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OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM–PHILIPPINES

Lessons in special warfare

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U.S. Army doctrine lists two core competencies for its Special Operations Forces (SOF): surgical strike and special warfare.¹ The doctrinal definition of surgical strike is “the execution of capabilities in a precise manner that employ Special Operations Forces in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover or damage designated targets, or influence threats.”² It is perhaps the more visible and well-known of the two competencies. An example of surgical strike is the raid into Abbottabad, Pakistan, that killed Usama bin Ladin in 2011.

Special warfare is the special operations competency that has as its foundation persistent engagement with the intention to achieve long-term effects. The doctrinal definition of special warfare is

the execution of capabilities that involve a combination of lethal and nonlethal actions taken by a specially trained and educated force that has a deep understanding of cultures and foreign language, proficiency in small-unit tactics, and the ability to build and fight alongside indigenous combat formations in a permissive, uncertain, or hostile environment.³

It may be less visible and well known than surgical strike, but is by far the more commonly executed competency.

U.S. involvement in the Philippines is an excellent example of a successful special warfare mission. It demonstrates that counterterrorism operations can be effective with a small U.S. presence that is based on an effective campaign plan and a fairly capable host-nation security force. It is based on the author’s personal experiences as the battalion commander of the 1st Special Forces Group’s 1st Battalion from 2000–2002 and as the commander of the Joint Special Operations Task Force–Philippines (JSOTF-P) executing Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines from 2006–2007.

This chapter begins with an overview of security threats as well as historical background on the U.S.–Philippines security relationship. It then offers analysis of a pre-9/11 special warfare mission and an examination of the effort to establish a JSOTF in the aftermath of 9/11. The chapter then jumps to 2006, when the author returned as the JSOTF-P commander to examine special warfare from 2006–2007. Finally, it concludes with some short vignettes and lessons learned from the operations in the Republic of the Philippines.

The U.S.-Philippine security relationship

The Philippines has a long history of insurrection, having been occupied or controlled by a foreign power from the 1500s until its independence in 1946. It has confronted myriad threats over the course of its

history, from Japanese occupation during World War II, to the Huk rebellion,⁴ to communist and Moro insurgencies, to multiple modern-day terrorist groups.

Recent threats to the Philippines include separatist insurgencies from the Moro population in the southern region of Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago. These include remnants of the Moro National Liberation Front, which signed a peace agreement establishing the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao in 1996; the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which continued the insurgency until signing a tenuous peace agreement in 2015; and splinter groups such as the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters and the Musari Breakaway Group. Other significant terrorist and insurgent groups include the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and Jemaah Islamiyya. Additionally, the New People's Army/Communist Party of the Philippines seeks to overthrow the Philippine government.

The Philippines also suffers violent election conflict and clan conflict (known as *ridos*). All of these groups represent the varied forms of revolution, resistance, terrorism, insurgency, and criminal violence that have created a difficult and dangerous security situation for the Philippine government and its citizens.

Due to the Philippines' strategic location in the Pacific Ocean, the United States has long had an interest in the nation. The United States granted the Philippines independence on July 4, 1946, but has maintained a close security relationship ever since.⁵ In 1951, the two countries signed a Mutual Defense Treaty, with each country agreeing to come to the defense of the other if attacked.⁶ The United States maintained two large military bases on the islands until the closure of Clark Air Base in 1991 and Naval Base Subic Bay in 1992.⁷ Following the closure of the bases, the United States engaged in military exercises with the Philippines to maintain interoperability and regional expertise. These include the Balikatan exercise,⁸ the COPE series of Air Force exercises,⁹ and the CARAT naval exercises.¹⁰ Additionally, SOF has conducted persistent engagement through Joint Combined Exchange Training programs.

Special warfare before 9/11

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the terrorist threat in the region intensified. In April 2000, the ASG captured 20 hostages, including 10 tourists from the Middle East and Europe.¹¹ The hostage crisis and other emerging threats drove Ambassador Michael A. Sheehan, the U.S. Department of State coordinator for counterterrorism, to initiate a security assistance program to establish a Philippine national counterterrorist force: the Light Reaction Company.¹²

Air Force Brigadier General Donny Wurster, commander of Special Operations Command Pacific (SOPAC), directed the 1st Special Forces Group's 1st Battalion, based in Okinawa, to deploy a mobile training team to organize, train, and equip the Light Reaction Company. The company was modeled on the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) commander's in-extremis force, a specially trained and resourced Special Forces company from the 1st Battalion focused on direct action and counterterrorism missions.¹³ The training mission began in relatively short order.

On May 27, 2001, during the initial training of the Light Reaction Company, the ASG kidnapped 20 people, including three Americans, from a beach resort in western Palawan Province. From there, they moved the hostages to Basilan Island in the Sulu Archipelago in southern Mindanao (see Figure 21.1 for a map of the Philippines).¹⁴ Weeks later, the militants beheaded one of the Americans, Guillermo Sobero, while demanding ransoms for the hostages.¹⁵ The Philippine government wanted to immediately deploy the Light Reaction Company despite the fact it had not completed its training; U.S. leadership, however, convinced them otherwise. On July 8, only two days after graduating, the company deployed.

U.S. advisors were not permitted to deploy with them, although the U.S. trainers maintained contact with the company leadership through e-mail and text messages. This limited contact revealed that the company was misemployed, something the U.S. trainers feared and had forecast during their initial mission analysis.¹⁷ Ultimately, the Light Reaction Company successfully recovered the hostages 11 months later

Figure 21.1 Map of the Philippines.¹⁶

Source: CIA, *The World Factbook 2020* (Langley: Central Intelligence Agency, 2020).

during a night raid when it was finally employed properly. Unfortunately, American Martin Burnham and Filipino nurse Ediborah Yap were killed during the rescue attempt.¹⁸

A few lessons emerged from this experience. First, forming good relationships is critical. At the first planning meeting between the U.S. planning team and the Armed Forces of the Philippines, a senior Special Forces noncommissioned officer attended the meeting. Some PACOM officers did not believe a noncommissioned officer should attend a meeting with the senior officers of the Philippines' general staff,

but they reluctantly allowed him to participate. When the master sergeant entered the meeting room, a number of Philippine generals greeted him warmly, as they had trained with U.S. Special Forces—and this particular master sergeant—for nearly two decades. During the meeting, they turned to him numerous times for his expert advice on how to conduct the mission. This example demonstrates the importance of building relationships and long-term engagement in special warfare.

A second lesson is to avoid building a partner force in the U.S. image. During planning, Special Forces soldiers developed an equipment list that included everything from weapons and body armor to night vision devices and radios. They recommended that the Light Reaction Company be equipped with .45-caliber pistols instead of 9-mm pistols, the caliber widely used by the U.S. military. This conflicted with the desires of the embassy's security assistance office, but the Special Forces soldiers were adamant and ultimately won the argument. Their rationale was that the Philippines produced .45-caliber ammunition indigenously, which would allow them to be self sufficient and not dependent on U.S. ammunition supplies.

This is just one example of fielding equipment that is best for the host nation even though it might run counter to the normal practice of providing equipment identical or similar to that of U.S. forces. It is important to understand the broader situation and host nation capabilities and provide self-sustaining solutions as opposed to creating a force in the U.S. image, which, unfortunately, is all too common.

A third lesson is that specialty units are likely to be improperly employed if engagement is limited to tactical-level training and does not also include training at the organizational level to ensure operational-level commanders know how to resource and employ these units. While the U.S. advisors were confident in the Philippines' ability to create a tactical counterterrorism capability, they correctly assessed that this force would not be properly employed or supported because it required intelligence and command-and-control structures that were not being developed in parallel.

This led to conventional commanders employing the company improperly and ineffectively during its first deployment. Instead of using the specialty trained and equipped force for its designed mission, they initially wasted it, employing it like a traditional infantry company in a traditional movement-to-contact operation. Too often, advisory missions focus on the development of tactical combat capabilities, while command-and-control, intelligence, and sustainment capabilities that are also necessary are ignored.

One final lesson is that Special Forces trainers should always strive to “work themselves out of the job.” From the beginning, the Special Forces trainers planned for the Philippines to become self sufficient. Over the next three years, the Light Reaction Company grew from a company to a battalion and ultimately a regiment. The Special Forces advisors served as the training cadre for the first training course. For the second course, they partnered with Philippine Special Forces to conduct the training. By the third iteration, the Philippines were capable of conducting the course without any U.S. advisors. To this day, the Filipinos continue to provide the training cadre without U.S. supervision. Thus, the Special Forces trainers effectively worked themselves out of a job, but it is important to note that it often takes more than two iterations of a course before the host nation is fully able to run quality training. It cannot be rushed.

Special warfare after 9/11

Due to the employment issues, the 1st Special Forces battalion commander received permission from SOCPAC to deploy to Zamboanga, Mindanao, to meet with the Light Reaction Company leadership to assess the issues. The meeting was scheduled for September 12, but the events of 9/11 delayed the meeting by several days. Concurrently, SOCPAC started to develop contingency plans, anticipating that U.S. action might be ordered against the ASG and Jemaah Islamiyya, since both were known to have direct links to al-Qaida.

In October 2001, SOCPAC directed the 1st Special Forces Group to conduct an assessment and develop a campaign plan to support the Philippine government and military. Colonel David Fridovich, the Group's commander, assembled a team of operations, intelligence, and logistics planners along with naval special

warfare and air force SOF planners and deployed them to the Philippines for a “Terrorism Coordination and Assistance Visit.”¹⁹ The Group developed a campaign plan following a detailed mission analysis that included frank and detailed discussions and assessments with the Philippine military leadership. Fridovich presented the plan to SOCPAC and PACOM, who brought it to the secretary of defense for ultimate approval.²⁰

This campaign plan formed the foundation for operations that started in 2002 and continue today. The plan was regularly updated and adjusted based on ongoing assessments and changing conditions, but the basic concepts identified during the October 2001 Terrorism Coordination and Assistance Visit remain.

PACOM, however, made a number of modifications to the campaign plan developed by Fridovich and his team. For one, Fridovich’s plan took a holistic approach to the security challenges faced by the Philippine government. It accounted for the Moro insurgency, the ongoing peace negotiations, and recognized the communist threat, which the Philippine government viewed as the more serious risk.

Yet the PACOM-approved campaign plan limited operations to Basilan Island, the ASG stronghold. Furthermore, the plan prohibited operations that might impact peace negotiations with the MILF. Finally, it limited U.S. support to countering only groups associated with al-Qaida; thus, SOCPAC could not provide support to the Philippine military in its fight against the communist New People’s Army. This, unfortunately, demonstrated a myopic counterterrorism focus rather than the holistic security approach required to address the multiple threats against a longstanding ally.

A couple of anecdotes from the planning are worth noting. When the assessment team first landed in Zamboanga, Colonel Alexander Yano, the Philippines Task Force Zamboanga commander, greeted us at the ramp of our C-130 aircraft. We had been in the same small group at the Infantry Officers Advanced Course at Fort Benning in 1985. Yano had attended the course through the International Military Education and Training program, which is managed by the Defense Security Cooperation Agency. Some of the program’s goals include “[establishing] a rapport between the U.S. military and the country’s military to build alliances for the future” and “[enhancing] interoperability and capabilities for joint operation.”²¹

In this case, the program had achieved its goal, as the relationship that I developed with Yano years earlier not only paid dividends during the Terrorism Coordination and Assistance Visit, but it also proved critical in subsequent years as Yano was later promoted to Army commander and ultimately to commander of the Armed Forces of the Philippines.

A second anecdote relates to personnel numbers. During planning, the SOCPAC commander received constant pressure from PACOM to identify how many U.S. forces were needed to conduct the operation. SOCPAC wanted to avoid a “manpower limit,” as SOF leaders remembered all too well the 55-man limit in El Salvador.²² SOCPAC attempted to focus on required capabilities as opposed to required number of personnel.

SOCPAC determined that operations on Basilan Island required 13 Special Forces detachments to advise the 13 Philippine battalions, three advanced operations bases (Special Forces company headquarters) to advise the three Philippine brigades, and one Special Forces battalion headquarters to advise the task force (division-level) command.

SOCPAC thought that this would prevent a manpower limit; however, a PACOM staff officer looked at the doctrine for a Special Forces detachment and learned it consisted of 12 men. He then multiplied that by 13 and came up with 156 personnel. He rounded that up to 160, and that became the initial manpower limit for the deployment to Basilan Island. Thus, the campaign planners were unable to outsmart the “personnelists” who demanded specific personnel numbers.

In January 2002, SOCPAC deployed Joint Task Force 510, a rapidly deployable headquarters within its command, to Zamboanga to start the advisory mission.²³ Realizing this was a long-term mission, SOCPAC established JSOTF-P to replace Joint Task Force 510 in July 2002.²⁴ The scale, scope, and duration of the mission had exceeded the ability of SOCPAC to command with its organic task force.

The JSOTF mission

In 2006, the author returned to the Philippines, this time as the JSOTF-P commander. Its mission statement read,

JSOTF-P, in coordination with the Country Team, builds capacity, and strengthens the Republic of the Philippines security forces to defeat selected terrorist organizations in order to protect [Republic of the Philippines] and U.S. citizens and interests, while preserving [Republic of the Philippines] sovereignty.

The mission statement had evolved over time, and the new statement eloquently captured what the task force needed to accomplish.

This short mission statement identified critical elements in the overall campaign plan. First, it acknowledged that operations must be conducted in coordination with the country team—the “interagency group made up of the head of each State Department section in the embassy and the heads of the other U.S. government agencies represented at [the embassy].”²⁵ Although this was a “Title 10” named operation in support of the global war on terrorism—meaning embassy approval for operations was not required—JSOTF-P and SOCPAC leadership recognized that the military effort had to be nested within the embassy’s strategic plan.

The mission statement also emphasized building capacity and strengthening security forces rather than an exclusive focus on military forces. This was an important distinction. From the initial assessment, it was clear that the security problem could not be solved by the application of military power alone. Southern Mindanao lacked sufficient police and law enforcement capability as well as operational courts and judges. The limited police that did exist wore military-style uniforms, carried rifles, and required military support to conduct law enforcement operations due to the high threat. The campaign plan identified the need to take a holistic approach, so the order authorizing the Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines mission included the necessary authorities to train, advise, and assist law enforcement forces.

Several initiatives focused on law enforcement. A simple one was influencing law enforcement personnel to wear their blue uniforms rather than military uniforms. Another was for them to assume control of checkpoints from the military and move the military into supporting roles. A major effort emphasized the rule of law, which meant getting the courts to function and putting judges back into their communities.

By 2006, this investment paid dividends when rogue elements of the Moro National Liberation Front, MILF, and the ASG committed numerous atrocities. On Basilan Island, the MILF and ASG fighters beheaded 10 Philippine Marines in a MILF-controlled area.²⁶ Rather than conducting “scorched earth” or “scouring operations” as were common prior to 2002, the Philippine military requested and were granted warrants for the arrests of the perpetrators and proceeded to conduct highly surgical military operations with special operations and law enforcement personnel.

Most importantly, in regard to policing, Federal Bureau of Investigation personnel, as well as members of the U.S. intelligence community, performed some of the best work. One of the most critical skills taught to the security forces, both military and police, was sensitive site exploitation. There was an inherent tension between the law enforcement community, which focused on evidence protection, chain of custody, and bringing perpetrators to justice, and the intelligence community, which sought intelligence for immediate and future follow-on operations. Yet U.S. law enforcement and intelligence personnel cooperated to reduce the friction between evidence and intelligence so that intelligence could be exploited immediately, while evidence was protected for later prosecution.

Unfortunately, the mission statement still restricted targeting to select terrorist organizations. This was in response to directives and concept plans that directed operations against only al-Qaida-linked terrorist

groups.²⁷ Although Philippine leaders wanted a broader mandate, this limitation did not adversely affect the partnership because trust had been established through years of persistent engagement.

JSOTF-P campaign plan lines of effort

The doctrinal basis for JSOTF-P's campaign plan was foreign internal defense, defined by joint doctrine as the

participation by civilian and military agencies of a government in any of the action programs taken by another government or other designated organization to free and protect its society from subversion, lawlessness, insurgency, terrorism, and other threats to its security.²⁸

Advising on counterinsurgency was a large part of the JSOTF-P mission, yet the U.S. military lacked counterinsurgency doctrine until December 2006.²⁹ Luckily, SOF has a long history with foreign internal defense, and its education and training in unconventional warfare helped compensate for the lack of doctrine.

Conducting accurate assessments was critical to JSOTF-P designing an effective campaign plan. The Special Forces soldiers conducted area studies prior to deployment, and once deployed, they conducted continuous area assessments. The psychological operations forces developed their engagement strategy using audience analysis, among other assessments. The civil affairs forces developed their plans based on the large amounts of data that they collected, including assessing local conditions as part of their civil information management process.

On Basilan, one of JSOTF-P's first tasks was to conduct a structured assessment of the security situation; the training level of security forces; and the economic, historical, and cultural conditions. JSOTF-P surveyed nearly 30 "barangays," or villages, using a 67-item questionnaire to gather data necessary to prioritize efforts. Fridovich directed their use based on his experience in Haiti. JSOTF-P used this information to synchronize efforts among military forces as well as efforts with other U.S. government agencies, such as the U.S. Agency for International Development.

The campaign also relied on basic counterinsurgency fundamentals: deny insurgent/terrorist sanctuary, deny insurgent/terrorist mobility, deny insurgent/terrorist access to resources, and separate the insurgent/terrorist from the population.³⁰ These easily understandable fundamentals guided the planning and execution of the campaign plan. Although they are simple to articulate, it is mindful to turn to influential military theorist Carl von Clausewitz who said, "Everything is very simple in war, but the simplest thing is difficult."³¹

The campaign's four lines of effort were: 1) Philippine security forces, 2) civil-military operations, 3) intelligence, and 4) influence operations.

The objective for the first line of effort was to develop a secure and stable environment. The training cycle flowed as follows: assess, train, rehearse, execute the operation, conduct an after-action review, identify strengths and weaknesses, train to correct deficiencies, rehearse, and execute the next operation. U.S. advisors shifted training away from large-scale battalion-size movement-to-contact (or "scouring operations," as the Philippine soldiers called them) to aggressive small-unit tactics that were more effective at finding and fixing enemy forces and conducting planned attacks.

U.S. advisors could not accompany their partners for any tactical operations, but they could often observe the forces in the field and on targets if the battalion commander was near enough. U.S. political leaders were unwilling to accept U.S. casualties, so they restricted U.S. service members from operating below the battalion level under the flawed assumption that the battalion commander would be away from the front lines. But in this type of warfare, there were no frontlines. The SOF soldiers overcame this

restriction by working closely with and collocating with the battalion commander and his tactical command post, even if it placed them at risk.

While improving ground tactical operations was a priority, the advisory mission extended beyond ground operations. One important improvement was providing the Philippine Air Force the ability to fly at night. Ground forces were reluctant to conduct night operations because their wounded could not be medically evacuated until daylight. JSOTF-P helped to get the Philippine helicopter pilots night vision goggles and facilitated extensive training by the U.S. Air Force's 6th Special Operations Squadron, which had aviation foreign internal defense as a mission.

Improving Philippine close air support was also important. By rigging gun cameras in Philippine OV-10 aircraft and MD-500 attack helicopters and using the overhead imagery capability of the U.S. P3 Orion, air advisors trained Philippine fixed and rotary wing pilots in rudimentary joint air attack tactics that significantly improved their ability to provide close air support. The film provided by the P3 flying overhead allowed the advisors to critique the training. After demonstrating the greatly improved capability to senior Philippine leadership and ground commanders, commanders had much greater confidence in their air support.

The JSOTF-P advisory mission extended to support activities as well. JSOTF-P logisticians identified critical joint logistics shortfalls that resulted from stovepiping and a lack of inter-service cooperation. By leveraging the U.S. ambassador to engage with senior leaders in Manila, the team transmitted recommendations for how to improve logistics and overcome some of the traditional inter-service rivalries.

Finally, another non-standard or overlooked activity fell to JSOTF-P lawyers. Philippine military lawyers' main focus was on administrative law and advising commanders on the enforcement of military regulations. They had little, if any, operational law training or experience unless they had participated in the International Military Education and Training program. JSOTF-P lawyers assessed the problem and developed training programs to provide operational law capabilities. This also offered another method to provide human rights and the law of land warfare training.

The second line of effort was civil-military operations. Informed by assessments, these operations focused on short- and long-term projects. In terms of long-term projects, civil affairs collaborated with the U.S. Agency for International Development to work with the Philippine government's Mindanao Economic Development Council on development projects that could address some of the root causes of the insurgency. Schools, medical facilities, roads, livelihood programs, and business development are all examples of development that can drive long-term change.

The United States also supported smaller civil-military operations activities such as medical and engineering civic action programs to provide the military access to contested areas. They supported a classic "ink spot" counterinsurgency strategy. Based on a threat assessment, Philippine forces would move into areas with a strong insurgent and terrorist presence. Next, they would engage the population to identify projects that would improve local conditions. They would then build the projects to help gain the trust of the local populace, which, if successful, would provide access to information on the insurgents; this was critical to denying insurgents and terrorists sanctuary, mobility, and access to resources.

The local political and military leadership recognized the value of civil-military operations. For example, the governor of Sulu Province had a problem with absentee barangay chiefs (village mayors) who lived off the island and only periodically visited the villages that elected them. JSOTF-P constructed "area coordination centers," which provided the barangay a place for town meetings and a central farmer's market and a location for the U.S. advisors to coordinate civil-military operations projects with local stakeholders. The Sulu governor asked the Philippine and U.S. militaries to only build area coordination centers where the mayor pledged to live full time in his barangay. Building these fairly basic centers thus improved local governance.

The third line of effort was intelligence. The JSOTF helped establish fusion centers at the Philippine combatant command and task force headquarters and tactical intelligence liaisons at the battalion level.

Releasable U.S. national-level and technical intelligence from both the military and other government agencies was fused with the extensive human intelligence capabilities of the Philippine military and government to improve targeting. U.S. intelligence personnel assisted their Philippine counterparts in terrorist targeting and developing target intelligence packages.

Like the ground operations, intelligence operations greatly improved over time. One of the many successes was the destruction of the ASG's auxiliary network on Jolo Island that provided weapons and safe houses to the group. The group's legitimate activities provided cover for its auxiliary support. Analysts determined that they were communicating via citizens band radio using codes in indigenous dialects. Once the code was broken and communications monitored, the Philippine military conducted a simultaneous joint special operation to take down much of the network in a single night.

Intelligence operations were complex, frustrating, and difficult with different military and civilian intelligence agencies having varying authorities and restrictions. Weekly coordination meetings with the various intelligence agencies at the U.S. Embassy, however, greatly facilitated overcoming the friction and allowed the JSOTF to provide quality intelligence to Philippine forces.

The final line of effort was influence operations. Philippine and U.S. psychological operations forces worked to sow dissent and discord among the ASG fighters and their supporters. Likewise, public affairs and public diplomacy officials at the U.S. Embassy worked to ensure transparency of U.S. activities and helped build trust between the Philippines and the United States. The collaboration produced a number of positive outcomes: the development of a comic book series in multiple dialects focusing on local heroes and their heroic actions, influencing the youth toward productive lives, tip lines, and effective use of the Department of State's Rewards for Justice Program.³²

A priority for influence operations was enhancing the legitimacy of the Philippine government and its security forces. Although the United States employed extensive psychological operations products in print and electronic media, as well as through face-to-face contact, legitimacy was best enhanced through action and occurred over time. From a U.S. perspective, it was imperative that the JSOTF avoid taking any action that would undercut Philippine legitimacy. This was an important part of all planning.

Operational vignettes

What follows are four short vignettes that illustrate the effectiveness of special warfare operations during Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines. The examples demonstrate the creative thinking required to accomplish the mission, the individual initiative of SOF personnel, that conventional forces have a role in counterinsurgency, and the importance of information operations.

Road building on Basilan Island

During the initial assessment and deployment to Basilan, one of the key infrastructure shortfalls the assessment team identified was the lack of a paved road to circumnavigate the island. Of the 130 kilometers of road, 84 kilometers remained unimproved. This hindered the ability of local farmers to move food to market, impeded economic development, and constrained the mobility of Philippine security forces. Because the mission had developed comparatively swiftly, humanitarian assistance funding required to complete the road was unavailable at the start of the mission in 2002.

PACOM decided that the best way to finish the road would be to bring in U.S. Navy Seabees³³ and U.S. Marine and Philippine Army engineers to build the road as part of a military exercise. The U.S. Navy conducted an amphibious landing on Basilan and offloaded Philippine and U.S. engineer equipment, and the engineers started paving the road using "assault road" techniques that would be used in any military situation.

Since PACOM lacked the authorities to build the road for humanitarian purposes, the legal justification to build it was for force protection purposes so that Philippine and U.S. military forces would have sufficient mobility for operations. Mobility was especially important for quick reaction force operations if any military units had any difficulties with the enemy. The completion of the road not only improved military mobility but also served the needs of locals and improved economic development.

Providing water to a village

The second vignette demonstrates the initiative of the Special Forces detachment. One particular detachment advised a battalion that did not have access to water in its camp. The Special Forces engineering sergeant identified a water source 2 kilometers away and developed a plan to place a sump pump at the source and then build a pipeline to the camp using PVC pipe. In between the water source and the camp was a small barangay that also lacked water. The villagers had to haul water using jugs from the same water source. A failed development project that had been attempted years earlier left a cistern on high ground next to the village.

The Special Forces engineers assessed that the pipeline they had built could also fill the cistern, and gravity could be used to carry water from the cistern to the village. They connected the pipeline to the cistern and built a connecting pipeline to the village for less than \$1,000. Two weeks later, the barangay mayor invited Philippine and U.S. military leadership to the village for the unveiling of the project. The project took place unbeknownst to the military leadership, and the villagers' outpouring of gratitude pleasantly surprised them.

The Special Forces detachment lacked humanitarian assistance funding, as well as the authorization to provide humanitarian assistance to the village (approximately \$2 million in humanitarian assistance funding was finally authorized six months after the initial deployment). They knew, however, that the village was strategically located and could provide valuable information about the insurgent and terrorist presence, which would enhance both Philippine military operations and force protection. They justified their actions because they were authorized to improve the conditions of Philippine and U.S. forces and, through creative engineering, also made allies of the local villagers who ultimately provided information to the Philippine military.

Both projects illustrate the slow pace of funding, resourcing, and authorities required to accomplish necessary activities and actions in support of a campaign plan. They also demonstrate how SOF often find creative ways to accomplish the mission and achieve desired effects in spite of the bureaucracy.

Advising counterinsurgency operations

The third vignette demonstrates that conventional units have a role in counterinsurgency. After the ASG lost their sanctuary in central Mindanao due to a cease-fire agreement between the Philippine government and the MILF, U.S. advisory operations expanded from 2005–2007. While requested as part of the original campaign plan, this broader mission had been initially denied. U.S. advisors deployed to these new locations, assessed the situation, identified the ASG sanctuaries, and provided operational advice to the Philippine military.

Because the ASG's auxiliary provided information on the Philippine military's movements, the only way for the military to achieve surprise in one particular area was to conduct an amphibious assault at night, so the U.S. advisors helped them plan and prepare for the operation. This technique was highly successful and resulted in the elimination of three sanctuaries, the destruction of a major bomb-making factory, and the death of ASG leader Khadaffy Janjalani.³⁴ This forced the ASG to disperse throughout the island and has prevented them from massing forces ever since.

This vignette illustrates two lessons. First, classic counterinsurgency methods do have modern applicability. Second, conventional military action also has a role in special warfare. The JSOTF was fortunate to have both surface warfare naval officers and Marines assigned as individual augmentees. They were instrumental in assisting the Philippine forces plan and execute the amphibious operations.

Producing lethal effects through influence operations

The fourth vignette demonstrates the importance of information operations. Abu Sulaiman replaced Jan-jalani as ASG commander, but his tenure in this position was relatively short lived, as an 11-month operation led to his death in January 2007.³⁵ His killing was a classic special warfare operation in support of the Philippine military.

In March 2006, the ASG bombed the Sulu Cooperative store on Jolo Island, killing 5 and wounding another 40, most of them Muslims.³⁶ One of the low-level ASG members became disgruntled over the killing of fellow Muslims and was significantly persuaded by his wife to provide information on Sulaiman. His wife had been influenced by both psychological and civil-military operations.

The dissent and discord program emphasized not only the poor ASG leadership but also the Rewards for Justice program, which offered a \$5 million reward for information leading to the capture or killing of Abu Sulaiman.³⁷ The low-level ASG member's wife was also influenced by the care she and her children had received from the Philippine government through medical civic action and the construction of schools and clinics. She challenged her husband, arguing that the ASG had done nothing for her family and that he should not support the group and instead help the government. She argued that she could not even put milk on the table for her children, yet there was a \$5 million reward available.

This convinced him to become an informant, and he eventually provided valuable intelligence on Abu Sulaiman. National-level intelligence assets later located Abu Sulaiman in the jungles on Jolo Island, and an intelligence officer immediately provided the information to Staff Sergeant Crysta Kovach, an intelligence analyst in JSOTF-P.

Kovach recognized this as actionable intelligence and knew that a U.S. Special Forces detachment was advising the 6th Philippine Special Forces Company that was planning to conduct an operation in the vicinity that night. She provided the information, developed a target intelligence package, and then transmitted it to the detachment so they could help their counterparts plan the mission.

Kovach received that information at 3 PM, and by 6 PM, the Philippine 6th Special Forces Company had started its movement into the jungle. At dawn, they arrived at the ASG camp. When Abu Sulaiman left the perimeter of the camp to use the bathroom, they attempted to capture him, but rather than surrender, he resisted and was shot and killed. The company cleared the camp, killing a number of ASG militants. They conducted a sensitive site exploitation, recovering computers, cell phones, and weapons. They sent a digital photo of Sulaiman over the radio to the task force headquarters and had the informant make a positive identification. In June 2007, the informant, along with others who played a role, received a portion of the reward. The informant and his family were placed in witness protection.

This last vignette illustrates how all the lines of effort in this special warfare campaign—advise and assist, intelligence, civil-military operations, and influence operations—came together and resulted in the death of the ASG leader. Although it took months to develop, when JSOTF-P received actionable intelligence, the Philippine forces were prepared to rapidly act and exploit it. This is the nature of special warfare.

Conclusion

This chapter examined a few of the many operations that occurred during Operation Enduring Freedom—Philippines, and they offer some important insights for future operations.

First, SOF doctrine and training prior to 9/11 was effective. Foreign internal defense conducted by personnel grounded in unconventional warfare is an important part of a special warfare campaign.

Second, persistent engagement over time allows relationships to develop. Continued engagement—including International Military Education and Training—are investments in people. It is impossible to predict when or if they will pay off, but they did in the Philippines, and they have in many cases around the world.

Third, the importance of host nation sovereignty cannot be over-emphasized. While some future operations will be conducted in failed states and ungoverned spaces, the majority of U.S. operations will likely be conducted in a sovereign nation in support of a host nation government. It is critical to build and train the host nation forces in their own image and have them plan and execute their own operations while providing the appropriate mentorship.

Finally, special warfare and operations in a country like the Philippines require personnel and leaders who can truly practice the art of leading without being in charge. They must be able to exercise presence, patience, and persistence to deal with the political friction and complexity to focus on achieving long-term effects rather than simply short-term gains.

In February 2015, a ceremony in Zamboanga marked the deactivation of JSOTF-P but not necessarily the end of U.S. support. At its height, the task force had up to 600 U.S. military personnel in country. Additionally, it is important to note that even advisory missions carry inherent risks, as 17 U.S. troops died as part of the mission.³⁸ Yet the mission was widely viewed as a success.

One RAND study assessed that JSOTF-P contributed to a “reduced transnational terrorist threat” and “increased [Philippine security forces] capabilities at the tactical, operational, and institutional levels.”³⁹ Kurt Hoyer, the U.S. Embassy press attaché, remarked, “Our partnership with the Philippine security forces has been successful in drastically reducing the capabilities of domestic and transitional terrorist groups in the Philippines.”⁴⁰ In the end, JSOTF-P was an efficient and effective use of SOF for special warfare.

Notes

- 1 A competency is an essential and enduring capability. See Department of the Army, *Special Operations*, ADP 3–05 (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2019), 1–3.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid., 9.
- 4 The Huk Rebellion, also known as Hukbalahap Rebellion, was a communist-led peasant uprising in the Philippines from 1946–1954.
- 5 Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, “U.S. Relations With the Philippines,” *U.S. Department of State*, January 21, 2020, accessed September 28, 2020, www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-the-philippines/.
- 6 “Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of the Philippines,” *The Avalon Project*, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/phil001.asp.
- 7 Bob Drogen, “Americans Bid Farewell to Last Philippine Base,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 25, 1992, www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-11-25-mn-1038-story.html.
- 8 The Balikatan exercise “has been the cornerstone of the U.S.–Philippine military alliance since the United States closes its [bases] and pulled out of the country in 1991.” It is a U.S. and Philippines joint military exercise that is conducted annually. See Travis J. Tritten, “U.S. Philippines Wrap Up Annual Balikatan Exercise,” *Stars and Stripes*, April 15, 2011, www.stripes.com/news/u-s-philippines-wrap-up-annual-balikatan-exercise-1.141114.
- 9 COPE is a long-standing exercise designed to enhance multilateral air operations among the U.S., Japan, and Australia. See Pacific Air Force Public Affairs, “COPE North 2019 Strengthens Partnerships, Sharpens Lethality, Improves Interoperability,” *Pacific Air Forces*, February 13, 2019, www.pacaf.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/1757382/cope-north-2019-strengthens-partnerships-sharpens-lethality-improves-interopera/.
- 10 The Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercise is the U.S. Navy’s “oldest and longest continually running exercise in South and Southeast Asia.” See Commander, Logistic Group Western Pacific, “U.S. and Bangladesh Navies Conclude Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training 2019,” *U.S. Indo-Pacific Command*, November 8, 2019, www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2012418/us-and-bangladesh-navies-conclude-cooperation-afloat-readiness-and-training-2019/.

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- 13 “Special Forces CIF Companies,” *American Special Operations*, accessed September 29, 2020, www.americanspecial-ops.com/special-forces/cif/.
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- 16 CIA, *The World Factbook 2020* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2020), www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/.
- 17 Linda Robinson et al., *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001–2014* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2016), 15.
- 18 “US Hostages Killed in Raid in the Philippines,” *PBS*, June 7, 2002, www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/asia-jan-june02-philippines_06-07.
- 19 Robinson et al., *U.S. SOF in the Philippines*, 16.
- 20 An interesting side note is that in the meetings in the Oval Office with his national security staff, President George W. Bush overruled Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s objections to executing the plan because he had told President Arroyo he would support her in the fight against terrorism. This was relayed to this author at West Point by the late General Wayne A. Downing, who was present at the meeting as the counterterrorism advisor to National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice.
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- 22 For more on the 55-advisor limit, see Cecil E. Bailey’s chapter in this handbook.
- 23 Robinson et al., *U.S. SOF in the Philippines*, 23.
- 24 Geoffrey Lambert et al., “Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines: Civilian Harm and the Indirect Approach,” *Prism* 3, no. 4 (2012): 121.
- 25 Shawn Dorman, *Inside a U.S. Embassy: Diplomacy at Work* (Washington, DC: Foreign Service Books, 2011), 69–70.
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- 27 Many of the authorities stem from Authorization for Use of Military Force, Pub. L. No. 107–40 § 1, 115 Stat. 225 (2001).
- 28 Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Foreign Internal Defense*, JP 3–22 (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018), ix.
- 29 Department of the Army, *Counterinsurgency*, FM 3–24 (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2006).
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- 39 Robinson et al., *U.S. SOF in the Philippines*, xvii.
- 40 LaGrone, “U.S. Officially Ends JSTOF-P”