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Anna Simons

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Diversity and SOF: Boon or Bane?

Anna Simons
Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, USA

This article argues that while SOF combat elements cannot be *made* more inclusive, the overall SOF enterprise can. While diversity for diversity's sake might appear to promise certain advantages, it introduces real sources of concern. These must be carefully considered. But so, too, should the need for combat interchangeability and reflexive trust among operators. Consequently, although SOF combat units may not be able to change in quite the ways that proponents of diversity and gender integration would prefer, successful application of 21st century warfare will require more than just operators, especially since organizations should stay together for longer than a single rotation. It is here where heterogeneity should come into its own, and there are historical precedents for this such as Detachment 101 (an Office of Strategic Services unit during World War II).

Keywords: SOF, special forces, diversity, gender integration, small combat unit, combat interchangeability, reflexive trust

The conundrum this article addresses is that the precise, stealthy, smart application of force requires elite-level operators. Because elite-level operators know they are "it" – and that by passing through a rigorous selection they are much better at precise, stealthy, smart physical force than anyone else – they possess healthy egos. Nor is their having healthy egos necessarily detrimental. High self-esteem may actually be necessary for operators to do difficult and sometimes impossible things. High self-regard, however, does tend to hamper operators from working more inclusively with others. Thus, if working more inclusively with others is essential in the twenty-first century – as many suggest it is – how might operator attitudes be made more compatible with national security needs? How might we square this circle? This article suggests that the answer lies in relegating Special Operations Forces (SOF) operators to a critical supporting, but not a domineering role in national defense.

Ultimately this article argues that while SOF combat elements cannot be *made* more inclusive, the overall SOF enterprise can. Whereas Direct Action (DA) and some Special

This article draws on more than 20 years of observations, as well as discussions with SOF operators and officers in the classroom and in the field (to include in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Sahel, and the Horn of Africa). One caveat is that I generalize about SOF, which is always problematic. Even when talking about U.S. SOF, the SOF "tribes" are very different from one another. Unfortunately, trying to account for their differences would yield several books and would require a very different article. Also, U.S. foreign policy is very different from that of other countries. I daresay our American "strategic personality" is as well. Consequently, U.S. SOF might best be used as a foil rather than as a model for other SOF, such as Denmark, to follow.

Correspondence should be addressed to Anna Simons Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, USA. E-mail: asimons@nps.edu

Reconnaissance (SR) missions require degrees of mutual dependence that militate against greater diversity and inclusiveness, a "one team, one fight, one problem set" approach *would* significantly broaden operators' appreciation of others. It is no coincidence that this is also what will be required in order to prevail in the twenty-first-century security environment (Simons, 2013).[1]

PREMISES AND WORKING ASSUMPTIONS

When it comes to the topic of diversity and the military – and the perception that Western SOFs are too "white" and too male – one would hope that Western defense establishments already recognize the value in placing different types (or categories) of individuals where those individuals' **comparative advantages** can be put to best use *while also ensuring* that their presence renders the whole greater than the sum of its parts and greater than the sum would be without these individuals.

As it is, SOF operators will typically embrace anything they suspect will grant them an edge and/or help them maintain their edge – from novel technology to new techniques. The only caveat is that whoever or whatever is introduced must provide value without detracting – *or* distracting. At the same time, operators are prone to reject anything they have reason to believe will jeopardize reflexive trust, although "reflexive trust" is neither a doctrinal term nor one they use.

In the following paragraphs, I introduce two concepts: reflexive trust and combat interchangeability. I do so in order to illustrate why standards remain so important and why a degree of homogeneity in certain kinds of operational units matters more than outsiders realize. At the same time, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that changes in the broader environment make the need for heterogeneous non-operators equally imperative. Consequently, it is worth examining instances when operators *have* behaved more inclusively toward others in order to see whether something cannot be gleaned from these examples.

Before delving into these two concepts I ask the reader first to accept certain truisms. For instance, if the only way to ensure that SOF units remain comprised of individuals with elite-level capabilities is to rigorously screen for those capable of sustained elite-level performance, then we should expect candidates who make it through selection to regard themselves *as* elite; after all, thanks to selection, they now *know* they are better than the rest of us at certain critically important tasks. This invariably results in a status differential, one compounded by the fact that, like most other animals, we humans are wired to respect physical prowess, as well as its proxies: size and strength. Indeed, though we might aver that "physical prowess *plus* mental agility" represents the best of all possible combinations, determining how smart others are is always subjective. Judging others' speed, strength, and stamina is not (Gardner, 1983) (Post, 2013).[2]

Consider, then, how such qualities are assessed in the combat arms. Not surprisingly, service in the combat arms has long been predicated on physicality. For obvious reasons, stature, speed, strength, and other physical attributes are important, and being able to haul, heave, climb, swim, and/or otherwise cover distance under heavy loads will continue to matter – at least so long as the need to be able to overpower strong, fast, highly skilled opponents *non-remotely* persists. Though even if everyone could be ergonomically, robotically, and/or pharmaceutically enhanced, this would only serve to raise the bar on baseline requirements such that, from operators' perspective, anyone

who is discernibly smaller, slower, or weaker than that baseline would still *appear* to be less capable and therefore still could not be considered "*the same as*." Put more simply, while those of us who are smaller, slower, or weaker may have other attributes that make up for our physical deficiencies, "making up for" will never equate to being "the same as."

COMBAT INTERCHANGEABILITY AND REFLEXIVE TRUST

While it is often said that a team is only as strong as its weakest link, this aphorism actually understates. SOF teams are already small and split teams are smaller still. To operate behind enemy lines and/or to be able to remain covert in tricky settings means teams cannot afford individuals who cannot readily replace one another at essential combat tasks. Instead, because teams risk casualties whenever they face danger (or an adversary), team members need to *know* they can count on one another as **interchangeable combatants**. This interchangeability means that every operator not only needs to possess some necessary set of subsidiary skills – as a medic/corpsman, communicator, engineer, or what have you – but also needs to be capable of being a highly skilled combatant first.

When it comes to combat tasks, interchangeability is key and being able to count on others' interchangeability represents a bare minimum; operators' confidence depends on being sure that fellow operators think enough alike that they will act and react sufficiently predictably. Surprisingly, this paramount need for combat interchangeability is seldom mentioned. Yet, both it and reflexive trust have to be considered foundational for units in the combat arms.

What exactly do I mean by reflexive trust? To answer, let me try to limn a hypothetical SOF operator, one whose teammates have passed through the same difficult assessment and selection process as has he (Office of Strategic Services, 1948) (Waller, 1994) (Couch, 2001) (Couch, 2004) (Couch, 2007).[3] One reason screening needs to be stringent is because without it operators are left questioning one another's capabilities when, instead, every operator needs to be able to count on the fact that all operators can perform above (and never just to) SOF's already extremely high standard. Our hypothetical SOF operator needs to be certain he can count on others' mental agility, drive, and other equally critical traits SOF selects for, in addition to their strength, speed, and stamina. Ideally, thanks to everyone knowing that everyone else has been put through the same wringer, no operator will have reason to doubt his fellow operators' abilities, or their judgment.

This knowledge, confidence, and trust only hold so long as selection is rigorous and realistic. If selection *is* rigorous and realistic, our hypothetical operator should be as sure as it is possible to be that his fellow operators will go the same extra mile that he will go to complete the mission and/or to save others' lives thanks to his knowing that they are made of enough of the same material as he is. In most settings, this kind of mirror-imaging and the conviction that "everyone is just like me" is not just wrong, but imperiling. If others **should** *be like me*, however, in terms of combat interchangeability, then this degree of solipsism serves an invaluable purpose. Not only does combat interchangeability represent the ultimate heuristic, so that no one has to second guess what others will do, but operators' conviction that others will perform as they know they would (and vice versa) take duplicability and turns it into an incomparable force multiplier.

To summarize the preceding discussion, under certain circumstances such as when attrition is likely, homogeneity across combat capabilities is not merely useful but necessary.

Homogeneity is why Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) exist: so that no one has to stop and think. Granted, in the actual real world of non-standard events, SOPs will only ever get operators so far – which is precisely where the concept of reflexive trust enters. With reflexive trust, *knowing* that everyone else shares the same standard operating ***capabilities*** reassures all involved that everyone will strive to cope with the unexpected in equally effective ways (Klein, 1998) (Gladwell, 2005).[4] SOPs, meanwhile, represent only one dimension of reflexive trust. To examine another critical dimension, we must also consider what disrupts trust.

Most obviously, an individual who cannot perform as expected or "carry his own weight" undermines trust. In addition, so too does anything that suggests someone might be putting something (or someone) above the team or mission. Other sources of doubt can include different allegiances, different values, and/or fears that selection is not effectively screening these out. Such doubts and their effect on trust highlights another truism: suspicions, once aroused, are hard if not impossible to dispel or to ever fully dismiss (Simons, 2004).[5]

Consider the effect of suspicions associated with the specter of other allegiances, whether loyalty to another country or to some supra-national ideology or religion. Here is where actively recruiting certain types of diversity into SOF can prove more problematic than might initially appear. For example, certain countries of origin can pose extremely difficult counter-intelligence challenges, especially when individuals still have relatives back "home." China, Iran, and Eritrea, to single out three countries, have proven extremely adept at influencing and coercing members of their overseas communities. Thus, to raise an uncomfortable but nonetheless critical concern: even if counter-intelligence agents can reassure operators that their foreign-born and/or "ethnic other" teammates are trustworthy, *should* team members always be at total ease? *Can* they afford never to wonder? One implication of this discussion for future research is to ask operators what *would* raise doubts in their minds, and what kinds of doubts, spurred by what specific concerns, would be hard and maybe even impossible for them to shake?

Different moral sensibilities, never mind different ethnic backgrounds, can likewise lead to radically different assessments of a situation or of a person. Deep-seated differences born of religious or ideological convictions might never surface among teammates. Alternatively, such concerns might first surface only after a third or fourth deployment or mission. What will happen then to reflexive trust? To what extent might different judgments sow doubts about someone's judgment overall? Or, to what extent might doubts lead to a misreading of someone's allegiances?

No matter how important it may seem today to ensure that operators are not all white, male, and of European descent, well-intentioned diversity mistakes are easy to make. For instance, Americans often think Koreans will better accept Korean-Americans than Anglo-Americans. Yet if Korean-Americans do not speak Korean, their acceptance can be difficult. Similarly, the argument that 3rd Special Forces Group (SFG), whose focus region is Africa, should have more black soldiers, turns out to be overly simplistic. Often Africans prefer white American counterparts. Alternatively, 3rd SFG probably should try to attract Haitian recruits, given their ability to communicate and excel when working in Francophone West Africa. Or, given the difficulty of learning a language like Somali, it might be prudent to assign Somali-American soldiers to work with Somali populations in the Horn of Africa. Such prudence, however, will only last as long as it is also understood that no Somali will regard anyone else of Somali descent to be impartial since even foreign-born Somalis can be tied to specific clans.

In short, not only can promoting diversity for the sake of fielding diversity introduce more fidelity issues than is commonly acknowledged, but obtuseness about how locals might read the loyalties of those they are interacting with is equally fraught. Another factor worth bearing in mind is that some affiliations, as well as some allegiances, can affect individuals in ways they themselves cannot articulate and thus are incapable of fully disclosing.

As for that other prominent diversity concern, gender, the push for female operators introduces a whole different suite of fidelity issues. There are at least two ways in which the presence of women erodes reflexive trust among heterosexual men.[6] First, the specter or prospect of sex – and the tension, rivalry, jealousy, favoritism, or appearance of favoritism this often generates – can shatter cohesion and can wreck families, finances, careers, etc. Second, whenever two individuals form an emotionally exclusive bond, this too introduces unpredictable sources of tension and favoritism, and subverts the "one for all and all for one" ethos small units require (Simons, 1997) (Danielsen, 2018).[7]

Without question, adding women to otherwise all-male units can prove invaluable, and SOF elements have been making use of women for special missions for decades. Nor is it hard to imagine a future scenario in which the deployment of an all-female Direct Action unit could deliver a strategic and not just tactical surprise. However to now push for women as full-time operators under the mistaken notion that this is what teams need in order to be able to interact with the more than 50% of the population that is female is fatuous.

Frequently advocates of gender integration cite the role of Combat Support Teams (CST or equivalent units) in Afghanistan and Iraq to prove the worth of having female operators in SOF. In the author's opinion, little honest reporting about the impact of CSTs has actually been done. Nor does anyone highlight what would have been even more efficacious: to have female local language speakers search and question local women, especially since female interpreters were often already nearby and possessed cross-cultural skills that enthusiastic, but inexperienced young American servicewomen lacked. Interestingly, too, one hears few stories about liaisons between female interpreters and operators, whereas ample anecdotal evidence points to the opposite occurring with CSTs. CSTs' presence caused at least some teams to have to be pulled from the field and created yet another source of disciplinary headaches for numerous commanders (Simons, Author's observations).

Unfortunately, none of the dirty laundry associated with the CSTs has been made public.[8] To be fair, few enterprises of any kind have been willing to admit to gender integration issues unless forced to—witness the #MeToo movement. Nor are individuals in any career field likely to be forthright about politically charged topics these days. Yet without a frank discussion about politically sensitive subjects, whether gender in the U.S. or the acceptance of immigrants in Europe, policymakers who feel strongly about "diversity" will continue to press for changes they think are wise and/or politically prudent. Ironically, by doing so they often end up creating more problems for the very individuals they seek to help. Such problems result by making it seem as though an entire class of individuals requires intercession from without or from on high, thereby confirming that members of whatever category is being singled out (e.g., women, or members of this or that racial or ethnic group) *are not*, in fact, "the same as"– but are lesser; otherwise they would not need outside support (Lemmon, 2015).

The catch associated with diversity is that without external pressure, there may be no other way to broaden who can become a SOF operator. Then again, if those decision makers applying the pressure are not informed about the costs, even the best-intentioned efforts can have

deleterious effects. Such effects are why SOF and other combat arms leaders have a responsibility to remind policymakers and members of the public why we need combat units in the first place: to go into harm's way, be able to absorb casualties, and *still* attempt to prevail. *Combat* is the reason having the same standard operating capabilities matters; *to prevail* in combat necessitates combat interchangeability and reflexive trust.

A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

However, even if we accept the fact that attrition will remain an enduring combat (and training) reality, this does not mean that other features of the broader operating environment are not changing. Up to this point, I have sought to explain why homogeneity in terms of combat capabilities matters. Increasingly, though, operational units require more than just combat-ready operators.

An illustration of such a requirement is a shift that has occurred over the past several decades in U.S. Army Special Forces (SF, numerically the U.S.'s largest SOF component). SF teams used to pride themselves on cross-training and being able to stay autonomous *and* self-reliant for significant periods of time. For example, as late as 1992, teams seldom had more than a single computer in a team room. Three decades ago, SF teams did not need to depend on information technology or other technical specialists to the extent they do now. The contrast with who and what gets sent abroad with teams today is profound. Teams today *cannot* be self-reliant, given their dependence on drones, jammers, Global Positioning System data, laptops, and so on, or on those who can fix them. It is true that teams may end up stuck, on their own, incommunicado and/or in extremis for periods of time. But how many of today's young operators would be able to execute time-sensitive missions without technological enablers? The answer hints at inescapable new dependencies, while the fact that the term "enabler" is used is revelatory of who still considers whom to be "support"– and not "the same as."

There is an interesting parallel between SOF views of enablers today and the views of airmen within air forces. Interestingly, Ezer Weizman, the founder of Israel's Air Force (IAF), was cognizant of a similar status mismatch prior to standing up his country's air force. Weizman knew fighter pilots were bound to view mechanics and other technicians as essential, but still "less than." In order to mitigate this and drive home a sense of mutual indispensability, he sought to reframe teams in the IAF around the plane rather than the pilot (Weizman, 1979).[9]

If we were to wonder what the equivalent of Weizman's approach might be today in relation to SOF, we would likely find ourselves perplexed. SOF is already platform- and capabilities-centric, whether around different means of ingress and egress, the degree to which operations are partnered or non-partnered, or the extent to which operations are (or are not) kinetic. So, what further adjustments might be called for?

SOF experiences over the past 18 years point to several possibilities. If we look to how effective capabilities-based approaches have been, we might conclude they have been far too generic, as though one size or style of counterinsurgency (COIN) or counterterrorism (CT) can possibly fit all. Neither units nor staffs have been tailored *to* specific adversaries. Yet, glaring differences among adversaries exist, such as those among ISIS, the Taliban, and al Shabaab, to pick just three groups that we continue to target. Consider also the regional politics in each of their theaters and the extent to which these vary as well.

Even the most cursory comparison should reveal that just because one set of approaches seems to work against one set of actors does not mean those approaches will succeed elsewhere. The so-called "Surge" of military forces into Iraq is often cited as an example of something that worked well in that country but failed when exported to Afghanistan in subsequent years. One could say much the same about Village Stability Operations (VSO) or the Afghan Local Police (ALP) within Afghanistan; they worked best wherever locals helped initiate them, but rarely worked well where Afghans needed to be bribed or compelled to accept them. Nor has it proven particularly useful to keep SOF units stove piped according to twentieth-century functional areas either, for example, Psychological Operations, Civil Affairs, Special Forces, and so on, as though security, politics, and governance, good, bad, or indifferent, are easily separable.

As a thought exercise, imagine instead if Weizman's concept of a Team (with a capital "T") could be mapped onto real-world problem sets circa 2019. Or, imagine if SOF was re-started from scratch. We would doubtless wind up with something very different looking than what constitutes SOF today. SOF's building block units were designed ***seventy**-some* years ago, back when World War II veterans (re)formulated special operations forces to meet the challenges of *their* day.

Imagine, too, the synergies to be gained if, for instance, *a* unit was assigned *an* adversary (or a very specific problem set) as its sole, enduring focus. Then, say each unit's task was to fully resolve its specific problem–as in rendering al-Qaeda, ISIS, al Shabaab or whomever inert–and that that unit was responsible for both planning the campaign *and* seeing it all the way through. Presumably whoever was in command of such a unit would have to go out of his or her way to recruit in individuals with considerably different capabilities and skills. Such capabilities and skills, for the purposes of the argument in this article, would translate into organic heterogeneity from the outset; no one would have to artificially or politically mandate or manufacture diversity from without; it would be "baked in" to SOF units from the outset.

WIDENING THE APERTURE

To some, it might seem that what I have just described can already be found in Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) or Task Forces (TFs). Certainly, JSOC appears to have done a better job of creating a "one team, one fight" approach than have other SOF entities. Among the organizations' claims to fame are the following attributes: flatter communications, a flattened hierarchy, strong singular leadership, and a singular command structure (Simons, 2017).[10] These attributes are all self-reinforcing. I would add, too, that by developing its own Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Analyze, and Disseminate (F3EAD) methodology, JSOC made clear to analysts, operators, and others alike that they were all mutually indispensable (McChrystal, 2013) (Munsing and Lamb, 2011) (Naylor, 2015).[11] Also contributing to JSOC's "one team, one fight" ethos has been the nature of the mission—TFs go after *high-value* targets; attention – TFs are *national* mission units; and funding – TFs are much better resourced than anyone else. Not only do TFs operate with a sense of urgency, but they likewise live by easily quantifiable metrics. It helps, too, that, when deployed, all personnel work long hours under austere conditions over the course of relatively short deployments. The fact that the work is so compartmented further assists with a "separate but integral" ethos.

JSOC, however, is not without critics. Members of other SOF units have questioned everything from the worth of kill/capture metrics to the promotion rates of what others pejoratively refer to as

"Death Star" commanders to the most senior ranks of SOF command. Stepping back and considering JSOC's relations with other USSOF "tribes," we would have to conclude that the inclusiveness that JSOC appears to have attained within itself has not spilled over to others; if anything, its inclusiveness *excludes*. To be sure, some of this is a function of compartmented work but some is attitudinal. Even within its units, there is a perception among non-operators that the same operators who treat them as essential when everyone is overseas treat them as "lessers" when they are all back home. According to non-operators with whom I have interacted, the status differential of "we're operators; you're support" invariably reasserts itself, which means it never entirely goes away.

This same attitude can actually be said to suffuse SOF overall: status differences that tend to be sublimated whenever operations are underway, re-surface once the realm of the ideal–which, for operators, involves dealing with pressing real-world, real-time threats–confronts the realities of belonging to a big, slow, endlessly frustrating and compliance-oriented military bureaucracy. In many ways this response is what typically occurs whenever people find themselves in the midst of a crisis: at the outset of an emergency all comers are usually welcome, and the idea that "everyone/everything depends on us" renders the "us" more (rather than less) inclusive. Once the sense of urgency begins to dissipate, however, normal sources of friction resurface, so-called "rice bowl" politics and interpersonal rivalries reemerge, and inclusiveness contracts.

For all of these reasons, then, the TF approach represents only a partial model for how SOF might better incorporate non-operators in the future. On the one hand, there is operators' default conviction that they are elite by virtue of belonging to an elite that others cannot join without passing through a selection process they cannot pass. Combine this conviction with Direct Action-centricity *and* with operational churn, and it is very difficult to see how SOF's internal status differentials might shift, especially since instability in terms of where individuals are deployed, who with, and for how many segmented periods of time militates against building trust across functional specialties, never mind separate communities.[12]

Here is where re-casting SOF's notion of a Team (capital "T") offers one obvious means of redress. There is a historical precedent for such a different Team approach. Detachment 101 was an early American Special Operations Force and one of the Office of Strategic Service's most successful units during World War II (Peers, 1963) (Hilsman, 1990) (Sacquety, 2013).[13] In every respect, Detachment 101 was a one-off. It was only once the unit's founder, Carl Eifler, was given his "exact" mission–intelligence gathering and sabotage in support of General Joseph Stilwell's effort to push the Japanese out of Burma–that he and a hand-picked group of two dozen Americans began to build the ultimate "learning organization" in theater. As they knew nothing about Burma, they recruited in anyone they could find who had local knowledge: 'indigenous Burmese' and Anglo-Burmese, expatriate mining engineers, and even local Irish priests, and incorporated them for the length of the unit's existence. Because Detachment 101 was remote and fairly poorly resourced, the unit's leaders went out of their way to make it indispensable to everyone they thought might be of assistance, from the U.S. Army Air Corps, whose downed pilots the unit's members helped to recover, to local villagers from among whom it recruited fighters. Throughout, Detachment 101 stayed relentlessly mission-focused. Detachment 101's focus was so steadfast that once it had accomplished what it was designed to do – help oust the Japanese from Burma – its leaders insisted that it be disbanded; they refused to allow the unit to be re-purposed. They knew that as successful as all of them had proved to be for the three years they served together, Detachment 101 would not succeed as effectively elsewhere.

If we fast forward to the contemporary security environment and the challenges it presents, the example of Detachment 101 suggests a number of possibilities. First, a Detachment 101-equivalent for al-Qaeda (or Afghanistan) should not look like the Detachment 101-equivalent for ISIS (or Iraq/Syria) or the Detachment 101-equivalent for al Shabaab (Somalia). Second, taking a unit that is tailor-made for one locale and one type of mission and sending it elsewhere defies know-your-area-of-expertise common sense. Significantly, too, when Detachment 101's initial team members left the United States for Asia they had no inkling of what their manning, structure, composition, or the like would – or even should – comprise. All they knew was that they would not be able to tackle whatever they were being sent to do on their own–which meant they had no choice but to be inclusively creative.

CONCLUSION

Based on the preceding discussion, where does this leave American SOF when it comes to diversity in our increasingly identity- and diversity-oriented era? Given that eliteness begets attitude, and accepting that combat requires that operators be worthy of one another's reflexive trust *and* be combat interchangeable, SOF combat units cannot become as diverse-looking as some policymakers or members of the public might like. This does not mean, however, that what constitutes a "*Special Operation*" ***Team*** cannot be re-framed or reconceptualized.

Change to SOF is overdue for several reasons. Chief among these reasons are the following: SOF's DA-centric orientation has not resulted in the wholesale collapse of a single hostile non-state entity. This (non-)result alone suggests the need to try something new. Tailoring units to, and for, specific adversaries represents one possibility. As it happens, such tailoring would also guarantee diversity in both design *and* in personnel.

Another reason to try something different is that without change, policymakers will remain wedded to using SOF to perpetually try to *outdo* hostile non-state actors and groups. There are two problems with trying to outdo others. First, tit-for-tat competition injects operators into a contest they, and the United States and coalition partners, can never definitively win since, by definition, "outdoing" means never being "rid of." Use of the terms "whack-a-mole" and "mowing the grass" to describe recent efforts underscore the problem. Second, focusing on *outdoing* rather than ***undoing*** deflects attention from what is actually needed to get adversaries to permanently renounce violence: either the application of more force than SOF can deliver on its own *or* more finesse than operators alone can manage.

Whether we are talking about using more force and/or greater finesse, either or both requires a widening of SOF's aperture, which in turn should help decision makers inside and outside of the SOF community re-conceptualize who can and *should* serve in special operations. For example, if SOF was re-oriented toward *undoing adversaries*, then operators would no longer represent the main effort and missions such as direct action would become just one among a series of tools. Discuss such matters with operators who are veterans of multiple combat deployments today, and much of this is obvious to them. Ironically, what they cannnot voice so explicitly is their immutable need for combat interchangeability and reflexive trust. No doubt this is because they have long internalized their need for both, bolstered by the fact that SOF has not yet experienced *serial* small unit failure.

In order to ensure that serial small unit failure does not occur now or in the future, proponents of greater diversity should be reminded of at least four things. First, attrition is a

combat and training reality. Second, *forcing* operators to accept diverse others because that makes SOF look better, and by extension makes politicians and members of the public feel better, defies why SOF combat units exist, which is to undertake the missions others cannot. Third, if the goal is to encourage operators to be more consistently inclusive, the most effective way to do this is to widen SOF's aperture: from force to finesse. Fourth, there are ample *strategic* reasons why such a reconceptualization of SOF is overdue, particularly when we consider the extent to which the past two decades have warped what twenty-first century SOF *should* be capable of, which is to self-organize in such a way as to use all available talent against specific sets of adversaries with the ultimate aim of getting them to implode or, better yet, undo themselves.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

NOTES

1. For a fuller account of the reasons why, see Anna Simons, *21st Century Cultures of War Advantage Them* (Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2013).
2. On the topic of multiple intelligences, see, for instance, Howard Gardner, Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences (Basic Books, 1983). On the challenges of assessing emotional intelligence, which should be considered a 'must' for anyone in a leadership position, see Jonathan Post, "Thickening the Global SOF Network," Masters thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, December 2013.
3. For some now-classic descriptions of selection processes, see *Assessment of Men: Selection of Personnel for the Office of Strategic Services* (U.S. Office of Strategic Services, 1948); Douglas Waller, *Commandos: The Inside Story of America's Secret Soldiers* (Simon and Schuster, 1994); also Dick Couch, *The Warrior Elite: The Forging of SEAL Class 228* (Crown, 2001); *The Finishing School: Earning the Navy SEAL Trident* (Crown, 2004); and *Chosen Soldier: The Making of a Special Forces Warrior* (Crown, 2007) among others.
4. For the significance of training, practice, decision-making during crises, etc., see Gary Klein, *Sources of Power: How People Make Decisions* (MIT Press, 1998). Or for a more popular account, see Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (Little Brown and Company, 2005).
5. For an earlier examination of the detrimental impact of any kind of affirmative action, see Anna Simons, "The Evolution of the SOF Soldier" in Bernd Horn, Paul de B. Taillon, and David Last (eds.), *Force of Choice: Perspectives on Special Operations* (Defence Management Series/Queen's Policy Studies Series, 2004).
6. For the most recent set of arguments I have made, see https://www.c-span.org/video/?425973-1/discussion-focuses-women-combat-roles
7. For small unit dynamics in U.S. Army Special Forces, see *The Company They Keep: Life Inside the U.S. Army Special Forces* (The Free Press, 1997); for the nature of small unit dynamics in a 'small nation' SOF, see Tone Danielsen, *Making Warriors in a Global Era: An Ethnographic Study of the Norwegian Naval Special Operations Commando* (Lexington Books, 2018).
8. Again, just the opposite. For a much praised, laudatory work that, in memorializing the death of a singular individual, unfortunately whitewashes the CST program, see Gayle Lemmon, Ashley's War: The Untold Story of a Team of Women Soldiers on the Special Ops Battlefield (Harper, 2015).
9. See Ezer Weizman, *On Eagles' Wings: The Personal Story of the Leading Commander of the Israeli Air Force* (Berkley Publishing Group, 1979). Or consider what a USAF targeteer once explained to me with pride: his was the truly essential skill; pilots, in his view, were just the delivery mechanism for his effects.
10. For a fuller description, see Anna Simons, *21st Century Challenges of Command: A View from the Field*, (Strategic Studies Institute, 2017).

11. See, for instance, Stanley *McChrystal, My Share of the Task: A Memoir* (Portfolio/Penguin, 2013); Evan Munsing and Christopher Lamb, *Joint Interagency Task Force-South: The Best Known, Least Understood Interagency Success*, (Institute for National Strategic Studies, Strategic Perspectives 5, 2011); and Sean Naylor, *Relentless Strike: The Secret History of JSOC* (St Martin's Press, 2015).
12. At best, churn introduces individuals many other individuals, who then try to use their relationships as glue whenever they can. Not only is this an unfortunately serendipitous way to conduct military business, but the fact that people have to resort to informal workarounds highlights what is wrong with the system: it fails to effectively accommodate realities on-the-ground.
13. For more, see William Peers, Behind the Burma Road: The Story of America's Most Successful Guerrilla Force (Little Brown, 1963); Roger Hilsman, American Guerrilla: My War Behind Japanese Lines (Potomac Books, 1990); Troy Sacquety, The OSS in Burma: Jungle War Against the Japanese (University Press of Kansas, 2013).

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