

SOF in the Littoral Campaign

Fighting all phases, across all domains

by CDR James L Clark, USN

On 2 August 1990, under Saddam Hussein, Iraq invaded its neighbor Kuwait. An international coalition of forces, including the U.S. military, responded. U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command deployed a rapid response task group. This task group was comprised of three SEAL platoons and two high-speed boat detachments. The missions they carried out resulted in critical support and intelligence that enabled the success of the coalition counter-invasion, ultimately making it possible to liberate the country of Kuwait.

On 17 January 1991, Operation DESERT STORM officially began, and the special boat detachments and SEALs conducted actual reconnaissance of Kuwaiti beaches. Nightly, the high-speed boats departed with embarked SEALs and combat rubber raiding crafts (CRRCs) lashed to their bows to transit through mined waters approaching the coastline. They launched the SEALs in the CRRCs about 500 yards from the beach. The SEALs swam in and performed beach recon in oil slick, 50-degree water where they recorded mines, beach obstacles, and even Iraqi patrols, passing within 50 yards of them without being detected. Then the operators swam back to their raiding crafts to be recovered by the boats.

With the ground invasion approaching, NSW conceived a tactical deception mission, and upon receiving word to “proceed with mission,” SEALs loaded two CRRCs onto the high-speed boats to conduct the actual beach diversion. With critical timing, as the ground war of DESERT STORM was looming to kick off in just hours, the four high-speed boats departed on



The nature of SOF means that training and operations will be joint. (Photo by SrAm Ryan Conroy.)

>CDR Clark is an active duty Navy SEAL with 28 years of SOF experience. After enlisting in the Navy in 1987, he attended Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL (BUDS) training, graduating with Class 159 in 1989. He went on multiple deployments during his fifteen-year enlisted career while assigned to various SEAL Teams including Operations DESERT STORM, UPHOLD DEMOCRACY, and ENDURING FREEDOM I. Commissioned a SEAL Ensign in 2003, he continued to serve in various roles, deploying multiple times to Operations IRAQI FREEDOM, OEF II, and INHERENT RESOLVE. He just graduated from the USMCU Command and Staff College as a distinguished graduate where he earned his Master's in Military Studies. He is assigned to the Strategic Capabilities Office at the Pentagon.

Intelligence from Central Command indicated two Iraqi armored divisions were moved into Kuwait to stop the (amphibious) invasion that never was.

James D. Gray¹

a night transit of 70 nautical miles in a sea state of two (smooth seas).

At Mina Saud, Kuwait, the SEALs under Lt Tom D. Dietz, assigned to Seal Team Five, boarded their CRRCs and moved into the target area. The high-speed boats loitered to provide recovery or hot extract if needed. Within two hours, the SEALs in the area planted demolition charges and beacons to indicate an amphibious landing and exfiltrated. They linked up with the CRRCs and transited to the recovering high-speed boats. The boats then moved within 200 yards of the beach and conducted two firing runs on bunkers with .50 cal machine guns, Mk-19 and 7.62 mm mini-guns and threw satchel charges into the water during egress. The demolitions planted by the operators exploded shortly after leaving the area, and air strikes were called in. The raiders returned to base shortly before dawn.

The 2 August 1990 invasion of Kuwait by Iraq initiated the largest deployment of U.S. forces since the Vietnam War—Operation DESERT STORM, the U.S.-led coalition liberation of Kuwait, in January 1991. The “U.S. Special Operation Command (USSOCOM) executed the largest deployment of Special Operations Forces in history.”² A small contingent from U.S. Special Operations Command, SEALs, and special



Critical skills operators during a training exercise. (Photo by Cpl Bryann K. Whitney.)

the conventional campaign to liberate Kuwait. Special operations forces (SOF) conducted numerous operations in support of Operation DESERT STORM, including special reconnaissance, direct action, civil affairs, psychological operations (now referred to as military information support operations), and

tions of the war, allowing the conventional forces of V Corps, I MEF, and the British to complete major combat operations in just six frenetic weeks ... SOF won their own victories, liberating more than half the landmass of Iraq on their own.³

SOF capabilities have supported conventional operations with exceptional results in Iraq and Afghanistan, but seventeen years of continuous counterterrorism (CT) operations have resulted in the misunderstanding that SOF is primarily a direct action force. This misunderstanding is exacerbated by SOF being professionally sequestered from its conventional peers and operating under the command and control of USSOCOM. Today, SOF is capable of conducting a wide range of special operations in support conventional operations, including the littorals. SOF may serve as a force multiplier to conventional forces operating in the littorals before, during, and after joint forcible entry operations.

U.S. forces will be required to operate in increasingly contested environments, including anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) zones established by our adversaries. These A2/AD zones are designed to disrupt current U.S. capabilities and war plans by extending the range at which our capabilities can be effectively engaged. SOF can play a critical role in penetrating, deceiving, and defeating these threats.

Special reconnaissance is one mission area in which SOF excels. USSOCOM has developed and fielded manned and unmanned reconnaissance systems designed to work as an integrated system-of-systems capable of penetrating an active A2/AD zone. SOF is capable of conducting long-range, low-visibility insertion and extraction into A2/AD zones via air, surface, and sub-surface mobility platforms. These platforms are interoperable with Navy and Maritime Sealift Command ships and auxiliaries, which vastly extends their range and endurance. The *Marine Corps Operating Concept (MOC)* specifically addresses A2/AD:

The concept will address the differences between ‘rolling back’ an A2AD threat versus creating gaps/seams by

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boats executed the military deception operation that, for a short but critical period of time, fixed a significant portion of Iraqi combat power against a nonexistent threat. This often-overlooked operation demonstrated the disproportionate effect a small, highly trained special operations force may generate in a conventional campaign.

Operation DESERT STORM was a significant test of the newly formed USSOCOM and demonstrated its value to U.S. Central Command in support of

combat search and rescue. Twelve years later, USSOCOM was called upon to support another conventional war with Saddam Husain’s Iraq and again demonstrated its ability to support conventional objectives. John D. Gresham, in *Operation IRAQI FREEDOM: Special Operations Forces and the Liberation of Iraq*, notes:

Much like Operation ENDURING FREEDOM—Afghanistan, Operation IRAQI FREEDOM Special Operations quickly became the key enabling ac-

location and/or time that can be exploited through a maneuver warfare approach.⁴

SOF's long-range, low-visibility reconnaissance capabilities can help identify gaps and seams in the A2/AD zones and serve as an advance force for amphibious operations. In reconnaissance, seeing is only part of the solution; being present makes all the difference to mission outcomes.

The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 demonstrated the value of coalition special operations in support of campaign objectives, from the highly successful special operations in Western Iraq, which prevented the employment of Iraqi theater ballistic missiles, to the northern front where SOF "conducted one of the greatest Unconventional Warfare campaigns in the history of warfare"⁵ by mobilizing and supporting Kurdish Peshmerga forces against much larger Iraqi formations. In addition, coalition special op-

erations in the littoral played a decisive role early in the campaign. Gresham, also notes:

Though not well reported, the maritime SOF campaign in the Iraqi littorals was a large and difficult undertaking, involving a wide variety of units from several nations ... A brilliant campaign, OIF SOF operations in the littorals will be a model for future operations for years to come.⁶

Special operations in support of the liberation of Iraq demonstrated SOF's ability to serve as a force multiplier during a conventionally led invasion. The *MOC* states:

Marines and SOF are naturally aligned in terms of mission approach and execution. Forward-deployed in similar geographical areas, both are actively engaged in shaping operations and able to respond immediately to crises as well as perform operations in a sustained campaign.⁷

In future major operations, SOF will play a critical role in all phases of the campaign across all domains.

SOF has proven capable of finding, fixing, and finishing high-value targets. Over the course of the last seventeen years, high-value targets have become synonymous with violent extremist organization senior leadership, such as al-Qaeda Senior Leader Osama Bin Laden, but the *DOD Dictionary of Military Terms* defines a high-value target as "a target the enemy commander requires for the successful completion of the mission."⁸ High-value targets in the contested littoral environment may include enemy command and control centers, communications nodes, A2/AD sensing and targeting sites, and small islands or artificial structures preventing the maneuver of coalition forces. Through employing low-visibility, long-range insertion/extraction capabilities, SOF could locate and attack these high-value targets with cyber tools that re-

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Insertion of special operations units will be an enabling action in future conflicts. (Photo by Cpl Aaron Henson.)

quire physical proximity to employ in order to sabotage critical infrastructure or inject confusion into the enemies' decision cycle. SOF is not limited to kinetic attacks; it has developed and fielded capabilities to exploit enemy vulnerabilities across multiple domains.

SOF is capable of seizing key terrain, such as the port facilities of Um Qasr or oil rigs in the northern Arabian Gulf during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM.⁹ The *MOC* points out the requirement

nel) level, which provides command and control for all of SOF in a designated geographic area of operations. (There are exceptions, but this is the rule.) Multiple JSOTFs may be established to support the geographic combatant commander's objectives under the operational control of theater special operations command. In order to ensure the coordination and deconfliction of special operations, the JSOTF will seek to embed liaison elements with adjacent

USSOCOM, its Service components, and theater special operations commands continue to plan, train, and prepare for future major combat operations. SOF is capable of conducting operations through all phases and across all domains of a major combat operation, especially in the littorals, where stealth, speed, and range are critical attributes that enable SOF to be a force multiplier.

Notes

1. James D. Gray, *NSW Boat Teams Set Stage for Operation DESERT STORM*, (Coronado, CA: Naval Special Warfare Command, 2016).
2. Department of Defense, *Conduct of the Persian Gulf War: An Interim Report to Congress*, (Washington, DC: July 1991).
3. John D. Gresham, *Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF): Special Operations Forces and the Liberation of Iraq*, (Online: Defense Media Network, 2016), available at <https://www.defensemedianetwork.com>.
4. Headquarters Marine Corps, *The Marine Corps Operating Concept: How an Expeditionary Force Operates in the 21st Century (MOC)* (Washington, DC: September 2016).
5. *Operation IRAQI FREEDOM*.
6. Ibid.
7. *MOC*.
8. U.S. Department of Defense, *Dictionary of Military Terms*, (Washington, DC: 15 February 2016).
9. *Operation IRAQI FREEDOM*.
10. *MOC*.

In reconnaissance, seeing is only part of the solution; being present makes all the difference ...

to operate from expeditionary advance bases;¹⁰ SOF could help to secure small islands for expeditionary advanced bases ahead of or in conjunction with Marine forces. Expeditionary advanced bases could support air, surface, and sub-surface SOF capabilities as well as command and control centers for a joint special operations task force (JSOTF).

Supporting littoral operations will create challenges for conventional leaders not accustomed to working with SOF. SOF is nominally task organized as a JSOTF (at the Navy Captain/Colo-

units and battlespace owners. These elements provide realtime coordination for SOF as well as subject-matter expertise in support of planning. Seventeen years of sustained combat operations conducted in coordination with conventional forces have proven the liaison element's value in decreasing the friction of special operations.

SOF has a demonstrated track record of success over the last 30 years in supporting conventional force objectives in major combat operations. From operational deception to long-range raids,

