

An Interview with **Eric T. Olson**



ADM Olson

JFQ: *We understand that you are focusing on the creation of a U.S. Special Operations Command [USSOCOM] Capstone doctrine: USSOCOM [Publication] 1. How do you see this relating to other joint doctrine (such as [Joint Publication 3–05, Doctrine for Joint Special Operations]) and Service doctrines about Special Forces?*

ADM Olson: Doctrine over the past several years has been very dynamic. Freezing it at any point for publication would have been inappropriate. We relied instead on an active program to collect and disseminate best practices as they were proving successful.

We are now working to revise USSOCOM Pub 1, a foundational document scheduled for completion on January 1, 2010. We have coordinated with the Joint Staff to delay our rewrite of JP 3–05 until January 15, 2010, because much of USSOCOM Pub 1 will be used in the new JP 3–05. The Joint Staff has granted us “fast track” authority of the next iteration of JP 3–05, which will shorten the publication cycle to just under 12 months.

USSOCOM is actually surging to originate more SOF [special operations forces] doctrine, as this is an area in which we have largely deferred to the Services. Our intent is to be able to meet our legislated responsibility for SOF doctrine development within a year.

JFQ: *How do you envision exercising your responsibilities as the joint proponent for security force assistance [SFA]? How do SFA and foreign internal defense [FID] compare? Are they not redundant?*

Admiral Eric T. Olson, USN, is Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command.

Colonel David H. Gurney, USMC (Ret.), and Dr. Jeffrey D. Smotherman of *Joint Force Quarterly* interviewed Admiral Olson at his Pentagon liaison office.

ADM Olson: SFA and FID are not redundant, but many of their activities overlap. In my view, SFA is an expansion of FID; the common purpose is to contribute to the development of other nations' security forces. As the Department of Defense [DOD] joint proponent for SFA, USSOCOM will serve mostly as an extension of the Joint Staff in a synchronization role. We will be the machine that receives, reviews, and prioritizes SFA requirements, and then makes recommendations to the Joint Staff about force preparation and allocation. I expect that most SFA missions will comprise a mixture of SOF and General Purpose Forces, with other agencies of government participating whenever appropriate. This construct nests nicely within the processes already developed at USSOCOM to synchronize DOD planning against terrorist networks. For more than a year, SFA has been a working group at the USSOCOM-hosted, semiannual Global Synchronization Conference.

JFQ: *We are interested in the new unconventional warfare [UW] definition and how that will support national security. Could*

you give us your views on UW in general and who conducts it and under what authorities? (I do not want to get into sensitivities here, but most JFQ readers do not realize that a Presidential finding is required for most operations, and we want to touch on this as an educational point.)

ADM Olson: The concept of UW has not changed. It remains, roughly, a set of activities intended to stimulate and support indigenous organizations that are challenging an illegitimate and hostile government. Such activities include but are not limited to guerrilla warfare, subversion, sabotage, and intelligence activities. The initial stages of the Afghanistan campaign are a great example of UW. Fewer than 600 SOF enabled indigenous Afghan forces to suppress and evict the Taliban government. UW is essentially the flip side of counterinsurgency [COIN], which encompasses those activities intended to support a legitimate government against challenge by insurgent forces.

JFQ: *This issue of JFQ features four authors who evaluate potential strategies in*

Afghanistan. Please give us your views on the COIN versus CT [counterterrorism] debate as you have forces that are intimately involved with both activities.

ADM Olson: COIN without CT, or CT without COIN, is a flawed strategy. And in Afghanistan, the situation is complicated by the reality that the elected government competes with Taliban shadow governments for control of the tribal communities. This brings UW into the equation. COIN, CT, and UW are all core SOF missions, so, in any case or combination, SOF are key to implementation of the selected strategy.

JFQ: *An excellent example of the application of the FID concept of remote area operations can be found in Major Jim Gant's One Tribe at a Time [Nine Sisters Imports, 2009]. Why have Special Forces not been used more along these lines in Afghanistan?*

ADM Olson: The employment of special operations forces as described by Major Gant plays to SOF strengths by translating tactical actions and microregional presence into stra-

Special Forces Soldier detonates explosive to simulate enemy attack during foreign internal defense training at Camp Diwaniyah, Iraq



U.S. Air Force (Eric Harris)

tegic effects. This is SOF at its roots and at its core. Allocation and employment of deployed SOF is the purview of the operational commanders, and so we are doing what we can to suggest innovative and bold utilization of SOF in the manner described by Major Gant. At USSOCOM, we say that “presence without value is perceived as occupation.” In Afghanistan, our value to the tribes isn’t necessarily measured by our traditional standards.

JFQ: Do you envision that SOF might take the lead in some operations in an IW [irregular warfare] environment around the world, such as Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force–Philippines [CJSOTF–Philippines]?

ADM Olson: SOF have the lead in CJSOTF–Philippines, as that task force has been commanded by Special Forces colonels for years. Although every situation is different, CJSOTF–Philippines is a great example of what SOF can accomplish in remote and challenging environments. It is the implementation of a SOF campaign plan that was developed to support the Armed Forces of the Philippines in their actions against common threats that were manifested in local terrorist groups with linkages to al Qaeda. In this case, General Purpose Forces were assigned in direct support of the SOF commander.

JFQ: We would like to ask about the CJSOTFs in Afghanistan and Iraq. They are manned mostly by 3^d and 7th SFG [Special Forces Group] in Afghanistan and 5th and 10th SFG in Iraq. You have directed that 3^d SFG take over sole responsibility for Afghanistan and Pakistan and that the 5th take over Iraq entirely with both groups augmented by other SFGs. However, there are rumors that USSOCOM is going to put non–Special Forces (SEALS, Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command, and Air Force Special Operations Command) officers in command of the CJSOTFs. Whom do you envision commanding CJSOTFs in the future when the dominant elements are all Army special operations (Special Forces, Civil Affairs, psychological operations, Special Operations Aviation, logistics support)?

ADM Olson: We are a joint force that is not hung up on the Service affiliation of any individual leaders. Realistically, though, the CJSOTFs in Iraq and Afghanistan will be commanded by Army SF colonels for the foreseeable future.

JFQ: The next question centers on the 5th SOF truth: “Most special operations require non–SOF support.” How do you feel about the support you are getting from the Services?

ADM Olson: The budget provided to USSOCOM is intended to meet requirements peculiar to SOF. All other requirements should be met by the Services. At this point in Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, the ability of the Services to meet SOF needs is stretched thin. Still, we are receiving good support. The main issue is related to the “enabling” forces that are in such short supply. SOF truly depend on them and cannot perform their missions without them.

JFQ: We would like an update on USSOCOM reorganization. Based on a recent Booz Allen Hamilton study done on SOF organization, you directed on October 1, 2009, that USSOCOM revert from the “centers” concept that General [Peter] Schoomaker [USA, (Ret.)] established in the 1990s back to the traditional J-staff organization. Please expand upon your rationale and how you think this will improve SOF support.

ADM Olson: USSOCOM is a unified combatant command with many of the responsibilities of a military department. A primary factor in the adjustments to our headquarters organization was the recognition that having a three-star SOF officer assigned to the Pentagon to represent the command’s requirements and positions is essential. I was also determined to empower both the deputy commander and chief of staff with the authorities expected of their positions. Since the centers had done what General Schoomaker created them to do, it was time to declare success and move on to a structure that is more in line with our counterpart organizations. I expect that we will improve our user-friendliness while we gain many efficiencies.

JFQ: As the first Navy SEAL ever appointed to the grades of three and four stars, as well as the first naval officer to be USSOCOM’s commander, you bring a unique perspective to your duties. As you approach 2½ years into your tour as USSOCOM’s 8th commander, what are the one or two most important things that joint military professionals should know about today’s USSOCOM?

ADM Olson: First of all, I don’t think the fact that I’m the Navy’s first three- or four-star or the first naval commander of USSOCOM is really all that important. I grew



Woman injured during sinking of ferry near Zamboanga del Norte, Philippines, is helped aboard Navy vessel by members of U.S. Joint Special Operations Task Force–Philippines

U.S. Navy (William Ramsey)

up in a joint-SOF environment, and I just sort of worked my way up through the system the same way all previous commanders have.

What I think is important to know about United States Special Operations Command is really at two levels. One is the command itself, meaning the headquarters, and that is to understand that we are a strategic level headquarters. We fill in what I would call a sort of strategic, almost intellectual battlespace regarding special operations: how they ought to be developed, how they ought to be used. We serve in many ways as an extension of the Joint Staff, in some ways as an extension of the Office of the Secretary of Defense; we have authorities that are of a unified combatant command, that are in some regards similar to military departments and defense agencies, that we serve as a microcosm of a sort of the department, with the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and joint commands, on the next level of command. And that's without real operational authority once the force leaves the United States, where the business is influencing how they're employed, not directing how they're employed from our headquarters in Tampa. So that's the command.

An entirely different discussion is the force itself. What you want to know about is United States Special Operations Forces, not United States Special Operations Command, and I think the message there is that it really is a broadly capable, career oriented force that fills in many of the niche requirements that this nation has. Our core activity is listed within the legislation that created us, some of it added since then—that's the menu from which we derive the capabilities that we invest in, and it's a wide range of capabilities. I think that there's a general sense that we are troops who have gone through more schools and been issued different types of equipment, but my cliché response to that would be, we're more a mindset than a toolset for the department. And in many ways, I think that because we have the ability to operate together more over the course of a career, and we operate in generally smaller units, we have some agility that larger organizations don't have. We also serve as a kind of control group for experimentation within the department. We are a place to bring new equipment online, do tests, and experiment with new tactics, techniques, and technologies along the way.

So that's the two levels. I think it's important to make a distinction between what the headquarters does and what the force does because what we're really doing is providing the wherewithal for the force to develop and operate.

JFQ: Do you envision an "Indirect Operations" Command advocated by Robert Martinage in his congressional testimony last spring? (Mr. Martinage is now working for the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special

ments in which we are ever more likely to find ourselves.

JFQ: As the joint proponent for SFA, should USSOCOM take the lead in training indigenous forces in Iraq and Afghanistan? Lieutenant General [William] Caldwell [USA] is a very capable officer and slated to take over Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan [CSTC-A]. Wouldn't a SOF three-star be an ideal choice for that position?

U.S. Soldiers from ISAF during night mission in Wardak Province, Afghanistan



U.S. Army (Matthew Friberg)

Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict and Interdependent Capabilities, and he wrote about this issue in his SOF report for the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments.)

ADM Olson: SOF are effective across the spectrum of conflict, and I think it is important to avoid the temptation to categorize units or capabilities as either "direct" or "indirect." The reality is that most of our units can be conducting direct actions one day and indirect actions the next. I do believe that we will need to develop a deployable senior-level SOF headquarters that can take command of a complex direct-indirect force structure in the ambiguous conflict environ-

ADM Olson: I have a great respect for LTG Caldwell and am glad to see him in command of CSTC-A, while I also acknowledge that a SOF three-star would likely be a good fit in that position. But in this area, the strength of SOF is not in raising basic armies or police forces; it is in developing and mentoring the special forces, commandos, paramilitary, and surrogate forces of other nations, which we are doing in both Iraq and Afghanistan. **JFQ**