

From the Dark Side

reviewed by LtCol Charles L. Armstrong, USMC(Ret)

Every few years an astute journalist notices the extraordinary contributions made to irregular warfare by a handful of American servicemen. Although the terms "special operations" and "special operations forces" are part of every action movie fan's vocabulary, the actual breadth of skills and talents in modern special operators' portfolios goes beyond even Hollywood's imagination. Linda Robinson is the latest such reporter, and her new book is probably the best in print about the U.S. Special Forces known to a previous generation as the Green Berets.

Drawing on information provided by numerous special operations soldiers (including a colorful "cast of characters" introduced early in the

The author makes one error of omission in her discussion of special forces participation in El Salvador's insurgency. Although Green Beret officers and noncommissioned officers served with distinction in advisory billets throughout that conflict, other members of the U.S. military mission included Navy SEALs, U.S. Marines, and other garden-variety soldiers and sailors. The Marine infantry battalion of the El Salvadoran Armed Forces, for instance, had a U.S. Marine advisor. Other Marines regularly advised the 6th Brigade. The advisors generally worked well together, although the U.S. Army Special Forces occasionally viewed other Services' participation as encroaching on its traditional mission.

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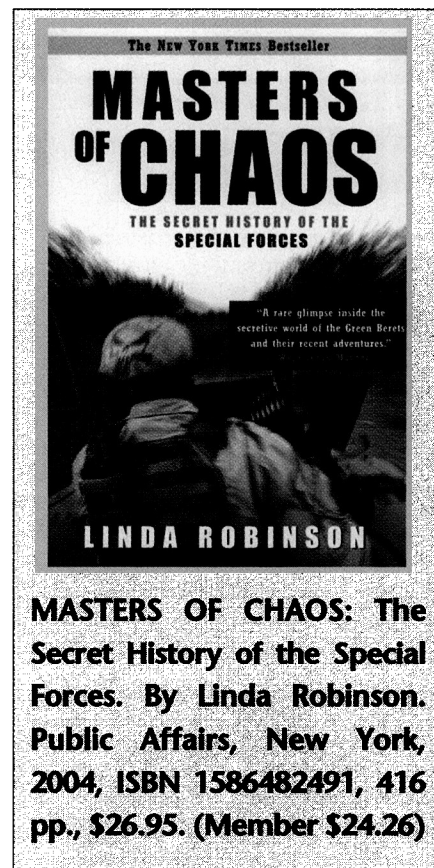
book), Robinson recounts a couple of decades' adventures from an operator's viewpoint. She provides enough background about special forces early history, selection, and training to make an uninitiated reader comfortably well informed. She follows the introduction by launching into an operation-by-operation account of recent special warfare activities.

An obvious fan of special forces, the author gives much justified praise to the characters who can be named, while acknowledging other sources or players who prefer to remain anonymous. She writes candidly and credibly about the traditional institutional tensions among military special operations units, conventional military units (and thinkers), and the Central Intelligence Agency. She paints a remarkably accurate verbal picture of operational details, capturing the thoughts and emotions of the irregular battlefield as well as I have seen it accomplished.

In her final chapter Robinson recaps the success story that is the rebuilding of the Army Special Forces after Vietnam. She identifies and discusses what she describes as a "natural division of labor" among the various special operations forces in future conflicts. Marine readers, even those who retain the Corps' decades-old suspicion of so-called elite units, will find her book informative, entertaining reading. Marines who are tapped for special operational assignments outside the mainstream Operating Forces would do well to read this book before they report for duty.

US  MC

>LtCol Armstrong graduated from Fort Bragg's John F. Kennedy Special Warfare School while a Marine lieutenant. During his career he served alongside special operations forces of various countries in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. He is currently advising startup companies in the small to medium business environment.





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