce combat effective domestic security forces, have produced a literary explosion of memoirs. There are narratives from reserve forces, Steven Clay's *Iroquois Warriors in Iraq*, active-duty army forces, Joshua Potter's *American Advisors*, and Special Forces, Rusty Bradley's *Lions of Kandahar* and Frank Antenori's *Roughneck Nine-One*. Not to be outdone, the Marine effort, while smaller than the Army's, birthed multiple books: Wesley Gray's *Embedded*, William Souza's *U.S. Military Advisors*, and even a memoir (*The Snake Eaters*) from Bing West's son, Owen, who advised Iraqi Army soldiers.

Despite the range and anecdotal value of the literature of SFA memoirs, none of these tactical level perspectives are academic. While they can provide valuable individual insight as primary sources, their observations are in isolation. They are not comparative and do not include efforts to counter bias or include appropriate methodology to make scholarly conclusions. This dissertation aims to fill some of these gaps identified in the current literature of SFA whether they be memoirs, macro level studies of security sector reform and military assistance, or gaps in principal agent theory.

Defining the Research Question: The Dependent Variable

Defining military effectiveness, the core of the dependent variable, has been a challenge since the dawn of warfare and military officers, political leaders, their staffs, and theorists have struggled with determining what makes one organization or army effective while another is not. Much of the literature is focused on the macro or nation-state level, such as Kenneth Pollack's

Armies of Sand, Caitlin Talmadge's *The Dictator's Army*, Allen Millet's *Military Effectiveness*, or Stephen Biddle's *Military Power*. Others, such as Ryan Grauer's *Commanding Military Power* or Richard Betts's *Military Readiness*, cloak the concept of effectiveness in other terminology, but still focus on the same question: what makes one military force (or paramilitary) more capable than another. Due to the significance of the question, there is seemingly no end to conflicting answers. John Nagl and Austin Long approach the question of effectiveness from the counterinsurgency perspective, arguing it requires different elements to be effective than conventional warfare.

Pollack argues that culture is central to military effectiveness, using it to explain why Arab armies have performed so poorly during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Poor civil-military relations and underdevelopment are also important factors; but the key cultural concepts of conformity, centralization of authority, deference to that authority, manipulation of information and atomization of knowledge ultimately impeded Arab armies' combat effectiveness.[29] Talmadge also addresses the importance of culture, focusing on the impacts that non-democratic states have on their militaries. She argues that such states' military culture is often oriented more on coup protection rather than on conventional war, with a negative impact on effectiveness. Talmadge identifies four areas where these differences occur: in promotions, training, command, and information management.[30] While her work offers superb explanations at the macro level, it does not address tactical level differences within the same state. Biddle posits that proper force employment requires reducing friendly exposure to modern firepower

[29] Kenneth M. Pollack, *Armies of Sand: The Past, Present, and Future of Arab Military Effectiveness* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 33–35, 371-387. Pollack's *Armies of Sand* is a refinement of an argument he began in his book *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness 1948-1991,* originally published in 2004.
[30] Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes*, 1st edition (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 4–8.

while maximizing it on the enemy. Although technology, material capabilities and gross resources are important, understanding how to properly employ those forces through doctrine and training are the true determinants of military effectiveness.[31]

Millet contends that effectiveness springs from a military force having a mixture of skills at several critical levels of operations: political, strategic, operational, and tactical.[32] Grauer, acknowledging the importance (even omnipotence) of Clausewitzian friction in combat, proposes the command structure theory to explain military effectiveness. For him, how armed forces manage information and uncertainty on the battlefield is the single greatest correlator to combat effectiveness.[33] Betts, writing to an America just emerging from years of Cold War struggles, focuses on how a demobilizing U.S. military can maintain its effectiveness against peer and near peer- competitors. He argues that training and sustainment are key components of effectiveness but also notes that military force must balance an ability to deploy quickly with combat capabilities to provide true readiness.[34]

In *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, John Nagl contends military effectiveness, especially in the conduct of counterinsurgency- which is the fundamental challenge host nation forces face in each of my case studies- requires armies to be learning organizations capable of adapting to the changing nature of warfare.[35] Austin Long's *The Soul of Armies* takes this thesis

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[31] Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle*,(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 190–91.
[32] Allan R. Millett, Williamson Murray, and Kenneth H. Watman, "The Effectiveness of Military Organizations," *International Security* 11, no. 1 (1986): 38, https://doi.org/10.2307/2538875.
[33] Ryan Grauer, *Commanding Military Power: Organizing for Victory and Defeat on the Battlefield* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 3–7.
[34] Richard K. Betts, *Military Readiness: Concepts, Choices, Consequences* (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 1995), 37–40. Betts uses the term major regional contingency in place of peer or near-peer competitors, but in practice the countries that he uses are peers or near peers, therefore making the updated terminology more useful.
[35] John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, 1st edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 9–11.

one step farther, noting that military organizations by their very nature are resistant to the necessary change required to be learning organizations and adapt. Barring the external intervention of politicians who perceive a particular insurgency as a threat to the state, military organizations are unlikely to change quickly enough to adapt to be effective in counterinsurgency warfare.[36] Unfortunately, each of these constructs offers little help in providing a stand-alone assessment of military effectiveness within the nation state at the micro level for units fighting irregular conflicts against guerrillas, terrorists, and insurgents.

Instead, to assess military effectiveness at the micro, or unit level, which is the dependent variable of this study, it is more appropriate to rely on the literature of counterinsurgency. Since their creation as an organization in the 1950s, U.S. Army Special Forces have been oriented on irregular warfare and counterinsurgency. That history is reflected in the fact that each of the case studies for this dissertation involves SF support to host nation forces conducting a counterinsurgency campaign. In each case, the SF advisors are not training the host nation army to be prepared to meet the army of another nation state on the field of battle. Instead, they are preparing elite forces to fight guerrillas, terrorists, and insurgents in irregular warfare. It is, therefore, appropriate to use key theoretical elements from counterinsurgency literature to help define what constitutes success in building a combat effective partner force that will be used in a counterinsurgency operation.

Using counterinsurgency literature as a basis, I will define a combat effective force as a unit that is capable of: 1) fighting without advisors present 2) fighting at night 3) conducting multi-day combat operations, and 4) consistently defeating enemy forces in combat.

[36] Austin Long, *The Soul of Armies*, 1st edition (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), 9–12.

The first three components focus on important military proficiencies and skills in the conduct of counterinsurgency, while the final assesses performance and the outcome of combat. Including both factors ensures that an assessment of the partner force reflects the challenges of measuring combat performance where one unit could be highly trained but faces an extremely skilled enemy that is difficult to defeat while a unit in another country could be only marginally trained but faces an inept enemy that is easier to defeat. By including both capability and performance, the assessment of effectiveness is more balanced holistically.

Fighting without advisors as a criterion for success seems almost self-evident, as most advisors deem that their objective is to work themselves out of a job eventually. Indeed, the U.S. counterinsurgency manual describes the final phase of such operations as a "movement to self-sufficiency."[37] Counterinsurgency theorists also posit that this movement to self-sufficiency reflects a need to minimize and eventually eliminate foreign intervention, which itself is thought to be a potential driver of the insurgency.[38] The Army's manual on Security Force Assistance deems it as so essential that it emphasizes the goal of independently operating host nation forces no less than eleven times.[39]

For a host nation force to fight independently, it would have to possess a set of key skills including gathering intelligence, planning, and then executing operations independently. Defined another way, partner forces should be able to conduct intelligence driven operations where the unit generates its own organic intelligence that produces targets or mission sets, plans

[37] Department of the Army, *Field Manual 3-24 Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2006), 5–2.
[38] David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*, 1st edition (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2009), 37–38.
[39] Department of the Army, *Field Manual 3-07.1: Security Force Assistance:* (Washington, D.C: Department of the Army, 2011).

a mission based on that intelligence, conducts the operation, and then processes intelligence garnered from that target to generate additional new targets. This operational cycle was named F3EAD by U.S. special operations forces during the post 9/11 wars, with the letters of the acronym identifying the different phases of the cycle: finding, fixing, then finishing the enemy, exploiting intelligence recovered from the target, analyzing that information, and then disseminating that information to begin the cycle again.[40] In a way, F3EAD is the pinnacle of intelligence driven operations as the units which are capable of conducting such operations can seize the initiative by conducting operations that kill or capture insurgent leaders and personnel faster than they can be replaced and trained. Such operations get within the decision cycle of the enemy, preventing the guerrillas from being able to react to the speed at which government forces can strike. In Iraq, General Stanley McChrystal pioneered this strategy, and it has been copied extensively by other U.S. and allied forces.[41] Therefore, to assess whether a partner force is truly capable of fighting without advisors, it must be able to conduct the F3EAD intelligence driven operations cycle without U.S. advisors present.[42]

Defining the second element, fighting at night, is much easier. Fighting at night simply means that the military organization can continue to conduct combat operations at night, with or without technological equipment such as night vision devices. Many military experts argue that this skill is a key differentiator for military effectiveness, especially in counterinsurgency operations where guerrilla forces often move and conduct operations at night. Roger Trinquier in his counterinsurgency opus, *Modern Warfare*, deemed it central- noting that "except in rare

[40] Richard H. Shultz Jr and Joseph L. Votel, *Transforming US Intelligence for Irregular War: Task Force 714 in Iraq*, Reprint edition (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020), 109–11, 125–31.
[41] Stanley McChrystal, *My Share of the Task: A Memoir*, Illustrated edition (New York, NY: Portfolio, 2014), 153–57.
[42] The importance of F3EAD is not constrained to the COIN/CT fight, and those skills are critical in conventional combat as part of a proper decision cycle. However, F3EAD in COIN/CT is emphasized here due to those being the basis of this study.

cases of emergency" missions should be carried out under the cover of darkness to gain surprise and minimize civilian casualties.[43] The Army and Marine Corps manual on counterinsurgency is replete with calls for the counterinsurgency force to conduct operations at night,[44] and the Joint manual echoes its importance.[45]

The third element, conducting multi-day combat operations, is relatively easy to measure through reviewing unit histories and assessing whether the organization was involved in sustained combat for at least three consecutive days. However, it requires some explanation for why it was selected. Being able to fight for multiple days implies that a military organization has several key characteristics: that the force is proficient in logistics and has the unit cohesion to be able to take casualties and keep fighting.

Logistics has long been considered an important component of military effectiveness, reflected in the adage "amateurs talk tactics, professionals talk logistics."[46] While having effective logistics does not guarantee success, inadequate and inept logistics can often doom otherwise successful operations. Millet reaffirms this importance in his work *The Effectiveness of Military Organizations*, noting that an ability to support operations logistically is one of the eight components to his measure of tactical effectiveness.[47] Martin van Creveld similarly touts the importance of logistics towards military effectiveness in his book, *Supplying War*.[48]

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[43] Roger Trinquier, *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency*, 1st edition (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2006), 45.
[44]Department of the Army, *Field Manual 3-24 Counterinsurgency*, 5–25, 6–15, A-4.
[45] U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-24 Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2018), II-24–25.
[46] The origins of this quote are unclear as it has been attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte, General Omar Bradley, and Commandant of the Marine Corps General Robert Barrow. Source: Barry Popik, "Blog Entry from June 19, 2019 'Amateurs Talk Strategy. Professionals Talk Logistics,'" accessed March 30, 2020, https://www.barrypopik.com/index.php/new_york_city/entry/amateurs_talk_strategy.
[47] Millett, Murray, and Watman, "The Effectiveness of Military Organizations," 68–69.
[48] Martin van Creveld, *Supplying War: Logistics From Wallenstein To Patton*, 2nd edition (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1–4.

Counterinsurgency operations are no different as they require military forces that can conduct food, ammunition, and fuel resupply in order to remain in contact with stealthy guerrillas and insurgents that are consistently or near-consistently on the move. Any unit can conduct a raid that lasts for an hour. Only units that are able to resupply themselves are able to fight for multiple days at a time. The chapter on assessments in the U.S. Army's Security Force Assistance Brigade techniques manual focuses extensively on the importance of logistics, noting that an advised host nation unit should not only be able to sustain themselves in combat after U.S. or coalition forces depart, but that unit should even be able to manage their own equipment throughout its lifecycle- from procurement to disposal.[49]

A good measure for the more nebulous term of multi-day combat is 72 hours, as few commando or special operations units could carry enough ammunition, food, and water to sustain themselves through that period of intense combat. Commando or special operations forces are generally light forces that travel by foot for many of their operations which means that their logistics is limited to what they can carry on their backs. While soldiers can often get by on less food for a short period of time, there are no shortcuts for the requirements of water and ammunition.[50] All the units in the selected case studies fall into this category of light or commando forces.

Cohesion is another critical component that enables a military force to conduct multi-day combat operations. It steels a unit to absorb casualties and keep fighting and is the sinew that holds a unit together under difficult conditions such as lack of sleep, long marches, and horrible

[49] U. S. Army, *Army Techniques Publication ATP 3-96.1: Security Force Assistance Brigade* (Independently published, 2020), 4–6 to 4–9.
[50] Lauren Fish and Paul Scharre, "The Soldier's Heavy Load" (Center for a New American Security, September 26, 2018), https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/the-soldiers-heavy-load-1.

conditions. Numerous scholars and practitioners have emphasized the importance of cohesion to military effectiveness, whether it be for conventional war or counterinsurgency. Theorists ranging from Lord Moran in *The Anatomy of Courage* to Carl von Clausewitz in *On War* to John Keegan in *The Face of Battle* have included it, in varying degrees, in their work.[51] Millet and Murray in *Military Effectiveness* and Jasen Castillo in *Endurance in War* note its general value in conflict,[52] while Anthony King in *On Combat Effectiveness of the Infantry Platoon* and Ben Connable in *The Will to Fight* discuss its importance in counterinsurgency and irregular warfare.[53] Connable provides an objective and detailed model on cohesion that identifies its key components: social cohesion and task cohesion and key subfactors that include vertical and horizontal cohesion. King, by contrast, notes that rather than group dynamics and interpersonal relations, cohesion is formed from challenging training and repetitive battle drills.[54] Regardless of the source of cohesion, there is considerable agreement among scholars of its importance to determining whether a unit is combat effective. Being able to carry on in sustained combat for at least 72 hours means that the unit has sufficient cohesion to not break in sustained combat, even in the face of casualties, running low on supplies, and witnessing evacuations of the wounded. Connable accurately describes the importance of this, noting that it is only when units are nearly

[51] Sir Charles Watson Lord Moran, *The Anatomy of Courage: The Classic WWI Study of the Psychological Effects of War*, 1st Carroll & Graf Ed edition (New York : Berkeley, Calif., Basic Books, 2007), 158–60, 171–74; Carl von Clausewitz, *On War, Indexed Edition*, trans. Michael Eliot Howard and Peter Paret, Revised ed. edition (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1989), 184–86.

[52] Jasen J. Castillo, *Endurance and War: The National Sources of Military Cohesion*, 1st edition (Stanford, California: Stanford Security Studies, 2014), 18, 39; Allan R. Millett, ed., *Military Effectiveness: Volume 1 The First World War New Edition*, 2nd edition (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1.

[53] Ben Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units* (RAND Corporation, 2018), 10–12, https://doi.org/10.7249/RR2341; Anthony King, "On Combat Effectiveness in the Infantry Platoon: Beyond the Primary Group Thesis," *Security Studies* 25, no. 4 (2016): 699–728, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2016.1220205.

[54] Anthony King, "On Combat Effectiveness in the Infantry Platoon: Beyond the Primary Group Thesis," *Security Studies* 25, no. 4 (2016): 700–702, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2016.1220205.

out of food and ammunition, exhausted, and under intense emotional and physical strain, that their true level of morale and cohesion can be measured.[55]

The final element, consistently defeating enemy forces in combat, is widely accepted as one of the basic building blocks to military effectiveness. This dissertation recognizes that even persistent defeat of insurgent forces in battle at the tactical level could still result in operational or strategic failure of the partner force.[56] Indeed, it has been noted that the annals of history are filled with cases where more effective militaries were defeated by less trained ones but had more industrial might or manpower (Germany and the Soviet Union in World War II being a prime example).[57] Yet without tactical battlefield success, it is impossible to achieve progress in other fields critical to success in counterinsurgency. Victory on the battlefield buys time for political reconciliation, economic development, and civil society to build, as well as other important elements necessary for strategic success.

Galula notes this requirement by observing, "Above all, we must loose the guerrilla's hold on the population by systematically destroying his combat organization."[58] From the guerrilla's perspective, Mao Zedong emphasized that insurgents should avoid decisive battle at all cost to avoid being destroyed-even calling on his forces to withdraw when faced by a superior enemy.[59] Therefore, if a counterinsurgent force can force a guerrilla element into combat and defeat them, they are challenging core principles of guerrilla strategy and effectiveness.

[55] Connable et al., *Will to Fight*, 47.
[56] Department of the Army, *Field Manual 3-24 Counterinsurgency*, 1–28.
[57] Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army*, 5.
[58] David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, New edition (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006), 64.
[59] Mao Tse-tung and Samuel B. Griffith, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, 2nd Revised ed. edition (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 73. 77-78.

Some scholars, such as Joseph Felter, have focused on a quantitative measure to assess this element, using insurgent losses, government casualties, and civilians killed in collateral damage to assess performance in battle.[60] Felter's method, while noteworthy and groundbreaking, has a set of important challenges. It is problematic for its parallels to the inadequate Vietnam War body count and has methodological issues with data accuracy, source, and obtainability. First, most of the qualitative data that he uses were provided by Philippine government forces, which are sources that have considerable risk for bias from a variety of angles. Second, relying purely on a quantitative assessment does not provide insight into whether the unit's missions have the intended effect. Such was the problem with the Vietnam War body count, which was contemporaneously used to show progress as it increased, but in actuality provided no true assessment towards that end. If I am able to find a source that indicates what the enemy believed about the assessed SOF element in each case, I will use that as a basis due to the objectivity associated with such an evaluation. However, if I cannot locate such assessments, as they are often rarely available, I will subjectively make an assessment based on primary and secondary sources.

Such a model also has other challenges. It would be highly unlikely that I could obtain similar data sets from the case studies that are included in this dissertation. Even if they were available at the macro level (as Felter uses), it would be even less likely that they would be available at the micro-level (such as for each unit which I will study). Instead, I will use a qualitative subjective assessment of combat performance against the enemy over the span of time of the advisory effort. Components of that assessment will include share of engagements won,

[60] Reiter, *The Sword's Other Edge*, 141–48.

correct intelligence targeting (colloquially known as jackpot ratios), and whether insurgent leaders were killed or captured.

Overall Assessment of Combat Effectiveness

Each of these four components of the dependent variable will be assessed on an ordered scale: not capable, limited or low capability, moderate capability, and fully capable. To determine the overall assessment of the dependent variable, defined as the degree of combat effectiveness of the partner force, the value of the four sub-elements will be qualitatively assessed together in a holistic fashion, creating a five-outcome ordered variable (low, low moderate, moderate, high moderate, and high combat effectiveness). Rather than to try to aggregate those variables together, after analyzing and assessing each component variable separately, I will then synthesize and assess them together and then make subjective assessment of what overall capability those component variables create when put together.[61]

It is important to reiterate that this assessment is not evaluating the overall success of the larger mission or whether U.S. policy goals have been met at the strategic or macro-level. Instead, I am measuring only the tactical level combat effectiveness of the partner force unit in each case study as there are important lessons to be learned from such a micro-study that have been previously unexplored. In this study, there will be cases where the overall strategic mission was a profound failure and U.S. policy objectives- including constructing capable host nation security forces- were not met. Still, at the same time, we were able to build an effective special

[61] I am highly qualified to make such a subjective evaluation based on my previous experience in Special Forces and as an Army officer. I served 26 years in the Army and 20 in Special Forces working with various host nation forces in Iraq, Kosovo, and Kuwait as well as with Jordanian and Emirati soldiers. For those skills, I was selected to be the sole Special Forces representative to help write the U.S. Army's official operational level history of the Iraq War. Those experiences help me to be able to use the Delphic method to accurately assess and code both the component variable effectiveness assessment as well as the overall effectiveness.

operations partner force at the tactical level. That paradox lies at the heart of what I will be exploring.

Hypotheses and Methodology

Introduction to the Hypotheses

My research will assess the effectiveness and appropriateness of existing SFA theories, showing that each theory fails to account for one or more important micro-level factors in explaining why a SFA mission is effective. More importantly, it will test the effects of five of those missing factors on whether a particular SF advisory mission was able to build a combat effective partner force: language training and cultural awareness, consistency of advisor pairing, partner force to advisor ratio, ability of advisors to organize the host nation units, and ability to combat advise host nation forces. My hypotheses will focus on these five factors which I believe help determine whether a Special Forces advisory mission is successful. Together those five factors will be considered through the lens of a new proposed theory, "concentrated and sustained partnership."

H1: Language Training and Cultural Awareness: the success of U.S. Army Special Forces in building combat effective partners is directly related to whether the language training and cultural awareness skills of the advisors match the region where they are deployed.

Conventional wisdom is that we would expect there to be a direct correlation between language training and cultural awareness of advisory forces and the likelihood of producing a combat effective partner force unit. The famous Lawrence of Arabia even dictated as his second "commandment" that an advisor should learn all they can about the culture and family groups that they will work with and must learn the local dialects of the language they will speak rather

than the broader language itself.[62] Yet the question of the impact of language and culture is at the core mystery that this dissertation seeks to explore. At least at first blush, it appears that the generally accepted importance of language training and cultural awareness is incorrect so I will test the importance of that commonly held belief.

In this hypothesis, I will evaluate the impact of whether the SF advisors have the language skills and regional orientation that matches the host nation forces they are advising. Because each of the five active duty Special Forces groups is regionally oriented, that orientation (and its associated language skills) will be the basis for this assessment.[63] If multiple groups have contributed to a particular advisory mission, I will compute the amount of time there was a matching orientation and compare it to the amount of time that there was not, creating a variation for this variable of high, moderate, or no match in language skills and cultural awareness.

It is important to note that this variable is not assessing the value of language training and cultural awareness, per se, as there is likely some inherent value gained from such skills towards the conduct of SFA in the form of patience, general cultural sensitivity, and cross-cultural communications skills. Nor will this variable be exploring the language qualification criteria or statistics of the various organizations, which themselves are subjective and unlikely to be made available. Rather this variable assesses the impact of a match or mismatch in the language skills and cultural awareness of the SF units with the missions they are assigned, as reflected in each case study. Whether and how much, for example, 7th Special Forces Group, the Latin American

[62] Robert D. Ramsey, *Advice for Advisors: Suggestions and Observations from Lawrence to the Present*, Global War on Terrorism Occasional Paper 19 (Fort Leavenworth, Kan: Combat Studies Inst. Press, 2006), 3.
[63] A Special Forces Group (around 1,500 people) is made up of three or four battalions, each with three companies of six teams (or Operational Detachment Alphas). Each Group is regionally oriented and all of their subordinate elements reflect that same orientation. Russell Howard, *Cultural and Linguistic Skills Acquisition for Special Forces: Necessity, Acceleration, and Potential Alternatives* (Tampa, FL: Joint Special Operations University, 2011), xiii.

oriented unit, was assigned to the mission in El Salvador. That question lies at the heart of pre-9/11 Special Forces operational employment, which rigidly enforced the assignment of the regionally assigned SF group to missions in the appropriate Geographic Combatant Command (GCC). Such orthodoxy often resulted in an imbalance of deployments, where some groups had challenging deployment to dwell ratios while others were less employed. Because that convention of inflexible regional alignment is becoming *en vogue* again among SF leaders, it is important to study the logic behind the original decision. The notion of regional alignment is also being implemented by the conventional Army as part of its new force generation model, giving even more impetus to study the underlying assumptions about such a policy.[64]

The genesis of this variable is at the very core of SF identity and origin. When Special Forces were first stood up in the 1950s, they were patterned on "Jedburgh" teams within the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) because many of the founding fathers of SF had served in those teams during World War II. Those teams were designed to be parachuted into German or Japanese occupied territory to organize, train, and equip partisan forces. As such, those teams had a language requirement that was carried over to SF when it was formed.[65] Although the language requirement has not changed, soon after the geographic combatant commands (GCCs) were stood up as a result of the Goldwater-Nichols defense reforms and SF became institutionalized as a branch, each SF group was affiliated with one of the GCCs and its soldiers trained in languages specific to that region. 7th Special Forces Group, for example, was oriented towards SOUTHCOM, and its members learned Spanish and Portuguese (Brazilian). Since then,

[64] Kyle Rempfer, "New Force Generation Model Aims to Regionally Align Army Units, Give Troops Predictability," *Army Times*, October 19, 2020, https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2020/10/14/new-force-generation-model-aims-to-regionally-align-army-units-give-troops-predictability/.
[65] Tim Ball, "Talking the Talk."

considerable funds have been spent on building and maintaining those capabilities and deploying the groups within their assigned regions. At times, that conventional wisdom has been debated, but there has not been a systemic dissertation level study to assess the impact of the regional alignment of language training and cultural awareness on the effectiveness of the partner force.[66] This study aims to fill that gap.

H2: Consistency of Advisor Pairing: Special Forces advisory missions are more likely to successfully build a combat effective partner force if there is consistency in pairing the same advisors with the same host nation forces across the span of the advisory effort.

Due to the length of most SF advisory efforts, it is impossible to deploy the same personnel for the entire length of the mission. Soldiers have to rest and recover, and other missions and training compete for each unit's available deployment time. The challenges of the global nature of America's post 9/11 wars put intense pressure on this variable as there was an almost insatiable demand for SF units. However, by either luck or design, some advisory efforts had the same set of advisors return to train the same partner forces multiple times across the duration of the mission.[67] I hypothesize that this added familiarity between advisor and advisee builds cohesion and trust and reduces the startup time as missions restart, thereby increasing the likelihood that the mission produces an effective partner force. This variable can be assessed by reviewing records of which units and individuals were paired with the host nation force being advised and will have a gradient ranging from high, moderate, and low consistency.

[66] Philip A Buswell, "Keeping Special Forces Special: Regional Proficiency in Special Forces" (Monterey, CA, Naval Postgraduate School, 2011); Robert R. Greene Sands, *Assessing Special Operations Forces Language, Region, and Culture Needs: Leveraging Digital and LRC Learning to Reroute the "Roadmap" from Human Terrain to Human Domain* (MacDill Air Force Base, Fl.: The JSOU Press, 2016).

[67] Austin Long et al., *Building Special Operations Partnerships in Afghanistan and Beyond: Challenges and Best Practices from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Colombia* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2015), 89.

There is a general informal conventional wisdom that consistency is an important in SF advisory missions. Proponents of the position note that it creates interpersonal bonds with the advised force and can lead to long term relationships that can pay dividends. Anecdotal references from personal memoirs almost always include discussions of those relationships and highlight their importance.[68] Similarly, U.S. professional military education pairs resident U.S. officers with foreign officers for a similar purpose. Despite this considerable amount of support for the position, there has been very little academic study of the topic, and the limited studies that do include consistency as a topic do not assess its relationship to the combat effectiveness of the partner force.[69]

H3: Partner Force to Advisor Ratio: Special Forces advisory missions are more likely to succeed in building a combat effective partner force if the partner force to advisor ratio is lower.

This variable assesses another element of Special Forces orthodoxy. According to U.S. military doctrine, the appropriate advisor ratio is that one Special Forces detachment of 12 soldiers should be paired with a battalion of host nation forces (roughly 600-900 soldiers), which equates to a ratio of 60 or 75 to 1.[70] That ratio has varied significantly across the missions studied in this dissertation with some advisory efforts pairing one detachment with a host nation company (100 or so soldiers) and others pairing detachments, or even parts of detachments, with

[68] Memoir style example of this include Rusty Bradley and Kevin Maurer, *Lions of Kandahar: The Story of a Fight Against All Odds*, 1st edition (New York: Bantam, 2011); Frank Antenori and Hans Halberstadt, *Roughneck Nine-One: The Extraordinary Story of a Special Forces A-Team at War*, 1st edition (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006).
[69] Long et al., *Building Special Operations Partnerships in Afghanistan and Beyond*, 80–81, 88–89. RAND signifies the importance of the variable, but does not assess its relationship to combat effectiveness of the partner force and does not specifically address it as a variable across multiple cases.
[70] Department of the Army, *Field Manual 3-05.20, Special Forces Operations* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2011), 3–30.

brigades (2,500 to 3,000 soldiers). Those ratios can be quantitatively calculated for each mission and normalized over time. I hypothesize that similar to the importance of student to teacher ratios deemed to be a factor in education, when the partner force to advisor ratio is lower the SF advisory effort will have a greater likelihood in succeeding. Such a lower ratio could be a factor in ensuring each advisor has time to train each trainee and in making personal connections to build trust and cohesion.

The generation of this variable is U.S. doctrine. As noted, SF doctrine since its inception has held that an ODA trained a battalion of host nation forces. However, there is some debate whether that ratio is reflective of applicability in unconventional warfare (UW) or SFA or FID, with various proponents arguing that different mission sets require higher or lower ratios. Furthermore, across SF history, the doctrinal standard of an ODA training a battalion has not been inviolable and the ratios have varied wildly based on national priorities, force caps, and manpower challenges.[71] This variable aims to explore what the impact is of varying the ratio, a topic that has parallels to the intense debate in the field of public and private education.[72]

H4: Ability to Organize Host Nation Units: Special Forces advisory missions are more likely to succeed in building a combat effective partner force if the host nation allows the advisors to organize the units being trained.

A consistent challenge in advisory missions has been the sovereignty trap, where despite the best efforts of foreign advisors, host nation forces are not willing to make changes that could

[71] Buswell, "Keeping Special Forces Special: Regional Proficiency in Special Forces"; Fletcher Schoen, "Reorganization Is Imperative to Fixing Special Forces' Bent Unconventional Culture," *Small Wars Journal*, June 29, 2015, https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/reorganization-is-imperative-to-fixing-special-forces%E2%80%99-bent-unconventional-culture.

[72] Matthew M. Chingos and Grover J. "Russ" Whitehurst, "Class Size: What Research Says and What It Means for State Policy," *Brookings* (blog), November 30, 1AD, https://www.brookings.edu/research/class-size-what-research-says-and-what-it-means-for-state-policy/.

be beneficial to the combat effectiveness of their forces. Different theorists at the macro level have explained this challenge to originate from diverging goals between the advisors and host nation in the principal agent theory while others such as Douglass North, John Wallis and Barry Weingast in their *Violence and Social Orders* have posited that it is how the prevalent social structures of the host nation maintain their power and strata.[73] This dissertation will not attempt to explore the cause of the divergence, but will explore the impact of the divergence, if one is present.

That impact will be qualitatively assessed based on whether host nation forces allow the Special Forces advisors to organize the forces which they train. For the purposes of this dissertation, organizing will be defined as the degree to which host nation forces implement recommendations of SF advisors. Those recommendations would include personnel, force structure, equipping, and employment decisions. Personnel decisions comprise the selection, promotion, and replacement, if necessary, of host nation leaders as well as the selection and pay process for the unit's soldiers. Decisions regarding force structure and equipping address how the unit is organized and for what purpose and are also a component for consideration whether the SF advisors have been allowed to organize host nation forces. Employment decisions include command and control structures for the units and tactical decisions such as how the units were used.

Although the scale of how much advisors are allowed to organize host nation units is likely to change over the duration of a mission, it is still possible to qualitatively normalize that over time and to assess the degree to which they were able to make changes. The degree to

[73] Douglass C. North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry R. Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History*, Reprint edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 18–26.

which SF advisors can organize host nation forces reflects both the degree of sovereignty that the host nation is willing to cede to American advisors, as well as the amount of rapport or trust which they can establish with their partners. In some cases, such as in Iraq and Afghanistan, regime change led to what was effectively a "re-boot" of the nation's military forces, giving foreign powers nearly carte-blanche to organize the units being trained as sovereignty issues were ignored. Other cases had more traditional advisor/trainee relationships affected by national sovereignty where SF soldiers had to build rapport to get the host nation to implement their recommendations.

Even within the broad divisions of regime change or not, there are considerable variations, for SF troops in Iraq appear to have had more license to reform their partner force than those in Afghanistan and the SF soldiers in Colombia had more success in organizing their partner force than those in El Salvador. Furthermore, within a single case the degree to which the host nation imposes its sovereignty over organizational decisions often changes over time. For example, early in the Iraq and Afghanistan missions, SF advisors had little resistance to their recommendations. However, as each country became more and more independent issues of sovereignty began to loom large and efforts to organize host nation forces came to resemble those in cases with established nation states. To reflect the range of resistance or support to change, this variable will be measured by three possible outcomes: high, moderate, or low ability of the SF advisors to organize the host nation forces.

I hypothesize that this variable contributes to effectiveness because it is at the core of the advisor/trainee relationship. Whether or not the students are receptive to what is being taught and recommended directly affects whether they implement the necessary changes to be combat effective. Although SF advisors are not all knowing and some recommendations could be

flawed, they have been invited by host nation forces and allowed to stay because the government of those forces sees value in the advisory effort. Therefore, qualitatively assessing how much change the advisors can affect provides a useful measure, as the more lessons they imbue, the greater the progress towards combat effectiveness.

It is worthwhile to note that although there has been a good amount of exploration of why there is a divergence between the goals of the principal and the agent, there has been little scholarly agreement on the impact of that divergence, and when it is assessed, it has nearly universally been at the macro-level. One school of thought holds that if the host nation or aid recipient simply allowed the foreign power to make the necessary changes, then their condition would improve. But because there are elements within society, government, or military that would suffer if those changes were made, such as through reducing corruption, those elements will not allow the change to occur.[74] A second group posits that for success to occur, there must be buy in from the host nation and that imposing external solutions will only last as long as the foreign power is contributing boots on the ground and money into the central bank.[75] This variable explores that debate at the tactical level, which has previously not been assessed.

H5: Ability to Combat Advise Host Nation Forces: Special Forces advisory missions are more likely to succeed in building a combat effective partner force if they are allowed to combat advise their partners.

[74] This premise of PA theory and its application to SFA are well explained in Biddle, Macdonald, and Baker, "Small Footprint, Small Payoff."

[75] For a good overview of this debate see Robert Tollast, "SOF, COIN, and the Question of Host Nation Viability: An Interview with Dick Couch," *Small Wars Journal*, July 1, 2013, https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/sof-coin-and-the-question-of-host-nation-viability-an-interview-with-dick-couch.

For this hypothesis, the variable of combat advising is defined as whether the Special Forces soldiers are allowed to accompany their host nation partners into battle within small arms range of the enemy and allowed to engage them with their individual weapons. The variable is not binary, but instead will be rated on a spectrum to reflect the different authorities (and interpretations of those authorities) that occurred across the history of each advisory effort.

In some cases, either due to national sovereignty issues, legal issues, or risk-avoidance, Special Forces advisors were prohibited from accompanying their partners on combat missions. In such situations, the advisors trained their soldiers at remote bases, usually (but not always) out of the danger of direct conflict. Once they completed their training, the host nation forces conducted combat missions on their own without American forces accompanying them. In the other extreme, the advisors trained their partner force and then accompanied them into combat, continuing their advisory efforts by fighting in battle shoulder to shoulder with host nation forces. In between those two extremes exist many different possibilities of the degree of risk that American leadership was willing to take and amount of sovereignty the host nation was prepared to cede. For example, in some cases, U.S. advisors could deploy with the host nation forces on the combat mission but had to wait at the last covered and concealed location while their partners engaged in fighting. Such conditions would allow advisors to observe most of the mission, and at times would result in them accidentally observing their partners in combat. Because of this variance, this will be an ordered variable with a rating of high, medium, or low degree of combat advising measured by how close to combat American forces were permitted and what actions they were allowed to take.

There is also a general conventional wisdom among SF soldiers that combat advising should be the ultimate aim for SFA or FID missions. Many SF leaders look back longingly at

the Vietnam War as the ultimate example of what can be accomplished by SF soldiers when allowed to fight shoulder to shoulder with their host nation partners. As such, there is a near continuous push to obtain more and more authorities for SF advisory efforts- to be able to move them to as close to the sound of the guns as possible. Even studies of advising in general terms tend to highlight the importance.[76] William Mott's treatise on military assistance directly links whether the donor nation is willing to commit combat troops to assist as a criterion for strategic level success, but it does not parse how many of those troops should be in advisory roles or conducting supporting combat operations.[77] However, there is scant evidence that anyone has ever tested the hypothesis of the importance of combat advising, and the majority of SF missions in gross numbers have been associated with missions where there are restrictions that prevent advisors from directly engaging in combat. More specifically, the relationship of combat advising to producing a tactical level partner is a topic that has not been addressed which this study intends to resolve.

Research Design/Methodology

My dissertation is a qualitative study that aims to develop a theory about what variables affect whether a Special Forces advisory mission can build a combat effective partner force. To achieve that end, I will use a multiple-case research design of structured and focused case studies, a technique particularly effective in developing generalizations about decision-making (in this study, about Special Forces SFA missions). Following the procedure outlined by Alexander George, I will outline the research objective, identify the elements (conditions and variables) involved in the study, select appropriate cases, hypothesize causal patterns, and

[76] John Dryer, "A Brief History of the Military Advising Mission," *Small Wars Journal*, May 20, 2018, https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/brief-history-military-advising-mission.
[77] Mott, *Military Assistance*, 21–25.

describe the questions to be asked of each case in the comparison.[78] Proper case selection requires that they be similar enough to provide a basis of comparison, but also have enough differences to ensure variance in the independent and dependent variables. The cases selected meet the requirement for such variation.

One advantage of this method is that a small number of cases (five in this dissertation) allows each one to be studied in an extremely detailed manner to understand the impact of the various independent variables on the dependent variable. At the same time, because all the cases focus on one organization, the U.S. Army's Special Forces in the conduct of one specific mission: building combat effective partner forces, it limits the problem of excessive differences between cases and allows me to study the subject chronologically. This also minimizes the number of causal explanations and effects that emerge, making it easier to determine the real causal relationship.[79] Furthermore, in-depth case study analysis facilitates the challenges of complex causality, which I believe is a factor in this research question as well as the cases studied.[80]

For within-case analysis, I will use the method of process tracing to scrutinize each SF operation and assess the different independent variables that could affect whether it produced a combat effective partner force. Process tracing helps identify causes and mechanisms that lead to that outcome by tracking how it was shaped, triggered, and affected by internal and external

[78] Alexander L. George, "Case Studies and Theory Development: The Method of Structured, Focused Comparison," in Paul Gordon Lauren, *Diplomacy: New Approaches in History, Theory, and Policy*, 1st Edition (New York: Free Press, 1979), 54–56.
[79] Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science*, 1st edition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 68–69.
[80] Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods,* 3rd edition (Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2002), 14, 24.

factors.[81] It uses an approach that assesses "the probative value of evidence relative to competing explanations" rather than simply the number of pieces of evidence.[82] It is an appropriate method because each case selected provides a set of causal stories that follow chains of cause-effect relations and a clear sequence of events that can be tracked, studied, and assessed. Special Forces units are prepared for a specific regional orientation, then deployed to an SFA mission where they train their host nation partners, and then redeploy after the mission (when I will assess whether they have been successful). Process tracing is also useful for theory testing and building, both of which are components of this dissertation.

Case Selection

To properly scope the study, I will only focus on cases that involve U.S. Army Special Forces training a partner force that qualifies as a special operations, elite, or commando unit that was created during the time of the advisory effort. Although studying SF advisory efforts with police or paramilitaries (such Village Stability Operations in Afghanistan or the Sons of Iraq or Hillah SWAT) would have great merit, those cases will fall outside the scope of my research and would create methodological problems in variation. Similarly, to compare like cases, I will not be studying any missions that involved U.S. Special Forces training conventional partner forces or surrogates in unconventional warfare. While there could be some debate on the semantics of what constitutes an elite, special operations, or commando partner force, in practicality there are often clear delineations in partner force armies between those forces and other units. Such elite units usually receive more training and greater budgets, and their makeup is composed more of volunteers rather than conscripts. Focusing on these

[81] Andrew Bennett & Jeffrey T. Checkel, *Process Tracing* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 10.
[82] Bennett and Checkel, 126–27.

forces reduces variance in the quality of the host nation forces, a factor which would likely affect the outcome of whether after training they were combat effective or not.

To further add consistency, in each case I will be studying host nation elite units that were stood up through U.S. assistance in situations of insurgency. This study explores units that were built in the middle of conflict- an inherently challenging task- and designed to fight against guerrillas and insurgents. The units I study are not being organized in the context of unconventional warfare to engage a conventional military force, such as against ISIS in Syria, or in the context of preparation to fight against another conventional foe. Because the pressures of combat affect all elements of the construction and employment of SOF units, it would not be fair to compare a unit built under such conditions with one built during peacetime.

Organizations that had been in existence before the advisory effort began are excluded from the study. By limiting this study to units that were directly formed by, with, and through U.S. Special Forces advisory missions, it limits a number of variables from the host nation that could affect whether a unit was combat effective at the end of its training. It would not be reasonable, for example, to compare an elite unit in one country that had been in existence for a decade with considerable combat experience with an elite unit in another unit that had just been stood up from scratch. Therefore, I intend to study the following cases:

- **7th Special Forces Group in El Salvador (1981-1992).** In the final decade of the Cold War, the Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush Administrations ordered soldiers from the Latin American regionally oriented 7th Special Forces Group to assist El Salvador against a communist insurgency. Recognizing that sending Special Forces troops to train conscripts would be an exercise in futility, elite units named BIRIs (*Batallones de Infantería de*

Reacción Inmediata, translated as Immediate Reaction Infantry Battalions) were stood up to meet the demands of the counterinsurgency environment.

Due to a combination of Congressional opposition and sovereignty concerns from El Salvador, only 55 advisors were permitted in country at one time, resulting in an extremely high partner force to advisor ratio.[83] Still feeling the effects of the Vietnam War and a national reluctance to become deeply involved in another nation's internal conflict, the U.S. national leadership forbade SF advisors from accompanying their partners into combat. This case allows me to test the impact of a very high partner force to advisor ratio, which is a situation in contravention of conventional wisdom. Because of the constraint of such a low force cap of advisors, this case provides considerable variation in that variable from other cases.

- **7th Special Forces Group in Colombia (2000-2015)** In the late 1990s, U.S. Special Operations Command proposed an extended advisory mission in Colombia to help government forces combat insurgents and support U.S. objectives as part of the war on drugs. Two elite forces, the BACOA (*Batallón de Comandos Ambroseo Almaeda*, translated as Ambrose Almaeda Commando Battalion) and AGLAN (*Agrupación de Lanceros*, translated as Lancero Grouping) would be created as part of the advisory effort to provide Colombia with new military capabilities. After the 9/11 attacks, the justification of the mission shifted to take advantage of anti-terrorism funds, and the Special Forces advisory mission continued.

  When the mission began, a significant number of forces were allocated to the effort as it was considered the mission most closely related to combat at the time. Those initially low

[83] Andrew J. Bacevich et al., *American Military Policy in Small Wars: The Case of El Salvador: Special Report, 1988* (Washington DC: Pergamon Press, 1988), 22–23.

ratios were increased as a byproduct of other global commitments after 9/11 and the Colombian government prohibited U.S. forces from assisting its military in direct combat action.[84] The stark change in the partner force to advisor ratio caused by those commitments (namely the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan) presents the possibility of conducting a case within a case comparison. While there was a correct regional pairing between the advisors and their partner forces, I hypothesize that other factors were more relevant to the outcome of the creation of effective Colombian elite forces.

- **1st Special Forces Group in the Philippines (2001-2015)**. Before the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. offered to help build an elite counterterrorism force for the Philippines and an advisory effort led by the regionally aligned 1st Special Forces Group stood up a new organization named the Light Reaction Company. Immediately after the 9/11 attacks, the advisor footprint grew significantly as both nations cooperated to combat Abu Sayyaf militants and other violent extremist organizations on the island of Mindanao. Authorities were expanded and additional resources flowed into the theater as it the operation became part of President George W. Bush's Global War on Terrorism and was named Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines.

  By 2005, however, demands from the Afghan and Iraqi theaters drew 1st Group soldiers out of their assigned region and the footprint in the Philippines waned considerably. Despite such fluctuations, domestic recognition of the value of the Light Reaction Company led to calls for expanding Filipino special operations forces. Over the span of the mission, SF advisors helped stand up eight additional companies, building a complete regiment as well as a special operations headquarters. Philippine law prevented U.S. forces from engaging in

[84] Mark Moyar, Hector Pagan, and Wil R. Griego, *Persistent Engagement in Colombia* (Tampa, FL: Joint Special Operations University, 2019), 32–36.

combat, and other global commitments kept the footprint of deployed soldiers relatively small, especially in comparison to Iraq and Afghanistan.[85]

- **5th and 10th Special Forces Groups in Iraq (2003-2011)** Iraq would normally fall under the responsibility of 5th Special Forces Group, which is regionally oriented to the Middle East. Because of the substantial troop requirements for the mission, 10th Group, which is normally oriented on Europe, was assigned to assist 5th Group in the standing up of the Iraqi Special Operations Forces. Even that troop commitment proved unequal to the task, and over time every Special Forces Group contributed to the advisory effort. Considerable resources were put against the mission with ratios approaching one advisor for ten to twelve Iraqi commandos, and those advisors directly accompanied their partners into combat.[86]

  After the decapitation of Saddam Hussein's regime, American SF troops had nearly carte blanche abilities to construct the unit as they wished. Such control over the organization of the unit only ebbed late in the mission as Iraq began to assert more and more independence and sovereignty. Even though less than half of the forces supporting the mission were regionally oriented, it is universally considered a success as the Iraqi Special Operations Forces were the only Iraqi combat forces that were able to hold off the advance of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria as it marched towards Baghdad in 2014.

- **3rd and 7th Special Forces Groups in Afghanistan (2007-2019)** With 5th Special Forces Group, the unit which normally would have responsibility for Afghanistan, committed to Iraq, two groups that had neither language training nor cultural connections to Central Asia

[85] Linda Robinson, Patrick Johnston, and Gillian Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001--2014* (Washington DC: RAND Corporation, 2016), xi–xvi, https://doi.org/10.7249/RR1236.
[86] Long et al., *Building Special Operations Partnerships in Afghanistan and Beyond*, 48–49.

were assigned instead. While 3rd and 7th Special Forces Groups provided most forces to the advisory mission in Afghanistan, as the war in Iraq drew down, the commitment of special operations forces to Afghanistan increased. As such, like in Iraq, every active-duty Special Forces group and some of the National Guard groups contributed forces.

Applying many of the lessons from the creation of the Iraqi Special Operations Forces, U.S. Special Forces advisors built similar organizations known as Afghan Commandos. Partner force to advisor ratios were low, troops accompanied Afghans on combat missions, and the advisors had a considerable say in the construction and organization of the unit. Within Afghanistan, the Commandos were universally regarded as an extremely capable force, conducting a vast majority of the offensive operations led by government forces.[87]

Controlling for Biases

One potential source of error is endogeneity or omitted variable bias, a particular challenge for small comparative case studies. Omitted variable bias only occurs when the omitted variable exerts a causal influence on both the explanatory variables of interest and the dependent variable.[88] This error can be minimized through proper selection of appropriate independent variables. By selecting five variables that address the most important factors associated with the success of Special Forces advisory missions, I aim to prevent omitted variable bias from occurring. While it would be nearly impossible to enumerate all the potential variables that I chose to not study, some of the choices I made are explained in the limitations of this study section of this chapter.

[87] Long et al., 38–40.
[88] Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1994), 169.

Another potential source of bias could come from case selection. To avoid this, I have selected cases that have considerable diversity. They vary temporally across the Cold War and the United States' post 9/11 wars, and also geographically and culturally. Additionally, they vary in other ways: in type of opposition faced by the host nation forces, the economic strength of the government (as measured by GDP), and on maturity of the host nation government (as defined by how long the government has existed in its current form). Significant differences also are present between the Iraq and Afghanistan cases, where the U.S. invaded and conducted regime change during named military operations with defense officials commanding the operation, and the other cases where the countries had sovereign national governments and a U.S. effort led by embassy officials. These differences result in variations in the dependent variable, which itself helps minimize bias.

To guard against bias in my primary sources, I will use multiple and varied sources of evidence, triangulating data as much as possible. Oral interviews will be conducted to include Special Forces soldiers of all ranks from each case study, as well as reviewing collections of interviews of the host nation soldiers being trained. By varying the ranks of the advisors and trainees, different perspectives will be obtained to help guard against a bias associated with more senior individuals who could desire to overstate their success. I will also interview military and civilian officials who had oversight of each mission to have a perspective outside of Special Forces and the host nation forces. When possible, I will interview host nation forces to have a perspective from the forces being trained. Lastly, I will also use primary source archival material, where available, to fact-check information and conclusions from the interviews I conduct.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

Using a comparative case study model guided by process tracing has considerable advantages in exploring a tactical level understanding of what factors contribute to the creation of combat effective partner special operations forces. The narrative technique qualitatively enables one to follow the inception, development, and progression of those forces over time and the impact of the decisions of their American SF advisors. However, such methodology also has limitations: some based on the choice of variables, and some based on the boundaries of the study's design itself.

The conditions and boundaries of the study affect its applicability. First and foremost, this is a study of advisory efforts conducted by U.S. Army Special Forces conducting SFA in major named operations amid an active insurgency where there is sustained and continuous presence.[89] Each of the cases lasted a decade or more and was a strategic priority for national decisionmakers. Such conditions are significantly different from the episodic security force assistance that Special Forces routinely provide across the globe where a handful of ODAs deploy intermittently under Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) or other authorities. Those conditions are also different from what advisors experience during unconventional warfare missions, where they work with militias or paramilitaries against conventional militaries to overthrow a government. As such, the conclusions from this study will not have as much direct applicability to those situations.

At the broader level, the study does not assess Foreign Internal Defense (FID) or SFA conducted by conventional U.S. forces such as regular army units, Military Transition Teams

[89] While it could potentially be considered that these were all major named combat operations, that would not technically be correct as U.S. forces were barred from conducting combat operations in the Philippines, Colombia, and El Salvador. The term "major named operations" does separate each of these cases from the smaller and more episodic advisory missions that SF forces participate in annually.

(MITTs), or Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs). It also is not a study on FID or SFA conducted by other U.S. special operations forces such as SEALs or Air Force Special Operations. While recognizing that it does not provide direct correlation, some of the broader lessons could potentially provide insight into those problems of standing up foreign militaries that have vexed the U.S. and its allies for much of the post 9/11 era.

Although most studies that use principal agent theory as their intellectual underpinning tend to include components of what the assisting nation and the host nation each contribute to SFA effectiveness, the undeniable focus of the theory resides on the host nation contribution. What their objectives are and whether they match the assisting and advising nation's objectives puts the host nation squarely in the driver's seat. This study reverses that focus, and while it includes variables related to the host nation, the focus is centered on the decisions of the advising and assisting nation, in this case the U.S.

That decision is deliberate. Focusing on the agent, or the host nation, does not address two important issues: first, the U.S. military, or any military with a proper civil military relationship, does not get to choose whether or where it will conduct advisory missions. If the nation's political leadership orders the military to deploy and conduct SFA, it has little choice in the matter. Under those conditions, factors such as micro level variables that could increase the odds to produce a combat effective partner force are critical. Each of those variables are ones that the advisors can directly affect through their decisions and actions. By contrast, macro level variables (such as culture or ethnic homogeneity of the host nation) are environmental factors that are beyond the control of Army Special Forces advisors, no matter what they do. For that reason, I have chosen to exclude them because they are not relevant to the core research question at hand. Second, even if models grounded in the principal agent theory conclude that conditions

are favorable at the macro level to produce a combat effective partner, if the training force does not conduct SFA and FID well at the micro level, the mission could still fail. The ratio of advisors to trainees, what is permitted with regards to combat advising, the consistency of advisor pairing and other critical choices on how to train and organize the partner force can lead to the failure of the overall mission even if the conditions appear to be promising.

Reversing the focus, shifting from the agent to the principal, is also currently significantly understudied. Most scholarly research has been logical offshoots of the principal agent theory, assessing its usefulness on other case studies and evaluating its components. While there is little doubt that the agent has a considerable impact on the results of an advisory mission, even at the tactical level, in many cases academic studies overlook the impacts from decisions made by the principal. This study explores that critical component of the equation and fill gaps in current scholarship.

Variable Selection

This study also has limitations based on what potential independent variables are not assessed as being critical components of creating combat effective SOF partners. The following section will provide a description of which potential variables I rejected, with an explanation of how likely the variable could have an impact on the outcome of a combat effective partner force or whether I considered it too difficult or outside the scope of this study to include. This section could provide avenues of opportunities for other scholars to expand upon or review and critique my work.

I considered using corruption as a variable, potentially employing the corruption perception index as a national level variable to explore the differences in its corrosive effects

between cases. However, because the variable is almost always calculated at the country, or macro-level, it fails to include critical micro level distinctions that are the foundation of my study. For example, using the index for Iraq places it as 160th of 180 nations in terms of transparency and incorruptibility.[90] Such broad-brush determinations do not account for critical micro-level differences in corruption that could help explain why one unit performs well and another does not. While an entire country could have a poor corruption rating, the specific unit being studied, as is the case with the ISOF, could have a reputation that far exceeds the country as a whole.

Similarly, I considered using culture as a qualitative variable, but rejected it for similar reasons. Defining culture and its nebulous impacts has been one of the most difficult and controversial challenges of social science. Even trying to group the two Latin American case studies together would be problematic as there are enough differences between El Salvadorans and Colombians as to make such a variable futile. Furthermore, even assuming that broad cultural characteristics could be assessed for each country involved in the case study, those macro-level assessments would likely be of little value at the micro, or unit level. This would be because there is no guarantee that the tactical level unit, which in some cases are made up of 100 or less soldiers, matches the culture of the larger unit. In many cases, the militaries of those nations have their own cultures, and the elite forces of those militaries often have their own subculture within the military culture. James Q. Wilson, in his book on bureaucracies, highlights how government organizations tend to develop their own cultures and subcultures.[91] A prime

[90] "Corruption Perceptions Index 2020 for Iraq," Transparency.org, accessed March 19, 2021, https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020.
[91] James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do And Why They Do It*, 1st edition (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1991), 179–85.

example is the polyglot Afghanistan, itself a mixture of cultures. Trying to use the culture of the country to explain differences between the Afghan Commandos and Iraq would be problematic, because neither of those forces can be easily defined culturally. In some cases, some units could be made up of one of the subcultures of the country. Therefore, I did not see culture as a viable variable because it was difficult to define and an environmental variable outside the control of the SF advisors.

The potential variable of ethnic makeup or degree of ethnic homogeneity of the country was rejected for similar reasons. While some countries could be considered diverse, such as Afghanistan, and Iraq, others are much more homogeneous, such as the Philippines, El Salvador, and Colombia. But here again, two factors argue against such an inclusion. First, that these are macro-level factors that are beyond the control of the advisors and second because such an assessment would be almost completely subjective. A connected variable that I also rejected was the Ethno-sectarian makeup of partner force unit. There is a possibility that the homogeneity or heterogeneity of the unit had an impact on their combat effectiveness. But determining that makeup would be extremely difficult because a researcher would have to have the ethno-sectarian identity of every single member of the various units to be able to make an ironclad assessment. Even determining the proper ethno-sectarian group might be problematic, with some individuals having cross-cultural identities. For example, what category would one place an Iraqi SOF commando whose father was a Sunni Kurd and mother was a Shi'a Arab?

In some ways, these variables can be addressed indirectly, and potentially more precisely, through a variable that I did include: whether the advisors could organize host nation forces. If there was extensive corruption at the tactical level- in the specific unit being advised- then logically that would have an impact on whether the host nation forces would permit their

advisors to make decisions about the organization, pay, promotion systems, and equipping (as well as other decisions) of their unit. Similarly, if the subculture of one unit was more open to listening to and implement recommendations for change, that would be also observed in the same variable. Even the ethnic composition of the units being advised can be addressed through this variable as when the Iraqi Special Operations Forces were first stood up, American advisors insisted that the unit's organization matched Iraq's demography down to the squad level and across the leadership of the organization. They had tremendous power to organize the unit by hand-picking ethnicities to meet quotas that they desired, and interestingly that identity became part of the unit's culture and persists to this day. This approach to the problem focuses on what this study is exploring- were the advisors able to organize the unit to make changes that directly affected the combat effectiveness of the unit? By focusing on what the advised unit allows their advisors to organize and not organize, many of the problematic issues of ill-defined variables are circumvented.

I chose not to have a variable representing the length of the mission. Across the five cases, the missions lasted 9, 16, 13, 15, and 13 years. The length of four of the missions was within three years of each other, and while there was one outlier, Iraq, the length of that mission still spanned nearly a decade and represented a much larger commitment than many of the other cases. Rather than using the duration of the mission as a variable, I believed it was far more important to assess the normalized partner force to advisor ratio. For example, a 30-year mission that only paired the equivalent of one advisor to two thousand trainees would likely have poorer results than a shorter five-year mission that had one advisor to twenty host nation soldiers.

Another variable that I rejected was an assessment of the training levels or capabilities of the advisors. For example, whether the SF advisor who worked with the BIATs in El Salvador

was statistically significant from his counterpart that trained the LRC in the Philippines, or whether the first ODA at the beginning of the fifteen-year mission in Colombia was significantly different from the last. I chose not to use this variable for several reasons. First, due to the extended length of the missions, I assumed that over time such a variable would likely normalize. Taking into account the span of each case study and the number of advisors and ODAs involved, the differences between one team or another would not be significant because when such differences were aggregated, they would not be significantly different across missions. So many ODAs participated in each mission that you would have some superior, some average, and some weak teams.

There is logical evidence to make such an assumption as there have been studies that reviewed the Special Forces training pipeline and found that there has been little change in the overall assessment and selection course over time. Indeed, one such study noted that many of the components of Special Forces Assessment and Selection (SFAS), a course which was only formally added to the process of joining Special Forces in 1988, match the factors used to select members of Office of Strategic Services Jedburgh teams as well as the original Special Forces soldiers in the 1950s.[92] In fact, a review of anecdotal memoirs reveals that many of the initial selection events for the first SFAS in 1988 have been in use consistently since the course began.[93]

The capstone exercise, named Robin Sage, has been the culminating event since 1974 and many of the civilian role players of the event are part of families that have supported the

[92] John Faunce, "A History of Assessment and Selection." *Special Warfare*, December 2016, https://www.soc.mil/SWCS/SWmag/archive/SW2902/A%20History%20of%20Assessment%20and%20Selection.pdf .

[93] Tony Schwalm, *The Guerrilla Factory: The Making of Special Forces Officers, the Green Berets*, Reissue edition (Simon & Schuster, 2013), 35–36, 58.

exercise for generations. Even before Robin Sage officially became the graduation exercise, there was similar Special Forces culmination training in the same rural counties near Fort Bragg, North Carolina for decades.[94] Even though Special Forces became an official personnel branch in the U.S. Army in 1987, the training was effectively the same before and after the event and any impact of that change would require a subjective assessment of the impact of institutionalizing the career field.[95] While one could, arguably, conduct a somewhat quantitative assessment that compared SF qualification course graduation rates with the success of the five different missions, the connection would be both tenuous and difficult to research as Special Forces Command maintains those graduation rates as some of its most closely guarded secrets due to the politicized nature of the perceived impact of changing course standards. Regardless, I will address this topic in the interviews I conduct as El Salvador is the only case study that falls before that change was implemented, and even then, only partially.

Pre-mission training falls into a similar category, as in the post 9/11 wars there has been a debate internal to SF of whether there should be more focus on direct action or on FID. This debate has affected the pre-mission training as advocates for one methodology or the other have focused their unit's pre-mission training to reflect their ideological beliefs: some with more shooting and combat preparation, others with more language and cultural awareness training. Like other elements of what makes up the SF advisors who participate in the mission, over time it is highly likely that these normalized over time with the amount of aggregate direct action or FID training evening out across the missions. Additionally, this variable would be extremely

[94] Kelly Twedell, "Robin Sage, Special Forces Training Begins Saturday," Fort Bragg, NC Patch, March 8, 2013, https://patch.com/north-carolina/fortbragg/annual-special-forces-training-begins-saturday.
[95] Alfred H. Paddock Jr, *U.S. Army Special Warfare: Its Origins: Revised Edition*, Revised edition (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 142, 146, 157–62; "General Orders No. 35," accessed March 23, 2021, https://history.army.mil/documents/misc/dago35-87.htm.

challenging to calculate, as it would likely require the training schedules of each ODA that participated in each mission for the entire span of the conflict. They would then have to be qualitatively reviewed to determine which category they fell into, as well as measured for how long each type of training was conducted. Such a debate is academic, however, as the likelihood that USSOCOM would release those training records through a freedom of information act request is extremely low based on my experience with similar requests. For all these reasons, I did not include this variable. With the proper records, another scholar could add to this study by examining pre-mission training.

There were also a set of variables that were beyond the scope of what I would be able to complete in my studies. Many of these could provide additional insight for other researchers. For example, I did not include a variable that assessed the prior combat experience of the individuals that made up the newly created partner force unit. In some cases, potentially many of those initial volunteers could have been combat veterans, while in other cases they could have been green, inexperienced conscripts. Determining what that experience was would require access to the rolls of those initial volunteers and the ability to ask them their prior experiences as even the host nation did not always record those details. Many of those veterans have been killed in combat, severely wounded, or simply left military service over time. As a result, accessing the list of the initial group and their background would be highly challenging. Furthermore, over the time span of each case study the initial combat experience of the first group of trainees would become less and less important. Over time, that experience would be normalized, and its impact overpowered by the combat experience that the unit experienced during its life cycle. Therefore, the amount of combat experience of the initial recruits was rejected as a variable.

Another variable that fell into this category was the dollar amount of military assistance provided. If one unit was provided significantly more in military assistance than another, that could potentially impact their combat effectiveness. Unfortunately, even determining the true amounts at the macro-level are extremely difficult because of the many different categories of money that the U.S. spends on military assistance. In addition to the title 10 Defense Department military assistance allocations, there are also title 22 State Department funds, counter-narcotics funds, counter-terrorism funds, Congressional 1206 security force assistance funds, 1207 funds, 1208 funds, Commander's Emergency Response Program, and multiple individual country specific funds.[96] Determining how much has been actually spent is further complicated by differing reporting categories of expenditure that include authorized, allocated, and obligated. Trying to follow the money from those national level programs down to the tactical units which are the topic of this study would be extremely challenging if not nearly impossible.

I also rejected a variable that would assess the more intangible categories of military assistance that were provided during the missions. In addition to the advisory effort from SF soldiers, some missions provided intelligence support, medical assistance, or even transportation assets to the host nation forces. Such intelligence help could be in the form of predator or other ISR feeds (either in real time or relayed verbally through the SF advisors), or the decision to release classified information to the host nation. Medical care could be in the form of providing casualty evacuation helicopters or medical facilities such as corps support hospitals, and transportation could be by rotary wing or even naval assets. Fire support (artillery or airstrikes)

[96] Rebecca Williams, Stephen Abott, and Gordon Adams, "DoD Authorities for Foreign and Security Assistance Programs" (Stimson Center, July 20, 2009), https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/files/file-attachments/DOD_security_assistance_authorities_1.pdf.

and information operations (printing psychological operations leaflets or helping with radio broadcasts) support could also constitute a component of these intangible assistance categories.

To a degree, the impact of these forms of assistance is reduced because my dependent variable is being measured only at the end of the mission. In some cases (such as Iraq and the Philippines), the U.S. mission had mostly or completely departed, and host nation forces faced their enemies effectively alone- with the bare minimum of such assistance. Furthermore, the dependent variable assesses host nation capabilities operating independently. They measure whether the host nation SOF units had these capabilities organically- such as full motion video aerial surveillance- as a part of their organization. In other cases, by the end of the mission the U.S. effort was drastically reduced and aimed to wean host nation forces from relying on U.S. assets- only providing them in dire emergencies. While I believe this strategy addresses this potential variable, it could be an area for another scholar to add to the contributions of this study.

Conclusions

My research aims to answer the riddle of why there seems to be a disconnect between U.S. Army Special Forces language training and cultural awareness skills and success in building an effective partner force on SFA missions. Answering that riddle requires finding the underlying reasons why Special Forces have been effective in some advisory missions and not in others. This has relevance to the debate about the importance of keeping Army Special Forces organizations regionally oriented and to the larger debate about their future structure, doctrine, and missions.

In relation to the larger debate about security force assistance, such an assessment would also help answer a second riddle associated with Special Forces advisory missions in Iraq and

Afghanistan. Specifically, it could help answer the question of why, despite billions of dollars that were committed to training both nation's militaries, the Special Forces advisors produced combat effective host nation forces while other efforts were largely unsuccessful. The answer to that riddle could potentially also shed light into the larger debate on what factors are important to larger SFA missions- missions that conventional forces and other advisors conduct- as well as the related topic of unconventional warfare and the broader topic of security sector reform. With considerable research already looking at those questions from the macro-scale, this research at the micro-level could potentially provide new and valuable insight.

CHAPTER 2: The Light Reaction Regiment in the Philippines, 2001-2015

Background and Context:

Before the appearance of European explorers, the Philippines were a miasma of more than seven thousand islands spread across an area larger than 120,000 square miles. Traditionally hosting native cultures of sailing, trading, and fishing, those islands were homes to a diversity of ethnicities and a polyglot of languages. During the Islamic golden age, explorers and evangelists brought Islam to the southern islands in the archipelago, especially Mindanao and the islands of the Sulu Sea, where it took hold and became a local majority but overall minority. When Ferdinand Magellan arrived in 1521, he claimed the vast area for Spain and gave the country its name, after King Philip II. The Spanish brought organization, culture, their language, and Roman Catholicism, but despite their best efforts they were unable to unify the disparate area. Like in many of its other colonial holdings, Spain implanted an oligarchy where ethnicity- and the degree to which one was Spanish- was an important factor in leadership. The Spanish governance phase ended abruptly in 1898 with the arrival of U.S. Navy Commodore George Dewey in Manila Bay and the ensuing conflict between the two great powers.[1]

The Unique Relationship: America and the Philippines:

Dewey's arrival ushered in what would become a long and unique relationship between the United States and the Philippines. After defeating Spain in the Spanish-American War of 1898, the U.S. formally annexed the Philippines as part of the spoils of war. Becoming its only formal colony, the U.S. directly or indirectly governed the Philippines from 1898 to 1946, a period fraught with large swings in the relations between the two states. Unwilling to shift from one colonial ruler to another, Filipino nationalists immediately rebelled against the U.S. and a

[1] Robert D. Kaplan, *Imperial Grunts: On the Ground with the American Military from Mogadishu to the Philippines to Iraq and Beyond* (New York: Random House, 2005), 139–42.

three-year war ensued that claimed as many as a quarter million lives.[2] While the insurrection was eventually put down, the U.S. subsequently granted additional autonomy to the Philippines. From then until the Philippines' eventual independence in 1946, the U.S. wrestled against several domestic insurrections, and then partnered with Filipino insurgents to fight against a brutal Japanese occupation during World War II. American sacrifices towards Philippine liberation, the two countries' positive bilateral relations as allies during the war, and the euphoria of obtaining their sovereignty resulted in the buoying of Filipino attitudes towards the U.S. Many American veterans from the war chose to settle in the Philippines, adding to an already vibrant expatriate population that eventually swelled to more than 350,000 U.S. citizens, a size large enough to justify the only Veterans' Administration regional office located outside the United States.[3]

The Cold War furthered bilateral cooperation with the two U.S. bases at Subic Bay and Clark Air Force Base proving instrumental to deterrence and U.S. efforts during the Korean and Vietnam Wars. But at the same time, the Philippines suffered through decades of domestic neglect, corruption, and instability. The tenure of President Ferdinand Marcos and his wife Imelda became a global symbol for the worst types of graft, electoral chicanery, and misconduct. To maintain his two decades of rule, Marcos implemented political repression, restricted the country's free press, and committed numerous human rights abuses. Many Filipinos blamed the U.S. for not challenging Marcos, a Cold War consequence from U.S. concerns that the country could be overtaken by a communist rebellion and become another Asian domino. Like many

[2] Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, "The Philippine-American War, 1899–1902," Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations, accessed November 14, 2020, https://history.state.gov/milestones/1899-1913/war.
[3] United States Department of State, "U.S. Relations With the Philippines," accessed November 28, 2020, https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-the-philippines/.

other nations in Asia, the Philippines had become a Cold War battleground, with the Soviet Union providing support to Marxist-Leninist aligned insurgent groups, most prominent among them the Communist New People's Army (NPA). Although the U.S. provided considerable support to its ally, the NPA was a determined foe, at times even proving to be an existential threat to the unitary nature of the Philippine state. Even after Marcos was eventually forced out, corruption remained and domestic challenges abounded: insurgencies continued, the economy sputtered along feebly, and coup attempts threatened democratically elected governments.

Upon the close of the Cold War and despite the persistent threat from the NPA, the Philippines experienced a surge in domestic nationalism which prompted a push for increased sovereignty and separation from the U.S. This translated most directly into the 1991 vote by the Philippine Senate to reject the lease extension on both American bases, effectively returning them to the Philippines. Although the actual decision was made easier on the U.S. side by the volcanic eruption of Mount Pinatubo which damaged Clark Air Force Base, after the closures, U.S.-Philippines relations decayed considerably and amid mutual discord.[4] While strategic relations had become frigid, at the micro level both nations maintained ties through foreign military sales, annual exercises, and Filipino participation in the U.S. international military education and training (IMET) security force assistance programs.

The 1998/9 Visiting Forces Agreement and the Decision to Create a Light Reaction Company:

After 1991 the readiness of the Armed Forces of the Philippines dropped precipitously, weakened by the disappearance of massive U.S. military assistance.[5] Relations between the two

[4] The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, "Politics, Pinatubo and the Pentagon: The Closure of Subic Bay," The Huffington Post, December 6, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/politics-pinatubo-and-the_b_10243750.
[5] Email, COL Dennis Downey, 9 July 2020.

countries drifted for the better part of a decade until both nations came to the realization that a renewed relationship was mutually beneficial. Facing China's growing military and diplomatic strength and a myriad of security threats in the South China Sea, the U.S. was eager to restore ties with its long-term ally. The Philippines, recognizing the anemic growth in the capabilities of its armed forces and its connection to withering U.S. military assistance, similarly appreciated the value in revitalizing bilateral relations. As such, a new visiting forces agreement was drafted in 1998 and ratified by the Philippine Senate in 1999. With the agreement, the two countries' relationship took a significant turn.[6] Despite the success of the agreement in obtaining ratification, there was enough residual anti-American sentiment and concerns with Philippine sovereignty that the agreement was challenged, albeit unsuccessfully, in the Philippine Supreme Court where divided justices barely upheld its constitutionality.[7] Notwithstanding those concerns, many senior diplomatic and military officials were eager to use the agreement as a springboard to restore the bilateral bond back to pre-1991 levels.

During the decade of American absence, the Philippines had evolved into a hub of Islamic terrorist financing and plots. In 1995 the Bojinka plot, which aimed to blow up eleven airliners and assassinate Pope John Paul, was planned in Manila by Ramzi Yousef, who led the 1983 bombing on the World Trade Center, and 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed.[8] That was followed in August 2000 by the kidnapping and later beheading of U.S. citizen Jeffrey Schilling by the Al Qa'ida linked Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). The Philippines Muslim minority,

[6] Andrew Yeo, "President Duterte Wants to Scrap a Philippines-U.S. Military Agreement. This Could Mean Trouble.," *Washington Post*, February 13, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/02/13/president-duterte-wants-scrap-philippines-us-military-agreement-this-could-mean-trouble/.
[7] Artemio V. Panganiban, "Visiting Forces Agreement, Mutual Defense Treaty Not Enforceable in US, Philippines," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, June 7, 2020, https://opinion.inquirer.net/130548/vfa-mdt-not-enforceable-in-us-ph.
[8] Linda Robinson, Patrick Johnston, and Gillian Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001--2014* (Washington DC: RAND Corporation, 2016), 12, https://doi.org/10.7249/RR1236.

which had long faced economic hardships and institutional bias had often been in a state of rebellion. In addition to the Abu Sayyaf Group, other major groups included the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which was actively involved in insurgency and guerrilla warfare but was not linked to Al Qa'ida, and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), which after decades of conflict had signed a peace treaty with the central government that established the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). Although the groups' general allegiances remained consistent, at times splinter elements would form with different agendas. Additionally, individuals would often float freely between the organizations, choosing which group most met their personal ideology or objectives or even which offered the best salary. Combined, these factors made intelligence activities against the various groups challenging.[9]

Recognizing that the changed situation both presented opportunities to revitalize relations and an important security need that should be addressed, Major Joseph Felter, a mid-grade officer serving as an Army attaché in the embassy, crafted a plan to assist the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in forming a national level counterterrorism unit. Felter had served in 1st Special Forces Group before becoming a foreign area officer and was familiar with Philippine military leaders and capabilities from previous deployments where his team served as advisors to elite units.[10] When Ambassador Michael Sheehan, the State Department Coordinator for Counterterrorism visited Manila in late 2000, Felter briefed him on his plan and Sheehan immediately agreed to support the effort.[11] After a series of bilateral discussions between Philippine and U.S. defense and diplomatic officials, it was agreed that the U.S. would assist in

[9] David Maxwell, "Foreign Internal Defense: An Indirect Approach to Counter-Insurgency/Counter Terrorism," in *Irregular Warfare Challenges and Opportunities* (Conference of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, Washington, DC: The Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2011), 3.
[10] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Joseph Felter, 20 July 2020.
[11] Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001--2014*, 13–14.

standing up of a company sized unit, to be named the Light Reaction Company (LRC), which would serve as the nation's tier one counterterrorism unit.[12] The training of the LRC would focus on creating urban and rural counterterrorism skills including night fighting capabilities, assaults of multiple structures, communications, intelligence, medical training, and sniper operations. Instruction was conducted from January through July 2001 at Fort Magsaysay on Luzon Island by members of 1st Special Forces Group.[13] The LRC, which eventually would grow to the size of a regiment because of American assistance and training, is the subject of this case study.

A Brave New World: The Post 9-11 Relationship:

The September 11 attacks and other events related to the Global War on Terrorism, as the conflict was coined by the Bush administration, provided new openings to expand relations and military cooperation between the U.S. and the Philippines. In particular, the seizing of two U.S. hostages by the Al-Qaeda linked Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) in May 2001 and the ensuing yearlong efforts to rescue them provided a window of opportunity for both sides to set aside their past differences and cooperate for their own advantages.[14] Faced with a radically new environment, representatives from the two countries were able to broker a personal meeting between President George W. Bush and Philippine President Gloria Arroyo. The two leaders established a personal bond and were laid the groundwork for an agreement where the U.S. would provide manpower, equipment, and training to narrowly assist the Filipino military in their struggle against Islamic extremist groups linked with Al Qa'ida. As such, a second front in

[12] Thomas G. Mahnken, ed., *Learning the Lessons of Modern War*, 1st edition (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2020), 199.
[13] Maxwell, "Foreign Internal Defense: An Indirect Approach to Counter-Insurgency/Counter Terrorism," 6.
[14] Richard Swain, "Case Study: Operation Enduring Freedom Philippines:" (Fort Belvoir, VA: Defense Technical Information Center, October 1, 2010), 2, https://doi.org/10.21236/ADA532988.

the global war against Al Qa'ida and affiliated groups was opened in the Philippines under the name of Operation Enduring Freedom- Philippines (OEF-P). To carry out that mission, U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) tasked its Special Operations subordinate command (SOCPAC) to stand up a Joint Special Operations Task Force centered around Green Beret advisors from 1st Special Forces Group.

As terms were negotiated and then drawn up for the new mission numerous restrictions were put in place by both sides, many of them byproducts of Philippine sensitivities over sovereignty. U.S. forces were limited to Basilan and Zamboanga provinces, both of which were backwaters far from the capital of Manila or the main island of Luzon. That prohibition was put in place to address the sensibilities of Philippine nationalists who could be angered by seeing scores of Americans.[15] To prevent any possible disruption of the peace negotiations between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the U.S. was prohibited from engaging in any operations against the group.[16] On the U.S. side, because the OEF-P mission was connected to the War on Terrorism through both executive decisions and congressional funding and authorization, it could only target Islamic terrorist groups associated with Al Qa'ida. Both the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and al Jama'a al Islamiyya (JI) met that criterion and therefore the U.S. could provide support to the Armed Forces of the Philippines in their fight against both groups. Other groups, such as the Communist Party of the Philippines and the New People's Army, which both were far more dangerous threats to the host nation, were off limits for U.S. assistance because they had no linkage to Al Qa'ida. Such restrictions were frustrating to both Americans and Filipinos. On the American side, U.S. Special Forces had a long history working with the Philippine government during the Cold War, and the NPA

[15] Swain, 16–17.
[16] Mahnken, *Learning the Lessons of Modern War*, 202–3.

had assassinated one of the organization's "patron saints" (Colonel Nick Rowe) in Manila in 1989. On the Philippine side, they had hoped that U.S. assistance would be interpreted broadly enough to address their most serious domestic threats.[17]

The decision to link the global war on terrorism to support for the Philippines proved to be a financial windfall, and the U.S. foreign military financing support jumped from $1.4 million in 2000 to $23.4 million during the next year. Where U.S. assistance had been almost nonexistent after the closure of bases in 1991, from 2001 to 2006 the Philippines would receive an astounding $199.2 million.[18] Through 2010, annual U.S. military assistance would never drop below $34 million.[19] The U.S. advisory effort experienced similar increases, with nearly 600 personnel from various military branches and specialties arriving for the first JSOTF-P (Joint Special Operations Task Force- Philippines) rotation in 2002. While the strength and composition of the force would wax and wane, the sustained effort was a marked change from the 1990s when U.S. advisory efforts were episodic. Across the duration of the mission, there would be constant contact between SF advisors and the Light Reaction Company and its follow-on organizations, the Light Reaction Battalion (LRB) and the Light Reaction Regiment (LRR). Both sides saw the unit as the "crown jewel" of their efforts and put considerable energy towards making it successful.

Conclusion of the Mission:

In 2011, the U.S. and the Philippines came to a joint conclusion that they should take combined efforts to close the mission. This decision came on the heels of Filipino congressional legislation to shift the responsibility for internal security from the military to

[17] Maxwell, "Foreign Internal Defense: An Indirect Approach to Counter-Insurgency/Counter Terrorism," 3–4.
[18] PowerPoint Briefing, Joint US Military Assistance Group, "Republic of the Philippines Security Assistance Program Update," 09 June 2004.
[19] Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001--2014*, 18.

police forces and a PACOM report that concluded the main objectives of the mission had been met. As a result of those decisions, the JSOTF slowly transitioned many of its responsibilities and activities to the U.S. embassy and civilian State Department efforts. The drawdown and eventual closure of the JSOTF generated considerable debate within both U.S. and Philippine defense circles, with some on both sides advocating for continuing the mission.[20] Like in El Salvador and Colombia, as the official Special Forces advisory mission under a named operation (OEF-P) concluded in February 2015, it was replaced by a smaller advisory team based at the embassy in Manila. Uncreatively, like the Operational Planning and Assistance Training Team (OPATT) in El Salvador and the Planning and Assistance Advisory Team (PAT) in Colombia, the new office was named the U.S. Pacific Command Augmentation Team (PAT).[21]

Overall Assessment of U.S.- Philippines Relations and its Impact on Case:

The long period of contact, governance, and, at times, shared sacrifice between the U.S. and the Philippines produced extremely close bonds, but also domestic sensitivities against what could be perceived as neo-colonialism by the U.S. This relationship created opportunities for US forces, but the residual psychological scars from being a colony left the Philippine military extremely sensitive about its sovereignty, which affected political decisions related to joint military activities. While the U.S. developed a "special relationship" with the United Kingdom based on their shared heritage, language, and culture, because of the singular experiences the U.S. shared with the Philippines, their connection can fairly be described as a unique relationship.

Introduction of the Independent Variables:

[20] Linda Robinson, "The SOF Experience in the Philippines and the Implications for Future," *PRISM | National Defense University* 6, no. 3 (December 7, 2016), http://cco.ndu.edu/News/Article/1020239/the-sof-experience-in-the-philippines-and-the-implications-for-future-defense-s/.
[21] Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001--2014*, xvi–xvii.

To determine what elements of the U.S. training effort were most important to the combat effectiveness of the LRR, five variables will be assessed: language training and cultural awareness, consistency in advisor pairing, partner force to advisor ratio, the degree to which advisors can organize or control host nation forces, and the ability to combat advise. The language training and cultural awareness variable explores the impact of those skills as measured by the degree to which the units deployed on the mission were regionally affiliated with the Pacific Command (PACOM) region and spoke those associated languages. The partner force to advisor ratio is a straightforward numeric assessment based on a mathematical calculation of that ratio. Consistency in advisor pairing studies how often the same advisors returned to work with the LRR and the impacts of those sustained partnerships. The degree to which SF advisors were able to organize or control decisions in the LRR examines how much sovereignty the Filipino leaders were willing to cede and what impact that had on the combat effectiveness of the LRR. It addresses institutional issues such as the organization, training, and equipping of the LRR, as well as personnel decisions and operational choices. When assessing the degree to which advisors could organize or control the LRR, I will explore different phases of the advisors' experiences such as the initial standup of the unit, Philippine resistance to U.S. recommendations to create a SOF parent headquarters for the unit, and the impacts of an attempted coup by unit members. Exploring the narrative of those periods helps evaluate how the variable changes over time. Finally, the ability to combat advise weighs the effects from the rules of engagement that prohibited SF advisors from accompanying members of the LRR into combat.

Language Training and Cultural Awareness:

Degree of Match

For a variety of reasons, there was a consistent and total match in the regional orientation (and therefore language training and cultural awareness) of the Special Forces advisors deployed to work with the Light Reaction forces. Before September 11th, deploying a Special Forces unit outside of its assigned geographic combatant command was sacrosanct- it simply did not happen due to the bureaucratic pressures exerted from regional stakeholders who wanted to continue to show relevance by maintaining the number of advisory missions they conducted. As such, 1st SFG was tasked to conduct the standup of the first Light Reaction Company in March 2001.

After the September 11th attacks through 2010, more than 80% of the requirements for SF units came from the CENTCOM area of responsibility.[22] In some ways, this relegated PACOM to becoming a perceived strategic backwater (according to several officers interviewed), and there was no competition between groups wanting to join the Philippine advisory mission. With the "war" seen as being primarily in the CENTCOM domain, 1st Special Forces Group maintained their regional orientation to PACOM and the Philippines. Undeterred from initially being shut out from the CENTCOM area of responsibility due to their lack of linguistic and cultural connections to the region, special operations leaders decided to make the best of the situation. Seeking to gain additional authorities and counterterrorism funds, key leaders in Special Operations Command Pacific (SOCPAC) were able to get U.S. strategic leadership to certify the mission as part of the war against Al Qa'ida and similarly aligned organizations, and the Philippines advisory effort was designated as Operation Enduring Freedom- Philippines. This assignment, combined with the demand from the CENTCOM theater, cemented 1st Special Forcers Group's hold on the task, and there was no pressure from any of the other active-duty

[22] U.S. Government Accounting Office, "GAO 15-571 SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES: Opportunities Exist to Improve Transparency of Funding and Assess Potential to Lessen Some Deployments," July 2015, 67, https://www.gao.gov/assets/680/671920.pdf.

groups to contribute to the mission. If anything, the tremendous troop requirements emanating from CENTCOM created pressure to draw 1st Special Forces Group teams out of their theater to contribute to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

At an individual and unit level, many in 1st Special Forces Group felt left out from the war and wanted to contribute to the fight in Iraq or Afghanistan but were assigned the Philippines mission as their contribution to the Global War on Terrorism until 2005 due to the continuing emphasis to have groups with some regional orientation deployed to those two countries. After 2005, while 1st SF Group contributed forces to CENTCOM missions due to the extraordinary troop requirements there, they retained their exclusive hold on the Philippines mission.

During the entire tenure of the advisory effort in the Philippines, only one other SF Group contributed forces. In October 2006, a battalion from 19th Special Forces Group, one of the two National Guard groups, was deployed to lead the JSOTF-P mission for six months.[23] Every other mission was composed of 1st Special Forces Group units. The assignment of a National Guard unit was not without controversy, given the fewer training days that the reserve component soldiers completed annually. But those concerns were offset somewhat by the knowledge that the battalion was regionally oriented to the Pacific Command (PACOM) and the SF soldiers within the unit spoke languages within the region. For various reasons, many senior leaders noted that the unit did not perform as well as 1st SF Group, and the experiment was never repeated for the duration of the Philippines mission. While the individual ODAs performed well in their advisory tasks, the battalion leadership approached the mission too lackadaisically, prompting a debate on whether the commander should be relieved or not.[24] The ODAs from that

[23] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL David Maxwell, 9 July 2020.
[24] Interview, LTG David Fridovich, 16 July 2020; Interview, COL David Maxwell, 9 July 2020.

national guard battalion were trained in PACOM languages, with some of the team members able to speak Tagalog. Therefore, for the variable of language training and cultural awareness, there was a complete match between the regional orientation of the groups assigned to the mission and the region where they were deployed.

Assessment of Impact:

Despite the complete match between the regional orientation of the units deployed and the region they were deployed to, SF personnel of all ranks who advised the LRR reported at best a mixed importance of this variable towards producing a combat effective partner force. Such a finding was counterintuitive, as it was expected that the 1st SF Group personnel would highlight that their knowledge of local languages and cultures was especially helpful. Instead, they explained that the PACOM area of responsibility is particularly heterogeneous, with hundreds of languages and cultures spread across the region, making it particularly difficult to match language training to the diverse challenges that SF soldiers could face. This variety resulted in 1st Group having to conduct training in multiple languages: Mandarin, Hangul, Thai, Hindi, and Tagalog, among others. Even within the Philippines itself there is considerable diversity, with over 170 languages and even more dialects spoken, further complicating the task of being able to communicate with the host nation forces.[25] As a result of these challenges, very few soldiers who deployed to the Philippines had been trained in Tagalog or Filipino. Many, focused on the perceived growing dangers of China and North Korea, had been trained in those languages instead.

In addition, the long association of the Philippines with the United States meant that many of the Filipino officers and many of the enlisted soldiers spoke English. One JSOTF-P

[25] Khan, Sehar, "How Many Languages Are Spoken in Philippines?," Mars Translation, May 8, 2019, https://www.marstranslation.com/blog/how-many-languages-are-spoken-in-philippines.

commander, Colonel David Maxwell, recalled a public relations event in Mindanao where the speaker began in Tagalog, only to have the local participants stare at him in confusion because they only understood the local dialects of Tausug and Maguindanao. When the speaker switched to English, the attendees were finally able to understand.[26] Because English seemed to be a common denominator, almost universally the SF soldiers interviewed indicated that they conducted training with the LRR either in English directly to the Filipinos or spoke English to one of the LRR soldiers who served as an informal translator. Of those who spoke Tagalog or Filipino, none indicated that they conducted all their training speaking the host nation's language. Interviewees gave a variety of reasons for this decision, many citing that the subject matter was too complex in vocabulary and was beyond their linguistic skills.[27] Others noted that the English skills of the host nation forces was a large factor. For some, speaking in English made it easier to conduct training as they did not have to deal with the mental exhaustion of speaking a foreign language for hours at a time or worry about an erroneous translation. Others noted that many of the Filipinos relished the opportunity to practice their English listening and speaking skills, at times insisting that the SF soldiers spoke English rather than their domestic languages.[28]

While many of the SF personnel interviewed downplayed the importance of language training and cultural awareness on whether a mission would be successful in producing a combat effective partner force, they highlighted that regionally orienting groups had an important consequence. The regional affiliation, which was originally meant to help facilitate training in the languages that SF operators should learn, also meant that those same individuals would likely

[26] Interview, COL David Maxwell, 9 July 2020.
[27] Interview, LTC Bob Boone, 13 July 2020.
[28] Interview, Angie Slattery, Combat Studies Institute with LTC Eric Walker, 20 April 2010.

spend a 20- or 30-year career working in the same region. A byproduct of that regional affiliation was an increased chance of maintaining long term personal connections to host nation personnel across multiple countries.

Many noted that the specific language training- whether the language they were trained in matched the country they deployed to- was not a critical variable in helping to make the LRR combat effective. However, they noted that the broader skills of knowing a language and having general cultural awareness of how to function effectively in a global environment were critical.[29] In addition, they remarked that what seemed to be more important than the knowledge of a specific language or culture was that individuals responsible for training host nation forces had a specific set of broader skills or attributes: adaptability, flexibility, patience, or appreciation of other cultures. Many noted that those skills were what Special Forces candidates are evaluated on during their assessment, selection, and initial training, and that they were more important than knowing a specific language associated with a mission. Nearly universally they commented that the current processes for SF candidates were generally effective in selecting candidates who had these attributes.

Consistency in Advisor Pairing: 1st Special Forces Group, "Repeat Offenders," and the Role of the CINCs In Extremis Force (CIF):

For the first six years of the advisory effort with the Philippines, one battalion was primarily tasked to support the training of the LRR: 1st Battalion, 1st Special Forces Group, which was forward deployed in Okinawa. The reason why this battalion was assigned the mission was that PACOM's CINC's in-extremis force (CIF) was organic to the organization. The CIF was a company sized element (they are now disbanded) organic to each SF group whose

[29] Interview, COL David Maxwell, 9 July 2020.

soldiers had received additional training in hostage rescue and direct-action missions.[30] That company was designed to be kept on call to respond to regional hostage crises or similar missions that other U.S. national level elements could either not deploy to quickly enough or were incapable of executing due to other requirements or priorities. To be able to accomplish such a complicated mission, the members of that company received additional training: the Special Forces Advanced Reconnaissance, Target Analysis, and Exploitation Techniques Course (SFARTEC) and the Special Operations Target Interdiction Course (SOTIC, an advanced sniper school).

While the CIF companies rarely performed the hostage rescue mission, those skills made them attractive as trainers for foreign counterterrorism forces, a mission well suited to training the LRR which would serve as the Philippine's national counterterrorism and hostage-rescue force. As such, C Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Special Forces Group, the PACOM CIF, was repeatedly called upon to provide ODAs to train the LRR. When the requirements of the mission became too much for one company because a portion of the CIF had to be kept ready to deploy on short notice in case a hostage rescue situation developed, a second company in 1st Battalion was prepared for the CIF mission. Those soldiers received the same SFARTEC and SOTIC training as C Company, and they assisted in both the on-call hostage rescue mission and the mission to train the LRR. Additionally, because SF soldiers had to complete lengthy training (9 weeks for SFARTEC alone) to serve with the CIF or the CIF backup company, those soldiers were moved to other assignments much less frequently, thereby creating an additional pathway for consistency.[31] Only in 2006 were ODAs from non CIF trained companies committed to the

[30] Jack Murphy, "Special Forces CIF Companies Disbanded and the Future of Green Berets," Jack Murphy, Investigative Journalist Writes, March 5, 2020, https://jackmurphywrites.com/153/special-forces-commanders-in-extremis-force-no-more/.
[31] Interview, Frank Sobchak with SFC John Mory, 21 July 2020.

LRR mission due to the requirement to begin deploying the PACOM CIF to Iraq to help relieve pressure on the 5th and 3rd Special Forces Group CIFs which were training the Iraqi Special Operations Forces.[32] Those factors resulted in a high level of consistency in pairing between SF advisors and members of the LRR.

Across the OEF-P missions working with the LRR, commanders at all levels across 1st Special Forces group made great effort to ensure ODAs would pair with the same host nation units they worked with on previous rotations. In their vernacular, they nicknamed those who participated in this effort "repeat offenders" or "OEF-P alumni" to highlight the importance of returning the same individuals to the same mission.[33] One Special Forces ODA had worked with the LRR on so many occasions across a decade that a soldier who started on the team as a junior communications sergeant eventually became the team's warrant officer, or second in command. That continuous contact provided a wealth of knowledge for working with the LRR as well as important interpersonal connections.[34] The considerable consistency of trainers assigned to work with the LRR had a significant impact on the trust that formed between the Filipino soldiers and their American advisors.

In some cases, that trust had not only been built during 1st SF Group's relationship with the LRR but had also developed across the extensive relationship between the U.S. and the Philippines. Some connections had formed during unit exchanges or combined training before the U.S. and the Philippines relations soured in 1991, reflecting the span of time that many SF personnel remained in their assigned Special Forces Groups. Others had developed during

[32] Interview, COL David Maxwell, 9 July 2020.
[33] Interview, COL David Maxwell, 9 July 2020, Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Scott Malone, 23 July 2020, and Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTG David Fridovich, 16 July 2020.
[34] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Leo Liebreich, 21 July 2020.

international military education and training programs where members of the Filipino Armed Forces attended U.S. military schools as exchange students.

Numerous officers and NCOs from 1st SF Group provided rich vignettes about the importance of that consistency and the trust and depth of personal relationships that followed from it. At the first Pacific Command-Armed Forces of the Philippines planning meeting for the standup of the first Light Reaction Company in 2000, two Special Forces officers and a senior NCO were chosen to attend as subject matter experts in addition to the larger delegation of Colonels, Navy Captains, and Admiral Dennis Blair, the commander of PACOM. Some senior U.S. officers tried to have the SF sergeant removed from the invitation list because they believed it was inappropriate for a sergeant to attend the meeting with members of the Philippine General Staff, but reluctantly they allowed him to participate. When the meeting started, and much to the chagrin of the senior U.S. officers, the Philippine generals perfunctorily greeted their U.S. counterparts and then quickly moved to embrace the NCO warmly, recognizing him immediately and asking him about his family. Those generals had first worked with that NCO, SFC Joe Harosky, nearly two decades before when they were junior captains and had trained with him multiple times.[35] During the meeting, Philippine generals sought out the expert advice of the NCO on how to conduct the mission rather than that of the more senior members of the U.S. delegation.[36]

Colonel David Maxwell, who served in the critical role as the SF battalion commander responsible for overseeing the standup of the initial LRC and later as the JSOTF-P commander, recalled that when he landed in the Philippines in October 2001, he was met at the C-130's ramp by the host nation local commander, who had been in the same Infantry Advanced Course small

[35] Interview, COL David Maxwell, 9 July 2020.
[36] Mahnken, *Learning the Lessons of Modern War*, 199.

group in 1985. That Philippine Army officer, Colonel Yano, was eventually promoted to general and served as the Chief of Staff of the Army and later the commander of the Armed Forces of the Philippines. When Colonel Maxwell returned to the advisory effort in different roles, he was able to reconnect with General Yano and tap the deep reservoir of trust and rapport built over decades.[37]

Other advisors had similar experiences, LTC Leo Liebreich had his first experience with the LRR when he was undergoing Special Forces Training in the Qualification Course. There he sponsored a LRC officer who was conducting an IMET exchange and made connections with him and gained knowledge about the unit and its capabilities that would pay off later.[38] MAJ Noel Sioson had experiences typical of many officers and NCOs in 1st Special Forces Group and had deployed to the Philippines and worked with the LRR four times in various capacities from 2010 through 2017. Across that span of time, Filipinos who were lieutenants and captains in the LRB had been promoted to major and lieutenant colonel and assumed greater responsibilities. The connections he built over those rotations were exemplified in his personal relationship with then Danilo Pamonag, who as Colonel was the first LRR commander on an earlier rotation, and then a one- and two-star general on later rotations. In 2017, he was a two-star general and Sioson and Pamonag were having coffee when Pamonag received the call of the failed assault in Marawi that kicked off five months of intense fighting.[39] Sioson was able to leverage his personal connection with Pamonag to gain valuable information and the acceptance of additional U.S. support.

Assessing the Impact of the Variable: "You Can't Surge Trust"[40]

[37] Interview, COL David Maxwell, 9 July 2020.
[38] Interview, LTC Leo Liebreich, 21 July 2020.
[39] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MAJ Noel Sioson, 26 June 2020.
[40] Interview, LTC Leo Liebreich, 21 July 2020.

Determining the impact of the consistency of 1st Special Forces Group advisors working with the LRR across the duration of the OEF-P mission is subjective. In some cases, the advisors noted that consistency in advisor pairings made decisions on what type of training to conduct much easier, preventing the long learning curve that often occurred during the startup of a mission. According to one officer, LTC Leo Liebreich, when advisors who had worked with the LRR on previous rotations were again paired with them, the advisors already knew what type of training worked and what did not. He postulated that this was due to a familiarity with the capabilities of the unit and the types of training that were most beneficial and produced the best results.

It also was a byproduct of knowing the personalities in the LRR. Advising foreign military forces, like any social situation, has an initial getting to know each other phase where trust and rapport must be built. Pairing the same advisors with the LRR allowed them to effectively skip that phase on follow-on rotations and pick up where they left off on the last rotation.[41] MAJ Noel Sioson noted that trust built over multiple rotations with the LRR's leaders often allowed him to bypass much of the Philippine military bureaucracy. Rather than have to shepherd paperwork through a complicated and unfamiliar process, his personal relationship allowed him to meet those same leaders – many of whom had been promoted to senior echelons- and get approval directly and immediately from them.[42]

Trust became even more important during combat advisory efforts. Although the U.S. teams were not allowed to directly accompany the LRR on its missions, they provided indirect advice and shared intelligence and other key capabilities such as contracted rotary wing aircraft. The decisions on what intelligence could be provided became very subjective, and personal

[41] Interview, LTC Leo Liebreich, 21 July 2020.
[42] Interview, MAJ Noel Sioson, 26 June 2020.

connections and trust became the foundation of those decisions in many cases.[43] When a difficult choice had to be made to determine whether a particular set of UAV imagery would be provided, or whether U.S. forces would disclose the process they used to obtain a particular piece of human intelligence, more often than not that decision would hinge on the consistency that U.S. forces had worked with the particular Filipino officers involved.[44] Trust was reciprocal, and when Filipino leaders trusted their American counterparts, they were more willing to listen to U.S. advice and implement their institutional or personnel recommendations.

The considerable consistency in advisor pairing and the trust that flowed from it allowed the Filipinos to accept advice and recommendation more easily, and that played out in tactical, organizational, and personnel fields. Interviewees repeatedly noted that when they had a personal relationship with a LRR member built across multiple rotations, the Filipino soldiers were more willing to accept their advice, contributing to better effectiveness. Better combat effectiveness also came from the shorter start up time at the beginning of each rotation that came from advisors already being familiar with the unit and its personnel. Such a reduction saved precious time, allowing the advisors to conduct more training and preparation for combat than they would have if they had been different advisors on each rotation. For all these reasons, this variable is rated as high consistency.

Partner Force to Advisor Ratio:

Background: Growth of the LRC into the LRR

When assessing this variable, it is important to note that the Light Reaction unit experienced tremendous growth during the contours of its experiences with U.S. Army Special Forces advisors. This growth (and change in the denominator of the variable) was not reflective

[43] Interview, Angie Slattery, Combat Studies Institute with LTC Eric Walker, 20 April 2010.
[44] Email, COL Dennis Downey, 11 July 2020.

of the ordinary, but constant, ebb and flow of personnel changes such as promotions, retirements, and individuals leaving the military or of those caused by casualties incurred during combat operations. Instead, the original Light Reaction Company of approximately one hundred soldiers grew to a three-company battalion over the span of 2003. One company was created during training supported by 1st Special Forces Group advisors from May to August 2003, and a second company from July to December of the same year.[45] U.S. military assistance for the growth, including new equipment and training, totaled $5.25 million.[46]

This conscious decision to grow the elite force was reflective of both the recommendations of U.S. Army Special Forces advisors and the recognition by the Philippine Army that a single company was not sufficient to meet the troop demands of the conflict with domestic and international Islamic violent extremist organizations. The addition of two companies would enable the force to create a dedicated operational cycle, where at any time one company would be training, a second would be conducting operations or on standby to conduct operations, and a third would be on leave or resting. This schedule, which could be amended during crises, ensured the Filipino special operators had recovery time to spend with their families and recover, as well as time to polish their tactical skills and integrate new members between missions. With that growth, the Light Reaction Company was renamed the Light Reaction Battalion (LRB).

In 2014, the Filipino government chose to further expand the LRB to a regimental size, changing the unit nomenclature to the Light Reaction Regiment (LRR) and doubling the number of companies from three to six. That decision was primarily taken because of the LRB's

[45] Francis U. Villanueva, *Tiradores: Missions and the Men of the Philippine's Light Reaction Regiment* (New York, NY: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2020), 39–41.
[46] PowerPoint Briefing, Joint US Military Assistance Group, "Republic of the Philippines Security Assistance Program Update," 09 June 2004.

impressive combat performance during operations in Zamboanga in 2013. However, growing the unit rapidly and significantly a second time proved to be extremely challenging. Even before the decision to grow the LRB was made, the organization could barely muster 40% effective strength, [47] which made additional growth that much more difficult, and finding new quality candidates was problematic, proving the adage that Special Operations forces cannot be created quickly or as the result of a crisis.[48]

An ongoing challenge for the Philippine military was resistance from conventional force commanders to the creation of the new elite force. Paralleling the opposition to elite forces in the U.S. military before the creation of U.S. Special Operations Command, many Filipino conventional commanders argued that giving up their best soldiers to serve in the LRB would weaken their units. Because of this hostility, many conventional commanders refused to send their troops to the LRB's assessment and selection. This loss was further accelerated by the ad hoc nature of the training for new operators, as the Philippine military had initially decided against standing up an institutional special warfare training center which could have assisted in creating a steady pipeline of new operators. One further problem came from the Philippine military's overuse of the LRB in combat operations, as well as its misuse in roles more suited for conventional forces, such as daylight assaults against well defended positions and standard reconnaissance patrols more suited to conventional Army or Marine units.[49] As a result, there

[47] Jack Murphy, "SOFREP Exclusive: Inside the Operations of the Light Reaction Regiment (Part 3) | SOFREP," SOFREP, June 16, 2017, https://sofrep.com/news/sofrep-exclusive-inside-operations-light-reaction-regiment-part-3/.
[48] U.S. Special Operations Command, "SOF Truths," accessed November 27, 2020, https://www.socom.mil/about/sof-truths.
[49] Linda Robinson, Patrick Johnston, and Gillian Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001--2014* (Washington DC: RAND Corporation, 2016), 15, https://doi.org/10.7249/RR1236; Email, COL Dennis Downey, 15 July 2020, Deputy Commander 1st Special Forces Group and Operations Officer at Special Operations Command, Pacific.

was a gradual loss in strength of the LRB each year after it was fully organized, with approximately 19 personnel leaving the unit annually for a variety of reasons.[50]

Assessing Personnel Strength of the LRR

When considering these factors, the size of the advised force can be considered 100 soldiers from its inception in 2001 until August 2003.[51] At that point, with the standup of the second company, the strength increased to two hundred soldiers. In December 2003, the strength increased to three hundred soldiers with the activation of the third company. A small battalion headquarters was added of roughly 30 commandos. From that high-water mark of 330 soldiers, a gradual decline occurred with a loss of approximately 19 personnel each year. In September 2013, during the siege of Zamboanga, the three LRCs had 47, 44, and 48 operators, for a total of 139 commandos.[52] Their performance during that battle resulted in recognition of the value of the Light Reaction Battalion by the Philippine military, which arrested their personnel decline and led to a decision to conduct eight new assessment and training classes over the two-year period. By the end of the U.S. advisory mission in 2015, the original three companies were back to full strength, but only one new company had been activated and declared operational, for a total of 400 operators.[53]

Special Forces Advisor Commitment:

Like the variation in the size of the Light Reaction unit changing due to growth over time, the number of Special Forces advisors committed to the mission similarly changed

[50] Although I do not have access to the personnel data of the LRB/LRR, several interviewees, including LTC Bob Boone, LTC Scott Malone and LTC Ken Gleiman, indicated there was a steady decrease in the unit's strength over the years. This approximation is also supported by Villanueva in *Tiradores*.
[51] Villanueva, *Tiradores*, 13.
[52] Villanueva, 217.
[53] Villanueva, 44–45.

considerably across the span of the mission, making the calculation of partner force to advisor ratio more difficult.

At the inception of the mission, a SF company with three full strength ODAs – a total of 45 advisors – were committed to standing up the first LRC.[54] That training lasted from January until July of 2001, and after the training concluded a gap occurred where the larger mission withdrew and left behind only a residual force.[55] During this transitional period, which lasted from August 2001- January 2002 only two SF advisors were working with the LRC.[56] This gap occurred because of a transition in policy, as the U.S. worked to rekindle relations that had weakened in the decade after closing its military bases and negotiated plans for a long-term presence to fight Al Qa'ida related groups in the Philippines in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

When the mission restarted again in earnest in February 2002 as JTF 510, the commitment had expanded greatly with a total of 1,300 personnel spread across joint forces of all services.[57] Of that larger force, the U.S. deployed a Special Forces battalion headquarters and nine ODAs, with the total commitment consistently in the range of 160 troops.[58] Of those troops, one overstrength ODA of fourteen men (ODA 134) was committed to serving as advisors for the LRC.[59] That ratio lasted until October of the same year when 1st Special Forces Group codified the new arrangement by officially standing up a Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF), named JSOTF-P reflecting the Philippines area of responsibility.[60] That organization expanded the SOF footprint to 226 personnel total by increasing the number of headquarters and support

[54] Interview, COL Max Carpenter, 17 July 2020.
[55] Maxwell, "Foreign Internal Defense: An Indirect Approach to Counter-Insurgency/Counter Terrorism," 5–6.
[56] Colonel David Maxwell, "Commander's Summary of Operations OEF-P" (Commander, 1st Battalion, 1st Special Forces Group, May 5, 2002).
[57] Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001--2014*, 28.
[58] Interview, COL Max Carpenter, 17 July 2020; Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, 36–37.
[59] Colonel David Maxwell, "Commander's Summary of Operations OEF-P."
[60] Email, COL Dennis Downey, 15 July 2020.

personnel while maintaining one company and four ODAs, one of which remained paired with the LRC.[61]

The pairing of one ODA with the LRC stayed constant until May 2003, when the LRC was expanded to a three-company LRB and the advisory mission swelled again to assist in that growth.[62] To accomplish that mission, two and a half ODAs (30 SF advisors) were committed to serve as the primary trainers as new candidates were assessed, trained, and joined the LRB.[63] U.S. and Filipino leaders agreed that an increased U.S. footprint was necessary as the LRC's NCOs were not ready or available to serve as the primary trainers because the LRC itself was already overcommitted to counterterrorism missions. The increased presence lasted through December 2003.

After that surge period the advisory commitment dropped substantially, partly because of a changed focus from the new SOCPAC commander and partly due to extended negotiations over the scope of U.S. the mission. Those negotiations had been upended by the political blowback from media revelations of U.S. Marine Corps proposals to conduct domestic combat operations paired with Philippine military forces. During that time of uncertainty, which lasted across all of 2004, the entire OEF-P mission ranged from 50-80 personnel total and reverted to caretaker status.[64] Even though the overall U.S. commitment was small, the LRB was a priority because of its tactical importance and due to the connections that SF advisors had made with unit personnel. Yet with such a small footprint, only a half of an ODA (6 advisors) could be paired

[61] Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001--2014*, 36.
[62] PowerPoint Presentation, COL Dennis Downey, "JTF 510/JSOTF-P 2002-2003 Locations," 12 July 2003.
[63] Juliana Gittler, "Philippine Soldiers Show Off What They Learned from the Green Berets," Stars and Stripes, December 14, 2003, https://www.stripes.com/news/philippine-soldiers-show-off-what-they-learned-from-the-green-berets-1.14479.
[64] Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001--2014*, 38.

with the LRB.[65] Following that low point, the JSOTF and OEF-P mission grew to 273 personnel in 2005, but the number of advisors working with the LRB remained the same.[66]

In October 2006, Colonel David Maxwell, a 1st SF Group officer who had served as the battalion commander for the 2001 mission that stood up the LRC, was selected to serve as the JSOTF-P commander. Under his tenure, the troop footprint expanded considerably such that a battalion headquarters, a Special Forces company headquarters, and seven ODAs deployed for the JSOTF-P mission.[67] As a result of the growth in footprint, an entire full-strength ODA was able to be paired consistently with the LRB.[68] The JSOTF then saw steady growth, eventually reaching 607 personnel at its high-water mark in early 2010.[69]

That same year PACOM conducted an assessment that determined most of the OEF-P objectives had been met, and that the mission should begin to slowly and incrementally close.[70] That conclusion led to a gradual reduction of JSOTF personnel, which translated to a similar reduction in advisors working with the LRR. In July 2010, a decision was made that the partnership with the LRB would be reduced so that only two SF ODA team members would be nominally paired with the LRB. Those SF soldiers would live with and work at the LRB's higher headquarters, the Joint Special Operations Group (JSOG), at Fort Magsaysay on Luzon, and only travel with and advise the tactical units part time. During those rotations, advisors not only had responsibility to tactically advise the LRB, but also to advise PA SOCOM (Philippine Army Special Operations Command), the new institutional headquarters, on operational level advise, train, and equip functions. The advisory effort again shifted in February 2011, when it

[65] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MAJ Shawn Boyer, 10 July 2020.
[66] Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001--2014*, 48.
[67] Swain, "Case Study," 23.
[68] Interview, COL David Maxwell, 9 July 2020.
[69] Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001--2014*, 48.
[70] Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, 80.

was recognized that two SF NCOs were vastly insufficient to manage such vast and complex functions, and an entire ODA was committed to the mission of overseeing the growth of the institutional functions of the unit's higher headquarters.[71]

That pairing ratio was maintained until August 2013 when COL Robert McDowell became the commander of 1st Special Forces Group and was able to successfully lobby to take command of the JSOTF-P mission and temporarily increase its footprint. Some officers under his command believed that the desire to deploy additional forces was not a part of a strategic reassessment of U.S. objectives, but instead reflected a belief that increasing the scope of the mission and being personally involved in commanding the deployment could be professionally beneficial. While most of the increase in forces worked with other AFP elements, the growth temporarily increased the number of SF advisors working with the LRB to three ODAs (approximately 36 personnel) from August 2013 until May 2104.[72] The surge in advisors also reflected that Americans were again being called on to assist in the growth of the LRB to regimental size as the LRR, as the Philippine institutional arm that would assess, select, and train new LRR operators was not fully developed.

During McDowell's deployment, the political winds shifted again, and it was announced that the mission would conclude in 2015. To reflect this reality, as his forces redeployed, they left behind only a split team, or half of an ODA, to work with the LRR.[73] That ratio remained until the JSOTF-P guidon was furled and the mission concluded in February. After that point, the U.S. maintained episodic contact with the LRR through Joint Combined Exercises for Training (JCETs) and the standard security force assistance mission.

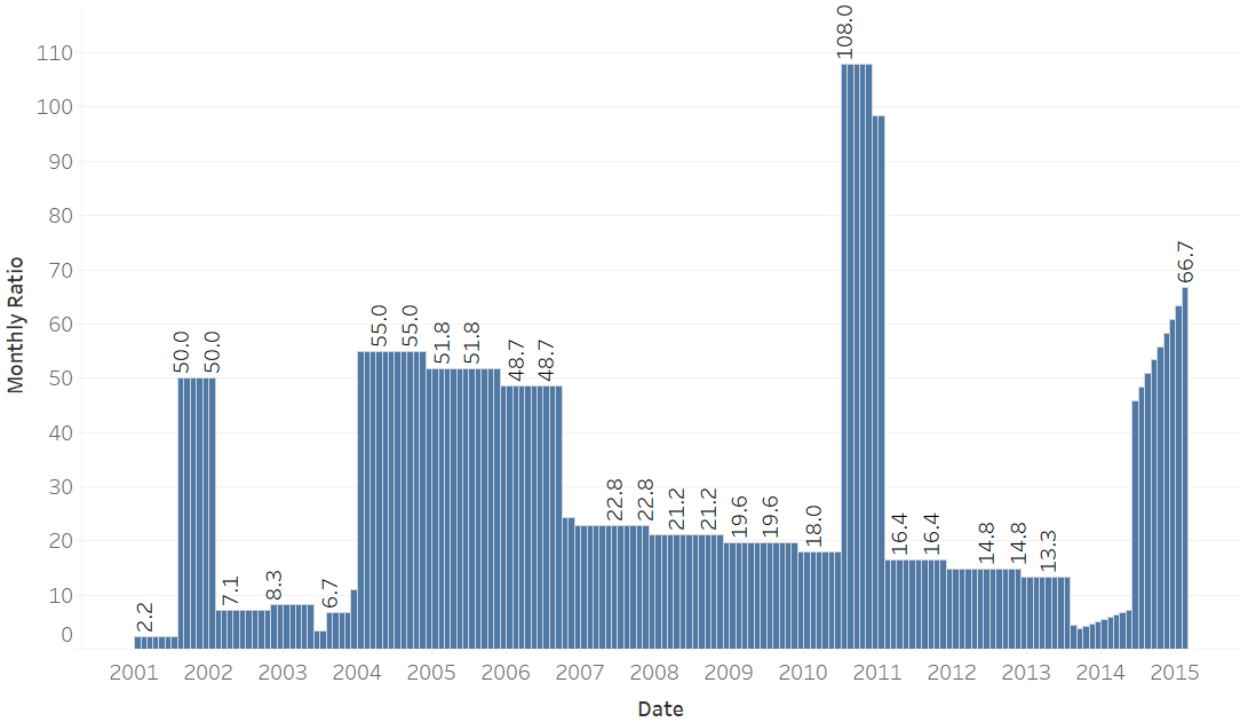
[71] Interview, MAJ Noel Sioson, 17 June 2020.
[72] Interview, COL Max Carpenter, 17 July 2020.
[73] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Erik Brown, 5 October 2020. Interview, MAJ Noel Sioson, 26 June 2020.

Calculation of Partner Force to Advisor Ratio:

The partner force to advisor ratio over the entire span of the mission was calculated by first determining the monthly partner force to advisor ratio. Most missions were conducted on a monthly basis rather than weekly, and at the macro level across fifteen years, the impact of a higher or lower ratio for a few days at the beginning or tail end of a mission would not be significant. Those monthly ratios were then averaged to calculate an overall average monthly ratio for the entire mission. That monthly average is 28.68 soldiers per one U.S. Special Forces advisor. Please see Table 2.1 in the appendix for the math used to determine that monthly average.[74]

[74] Doctrinally, one Special Forces ODA of twelve personnel should be allotted to train a single host nation battalion, equating to a ratio of 50 or 75 to 1. The partner force to advisor ratio in the Philippines roughly double the doctrinal ratio but did not seem to show a statistically significant change in results.

Figure 2.1 Monthly Ratio of Partners to Advisors (Philippines)



Assessment of Variable:

Evaluating the impact of the partner force to advisor ratio in a single case is not practical. While there is variation in the monthly average across the span of the advisory effort with the LRR, it would not be possible to assess the impact of that variance on the dependent variable. There were no advisors interviewed who had a perspective across long enough time periods where different ratios existed for them to be able to fairly assess changes in the combat effectiveness based on observations of different ratios. Assessment of this variable will be conducted when multiple case studies have been completed. However, advisors universally noted that in almost all cases, decreasing the partner force to advisor ratio had a positive impact on the combat effectiveness of the unit they trained. It can be noted, however, that during periods of the LRR's growth, additional advisors were deployed which lowered the ratio.

Advisor's Ability to Organize Host Nation Unit:

The Philippines' unique history with the U.S. had considerable impacts on the ability of the SF advisors to organize the Light Reaction units as they were stood up. In one way, the long-term relationship- even though it had been broken temporarily by the withdrawal of the U.S. military in 1991- had led to deep bonds and connections between the two militaries that led to Filipino officers trusting the recommendations and judgment of U.S. advisors. At the same time, that history, and the connection as a *de facto* colony, made the Filipinos particularly sensitive towards issues of sovereignty. Indicative of the tensions in such a bipolar relationship was the slogan picked for the Light Reaction Regiment, "*Tiradores de la Muerte*" which translates as "shooters of death." That logo originally came from a Filipino guerrilla unit that fought in the Philippine American War and whose sharpshooters were responsible for the death of the most senior American killed during the conflict, General Henry Lawton, in 1899.[75]

To assess the rating for this variable, I will explore how the U.S. advisors' ability to influence the LR units changed over time. In doing this, three separate phases will be reviewed: early successes when SF advisors had considerable leeway in organizing and controlling LR activities; Philippine military misuse of the LR units and their reluctance to stand up a SOF headquarters; and the Oakwood coup plot and its impacts. The impact of the longevity of the mission will also be evaluated. It is important to review the narrative of these key time periods as they provide considerable insight into the degree to which SF advisors could organize and control the LR units.

Early Successes:

[75] Villanueva, *Tiradores*, 11–12.

Despite these sensitivities, during the stand up of the initial LRC, the Philippines ceded considerable sovereignty. When the U.S. approached the Philippines about the possibility of organizing and training a national level counterterrorism and hostage rescue force, they were enthusiastic. The Armed Forces of the Philippines lacked such a capability, and the U.S. offered to not just train Filipino forces, but also agreed to fully fund the equipping of this new force; effectively offering a $2.2 million grant to accomplish that end. Almost all the equipment provided was brand new, still wrapped in its shipping containers and plastics, and the Filipino leaders who were part of the first LRC noted that receiving the tactical gear was like "opening gifts during Christmas."[76] Potentially buoyed by the considerable grants and free training, the Philippines initially gave U.S. SF advisors substantial authority in their decisions.

The Filipino officers who oversaw the creation of the LRC were content to let the U.S. pick out the equipment for the new unit. Special Forces NCOs from 1st Group who had considerable experience in counter-terrorism training and operations developed the equipment list, including everything from weapons and body armor to night vision devices and radios. Many of the NCOs tried to copy the equipment of their own unit, the PACOM CINC's in-extremis Force (CIF) and spared no expense on the weapons they chose.[77] The level of U.S. control over the initial equipping even included the caliber of sidearm which the LRC operators would carry, with the SF advisors selecting .45 caliber pistols rather than the 9mm used by U.S. forces because the Philippines produced .45 caliber ammunition indigenously, which they assumed would help the unit with future logistics challenges.[78]

[76] Villanueva, 27.
[77] Interview, CSM Brian Johnson, 16 September 2020.
[78] Mahnken, *Learning the Lessons of Modern War*, 199–200.

Although the Philippines nominated those who would attend the initial LRC operator selection, assessment, and training by ordering a complete Basic Airborne Class comprised of Scout Ranger and Special Forces companies to begin training, the AFP took a hands off approach and let the U.S. advisors determine who would pass the course.[79] In the words of one of the advisors who conducted that process, "it was like a (Special Forces) selection … we had the ability to send home the ones we didn't want."[80] Every interviewed U.S. SF advisor who participated in the mission concurred with that assessment and emphasized that if an officer or NCO did not meet the high standards of the training, they failed and were sent back to their parent headquarters. That said, most advisors estimated that around 70% of initial trainees passed the rigorous process.[81]

Although Philippine officers were generally willing to subvert their concerns over sovereignty for most issues regarding the training of the original LRC and its sister companies, one issue where they intervened and prevented 1st Special Forces Group advisors from having their way was the subject of the advisor footprint. Concerned with the optics of a large American military footprint and the potential political impact it could have, Philippine officers insisted on a force cap starting with the earliest OEF-P missions. This limit was set at 1,300 total U.S. personnel from all services, which meant that the number of Special Forces personnel was capped at 160, significantly fewer than they had wanted to deploy.[82] Philippine military officers also set a limit of 600 Americans that would be allowed into the southern operating area where most of the nation's Muslim population lived and the ASG operated.[83]

[79] Villanueva, *Tiradores*, 24–25.
[80] Interview, MSG Joe Morley, 22 July 2020.
[81] Interview, MSG Joe Morley, 22 July 2020.
[82] Interview, COL David Maxwell, 9 July 2020.
[83] Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001--2014*, 28.

Excepting the force cap, during the early days of the mission American advisors had considerable control over the organization, training, and equipping of the LRR. This period of goodwill and willingness to subvert issues of sovereignty and accept U.S. advice lasted primarily for the duration that the first LRC was stood up. Past that initial period, several factors created considerable impediments to the U.S. advisors being able to control or organize the LRR.

Used and Abused: Resistance and Delay to Creating a Philippine SOF Headquarters:

One challenge for U.S. advisors in their attempts to organize and control the LRR was the decision to keep the Light Reaction units under the command of local conventional commanders and not stand up a Philippine special operations headquarters that could oversee funding and operational use of the LRR. Although the Filipinos had been willing to let the U.S. advisors control the standup of the unit, they were not willing to give them the same level of operational control. Initial training of the first LRC identified that, "while the Philippines government could develop a tactically proficient counterterrorism force, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) did not have a command-and-control structure to properly employ the LRC or to integrate it with other forces and current operations."[84] As such, employment of the LRC or LRB fell under the regional conventional force commander where the unit was deployed. Many of the local commanders did not understand how to properly employ and logistically support special operations units, and as a result the unit was often misused. When U.S. advisors attempted to intervene and to advise the conventional commanders about the proper employment of the LRC or LRB, they were often met with considerable resistance.[85] Philippine Marine and Army

[84] David Maxwell, "Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines: What Would Sun Tzu Say?," *Military Review* 84, no. 3 (2004): 20–23, http://search.proquest.com/docview/225312270/?pq-origsite=primo.
[85] Jack Murphy, "Inside the Light Reaction Regiment, the Philippines Answer to Delta Force," SOFREP, June 13, 2017, https://sofrep.com/news/sofrep-exclusive-inside-ligconht-reaction-regiment-philippines-answer-delta-force-part-2/.

officers often did not trust one another and would compete rather than cooperate to accomplish missions.[86] This put the LR units into unfortunate circumstances where they would at times be used – over the protests of their American advisors- as a sacrificial force or for a mission that either a Marine or Army commander would not risk his own forces.

Such practices began during the very creation of the first LRC. Faced with the political relations nightmare of American hostages being paraded on global cable channels by ASG, the Philippine government wanted to curtail the unit's initial training in 2000 and deploy the LRC on a search for the hostages despite not having completed its program of instruction by 1st Special Forces Group. While the advisors were able to convince the government that such a hasty decision was unwise, they were unable to convince Philippine leaders that the unit needed more preparation and the LRC was deployed into the search mission a mere two days after completing training.[87] Rather than deploy the unit based on confirmed intelligence to conduct pinpoint hostage rescue missions, the LRC was thrown into jungle areas where the AFP suspected the hostages might be held to conduct zone reconnaissance that a conventional unit could have performed. Despite nearly continuous extended patrolling, the new LRC was unsuccessful in locating the American hostages and succeeded only in exhausting and frustrating its members during the fruitless search.

Such misuse continued against the advice of U.S. mentors for years. Desperate to contain the ASG and under considerable pressure to recover European and U.S. hostages, the Armed Forces of the Philippines effectively deployed the first LRC to the jungle across 2002 and 2003. In the words of the JSOTF commander at the time, LTC Dennis Downey, the LRC was, "ordered it to patrol endlessly without intelligence, mobility, or supply chains to track the ASG on their

[86] Kaplan, *Imperial Grunts*, 150–52.
[87] Mahnken, *Learning the Lessons of Modern War*, 200.

home turf. It was not a great plan."[88] Rather than take advantage of the elite counter terrorism training that the unit received, the LRC was initially employed more like long-range surveillance units or worse, deployed ahead of conventional AFP elements beating the bush in a hammer and anvil approach to seek and destroy ASG elements. This led to unfortunate incidents where small numbers of LRC troops faced larger bodies of ASG on terrain they were intimately familiar with. Several times those units had to be extracted under pressure at risk of being destroyed.[89] While American advisors pushed to have the unit employed properly, it fell on deaf ears.

Similar problems occurred in 2006 during the AFP directed and led Operation Ultimatum on Jolo Island, where several of the LRCs in the newly formed LRB were misused badly. During that effort, Philippine joint forces conducted an amphibious landing that aimed to catch ASG elements by surprise, while other ground forces served as blocking or deception elements.[90] Two LRCs were originally used as part of the cordon force, a complete misunderstanding and misuse of their special capabilities. Unsurprisingly, the ASG elements were able to break contact and disappear into the jungle.[91] While the LRCs performed more capably during combat engagements and were sparingly used in high value targets, forcing ASG elements to flee, the deployment of the LRCs to the blocking force was over the protests of U.S. advisors.

As a result of the persistent misuse of the LRC and LRB, Special Forces advisors in the JSOTF identified the lack of a proper command and control mechanism to ensure proper integration of the LRC with the regional command in Mindanao as a major deficiency to Philippine joint headquarters.[92] With the assistance of U.S. embassy staff and leadership at

[88] Email, COL Dennis Downey, 11 July 2020.
[89] Email, COL Dennis Downey, 15 July 2020.
[90] After-Action Review Document, Headquarters Joint Task Force Comet, Western Mindanao Command, Armed Forces of the Philippines, "OPLAN ULTIMATUM an Overview," undated but probably November 2007.
[91] Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001--2014*, 52.
[92] Maxwell, "Foreign Internal Defense: An Indirect Approach to Counter-Insurgency/Counter Terrorism," 6.

PACOM and SOCPAC, the JSOTF continued to lobby senior Philippine leaders to resolve the problem.

Like many other Special Forces advisory missions, the creation of a host nation higher headquarters to offset some of the internal misuse problems was slow to launch. Favoring tactical combat training rather than institutional development, the LRR was the primary focus of JSOTF-P and its Special Forces advisors. That said, across the duration of the mission those same advisors worked to establish some level of Philippine SOF institutional headquarters. In late 2003, at the behest of the JSOTF, the Armed Forces of the Philippines stood up an organization known as the Joint Special Operations Group (JSOG), which would carry out operational control of the LRC and elite Philippine Navy and Air Force special operations elements.[93] JSOG served as the country's tier one national mission force and was independent of the Philippines' regional commands for its institutional support, instead falling under the direct command of the chief of staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines. Unlike U.S. national forces, JSOG elements could be requested by regional conventional commanders and then would deploy and fall under the tactical command of those conventional regional headquarters. JSOG units such as the LRC were not allowed to operate unilaterally or independently.[94] Another problem was that the unit was initially led by loyalists to President Gloria Arroyo who had little experience in the LRC's capabilities and organization. Over the objections of U.S. advisors, JSOG was based at Camp Aguinaldo in a dense urban environment on the outskirts of Manila. There it had limited command and control, logistics, maintenance, and mobility capabilities as the base did not have an airfield with a dedicated airwing causing units to have to travel through the capital's notorious traffic to deploy. Some advisors speculated that the headquarters was

[93] Villanueva, *Tiradores*, 462.
[94] Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001--2014*, 84.

placed near the capital to ensure civilian leadership had constant oversight of the organization's forces and plans.[95]

U.S. Special Forces advisors also helped stand up the institutional side of Philippine Special Operations Forces headquarters responsible for organizing, training, and equipping Philippine Army SOF units. Across the span of the mission, the AFP opened Philippine Army Special Operations Command (PA SOCOM) as well as other institutions and processes that created a self-sustaining SOF enterprise responsible for providing forces to the Philippine Chief of Staff. U.S. advisors also helped in the construction of a special warfare training school, including a cadre, selection criteria, courses, and noncommissioned-officer (NCO) academy.[96] While such progress was proceeded at a glacial pace, the institutional effort saw renewed effort in the spring of 2013, when the JSOTF helped stand up a SOF Center of Excellence at PA SOCOM, which coordinated the U.S. SOF training missions; refined Philippine SOF requirements and standards within the AFP; and helped focus and develop SOF training standards, including the expansion the same year for the LRR.[97] The joint Philippines Special Operations Command headquarters, AFPSOCOM (Armed Forces of the Philippines Special Operations Command) was not officially stood up until 2018- after the primary advisory mission had concluded- and was slow to gain institutional control over the disparate SOF elements.[98]

Coup Proofing and the Oakwood Plot:

Another factor that affected the ability of the SF advisors to control or organize the LRR came from the involvement of members of the unit in an attempted coup in 2003. That

[95] Email, COL Denis Downey, 15 July 2020.
[96] Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001--2014*, xxi.
[97] Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, 85.
[98] Prashanth Parameswaran, "What's in the New Philippines Special Operations Command?," The Diplomat, April 13, 2018, https://thediplomat.com/2018/04/whats-in-the-new-philippines-special-operations-command/.

fundamental violation of civil military relations put a considerable stain on the unit's reputation and resulted in significantly more oversight from the Philippine government. At that time, President Gloria Arroyo had been in office for only two years having replaced President Joseph Estrada after he was impeached and then resigned during the People Power II protests. President Estrada was well respected within military circles and had undertaken a significant military campaign against the MILF in the early part of his term. The ascension of then Vice President Arroyo to the Presidency caused numerous fissures among the military and several units revolted against her (some calling themselves "The Rebels" and even flying the flag of the Confederate States of America). Arroyo's presidency was not on firm ground with the Philippine military, many of whom perceived her to be "soft" against what they saw as a significant Islamic threat, and distrustful of the Armed Forces of the Philippines from the start of her tenure in office.[99]

In that context, from late 2002 through 2003, members of a military coup recruited the commander of the first LRC, Lieutenant San Juan, who served as the course director for the second LRC, which was being organized and trained. San Juan used his position to recruit four other members of the LRC to join the coup attempt. On July 27, 2003, the plotters took over the Oakwood Hotel in Manila and proclaimed a revolution against Arroyo. The coup was short lived, and the plotters were arrested; their weapons confiscated by the Arroyo government (including American provided kit fielded to the LRC). For a brand-new unit that was meant to become the crown jewel of the Philippine's elite counter terrorism capabilities, it was a tremendously embarrassing and impactful event.[100]

After the coup attempt, the LRB was under intense scrutiny by President Arroyo and other democratically elected leaders who were keenly aware of internal threats that the

[99] Email, COL Dennis Downey, 11 July 2020.
[100] Villanueva, *Tiradores*, 36-38.

organization could pose. At many times, debates over equipping the unit with the best gear and personnel were questioned by senior civilian leaders who wondered whether if they built a Philippines equivalent of the U.S. Delta Force, would the unit faithfully serve in that capacity as a protector of the republic, or might they become a threat to the duly elected government.[101] More importantly, in the immediate aftermath of the coup attempt the unit's leaders were carefully staffed with officers who had impeccable loyalty to the civilian administration. Allegiance to elected officials and respect for proper civil military relations became the prominent qualities for senior selection rather than whether they were militarily proficient or capable leaders. Fortunately, those skill sets were not always mutually exclusive, and several superb unit commanders possessed both components. However, at times the LRR suffered from leaders who seemed to be put in place to keep the unit from becoming a danger to the government.

Several advisors believed that the resistance from the Philippine government affected the combat effectiveness of the LRR, the dependent variable. Fear of the LRR becoming too powerful for its own good resulted in the government at least temporarily stunting the unit's capabilities to prevent another coup. Over time, those fears were tempered by the LRR's fighting prowess- especially during the Battle of Marawi in 2017, when it received considerable attention and accolades from President Rodrigo Duterte. Those successes seemed to prove the unit's value to the government, which reversed tendencies towards curbing the unit's advancement- albeit after the JSOTF involvement and the scope of this study.

The Duration of the Mission:

[101] Email, COL Dennis Downey, 11 July 2020.

In some ways, the duration of the mission worked against U.S. advisors. Early in the mission, many advisors noted that new members of the LRC and LRB were particularly impressed with U.S. Special Forces skills based on their initial decisive performance in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Over time, members of the LRR gained significant combat experience to the point that they began to consider themselves peers or even more capable than some U.S. advisors. As LRR members gained combat experience, they would often push back more against U.S. suggestions and, as a result, American advisors had less ability to control or organize the unit.[102] An initial topic of discussion at the start of the mission often became a comparison on the amount of combat experience the advisors had compared to the members of the LRR. By 2010, the LRR had been in combat more than a decade and some of the members had more experience in battle than some of the younger U.S. advisors.[103] In those cases, interviewees noted that it was difficult to build rapport with the experienced members of the LRR and they often would ignore U.S. advice on how to organize or employ the unit in combat.

Assessing the Impact of the Variable:

Likely because of a "honeymoon period" stemming from renewed U.S.-Philippine relations as well as the considerable amount of military assistance provided, the SF advisors ability to control or organize the LRR elements was initially high. Philippine military forces gave American advisors considerable leeway in the organization and equipping of the LRC, as well as the selection of its operators. Issues of national sovereignty were often overlooked based on the perceived experience of U.S. advisors and the advantages that the U.S. brought with an open purse. However, that initial phase was quickly overturned by Philippine concerns, and the sovereignty "clock," a period when host nation forces are prone to ignore such issues, quickly

[102] Interview, LTC Ken Gleiman, 13 August 2020.
[103] Interview, LTC John Moria, 24 July 2020.

ran out. The Oakwood coup plot damaged the LRR's relations with civil authorities and many advisors perceived that because of that harm, Philippine leaders would never allow the LRR to meet the goals of the U.S. Special Forces advisors lest it become a danger to the government.

Additionally, because the LRR was placed under the operational control of conventional units which often misunderstood their unique capabilities and limitations, the recommendations of U.S. advisors were watered down and often ignored, leading to misuse of the LRR. Calls and initiatives from the U.S. Special Forces elements to positively resolve this by putting the unit under a special operations headquarters were often stymied, slow to take effect, and limited in application. Because of all these factors, the overall rating of how much the U.S. advisors were able to organize the LRR will be rated as low. Such a rating is also appropriate, especially in comparison to the missions of Iraq and Afghanistan, where early in the effort to build those host nation special operations forces, U.S. forces had carte blanche to organize and control those units in whatever way they saw fit.

Combat Advising

In accordance with the Philippines Constitution, foreign forces are explicitly prohibited from engaging in domestic combat operations.[104] Such a rule effectively prohibited the 1st SF Group units from conducting combat advising along the lines of what occurred in Iraq or Afghanistan. It was such a bedrock component of the mission that commanders issued guidance that noted, "Any perception of U.S. or unilateral operations equals U.S. strategic failure in the Philippines and Pacific Region."[105] Despite that prohibition, there was still considerable variation on what type of advising was permitted, and that variation changed over time. Rather

[104] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC John Maraia, 24 July 2020.
[105] PowerPoint Briefing, COL David Maxwell, "Joint Special Operations Task Force Philippines (JSOTF-P), A Special Warfare Approach to Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism," June 2015.

than a purely binary variable of whether combat advising occurred or not, the variable was more accurately described as a spectrum with a range of outcomes.

An example of how this sensitivity towards the presence of U.S. forces played out was that in the first deployment of its forces to the Philippines after the September 11 attacks, the U.S. had initially named the operation a Joint Task Force, a designation used by elements conducting combat operations in Afghanistan and later Iraq. Filipino military and political leaders balked at the nomenclature, concerned that such a moniker could imply that U.S. forces might be conducting domestic combat operations. To alleviate these concerns, both countries agreed to give the new operation on Mindanao the name "Balikatan" ("shoulder to shoulder" in Tagalog), which was an annual combined exercise normally conducted on Luzon. The actual Balikatan exercise was not scheduled to occur until much later in the year and in a different location in the Philippines, but the senior military leaders believed that obscuring the nature of the operation would generate less media attention and potential resistance to the deployment.[106] Similarly, Philippine military leaders cautioned U.S. SF advisors to avoid being photographed with their military forces in an operational setting for fear of the political repercussions as well as the potential that such optics could be used as propaganda material by the ASG or NPA.[107]

Despite these attempts to reduce the perception of a U.S. colonial return or disruption of Filipino sovereignty, the issue of a sizeable U.S. deployment resulted in considerable political oversight. The Philippine Senate took up the matter, opening investigations, hearings, and eventually holding a vote on the mission's legitimacy. Approved in a hair's breadth vote, that resolution reminded the U.S. that its forces were not to engage in combat except in self-defense and prohibited U.S. forces from operating independently or in establishing permanent bases:

[106] Maxwell, "Foreign Internal Defense: An Indirect Approach to Counter-Insurgency/Counter Terrorism," 10.
[107] Interview, COL Dennis Downey, 20 July 2020.

resulting in only temporary facilities being used for the duration of the fourteen-year mission. Total U.S. forces would be capped at 600 personnel of all types, including guards, doctors, pilots, and SF advisors; creating an artificial limit that prevented the deployment of the preferred number of civil affairs and psychological operations personnel.[108] There would also be a geographical restriction for the mission to only Basilan Island and the Zamboanga peninsula, which was seen as a way to limit American presence, and thereby visibility, to domestic news media.[109] Even those terms were so controversial that the Philippine Supreme Court heard a case related to the prospective deployment, eventually ruling that the mission was legal.[110] Such political machinations delayed the initial deployment of advisors to February 2002 and affected the size and composition of follow on missions.

When USMC leaders were given responsibility for the third rotation of the OEF-P mission in 2003, they officially announced their desire to expand the mission to over one thousand personnel and to negotiate the possibility to target Al Qa'ida affiliated terrorists during combined combat operations with Philippine military forces. Those statements triggered sovereignty concerns within the Philippine government to such an extent that then-President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo canceled the conventional force portion of the mission altogether, citing a constitutional ban on U.S. forces engaging in such actions. The ensuing fallout left only a small 1st Special Forces Group caretaker force deployed from March 2003 until 2005, which employed measures to maintain an extremely low profile.[111]

In addition to changing the name of the mission to satisfy political sensitivities, U.S. and Filipino leaders also put operational restrictions on the movement of SF advisory elements to

[108] Interview, COL David Maxwell, 9 July 2020.
[109] Swain, "Case Study," 16–17.
[110] Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001--2014*, 22–25.
[111] Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, 36–38.

keep them out of combat. Initially, advisors had to obtain permission from the JSOTF level to participate in any type of operation, but those restrictions proved too cumbersome for the advisors and the headquarters. Faced with that challenge, the JSOTF negotiated blanket permission that allowed advisors to deploy with battalion headquarters. That rule, largely interpreted that advisors could not get closer to combat than the location of the Filipino battalion commander, remained in place for the first year and a half of the mission.[112]

In practice, SF advisors found the rule to be problematic because in the jungles of the Philippines there was no front line and the battalion commander's position could easily encounter the enemy. U.S. forces retained the right to defend themselves in the event they were attacked, which created a fine line for advisors who wished to respect Philippine sovereignty and avoid combat but also put themselves in a location where they could offer their best advice.[113] Remaining with the battalion headquarters was not a viable solution to advise the members of the LRC and LRB because from that location advisors did not have the ability to see what happened during combat. Some advisors, especially during the early phases of the mission when the LRC had no battalion headquarters, re-interpreted this guidance to mean the last covered and concealed position before the objective, which was outside of small arms range, and therefore potentially outside of combat.[114] Other SF advisors simply made the best of the situation by interpreting the restriction to allow them to go wherever the battalion commander moved, even if the commander moved forward to the front lines. That interpretation gave the SF advisors some perspective of the smaller units by being able to observe them when the battalion commander traveled to visit his subordinates.[115]

[112] Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, 53.
[113] Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, xvi.
[114] Interview, COL Bill Coultrup, 14 July 2020.
[115] Mahnken, *Learning the Lessons of Modern War*, 207.

Pairing with battalion level still proved to be sub-optimal, so in June 2002 the JSOTF was able to obtain permission for Special Forces advisors to accompany company level units on operations.[116] Gaining approval for putting advisors at that level was particularly challenging, as Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had consistently blocked previous requests, with some senior leaders hypothesizing that the continued opposition came from Rumsfeld's long standing frustration with the Philippines over their decision to close the U.S. Navy base at Subic Bay. In late 2002, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz visited the JSOTF-P mission and during his briefing he asked how he could help. The 1st SF Group Commander, COL David Fridovich, said that he really needed his advisors to work at company level and indicated they were being creative in their approach to working with the Philippine military at the battalion level and preferred more clarity on what would be allowed. Wolfowitz noted that Rumsfeld was on vacation for the next few days and that he was the acting secretary and would approve the decision.[117]

Still, some missions were deemed to be so risky and high profile, such as the missions when the LRC attempted to find and rescue American hostages, that U.S. SF advisors were not allowed to accompany the Filipino commandos at all.[118] The rule changed yet again in 2006, when USPACOM authorized troops to be in a "combat environment" so long as they were in locations where they would not encounter the enemy. Such a nebulous authorization gave additional freedom to LRB advisors, but most commanders interpreted it conservatively due to the potential diplomatic and political repercussions if U.S. forces came under fire or took casualties.[119] When taking all these factors into consideration, the Philippines advisory effort

[116] Swain, "Case Study," 17–20.
[117] Interview, LTG David Fridovich, 16 July 2020.
[118] Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001--2014*, 27.
[119] Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, 53.

should be rated as a medium degree of combat advising. While SF advisors were not allowed to accompany their counterparts into battle, they were able to accompany them during parts of their combat missions and were sometimes incidentally exposed to combat.

Assessing the Impact of the Variable:

The prohibition on accompanying the LRR and other Philippine military forces into combat was disparaged by most of the advisors interviewed. While they understood and accepted the limitations, they expressed frustrations at the perceived impacts. Many argued that if they had been able to accompany Philippine forces into combat, they would have made much more rapid, consistent, and further progress than they were able to make under the established rules of engagement that banned combat advising. Specifically, they believed that being able to accompany them into battle would have allowed them to be able to assess the LRR's performance firsthand rather than to have to rely upon the Filipino after-action reports, many of which they felt could not be trusted to be accurate or fully critical.[120]

Additionally, SF advisors argued that not being able to accompany the LRR into combat limited or even damaged the rapport that they could establish with the Filipino officers and NCOs, which in turn resulted in the LRR being less willing to make difficult but necessary changes.[121] As the last JSOTF-P commander noted, it made it harder for the Filipinos to be willing to trust U.S. recommendations when Americans were not willing to share the same dangers that they experienced.[122] This concern with prohibitions on accompanying the LRR into combat extended to the restrictions that originally prevented advisors from providing support below battalion level. Lieutenant Colonel Dave Maxwell, who was the battalion commander of

[120] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Brian Johnson, 16 September 2020.
[121] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MAJ Joe Harosky, 24 September 2020.
[122] Interview, COL Erik Brown, 5 October 2020.

the first LRC advisory effort, noted in a 2002 report to his higher headquarters, "rapport with the AFP (Armed Forces of the Philippines) is going to wane because there is a perception that the US forces are not willing to commit to advising and assisting at the lowest levels. Furthermore, until US SF conducts advisory operations at the lowest tactical levels, [AFP] operations will never be sufficiently improved to get the job done."[123]

Other Factors:

Although this dissertation focuses on five primary independent variables, it is important to consider other potential explanations for the outcome of the dependent variable. Some factors in this case study that are relevant to how the LRR performed after training had concluded are the quality of initial recruits, the screening of those trainees conducted on induction, and whether any special pay or benefits were provided to members of the unit.

For the first LRC, an entire company sized basic airborne class was ordered to report for training as the basis of the organization. When it was apparent that with expected washout rates, injuries, and other administrative issues a single company would likely not produce enough qualified soldiers at the end of training, select individuals from Philippine Army Scout Ranger and Special Forces units were allowed to attend training also.[124] Thus, while the quality of individual recruits for the first LRC were above that of regular Army conscripts, they had no special counterterrorism or hostage rescue skills.

Many did, however, have combat experience due to the seemingly never-ending conflict between the Philippine government and the communist NPA or Muslim insurgent groups. The Scout Ranger course, which many of the initial group of LRC volunteers had completed, conducts combat operations as its graduation exercise, and students are not allowed to complete

[123] Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001--2014*, 41.
[124] Villanueva, *Tiradores*, 25–27.

the course until they engage the enemy.[125] The pattern of complete company sized units being selected and sent en masse to be trained continued with the second and third LRCs, with the second LRC being a complete Philippine Special Forces company and the third a Scout Ranger company.[126] For both following expansions, the Philippine Scout Rangers and Special Forces regiments provided the majority of the recruits for the LRR.[127]

There was little screening for the first group of trainees to ensure dedication and trustworthiness. No counterintelligence screenings or polygraphs were conducted, and there were no security reviews. In terms of benefits, unit members received no special pay or incentives beyond what they were already authorized. For example, although they did not warrant special pay for being a part of the LRR, they did qualify for parachutist/airborne pay like any other soldier in the Philippine Army. Families were also not part of the equation, and they received no special treatment or benefits.[128] Like other servicemembers, their families were potentially at risk from insurgent attacks, although given the relatively stable nature of the Philippines, that was an unlikely possibility. Unlike other cases, there was no concerted effort to create a multi-ethnically representative force in the LRR, and it is highly probable that the entire force was religiously Christian as no evidence existed of any Muslim LRR members.

Assessing the Combat Effectiveness of the Light Reaction Regiment:

There is always considerable debate over the combat effectiveness of individual military forces. In 2020, the magazine Business Insider identified the LRR as one of the top 5 non-US special operation forces in the world, beating out even the legendary Israeli Sayeret Matkal, the national mission force unit famous for the daring Entebbe rescue mission in 1976 and other

[125] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Scott Malone, 23 July 2020.
[126] Villanueva, *Tiradores*, 36–40.
[127] Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001--2014*, 118.
[128] Email, COL Dennis Downey, 11 July 2020.

operations.[129] While such an assessment is clearly debatable, it is a significant achievement for a unit to achieve such notoriety. To properly evaluate the LRR's combat effectiveness more dispassionately, four key areas will be assessed: competence at night fighting, the capability to fight without advisors present as defined by whether they could conduct intelligence driven operations, the ability to conduct multi-day combat operations, and how it performed in combat against enemy forces.

Night Fighting:

From its inception, the LRR was outfitted similarly to the CINC's in-extremis force (CIF) Special Forces companies that conducted their initial training. Each LRR member was equipped with a PVS-14 or PVS-15 night vision goggle and issued advanced laser pointers for their rifles as part of the $2.2 million initial support package provided by the U.S.[130] Such equipment gave them a significant technological advantage over the Islamist insurgent groups they faced, such as the ASG, which had only a handful of night vision devices across its entire force.

Despite that imbalance in night vision equipment and capability, many of the interviewees noted that the LRR was rarely willing to engage in night actions. Some observed that there seemed to be a cultural reluctance to fight at night, noting that the LRR soldiers were "solar powered," and when the sun went down, they ceased operations. Some SF advisors hypothesized that the seemingly endless conflict with Islamic militants played a role in this reluctance to fight at night. That struggle had spanned generation upon generation, and some advisors recalled stories that they had been told by Filipino officers that during combat against

[129] Stavros Atlamazoglou, "Best Non-US Special Operations Forces from around the World," *Business Insider*, September 1, 2020, https://www.businessinsider.com/best-non-us-special-operations-forces-from-around-the-world-2020-8.
[130] Villanueva, *Tiradores*, 27.

certain families the AFP had killed the grandfather, the father, and was now fighting the son.[131] Because of that reality, fighting at night could be seen as pointless since the extra effort would be unlikely to have an impact. If one had to "mow the grass" of extremism every few years, there was no reason to have to take extra risks.[132]

One advisor described that cultural reluctance in this way, "Everything stopped at about 1700 every day (because) it's a tropical area and equatorial. The sun goes down the same time about six o'clock every evening and nobody fights at night. It was a civilized way of warfare because you could have a cold beer by about 1800 every day. What both sides would do because the AFP, the Armed Forces of the Philippines and LRC and the Abu Sayyaf, the opposition, they would text each other in the evening and brag about how many they killed on each side and the other ones would refute, 'No you did not kill us, we killed you.' And so, over beer and pasta and noodles, they would heckle each other before the next day's event. But they wouldn't fight at night."[133]

Others argued that the lack of willingness to fight at night came from the inability of the casualty evacuation system to promptly remove wounded soldiers from the battlefield during periods of darkness. When the LRC was initially stood up, there was not a single helicopter crew in the entire Armed Forces of the Philippines that was capable of extracting wounded at night.[134] Aircrews lacked equipment and training to conduct such a difficult technical operation in the jungle environment. Knowing that they would have to wait until the sun rose to be evacuated - and potentially bleed to death from any wound that could not be treated locally- led

[131] Interview, Angie Slattery, Combat Studies Institute with LTC Eric Walker, 20 April 2010.
[132] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Erik Brown, 5 October 2020.
[133] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Max Carpenter, 17 July 2020.
[134] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Steve Durfee, 14 July 2020; Interview, LTC Leo Liebreich, 21 July 2020.

many LRR members to conclude that it was not worth the additional risk to fight at night.[135] This issue was so significant that the JSOTF recognized the challenges it created and worked with the embassy to improve the capability and skills of Philippine helicopter pilots, a project that only came partially to fruition. Understanding how critical the issue was for the LRR, the JSOTF received approval from USPACOM to authorize its civilian contract helicopters from the Evergreen corporation to perform night medevac operations, so long as the Filipino forces were not in direct combat.[136]

Finally, some advisors noted that the terrain and environment also affected the LRR's willingness to fight at night. When called upon to conduct missions in triple canopy jungle terrain, often in overcast conditions, night vision technology was not remarkably effective. Requiring considerable ambient light to function, even modern night vision goggles simply would not perform in those environments, preventing the LRR from acquiring a technological edge over opponents.[137] Some advisors noted that the jungle terrain was so complicated and affected technological advantages gained through night vision goggles and infra-red pointers that the U.S. would not have been able to perform well in that environment either.[138]

There was some disagreement on this variable from some of the interviewees. Several advisors noted that they believed the LRR was capable and willing to fight at night and was one of the best forces in Asia on that capability.[139] While they did not put the Filipino elite forces on the same level as U.S. forces, they noted that comparing them would be unfair due to the gross differences in defense spending between the two countries.

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[135] Interview, LTC John Moria, 24 July 2020.
[136] Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001--2014*, 27.
[137] Interview, LTG David Fridovich, 16 July 2020.
[138] Interview, COL Erik Brown, 5 October 2020.
[139] Interview, MAJ Shawn Boyer, 10 July 2020; Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Brian Johnson, 16 September 2020.

Other environments affected the unit's capabilities and willingness to engage in night fighting differently. During the 2013 Siege of Zamboanga and 2017 Battle of Marawi, media reports and advisor commentary noted that the LRR was often very willing and capable of conducting night operations.[140] With state-of-the-art trauma centers available near both cities and accessible by road, evacuation in such conditions was significantly easier. Other advisors also noted that even in urban terrain, where the night vision equipment would function much more effectively, at times the LRR was still reluctant to fight at night.

Assessment:

Setting a value to the LRR's night fighting capabilities is challenging due to the mixed reviews given by the different interviewed advisors. Some assessed the LRR's willingness to conduct night operations as low due to cultural challenges, the inability to potentially evacuate casualties, and terrain issues. Others noted that the terrain was a factor that would even deter highly trained and advanced U.S. forces from fighting at night and noted that based on their experiences working with other Asian militaries, the LRR was comparably very capable. Considering all those influences, a medium rating would likely be the most accurate assessment of this element of the dependent variable.

Conducting Multi-Day (72 hours) Combat Operations:

Being able to conduct multi-day combat operations implies that the host nation unit can withstand casualties, logistically sustain themselves, and conduct casualty evacuation. Few interviewees indicated that the LRR could perform those functions to a standard that would allow them to be able to conduct multi-day operations.

[140] James Lewis, "The Battle of Marawi: Small Team Lessons Learned for the Close Fight," Small Wars Journal, January 23, 2019, https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/battle-marawi-small-team-lessons-learned-close-fight. Interview, COL Bill Coultrup, 14 July 2020.

The most glaring challenge identified was logistics. One early challenge that was identified was that the Armed Forces of the Philippines did not have a culture that emphasized proper logistics procedures and maintaining their equipment.[141] This weakness directly affected their ability to conduct sustained long-term operations. The JSOTF leadership, down to the individual advisors, put considerable effort into improving the LRR's logistics practices and capabilities but were unable to make significant progress. Based on initial observations, 1st SF Group advisors were able to convince the Joint U.S. Military Assistance Group (JUSMAG) in the embassy to set up contracts for highly technical gear such as night vision goggles and long-range Harris HF radios.[142] Many of those newly fielded systems that the US provided at great cost to the LRR and other AFP units soon were in desperate need of maintenance and had little or no capacity without it.

The problem was not just logistics sustainment programs for high end equipment, it was the entire logistics system: conducting preventative maintenance, ordering replacement parts, getting those to where they were needed, and repairing damaged equipment.[143] Ammunition and fuel resupply suffered similar challenges, with poor quality and distribution creating systemic challenges.[144] One of the root causes of the systemic challenges was that the Philippine military simply did not have enough funds to pay, arm, equip, and properly supply all of its forces. The situation was so dire that some soldiers would steal ammunition and sell it on the black market to help feed their families.[145]

[141] Interview, COL Bill Coultrup, 14 July 2020.
[142] Email, COL Dennis Downey, 15 July 2020.
[143] Kaplan, *Imperial Grunts*, 155–56.
[144] Colonel David Maxwell, "Commander's Summary of Operations OEF-P."
[145] Kaplan, *Imperial Grunts*, 157.

Recognizing the depth of the problems with the host nation and LRR logistics system, American advisors would often bend rules to help prevent catastrophic failure. One SF officer noted how he would always order extra supplies for his team, such as batteries and commonly needed parts for night vision goggles, before their deployment knowing that while his unit could never use them all, he could leave the excess behind with the LRR.[146] The compound effect of all these logistics challenges was that most advisors reported that the LRR would rarely conduct operations longer than twenty-four hours. Knowing that they would be unlikely to be resupplied, the LRR commonly would plan a mission that would hit a single target or series of targets in one night, and then return to their base to refit and resupply.[147]

Executing a logistical resupply in the middle of a mission was challenging for the LRR unless it operated in an urban environment near a logistics hub. A component of the challenge was that the Philippine military simply did not have a strong logistics system and could not be counted upon to deliver what was necessary in the middle of a crisis. Unfortunately, the LRR's internal support units were not robust or capable enough to fill that institutional gap. Like many other special operations forces that Americans helped train and build, the internal logistics component of those units was often an afterthought and received little funding and focus.[148] A common refrain was that the preferred focus was to train host nation forces in tactical combat skills: shooting, moving under fire, and managing multiple units in contact. Because of this, there was no external or internal force capable of reliably resupplying the LRR, and some advisors noted that their logistical time horizon was limited by what the Filipino troops could

[146] Interview, LTC Leo Liebreich, 21 July 2020.
[147] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Jim Keating, 15 July 2020.
[148] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Dennis Downey, 20 July 2020.

carry with them on their backs.[149] Sometimes this would reach 72 hours, and sometimes it would not, and if the LRR element met any type of resistance it usually would not.

While many advisors expressed their frustration at the logistics capabilities of the LRR, they also noted that after more than a decade of collaboration, the LRR's logistics culture was far better than the rest of the Philippine military. They maintained their weapons and other equipment more carefully, and the levels of corruption- as measured anecdotally through the amount of "disappearing" or lost equipment- was far less than with any other unit they had worked.[150]

Assessment:

There was little divergence in evaluations of the LRR's logistics capabilities- specifically its ability to conduct combat operations for 72 hours or longer- in either interviews of former advisors or in existing literature. Almost all agreed that the unit's maintenance, internal support elements, and ability to conduct resupply operations had limited ability to meet this component of the dependent variable. Therefore, based on reviews of these factors, the LRR is assessed as having a low capability to be able to conduct extended combat operations.

Fighting without Advisors Present:

As defined in my methodology, to be able to fight without advisors host nation forces have to be able to conduct intelligence driven operations. Such a capability would mean that the LRR was able to generate its own intelligence organically, successfully action those targets generated by the intelligence with the LRR, conduct sensitive site exploitation of those targets, and then use that information to repeat the cycle in another series of operations. In Iraq and Afghanistan, this was known by Special Operations Forces as the F3EAD cycle: Find, Fix,

[149] Interview, COL Erik Brown, 5 October 2020.
[150] Interview, LTC John Moria, 24 July 2020; Interview, MAJ Noel Sioson, 3 July 2020.

Finish, Exploit, Analyze, and Disseminate and was a key component in how successful special operations forces were able to engage and destroy enemy networks.[151] Defeating similar networks in the Philippines would require the LRR to be able to conduct such operations on their own.

Despite providing advice, financial assistance, and even some equipment, the U.S. was unable to develop organic signals intelligence or imagery intelligence capabilities in the LRR across the decade and a half mission. Instead, the LRR had to rely on U.S. resources for those categories of intelligence.[152] U.S. imagery assets included the Scan Eagle UAV which were deployed for most of the mission, sensors on a P3 Orion that supported the mission sporadically, and forward-looking infrared radar capabilities on SH-60 helicopters from the U.S. Navy. Signals intelligence included off the shelf equipment and some intercept gear organic to 1st Special Forces Group. On occasion, decisions were made to release U.S. national level and technical intelligence from both the military and other government agencies. Although the Philippines was unwilling to adopt affordable signals or imagery intelligence despite U.S. prodding, they embraced the concept of establishing fusion centers to blend their own human intelligence with tactical intelligence gained through reconnaissance with U.S. provided SIGINT and IMINT. In most cases, those were permanently established at the Philippine combatant command level (for example, Western Mindanao Command, or WESMINCOM), but they were also set up in ad-hoc fashion for the LRR when a JSOTF was established for a mission of significant importance and duration.[153]

[151] Richard H. Shultz Jr and Joseph L. Votel, *Transforming US Intelligence for Irregular War: Task Force 714 in Iraq*, Reprint edition (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020), 109–11, 125–31.
[152] Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001--2014*, 30–31.
[153] Mahnken, *Learning the Lessons of Modern War*, 210.

By contrast, the Philippine military had a robust but erratic human intelligence capability. Several of the SF advisors noted that the LRR was able to run its own human source networks independently. This capability came from extensive family connections as well as the long duration that officers and leaders had served in the same areas in combat, giving them a playbook of contacts to work with during operations. LRR officers were able to recruit and develop contacts properly, train them on basic tradecraft skills, and were also proficient on sorting the wheat from the chaff to determine which information was faulty and which was verifiable.[154]

However, the LRR's human intelligence capabilities also had significant flaws and weaknesses. Rather than run their contacts through the unit S-2 intelligence staff or a military intelligence detachment, most Philippine officers personally managed their own human intelligence sources. They did this because the U.S. and Philippine governmental rewards systems gave financial incentives for killing or capturing high value targets to individuals rather than organizations. Because of this policy, many Philippine officers set up agreements with their contacts so that they would receive a share of the rewards money in addition to the source. That personal financial incentive made it rare for officers to share their information with other units in the area or even their own intelligence cells. What resulted was a systemic inability to corroborate intelligence, and a reluctance to provide intelligence to the unit most able to action it in real time for fear that someone else would earn the reward.[155]

These problems were not limited to the LRR but were endemic throughout the Philippine military. When the LRR shared battlespace with conventional Philippine Marine or Army units,

[154] Interview, LTG David Fridovich, 16 July 2020; Interview, MAJ Noel Sioson, 3 July 2020.
[155] Interview, COL Bill Coultrup, 14 July 2020.

intelligence sharing was always a major issue that hamstrung many of their operations.[156] Those units would rarely disclose information they had obtained, not only because of the personal financial gain individuals could reap from earning a bounty on an ASG key leader, but also because of the prestige that could be earned from such a capture. One advisor noted bluntly, "you throw money around an area that is really impoverished and needs money, and people will tell you whatever you want to hear. … You really had to confirm their HUMINT (Human Intelligence) through multiple sources."[157]

Across the fifteen-year mission, dedicated efforts were made to train the LRR in sensitive site exploitation (SSE). SF advisors trained their counterparts on the importance of SSE for intelligence gathering and collecting evidence, and the JSOTF even set up training sessions by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation and other government organizations within the intelligence community.[158] Despite those endeavors, the LRR's ability to conduct proper SSE was inconsistent and limited after the advisory mission concluded. A major problem was that the Philippine government simply did not have the funds or capability to be able to exploit hardcopy documents or electronic media in a timely manner. It lacked the logistics infrastructure to move captured items to a location where they could be exploited quickly, and they did not have the capability to exploit them forward.[159]

In some cases, military cultural challenges had to be overcome to conduct proper SSE. Due to the endemic poverty in the Philippines, there was originally a predilection on the part of some LRR operators to take computers and cell phones from objectives for themselves.[160] While

[156] Email, COL Dennis Downey, 11 July 2020.
[157] Interview, LTC Scott Malone, 23 July 2020.
[158] Interview, COL Dave Maxwell, 9 July 2020.
[159] Interview, COL Bill Coultrup, 14 July 2020.
[160] Interview, COL Dave Maxwell, 9 July 2020.

such a tendency was mostly suppressed with training, especially when U.S. advisors accompanied commandos onto the objective, at times it resurfaced. All things considered, most advisors noted that the LRR learned how to conduct proper tactical SSE and could perform it effectively after the advisory mission concluded.[161] During the battles of Zamboanga in 2013 and Marawi in 2017, there were multiple cases where LRR members performed limited tactical SSE that generated follow on targets.[162]

Most of the successful missions the LRR conducted against high value targets before the closure of the JSOTF-P mission in 2015 required extensive U.S. support, indicating that the unit simply was not able to conduct unilateral intelligence driven operations. The 2007 killing of ASG leader Abu Soleiman represents a case study in how much external assistance was required. After Abu Soleiman conducted a series of bombings that carelessly resulted in the killing of scores of Muslim Filipinos, some of his supporters began to question his leadership. Armed with the additional motivation of a $5 million reward offered by the U.S. State Department for his capture or killing, an informant met with Philippine intelligence officers and provided valuable information. A search ensued, supported by both the LRB and other Philippine elite forces, but it was unsuccessful until the informant provided Abu Soleiman's cell phone number and U.S. technical capabilities were able to locate him. Armed with that information, Philippine Special Forces commandos and the LRB surrounded and killed him when he tried to escape.[163] The Abu Soleiman case study demonstrates a truism across the LRR experience: while the Filipino human intelligence capabilities were adept, they lacked the critical other capabilities to conduct real-time intelligence driven operations.

[161] Interview, LTC Leo Liebreich, 21 July 2020; Interview, LTC Scott Malone, 23 July 2020; Interview, Frank Sobchak with CDR James Marvin, 23 July 2020.
[162] Villanueva, *Tiradores*, 213–40, 349–65.
[163] Maxwell, "Foreign Internal Defense: An Indirect Approach to Counter-Insurgency/Counter Terrorism," 17.

Assessment:

Because the LRR lacked organic signals and imagery intelligence and had a capable, but inconsistent human intelligence capability, their ability to carry out unilateral intelligence-based operations without advisors present was marginal. Additionally, because they lacked many of the capabilities to conduct timely sensitive site exploitation, their ability to conduct timely and effective F3EAD operations where one target would generate follow-on targets was limited. Combined, these factors result in a low rating for being able to fight without advisors present.

Performance against the Enemy in Combat:

The LRR's performance against its principal opponents, the Abu Sayyaf Group, the Moro National Liberation Front, and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front is mixed. Although the unit engaged in countless smaller operations, probably the best operations to assess their effectiveness are the 2013 Siege of Zamboanga and the 2017 Battle of Marawi. Each of those operations was sufficiently long, complex, and in opposition to a determined enemy to truly evaluate the LRR's capabilities. While shorter engagements have some value, an operation whose planning lasts hours and execution lasts minutes is not a complete appraisal by any measure.

The Siege of Zamboanga began on 9 September 2013, when 500 fighters from a splinter element of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) attempted to take over Zamboanga City on Mindanao, the Philippines' sixth most populous city with over 800,000 residents. The MNLF force took hostages and occupied sections of the city and outlying towns, announcing that they declared the region to be independent from the Philippines. The Armed Forces of the Philippines rushed forces to the besieged city, including the LRB. Unfortunately, the expansion of the LRB and the inability to adequately recruit and train new operators had caused

considerable attrition and the LRB's personnel strength barely reached 40% during the fighting.[164]

During the initial phases of the battle, the MNLF fighters took more than two hundred hostages and barricaded themselves into dense urban areas.[165] Initial assaults by the Philippine military were summarily repulsed, as the siege in urban terrain represented a significant change from fighting in jungles with which they were more familiar. AFP forces also exhibited overconfidence, expecting to brush the MNLF away quickly, and at times did not plan or prepare properly before initiating operations.

All three companies of the LRB were activated and deployed to the fighting, which lasted 21 days. The companies had some challenges with logistical resupply and repair and maintenance of equipment but being close to regular Army units helped offset those challenges somewhat. Nevertheless, those problems were serious enough that some units had to rely on the local population for food and water.[166] The LRB also performed relatively well at night, using night vision goggles and sniper scopes to put continuous pressure on MNLF forces. The LRB's intelligence apparatus was not well suited for the mission, and it was effectively limited to tactical reconnaissance only to gather intelligence as its intelligence networks were poorly developed and it lacked its own unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) ISR capability. Even though the JSOTF was technically prohibited from supporting the mission because the MNLF was not officially designated as being part of Al Qa'ida and its affiliated movements, the Special Forces headquarters interpreted the rules of engagement as meeting the criteria for force protection

[164] Jack Murphy, "Inside the Operations of the Light Reaction Regiment."
[165] Alan Taylor, "Bloody Philippine Siege Brought to an End," *The Atlantic*, September 30, 2013, https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2013/09/bloody-philippine-siege-brought-to-an-end/100599/.
[166] Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001--2014*, 100.

measures due to its proximity to the battlefield at Camp Basilio Navarro.[167] As such, the JSOTF launched its organic ISR assets and provided real-time intelligence to the LRB.[168]

Given the LRB's expertise in hostage rescue and counterterrorism missions, it was well suited for many of the tasks it was given in Zamboanga and they were credited with saving 96 hostages, as well as capturing 99 and killing 116 MNLF fighters.[169] Another area where they excelled was in conducting sniper and counter sniper missions, recording a stunning 14 confirmed kills in the first day of operations.[170] However, when the unit had to perform more traditional assaults on defended objectives, they were less successful and on several occasions had to disengage under fire with the loss of a total of nine operators. All things considered, the LRB's performance was commendable during the Siege of Zamboanga.

Despite having several years to expand from three companies to six and to potentially improve the combat effectiveness of the LRR, the 2017 Battle of Marawi proved to be a difficult operation for the unit. Its own informal historian described the opening phase of the battle as the Philippine's Gothic Serpent redux, indicating it was on par with the disastrous 3-4 October 1993 Battle of Mogadishu memorialized in the book and movie, *Blackhawk Down*.[171] Like that battle, the LRR suffered losses on a scale like those taken by US elite forces in Somalia, which was one of the worst days for US Special Operations Forces since the inception of USSOCOM. Lasting nearly five months, the conflict in Marawi became the longest urban battle in the Philippines history: four times longer than the U.S. led effort to liberate Manila in World War II.[172]

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[167] Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, 99.
[168] Villanueva, *Tiradores*, 230.
[169] Villanueva, 281.
[170] Villanueva, 223.
[171] Villanueva, 285.
[172] Agence France-Presse, "Marawi: City Destroyed in Philippines' Longest Urban War," Inquirer News, accessed November 20, 2020, https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/939202/marawi-war-maute-terrorism-duterte-isnilon-hapilon-is-islamic-state.

At the outset of the battle, the JSOTF had been closed and the mission reorganized into a small Planning and Assistance Advisory Team (PAT) principally operating out of the U.S. Embassy in Manila. However, the LRR still had U.S. Special Forces advisors attached to the unit, but as in the battle of Zamboanga they were prohibited from accompanying unit members into battle. Like in that previous battle, those advisors were authorized to share U.S. intelligence and offer material support where possible. Because of those similarities, the U.S. reorganization had little difference in impact on the conduct of both battles and they were an effective demonstration of LRR capabilities.

The battle opened in a similar manner to the fateful operation in Somalia, where LRR commandos had planned to conduct a kill or capture mission against Isnilon Hapilon, the leader of the Abu Sayyaf Group and ISIS Amir of South-East Asia. Expecting a mission that would be concluded in minutes, if not hours, many of the LRR operators had not prepared for an extended battle. When the initial assault force suffered three killed and became bogged down, other elements of the LRR as well as conventional forces scrambled to help.[173] The internal LRR quick reaction force blundered into an ambush and became encircled, itself requiring rescue. In the ensuing chaos, Hapilon escaped the initial cordon. As the fighting expanded and the situation for the trapped force became more dire, it became clear that there were hundreds if not thousands of fighters in the nearby area, highlighting that the mission had been a significant intelligence failure on the part of the LRR and its organic intelligence assets.[174] Rather than a surprise strike to snatch the terrorist group's leader, the mission unexpectedly uncovered the

[173] Villanueva, *Tiradores*, 300–309, 415.
[174] Kyodo News, "Lessons Learned from Marawi Siege, Government Officials Say," ABS-CBN News, May 24, 2018, https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/05/24/18/lessons-learned-from-marawi-siege-govt-officials-say.

ASG's efforts to declare an ISIS affiliate of the Islamic State of the Philippines on Mindanao and kicked over the proverbial hornet's nest.

Copying tactics that worked effectively during the Battle of Zamboanga, ASG fighters took hundreds of civilian hostages as human shields, barricaded themselves in the city, and emplaced belts of IEDs along likely avenues of approach. The guerrillas included foreign fighters from across the globe and employed skilled snipers, primitive night vision goggles, and commercial drones to conduct reconnaissance.[175] When the fighting finally concluded, 165 Filipino soldiers had been killed, including twelve members of the LRR.[176] Dozens of other LRR operators had been wounded, many to the point of being unable to continue to serve. Unable to dig out the entrenched insurgents, the LRR was forced to revert to softening up targets through its sniper teams and using airstrikes or artillery to create enough damage to assault with ground forces- and even then, at the cost of numerous casualties.[177] LRR snipers again proved to be particularly effective, eventually killing the top three ASG leaders including Hapilon.[178]

The unit also used its night fighting capabilities to its advantage and would cross obstacles or conduct some assaults at night that had been deemed too dangerous to carry out during the day.[179] Despite those capabilities, in general the LRR skills, equipment, and tactics were not sufficient to decisively overcome the defensive advantage held by the ASG and the fight drug on for months. Logistically they faced considerable challenges resupplying themselves to the point that they were unable to conduct sustained operations for more than 72

[175] Indo-Pacific Defense Forum Staff, "Lessons From Marawi: A Conversation with Retired Lt. Gen. Danilo G. Pamonag, Commander Philippine Army SOCOM," *Indo-Pacific Defense Forum* (blog), March 23, 2020, https://ipdefenseforum.com/2020/03/lessons-from-marawi/.
[176] Villanueva, *Tiradores*, 451.
[177] James Lewis, "The Battle of Marawi: Small Team Lessons Learned for the Close Fight."
[178] Villanueva, *Tiradores*, 430–32.
[179] James Lewis, "The Battle of Marawi: Small Team Lessons Learned for the Close Fight."

hours, and some offensives stalled when they ran out of ammunition or fuel.[180] Highlighting the degree to which indirect fire and airstrikes had been used, by the time that the city was retaken, it had been effectively destroyed in the process and hundreds of thousands had been made homeless.[181]

Assessment:

When rating this element of the dependent variable, the LRR's performance against the enemy in battle is mixed. It fought well in many cases across those two major battles, but there were occasions when the unit was repulsed by determined enemy fighters. The unit also suffered logistical challenges and had to rely on the JSOTF for some of its intelligence, showing that even near the end of the advisory mission, it was not able to operate fully independently. While those cases are in the minority, it would indicate that a medium rating would be most appropriate.

Preliminary Observations:

It is certainly difficult to make broad conclusions from the data in a single case study. Therefore, this section will represent preliminary observations from the case itself that should not be taken as final conclusions. Before examining the impact of individual independent variables, the LRR's overall capabilities will be assessed. At the macro-scale, when evaluating the various components of combat effectiveness, the LRR received low ratings in conducting combat operations for 72 hours and fighting without advisors present, and medium scores in performance in combat and night fighting skills. Looking at those components holistically results in an overall rating of low moderate effectiveness.

[180] Interview, MAJ Noel Sioson, 3 July 2020.
[181] Jack Murphy, "Marawi Commander Details What Really Happened in His Country's Largest Terrorist Attack and How His Men Fought Back," SOFREP, December 14, 2017, https://sofrep.com/news/sofrep-exclusive-marawi-commander-details-what-really-happened-in-his-countrys-largest-terrorist-attack-and-how-his-men-fought-back/.

Even though the LRR rated medium on its performance against enemy forces in combat and in fighting at night, it performed poorly in its ability to conduct independent intelligence driven operations based on the F3EAD cycle as well as its ability to conduct sustained combat operations for 72 hours or more. The LRR's limited ability to use imagery intelligence or signals intelligence, coupled with its moderate but inconsistent human intelligence capabilities and skills in sensitive site exploitation drive the low rating in independent operations. Problematic logistics capabilities, centered around poor maintenance practices and a lack of organic and institutional resupply elements, resulted in a low ability to conduct operations for long enough to meet the 72-hour requirement. Put together, the LRR was a very capable force in conducting actions on the objective and fighting its principal opponents. But when faced with the larger and more complex challenges of functioning in extended combat and conducting intelligence driven operations, the LRR faltered and had limited abilities.

When examining the independent variables which are being assessed to determine whether they have causality towards that outcome, probably the most clear-cut conclusion that can be made is that the variable of language training and cultural awareness in SF advisors did affect the overall combat effectiveness of the LRR. Surprisingly, interviewees nearly universally agreed that their language skills had a negligible impact during the advisory mission. Many spoke languages other than Tagalog or Filipino dialects, and even those who did speak a host nation language found that they usually conducted training in English or worked through an interpreter. Based on those observations, it seems that there is little correlation between the variable of language training and cultural awareness of the advisory force and the combat effectiveness of their partner force.

There does seem to be some correlation and possible causal relationship between the variable of consistency in advisor pairing and the combat effectiveness of the LRR. Like the variable of language training and cultural awareness, interviewees were similarly united in their perspective on the relationship of the variable of consistency in advisor pairing to the outcome of a combat effective partner force. The fact that 1st Special Forces Group, apart from a single rotation across 15 years of advisory work, was the sole SF Group to contribute forces to the mission meant there was inherently a substantial degree of consistency. Establishing the LRR as a national level counterterrorism force capable of performing hostage rescue missions also initially mostly limited the pool of potential trainers to Special Forces CINC's in-extremis Force companies, a further boon to consistency. That consistency was magnified even further by active efforts of the Group's leadership which aimed to maximize the variable, noting they desired "repeat offenders" or "alumni" to return to the mission time after time.

Participants noted that consistency affected their ability to assist the LRR in becoming a combat effective force through multiple pathways. First, the consistent pairing of the same advisors with LRR members enhanced rapport between the advisor and host nation forces, allowing Philippine military leaders to make decisions that allowed 1st SF Group to have a greater impact. Contentious issues that could have triggered show-stopping sovereignty concerns were overcome by the trust developed across multiple rotations. Additionally, consistent advisor pairing allowed training often to pick up where it had left off previously, rather than have an initial assessment phase where advisors determined what skills the LRR possessed and where training should begin. That factor, by itself, seemingly sped the progress of the LRR significantly due to a significant reduction in lost start up time at the beginning of missions.

Beyond those variables, it is much more difficult to come to conclusions as to the causation relationship of the other independent variables to the combat effectiveness of the LRR within the single case study. Although logically it would make sense that a lower partner force to advisor ratio would improve the combat effectiveness of host nation forces, it is nearly impossible to reach conclusions on the variable within a single unit pairing. While the ratio did vary significantly over time, evidence on how fast progression occurred would be completely anecdotal and there were not enough advisors who had observed multiple time periods at different ratios to be able to make a valid assessment. It should be noted, however, that even though the partner force to advisor ratio in the Philippines (29:1) was roughly double the doctrinal ratio (50 to 75:1) that an increase in advisors did not seem to show a statistically significant change in the outcome of the LRR's combat effectiveness.

The variable of the ability of advisors to organize or control host nation units presents an interesting study within the LRR case study. In what could be described as a sovereignty clock, the advisors initially had considerable control over decisions that affected the LRR: how they were equipped, who would lead and be part of the unit, and what training they would conduct. They also had some control over the unit's operational decisions, but significantly less than with institutional decisions. Over time, due to factors that included residual blowback from an LRC-led attempted coup, misuse by Philippine military officers, and the lack of a SOF headquarters, the ability of advisors to control LRR units decreased. Such conditions present the possibility to conduct a case within a case review as many sovereignty issues drove the decrease in the apparent degree of control. While preliminary, discussions with interviewees seem to indicate that when advisors had more control, they were often able to overcome certain negative cultural trends that affect combat performance: maintaining proper civil military relations, selecting the

most capable leaders and soldiers, equipping the unit properly, and ensuring it is employed effectively. As sovereignty concerns increase, if the advisors have not had sufficient time to alter negative cultural habits, the host nation's forces default back to their baseline and those undesirable habits return. The return of those habits heralds a deleterious impact on combat effectiveness, thereby implying there is a relationship between the two variables. The timing on how long such a "clock" would last is challenging to determine from a single case study, but it seems that based on the conditions relative to the LRR in the Philippines during OEF-P the advisory force had at only a year before the host nation began exerting its sovereignty. Multiple factors would affect how long such a period would last, at least among them the length and quality of long term relations between the two countries, the degree of how dire the host nation saw their military situation, the financial amount of assistance that the advising nation provides, and whether any negative incidents (crimes, abuses, or other negative media events) are committed by the advisors.

The impact of the variable of combat advising can be similarly assessed. While it would be best to compare a case where advisors could combat advise to one that did not fully appreciate the impact of the combat advising variable, some conclusions could potentially be drawn from case within a case comparison, such as the experience of 1st Special Forces Group advisors and the LRR. While combat advising was proscribed, there was variance in how close advisors were permitted to be to combat operations across the fifteen-year mission. Advisors uniformly commented that they believed being closer to combat was more effective, and that the ideal situation would be for them to be allowed to accompany their partner force into battle. They argued this for several reasons. Most prominently were the impact that fighting shoulder to shoulder with their allies had on the trust and cohesion as well as the impact from observing

firsthand the performance of the partner force rather than relying on their second hand (and potentially inaccurate) reporting.

Altogether, for the LRR case study, while it is not possible to make single case conclusions, it appears that the variable that has the least impact on whether a partner force becomes combat effective is the language training and cultural awareness of the trainers. The variable that has the most independent evidence of contributing to the host nation unit's combat effectiveness is the consistency in advisor pairing. Combat advising and ability to control or organize host nation units appear to have a positive correlation towards combat effectiveness through case within a case comparison, and there is insufficient data to assess the impact of the partner force to advisor ratio. By assessing the next case, that of the Iraqi Special Operations Forces built across a decade following the destruction of the Saddam regime, we will gain further insight into the importance of these variables.

CHAPTER 3: The Iraqi Special Operations Forces, 2003-2011

Background and Context:

A strategic crossroads with few natural barriers, Iraq has been a buffer state for much of its current and historical existence. The life of a buffer state is hard, and Iraq has been occupied and fought over and its peoples have suffered at the hands of brutal invaders, colonial rulers, tyrants of their own making, and even each other. The process of changing hands back and forth between various civilizations has resulted in Iraq becoming a melting pot of ethnicities, cultures, and religions who are often in conflict. Most of Iraq's transitions came with blood and violence, and as a result, most Iraqis are deeply scarred and traumatized: mistrustful of each other and of outsiders and deeply divided. Today, "Iraq's Shi'a are afraid of the past, its Sunnis are afraid of the future, and its Kurds are afraid of both."[1]

Geographically, Iraq is situated along historically important land and river trade routes, providing a strategic location between cultures which provided economic benefit but also resulted in a great mixing of cultures and religions. At the same time, its dearth of natural boundaries- excepting its mountainous north and northwest border- make it difficult to protect from outside invasion but an ideal location to create the strategic depth of a buffer state. Those unfortunate geographic facts have shaped Iraq as we know it. After the Babylonian period, the area of what would later become Iraq was conquered by Cyrus the Great, who infused Persian influence and population (a trend Iraq has had to deal with throughout its existence), and then by Alexander the Great, who brought Hellenistic culture and populations. Iraq again fell back under

[1] Quote attributed to U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker in Thomas Ricks, "Quote of the Day: Ryan Crocker Analyzes Iraq," *Foreign Policy*, June 28, 2010. I have also seen it attributed to other sources elsewhere.

Persian control and became a battleground and buffer state between the Parthian and Sassanid Empires and the Byzantine Empire.[2]

Persian control was upended with the arrival of Islam, which brought with it Arab culture and civilization. Iraq became central to the Sunni-Shi'a schism, with Ali, the first Imam of the Shi'a, assassinated in Kufa and his son, Husayn, killed in Karbala in a series of succession battles over who should be the leader of the faithful. Those murders, and the pilgrimages and centers of learning that developed in their aftermath, made Iraq central to the Shi'a faith, and set in motion events that would eventually result in Iraq becoming a majority Shi'a state and theological and political competitor to Iran.[3] Iraq's Islamic golden age came to an end with the invasion of the Mongols, an event so brutal that it forms the basis of comparison for all of Iraq's other traumas. Historians of the time described the carnage with vivid detail: upset that Baghdad had refused to surrender, the Mongols massacred civilians for sport, cutting pregnant women open and killing their unborn children- leaving the fatally wounded mother to die slowly. Books from the city's libraries were cast into the Tigris, turning the river black as the ink of thousands of tomes dissolved, and the Caliph himself was rolled in a rug and trampled to death by horses.[4]

In the wake of the Mongols, which brought more destruction to Mesopotamia than the black plague brought to Europe, the Abbasid Caliphate collapsed and Iraq fell under the shadow of various Persian empires. Among other changes, those empires brought Shi'a Islam to Iraq as the official state religion, further complicating the melting pot of ethnicities and religions. The outline of modern Iraq fell under Sunni Ottoman control in the 17th Century, and as a buffer state

[2] William R. Polk, *Understanding Iraq: The Whole Sweep of Iraqi History, from Genghis Khan's Mongols to the Ottoman Turks to the British Mandate to the American Occupation* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 31–34.
[3] Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, 1st edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 21–23, 55–56.
[4] Polk, *Understanding Iraq*, 55–57.

yet again shouldered between archrivals, Iraq became a battleground for hundreds of years. The Ottomans subdivided the territory into three provinces. In the north lay Mosul, a mountainous province with a large population of Kurds: an ethnically distinct people who stretched from Anatolia to Persia. In the center lay the historic Baghdad; and in the south the Ottomans created the province of Basra, which encompassed southern Iraq and modern-day Kuwait to expand the coastline and facilitate maritime trade.[5]

Iraq's temporary expansion ended and its problem of maritime access returned when the Ottoman Empire collapsed and Iraq became a British Mandate and Kuwait a British protectorate. The short-lived Mandate was marked by revolts for independence as well as harsh repression by the British that included the bombing of civilians, the burning of villages and even proposed use of chemical weapons "against uncivilised tribes."[6] In the modern age, the discovery of vast petrochemical reserves further cursed Iraq by creating additional incentives for manipulation and intervention by foreign powers. Iraq officially gained independence in 1932, but British influence weighed heavy on the state until after World War II and the fall of the Iraqi monarchy in 1958.[7]

The 1991 Gulf War and the Interwar Years:

Recent history has only added to these centuries of suffering, further scarring Iraq's peoples. After decades of rule by corrupt and ruthless dictators, Saddam Hussein seized the presidency in 1979, putting the Sunni minority in control of the country. Barely a year later, he invaded Iran (which he frequently referred to as Persia) over border disputes related to oil wealth and coastal access. Up to half a million Iraqis died in the eight-year conflict and Saddam killed

[5] Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 3rd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 8–13.
[6] Giles Milton, "Churchill's Shocking Use of Chemical Weapons," *The Guardian*, 1 September 2013. Quote references original source from Churchill.
[7] Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 103–6, 143–45.

off another hundred thousand of his own people in the genocidal Anfal campaign against the Kurds.[8] Iran, for which the conflict was an existential crisis, suffered as many or more losses and endured the horrors of chemical weapons and child soldiers. Determined to never again face such a threat, Iran's leaders rearmed and waited for the opportunity to destabilize their dangerous neighbor. Iraq nearly bled dry also, and when the guns fell silent it was deeply in debt to its richer neighbors in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Those debts, combined again with border disputes over oil and maritime access, contributed to Saddam's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, which some Iraqis believed was rightfully part of Iraq. Saddam's invasion led to American intervention to protect U.S. access to oil resources and as a way to establish a "new world order" in the aftermath of the Cold War. After the U.S. and its coalition allies ejected Iraq from Kuwait, Shi'a and Kurdish elements sensed the regime's fragility and staged near simultaneous uprisings. Saddam put down the uprisings viciously, killing tens of thousands and burying them in mass graves. Many Shi'a leaders blamed the U.S. for inciting the revolts, and then failing to stop the massacres. Following the twin uprisings, the U.S. and its allies set up no fly areas in Northern and Southern Iraq, and an extended period of low-level conflict developed between the two countries with Iraq being accused of plotting terrorist attacks or targeting American warplanes and the U.S. responding with cruise missile strikes or bombing missions. A humanitarian crisis in northern Iraq resulted in the deployment of ground forces, which when combined with the no-fly zone, resulted in the creation of a *de facto* Kurdish autonomous region.[9] Many soldiers from 10th Special Forces Group participated in the mission due to the requirement to use Turkey as a logistics base, which itself was assigned to U.S. European command.[10] Iraq remained in political

[8] Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 4th edition (Routledge, 2018), 200–202, 212–14.
[9] Kerim Yildiz, *The Kurds in Iraq - Second Edition: The Past, Present and Future*, 2nd edition (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 37–43.
[10] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Clay Morrow, 2 November 2020.

limbo for more than a decade, suffering under crushing international sanctions that prevented Saddam from rearming but also killed tens of thousands of civilians and destroyed the country's infrastructure.[11]

Operation Iraqi Freedom and Regime Change:

Then came another American invasion in 2003, which dissolved all central authority and ignited civil war. Special Operations Forces played an outsized role in the initial phases of the operation, with the Middle East oriented 5th Special Forces Group supporting conventional forces and a small free Iraqi force and the European oriented 10th Special Forces Group assisting Kurdish Peshmerga in combat against Iraqi forces in the north.[12] While the U.S. and its coalition allies were able to defeat a ramshackle Iraqi Army quickly, a capable insurgency quickly took its place. The coalition made a series of errors that included a poorly planned and resourced reconstruction phase, disbanding the Iraqi security forces, and banning Saddam's Ba'ath Party. Those mistakes accelerated the growth of resistance against what many Iraqis saw as an occupation.[13] Rebel groups, led by the grandchildren of those who fought the British, attacked the occupying forces as well as rival ethno-religious groups. Iran, assessing the American effort as foundering, pursued strategies to fracture the country into three blocks and manipulated Iraqi politics to emasculate its traditional opponent. Members of the principal "tribes" of Iraq: Kurds, Shi'a, and Sunni found themselves hunted by government sponsored death squads, militias, terrorists, and the Americans. By 2007, the country was engaged in a low-grade civil war that

[11] Michael Spagat, "Truth and Death in Iraq under Sanctions," *Significance* (Journal of The Royal Statistical Society), September 2010.
[12] Charles H. Briscoe, Special Operations CMD History Office, and United States Army, *All Roads Lead to Baghdad: Army Special Operations Forces in Iraq, New Chapter in America's Global War on Terrorism* (Military Bookshop, 2013), 65–66, 111–12.
[13] Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama*, Reprint edition (New York: Vintage, 2013), 12-18. 26-34.

pitted the various ethno-sectarian groups against each other. The devastation of the Iraqi state was so significant that some Baghdadis compared the American occupation to the Mongol invasion.

Creation of the Iraqi Special Operations Forces:

In the aftermath of the near-catastrophic Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) Order 2, which disbanded the Iraqi security forces in their entirety, allied military forces were faced with the daunting task of completely rebuilding the Iraqi police, military, and intelligence services. While the U.S. Army focused on building Iraq's new Army, first called the Iraqi Civil Defense Corps (ICDC), American special operations forces led by the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Arabian Peninsula (CJSOTF-AP) initially focused extensively on kill/capture missions to round up the "deck of cards" of the principal leadership of the Saddam regime. At times, the missions were unilateral and at other times they were conducted paired with whatever local allies they could find, but at least initially there was little unified or coherent SOF plan to build a partner force. That changed in October of 2003 when CENTCOM Commander General John Abizaid tasked the CJSOTF with building the 36th ICDC battalion after leaders of Iraq's five top political parties wrote to him complaining that they were being sidelined in American efforts to rebuild the Iraqi security forces.[14] Abizaid hoped that the creation of the unit would help convince those parties to disband their armed militias and integrate into the new Iraqi state.

Rather than simply build an Iraqi Army regular infantry battalion that would then become a part of the larger force, the CJSOTF decided to use the opportunity to build their own partner force and renamed the unit the 36th Commando Battalion. They were given 30 days to make the unit fully mission capable and began a rigorous selection that would weed out candidates who

[14] E-mail, Colonel (Ret.) Mark Mitchell to Colonel Frank Sobchak, November 3, 2015, Subject: Assistance with ISOF (Iraqi Special Operations Forces), Maliki, and Admiral Winters.

were not capable of enduring the rigors of intense special operations missions. The Commandos would be patterned after the U.S. Ranger battalions in organization, equipment, and missions, and would aim to operate primarily as a platoon or company with the ability to muster all the companies together for larger missions. Operations would mainly be conducted at night and would target top tier threats that went beyond the capabilities of other Iraqi Army units. As the Commandos were being recruited, trained, and organized, the CJSOTF lobbied CENTCOM to build the Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Force (ICTF), which would have similar capabilities to the U.S. Army Special Forces CINC's in-extremis Force (CIF) companies. Over time, those units would grow from a handful of soldiers to a division sized force led by a ministry level directorate independent from other Defense forces which reported directly to the Prime Minister.[15] Those forces, which became known as the Iraqi Special Operations Forces (ISOF), are the subject of this case study.[16] Special Forces from every active-duty group were involved in the advisory effort, although 3rd (focused on AFRICOM), 5th, and 10th Special Forces Groups carried most of the burden. The mission to advise the ISOF became the centerpiece of the U.S. SOF effort and was resourced intensely from its inception in 2003 until its conclusion in December 2011 when all American forces, including those advising the ISOF, were withdrawn from Iraq.

Introduction of the Independent Variables:

To assess the combat effectiveness of the ISOF and the efficacy of the U.S. training effort towards that end, five variables will be assessed: partner force to advisor ratio, consistency in advisor pairing, language training and cultural awareness, the degree to which advisors can organize or control host nation forces, and the ability to combat advise.

[15] David Witty, *The Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service* (Washington, DC: The Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings Institution, 2016), 6–7.

[16] The term ISOF generally refers to all of Iraq's elite forces included in the Counter Terrorism Service and Counter Terrorism Command. The ICTF, like the Commandos and other elite units, are part of the ISOF.

Partner Force to Advisor Ratio:

Background: ISOF Expansion

Like the Light Reaction Regiment in the Philippines, the ISOF experienced considerable growth over its development. Before the term ISOF was even developed, the elite Iraqi forces comprised two disparate battalions, the 36th Commandos and the ICTF. It was quickly recognized that the two organizations shared common organizational and functional bonds and required a unified headquarters and support elements, so they were combined into a brigade in August of 2004. The Commandos were officially renamed 1st Battalion 1st ISOF Brigade, even though they were still often referred to as the 36th, and the ICTF was officially renamed 2nd Battalion, 1st ISOF Brigade even though they also retained their original nomenclature. At that same time, a support battalion was added to fulfill the logistics needs of the unit and a recce squadron was created to handle human intelligence and urban reconnaissance. To ensure force regeneration as the organizations took losses and soldiers retired, an organic Iraqi led training center, later named the Iraqi Special Warfare Center and School (ISWCS), was also stood up.[17] In total, the elite forces were authorized around 1,600 personnel, inclusive of operators and support elements from late 2005 until mid-2007. [18]

In May 2006, the CJSOTF and Iraqi government agreed that the ISOF should be expanded by forming a second commando battalion which would include regional companies in Anbar, Basrah, Diyala, and Mosul provinces.[19] With all the elements of 1st ISOF Brigade garrisoned in Area IV on Baghdad International Airport and looking to the future when Iraqi forces would not be able to rely on American aircraft to move around the country quickly,

[17] Witty, *The Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service*, 7.
[18] Austin Long et al., *Building Special Operations Partnerships in Afghanistan and Beyond: Challenges and Best Practices from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Colombia* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2015), 45–46.
[19] Interview, Frank Sobchak with BG Arkhan Fadhil, 8 September 2020.

CJSOTF advisors believed that regional battalions would allow the ISOF to be able to react quickly to threats across the country. This change would result in the size of the ISOF expanding dramatically, to 4,800 authorized personnel, but the Iraqi special warfare center was incapable of meeting the demand to grow that quickly without sacrificing quality. As such, actual growth was extremely slow, and only the Basrah and Mosul companies were activated by January 2008. The other companies formed and grew much more slowly.[20]

Near the end of 2007, American and Iraqi SOF leaders decided that the regional companies would be expanded to battalions and that those units would fall under a newly created headquarters, the 2nd ISOF Brigade, which was activated in July 2009. To provide the intelligence necessary to support those units, regional counterterrorism centers were stood up in parallel with the combat units. The centers, which fell under the ISOF's Counter Terrorism Command headquarters, performed functions similar to the U.S. joint interagency task forces and included elements of the Iraqi police and intelligence services. That growth would propel the ISOF's authorized strength to 8,500 personnel, but that size was purely hypothetical as the Special Warfare Center and School had not yet completed the growth of the regional companies.[21] Despite pressure from Iraq's political leaders, both U.S. and Iraqi SOF officers were reluctant to mass produce the elite forces, and most evidence indicates that the ISOF manning statistics hovered at around 59%. Efforts by the Iraqi Minister of Defense to conduct a mass transfer of soldiers from the Army to the ISOF to increase its manning were rebuffed by U.S. and Iraqi leaders.[22] By the time of the U.S. withdrawal in 2011, each regional battalion was, in actuality, closer to a company sized unit.

[20] Long et al., *Building Special Operations Partnerships in Afghanistan and Beyond*, 45–46.
[21] Witty, *The Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service*, 12.
[22] Long et al., *Building Special Operations Partnerships in Afghanistan and Beyond*, 46.

Advisor Commitment:

Unlike the Philippines mission, the SF advisor ratio in Iraq was relatively constant. Even as the ISOF expanded, the advisor commitment grew to match it. This was likely because Iraq was the U.S. main effort, while the Philippines was a supporting effort in a supporting theater of the larger global war on terrorism (GWOT). Indeed, even the 1st Special Forces Group committed troops to the insatiable demands of the Iraq theater of operations, detracting from its mission to build the Light Reaction Regiment (LRR) in the Philippines.[23] Because of this, rather than determine the partner force to advisor ratio by examining the changing U.S. commitment over time and comparing that to the personnel strength of the entire organization, in Iraq the consistency of the commitment makes it easier to explore the degree of that commitment to each of the two main components of the ISOF, and then normalize that over time to reflect the overall ratio.

ICTF:

The ICTF was made up of three operational troops; a support element with vehicle drivers, gunners, and mechanics; a headquarters section; and one "recce" or reconnaissance troop. Each of the operational troops was assigned 22 Iraqi soldiers, and they followed a red, amber, green cycle with one troop in each phase. All the phases lasted ten days, allowing ICTF commandos to go on leave (red), train (amber), and then conduct combat operations (green). SF advisors mirrored the Iraqi cycle, and when an ICTF troop entered the leave phase, their partnered ODA either took time off to recover from the intense combat operations, or assisted advisors of other troops as required.

[23] The LRR, the subject of chapter 2 in this dissertation, is the Philippine national mission force stood up by 1st Special Forces Group advisors from 2001-2015.

Throughout the history of the U.S. mission in Iraq, each ICTF troop was paired with an ODA of SF advisors.[24] This was accomplished by having an American CIF troop (which was composed of three ODAs) paired with the ICTF battalion.[25] That significant commitment was maintained likely due to the priority that was given to the Iraq theater, as well as the internal U.S. decision to pair only CIF units with the ICTF. It is worth noting that this ratio is roughly a 1.83 to 1 ratio, one massively larger than the doctrinal ratio of 50 to 75:1. Some information indicates that the ratio might have been even higher during the initial standup of the organization, with secondary sources relating that such a ratio reached or exceeded a 1:1 ratio, but interviews I conducted with many officers and non-commissioned officers who worked with the ICTF during this period did not match that data.[26]

Commando Battalions:

When the commandos initially stood up as the 36th Commando battalion, a SF company headquarters (AOB) and two full strength SF ODAs – approximately 34 personnel – served as advisors. That initial phase lasted from approximately October 2003 until June 2004, when an additional ODA was added to support the battalion as it became fully operational (causing the number of SF advisors to reach approximately 46 personnel).[27] The increased advisor ratio was short lived as the demands of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the missions in the Philippines, Colombia, and elsewhere far exceeded the numbers of SF soldiers in the Army. The

[24] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW2 Travis Rolph, 29 October 2020.
[25] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Scott Ford, 29 October 2020. Each CIF was comprised of two troops, making and in many cases the CIF companies would have one troop deployed and one at its home station recovering or training.
[26] Long et al., *Building Special Operations Partnerships in Afghanistan and Beyond*, 48.
[27] CW4 Jade Anderson, Unpublished article, "The 36th Commando Battalion Evolution to the 1/1st ISOF Commando Battalion of Today," 6 December 2019.

additional manpower dropped by the end of 2004, when the ratio stabilized at two ODAs working with the battalion.

Such a pairing allowed the SF advisors to match the cyclical leave/training/operations cycle of the Commandos with one ODA paired with the company conducting training while the second paired with the company conducting operations. Because one Commando company was always on leave, this resulted in a ratio of one ODA paired with an Iraqi commando company of 120 soldiers, a matching that persisted and remained constant throughout the remainder of the conflict.[28] That ratio (10 to 1), it should be noted, is nearly six times the doctrinal SF ratio of having one ODA advise a host nation battalion.[29] Even after the 36th Commando battalion relocated from their individual company bases to Area IV on Baghdad International Airport in a special cantonment area purpose-built for the ISOF, the ratio of an ODA advising a commando company did not change.[30]

As each regional commando company was stood up, an ODA was assigned to advise it. Such a commitment of forces approximated the ratio that was already in place with the 1st Battalion 1st Brigade Commandos and reflected the opinion of CJSOTF leaders that they should duplicate that pattern for continued success. However, the actual ratio of trainees to advisors was slightly smaller than the original assignment as the regional companies had one platoon of soldiers always on leave, with their other two platoons in a training and operations cycle. Based on the manning documents and interviews with advisors, none of the regional Commando units

[28] Interview, Frank Sobchak with SGM Ron McDaries, 30 October 2020; Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Clay Morrow, 2 November 2020.
[29] Doctrine does not specify whether this battalion sized element is a conventional unit, a SOF unit, or an irregular force such as a partisan force. However, if the doctrinal ratio is to be taken as a conventional or partisan unit, a better selected, equipped, and trained SOF force should be able to be trained at an even higher ratio- but in each case the ratios have been exponentially lower.
[30] Interview, Frank Sobchak with SFC Tom Disburg, 28 October 2020.

that had SF advisors paired with them ever expanded much beyond company size- at least not before the U.S. withdrawal in 2011. Even when they had been designated as battalions, their end strength was closer to a company sized unit, and that "battalion" was still paired with an SF ODA.[31]

Calculation of Partner Force to Advisor Ratio:

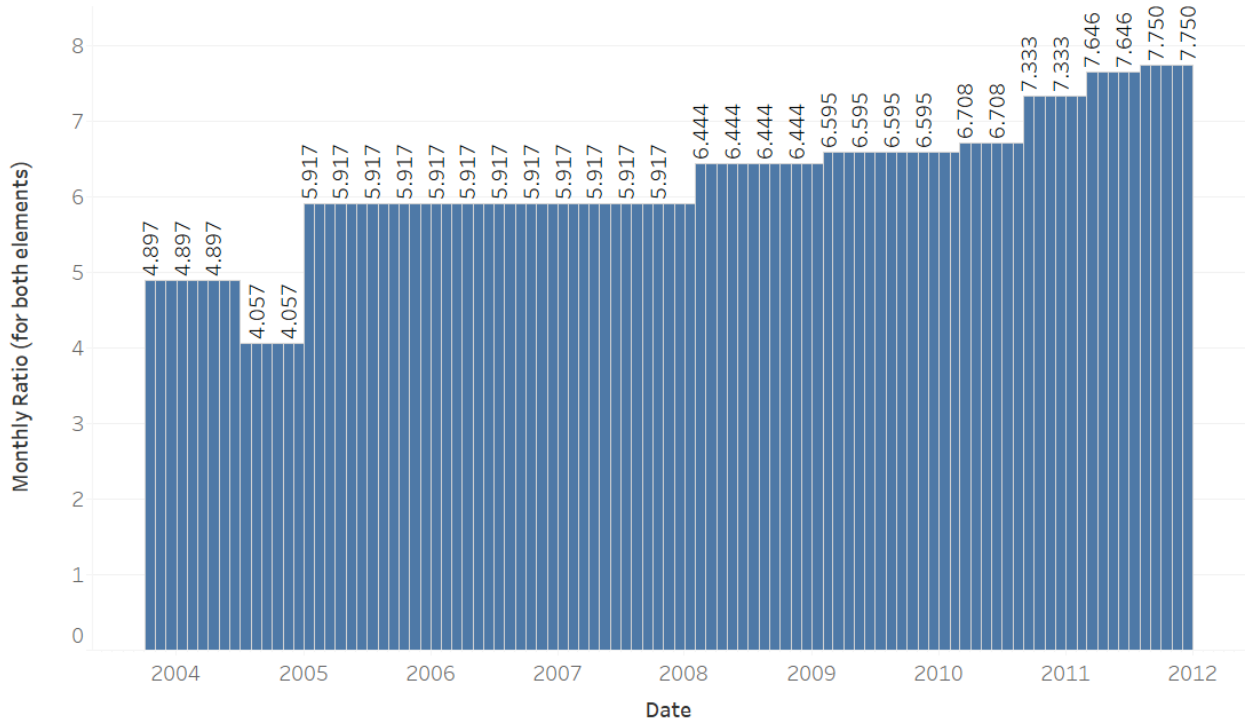
The partner force to advisor ratio over the entire span of the mission was calculated by first determining the monthly partner force to advisor ratio. Most missions were conducted on a month-to-month basis, and at the macro level across eight years, the impact of a higher or lower ratio for a few days at the beginning or tail end of a mission would not be significant. The numbers used also reflect the doctrinal strength of the ODAs, as there is evidence that the ISOF missions were prioritized to have full ODAs to accomplish the mission. At times, some ODAs were "cannibalized" or stood down and at other times SF soldiers not normally scheduled to deploy volunteered to provide manpower for other deploying ODAs to ensure full teams worked with the ISOF.[32] Additionally, the numbers do not reflect emergency leaves, casualties, or other irregular events. Over eight years of war, those occurrences were small compared to the total pool of advisors and are unlikely to have a statistically significant impact. The number of Iraqi "trainees" in the Commandos and ICTF are summed, and then divided by the sum of the SF advisors working with both units to produce a ratio. Those monthly ratios were then averaged to calculate an overall average monthly ratio for the entire mission. That monthly average is 6.2 soldiers per U.S. Special Forces advisor. Please see Table 3.1 in the appending for the math used to determine that monthly average.[33]

[31] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Erik Brown, 5 October 2020.
[32] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW2 Travis Rolph, 29 October 2020.
[33] Doctrinally, one Special Forces ODA of twelve personnel should be allotted to train a single host nation battalion, equating to a ratio of 50 or 75 to 1. The partner force to advisor ratio in Iraq was an astronomical eight to twelve

Assessment of Variable:

Like most variables in this study, assessing the impact of the partner force to advisor ratio is not viable from one case. In the case of Iraq, that would be particularly difficult because there is little to no case within a case variation as the ratios stayed nearly constant across the entire conflict. There were advisors, however, who had served across multiple cases,[34] and they were able to generally comment about the impact of the partner force to advisor ratio. There was near universal agreement that decreasing the ratio had a positive impact on the combat effectiveness of the unit they trained, and not a single advisor thought that a higher ratio was better.

Figure 3.1 Monthly Ratio of Partners to Advisors (Iraq)



times the doctrinal ratio, representing a massive increase in effort. Whether or not that ratio directly contributed to increasing the combat effectiveness of the ISOF is the subject of this dissertation and in dispute, but there is little doubt that the ISOF was one of the more effective partner forces that SF advisors helped develop.

[34] The most common situation for multiple cases was Iraq and Afghanistan. However, there were some advisors who advised host nation SOF elements in Colombia, Afghanistan, and Iraq as well as a very small set of advisors who had done the same across the Philippines, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

Consistency in Advisor Pairing:

There was considerable consistency in advisor pairing across the SF advisory effort with the different elements of the ISOF. For the ICTF, only two companies advised the unit for the first three years of its existence. The decision to minimize the number of advisors was centered around the fact that the ICTF was considered Iraq's national level counterterrorism force. Therefore, it should be paired only with an equivalent capability within the U.S. effort: the Special Forces CINC's in-extremis Force (CIF) companies. As such, B company, 2nd Battalion, 3rd Special Forces Group stood up the organization and served as their sole advisors for the first 18 months of the unit's existence. As a CIF, the company's organization differed slightly from regular SF companies and was instead based around two troops of roughly 36 SF operators each. For those 18 months, the two troops of the company did back-to-back rotations, switching out every 120 days. Such a cycle was quickly deemed to be too grueling, and the 5th Special Forces Group CIF, A company, 1st Battalion, was assigned to the rotational cycle in March 2005. Each one of the two troops in those two companies cycled through 120-day rotations for the next year.

Even though the rotations were shorter than conventional yearlong rotations, they were physically and emotionally brutal for the advisors.[35] One advisor noted that he submitted 118 combat operations for approval during an average four-month rotation, only having two nights without a mission. Each operation was complex, with multiple structures to be assaulted and almost always follow-on operations the same night (which did not count in the 118). One atypical fifteen-hour combat cycle in 2005 involved the rescue of an Iraqi Army general officer who was an Al Qa'ida hostage and then four follow-on missions, including the capture of #11 on the theater high value target list. As such, in March 2006, even the two Group cycle was

[35] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Scott Ford, 29 October 2020.

determined to be too arduous, and all the other CIFs in U.S. Army Special Forces Command (C Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Special Forces groups- which stood up the LRR, C Company, 1st Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group, and C Company 3rd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group) were added to the rotation. Even then, however, the 3rd Group and 5th Group CIFs were considered the primary advisors, and each company would deploy once in the annual cycle. One of the other three CIFs would deploy for the other four months of the year so that each of those companies would deploy once in a three-year cycle.[36] This cycle persisted for the remainder of the conflict.[37]

Like in the Philippines, the assignment of the CIF to the ICTF advisory effort greatly increased the consistency of advisor pairing for a variety of reasons. First, because there were only five companies across the entire U.S. Army, there was an extremely small pool of personnel to pull from to serve as advisors. Second, those companies had an extremely stable set of personnel assigned to them. Individual advisors would often stay within the same CIF company for years, some never conducting a permanent change of station move. The relative stability occurred because CIF companies were designed to be kept on call to respond to regional hostage crises or similar missions and the members of each company received additional training: the Special Forces Advanced Reconnaissance, Target Analysis, and Exploitation Techniques Course (SFARTEC) and the Special Operations Target Interdiction Course (SOTIC, an advanced sniper school).[38] If a SF soldier did not have those skills, in the case of SFARTEC, an arduous nine week course with a pass rate under 50%, he could not be assigned to those companies. It was

[36] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW2 Travis Rolph, 29 October 2020.
[37] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Erik Brown, 5 October 2020.
[38] Jack Murphy, "Special Forces CIF Companies Disbanded and the Future of Green Berets," Jack Murphy, Investigative Journalist Writes, March 5, 2020, https://jackmurphywrites.com/153/special-forces-commanders-in-extremis-force-no-more/.

simply cheaper and easier for the Army to make the personnel in such highly trained units more stable to avoid the costs of having to retrain new personnel.

The Iraqi Commando battalions in the ISOF, first the 36th and then the regional battalions, experienced a similar consistency in advisor pairing. A vast majority of the ODAs that served as advisors to the commandos came from 5th and 10th Special Forces Groups, the two organizations that provided the headquarters for CJSOTF-AP. For the first three missions, 5th Special Forces Group worked with the Commandos. Teams from 1st battalion were matched with them, then 2nd battalion teams, and then the same teams from 1st battalion returned as advisors on the third rotation.[39] Some advisors noted that it was only when the SF soldiers on those ODAs started to become burned out by back-to-back rotations that other groups were added to the mix to alleviate personnel pressure and stress.[40] During that advisory phase, each Commando company was based at a different garrison across Baghdad and there was no special qualification required to pair an ODA with a Commando unit. However, there was considerable effort made to pair the same advisors with the same Commando unit rotation after rotation.[41]

Although initially there were no special qualifications for an ODA to pair with the Commandos, after they moved to Area IV on Baghdad International Airport (BIAP) in 2006, Special Forces CIF companies and teams became the primary set of advisors.[42] Like the ICTF, this greatly increased the consistency in advisor pairing because the CIF requirement limited the potential advisory pool to only five companies across the entire Special Forces Community.

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[39] Interview, Frank Sobchak with SGM Ron McDaries, 30 October 2020.
[40] CW4 Jade Anderson, Unpublished article, "The 36th Commando Battalion Evolution to the 1/1st ISOF Commando Battalion of Today," 6 December 2019.
[41] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Michael Repass, 21 September 2020; PowerPoint Presentation, FOB 51 (Forward Operating Base 51, which is 1st Battalion 5th Special Forces Group),"The 36th Commando Battalion," 6 September 2004.
[42] Email, CW4 Jade Anderson, 28 October 2020, multiple advisory rotations; Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Erik Brown, 5 October 2020.

There are numerous anecdotal reports from different advisors that give additional insight into how often the various elements of the ISOF were paired with the exact same advisors. One noted that a teammate had served on four different ICTF rotations and then retired. But his connection with ISOF did not end there. After his retirement, he returned as a contractor to continue working with the ICTF, supporting them in their fight to recapture Mosul in 2016.[43] Another participated in eight combat tours in Iraq, four of which he directly advised ISOF units and during the others he supported and interacted with ISOF. This meant the same advisor worked with the same commando battalion for thirty-two months (nearly 3 years) out of the possible eight years of the entire case study.[44] Yet another advisor served with the ISOF for three years on five straight rotations during assignments to both 5th and 10th Special Forces Groups. He had become such an institutional element of working with the ISOF that other teams joked that they had to sign for him as part of the property book handover as they changed out in between missions.[45] Such consistent pairings were more common than not, and one SF company worked with the same ISOF unit for more than seven years. Their only breaks from the coupling were when they returned to the U.S., allowing the SF advisors to see their Iraqi partners mature from their positions as captains commanding companies to generals leading the entire organization.[46]

Because of how consistently many advisors were paired with the ISOF rotation after rotation, they often became great friends with the soldiers and officers they advised. Major General Patrick Roberson, who completed four advisory rotations with the ISOF noted that he had first met Fadhil Jalil al Barwari, the unit's future commander, in 1996. This time distortion,

[43] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW2 Travis Rolph, 29 October 2020.
[44] Email, CW4 Jade Anderson, 28 October 2020, multiple advisory rotations.
[45] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Seaux Larreau, 29 October 2020.
[46] Long et al., *Building Special Operations Partnerships in Afghanistan and Beyond*, 54.

which was several years before the 2003 Iraq War, occurred because earlier in his career Roberson had been serving as a team leader during the U.S. led Operation Provide Comfort, which delivered humanitarian and military assistance to Kurdish factions after the 1991 Operation Desert Storm.[47] At that time, Barwari was serving in a Kurdish Peshmerga militia and met numerous American Special Forces soldiers rotating through northern Iraq. During Roberson's four ISOF deployments, his long-term connections with Barwari helped him to pick up where he had left off from a prior rotation, greatly facilitating growth in unit capabilities.

Assessing the Impact of the Variable, "We Have Killed Many Men Together":

Like the 1st Group advisors who worked with the LRR, the SF soldiers who worked with the ISOF nearly universally indicated there were considerable advantages to consistently pairing with the same Iraqi forces. It reduced the startup time of each mission, allowing the advisor to pick up where they previously left off rather than to start anew.[48] Another advisor noted that for the first two years of his work with the ISOF, his unit did four-month rotations. That meant that he knew that when he finished each deployment, at the longest he would be back in eight months working with the same Iraqis. To him, that meant that he knew exactly where his unit had left off in the training process and within a few missions, his advisory effort was "back on track."[49] When evaluating the impact of such pairing at the macro scale, one advisor noted that the SF approach with the ISOF led to a consistent and sustained effort, effectively producing a campaign plan with the same people working to produce results with the same forces across the span of the war. Comparatively he argued the multinational advisory effort with the rest of the Iraqi Army was akin to fighting the war in Iraq one year at a time for ten years. "Every single

[47] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Patrick Roberson, 22 December 2020.
[48] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Seaux Larreau, 29 October 2020.
[49] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Scott Ford, 29 October 2020.

year was just start over. It is all new Americans, and most of them have never been there. (Meanwhile) The Iraqis haven't gone anywhere, and they knew how to navigate that environment."[50]

Such consistency led to the development of personal relationships and trust that made it easier to work through issues that impeded progress.[51] Sergeant Major Ron McDaries served as an advisor during three rotations, but like many others transitioned to contractor work after he retired. In 2014 he was in Iraq in that function with the U.S. State Department as ISIS was marching towards Baghdad. His supervisors expressed concern that there was no formal security where they were based, at Sather Airbase on BIAP and asked him if he could help. He said that he knew General Fadhil (most Iraqis prefer to pair their first name with their rank), and asked his supervisor for his phone to set up a meeting. Much to his supervisor's surprise, Fadhil invited them to his home and when they arrived, Fadhil walked past the higher-ranking embassy personnel and gave McDaries a big hug and said, "This is my brother. We have killed many men together and drank many beers." Despite not having seen each other in a few years, Fadhil offered McDaries whatever support the embassy needed, including providing an element from ISOF for security at the airbase.[52]

A few dissenting voices noted that while they agreed in principle every effort should be made to maintain a consistent pairing with advisors and host nation forces, there could be exceptions when that pairing should be broken. One advisor noted that consistency could be a double-edged sword, and that if an ODA was not good at teaching and training or individuals on the team were bad at establishing rapport, then pairing that unit with the same host nation forces

[50] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Max Carpenter, 24 July 2020.
[51] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Erik Brown, 5 October 2020.
[52] Interview, Frank Sobchak with SGM Ron McDaries, 30 October 2020.

was likely to have inverse effects.[53] Others recalled that at times teams would have life cycles, where team members would have personal issues, or they would become burned out after multiple rotations and their performance would drop.[54] In exceptional cases such as that, advisors noted that it made sense to break the bond of consistency.

Overall, this evidence results in the variable of consistency in advisor pairing to be rated as high. Across multiple rotations, both the efforts of CJSOTF leaders and the assignment of the CIFs to work with the ISOF greatly limited the pool of advisors and resulted in frequent return pairings. As one advisor noted, "continuity is better than gold. (It) is absolutely how you shape a force and ensure that they are responsive to our requirements and our objectives. … It is instant trust, credibility, and most importantly, influence."[55]

Language Training and Cultural Awareness:

Degree of Match

The personnel demand for Special Forces operators in Iraq far exceeded what 5th Special Forces group could provide. As one former group commander noted, even if the entire group had been deployed for the duration of the war and its members never returned home, it could not have met the needs of the theater commander.[56] Because of its connections with the Kurds during the interwar years between Operation Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom, 10th Special Forces Group, which was regionally and linguistically oriented to Europe, was selected by U. S. Army Special Forces Command, the title X force provider headquarters for all U.S. Special Forces units, to assist 5th Group in Iraq. The two groups would share roughly even

[53] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW4 Eric Brashears, 29 October 2020.
[54] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Erik Brown, 5 October 2020.
[55] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Erik Brown, 5 October 2020.
[56] Interview, Frank Sobchak, CSA OIF Study Group, with Colonel Mark Mitchell, CJSOTF Commander, September 29, 2014.

responsibility as the CJSOTF-AP headquarters and contribute similar amounts of forces to the mission. Even those two groups proved not to be enough and by 2006 other groups were called in to provide battalions, companies, and ODAs of personnel to help alleviate the exhaustion from back-to-back rotations for the 5th and 10th Group operators. Of all those groups that were involved in the mission, only 5th Group was oriented to the Middle East, spoke regional languages, and had extensive cultural awareness experience. Even though 10th Group had worked with the Kurds at times, the Kurdish language was not taught at the Special Warfare Center language school, and the Kurds were considered part of the CENTCOM AOR.

While in general it is without dispute that 5th and 10th Groups took the lion's share of troop commitments to Iraq, when examining the contribution towards the ISOF- only a portion of the CJSOTF-AP mission- the assessment becomes more complicated. As was noted in the consistency in advisor pairing variable, the ISOF was made up of two elements, the ICTF and the Commandos. The 3rd Group CIF, regionally and linguistically oriented towards Africa, stood up the ICTF and had a monopoly on pairing with the organization for its first 18 months of existence. After that, the 3rd and 5th Group CIFs shared equally in pairing with the ICTF until mid-2006 when the other three CIFs were added to the rotational cycle. Rather than share the advisory responsibility equally among the five CIFs, 3rd and 5th Group were each given one third of the partnership while the other three CIFs shared in the other third of the deployment time. At the macro level, this means that 5th Special Forces Group, the only regionally oriented organization, advised the ICTF for less than a third of its existence.

The history of the Commandos' partnership is similar. While they were stood up by 5th Group teams, 10th Group teams rapidly fell in on the advisory cycle and the two groups worked nearly equal amounts of time with the Commandos. By 2006, operational pressures and the

consolidation of the unit at BIAP resulted in the Baghdad based Commando battalion being rotated between CIF units on a ratio that matched the ICTF. As a result, the regionally oriented 5th Special Forces Group advised that Commando battalion for roughly a third of its existence. Because the regional Commando companies (later battalions after the organization grew again) were not advised by CIF elements, they were shared in approximately even proportions between 5th and 10th Group teams.

When consolidating this data, it should be noted that even though the ICTF was technically a battalion, its personnel size was much closer to company strength. The regional companies, when combined, came close to the manpower of the Baghdad based 1st Battalion 1st ISOF Brigade (formerly the 36th Commandos). Altogether, the driving force on determining the degree of match with language training and cultural awareness was driven mostly by the Baghdad based Commando battalion because it had the largest number of personnel. As noted, that meant that a regionally oriented SF unit with matching language training and cultural awareness was only paired with the ISOF for approximately a third of the advisory effort. That degree was then somewhat reduced further because the ICTF had advisors that had a regional match for even less time.[57] This leads to an overall assessment that the degree of match for language training and cultural awareness of the SF advisors to the ISOF was low.

Assessment of Impact:

Interviewees provided many different opinions regarding the importance of language training and cultural awareness. Although members of 5th Special Forces Group generally noted that they believed their regional orientation to the Middle East and knowledge of Arabic contributed positively to the development of the ISOF, such an opinion was by no means

[57] This is because of the extensive 3rd Group involvement, as well as the other CIF companies from across SF command.

universal, and few argued it emphatically. One SF soldier who spent most of his career in 5th Special Forces Group and was trained in Arabic but was later transferred to the non-regionally affiliated 10th Special Forces Group noted that there was little difference between the groups based on their language training and cultural awareness. Across three years of deployments, he could recall only one occasion where someone from another group made a significant cultural error that affected operations.[58] Among advisors from the other Special Forces Groups that were not regionally oriented to the Middle East, there was more consensus that their lack of cultural awareness or language training affected the mission. Another advisor who started his career in 5th Special Forces Group, which was regionally oriented to the Middle East, but served in other groups as well observed "regional orientation only matters for the first trip. Once you have an advisor pool of special operations forces that have deployed and built a relationship with that partner force, it doesn't take long for special operations forces to regionally orient (themselves). That doesn't mean that there are three-three in a language (on language testing). But you can take a unit from 1st Group and put them in Iraq, and very quickly, they understand the cultural, tribal, political, and social aspects of that environment and are able to operate effectively."[59]

Those that downplayed the importance of language training and cultural awareness provided various reasons for their perspective. Some noted that even from its early days, all ISOF units were fortunate to have many interpreters. Rather than relying on their own skills, advisors often relied on those interpreters to translate for them in training and in combat. Many also noted that over time, the Iraqis came to take on many Western habits, traditions, and

[58] In that case, a 10th Special Forces Group soldier tried to romantically engage the sister of an ISOF commando, resulting in the commando becoming enraged at the American and the offender being sent home. Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Seaux Larreau, 29 October 2020.

[59] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Erik Brown, 5 October 2020. Three-three refers to a score on the defense language proficiency test for reading and listening, which equates to general proficiency.

processes which made it easier to communicate and work together.[60] By the middle of the eight-year mission, many of the Iraqis had learned conversational English and taken to wearing uniforms with pockets on the shoulders replete with Velcro, and even copied the way the Americans would wear their Oakley sunglasses. They wore American baseball caps backwards in the style of SF that annoyed conventional American military leaders, carried the same flip knives as their advisors, and basically looked like mirror images of Special Forces ODA members.[61] Some had even picked up American vices, such as dipping tobacco- a far cry from the more common Iraqi habit of smoking cigarettes or Sheesha (water pipes).

Others noted that the duration of the mission, coupled with their consistent pairing with the same ISOF units, resulted in close personal contacts that went beyond simply being able to communicate in Arabic. While the lack of language skills might have impacted the first rotation, by the second it was negligible. By the third or fourth rotation, some advisors had worked with the same Iraqi commandos so often that they knew how they would react or behave in a certain situation, which effectively precluded the requirement for verbal communication.[62]

Some senior advisors noted that the ability to build rapport, which they argued was critical to being able to have a positive impact on a host nation unit, is a personal skill that was not always correlated with language training or cultural awareness. They often argued the two skill sets were completely independent from one another and completely independent of rank. In such a case and for the good of the mission those leaders would pair a more junior SF soldier who had strong interpersonal skills and ability to build rapport with important host nation elements rather than more senior operators.[63]

[60] Email, CW4 Jade Anderson, 28 October 2020, multiple advisory rotations.
[61] Interview, Frank Sobchak with SGM Ron McDaries, 30 October 2020.
[62] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Seaux Larreau, 29 October 2020.
[63] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW4 Eric Brashears, 29 October 2020.

Another poorly kept secret was how few SF operators in 5th Group, the regionally oriented unit, were professionally proficient in Arabic. Like the remainder of the Department of Defense, U.S. Army Special Forces are required annually to take either the Defense Language Proficiency Test (DLPT) to rate skills in listening and reading or the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) for speaking. On those tests each skill is rated at a level ranging from zero to five, with five equating to functional native proficiency. To provide further clarity on a linguist's skills, a plus would be added after the numeric score for those who scored close to the next higher level. During the decade that SF soldiers advised the ISOF, the requirement to graduate from the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School Language program was a 1/1 rating on the DLPT. However, because of the complexity of some languages such as Arabic and Mandarin Chinese, that graduation requirement was frequently waived to a 0+/0+ requirement. The OPI was generally not used as a scoring during the time of this case study but has since become more *en vogue* to rate SF linguist skills, reflecting the importance of speaking skills in advisory missions. The U.S. Special Operations Command Language Regional Expertise and Culture Strategy Report in 2012, which included statistics from the period of this case study, noted that only 66 percent of Special Forces students could attain the 1/1 level.[64] These statistics matched anecdotal evidence gathered from interviewees and the author's personal experience.[65] During the author's four years in 5th Special Forces Group, no more than a dozen SF operators at a time scored at the 2/2 level across the entire group of 54 ODAs (approximately 650 SF qualified personnel). At best, the entire group might have had one or two operators who scored at the 3/3 level of general professional proficiency. As of April 2021, across **all** of Special

[64] Robert R. Greene Sands, *Assessing Special Operations Forces Language, Region, and Culture Needs: Leveraging Digital and LRC Learning to Reroute the "Roadmap" from Human Terrain to Human Domain* (MacDill Air Force Base, Fl.: The JSOU Press, 2016), 62–63.
[65] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Seaux Larreau, 29 October 2020.

Forces command, inclusive of the five active duty and two national guard groups and the headquarters, there were only 57 Special Forces personnel who scored at the 2/2 level or above on the DLPT or OPI on an Arabic language.[66] Six months of perfunctory Arabic training for five hours a day, the training SF soldiers receive at Fort Bragg, simply does not provide sufficient experience to be functionally proficient.

According to the Interagency Language Roundtable, a level 1 rating is only considered to be elementary proficiency, with "sufficient comprehension to read very simple connected written material in a form equivalent to usual printing or typescript." The level 0+ rating is considered memorized proficiency, where one is, "able to read some or all of the following: numbers, isolated words and phrases, personal and place names, street signs, office and shop designations. The above (are) often interpreted inaccurately. Unable to read connected prose." Even the 2 rating only equated to a limited working proficiency where one could, "read with some misunderstandings straightforward, familiar, factual material, but in general insufficiently experienced with the language to draw inferences."[67]

These scores indicate that the vast majority of those in 5th Special Forces Group- the one regionally oriented to the Middle East with the appropriate language and cultural skills- had elementary proficiency in Arabic. Another third of the unit was rated at memorized proficiency and unable to read connected prose. Only a handful functioned at a limited working proficiency, which often misunderstood inferences and other complex ideas. Such statistics led some SF operators to posit that their Arabic language training did not significantly contribute to the mission because it was nearly impossible to be able to train to the level necessary to operate

[66] Email Department of the Army Civilian Francis Restituyo, USASOC Language, Regional Expertise and Culture Director, 12 April 2021.
[67] U.S. Government Interagency Language Roundtable, "Interagency Language Roundtable Language Skill Level Descriptions," accessed April 6, 2021, https://www.govtilr.org/Skills/ILRscale4.htm.

without interpreters. Even at a DLPT level of 3/3 in Arabic, they argued, an SF linguist would not be able to understand critical nuances, subtleties, and tone and would need the skills of a native speaker to operate effectively.[68]

Those who were less proficient in Arabic, such as one advisor who scored 0+/1 on the DLPT, noted that there was only a small subset of words that were critical to know in the thick of combat, and that if they knew those words they could function even in the most extreme conditions.[69] Another advisor who was in the regionally aligned 5th Special Forces Group added, "None of us spoke the language (Arabic) in the early days; I went to school for Farsi. But by the end, we could say the important stuff like put the machine gun over there, or you are our prisoner."[70] A third advisor noted that he did not know any Arabic when he began to advise the ISOF and instead knew French and Serbo-Croatian.[71] To them, just knowing the situation and the desired end state between the advisor and the partner force allowed communication even though they did not speak Arabic, per se, because they could memorize the most important words and phrases. Such a perspective matches what other SF advisors- both in the Philippines and Iraq- observed, that knowledge of a specific language does not matter because there is a learning curve where the advisors came to learn the words they really needed after a rotation or two. Moreover, while the specific language does not matter, knowing any language does add to one's ability and willingness to learn other languages more easily as well as it gives them the patience and cross-cultural communication skills important to advisors writ large.

Advisor's Ability to Organize Host Nation Unit:

[68] Long et al., *Building Special Operations Partnerships in Afghanistan and Beyond*, 49–50.
[69] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Clay Morrow, 2 November 2020; Interview MSG Seaux Larreau, 29 October 2020.
[70] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Ron McDaries, 30 October 2020.
[71] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Scott Ford, 29 October 2020.

Across the span of the SF partnering effort with the ISOF, their ability to organize the host nation unit changed significantly. After the coerced regime change of the Iraqi government and the disbanding of the Iraqi security forces under CPA order 2, the rebuilding of the Iraqi security forces started from scratch. During that initial phase, U.S. advisors had nearly carte blanche ability to organize the ISOF in whatever way they saw fit. Over time, Iraqi leaders asserted more and more sovereignty and by 2008 operational control of the ISOF had been returned to the Iraqi government. Once that occurred, the ability of the SF advisors to organize and influence the unit decreased appreciably, even though the unit maintained much of the identity and organizational culture that the Americans had built.

Regime Change and Carte Blanche Phase: "We Work for President Bush":

When the ISOF was first organized as the 36th Commando Battalion and the ICTF, their SF advisors had almost total control over all the important decisions regarding the force. The Americans chose what equipment the force would use, who would lead the organization, what training requirements the force would have, and what standards were required to join and remain in the unit. The unit table of organization and equipment as well and even the ethno-sectarian makeup of the force were dictated by American SF advisors- with little to no input from the Iraqis. During that phase, even the Iraqis in the ISOF recognized how much control the Americans maintained. One ICTF officer who started with the unit in 2003 and rose to become a brigadier general in charge of the unit's schoolhouse noted the ISOF, "was controlled 100% by the US forces at the time, and especially the US Special Forces. They had the ability to adjust, change, and modify any kind of organizational layout that we had within the unit."[72]

[72] Interview, Frank Sobchak with BG Arkhan Fadhil, 8 September 2020.

The level of control and ability to organize was so complete that even the formal command relationship of the ISOF units to the CJSOTF reflected the totality of the advisors' influence over their partners. Initially, the ISOF was considered as being under the operational control of the CJSOTF.[73] This term is a formal command relationship which means that the controlling unit has "the authority to perform those functions … involving organizing and employing commands and forces, assigning tasks, designating objectives, and giving authoritative direction necessary to accomplish the mission."[74] Such a degree of control is usually allotted only to forces of the same nation, but in the case of the ISOF, this authority was formally employed to clarify the degree of control the CJSOTF had over the unit.

According to several of the interviewees, a key part of the long-term success of the ISOF occurred because early in the mission U.S. advisors hand picked many of the Iraqis who would serve in the key leadership positions within the organization.[75] For the first several years, SF advisors could hire and fire leaders at will, and executed that authority frequently. Advisors noted examples of them relieving an ISOF company commander for stealing, a sergeant major for corruption, and firing another leader for having an accidental discharge with his weapon.[76] Such a degree of control helped prevent corruption and sectarianism from spreading within the organization and contributed to a culture of competence. Many of the leaders picked by SF advisors at the beginning of the ISOF's existence later became battalion and brigade commanders or command sergeant majors.

[73] Witty, *The Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service*, 9, 14.
[74] Charles T. Berry Jr., "Understanding OPCON," www.army.mil, May 3, 2010, https://www.army.mil/article/38414/understanding_opcon.
[75] Email, CW4 Jade Anderson, 28 October 2020, multiple advisory rotations.
[76] Interview, Frank Sobchak with SGM Ron McDaries, 30 October 2020.

One of the most important decisions in the beginning phase of the relationship was when SF advisors chose Fadhil Jalil al Barwari to be the commander of the 36th Commando Battalion. Iraqi leaders had little to no input in the decision, and Fadhil was chosen for his professionalism, leadership ability, bravery in battle, and personal gravitas- as well as his connection with 10th Special Forces Group from working with them in a Kurdish militia during interwar years and Operation Provide Comfort.[77] He methodically climbed the ranks within the organization, earning promotion to Major General and selection to command the 1st ISOF Brigade from 2004 until his death in 2018.[78] Reflecting on the importance of being able to select organizational leaders, Major General Patrick Roberson remarked, "I think a lot of it goes to in the beginning … we had a lot of control. If you have a lot of control over an organization, the most important thing you can do whether you're in the American army or whether you're controlling a partner force is to pick the leadership. If you're able to pick the leadership, that matters the most because picking the best leaders in a meritocracy type organization usually works out the best for you in the long run."[79]

SF advisors also designed and implemented the unit's organizational and equipping structure. The troop structure of the ICTF mirrored the structure of the Special Forces CIF units which advised it, and the composition of the commando battalions was conceived to match the U.S. Army Ranger battalions. Those structures have not changed over time and remain effectively the same today as they did when they were both first created in 2003. The set of equipment that those units use operationally was also designed and issued by U.S. advisors. In

[77] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Erik Brown, 5 October 2020; Interview, Frank Sobchak with SGM Ron McDaries, 30 October 2020,
[78] David M. Witty, "Remembering MG Fadhil Barwari - ISOF Commander," *SOF News*, September 25, 2018, https://sof.news/iraq/mg-fadhil-al-barwari/.
[79] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Patrick Roberson, 22 December 2020.

what would later become a controversial decision, the ISOF units were equipped with American special operations gear to match that which their advisors carried. Designed to make them more interoperable with their SF partners, it also had the unintended consequence of not matching the logistics system of the rest of the Iraqi security forces, which used Soviet bloc equipment.[80] Some senior SF advisors later commented that with the similar equipment and unit size, the only way that one could tell the Iraqis from Americans on the full motion video of unmanned aerial vehicles was that the American SF soldiers were usually slightly taller than their ISOF partners.[81] To this day, the ISOF still uses American elite equipment. Put together, the organizational and equipping decisions that SF advisors made at the beginning of the mission- which persist to this day- demonstrate their degree of control and ability to organize the ISOF.

Another key decision that the SF advisors made at the unit's inception and enforced while they had control was to force the unit to be non-sectarian. Unlike most units in the Iraqi security forces, which were nearly homogeneous, the SF advisors mandated that the unit's ethno-sectarian makeup would roughly match Iraq's demographics.[82] When the unit was first formed, it was comprised of elements of the five largest militias in Iraq, each of which represented major ethno-sectarian demographics. The Kurdish Democratic Party provided approximately 28 percent of the manpower for the unit; Ahmad Chalabi's Shi'a Iraqi National Congress, 22 percent; the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, 21 percent; Allawi's secular Shi'a Iraqi National Congress, 15 percent; and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, 15 percent.[83] Not only was the general makeup of the unit prescribed by the Americans, but also the leadership

[80] Witty, *The Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service*, 7–9.
[81] Joel D Rayburn and Frank K Sobchak, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War – Volume 1: Invasion – Insurgency – Civil War, 2003-2006* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2019), 342.
[82] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Clay Morrow, 2 November 2020
[83] Rayburn and Sobchak, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War – Volume 1: Invasion – Insurgency – Civil War, 2003-2006*, 341.

was carefully selected to ensure one of Iraq's ethnic or religious groups did not have more than their fair share of command and responsibility.[84] In the words of one advisor this resulted in the unit "policing itself," where the Iraqis of different sects monitored the distribution of leadership positions and soldier billets to make sure they were not short changed.[85] Others argued that it reduced the amount of corruption present for similar reasons. Yet another advisor described the effect of this dynamic as, "when Shi'a and Sunnis are out on a target, they're saving each other's lives and fighting side by side. Over time, it erodes prejudices and they become more loyal and beholden to each other than to whatever tribe they came from."[86] The non-sectarian makeup of the unit became a point of pride for the ISOF's soldiers and became a self-sustaining part of the organization's culture and identity that persisted even after the U.S. advisors left. As late as 2014, the ISOF was still comprised of Arabs, Sunnis, Shi'as, Kurds, Christians, and Turkmen that roughly approximated Iraq's population.[87]

Special Forces advisors also carefully organized and controlled the rigorous selection, assessment, and training pipeline to ensure that only quality recruits would serve in the unit. To become part of the ISOF, Iraqis had to volunteer and then pass through a three-week selection and assessment course that was held in Iraq. American advisors weeded out candidates who were not physically fit and those who were incapable of working together. If a candidate did not meet the advisors' standards, they had ultimate authority to eliminate them from the training pipeline regardless of political connection or position. In the initial group of applicants, only 389 of 508 Iraqis passed the challenging entry process, a far cry from the limited weeding out process

[84] Interview, Frank Sobchak with SGM Ron McDaries, 30 October 2020.
[85] Interview, Colonel Frank Sobchak, CSA OIF Study Group, with Lieutenant Colonel (Ret.) Robert Kelley, Commander, 1st Battalion, 5th Special Forces Group, July 11, 2014.
[86] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Erik Brown, 5 October 2020.
[87] Witty, *The Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service*, 26.

which occurred with the remainder of the Iraqi army.[88] As the unit's accomplishments became more well known, the attrition rate soared to between 40 and 50 percent.[89] The high standard set by SF advisors still persists in 2021, as the pass rate for selection is only 60-65%.[90] Those that passed selection were sent on to either an 8-week commando training course or three months of ICTF training, named the Operator Training Course (OTC) to match the arduous course that U.S. national level SOF attend.[91] Advisors weeded out additional candidates in each phase, further ensuring the quality of graduates of the training program.

The CJSOTF advisors also initially controlled the pay for all the ISOF units. SF advisors, believing it to be an issue critical to recruitment, retention, and trust, initially authorized an incentive pay which nearly doubled or tripled the income of a similar rank soldier in the Iraqi Army when they set up the unit.[92] To ensure there was no corruption, many advisors held a formal "payday activities" event where the ISOF lined its soldiers up to distribute soldiers' salaries. Such formations allowed the advisors to observe the proceedings and make sure that it was done properly.[93] Initially these funds came directly out of U.S. coffers, but over time as Iraq's sovereignty was restored the Iraqi leadership in the ISOF slowly took control of the system. This additional pay of $800 a month,[94] which came from US coffers but funneled through the Iraqi military budget, was perceived by some Iraqis to be quid pro quo for their service. This truism is reflected in a vignette from Major General Patrick Roberson, who served as an advisor to the ISOF four times. On one occasion after a difficult mission which had caused

[88] Briefing, CJSOTF-AP, 36th Iraqi Civil Defense Corps Battalion, c. Jan 2004.
[89] Witty, *The Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service*, 8.
[90] Interview, Frank Sobchak with BG Arkhan Fadhil, 8 September 2020.
[91] Interview, Frank Sobchak with BG Arkhan Fadhil, 8 September 2020.
[92] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Erik Brown, 5 October 2020.
[93] Interview, Frank Sobchak with SGM Ron McDaries, 30 October 2020.
[94] Witty, *The Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service*, 13.

domestic Iraqi political repercussions due to the ethno-sectarian identities of the individuals targeted, Roberson was talking to a group of ISOF soldiers and asking them what they thought would be the fallout from the operation. One responded, "we don't care about that, we work for President Bush."[95] Another advisor noted the importance of making sure the partner force was well compensated financially by stating, "when he is taking home enough cash to feed all four generations of his family and provide housing for him, that is a game changer. You've got loyalty, and you are definitely hitting on all cylinders with that individual at that point."[96] Even after Iraqis took control of the ISOF, SF advisors advocated for the pay to be retained and it became institutionalized.

Unlike the LRR, ISOF recruits underwent extensive screening before joining the unit because of the U.S. having nearly complete control over the organization. First, prospective candidates were vetted with a polygraph as well as a counterintelligence screening. Later, many of their soldiers' families were moved into special housing in Area IV on BIAP where they could not be targeted, manipulated, or corrupted.[97] At least partly because of this, there was not a single green on blue fratricide incident for the entire history of the ISOF and when SF personnel operated alone with them in training, they rarely wore body armor. Such conditions were completely different in Afghanistan, where most units required an armed "guardian angel" whose function was to make sure there was not an infiltrator in the partner force.[98] These policies were organized by the U.S. advisors, and given the complete level of control they exerted, the Iraqis were not able to exert claims of national sovereignty to block them. Even after Iraq regained its sovereignty the policies remained in place.

[95] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Patrick Roberson, 22 December 2020.
[96] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Erik Brown, 5 October 2020.
[97] Email, COL Dennis Downey, 11 July 2020, Multinational Force-Iraq Headquarters staff officer.
[98] Long et al., *Building Special Operations Partnerships in Afghanistan and Beyond*, 50.

One CJSOTF commander noted that initially his advisors had almost complete control over the ISOF to organize and reorganize them at will: "We created them with the equipment, the training, and the work ethic. It wasn't like we're going to the range for 40 minutes and *inshallah* taking a nap and calling it a day. We inculcated and instituted a work ethic that these guys really just took on."[99] This nearly complete control over the ISOF was only formally changed in September 2006, well past the June 2004 transition of sovereignty which should have returned control of the ISOF to the Iraqi government. Despite signing a memorandum of agreement that ratified the change, the CJSOTF ignored the directive and continued to exert direct control over the ISOF until January 2008. Only then was a new agreement created that resulted in shared control between the Government of Iraq and the CJSOTF.[100] During that evolutionary period when the SF advisor's level of control waned, a domestic Iraqi SOF headquarters was formed.

Institutionalizing the ISOF: The Counter Terrorism Command and Counter Terrorism Service:

Unlike in the Philippines, Iraqi political and military leadership offered no resistance towards American SF recommendations to establish a SOF headquarters to command, manage, and resource the various elite forces. Similarly, because the elite forces had fallen under the direct control of the CJSOTF since their inception, there was little friction with Iraqi conventional commanders as they were not in the ISOF's chain of command.[101] Demonstrating how much ability to organize the Iraqi elite forces they still had, in 2007 the CJSOTF and the

[99] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Chris Conner, 13 July 2020.
[100] Witty, *The Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service*, 9.
[101] Witty, 9. Until 2008, the various ISOF units were officially under the operational control of the CJSOTF, a formalized command relationship that allowed the American SF advisors to organize and employ those forces as the CJSOTF commander saw fit.

Iraqi National Counterterrorism Force Transition Team (INCTF-TT), a special operations organization created to help the ISOF brigade shift to Iraqi control, drew up plans to create Iraqi civilian defense oversight and military headquarters for the ISOF.

Demonstrating fundamental differences of opinions on how the force should be structured and commanded, the two American organizations presented completely diverging strategies to General David Petraeus, the Iraq theater commander. In some ways, U.S. advisors fought amongst themselves more than with Iraqi leadership over the creation of the new special operations headquarters. One perspective held by Admiral Edward Winters, a Navy SEAL that commanded the INCTF-TT, was that the new headquarters should resemble the U.S. national level counterterrorism force and, therefore, ought to be an organization outside the typical government and military bureaucracy and answer directly to the head of the executive branch. In crisis situations, he argued, such a construct would allow Iraq's elite counterterrorism forces to react nimbly and quickly.[102] By contrast, the CJSOTF argued that the ISOF should fall within the traditional military structure of Iraq's security forces. Their leaders, including Colonel Mark Mitchell, the CJSOTF commander, believed that Iraq's political and military institutions and respect for civil military relations were not mature enough to create an elite force outside the military chain of command. They feared the ISOF would become a Praetorian Guard for the Prime Minister and that political targeting would follow.[103] Indeed, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had long sought to obtain direct control over the elite force, even issuing an executive order in January 2007 that would place the unit under his own Office of the Commander in

[102] Interview, Frank Sobchak, CSA OIF Study Group, with Rear Admiral Edward Winters, Iraqi National Counterterrorism Force Transition Team Commander, October 22, 2015.
[103] Interview, Frank Sobchak, CSA OIF Study Group, with Colonel Mark Mitchell, CJSOTF Commander, September 29, 2014.

Chief, a shadow military organization run out of the Prime Minister's office.[104] Faced with two conflicting recommendations, General Petraeus decided to support Admiral Winters' proposal, at least in part because it reflected the recommendation of a flag officer. Despite the final verdict, the entire process of the creation of the headquarters elements reflected how much ability the U.S. advisors had to organize the Iraqi SOF elements, as the discussion and decision process were almost entirely within American circles.

The decision resulted in the creation of the Counter-terrorism Service (CTS) and the Counter-terrorism Command (CTC). The CTS was created as a stand-alone ministry level organization that was to be led by a civilian that handled the strategic, institutional, and force management affairs of Iraqi SOF elements. Critical functions such as acquisition, medical care, communications, finance, logistics, and personnel management would be performed by the CTS.[105] Meeting Prime Minister Maliki's desires, the CTS would be completely independent of the Defense Ministry and report directly to Iraq's chief executive.[106] The CTC would be a military organization led by a two-star general that served as an operational headquarters that performed command and control for ISOF combat operations either within Iraq or, theoretically, in another country.[107] The goal of a civilian to run CTS dissipated quickly as Maliki assigned a three-star general known to be loyal to him as the organization's first director.

Fedayeen Maliki: "You Taught Us Better than This":

After Prime Minister Maliki obtained control over the ISOF, the ability of SF advisors to organize the unit decreased dramatically. Over time, the leadership of the organization changed from the demographically mixed ratios that matched the population to one that had an imbalance

[104] Witty, *The Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service*, 10.
[105] Interview, Frank Sobchak with BG Arkhan Fadhil, 8 September 2020.
[106] Witty, 10-11.
[107] The CTC commander would later be advanced to be a three-star general.

of too many Shi'a leaders. The shift occurred slowly, as the advisors still had some control over the unit and many of the elements of the unit's culture and identity that they had been instilled persisted in the face of Shi'a partisanship. As one advisor noted, after the CTC and CTS became part of the Office of the Commander in Chief, at times entire groups of Shi'a soldiers who had not completed ISOF training would arrive unannounced at the unit, with instructions to integrate at all levels of the organization. When the SF advisors observed such sectarian attempts, they were often- but not always- able to shut down the infiltration.[108] Other SF advisors observed that after the CTS and CTC assumed operational control of the ISOF, it became much more difficult to change out key leadership at the battalion level and above. Some of those positions fell to Maliki supporters- often to officers unqualified to fill special operations leadership positions. Below that level, however, the long-term relationship that the advisors had with MG Fadhil, the ISOF commander, enabled them to still have a say on who assumed leadership positions.[109] Even if a newly appointed ISOF officer was deemed as incompetent or sectarian but had the political connections to be assigned to the unit, MG Fadhil would sideline him by giving him a non-combat role or preventing him from making important decisions.[110]

Loss of control over the ISOF's personnel system was not the only change that occurred after Prime Minister Maliki gained control over the ISOF. More ominously, the unit's targeting shifted considerably. At the tactical level, approved Shi'a targets dropped dramatically and executed missions were usually unsuccessful in killing or capturing their objective. The situation became so acute that SF advisors, in coordination with loyal ISOF officers, decided to conduct

[108] Interview, Frank Sobchak, CSA OIF Study Group, with Lieutenant Colonel (Ret.) Patrick Morrison, Iraqi Special Operations Forces, Brigade Senior Adviser, Iraqi National Counter Terrorism Force Transition Team, September 22, 2014.
[109] Email, CW4 Jade Anderson, 28 October 2020, multiple advisory rotations.
[110] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Clay Morrow, 2 November 2020.

an operational test of their theory. They put together what they described as "near perfect" target packages for Shi'a objectives which were consistently rejected. When they submitted similar or even less detailed packets for Sunni targets, they were immediately approved.[111] Even when Shi'a targets were approved, several advisors believed that elements within the CTS or CTC were tipping off the Shi'a targets to prevent their capture.[112]

Most shocking were the targeting changes at the strategic level. In August 2008, the Prime Minister's office, via CTS chief Talib Kenani, ordered the arrest of a prominent Sunni politician, the governor of Diyala province. Although the governor himself avoided capture, two other Sunni politicians were arrested in what was a clear message of sectarian political intimidation.[113] This began a long series of politically driven operations that the U.S. advisors believed had more of a goal to terrify and coerce Maliki's political opponents rather than kill or capture insurgents. The SF advisors denounced the operations and refused to participate but were nearly powerless to stop the operations from happening. Over time, Maliki's authoritarian and sectarian influence over the ISOF grew to the point that even though the advisor footprint did not decrease, the CJSOTF began conducting more combat advisory missions with other Iraqi units such as the National Police's Emergency Response Unit. As a result, during this time the ISOF became unpopular and known as "the dirty brigade" or "Fedayeen Maliki" referring to the violent paramilitary force during Saddam Hussein's rule that he used as political enforcers.[114] ISOF commandos recognized the cancerous influence but were unable to stop it, commiserating

[111] Interview, Frank Sobchak, CSA OIF Study Group, with Lieutenant Colonel (Ret.) Patrick Morrison, Iraqi Special Operations Forces, Brigade Senior Adviser, Iraqi National Counter Terrorism Force Transition Team, September 22, 2014.
[112] Email, CW4 Jade Anderson, 28 October 2020, multiple advisory rotations.
[113] Marisa Sullivan, "Maliki's Authoritarian Regime Web" (Institute for the Study of War, April 2013), 12.
[114] Shane Bauer, "Iraq's New Death Squad," June 3, 2009, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/iraqs-new-death-squad/.

with their advisors and telling them, "You taught us about being Iraqis . . . You taught us that our ethnicity is not part of it, [that it should be] Iraq first… You taught us better than this."[115]

The Post Maliki Years, Rebirth and Restoration:

Despite Maliki's influence and political malfeasance, many key leaders remained in the ISOF and tried to minimize his long-term impact on the unit. Until U.S. advisors left in December 2011, they also served as a brake, slowing Maliki's worst impulses. Even after their departure, a small element of civilian contractors, many of them former SF personnel, remained working with the Office of Security Cooperation-Iraq in the U.S. embassy and were also able to degrade negative influences. Although Maliki was able to put some of his allies into key positions and temporarily put the unit demographics out of balance, in many ways the core identity and culture of the unit remained. The key ingredients of the unit's ethos persisted and outlived Maliki's eight-year prime ministership: its multi-ethnic and multi-sectarian identity, its dedication to excellence, the recruitment, selection, and retention of quality individuals, the commitment to difficult, challenging, and realistic training.[116] Those characteristics were maintained even though the ISOF expanded to reach a size of 13,000 personnel with each of the regional battalions growing into a brigade sized unit.[117] In some ways, it appears that those who disagreed with Maliki drug their feet on his initiatives and delayed their implementation in an effort to wait him out. Fortunately, they did not have to wait long.

In some ways, ISIS's 2014 assault, which almost destroyed Iraq as a unitary nation, was cathartic and cleansing. Prime Minister Maliki rightfully absorbed much of the blame for the

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[115] Joel D Rayburn and Frank K Sobchak, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War: Volume 2, Surge and Withdrawal, 2007-2011* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2019), 417.
[116] Michael Knights and Alex Mello, "The Best Thing America Built in Iraq: Iraq´s Counter-Terrorism Service and the Long War Against Militancy," *War on the Rocks*, July 19, 2017, 4, https://warontherocks.com/2017/07/the-best-thing-america-built-in-iraq-iraqs-counter-terrorism-service-and-the-long-war-against-militancy/.
[117] Witty, *The Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service*, 26.

security disaster and the failure of the Iraqi security forces and was ignominiously forced out of office in August of that year.[118] In the aftermath of his resignation, the ISOF bore the brunt of the fighting against ISIS, serving as effectively the only ISF institution that did not crumble. With the organization acting as a bulwark against ISIS, it was perceived by many as the savior of Iraq, buoying its popularity and support. Its multi-ethnic identity and dedication to the nation proved to be particularly important and one scholar noted that the ISOF and CTS, "gave Iraqis confidence in their country's unity, and without it, some believe Iraq would today be a failed state. All in all, the CTS is now widely regarded as loyal to Iraq and not to any one person."[119]

Assessing the Impact of the Variable:

The advisory effort in Iraq differed considerably from the effort in the Philippines. It began with American advisors having complete control over every aspect of the ISOF's creation and existence. They controlled who joined the unit, who led it, and the standards for assessment, training, and retention. SF advisors chose the unit's organization, weapons, demographic makeup, and pay. At first, they controlled the unit directly in combat. Even though Iraq gained back sovereignty and reestablished control of its security forces over time, at no point were restrictions in place in Iraq that rivaled those in place in the Philippines. When change came, it arrived gradually, and the U.S. still exerted considerable influence over the force. For all these reasons, the variable of the advisors' ability to organize host nation forces should be rated as high (if not extremely high).

The length of time between when the U.S. took control and then ceded it is important, and in Iraq it was roughly four full years of nearly complete control before the shift began. That

[118] "Maliki Gives up Iraq PM Job to Rival," Al Jazeera News, August 15, 2014, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2014/8/15/maliki-gives-up-iraq-pm-job-to-rival.
[119] David Witty, *Iraq's Post 2014 Counter-Terrorism Service* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018), 5, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus157-Witty-2.pdf.

uninterrupted time where advisors had nearly complete control over the ISOF helped establish a culture that persisted through Prime Minister Maliki's malfeasance and ISIS's brutal offensive. That culture endures today. It was almost as if the ISOF required a certain amount of time to "cure" or "set" before it would be resistant to negative influences. Like in the Philippines, this seems to indicate that the sovereignty "clock," a short period when host nation forces are prone to allow the most change by foreign advisors, is extremely important. Advisors should commit the most resources and exert the most effort during this phase as it is likely to produce the most dividends.

Combat Advising: "You Were Killing with Them."

Advisors to the ICTF and Commandos were involved in every aspect of daily life with their host nation partners and every phase of their operational life cycle. SF advisors initially ran the selection and assessment courses in Iraq, and the instruction for the ICTF operators and training for the Commandos in Jordan. After their initial training, they advised them in combat, fighting shoulder to shoulder with their Iraqi partners. Often the Iraqi schoolhouse mission was assigned to a team that had many newly assigned personnel, and over time that ODA would "graduate" to advising ISOF soldiers in combat. That way they would make personal bonds with the Iraqis during weeks to months of training together and would then see the same advisors working together in combat. Unlike other efforts, there were no American mess halls on the camps where the ICTF and commandos were located, and the SF advisors ate at the Iraqi dining facilities. One advisor noted, "you were training with them, you were eating next to them in the mess hall, and you were killing with them."[120] Few, if any, restrictions were put on SF advisors'

[120] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW2 Travis Rolph, 29 October 2020.

ability to accompany their partners in combat, and those that were did not come close to those in the Philippines.

Advisors universally touted the importance of the variable and its impact on the ability to produce a combat effective partner force. One advisor who had also served as the JSOTF-P commander in the Philippines noted, "You had to have skin in the game, you have to share danger and adversity with your partner force to afford to be successful. You can shower millions of dollars (on them) and have a years-long relationship like in the Philippines, but if you're not out there on operations with them in the fight, leading by example, and sharing that, then you would never reach nowhere near the same level of effectiveness."[121] Others noted that, unlike other missions, the U.S. advisors lived in the same buildings as their Iraq partners and basically were with them almost every day, all day. Advisors accompanied the ISOF onto the objective and fought as partners, but also spent time with them between missions and got to know their families. This considerable proximity of day in and day out contact built trust and helped erase some cultural reluctance to admit mistakes, which in turn were easier to observe because advisors were present to see what their partners were doing in combat.[122]

There were minor variations between the groups on what the advisors would and would not do. For example, during missions, most 3rd Special Forces Group teams would not allow Iraqis to serve as drivers or man the vehicle mounted heavy machine gun for fear of a green on blue fratricide incident. By contrast, the 5th Special Forces Group teams allowed Iraqis to fill both of those roles.[123] But in general, ISOF soldiers and their SF advisors lived, fought, and at times, died shoulder to shoulder.

[121] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Erik Brown, 5 October 2020.
[122] Interview, Frank Sobchak with SGM Ron McDaries, 30 October 2020.
[123] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW2 Travis Rolph, 29 October 2020.

Some advisors did note that even though they were deeply involved in combat advising the ISOF, at times there were difficult decisions of how much risk was reasonable for them to accept. Returning rotation after rotation contributed to the perception that risk built up over time and that some missions might be so difficult that advisors had to decide if the operation was worth losing the life of one of their friends and comrades. In those cases, advisors might adjust whether they would accompany the first group of assaulters through the door of the first building or let the ISOF conduct the initial clearing before entering the building.[124] Yet even in these cases, the SF advisors working with the ISOF had tremendously more contact, oversight, and mentorship with their partners than those working with the LRR in the Philippines.

Assessing the Impact of the Variable:

During the entirety of the ISOF advisory mission, there was little to no restriction on what type of advising Special Forces soldiers could do with their partners. If any limitation was put in place, it was usually done at the behest of the advisors themselves based on their personal risk assessment or their own preferences. With the Iraqi government dissolved in 2003 and generally compliant institutions installed in their place, there was little resistance to coalition forces implementing whatever advising policies they wanted, and issues of national sovereignty simply did not affect what was allowed. Even as Iraq gradually regained its sovereignty, SF advisors consistently accompanied them on combat missions. Few restrictions, if any, were ever put on the ability to accompany Iraqi forces across the span of the mission. Based on these factors, the degree of combat advising with the ISOF will be rated as high.

Other factors:

[124] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW4 Eric Brashears, 29 October 2020.

Although this dissertation focuses on five primary independent variables, it is important to consider other potential explanations for the outcome of the dependent variable. A key difference between the ISOF and the LRR in terms of other factors that could affect their combat effectiveness is that U.S. advisors exerted nearly complete control over the ISOF initially. This meant that many of the issues that could create differentiations between cases- such as the quality of initial recruits, the screening of those trainees conducted on induction, and whether any special pay or benefits were provided to members of the unit- were all organized and controlled by the SF advisors. As such, those factors are included under the ability to organize host nation forces variable.

Perhaps the key factor that is different between the two cases is that in Iraq, the ISOF were formed in a country with an extremely large U.S. SOF and conventional force presence in a theater of war led by military forces rather than in a sovereign state where American military forces answer to an Ambassador and Embassy officials. In Iraq, there was a well-defined chain of command and little shortage of resources. If they chose to, SF advisors could provide equipment maintenance, transportation support, intelligence, or even medical support (which they did to ISOF soldiers at times in contravention of normal U.S. procedures). While the impact of these differences is in dispute, as some argue having too many resources creates dependency and slower development, what is not disputable is that resources available to the American advisory effort were much greater in Iraq.[125] While millions were spent in the Philippines, trillions of dollars were spent in Iraq.[126] Although it is extremely difficult to determine exactly how much was spent on the ISOF due to classified budgets, poor accounting

[125] Email, COL Dennis Downey, 11 July 2020, Multinational Force-Iraq Headquarters staff officer.
[126] Paulina Cachero, "US Taxpayers Have Spent Over $2 Trillion for the Iraq War, Report Says," *Business Insider*, February 6, 2020, https://www.businessinsider.com/us-taxpayers-spent-8000-each-2-trillion-iraq-war-study-2020-2.

practices, and insufficient records, some studies indicate it reached the $50 million range annually. That factor also contributed to a significantly different landscape between the two advisory efforts.

Assessing the Combat Effectiveness of the ISOF:

Several vignettes provide interesting insight into the ISOF's combat effectiveness. One is a story from 2005 when a high value target the unit had been chasing for a few months suddenly showed up at the commandos' doorstep and surrendered. The individual said that once he heard that the ISOF was chasing him, their reputation struck such fear into him that he chose to give himself up to avoid getting killed or potentially having his family hurt as collateral damage.[127] Another vignette stems from the unit's successes in the 2014 war against ISIS. After the conflict, the ISOF's effectiveness was seen by many Iraqis as being the savior of the nation. Songs and poems were created to honor its battlefield successes, and college students and children wore T-shirts with the unit's logos.[128] But vignettes and stories are not academic assessments, so to properly evaluate the ISOF's combat effectiveness more dispassionately, four key areas will be reviewed: competence at night fighting, the capability to fight without advisors present as defined by whether they could conduct intelligence driven operations, the ability to conduct multi-day combat operations, and how it performed in combat against enemy forces.

Night Fighting:

The ICTF, like the LRR in the Philippines, was equipped to match the capabilities of the CINC's in-extremis force (CIF) Special Forces companies that helped organize them. While the Commando battalions had slightly less capability, each soldier was still equipped with night

[127] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW4 Eric Brashears, 29 October 2020.
[128] David Witty, *Iraq's Post 2014 Counter-Terrorism Service*, 5.

vision goggles and laser pointers for their rifles. Standard equipment included PVS-7, 14, and 15 goggles, which gave them considerable advantages over almost all their opponents.

When SF advisors first formed the Commandos and ICTF, they had to overcome some Iraqi military cultural habits that avoided training and conducting operations at night. One advisor quipped that at first, the Iraqis were "solar powered" and that at night operations seemed to cease.[129] But through training and mentorship the Iraqis were able to overcome those barriers relatively quickly. By mid-2004, the ISOF was operating almost exclusively at night and capable of conducting several raids in a single period of darkness. One advisor noted that by 2005 the Iraqis had grown so proficient operating at night that he felt like he was working with a US unit.[130] Because their capabilities so overmatched their opponents at night, it simply became much safer and more effective to conduct all operations at night, and the unit effectively switched to a reverse cycle operation where it conducted missions at night and slept during the day. Reflecting on this change in procedures, the ISOF decided to paint their vehicles black and change their uniforms to black Nomex jumpsuits, further allowing them to blend in during night operations.[131] Over time, those capabilities became more and more honed with years of practice and one CJSOTF commander noted that there was no peer military unit within the CENTCOM area of responsibility that matched the ISOF night fighting skills.[132]

After the U.S. advisors left Iraq in 2011, the ISOF's night fighting skills decayed somewhat. Misuse by Iraqi government forces desperate to have a unit that would fight against ISIS in 2014 resulted in the ISOF being thrown into combat more as shock infantry rather than their SOF role. Such dire situations caused ISOF forces to often fight during the day, an

[129] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Michael Repass, 21 September 2020.
[130] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Clay Morrow, 2 November 2020.
[131] David Witty, *Iraq's Post 2014 Counter-Terrorism Service*, 24.
[132] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Chris Conner, 13 July 2020.

environment that they were neither prepared for nor preferred. That said, even during those combat operations there was considerable evidence that the night fighting capabilities that the ISOF had developed over years of practice were still present.[133] After ISIS's advance had been halted and the ISOF was able to return to the offensive, they were much more able to take advantage of their night fighting capabilities and would conduct operations such as offensives, raids, and ambushes at night during the 2014 battle of Mosul.[134] Media reports from 2021 also showed that as the conventional threat from ISIS has ebbed, the ISOF returned to its manhunting kill/capture operations and has been primarily conducting those operations at night, using night vision equipment, and performing capably and successfully.[135]

Assessment:

There is clear evidence that the ISOF had and still has considerable night fighting skills. They had excellent equipment, training, and willingness to operate at night. Even after the withdrawal of U.S. forces, the ISOF routinely conducted night operations, whether they were during more traditional manhunting kill/capture missions or during the sustained combat against ISIS more akin to the role played by elite infantry. Taking all those influences into consideration, a high rating would likely be the most accurate assessment of this element of the dependent variable.

Conducting Multi-Day (72hrs) Combat Operations:

Methodologically, for this study's purposes, conducting multi-day combat operations implies that a host nation unit can withstand casualties, logistically sustain itself, and conduct

[133] David Witty, *Iraq's Post 2014 Counter-Terrorism Service*, 6–8.
[134] Mitch Utterback, "What the Fight Against ISIS Is Actually Like on the Iraqi Frontlines," *Skillset Magazine*, May 13, 2020, https://www.skillsetmag.com/2020/05/13/frontlines-fight-against-isis/.
[135] Louisa Loveluck, Mustafa Salim, "Hunting ISIS: On a Nighttime Raid with Iraqi Special Forces," *Washington Post*, February 3, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/02/03/iraq-isis-american-troops-counterterrorism/.

casualty evacuation. While the ISOF has consistently demonstrated that they can conduct multi-day combat operations as evinced by their performance against ISIS from 2014 to 2020, at times they have struggled with logistical resupply, maintenance, and long-term sustainment.

While most advisors noted that the individual level maintenance performed by ISOF soldiers was acceptable or even good, the organization faced challenges with unit and depot level maintenance programs. In some ways, this was a self-inflicted wound caused by early decisions made by advisors. Rather than arm the ISOF with Eastern bloc weapons such as the AK-47, which were relatively easy to maintain and matched the logistics system of the rest of the Iraqi security forces, the SF advisors decided to provide the ISOF with equipment that matched their own. Individual ISOF troops used the SOCOM model of the M4 rifle with its high-end optics and night vision, M9 pistols, .50 M2 heavy machine guns, and U.S. sniper rifles.[136] This decision created challenges with ammunition resupply, as the ISOF had to requisition something completely different from what was normally available to other Iraqi units. It also created challenges with maintenance for the same reasons, and the units even lacked appropriately trained armorers.[137]

Another challenge was that because the ISOF was outside the traditional Ministry of Defense construct (as previously noted, the Counter Terrorism Service was its own ministry-like department), obtaining immediate resupply in the heat of battle was challenging. Initially, CJSOTF advisors had assumed that the ISOF could obtain critical needs resupply such as water, food, and fuel, from the local conventional Iraqi Army unit.[138] However, when the ISOF was placed under the CTS and not in the Defense Ministry, local military commanders would

[136] Long et al., *Building Special Operations Partnerships in Afghanistan and Beyond*, 52.
[137] Email, CW4 Jade Anderson, 28 October 2020, multiple advisory rotations.
[138] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Duke Christie, 19 October 2020.

sometimes refuse to resupply them because the ISOF was not part of their funding. In some instances, ISOF units waited for resupply until the CTS headquarters transferred funds to cover their resupply to the Iraqi Army resource management headquarters. This challenge was alleviated somewhat by the establishment of interdepartmental agreements and the creation of a CTC level logistics command, but at times local units delayed ISOF resupply and institutional lapses occurred where the Defense Ministry delayed paying ISOF members.[139]

At the same time, the ISOF was successful in establishing a baseline in critical institutional logistical functions. Before the American advisors left, Iraqis conducted their own assessment and selection courses and ran their own schoolhouse for both the commando course and OTC. This gave them the ability to replace combat losses and keep the organization functional at the institutional level as the force took casualties: capabilities that would be critically important in the battle against ISIS. As one advisor noted, "as important as being effective out on operations is their ability to regenerate combat power and to sustain themselves, conduct administration, intelligence, logistics, and communications. It isn't sexy, certainly not as sexy as kicking doors, but it is just as critical."[140] The ISOF were able to perform all those functions, and even though they were not to the standard of the U.S. military, they were capable.

Although the ISOF's logistics system has struggled to meet the demands of high intensity combat, it has rarely failed. Unlike many other partner force units built or assisted by U.S. SF, building a logistics component for the ISOF began nearly in parallel with its tactical forces. Even before the first brigade was officially stood up, a support battalion had been organized to meet the logistics needs of the disparate SOF elements in March 2004.[141] At least in part due to

[139] Witty, *The Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service*, 20.
[140] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Erik Brown, 5 October 2020.
[141] Interview, Frank Sobchak with BG Arkhan Fadhil, 8 September 2020.

this, the historical record of the unit was exemplary during its fighting with ISIS in 2014 and later and there were numerous examples of ISOF units fighting for more than 72 hours. During the battle of Baiji, in July of that year, a small group of ISOF commandos, outnumbered five to one by ISIS fighters, held out for over a week, refusing to surrender the critical refinery there even when given the offer of safe passage.[142] In the battle of Mosul, the ISOF absorbed a staggering forty percent casualties yet fought on consistently for months on end with little to no relief. The Najaf regional commando battalion went from 350 soldiers to fewer than 150 in ninety days of fighting.[143] During the fighting, ISOF logistics elements conducted recovery and repair of their vehicles in contact, returning the damaged HMMWVs to the front within days and were able to provide hot meals to their soldiers.[144] Such a record was also repeated in Ramadi, Fallujah, and Tikrit. In many ways the ISOF's performance echoes the challenges many developing nations have with mastering the challenges of support and sustainment as well as the common priorities the U.S. and other donor nations usually put on building combat units before they begin work on logistics. But ultimately when the ISOF's system was called upon to deliver water, ammunition, fuel, and food in the height of intense urban combat, it delivered.

Assessment:

The ISOF's logistics capabilities are mixed. While it is generally able to conduct local resupply or organically resupply their own units, at times those capabilities break down. Compared to the Iraqi Army, which has its own logistics challenges, the ISOF's resupply capabilities are not robust. Although there are support elements at every level of command from

[142] Hannah Allam and Mitchell Prothero, "Islamists Have Cornered Commandos Defending Iraq's Largest Refinery," McClatchy Washington Bureau, July 9, 2014, https://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24770242.html.
[143] Knights and Mello, "The Best Thing America Built in Iraq: Iraq´s Counter-Terrorism Service and the Long War Against Militancy."
[144] Mitch Utterback, "What the Fight Against ISIS Is Actually Like on the Iraqi Frontlines."

battalion through CTC level, those capabilities are rarely able to conduct long-term resupply and are challenged when ISOF units operate far away from either the Baghdad headquarters or one of the four regional hubs. There is ample evidence, however, that the unit consistently met the standard of being able to fight independently in sustained combat for 72 hours or more. Therefore, based on reviews of these factors, the ISOF is assessed as having a medium capability to be able to conduct extended combat operations- although at the high end of that rating.

Fighting without Advisors Present:

As defined in my methodology, to be able to fight without advisors, host nation forces must be able to conduct intelligence driven operations. Such a capability would mean that the ISOF was able to organically generate its own intelligence, successfully action those targets, conduct sensitive site exploitation of those targets, and then use that information to repeat the cycle again in another series of operations. Known as the F3EAD cycle: Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Analyze, and Disseminate, it proved to be extremely effective in disrupting, damaging, and destroying insurgent or terrorist networks.[145]

Both the ICTF and the Commandos had recce (reconnaissance) units organic to the battalion level. The recce units were not typical tactical reconnaissance forces or scouts, but instead were urban reconnaissance forces that had been trained in human source operations and tradecraft by highly skilled Special Forces operators. Those human intelligence cells were functioning independently as early as 2004 and were generating their own target sets.[146] They had the ability to manage source operations as well as conduct close target reconnaissance out of

[145] Richard H. Shultz Jr and Joseph L. Votel, *Transforming US Intelligence for Irregular War: Task Force 714 in Iraq*, Reprint edition (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020), 109–11, 125–31.
[146] Interview, Frank Sobchak with SGM Ron McDaries, 30 October 2020.

uniform in civilian vehicles.[147] It was a robust capability that ranged across the entire geographical and ethno-sectarian span of the country and could communicate via a secure electronic server between elements.[148] The recce force was well trained, employing their own control and coordination elements as well as counterintelligence capabilities. Women were recruited for service to collect intelligence with no limitations to infiltrate insurgent or terrorist networks.[149] Every demographic within Iraq could be targeted and collected upon, reflecting the multi-ethnic makeup of the ISOF. While intelligence could be generated- itself not an easy task given the closed nature of some groups- at times, the ISOF's political leadership was not willing to carry out missions based on the intelligence gathered.

The impact of that capability meant that the ISOF was able to effectively carry out intelligence driven operations. Unlike any other Iraqi unit, it could conduct multiple kill or capture operations in the same night using information gained from one operation to build the next target set. Their process was not slowed even when the Iraqi government required warrants to carry out missions as the unit recruited civilian judges to pair with their intelligence fusion cells to be able to receive approval in real time.[150]

At the same time, the ISOF faced some challenges in being able to conduct intelligence driven operations. The force only had rudimentary signals intelligence and imagery intelligence and had relied on U.S. forces to provide them. Like many developing countries, Iraq lacked the financial resources to be able to purchase such expensive capabilities in bulk. After the

[147] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW2 Travis Rolph, 29 October 2020; Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Seaux Larreau, 29 October 2020.
[148] Witty, *The Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service*, 14.
[149] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Major General Michael Repass, 21 September 2020.
[150] Knights and Mello, "The Best Thing America Built in Iraq: Iraq´s Counter-Terrorism Service and the Long War Against Militancy."

withdrawal of U.S. forces, the CTC slowly purchased a baseline capability.[151] Similarly, the ISOF did not have the budget to be able to purchase technical capabilities to be able to conduct real time sensitive site exploitation (SSE). However, their members were extremely resourceful and dedicated and would conduct SSE to the maximum of their abilities. A standard battle drill they developed was when they captured cell phones on an objective, they immediately obtained a warrant from an Iraqi judge to be able to search the phone. With the warrant in hand, they would bring the phone to the appropriate Iraqi mobile provider and have them open ("crack") the phone and provide names of the owners of any phone numbers stored in the phone or used by the phone. This procedure often took up to twelve hours, although at times it could be done more quickly.[152] Exploitation of documents was similar in that the ISOF routinely collected documents from the battlefield and attempted to benefit from them in real time, but more often than not documents were brought to rear areas for later use.[153] In addition to those challenges, sometimes elements within the CTC were reluctant to share intelligence with one another, fearing a possible compromise of the intelligence as well as wanting to be able to take credit for key operations.[154]

Assessment:

The ISOF made the most of their budget constrained capabilities and had extremely capable HUMINT and some ability to do SSE on electronic devices and documents. Their HUMINT was well trained, motivated, and fit into a system that knew how to use it to generate targets. However, they had limited SIGINT and ISR and had some institutional challenges.

[151] Interview, Frank Sobchak with BG Arkhan Fadhil, 8 September 2020.
[152] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Ken Gleiman, 13 July 2020.
[153] "Mitch Utterback, A Veteran in Transition Blog: Adventures in Mosul with the ISOF," Mitch Utterback, April 30, 2017, https://mitchutterback.wordpress.com/.
[154] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC David Witty, 3 September 2020.

They had the ability to conduct timely and effective F3EAD operations where one target would generate follow-on targets, although at times it could be inconsistent. Combined, these factors result in a medium rating for being able to fight without advisors present.

Performance against the Enemy in Combat:

There is nearly universal acclaim for the ISOF's performance in battle against its principal opponents. Whether it was fighting Shi'a militias such as Jeish al Mehdi (JAM) or Kata'ib Hizballah or against Sunni terrorist groups such as Al Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI) or the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), ISOF consistently defeated their enemies. At times, the fighting was brutal, drawn out, and cost the ISOF many casualties, but in nearly every case they prevailed. This performance was steady whether it was in sustained manhunting operations or large set-piece battles such as in Mosul and Fallujah. Only when they were vastly outnumbered were they forced to retreat, and even then, it was after holding out far longer than any other Iraqi unit. All these engagements happened after the U.S. withdrawal in 2011, which means they provide a perspective of the ISOF's capabilities without the help of advisors or enablers.

As ISIS marched across Iraq in 2014, nearly every ISF unit crumbled in front of their onslaught. The ISOF, by contrast, remained cohesive and fought determined delaying actions across the country – even when significantly outnumbered. At Baiji, a small detachment held out for more than a week, before retrograding on their own to safety. The ISOF's only defeat- albeit temporary- was in Ramadi in 2015 when CTC forces that had been defending the city for sixteen months was hit by a well-planned ISIS offensive led by nearly two dozen car bombs in immediate succession, causing the force to withdraw and abandon the city to regroup. The attack had been extremely well planned and used sleeper cells dressed in police uniforms for surprise as well as dump trucks and bulldozers armored with welded-on steel plates for the car

bombs.[155] As the tide turned, the ISOF led the effort to liberate captured towns and cities, often succeeding where other Iraqi forces failed, such as during the battle of Tikrit. The organization was often the first unit to enter ISIS held cities and was present at every major battle. At the battle of Mosul, they demonstrated exemplary combat performance and were instrumental in the city's liberation.[156]

At times, the force faced challenges because during the fight to save Iraq, the unit was forced to use tactics that it had not prepared for. Instead of the deliberately planned offensive operations such as raids, ambushes, or kill/capture missions formed on a foundation of concrete intelligence, the ISOF had to fight as a conventional infantry unit.[157] Pushed into conducting defensive operations, most elements were challenged to adapt. In traditional infantry style offensive operations, some of the more recently formed brigades sometimes stumbled and demonstrated poor tactics, lack of fire discipline, and reluctant use of body armor and other protective kit. Other units tended to rely on their vehicles too much and eschewed dismounted operations. At times, the unit was forced to rely upon U.S. or coalition airstrikes to help them rout ISIS forces, as in Ramadi where the ISOF called in over 600 aircraft, most of them not from the Iraqi Air Force. Many of these problems can be tied to the overuse of the unit by senior Iraqi leaders, as well as the appalling casualties that the ISOF took as a result.[158] After the defeat of ISIS, the CTC/ISOF gradually reverted back to its traditional intelligence driven manhunting and

[155] Loveday Morris and Mustafa Salim, "Chaos in Iraqi Forces Contributed to Islamic State's Biggest Win This Year," *Washington Post*, May 23, 2015, sec. Middle East, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/chaos-in-iraqi-forces-contributed-to-islamic-states-biggest-win-this-year/2015/05/22/cf4e000e-ffd4-11e4-8c77-bf274685e1df_story.html.
[156] David Witty, *Iraq's Post 2014 Counter-Terrorism Service*, 6–7.
[157] Loveday Morris, "The Force Leading the Iraq Army's Fight against ISIS Went from 'Dirty Division' to Golden Boys," *Washington Post*, July 26, 2016, sec. Middle East, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/the-force-leading-the-iraqi-militarys-fight-against-isis-went-from-dirty-division-to-golden-boys/2016/07/25/8e6b0164-389e-11e6-af02-1df55f0c77ff_story.html.
[158] David Witty, *Iraq's Post 2014 Counter-Terrorism Service*, 6–10.

kill/capture operations, and generally successful in breaking up stay behind cells from the terror group.[159] But despite these challenges, altogether the unit adapted and fought effectively against ISIS, ultimately defeating it in every engagement they faced.

Assessment:

Assessing the ISOF's performance in battle is relatively straightforward as they were involved in every major engagement against ISIS until the organization's defeat. Despite being thrown into a situation for which it was not prepared, organized, or trained, the organization performed quite well. With the exception of a handful of battles, the ISOF either held its own against ISIS or defeated the militant group outright. Success came at a cost, and the unit endured considerably high levels of casualties and was forced to rely on coalition air support during some battles to be able to achieve victory. After the fall of ISIS, the unit has transitioned reasonably well back to its more traditional SOF role of conducting national level CT missions. Considering all these factors, a high rating- albeit at the low end of the scale- would be most appropriate.

Preliminary Observations:

At the macro-scale, when evaluating the various components of the dependent variable of combat effectiveness, the ISOF received medium ratings in conducting combat operations for 72 hours and fighting without advisors present; and high scores in performance in combat and night fighting skills. When looking at those components holistically, the ISOF rates an overall ranking of high moderate effectiveness. The ISOF proved to be a highly capable and adaptable force that bore the brunt of ISIS's assault on Iraq from 2014 to 2017 and is still engaged in fighting them today. It proved to have a competent and skilled human intelligence capability that could

[159] Louisa Loveluck, Mustafa Salim, "Hunting ISIS."

generate multiple target sets in the same 24-hour cycle, albeit not consistently. Logistically the unit could engage in extended battles, but due to some institutional level shortfalls it frequently faced real challenges in performing at the highest levels. At night, the ISOF had few equals and overall, it was the most capable force built in Iraq by coalition forces and retained many of the skills and organizational values instituted by SF advisors long after they withdrew.

Despite having a much smaller degree of a match in language training and cultural awareness than in the Philippines case study, in Iraq there was a similar relative consensus that those skills did not have significant causation towards the overall combat effectiveness of the partner force. Comments that the importance of speaking Arabic was negligible came from those who spoke the language as well as those that did not. Most noted that Arabic was an extremely difficult language, and few could speak it fluently. Instead, basic survival skills were all that were needed to train the unit appropriately and due to the length of the mission and the number of times advisors returned to work with the ISOF, many developed that level of proficiency by the end of the first mission. Based on those observations, it seems that there is little correlation between the variable of language training and cultural awareness of the advisory force and the combat effectiveness of their partner force.

There seems to be some correlation and possibly causation between the variable of consistency in advisor pairing and the combat effectiveness of the ISOF. Interviewees regularly noted the importance of re-pairing the same advisors with the same unit, and like with the LRR, because the ISOF mission was either entirely or partially given to CIF companies, it greatly increased the consistency of pairings. Paralleling many of the comments from advisors that worked with the LRR, those that trained the ISOF noted that consistent pairing enhanced rapport and built trust as well as helped advisors to restart training more efficiently. Perhaps most

importantly, consistency allowed the relationships built with ISOF operators that grew into positions of responsibility to pay dividends. Even when Iraqi political leaders such as Prime Minister Maliki and his administration aimed to politicize the ISOF, those relationships helped slow those negative influences.

The partner force to advisor ratio for the ISOF (6.2:1) was massively lower than the doctrinal standard (50 to 75:1) or the ratio in the Philippines (29:1). The ratio, which is roughly ten times the advisor commitment than what is doctrinally recommended, was extremely consistent. While it would be impossible to conclude that the lower ratio was most directly responsible for the better effectiveness of the ISOF than the LRR, it is worthwhile to reflect that in both cases the ratio has been much lower than what is dictated by doctrine. A potential area of research which is not included in this study is the impact of the different ratio between the ICTF (1.83:1) and the Commandos (10:1) or even the regional Commandos (which was not explored). The level of this study was not conducive to exploring the difference in effectiveness of the two units and separating news and research organization reports of them is challenging as few have differentiated in their reporting, instead defaulting on lumping them all together as ISOF.

Because the U.S. deposed the regime of Saddam Hussein and installed their own governing body, at least initially the U.S. had considerable ability to organize or control host nation forces. Because of this, SF advisors chose how the ISOF would be equipped, what would be required to join the unit, the organization's ethno-sectarian demographics, who would lead, what they would be paid, what training the unit would conduct, and even how they would be employed on the battlefield. While the U.S. ability to influence the unit waned over time, many of those initial decisions had long lasting consequences and some even became part of the ISOF's institutional identity- persisting long after the 2011 American withdrawal. In effect, SF

advisors were able to change some of the cultural habits of their partner force and put them on a trajectory vastly different from other Iraqi security forces. Such an impact could potentially indicate the importance of this variable, but it also seems to confirm the importance of affecting as much change as early as possible before issues of host nation sovereignty become paramount- the same issue of a "sovereignty clock" identified as a factor affecting this variable with the LRR.

The variable of combat advising in Iraq also presents distinct differences from the SF effort in the Philippines. In Iraq, SF soldiers were rarely separated from ISOF soldiers as there were few, if any, limitations on what they were permitted to do. To many, combat advising was the gold standard, and being able to accompany their partners in battle in Iraq had many advantages. Sharing the same hazards built trust between the two forces and enabled the SF advisors to see every aspect of their operations firsthand, a factor which made coaching and mentoring them to improve their performance much easier.

For the ISOF, like the LRR, it appears that the variable that has the least impact on whether a partner force becomes combat effective is the language training and cultural awareness of the trainers. The variable that seems to have the most independent evidence of contributing to the host nation unit's combat effectiveness is the consistency in advisor pairing. Combat advising, a lower partner force to advisor ratio, and the ability to control or organize host nation units appear to have a positive correlation towards combat effectiveness. In the next chapter, advisory efforts with the Afghan Commandos, a case that shares many macro-level similarities with the mission in Iraq, those variables will be assessed again.

CHAPTER 4: The Afghan Commandos, 2007-2019

Background and Context:

Like Iraq, Afghanistan has suffered the misfortune of being a border state at a geographic crossroads. Landlocked and situated between great empires, its terrain has been fought over innumerable times, producing a mix of peoples that make Iraq look like a homogeneous state. The mighty Alexander the Great labored for five years to try to break the opposition of Afghan tribes. Next came the Mauryan Empire from the Indian subcontinent who brought Buddhism and extended trade routes. Islam followed, carried by Arab and Persian armies who captured Kabul and key population centers after bitter fighting. While the religion became part of the country's fabric, the Arab and Persian Empires were obliterated by the Mongols, who wreaked so much destruction that after their wrath most of Afghanistan reverted to an agrarian nomadic lifestyle. In the 19th Century, the country became a battleground in the Great Game between the British and Russian Empires, each fearful that the other would use Afghanistan as a pathway to invade their spheres of influence in India and Central Asia respectively. England fought three mostly disastrous wars in Afghanistan, often punctuated by a near complete destruction of their forces. At the end of the third Anglo-Afghan War in 1919, the country obtained its independence as a constitutional monarchy, albeit an unstable one.[1]

Each of those groups and empires left their marks on the peoples of Afghanistan and further bifurcated its human terrain. Today, no less than twenty major ethnic groups exist in the country, most with their own distinct language. Pashtuns, who founded the first Afghan monarchy in the 18th century are the majority, making up approximately forty percent of the

[1] Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Gress, trans., *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*, 1st edition (Lawrence, Kan: Univ Pr of Kansas, 2002), 6–7.

country.[2] Tajiks are the next largest group, followed by the Shi'a Hazaras- a group often persecuted due to their sectarian beliefs. Rounding out the major ethnic groups are Uzbeks, Turkomen, and Aimaqs.

Afghanistan's physical terrain is similarly difficult. Much is high desert, but many tremendous mountain ranges parcel the country. Geographic divisions are further reinforced by a lack of infrastructure. There are no railroads, and few road networks. Those that exist are nearly impassable in winter. Almost no industry exists and over 85% of the population is involved in agriculture.[3] Electricity is limited, especially in rural areas. Whether a result of its terrain, its peoples, or its history, Afghanistan has little national identity or distinctiveness as a unified modern nation-state. For the vast majority of Afghans, their primary loyalty is to their tribe, subtribe, or clan and not to the country as a whole. In the face of a foreign invader, however, those divisions evaporate, and Afghans unify against the threat.[4] As such, Afghanistan has been referred to as the graveyard of empires.

The Cold War and Soviet Invasion:

After the British withdrawal, Afghanistan had a brief respite from war until the "new" Russian empire, this time in the form of the Soviet Union, again set its sights on the country for the same reasons as its previous intervention. In 1978, the Afghan Communist Party took control of Kabul in a bloody coup. Unable to fully consolidate power, a civil war ensued that was spurred on by Cold War rivalries and Pakistani interference. Worried by the dangers of potential threats in a neighbor, the Soviet Union invaded and installed their own puppet

[2] Donald Wright and Combat Studies Institute Press, *A Different Kind of War: The US Army in Operation Enduring Freedom: October 2001 – September 2005* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2010), 11.
[3] Grau and Gress, *The Soviet-Afghan War*, 5.
[4] Ali Ahmad Jalali, *Afghan Guerrilla Warfare: In the Words of the Mjuahideen Fighters* (St. Paul: Zenith Press, 2002), xiii–xiv.

government the next year. With their proxy unable to survive independently, the Soviet Union deployed over 100,000 troops and was dragged into a quagmire.[5] Their intervention was characterized by brutality, the destruction of what little infrastructure existed, and the rise of domestic and international extremists. Over 1.3 million Afghans died and more than a third of the country became refugees.[6] Afghan militias which had been engaged in ruthless conflict with one another were quick to unify to face the foreign invader. Calling themselves mujahideen, or soldiers of God, they were joined by foreign fighters who saw the conflict in apocalyptic religious terms as an obligation to fight for the survival of Islam.[7] The U.S. and Pakistan, recognizing that the conflict provided them opportunities to forward their national objectives, provided military assistance and training to many Mujahideen groups. American SF soldiers from 5th Group even deployed as part of that mission, training fighters in infantry tactics and how to use specialized weapons. Many of Afghanistan's future military and civilian leaders, such as Abdul Rashid Dostum, Atta Muhammad Nur, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and Ismail Khan, either fought with the Soviets, with the Mujahideen, or on both sides during the conflict.[8] Some received direct assistance from either the CIA, U.S. Special Forces, or both.

Following the Soviet withdrawal, a period of chaos ensued. The Communist government did not survive long, and after its fall the various militias and mujahideen which had been somewhat unified in purpose began to fight one another for dominance and power. The West, which had likewise been unified in the aim of expelling the Soviets, came to forget Afghanistan

[5] Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Gress, trans., *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*, 1st edition (Lawrence, Kan: Univ Press of Kansas, 2002), 9–17.
[6] Ali Ahmad Jalali, *Afghan Guerrilla Warfare: In the Words of the Mjuahideen Fighters* (St. Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2002), ix.
[7] Technically Mujahideen means those who fight for religion, but the soldiers of God has become more accepted.
[8] Charles H. Briscoe et al., *Weapon of Choice U.S. Army Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan* (Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2003), 95.

soon after that objective was met. The collapse of the Soviet Union only further accented that trend. During the chaos of the ensuing Afghan civil war, a fundamentalist Islamic group, the Taliban, came to prominence by capturing Kabul and most of the country. Through restoring a sense of stability and security in the areas they governed, albeit extremely harsh and totalitarian, they became the dominant force in Afghanistan.[9] As the civil war ground on, little progress was made by any side, and the country was *de facto* partitioned by the control of various militias. Suffering and loss seemed to be the only fields that progressed.

September 11th and Operation Enduring Freedom:

Afghanistan probably would have remained forgotten by the world had it not been for Al Qa'ida's September 11th attacks on the U.S. Owing to the country's role as a haven for that terrorist organization, an American response was a foregone conclusion. Like in Iraq, Special Operations Forces played an outsized role in the initial invasion, with the Middle East oriented 5th Special Forces Group working hand in hand with CIA officers. ODAs linked up with Afghan militias representing various ethnic and political groups, providing them little training but a direct link to U.S. and coalition airpower. Equipped with laser pointers and able to direct GPS guided bombs, less than four hundred SF operators proved to be decisive to the Afghan conflict.[10] After a lightning-fast defeat of the Taliban, Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun politician, was selected at the Bonn Agreement to become Afghanistan's interim president.

As the George W. Bush administration pivoted to face Iraq in 2003, resources and manpower quickly dried up in Afghanistan and it became a supporting theater in the global war effort. The regionally oriented 5th Special Forces Group packed up and began conducting pre-

[9] Wright and Press, *A Different Kind of War*, 20–22.
[10] Briscoe et al., *Weapon of Choice U.S. Army Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan*, 93–99, 180–89.

mission training to face the next country in the Axis of Evil.[11] Conventional forces, which had been in supporting roles and small numbers during the toppling of the Taliban, arrived in ever greater numbers and took charge of the mission. Many parts of the country had been untouched by coalition forces in the initial phase of operations. One SF NCO noted the bewilderment on the part of Afghans during this period: "We showed up at one village and they thought we were Russians."[12]

The first few years of Operation Enduring Freedom, the name bequeathed to the mission in Afghanistan, were schizophrenic. Aid efforts attempted to unify the disparate Afghan population and provide legitimacy to the Karzai government while military elements pursued fleeing Taliban and Al Qa'ida elements. As the U.S. presence changed from expeditionary to long-term and logistics intensive, its strategy also vacillated between different objectives: pursuit of Al Qa'ida to stability and support of the Afghan government and then to counterinsurgency against the Taliban. The mission itself also morphed from one led by the U.S. and a small coterie of allies to one that included a parallel effort with a vast constellation of coalition forces under NATO auspices named the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).[13] Despite determined efforts to destroy them, the Taliban and other insurgent and terrorist forces seemingly gained strength over time.[14]

Creation of the Afghan Commandos:

Unlike in Iraq, there was no immediate effort to build Special Operations partners. From 2001 until 2007 Special Forces ODAs either operated unilaterally, with whatever local militia

[11] During his 2002 State of the Union speech, President George W. Bush dubbed three states: Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as part of the an "Axis of Evil" that threatened global peace.
[12] Interview, Frank Sobchak with anonymous active-duty 3rd SF Group member, 8 January 2021.
[13] At its apogee, 42 countries contributed to the ISAF mission including all 30 members of NATO.
[14] Wright and Press, *A Different Kind of War*, 254–66, 283–86.

forces they could find, or, when they could, with Afghan National Army (ANA) conventional forces.[15] That began to change in late 2006, when the head of Special Operations Command Central (SOCCENT), BG Frank Kearney, tasked the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force (CJSOTF) to determine whether they could build an Afghan Special Forces unit. The CJSOTF assessed that the ANA did not have the capability to build and sustain such a unit and that such a need was questionable. Instead, the CJSOTF recommended that an elite light infantry Ranger style force could be assembled and that such a unit would be greatly useful as a SOF partner force as well as "shock troops" to deal with tactical challenges that the ANA were unable to handle on their own.[16] That unit would be the ANA Commandos.

Up to that point, the CJSOTF had been spending $1.2 million a month of U.S. Special Operations Command's (USSOCOM) money on local tribal militias to provide security for SF ODAs.[17] Although tribal militias were historically how Afghan governments provided local security, such a policy was seen as fiscally untenable and not consistent with the goal of disbanding militia forces and replacing them with a centralized Afghan national military force. As such, there was considerable pressure to stop working with irregular forces, which would mean the loss of SF partner forces. As this began to happen, the desire to have a local partner force resulted in some ODAs taking their paid Afghan security guards on operations. Such unstable partnerships provided further impetus to stand up the Commandos quickly.[18]

Lessons learned from standing up the ISOF were studied and considered but did not directly influence the creation of the Commandos. Senior CJSOTF leaders believed the situation

[15] In many cases conventional forces: coalition, U.S. Marines, or U.S. Army forces took precedent to work with local ANA units as a way to put an Afghan face on the conflict.
[16] "Special Warfare: Afghanistan, The Road Ahead," *Special Warfare*, December 2011, 20.
[17] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Edward Reeder, 17 December 2020.
[18] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Fred Dummar, 16 December 2020.

in Afghanistan was so different: the enemy, the terrain, the infrastructure, and the culture, that it required a distinct solution from the one that worked in Iraq. Once the proposal to create Commandos reached ANA senior leaders, it was modified slightly and gained momentum based on their knowledge of, or service with, the previous Afghan Commando unit that had been created by the Russians during their occupation. Major General Sher Mohammed Karimi, who had graduated the U.S. Special Forces Qualification course before the Soviet invasion and was serving as the ANA Operations Officer (G3), was particularly instrumental in shepherding the proposal to quickly gain its approval.[19] Over time, the Commandos would grow into a division sized force and become the primary Afghan military instrument for host nation and coalition military and civilian policymakers. Although the U.S. and its allies built a constellation of different Afghan SOF elements, the Commandos were by far the largest and most influential organization. Some of the other elements that were stood up will be addressed in the consistency in advisor pairing section of this chapter as they contributed to challenges to creating a unity of effort in the advisory effort with Afghan SOF.

Operation Freedom's Sentinel:

By 2015, the war had ground on for more than a decade and produced little more than strategic equilibrium. A democratically elected, coalition supported government sputtered along in Kabul and in nearly all the main population centers, but the Taliban and other insurgent groups continued to survive. With little signs of new forward progress and domestic war weariness growing, the administration of President Barack Obama moved to draw down forces and adjust the mission. The impetus to change also reflected shifts in Afghan sovereignty, as

[19] Email, COL Fred Dummar, multiple advisory rotations, December 26, 2020.

night raids, civilian casualties, and airstrikes- as well as Afghan perceptions of them- had caused a domestic push to decrease the amount of U.S. and coalition-led offensive operations.

After a period of negotiations between Afghanistan, the U.S., and coalition allies, a status of forces agreement was signed. Having already attempted a surge of forces to Afghanistan without seeing gains like those produced by the surge in Iraq, the total U.S. troop commitment was reduced to around 10,000 personnel- less than half of what was deployed the year before- and those forces were consolidated on fewer bases.[20] In addition, the core mission shifted from conducting combat operations to training and assistance of Afghan forces as well as counter terrorism efforts against the remnants of Al Qa'ida, the Haqqani network, and ISIL derivates in Afghanistan. Apart from the Commandos and a few other organizations, most of the coalition's security force assistance shifted to building institutional capabilities rather than advising combat forces. Much of those responsibilities shifted to the shoulders of NATO allies, deployed as part of a parallel effort named the Resolute Support Mission. Reflecting these changes, the Operation Enduring Freedom mission was concluded and replaced with a new moniker: Operation Freedom's Sentinel.

Over time, the new policy had a significant impact on the conduct of the war. Afghan military forces took the lead for the country's security and proved to not be fully up to the task. In some districts, Taliban forces came to openly control significant population centers, and in others they expanded their control of the countryside. Attacks in Kabul escalated, giving rise to concerns of the survival of the government. Faced with the threat of a potential collapse, the

[20] Richard Sisk, "Amid Confusion, DoD Names New Mission 'Operation Freedom's Sentinel,'" Military.com, December 29, 2014, https://www.military.com/daily-news/2014/12/29/amid-confusion-dod-names-new-mission-operation-freedoms.html.

number of U.S. airstrikes increased dramatically. The Commandos stood nearly alone as one of the few effective ground forces holding off continued assaults.

Introduction of the Independent Variables:

To assess the combat effectiveness of the Commandos this study will assess five variables: partner force to advisor ratio, language training and cultural awareness, consistency in advisor pairing, the degree to which advisors can organize or control host nation forces, and the ability to combat advise.

Partner Force to Advisor Ratio:

Background: The Growth of the Afghan Commandos: Special Operations Forces Cannot be Mass Produced[21]

Echoing a trend in American efforts during its post 9/11 conflicts, the Afghan Commandos grew significantly over the span of the U.S. advisory mission. After the decision was made to create the Commandos in 2006, Afghans who would be part of the training cadre were sent to Jordan to prepare. They returned and helped stand up the Commando Training Center (CTC) at Camp Morehead, which would serve as the home of all ANASOC training.[22] Ironically, the base at Camp Morehead was the same location that served as the training base for the Soviet version of Afghan Commandos during their occupation.[23] The first Commando kandak, or battalion sized unit, graduated from training at CTC at the end of July 2007 and reported ready for combat by the beginning of August.[24] Each kandak originally had three Commando companies and one headquarters and service company and was made up of 920-950

[21] U.S. Special Operations Command, "SOF Truths," accessed November 27, 2020, https://www.socom.mil/about/sof-truths.
[22] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Faiz Wafa, 8 January 2021.
[23] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Fred Dummar, 16 December 2020.
[24] Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson, "New Afghan Commandos Take to the Frontlines," NPR.org, July 23, 2007, https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=12127848.

soldiers. Because the 7th Special Forces Group CINC's in-extremis Force (CIF) company –the first choice to lead Commando training – was deployed to Iraq advising the ISOF, the first cycle was conducted by the Group Special Forces Advanced Urban Combat (SFAUC) committee, a detachment that helped train ODAs for fighting in built-up areas.[25]

The initial phase of the Commandos saw the organization having one kandak available to support each of the five regionally oriented Afghan Corps headquarters, and one additional kandak based in Kabul to be able to provide national level counter-terrorism capabilities.[26] Such an orientation would station a battalion near Afghanistan's major population centers so as to respond to local crises. Two battalions were stood up in 2007, three in 2008, and the last in 2009.[27] As the final battalion came online, BG Ed Reeder, then serving as the Commanding General of Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command-Afghanistan (CFSOCC-A), ordered the construction of four additional battalions, which when completed would put the total number of Commando kandaks at 10.[28] Two of those new kandaks were produced in 2010, one in 2011, and one in 2015.

It is likely that this decision to expand the Commandos reflected both their capabilities and the reality that few other ANA units could conduct offensive operations like the Commandos. One advisor observed that during this period nearly every Commando who began training passed and that Afghan Commandos were being "mass produced to meet the need," in contravention to core SOF principles[29] Another senior NCO noted that he considered the

[25] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Fred Dummar, 16 December 2020.
[26] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Edward Reeder, 17 December 2020.
[27] "Afghan National Army (ANA) - Order of Battle," Global Security, accessed June 16, 2021, https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/afghanistan/ana-orbat.htm.
[28] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Edward Reeder, 17 December 2020.
[29] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Stephen Durfee, 2 September 2020.

Commandos more of an elite infantry force, but for Afghanistan they were considered SOF.[30] A third was even more explicit, positing, "they just took an infantry battalion and said, hey, you're going to be Commandos. Iraq was a quality program; Afghanistan was a quantity program. I literally think the assessment must have been, hey, give me a roster. There was no assessment criteria. There were no true standards that were established, or if there were they weren't followed."[31]

In 2017, the ANA General Staff, in conjunction with American advisors, decided to double the size of the Commandos by 2020, from ten battalions and 11,700 soldiers to twenty battalions/kandaks and 23,300 personnel.[32] As the directive was passed down the chain of command to the leadership at the Commando Training Center (CTC), they reported that such a growth was simply impossible. The Commando school already struggled to maintain the existing force structure due to casualties, desertions, and soldiers completing their term of service. Instead of creating additional battalions, the CTC recommended adding a company to each battalion, which they saw as both feasible and meeting the intent of the General Staff. While such a policy would not double the size of the Commandos, it would add more combat power at the tactical level without creating additional bureaucracy or headquarters.

To meet such demand, the (CTC) was forced to greatly expand throughput and reduce the quality of the candidates even farther than had already been sacrificed. Regular ANA units were ordered to Camp Morehead, tasked to attend training, and "reflagged" as Commando units. While they completed the required twelve-week Commando course, few candidates failed the

[30] Interview, Frank Sobchak with SGM David Topejr, 23 December 2020.
[31] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Scott Ford, 29 October 2020.
[32] Dan Lamothe, "Afghanistan Is Building up Its Commando Force to Fight the Taliban. But at What Cost?," *Washington Post*, April 28, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/afghanistan-is-building-up-its-commando-force-to-fight-the-taliban-but-at-what-cost/2018/04/27/dd1c0c1c-44cd-11e8-b2dc-b0a403e4720a_story.html.

training, raising questions about quality control. The creation of the new Commando companies was hectic, with multiple simultaneous courses crammed into the same time frame. New buildings, ranges, and training areas had to be built, and obtaining equipment for the additional units was particularly difficult. The tenth kandak still did not have its entire complement of weapons by 2017, further slowing growth of the force.[33] Yet on the eve of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, ANASOC made up one fifth of the entire Afghan security forces.[34]

Advisor Commitment:

When the Commandos were first organized, a single ODA was paired with each kandak (a battalion sized unit) to match the doctrinal requirement.[35] Such a pairing remained relatively constant for the first few years of the mission due to the manpower constraints of ODAs being committed to the Iraq theater as well as other missions worldwide.[36] The ratio also remained constant as additional Commando kandaks were created and then sent into combat.[37] The only exception to this general rule was that after the 6th Kandak was stood up, it was consistently paired with two ODAs because it was considered the national counter-terrorism force rather than a regionally based unit.[38]

In practice, because the Commando kandaks followed a red, amber, green operations cycle, the pairing would be more accurately described as an ODA advising two Commando companies. In this cycle, of the three fighting companies in each kandak, one company

[33] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Larry Niedringhaus, 7 January 2021.
[34] Susannah George, "With Less U.S. Tactical Support, Afghanistan's Elite Forces Are Struggling to Roll Back Taliban Advances," *Washington Post*, March 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/afghanistan-taliban-battles-kandahar/2021/03/05/2d88fea4-777e-11eb-9489-8f7dacd51e75_story.html.
[35] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Scott Ford, 29 October 2020.
[36] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Fred Dummar, 16 December 2020. Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Edward Reeder, 17 December 2020. Email, CW 5 JP Guidry, 8 JAN 2021, multiple advisory rotations.
[37] Austin Long et al., *Building Special Operations Partnerships in Afghanistan and Beyond: Challenges and Best Practices from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Colombia* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2015), 33.
[38] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Ms. Valentin Swegle, 22 December 2020. Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Larry Niedringhaus, 7 January 2021.

conducted combat operations (green), one company conducted training (amber) and one company (red) was on leave, which allowed its soldiers to travel across the country to visit family and to bring their pay back home. Because Afghanistan did not have a developed banking system, Commandos were paid in cash and many physically delivered their pay to their families for either safekeeping or for financial assistance.[39]

There was some variation on how ODAs divided the training and combat advising functions based on the leadership and personal preferences of each ODA, with some ODAs preferring to spend more time advising their partners in combat and others focusing on pairing with the Commandos in their preparatory training. One ODA from 3rd SFG on its first rotation working with the Commandos put most of its personnel with the operational company that was conducting combat operations, and those who needed a rest helped the Afghan cadre of the training company. On the very next rotation, the same ODA, but under new leadership, was working with a different kandak which had its companies at two different locations. For that rotation, the ODA split its team evenly between the two locations and the same six SF operators remained with the same company for the entire rotation.[40] Regardless of how the ODAs divided responsibility between the two missions, during that phase the overall ratio of advisors to trainees remained constant.

At several points during the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, the CJSOTF obtained more manpower, allowing them to pair two ODAs with each Commando kandak. This was in part due to a recognition of the challenges a single ODA faced trying to advise a battalion sized element (even with one company consistently on leave). Based on multiple interviews, these

[39] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Fred Dummar, 16 December 2020. Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Bill Carty, 6 January 2021.
[40] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Joshua Stephen, 5 January 2021.

more robust pairings occurred from March 2011 to February 2012 and June 2013-October 2014.[41] Even though the pressure on the SF institutional force had been relieved somewhat by the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq in 2011, the rise of ISIS in 2014 made such a large commitment to Afghanistan untenable, and the pairing ratio returned to one ODA per kandak by the end of that year.[42] A RAND study noted that many advisors believed that the doctrinal pairing of a single ODA to a battalion sized element was insufficient, a conclusion echoed by many interviewees in this study. One noted, "it takes more than twelve guys. Just mentorship alone with commanders, we don't have enough bodies to do the mentoring."[43]

The pairing ratios shifted again in November 2014 due to changes associated with the end of the Operation Enduring Freedom mission and the beginning of the Operation Freedom's Sentinel mission. The CJSOTF, which had been made up of a Group headquarters and two or more SF battalions, was stood down in October 2014 and replaced with a single reinforced battalion which was reflagged as a new headquarters: the Special Operations Task Force-Afghanistan (SOTF-A).[44] The significant reduction in SF advisor presence resulted in some kandaks having an ODA assigned for the duration of the deployment, other kandaks having a sporadic presence, and some kandaks going without a partner ODA. For those where there was sporadic SF advisory presence, which some interviewees said averaged around two or three kandaks per rotation, an ODA would be divided between those units. The ODA would travel to one of the kandaks, spend four or five days working with them conducting combat operations or

[41] Long et al., *Building Special Operations Partnerships in Afghanistan and Beyond*, 2015, 34. Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Bill Carty, 6 January 2021. Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Larry Niedringhaus, 7 January 2021.
[42] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Edward Reeder, 17 December 2020.
[43] Long et al., *Building Special Operations Partnerships in Afghanistan and Beyond*, 2015, 33–34.
[44] Michael E Krivdo, "Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Afghanistan A Short History | 2002-2014," n.d., 7.

training, and then the ODA would travel to the next kandak.[45] Other advisors noted that for some kandaks support from an ODA would only occur if requested or if the tactical situation warranted support, so ODAs would come and go as needed across the battlefield.[46]

Assessing the Personnel Strength of the Commandos:

A major challenge with assessing the personnel strength of the Commandos was their endemic desertion and AWOL status, something unheard of amongst operators in the Iraqi Special Operations Forces and the Filipino Light Reaction Regiment (LRR). Even though each kandak was doctrinally between 920 and 950 Commandos, some advisors noted that due to desertion and AWOL, unit strength hovered at around 60-70%.[47] At the company level, authorized strength was 118 Commandos, and several interviewees noted that units worked to keep as many soldiers present for duty in the operations or "green" company by shifting soldiers from the headquarters unit.[48] One advisor from the Center for Army Analysis who deployed to Afghanistan for seven months to study ANASOC estimated annual desertion rates for the Commandos to be between 20 and 25%, something that rapidly depleted ability and willingness to fight.[49] To keep up with these astronomical rates, the Commando school had to conduct two to three classes a year, producing a total of roughly 1,000 new Commandos annually.[50] During some surge periods, each of those three courses was producing 1,000 new Commandos, for an

[45] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Larry Niedringhaus, 7 January 2021.
[46] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW4 Eric Brashears, 2 November 2020.
[47] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Joshua Stephen, 5 January 2021.
[48] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Joshua Stephen, 5 January 2021. Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Brian Petit, 21 December 2020. Authorized strength comes from ANASOC MTOE, "ANA 1398 v2" 2021 provided by COL Fred Dummar
[49] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Ms. Valentin Swegle, 22 December 2020. Although it was roughly half of the annual ANA desertion rate of 40%, it was still significant enough to cause problems with Commando tactical units becoming combat ineffective.
[50] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Larry Niedringhaus, 7 January 2021.

astounding 3,000 Commandos a year.[51] Although the desertion and AWOL rates varied by kandak, advisors reported that they were widespread and consistent at the macro scale.[52]

Commandos, like other Afghan soldiers, deserted or went AWOL for a variety of reasons. Sometimes the soldiers or their family members had been threatened. Sometimes it was as simple as the fact that they could not get home on leave and were desperate to give a portion of their pay to family members or just see their relatives and families. Due to the size of Afghanistan and the state of the infrastructure, getting from one side of the country to the other was a daunting task that could take a week or more. Recognizing the importance to Commandos of being able to get home during leave, at times the CJSOTF tasked one of their C-130 Hercules aircraft to fly to various Commando outposts and bring soldiers who were due to take leave to the transit hub in Kabul. Such a solution was not sustainable by the Afghan logistics system, and as U.S. forces drew down during Operation Freedom's Sentinel the practice was discontinued- an event that led to increased AWOL rates.

Other Commandos apparently left due to stagnant and dysfunctional Afghan military personnel practices. Many Afghan soldiers believed that career progression was difficult to impossible, something that the U.S. tried to alter but was unable to achieve meaningful change. Many soldiers did not see a realistic pathway for an enlisted soldier to become an NCO and few recognized a way for an NCO to become an officer. Moreover, the ANA did not have a formal system to move soldiers from one duty station to another, either for personal reasons such as wanting to be closer to family members, or for professional reasons to obtain important postings.

[51] "ANA Commandos," Global Security, accessed June 16, 2021, https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/afghanistan/comando.htm. The numbers in the website match what at least one advisor noted were being produced annually.

[52] For example, some advisors noted that the 6th Commando Kandak, which was the national counter-terrorism force based in Kabul, did not experience the problem as deeply as other locations.

Because going AWOL or deserting was such a common cultural practice, perhaps a trait the ANA adopted from their militia precursors, it did not incur a significant penalty or punishment. Such policies only hurt Commando personnel strength.

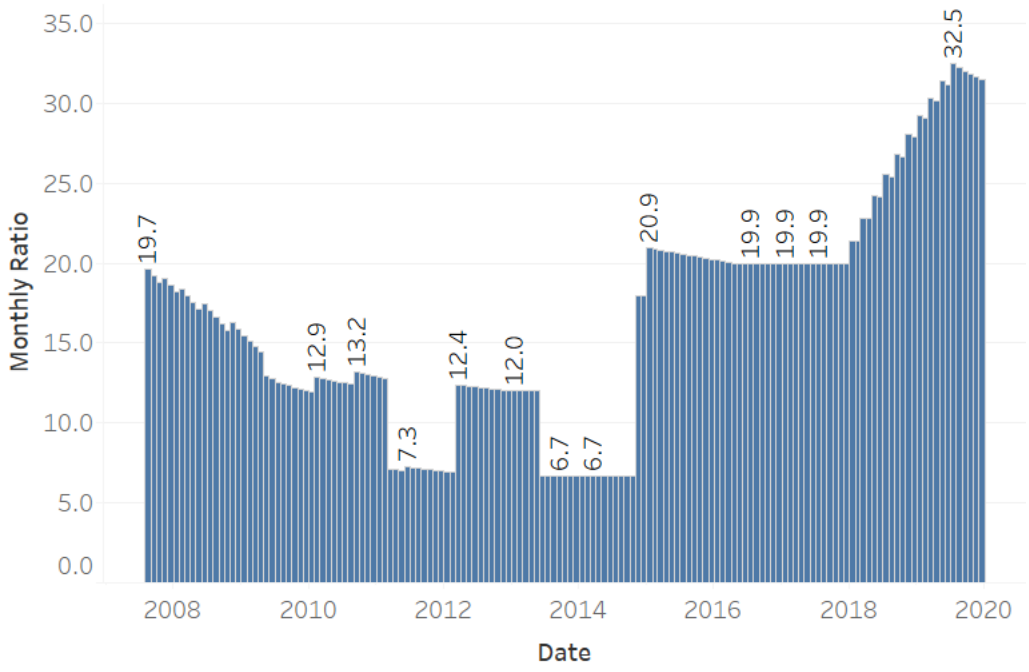
Calculation of Partner Force to Advisor Ratio:

The partner force to advisor ratio was calculated in the same manner as the previous two case studies. Monthly ratios were calculated, and then those were averaged across the span of the mission to produce an overall ratio. Also like in other cases, the doctrinal strength of the ODAs was used to calculate the number of advisors as there is evidence that the Afghanistan mission was prioritized to have full ODAs as much as possible. There certainly were situations where understrength ODAs were put into advisory roles, but there is insufficient evidence to be able to do such precise calculations.

The starting point to calculate the number of Afghan Commandos being advised (or trained) was the doctrinal strength of a Commando company (118), because most of the ODA focus was at the company level due to the red/amber/green cycle. Focusing on the company level rather than the battalion represents the same methodology as the Iraq case. Most ODAs advised two companies (the amber and green cycle companies), although at times one ODA was paired with a single company. While ODAs did also advise elements of the headquarters company and battalion staff, most interviewees reported their focus was on the company level. Chart 1 reflects those calculations, with matching advisor and trainee additions at each point that a new Commando kandak was organized. The chart also reflects a best estimate of Afghan personnel strength based on desertion and AWOL rates. As each new Commando unit was created, its strength was rated at 100%, reflecting that units coming out of the CTC began their life cycle with a full complement of Commandos. To match the reported 25% desertion loss

rate, A monthly reduction of 2% is imposed on those new units until they reach 75% strength, which many advisors reported was the sustainable personnel strength. At that point, Commando strength plateaus to reflect the institutional ANASOC force being able to keep up with losses. After conducting those calculations, the overall monthly average is 16.4 soldiers per one U.S. Special Forces advisor. Please see Table 4.1 in the appending for the math used to determine that monthly average.

Figure 4.1 Monthly Ratio of Partners to Advisors (Afghanistan)



Assessment of Variable:

Because of the erratic and extremely high numbers of desertions and AWOLs, assessing the impact of the partner force to advisor ratio is difficult to calculate. That said, what became clear from the data and interviews was that the doctrinal ratio of an ODA training a battalion was wholly insufficient. Calculating the ratios for Commandos present for duty (or a best

approximation for it), as was done in this case study, reveals numbers that more closely approximate an ODA training a company was common and considered more effective.

Like in Iraq, advisors were adamant that the ratio of advisors to trainees mattered significantly, and that the lower that ratio was, the better chance of producing combat effective partners. One advisor who served in Iraq and Afghanistan noted that because he had to advise more host nation forces per advisor in Afghanistan, each person's span of control was wider, and they simply couldn't accomplish the same tasks because he did not have enough people.[53] Looking at the data across three case studies so far (LRR) in the Philippines, ISOF in Iraq, and Commandos in Afghanistan), it is clear that none of the cases uses anything close to the doctrinal ratio.[54] Early and preliminary conclusions for this variable indicate that the doctrinal recommendation should be reassessed and likely changed.

Language Training and Cultural Awareness:

Degree of Match

Although 5th Special Forces Group, the unit regionally oriented towards the Middle East and Central Asia, led the assault into Afghanistan in 2001, it was soon pulled off the mission to focus on the 2003 invasion of Iraq. 5th Group rapidly became fully embroiled there, a mission that also drew in 10th Group. As a result, 3rd Special Forces Group, which was regionally oriented towards Africa, and 7th Special Forces Group, which was regionally oriented towards Latin America, were assigned to share responsibility for the Afghanistan mission as the CJSOTF-A headquarters.[55] Those two units provided the vast majority of the ODAs that served

[53] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Scott Ford, 29 October 2020.
[54] Doctrinally, one Special Forces ODA of twelve personnel should be allotted to train a single host nation battalion, equating to a ratio of 50 or 75 to 1. The partner force to advisor ratio in Afghanistan was three to four times the doctrinal ratio.
[55] Wright and Press, *A Different Kind of War*, 332.

as advisors to the Commandos across the span of this case study. Due to the duration of the conflict and the manpower pressures on those two groups, every other Group- including both National Guard units- also contributed forces, although to a much lesser degree. 5th Group was especially hard pressed to provide a contingent, because less than three years after they formally withdrew from Iraq, they returned to help fight ISIS and soon after that they were tasked with advising Kurdish and other paramilitary forces in Syria. As a result, for the phase from 2007-2009 when the Commandos were first stood up, there was effectively zero match for the regional orientation of the Special Forces Groups assigned to train the Commandos.

In August of 2009, U.S. Army Special Forces Command (USASFC), the organization responsible for SF Title X functions, adjusted the regional alignment of the five active-duty Special Forces Groups. Recognizing that 5th Group was overtasked with other responsibilities in the Middle East, USASFC shifted responsibility for Afghanistan and Pakistan from that unit to 3rd Special Forces Group.[56] Pashtu language training started at the U.S. Army Special Warfare Center and School (SWCS) in parallel with the shift, but given the length of the training program, none of those who learned the language arrived until 2010. By 2012, a handful of Pashtu speakers had arrived, but few, if any Dari speakers. SWCS had been slow to make institutional changes because there had been a continuing assumption that the U.S. would be withdrawing from Afghanistan soon, and as a result there was reluctance to re-engineer the institutional schoolhouse training to focus on those languages.[57] Changing languages would require firing current instructors, finding and hiring new instructors, and rewriting programs of instruction and syllabi: a slow and drawn-out process that caused many leaders to resist the shift.

[56] Michael Krivdo, "Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Afghanistan A Short History," *Veritas*, April 2016, https://arsof-history.org/articles/v12n2_cjsotf_sidebar_timeline.html.
[57] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Bill Carty, 6 January 2021.

The 3rd Group responsibility for Afghanistan only lasted until 2016, when the unit was refocused back to Africa and 5th Group was given responsibility for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Some SF NCOs noted that even though their unit had been assigned Afghanistan for seven years, by the time 3rd Group was switched back to Africa and directed to focus on French and Arabic, less than half of the operators had been trained in Dari or Pashtu.[58] During that window from 2009-2016, teams from 3rd Group were technically regionally oriented to Afghanistan, resulting in an orientation match somewhat less than half of the time, even though many of those ODAs had never been fully trained in the local languages. The calculation is a result of the Commando mission being split roughly evenly between 3rd and 7th Group but reduced slightly by the participation of other non-regionally oriented groups in the advisory effort. From 2016 until 2019 the match again dropped to near zero as the regionally oriented group (5th) was still extensively deployed to Iraq and Syria while 3rd and 7th Groups usually still led the smaller reinforced battalion sized Special Operations Task Force (SOTF) that had replaced the CJSOTF. Overall, this puts the rating of the degree of match in language training and cultural awareness of the SF advisors to the Afghan mission as low.

Assessment of Impact: "It is Good to See you are Training your Men in the Language of the Enemy.":

Echoing a trend, most of the SF advisors in Afghanistan believed that knowing the local Afghan language had little impact on whether they were able to produce a combat effective partner force. One significant factor was that in Afghanistan, like the Philippines and completely unlike Iraq, multiple languages were spoken. Even though there were at least twelve widely

[58] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Joshua Stephen, 5 January 2021.

spoken languages in Afghanistan and three official languages,[59] roughly ninety percent of Commandos spoke Dari, which was far out of the statistical norm for the population. This demographic was far outside the country's norm, for roughly half of Afghanistan was Pashtun. That disparity caused some challenges, with many Pashtuns feeling that Tajiks, who usually spoke Dari, were occupying their homelands in Afghanistan.[60] A handful of Commandos also spoke some of the other languages of Afghanistan, further complicating both determining which languages SF soldiers should learn and which languages they should use in training and operations. There were often Commandos in the same unit that did not speak the same language. Knowing which Commando spoke which language as their primary tongue was often challenging and caused confusion in interpreters and advisors.[61]

Afghanistan was not challenging simply because it was a mixture of many different languages. In many cases each language represented a completely different ethnic group, creating cultural communications challenges. For example, one advisor recalled the CJSOTF's judge advocate teaching law of land warfare training to a mixed group of Commandos from various ethnicities. Most of the Tajiks and Hazaras accepted the guidance on treatment of civilians and prisoners with little conflict, but many Pashtuns had difficulty understanding some of the basic concepts. Several of the Pashtuns asked why they could not search the property of female household members to ensure they did not own "illegal" Western style clothing and were further dismayed when they were told that they could not physically strike those civilians if they discovered anything they deemed "salacious."[62]

[59] "Afghanistan - The World Factbook," accessed June 8, 2021, https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/afghanistan/#people-and-society.
[60] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Ms. Valentin Swegle, 22 December 2020.
[61] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Bill Carty, 6 January 2021.
[62] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Ms. Valentin Swegle, 22 December 2020.

That, combined with the extremely heterogeneous ethno-sectarian makeup of Afghanistan and overlapping layers of complexity formed by religion, tribe, clan, ethnicity, and local politics, made understanding language and culture difficult. Reflecting this challenge, Colonel Fred Dummar, who served on four SF and one contractor rotation to Afghanistan, noted that during one deployment, he was speaking with a senior Commando officer when the American CJSOTF logistics officer approached. That officer was part of the Afghanistan-Pakistan hands program, and when he greeted the Afghan senior leader in Pashtu, the Afghan officer grunted and ignored him. After that officer walked away, the Afghan, who was Tajik and preferred to speak Dari, commented to Dummar, "it is good to see you are training your men in the language of the enemy."[63]

Many of those languages were difficult. Dari, Urdu, and Farsi were all category III languages, and Pashtu was a category IV language (with IV being the most difficult).[64] This made many leaders suggest that it was not an effective use of time to try to learn all the nuances of an Afghan language. MG Edward Reeder, who commanded the CJSOTF and deployed six times to Afghanistan noted, "you're never going to master the language well enough to be able to have a decent conversation with a minister or with a general, much less a peasant."[65]

Advisors nearly universally noted that even if they did not speak whatever Afghan language their partners spoke, they were able to find ways to work around the barrier. Many SF soldiers either relied on interpreters or spoke English and enlisted one of the Commandos to help translate. One NCO noted that he could almost always find someone that liked American movies enough to be able to communicate with them and use them as a *de facto* interpreter.[66] Others

[63] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Fred Dummar, 16 December 2020.
[64] "DLI's Language Guidelines," AUSA, August 1, 2010, https://www.ausa.org/articles/dlis-language-guidelines.
[65] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Edward Reeder, 17 December 2020.
[66] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW4 Eric Brashears, 2 November 2020.

believed that advisors required interpreters to make sure that what they said was accurate and could be delivered quickly in crisis situations such as the heat of battle.[67] Another advisor bluntly noted, "Language was not important… The key thing was finding the right interpreter that could teach me about the cultural stuff… I needed to know how they think and why they (Afghans) made the decision they are making. That's what is important. I need to understand that, not how to say hello."[68]

Like in Iraq, some advisors noted that over time, those who did not speak host nation languages caught up by learning the most important vocabulary. Rather than language training and cultural awareness what mattered most was experience. "Experienced guys who had been to Afghanistan before and knew right and wrong was what mattered most."[69] Many advisors argued that perhaps language mattered on the first rotation, but much less so on later rotations. During the experience of multiple rotations, advisors learned what they needed to know about culture and bits and pieces of the language.[70] As one noted, as an SF soldier with a penchant for languages, if you hear the same word enough times on multiple rotations, you learn the most important words and phrases.[71]

They also noted that in terms of language, if Afghans saw Americans trying to speak and learn, they would stop and try to help their American partners. As one advisor noted, "cultural awareness works both ways," and that the interpreters and Commandos, after several rotations working with Americans began to get to know what their advisors meant and began to understand what they implied even if it was not stated specifically.[72] Over time the Commandos

[67] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Edward Reeder, 17 December 2020.
[68] Interview, Frank Sobchak with SGM David Topejr, 23 December 2020.
[69] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Joshua Stephen, 5 January 2021.
[70] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Bill Carty, 6 January 2021.
[71] Interview, Frank Sobchak with SGM David Topejr, 23 December 2020.
[72] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Bill Carty, 6 January 2021.

would often learn broken English, at least enough to be able to function in tactical operations, learning key phrases such as "take the left door" or "search him" or "set up a base of fire here."

In the words of one advisor, "knowing Dari or Pashtu was not mission essential, it was mission enhancing. Not knowing the specific language where you operated was not limiting."[73] What was more essential was understanding the environment and knowing the most important cultural awareness issues such as Islam and the impacts of Ramadan and to be sensitive to those and respect them. To him, most of those topics could be learned over time.

There were few dissenting voices. Of those, some noted that knowing a host nation language was not as important as having solid cultural awareness. MG Ed Reeder once asked a senior Afghan general what he should do to best understand the culture and language, and the Afghan replied "Read the Qur'an. I live for the prophet and make all of my personal and professional decisions in the name of the prophet (Muhammad)." Reeder provided an anecdote that some advisors would see Afghans stop fighting and drop to their knees and pray in the middle of battle. If the advisors did not understand the culture, they might call them cowards to try to get them to fight, which would almost certainly destroy any chance of building rapport because they were praying not because they were afraid, but because they were religiously devout and the call for prayer demanded them to pray at that time.[74]

Other advisors reiterated the importance of culture: "Teams that were good at building rapport didn't have problems, while teams that didn't get it had problems. The cultural aspect of it is huge, it is probably the biggest thing … It is only through cultural awareness that you can talk someone into doing something that you want them to do."[75] Some advisors who had served

[73] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Bill Carty, 6 January 2021.
[74] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Edward Reeder, 17 December 2020.
[75] Interview, Frank Sobchak with SGM David Topejr, 23 December 2020.

in 7th Group even noted there were cultural parallels between elements of Hispanic culture, which they normally advised, and Afghan culture. Both had male dominated societies where masculinity and projections of strength mattered and where honor and families were a key part of life. Although the specific religion was different, the importance of faith in daily life was also a similarity. Because of that, for them it was "not a giant leap" to shift from understanding and building rapport with soldiers in Latin America to soldiers in Afghanistan.[76]

Others observed that while language and cultural awareness were important, what was more important was whether an advisor had the right interpersonal skills. Some advisors noted that the SF assessment and training process aims to identify and select those with such traits, such as empathy and respect for others. They remarked that a classic example of this often occurs during the culminating event of the Special Forces qualification course, the Robin Sage guerrilla warfare exercise. During the exercise students must be able to build rapport and develop trust with the guerrilla chief or leader and are invariably asked to eat some odd cuisine to help achieve that goal. As a senior SF leader noted, when the Guerilla chief brings out an earthworm and says it is a delicacy, you have to eat the earthworm. You need to eat it with a smile to build rapport, and if you do not eat it or pretend to eat it, you will never recover.[77]

Some advisors posited that not everyone on the advisory team had to be able to speak a host nation language but that it was important to have some number know it. As an example, one noted that during her deployment there was one SF advisor who spoke Dari fluently who had been in the Afghanistan/Pakistan Hands project. She noted the Afghans were terrified of him

[76] Interview, Frank Sobchak with SGM David Topejr, 23 December 2020.
[77] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Jim Linder, 21 December 2020.

because he understood everything that was said to the point he could make jokes in their language, and the Afghans could not conceal anything.[78]

Consistency in Advisor Pairing: Chasing the Latest "Bright and Shiny Object"

Unlike in Iraq and the Philippines, in Afghanistan advisors were not consistently paired with the same host nation forces. A 2015 RAND study harshly noted, "U.S. special operations commanders have not instituted a policy of routinely returning the same SOF teams to partner units."[79] Multiple interviews for this study with U.S. and Afghan leaders universally confirmed that finding and noted that despite the identification of the problem, little was done to correct it. One senior NCO remarked that he deployed three times to Afghanistan but never went to the same location or worked with the same partner force. "The same detachment rarely went to the same location. It just didn't happen. … it was infuriating."[80] Another officer noted that after six or seven rotations, statistically some ODAs ended up in the same place out of sheer luck, but there did not seem to be a concerted effort to pair them with the same Commando unit.[81] "We thrive off (of) partnership (but) there is no effort to get guys back to the same location."[82] Some advisors pushed back against the consistency of inconsistent pairing, requesting that they be matched with the same partners on subsequent rotations, but little changed rotation to rotation.[83] Together, these factors result in a low rating for the variable of consistency in advisor pairing.

This problem occurred for a variety of reasons. First, SF leaders did not establish specific requirements for an ODA to be able to partner with a Commando kandaks. This differed

[78] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Ms. Valentin Swegle, 22 December 2020.
[79] Austin Long et al., *Building Special Operations Partnerships in Afghanistan and Beyond: Challenges and Best Practices from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Colombia* (RAND Corporation, 2015), 39, https://doi.org/10.7249/RR713.
[80] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Joshua Stephen, 5 January 2021.
[81] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Bill Carty, 6 January 2021.
[82] Long et al., *Building Special Operations Partnerships in Afghanistan and Beyond*, 2015, 39–40.
[83] Interview, Frank Sobchak with anonymous active-duty 3rd SF Group member, 8 January 2021.

from Iraq and the Philippines where policies required that at least part of the advisory effort be limited to CINC's In Extremis Forces (CIF) SF companies. As a result, the pool of ODAs that were available to match with Afghan partners was much larger. Instead of five companies from across the entire SF enterprise, each of the two primary units committed to the mission (3rd and 7th Groups) had eight companies available for the mission.[84] All the other groups also contributed forces, further diversifying and expanding the pool of potential advisors.

While officially the purpose of this policy was designed to decrease the deployment pressure on those going back and forth to Afghanistan, some advisors believed that it was an attempt to ensure everyone had a chance to deploy to combat- an event necessary for promotion to senior levels.[85] One senior SF planner observed, "There is no plan. We keep going there (Afghanistan) because no commander wants to be the first one to not have a combat rotation."[86] The shift of 3rd Group's area of responsibility from Afghanistan back to Africa was viewed as particularly illogical and counterproductive. To some, the decision struck a chord of, "everyone gets a trophy, and everyone has to play" that ignored the hard-won experiences earned across a decade.[87] Adding SEAL Platoons and Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC) detachments to the pool of potential advisory forces further decreased the likelihood of consistent pairings.

Another cause for inconsistent pairing was nearly constant change in which Afghan partner force element was the priority for the advisory mission. At different times across the

[84] During this period, Groups were growing from three to four organic battalions. The fourth battalion was focused more on operational preparation of the environment and nicknamed "Jedburgh battalions" to reflect a throwback to the OSS pilot team mission during World War II. Excluding that battalion, which was rarely used for Commando kandak advisory missions, leaves three battalions each with three companies. Subtracting the CIF company from each group results in the availability of eight companies for each of the two Groups.
[85] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Joshua Stephen, 5 January 2021.
[86] Jessica Donati, *Eagle Down: The Last Special Forces Fighting the Forever War* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2021), 270.
[87] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Edward Reeder, 17 December 2020.

conflict, the focus shifted between Afghan National Army regular forces, Afghan National Police, Afghan Highway Police, Afghan National Army Special Forces (ANASF), the Afghan Local Police Program, the Provincial Response Companies (PRC) from the Ministry of the Interior, and the Village Stability Operations (VSO) Program- as well as several other elements.[88] In some ways, as each senior US theater and SOF leader rotated through Afghanistan, rather than continue to focus on the Commandos, ODAs were pulled from one assignment and put on whichever of those programs the new commander thought should be the priority.[89] Frustrated NCOs and officers referred to this lack of unity of effort as "chasing the latest bright and shiny object."[90] While there is no evidence that the Commandos could have solved Afghanistan's ills, there is little to dispute that the constantly changing priorities reduced the consistency of advisor pairings with the Commandos.

The standup of the ANASF, which were meant to either help provide human intelligence for ANASOC or to do foreign internal defense (FID) and train and advise ANA units, was particularly jarring.[91] When Faiz Wafa, the CSM at ANASOC, learned that the U.S. would be standing up the ANASF, he was surprised and concerned. "I was like, hey, let's complete the Commandos first, then worry about the Special Forces. ... The Commandos are the best unit right now in Afghanistan, and everybody wants to become a Commando. When you say like, hey, there's another unit that is above them, the Special Forces, which is higher than the Commandos, guess what? (Then) Everybody wants to become Special Forces. Now you cannot

[88] Many advisors commented about this trend including: Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Fred Dummar, 16 December 2020. Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW4 Eric Brashears, 2 November 2020. Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Brian Petit, 21 December 2020.
[89] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Scott Ford, 29 October 2020.
[90] Interview, Frank Sobchak with anonymous active-duty 3rd SF Group member, 8 January 2021.
[91] There was considerable frustration with this program, with some interviewees describing its objectives as unclear and others noting that it tried to give a "boutique SOF capability" to Afghanistan, a country that neither needed such a capability nor could potentially build such a capability.

complete the Commandos."[92] Recruiting for the ANASF from the Commandos set them back in their combat effectiveness because they lost capable personnel and had to rebuild key skills in Commando units.[93] One Special Forces NCOs observed this impact directly, noting that even though his partnered Commando force was far from ready to fight unilaterally, when the ANASF were stood up, he was directed to send some of those Commandos back to Camp Morehead to be retrained as ANASF.[94]

The standup of the Village Stability Operations (VSO) program, a local defense initiative which aimed to copy the Vietnam War program which placed Special Forces ODAs in Nung and Montagnard villages, created similar prioritization problems. One SF officer noted that during his 2011-2012 rotation, the VSO mission was given the top precedence. ODAs that had been traditionally paired with Commandos were taken off that mission because it was thought that the SF ODAs' language skills and cultural awareness would be more in demand for the VSO mission, where soldiers lived in and amongst Afghans. In their place, SEAL platoons were assigned to work with the Commandos because, as the thinking went, even though SEALs lacked even the most rudimentary language skills, their focus on direct action missions would match the principal mission of the Commandos. In the words of a SOTF commander during that time, "there were holes to fill" and he assigned what he believed to be the best suited forces to the important VSO mission.[95]

Assessing the Impact of the Variable "It's Like Seeing Your Relatives Again":

[92] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Faiz Wafa, 8 January 2021.
[93] Linda Robinson, *One Hundred Victories: Special Ops and the Future of American Warfare*, First Edition (New York: Public Affairs, 2013), 258.
[94] Interview, Frank Sobchak with anonymous active-duty 3rd SF Group member, 8 January 2021.
[95] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Bill Carty, 6 January 2021.

Even though it was difficult to pair the same advisors with the same Commando units because of structural challenges and changing priorities, there was a clear recognition that consistency in advisor pairing paid generous dividends. One advisor commented, "for an Afghan, relationships were everything."[96] Having the opportunity to interface with the same individuals builds trust and confidence between both sides, allowing each to take risks that they normally would not be willing to take. Consistency, and the personal relationships that came along with it, also helped units to progress more quickly. Another senior NCO observed that going back to the same area and partner force allowed you to understand the physical and human terrain, which would make a huge difference on your success for a rotation. Advising the same unit would be "plug and play" because ODA team members would know the leaders and the NCOs and the people who could be trusted.[97] MG Jim Linder, who served as the Commanding General for the Special Operations Joint Task Force-Afghanistan, posited that advisors were ten times more effective on their second rotation as they were on the first one. To him, relationships were critical, and they usually begin as transactional processes, but as an advisor builds the relationship it shifts from transactional to personal. That shift usually occurred on a second rotation, emphasizing the need for consistency in pairing.[98]

As CSM Faiz Wafa, the former ANSAOC CSM noted, during his career in the Commandos, he met every senior U.S. leader when they first deployed as majors and lieutenant colonels. He maintained connections and friendships with them as they grew in rank and authority, with many of them reaching senior positions at the three-star rank in USASOC and USSOCOM. In Wafa's words, "that helped me because I knew that guy already. I knew how he

[96] Interview, Frank Sobchak with SGM David Topejr, 23 December 2020.
[97] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Joshua Stephen, 5 January 2021.
[98] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Jim Linder, 21 December 2020.

works. I knew what his strategy was. I knew what his priority for the Afghan SOF forces was and … how he's going to help me."[99] American advisors echoed this impact, noting that building rapport is normally a long and drawn-out process that could take weeks or even months. Returning to the same area and Commando kandak was "instant rapport" and meant saving considerable time and effort towards that end. Coming back to the same kandak "is like seeing your relatives again."[100]

The effects were often clear when consistency was not possible. One observer noted, "every time they (military advisors) rotate out you just start over again, it is like Groundhog Day."[101] Others pointed out that six-month deployments without returning to the same partner force sometimes created "mentor fatigue" on the part of the Afghans. "There is reluctance on part of Afghans to really open up to you because they get tired [of the constant influx of new advisors]."[102] Another advisor with multiple rotations to Afghanistan noted trying to overcome cultural and bureaucratic inertia was difficult. Repeated rotations helped advisors both identify problems that needed to be solved as well as strategies to overcome them. He observed, "you had to know where the bodies were buried" to be truly effective in Afghanistan.[103] Some Afghans would wait out advisors who proposed changes that would limit corruption and graft, knowing that they would leave in six to twelve months. In such a case, Afghans delayed proposals for change until new advisors arrived and then used their lack of experience to kill

[99] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Faiz Wafa, 8 January 2021.
[100] Interview, Frank Sobchak with anonymous active-duty 3rd SF Group member, 8 January 2021.
[101] Long et al., *Building Special Operations Partnerships in Afghanistan and Beyond*, 2015, 40.
[102] Todd C. Helmus, *Advising the Command: Best Practices from the Special Operation's Advisory Experience in Afghanistan* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2015), 10.
[103] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Fred Dummar, 16 December 2020.

proposals they did not like. If the advisors had been deployed previously, they would have had experience with the tactic and would be more circumspect in addressing motives.[104]

There were few dissenters to the importance of consistency. Those that did noted that other factors contributed to the calculus of whether a team should be re-matched with the same partner force. Team leadership could change out, impacting the interpersonal relationships or the level of aggressiveness needed for an area of operations. The area of operations could change from being a peaceful area to an extremely violent one- or vice versa- requiring a team with a different set of skills and experiences. Returning the same team to the same area could build hubris and overconfidence or even a lack of creativity or action. One officer with considerable experience in Afghanistan noted that on one rotation a 1st Group ODA on their first rotation did better than some 3rd or 7th Group teams on their fourth or fifth rotation because those teams were too bitter, too tired, or too worn out to try new things. To him, previous experience was certainly helpful in knowing the tribes and challenges of Afghan roads, but it was not critical.[105]

Advisor's Ability to Organize Host Nation Unit:

The first years after the fall of the Taliban were, in the words of one CJSOTF-A commander, "the Wild, Wild, West."[106] There were few rules and the U.S. had considerable ability to influence and organize Afghan forces. However, the Commandos were not formed until 2007, nearly six years after the initial invasion and regime change.[107] That time lapse resulted in a growth of Afghan sovereignty by the time that the Commandos began their training, resulting in American advisors being allowed to take the lead on fewer key decisions than they

[104] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Fred Dummar, 16 December 2020.
[105] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Brian Petit, 21 December 2020.
[106] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Edward Reeder, 17 December 2020.
[107] By contrast, SF advisors were organizing the ISOF less than six months after the fall of Saddam.

had in Iraq. Their ability to influence the direction of the Commandos only decreased as time progressed.

Initial Stand up of the Commandos:

Compared to the rigorous selection, assessment, and training process set up by Special Forces advisors in Iraq and the Philippines, initial selection and training of the Commandos was haphazard. ANA soldiers that had just completed a 6-week basic training course formed the basis of the first Commando kandak, and there was no selection and assessment phase such as what occurred with the LRR in the Philippines or the ISOF in Iraq. Many had no other military experience, and some had barely been able to zero their rifles. That group began the twelve-week Commando course, and SF trainers made the first week physically challenging, which weeded out roughly a quarter of the class. The remaining eleven weeks focused on individual and collective skills training, and nearly all the prospective Commandos passed that phase and graduated.[108] None of the next few classes were specially selected or recruited; most were regular ANA infantry battalions which were ordered to report for Commando training at Camp Morehead. Few prospective Commandos failed.[109]

Over time, the process evolved where replacement soldiers were generally recruited individually from regular ANA battalions and from basic training. Some new battalions were also formed via this individual selection method, but others were created by sending entire ANA infantry battalions through Commando training as had been done for the first kandak. Many SF advisors noted that the failure rate decreased dramatically in later Commando classes, with one officer that ran the training program estimating it to be in the 1-2% range, with many of the

[108] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Fred Dummar, 16 December 2020.
[109] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Faiz Wafa, 8 January 2021.

failures recycling into later classes.[110] Such statistics frustrated many advisors, with some arguing that Commando training was the Afghan equivalent of "no kid left behind."[111] The Commando selection and training process, which few advisors considered ideal, was a negotiated solution reached between them and ANA leadership, reflecting the degree to which they were able to organize their partner force.

Leadership selection was another problematic issue for SF advisors. While SF advisors were able to hand pick key leaders for the first kandak,[112] many reported that after that initial success it was difficult, if not impossible, to personally select or fire Commando leadership, particularly at the kandak level and above. Such positions, they felt, were often political appointments based on nepotism or connections rather than leadership or combat skills.[113] Navigating these complexities was particularly challenging. For example, to replace an Uzbek in a key position would usually require replacing him with another Uzbek to keep the balance of power and status quo. If an Uzbek was not available locally, reassigning an Uzbek from another location to that role could set off power struggles that involved negotiations with the second location and likely reassigning an Uzbek to backfill that role also. In such cases, tribe and ethnic background trumped experience and capability. For the high-profile national counterterrorism force 6th Commando Kandak, not only did the commander have to be Uzbek, but he also had to be politically connected with the current Afghan president. U.S. advisors simply could not make changes on their own, and even suggestions of changes created complications.[114]

[110] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Larry Niedringhaus, 7 January 2021.
[111] Interview, Frank Sobchak with anonymous active-duty 3rd SF Group member, 8 January 2021.
[112] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Tim Williams, 16 October 2020.
[113] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Scott Ford, 29 October 2020.
[114] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Fred Dummar, 16 December 2020.

One area that the U.S. did have considerable leverage, likely related to the fact that the U.S. was outfitting the force, was in the series of decisions on how to equip the Commandos and what their organizational structure should be. In both cases, SF advisors made the most important decisions. The troop structure of the Commandos mirrored the structure of U.S. Ranger battalions, with some notable exceptions due to the insistence of Afghan leaders. The Commando battalion headquarters would include a religious affairs officer, a mullah/imam, and an Islamic education officer. [115] U.S. advisors selected the equipment that the Commando battalions would use, and they settled upon American weapons and gear, albeit not as capable as their U.S. partners. Yet even in the realm of equipping the Commandos there were challenges. Some units ended up with an ad hoc set of weapons and equipment, because what they were assigned was funneled off by other Afghan officers to either their own units or to the black market. Winter clothing, communications equipment, and crew served weapons were particularly susceptible to such practices. As one advisor noted, "what entered on the left side did not reach the ride side" of the equation.[116]

The force structure of the Commandos as well as concerns of Afghan sovereignty did not normally facilitate the ability of SF advisors to directly control Commando pay. At times, they were able to step in and personally manage the funds to ensure there was no corruption, but it was far from uniform. Like in Iraq, SF advisors lobbied for the Commandos to be eligible for a special incentive pay, and they received an extra $50 per month as well as double rations.[117] While the increase of the Commandos' pay over ANA base pay was nowhere near as significant

[115] ANASOC MTOE, "ANA 1398 v2" 2021 provided by COL Fred Dummar.
[116] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW4 Eric Brashears, 29 October 2020.
[117] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Edward Reeder, 17 December 2020. Email, CSM Faiz Wafa, ANASOC CSM, 14 June 2021. Even a $50 incentive pay was still a significant increase over ANA base pay.

as the ISOF over the Iraqi Army, it was enough to create a different lifestyle for the Commandos.[118]

The scope of the American effort to build such a large SOF element as well as its comparably late start made it more difficult to properly screen Commando candidates. Some Afghan military and political leaders also bristled at what they saw as a violation of sovereignty required to perform detailed background checks on every Commando. As a result, prospective Commandos were screened biometrically, with their personal information compared to databases to ensure they were not part of the Taliban. In addition, they received a basic counter-intelligence screening.[119] As a result, unlike in the Philippines and Iraq, SF advisors consistently faced an insider threat and there were multiple instances where they were shot or killed by their partners.[120] This altered the advisory relationship, and many units required an armed "guardian angel" present at training who watched over the Afghans and was ready to shoot them if they presented a threat.[121]

Standup of the ANASOC Headquarters:

When the Commandos first stood up, they were organized to work directly for ANA corps commanders and receive their logistics from them. Such a construct, in the words of one advisor, meant that the Commando command and control structure "was not clean cut," and resulted in significant unity of command challenges as well as misuse of the elite force.[122] Getting the Commandos authorized to conduct any sort of operation required interaction with the

[118] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Patrick Roberson, 22 December 2020.
[119] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Fred Dummar, 16 December 2020.
[120] Haley Britzky, "Attack in Afghanistan Results in Both US, Afghan Casualties," *Task & Purpose*, February 8, 2020, https://taskandpurpose.com/news/afghanistan-nangarhar-attack-casualties/. Also see Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Patrick Roberson, 22 December 2020.
[121] Long et al., *Building Special Operations Partnerships in Afghanistan and Beyond*, 2015, 50.
[122] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Edward Reeder, 17 December 2020.

conventional ANA brigade or division, which required considerable effort on the part of SF senior officers to educate and mentor them on proper utilization of those elite forces. Those ANA conventional leaders often grossly mismanaged the Commandos, such as using them to man checkpoints or serve as a quick reaction force because they knew that they would be reliable and would not flee at the first sign of enemy contact.[123]

At times, when the Commandos or their SF advisors pushed back against the misuse, because the Commandos' logistics ran through the ANA conventional forces, the conventional commander often would withhold the Commando's pay or even food until they agreed to carry out his orders. In at least one case, an ANA conventional leader broke up Commando elements by picking the best fighters from the Commandos to serve as his personal security detachment. In another case, an ODA was moved from one location in Afghanistan at great expense- flown on limited fixed wing resources- to link up with a Commando kandak for an operation. When they arrived, they discovered that the conventional ANA commander had sent the entire kandak to serve as check point security over 100 kilometers away, resulting in the ODA having to return empty handed.[124] The conventional ANA control of Commando logistics created additional problems as many officers skimmed money from the better funded elite forces.[125]

To resolve these challenges, in 2012 both U.S. and Afghan SOF leaders decided to stand up a brigade sized headquarters unit led by a one-star general, named the Afghan National Army Special Operations Command (ANASOC). Unfortunately, even though command of the Commando kandaks was shifted to their Commando brigade headquarters, operationally they were employed by the corps commanders in the military districts and by other ANA

[123] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Scott Ford, 29 October 2020.
[124] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW4 Eric Brashears, 29 October 2020.
[125] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Fred Dummar, 16 December 2020.

conventional commanders. This structure, which was insisted upon by the ANA leadership, resulted in the misuse of the Commandos persisting after the new headquarters was formed.[126] The effectiveness of the new headquarters was also impeded because it was challenging to find sufficient staff officers and leaders to fill the new organization that understood the Commandos' capabilities.[127] Because of these challenges, some advisors observed that the ANASOC headquarters performed functions more parallel to the organize, train, and equip functions of U.S. title X forces but usually lacked direct command and control functions.

Recognizing that ANASOC commander's rank was lower than ANA corps and division commanders, the position was elevated to two-star rank to try to offset the imbalance.[128] The brigade headquarters was expanded to division size with two subordinate Commando brigades in Shindand and Khost that split responsibility for the country geographically between east and west. Even after that change, command and control was still difficult and misuse continued. One advisor posited that each company had three bosses, first the ANASOC chain of command, second the ANA conventional battlespace commander, and third the U.S. CJSOTF advisors.[129]

From 2015 to 2020, the ANASOC headquarters element was expanded again in another attempt to resolve this continued misuse and to facilitate further regional command and control. Rather than a division headquarters led by a two-star general, ANASOC was elevated to a corps headquarters led by a three-star general.[130] It was thought that the higher rank would increase ANASOC's clout relative to other conventional ANA units, as the ANASOC commander would be a peer to other ANA corps commanders after this promotion. No additional intermediate level

[126] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Edward Reeder, 17 December 2020.
[127] Interview, Frank Sobchak with SGM David Topejr, 23 December 2020.
[128] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Fred Dummar, 16 December 2020.
[129] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Brian Petit, 21 December 2020.
[130] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Faiz Wafa, 8 January 2021.

of command was inserted, but two additional brigades were added to reach a total of four that split the country geographically based on compass cardinal directions. A new organic logistics component was also included to try to reduce the amount Commandos would have to rely on ANA conventional logistics.[131]

Unfortunately, command and control issues endured as well as the ANA mismanagement of the Commandos. During one crisis, recently elected President Ashraf Ghani was under pressure by Taliban advances in Kunduz. During meetings, the president directed the ANA Chief of Staff to move the 207th ANA Corps into the fight, but the unit was incapable or unwilling. The senior SF commander, sensing the political danger to the new president, lobbied President Ghani personally to move the Commandos to support, later recalling, "if these corps commanders are putting Commandos on checkpoints, I guess I have to go to the president of the country, but that's kind of what it takes here."[132]

The standup of ANASOC headquarters did lead to some improvements for the Commandos. As the war ground on and casualties mounted in the Commandos, senior U.S. advisors helped the Afghans stand up a wounded warrior program. At first, when Commandos were seriously wounded or lost limbs, they were forced to leave the military. This created problems with morale and retention because other Commandos would realize that if they became seriously wounded, they would become helpless because they would not be able to hold a job or earn money to support their family. The ANASOC Command Sergeant Major, Faiz Wafa, noted that, "how can we expect the younger generation to come into the Army, if they see the guys that lost their leg, … and nobody took care of him?" To address this issue, a program was created

[131] "ANA Special Operations Command (ANASOC)," accessed December 18, 2020, https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/afghanistan/anasoc.htm.
[132] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Edward Reeder, 17 December 2020.

where seriously wounded Commandos would be retrained into office jobs in the various staff functions such as personnel, logistics, or intelligence. Assisted by SF advisors, senior ANASOC leaders fought for four years to push the program through the ANA bureaucracy and the Ministry of Health and were ultimately successful.[133] Without the assistance and pressure from the U.S. advisors, the change likely would not have come to fruition.

Operation Freedom's Sentinel and the Never-ending War:

As the conflict progressed, the ability of SF advisors to organize or influence the Commandos decreased even farther. Some of the reduction was because of decreased American authorities caused by the shift from Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) to Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS). With the end of U.S. offensive operations and the enhanced push to put Afghans in the lead of security operations, some advisors felt that the U.S. became casualty averse- a trend that resulted in Afghans being less willing to take American advice and recommendations. After the shift to OFS, one advisor noted that his ODA only had three offensive missions over four months, which approximated the rate they were doing in a week before the change. That reduction was a byproduct of a new approval process which required a confirmed threat to Americans from a specific enemy fighter. Even then, such a mission required extensive justification, with one advisor noting that he wrote a 117-page mission order with his Afghan partner to justify a kill/capture mission.[134] Others noted there was intense pressure to avoid ground movement due to IEDs, which resulted in Americans being unable to attend many meetings where Afghans made decisions about the future of the Commandos and ANASOC.[135]

[133] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Faiz Wafa, 8 January 2021.
[134] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Joshua Stephen, 5 January 2021.
[135] Interview, Frank Sobchak with SGM David Topejr, 23 December 2020.

Some changes in the ability of SF advisors to organize or influence the Commandos were an organic result of the duration of the conflict. Several advisors noted that even by 2015, many Afghans had begun looking towards what would happen after the U.S. left and began making political calculations on whether they should conduct a mission based on the implications of whom they would anger or what vendetta they might cause. One advisor noted that his partner, a Commando company commander, refused to do anything other than checkpoint operations. "They knew we were leaving. Why would they do an operation if the U.S. was leaving?"[136] With a potential U.S. withdrawal looming on the horizon, many ANASOC units became less – or not at all – responsive to requests or guidance from the coalition. Instead, each request would be assessed transactionally as well as evaluated for their local political and tribal impact. "If Afghans didn't see (that the mission) was in their own interest, they would not do it."[137] Even some missions that the SOJTF-A CG felt were important, where he called the ANASOC CG directly, were disapproved- a significant difference from earlier in the war.

At the tactical level Commandos also pushed back on American entreaties. By 2016, many Commandos had been in combat longer than the average member of an SF ODA. Their grizzled experiences made them jaded and less willing to take risks, and they had even begun to treat the SF groups differently based on where they were based and what their previous experiences had been. One Commando told his advisors, "You guys are from Colorado rather than North Carolina, so you know what mountains look like. That is good. But what might have worked in Iraq won't work here."[138]

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[136] Interview, Frank Sobchak with SGM David Topejr, 23 December 2020.
[137] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Brian Petit, 21 December 2020.
[138] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW4 Eric Brashears, 29 October 2020. 10th Special Forces Group, a relative newcomer to the Afghan theater due to its focus on Iraq until 2011, is based in Colorado while 3rd and 7th Special Forces Groups, which shouldered most of the burden of advising the Commandos, had been based in North Carolina (until 7th Group moved to Florida in 2011).

Assessing the Impact of the Variable:

SF advisors stood up the first Commando unit more than six years after the fall of the Taliban. In that interim period, a new Afghan government was created as well as an accompanying military structure with its own bureaucracy. When the Americans tried to organize the Commandos in the way they thought most effective, that government and bureaucracy interceded and blocked many of the proposals. Some decisions on how the force would be organized were set by the SF advisors, such as the general construct of the unit and its equipping, but others, such as individual and leadership selection, were made by the Afghans. The "sovereignty clock," which was discussed in the Philippines and Iraq cases, had run out. Standing up the ANASOC headquarters only helped alleviate these challenges somewhat, and by 2015 the ability of SF advisors to influence Commando units had decreased even farther. For all these reasons, the variable of the advisor ability to organize host nation forces should be rated as medium.

Combat Advising "Delta Force Wannabes to Footprints in the Sand":

After the Taliban were overthrown and the U.S. and its coalition allies installed a new government, the Hamid Karzai administration was extremely supportive of having U.S. soldiers participate in combined combat operations with Afghan soldiers. Even as the Afghan government reasserted its sovereignty, it did so in areas not related to the realm of combat advising. Like those deployed to Iraq, SF advisors working with the Commandos had little to no restrictions on what type of combat advising they could perform. They regularly trained with their partners, ate meals with them, and then fought shoulder to shoulder with them through all parts of combat missions. No prohibitions were put in place on how close to combat operations they were allowed, and many advisors were wounded or killed in the performance of their

mission. As a result, based on that evidence the degree of combat advising that was allowed with the Commandos will be rated as high.

While in general such lack of restrictions indicates the highest degree of combat advising, there were caveats. Some advisors noted that at the beginning of the Commando mission there was a tendency by a subset of ODAs to focus more on conducting combat operations themselves rather than on advising the Commandos, with proponents arguing that there was, too much fighting to be done to focus on security force assistance with Afghans. Some teams would even balk at sending in reports on the training levels of their partner kandaks, claiming that they were too busy with combat operations to be able to send the information.[139] This trend might possibly have occurred because ODAs became content conducting operations unilaterally or with a veneer of host nation presence during the six years of the war before they began advising the Commandos. At the same time, a desire to focus on unilateral direct action missions rather than foreign internal defense has long been a preference for some segments within SF.[140] One SF senior leader of the Afghan mission, BG Don Bolduc, reportedly told his subordinates "I don't need to speak the language, I speak 5.56," implying that shooting skills and killing the enemy were more important than teaching host nation partners to do the same. ODAs inclined to follow such a methodology conducted operations with the bare minimum number of Afghans required and only made nominal efforts to train the Commandos.[141] Those ODAs, in the words of one

[139] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Larry Niedringhaus, 7 January 2021.
[140] Direct action missions usually focus on offensive operations such as prepared attacks, ambushes, or raids.
[141] Source for BG Bolduc quote is Interview, Frank Sobchak with SGM David Topejr, 23 December 2020. This quote closely matches a quote by BG Frank Toney, a previous U.S. Army Special Forces Command CG and Special Operations Command Central CG, who stated, "5.56 is the only language you need to speak." Source for BG Toney quote is author, who heard the statement during a command visit at Fort Campbell in 1998 or 1999.

CJSOTF commander, wanted to act like the U.S. national mission force, which would conduct short, usually unilateral, direct action missions.[142]

Conversely, by late in the conflict many SF advisors had deployed on numerous rotations and concluded that their efforts were having little impact on the outcome of the war. Some of those teams became cautious about which missions they would accompany their partner force because they questioned whether certain missions would be worth risking their lives. As one SF battalion commander noted, some advisors had been "running on the hamster wheel" for several years and not seen significant progress, so they were not interested in conducting missions just for the sake of conducting missions. They had come to the mature realization that such actions were only making footprints in the sand that would be wiped out by the next tide if they were not part of a larger context and paired with considerable follow-on effort.[143]

Assessing the Impact of the Variable:

Despite some minor differences in how combat advising was implemented with the Commandos across the span of the Afghan conflict, there was near universal appreciation of how important it was to producing combat effective partners. CSM Faiz Wafa, a former ANASOC CSM, noted that as he got to know new advisors they had to earn his trust to really build rapport, and that the best way to do that was fighting shoulder to shoulder as partners.[144] Major General Ed Reeder reiterated this, arguing that "their U.S. counterpart standing shoulder to shoulder with them (the Commandos) sharing the same burdens of combat," is what kept them going.[145] To him, embedded role models made a huge difference on combat advising because it showed that the advisors were willing to share the same risk and danger as the Commandos. In a virtuous

[142] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Edward Reeder, 17 December 2020. Also known as Delta Force.
[143] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Brian Petit, 21 December 2020.
[144] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Faiz Wafa, 8 January 2021.
[145] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Edward Reeder, 17 December 2020.

cycle, sharing risk and danger was seen as the best means to demonstrate commitment and dedication, something that would result in host nation forces working to mirror that commitment themselves. Others saw that combat advising had practical benefits. Having Americans present and fighting as partners meant that the Commandos were likely to get the same level of medical care as Americans while they were there, through helicopter medical evacuation as well as the presence of highly trained Special Forces medics. Knowing that that possibility was available seemingly made a huge impact on the Commandos willingness to fight according to some advisors.[146]

Other factors:

Like in Iraq, the Afghan Commandos were created in an environment where there was an extremely large military force presence in a theater of war led by military forces rather than in a fully sovereign state where an ambassador leads U.S. efforts. Similarly, in Afghanistan there was rarely, if ever, a real shortage of resources. Although Iraq was clearly the main effort in America's post 9/11 military conflicts, Afghanistan was inundated with funds and manpower compared to the efforts in the Philippines, Colombia, and El Salvador. The total spent on the war in Afghanistan has been estimated to be $2.26 trillion, a similar cost to the war in Iraq.[147] Like trying to estimate how much was spent on the ISOF in Iraq, it is extremely challenging to determine exactly how much was spent on the Commandos due to classified budgets, poor accounting practices, and insufficient records.

A second difference is that as this study is being written in 2021, a substantial military, contractor, and government civilian presence remains. The Iraq and Philippines case studies had

[146] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Brian Petit, 21 December 2020.
[147] "Bagram: Last US and Nato Forces Leave Key Afghanistan Base," *BBC News*, July 2, 2021, https://news.yahoo.com/bagram-last-us-nato-forces-062823658.html.

a termination point where U.S. forces either completely or largely withdrew, even if they returned relatively soon afterwards. In Colombia and the Philippines, while there was not a wholesale withdrawal, the U.S. presence diminished to a point where it could have a negligible impact. While this makes assessing the Commandos slightly more difficult, there is enough evidence already of how they have performed by themselves to evaluate the dependent variables.

Unlike in Iraq and the Philippines, in Afghanistan other SOF elements- namely SEALs and MARSOC detachments- helped advise Commando units. While the SF ODAs were overwhelmingly the main advisory force in terms of number of deployments and in units paired, it is important to recognize that other elements contributed to the overall effort. In a perfect world, it would be better to have only one advisory element working with a host nation force to be able to assess their impact, but conclusions can still be drawn from the Afghanistan case.

A new and significant difference in Afghanistan was the baseline education level of Afghan soldiers as they entered the Commandos. According to the U.N. Development Programme, in 2021 Afghanistan ranked as 169th of 189 countries in the Human Development Index, which includes lifespan, mean years of schooling, and gross national income per capita.[148] Its education system was barely functional, and adult literacy sat at 43% in 2020 according to the World Bank- the 9th lowest rate.[149] This translated to a series of challenges for advisors in Afghanistan that were dissimilar from those faced by other cases.

Several advisors noted that a significant number of Commandos could not read. Despite efforts to instill minimum standards for entry, SF advisors were unable to maintain them due to the need to replace combat losses and unit expansion. Because the education level of

[148] "Latest Human Development Index Ranking | Human Development Reports," accessed June 4, 2021, http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/latest-human-development-index-ranking.
[149] "Literacy Rate, Adult Total (% of People Ages 15 and above) - Afghanistan | Data," accessed June 4, 2021, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS?end=2018&locations=AF&start=1979.

Commando recruits was so low, it affected their capability to learn basic soldier skills. For example, one SF advisor was beginning to teach an indirect fire mortar class, but none of the Afghans could add or multiply or even understand the basics of mathematics. The advisor had to take time to try to teach them those baseline skills, which reduced time for other subjects. Another noted that over half of the attendees to a long-range radio class washed out before training started because they could not read numbers and were unable to correctly tune the radio dials to the right frequency.[150] During another exercise, one Commando candidate who had otherwise passed the physical requirements for entry ingested batteries because he thought they were food and could power him. He was medically removed from the course. Advisors also noted the difference in baseline driving skills between Iraq and Afghanistan, with soldiers in the ICTF generally arriving with some capability while those in the Afghan Commandos did not[151] As Major General Pat Roberson contended, all these factors together meant the combat effectiveness of the Commandos had less to do with the training provided and had "everything to do with the human capital that was provided."[152]

Afghanistan's low gross national income and long history of having weak central governments (if one at all) resulted in Afghanistan's infrastructure being significantly different than other cases. The famous ring road, which was supposed to run a circle around the entire country, has never been completed, and the country's lack of development made the number of paved roads- or roads at all- a scarcity. Such a lack of infrastructure had a series of impacts. It made it much harder to logistically resupply Commando units, as well as perform casualty

[150] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Ms. Valentin Swegle, 22 December 2020. The radios were long range Harris high frequency equipment which could have helped make the Commandos more independent by being able to unilaterally call for logistics support or intelligence updates.
[151] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Scott Ford, 29 October 2020.
[152] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Patrick Roberson, 22 December 2020. Roberson noted the education differences and personal experiences of Afghans were different from many of the other cases in this study.

evacuation or other critical military functions. It also affected the ability of advisors to mix tribes and ethnicities, as if a soldier were too far from home it would be exceedingly difficult for him to be able to go on leave and return promptly. Making a unit in Afghanistan ethnically diverse, like the ISOF, would have been challenging due to the poor infrastructure.

Assessing the Combat Effectiveness of the Commandos:

In August 2017, General John Nicholson, the Commander of the Resolute Support Mission, said: "The [Commandos] have never lost a battle...The Taliban have never won against the Commandos...They never will."[153] Unfortunately such an optimistic prediction proved inaccurate even before the U.S. departed from Afghanistan. However, compared to other Afghan units, the Commandos proved to be extremely capable and were relied upon extensively by ANA and American senior leadership. Although the Commandos comprised only seven percent of the Afghan National Security Forces, they frequently conducted 70% to 80% of the fighting.[154] Some American advisors thought so highly of the Commandos that they argued that individual soldiers from the unit would have been enthusiastically recruited by U.S. Ranger battalions and served with distinction within those organizations.[155]

While there is little doubt that the Commandos were the most effective fighting force that Americans built in Afghanistan, to assess their true capabilities they must be compared to the same variables and standards used in this dissertation's other case studies: competence at night fighting, the ability to conduct multi-day combat operations, the capability to fight without

[153] Resolute Support Public Affairs Office, "PRESS CONFERENCE STATEMENT BY GENERAL JOHN NICHOLSON, COMMANDER, NATO RESOLUTE SUPPORT MISSION," U.S. Central Command, August 24, 2017, https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/1287992/press-conference-statement-by-general-john-nicholson-commander-nato-resolute-su/.
[154] Helene Cooper, "Afghan Forces Are Praised, Despite Still Relying Heavily on U.S. Help (Published 2017)," *The New York Times*, August 20, 2017, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/20/world/asia/afghanistan-military-strategy.html.
[155] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Fred Dummar, 16 December 2020.

advisors present as defined by whether they could conduct intelligence driven operations, and how they performed in combat against enemy forces.

Night Fighting:

Echoing a trend, like the host nation partner forces in the Philippines and Iraq, the Commandos were equipped similarly to their SF advisors. Each soldier was issued a PVS-7 night vision goggle and PEQ-2 laser pointer, but they generally were not given the more technologically advanced PVS-14 or 15 goggles issued to the ISOF and SF CIF companies. Still, these capabilities gave them considerable advantages over almost all their opponents.[156]

Advisors provided mixed reviews on the Commandos' night fighting skills. Most gave high marks and noted that the Commandos hated daytime operations and preferred to conduct operations at night because it was safer and because their skills outmatched most threats. By late in the war, ANASOC had obtained 35 Mi-17v5 Hip helicopters and SOF aviators and contractors had trained the pilots to fly using night vision goggles and conduct airborne night infiltrations, further tipping the balance in their favor.[157] One advisor who worked with ANASOC headquarters and training units noted that from a systemic level, there were voracious requirements for the batteries used in night vision equipment, seemingly indicating they were being used extensively. Others noted that Commandos rarely turned down nighttime missions and one advisor described them as great night fighters.[158]

At the same time, other advisors had negative comments about their night fighting skills. One noted that while the Commandos routinely fought at night and were successful, he did not believe that they "owned" night because sometimes periods of darkness would cause them to

[156] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Fred Dummar, 16 December 2020.
[157] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Edward Reeder, 17 December 2020.
[158] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Larry Niedringhaus, 7 January 2021.

lose momentum and stall on an objective.[159] Another noted that his partner force Commando kandak simply would not use their night vision goggles, which effectively negated the value of the equipment and their training.[160] Others noted that some Commando units were capable of fighting at night but did not prefer to because they were not confident in their skills.[161]

Assessment:

The varied appraisals from different advisors on the Commandos' night fighting skills warrants a medium rating for this element of the dependent variable. The Commandos were properly equipped to conduct operations, had no cultural disinclination to fight at night, and were suitably trained. Despite all those factors, advisor reviews of their skills did not reflect the same level of near-universal enthusiasm given to the ISOF, resulting in a lower rating.

Conducting Multi-Day (72hrs) Combat Operations:

When the Commandos first stood up, the CJSOTF and ANA leadership decided that they would obtain logistics support from regional ANA conventional units. This was decided in part because U.S. SF leaders wanted to, for the sake of simplicity, focus first on developing the unit's combat capabilities and because Afghan leaders preferred not to create a separate logistics system. Unfortunately, this construct proved extremely problematic. On numerous occasions ANA conventional commanders refused to resupply Commando units- at times even elements in contact with the enemy such as during the politically sensitive battle to recapture Kunduz in 2015.[162] Under such conditions, some advisors noted that the Commandos could carry out operations for at most 24 hours, and even reported that at times they were forced to rely on

[159] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Brian Petit, 21 December 2020.
[160] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Joshua Stephen, 5 January 2021.
[161] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Martin Schmidt, 9 September 2020.
[162] Jessica Donati, *Eagle Down: The Last Special Forces Fighting the Forever War* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2021), 74.

villagers to get water and food resupply.[163] The Commandos were also especially reliant on U.S. trauma care and casualty evacuation, seriously limiting their unilateral capabilities. Several advisors noted that because ANA units were not consistently providing logistics support and casualty evacuation, some Commando units became dependent on their U.S. advisors for those resources, a habit which they found hard to break even after ANASOC added their own limited internal logistics capabilities.[164]

Because the original system proved deficient, SF advisors pursued multiple strategies to overcome those challenges. Some farsighted leaders, such as Colonel Fred Dummar, implemented reforms so that the Commandos could sustain themselves such as creating a helicopter transportable "chuck wagon" vehicle that could provide hot meals for extended operations. Recognizing that American casualty evacuation would eventually fade away, he also helped purchase tactical ambulances that could provide forward medical care.[165] Other leaders focused on building a more formalized and institutional logistics structure within ANASOC, and an entire support kandak was added to the headquarters.[166] A special operations helicopter wing was created, partly to give the Afghans an organic infiltration capability, but also partly as a recognition that the distances and infrastructure involved in a ground resupply made that option unrealistic for most missions. The skilled pilots were also capable of performing night casualty evacuations.

To ensure long term sustainability of the force, significant energy was put towards preparing the Afghans to run the Commando Training Center, and by 2019 they were mostly running courses with little U.S. assistance. SF advisors also trained Commando logisticians to

[163] Interview, Frank Sobchak with SGM David Topejr, 23 December 2020.
[164] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW4 Eric Brashears, 2 November 2020.
[165] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Ms. Valentin Swegle, 22 December 2020.
[166] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Faiz Wafa, 8 January 2021.

preposition supplies where battles were anticipated, to build prepared resupply bundles to be ready to drop to besieged forces, and to leapfrog units during long battles where an initial Commando force would fight for 48-72 hours, and then be extracted by the same helicopters that dropped off their replacements who would continue the fight.[167] After these reforms, the Commandos could often conduct combat operations for 72 hours or more, although not consistently. The Afghan logistics trains were simply not robust enough to address the needs of the force and at times the U.S. had to provide emergency resupplies of food and ammunition.[168]

The U.S. reforms were significantly hampered by challenges of corruption, nepotism, and a general lack of understanding of logistics matters. Corruption was so endemic in Afghanistan that it affected the Commandos' operational abilities. One advisor noted that there was a common notion that, "If I'm not stealing fuel, I'm not being a good Afghan" because I'm not taking care of my family.[169] This often resulted in a negotiation over how much fuel really was needed for missions because the Afghans would request more than was required so they could resell the excess and pocket the difference. Another senior advisor recalled that in 2015, a team of SF advisors was trying to convince their partner kandak to deploy their amber cycle (training) company to support the green cycle (operations) company so that they could conduct a larger-scale operation. The Afghan battalion commander refused, citing that he did not have enough fuel. Desperate to get the unit moving, the Americans called their headquarters, whose commander then engaged the three-star commander of ANASOC. Only after that general personally called the Commando battalion commander and told him that he knew he was selling part of his fuel ration to the fuel station across the street, was the second company freed for the

[167] Technically this would be a way of avoiding having to resupply a force in contact but given the constraints of Afghanistan it represents a novel way to address those challenges.
[168] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Brian Petit, 21 December 2020.
[169] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Ms. Valentin Swegle, 22 December 2020.

operation. The general noted that while such a practice was acceptable occasionally, it should not impede combat missions.[170] Despite such warnings, the practice of stealing fuel persisted and continued to impact operations.

Worse, problems with corruption extended far beyond fuel supplies. The Afghan logistics system was so dysfunctional that during the 2018-2019 period of Commando growth, to ensure the supplies for the new units were properly distributed, American SF advisors waited at airfields for key shipments (such as M4 rifles). If they did not, the equipment would almost certainly have been stolen.[171] Other advisors noted how they had challenges getting uniforms for the Commandos because ANASOC logistics warehouses reported there were no uniforms available. When they visited the warehouses themselves, the logisticians were wearing Commando uniforms and the shelves were stocked. The issue boots, the mainstay of an Infantry soldier's life, were so bad due to graft and corruption that many Commandos preferred to fight in sandals rather than the unreliable boots that would fall apart after a few missions.[172]

The American premise of logistics also conflicted directly with Afghan cultural norms, which saw success as equipment sitting on the shelf, rather than equipment issued out to tactical units and empty shelves in warehouses. Several advisors commented how critical issue items, such as crew served weapon mounts for vehicles and mechanics' tool kits, were scarce in tactical units, but stocked in row after row of shelves in logistics warehouses.[173] Advisor attempts to change the culture had little impact, and they found that their best strategy to resolve shortages was to go to the warehouses themselves with empty trucks and take what they needed.

[170] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Fred Dummar, 16 December 2020.
[171] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Larry Niedringhaus, 7 January 2021.
[172] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Ms. Valentin Swegle, 22 December 2020.
[173] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Fred Dummar, 16 December 2020.

The shaky Afghan logistics systems came under even more pressure after the end of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in 2015 when U.S. forces withdrew over half of their manpower and consolidated those remaining on fewer bases. The organic logistics system proved to be incapable of sustaining some Commando units, so they were moved to locations where Afghans – with some American assistance – could. Farah and Herat Provinces were seen as especially problematic. Logistically supporting them was extremely challenging as flying ANASOC rotary wing assets to the Commando bases there required a forward arming and refueling point (FARP)- a temporary logistics facility that was deemed beyond Afghan skills. Without the constant U.S. support inherent in OEF, the Commandos' logistics system faltered at times, presaging worse challenges when they would have to operate unilaterally.

Assessment:

The model of relying on conventional forces for host nation SOF logistics, which was adopted in both Iraq and Afghanistan, was unsuccessful and inhibited the ability of both countries' SOF units to conduct operations beyond 72 hours- at least until changes were made that increased organic SOF capabilities. Even after those policy shifts, ANASOC logistics struggled- partly from institutional problems, and partly from the challenges with the size, terrain, and lack of infrastructure in Afghanistan.

At the bare tactical level, most Commando kandaks could conduct limited operations for 72 hours. That ability was more a testament to their resilience and acceptance of adversity, such as taking casualties or a lack of food or water than an indicator of their logistics capabilities. Even then, underlying cultural issues, corruption, and the tyranny of Afghanistan's distances and infrastructure made such operations extremely challenging. Conducting short notice resupply missions for unexpected events were particularly challenging and nearly beyond the

Commandos' ability because they lacked the logistics infrastructure and equipment to make it happen. At any level above tactical, the weakness of the Commandos' and ANASOC's institutional logistics system came into focus. That fragility meant they could rarely conduct long-term resupply and were exceptionally challenged when units operated at any distance from their kandak headquarters or ANASOC logistics facilities. During some missions, desperate tactical commanders have resorted to social media to appeal for supplies and food that their headquarters was unable to provide.[174] When putting all these considerations together, the Commandos are assessed as having a medium capability to be able to conduct extended combat operations- although at the extremely low end of that rating.

Fighting without Advisors Present:

Methodologically, to be able to fight without advisors, host nation forces must be able to conduct intelligence driven operations. Such a capability would mean that the Commandos were able to generate their own intelligence organically, successfully action those targets, conduct sensitive site exploitation of those targets, and then use that information to repeat the cycle again in another series of operations. Known as the F3EAD cycle: Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Analyze, and Disseminate; it proved to be extremely effective in disrupting, damaging, and destroying insurgent or terrorist networks.[175]

While some individual Commando units have performed superbly, as a whole the organization has had challenges transitioning from fighting while partnered with coalition forces to fighting independently- a basic precursor task to being able to conduct intelligence driven

[174] Pamela Constable, "Death of Famed Afghan Commander in Taliban Massacre Highlights the Country's Struggles and Fears," *Washington Post*, June 19, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/afghanistan-taliban-commando-killed/2021/06/19/ebd748fc-d03e-11eb-a224-bd59bd22197c_story.html.
[175] Richard H. Shultz Jr and Joseph L. Votel, *Transforming US Intelligence for Irregular War: Task Force 714 in Iraq*, Reprint edition (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020), 109–11, 125–31.

operations. In fact, a 2019 study showed that ANASOC independent operations dropped nearly 20% from the year prior, an ongoing downward trend that reflected the Commandos becoming more reliant on U.S. support than less.[176] Many SF advisors confirmed this trend and expressed frustration at their inability to fight independently. Several noted that at various points, Commando units had considerable problems with discipline and drug addiction.[177] One reported that in 2015 the situation had become so out of control in one kandak that SF medical personnel were deployed to perform drug testing on the Commandos, resulting in the cashiering of nearly an entire battalion.[178]

Describing the Commandos ability to fight independently, one advisor noted, "they would generally be able to put in a support by fire position and go in and clear a compound, but under duress when things got sporty, they tend to go to ground and let the Americans fight."[179] Others were less generous. "We had problems with elements that either wouldn't do their task, because they just didn't understand it somehow, or the minute that they got under gunfire, they would shut down to a degree, and no matter who told them that they needed to suppress or do whatever, they kind of did their own thing to protect their own little element."[180] Another bluntly noted that they could not conduct independent combat operations. "When the shooting started, they (the Commandos) would hide. We would fight, then yell at them, and they would fight a little bit. Then they would stop fighting again and we would keep fighting. It wasn't

[176] Shawn Snow Gould Leo Shane III, Joe, "Afghan Special Operators Partnering with US Forces More Often, Still Reliant on American Support," *Military Times*, February 5, 2020, https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2020/02/05/afghan-special-operators-partnering-with-us-forces-more-often-still-reliant-on-american-support/.
[177] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Joshua Stephen, 5 January 2021. Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Larry Niedringhaus, 7 January 2021.
[178] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Ms. Valentin Swegle, 22 December 2020.
[179] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Fernando Lujan, 11 August 2020.
[180] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Scott Ford, 29 October 2020.

worth the effort. We had to fend for ourselves."[181] Several SF advisors predicted that the Commandos would collapse after the U.S. left Afghanistan.

Others noted that the Commandos had become reliant on US fire support, intelligence, and logistics.[182] As soon as the U.S. withdrew these capabilities the number of operations conducted by the Commandos dropped precipitously. In particular, if the U.S. did not provide the same enablers to the Commandos that they provided to their own ODAs, such as AC-130 gunships, Predator drones for ISR, and local casualty evacuation, they would often refuse to conduct operations.[183] One advisor commented that those capabilities helped "strengthen the spine" of the Commandos when ground forces had to close with the enemy.[184] Without them, many Afghans were simply not willing to risk their lives.[185]

But others had a more sanguine perspective on the Commandos. They argued that the Commandos could conduct independent operations, although carrying out intelligence driven independent operations- the core of this variable- was more challenging. They pointed out that at times late in the war, Afghans would become impatient with what they perceived to be U.S. risk avoidance and would launch an operation on their own with HMMWVs or Mi-17 helicopters. Others noted that if the Commandos were provided with U.S. intelligence, they could launch unilateral operations, but were not able to generate targetable intelligence and repeat the cycle themselves.[186]

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[181] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Joshua Stephen, 5 January 2021.
[182] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Bill Carty, 6 January 2021.
[183] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Edward Reeder, 17 December 2020.
[184] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Brian Petit, 21 December 2020.
[185] Donati, *Eagle Down*, 123–24. This documents an instance where a Commando kandak refused to conduct offensive operations unless such enablers were provided, an event which advisors confirmed was relatively common.
[186] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Fred Dummar, 16 December 2020. Interview, Frank Sobchak with SGM David Topejr, 23 December 2020.

The Commandos had considerable challenges gathering and processing intelligence. Several advisors flatly noted that most of the Commandos could not perform the classic F3EAD model of intelligence driven operations.[187] With the Commandos operating in ANA corps battlespace, they had to collaborate with those forces and obtain targeting approval from them. Those systems were inherently dysfunctional, and few ANA divisions pushed intelligence down to the Commandos. Such challenges could have been overcome from bottom up targeting, but because the Commandos generally lived in cantonment areas and not amongst the people and in the environment where they conducted operations, they did not have good human intelligence- at least not responsive enough to conduct intelligence driven operations. Although the ANA SF were meant to fill that void, they also often proved incapable of the task.[188]

Additionally, there was little institutional level intelligence sharing and at the tactical level, and few Commando kandaks routinely shared intelligence with either other ANA units or MOI units.[189] Some advisors noted that most actionable intelligence for the Commandos came from U.S. sources and capabilities.[190] When the U.S. began withdrawing its forces and limiting operations after the 2015 shift to Operation Freedoms' Sentinel, the number of human intelligence reports dropped significantly as there was not the same amount of American money to pay sources and contacts.[191] US efforts to build an organic capability were often frustrated by endemic corruption, such as when low profile civilian sedans purchased to be employed by human intelligence agents in each kandak were quickly taken over by Afghan general officers for their own personal use.[192]

[187] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Joshua Stephen, 5 January 2021.
[188] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Brian Petit, 21 December 2020.
[189] Helmus, *Advising the Command*, 29.
[190] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Joshua Stephen, 5 January 2021.
[191] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Edward Reeder, 17 December 2020.
[192] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Ms. Valentin Swegle, 22 December 2020.

Little effort was made to develop signal intelligence assets because they were deemed beyond Afghanistan's technical and budgetary capabilities. ANASOC was given a rudimentary imagery intelligence capability in the form of eighteen Pilatus PC-12 ISR aircraft in a special operations wing, manned with sensor operators. The aircraft were generally unable to provide real time full motion video downlink capabilities, and often the aircraft were used for photographic imagery intelligence. As a result, the airframes did not add to the ability to perform intelligence driven operations. At times, the aircraft reflected the challenges of corruption, with American advisors having to remind Afghan generals that the aircraft were not their personal means of transportation.[193]

At the tactical level, most kandaks could, however, do battlefield interrogation and some could conduct follow on operations based on intelligence garnered from those interrogations. At the same time, few, if any Commando units had the ability to do any detailed sensitive site exploitation (SSE) of computers, documents, or phones that would lead to timely follow-on operations.[194] Some kandaks could perform close target reconnaissance whereby Commandos were given mobile GPS devices and cameras to identify a target and its location. But such capabilities were far from uniform.[195]

Assessment:

While there is little doubt the Commandos were the best ANA fighting force in Afghanistan, they struggled with many basic level capabilities. Some kandaks were able to conduct unilateral operations, but many others simply refused to fight without American advisors and their considerable enablers. They had some limited HUMINT and IMINT capabilities, but

[193] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Edward Reeder, 17 December 2020. Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Fred Dummar, 16 December 2020.
[194] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Larry Niedringhaus, 7 January 2021.
[195] Interview, Frank Sobchak with anonymous active-duty 3rd SF Group member, 8 January 2021.

neither those skills nor the Commandos' operational abilities were sufficient to conduct true intelligence driven operations or F3EAD. Combined, these factors result in a low rating for being able to fight without advisors present.

Performance against the Enemy in Combat:

While American forces remained in Afghanistan there were few engagements where the Commandos fought without the support of U.S. advisors or enablers. This makes evaluating their effectiveness in combat somewhat more challenging than assessing the performance of the ISOF or LRR, both of which had ample experience with independent fighting. For the Commandos, the 2015 Battle of Kunduz provides some valuable insight, as well as operations in 2021 when the U.S. had its smallest personnel footprint of the war and had shifted nearly all responsibility to the Afghans. The short period from June to August 2021 when U.S. troops had largely withdrawn and the Commandos were forced to fight on their own, also provides valuable data.

In late September 2015, the Taliban quickly and effortlessly took over the provincial capital of Kunduz in a surprise attack led by several hundred fighters. SF ODAs were given two hours to pack their equipment and then load helicopters with as many Commando partners that they could muster. Based on interviews of participants, approximately 150 Commandos were supported by 27 Special Forces advisors for the opening phase of the battle.[196] The newly arrived 6th Commando Kandak, part of the country's national mission force based in Kabul, engaged in fierce fighting, but the 10th Commando Kandak, based in Kunduz, refused to fight to retake the city and instead only provided security at the nearby airfield.[197] Despite being

[196] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Joshua Stephen, 5 January 2021.
[197] Jessica Donati, *Eagle Down: The Last Special Forces Fighting the Forever War* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2021), 70–75.

provided considerable support for the operation from AC-130 gunships, High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS), and many airstrikes, the Commandos and SF advisors made little progress in recapturing the city for the first two days. In an attempt to win back the city as quickly as possible, additional American and Afghan forces were surged into the battle. Fighting seesawed across the city for fifteen days before the Taliban were finally expelled, with the Commandos providing the bulk and brunt of the Afghan commitment.[198] Many saw the battle, which was the first time a major city had fallen to the Taliban, as initial evidence of how the ANA would perform by itself, as it occurred less than a year after the end of the OEF mission. Despite hopes that the ANA (and the Commandos) could retake the city with little effort, the U.S. had to revert to levels of support not provided since the early days of OEF. While the city could not have been retaken without the determined efforts of the Commandos, their reliance on U.S. support soured many on the ability of the Commandos and other ANA forces to be able to fight the Taliban successfully on their own.

Combat actions in 2021 further confirmed the perspective that the Commandos, while the most capable government force, struggled when facing Taliban forces by themselves without U.S. enablers. As U.S. forces withdrew, Afghan forces- including the Commandos- could not hold on to large swaths of Afghanistan. From May to the end of June 2021, Taliban forces went from controlling 73 of Afghanistan's 407 districts to controlling 157 districts.[199] The Commandos, in many cases the only forces staving off disaster after other ANA and ANP forces dissolved, were pressed into service as conventional infantry, and conducted double the number

[198] Rod Nordland, "Taliban End Takeover of Kunduz After 15 Days (Published 2015)," *The New York Times*, October 13, 2015, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/14/world/asia/taliban-afghanistan-kunduz.html.
[199] Bill Roggio, "Taliban Doubles Number of Controlled Afghan Districts since May 1," *Long War Journal*, June 29, 2021, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2021/06/taliban-doubles-number-of-controlled-afghan-districts-since-may-1.php.

of combat missions as the previous year. American airstrikes, by comparison, dropped to five percent of the total for the same period a year before.[200] Such pressures made it exceedingly difficult for the Commandos to be able to hold their own against the Taliban.

On June 19, 2021, a Commando unit that had been sent to relieve besieged ANA conventional forces in Faryab province was defeated and then massacred. Twenty-two Commandos, including a famed commander who received training in the U.S., died in the assault. At least one report indicated that the Commandos ran out of ammunition and the ANASOC headquarters was not able to resupply them nor provide requested close air support.[201] Although the outpost was recaptured later that month with Commandos in the forefront of the battle, the incident highlighted the unit's mixed performance in battle when left without American assistance. Other media reports indicated that some Commando elements conducted nighttime heliborne kill/capture missions, although such capabilities are far from universal.[202]

In the final desperate weeks as province after province fell and the Taliban began closing in on Kabul, the Commandos buckled, and in some places collapsed, in combat. Around Kandahar City, Commandos and other security forces battled the Taliban for more than a month.[203] When the U.S. contracted logistics withdrew and the Afghan supply system collapsed, the Commandos were not able to perform as they were designed: supported by a heavy logistics footprint that could resupply them on demand. Commando elements began to run out of

[200] George, "With Less U.S. Tactical Support, Afghanistan's Elite Forces Are Struggling to Roll Back Taliban Advances."
[201] Anna Coren, Sandi Sidhu, Tim Lister and Abdul Basir Bina, "Taliban Fighters Execute 22 Afghan Commandos as They Try to Surrender," *CNN*, July 14, 2021, https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/taliban-fighters-execute-22-afghan-commandos-as-they-try-to-surrender/ar-AAM5l6E.
[202] Jim Huylebroek, "On the Front Line: A Night With Afghan Commandos," *The New York Times*, June 25, 2021, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/25/world/asia/afghan-commandos-helmand.html.
[203] Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Fahim Abed, and Jim Huylebroek, "On Afghanistan's Front Line, There Are No Good Choices," *The New York Times*, August 9, 2021, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/09/world/asia/Afghanistan-taliban-kandahar.html.

ammunition, food, and water. Some surrendered after extended sieges or battles, putting themselves at the mercy of the Taliban. Another Commando element held Mazar-i-Sharif until local warlords capitulated, leaving them surrounded.[204] After the fall of Kabul, several Commando units refused to give in and began the slow march to the Panjshir, where a nascent resistance to the Taliban was building.[205] Other units moved to Hamid Karzai International airport and helped secure the outer perimeter during the U.S. led evacuation.

Assessment:

The Commandos are almost certainly the most effective Afghan security force element built by the U.S. during its two-decade investment. That said, despite considerable publicity about the Commandos' performance in battle, the more often they fought without advisors or with little advisor assistance, the more disappointing their performance. Properly supported logistically and with air support, they often held their own against the Taliban or other enemy forces and were capable of defeating them. Unfortunately, those conditions were impossible for ANASOC and the ANA to consistently deliver, making the Commandos' performance in battle inconsistent at best. Based on a review of their performance during the battle of Kunduz and operations in 2021, a medium rating seems most appropriate.

Preliminary Observations:

The Commandos received medium ratings in conducting combat operations for 72 hours, night fighting skills, and performance in combat, and low scores in fighting without advisors present. When looking at those components holistically, the Commandos have an overall

[204] Hollie McKay, "Embedded with the Last Afghan Special Forces Team in Mazar-i-Sharif," *Coffee or Die Magazine* (blog), August 22, 2021, https://coffeeordie.com/afghan-special-forces-mazar/.
[205] Sami Sahak, Wali Arian, and Jim Huylebroek, "Taliban Claim Control Over Panjshir Valley, but Resistance Vows to Fight On," *The New York Times*, September 6, 2021, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/06/world/asia/afghanistan-panjshir-taliban-resistance.html.

ranking of low moderate effectiveness. While they were undoubtedly the best Afghan government fighting force, their effectiveness in battle was erratic when they were not partnered with SF advisors and U.S. enablers. With an inadequate human intelligence capability and nearly no imagery or signals intelligence resources, the Commandos had limited ability to conduct intelligence driven operations, the bellwether for fighting without advisors present. Many advisors also reported that the Commandos were often unwilling to fight without their advisors and enablers- an even lower and more basic standard than being able to conduct intelligence driven operations. Logistically they could meet the standard of fighting for 72 hours but had significant institutional gaps and other supply challenges that made such a capability unreliable. ANASOC Commandos were capable night fighters, but at times they ignored their training and fought without technological advantages.

Like in Iraq, there was both little match in language training/cultural awareness of the advisors to the region and also general consensus that those skills did not substantially impact the combat effectiveness of the partner force. For most of the mission, Afghan languages were not part of the SF educational system, and even when they were, few advisors developed functionally proficient skills. Echoing similar comments from the missions in the Philippines and Iraq, SF advisors found ways to work around their lack of language skills. Many Afghans learned basic English, interpreters were widely available, and SF soldiers learned enough basic vocabulary to function effectively. A clear trend has developed that there seems to be little evidence that the regional match in language training and cultural awareness of the advisory force significantly influenced the combat effectiveness of their partner force.

Interviewees once again nearly universally reported the importance of consistency in advisor pairing, indicating that such steadiness became even more important as the mission's

duration increased. Unlike in the Philippines and Iraq, unity of effort challenges caused by command level decisions severely reduced consistency, much to the dismay of nearly every advisor interviewed. Stable and reliable pairings, when they occurred, allowed advisors to see through host nation attempts to delude advisors as well as enabled them to skip the initial phase of meeting leaders, building rapport, and learning unit capabilities. Such pairings also helped establish trust, fundamental to overcoming challenges of shame/honor societies such as those in Afghanistan.

The partner force to advisor ratio for the Commandos (16.4 to 1) was higher than with the ISOF (6.2:1) but lower than with the Light Reaction Regiment in the Philippines (29:1). Continuing a trend in the post 9/11 advisory efforts, the ratio was still several orders of magnitude lower than the doctrinal standard (50 to 75:1). Such a consistency provides further evidence of the value of reassessing that norm, while the variation between cases makes assessing the impact more difficult. Even though the partner to advisor ratio was lower than in the Philippines, creating the Commandos was a monumental effort, and the size of the force grown was far larger than any of the other cases in this study. That ratio was kept artificially low by a massive commitment of advisors, many of whom indicated that the mass production of the Commandos violated core SOF principles and directly impacted the unit's effectiveness.

Even though the U.S. conducted regime change by ousting the Taliban, SOF leaders waited for six years to begin building the Commandos and by then Afghanistan had regained considerable sovereignty. While SF advisors still had a considerable say in how the unit was equipped and organized, they lost much of the ability to influence who would join and lead the force and what qualifications would be required. That ability to influence decisions within the Commandos decreased more rapidly in Afghanistan than in Iraq, likely because advisors had let

the "sovereignty clock" run out during their late start. Like in both other cases, delayed efforts to stand up a host nation SOF headquarters had a marginal impact on the advisors' ability to affect change in the force.

Combat advising in Afghanistan tacked closely with the practice in Iraq, with little restrictions initially but some limitations later. Like in Iraq, advisors emphasized the importance of the practice, indicating that if they did not share the same risks as their partners, it would be difficult to establish credibility or evaluate their true capabilities. Some did note, however, that the extended duration of the war potentially caused the Commandos to become reliant on U.S. enablers, something that ultimately negatively impacted their combat effectiveness.

In Afghanistan, as in both other cases, the variable that seemingly had the least impact on whether a partner force became combat effective was the advisors' language training and cultural awareness. Displaying a parallel trend in all three cases, advisors reported that consistency in advisor pairing and the ability to combat advise each contributed significantly to the host nation unit's combat effectiveness. The ability to organize host nation forces, evinced by advisors' limited influence in Afghanistan and the Commandos' reduced effectiveness compared to the ISOF, likely shares similar importance. Lastly, Afghanistan's lower partner force to advisor ratio compared to the Philippines seemingly had little impact on the effectiveness of the partner force, calling into question what ratio is required to have an effect. The next case study will address Special Forces advisory efforts in El Salvador, a mission distinct from those examined so far due to its Cold War nature, overwhelming political restrictions, and small personnel commitment.

CHAPTER 5: BIRIs in El Salvador, 1981-1991

Background and Context:

Underscoring the country's difficult history, the Salvadoran poet Roque Dalton wrote, "We all (Salvadoreans) were born half-dead. We survive, half-alive."[1] Tragically, El Salvador has endured long periods of chaos and instability separated by brief phases of steadiness and calm. Until the 16th century, various Mesoamerican nations fought over the land that would later become the nation-state. Spain conquered and then governed the territory through 1821, when El Salvador obtained its independence after a series of regional insurrections. The promise of independence instead brought volatility and violence. El Salvador was briefly occupied by Mexico before it experimented combining with other Central American states to form regional republics, a trial that brought neither economic nor political stability. It became fully independent again in 1898 via a military coup, the first of many in the current phase of the country's existence. The trend of the military's involvement in politics persisted and officers ruled the country for most of its history, serving as presidents for 74 of the 100 years before the Civil War began.[2]

Roughly the size of Massachusetts, El Salvador is the most densely populated country in the Western Hemisphere with more than five million citizens squeezed into a thin slice of terrain 140km (88 miles) wide by 262 km (168 miles) long.[3] Gross inequities have dominated its domestic economic landscape, further contributing to the perilous state of the country's security. A small group of elites nicknamed the "fourteen families" that controlled most of El Salvador's

[1] The North American Congress on Latin America, "In the Beginning There Was the Coffee Oligarchy," NACLA, September 25, 2007, https://nacla.org/article/beginning-there-was-coffee-oligarchy.
[2] Patrick Paterson, *Training Surrogate Forces in International Humanitarian Law: Lessons from Peru, Colombia, El Salvador, and Iraq* (Tampa, FL: Joint Special Operations University, 2016), 61.
[3] Julio A. Montes, "El Salvador: The Last Battlefield in Central America," *International Defense Review*, September 1991, 915–18.

land and wealth have paired with the military to maintain their position in society since the nineteenth century. Two percent of the population controlled 60 percent of the land and an even higher percentage of the revenue.[4] Relations with El Salvador's neighbors were as fractious as its internal domestic politics, and in 1969 riots during the FIFA World Cup sparked a bloody 100 hour conflict with Honduras, The Soccer (Football) War.

Compared to Iraq and Afghanistan, El Salvador was ethnically homogenous. Spain's uninterrupted three century control of the country helped spread its language and culture, the latter of which became intertwined with and eventually indistinct from the native population's. As a result, by the 1980s the ethnic population was 89 percent mestizo (mixed European and native ancestry), 10 percent native, and one percent white. Nearly the entire population spoke Spanish, and unlike other Central and South American countries the native tribal ethnic and linguistic identities were not dominant factors.[5]

Terrain in El Salvador was very compartmented, mountainous, and heavily vegetated with few roads along the Salvadoran border with Honduras but was less rugged in the rest of the country. Owing in part to its compactness, it was relatively developed with road and highway networks.[6] The countryside is crisscrossed by rivers, many of them navigable. While the terrain was complicated, it was nowhere near as restrictive or difficult as Afghanistan. Agriculture was the primary economic driver, with crops of indigo, coffee, and cotton being most important.

Even before the U.S. acquired the terrain or statute to become a world power, it recognized its sphere of influence included Central America and the Caribbean. Economic

[4] The North American Congress on Latin America, "In the Beginning There Was the Coffee Oligarchy."
[5] Richard A. Haggarty, *El Salvador: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1988), http://countrystudies.us/el-salvador/21.htm.
[6] Charles H. Briscoe, "El Paraiso and the War in El Salvador (1981–1983)," *Veritas*, Summer 2007, https://arsof-history.org/articles/v3n1_paraiso_page_1.html.

concerns, including preservation of monopolies and access to markets, as well as security interests drove the American involvement. These interests were formally recognized in 1823, when President James Monroe issued the Monroe Doctrine, which declared that any attempt by European powers to extend their system or influence over any portion of the hemisphere would be seen as dangerous to the safety and security of the U.S. America's involvement in El Salvador's civil war fits squarely into that context, both from the perspective that it saw itself as the dominant power in the region and from the perspective that it would challenge any outside force- this time the Soviet Union- that attempted to interfere in its backyard.

The Cold War, Coup, and Civil War:

El Salvador's economic disparities, military governance, and lack of representation made it a fertile ground for insurgency and revolution. Already primed with dry kindling, the fraudulent election of General Humberto Romero in 1977 provided the spark to ignite armed insurrection. Salvadoran military forces responded to protests against Romero by opening fire on crowds of civilians, killing hundreds. A state of emergency, suspension of civil rights, and government sponsored death squads followed. Moderate Army officers partnered with civilians overthrew Romero in yet another coup in 1979, only to have their proposed reforms blocked by reactionary elements in the military. The capital's Archbishop was assassinated during mass, and four Catholic nuns from the U.S. were kidnapped, raped, and then murdered by Salvadoran security forces. Tens of thousands of civilians were killed in politically motivated violence from 1977 to 1981, the majority at the hands of government forces.[7] Such abuses strengthened the hands of rebel forces, which unified under the banner of the *Frente Farabundo Martí para la*

[7] Paterson, *Training Surrogate Forces in International Humanitarian Law*, 61–64.

Liberación Nacional (FMLN), at least partially at the behest of Cuba.[8] The Soviet Union recognized the opportunity to win propaganda and military victories, providing military assistance and training to the insurgents. Its proxies, Cuba and Vietnam, also provided military advisors, and Nicaragua provided a sanctuary for FMLN leaders and units to train and recuperate.

Worried that another Cold War domino might fall and concerned with the domestic political ramifications of "losing" El Salvador like the U.S. "lost" Nicaragua and Iran, the newly elected administration of Ronald Reagan decided to increase military assistance and boost the U.S. advisory effort. Not even a decade after the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam and barely five years since the fall of Saigon, they faced considerable domestic opposition to intervention. Seeing parallels between El Salvador and Vietnam, many in Congress sought to avoid getting drawn into a larger conflict. Because of this, the military effort in El Salvador experienced considerable Congressional oversight and restrictions. A limit of fifty-five advisors was agreed upon between administration and Congressional officials, and constraints were placed on them so that they would be barred from engaging in combat operations.[9]

As the mission unfolded, U.S. political leaders tasked the military to assess the situation and provide recommendations. Completed in 1981, a commission headed by U.S. Army Brigadier General Frederick F. Woerner provided a brutal assessment of the Salvadoran military's capabilities and prospects. The fall of the government was a distinct possibility, with the report noting, "the Salvadorans couldn't win the war with what they were doing."[10] Other

[8] Brian D'Haeseleer, *The Salvadoran Crucible: The Failure of U.S. Counterinsurgency in El Salvador, 1979-1992* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2017), 59.
[9] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Ted Mataxis, 15 January 2021. There is some indication that the idea for the 55 total advisors came from the speed limit then common across the US, which was 55 miles per hour.
[10] D'Haeseleer, *The Salvadoran Crucible*, 70.

members of the commission described the country's armed forces as, "a militia of 11,000 that had no mission," which spent most of its time "sitting in garrisons abusing civilians."[11] Defeat could be staved off, according to Woerner's report, by tripling the size of the Salvadoran Army combat forces, professionalizing its officer corps, instilling respect for human rights, and training it to conduct counterinsurgency operations.[12] Woerner provided three alternatives: a lengthy and costly "strategic victory" option, an offensive strategy that was slightly less expensive that aimed to gain the initiative, and lastly the least expensive "survival" option that aimed to merely prevent an FMLN victory. Shocked by the price tag of the first two options and fearful of the political challenges they would face in the wake of the Vietnam War,[13] the Reagan administration selected the survival option.[14]

As the survival option was carried out, the advisory effort in El Salvador split into two phases: a mobile training team (MTT) period from 1981-1984 and then a brigade advisor phase from 1984 until 1991. During the MTT phase, SF units (ODAs, ODBs, and even battalions) out of 7th Special Forces Group trained and advised host nation forces in El Salvador, neighboring countries, and in the continental U.S. MTTs constituted whole units that deployed together episodically and for short term deployments generally ranging from one to six months. Their focus was growing the El Salvadoran Armed Forces from its peacetime strength of around 11,000 troops to a wartime complement of roughly 42,000 men, and more than 40 Special Forces Mobile Training Teams (MTTs) were deployed across the three-year span to El Salvador itself.[15]

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[11] Paterson, *Training Surrogate Forces in International Humanitarian Law*, 67.
[12] Charles H. Briscoe, "El Paraiso and the War in El Salvador (1981–1983)."
[13] D'Haeseleer, *The Salvadoran Crucible*, 68–70. The Reagan administration was especially concerned that more extensive support would trigger the 1973 War Powers Act, which could potentially prompt a Congressional vote to shut down funding for the mission and end U.S. involvement.
[14] Richard D. Downie, *Learning from Conflict: The U.S. Military in Vietnam, El Salvador, and the Drug War* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1998), 133.
[15] Charles H. Briscoe, "El Paraiso and the War in El Salvador (1981–1983)."

In 1984, the effort shifted from growth to focusing more on the effectiveness of newly fielded units. Rather than episodic MTTs, each Salvadoran brigade was assigned two to four advisors for an entire year. The program was dubbed the Operational Planning and Assistance Training Team (OPATT), and the acronym became synonymous with the brigade advisor program. A standard complement included one SF or combat arms officer, one NCO, and one intelligence officer[16], and each of the individuals was generally chosen by an Army level selection process. In addition to OPATT, rotating MTTs continued to provide specific types of training that Salvadoran units needed, such as a local non-commissioned officer school, mortar, or scout training. At least 3-4 MTTs deployed per year, which was a stark reduction from the MTT phase.[17] Some growth continued in this phase, and the Salvadoran Armed Forces would eventually reach 56,000 troops.[18]

Creation of the BIRIs:

As noted in the Woerner report, the El Salvadoran military was poorly suited for the type of warfare that it would have to conduct. Like many armies that prepare for the last war, it was organized and trained to fight a conventional conflict in a repeat of the 1969 Football/Soccer War against Honduras. Its forces were well armed but poorly trained and had little mobility. Few units could conduct offensive operations and Army forces mostly performed static defense at checkpoints and critical infrastructure locations.[19] As such it was not prepared or equipped to fight guerrillas and Army officers understood little about counterinsurgency tactics.

[16] At first these were intended to be Military Intelligence branch officers, but after one rotation they were replaced with Operations and Intelligence qualified Special Forces NCOs.
[17] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Ted Mataxis, 15 January 2021.
[18] Robert D. Ramsey, *Advising Indigenous Forces: American Advisors in Korea, Vietnam, and El Salvador* (Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2012), 83.
[19] James S. Corum, "The Air War in El Salvador," *Aerospace Power Journal*, Summer 1998, 30.

Because it would be difficult to train and equip regular El Salvadoran Army units to that capability, American advisors decided it would be best to create new units modeled on what had been successful against insurgents in Bolivia, Colombia, and Venezuela: small, lightly armed and equipped, but highly mobile *Cazador* (hunter) battalions.[20] Ideally the battalions were to be made up of veteran soldiers who could deploy quickly from their garrison, but neither of those came to fruition and the battalions consisted of 250-350 conscripts. American and Venezuelan advisors trained the units in a compressed six-week program like what had been used by 8th Special Forces Group trainers in the 1960s with the original Venezuelan *Cazador* battalions and Bolivian Ranger units responsible for finding and killing Che Guevara.[21] Unfortunately, the situation and terrain were different in El Salvador and the FMLN units had progressed far beyond small patrols of guerrillas hiding in the jungle. By 1982, the FMLN had formed organized and well-armed battalions of 600 or more fighters that included crew served machine guns, snipers, and mortars. One advisor later observed, "It (the *Cazador* battalion) was a good concept for the Orinoco River Valley, Venezuela, vintage 1962, against that threat, on that terrain, and in that type of vegetation. This concept was not completely translatable to the Central American conflict, vintage 1983."[22] When facing the larger and more capable FMLN battalions, the *Cazador* units were torn to pieces because they were not large enough or trained sufficiently to fight the FMLN head on. Some advisors called the *Cazador* battalions "a creation of expedience." [23]

[20] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Dr. David Spencer, 22 January 2021.
[21] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL John Waghelstein, 25 January 2021.
[22] Charles H. Briscoe, "El Paraiso and the War in El Salvador (1981–1983)."
[23] Charles H. Briscoe, "San Miguel: The Attack on El Bosque," *Veritas*, Summer 2007, https://arsof-history.org/articles/v3n3_san_miguel_page_1.html.

To address this problem, the El Salvadoran military put two *Cazador* battalions together, creating a new organization named the BIATs (*Battalion Infanteria Anti-Terrorismo*- Anti Terrorism Battalions) comprised of 9 companies and around 600 men.[24] Those units still proved unequal to the task of fighting full strength FMLN battalions and were not sufficiently mobile to pursue them. What was needed were elite units that were much more highly trained than the *Cazador* or BIATs, also but extremely mobile and capable of conducting offensive operations. The American and Salvadoran answer was the *Batallones de Infantería de Reacción Inmediata* (Quick Reaction Infantry Battalions), commonly known as BIRIs. A total of five BIRIs were stood up, and rather than six weeks, each BIRI received six months of intensive training by SF advisors before being deployed. They would be equipped with brand-new American military equipment but still meet the requirements of being highly mobile, able to face FMLN battalions in combat, and conduct offensive operations. 4 UH-1 H helicopters were made available to each BIRI to assist in mobility. BIRIs were made up of 6-9 companies and 900-1200 soldiers and functioned like U.S. Ranger units in practice.[25] Together the two units formed the core of Salvadoran strategy, with the BIATs acting as an anvil to fix FMLN organizations or prevent their freedom of movement and BIRIs acting as hammers to strike and destroy them.[26] BIRIs were under the control of the Salvadoran General Staff, the *Estado Mayor*, but in practical terms they were based within the area of operations of the six Army brigades, often at the same base as the brigade headquarters.[27] BIRIs acted as firefighters, checking in and operating under the command of the military zone/district which required assistance, and then returning to their original base to refit once the danger from FMLN units had subsided. At times, if the district

[24] Cecil Bailey, "ESAF OB," Unpublished article, 3 August 2021.
[25] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Dr. David Spencer, 22 January 2021.
[26] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Wayne (Pat) Richardson, 20 January 2021.
[27] Briscoe, "San Miguel: The Attack on El Bosque."

where they were based was having security problems, they would operate out of their own garrison. Because of the construct of the American advisor presence and its fixed limit at 55 personnel, after their initial training, some BIRIs received considerable attention and partnership with SF soldiers, while others received little to none.

Survival and Peace:

The November 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall signaled the beginning of what would be a rapid collapse of the Soviet Union and its Eastern Bloc allies. In August 1991, several former Soviet Republics declared their independence and by the end of the year the Soviet Union had formally dissolved and was replaced by the Russian state.[28] Accompanying that dizzying collapse was the evaporation of financial, military, and psychological support for Marxist insurgencies worldwide. Without that assistance, the FMLN had no hope of achieving victory. At the same time, the U.S. considered suspending funds to its ally, surprised by FMLN success in their 1989 offensive and embarrassed by sustained human rights abuses by government forces.[29] Domestically in El Salvador, the war had been fought to a standstill and both sides were exhausted. El Salvador's infrastructure and people were devastated, with nearly a million people out of a population of 5.4 million displaced and hundreds of thousands of homes destroyed.[30] Both sides were enthusiastic to end the conflict, which was completed by the Chapultepec Peace Accords in January 1992. The agreement required the FMLN to disband and transition to a political party; the Army to shrink to half its size; and the judicial and electoral systems to reform. As part of accords, all the BIRIs were forced to demobilize. Despite the devastation and

[28] Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute and United States Department of State, "The Collapse of the Soviet Union," MILESTONES: 1989–1992, accessed September 30, 2021, https://history.state.gov/milestones/1989-1992/collapse-soviet-union.
[29] Downie, *Learning from Conflict*, 142.
[30] C'esar A. Chelala, "Central America's Health Plight," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 22, 1990, https://www.csmonitor.com/1990/0322/echel.html.

the inability of government forces to defeat the FMLN, America had achieved its strategic objective of preventing the fall of the government.

Introduction of the Independent Variables:

To assess the combat effectiveness of the BIRIs this study will assess five variables: consistency in advisor pairing, language training and cultural awareness, partner force to advisor ratio, the degree to which advisors can organize or control host nation forces, and the ability to combat advise.

Consistency in Advisor Pairing: "Living the Dream and It Was the Only War We Had."

Overall, there was a medium level of consistency in advisor pairing across the span of the El Salvador mission. Even though there were two very distinct phases of the advisory effort, many of the same officers and NCOs returned for numerous deployments.[31] Indeed, many advisors returned for three or four rotations, coming to know the country and its peculiarities to the point where they would openly complain to their comrades, "(I am being sent to) El Paraiso again, I hate that place!"[32]

This occurred for a variety of reasons. First, because the regionally oriented 3rd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (hereafter 3/7) was stationed in Panama, a vast majority of the advisors came from that unit.[33] Because the unit was based in the area of responsibility of U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), the USSOUTHCOM Commander in Chief (CINC), had operational control of the unit and could assign it to missions without having to go through the Army bureaucracy in Washington and at the U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) headquarters. In essence, he "owned" the unit and could- and did- assign it to missions within

[31] Far more NCOs returned for multiple tours than officers, although some officers did deploy multiple times.
[32] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Cecil Bailey, 21 September 2020.
[33] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Ted Mataxis, 15 January 2021. Several advisors (both within and outside 3/7) estimated that roughly half of the advisors were from 3/7 across the entire mission.

his theater at will. Furthermore, because U.S. Special Operations Command and its subordinate Theater Special Operations Command (TSOC), Special Operations Command South (SOCSOUTH), played almost no part in the selection process,[34] assigning 3/7 members to the El Salvador advisory effort was relatively streamlined. One former officer in 3/7 noted, "to put it into context, we have to realize that not only did we not have theater SOCs (Special Operations Commands), we had no USASOC (U.S. Army Special Operations Command), we had no USACAPOC (U.S. Army Civil Affairs Psychological Operations Command, we had no USSOCOM … (as such) the commander of the 3rd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group in Panama informally wore the hat of the UW (Unconventional Warfare) advisor to the CinC SOUTH."[35] Because of that role, the 3/7 commander had considerable influence in the assignment of units to missions within USSOUTHCOM.

This construct that fast tracked assignment of units and individuals from 3/7 to El Salvador was fully supported by leaders within the battalion. When possible taskings across USSOUTHCOM began to be circulated, 3/7 leaders consistently picked the El Salvador mission first since they saw it as the most dangerous, challenging, and important mission within the area of responsibility. Additional missions, such as Honduras and elsewhere across Latin America, were bypassed and given to other battalions in 7th Group. Honduras demanded a commitment of an entire company of advisors, and with 3/7 bypassing that mission, it meant statistically that the pool of personnel focused on El Salvador was further reduced.[36] To highlight the importance of

[34] USSOCOM was created in 1987 and had no impact on the selection process until that time, even past that time, the impact was negligible. While a SOF coordination cell existed in all the CINCs, it was led by a colonel, which was the same rank as the 7th Group commander, and he had little political clout as a result.
[35] Lt. Col. Geoffrey Lambert, Lt. Col. Frank Pedrozo, and Col. J.S. Roach, "Interview: Special Forces in El Salvador," *Special Warfare*, October 1993. The quotation here if from LTC (later LTG) Geoffrey Lambert.
[36] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Wayne (Pat) Richardson, 20 January 2021. At the time, each SF group had only nine maneuver companies, and with one committed full time to Honduras, only 8 remained in the pool for potential commitment to El Salvador.

the mission to 3/7, interviewees recalled that one 3/7 battalion commander gave his operations officer a verbal directive to never turn down any El Salvador mission.[37] Another remarked, "3/7 was very parochial about who went to El Salvador. They didn't want any 1st or 2nd Battalion (7th SF Group) guys there."[38] Combined, these factors resulted in a near monopoly on 3/7 providing advisors to the mission, with one officer recalling that 35 of the 55 advisors during the OPATT phase were consistently from 3/7.[39]

Another factor in consistency was that for most of the mission, only three Special Forces Groups existed: 1st and 3rd Groups were reactivated in 1984 and 1990, respectively.[40] This meant that the entire Special Forces enterprise and pool of potential advisors was 20-40% smaller during the conflict in El Salvador when compared to the post 9/11 period. It also meant that the three active-duty groups, including 7th Group, also had to split responsibilities for Asia and Africa (which after the two new groups stood up became their geographic purview). As a result, components of the other two battalions in 7th Group (1st and 2nd) were regionally focused on Korea, the Caribbean, and parts of Africa, which further centered 3/7 on Central America.[41]

Consistency also occurred because advisors saw the mission in El Salvador as personally rewarding. Many advisors returned time after time because to them, what they did in country was exactly the reason that they volunteered to join the SF regiment. Day in and day out, advisors lived, ate, and sometimes fought shoulder to shoulder with the host nation forces they

[37] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Ed Reeder, 17 December 2020.
[38] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Francisco Pedrozo, 8 September 2020.
[39] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Kevin Higgins, 30 September 2020.
[40] "3rd Special Forces Group," Military.com, accessed August 20, 2021, https://www.military.com/special-operations/3rd-special-forces-group.html; J. M. Simpson, "1st Special Forces Group (Airborne) Celebrates 30th Anniversary of Unit Reactivation," Northwest Military.com, September 5, 2014, http://www.northwestmilitary.com/news/news-front/2014/09/1st-Special-Forces-Group-Airborne-celebrates-30th-anniversary-of-unit-reactivation-at-Joint-Base-Lew/.
[41] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Wayne (Pat) Richardson, 20 January 2021.

advised. There was no dedicated air support, there was no transportation, and no U.S. mess hall. If they came under attack, support would have to come from El Salvadoran forces. In the era before email and mobile phones, advisors might not see or hear from their higher headquarters for months. By default, they had considerable autonomy and authority to make decisions on their own.[42] News from the embassy would take at least two days to arrive, as did mail- both personal and official. Due to travel challenges, advisors were only allowed rest and recuperation once every thirty days- and then for a single weekend in the capitol. Years later, one interviewee nostalgically described his advisory mission as, "living the dream."[43]

A second factor that made El Salvador especially attractive to SF advisors was that during the Cold War 1980s, the advisory mission was seen as an opportunity to deploy to combat, even though it wasn't formally sanctioned as a conflict by the U.S. government. When advisors returned from their deployments, they passed on tales of their experiences being engaged by enemy fire, calling in artillery support, and rallying El Salvadoran soldiers during combat. Those events represented the ultimate professional achievements for nearly all Special Forces personnel- being tested by the crucible of combat. As such, numerous SF personnel leapt at the opportunity presented in El Salvador and many volunteered multiple times to return as advisors. Describing this influence one advisor noted, "It was the only war we had."[44] Displaying the importance of this factor, another relayed that during the 1980s deploying to combat was "a big deal. It (El Salvador) was the only war in town."[45] Another described his intense desire to join the effort in El Salvador because he "missed" the Vietnam War and noted that his deployment there was the only time during his career that he carried a loaded weapon

[42] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Mike Hennelly, 14 January 2021.
[43] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Wayne (Pat) Richardson, 20 January 2021.
[44] Interview, Frank Sobchak with BG Hector Pagan, 5 January 2021.
[45] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Francisco Pedrozo, 8 September 2020.

every day of the mission.[46] Others described contemporaries who were assigned to other SF Groups not involved in the mission in El Salvador (such as 10th, which was focused on Europe) that taught themselves Spanish in their spare time so as to be able to join the mission and go to combat.[47]

The missions in El Salvador were so sought after by individuals and units that it created competition within the SF battalions to be chosen to deploy. Commanders often published careful selection criteria to determine who would be picked for the mission, and individuals and units fought to prove themselves worthy of the assignment. Whatever team or individual performed the best in pre-mission training or other assessments was selected. Language training often was a criterion, and test scores or oral interviews or pre-mission briefings in Spanish were frequently part of the process. Interviewees noted that unlike other U.S. advisory efforts, one was not selected haphazardly for the mission.[48]

In addition to being a competitive criterion for whom was selected on the mission, language also played a part in increasing the consistency in advisor pairing. Surprisingly there was not a large pool of US Spanish speaking officers, and the initial language requirement had to be lowered to be able to fill the advisor requirements.[49] Because there were so few officers that met the requirement even after it was lowered, those that did returned for multiple tours. Such a similar shortage of Spanish speakers did not exist among NCOs, but consistency was seen as important by the leadership who assigned them to the mission and many also returned year after year.[50]

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[46] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Mike Hennelly, 14 January 2021.
[47] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Ted Mataxis, 15 January 2021.
[48] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Kevin Higgins, 30 September 2020.
[49] Ramsey, *Advising Indigenous Forces*, 93.
[50] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Leamon Ratterree, 5 January 2021.

Various factors played against the momentum towards consistency. First, while the mission was nearly universally seen as personally rewarding by SF officers and NCOs, there was a consensus that it was not professionally rewarding. For officers in particular, the Army's centralized promotion system deterred some advisors from coming back to serve multiple tours. During the OPATT phase, most positions were for majors or senior captains (frocked as majors). For officers of those ranks to be promoted, they had to serve in tactical units and hold key positions such as the battalion executive officer or operations officer as well as to attend the Command and General Staff College at Ft. Leavenworth. That meant that they would have to leave their advisor duty and "punch their ticket" by filling those positions.[51] Worse, within the Army system, serving as an advisor was not considered a key position that would accelerate promotion. As one interviewee observed, if you wanted a successful career and sustained promotions, you couldn't go to El Salvador and serve as an advisor for a couple of years. The Army promotion system was simply not that flexible and not set up to recognize the importance of that consistency. More bluntly he noted, "People who sit on promotion boards did not do those (advisory) jobs."[52] Doing repeated tours was somewhat easier for NCOs as their career paths generally had more flexibility, but some officers were afraid of serving as OPATT advisors for fear of hurting their career. Some of those who did choose to return for multiple tours were able to successfully navigate the system carefully and still get promoted, while others simply chose not to care about their own promotions.

A much larger challenge to maintaining consistency in advisor pairing came from the Salvadorans themselves. Across the span of the war, the El Salvadoran military had two-year conscription, and in many cases entire units were drafted at the same time *en masse*. This

[51] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Wayne (Pat) Richardson, 20 January 2021.
[52] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Cecil Bailey, 21 September 2020.

process included even the elite BIRIs, which received better equipment, more training and additional advisory focus. When the two-year obligation concluded, often nearly the entire organization mustered out of the service at the same time. Some officers and, in rare cases, a handful of NCOs remained past their commitment, but in general entire units simply dissolved. The process was so consistent that the FMLN knew when certain units were going to muster out and planned their offensive operations around those dates, knowing that certain units would have shifted from veteran status to new and inexperienced.[53] This was far different than other cases because in other countries soldiers joined the elite units on an individual basis, creating more stability and a more effective way to pass on knowledge and experience. El Salvador's conscription procedure dramatically affected consistency because even though many of the same Americans returned for rotation after rotation, compared to other cases, fewer of the same host nation forces remained in the BIRIs to be their partners. As an example, when BIRI Atlacatl was formed, 1,383 soldiers participated in training, but after the two-year period of mandatory service, only 250 remained.[54] With fewer of the same host nation personnel remaining, often the Americans had to start from scratch with the new personnel.

Assessing the Impact of the Variable:

Like every other case, there was agreement that in a perfect world there should have been more consistency between advisors and host nation forces. Even the single yearlong rotations were seen as not sufficient by many key leaders. Ambassador Thomas Pickering believed that because it took considerable time for new advisors to become familiar with the environment in El Salvador, long and repeated tours were the only solution to the challenges the mission faced. During a post-conflict interview he observed the mission, "had an enormous problem with …

[53] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Leamon Ratterree, 5 January 2021.
[54] D'Haeseleer, *The Salvadoran Crucible*, 72–73.

longer tours for military personnel. I felt that we were constantly running people through there who had to relearn. The one-year tour (advisor) did not become effective for four to six months, and it was a tragedy that we did this. … In a sense, we were constantly re-learning old lessons."[55] To Pickering and many interviewees, if the advisor did not return for a second rotation, their replacement would likely be starting over again and wasting time learning the basics of the mission and the unit with which they worked.

Other advisors reiterated this point, noting that as a rule the longer an advisor served in El Salvador, the more effective they were. "An advisor who is only there once doesn't see the entirety of the picture and it is easy to get frustrated or discouraged. They don't know where the unit has come from."[56] Multiple tours allowed advisors to understand the unit organization, the terrain, and how the FMLN fought, and more importantly it connected them with key El Salvadoran officers that could help them facilitate challenging parts of the mission. As some observed, the familiarity built over multiple missions, especially if it was connecting with the same officers, helped advisors to be able to develop the trust necessary to have difficult conversations with their partners about problems with their units. At the same time, some advisors noted that consistency also had a continuum where on the other side of effectiveness, some advisors went native and stopped focusing on US objectives and methodology and only focused on the goals and objectives of the host nation leadership.[57]

At times, consistency not only paid dividends during the initial advisory effort, but it also continued to pay returns far in the future. Near the beginning of his career, MG Simeon

[55] Ramsey, *Advising Indigenous Forces*, 90. Pickering was U.S. ambassador to El Salvador from 1983-1985. Some of his frustration came from the disparity to State Department diplomatic tours, which ranged from two to four years in length.
[56] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Francisco Pedrozo, 8 September 2020.
[57] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Ted Mataxis, 15 January 2021.

Trombitas served as a brigade advisor during the U.S. mission in El Salvador and became friends with many of the unit's officers and NCOs. More than a decade later, one of those lieutenants had become the commander of El Salvador's solitary airborne battalion during its deployment to Iraq- by happenstance while then BG Trombitas was the senior advisor to the Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service. Several years after that, the El Salvadoran officer had risen to become the commanding general of the El Salvadoran Army at a time when Trombitas was serving as the Commander of U.S. Army South (USARSO).[58] The interpersonal relationships and bonds built during the Cold War advisory effort helped Trombitas quickly reestablish connections with his friend and deal with sensitive and difficult subjects more easily.

Language Training and Cultural Awareness:

Degree of Match

Like in the Philippines, there was a consistent and complete match between the regional orientation of the SF Groups and individuals assigned to conduct the advisory missions in El Salvador, resulting in a high rating for the variable. Demonstrated skills in Spanish and an understanding of the cultures in Latin and Central America were a baseline requirement for all advisors and, unlike all the other case studies, interpreters were not provided. No SF unit other than 7th Special Forces Group, the regionally affiliated unit, contributed forces in any significant amount.

During the first phase of the war, when advising was conducted primarily by mobile training teams, every Special Forces unit that conducted the mission came from a Latin American regionally oriented battalion within 7th Group. As previously noted, the vast majority of those units were part of 3rd battalion, which was forward deployed in Panama at the time, a

[58] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Simeon Trombitas, 15 September 2020.

fact which further strengthened the SF operators' Spanish language skills and cultural awareness. Three explanations dominated the narrative among interviewees of why this occurred, all of which were intertwined with the consistency of advisor pairing. First, because 3rd battalion was forward deployed, U.S. Southern Command was able to task the regionally oriented unit without significant interference from the Army bureaucracy. Second, since the mission in El Salvador was considered the closest thing to combat that most advisors would experience during their careers, 7th Group carefully guarded the assignment of its units to the mission and blocked any other unit from providing forces or individuals. Finally, unlike other case studies that are set in the period of the post 9/11 wars, in the 1980s the mission in El Salvador not only faced no other competition from other significant advisory efforts, it also was extremely small. With an imposed cap of only 55 advisors, those in command of the mission were able to be more selective and ensure those involved had the appropriate language and cultural awareness skills. There was no need to "spread the wealth" among other SF groups that did not speak the language to give advisors a break.

During the second phase of the advisory effort, when individual advisors were assigned to brigades as part of the OPATT mission, demonstrated Spanish proficiency on the Defense Language Proficiency Test was a mandatory prerequisite. Initially the requirement was for advisors to have scored at the 3/3 level,[59] which equates to general proficiency defined as, "able to speak the language with sufficient structural accuracy and vocabulary to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations in practical, social and professional topics. Nevertheless, the individual's limitations generally restrict the professional contexts of language

[59] Ramsey, *Advising Indigenous Forces*, 89.

use to matters of shared knowledge and/or international convention."[60] With a relatively large population of native Spanish speaking personnel within Special Forces, ensuring that advisors had the requisite skills was generally attainable, especially among non-commissioned officers. However, the requirement proved more difficult for officers, and the prerequisite was changed in 1983 so that it would allow those who attained a minimum score of 2/2 (limited working proficiency) to be accepted as advisors with a waiver.[61] That skill level was defined as, "Able to satisfy routine social demands and limited work requirements. … The individual can get the gist of most everyday conversations but has some difficulty understanding native speakers in situations that require specialized or sophisticated knowledge."[62] There was no evidence that anyone under a 2/2 level was accepted as an advisor.

Even past the formal testing requirements, leaders and organizations added informal conditions for selection as an advisor during both phases of the mission. Within 7th Special Forces Group, units underwent intense language preparation before deploying. Detachments trained as a unit for four months practicing Spanish and only the units that performed the best were slated for the MTT missions.[63] Even after completing the training, the assessment continued. Group commanders at all levels mandated that briefings to obtain their approval for units to deploy to El Salvador were to be conducted in Spanish. During the briefing, each member of the team discussed his portion of the operation, and if a soldier's Spanish was not deemed strong enough, they simply were dropped from the mission.[64]

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[60] U.S. Government Interagency Language Roundtable, "Interagency Language Roundtable Language Skill Level Descriptions," accessed April 6, 2021, https://www.govtilr.org/Skills/ILRscale4.htm.
[61] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Ted Mataxis, 15 January 2021. Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Simeon Trombitas, 15 September 2020. Ramsey, in *Advising Indigenous Forces,* also confirms this change.
[62] U.S. Government Interagency Language Roundtable, "Interagency Language Roundtable Language Skill Level Descriptions."
[63] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW3 Dave Hulsey, 4 January 2021.
[64] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Wayne (Pat) Richardson, 20 January 2021.

Upon arriving in El Salvador, units selected for the MTT mission and individuals assigned to the OPATT effort were evaluated yet again by the Military Advisor Group (MILGRP) leadership. Several advisors reported firsthand knowledge of individuals being rejected and returned to their home station after failing that assessment. "The MILGRP were real sticklers for people being able to speak Spanish. … They would go check you out and if your Spanish was not up to par, before you could even unload your bags, they sent you back."[65] Another noted that even if somehow an advisor tested well but did not speak Spanish capably enough to function in El Salvador, they were sent home. He recalled that his predecessor had only lasted for two days before being redeployed because the El Salvadoran leaders that he worked with could not understand him.[66]

Assessment of Impact:

In contrast to all the previous cases, advisors in El Salvador nearly universally highlighted the importance or even criticality of speaking the language of the host nation. While the cause of this difference deserves further research, it is important to note that in El Salvador, unlike the other cases, Spanish was the only official language and there were few native dialects spoken. English speaking skills inside the El Salvadoran military were limited, and one advisor reported that in his entire brigade only two soldiers spoke English.[67] The relative difficulty of the different languages could also have played a role. Spanish is a category I language according to the DOD Round table, meaning that it was in the easiest category and considerably simpler to learn than languages such as Arabic, Dari, or Pashto.[68] The relative ease of learning Spanish, as

[65] Interview, Frank Sobchak with BG Hector Pagan, 5 January 2021.
[66] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Wayne (Pat) Richardson, 20 January 2021.
[67] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Simeon Trombitas, 15 September 2020.
[68] "DLI's Language Guidelines," AUSA, August 1, 2010, https://www.ausa.org/articles/dlis-language-guidelines.

well as its primacy across Latin America, makes it organizationally easier for 7th Group to focus and train on that language.

Regardless of the cause of this divergence between cases, there was little disagreement amongst interviewees about the importance of Spanish skills and cultural awareness to the advisory effort. Interviewees noted, "to be able to advise, you have to be able to talk to them,"[69] and, "to properly advise you have to know who is who and to be able to speak the language and know the culture."[70] Advisors opined that while language helped build bridges and establish rapport, it was also essential to the effectiveness of advising. Without proper communication skills, "you could talk to guys, and they would nod their head, but then when you asked questions, they didn't understand a thing you said."[71] Many advisors warned that in the heat of combat it was essential to be able to communicate with the host nation immediately, when seconds mattered. Others commented that speaking Spanish had additional advantages because, "the better your Spanish skills the more you were able to get inside the head of the officer that you are advising so that you could think the same way they would, which allows you to understand and anticipate needs."[72]

The lack of English-speaking Salvadoran forces in some ways made speaking Spanish essential. "If I tried to talk to my brigade commander through an interpreter, that would have been the end of me simply because he would not have put up with it."[73] Another advisor noted that, "you couldn't communicate in English. There might be someone in the brigade who spoke a few words of English, but if you didn't speak Spanish, you were dead in the water."[74] Such a

[69] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Wayne (Pat) Richardson, 20 January 2021.
[70] Interview, Frank Sobchak with BG Hector Pagan, 5 January 2021.
[71] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Francisco Pedrozo, 8 September 2020.
[72] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL John Waghelstein, 25 January 2021.
[73] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Francisco Pedrozo, 8 September 2020.
[74] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Hy Rothstein, 12 October 2020.

condition, which was distinct from the other cases where interpreters were widely available or host nation forces could translate or spoke English, undoubtedly highlighted the importance of language to the advisors.

Some interviewees gave examples of when visiting officers or advisors did not have the requisite language skills and it adversely affected the mission. This usually occurred when the U.S. military deployed technical experts to assist Salvadoran forces, usually in the fields of intelligence or communications. In 1984, during negotiations for the Central American peace process, one SF advisor noted that the interpreter provided by the Organization for American States was not providing an accurate translation to the commander of the U.N. observer force- who himself spoke no Spanish. The interpreter was ordered home and a Spanish speaking officer was quickly deployed instead.[75] On another occasion, the Army sent an officer considered to be the best in tactical intelligence capabilities to serve as the senior advisor to the *Estado Mayor* (General Staff) even though he spoke little Spanish. In less than a month, the El Salvadoran officers had ostracized him because he could not communicate with them. An SF advisor was called to help him, and soon after the original officer was sent home.[76]

There were few dissenting voices, and even those who did not insist on the absolute importance of being able to speak Spanish still noted that it brought great value to an advisor in the conduct of his mission. Dissenters pointed out that individual skills, knowledge, and experience mattered as much as being able to speak Spanish. "It is a handicap not to speak the language. But most places are worried about what you do and what you show them what you can do for them more than the language."[77] Others observed that because so few of the host

[75] Email from LTC (ret) Cecil Bailey to Frank Sobchak, 28 July 2021.
[76] Email from LTC (ret) Cecil Bailey to Frank Sobchak, 1 August 2021.
[77] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Ted Mataxis, 15 January 2021.

nation forces spoke English, advisors were immersed and forced to consistently speak Spanish. As a result, even if advisors had a workable knowledge of Spanish at the beginning of the mission, over the duration of their deployment their Spanish improved significantly.

Partner Force to Advisor Ratio:

At first glance, it would appear that the calculation of the partner force to advisor ratio for El Salvador would be relatively straightforward. Theoretically the denominator, representing the number of advisors present, should be fixed at 55 based on the force structure cap implemented by the Department of Defense. Because of intense political and media pressure, excruciating efforts were made to ensure the cap was not exceeded. One advisor noted that during his rotation three SF advisors were asked to leave the country for several days to be able to bring in three other advisors who were there to conduct specialized training. Those in El Salvador were put on leave, packed their bags, and quickly flown out of the country. As soon as the new set of advisors completed their task and left, the original advisors were flown back in and resumed their mission.[78] There was intense Congressional oversight and one MILGRP leader recalled that whenever lawmakers visited, the politicians inevitably asked to see the list of advisors and counted them to make sure the 55-person limit was not being exceeded.[79]

While the official requirement was clear that there should be only 55 advisors in El Salvador, some ambiguities allowed more than two times that number to usually be present in the country.[80] During the interagency process in El Salvador, embassy and military leaders agreed upon a set of arcane rules to determine who would count against the 55-person ceiling. First, some soldiers who were in the country on short temporary duty assignments were not counted

[78] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Leamon Ratterree, 5 January 2021.
[79] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Mike Hennelly, 14 January 2021.
[80] Interview, Frank Sobchak with BG Hector Pagan, 5 January 2021. Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Francisco Pedrozo, 8 September 2020.

against the advisory effort. There is conflicting information on exactly how long an assignment would need to be to be counted,[81] but strong enough evidence to indicate such a rule was in place.[82] Second, soldiers who were conducting humanitarian or non-combat training also did not count against the advisor cap. Under that interpretation, SF medics training El Salvadoran troops on combat casualty treatment and first aid or serving in brigade hospitals were not counted against the limitations.[83] Similarly, SF engineer sergeants conducting training on how to find and remove minefields also did not count. Nevertheless, while the 55-person cap did not stop interpretations that perhaps stretched the original intent of the rule, it did serve to prevent those numbers from becoming so large that they would trigger Congressional intervention.

The rules associated with what counted towards the number of in-country advisors were not the only factor that made calculation of the partner force to advisor ratio more complex than simply using a fixed value of 55 in the denominator. Any training conducted outside El Salvador did not count towards the force cap, a loophole that the U.S. military recognized and exploited. Several advisors noted that the cap specifically led to decisions to conduct training outside the country, and all the BIRIs except one benefitted from having more advisors during their initial training as a result.[84]

The first BIRI, Atlacatl, was named after a legendary indigenous ruler in Mesoamerica during the Spanish conquest and trained in El Salvador from March to August 1981 with Special Forces MTTs. As a result, the force cap greatly limited the number of advisors that could train the battalion and most SF leaders concluded that conducting training inside El Salvador was not

[81] Most evidence indicates the cutoff to be counted was ten days. Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Roy Trumble, 18 September 2020.
[82] Downie, *Learning from Conflict*, 145. Downie indicates that individuals on temporary duty for under 14 days in El Salvador were not counted.
[83] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Ted Mataxis, 15 January 2021.
[84] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL John Waghelstein, 25 January 2021.

the best option. Planners immediately began searching for other locations to train so that it would not be constrained by the rules in El Salvador.

As a result, the second BIRI, Ramon Belloso, was trained in the United States at Fort Bragg, North Carolina by 7th SF Group from January to June 1982 with a massive effort in personnel and cost. To recognize the importance of their instructors, the Salvadorans adopted the green beret with a red flash, 7th SF Group's headgear, as their own but earned the nickname "the gringo battalion" from their countrymates.[85] In addition to being a way to circumvent the 55-advisor cap, BIRI training was shifted to the U.S. because constant conflict inside El Salvador made training complicated. During the training of the first BIRI, Salvadoran officers had halted training to take "everyone with a rifle" straight into combat operations, leaving the SF advisors temporarily unemployed.[86] Recruits were sent into battle with little training, the equivalent of, "sending an armed mob out to fight well-trained and disciplined guerrillas," with the expected disastrous results.[87]

An entire SF battalion with considerable augmentation was committed to the mission, with approximately 220 advisors.[88] The training cost the U.S. more than $8 million, which if it had been spent in El Salvador, could have trained six to eight battalions for the same price.[89] Additionally, many advisors believed that training in the U.S. offered too many distractions such as alcohol, movies, and other temptations to repeat such a cycle.[90] Training inside the U.S. was also more complicated for the SF advisors, who were able to return to their homes after training

[85] Email from LTC (ret) Kalev Sepp to Frank Sobchak, 28 September 2020. Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Wayne (Pat) Richardson, 20 January 2021.
[86] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Leamon Ratterree, 5 January 2021.
[87] Email from MSG Chris Zets to Frank Sobchak, 23 December 2020.
[88] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Cecil Bailey, 21 September 2020. Email, MSG Chris Zets to Frank Sobchak, 26 December 2020.
[89] Ramsey, *Advising Indigenous Forces*, 84.
[90] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Cecil Bailey, 21 September 2020.

was concluded for the day. As a result of all these factors, military leaders decided not to repeat BIRI training in the U.S.

With American military leaders concluding that training in the U.S. was not the best solution, they continued to experiment with different locations. As part of the process to find the best solution to create BIRIs quickly, effectively, and with minimum cost, the third BIRI, Atonal, was trained in Panama. A full company in 3rd Battalion 7th Special Forces Group, which at the time was five ODAs, was dedicated to the effort.[91] Because of the pressure to produce the battalion in time to be ready to protect the El Salvadoran elections in April 1982, its training was abridged to only ten weeks rather than the normal six months.[92]

The next BIRI, Eusebio Bracamonte, was trained in Honduras at the CREM (*Centro Regional de Entrenamiento Militar*), or RMTC (Regional Military Training Center).[93] Like before, the training lasted six months from June to December 1983 and involved a considerable advisory element from 7th SF Group. In addition to not being counted against the 55-person cap, training was conducted in Honduras because it was a relatively relaxed environment where the soldiers did not have to worry about being attacked during training. While there was a guerrilla threat in Honduras, it was nothing compared to the challenges of conducting training in El Salvador itself. An entire special forces company of six ODAs, augmented by one additional ODA conducted the training, amounting to roughly 90 SF trainers for the span of the mission.[94] The training in Honduras was short lived because of the enmity between El Salvador and Honduras from the brutal Soccer War. Neither country was entirely comfortable with the

[91] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Wayne (Pat) Richardson, 20 January 2021. A company headquarters plus 5 ODAs would likely result in the Atonal being trained by approximately 70 advisors.
[92] Charles H. Briscoe, "El Paraiso and the War in El Salvador (1981–1983)."
[93] Email from CSM Chris Zets to Frank Sobchak, 22 December 2020.
[94] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW3 Dave Hulsey, 4 January 2021.

location of the training, and it had taken considerable political capital on the part of the U.S. to get both countries to agree to the concept.[95] Cost was also a factor, and while training in Honduras was not as expensive as in the U.S., it was still two to three times as expensive as training in El Salvador. While much of the tab was picked up by U.S. military aid programs, a significant portion was still paid for by the El Salvadoran military, and they sought to make their limited funds go as far as possible.[96]

After experimenting with a different option for each of the first four BIRIs, SF advisors decided that the best option would be to train the final BIRI, Manuel José Arce, in Panama from October to March 1983.[97] 3rd Battalion, 7th SF Group committed a company to the effort, approximately 80 advisors, and the training lasted for six months. In some ways, training there benefitted from many of the same advantages of being in the U.S. as Panama was 3rd Battalion's base and its training facilities and ranges were top quality, but without the high costs of being in the U.S.

Other types of training were also conducted outside El Salvador, thereby bypassing the force cap and increasing the number of advisors that worked with the BIRIs. Training for special skills such as mortar platoons and scouts went to bases in the U.S. as small groups, and individuals from the BIRIs went to leadership and specialized training at Fort Bragg, Fort Benning, and other locations across the U.S on a consistent basis.[98] ODAs trained BIRI leaders

[95] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Mike Hennelly, 14 January 2021.
[96] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL John Waghelstein, 25 January 2021.
[97] Briscoe, "San Miguel: The Attack on El Bosque."
[98] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Leamon Ratterree, 5 January 2021. Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Mike Hennelly, 14 January 2021.

in RECONDO (light infantry long range reconnaissance) tactics and groups of 30 hand-picked BIRI soldiers attended SF led Ranger courses in Panama.[99]

To determine the number of advisors working with BIRIs, all those amounts must be totaled: those in El Salvador (reported to be consistently double the 55-person force cap), those in the U.S., and those in Panama. Altogether, a good estimate of that sum would be 130 advisors, which applies to every month of the operation. While it almost certainly varied over time, it would be nearly impossible to find the exact amounts and the approximate value serves as a best estimate. During the specific months that individual BIRIs were stood up outside of El Salvador, additional advisors were added to that total based on the size of the force involved in training.

Assessing El Salvadoran Personnel Strength:

The historical record of the actual strength of the BIRIs is confusing and unclear. While most sources agree that the authorized strength of the units was in the range of 1,000 soldiers, there is considerable debate about the number of Salvadorans who were present for duty on a regular basis.[100] Although the Salvadoran Army did not have a generous leave policy like the Afghan and Iraqi militaries- possibly due to the relatively smaller size of the country- its soldiers were granted passes to visit their families and it did experience some desertion. Soldiers who snuck off to be with their families or girlfriends were known by a moniker of "iguanas," although such absentee periods were generally of short duration and the soldiers returned after a

[99] Briscoe, "San Miguel: The Attack on El Bosque." Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Kevin Higgins, 30 September 2020.

[100] Kenneth Finlayson, "OPATT TO PATT: El Salvador to Colombia and the Formation of the Planning and Assistance Training Teams," *Veritas*, March 2006. Many advisors recalled BIRI strength in the range of 900 to 1100 men. One advisor noted that the Belloso Bn was 950 soldiers- source Email MSG Chris Zets to Frank Sobchak, 27 December 2020.

day or two.[101] The issue of "ghost soldiers" who were supposed to be present for duty according to official rolls, but did not exist, was also a problem, although not to the same degree as in either Iraq or Afghanistan. There was a consensus among advisors that Salvadoran officers generally overreported their personnel statistics because it offered an opportunity to pocket the additional funds and because if a commander reported actual strength, he might not be allocated necessary funds to run the base. It was common enough that two terms were used to describe the practice: *ficticiosos* (fictitious) and *fantasmas* (ghosts).[102] Interviews of twenty different advisors produced estimates of the present for duty strength of BIRIs in the range of 600-900 soldiers, with most in the 800 to 900 soldier range. For simplicity, I will consistently use 850 soldiers.

Unlike the other case studies, SF brigade advisors during the OPATT phase were not just responsible for their partnered elite force, the collocated BIRI. Their main focus was to advise an entire Salvadoran Army brigade. As a result, the amount of time which OPATT advisors worked with the BIRIs varied from advisor to advisor and brigade to brigade. Because the BIRIs were the most elite force based in the brigade sector, some advisors gravitated to them and spent the most of their time working with the force. Many others, perhaps most, focused on the brigade staff or other brigade units and peripherally worked with the BIRIs. Some barely worked with the BIRIs at all during their rotations. To reflect this challenge, the number of soldiers being advised will reflect not only the personnel strength of the BIRIs, but also the personnel strength of the brigades to which the advisors were assigned.[103] As the Salvadoran Army grew from 11,000 soldiers to 56,000 in the span of 1981-1984, each brigade also grew

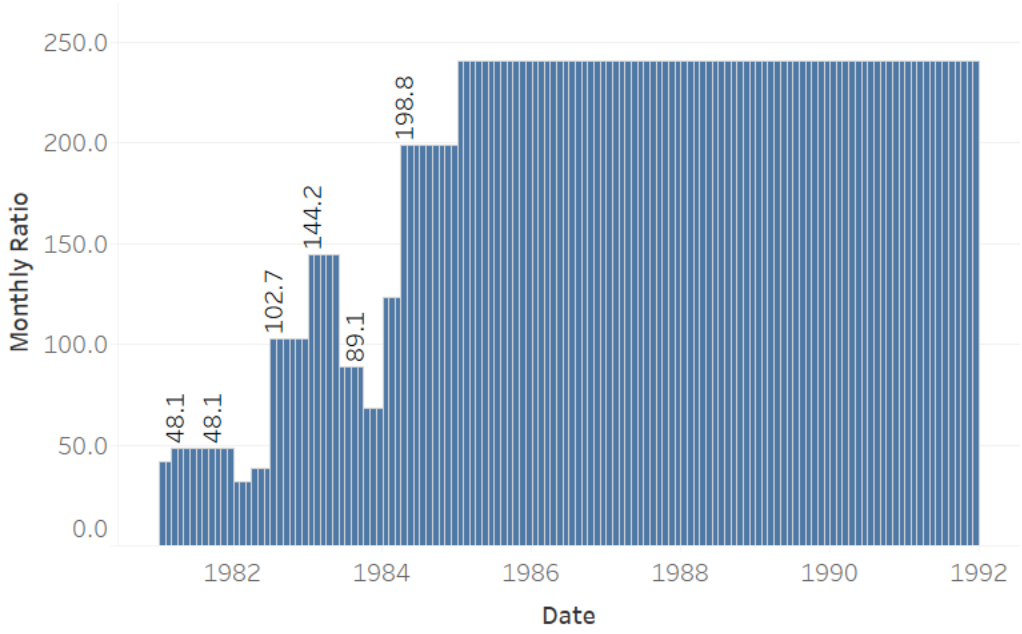
[101] Briscoe, "San Miguel: The Attack on El Bosque." AWOL soldiers were known as Iguanas because they usually crawled under the base fence line to leave and return.
[102] Email, Cecil Bailey to Frank Sobchak, "El Salvadoran Brigade Size," 12 September 2021.
[103] The personnel strength of each BIRI does not grow or change over time, but the number of BIRIs increases over time as each unit is stood up and begins training.

proportionally.[104] At the beginning of the war, each brigade comprised roughly 900 troops, and at the end approximately 4,500 troops.[105] Rather than reflect monthly growth, at the beginning of each year from 1982 to 1985, an additional 900 troops were added to each of the six brigades (for a total of 5,400) because El Salvadoran conscription was annually based rather than rolling.

Calculation of Partner Force to Advisor Ratio:

The partner force to advisor ratio was calculated in the same manner as the previous case studies. Monthly partner force to advisor ratios were calculated, and then those ratios were averaged across the span of the mission to produce an overall ratio.

Figure 5.1 Monthly Ratio of Partners to Advisors (El Salvador)



Assessment of Variable:

[104] Paterson, *Training Surrogate Forces in International Humanitarian Law*, 67–69.
[105] Email, LTC Cecil Bailey to Frank Sobchak, 13 September 2021.

Unfortunately, due to the lack of an unclassified historical record, conflicting accounts, techniques the U.S. used to circumvent the force cap, and imprecise data, the calculation for the advisor to training ratio are the least precise of all the case studies. At the same time, because the ratio is so significantly different- three advisors were paired with a brigade during the OPATT phase- the imprecision does not affect conclusions that can be drawn from the variable. Rather than an ODA advising less than a battalion of host nation forces, in El Salvador less than an ODA was advising three or four times a battalion of host nation forces (a full brigade). This effectively was a reverse from all three previous case studies. The partner force to advisor ratio, 189.6 to 1, was so much higher that even the inherent errors in the calculation could not make up for the gap between it and the other cases.[106] Compared to other case studies, El Salvador is a significant outlier in that it does not provide direct evidence of an impact from reducing partner force to advisor ratios lower than the doctrinal amount.[107]

In terms of the anecdotal impact of this difference, many advisors argued that the three-man OPATT advisory teams simply weren't sufficient to properly train their forces effectively but made the best of a difficult situation by focusing their training on units and individuals that they felt would pay dividends in the long run. Rather than try to train the entire brigade, they focused on the best battalion and the most capable leaders or on a specially recruited "strike" or reconnaissance company.[108] A small minority disagreed that the small teams were problematic and posited that the 55-advisor cap was of great value because it prevented the conflict from

[106] Please see Table 5.1 in the appending for the math used to determine that monthly average.
[107] Doctrinally, one Special Forces ODA of twelve personnel should be allotted to train a single host nation battalion, equating to a ratio of 50 or 75 to 1.
[108] Interview, Frank Sobchak with BG Hector Pagan, 5 January 2021.

becoming a U.S. centered mission and forced the El Salvadorans to take agency for the conflict.[109]

Advisor's Ability to Organize Host Nation Unit: "Money Talks"

Unlike the three other cases in this study, in El Salvador the U.S. advisors made no attempt to stand up a host nation special operations command. Indeed, the American SOF specific headquarters, USSOCOM, had only been authorized by Congress in 1987 and was still in its functional infancy by the end of the conflict in El Salvador. Special Forces itself did not even become a separate branch of the Army until 1984 for enlisted personnel and 1987 for officers. Until then, those serving in the organization were managed as part of a functional area and controlled under their original branch while serving part time part time in SF.[110] Regardless, even if SF advisors had recommended the creation of an El Salvadoran SOF headquarters (perhaps in spite towards their own system), it is unlikely that it would have been stood up due to structural complexities of the El Salvadoran military system. Two of El Salvador's other elite units, the Airborne battalion and the PRAL (*Patrulla de Reconacimiento de Alance Largo*, or Long Range Reconnaissance Commandos), were functionally controlled by the Air Force. Neither unit could conduct true special operations during the war, and interservice rivalry at times made synchronizing their efforts with army forces challenging. Without a SOF parent headquarters, the BIRIs never benefited from having an independent command that protected their budgets and oversaw their operational employment.

In general, many interviewees noted that the ability to affect host nation decisions depended mostly upon the relationship between the advisor and his host nation partner. For the

[109] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL John Waghelstein, 25 January 2021.
[110] Steve Balestrieri, "The Special Forces Branch Is Created April 9, 1987," SOFREP, accessed September 17, 2021, https://sofrep.com/specialoperations/special-forces-branch-is-created-april-9-1987/.

advisor to be able to influence the El Salvadoran unit to the degree that they could organize them tactically or administratively, two factors had to be present. First, the host nation commander had to be receptive to foreign advice. Across the interviews, advisors noted that there was a large span of possibilities for this variable as some commanders were very receptive while others had no interest in listening to their American partner. Second, the advisor had to have the ability to build and retain rapport with his counterpart. Some were highly capable at this skill, while others were unable to earn the trust of their partner even though they were receptive to American advice. The best advisors lived with their counterparts, ate Salvadoran food, and connected on a personal level.

For some, however, the ability to influence the Salvadorans came over time and because they witnessed the Americans' skills and the value of their recommendations. One advisor noted that when he initially arrived, his counterpart, who outranked him, was leery of taking any advice from an American who lacked combat experience. That changed after the Salvadoran officer disregarded the advisor's recommendations and his unit maneuvered into a tragic ambush that resulted in multiple casualties. After that event, the American's training and experience proved itself to be of value and he was able to influence his unit more significantly.[111] A similar crisis led to another officer suddenly earning the trust of his Salvadoran brigade commander. During the 1989 final offensive in Santa Anna, one advisor noticed that the brigade operations officer refused to leave his bunker during a battle when the *cuartel* (base) was in danger of being overrun. When the advisor passed this information to the Salvadoran commander, he fired the operations officer and told the American, "You are my new operations officer."[112] Within the set of twenty interviews conducted for this study, that was not the only time that American advisors

[111] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Simeon Trombitas, 15 September 2020.
[112] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Wayne (Pat) Richardson, 20 January 2021.

were asked by Salvadoran leaders to temporarily take charge until imminent danger had passed.[113]

Another advisor was able to make changes subtly by showing his partner that his recommendations were sound. The brigade commander with whom an SF officer was partnered believed there should not be contact or socialization between officers and conscripts, and always ate in the officers' club and never interacted with his soldiers. After building rapport with the colonel, his advisor talked him into eating with his troops for a meal because the advisor knew the dining facility contractor was corrupt and the food barely edible. When the colonel suffered a bout of food poisoning after just one meal, he resolved to change the food for his soldiers, drastically improving their morale and willingness to fight.[114]

For other advisors, influencing their partner was purely transactional. Several interviewees noted that money and resources played a factor in whether a Salvadoran officer was willing to listen to advice. Upon meeting his partner commander at the beginning of his tour, one advisor was told he would have nearly carte blanche to do whatever he wanted with the unit. When he humbly noted that he didn't deserve such influence, the Salvadoran bluntly told him that he did, because "when we get advisors, funds will come later."[115] In another case, an SF advisor was able to gain the trust of his partner simply by being able to consistently supply the brigade headquarters with replacement cartridges for the xerox machine.[116] As one advisor noted, "money talks."[117] More than a few interviewees lamented that advising was much easier when one could provide real time support such as helicopters, artillery, or close air support.

[113] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Francisco Pedrozo, 8 September 2020.
[114] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Wayne (Pat) Richardson, 20 January 2021.
[115] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Leamon Ratterree, 5 January 2021.
[116] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Ted Mataxis, 15 January 2021.
[117] Interview, Frank Sobchak with BG Hector Pagan, 5 January 2021.

Because advisors could not provide that in El Salvador, many felt it hurt their credibility and ability to build rapport and ultimately influence their partners.[118]

In many cases, lack of combat experience did not seem to be a factor that affected the host nation's willingness to accept their advice. This seemed to occur because El Salvador's conscription policy and low retention rate meant that most host nation soldiers left the military after two years of service and there was a constant cycle of brand-new soldiers for the Americans to train. In addition, Salvadoran initial training was so rudimentary that some soldiers did not fire weapons or conduct basic tactical training. As a result, even though the SF soldiers were not allowed to accompany the El Salvadorans on combat missions and many lacked combat experience, they were still seen by many as a valued asset because of the resources and training experience that they brought.[119]

Other advisors disagreed that possessing tactical skills and knowledge was enough to persuade Salvadoran officers of their value and argued that the structural organization of the MTT and OPATT advisors created challenges. They noted that American captains were seen by some Salvadorans as not senior or experienced enough to work alongside a brigade headquarters which managed both tactical and operational level activities. Advisors had to be able to understand U.S. domestic politics and explain decisions made in Washington and how they affected the war effort, and many captains were not mature enough to be able to perform those functions.[120] Even American majors or lieutenant colonels were seen by some Salvadoran officers as too junior to contribute to their command decisions. While the lower rank and lack of combat experience were seen as liabilities by some advisors and Salvadoran officers, many

[118] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Ted Mataxis, 15 January 2021.
[119] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW3 Dave Hulsey, 4 January 2021.
[120] Interview, Frank Sobchak with BG Hector Pagan, 5 January 2021.

interviewees noted that Salvadorans were still receptive to areas where U.S. advisors had expertise, such as planning operations and training. When advisors focused on areas where their partner would be receptive to advice, they were more likely to have an impact.[121]

Some relationships were purely negative, and advisors had little influence on the decisions made by El Salvadoran officers. One SF team leader observed that his partner resisted his suggestions on how to prepare his unit for combat, noting that the brigade officers "didn't see the need for us. They [felt that they] were perfectly capable of training their own units."[122] Another advisor opined that for his position, "Observer would be a far more accurate term than 'advisor' or 'trainer.' Those latter two terms require either a willingness of the host nation to accept advice/help, or lacking that, some sort of power base from which to implement change in spite of local resistance. Neither of those conditions existed for me and so during almost my entire tour, I was strictly an observer."[123] In a particularly caustic demonstration of an inability to influence, an SF NCO observed a string of lights stretching down a nearby mountain at night and asked the unit commander what it was. The commander nonchalantly commented that it was FMLN guerrillas. When the advisor responded that they needed to go attack them, the El Salvadoran officer flatly refused, dryly observing that if they attacked the FMLN, the FMLN would attack them back.[124]

In cases where the Salvadorans were not receptive to change or reorganization, rather than push back directly, they often would be subtle and delay a proposal until the advisor left

[121] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Ted Mataxis, 15 January 2021. Interview, Frank Sobchak with BG Hector Pagan, 5 January 2021.
[122] Charles H. Briscoe, "El Paraiso and the War in El Salvador (1981–1983)."
[123] Ramsey, *Advising Indigenous Forces*, 89.
[124] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Leamon Ratterree, 5 January 2021.

which effectively prevented change from occurring. But on issues that the U.S. saw as non-negotiable, such as human rights, most advisors agreed that the Salvadorans would toe the line, at least in front of the Americans. The threat of advisor assistance being removed, either for a specific unit or the country writ large for violations, was significant enough to ensure compliance, at least when Americans were present.[125] Oftentimes, however, if SF advisors were not physically present, Salvadoran units would drift back to their default preferences.

Assessing the Impact of the Variable:

Unlike all the other case studies, it did not appear that the advisors' ability to influence Salvadoran behavior changed over time. Instead, as was previously noted, the ability to convince Salvadoran partners to change behavior was generally linked to the relationship between the advisor and host nation commander. As such, there was no "sovereignty clock" during the El Salvador mission. The cause of this phenomenon is unclear, but at least in Iraq and Afghanistan it could possibly be related to the impact from regime change.

At the macro scale, the advisors' biggest impact was not on improving the tactical proficiency of Salvadoran units in battle. Constraints on the number of advisors and their ability to combat advise barred them from having a real effect in that realm. Rather, the most significant influence they had was in changing the culture of the Salvadoran Army in the fields of human rights and civil military relations. Advisors put considerable effort towards these two areas, with a senior officer noting, "Up and down the chain of command human rights was an important issue for us."[126] Without a doubt, war crimes still occurred and the Salvadoran record was marred by numerous abuses, such as the 1981 El Mozote Massacre that was carried out by the Atlacatl battalion and in 1989 when members of the same battalion murdered Jesuit priests

[125] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL John Waghelstein, 25 January 2021.
[126] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Mike Hennelly, 14 January 2021.

and civilians at Central American University.[127] At the same time, the culture of an organization that was inherently linked to endemic corruption, brutal repression, and utter disregard for civilian control of the military changed over the course of the war. Compared to where the Salvadoran military was in 1981, advisors had made some progress.

Different strategies were employed to achieve this objective, ranging from refined to punitive. For example, the U.S. called FMLN fighters either insurgents or guerrillas, while initially the Salvadoran military called them terrorists. Insurgents were seen as having significantly more rights under the Geneva conventions, and American insistence on using their terminology resulted in the Salvadorans adopting the same vernacular. Advisors mandated that the Salvadoran military would treat the population and captured guerrillas respectfully and in accordance with the laws of land warfare and made it clear that if they violated them the U.S. money and advisory effort would shut down. One recalled that by his second rotation in 1984, he had begun to see change because civilians had begun to enter the base and provide information on the guerrillas. One of the *campesinos* (a peasant farmer), told him that the FMLN "used to come up to the house and ask about food, water, and intelligence. They rarely do that anymore because soldiers are often there. In the past soldiers used to steal watermelons and oranges. They are much better behaved now."[128]

Another strategy focused on how Salvadoran Army leaders treated their own soldiers. If SF advisors were able to prevent NCOs and officers from mistreating their own troops, that positive treatment could have a trickle-down effect that would impact how the troops treated civilians. Physically or mentally abusing soldiers could produce infiltrators or informants, and

[127] Belisario Betancur, Reinaldo Figueredo Planchart, Thomas Buergenthal, "The Commission on the Truth for El Salvador" (United Nations Security Council, April 1, 1993).
[128] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Leamon Ratterree, 5 January 2021.

good treatment could provide an inoculation against such behavior. While advisors noted it was more difficult to train senior leaders, junior officers were often open to learning, and by the end of the ten-year U.S. mission many of those junior leaders had been promoted to positions of responsibility.[129]

Perhaps the most effective strategy involved advisors threatening to remove their support if the Salvadoran military did not clean up their human rights record, or at least reduce the number of abuses. As one SF officer observed, "It (respect for human rights) wasn't a religious conversion; it was a self-interest conversion."[130] US advisors served as conduits to report human rights violations directly to the embassy through military channels. Nearly every advisor interviewed noted that they warned El Salvadoran leaders they would report any incident of abuse immediately and that it could result in the advisors being recalled and a drop in military assistance funds. "We made it crystal clear that the U.S. would not tolerate it."[131] Advisors wrote reports that not only documented the military abilities of their partnered commander but also their human rights record. Any derogatory information would result in American efforts to retrain or even sack that commander.[132] When one advisor suspected that his partner was involved in abuses, he bluntly told him, "I can't tell you what you can do, but I can tell you what I will do, and we (the advisors) are leaving in the morning."[133] His partners came to understand that if the Americans saw or heard anything that looked like a human rights violation, they would lose training, logistics support, and funds. Consequently, at least in his presence or around other advisors, the Salvadoran commander restrained himself and his men. As perhaps the most

[129] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Wayne (Pat) Richardson, 20 January 2021.
[130] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Jim Roach, 22 September 2020.
[131] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Leamon Ratterree, 5 January 2021.
[132] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Ted Mataxis, 15 January 2021.
[133] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Jim Roach, 22 September 2020.

convincing evidence that the American advisors had an impact on the Salvadoran military's human rights record, among the provisions to the peace accords that ended the war was an insistence by the FMLN leadership that the American advisors stay for at least another year after the cessation of hostilities. When asked why they made such a request, the FMLN leaders stated that the advisors would guarantee that the Salvadoran military would behave and at least not commit human rights abuses in the presence of the Americans.[134]

A second area where the U.S. advisors had a strategic impact was in changing the El Salvadoran military's perception of civil-military relations. Prior to the war, coups and military juntas were common and the Armed Forces had little respect for civilian leaders. Over the course of the war through example, coaxing, and threats, the military came to gradually accept civilian leaders' authority.

Several key points stand out during the war's termination phase. As part of the Chapultepec peace accords, El Salvador's security forces, which had ballooned to more than 56,000 troops, were forced to drop to less than half that strength. All the BIRIs were ordered to disband *en masse*. Such a massive demobilization would have been challenging for any country, much less one which did not have a stellar record of military leaders respecting civilian elected officials. Such a drop meant armed young men would lose their jobs and have to be retrained into a civilian profession, a risky endeavor that could easily lead to disaster. Defense budgets, at least some of which were being skimmed by corrupt officers, would drop dramatically. Despite such challenges, El Salvador's military demobilized peacefully and professionally, with little friction or pushback to elected civilian officials. Unlike many previous instances, it did not seize the government because it did not like the policies that were being implemented. While there

[134] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Leamon Ratterree, 5 January 2021. Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Kalev "Gunner" Sepp, 11 August, 2020

was still military interference in the affairs of elected civilian officials, ultimately the fragile new respect for civil authority held. Barely two years after the end of the war, the military respected the results of a truly free election: one that even included a party that represented their erstwhile enemy, the FMLN.[135]

When combining all these factors, the variable of the advisor ability to organize host nation forces should be rated as medium.

Combat Advising:

In the wake of the Vietnam War, American policymakers put considerable restrictions on what advisors in El Salvador could and could not do in the execution of their mission. At a fundamental level, advisors were explicitly barred from combat. Theoretically they were supposed to only serve as trainers and not as advisors, owing to the negative connotation of advisors in Vietnam, but in practice, the distance between training and advising blurred.[136] Advisors were to principally supervise training on Salvadoran military bases, and if they planned to be involved in activities away from that facility, they were to obtain permission from the MILGRP. To further emphasize their defensive posture, advisors were initially only allowed to carry pistols, and at times they were required to conceal them to both prevent negative reactions amongst the Salvadoran population and to make it harder for them to respond to challenges in an aggressive way. Although the prohibition on carrying rifles did not last long, guidance on their use only allowed advisors to fight to protect themselves or other Americans.[137]

As a general rule that was intended to keep them away from the front lines, advisors were authorized to accompany their senior counterpart, the Salvadoran brigade commander, but not

[135] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Wayne (Pat) Richardson, 20 January 2021.
[136] Lt. Col. Geoffrey Lambert, Lt. Col. Frank Pedrozo, and Col. J.S. Roach, "Interview: Special Forces in El Salvador," 36.
[137] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Francisco Pedrozo, 8 September 2020.

accompany lower ranking officers.[138] One advisor recalled that the embassy regional security officer told a group of new advisors that if they made contact with the enemy while doing their duties, they were to fall back to the rear of the unit and call for extraction. Such an option was completely impractical and ludicrous.[139] Because the mission was officially not warfighting, advisors were prohibited from receiving combat awards, such as right shoulder sleeve patches that designated wartime service, valor awards, and the combat infantryman's badge.

Despite the relatively unambiguous regulatory prohibitions, there was considerable grey space in what actually happened as advisors went about their day-to-day activities. The grey space existed for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, in the violent El Salvadoran Civil War there was no semblance of a front line or rear area. Advisors could be and were frequently attacked at any time. Nearly every interviewee gave an example of when this occurred to them personally, and some recalled several experiences of being swept up in combat. The FMLN explicitly targeted American SF advisors, recognizing their importance to the conflict.[140] As one interviewee noted, advisors did not go looking for trouble, but the war often came to them because it was simply unavoidable. When El Salvadoran base camps were attacked American advisors simply had no place to go and had to fight to survive. In the words of one advisor, "if we didn't fight, we would have been killed. There was no Quick Reaction Force (QRF) coming for us."[141] There was little respite for advisors and whether one was in combat or not was very fluid as a location could easily drift in and out of combat. Some advisors remembered being in downtown San Salvador at the *Hotel Presidente* in bathing suits at the pool watching firefights in

[138] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Ted Mataxis, 15 January 2021.
[139] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Wayne (Pat) Richardson, 20 January 2021.
[140] Bradley Graham, "Public Honors for Secret Combat," *Washington Post*, May 6, 1996, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1996/05/06/public-honors-for-secret-combat/f764f45e-1b75-4e8c-8c32-94844434d5e0/.
[141] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Wayne (Pat) Richardson, 20 January 2021.

the hillsides all around them, knowing that they could be engulfed in combat unexpectedly at almost any time.[142]

As a result of such conditions, advisors were frequently drawn into combat and one SF NCO, SFC Gregory Fronius, was killed while trying to rally Salvadoran troops amid an FMLN assault.[143] Fronius was not the only advisor to die during the mission, and a total of twenty-two American military personnel perished while conducting their duties.[144] Recognition that the advisors were involved in combat was forbidden until 1998, when the Army relented amid pressure from the media and Congress and began processing combat awards for the advisors. Within 7th Special Forces Group's soldiers, a total of one Silver Star, twenty Bronze Stars (Valor), four Army Commendation Medals (Valor), 51 Combat Infantryman's Badges, and four Combat Medical Badges were finally awarded.[145]

Some of the rules of engagement also created room for interpretation. For example, the rule on being able to accompany their partner led to potentially conflicting guidance. If the Salvadoran brigade commander was going into combat, should the advisor accompany him? The rule had assumed that a brigade commander would not be near the front lines, but some host nation commanders were willing to take more risks than others and the counterinsurgency environment led to situations where rear areas were consistently at risk. Even when an advisor did accompany their partner, the general rule created still more questions. If an El Salvadoran commander, partnered with an SF advisor, was leading his forces in combat from his operations center and chose to move forward to observe, assess, and lead, exactly how far forward was the

[142] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Mike Hennelly, 14 January 2021.
[143] James Lemoyne, "Rebels Kill 43 Salvador Troops and U.S. Adviser," *The New York Times*, accessed August 6, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/1987/04/01/world/rebels-kill-43-salvador-troops-and-us-adviser.html.
[144] "March 13, 1981, US to Send 15 Green Beret Advisors to El Salvador," SOFREP, accessed February 17, 2021, https://sofrep.com/specialoperations/march-13-1981-us-agrees-send-15-green-beret-advisors-el-salvador/.
[145] Original Pamphlet, U.S. Army Special Forces Command, "El Salvador Awards Ceremony," 12 June 1998.

advisor allowed to travel? Last terrain feature? Mortar range? Small arms fire? There were no easy answers to what was allowed, and, in some cases, guidance shifted when new leaders took charge of the embassy's regional security office or the MILGRP.[146]

Even transiting from one location to another while accompanying their partner was dangerous for the advisors. At least one was shot down while flying with their brigade commander in his helicopter. In that case, an El Salvadoran reconnaissance team had been compromised and was being pursued by FMLN forces and faced imminent destruction. When confronted with the decision to either try to rescue his unit immediately or take the American advisor accompanying him back to base first, the Salvadoran brigade commander chose to try to evacuate his team and the helicopter was shot down in the process.[147]

The gray space also occurred because of the time when the conflict occurred. In the 1980s and early 90s, there was little technology to assist commanders or policymakers in following the whereabouts and activities of the advisors. There was no blue force tracker that a headquarters could use to observe where advisors were at any time, and social media, cell phones, and even global positioning systems simply did not exist yet. In addition, because of a lack of resources, senior personnel in the embassy were rarely able to visit the advisors on their partner's bases. Some noted that even postal service mail was limited to one or two deliveries a month. Altogether, those conditions meant advisors were given considerable leeway to make decisions and their headquarters had no ability to monitor their whereabouts in real time.

The ambiguity also put advisors in a challenging moral position, and many felt it necessary to interpret or even stretch the rules to be effective advisors. To them, the only way to properly advise was to accompany their partners on operations as far forward as possible so they

[146] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Ted Mataxis, 15 January 2021.
[147] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Wayne (Pat) Richardson, 20 January 2021.

could observe the Salvadoran units and be able to report ground truth to U.S. and Salvadoran leaders. One advisor told his partners, "If I go out and something bad happens to me, drag my body back to the *cuartel* (base) and tell them I got shot here."[148] Several recalled witnessing fellow advisors who became wounded but chose not to report it because of their concerns about the impacts such an incident could have on the overall mission.[149] Still another reported that some advisors wore El Salvadoran uniforms to conceal their presence when they accompanied their partners on operations.[150] Altogether, these factors result in a medium rating for the variable of combat advising.

Assessing the Impact of the Variable: "Coaching a Basketball Game from the Locker Room"

Despite the proscriptive environment that prevented advisors from engaging in combat activities, nearly all interviewees bristled at the restrictions and noted that they would have been more effective if they had been allowed to fight shoulder to shoulder with their partners. "We were expected to coach a basketball game from the locker room," quipped one advisor to describe the challenges of not being allowed to accompany their partners into battle.[151] Like in the Philippines, advisors noted that not being able to consistently see their partners in combat limited their ability to assess how they were performing, thereby impeding their ability to produce combat effective partners.

In addition, advisors also noted that not being allowed to accompany their partners into battle directly impacted their ability to establish and maintain rapport. Showing that they were

[148] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Francisco Pedrozo, 8 September 2020.
[149] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Cecil Bailey, 21 September 2020. Also Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Wayne (Pat) Richardson, 20 January 2021.
[150] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Ed Reeder, 17 December 2020.
[151] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Kalev "Gunner" Sepp, 11 August 2020

willing to share the same risks as the troops they advised was critical in the minds of many interviewees. One commented, "Advising was so much easier when you are part of the combat action. It shows that you are willing to die for them, (and) it completely trumps the importance of language and culture."[152] Another observed, "There is no substitute for being there and sharing imminent danger with those you advise. If an advisor shows one of his soldiers something, he should be willing to do it also."[153]

Other factors:

The scale and scope of the American effort in El Salvador was dwarfed by every other case in this study, even the comparably small effort in the Philippines. A constant shortage of resources abounded and the troop commitment, as previously indicated, was not only extremely small, but also barred from engaging in combat. While there are varying estimates on how much help the U.S. provided, most land in the $1 billion range[154] for military assistance and $4 billion altogether, amounts that were sometimes spent in a single day at the height of the Iraq War.[155]

Restrictions placed on the mission in El Salvador had other impacts. With officially only 55 advisors in country at any one time, advisors were stretched extremely thin. Because of this, during both the MTT and OPATT phases of the war some Salvadoran units- including the BIRIs- did not have advisors continuously assigned. Gaps in partnership occurred where Americans simply did not have contact with a unit. Furthermore, at many times when advisors did have contact, their attentions were spread over multiple units. OPATT advisors were assigned to brigades, and some dedicated considerable time to the BIRI in their military district because of

[152] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Ted Mataxis, 15 January 2021.
[153] Interview, Frank Sobchak with BG Hector Pagan, 5 January 2021.
[154] Benjamin Schwarz, A*merican Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador: The Frustrations of Reform and the Illusions of Nation Building*, RAND Report R-4042 (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1991), 2.
[155] Downie, *Learning from Conflict*, 143.

its enhanced capabilities, while others spent little to no time with their partnered BIRI. The lack of an uninterrupted advisor presence is a significant difference from the other cases, even though it is more historically representative of most SF advisory missions.

A handful of advisors who participated in the advisory effort were not Special Forces personnel. One of El Salvador's brigades was a naval infantry brigade, and its advisors were consistently pulled from the U.S. Marine Corps. That brigade (the 6th) was excluded from this study to remain focused on the impact of SF advisors. During the OPATT phase, a limited number of advisors came from the regular Army, although anecdotal evidence from interviews indicates that group amounted to less than ten percent of the effort.

Like in Afghanistan, literacy and baseline education levels were a significant problem.[156] While El Salvador's literacy rate, which stood at 74% in 1992, was significantly better than Afghanistan's, it still created challenges.[157] Advisors recalled that it affected all types of training, and that for more technical training, such as radio operators or mortar crew members, they had to give a pre-test to see if trainees could read.[158] Screening candidates delayed training, especially when illiterate soldiers were sent for training and had to be replaced. Such interruptions were more impactful given the limited time each advisor had with partnered soldiers.

Assessing the Combat Effectiveness of the BIRIs:

The FMLN despised the BIRIs because of the human rights abuses they committed as well as their fighting prowess. Like the Commandos in Afghanistan, most scholars assessed the BIRIs as the most combat effective American built element in El Salvador during the war. To

[156] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Leamon Ratterree, 5 January 2021.
[157] "El Salvador Literacy Rate 1992-2021," Macrotrends, accessed September 27, 2021, https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/SLV/el-salvador/literacy-rate.
[158] Email from MSG Chris Zets to Frank Sobchak, 23 December 2020.

evaluate their capabilities in comparison to the other cases, the BIRIs competence at night fighting, ability to conduct multi-day combat operations, capability to fight without advisors present, and performance against enemy forces will be assessed.

Night Fighting:

Extremely limited quantities of second-generation PVS-5 night vision goggles as well as first-generation PVS-2 and 4 starlight scopes were provided to the BIRIs. That technology was far less capable than what was available during the decades of America's post 9/11 wars and provided to the partner forces in the other cases in this study. At the same time, whether a unit is capable of fighting at night is not dependent upon technological advantages such as night vision devices. The FMLN, Vietcong, and many other organizations were respected for their night fighting skills, even though they had no technological advantages. Thus, an assessment of night fighting abilities only relies on such benefits to the extent that they improve a unit's basic willingness and capability to fight at night.

There was a general consensus that Salvadoran night fighting skills improved slowly over the span of the conflict.[159] At the beginning of the war, Army units avoided fighting at night and would return to camp and build large fires to wait out the cycle of darkness.[160] One advisor noted that they had to train officers on night land navigation and most would not venture farther than 100 meters from their base as they were not comfortable maneuvering their units at night.[161] After considerable training and effort by U.S. advisors, most Salvadoran units were still unwilling or incapable of conducting night operations.[162] The sole exceptions were some of the BIRIs, which benefited from a longer extended training period when they were first stood up and

[159] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Leamon Ratterree, 5 January 2021.
[160] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Wayne (Pat) Richardson, 20 January 2021.
[161] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Francisco Pedrozo, 8 September 2020.
[162] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Edward Reeder, 17 December 2020.

better equipment. By the end of the war, at least BIRI Belloso and BIRI Atlacatl were conducting night patrols and ambushes.[163] While advisors debated the extent of their skills, some felt that they were able to conduct offensive operations against the FMLN at night and best them in combat.

Assessment:

Salvadoran units began with absolutely no night fighting skills and without a military culture steeped in the practice. American advisors, limited by numbers in what they could affect and in authorities what they were allowed to do, spent most of their focus towards other baseline soldier skills. As a result, only a few of the BIRIs were able to generate night fighting capabilities, and those that did had varying levels of skills. This data indicates that the BIRIs' night fighting skills warrant a low rating for this element of the dependent variable.

Conducting Multi-Day (72hrs) Combat Operations: "It wasn't enough just to have boots on the ground, you also had to have boots."[164]

When the BIRIs were organized, they were designed to function within the Salvadoran Army logistics system. Each battalion had a small internal logistics organization, but it was expected to get long term support from other logistics organizations within the military district that it was assigned. As such, the BIRIs suffered from the institutional logistics challenges of the Salvadoran military.

Advisors provided mixed opinions on whether the BIRIs could conduct operations longer than 72 hours. Some noted that because the Salvadoran logistics system was so unreliable, units had no expectation that the military could resupply them. To counter this challenge, they would

[163] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL John Waghelstein, 25 January 2021. Two other advisors, COL Francisco Pedrozo and COL Wayne Richardson both concurred that only some of the BIRIs had become capable by the end of the war.
[164] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Mike Hennelly, 14 January 2021.

pack everything they could into rucksacks and so that they could conduct operations for a week based on what the unit could carry. To mitigate risks, operations were often carried out near major roads where vehicles could potentially bring resupplies of ammunition.[165] Because El Salvador was relatively small geographically, operations could generally be conducted close to a road or a village so that units could purchase water or food.[166] Americans also tried to augment logistics capability by adding a maintenance and supply unit at each brigade headquarters.[167]

Others disagreed and noted that the Salvadoran Army was incapable of conducting tactical resupply of units in contact and even struggled with performing long missions that did not involve resupplying during combat. Salvadoran military culture focused on the combat arms branches and many officers saw logistics as an afterthought. Units often had difficulty anticipating their true needs in combat, and commanders frequently failed to order a resupply until it was too late, when the organization had already run out of a critical need. At times, SF advisors intervened to prevent crises by personally ordering supplies to make sure that ammunition and food were sufficient for engagements.[168] Interviewees noted occasions where U.S. advisors and contractors had to resupply units via American organized paradrops.[169] At the same time, other interviewees noted that the expansion of the Salvadoran military provided additional UH-1 helicopters, which were used to rapidly resupply units in need. By the end of the war, there was some evidence that Salvadorans- especially BIRIs- were not only using the helicopters, but also resupplying themselves via airdrop.[170] Other advisors commented that while

[165] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW3 Dave Hulsey, 4 January 2021.
[166] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Leamon Ratterree, 5 January 2021. Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Francisco Pedrozo, 8 September 2020.
[167] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Mike Hennelly, 14 January 2021.
[168] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Wayne (Pat) Richardson, 20 January 2021.
[169] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Leamon Ratterree, 5 January 2021.
[170] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Francisco Pedrozo, 8 September 2020.

the BIRIs were probably not capable of supporting themselves through 72 hours of sustained combat, there were very few fights that long because much of the combat was hit and run guerrilla warfare.[171]

Medical evacuation of casualties was especially problematic. At the operational level, in 1985 the U.S. purchased six helicopters specifically designed for that purpose. Before then, if a soldier was wounded, they remained in the field until evacuated by truck and many died of wounds before they arrived at proper care. Even after the helicopters' fielding, medical issues were still problematic and evacuation not consistent, especially at night because the aviators did not have the ability or training to evacuate the wounded during darkness.[172]

Like all the other cases, corruption within the logistics system severely hampered the BIRIs' ability to conduct extended operations. Numerous advisors told stories of ill-equipped soldiers despite headquarters having warehouses full of supplies. In spite of seeing shelf after shelf full of boxes of new magazines for M-16 rifles, the soldiers in one advisor's unit had a single magazine for their weapons. When advisors tried to issue the items to their partnered units, the logisticians would not budge.[173] Other units had soldiers training with wooden sticks instead of guns and lacked boots, uniforms, and cleaning kits- all of which had been provided as part of military assistance but either were sold on the black market or sat on warehouse shelves.[174] One advisor noticed that his partners were carrying broken night vision goggles on their missions and asked them why they were packing them along. The Salvadoran officer noted that the logistics officer would not issue replacements, even though there were ten new goggles

[171] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Ted Mataxis, 15 January 2021.
[172] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Jim Roach, 22 September 2020.
[173] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Edward Reeder, 17 December 2020.
[174] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Leamon Ratterree, 5 January 2021.

on the shelf.[175] These problems with higher level logistics affected the BIRIs' and other units' ability to fight and function for extended periods. As the war drew to a close, the corruption became worse because regardless which side who won, hoarded equipment could be sold for a profit.

Assessment:

Advisors provided mixed opinions on whether BIRIs could operate for 72 hours in combat. In some ways, knowing that their logistics system was dysfunctional helped the units, which compensated by packing more supplies along on missions. Unlike Afghanistan, the relatively compact El Salvador, combined with its poor but sufficient infrastructure, provided a less challenging environment. Units were generally able to pay for resupply of water and food from local villages. By contrast, medical evacuation was limited, and corruption made theater level logistics dysfunctional. Altogether, these factors result in the BIRIs being assessed as having a medium capability to be able to conduct extended combat operations.

Fighting without Advisors Present:

Methodologically, to be able to fight without advisors, host nation forces had to be able to conduct intelligence driven operations. As previously noted, this means they would have to be able to organically generate their own intelligence, successfully action those targets, conduct sensitive site exploitation of those targets, and then use that information to repeat the cycle again in another series of operations. While the formal F3EAD cycle did not yet exist during El Salvador's Civil War, the basics of an intelligence driven cycle form the foundation of counter-guerrilla operations.[176]

[175] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Francisco Pedrozo, 8 September 2020.
[176] Richard H. Shultz Jr and Joseph L. Votel, *Transforming US Intelligence for Irregular War: Task Force 714 in Iraq*, Reprint edition (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020), 109–11, 125–31.

Representing a change from the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, in El Salvador the U.S. provided minimal direct support. It eschewed delivering air support, artillery, or medical evacuation and only provided limited intelligence. As such, the Salvadorans were forced to fend for themselves and more highly trained units such as the BIRIs were generally able to operate and fight independently.

Their ability to conduct intelligence driven operations, like their night fighting skills, developed over time. When one advisor first began working with his partnered unit, he asked the commander where the tactical operations center was. The Salvadoran officer took out a map from his pocket and tapped it, meaning effectively that he and the map were the operations center. The unit had no intelligence analysts and made no effort to collect intelligence. After several months, the advisor was able to establish a rudimentary headquarters that included operations, intelligence, and logistics cells. With those in place, they were able to conduct basic intelligence activities, but were not able to carry out intelligence driven operations by the time the advisor returned home.[177] Other advisors noted that initially the most likely way that Salvadoran units would gain intelligence was not through human intelligence and informants, but through conducting a movement to contact patrol in search of enemy forces or by establishing reconnaissance outposts. Such abilities demonstrated minimal abilities to conduct intelligence driven operations.[178]

With some units, American advisors were able to hone their partner's skills so that they could conduct intelligence driven operations. But in other units where the commander was not receptive, they never developed the capability. In such units, they could plan a single operation but could not process intelligence from one mission quickly enough to make it of value to

[177] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Jim Roach, 22 September 2020.
[178] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW3 Dave Hulsey, 4 January 2021.

conduct a follow-on operation. Tactical performance was very formulaic, and units used a limited set of drills that they replicated from mission to mission. Only on a handful of missions did advisors describe operations where BIRIs or other units used intelligence gathered from one mission to plan and conduct another.[179] In most cases, Salvadoran units such as the BIRIs were more focused on intelligence being given by a higher headquarters and issued down to the tactical unit rather than the unit generating the intelligence itself.[180]

BIRIs were inconsistent in their ability to generate human intelligence. Some units had moderate to good informant networks, while others had not invested at all in developing the appropriate connections and capabilities. Some advisors noted that units that had internalized U.S. lessons on human rights often treated the civilian population better, which resulted in more consistent and trustworthy informants.[181] Salvadoran abilities to generate signals intelligence were rudimentary. A few units had handheld signals intercept devices that could overhear the conversations on the communications devices used by FMLN. Oftentimes, officers could recognize the voices of the FMLN leaders, as they had known each other before the war started.[182] At times, the U.S. provided recordings or transcripts of radio intercepts when intelligence was deemed important. Imagery intelligence was limited to U.S. capabilities as the Salvadorans did not have an organic capability.[183] OV-1 Mohawk aircraft from Panama frequently overflew El Salvador for missions and provided raw and analyzed intelligence to Salvadoran military officials.[184]

Assessment:

[179] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Francisco Pedrozo, 8 September 2020.
[180] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Leamon Ratterree, 5 January 2021.
[181] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL John Waghelstein, 25 January 2021.
[182] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Wayne (Pat) Richardson, 20 January 2021.
[183] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Ted Mataxis, 15 January 2021.
[184] James S. Corum, "The Air War in El Salvador."

While the BIRIs were the most capable Salvadoran units and consistently fought without advisors present, they were often not able to conduct intelligence driven operations. Such skills developed over time, and many advisors prioritized other skills as more critical needs, especially given the starting point of many units. Some BIRIs and other units had basic human intelligence and signals intelligence capabilities, but few could gather and process intelligence quickly enough to conduct back-to-back operations. Such factors result in a low rating for being able to fight without advisors present.

Performance against the Enemy in Combat:

Finding a detailed historical record of the combat performance of the BIRIs is challenging, perhaps due to the lack of embedded media and limited number of American advisors. In what is perhaps the closest to an official history from the military's standpoint, the BIRIs consistently performed capably in combat, even when other Salvadoran units did not. For example, on 4 December 1990, FMLN forces attempted a night ambush of BIRI Atonal. The unit counterattacked so effectively that the FMLN was forced to flee the battlefield, taking more losses than the unit it ambushed.[185] Despite the scant records, it is clear that the FMLN feared and hated the BIRIs significantly because they were the only government units that the FMLN specifically named to be disbanded as part of the 1992 peace accords.

The story of the BIRIs' combat performance also fits into the larger picture of the improvement of El Salvador's armed forces. As one advisor who had multiple tours in El Salvador noted, "early on we were losing," because at first the ESAF was "not much more than

[185] Humberto Corado Figueroa, *En Defensa de la Patria: Historia del Conflicto Armado en El Salvador 1980-1992* (San Salvador, El Salvador: Universidad Tecnológica de El Salvador, 2008), 385–86. Figueroa's work is undoubtedly biased, and it is clear especially in his disparaging perspective of FMLN behavior. However, he does record government human rights abuses, such as of BIRI Atlacatl, and how poorly the Army performed initially.

an armed mob."[186] Advisors helped instill discipline and training and changed military culture from conducting static defense at fixed checkpoints to becoming aggressive, patrolling off roads, and conducting operations such as ambushes and raids to kill guerrillas. Nearly all advisors reported that such a cultural change had the most impact in the BIRIs, with those units conducting most offensive operations. By the end of the war, some units were able to conduct combined operations where they cooperated with other Salvadoran elements and pursued FMLN guerrillas regardless of the situation. Previously government forces would often not cooperate across unit boundaries to the extent that they would not even pursue enemy forces for fear of political repercussions as well as possibility of fratricide.[187] Like the change from defensive operations to offensive operations, the BIRIs were the units that were most aggressive in employing this tactic.

The Army base at El Paraiso, where BIRI Arce was based for part of the war and received specialty training from MTTs, serves as a microcosm of how the Salvadoran forces performed in combat against the FMLN. In 1983 the base, which was also home to one of the six brigade headquarters of the Salvadoran Army, was targeted by FMLN commandos and overrun. The insurgents blocked reinforcements and spent two days in control of the base, looting it of weapons, equipment, and ammo, and then used explosives to demolish its buildings. More than two hundred government soldiers were killed in comparison to only ten guerrillas.[188] After the embarrassing defeat, SF MTTs and advisors focused on improving unit capabilities and base defenses. In 1985, FMLN sappers tried to repeat the success of 1983 by targeting the base

[186] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MSG Leamon Ratterree, 5 January 2021.
[187] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Wayne (Pat) Richardson, 20 January 2021. In terms of political repercussions, many officers were initially afraid that if they pursued enemy forces into another unit, it might reflect negatively on that commander, and if that commander outranked the leader of the pursuing force, it could impact their own promotion.
[188] Charles H. Briscoe, "El Paraiso and the War in El Salvador (1981–1983)."

again. They penetrated the base's perimeter, causing an extended battle with government forces. Ultimately the Army forces held but suffered considerable casualties. In 1989 when the FMLN targeted the base again, they were repulsed without breaching the base's defenses.[189]

The Salvadoran Army's improvement was also recorded in the 1989 FMLN "final offensive," which shifted tactics and focused on cities rather than military targets.[190] Although the operation created a severe psychological impact from the strategic surprise it achieved, the Salvadoran military was able to defeat FMLN units in set battle, despite the organization putting considerable resources towards the operation.[191] The BIRIs fit prominently in the government's response, with the units shifting from one crisis to the next conducting offensive operations to root out guerrillas.

Assessment:

There is little question that the BIRIs' combat performance improved over the course of the war because of SF training and advisors. American strategic objectives had resourced an effort that aimed to prevent El Salvador's military from being defeated and achieved that goal.[192] While some military experts and many in the media lambasted the capability and effectiveness of the Salvadoran military, by the end of the conflict they were able to hold their own in battle against their opponent, the FMLN. One advisor recalled that a fellow American who was a Vietnam veteran had disparagingly said that if the Salvadorans were fighting the Vietcong, "these guys would have a problem." Noting that performance in battle against your opponent is what matters more than raw effectiveness, the advisor responded, "if they were fighting the

[189] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Francisco Pedrozo, 8 September 2020.
[190] Downie, *Learning from Conflict*, 142–43.
[191] Ramsey, *Advising Indigenous Forces*, 87.
[192] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL John Waghelstein, 25 January 2021.

Vietcong, they probably would, but they are fighting other Salvadorans."[193] Because the BIRIs and the rest of the Salvadoran military fought the FMLN to a standstill, a medium rating is appropriate for this variable.

Preliminary Observations:

The BIRIs received medium ratings in conducting combat operations for 72 hours and for their performance in combat, and low scores in fighting without advisors present and night fighting skills. Combined, this results in a low moderate effectiveness rating for the BIRIs. While the BIRIs were likely the best fighting force in El Salvador, like the Commandos were in Afghanistan, they had considerable shortcomings. They lacked the ability to conduct intelligence driven operations and only some of the BIRIs were able to carry out limited night operations. They had difficulty conducting resupply operations while in contact and the larger logistics system that supported them was abysmal. They could only meet the standard of fighting for 72 hours because of their mental and physical toughness and their ability to pack along most of what they would need. In combat, they fought the FMLN to a draw.

Unlike in Iraq and Afghanistan, stringent language requirements caused a complete match in language training/cultural awareness of the advisors to the region that they operated. However, in stark contrast to all three other cases thus far, advisors in El Salvador emphasized the importance of that match to their ability to produce effective partner forces. The cause of this divergence is unclear. One possibility is that the relative supply of Spanish speaking NCOs and officers in the U.S. Army, which was much larger than the availability of those who spoke Arabic, Dari, or Pashtu, created an expectation among host nation forces in El Salvador that their advisors would speak Spanish. Another is that the organizational norms of 7th Special Forces

[193] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Francisco Pedrozo, 8 September 2020.

Group, which primarily spoke Spanish during this period, affected the interviewees' perception of the relative importance of language. The unit took great pride in their near universal ability to speak a foreign language with relative fluency and saw it as a factor that set them apart from other SF groups. With nearly everyone in the unit having such skills, it could have created an expectation amongst host nation forces that anyone deployed had functional Spanish skills.

Interviewees once again identified the importance of consistency in advisor pairing. Advisors were highly motivated to volunteer multiple times for the mission in El Salvador, because of the combat environment, the autonomy they had, and that the mission matched the reason why they joined Special Forces. In addition, 3rd Battalion 7th Special Forces Group, because of its forward based status in Panama, had effectively a first right of refusal on missions to El Salvador that resulted in a *de facto* monopoly of the mission. Advisors noted that successfully creating combat effective partners required "a long-haul mentality, with consistent and sustained commitment for a decade."[194] When advisors were able to return for multiple tours, they understood the general situation better and were able to play on personal connections to advance their partners' effectiveness more rapidly.

Even though advisors used as many loopholes as possible to maximize their influence,[195] the partner force to advisor ratio for the BIRIs (189.6 to 1) was more than six orders of magnitude higher than any of the other cases. Comparatively, the Light Reaction Regiment in the Philippines was 29:1, the Afghan Commandos were 16.4 to 1, and the ISOF 6.2:1. Such a calculation should not come as a surprise, given the extreme force caps emplaced as well as the larger scope of responsibilities for the advisors. This ratio reverses the trends of all the post 9/11

[194] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Mike Hennelly, 14 January 2021.
[195] Such as training outside El Salvador, or not counting advisors participating in short duration or humanitarian missions.

advisory efforts as the only ratio higher than the doctrinal standard (50 to 75:1). Most advisors noted that they would have strongly preferred to have more SF advisors to be able to share the burden and noted that such a scenario would have produced more capable partners.

More like the mission in the Philippines than those in Iraq or Afghanistan, in El Salvador advisors had to navigate the complexities of a sovereign nation that had not experienced regime change. Unlike the other cases, advisors did not report that there was a "sovereignty clock" where the host nation's willingness to accept recommended changes or reorganization decreased. While the cause is unclear, one possibility is that U.S. strategic level influence, especially through coercion and threats to remove or reduce aid or advisors,[196] could have played a role. Instead, it appears that advisors' ability to influence their host nation partners was dependent on two factors: the willingness of the local Salvadoran commander to accept change, and the interpersonal relationship that the advisor built with their partner. Advisors who had better relations with their partners were able to have a greater impact in organizing host nation forces to be more combat effective.

Sovereignty issues as well as U.S. domestic political issues played a considerable factor in the rules of engagement related to combat advising in El Salvador. As a result, combat advising there was diametrically different than in Iraq and Afghanistan but similar to the Philippines. Restrictions were extreme in principle, but because of the different technological and media environment in El Salvador, considerable gray space existed that, at times, pulled advisors into combat. Most advisors noted that they would have preferred to be able to combat advise their partners and apply resources such as air support and artillery which were commonplace in Iraq and Afghanistan.

[196] American political leaders significantly cut military assistance to El Salvador in 1990 as a result of continued human rights abuses.

El Salvador presents several exceptions to previous trends. Advisors reported matching language training and cultural awareness of the trainers to the area where they deployed was extremely important. Somewhat effective host nation forces- at least enough to match the objectives of U.S. strategy- were produced despite an extremely high partner force to advisor ratio. Advisors did, however, match other cases in reporting that consistency in advisor pairing and the ability to combat advise were important to developing the host nation unit's combat effectiveness. The ability to organize host nation forces was seemingly not guided by macro-scale geopolitical issues, but more by interpersonal relationships between the advisors and host nation forces. Regardless of the impact of each specific variable, altogether the advisors had a significant impact on the war. After the peace accords had been signed, then Brigadier General Joseph Stringham, who had served as the MILGRP commander from 1983-1984, met with one of the former commanders of the FMLN. During a seminar on the war, the former guerrilla bluntly told his opponent, "If it wasn't for your men, we would have won the war."[197] In the end, the U.S. relationship with El Salvador's military would persist long after the end of the country's civil war. After the attacks of September 11th, El Salvador contributed forces to the American efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq, with their service in Iraq being particularly exceptional. During an especially intense battle in April 2004, Salvadoran forces fought until they ran out of ammunition and then engaged in hand-to-hand combat, repulsing Sadrist militiamen and earning a rare nomination for six American bronze star medals.[198] The final case study will address another Latin American mission dominated by 7th Special Forces Group, the advisory effort in Colombia during a period that spanned both before and during the Global War on Terrorism.

[197] Email from MSG Leamon Ratterree to Frank Sobchak, 5 January 2021.
[198] Joel D Rayburn and Frank K Sobchak, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War – Volume 1: Invasion – Insurgency – Civil War, 2003-2006* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2019), 300.

CHAPTER 6: BACOA and AGLAN in Colombia, 2002-2016

Background and Context:

At first glance, Colombia had many historical experiences that might put it in a different baseline than the other countries in this study. It is Latin America's oldest democracy[1] and the second oldest in the Western Hemisphere. Despite being surrounded by countries with histories dominated by authoritarian rulers, military juntas, and horrific human rights abuses, Colombia has nearly consistently held free and fair elections and carried out peaceful transitions of power across its history.[2] Its civil-military relations, especially of civilian control over security forces, are exemplary and its constitution is widely respected for protecting personal freedoms and ensuring respect for the rule of law. From 1958 to 1974, the two major political parties formed a power sharing agreement that prevented civil war and was bilaterally respected.[3]

Colombia has also had a long history of cooperation with the U.S. military, creating a deep reservoir of goodwill and strong connections. Colombia was the only South American nation to answer America's call to assist United Nations forces during the Korean War, sending an infantry battalion and a frigate. Not wanting their troops to be a token political gesture, the Colombian government authorized them to engage in combat, and of the more than 4,300 that deployed, 141 were killed, 448 were wounded, and 69 are still listed as missing in action.[4] By all

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[1] Robert D. Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque: The Colombian Security Force Experience, 1998-2008:* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2009), 4, https://doi.org/10.21236/ADA514131.
[2] Jonathan D. Rosen, *The Losing War: Plan Colombia and Beyond*, Reprint edition (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015), 53. The one exception to this across all of the twentieth century was the one-year military dictatorship and three-year presidency (without an election) of Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, who pardoned those involved in political violence and established the power sharing agreement between the two political parties.
[3] Carlos Ospina, "Chapter 6, Colombia and the FARC: From Military Victory to Ambivalent Political Reintegration?," in *Impunity: Countering Illicit Power in War and Transition* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 2016), http://cco.ndu.edu/News/Article/780177/chapter-6-colombia-and-the-farc-from-military-victory-to-ambivalent-political-r/.
[4] Kieran Duffy, "The Korean Connection, Colombia in the Korean War," *The Bogotá Post*, February 17, 2016, https://thebogotapost.com/the-korean-connection/9610/.

accounts, the Colombian performance during the Korean War was exemplary, and during the Battle of Old Baldy in 1953 the battalion fought ferociously, taking more than twenty percent casualties.[5] Historians often credit the Colombians with preventing a Chinese attack from cutting off the 7th Infantry Division.[6] A U.S. war correspondent observed of the Colombian unit, "They are the bravest men I have ever seen."[7] By the end of the war, the U.S. had awarded a Presidential Unit Citation – the highest unit award – as well as eighteen Silver Stars and twenty nine Bronze Stars for valor to individual Colombians, including one to the battalion commander for the Battle of Old Baldy.[8]

During the internal conflict known as *La Violencia* (the Violence), Colombia asked for assistance and the U.S. sent both CIA and Special Forces assessment teams.[9] A specific request included establishing a Ranger School like program in Colombia, and in 1956 American advisors helped a cadre of Korean War veterans and recent Colombian Ranger graduates establish *Lancero* School. Named after the elite Colombian "Lancer" cavalry force that supported General Simón Bolivar's army during the South American wars of independence from Spain, the course soon became known as one of the most difficult commando courses worldwide.[10] The three-month long school includes a graduation requirement to lead troops in combat for Colombian personnel, and includes sleep deprivation, insufficient food, difficult conditions and terrain, and constant leadership tests. Losing twenty pounds of weight is not uncommon, and one U.S.

[5] Mark Moyar, Hector Pagan, and Wil R. Griego, *Persistent Engagement in Colombia* (Tampa, FL: Joint Special Operations University, 2019), 4.
[6] Jon Guttman, "Columbia in the Korean War," HistoryNet, May 28, 2013, https://www.historynet.com/seeking-information-on-columbia-in-the-korean-war.htm.
[7] Kieran Duffy, "The Korean Connection, Colombia in the Korean War."
[8] Charles H. Briscoe, "Barbula and Old Baldy, March 1953: Colombia's Heaviest Combat in Korea," *Veritas*, Winter 2006, https://arsof-history.org/articles/v2n4_barbula_old_bardy_page_1.html.
[9] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Tom Marks, 20 January 2021.
[10] Charles H. Briscoe, "Colombian Lancero School Roots," *Veritas*, Winter 2006, https://arsof-history.org/articles/v2n4_lancero_page_1.html.

graduate from 2011 lost 48 pounds during the course.[11] Like its U.S. counterpart, over time *Lancero* school became a requirement to access senior positions in the Colombian military and developed into a course that soldiers from across the globe sought to attend. The second U.S. advisor to *Lancero* school was General John Galvin, who served as the CINC of USSOUTHCOM during the American advisory effort in El Salvador.[12] One of the company commanders for BIRI *Belloso* was the honor graduate from his *Lancero* school course and returned home to El Salvador to use the skills he learned against the FMLN.

But beyond that façade of collaboration and democratic governance, Colombia had also endured dark historical periods of extended violence, inequity, and foreign manipulation-including from the U.S. Its terrain made governance difficult, and even during periods of peace, the country was often ripe for insurrection.

Colombia hosts extremely complicated terrain. It is the only South American country with coasts on both the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean. Three parallel mountain ranges cleave the country in half, with the territory west of the mountains encompassing 45% of the land, but hosting 95% of the population, 96% of the government, and 97% of the roads.[13] The area east of the mountains, which includes the Amazon and Orinoquia regions contains 55% of the land, but only 5% of the population, 4% of the government, and 3% of the roads. Seventy percent of the population live in cities, but only 15% of the roads in the country are paved and riverboats serve as the only means of transportation for 40% of the country.[14] Vast tracts of land are barely

[11] Jane Crichton, "U.S. Army Military Personnel Exchange Program in Colombia Strengthens Armies," www.army.mil, May 25, 2011, https://www.army.mil/article/58119/u_s_army_military_personnel_exchange_program_in_colombia_strengthens_armies.
[12] Nicholas Naquin, "Learning the *Lancero* Way: U.S. Helped Develop Elite Colombian Training," AUSA, March 2, 2020, https://www.ausa.org/articles/learning-lancero-way-us-helped-develop-elite-colombian-training.
[13] As of 2009.
[14] Robert D. Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 2–3.

populated and effectively ungoverned, a near perfect terrain incubator for insurgency. One American Ambassador noted that when Colombia tried to re-establish control of those areas, "the government wasn't reestablishing its presence. It was establishing it for the first time in 500 years."[15] Such isolating terrain also led to social and economic disparities. As of 2009, Colombian society was roughly divided into a handful (5%) in the upper class, a small group (20%) in the middle class, and the vast majority (75%) in the lower class. The class split fell nearly along the same lines as the terrain, with 54% of the rural population living in poverty- and half of that population in extreme poverty. Half of a percent of the population owned 60% of the productive land.[16]

Much of Colombia's politics has been divisive also. Even before obtaining its independence from Spain, what would later become Colombia experienced several rebellions which were brutally put down. After breaking free, the new state, *Gran Colombia*, encompassed what today are the nations of Colombia, Panama, Ecuador, Venezuela, and parts of Brazil and Guyana. That conglomerate did not dissolve quietly, and several civil wars, including one known as The War of the Thousand Days which killed five percent of the population, led to the breakup of the confederation. To obtain a more favorable position to negotiate for the construction of the Panama Canal, the U.S. inspired a separatist movement that broke away from the rump Colombia to form the modern state of Panama in 1903.[17] When Colombian banana workers threatened to strike against the United Fruit Company in 1928 for demands that included not working on Sunday, the U.S. government promised to have Marines end the walkout if the

[15] Daphne McCurdy and Nick Lopez, "Institution Building as a Counterinsurgency Tool: The Case of Colombia," Modern War Institute Podcast, accessed February 4, 2021, /institution-building-as-a-counterinsurgency-tool-the-case-of-colombia/. Quoting Ambassador Kevin Whitaker.
[16] Robert D. Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 4.
[17] Rex A. Hudson and Library of Congress, eds., *Colombia: A Country Study*, 5th ed, Area Handbook Series 550–26 (Washington, D.C: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 2010), liii, 18–36.

Colombian government did not intervene. It did so by deploying soldiers from Bogota that set up machine guns and opened fire on the crowd.[18]

The assassination of Presidential Candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in 1948 ignited long-term acrimony between liberal and conservative elements, causing a horrific civil war known simply as *La Violencia* (the violence) that killed an estimated 300,000 Colombians. "The memory of the sheer horror became an enduring part of the Colombian psyche, to be exploited in particular by those who claimed to speak for the victims or as the authentic voice of history."[19] To end the bloodshed, the country's elites turned to a military general, Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, who took power in a coup in 1953. While Pinilla was generally successful in putting an end to the violence among mainstream political factions, radical elements on both sides, including the *Partido Communista Colombiano* (Colombian Communist Party-PCC) opted to continue the struggle.[20] As the PCC was a legal political party at the time, to create distance between that arm and its military wing, it birthed the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC) in 1963. The division also was a byproduct of friction between different leadership factions, a factor which also led to the spinoff of a much smaller Cuban allied group named the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Army of Colombia, ELN), which Colombian security forces have struggled with for decades. The FARC espoused rural Marxist-Leninist liberation ideology that aimed to eliminate inequality in Colombia. Disagreements in strategy and leadership eventually led to a full split within the

[18] Jorge Enrique Elias Caro and Antonino Vidal Ortega, "The Worker's Massacre of 1928 in the Magdalena Zona Bananera - Colombia. An Unfinished Story," *MEMORIAS Revista Digital de Historia y Arqueología Desde El Caribe Colombiano.* 18 (December 2012).
[19] Carlos Ospina, "Chapter 6 Colombia and the FARC."
[20] Dennis M Rempe, *The Past as Prologue?: A History of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy in Colombia, 1958-66* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2002), 3, 15–17, http://books.google.com/books?id=0ndsAAAAMAAJ.

PCC in 1982.[21] At the core of the divorce was the issue of drug cultivation as part of its funding model, which the FARC fully embraced. With access to funds and finances from the drug trade, the FARC shifted from being a threat to Colombia's well-being to a menace to its survival.[22]

***Plan Colombia*:**

By the late 1990s, Colombia had been at war with the FARC or other revolutionary groups for more than 50 years, and the conflict had taken a tremendous toll on the government and its ability to maintain control over the country.[23] Ambassador Kevin Whitaker, who held the post in Bogota from 2014-2019, later observed that during this era, "Colombia was on the verge of becoming a failed state."[24] An Army officer with extensive experience in Colombia described how dire the situation had become: "In the 90s, the FARC was an existential threat to the Colombian state. They had beaten the Colombian Army multiple times in combat, defeating battalion sized units in horrific ambushes. It looked as if, at a minimum, the FARC would bring down the government, forcing them to sue for peace and create a FARC controlled autonomous zone."[25] Indeed, the FARC had surrounded and destroyed an elite counterguerrilla battalion at the Battle of Billar in 1998, with two thirds of the unit's men killed or captured after three days of combat.[26]

American officials issued a series of grim warnings on the situation in Colombia. Clinton administration appointees cautioned that the Colombian government could collapse, the American Ambassador in Bogota provided his formal assessment that the Colombian military

[21] Carlos Ospina, "Chapter 6 Colombia and the FARC."
[22] Daphne McCurdy and Nick Lopez, "Institution Building as a Counterinsurgency Tool." Quoting Ambassador Kevin Whitaker.
[23] United States Army Special Operations Command, "White Paper: ARSOF and Operation Willing Sprit 2003-08, An Operational Analysis," May 2018.
[24] Daphne McCurdy and Nick Lopez, "Institution Building as a Counterinsurgency Tool." Quoting Ambassador Kevin Whitaker.
[25] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Augustin Dominguez, 11 February 2021.
[26] Robert D. Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 29.

would be unable to stabilize the security situation, and the Defense Intelligence Agency concluded that if the FARC was unable to be properly countered, the central government would collapse within five years.[27] In a retrospect article, the Washington Post noted that in the early 2000s, comparing Colombia to Afghanistan was reasonable with each having their share of random bombings and kidnappings, but with Colombia edging out Afghanistan for the highest murder rate in the world.[28]

The embarrassing and grave situation spurred action within the Colombian military and civilian leadership. Andres Pastrana was elected President in late 1998 on a reform platform, and he and his senior generals decided to work more closely with Americans.[29] Military and civilian officials on both sides were excited at the prospect of re-energizing bilateral connections which had sunk to a low point across the 1994-1998 Presidency of Ernesto Samper. During Sampler's tenure, the U.S. declared the Colombian government too corrupt and tainted with human rights abuses to be able to effectively fight drug cartels, cutting off economic and military assistance valued at over $1billion.[30] Once taking office, President Pastrana lobbied Washington to support his *Plan Colombia*, which he saw as a vehicle for a massive infusion of foreign assistance to try to end the conflict against the FARC and fund development projects and counternarcotics efforts. After a series of negotiations, the U.S. Congress approved the program whose allocations exceeded all other aid packages other than Israel and Egypt.[31]

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[27] Patrick Paterson, *Training Surrogate Forces in International Humanitarian Law: Lessons from Peru, Colombia, El Salvador, and Iraq* (Tampa, FL: Joint Special Operations University, 2016), 54.
[28] Dana Priest, "Covert Action in Colombia," *The Washington Post*, December 21, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/investigative/2013/12/21/covert-action-in-colombia/.
[29] Robert D. Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 30.
[30] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Tom Marks, 20 January 2021.
[31] Moyar, Pagan, and Griego, *Persistent Engagement in Colombia*, 16. *Plan Colombia* would reach a total of $4.5 billion in assistance by the end of FY 2005.

In exchange for its renewed support, the U.S. demanded that Colombia execute massive internal reforms and clear house of those tainted by the corruption of narcotics. Due in part to that American pressure and in part due to President Pastrana's desire to reset his government in light of the ongoing crises, many senior Colombian military leaders including division commanders and the Army chief of operations were cashiered.[32] A cascading impact ensued, with the new senior leaders firing mid-grade officers for incompetence and corruption and replacing them with more competent and upright ones.[33] With those changes in place, U.S. support began flowing again, with $959 million in assistance for FY 2000, nearly ten times what was appropriated only two years prior.[34] At the same time, there were considerable limitations put on the use of funds, and what many believed was an artificial bar was placed on using counter narcotics funds for counterinsurgency or counterterrorism missions, even though there was considerable operational overlap. Those limitations led to significant consternation, and it was not uncommon to hear Colombian Army commanders begging in vain to use U.S. supplied counter narcotics helicopters to send reinforcements to troops in contact who would be doomed without additional support. Despite the restrictions, the U.S. made a considerable peacetime commitment of troops to help advise and assist the Colombian military, and a significant portion of that commitment was from 7th SF Group.[35]

Expanding Colombia's Special Operations Forces:

When U.S. support began to increase with the implementation of *Plan Colombia*, only one true special operations unit existed in the nation's armed forces: the *Agrupación de Fuerzas Especiales Anti-Terroristas Urbanas* (AFEU, or Urban Anti-terrorist Special Forces Group).

[32] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Tom Marks, 20 January 2021.
[33] Moyar, Pagan, and Griego, *Persistent Engagement in Colombia*, 20.
[34] Robert D. Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 23, 80.
[35] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Tom Marks, 20 January 2021.

AFEU had been stood up with the assistance of 7th SF Group ODAs immediately after the 1985 debacle when the insurgent group M-19 seized the Colombian Palace of Justice.[36] As noted in its name, AFEU's primary focus was urban counterterrorism, and it did not have the ability to conduct rural high value target operations or rescue hostages deep in the jungle. The unit also had command and control challenges because the joint headquarters which it was a part of was centered on the capital district and that command had little intention of loaning out its premier unit to other headquarters.[37] AFEU did, however, have an American SF exchange officer assigned to the unit who lived in Colombia with his family as a permanent duty station and C Company, 3rd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group, the USSOUTHCOM CINC'S in Extremis Force (CIF), had a habitual relationship with the unit and deployed regularly to conduct joint training. Those long-term connections helped pave the way for a larger SOF presence and the creation of additional Colombian SOF elements.

Other high caliber Colombian units (both conventional and elite) centered on conducting large scale offensive operations in a jungle environment, and few had the ability to conduct HVT or hostage rescue operations in rural environments. The Colombian Army was unwilling to retrain any of their elite units or reassign them to those missions, as they were the only units that could conduct offensive operations against the FARC. The vast majority of the Colombian Army was a conscript force that was primarily capable only of territorial security: guarding roads, bridges, pipelines, and other fixed sites.

In 2002, the Commander of the US Military Group (MILGP) COL Ken Keen,[38] recognized that capability gap and offered to help the Colombians develop a force similar to the

[36] Kenneth Finlayson, "ARSOF in Colombia: Introduction," *Veritas*, 2006, https://www.soc.mil/ARSOF_History/articles/v2n4_colombia_page_1.html.
[37] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Mike Brown, 11 February 2021.
[38] Keen achieved the rank of LTG and was interviewed for this chapter.

U.S. Ranger Regiment, a unit he had previously served in, which could conduct kill/capture missions against HVTs, rescue hostages, and carry out long range reconnaissance in jungles and other rural settings.[39] Even though powerful factions of the Colombian military opposed the creation of such a unit, Keen's proposal was met warmly by General Jorge Enrique Mora, commander of the Colombian Armed Forces, whose campaign plan included killing or capturing FARC senior leadership.[40] Such a unit would also address the critical issue of rescuing hostages, which Colombian military officials recognized as an important morale issue and means to undermine FARC finances. At any time, there were at least 500 military hostages as well as untold civilian hostages including Ingrid Betancourt, a dual French-Colombian politician who had run for the presidency.[41] Across the span of the conflict, the FARC kidnapped more than 24,000 Colombians.[42]

The unit that would be organized to fulfill those missions was the *Batallón de Comandos Ambroseo Almaeda* (Ambroseo Almaeda Commando Battalion or BACOA), which began to form in early 2002.[43] As the plan moved from idea to reality, SF advisors decided to model BACOA after elite South Vietnamese and El Salvadoran reconnaissance units that could locate enemy encampments and leaders and then destroy them through airstrikes. To provide the stealth necessary to accomplish that, the battalion was designed to break down and function as platoon or even squad level units, a capability that no other Colombian unit possessed. It would also possess a hostage rescue capability, although the unit would not focus on the precision shooting skills central to such high-risk missions. Training consisted of a three-week assessment

[39] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Carlos Berrios, 12 January 2021.
[40] Carlos G. Berrios, "Critical Ingredient: US Aid to Counterinsurgency in Colombia," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 28, no. 3 (May 4, 2017): 546–75, https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2017.1307610.
[41] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Dr. David Spencer, 22 January 2021.
[42] Paterson, *Training Surrogate Forces in International Humanitarian Law*, 54.
[43] Moyar, Pagan, and Griego, *Persistent Engagement in Colombia*, 30.

course, and many candidates had already completed the *Lancero* course or Colombian Airborne School.[44] Experience in combat was a prerequisite as well as certificated good conduct, superb physical fitness, strong marksmanship and passing a psychological exam.[45]

While BACOA was concluding its training, Colombian senior military leaders, including Army Commander General Ospina, decided that they needed another battalion with similar capabilities, and began to organize a unit named *Agrupación de Lanceros* (*Lancero* Group, or AGLAN).[46] AGLAN was focused on operationalizing the skills taught in *Lancero* school, which itself was modeled on the U.S. Army Ranger program. *Lancero* companies had previously served in the Colombian Army during the 1950s and 60s, which made the stand up of AGLAN more straightforward as organizational blueprints only needed to be updated and expanded.[47] It was decided that AGLAN core missions would be reconnaissance and HVT kill/capture missions, mirroring the capabilities of BACOA and providing depth and redundancy for the Colombian campaign plan. American SF advisors helped in the selection and training process, and the battalion was fully operational by the end of 2003.[48] Selection lasted for three weeks, and paralleling the Ranger Regiment, most of the unit's soldiers would attend *Lancero* school after serving in the battalion. Like all new organizations, AGLAN experienced growing pains, and some SF advisors, believing that the unit was initially more of an elite infantry element than SOF, described it as similar to "the quick reaction force in the 82nd Airborne or some-type of

[44] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Mike Brown, 11 February 2021.
[45] Email from GEN Ospina Ovalle to Frank Sobchak, 16 February 2021.
[46] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Dr. David Spencer, 22 January 2021.
[47] Email from GEN Ospina Ovalle to Frank Sobchak, 16 February 2021. In an interesting parallel, after the units helped tamp down insurgents during the "*La Violencia*" period, they were disbanded by conventional officers who believed they had limited utility- matching the dissolution of U.S. Army Ranger companies in the 1950s and 1960s.
[48] Moyar, Pagan, and Griego, *Persistent Engagement in Colombia*, 30.

ready-reaction unit."[49] Over time, both units would mature into a fully capable SOF that were as good or better than most NATO SOF.

Changes in the American Commitment: The Dream Authority, Operation Willing Spirit, and Afghanistan

Across the span of the U.S. mission, the degree of SF commitment and the authorities associated with it experienced several significant changes. One massive turning point occurred in 2002, when, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. Congress effectively erased the regulatory line between counter narcotics and counter terrorism which had caused friction during the implementation of *Plan Colombia*. House Resolution 4775, the *2002 Supplemental Appropriations Act for Further Recovery from and Response to Terrorist Attacks on the United States*, authorized funding of operations in Colombia that targeted organizations involved in narco-terrorism. That change expanded upon authorities in Section 1021 of the 2002 National Defense Authorization Act, which allowed the Defense Department to support counter-drug activities of any foreign government entity, including police forces. One scholar later described Section 1021 as "the dream authority" because it allowed a broad variety of counternarcotics activities with few restrictions.[50] Those authorities were further codified by the executive branch in National Security Presidential Directive (NSPD) 18 which allowed sharing intelligence, coordinating psychological operations, and assisting the Colombian military in fighting narco-terrorists.[51] While engaging in combat was still barred, the two changes opened significant funding streams and added so many new authorities that they amounted to a complete change to the mission in Colombia.

[49] Finlayson, "ARSOF in Colombia: Introduction."
[50] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Dr. David Spencer, 22 January 2021.
[51] Kenneth Finlayson, "Conducting the Orchestra: AOB 740 in Colombia," *Veritas*, Fall 2006, https://arsof-history.org/articles/v2n4_conducting_orchestra_page_1.html. NSPD-18 was issued in November 2002.

A second change occurred unexpectedly in February 2003 when a U.S. contracted aerial surveillance aircraft involved in coca-eradication efforts developed engine trouble and crashed in FARC controlled territory. FARC guerrillas executed one wounded American contractor and took three others hostage. In a parallel to the Philippines case study when the Abu Sayyaf Group kidnapped two Americans, the taking of U.S. civilian hostages in Colombia created a visceral reaction far out of proportion to the number of civilians held.[52] Perhaps related to historical baggage and scar tissue from the Iranian hostage crisis, the U.S. government quickly authorized expanded authorities that allowed them to participate in missions related to the rescue of the American contractors. With the approval of the Colombian government, an entire mission was set up towards that end, Operation Willing Spirit, and additional forces were deployed to share intelligence and prepare for potential operations. Those authorities lasted until the hostages' rescue by a unilateral Colombian operation in 2008.

One final change occurred gradually. When the U.S. decided to invade Iraq, it became clear that 5th SF Group, the unit regionally assigned to the CENTCOM area of responsibility, could not handle that mission and operations in Afghanistan simultaneously. As a result, the SOF mission in Afghanistan was re-tasked as shared responsibility between 7th Special Forces Group and 3rd Special Forces Group. The considerable commitment there drew forces away from the mission in Colombia and resulted in embassy leaders looking for creative solutions to increase the number of advisors. Brigadier General Simeon Trombitas, who in late 2003 was serving as the MILGP Commander, had previously served as an advisor in El Salvador's Operational Planning and Assistance Training Teams (OPATTs). Recognizing that a similar program could help provide individual advisors from across the Army and Department of

[52] Charles H. Briscoe, "Operation WILLING SPIRIT (OWS): Setting Conditions for Operación JAQUE," *Veritas*, Fall 2018, https://arsof-history.org/articles/v14n3_op_willing_spirit_page_1.html.

Defense, Trombitas was able to establish a Colombian equivalent, the Planning and Assistance Advisory Team (PATT). While PATT advisors were not major contributors to the efforts to build BACOA and AGLAN, they provided the core of the advisory effort for Colombian conventional forces, a critical component of the overall assistance program.[53]

Victory:

The success of *Plan Colombia* led to a follow-on effort named *Plan Patriota* under newly elected President Álvaro Uribe. *Plan Patriota* perpetuated massive American military assistance, but also included significant domestic reforms. The defense budget was doubled from 2 to 4 percent of the country's gross domestic product and the size of the Army was increased by 60,000 troops. Perhaps even more importantly, mandatory conscription gradually ended, and the Army slowly became a volunteer force.[54]

In addition, Colombian military leaders- some trained at the School of Advanced Military Studies at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas- crafted a campaign plan that they believed could deliver victory. It included three key components: area control, simultaneous and continuous offensive operations, and killing or capturing FARC high value targets (HVTs).[55] Area control aimed to reestablish government control over FARC held or ungoverned territory. Military offensive operations aimed to use conventional forces to keep the FARC off balance through constant pursuit, preventing them from resting or training. Towards that end, the U.S. provided Colombia more than 100 UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters, the fourth largest UH-60 fleet in the world,

[53] Kenneth Finlayson, "OPATT TO PATT: El Salvador to Colombia and the Formation of the Planning and Assistance Training Teams," *Veritas*, March 2006.
[54] Linda Robinson et al., *Improving the Understanding of Special Operations: A Case History Analysis* (RAND Corporation, 2018), 62, https://doi.org/10.7249/RR2026.
[55] David Spencer, "The Sword of Honor Campaign in the Cauca Valley: 2011-2013 Colombian Conflict Focus of Effort," *Small Wars Journal*, May 31, 2013, 17.

enough to conduct battalion sized air assault missions in a single lift.[56] Colombian SOF, including BACOA and AGLAN, were given responsibility for the final leg of the campaign plan by hunting FARC HVTs.[57]

The plan took time to execute because Colombian SOF units had to be fully organized, trained, and equipped. Implementation was also delayed because even when fully trained, it was difficult to kill and capture HVTs rapidly through ground forces alone due to the distances and terrain involved. To address that challenge, Colombian military leaders, having observed the impact of precision guided munitions (PGMs) in Iraq, approached the U.S. about providing such weapons but were rebuffed. Undeterred, the Colombians acquired weapons from Israel, but were not impressed with the results.[58] In 2006, a second round of negotiations with the U.S. resulted in an offer to provide Paveway II kits that would convert regular bombs into GPS guided precision weapons.[59]

The combined efforts of the PGM bombing campaign and direct action BACOA and AGLAN missions to kill or capture FARC senior leaders produced results. From July 2007 through November 2013, 65 FARC senior leaders were killed by SOF elements or PGMs, or a combination of both where SOF elements provided terminal guidance to the PGMs.[60] The American Ambassador at the time, Kevin Whitaker, later recalled that the HVT strategy of the Colombian military, "put the idea into the minds of senior FARC leadership that their time on this Earth was limited. That they may be under continuing threat of ending up on the wrong end

[56] Sikorsky Aircraft Corp, "Sikorsky Continues to Expand Its Capabilities in Colombia," November 1, 2012, https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/sikorsky-continues-to-expand-its-capabilities-in-colombia-176787651.html. Also Interview, Frank Sobchak with Dr. David Spencer, 22 January 2021.
[57] Berrios, "Critical Ingredient."
[58] Email from Tom Marks to Frank Sobchak, 26 November 2021.
[59] Priest, "Covert Action in Colombia."
[60] Priest.

of a precision guided munition at some point."[61] Combined with conventional forces' continuous offensive operations, the kill/capture campaign put FARC leaders under constant pressure. Thousands simply gave up. After surrendering, the FARC 47th Front Commander told government interviewers, "Everywhere we went, the Army was there. We couldn't sleep in one place for more than one night."[62] Exhausted and fearful for their safety, in 2015 senior FARC leaders announced a unilateral ceasefire, and by the next year the two sides had agreed upon a peace deal. During the negotiations, the FARC splintered and a handful of dissident groups, mainly lower and mid-grade leaders, decided to continue fighting.[63] But for the most part Colombia was at peace for the first time in more than a half-century.

Introduction of the Independent Variables:

This chapter will assess the combat effectiveness of BACOA and AGLAN, two Colombian SOF units that were built with the advisory and financial assistance of the U.S. and which benefited from consistent partnership with SF units. It will not assess the effectiveness of AFEU. That unit was excluded because it was created in the 1980s, a significant time before the other Colombian SOF units and not within the time scope of the sustained effort that began with *Plan Colombia*. Methodologically, an extra fifteen years of training and development would not put it on an even measurement footing with other Colombian SOF units commissioned after the increased U.S. commitment began in 1998.[64] The fourteen years of partnership with BACOA and AGLAN roughly match the span assessed in other cases of this study, and AFEU's 29 years would be a significant outlier. To evaluate what conditions were most important for SF advisors

[61] Daphne McCurdy and Nick Lopez, "Institution Building as a Counterinsurgency Tool." Quoting Ambassador Kevin Whitaker.
[62] Moyar, Pagan, and Griego, *Persistent Engagement in Colombia*, 36.
[63] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Scott Morley, 11 February 2021.
[64] This decision to only include units stood up with generally similar timelines is also reflected in the case selection portion of Chapter 1.

in their training of BACOA and AGLAN, five variables will be evaluated: consistency in advisor pairing, language training and cultural awareness, advisor to trainee ratio, the degree to which advisors can organize or control host nation forces, and the ability to combat advise.

Consistency in Advisor Pairing: "*La Familia*"

Overall, there was a medium level of consistency in advisor pairing across the span of the Colombia mission and matching the same advisors with the same host nation forces was often a haphazard endeavor. Owing to their sustained assignments to 7th Group, all the advisors had had considerable experience across Latin America. In fact, of just those that were interviewed for this study, six advisors had served in both the OPATT program in El Salvador and Colombia, even though the two conflicts were separated by more than a decade.[65] They brought broad lessons from across the region as well as specific lessons from the Salvadoran Civil War, such as morphing the OPATT (Operational Planning and Assistance Training Team) concept from that war to fit the conflict in Colombia and renaming it the PATT (Planning and Assistance Advisory Team).[66] Such consistent regional relationships resulted in many Special Forces leaders referring to 7th Group and its mission as "*La Familia*," which means The Family. They saw working in Latin America as a family business with their Latin American military partners as extended family members.[67]

But despite the theater wide experience, consistently matching advisors to the same units proved difficult. Before 7th Group began to deploy to Afghanistan, the large American commitment in Colombia meant that SF advisors had to work with many different types of host

[65] The six advisors who served as advisors in both El Salvador and Colombia were: COL Kevin Higgins, CSM Chris Zets, CW3 Dave Hulsey, LTG Charles Cleveland, MG Ed Reeder, and MG Simeon Trombitas.
[66] Finlayson, "OPATT TO PATT: El Salvador to Colombia and the Formation of the Planning and Assistance Training Teams."
[67] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Kevin Higgins, 6 October 2020.

nation units. While there was always an SF presence with the Colombian SOF units, they also advised regular Army forces, police, and even pipeline security forces. Working with SOF elements was seen as the best mission by far, while working with infrastructure security forces was often viewed as a drudge. Because of that vast disparity, some of the Group's commanders purposely rotated their forces through different locations and host nation units to ensure what were seen as "good" and "bad" missions were spread out evenly. They saw this as important to sustaining their force and long-term retention of personnel.[68]

Other commanders believed that consistency in advisor pairing was most important in an immature relationship, but over time it was not as necessary. Having a habitual unit to unit relationship was important, noted one commander, but by 2008 he believed nearly everyone in 7th Group knew who the BACOA were and their capabilities. On the flip side, he also believed if a Colombian saw a SF shoulder patch and a red 7th Group beret flash, the advisor had instant credibility.[69] In essence, different command groups had differing priorities on how much emphasis they placed on trying to pair the same advisors with the same host nation units, with some leaders making consistent pairings and others not.[70]

As a result of the lack of command emphasis, to some officers attaining consistency in advisor pairing seemed to be purely coincidental. Like in Afghanistan, as the emphasis of each SF leader changed, Colombian units would fall in and out of favor, with a direct impact on whether they had persistent and consistent advisors. At least one officer noted policies seemed to change every two years, which not coincidentally matched the command tenure for group leaders. Such a policy, he observed, created "relationships built only by happenstance."[71]

[68] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTG Charles Cleveland, 19 October 2020.
[69] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Mike Brown, 11 February 2021.
[70] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Amil Alvarez, 10 February 2021.
[71] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Joe Reagan, 8 February 2021.

The lack of consistency was noted by the Colombians, who pointed out the issue to U.S. embassy officials. To the Colombians, the lack of consistency manifested itself in SF advisors retraining them in the same tasks as the previous deployment. One American officer in the MILGP recalled that General Alberto Mejia Ferrero, who later became the CCOPE commander, told him "I love your SF guys, but they always seem to teach the same thing. They pull out the same program of instruction folder they have done before and off we go."[72] The lack of consistency also resulted in conflicting recommendations of equipment that the U.S. should supply as part of its military assistance program. As different units rotated through, each would provide a new list, often with completely different priorities that either ignored the previous list published only months earlier, or even requested cancellation of previous decisions.[73]

After 7th Group began to deploy to Afghanistan in 2004, the ability to consistently pair advisors with the same Colombian SOF units became even more difficult.[74] There was insufficient manpower to complete all the missions SF units had been tasked with performing as part of the George W. Bush administration's Global War on Terrorism. As a result, it was difficult to consistently send the same units to Colombia, and some commanders saw the less dangerous environment there as an opportunity to provide a break for their forces from the strains of combat in Afghanistan. A senior NCO recalled that on one Colombia rotation, the team leader and team sergeant of one ODA- the two senior members of the unit- had never deployed to SOUTHCOM. To him, "Afghanistan and Iraq[75] were distractions from what we were trying to accomplish in Central and South America."[76]

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[72] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Carlos Berrios, 12 January 2021.
[73] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Carlos Berrios, 12 January 2021.
[74] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Douglas Judice, 1 February 2021.
[75] While 7th Group focused on Afghanistan, their CINC's In Extremis Force (CIF), C/3/7, regularly deployed to Iraq to advise the Iraqi Counterterrorism Force (ICTF).
[76] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Amil Alvarez, 10 February 2021.

Those combat deployments, some of which focused on unilateral operations without a partner force, were diametrically opposite from the environment in Colombia, where teams were barred from combat, under the authority of the Embassy, and paired with host nation forces. At times, switching between the two distinct environments caused ODAs to forget the rules of the road and the cultural nuances of Latin America. Recognizing this phenomenon, one senior SF leader observed that- counterintuitively- when 7th Group had fewer advisors assigned to SOUTHCOM on deployments, there usually were more significant incidents, problems, and scandals.[77] The deployments to Afghanistan and their concomitant decrease in consistency in advisor pairing in Colombia also resulted in SF personnel who were deployed there not knowing who the important people in Colombia were- the "key belly buttons" that needed to be touched to make things happen.[78] In Colombia, the informal power dynamics often did not match the formal positions held by host nation leaders, and the decrease in experience and consistency in advisor pairings caused each rotation to have to relearn who was crucial in making the mission function effectively and efficiently.

The manpower demands of the Afghan theater also resulted in shorter deployments to Colombia, a reduction from six to three months, which further diluted consistency.[79] A 2014 USSOCOM commissioned study concluded that, "Most team (ODA) members observed that three months afforded too little time for understanding the operational environment and building relationships with Colombian personnel."[80] Because of the pressures of Afghanistan and other

[77] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Amil Alvarez, 10 February 2021.
[78] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Barbara Fick, 28 January 2021.
[79] Deployments to Afghanistan, by comparison, were nine months. Colombian missions were purposely shortened to increase the number and length of the missions to Afghanistan.
[80] Moyar, Pagan, and Griego, *Persistent Engagement in Colombia*, 46.

military commitments, advisors noted that, on average, the same ODA would only return to the same host nation unit 25-50% of the time in a two-year period.[81]

While maintaining consistency at the organizational level was challenging, 7th Group had numerous examples of individuals whose regular deployments to Colombia resulted in deep personal connections with the host nation's military. Several advisors noted that across their 20- or 30-year military career they partnered with many Colombian officers who, like them, were junior officers or NCOs at the beginning of the relationship but had become some of the most senior leaders in the Colombian military by the time of their retirement. CSM Amil Alvarez, who had dozens of deployments to Colombia and became the Command Sergeant Major for both 7th SFG and SOCSOUTH, observed, "Some Colombians you met in the 1990s later became general officers, and even if you didn't see them for a couple of years due to Iraq and Afghanistan, you still had a relationship."[82]

One junior officer advised the BACOA as it was created and became friendly with many of the unit's officers. A decade later, one of the platoon leaders had become the BACOA battalion commander and recognized the 7th SF Group officer when he returned as a more senior advisor.[83] Another more senior SF officer who served three tours in Colombia, noted that because he worked as a captain with the Colombian forces in the 1990s, by the 2010s, he had personal relationships with all the senior leaders of the Colombian military, including the commander of the Armed Forces.[84] Perhaps the best example of such sustained interaction is of BG Sean Mulholland, who attended *Lancero* School as a captain and was the honor graduate. In the 1990s he returned to be the U.S. exchange officer at *Lancero* school, living in Colombia for two years. Mulholland led 7th

[81] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Kevin Key, 8 February 2020.
[82] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Amil Alvarez, 10 February 2021.
[83] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Joe Reagan, 8 February 2021.
[84] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Mike Brown, 11 February 2021.

SFG at all levels, including as the Group commander, and later commanded SOCSOUTH. His decades of experience and extensive personal connections in Colombia helped him in his duties, especially in the standup of the AGLAN.[85]

Recognizing the importance of consistency and the challenges that the deployments to Afghanistan created towards maintaining it, several innovative leaders implemented policies to improve stability. In 2008, Colonel Sean Mulholland, the 7th Special Forces Group commander, proposed to U.S. Army Human Resources Command and U.S. Army Special Forces Command (USASFC) that officers and NCOs assigned to the one-year unaccompanied PATT advisory mission in Colombia would receive credit for serving at the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School (USAJFKSWCS). Such a proposal was highly lucrative to SF personnel, as it would allow them to stay on an operational deployment, but get credit for a schoolhouse training assignment, an important requirement for promotion. It would also allow their families to remain at Eglin Air Force Base, the home of 7th Group, while they received credit for the assignment rather than having to uproot them and move to Fort Bragg, where USAJFKSWCS was based. The proposal was accepted and improved consistency within the PATT program.[86] Other advisors leveraged technology to try to offset some of the lack of consistency, using the communications program WhatsApp to make free text, voice, and video calls to their Colombian partners between rotations. Through the app, advisors stayed connected with the personal and professional lives of Colombian SOF NCOs and officers, albeit virtually.[87]

While there was significant turbulence on the American side of the advisory effort in maintaining consistent pairing, on the Colombian side there was considerable stability.

[85] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Amil Alvarez, 10 February 2021.
[86] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW3 Dave Hulsey, 4 January 2021.
[87] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Kevin Key, 8 February 2020.

Representing the opposite of the host nation situation in El Salvador, Colombian SOF personnel, especially those in the BACOA and AGLAN, spent long careers in their parent unit. One RAND study indicated that nearly 70% of the Colombian SOF personnel were career soldiers.[88] Because the Colombian Army and Joint SOF headquarters were organized almost in tandem with the creation of the two units, their soldiers usually did not transfer to other Colombian units and were able to stay within the broader SOF organization without negatively impacting their careers. There was so much personnel stability within the units that the Colombian soldiers would often tell their American advisors, "See you in 6 months" when they departed.[89]

Assessing the Impact of the Variable: "Operating at the Speed of Trust."

Even though there were challenges with ensuring consistency in advisor pairing, there was a consensus, like the other cases, of the variable's importance. CSM Amil Alvarez noted that, "it is absolutely critical. … If you were worried about the long-term impact you had, consistency in pairing matters."[90] General Carlos Ospina Ovalle, who served as the commander of the Colombian Armed Forces, observed "consistency is very important but not always possible. … I knew that there was great appreciation from the Colombians to the advisors and that some of them were especially trusted because they had deployed several times to Colombia."[91]

Interviewees pointed out that consistency was important because tactical growth occurred only after long and extended contact, which was essential to build the trust necessary to ask difficult questions or accompany host nation forces on sensitive operations. In the absence of

[88] Austin Long et al., *Building Special Operations Partnerships in Afghanistan and Beyond: Challenges and Best Practices from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Colombia* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2015), 71.
[89] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Mike Brown, 11 February 2021.
[90] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Amil Alvarez, 10 February 2021.
[91] Email from GEN Ospina Ovalle to Frank Sobchak, 16 February 2021.

consistency, Americans were perceived as temporary help by the Colombians.[92] Personal relationships that developed from consistency were seen as critical, because those connections made it easier to get things done when the bureaucracy intervened. Strong relationships allowed advisors to "operate at the speed of trust."[93] In addition, the knowledge and familiarity that came from having worked with the same host nation forces minimized or precluded the requirement for a pre-deployment site survey, saving taxpayer funds. Experience would "jumpstart" a mission, allowing advisors to pick up where they left off and produce better results than if they had started from scratch.[94] When the same 7th SFG teams worked with AGLAN across multiple rotations, one advisor concluded that planning was easier because they knew the unit, knew the people in it, and knew what training was required to advance their capabilities.[95]

Language Training and Cultural Awareness:

Degree of Match

Like in the Philippines and El Salvador, there was a complete match for the regional orientation of the SF Groups assigned to conduct the advisory mission in Colombia, resulting in a high rating for the variable. 7th Special Forces Group, oriented on Latin America, contributed the vast majority of forces.[96] While the demands of the post 9/11 wars drew 7th Group to Afghanistan, at no time was the organization's regional affiliation changed. Before September 11, 2001, nearly all of the Group's units spoke Spanish, even though a handful of individuals and detachments were trained in Brazilian-Portuguese. As the war in Afghanistan drug on, some

[92] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Joe Reagan, 8 February 2021.
[93] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Greg Wilson, 1 September 2020.
[94] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Kevin Key, 8 February 2020.
[95] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW3 Dave Hulsey, 4 January 2021.
[96] 19th and 20th Special Forces Groups, part of the U.S. Army National Guard, contributed individual augmentees and a handful of detachments (ODAs), and even a company occasionally, but they were not a major force contributor. Those who did deploy were regionally oriented to Latin America.

individuals were trained in Dari and Pashto, but the Group maintained its regional affiliation and linguistic focus.

There was considerable emphasis, especially early in the mission, to making sure that advisors were proficient in Spanish. "At the beginning of the Colombian mission, if you weren't a skilled Spanish linguist, your value to the team was diminished. … There was a tremendous amount of pressure on the ODAs to maintain and improve their language because the most challenging missions in the 7th SFG most often went to teams with strong language skills."[97] When an SF soldier scored below a 1/1 on the DLPT, they faced disciplinary action in the form of counseling statements, prohibition from attending advanced skills training, or worse, and were often forced to spend their free time conducting remedial training in Spanish.[98] Money did not exist to pay for interpreters, so some teams hired local tutors to help train their non-native speakers. Like in El Salvador, it was common for ODAs deploying to the Colombia mission to give their pre-mission briefings to their chain of command in Spanish. Some 7th Group organizations even spent the entire month before deployment conversing in Spanish for all military duties to practice and improve their skills before deployment.[99]

Assessment of Impact:

Colombia, like El Salvador, represents another outlier from the other three cases on the value that advisors put on being regionally affiliated and able to speak the host nation language: although not to the same degree and with important caveats. While there are some similarities between the two cases that could help explain why advisors generally stressed the importance of language training and cultural expertise, there were also differences. Paralleling the El Salvador

[97] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Ed Reeder, 17 July 2020.
[98] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Kevin Key, 8 February 2020.
[99] Long et al., *Building Special Operations Partnerships in Afghanistan and Beyond*, 68.

case, Spanish was the only official language and so dominant that it was spoken by 99.2% of the Colombian population.[100] Additionally, as a category I language on the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Round Table, Spanish was easier to learn than the languages of the other cases. It was spoken broadly across the region (unlike Filipino/Tagalog or Dari/Pashto), but unlike El Salvador, many Colombians spoke English.

Advisors described the importance of language training and cultural awareness in a variety of ways. They reiterated the point, captured in other cases, that language is part of friendship and partnership and is a critical component to building trust. "Spanish was really important to building rapport. Even knowing some slang could help get a team in the door in tough times."[101] Some advisors argued that ODAs that did not focus on language or culture were not as effective, and SEAL (Sea, Air, and Land) units did not seem to be received as well or have as much of an impact as SF ODAs because of their poor linguistic skills.[102] Others posited that, "If you don't understand the host nation history and culture, you could create an international incident. … You need to know both the national culture and subcultures."[103] Such incidents could either damage rapport or even shut down training in its entirety. General Carlos Ospina Ovalle, commander of the Colombian Armed Forces agreed, observing, "I think that the combination of language and culture is very important to advise troops in a foreign country. … many of them (advisors) were sons of immigrants and that is very helpful (what they call second generation) because they were aware of the difficulties they would have to face." [104] One other advisor noted, "If you're really trying to build capacity or work with partners, … you have to

[100] "What Languages Are Spoken in Colombia?," WorldAtlas, August 1, 2017, https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-languages-are-spoken-in-colombia.html.
[101] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Kevin Key, 8 February 2020.
[102] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Scott Morley, 11 February 2021.
[103] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Amil Alvarez, 10 February 2021.
[104] Email from GEN Ospina Ovalle to Frank Sobchak, 16 February 2021.

have the language to communicate and to pick up all the nuances, whether they are social or cultural. You cannot do that through an interpreter."[105]

Some advisors argued that because of how advanced the Colombian military's skills had become, language training and cultural awareness became even more important. "Language skills are paramount to building a combat effective partner force. At the tactical level they have value but are not essential. But once you get into the operational and strategic levels of advice for a partner that is, especially like Colombia, where they have made the jump and they are doing tactical (operations) in their sleep, language becomes more and more important. Understanding logistics, building SOF institutions, (and) building intelligence sharing processes across the host nation interagency, all of those require precise language skills and cultural understanding."[106]

At the same time, a decline in the capability of 7th Group Spanish speakers across the span of the mission provides reason to question the general importance of language skills. Even though advisors sang accolades of the importance of language skills, if those same advisors deployed with less than proficient Spanish skills, then perhaps other factors were at play in the creation of combat effective Colombian SOF elements. Quantitative and qualitative data show a drop in language skills across 7th Group's decade of deployments to Central Asia, likely because constant deployments to Afghanistan made it difficult to find time to practice Spanish.

The degradation in language and cultural skills was noted by officers within the SF regiment and by embassy personnel. Some noted that by 2006 the deployments to Afghanistan had resulted in powerful command emphasis for some 7th Group soldiers to learn Central Asian languages, to include Pashtu, Uzbek, and Urdu, even though the Group was still regionally oriented to Latin America. Others noted that some of the new soldiers arriving from the SF

[105] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Joe Reagan, 8 February 2021.
[106] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Scott Morley, 11 February 2021.

training pipeline spoke Central Asian languages rather than Spanish.[107] In 2016, the 7th Group CSM was shocked to learn that the organization had been assigned a Battalion Commander and Battalion Command Sergeant Major that had never deployed to Latin America but had been to Iraq and Afghanistan numerous times.[108]

Embassy personnel provided an even grimmer perspective on the language skills of 7th Group. While the Spanish of some SF operators was phenomenal, owing to the fact they were native speakers, others had limited to no skills.[109] One MILGP officer observed that in the 2006-time frame, some ODAs only had a few soldiers who could speak Spanish. In a particularly striking vignette, a 7th SFG team sergeant, the senior NCO in the organization, was watching and evaluating a group of Colombian SOF leaders as they conducted mission planning for a direct-action assault. The embassy official asked him how he thought the Colombians did, and he responded that he didn't know because he didn't speak Spanish. That team sergeant had spent most of his career in 3rd Special Forces Group where French was the target language because of the unit's focus on Africa.[110] Such assignments were not uncommon as individuals crossed over between groups to follow mentors or fill key leadership positions important for promotion.

Statistically, a 2014 SOCOM report noted that most SF personnel deploying to Colombia were able to score a 1/1 on the Defense Language Proficiency Test (DLPT), the minimum level necessary to deploy to the USSOUTHCOM area of responsibility, but few had higher levels of proficiency.[111] Although the requirement to graduate the qualification course and become a

[107] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Kevin Key, 8 February 2020.
[108] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Amil Alvarez, 10 February 2021. Each group had a total of four battalion commanders and CSMs- some of the most important leaders in the organization.
[109] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Barbara Fick, 28 January 2021.
[110] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Carlos Berrios, 12 January 2021.
[111] Moyar, Pagan, and Griego, *Persistent Engagement in Colombia*, 46.

qualified Special Forces operator was generally 1/1,[112] at times, that standard was waived to a 0+/0+ level in order to provide teams sufficient personnel to deploy to Afghanistan.[113] Several officers interviewed noted that even the 1/1 score was insufficient to be an effective advisor.[114] Spanish speaking skills at that level were not enough to be truly functional, and more importantly, the cultural awareness taught during the USAJFKSWCS courses often amounted to bringing in a cooked meal for lunch from the country one was assigned to study. Criticizing such approaches, one advisor reasoned, "True cultural awareness requires sustained study and academic rigor, something that comes from a graduate level education in regional studies or at least four months of immersion in country."[115]

Back-to-back deployments to Afghanistan not only degraded language skills, but also had implications for cultural awareness. When 7th Group had been wholly focused on Latin America, it understood the cultural nuances of the environment and how to advise when they were barred from combat. Over time, continuous combat deployments warped some of the Group's teams towards focusing on leading during combat operations and not advising.[116] Switching from a mindset of guiding partnered combat operations to a mentality where they were invited by the host nation and could not lead their partners in battle was challenging and affected rapport.[117] "Early on we did everything for the Afghans. They didn't even have uniforms or equipment. We would direct them and lead them everywhere. Then we would deploy to Colombia with its well-established and experienced military and SOF commands, and there was

[112] U.S. Army Special Forces Command, "USASFC(A) Policy 350-1-14: Command Language Program," July 9, 2014.
[113] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Amil Alvarez, 10 February 2021.
[114] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Douglas Judice, 1 February 2021.
[115] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Joe Reagan, 8 February 2021.
[116] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Dr. David Spencer, 22 January 2021.
[117] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Barbara Fick, 28 January 2021.

little need for an E-7 (Sergeant First Class) to advise a colonel or a general in counterguerrilla tactics."[118]

Echoing comments made by El Salvador advisors about the importance of personality in building rapport, several participants in the Colombia mission noted that language skills and cultural awareness were only two pieces of the puzzle that contributed to rapport building and the combat effectiveness of the partner force. "If it was just about language training and a little bit of culture, you could take twenty-five Hispanic drill sergeants from Fort Benning and give them two days of classes and deploy them. They (the Army) tried to do that, multiple times, and it was an unmitigated disaster."[119] Understanding the culture of the target country was very important because each has their own distinct culture, and the military has its own subcultures within that.

Another SF advisor who later served as a foreign area officer noted the quirkiness of the relationship between language and good advising. In some cases, Puerto Rican officers and NCOs who were native Spanish speakers were fired and sent back to the United States while others from West Virginia who struggled to achieve a 2/2 on the DLPT and spoke Spanish with a thick Southern accent were highly successful. In those instances, personality mattered more than language skills and having the right character traits and temperament were critical. Language helped, but an advisor had to be able to gain trust and provide value through training, advising, and delivering what they promised.[120]

Partner Force to Advisor Ratio:

[118] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Douglas Judice, 1 February 2021.
[119] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Mike Brown, 11 February 2021.
[120] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Augustin Dominguez, 11 February 2021.

The Colombian component of the equation to calculate partner force to advisor ratio is relatively straightforward. The BACOA battalion was composed of a headquarters company, two line companies and one reconnaissance company of scouts and snipers; altogether approximately 300 commandos.[121] AGLAN was a battalion sized element made up of five fifty-man companies, for a total of 250 *Lanceros.*[122] Like other SOF elements partnered with U.S. forces in the post 9/11 era, both units adopted a red/amber/green cycle with one third of the unit conducting combat operations, one third conducting training, and one third on leave.[123] When taking this into account, the number of BACOA soldiers being actively advised by SF soldiers was closer to 200 commandos [124] and the number of AGLAN soldiers was closer to 170. There was no evidence of "ghost soldiers" or other corruption that was endemic to nearly all the other case studies and desertions were simply unheard of in either unit. Casualties and retirements were replaced almost immediately, especially in the AGLAN, which used the pre-existing *Lancero* school to screen for new candidates. As a result of these factors, both units' strengths wavered little over the span of the assessment period.

By contrast, the size of the advising force varied considerably. At the operational level, senior American officials placed a force cap on the number of deployed personnel to Colombia. At first, the maximum number of U.S. military personnel was set at 400 people.[125] After the FARC captured the three American contractors in 2003, the total footprint grew significantly: to

[121] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Carlos Berrios, 12 January 2021.
[122] Kenneth Finlayson, "Colombian Special Operations Forces," *Veritas*, Fall 2006, https://arsof-history.org/articles/v2n4_colombian_sof_page_1.html.
[123] *Pedro Vallejo, "Powerpoint Presentation: Organización CCOES" (Commando Conjunto de Operaciones Especiales* (CCOES), February 15, 2021). Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Mike Brown, 11 February 2021. Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Carlos Berrios, 12 January 2021.
[124] Kenneth Finlayson, "Colombian Special Operations Forces."
[125] Robert D. Kaplan, *Imperial Grunts: On the Ground with the American Military from Mogadishu to the Philippines to Iraq and Beyond* (New York: Random House, 2005), 146.

800 military personnel and 600 contractors, not including those aligned specifically towards conducting a potential hostage rescue mission.[126]

Included in the force cap were advisors from the regular army working with their counterparts in Colombia's conventional forces as well as additional joint SOF elements advising Colombian conventional forces, police, and other elite elements. There was considerable political oversight to ensure the limits were not exceeded, to the point where the number of "boots on the ground" was monitored even more strictly than in El Salvador, and when the mission was at capacity, one advisor had to leave the country before a new one would be allowed to enter.[127] The U.S. embassy provided daily reports counting the number of personnel in the country which were heavily scrutinized by both SOUTHCOM and Congress.[128] The SF advisory effort was only a small fraction of the total pool of advisors.

During its rotations in 2002 and 2003, 7th Special Forces Group dedicated two full companies supported by a battalion headquarters and staff to the Colombia mission. In sum, the effort totaled ten ODAs and approximately 100 advisors.[129] Of that element, one full ODA was committed to the standup of BACOA and to the creation of AGLAN, each of which lasted six months.[130] After the initial training of AGLAN and BACOA was concluded, only 15 advisors were involved in training Colombian SOF elements with the remainder committed to training conventional forces and police elements. [131]

[126] Brian S. Petit, *Going Big by Getting Small: The Application of Operational Art by Special Operations in Phase Zero* (Outskirts Press, 2013), 129.
[127] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTG Charles Cleveland, 19 October 2020.
[128] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Barbara Fick, 28 January 2021.
[129] Petit, *Going Big by Getting Small*, 130.
[130] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Dr. David Spencer, 22 January 2021.
[131] Moyar, Pagan, and Griego, *Persistent Engagement in Colombia*, 31.

When 7th Group was assigned shared responsibility for the SOF mission in Afghanistan, the unit's commitment to Colombia dropped precipitously. As it became clear that the mission in Afghanistan would require two battalions from 7th Group for each rotation, SOCSOUTH pressured the group leadership to continue to commit a battalion to Colombia to assist in the effort to rescue the American hostages. After being briefed on the location of every deployed ODA, the SOCSOUTH commander acknowledged that the Group did not have the ability to meet the request. Thus, for the span of 2004 only a single AOB[132] remained with seven ODAs.[133] Despite the overall reduction in advisors, because of the importance that American commanders put on maintaining relationships with AGLAN, BACOA, and AFEU an ODA was assigned to each of those elite units, resulting in a net increase in the number of advisors working with Colombian SOF elements.[134] Reflecting on the manpower constraints, BG Charles Cleveland, the SOCSOUTH commander, later commented "We were the economy of force theater; you made your case, took what was given, and made the best of it."[135]

In 2005, the troop commitment was again cleaved in half, with only three ODAs remaining. Of those, one ODA was dedicated to Colombian SOF elements, one trained national police units, and one worked with the conventional Army.[136] Rather than completely abandon the partnerships that they had forged, SF leaders decided to shrink the presence equally,[137]

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[132] While only an AOB (company) remained of advisors, the battalion headquarters and staff (FOB) continued to be a part of the commitment to Colombia. The FOB served as the command element for the AOB that trained and advised Colombian forces as well as another AOB deployed to Latin America, but their primary focus was on the Operation Willing Spirit mission that aimed to rescue the American hostages held by the FARC. That construct lasted until the 2008 time period, when the unilateral Colombian rescue of the hostages made such a large command and control element unnecessary. Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Carlos Berrios, 12 January 2021.
[133] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Ed Reeder, 17 December 2020. Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Douglas Judice, 1 February 2021. Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW3 Dave Hulsey, 4 January 2021.
[134] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Joe Reagan, 8 February 2021.
[135] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTG Charles Cleveland, 19 October 2020.
[136] Moyar, Pagan, and Griego, *Persistent Engagement in Colombia*, 34. Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW3 Dave Hulsey, 4 January 2021.
[137] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW3 Dave Hulsey, 4 January 2021.

resulting in split teams (half ODAs) being assigned to work with the BACOA, AGLAN, and AFEU in almost a caretaker status.[138] Group level guidance focused on "keeping the lights on" to maintain a long term relationship with Colombian SOF.[139] At perhaps the lowest advisory point, the summer 2006 rotation had 3 advisors each with the AGLAN and BACOA before 7th Group was again able to pair split ODAs with the units.[140]

As American forces began to draw down in Afghanistan, more SF teams became available for the mission in Colombia. By 2013 the 7th Group presence there had notched up slightly to four and a half ODAs conducting a variety of missions.[141] Approximately a detachment (ODA) and a half (approximately 18 men) were paired with the Colombian Joint Task Force Omega interagency headquarters as it planned the FARC HVT mission. AGLAN and BACOA were considered important enough to each warrant a consistent partnership with an ODA, which 7th Group classified as a "persistent presence."[142] Little change occurred in the U.S. commitment until 2016, when the Colombian government and the FARC agreed to end the conflict through a negotiated peace treaty.

In addition to these cyclical advisors, USSOCOM sent a handful of advisors to Colombia on permanent change of station orders, which allowed them to live in Colombia with their families for two to three years. Of the units studied in this case, BACOA was authorized an exchange officer and the *Lancero* school -the training pipeline for the AGLAN- was authorized one NCO.[143] In addition, each key division (including the Colombian SOF headquarters) had a

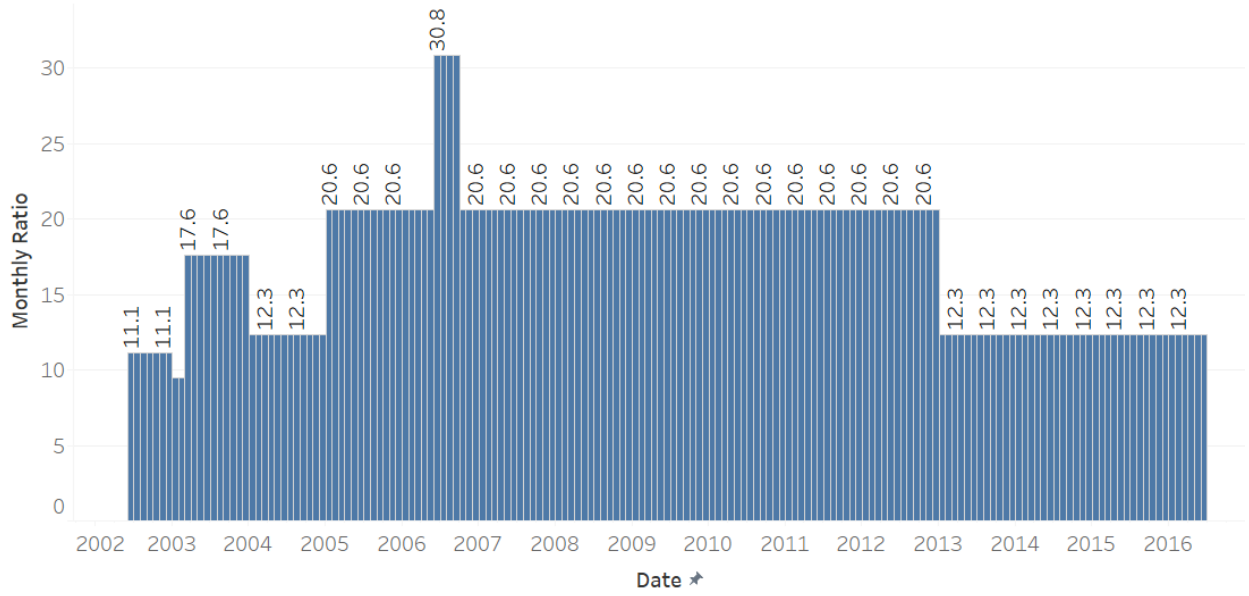
[138] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Joe Reagan, 8 February 2021. Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Douglas Judice, 1 February 2021.
[139] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Kevin Key, 8 February 2020.
[140] Kenneth Finlayson, "Colombian Special Operations Forces."
[141] Moyar, Pagan, and Griego, *Persistent Engagement in Colombia*, 45.
[142] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Douglas Judice, 1 February 2021.
[143] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Dr. David Spencer, 22 January 2021.

four person PATT[144] embedded within it, which was supposed to be led by a major, but often was led by a captain because Colombia was lower in priority than Iraq and Afghanistan. [145] Because all these more permanent advisors also worked directly with AGLAN and BACOA, a net total of six personnel was added to the monthly total of cyclical SF advisors: four for the PATT and two for the exchange officers.

Calculation of Partner Force to Advisor Ratio:

The partner force to advisor ratio was calculated in the same manner as the previous case studies. Monthly ratios were calculated, and then those ratios were averaged across the span of the mission to produce an overall ratio.

Figure 6.1 Monthly Ratio of Partners to Advisors (Colombia)



Assessment of Variable:

[144] Finlayson, "OPATT TO PATT: El Salvador to Colombia and the Formation of the Planning and Assistance Training Teams."
[145] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Douglas Judice, 1 February 2021.

The partner force to advisor ratio in Colombia, 17.5 to 1, was close to the ratio in Afghanistan (16.4) and represented yet another example of a mission that committed far more advisors than the doctrinal ratio.[146] Like in Afghanistan and even the Philippines, in Colombia one special forces ODA was advising slightly more than a company of host nation forces. In terms of the anecdotal impact of the ratio in Colombia, there was general agreement that the number of advisors working with host nation forces was at the appropriate level. Some advisors noted that it made sense to have more advisors present when host nation units were first being stood up, but over time as the units gained capabilities and skills, fewer advisors were needed.[147] Such an observation could also be related to the fact that after the first few years of advisory work, in both AGLAN and BACOA, Colombian leaders began to assign their own instructors that internally conducted training when advisors were not present. Other advisors, however, posited that the rapid and significant decrease in advisors that occurred as 7th Group teams were diverted to the conflict in Afghanistan damaged the rapport that had been established with the Colombians.[148] Expectations had developed over how large the advisory commitment would be, and when it dropped precipitously the Colombians took notice.

Advisor's Ability to Organize Host Nation Unit: "*Acompañado*"

Most advisors fawned over how accommodating the Colombians were to their recommendations. One simply noted, "Colombians were great partners: They appreciated the U.S., were very forgiving, and were easy to work with."[149] Some speculated that the overly

[146] Doctrinally, one Special Forces ODA of twelve personnel should be allotted to train a single host nation battalion, equating to a ratio of 50 or 75 to 1. The partner force to advisor ratio in Colombia was three to four times the doctrinal ratio. Please see Table 6.1 in the appending for the math used to determine the overall ratio for Colombia.
[147] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Mike Brown, 11 February 2021.
[148] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Kevin Key, 8 February 2020.
[149] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Douglas Judice, 1 February 2021.

receptive nature was because the Colombians were enamored with the U.S. military and respected America as a country. There was also a sense among some interviewees that the Colombians wanted to emulate the SF advisors and follow their advice, almost in the way that a younger brother would idealistically look up to an older sibling. Advisors noted that Colombians often looked to the U.S. for affirmation even when they knew what they wanted to do and understood that it was the right choice. This Colombian yearning for American approval was described by some advisors as "*acompañado*," which literally translates as accompanied, but more accurately would be described as a yearning to stand shoulder to shoulder in partnership with their American friends.[150] The desire to please the Americans was so strong that one advisor described the Colombians as "receptive to a fault."[151] Another posited that, "they (the Colombians) would never do anything to damage the U.S.-Colombian relationship, even if it meant tolerating bad actors."[152] A journalist who served as an advisor to the U.S. MILGP described them as, "the dream allies."[153]

In practice, the desire to please their American partners and friends translated into the Colombians often going out of their way to accommodate American requests. One advisor noted that during the selection process for BACOA commandos if he told the Colombian commander someone was not a good candidate, he would remove that individual from the unit without debate.[154] Several commented that the Colombians much more willing to accept U.S. tactical level recommendations than Afghans were. Colombians were also particularly adept at

[150] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Scott Morley, 11 February 2021.
[151] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Joe Reagan, 8 February 2021.
[152] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Douglas Judice, 1 February 2021.
[153] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Tom Marks, 20 January 2021
[154] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW3 Dave Hulsey, 4 January 2021.

recognizing how U.S. ideas could be adopted and then adapted, or "Colombianized" to match the conditions in their country.[155]

Perhaps one of the best examples of the Colombians' willingness to adopt American ideas was the creation of the various SOF headquarters within their armed forces. Like their mentors, the Colombians stood up not just an element to lead the Army Special Operations component (*Comando de Operaciones Especiales del Ejercito* (COESE) or Colombian Army Special Operations Command) but also a joint force command (*Comando Conjunto de Operaciones Especiales* (CCOPE) or Joint Special Operations Command) designed to command special operations forces in combat as well as provide for their institutional needs by organizing, training, and equipping them.[156] First commanded by a Colonel, the headquarters was later led by a one star general and then a two star general, which put it on even footing with Colombian conventional regional commands. The acronym CCOPE was changed to CCOES in 2009, but the organization was not altered, and it maintained the same Spanish name and English translation.[157] In another parallel with the U.S., by 2019 the Colombian military had also created a special forces branch for its officers and special skill identifiers for its NCOs. [158]

These elements were created mainly because, like in the American experience, after the various Colombian SOF elements were formed they were misused by conventional Colombian officers.[159] AFEU, the national counterterrorism force, was routinely tasked to perform personal security detachment missions for Colombian civilian and military VIPs, and was even ordered to

[155] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Augustin Dominguez, 11 February 2021.
[156] Berrios, "Critical Ingredient," 568–69. COESE was created in 2003, CCOPE in 2004.
[157] *Pedro Vallejo, "PowerPoint Presentation: ORGANIZACION CCOES 2019" (Commando Conjunto de Operaciones Especiales* (CCOES), August 29, 2019).
[158] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Amil Alvarez, 10 February 2021.
[159] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Kevin Key, 8 February 2020.

perform static defense by guarding airfields.[160] BACOA and AGLAN experienced similar mismanagement as they were repeatedly railroaded by higher conventional commanders and given missions that were not appropriate.[161]

Another reason for the creation of the Colombian SOF headquarters was that Colombia had been divided into different military zones, each commanded by a two-star general. Those regional commanders had considerable power and were reluctant to cede control of units that operated within their battlespace.[162] Such a construct made it difficult to flow forces from one region to another as the FARC or other enemy forces moved seamlessly between regional commands. The various SOF commands were at least partially created to address this challenge and to give Colombian national leaders military forces that could quickly deploy anywhere in the country and match the flexibility of their opponents.[163]

There is some dispute of whether the U.S. convinced the Colombians to form their own SOF headquarters, or whether the Colombians recognized the challenges they were experiencing and decided to do it on their own. Most involved in the process noted that there was a two-way communication on the standup of the organizations, and at least one American officer described the process as "pushing on an open door," in that the Colombians did not require any convincing and immediately took to implementing the idea.[164] On the Colombian side, Generals Mejia and Ospina were both particularly committed to the creation of new SOF units and headquarters. Others argued that it was more U.S. driven and based on a desire to remake Colombian SOF

[160] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Douglas Judice, 1 February 2021.
[161] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Mike Brown, 11 February 2021.
[162] This was because they would often want to retain control of assets for operational reasons and to avoid fratricide.
[163] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Amil Alvarez, 10 February 2021. This phenomenon was similar to the justification that helped the U.S. stand up its national level counterterrorism forces, which were not limited by the constraints of different Geographic Combatant Commands.
[164] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Augustin Dominguez, 11 February 2021. Quote from Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Mike Brown, 11 February 2021.

forces in the U.S. image to prevent the mistakes of the pre-SOCOM area where SOF was misused and underfunded.[165] Either way, it represents a significant divergence from the other cases where U.S. efforts to create domestic SOF headquarters were poorly supported by host nation forces.

Most interviewees pointed out that the long military partnership between the U.S. and Colombia greatly helped the Americans in their ability to influence Colombian decisions. The nearly continuous SOF presence, which began in the 1960s, built a deep reservoir of trust, connections, and friendships. While the presence was not always robust, it was extremely consistent and became the foundation upon which later success was built.[166] An integral part of that connection was sending SF NCOs and officers to *Lancero* school, which was effectively a requirement to become a senior leader in the Colombian military, and 7th Special Forces Group went to great pains to ensure their *Lancero* graduates always returned to work in Colombia. One such graduate observed, "I went to *Lancero* school to better understand the Colombians and how their military works, and it gave me instant credibility with them. … Because of (graduating from) the course, whatever I said was gold (and) I could do no wrong as soon as they found out that I had attended the *Lancero* course."[167]

Another factor that affected Colombian willingness to accept American suggestions was the degree to which they had experienced combat. Like in other cases, combat experience was the coin of the realm in Colombia and earned instant credibility. Until around 2004 or 2005, American advisors were at a disadvantage because few had been in combat. Once 7th Group was assigned Afghanistan as its primary focus, that calculus changed quickly, and many Colombians

[165] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Douglas Judice, 1 February 2021.
[166] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Barbara Fick, 28 January 2021.
[167] Interview, Frank Sobchak with SGM David Topejr, 23 December 2020.

wanted to mirror many of the U.S. capabilities and to be part of the U.S. global SOF network.[168] American manhunting skills conducting kill/capture missions of high value targets were particularly in demand, as many Colombians deemed that they could apply those lessons towards dismantling the FARC. As was noted by General Ospina, "the experience in Iraq and Afghanistan … provided both parties with common language and a common mentality of soldiers battling against terrorists and terrorism. In the same way, combat experience brought together two very distant worlds. … Firefights, ambushes, and close combat in the Colombian jungles can be compared with the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan and is part of that common language."[169]

Despite the extremely positive relations, there were limits to what Colombians would accept and at times American missteps created friction. When Colombians felt that an American request was not in their best interest or not well thought out- especially for the situation in Colombia- they would respectfully decline to implement it. Simply put, while the Colombians generally loved and respected the Americans, they were not going to make a bad decision for the sake of friendship. Several interviewees gave examples of when the Colombians chose to exert their sovereignty, and more than a few concluded that most of the success in Colombia were due to the Colombians themselves, especially knowing when to say "no" to the Americans.[170] One went as far as concluding that the U.S. was "relatively successful, often quite in spite of ourselves" because "a superb Colombian senior team not only understood its war better than we

[168] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Amil Alvarez, 10 February 2021.
[169] Email from GEN Ospina Ovalle to Frank Sobchak, 16 February 2021.
[170] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Carlos Berrios, 12 January 2021. Interview, Frank Sobchak with Dr. David Spencer, 22 January 2021. Interview, Frank Sobchak with Tom Marks, 20 January 2021.

did but also understood how best we could fit in."[171] Another commented, "In some ways, they (the Colombians) put up with U.S. advisors who weren't qualified to do the job." [172]

There were numerous anecdotes of such occasions. Early in the advisory effort, a set of American contractors believed that providing rubber boots would help the Colombians be able to move in the rainy season when rivers swelled, and roads became nearly impassable. But the Colombians didn't need the boots, and even though they accepted them to appease the Americans, they never took the boots on missions.[173] When initially building the BACOA, a set of military advisors had called for the Colombians to have psychological operations loudspeaker teams, HMMWVs that could be sling loaded by helicopters, and Carl Gustav recoilless rifles so that they would be equipped like an American Ranger unit in a classic case of mirror imaging. Rather than tell the Americans "No," the Colombians accepted the assistance, but set the loudspeakers up around their base at Larandia as a public address system and left the sling load equipment and recoilless rifles in storage.[174]

Similar disconnects occurred at the operational level. Early during *Plan Colombia*, the SOUTHCOM J3 was livid because the Colombian Army would not focus its main effort on Putamayo, where plantations of coca were located. He was particularly incensed because he felt the Colombians had walked back an agreement he made with them, but his anger was unjustified because he failed to appreciate which officer had the actual authority to make the decision. Even though Colombian politicians and senior generals had agreed to the American focus (likely to placate them), a more junior general had command of the units that would be involved and was

[171] Email from Tom Marks to Frank Sobchak, 7 January 2021.
[172] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Douglas Judice, 1 February 2021.
[173] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Dr. David Spencer, 22 January 2021.
[174] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Mike Brown, 11 February 2021.

simply ignoring the request.[175] Other advisors noted that some senior American leaders neither appreciated nor understood General Ospina's strategy, but he was clear and unwavering in his objectives- which proved to be key to successfully terminating the war against the FARC.[176]

Overall, the relationship "was much more an arrangement of equals."[177] The Colombians were very willing to push back on U.S. desires and would frequently tell the Americans, "That's not something we are going to do." But the Colombians were also willing to accept U.S. ideas and recommendations when they realized that the concepts were sound and advantageous to their situation. Furthermore, they rarely let national pride or sovereignty impede on what could help them in the fight against the FARC even if it meant accepting an idea that was not the most beneficial to them at a personal level.

Assessing the Impact of the Variable:

Even though Colombia was not an area of war like Afghanistan or Iraq and did not experience U.S. led regime change, in many ways the Colombians were more receptive to U.S. advice and recommendations on how to organize their SOF elements than Iraqis and Afghans. This is a counterintuitive finding, as one would likely expect that when the U.S. disbanded the armed forces of Iraq and Afghanistan during their occupations, they could have created the military in whatever way they saw fit. But it was not the case, and the Colombians were, within reason, friendly and patient towards American ideas.

During the more than decade-long advisory effort, there was also not a significant shift in the Colombian willingness to accept American recommendations. The "sovereignty clock" so prevalent in other cases, never even started ticking. While large scale operations such as Iraq

[175] Email from Tom Marks to Frank Sobchak, 23 January 2021.
[176] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Carlos Berrios, 12 January 2021.
[177] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Tom Marks, 20 January 2021.

and Afghanistan with their massive troop footprint could have caused such a phenomenon due to the population's patience waning from the sheer number of interactions and frictions, such a condition also existed in the Philippines, which had a troop commitment on the scale of Colombia. The explanation for it not happening in Colombia is not definitive, but likely related to the long-term positive relations that had existed between the two countries.

All together there is little doubt that the advisory effort had a considerable impact, especially on the creation of Colombian SOF. The development of those organizations was far deeper and broader than the special operations forces created in all the other cases in this study. Rather than simply elite infantry, such as was built in Afghanistan or El Salvador, Colombia developed a true special operations capability. Moreover, unlike in the Philippines and Iraq, the Colombians embraced that culture wholeheartedly and stood up not only units, but also headquarters designed to lead them in combat and to care for their institutional needs. The creation of the Colombian SOF was so complete and matching to the American recommendations that several advisors independently noted that the only thing they were lacking was a Colombian equivalent of the Nunn-Cohen amendment to the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act that provided a dedicated funding stream for SOF resources.[178]

With this in mind, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the U.S. changed the very culture of the Colombian military. Indeed, General Carlos Ospina Ovalle observed, "I think the most important contribution was the transfer of military culture. The way American soldiers understand their duty, the way they understand what is to be a true professional, the way they handle difficult human rights situations in the field, as well as their discipline were important

[178] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Scott Morley, 11 February 2021. Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Amil Alvarez, 10 February 2021. Admiral Eric Olson, the USSOCOM Commander from 2007 to 2011, frequently called Major Force Program 11, the SOCOM acquisition authority, the "crown jewel" of the organization's strength.

practical lessons for their Colombian counterparts."[179] Based on this information it is clear that in Colombia the variable of advisor ability to organize host nation forces should be rated as high.

Combat Advising:

Like during the American involvement in El Salvador, considerable restrictions were put on SF advisors during their operations in Colombia. In simplest terms, across the U.S. effort advisors were explicitly barred from engaging in combat. At various times, however, changes to the rules of engagement allowed SF personnel to get closer to operations and even assist in reconnaissance missions, but the prohibition on combat advising was explicit and invariable. Unlike in El Salvador, technology had developed enough so that advisors to Colombian SOF elements were rarely out of contact with their headquarters or the Embassy and it was impossible for them to skirt the rules like had been done in the 1980s. Ubiquitous mobile phones with cameras and 24-hour media channels embedded with Colombian military units and FARC guerrillas changed the environment such that, unlike El Salvador, any violation of the rules in Colombia was likely to be quickly discovered and punished.

Early in the mission, during the 1990s and until the FARC capture of U.S. contractors in 2003, rules on what SF advisors could and could not do were even more restrictive than in El Salvador. In many cases, U.S. personnel were prohibited from leaving the base of their Colombian partners and were not even allowed to accompany them if they moved forward to plan an operation.[180] The Embassy was extremely risk averse and required many advisors to use an armored vehicle to go from domicile to duty. That particular rule had been implemented because the FARC began to realize how much of an impact the advisors were having and began targeting them, hoping that if they killed, wounded, or captured one, it could create enough

[179] Email from GEN Ospina Ovalle to Frank Sobchak, 16 February 2021.
[180] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Augustin Dominguez, 11 February 2021.

political drama to lead to at least a partial U.S. withdrawal.[181] Embassy officials routinely refused requests to authorize SF soldiers to combat advise their partners on the grounds that casualties could collapse domestic Congressional support for assistance and even the mission itself. As such, they even prohibited U.S. forces from returning fire if they inadvertently came in contact.[182] For example, in February 2003, a Special Forces ODA partnered with a Colombian police unit monitored the distress call from the American contractor aircraft as it went down but were not allowed to respond even though their partners had Blackhawk helicopters and were less than 30 minutes flight time from the crash site.[183]

After the capture of the U.S. contractors, the rules of engagement became a point of intense frustration and dispute. SF leaders tried desperately to convince the embassy and DoD to support a change that would permit advisors to go forward with Colombian units in limited amounts and under certain constraints. Working with Embassy personnel such as the Regional Security Officer, SF advisors reviewed threat assessments and worked to gain pre-approval for potential areas where they would be allowed to deploy to a forward operating base with their Colombian partners.[184] When such approval was given, advisors could then accompany Colombians to the staging area as they moved forward.[185] Some recalled that senior leaders, such as the SF company commander and sergeant major, could go forward with their partnered Colombian commander and his C2 element, effectively shadowing him where he went.[186]

In June 2005, the authorities were expanded slightly during Operation Willing Spirit, allowing U.S. SOF elements to conduct sensitive site exploitation (SSE) of recently captured

[181] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Barbara Fick, 28 January 2021.
[182] Moyar, Pagan, and Griego, *Persistent Engagement in Colombia*, 33.
[183] Charles H. Briscoe, "Operation WILLING SPIRIT (OWS): Setting Conditions for Operación JAQUE."
[184] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Mike Brown, 11 February 2021.
[185] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Chris Zets, 21 December 2020.
[186] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Carlos Berrios, 12 January 2021.

FARC camps while paired with Colombian SOF.[187] Although such operations could only occur after combat had ended, they were a significant change as they allowed U.S. forces to enter FARC controlled territory- a risky proposition by itself. Over the next year, American SF leaders obtained approval for another expansion in authority that authorized them to pair with Colombian SOF reconnaissance teams looking for the American hostages.[188] At first the authority was limited to three Americans per mission but was later changed to allow a single ODA to accompany their Colombian partners.[189] At its apogee, June 2008 when it appeared that recovery of the hostages could be imminent, the maximum number of SF advisors allowed to accompany Colombians forward on operational missions only reached 33 personnel.[190] Even then, Americans were still barred from combat, and some interpretations held that they had to remain at the last covered and concealed location to prevent that occurrence.[191]

As soon as the hostages were freed those expanded authorities evaporated quickly. By the end of 2008, restrictions were again so tight that SF advisors were generally not permitted to leave the installation where their host nation partner was based. If they wanted to move with their partners to a different location, either for operational or training purposes, they had to put together a request in the form of a Contingency Operation (CONOP) for embassy approval.[192] Even then the rules held that if the advisors were approved to go forward, they could not accompany the Colombians tactically. Instead, the SF advisors travelled to the town closest to

[187] United States Army Special Operations Command, "White Paper: ARSOF and Operation Willing Sprit 2003-08, An Operational Analysis."
[188] Charles H. Briscoe, "Operation WILLING SPIRIT (OWS): Setting Conditions for Operación JAQUE."
[189] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTG Charles Cleveland, 19 October 2020. Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Carlos Berrios, 12 January 2021.
[190] Charles Cleveland and Daniel Egel, *The American Way of Irregular War: An Analytical Memoir* (Washington, DC: RAND Corporation, 2020), 136, https://doi.org/10.7249/PEA301-1.
[191] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW3 Dave Hulsey, 4 January 2021.
[192] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Douglas Judice, 1 February 2021.

where the operation would be conducted and stayed in a hotel where they could help the Colombian SOF unit conduct final mission preparations but not go further forward.[193]

Several interviewees noted that, at times, the rules – or the interpretation of the rules – changed depending on the senior personalities in the Embassy, leadership at SOCSOUTH, or even the Colombians themselves. Some leaders were more willing to accept risk than others, and if either the senior SF officer in Colombia or the MILGP commander had good relations with the Ambassador or the Colombians, it was possible that certain restrictions would be made less onerous.[194] Like in El Salvador, but to a considerably less degree, there were occasions where the nature of the guerrilla conflict and the somewhat dynamic nature of the rules put SF soldiers in contact with enemy forces regardless of the rules of engagement. Explaining why he engaged in combat despite the prohibitions, one advisor who unexpectedly made contact with the FARC quipped, "I'm coming home alive."[195]

SF advisors often struggled with the contrast in rules between Afghanistan and Colombia. Experiences from combat in Afghanistan had outsize influence on operations in Colombia and some ODAs failed to adapt to the rules of the Latin American environment, with results of dramatic and spectacular failure. Other teams simply fumed at the restrictions and performed sub-optimally. In Colombia SF advisors had to be comfortable with the State Department making the overall rules, and with negotiating with both the Colombians and the embassy to convince them that it would be safe and appropriate to do what they believed was necessary for

[193] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Scott Morley, 11 February 2021.
[194] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Kevin Key, 8 February 2020. Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Douglas Judice, 1 February 2021. Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Mike Brown, 11 February 2021.
[195] Moyar, Pagan, and Griego, *Persistent Engagement in Colombia*, 33.

mission success.[196] Considering all these factors, the variable of being able to combat advise host nation forces is rated as low for SF operations in Colombia.

Assessing the Impact of the Variable:

SF advisors provided mixed opinions on the impacts of limitations on their ability to combat advise host nation forces. A slight majority vociferously argued that not being able to combat advise impeded their ability to make progress with Colombian SOF elements. "We're only using twenty percent of our capabilities under the current rules of engagement," offered one SF officer.[197] A slightly smaller group noted that restrictions on participating in combat was simply inviolable and actually provided some advantages.

Most important among those who argued that the limitations hurt their effectiveness was the sense that they would lose credibility and rapport if the American advisors were not subject to the same dangers as their partners. One senior advisor noted, "When you pat them on the back and say good luck (on your mission), you lose credibility. If you don't share the same risks they do, you can't really build rapport."[198] Others perceived that it became a friction point when the SF advisors could not accompany their Colombian partners, with some Colombians frustrated that their American "*hermanos*" (brothers) were turning their backs on them. "Because we are not in the field, the Colombians think that they know better than us,"[199] remarked a senior MILGP officer. Yet most Colombians understood the decisions were political and not personal and accepted that it was simply the way it was going to be, even though they were frustrated by the rule.[200]

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[196] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Amil Alvarez, 10 February 2021. Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Douglas Judice, 1 February 2021.
[197] Moyar, Pagan, and Griego, *Persistent Engagement in Colombia*, 33.
[198] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Ed Reeder, 17 July 2020.
[199] Moyar, Pagan, and Griego, *Persistent Engagement in Colombia*, 33.
[200] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Kevin Key, 8 February 2020.

Not being able to accompany the Colombians on operations also limited an advisor's ability to observe and critique their partner's performance when it mattered most. CSM Chris Zets, who served as 7th Group's Command Sergeant Major and had numerous deployments to Colombia commented that if you could not combat advise, "as soon as you send people out the gate and they leave, you have no idea whether they're doing what you told them to do or not. You have no idea whether they're using fire discipline, and you have no idea whether they're following any kind of human rights considerations. The way you do that is by presence."[201] Not being able to accompany partners often meant what actually happened was lost in translation due to cultural differences in how Colombians would describe events or impeded by language skills that were insufficient to understand the technical details and jargon in a report.

Those who argued that the prohibitions on combat advising had either negligible results or even positive impacts often emphasized that the political reality that neither the U.S. nor the Colombian governments would have permitted it. To them Colombia was a sovereign country, and the U.S. was not at war with Colombia or at war with the FARC or any other insurgent groups. Because of that, while combat advising was important, there should still be limits on what U.S. forces could do. The overall objective should be for the advisors to go forward with their partners, but not be first through the door.[202] Echoing this sentiment, another advisor - citing Afghanistan by comparison- noted that if the host nation only fights because the U.S. is there next to them in combat, then combat advising is actually counterproductive.[203] One senior MILGP officer went so far as to argue, "one reason that we are successful is that we are not involved in combat."[204] In that context, many advisors in Colombia simply saw the ability to

[201] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Chris Zets, 21 December 2020.
[202] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Amil Alvarez, 10 February 2021.
[203] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Joe Reagan, 8 February 2021.
[204] Donald Stoker, ed., *Military Advising and Assistance*, 1st edition (London: Routledge, 2008), 178.

combat advise, which they were able to do in Afghanistan but not Colombia, as mission enhancing rather than mission essential.[205] While there was friction over authorities and the inability to combat advise at the team level, the higher up the chain of command, there was understanding and respect why the rules were in place.

Other Factors:

By comparison to the heterogenous Iraq, Afghanistan, and even the Philippines, Colombia had only a modest mix of cultures, with 86% of the population either white or mestizo (mixed white and native American) according to the 2005 census.[206] There was also little religious diversity, with 90% of the population reporting as Catholic, 10% as protestant, and only a handful of other faiths.[207] Even among the limited different ethnic and religious groups, the national identity of being a Colombian resonated strongly. The notion of tribal identity being important simply was nonexistent. As one advisor noted, a major difference between Colombia and Afghanistan was that "the Colombian soldier knows he is Colombian. If you ask him about his identity, it doesn't matter if he has African or Spanish or Native American heritage, he will say he is Colombian. If you ask an Afghan about his identity, they won't say they are Afghan, they habitually will say they are Dari, or Pashtu, or Hazara, or some other ethnic identity."[208] Such homogeneity and strength in national identity had impacts on cross-cultural communication and in the degree of internal friction within the host nation forces.

From 2000 to 2016, the U.S. provided over $10 billion in various forms of assistance to Colombia, including its military support.[209] While such an amount is more than double the

[205] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Kevin Key, 8 February 2020.
[206] Rex A. Hudson and Library of Congress, eds., *Colombia: A Country Study*, 5th ed, Area Handbook Series (Washington, D.C: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 2010), 86–87.
[207] Hudson and Library of Congress, xxxiv.
[208] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Chris Zets, 21 December 2020.
[209] Nicholas Naquin, "Learning the Lancero Way."

amounts of aid provided to El Salvador and the Philippines, it pales in comparison to assistance provided to Afghanistan and Iraq. The sum of all Colombian assistance from the approval of *Plan Colombia* in 1999 through 2013 roughly equaled the cost of running the Iraq or Afghanistan war for a single month during the surge.[210] In addition, the Colombians themselves provided ten times as much as the U.S. assistance by taxing businesses and individuals to pay for the war. There was consistent domestic support to win the conflict and citizens supported the tax increases.[211]

One final difference is that unlike any other nation in this study, the Colombian military had a capable NCO corps. American assistance helped establish a Colombian NCO Academy in 1993, and by 2003 it was producing quality NCOs.[212] One senior American advisor described that academy and its collective alumni as a "game changer" for the conflict.[213] In 2002, U.S. Chief of Staff of the Army General Eric Shinseki asked his Colombian counterpart what they needed most, and he responded that they only needed a senior NCO/Sergeant Majors academy. Shinseki ensured that U.S. funds and personnel assistance were committed to the project.[214]

Assessing the Combat Effectiveness of BACOA and AGLAN:

BACOA and AGLAN played an integral role in the Colombian campaign to kill or capture FARC HVTs, and nearly all observers rated them as being true special operations forces-not just elite infantry. Their competence at night fighting, ability to conduct multi-day combat

[210] Major Fernando M Luján, *Light Footprints: The Future of American Military Intervention* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2013), 8.
[211] Daphne McCurdy and Nick Lopez, "Institution Building as a Counterinsurgency Tool." Quoting Ambassador Kevin Whitaker.
[212] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Wayne (Pat) Richardson, 20 January 2021.
[213] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW3 Dave Hulsey, 4 January 2021.
[214] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Tom Marks, 20 January 2021.

operations, capability to fight without advisors present, and performance against enemy forces will be assessed to evaluate their capabilities in comparison to the other cases.

Night Fighting:

Like in the Philippines, the terrain in Colombia had an impact on night fighting. The triple canopy jungle made American style operations using night vision goggles nearly impossible because of the lack of ambient light on the jungle floor.[215] One advisor noted that some conventional Colombian units chose to stop moving at sunset and build fires rather than try to maneuver in such inhospitable terrain.[216] But nearly every advisor noted that the Colombian SOF units had much stronger night fighting skills, and while the jungle had an impact, it did not prevent them from conducting operations during periods of darkness. Units across CCOES had been provided modern night vision goggles and laser pointers, with some interviewees noting that the Colombian elite forces were better equipped than U.S. ODAs before 9/11.[217] With equipment, training, and will, those elements could move at night, even in dense jungle, but it was very deliberate with an average movement rate of around one kilometer per hour.[218]

In terrain that was not as restrictive, the Colombian SOF elements performed superbly at night.[219] Some advisors noted that they were not afraid of taking risks and their night fighting prowess rivaled the U.S. skills in part due to their aggressiveness and machismo.[220] Several recalled that the Colombians conducted multiple unilateral military freefall operations at night, using goggles and oxygen and performing their own jumpmaster safety inspections. That alone

[215] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Chris Zets, 21 December 2020.
[216] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Duke Christie, 19 October 2020.
[217] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Kevin Key, 8 February 2020.
[218] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Joe Reagan, 8 February 2021.
[219] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW3 Dave Hulsey, 4 January 2021. Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Mike Brown, 11 February 2021. Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Douglas Judice, 1 February 2021. Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Carlos Berrios, 12 January 2021.
[220] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Kevin Key, 8 February 2020.

was a capability that was out of reach of most NATO countries, with the then Chief of Staff of the Army General Mark Milley observing that it was a skillset possessed by only six armies in the world.[221] On one such mission, they landed within 800 meters of the target in dangerous jungle terrain at night on a very small landing zone. The unit set up hide sites and then shot and killed a renegade FARC high value target in darkness and then successfully exfiltrated.[222] CCOES had also developed- through American advisory and financial assistance- a highly capable SOF aviation unit comparable to the U.S. 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, which could fly anywhere in the country at night under goggles to conduct infiltrations, exfiltrations, casualty evacuation, and logistics resupply.[223]

Assessment:

Colombian SOF units, such as BACOA and AGLAN, had the proper equipment, skill, and willingness to perform night combat operations in challenging terrain. They were supported by rotary wing assets and maintained other night skills that gave them capabilities matched by few armies in the world. Clearly, this indicates their night fighting skills deserve a high rating for this element of the dependent variable.

Conducting Multi-Day (72hrs) Combat Operations:

While CCOES had one logistics battalion assigned to provide direct support, Colombian SOF units primarily relied on the logistics elements of the conventional military.[224] Unlike many of the other case studies, the Colombian military logistics system was developed and functional by 2003, at least in part through American financial support and advisor assistance. One advisor noted that as the BACOA and then AGLAN were stood up, their

[221] Email from LTC Augustin Dominguez to Frank Sobchak, 4 February 2021.
[222] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Scott Morley, 11 February 2021.
[223] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Dr. David Spencer, 22 January 2021.
[224] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Amil Alvarez, 10 February 2021.

soldiers received basic items through the Colombian supply chain, such as boots, web gear, body armor, and other individual equipment. Only then did U.S. SOF and MILGP provide SOF specific equipment to those forces.[225] Not a single advisor offered observations of corruption within the Colombian logistics structure, an endemic factor in every other country in this study.

With a strong foundation, Colombian SOF units were consistently able to conduct multi-day sustained combat operations- often far in excess of 72 hours. Such feats were even more noteworthy given the challenges of the Colombian environment. Dense jungles made ground resupply challenging, and even aerial resupply relied upon finding an appropriate drop zone or landing zone. Because of those conditions, the Colombians frequently chose to make do and pack as much ammunition and food as was humanly possible into their gear. Nearly every advisor praised the mental and physical toughness of the Colombians who stoically conducted missions for up to thirty days.[226] In such cases, the CCOES forces either lived off the land, or simply did without proper nourishment. One advisor witnessed Colombian SOF troops deploying on ten-day special reconnaissance missions with only a foot long brick of sugar to eat for the entire operation. Rather than rely on a precarious resupply system for water, the Colombians could drink stream water without filtration or purification, something that would likely kill an American, if not make them incapacitated and mission ineffective.[227] Some technological advances did help the longevity of missions, with dehydrated rations being appreciated especially among AGLAN *Lanceros*.[228]

On dismounted missions, CCOES units would often pack along a pot and bags of rice and beans which they would cook in a patrol base to sustain themselves. Because it matched the way

[225] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Mike Brown, 11 February 2021.
[226] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW3 Dave Hulsey, 4 January 2021.
[227] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Joe Reagan, 8 February 2021.
[228] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Dr. David Spencer, 22 January 2021.

that local *campesinos*, or farmers, prepared their meals, the fire and cooking would not necessarily alert the FARC or other enemy forces to their presence. One advisor noted that if the mission went longer, the Colombians just made do with less food or even without food for days. "The Colombian military doesn't need much gear; they are tough and hard and more comfortable suffering and taking risks than American forces are."[229]

Colombian SOF elements routinely conducted combat resupply and casualty evacuation for units in contact when conditions warranted and included logistics in mission planning. They performed both functions during night and day, and during adverse weather conditions.[230] An advisor recalled a BACOA element conducting an air assault into the FARC autonomous zone in 2006 at night, and then fighting for several days. During that time, the unit required a combat resupply of ammunition and conducted airmobile casualty evacuation at night under night vision goggles while in contact. During other long missions, the unit conducted resupply via parachute, recovered caches put in specifically for the mission, or through bundles kicked out of the side doors of helicopters.[231]

During Operation Willing Spirit, U.S. SF personnel were paired with their Colombian counterparts to conduct reconnaissance and attempted interdiction missions as part of the hostage rescue effort. Those combined forces conducted operations for over a month- the longest U.S. patrol in hostile territory since the Vietnam War. The Americans struggled with the physical challenges of the operation, losing an average of 25 pounds per person, resulting in the SOCSOUTH commander observing in his memoirs that after the mission, "We had a new appreciation for our Colombian counterparts."[232]

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[229] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Amil Alvarez, 10 February 2021.
[230] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Mike Brown, 11 February 2021.
[231] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Kevin Key, 8 February 2020.
[232] Cleveland and Egel, *The American Way of Irregular War*, 136.

Assessment:

There was nearly universal agreement that CCOES units could consistently conduct combat operations for more than 72 hours. Many advisors marveled at the toughness and skill of the Colombian SOF units in conducting long combat missions, and some noted that their logistics skills were as good as American forces.[233] Their institutional logistics system functioned well, and they could conduct resupply and casualty evacuation of units under fire. With such capabilities, assigning a high rating to the ability of CCOES units to conduct extended combat operations is an easy decision.

Fighting without Advisors Present:

Methodologically, to be able to fight without advisors, host nation forces had to be able to conduct intelligence driven operations where information garnered from one mission would lead to other follow-on missions. Key components of this cycle would be for units to be able to organically generate their own intelligence, successfully action those targets, conduct sensitive site exploitation of those targets, and then use that information to repeat the cycle again in another series of operations- in a nutshell, the F3EAD cycle.[234] Because of the particular operational level problem set that the Colombians believed they faced, namely decapitating the FARC leadership through relentless kill/capture missions, they were particularly receptive to learn from the cycle used by American SOF elements in Iraq and Afghanistan and adapt it to their needs.

There was near universal consensus that the CCOES units, particularly BACOA and AGLAN, could conduct intelligence driven operations. One interviewee noted that the

[233] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Mike Brown, 11 February 2021.
[234] Richard H. Shultz Jr and Joseph L. Votel, *Transforming US Intelligence for Irregular War: Task Force 714 in Iraq*, Reprint edition (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020), 109–11, 125–31.

Colombians have significant organic first world intelligence gathering capabilities that allow them to perform the F3EAD cycle.[235] In particular, there was agreement that Colombian human intelligence was very good and that they were keen students of tradecraft skills taught by SF advisors.[236] Colombian signals and imagery intelligence capabilities were less developed, but included UAVs with full motion video, aircraft with high resolution ground radars, and various types of signals intelligence capable of intercepting and geo-locating FARC communications.[237] The skills of the Colombian intelligence personnel, as well as the equipment they possessed, far eclipsed those of all other cases reviewed in this study.

SF advisors also trained CCOES units in sensitive site exploitation and they consistently applied those skills effectively on missions. They were extremely proficient at battlefield interrogation and were capable of doing basic document exploitation on the objective.[238] While they did not have the same problems with corruption that the Philippines had with captured computers and cell phones being stolen; they did have similar challenges at not being able to exploit computers and other media in a timely manner because they lacked the resources to process them at their forward operating bases. Almost all electronic devices had to return to Bogota to be analyzed and as a result, rather than follow on missions happening the same night, they would more likely transpire two or three nights later.[239] Because many of the operations were in rural environments, such a delay seemed to not significantly affect the success rate of successive missions, likely because FARC elements were similarly challenged to move quickly in such conditions.

[235] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Dr. David Spencer, 22 January 2021.
[236] Interview, Frank Sobchak with MG Ed Reeder, 17 July 2020.
[237] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Chris Zets, 21 December 2020. Interview, Frank Sobchak with Dr. David Spencer, 22 January 2021.
[238] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Kevin Key, 8 February 2020.
[239] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Douglas Judice, 1 February 2021.

At the same time, there was agreement that these skills developed over time, and as a direct result of the American military assistance that came from training and new equipment.[240] Through Operation Willing Spirit, the U.S. ran a fusion center in the embassy which shared considerable amounts of intelligence[241] with their Colombian partners, including providing Centrix computers to help share classified information.[242] Even with that support the Colombians generated a considerable amount of intelligence themselves, and a typical scenario would begin with the Colombians getting indicators through their organic signals intelligence (which had been provided by the U.S.) that an HVT was likely to become a viable target. Colombian human intelligence would confirm the signals intelligence, and only then would the Colombians inform the U.S. Embassy Intelligence Fusion Center (EIFC) of their activities. From there, the U.S. would refocus its national level intelligence capabilities (ISR and SIGINT) on the target to help provide further intelligence for the Colombians.[243]

As the U.S. provided those resources, the Colombians worked to develop their own parallel domestic capability, and by 2010 they had constructed a system that rivaled the American capability to conduct the F3EAD process. Central to that system was a Colombian fusion cell that linked the CCOES headquarters with Colombian police, intelligence, and conventional military elements. With analysts from across the country's intelligence communities under one roof, they built combined target lists of FARC HVTs and often tasked resources collaboratively. Ironically, at that point of development the Colombian experience mirrored some of the same challenges faced by the U.S. intelligence community in the 2001–2005 time frame, when organizations sometimes shared their proprietary intelligence based on

[240] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Chris Zets, 21 December 2020.
[241] Cleveland and Egel, *The American Way of Irregular War*, 135.
[242] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Douglas Judice, 1 February 2021.
[243] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Mike Brown, 11 February 2021.

the personalities of their principal leaders and their relationship with those in other organizations.[244]

Between 2009 and 2011,[245] the Colombian ability to carry out intelligence driven operations was so effective that it was having a profound effect on FARC key leaders. Combined with the success of conventional forces and police, the FARC no longer represented an existential threat to the state, and the dominant agency for domestic intelligence gathering and prosecution of HVTs shifted from the military to the police. As a functioning democracy no longer facing dire circumstances, the Colombian government wanted to return to the rule of law. Except in rare circumstances, the police were considered the only agency with the authority to arrest Colombian citizens, which led to an increase in interagency operations at the tactical level.[246] If the military wanted to kill a Colombian citizen, a judicial process had to be followed and civil authorities had to approve the operation. Like in the U.S., restrictions were also placed on the military collecting domestic intelligence against fellow Colombians. Because of the importance of collecting evidence to support criminal trials against captured enemy leaders, the conduct of SSE changed to ensure that a proper chain of custody was maintained. In nearly all cases, the military began to have to hand over anything captured to police elements or have a police representative on the mission to collect it firsthand. It became illegal for the military to "crack" a confiscated cell phone to search it for other connections or intelligence. Such requirements slowed down the F3EAD cycle but were a critical component of returning to a state of normalcy.[247]

Assessment:

[244] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Dr. David Spencer, 22 January 2021.
[245] Rather than a complete, conscious, and sudden shift, the change occurred gradually.
[246] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CSM Amil Alvarez, 10 February 2021.
[247] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Joe Reagan, 8 February 2021.

By 2016, the ability of Colombian SOF elements, specifically BACOA and AGLAN, to be able to conduct intelligence driven operations and the F3EAD cycle were unrivaled among the cases in this study. They far eclipsed those of any other country studied, and one interviewee noted that the processing of high value FARC targets by Colombian SOF rivaled the pace set by U.S. national forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, killing or capturing senior and mid-level leaders so often that it became difficult for the FARC to replace them.[248] Not only did they have strong capabilities in each intelligence function, but they formed a skilled fusion center independent of U.S. advisor assistance. That degree of competence earns the Colombians a high rating for the variable of being able to fight without advisors present.

Performance against the Enemy in Combat:[249]

Echoing a trend among interviewees' perspectives on the performance of BACOA and AGLAN, there was widespread agreement that against the FARC, their principal enemy, the elite forces performed extremely well. One American officer commented, "The Colombians brought the FARC to heel and pushed them to the negotiating table mostly through their own efforts."[250] In addition, nearly every advisor admired the Colombian willingness to take risks, something they considered important for conducting successful special operations missions. Several noted that many of the Colombian operations would not gain approval under U.S. planning conditions due to the U.S. forces being more risk averse.[251] Those advisors also relayed numerous

[248] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Dr. David Spencer, 22 January 2021.
[249] The following assessment does not include Operation *Jaque* (check- from chess- in English), the highly successful deception mission in 2008 which rescued 15 hostages, including former Colombian presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt and the three American contractors held since 2003. While Colombian SOF elements played an unwitting support role to the mission through actions to discourage FARC leaders from moving the hostages, current evidence indicates they were not part of the operation itself. Charles H. Briscoe and Daniel J. Kulich. "Operación JAQUE: The Ultimate Deception." *Veritas*, 2018. https://www.soc.mil/ARSOF_History/articles/v14n3_op_jaque_page_1.html.
[250] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Augustin Dominguez, 11 February 2021.
[251] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Scott Morley, 11 February 2021.

anecdotes of the performance of CCOES units in battle, often in the conduct of true special operations missions.

On one occasion, BACOA commandos received domestic intelligence about when a FARC commander would be moving along a specific route a mere five days later. They planned and rehearsed quickly and then conducted a night air assault into a small helicopter landing zone. After walking across mountains for two days, they set up a surveillance and overwatch position and waited for another two days. When the FARC HVT appeared on horseback on the fifth day, the sniper team engaged and killed him and his escorts at a range of 1,000 meters, an extremely impressive shot for any army. After searching the bodies, they exfiltrated without taking casualties. A comparable mission profile resulted in disaster for U.S. special operations forces in Afghanistan during Operation Red Wings.[252]

After the war, a former FARC guerrilla offered his personal recollections of being hunted by AGLAN and BACOA from 2004-2007, noting that the arrival of those counter-guerrilla units on the battlefield shocked the FARC leadership because of their discipline and skills. In particular, one AGLAN unit had infiltrated deep into FARC held territory and remained undetected for a dozen days waiting for their prey of senior leaders. When their targets did not arrive, the *Lanceros* exfiltrated without being detected. The unit's hide sites were the only evidence that they had been there, which deeply alarmed the FARC because to that point such territory had been a complete sanctuary for them from Colombian military units. "Nobody

[252] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Augustin Dominguez, 11 February 2021. Operation Red Wings was a 2005 U.S. Navy SEAL reconnaissance mission in Afghanistan that aimed to find an insurgent leader and then kill or capture him. The team was quickly compromised by insurgent forces and the helicopter bringing the quick reaction force in to rescue them was shot down, killing all on board. Unable to escape, three of four members of the initial reconnaissance team were also killed.

expected such a raid, (and) … the details left the Bloc's commanders astonished."[253] Sometime later, 26 guerrilla leaders were conducting a reconnaissance to set up an ambush of a Colombian Marine unit, but unbeknownst to them the CCOES leadership had been alerted of their movement and ordered an AGLAN counter-ambush. A dog accompanying the FARC leaders warned them just before they walked into the kill-zone, and in the chaos the FARC sent several mobile companies to pursue the *Lanceros* who escaped without any losses. Stunned by the fierceness of how the government unit fought as it successfully extricated itself, the FARC leaders mistakenly estimated that the 38-man unit was one made up of over 1,800 soldiers.[254]

By 2008, the CCOES missions focused on killing or capturing senior FARC leaders began to show decisive results. That year, the target was FARC's second in command, Raul Reyes, who was hiding in the sanctuary of the Ecuadorian border region with Colombia.[255] After detecting his location through an informant and confirming it through an intercepted satellite phone call, Colombian SOF elements infiltrated covertly and placed beacons to assist in a precision guided munition airstrike. After the strike, those forces flew in helicopters at night to conduct sensitive site exploitation and recover proof that they had killed Reyes.[256] Intelligence gathered there was later described by The Washington Post as "the most valuable FARC intelligence find ever."[257] Over time, CCOES and other elite Colombian units systematically dismantled FARC leadership and in 2011, they were successful in killing FARC supreme leader

[253] Gabriel Ángel, "El Yarí, La Selva de La Guerra Contra Las Disidencias de Las Farc," *Las 2 Orillas*, February 11, 2019, sec. Poder, https://www.las2orillas.co/el-yari-la-selva-de-la-guerra-contra-las-disidencias-de-las-farc/. A Bloc is a FARC major regional subunit made up of 1,000 to 10,000 guerrillas. The FARC subdivided the country into seven blocs, which were only subordinate to the Central High Command (Estado Mayor Central).
[254] Gabriel Ángel reports the FARC side of the encounter, while the government side is recounted in Email from GEN Ospina Ovalle to Frank Sobchak, 16 February 2021.
[255] "When Colombia Bombed Ecuador: The Killing of Raul Reyes | News | TeleSUR English," accessed February 11, 2021, https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/When-Colombia-Bombed-Ecuador-The-Killing-of-Raul-Reyes-20160228-0009.html.
[256] Interview, Frank Sobchak with Dr. David Spencer, 22 January 2021.
[257] Priest, "Covert Action in Colombia."

Alfonso Cano. He had long been a target of the HVT campaign and considerable pressure had kept him on the run and drew him out of the mountainous Tolima Department into Valle del Cauca where it would be easier to find him. In November, Colombian intelligence located Cano and CCOES units briefly surrounded him before he was killed in a firefight.[258] Over the next year, 2012, the Colombian military killed 19 senior FARC leaders and captured another through a combination of precision guided munitions and CCOES raids, and in 2013 they killed another 13 and captured five.[259]

Operations continued even after the peace accords with the FARC, because the organization splintered when some elements that came to be known as Organized Armed Groups (*Grupos Armados Organizados* or GAOs) rejected the armistice and decided to keep fighting. In 2017, GAO fighters kidnapped five international kayakers, including two Americans, who had thought the accords afforded them opportunities to access new and unexplored rivers. One of the kayakers was able to send a surreptitious note that he was being held, which triggered FBI and U.S. national-level military hostage rescue elements to begin planning for a rescue. But before those forces were able to deploy to Colombia, CCOES commander General Luis Fernando Navarro Jiménez called and promised Colombian forces would resolve the crisis if the U.S. shared intelligence.[260] American officials agreed, and Colombian SOF elements began planning and moved forward to the region. When an aircraft began circling over the GAO position, the leaders of the group panicked, realizing that they had put themselves in a very dangerous situation by taking so many foreign hostages. Understanding the dangers they faced from a

[258] Spencer, "The Sword of Honor Campaign in the Cauca Valley: 2011-2013 Colombian Conflict Focus of Effort."
[259] Priest, "Covert Action in Colombia."
[260] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Scott Morley, 11 February 2021.

commando rescue mission, the kidnappers agreed to release the kayakers that same day.[261] This example is noteworthy not only because of the fear the GAO had for CCOES units, but also because the U.S. had so much faith in the capabilities of those Colombian forces that they agreed to let them resolve the situation.

In 2018, Colombian SOF elements targeted one of the GAO's most senior leaders operating in an area that was both difficult to access and had challenging terrain. Domestic Colombian intelligence identified a route that the GAO leader would be using, and CCOES put Colombian special operators into a swamp to wait for nine days because it was the only area that provided concealment along the target's path. On the final day, the target appeared for a total of five minutes, and a CCOES sniper killed him with the first shot. They then successfully exfiltrated the area without taking casualties.[262]

Assessment:

CCOES units performed extremely well against the FARC, and over time they systematically disemboweled the organization's leadership. Conducting true special operations missions, they killed and captured senior commanders at a pace that rivaled the best American SOF units' efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Unable to replace its leaders as quickly as they were being eliminated, the FARC became vulnerable to conventional Colombian units and began to falter. In unit-to-unit engagements, there are no records of defeats of CCOES units by the FARC. Taking all of that into consideration, a high rating is appropriate for this variable.

Preliminary Observations:

[261] Jay Bouchard, "How 5 Kayakers Were Taken Hostage in Colombia by FARC Rebels," Outside Online, May 11, 2017, https://www.outsideonline.com/2184291/how-5-kayakers-were-taken-hostage-colombia-farc-rebels.
[262] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Scott Morley, 11 February 2021.

CCOES units, specifically AGLAN and BACOA, received high ratings across every variable. They even consistently conducted combat operations for longer than 72 hours, a logistics challenge for many first world militaries. Unique in this study for such consistently superior assessments, the two Colombian SOF units earned an overall effectiveness rating of high. That evaluation was backed up by anecdotal comments from former advisors and embassy personnel, nearly all of whom had served with other foreign units evaluated in this study.

One advisor offered the highest possible praise: "Colombian SOF is as good as U.S. SOF at the tactical level. … We [US SOF] beat them in resources and technology, but Colombian SOF is even better than many 'first world' SOF."[263] The Colombians were so proficient by 2014 that when an embassy official asked a Special Forces team sergeant partnered with Colombian SOF how they were performing, the NCO responded that he did not know why they were being deployed to Colombia anymore because the CCOES units were as capable as his own team.[264] Those capabilities have played out in the grueling nine day U.S. sponsored SOF competition for militaries within USSOUTHCOM, *Fuerzas Commando*. Across the fifteen events held through 2019, the Colombians have won an astounding ten competitions.[265] That year, the U.S. decided to get serious about trying to win the competition and put their competitors on a special duty status so that they would not deploy, and their only requirement was to train and prepare. They still lost to the Colombians.[266]

[263] Berrios, "Critical Ingredient," 570. Quote is from LTC Will Griego, US SOF Advisor to Colombian SOF.
[264] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Augustin Dominguez, 11 February 2021.
[265] Steve Balestrieri, "Colombian SF Operators Win Fuerzas Commando 2019 Special Ops Competition," SOFREP, June 30, 2019, https://sofrep.com/news/colombian-special-forces-operators-win-fuerzas-commando-2019-special-ops-competition/.
[266] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Joe Reagan, 8 February 2021.

Indeed, Colombia progressed from needing U.S. assistance to helping the U.S. assist other militaries and from being an exporter of coca to exporter of security assistance. In 2009, they offered to deploy SOF elements to Afghanistan in support of the American CJSOTF, but the plan ultimately was scuttled because of political reasons.[267] By 2017, CCOES units had begun to deploy outside of the country to conduct foreign internal defense missions with other nations' military and police forces in coordination with SOUTHCOM goals. At that stage, when American SOF elements deployed to Colombia the expectation that they would conduct tactical training was dropped and they were placed on equal footing with the Colombian SOF so that each element would learn from the other.[268]

While American assistance undoubtedly helped lead to such outcomes, the Colombians themselves were enormously responsible for their own success. In the words of one advisor, the Colombian commandos "never lost what we gave them. They honed it and improved upon it, using every TTP (tactics, technique, and procedure), we trained them in. They soaked it up."[269] Another concluded, "the Colombian SOF were capable even before the U.S. advisory effort began. We just made them better. When you engage so heavily in terms of manpower and funds, it is almost inevitable that they will get better. Using a baseball analogy, Colombian SOF was a double A minor league team at the time U.S. SOF began to engage them in earnest. Through our persistent engagement, they became a major league team."[270]

Switching from the macro to micro level to assess each independent variable, like in El Salvador, there was a complete match in the language training of the advisors and the region

[267] CBS News, "Colombia To Aid US In Taliban Fight," CBS News.com, July 27, 2009. Also Interview, Frank Sobchak with Dr. David Spencer, 22 January 2021.
[268] Interview, Frank Sobchak with LTC Scott Morley, 11 February 2021.
[269] Interview, Frank Sobchak with CW3 Dave Hulsey, 4 January 2021.
[270] Interview, Frank Sobchak with COL Carlos Berrios, 12 January 2021.

where they deployed. Also a parallel between the two cases, advisors to Colombian SOF reported that such a match was important and connected it to their ability to produce effective partner forces, although not to the same degree. The explanation for why advisors in the two Spanish speaking cases put more emphasis on language training will be explored more in the next chapter. At the same time, language skills of those in Colombia were not as statistically good as those in El Salvador.

Closing out a clean sweep across all five cases, advisors again emphasized the value of consistency in advisor pairing. Even though the conflict in Afghanistan and other commitments made it difficult to maintain, many interviewees recalled examples of relationships that they had formed across decades of experience in Colombia which helped in the accomplishment of their mission. Those connections not only smoothed out bureaucratic challenges, but they also created deep trust between key Special Forces leaders and senior Colombian officers.

The partner force to advisor ratio for BACOA and AGLAN was 17.5 to 1, three to four times the doctrinal planning factor (50 to 75:1). This trend, which also manifested in the ratio for the Light Reaction Regiment in the Philippines, the Afghan Commandos, and the ISOF indicates that the standard of an ODA training a battalion is not being followed.[271] While most advisors indicated they would have preferred to have an even lower ratio, they noted the skills of the Colombians made such a need not as critical as in other missions.

Like in the Philippines and El Salvador, Colombian national sovereignty was an important issue that limited the ability of U.S. advisors to make some changes. At the same time, however, Colombia's long relationship with the U.S. smoothed those challenges and allowed advisors to make significant impacts. Colombian SOF personnel were often enthusiastic

[271] For reference, the ratio for the Philippines was 29:1, Afghanistan 16.4 to 1, Iraq 6.2:1 and El Salvador 189.6 to 1.

about learning and respected their partners, and those factors enabled SF advisors to have a considerable impact. The American ability to influence the development of CCOES units did not wane with time, and the absence of a "sovereignty clock" was likely also related to the strong bilateral relationship.

Mirroring El Salvador and the Philippines, SF soldiers in Colombia were explicitly barred from combat advising. With advances in technology, little gray space remained, and the rules were strictly enforced. At times, policies were made more lenient, such as during the effort to rescue the three American hostages held by the FARC, but even then, Americans did not fight shoulder to shoulder with their host nation partners. Many advisors chafed at the restrictions and provided justifications why they believed it negatively impacted their ability to accomplish their mission. Unique in the case studies reviewed, a sizable portion of the interviewees argued the opposite, that the ban on combat advising helped prevent them from doing too much for the Colombians which allowed them to develop properly. Nearly all noted that the shift from a high intensity combat environment in Afghanistan to the strict rules of Colombia proved challenging.

Unlike the other Latin American case, Colombia- with few exceptions- represents a return to the norms observed in the other three countries studied. Interviewees argued that consistency in advisor pairing was extremely important, as well as maintaining a low partner force to advisor ratio. Organizing host nation forces was valuable, but the ability to do that was as much a product of the extremely long relationships between the U.S. and Colombia as it was of the interpersonal relations between advisors and their partners. Proper language training and cultural awareness was important, but not essential. Being able to advise partners in combat was seen as important by most, but a larger minority than in all other cases argued that it was not critical. The mix of those factors- combined with the dedication of the Colombians themselves-

resulted in the BACOA and AGLAN being assessed as among the most effective SOF on the planet.

This chapter concludes the case-studies, and the next chapter will address overall observations, conclusions, and recommendations. The question of why the Colombians came to be so effective while the Afghans did not will be reviewed in detail, as well as those of the other countries evaluated in this study.

CHAPTER 7: Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction:

In light of the monumental failures to build capable security forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, there is perhaps no more relevant time to study the topic of security force assistance. During its involvement in Iraq, the U.S. committed more than $25 billion to construct an army of 250,000 men and 600,000 other security forces. Fewer than 10,000 ISIS fighters routed those Iraqi troops, whose real numbers were much lower due to corruption and graft.[1] Coalition forces spent an astounding $83 billion on training and equipping Afghan security forces, only to watch a near repeat of their experience in Iraq.[2] In both cases, the victors held parades with scores of captured American equipment.

The twin security force assistance disasters resulted in deep introspection amongst defense and security professionals and in their tumultuous wake, a number of articles were penned- purportedly to postmortem the failures- that were more sensational than scholarly. One even concluded that the U.S. was incapable of building foreign militaries.[3] Such arguments garner headlines, but they overlook considerable evidence and fail to assess important nuance and differences between conflicts.[4] For two cases included in this study, Colombia, and El Salvador, the U.S. helped build security forces that either achieved victory outright or successfully fought their opponent to a stalemate that resulted in the government remaining in

[1] Jeremy Stöhs, "Built to Fail: The Iraqi Army from Invasion to the Rise of the Islamic State," *Journal for Intelligence, Propaganda, and Security Studies* 11, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 145, 152.
[2] Sean McFate, "Shifting the Blame: How the Pentagon Lost Afghanistan," *The Hill*, August 17, 2021, https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/568102-shifting-the-blame-how-the-pentagon-lost-afghanistan.
[3] Rachel Tecott, "Why America Can't Build Allied Armies," *Foreign Affairs*, October 18, 2021, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-08-26/why-america-cant-build-allied-armies.
[4] Outside the scope of this study, it is generally acknowledged that the U.S. efforts to help construct a capable military for South Korea, and to a lesser degree West Germany, were successful.

power. While the overall security force assistance mission in the Afghan and Iraq case studies was a gross failure, the U.S. was still constructed elite forces that were much more capable than the remainder of the host nation's military forces. If not for the ISOF fighting doggedly and holding off the ISIS advance in 2014, Iraq probably would not exist as a unitary state today. It is the specifics of those cases that this study seeks to mine for lessons on how the larger efforts- and security force assistance in general- could have been improved.

Key Findings:

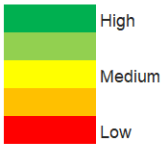
This study asked the question, "Under what conditions have U.S. Army Special Forces been successful in building a combat effective partner force?" Perhaps the clearest finding is that there is no magic bullet, no single one-size fits all solution to the problem of creating combat effective partner forces. Instead, a series of variables are at play: consistency in advisor pairing, the partner to advisor ratio, the ability to organize host nation forces, language training and cultural awareness, and the degree to which advisors can advise their partners in combat. If one variable is not aligned positively because, for example, the ratio of partner forces to advisors is too high, or there is not sufficient consistency in advisor pairing, then to produce a combat effective force, other variables will have to contribute to make up for the obstructive variable. There also is no set number of these variables that must be aligned positively, or specific variables that must be matched to achieve success. Instead, there are multiple different combinations of variables, positively aligned, that can produce combat effective partners. In essence, this study confirms the principle of multiple causality, that producing a combat effective partner force requires a cocktail of properly aligned variables.

At the same time, this study determined that some of those variables have more impact than others. Consistency in advisor pairing and a low partner force to advisor ratio were both

reliably reported as being critical in producing combat effective partners. Similarly, if the advisors were able to organize host nation forces, because of good advisor/partner rapport or of openness of the host nation forces to change, reporting generally indicated a positive correlation with positive results. Being able to combat advise or having proper language training and cultural awareness to match host nation forces both did not represent critical factors towards building combat effective partners, although both variables had a minority of proponents who indicated their importance. A summary of the data reported across the five case studies is included here in table 7.1.

Table 7.1: Independent Variable Assessments

	Country				
Independent Variable	Afghanistan	El Salvador	Philippines	Iraq	Colombia
Consistency in Advisor Pairings	Low	Medium	High	High	Medium
Language Training/Cultural Awareness	Low	High	High	Low	High
Partner to Advisor Ratio	16.4	189.6	28.7	6.2	17.5
Ability to Organize Host Host Nation Unit	Medium	Medium	Low	High	High
Combat Advise	High	Medium	Medium	High	Low
Overall (Combat Effectiveness)	Low-medium	Low-medium	Low-medium	High-medium	High

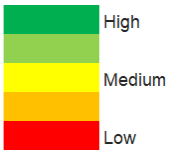


When those variables were applied to the five different host nation SOF elements, it resulted in the data included in table 7.2, with a ranking of the most effective forces to the least being Colombian AGLAN and BACOA, the ISOF in Iraq, the LRR in the Philippines, the BIRIs in El Salvador and the Afghan Commandos. As three of the units had the same overall effectiveness rating, subjective assessments determined the rankings. Because they were unable to function effectively without advisors present, realistically the most important and crucial variable, the Afghan Commandos were assigned the lowest rating. Simply put, if a unit could not function without its advisors, it was in a completely different category. The remaining tie between the Philippines and El Salvador was broken by the subjective assessment that being able to fight for 72 hours was more important than night fighting skills. At the same time, it should

be noted that all the units evaluated were assessed as being effective, with the lowest rating being low-medium.

Table 7.2: Dependent Variable Assessments

	Country				
Dependent Variable	Afghanistan	El Salvador	Philippines	Iraq	Colombia
Night Fighting	Medium	Low	Medium	High	High
72-Hour Operations	Medium	Medium	Low	Medium	High
Fight Without Advisors (F3EAD)	Low	Low	Low	Medium	High
Performance vs. Enemy	Medium	Medium	Medium	High	High
Overall Combat Effectiveness	Low-medium	Low-medium	Low-medium	High-medium	High
Rank	5	4	3	2	1



Consistency in Advisor Pairing:

Interviewees were almost unanimous in believing that greater consistency in advisor pairing resulted in more effective host nation units. Consistency resulted in better rapport and trust, which translated to the willingness of host nation officials to share sensitive information, give greater authorities to SF advisors, and allow them more access to important events and leaders. Trust and rapport also allowed advisors to have difficult conversations with host nation forces about performance and ways to improve, so consistency became a way to overcome some of the cultural barriers to bluntly honest conversations among the militaries of shame/honor societies. Over time, the impacts of consistency became exponential, as junior leaders in host nation units were promoted to more important positions of authority where they were able to have an even greater impact on the trajectory of advised units. Personal relationships matter, and those built across multiple rotations proved important- even crucial at times- in overcoming bureaucratic inertia as well as resistance to changes recommended by advisors. When recommending that a host nation leader be replaced, nothing helped more than having longstanding connections and deep interpersonal bonds.

Another advantage from consistency came in the familiarity that the advisors developed with the unit itself. Across multiple rotations, advisors came to understand the capabilities of the host nation unit and were able to recognize the unit's training needs more quickly. Consistency also meant there was less need for a period at the beginning of a mission for leaders of both nations to get to know one another and build rapport. As a result, on future rotations the "startup" period was significantly reduced as the advisors knew the key personnel and recognized where the unit was within its training cycle. With less wasted time, advisors were able to focus more on lessons that were applicable and needed rather than reassessing the host nation unit each time. Such advantages were magnified when deployed advisors communicated with the next unit preparing to conduct the training mission, as was the case in the deployment cycle for SF units working with the ICTF.

Partner Force to Advisor Ratio:

There was also near-universal agreement among the interviewees that a lower partner force to advisor ratio was directly related to producing combat effective units. In situations where there were fewer advisors, each advisor's span of control became greater and they were responsible for coaching, teaching, and mentoring more host nation soldiers. When that occurred, advisors were unable to monitor what their partners were doing as closely as they would have if they had more SF soldiers to share the burden. Mistakes or failures on the part of the partners were more frequently overlooked because of the additional load on each advisor.

Ability to Organize Host Nation Units:

Across nearly every interview, advisors indicated that their ability to organize host nation forces was extremely important. Simply put, the less resistance they received from the

partner force in making necessary changes, the more likely they were able to produce a combat effective partner force. The amount of resistance depended on a variety of factors, such as the amount of assistance provided, the shared history between the two nations (problematic for the Philippines, positive for Colombia), rapport between advisors and host nation forces, and even whether significant incidents or scandals had occurred during the mission. Organizing host nation forces could be relatively easy, with some offering little resistance; to transactional where each action required some sort of restitution from advisors; to nearly impossible no matter what was offered in exchange. In addition, on many of the missions there appeared to be a "sovereignty clock," where the host nation's willingness to accept change waned over time. During the early phases of a mission a "honeymoon" period usually existed, and the partner forces were often willing to overlook issues of national sovereignty and accept reform. But as the mission stretched on, host nation forces tired of the advisors' presence and implementing change became more difficult.

Combat Advising:

While a large majority of interviewees reported combat advising was important, the most effective partner forces- BACOA and AGLAN in Colombia- were trained in an environment where advisors were barred from combat. One of the worst, the Afghan Commandos, was advised shoulder to shoulder during intense combat. The ISOF, the second-best force evaluated, partnered in conditions very similar to the Afghan Commandos. These conflicting results call into question the importance of the variable, and it is likely that combat advising provides some benefit to producing a combat effective partner force, but the data from this study indicates that it is not as important as other variables. Despite intense anecdotal arguments that combat advising is critically necessary, there is strong evidence that it is not essential.

Those who reported that the variable was important argued that not being able to accompany their partners into combat damaged trust and rapport. Not sharing the same risks as host nation forces could prove caustic to the partner's relationship, which was itself critical to making progress towards building effective combat units. In addition, a prohibition on combat advising prevented SF operators from observing how their partners performed in their most important "test." With critical information on effectiveness only coming from host nation units themselves, it was difficult for advisors to accurately assess their abilities.

Those who disagreed generally argued that if SF soldiers were allowed to advise their partners in combat, they would be inclined to carry out the mission themselves. Rather than patiently coaching, teaching, and mentoring the unit they were advising, the advisors would focus on fighting the enemy and trying to win the war themselves. American lack of patience, as well as the desire to earn awards and accolades provided a powerful incentive for advisors to step in and conduct operations rather than train their partners.

Language Training and Cultural Awareness:

Language training and cultural awareness was the most contentious variable, with most respondents in three cases (the Philippines, Iraq, and Afghanistan) indicating that it had little to do with building combat effective partners. In two cases (El Salvador and Colombia), the results were flipped, with most indicating that speaking the language of the country where they deployed was essential.

Those who reported the importance of language training often indicated that language was the gateway to earning rapport and trust. Others noted that language skills were important in tactical scenarios, where during the heat of combat communication had to be precise and timely.

In addition, if an advisor was trained in the host nation language of a particular region, they were likely to either remain in that regionally oriented SF group or return to it after other assignments. As a result, they were likely to be returned to the same set of countries on future deployments, increasing consistency in advisor pairing while building a deep stable of interpersonal connections and better understanding regional history and culture.

While few argued that language skills had no value whatsoever, most interviewees indicated that they should be considered more as mission enhancing than mission essential. Advisors of such a mindset provided a series of explanations. Some noted that even though they did not speak the host nation language, over a few weeks of their first deployment they were able to learn enough vocabulary to function in the heat of combat. Across multiple rotations, the value of language training became less important as individuals who were not regionally oriented picked up additional vocabulary and cultural awareness. Moreover, many host nation soldiers spoke English or learned it during the deployment, often obviating the need for those skills on the part of the advisor. In some countries where multiple languages were spoken, such as the Philippines and Afghanistan, it was particularly difficult to have adequate linguists on each team. Unable to communicate effectively, interpreters became the only viable option. Other SF soldiers opined that having the personality and temperament to serve as an advisor were more important than knowing the language, recalling incidents where poor linguists were able to establish rapport more effectively than those who were fully trained.

Policy Implications:

Sovereignty Should not be Sacred:

In general, this study evaluated two types of conflicts: one in which the U.S. conducted regime change and had nearly carte blanche to recreate the defense institutions of the defeated nation, and a second in which the host nation requested assistance but maintained control over the decisions made within the state. While the two scenarios seem completely different from the standpoint of sovereignty, there are in fact similarities. In the first, even though the U.S. initially had nearly unfettered ability to implement changes as it wished, the host nation demanded the return of its sovereignty relatively quickly, quickly bringing it virtually on par with the second scenario. The issue of host nation sovereignty, whether it serves as a barrier to change for the entire mission or at some point after regime change has occurred, should not be an excuse for inaction as in both cases the U.S. still had considerable leverage in trying to influence the host nation. States that call for massive U.S. assistance are usually fragile and desperate, and even if their governments have not been forcibly changed, they often are in danger of having it occur.

Yet despite the opportunity that such situations provide, in many cases American advisors ensnared themselves in the belief that sovereignty is binary- a state has it, or it doesn't. Sovereignty became a pretense to avoid pushing too hard on states that suffered problems with corruption, graft, and poor leadership. In Iraq, one U.S. Army general noted that "the United States had the money and guns to try to influence Iraqi policy—including the selection of security force leaders—but often gave both away without caveat or condition."[5]

While respecting host nation sovereignty has long been the foundation of American foreign policy and a component of its grand strategy to expand liberal democracy, it should not be an excuse to blithely accept problematic issues within the culture of the host nation's military.

[5] Joel D Rayburn and Frank K Sobchak, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War: Volume 2, Surge and Withdrawal, 2007-2011* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2019), 631.

Instead, the U.S. should step in and demand that the host nation appoint capable leaders and limit corruption. It needs to be willing to establish hard limits and be ready to draw lines in the sand that result in the removal of those who do not pass muster. If not, the U.S. will simply dump money purposelessly into the mission and empower negative influences within the host nation's military, creating a downward spiral. Advisors must also be clear eyed that they will not be able to purify fragile states and construct the equivalent of Switzerland in a single decade. Ultimately if the host nation is unwilling to make the necessary incremental changes, then the U.S. should simply pack up and leave rather than commit the sunk-cost fallacy.

To a degree, the U.S. did it properly- and indirectly- in Colombia during the presidency of Ernesto Samper. Cutting off $1 billion in aid sent a clear signal that empowered reformers, who used the pressure to implement changes and replace poor defense leaders. The newly emplaced officers brought their own capable subordinates, creating a virtuous cycle across the chain of command. While not a subject of this case study, the U.S. carried out similar harsh tactics when dealing with the South Korean Army during the Korean War. American officers, recognizing the direness of the situation, imposed their will on host nation forces, routinely firing Koreans who exhibited incompetence, false reporting, and corruption. Korean officers came to understand that "they ignored advice, particularly in critical tactical situations, at their peril."[6] Even in the case of El Salvador, when American advisors threatened to walk out and report their counterparts if they committed human rights abuses, the Salvadorans complied, at least in the presence of their partners. In future conflicts, the U.S. must be able to make similar difficult decisions and play "hardball" when necessary to accomplish its goals.

[6] Robert D. Ramsey, *Advising Indigenous Forces: American Advisors in Korea, Vietnam, and El Salvador* (Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2012), 18–19.

Even such tactics have expiration dates, and they are more effective earlier in a mission. To a certain degree, many missions have a "sovereignty clock" that begins ticking once the mission starts. Foreign advisors will only have a certain amount of time, almost a honeymoon period, before the host nation tires of their presence and domestic politics profoundly limits foreign influence, even when threatening dire consequences. Such a countdown occurred in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Philippines. Recognizing this, in future advisory missions the U.S. should make as many changes as possible initially before the clock runs out. The more that is done early on, the odds are increased that those changes "stick" by changing the host nation's culture. It is especially important to appoint key leaders who are capable and honest, as they can carry similar values long after American forces have left. Such early decisions are not a determinant and will not guarantee a positive outcome, but they can have an impact, especially when paired with firm measures from U.S. leaders to limit corruption as was used early in the Colombia mission during the Samper administration and in El Salvador against human rights abuses.

Leadership Matters, Host Nation Leadership Matters Even More:

No host nation factor is more important than who leads their SOF unit as it is stood up and during its early years. Leaders selected then are likely to climb through the ranks and eventually head the organization, thereby extending and intensifying their positive or negative impact. Having capable and supportive host nation leaders also has exponential effects, as they are almost certain to be involved in the selection of their subordinates. Such a process is likely to result in a virtuous cycle where they pick skilled and sympathetic officers that, in turn, pick other equally capable and supportive subordinates. Colombia was particularly blessed by a set of extremely capable and dedicated leaders, both political (President Álvaro Uribe Vélez and Minister of Defense and President Juan Manuel Santos Calderón) and military (Generals

Fernando Tapias, Enrique Mora Rangel, Carlos Ospina Ovalle, Freddy Padilla de Leon, and Albert José Mejia).[7] They not only were gifted in developing strategies to meet their security needs, but also in knowing when to accept and when to ignore American suggestions politely. The ISOF in Iraq could not have been constructed nor become as effective as it did without the larger-than-life figure of General Fadhil Jalil al Barwari. Fadhil continuously set the example for his subordinates in tactical performance and bravery, and he showed little patience for officers who lacked courage or skill on the battlefield.

It is worthwhile to note that in both cases, the U.S. was either directly or indirectly involved in the selection process of important host nation leaders. In Iraq, SF advisors installed Fadhil as the commander of the 36th Commandos because of his leadership and bravery, but also because of their connections to him from the 1990s Provide Comfort mission. He later became the ISOF commander. In Colombia, U.S. pressure to implement reforms after the disastrous administration of Ernesto Samper helped lead to the sacking of many senior officers and the ascendance of competent leaders within the defense establishment.

For policymakers, this means that during large scale security force assistance missions it is important to identify capable host nation leaders early and use whatever leverage possible to ensure they obtain and maintain positions of responsibility. Every case is different, with those involving regime change, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, giving the greatest ability of the external power to make such selections. But even in more traditional cases, there are ways for the advising force to be able to influence leadership selection, even if issues of sovereignty require it

[7] Thomas A. Marks, Ph.D., "A Model Counterinsurgency: Uribe's Colombia (2002-2006) vs FARC," *Military Review*, April 2007, http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/colombia/Marks_Colombia.pdf; Carlos G. Berrios, "Critical Ingredient: US Aid to Counterinsurgency in Colombia," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 28, no. 3 (May 4, 2017): 546–75, https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2017.1307610.

to be very circumspect. It will be those leaders, or the subordinates that they select, that will have to stand on their own when eventually the U.S. and its allies withdraw.

Language:

Unfortunately, the language capabilities of SF soldiers are often far from the hyped skills normally associated with the regiment. At the time of publication of this study, the graduation standard for the qualification course is only 1+ on the defense language proficiency test (DLPT) or oral proficiency interview (OPI), below the level 2 standard recognized as limited working proficiency which could, "read with some misunderstandings straightforward, familiar, factual material, but in general insufficiently experienced with the language to draw inferences."[8] As of April 2021, across all of Special Forces command, inclusive of the five active duty and two national guard groups and the large headquarters, there were 244 Special Forces branch personnel who scored at the 2/2 level on the DLPT or OPI in Spanish and 94 who scored at the 3/3 level. In other languages, the weakness was more acute. French had 74 at the 2/2 level and 31 at the 3/3 level, Russian had 152 at the 2/2 level and 31 at the 3/3 level. For the more difficult languages, the situation is dire: Arabic had 45 at the 2/2 level and 12 at the 3/3 level, Farsi had 4 at 2/2 and none at 3/3, Mandarin had 9 at 2/2 and 5 at 3/3, and Korean had 5 at 2/2 and 10 at 3/3.[9]

Framed under those conditions, this study concludes that the Special Forces regiment should not return to the pre 9/11 world where it was sacrilegious for a SF group to deploy forces outside of its assigned region. Excepting 7th Special Forces Group, which focuses on Latin

[8] U.S. Government Interagency Language Roundtable, "Interagency Language Roundtable Language Skill Level Descriptions," accessed April 6, 2021, https://www.govtilr.org/Skills/ILRscale4.htm.
[9] Email Department of the Army Civilian Francis Restituyo, USASOC Language, Regional Expertise and Culture Director, 12 April 2021.

America, no other SFG has strong enough language skills to add significant value to an advisory mission. Moreover, the vast majority of interviewees noted that they were able to successfully perform their advisory duties even if they did not speak the host nation's language in Iraq, Afghanistan, and, to a lesser degree, the Philippines.

In many ways, the recommendation of this study is also an acceptance of the educational reality that leaders face in trying to choose the languages that SF soldiers should learn. The PACOM area of responsibility alone gives insight into these challenges. As 1st SF Group's focus, the region hosts over half the world's population spread across 36 countries, 16 time zones, and 52% of Earth's surface. More importantly, over 1,000 languages are spoken across its vastness, making it difficult if not impossible to match language skills with all the possible contingencies the group could face.[10] While some other regions are less diverse, all face their own linguistic and cultural challenges in trying to pair appropriately.

All things considered, language skills are still important, and this study should not be interpreted as an argument against the value of language training and cultural awareness. To be crystal clear, it presents no such argument. There are considerable advantages that come from being able to speak a foreign language in advisory efforts, and those advantages grow in concert as an individual's ability to converse grows. Knowing another language increases an advisor's ability to empathize with the force they are advising, communicate, and build trust, regardless of whether it is the same language spoken by the host nation's forces.

The conclusion that should be taken from this study is that simply knowing a foreign language and having experience working with other cultures seems to be more fungible than

[10] Janice Burton, "USPACOM Area of Responsibility," *Special Warfare*, March 2014, https://www.soc.mil/SWCS/SWmag/archive/SW2701/JAN-MAR_2013web.pdf.

initially thought. If an SF soldier is trained for operating in one region, they can be deployed to another region and pick up on important vocabulary and cultural factors after a rotation or two. Such deployments, however, should not impede maintaining consistency between advisors and host nation SOF forces, as that variable appears to be much more important than language training and cultural awareness.

Doctrine and the Partner to Advisor Ratio:

According to U.S. Army doctrine, Special Forces ODAs, "can develop, organize, equip, train, and advise or direct indigenous forces up to battalion size."[11] With most battalions ranging in size from 600 to 900 soldiers, the ratio of advisors to host nation partners should be in the range of 60-75 to 1. Four of the five case studies in this dissertation had ratios far lower than that standard, usually by orders of magnitude, which calls into question current doctrine.[12] Rather than an ODA advising a battalion-sized element, the ratios associated with those missions were much closer to an ODA advising a company sized element. Given that all the units advised at least produced a medium level of combat effectiveness, this study indicates that ODAs usually had more of a positive impact on the combat effectiveness of host nation forces when training company sized elements.[13]

Given that reality, while technically the doctrinal statement is not incorrect, as an ODA "can" advise units up to battalion size, the guidance is still misleading. To clarify the true capabilities of an ODA, current doctrine should be revised to include a statement that "while an

[11] Department of the Army, *Field Manual 3-05.20, Special Forces Operations* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2011), 3–30.
[12] The ratio for Iraq was 6.2 to 1, Afghanistan 16.4 to 1, Colombia 17.5 to 1, and the Philippines 28.7 to 1. Only El Salvador met or exceeded the doctrinal amount (189.6 to 1).
[13] The only outlier being El Salvador.

ODA can advise units up to battalion size, they are most successful when paired with host nation units of company size, and efforts should be made to match forces at such a ratio." Adding such a statement would not be easy, as the premise that an ODA trains a battalion is nearly sacred in the SF planning process. Refocusing ODAs on companies would also create the optics of seemingly reducing the overall impact of SF at the macro level of security force assistance. Such a change would also trigger deep reviews of the Special Forces Regiment's force management and force structure.

Special Operations Forces Cannot be Mass Produced:

The five SOF "truths," which include the premise that SOF cannot be mass produced, were originally intended to help guide U.S. policymakers on constructing American SOF elements.[14] In particular, it was meant to serve as a caution against a desire to expand the command beyond the point where the newly created units would no longer qualify as elite. This dissertation's case studies affirm with high confidence that such a maxim is also applicable to the construction of foreign SOF elements.

Across the five case studies, there was a massive difference in the scale of the constructed partnered element. In El Salvador, the six BIRIs constituted nearly 5400 combatants. For Afghanistan, while American SOF built nearly a division's worth of Commando units, only 2600 fighters were normally available due to desertions, ghost soldiers, a large tail to tooth ratio, and a policy that had one third of the force's combat power on leave at any one time. The remaining

[14] U.S. Special Operations Command, "SOF Truths," accessed November 27, 2020, https://www.socom.mil/about/sof-truths.

three case studies were markedly smaller efforts: 750 in Iraq, 400 in the Philippines, and 370 in Colombia.

The two largest efforts, El Salvador and Afghanistan, produced the two least effective units. While there were other contributing factors, interviewees in both cases indicated that they believed at least some of the explanation was related to the mass production of host nation forces. As the scale of the effort grew, quality control slipped, and the outcome's emphasis swung towards meeting production quotas. That shift occurred despite having large numbers of advisors paired with the Commandos in Afghanistan, a force whose eventual collapse seemed to confirm the advisors' concerns.

Consistency, Consistency, Consistency:

Perhaps one of the clearest conclusions, supported by qualitative anecdotal evidence from interviews across all five cases, was that consistency in advisor pairing directly affected the ability to produce combat effective partners. Regularly pairing the same advisors with the same host nation forces provides a variety of advantages. First, it affords advisors a wellspring of knowledge concerning the performance and capabilities of the host nation unit. Rather than having to reassess their partners at the beginning of each mission, repeat advisors were often able to restart training quickly. In some cases, as in Iraq with the ICTF, advisors worked on a back-to-back basis, with one unit deployed while the other rested. Such a construct, with the resting unit maintaining contact with the forward deployed unit and receiving updates on the partner force's progress, was ideal. Consistency also led to increased rapport and stronger interpersonal connections. SF officers and NCOs gave examples of long-term relationships with host nation leaders that began early in their careers and grew across multiple deployments while host nation

officers were promoted into positions of great responsibility. Those connections helped the SF advisors make necessary changes, obtain important authorities, or overcome mission adversities.

Maintaining such an important factor did not prove to be easy, and either U.S. or host nation decisions often affected consistency. In Afghanistan especially and Colombia to a degree, the changing cadre of SF leaders led to a consistently shifting focus that emphasized different host nation units over time. Such "chasing shiny objects" as one interviewee described it should be avoided at all costs, because it violates the principle of unity of effort and because it disrupts consistency in advisor pairing. At the tactical level, leaders should resist the temptation to change a policy focus just because it was implemented by the previous commander. In security force assistance missions, it is unlikely that the U.S. will have sufficient time, money, or patience to be able to build more than one quality host nation SOF organization properly. At the strategic level, SF leaders should refrain from giving every unit a chance to deploy to combat to "spread the wealth," as it also waters down the positive impacts of consistency.

A Long, Hard Slog (also known as Culture Eats Strategy for Breakfast):

The comment "culture eats strategy for breakfast" was originally made in a business context, noting a premise that the culture of an organization is a key determinant for success that matters more than detailed strategic plans.[15] If anything, this study has proved that culture matters as much in security force assistance as it does in business. Different components of culture, most of them difficult to measure quantitatively, all affect a host nation unit's ability to

[15] Jacob M. Engel, "Why Does Culture 'Eat Strategy For Breakfast'?," *Forbes*, November 20, 2018, https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2018/11/20/why-does-culture-eat-strategy-for-breakfast/. The quote itself is from Peter Drucker, a management consultant and business management scholar.

change: degree of ethno-sectarian homogeneity, level of corruption, amount of warrior spirit or martial attitude.

The U.S. and its allies usually do not conduct security force assistance in areas where governance is strong and corruption is low. As a result, changing culture, which is necessary in many long-term SF advisory efforts, is lethargic, challenging, arduous, and frustrating. It requires great patience and consistency and near constant contact, and the concept of two steps forward and one step backwards is emblematic of much of the work. The cases in this study (Philippines, Iraq, Afghanistan, El Salvador, and Colombia) involved advisory efforts that lasted for 15, 9, 13, 12, and 15 years respectively.[16] Despite the duration of missions, the involvement of high-quality advisors, and the expenditure of considerable economic and military assistance, most of the cases only produced a moderately capable partner force. Building foreign militaries takes decades, and uniformed leaders must be blunt and realistic when providing their best military advice to civilian leaders. In retrospect, the notion that we could construct host nation armies in a handful of years- central to the strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan- was macabre.

Despite the length of the advisory efforts in these five cases, even some of the more successful missions were not able to affect key elements of the host nation's culture. The U.S. was barely able to register an impact on the *tanda*[17] system in El Salvador, which promoted classmates of the same graduating year at the Salvadoran Military Academy at the same time regardless of circumstances. Seen as cronyism that prevented capable officers from reaching positions of importance, the U.S. expended considerable effort in trying to root out the practice.

[16] Based on the years measured in this study. While the mission advising the Afghan Commandos lasted two additional years before collapsing, they were not part of the measurement data in this study.
[17] Tanda roughly translates as class year, and by the start of the Salvadoran Civil War had become the equivalent of a "good old boy" caste system, where longevity mattered far more than skill. Promotional upward mobility to jump classes for either command or rank was nearly impossible.

The efforts were not successful and, in many ways, the *tanda* system still flourishes today, just not to the same degree.[18] While the NCO corps in Colombia was the most capable of any case study and better than some NATO allies, it still suffered from class issues. Officers often saw sergeants as part of the lower classes and therefore incapable of being given responsibility and autonomy, even if they had proven themselves proficient at taking charge.[19] Culture changes at a glacial pace, and even then, some elements are powerfully resistant to outside forces. As Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld predicted, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan would be "a long, hard slog." Changing host nation military culture so that their forces can stand on their own is perhaps the most difficult component of that "slog."

Conclusions:

For most of the current and last century, U.S. defense policy towards building foreign militaries has been erratic. During normal times, it is generally ignored in favor of focusing on fighting other nation states in traditional conflicts. But during crises involving nation building, the U.S. refocuses its attention and money on the topic with a seemingly never-ending supply of resources that are often applied with little insight into what is effective. And when the emergency has passed, security force assistance falls out of favor again and the traditionalists try to forget the experience ever happened. We cannot repeat such a dangerous cycle.

Much of the current theory around security force assistance implies that there is nothing the advisory effort can do to change the outcome as it is in the hands of the host nation. Rather than the host nation being completely in the driver's seat, this research found that the outcome of advisory efforts is more shared between inputs from both the advising force and the host nation.

[18] Ramsey, *Advising Indigenous Forces*, 94, 98–99.
[19] Donald Stoker, ed., *Military Advising and Assistance*, 1st edition (London: Routledge, 2008), 184–85.

Without a doubt, the goals and objectives of the host nation have a large- if not dominant-impact. But at the same time, the decisions made by the advisory force also have consequences. In the late 1990s, Colombia was a failing state on the verge of collapse. Without the U.S. advisory effort and monetary assistance, its trajectory might have mirrored Lebanon's.

Producing viable host nation partners, requires capable advisors employing effective tactics. Based on this study, many of those tactics are clear. Consistency in advisor pairing, a low partner to advisor ratio, long-term sustained presence, and the ability to organize the host nation unit are all factors that directly impact whether advisors can produce combat effective partners. The appropriate mix of those factors, with strength in one variable counterbalancing weakness in another, is essential to successful security force assistance.

Despite the best wishes of many in the Defense Department who have already shifted to the Pacific and China as a near-peer competitor, odds are that we will have to train another foreign military at some point in the future. Such a mission might even be in the broader context of competition with a near-peer competitor. When it inevitably happens, we should be ready to implement the best strategies to give security force assistance the greatest chance of succeeding. Pretending a problem does not exist does not make it go away.

Appendix A: Table A.1 Philippines Case Study Partner Force to Advisor Ratio

Year	Month	Number of Advisors	Number of Soldiers in LR Unit	Monthly Ratio	Overall Average Monthly Ratio
2001	January	45	100	2.2	28.7
	February	45	100	2.2	
	March	45	100	2.2	
	April	45	100	2.2	
	May	45	100	2.2	
	June	45	100	2.2	
	July	45	100	2.2	
	August	2	100	50.0	
	September	2	100	50.0	
	October	2	100	50.0	
	November	2	100	50.0	
	December	2	100	50.0	
2002	January	2	100	50.0	
	February	14	100	7.1	
	March	14	100	7.1	
	April	14	100	7.1	
	May	14	100	7.1	
	June	14	100	7.1	
	July	14	100	7.1	
	August	14	100	7.1	
	September	14	100	7.1	
	October	14	100	7.1	
	November	12	100	8.3	
	December	12	100	8.3	
2003	January	12	100	8.3	
	February	12	100	8.3	
	March	12	100	8.3	
	April	12	100	8.3	
	May	12	100	8.3	
	June	30	100	3.3	
	July	30	100	3.3	
	August	30	200	6.7	
	September	30	200	6.7	
	October	30	200	6.7	
	November	30	200	6.7	
	December	30	330	11.0	
2004	January	6	330	55.0	
	February	6	330	55.0	
	March	6	330	55.0	
	April	6	330	55.0	
	May	6	330	55.0	
	June	6	330	55.0	
	July	6	330	55.0	
	August	6	330	55.0	
	September	6	330	55.0	
	October	6	330	55.0	
	November	6	330	55.0	
	December	6	311	51.8	
2005	January	6	311	51.8	
	February	6	311	51.8	
	March	6	311	51.8	
	April	6	311	51.8	
	May	6	311	51.8	
	June	6	311	51.8	
	July	6	311	51.8	
	August	6	311	51.8	
	September	6	311	51.8	
	October	6	311	51.8	
	November	6	311	51.8	
	December	6	292	48.7	
2006	January	6	292	48.7	
	February	6	292	48.7	
	March	6	292	48.7	

Year	Month	Number of Advisors	Number of Soldiers in LR Unit	Monthly Ratio
2006	April	6	292	48.7
	May	6	292	48.7
	June	6	292	48.7
	July	6	292	48.7
	August	6	292	48.7
	September	6	292	48.7
	October	12	292	24.3
	November	12	292	24.3
	December	12	273	22.8
2007	January	12	273	22.8
	February	12	273	22.8
	March	12	273	22.8
	April	12	273	22.8
	May	12	273	22.8
	June	12	273	22.8
	July	12	273	22.8
	August	12	273	22.8
	September	12	273	22.8
	October	12	273	22.8
	November	12	273	22.8
	December	12	254	21.2
2008	January	12	254	21.2
	February	12	254	21.2
	March	12	254	21.2
	April	12	254	21.2
	May	12	254	21.2
	June	12	254	21.2
	July	12	254	21.2
	August	12	254	21.2
	September	12	254	21.2
	October	12	254	21.2
	November	12	254	21.2
	December	12	235	19.6
2009	January	12	235	19.6
	February	12	235	19.6
	March	12	235	19.6
	April	12	235	19.6
	May	12	235	19.6
	June	12	235	19.6
	July	12	235	19.6
	August	12	235	19.6
	September	12	235	19.6
	October	12	235	19.6
	November	12	235	19.6
	December	12	216	18.0
2010	January	12	216	18.0
	February	12	216	18.0
	March	12	216	18.0
	April	12	216	18.0
	May	12	216	18.0
	June	12	216	18.0
	July	2	216	108.0
	August	2	216	108.0
	September	2	216	108.0
	October	2	216	108.0
	November	2	216	108.0
	December	2	197	98.5
2011	January	2	197	98.5
	February	12	197	16.4
	March	12	197	16.4
	April	12	197	16.4
	May	12	197	16.4
	June	12	197	16.4

Year	Month	Number of Advisors	Number of Soldiers in LR Unit	Monthly Ratio
2011	July	12	197	16.4
	August	12	197	16.4
	September	12	197	16.4
	October	12	197	16.4
	November	12	197	16.4
	December	12	178	14.8
2012	January	12	178	14.8
	February	12	178	14.8
	March	12	178	14.8
	April	12	178	14.8
	May	12	178	14.8
	June	12	178	14.8
	July	12	178	14.8
	August	12	178	14.8
	September	12	178	14.8
	October	12	178	14.8
	November	12	178	14.8
	December	12	159	13.3
2013	January	12	159	13.3
	February	12	159	13.3
	March	12	159	13.3
	April	12	159	13.3
	May	12	159	13.3
	June	12	159	13.3
	July	12	159	13.3
	August	36	159	4.4
	September	36	139	3.9
	October	36	155	4.3
	November	36	170	4.7
	December	36	185	5.1
2014	January	36	200	5.6
	February	36	215	6.0
	March	36	230	6.4
	April	36	245	6.8
	May	36	260	7.2
	June	6	275	45.8
	July	6	290	48.3
	August	6	305	50.8
	September	6	320	53.3
	October	6	335	55.8
	November	6	350	58.3
	December	6	365	60.8
2015	January	6	380	63.3
	February	6	400	66.7

Appendix B: Table B.1 Iraq Case Study Partner Force to Advisor Ratio

Year	Month	Number of Advisors with ICTF	Number of Soldiers in ICTF	Number of Advisors with Commandos*	Number of Commandos **	Total ISOF Soldiers (Per Month)	Total Advisors (Monthly)	Monthly Ratio (for both elements)	Overall Average Monthly Ratio
2003	October	24	44	34	240	284	58	4.9	6.2
	Novem..	24	44	34	240	284	58	4.9	
	Decem..	24	44	34	240	284	58	4.9	
2004	Septe..	24	44	46	240	284	70	4.1	
	October	24	44	46	240	284	70	4.1	
	Novem..	24	44	46	240	284	70	4.1	
	May	24	44	34	240	284	58	4.9	
	March	24	44	34	240	284	58	4.9	
	June	24	44	34	240	284	58	4.9	
	July	24	44	46	240	284	70	4.1	
	January	24	44	34	240	284	58	4.9	
	Februa..	24	44	34	240	284	58	4.9	
	Decem..	24	44	46	240	284	70	4.1	
	August	24	44	46	240	284	70	4.1	
	April	24	44	34	240	284	58	4.9	
2005	Septe..	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	October	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	Novem..	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	May	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	March	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	June	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	July	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	January	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	Februa..	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	Decem..	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	August	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	April	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
2006	Septe..	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	October	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	Novem..	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	May	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	March	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	June	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	July	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	January	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	Februa..	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	Decem..	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	August	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	April	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
2007	Septe..	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	October	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	Novem..	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	May	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	March	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	June	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	July	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	January	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	Februa..	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	Decem..	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	August	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	April	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
2008	Septe..	24	44	48	420	464	72	6.4	
	October	24	44	48	420	464	72	6.4	
	Novem..	24	44	48	420	464	72	6.4	
	May	24	44	48	420	464	72	6.4	
	March	24	44	48	420	464	72	6.4	
	June	24	44	48	420	464	72	6.4	
	July	24	44	48	420	464	72	6.4	
	January	24	44	24	240	284	48	5.9	
	Februa..	24	44	48	420	464	72	6.4	
	Decem..	24	44	48	420	464	72	6.4	
	August	24	44	48	420	464	72	6.4	
	April	24	44	48	420	464	72	6.4	
2009	Septe..	24	44	60	510	554	84	6.6	
	October	24	44	60	510	554	84	6.6	
	Novem..	24	44	60	510	554	84	6.6	
	May	24	44	60	510	554	84	6.6	
	March	24	44	60	510	554	84	6.6	
	June	24	44	60	510	554	84	6.6	
	July	24	44	60	510	554	84	6.6	
	January	24	44	48	420	464	72	6.4	
	Februa..	24	44	60	510	554	84	6.6	
	Decem..	24	44	60	510	554	84	6.6	
	August	24	44	60	510	554	84	6.6	
	April	24	44	60	510	554	84	6.6	
2010	Septe..	24	44	72	660	704	96	7.3	
	October	24	44	72	660	704	96	7.3	
	Novem..	24	44	72	660	704	96	7.3	
	May	24	44	72	600	644	96	6.7	
	March	24	44	72	600	644	96	6.7	
	June	24	44	72	600	644	96	6.7	
	July	24	44	72	600	644	96	6.7	
	January	24	44	60	510	554	84	6.6	
	Februa..	24	44	60	510	554	84	6.6	
	Decem..	24	44	72	660	704	96	7.3	
	August	24	44	72	600	644	96	6.7	
	April	24	44	72	600	644	96	6.7	

* This is the total number of advisors with both the Commando unit in Baghdad and the regional units

** This is the total number of Iraqis with both the Commando unit in Baghdad and the regional units

Year	Month	Number of Advisors with ICTF	Number of Soldiers in ICTF	Number of Advisors with Commandos*	Number of Commandos **	Total ISOF Soldiers (Per Month)	Total Advisors (Monthly)	Monthly Ratio (for both elements)
2011	Septe...	24	44	72	700	744	96	7.8
	October	24	44	72	700	744	96	7.8
	Novem...	24	44	72	700	744	96	7.8
	May	24	44	72	690	734	96	7.6
	March	24	44	72	690	734	96	7.6
	June	24	44	72	690	734	96	7.6
	July	24	44	72	690	734	96	7.6
	January	24	44	72	660	704	96	7.3
	Februa...	24	44	72	660	704	96	7.3
	Decem...	24	44	72	700	744	96	7.8
	August	24	44	72	700	744	96	7.8
	April	24	44	72	690	734	96	7.6

* This is the total number of advisors with both the Commando unit in Baghdad and the regional units
** This is the total number of Iraqis with both the Commando unit in Baghdad and the regional units

Appendix C: Table C.1 Afghanistan Case Study Partner Force to Advisor Ratio

Year	Month	Number of Advisors	Number of Commandos	Monthly Ratio	Overall Average Monthly Ratio
2007	August	12	236	19.7	16.4
	September	12	231	19.3	
	October	12	226	18.8	
	November	24	457	19.0	
	December	24	447	18.6	
2008	January	24	437	18.2	
	February	36	663	18.4	
	March	36	648	18.0	
	April	36	633	17.6	
	May	36	618	17.2	
	June	48	839	17.5	
	July	48	819	17.1	
	August	48	799	16.6	
	September	48	779	16.2	
	October	48	759	15.8	
	November	60	975	16.3	
	December	60	950	15.8	
2009	January	60	925	15.4	
	February	60	905	15.1	
	March	60	885	14.8	
	April	60	865	14.4	
	June	84	1071	12.8	
	July	84	1056	12.6	
	August	84	1046	12.5	
	September	84	1036	12.3	
	October	84	1026	12.2	
	November	84	1016	12.1	
	December	84	1011	12.0	
	May*	84	1086	12.9	
2010	January	84	1006	12.0	
	February	96	1237	12.9	
	March	96	1227	12.8	
	April	96	1217	12.7	
	May	96	1212	12.6	
	June	96	1207	12.6	
	July	96	1202	12.5	
	August	96	1197	12.5	
	September	108	1428	13.2	
	October	108	1418	13.1	
	November	108	1408	13.0	
	December	108	1398	12.9	
2011	January	108	1388	12.9	
	February	108	1378	12.8	
	March	192	1368	7.1	
	April	192	1358	7.1	
	May	192	1348	7.0	
	June	216	1574	7.3	
	July	216	1559	7.2	
	August	216	1549	7.2	
	September	216	1539	7.1	
	October	216	1529	7.1	
	November	216	1519	7.0	
	December	216	1509	7.0	
2012	January	216	1499	6.9	
	February	216	1489	6.9	
	March	120	1484	12.4	
	April	120	1479	12.3	
	May	120	1474	12.3	
	June	120	1469	12.2	
	July	120	1464	12.2	
	August	120	1459	12.2	
	September	120	1454	12.1	
	October	120	1449	12.1	
	November	120	1445	12.0	
	December	120	1439	12.0	
2013	January	120	1439	12.0	
	February	120	1439	12.0	
	March	120	1439	12.0	
	April	120	1439	12.0	
	May	120	1439	12.0	
	June	216	1439	6.7	
	July	216	1439	6.7	
	August	216	1439	6.7	
	September	216	1439	6.7	
	October	216	1439	6.7	
	November	216	1439	6.7	
	December	216	1439	6.7	
2014	January	216	1439	6.7	
	February	216	1439	6.7	
	March	216	1439	6.7	
	April	216	1439	6.7	
	May	216	1439	6.7	
	June	216	1439	6.7	
	July	216	1439	6.7	
	August	216	1439	6.7	
	September	216	1439	6.7	
	October	216	1439	6.7	
	November	80	1439	18.0	
	December	80	1439	18.0	
2015	January	80	1675	20.9	
	February	80	1670	20.9	
	March	80	1665	20.8	
	April	80	1660	20.8	

Indicates drawdown: not every Kandak has ODA support (1/2 Intermittent, 1/2 full time ODA)
Indicates surge period when 2 ODAs are paired per Kandak (one/company)
Indicates new company operational (Post 2017 Growth)
Indicates new Kandak operational

*standup of 6th Kandak National Force with 2xODA generally remains full strength

Year	Month	Number of Advisors	Number of Commandos	Monthly Ratio
2015	May	80	1655	20.7
	June	80	1650	20.6
	July	80	1645	20.6
	August	80	1640	20.5
	September	80	1635	20.4
	October	80	1630	20.4
	November	80	1625	20.3
	December	80	1620	20.3
2016	January	80	1615	20.2
	February	80	1610	20.1
	March	80	1605	20.1
	April	80	1600	20.0
	May	80	1595	19.9
	June	80	1595	19.9
	July	80	1595	19.9
	August	80	1595	19.9
	September	80	1595	19.9
	October	80	1595	19.9
	November	80	1595	19.9
	December	80	1595	19.9
2017	January	80	1595	19.9
	February	80	1595	19.9
	March	80	1595	19.9
	April	80	1595	19.9
	May	80	1595	19.9
	June	80	1595	19.9
	July	80	1595	19.9
	August	80	1595	19.9
	September	80	1595	19.9
	October	80	1595	19.9
	November	80	1595	19.9
	December	80	1595	19.9
2018	January	80	1713	21.4
	February	80	1711	21.4
	March	80	1827	22.8
	April	80	1823	22.8
	May	80	1937	24.2
	June	80	1931	24.1
	July	80	2043	25.5
	August	80	2035	25.4
	September	80	2145	26.8
	October	80	2135	26.7
	November	80	2243	28.0
	December	80	2231	27.9
2019	January	80	2337	29.2
	February	80	2323	29.0
	March	80	2427	30.3
	April	80	2411	30.1
	May	80	2513	31.4
	June	80	2495	31.2
	July	80	2597	32.5
	August	80	2579	32.2
	September	80	2563	32.0
	October	80	2547	31.8
	November	80	2533	31.7
	December	80	2521	31.5

Indicates drawdown: not every Kandak has ODA support (1/2 Intermittent, 1/2 full time ODA)
Indicates surge period when 2 ODAs are paired per Kandak (one/company)
Indicates new company operational (Post 2017 Growth)
Indicates new Kandak operational

***standup of 6th Kandak National Force with 2xODA generally remains full strength**

Appendix D: Table D.1 El Salvador Case Study Partner Force to Advisor Ratio

Indicates training period for new BIRI (additional SF trainers)
Indicates new BIRI operational

Year	Month	Number of Advisors	Salvadorans Advised	Monthly Ratio	Overall Ratio
1981	January	130	5400	41.5	189.6
	February	130	5400	41.5	
	March	130	6250	48.1	
	April	130	6250	48.1	
	May	130	6250	48.1	
	June	130	6250	48.1	
	July	130	6250	48.1	
	August	130	6250	48.1	
	September				
		130	6250	48.1	
	October	130	6250	48.1	
	November	130	6250	48.1	
	December	130	6250	48.1	
1982	April	350	13350	38.1	
	May	350	13350	38.1	
	June	350	13350	38.1	
	July	130	13350	102.7	
	August	130	13350	102.7	
	September	130	13350	102.7	
	October	130	13350	102.7	
	November	130	13350	102.7	
	December	130	13350	102.7	
	February*	420	13350	31.8	
	March*				
		420	13350	31.8	
	January*	420	13350	31.8	
1983	January	130	18750	144.2	
	February	130	18750	144.2	
	March	130	18750	144.2	
	April	130	18750	144.2	
	May	130	18750	144.2	
	June	220	19600	89.1	
	July	220	19600	89.1	
	August	220	19600	89.1	
	September	220	19600	89.1	
	December*	300	20450	68.2	
	October*	300	20450	68.2	
	Novembe..	300	20450	68.2	
1984	January	210	25850	123.1	
	February	210	25850	123.1	
	March	210	25850	123.1	
	April				
		130	25850	198.8	
	May	130	25850	198.8	
	June	130	25850	198.8	
	July	130	25850	198.8	
	August	130	25850	198.8	
	September	130	25850	198.8	
	October	130	25850	198.8	
	November	130	25850	198.8	
	December	130	25850	198.8	
1985	January	130	31250	240.4	
	February	130	31250	240.4	
	March	130	31250	240.4	
	April	130	31250	240.4	
	May	130	31250	240.4	
	June	130	31250	240.4	
	July	130	31250	240.4	
	August	130	31250	240.4	
	September	130	31250	240.4	
	October	130	31250	240.4	
	November	130	31250	240.4	
	December	130	31250	240.4	
1986	January	130	31250	240.4	
	February	130	31250	240.4	
	March	130	31250	240.4	
	April	130	31250	240.4	
	May	130	31250	240.4	
	June	130	31250	240.4	
	July	130	31250	240.4	
	August	130	31250	240.4	
	September	130	31250	240.4	
	October	130	31250	240.4	
	November	130	31250	240.4	

Year	Month	Number of Advisors	Salvadorans Advised	Monthly Ratio
1986	December	130	31250	240.4
1987	January	130	31250	240.4
	February	130	31250	240.4
	March	130	31250	240.4
	April	130	31250	240.4
	May	130	31250	240.4
	June	130	31250	240.4
	July	130	31250	240.4
	August	130	31250	240.4
	September	130	31250	240.4
	October	130	31250	240.4
	November	130	31250	240.4
	December	130	31250	240.4
1988	January	130	31250	240.4
	February	130	31250	240.4
	March	130	31250	240.4
	April	130	31250	240.4
	May	130	31250	240.4
	June	130	31250	240.4
	July	130	31250	240.4
	August	130	31250	240.4
	September	130	31250	240.4
	October	130	31250	240.4
	November	130	31250	240.4
	December	130	31250	240.4
1989	January	130	31250	240.4
	February	130	31250	240.4
	March	130	31250	240.4
	April	130	31250	240.4
	May	130	31250	240.4
	June	130	31250	240.4
	July	130	31250	240.4
	August	130	31250	240.4
	September	130	31250	240.4
	October	130	31250	240.4
	November	130	31250	240.4
	December	130	31250	240.4
1990	January	130	31250	240.4
	February	130	31250	240.4
	March	130	31250	240.4
	April	130	31250	240.4
	May	130	31250	240.4
	June	130	31250	240.4
	July	130	31250	240.4
	August	130	31250	240.4
	September	130	31250	240.4
	October	130	31250	240.4
	November	130	31250	240.4
	December	130	31250	240.4
1991	January	130	31250	240.4
	February	130	31250	240.4
	March	130	31250	240.4
	April	130	31250	240.4
	May	130	31250	240.4
	June	130	31250	240.4
	July	130	31250	240.4
	August	130	31250	240.4
	September	130	31250	240.4
	October	130	31250	240.4
	November	130	31250	240.4
	December	130	31250	240.4

Indicates training period for new BIRI (additional SF trainers)

Indicates new BIRI operational

Appendix E: Table E.1 Colombia Case Study Partner Force to Advisor Ratio

Year	Month	Total Advisors	Soldiers in BACOA	Soldiers in AGLAN	Total Advised	Monthly Ratio	Overall Ratio
2002	June	18	200		200	11.1	17.5
	July	18	200		200	11.1	
	August	18	200		200	11.1	
	September	18	200		200	11.1	
	October	18	200		200	11.1	
	November	18	200		200	11.1	
	December	18	200		200	11.1	
2003	January	21	200		200	9.5	
	February	21	200		200	9.5	
	March	21	200	170	370	17.6	
	April	21	200	170	370	17.6	
	May	21	200	170	370	17.6	
	June	21	200	170	370	17.6	
	July	21	200	170	370	17.6	
	August	21	200	170	370	17.6	
	September	21	200	170	370	17.6	
	October	21	200	170	370	17.6	
	November	21	200	170	370	17.6	
	December	21	200	170	370	17.6	
2004	January	30	200	170	370	12.3	
	February	30	200	170	370	12.3	
	March	30	200	170	370	12.3	
	April	30	200	170	370	12.3	
	May	30	200	170	370	12.3	
	June	30	200	170	370	12.3	
	July	30	200	170	370	12.3	
	August	30	200	170	370	12.3	
	September	30	200	170	370	12.3	
	October	30	200	170	370	12.3	
	November	30	200	170	370	12.3	
	December	30	200	170	370	12.3	
2005	January	18	200	170	370	20.6	
	February	18	200	170	370	20.6	
	March	18	200	170	370	20.6	
	April	18	200	170	370	20.6	
	May	18	200	170	370	20.6	
	June	18	200	170	370	20.6	
	July	18	200	170	370	20.6	
	August	18	200	170	370	20.6	
	September	18	200	170	370	20.6	
	October	18	200	170	370	20.6	
	November	18	200	170	370	20.6	
	December	18	200	170	370	20.6	
2006	January	18	200	170	370	20.6	
	February	18	200	170	370	20.6	
	March	18	200	170	370	20.6	
	April	18	200	170	370	20.6	
	May	18	200	170	370	20.6	
	June	12	200	170	370	30.8	
	July	12	200	170	370	30.8	
	August	12	200	170	370	30.8	
	September	12	200	170	370	30.8	
	October	18	200	170	370	20.6	
	November	18	200	170	370	20.6	
	December	18	200	170	370	20.6	
2007	January	18	200	170	370	20.6	
	February	18	200	170	370	20.6	
	March	18	200	170	370	20.6	
	April	18	200	170	370	20.6	
	May	18	200	170	370	20.6	
	June	18	200	170	370	20.6	
	July	18	200	170	370	20.6	
	August	18	200	170	370	20.6	
	September	18	200	170	370	20.6	

Creation of BACOA
Creation of AGLAN

Year	Month	Total Advisors	Soldiers in BACOA	Soldiers in AGLAN	Total Advised	Monthly Ratio
2007	October	18	200	170	370	20.6
	November	18	200	170	370	20.6
	December	18	200	170	370	20.6
2008	January	18	200	170	370	20.6
	February	18	200	170	370	20.6
	March	18	200	170	370	20.6
	April	18	200	170	370	20.6
	May	18	200	170	370	20.6
	June	18	200	170	370	20.6
	July	18	200	170	370	20.6
	August	18	200	170	370	20.6
	September	18	200	170	370	20.6
	November	18	200	170	370	20.6
	December	18	200	170	370	20.6
	0vember	18	200	170	370	20.6
2009	January	18	200	170	370	20.6
	February	18	200	170	370	20.6
	March	18	200	170	370	20.6
	April	18	200	170	370	20.6
	May	18	200	170	370	20.6
	June	18	200	170	370	20.6
	July	18	200	170	370	20.6
	August	18	200	170	370	20.6
	September	18	200	170	370	20.6
	October	18	200	170	370	20.6
	November	18	200	170	370	20.6
	December	18	200	170	370	20.6
2010	January	18	200	170	370	20.6
	February	18	200	170	370	20.6
	March	18	200	170	370	20.6
	April	18	200	170	370	20.6
	May	18	200	170	370	20.6
	June	18	200	170	370	20.6
	July	18	200	170	370	20.6
	August	18	200	170	370	20.6
	September	18	200	170	370	20.6
	October	18	200	170	370	20.6
	November	18	200	170	370	20.6
	December	18	200	170	370	20.6
2011	January	18	200	170	370	20.6
	February	18	200	170	370	20.6
	March	18	200	170	370	20.6
	April	18	200	170	370	20.6
	May	18	200	170	370	20.6
	June	18	200	170	370	20.6
	July	18	200	170	370	20.6
	August	18	200	170	370	20.6
	September	18	200	170	370	20.6
	October	18	200	170	370	20.6
	November	18	200	170	370	20.6
	December	18	200	170	370	20.6
2012	January	18	200	170	370	20.6
	February	18	200	170	370	20.6
	March	18	200	170	370	20.6
	April	18	200	170	370	20.6
	May	18	200	170	370	20.6
	June	18	200	170	370	20.6
	July	18	200	170	370	20.6
	August	18	200	170	370	20.6
	September	18	200	170	370	20.6
	October	18	200	170	370	20.6
	November	18	200	170	370	20.6
	December	18	200	170	370	20.6
2013	January	30	200	170	370	12.3

Creation of BACOA
Creation of AGLAN

Year	Month	Total Advisors	Soldiers in BACOA	Soldiers in AGLAN	Total Advised	Monthly Ratio
2013	February	30	200	170	370	12.3
	March	30	200	170	370	12.3
	April	30	200	170	370	12.3
	May	30	200	170	370	12.3
	June	30	200	170	370	12.3
	July	30	200	170	370	12.3
	August	30	200	170	370	12.3
	September	30	200	170	370	12.3
	October	30	200	170	370	12.3
	December	30	200	170	370	12.3
	Ovember	30	200	170	370	12.3
2014	January	30	200	170	370	12.3
	February	30	200	170	370	12.3
	March	30	200	170	370	12.3
	April	30	200	170	370	12.3
	May	30	200	170	370	12.3
	June	30	200	170	370	12.3
	July	30	200	170	370	12.3
	August	30	200	170	370	12.3
	September	30	200	170	370	12.3
	October	30	200	170	370	12.3
	November	30	200	170	370	12.3
	December	30	200	170	370	12.3
2015	January	30	200	170	370	12.3
	February	30	200	170	370	12.3
	March	30	200	170	370	12.3
	April	30	200	170	370	12.3
	May	30	200	170	370	12.3
	June	30	200	170	370	12.3
	July	30	200	170	370	12.3
	August	30	200	170	370	12.3
	September	30	200	170	370	12.3
	October	30	200	170	370	12.3
	November	30	200	170	370	12.3
	December	30	200	170	370	12.3
2016	January	30	200	170	370	12.3
	February	30	200	170	370	12.3
	March	30	200	170	370	12.3
	April	30	200	170	370	12.3
	May	30	200	170	370	12.3
	June	30	200	170	370	12.3

Creation of BACOA

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MAJ Shawn Boyer, Joint Intelligence Center and JSOTF-P J-2 2004-2009, 10 July 2020.

COL Erik Brown, JSTOF-P Commander 2014-2015, 5 October 2020.

COL Max Carpenter, AOB CDR 2001-2002, Deputy Group Commander 2012-2014, 17 July 2020.

COL Bill Coultrup, JSOTF-P Commander 2007-2010, 14 July 2020.

COL Dennis Downey, JSTOTF-P DEPUTY Commander 2002-2004, JSTOTF-P Commander 2004, SOCPAC J35 2008-2010, 20 July 2020.

CSM Steve Durfee, ODA Team Sergeant 2006-2008, Company SGM 2012-2013, 14 July 2020.

LTC Joe Felter, Attache in embassy during OEFP 200-2002, 20 July 2020.

LTG David Fridovich, JSOTF-P Commander 2002, SOCCENT CG PACOM J3 2005-2008, 16 July 2020.

MAJ Ken Gleiman, ODA Team Leader, Assistant Battalion S3, and AOB Commander (4 rotations from 2000-2009), 13 August 2020.

MAJ Joe Harosky, ODA Team Leader 2005-2008, 24 September 2020.

CSM Brian Johnson, ODA Team Sergeant 1999-2000, Company SGM 2004, Battalion CSM 2011, 1st SFT Group CSM 2013-2014, 16 September 2020.

LTC Jim Keating, JSOTF-P Chief of Staff 2011, 15 July 2020.

LTC Leo Liebreich, ODA Team Leader 2006-2008, 1 SFG assigned to Embassy as JUSMAG Ground OIC 2013-2015, 21 July 2020.

LTC Scott Malone, ODA Team Leader, ODB Commander, JSOTFP J3, Chief of Current Operations SOCPAC, 2003 to 2011, 23 July 2020.

CDR (SEAL) James Marvin, JSTOTF-P DEPUTY Commander 2006 to 2007, 23 July 2020.

COL Dave Maxwell, 1st Battalion, 1st Special Forces Group Commander 2000-2002, JSOTF-P Commander 2006-2007, 9 July 2020.

LTC John Moria, Battalion Commander 2006 to 2008, 24 July 2020.

MSG Joe Morley, ODA Lead Assault Troop Trainer 2001, 22 July 2020.

SFC John Mory, ODA Assault Troop Trainer 2000-2002, 21 July 2020.

CW2 Duke Sawyer, ODA Team Warrant Officer 2001 to 2002, 24 July 2020.

MAJ Noel Sioson, ODA Team Leader 2010-2011, ODB Company Commander 2015-2017 26 June and 3 July 2020.

Iraq

CW4 Eric Brashears, ODA and ODB Warrant Officer (10th SFG) 2004-2005, 29 October 2020.

COL Erik Brown, CJSOTF Chief of Staff (10th SFG) 2008-2009, Battalion Commander SOTF-C 2010-2011, 5 October 2020.

LTC Max Carpenter, Advisor to GEN Kenani Iraqi CTS CG 2009-2010, 24 July 2020.

COL Chris Conner, Battalion Commander (5th SFG) for 4 rotations 2003-2007, CJSOTF Commander 2008-2009, 13 July 2020.

SFC Tom Disburg, ODA NCO (10th SFG) 2007, 28 October 2020.

COL Dennis Downey, MNF-NW Staff 2005, MNF-I Staff 2007, 29 October 2020.

MSG Steve Durfee, ODA Team Sergeant (1st SFG) 2007, 12 August 2020.

BG Arkan Fadhil, Iraqi ISOF Commando 2003-present current Commander ISOF Academy, 8 September 2020.

MSG Scott Ford, ODA Team Sergeant (B/2/3 SFG) 2004-2005, 29 October 2020.

LTC Ken Gleiman, ODB Company Commander (1st SFG) 2008-2009, 13 July 2020.

COL Burton Glover, ODA Team Leader, ODB Company Commander, other Staff Positions in 5th SFG 2003-2011, 20 and 23 July 2020.

MAJ Joe Harosky, ODA Team Leader (1st SFG) 2007, 24 September 2020.

CSM Brian Johnson, Battalion CSM 2009 (1st SFG), 16 September 2020.

MSG Seaux Larreau, ODA NCO (5th and 10th SFG) 2003-2006, 29 October 2020.

COL Derek Lipson, AOB Commander 2006-2007, SOITT Senior advisor 2008, Battalion Commander SOTF-N (20th SFG) 2010-2011, 24 September 2020.

SGM Ron McDaries, ODA Team Sergeant ODB Company Sergeant Major (5th SFG) 2003-2004, 30 October 2020.

MSG Clay Morrow, ODA Team Sergeant (5th SFG) 2005, 2 November 2020.

MG Michael Repass, CJOSTF Commander (10th SFG) 2004-2005, 21 September 2020.

MG Patrick Roberson AOB Commander, Battalion Commander (10th SFG) multiple tours 2003-2009, 22 December 2020.

CW2 Travis Rolph, ODA Warrant Officer (A/1/5 SFG) 2005-2006 ODA, 29 October 2020.

MG Simeon Trombitas, INCTF-TT CG 2008-2009 (7th SFG background), 15 September 2020.

LTG Ken Tovo, Battalion Commander 2003-2004, CJSOTF Commander (10th SFG) 2006-2007,5 October 2020.

COL Tim Williams, Battalion Commander 2002-2004 (5th SFG), CJSOTF Chief of Staff 2005, MNF-I Staff 2011, 16 October 2020.

LTC David Witty, Senior Advisor to ICTS 2007-2008 and 2013-2014, 3 September 2020.

Afghanistan

Anonymous 3rd SF group member, Deployments in 2006-7, 2010, 2011-2012, 8 January 202.

CW4 Eric Brashears, Battalion Warrant Officer (10th SFG) 2010-2012 and 2016-2017, 2 November 2020.

COL Bill Carty, CJSOTF Chief of Staff (3rd SFG) 2009, Battalion Commander of SOTF-S (Kandahar) 2011-2012, 6 January 2021.

COL Duke Christie, ISAF SOF Commander 2011-2013, 19 October 2020.

COL Fred Dummar, 7th SFG CJSOTF XO 2006-2007, CJSOTF-A Chief of Staff 2013-2014, Commander ANASOC 2014-2015, contractor ANASOF HQ 2015-2016, 16 December 2020.

SGM Stephen Durfee, Camp Morehead SOAG NCO (1st SFG) 2010-2011, 2 September 2020.

MSG Scott Ford, ODA Team SGT (3rd SFG) 2007-2008, 29 October 2020.

COL Burton Glover, Battalion Commander of SOTF-A (7th SFG) 2016-2017, 23 July 2020.

COL Jack Hastings, ODA Team Leader (1st SFG) 2004, Staff Officer SOTF-S 2009-2011, 9 September 2020.

MG Jim Linder, SOJTF-A CG 2017-2018, NTM-A SOF DCG 2011-2012, 21 December 2020.

COL Fernando Lujan, Deputy Commander Camp Morehead (SOAG) 2013-2014, 11 August 2020.

COL Larry Niedringhaus, AOB Commander (7th SFG) 2008-2009, Camp Morehead SOAG Deputy Commander 2014-2015, Camp Morehead SOAG Commander 2017-2018, 7 January 2021.

COL Brian Petit, Battalion Commander of SOTF-S (Kandahar) 2010, ANASOC SOAG Commander 2013-2014, 21 December 2020.

MG Ed Reeder, CJSOTF-A Commander (7th SFG) 2006-2007, CG CFSOCC-A 2009-2010, CG SOJTF-A 2014-2015, 17 December 2020.

MG Patrick Roberson, CJSOTF-A Commander (3rd SFG) 2013, 22 December 2020.

COL Martin (Marty) Schmidt, AOB Commander (7th SFG) 2002, SOTF Commander 2013-2014, SOAG Commander 2017-2018, 9 September 2020.

MSG Joshua Stephen, ODA Team Sergeant (3rd SFG) Kandahar 2010-2011, Jalalabad 2012, Battle of Kunduz 2015, 5 January 2021.

Ms. Valentin Swegle, Center for Army Analysis ORSA attached to SOAG 2014-2015, 22 December 2020.

SGM David Topejr, ODA Team Sergeant and Company SGM (7th SFG) 2006-2007 and 2013, 23 December 2020.

CSM Faiz Wafa, Afghan Commando Battalion CSM (Gardez) 2007-2008, ANASOC CSM 2008-2015, 8 January 2021.

COL Tim Williams, J3 SOCCENT Staff Officer 2006-2008, 16 October 2020.

<u>El Salvador</u>

LTC Cecil Bailey MTT Advisor with 3/7 SFG 1981, MILGROUP Staff El Salvador 1984-1985, 21 September 2020.

LTG Charles Cleveland, MTT advisor with 3/7 SFG 1987-1990, 19 October 2020.

MG Mark Hamilton, MILGROUP Commander 1990-1992, 28 September 2020.

COL Kevin Higgins, MTT Advisor 1983-1984, OPATT Advisor (San Miguel) 1986-1988, 30 September 2020.

LTC Mike Hennelly, J5 El Salvador Desk and other Staff Positions at SOUTHCOM 1986-1989, 14 January 2021.

CW3 Dave Hulsey, 7 SFG advisor to BIRI training at CREM in Honduras 1984, 4 January 2021.

LTC Ted Mataxis, Chief of Advisor Program 1988-1990, 15 January 2021.

BG Hector Pagan, 7th SFG MILGRP Liaison 1989, 5 January 2021.

COL Francisco (Frank) Pedrozo, El Salvador OCS Advisor 1982, OPATT advisor 5th Brigade 1985-1986, MLGRP Training Officer, Operations Officer, and Deputy Commander 1989-1992, 8 September 2020.

MSG Leamon (Lee) Ratterree, ODA NCO for BIRI Belloso training at Ft Bragg 1982, MTT Advisor 1984, OPATT Advisor 1985-1986, 5 January 2021.

MG Ed Reeder, National Civil Defense OPATT Advisor, 1987-1988, 17 December 2020.

COL Wayne (Pat) Richardson, MTT Advisor from 3/7 SFG 1980-1984 and OPATT Advisor 1988-1990, 20 and 21 January 2021.

COL Jim (Ranger) Roach, SOUTCOM J3 Staff Officer 1983-1984 OPATT Brigade Advisor and Senior OPATT Advisor 1984-1986, 22 September 2020.

COL Hy Rothstein, 7th SFG OPATT Advisor 1987-1989, 7 SFG DCO 90-93 12 October 2020.

MAJ Kalev (Gunner) Sepp, OPATT Advisor 1989-1990 (1st Brigade in San Salvador and 2nd Brigade in Santa Ana), 11 August 2020.

Dr. David Spencer, NDU Professor and author on El Salvador War, 22 Jan 2021.

MG Simeon Trombitas, OPATT Advisor (4th Brigade) 1989-1990, 15 September 2020.

COL Roy Trumble, Company Commander and Battalion XO for 3/7 SFG (Panama) 1981-1984, Battalion Commander 1988-1990, 18 September 2020.

COL John Waghelstein, Battalion Commander (7th SFG) 1981-1983, El Salvador MILGRP Commander 1983-1984, 7th SFG Commander 1985-1987, 25 January 2021.

CSM Chris Zets, ODA NCO for BIRI Belloso training at Ft Bragg 1982, 21 December 2020.

Colombia

CSM Amil Alvarez, 7th SFG Battalion CSM 2011-2013, 7th SFG Group CSM 2013-2016, SOCSOUTH CSM 2016-2018, 10 and 24 February 2021.

COL Carlos Berrios, SOUTHCOM J5 2000-2003, Colombia MILGRP 2003-2006, Joint Staff Andean Ridge Desk 2006-2008, 12 January 2021.

COL Mike Brown, 7th SFG AFEU Colombia exchange officer 1996-1998, Army Chief Colombia MILGRP 2004-2007, USARSOUTH 2008-2009, MILGRP Chief Colombia 2009-2012, 11 February 2021.

COL Duke Christie, Battalion Commander 3/7 SFG 2002-2003, 19 October 2020.

LTG Charles Cleveland, SOCSOUTH CG 2005-2008, 19 October 2020.

LTC Agustin Dominguez, Joint Staff Colombia Desk 2014, Army Attaché Colombia 2016-2018, 11 February 2021.

COL Barbara Fick, Colombia desk SOUTHCOM 2001-2004, SOUTHCOM CAG 2004-2008, Plans officer Colombia MILGRP 2008-2010 28 January 2021.

COL Kevin Higgins, MILGRP CDR Colombia 1999-2001, 6 October 2020.

CW3 Dave Hulsey, 7th SFG and SOCOM SOCSOUTH Desk 1993-1994, 2000, 2004-2020, 4 January 2021.

LTC Douglas Judice, 7th SFG ODA Team Leader with AFEU 2001, Exchange Officer AFEU 2003-2005, Colombia PATT 2007-2010, SOUTHCOM J35 2010-2012, Army Mission Chief Embassy 2012-2015, 1 February 2021.

LTG Ken Keen, Colombia MILGRP Commander 2001-2003, CG USARSOUTH 2005-2007, DCG SOUTHCOM 2009-2011, 15 October 2020.

LTC Kevin Key, ODA Team Leader 2006, AOB Commander 2013, 7th SFG S3 2014-2016, SOCSOUTH 2018-2020, 8 February 2021.

Tom Marks, Journalist and US Contractor in Colombia 1998-2015, 20 January 2021.

LTC Scott Morley, SOLO Colombia 2016-2018, 11 February 2021.

LTC Joe Reagan 7th SFG ODA Team Leader 2010, AOB Commander 2015, SOCSOUTH J3 2017-2020, 8 February 2021.

MG Ed Reeder, 7th SFG Battalion S-3 1998-1999, Commander 7th SFG 2006-2007, 17 July 2020.

Dr. David Spencer, Advisor to Colombian Armed Forces 1998-2018, Colombia Desk Officer OSD (P) 2012-2017, 22 January 2021.

SGM David Topejr, 7th SFG ODA Team Sergeant, Company SGM 1999-2001and 2004, 23 December 2020.

MG Simeon Trombitas, Colombia MILGRP Commander 2003 to 2005, 15 September 2020.

COL Greg Wilson, J3 SOCSOUTH 2006, SOCFWD Commander 2007-2009, 1 September 2020.

CSM Chris Zets, 7th SFG Company SGM 1998-2000, Group CSM 2006-2008, 21 December 2020.