

# UNITED STATES ARMY INSTITUTE FOR MILITARY ASSISTANCE

## A HISTORY OF SPECIAL FORCES

### STUDENT HANDOUT

The story of the United States Army's unconventional forces dates back at least to the French and Indian wars, when Major Robert Rogers formed his "Rangers" from the New Hampshire state militia to conduct "unconventional warfare" against the Indians. This type of warfare was again successfully used to defeat the British in the Revolutionary War. Most notable during this period was Francis Marion, the South Carolina "Swamp Fox" who cut British supply and communication lines and prevented the Loyalist Party from becoming an effective force. With the Civil War came John S. Mosby of the Confederacy, who advocated and made effective use of unconventional warfare against the Union forces which were superior in both number and equipment.

The more direct relationship and unit lineage of today's Green Berets dates back to the organization of the First Special Service Force. Formed July 9, 1942, at Fort William Henry Harrison, Montana, this unit was called the "Devil's Brigade" by its Nazi opponents. The force was a joint American-Canadian unit, raised and commanded by Major General Robert T. Frederick. Instead of the mission for which they were originally organized—sabotage operations in occupied Norway—they went to Europe, where on the brigade's most famous operation was a savage, 6-day battle for Monte La Difensa in the Mount Maggiore hill mass. The force succeeded in capturing this vital enemy position, which was impeding the progress of the 5<sup>th</sup> US Army up the Italian peninsula from Naples. The Devil's Brigade later saw action in France, and there it subsequently inactivated. The crossed arrows and distinctive unit insignia of the present-day Special Forces was first authorized for the Special Service Force by the Secretary of War on February 26, 1942.

Unconventional warfare during World War II took on another form with the formation of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) under the command of Colonel William O. "Wild Bill" Donovan. Volunteers for the unit were extremely specialized and carefully selected, and their missions took them behind enemy lines in every theater of operations. American, British, and French agents of the OSS parachuted into France in small teams that consisted of two officers and an enlisted radio operator. One OSS detachment saw action in North India and Burma.

Another unconventional unit from which Special Forces draws its lineage was "Merrill's Marauders." Commanded by Colonel Frank D. Merrill, the Marauders' official name was the 5307<sup>th</sup> Composite Unit (Provisional); the 3,000-man force fought against the Japanese in five major battles and seventeen minor skirmishes in northern Burma. The volunteers underwent a famous, tortuous trek of hundreds of miles in the Burma wilds, to finally capture the vital airfield in the village of Myitkyina. Like the Devil's Brigade, their story was later incorporated into a title motion picture and book.

The US Army Special Forces also draws lineage and honors from the six US Ranger (Infantry) Battalions of World War II, which operated in both the European and Pacific Theaters of the war.

The First Ranger Battalion was activated June 19, 1942, in Carrickfergus, Ireland. In command was Major William O. Darby. The unit took part in the initial North African Landings and in hard-fought battles in Tunisia. The unit received a Presidential Unit Citation for combat in the critical battle of El Guettar. Later battles took place at Gela, Salerno, and Cassino, Italy, and on the beachheads at the D-day landings in Europe. Five other battalions were eventually formed

and fought in the European and Pacific campaigns. The Rangers were disbanded August 15, 1944 at Camp Butner, North Carolina. Patterned after the British Commandos, the Rangers considered that their success against tremendous odds was largely due to their strenuous and realistic combat training with the British. The men became skilled in the many weapons of war and in the use of unconventional commando tactics.

During the Korean war, the Rangers were revived when eight Ranger Companies were formed at Fort Benning, Georgia, and were trained in long range patrolling and special missions. The 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Companies were attached to the 187<sup>th</sup> Regimental Combat Team for the combat parachute jump at Munsan-ni.

The US Army Special Forces came into its own on June 20, 1952, when the original 10<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group, commanded by Colonel Aaron Bank, was activated at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. On that day was born the unit that would carry on the tradition of Rogers, Marion, Mosby, and Merrill. And the men of Special Forces in the past 30 years have done so in such a way as to bring honor, recognition, and respect on themselves as did their forerunners.

The commander of the first unit of Special Forces was most likely a little disappointed in his new command at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

Colonel Aaron Bank's brand new 10<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group, which he had been called from Korea to form, consisted of one officer, one warrant officer, and eight enlisted men. The strength that had been authorized by the Army Chief of Staff was 2,500 men. But, undaunted by their small size, those first few moved into the newly formed Psychological Warfare Center and began.

Colonel Bank set to work immediately to enlarge the ranks, and within 9 months over 1,000 had joined his fledgling unit. Many of those who came were former members of the Rangers and the OSS (Office of Strategic Services). They were searching for a unit in which they could train for the unconventional type of warfare they had used so successfully in World War II and the Korean war. Special Forces had this type of new and exciting training, and it varied almost constantly.

The new SFers boasted they were the new elite of the Army because they were trained in every aspect of warfare. They knew jungle fighting, underwater operations, demolitions, and of course airborne operations. Their training enabled them to claim familiarity with almost any foreign weapon. Almost constantly in the field, the Special Forces soldiers learned to function in every sort of climate and terrain.

In early 1953, word spread through the 10<sup>th</sup> that if they progressed well enough, they might be sent to Germany. Most of them were eager to return overseas, and they began training even harder. On November 11, 1953, the group was split and one-half was deployed to Bad Toelz, West Germany. There they moved into Flint Kaserne, a \$13 million billeting complex constructed by Adolph Hitler for his elite SS troops. They retained the designation of the 10<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group, and the half remaining at Fort Bragg became the 77<sup>th</sup> Group.

Lieutenant Colonel Jack T. Shannon, formerly the executive officer of the 10<sup>th</sup>, became the 77<sup>th</sup> commander. The proud unit emphasized the flexibility of Special Forces with their motto, "Anything, anytime, anyplace, anyhow." And they continued to train so that they could always live up to the words.

As the 10<sup>th</sup> Group became well established in Germany, a new item of headgear began to appear in rapidly increasing numbers. It was the Green Beret. The distinctive hats had been seen occasionally on the heads of Special Forces soldiers during field exercises back at Fort Bragg, but not so much as to call attention to them. Uncommon and unauthorized types of headgear, such as straw hats, cowboy hats, hunter's caps, sock hats, and snowcaps were often

substituted for the conventional Army issue when the SFers went to the field. And usually this was done in the interest of comfort. The berets were never worn with a dress uniform or in a public place, only when the men were in the field.

But now the men of the 10<sup>th</sup> in Germany had decided to adopt the wear of the beret to all uniforms. The group's commander, Colonel William Eckman, okayed the new item as far as the group policy was concerned in 1954. By 1955, every Special Forces soldier in Germany was wearing the Green Beret as a permanent part of his uniform.

About the same time, back on Smoke Bomb Hill, the home of the 77<sup>th</sup>, Colonel Edson D. Raff, commander of the PSYWAR Center, was making the first real effort to make the Green Beret an authorized item. He began a fight that lasted almost a decade and that is a major part of Special Forces early history. Colonel Raff's first request was flatly denied by the US Continental Army Command in 1954.

Two years later, Special Forces did get one part of its own special uniform approved—the shoulder patch. Since the beginning of Special Forces, the airborne unassigned patch depicting a glider and a parachute on a red shield had always been worn.

But in 1956, Special Forces Captain John W. Frye designed the patch that is still worn today. The patch forms an arrowhead, representing the craft and stealth of the early American Indian. An upturned dagger represents a type of weapon actually issued in one of the SF's ancestor units, the "Devil's Brigade" of World War II. Three Bolts of lightning denote Special Forces infiltration by air, water, and land. The patch is teal blue, meaning branch unassigned. Black and gold airborne tab is worn directly above it.

In the meantime, Special Forces were working with their counterparts in the PSYWAR Center to setup courses of instruction in their fields. In 1956, the Center's title changed to the "Special Warfare Center and School", and classes were begun in several phases of unconventional warfare.

Another unit, the 1<sup>st</sup> Special Forces Group, was activated June 17, 1957, and was stationed on Okinawa. The group was formed by a cadre from the 77<sup>th</sup> Group at Fort Bragg. One unit went via Hawaii, as the 14<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Operational Detachment, and another proceeded from Camp Drake, Japan, as the 825<sup>th</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Army Special Forces Operational Detachment. The 1<sup>st</sup> Group trained men for duty in Taiwan, Thailand, and later, Vietnam and Laos. The Special Forces soldiers were trained in five basic military occupational specialties: US and foreign weapons, medical techniques, engineering, communications, and intelligence operations. By 1959, more and more Special Forces men were being sent for temporary duty in South Vietnam and Laos. They worked in advisory roles with the forces of those countries as the military conflict in Southeast Asia began to grow.

Back in the States, in June 1960, the old 77<sup>th</sup> Group was re-designated the 7<sup>th</sup>. At the same time came the activation of the 1<sup>st</sup> Special Forces as the parent of all existing groups. A result of the Combat Army Regimental System, this brought the 1<sup>st</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> Groups into the same command. It also officially passed them the heritage of the WWII Ranger Battalions and the First Special Service Force.

The new 7<sup>th</sup> Group immediately picked up the step, and before long it, too, was providing men for duty in Vietnam as the United States' role there increased. Although just beginning to become involved in the fighting in Southeast Asia, Special Forces had another fight on their hands back in the United States. The push for the authorization of the Green Beret as standard headgear had reached fever pitch. It was to continue at this rate for another year until, with the help of President John F. Kennedy, the beret was authorized on September 26, 1961. This marked a great victory for

Special Forces as they now had their own distinctive headgear that set them apart from the “average” soldier but much more. And this would be emphasized in the Republic of Vietnam.

Special Forces entered its second decade and immediately began preparing for what seemed to be inevitable—war in Southeast Asia.

The 5<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group had been activated in September 1961 at Fort Bragg, with its orientation toward the Republic of Vietnam. The group reached its full strength during 1962 and added the 2<sup>nd</sup> Civil Affairs Detachment, the 152<sup>nd</sup> Medical Detachment, the 535<sup>th</sup> Engineer Detachment, and the 801<sup>st</sup> Intelligence Corps Detachment. The highly trained men of those specialized detachments added a full complement of professional knowledge to the group. The Signal Company was activated in March 1964, and the group was ready to assume its place in Vietnam. In September 1964, the 5<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group began its advisory role against Viet Cong insurgents.

The Green Berets conducted their advisory missions in small teams known as “A”, “B”, or “C” teams. The 5<sup>th</sup> Group had such teams located throughout the entire country, from the wide plain of the Delta region to the edge of the demilitarized zone. October 1964 marked the group’s total involvement in the war as the 5<sup>th</sup> Group headquarters moved to Nha Trang.

Three months earlier, on July 6, Special Forces had begun to prove they were something special when Green Beret Captain Roger H.C. Donlon earned the first Medal of Honor since the Korean war. The award was presented to him 6 months later by President Lyndon Johnson. The honor came as a result of Captain Donlon’s gallantry during a savage 5-hour battle at Camp Nam Dong. The “A” Detachment that fought that battle received a total of 33 US and Vietnamese decorations for its stand against a superior North Vietnamese regular fighting force.

By mid-1965, the men of the 5<sup>th</sup> Group had assumed wide-ranging tasks. These included assistance to civilian agencies in dredging canals in enemy-controlled villages. Their ability to wage aggressive combat was finely balanced with their ability to conduct civic action projects such as building schools, hospitals, town meeting halls, and government buildings. Still upholding their fighting role, many attacks similar to the one at Nam Dong were also repelled at Dong Xoai, Plei Me, and many other locations. For heroism at Dong Xoai, then 1LT Charles Q. Williams received the 5<sup>th</sup>’s second Medal of Honor. The year 1965 was also a year of heavy casualties incurred by the group.

But the 5<sup>th</sup> Group soldiers were not the only Special Forces in Vietnam. Established along with a strategic hamlet program in 1961, SF Mobile Training Teams (MTTs) from Okinawa had undertaken the task of aiding in the training of South Vietnamese (ARVN) units in counterinsurgency operations. In the early years, the Green Berets’ most vital achievement was winning the allegiance of the diverse ethnic tribes in support of the Vietnamese government. Evolving out of this training was the Civil Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) program, and by 1964 it had expanded to cover the training of the Vietnamese self-defense units. Adapted to this new program were mobile guerrilla and strike forces, which were operational throughout the country, as well as highly mobile reaction/reinforcement forces.

At its peak, Special Forces elements controlled over 80 camps and 60,000 CIDG soldiers. Their efforts in border control and surveillance were vital elements in aiding regular US and ARVN units to successfully accomplish their combat missions.

In 1965, the men took on an added responsibility—that of familiarizing and guiding conventional force in a land new to them and a concept of war strange to them. Integrated with the CIDG mission was the advisory role to the Vietnamese Special Forces. During the period 1966-67, special projects Delta, Sigma, and Omega were developed out

of the Mobile Strike Force concept. Reaction and exploitation techniques of these projects carried the guerrilla war to the enemy.

Special Forces men had gained several years' experience in intelligence collection during their time in Vietnam, a field in which the Vietnamese were relatively inexperienced. By 1967, nearly half of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) intelligence had been thus acquired.

Special Forces-trained troops played a vital part in the defeat of the 1968 enemy Tet offensive. Border camps, cutting severely into enemy infiltration and supply routes, bore the brunt of the attacks. SF-trained CIDG troops at Camp Ben Het underwent one of the heaviest attacks of the offensive.

Again in 1970, the CIDG proved their worth in Cambodian operations. Great damage was inflicted on large caches in cross-border operations in combat tactical zones, later termed military regions. This paved the way for operation into enemy strongholds in both the Seven Mountains area and the U Minh Forest (Forest of Darkness).

The role of Vietnamization was practiced by the Green Berets from their first contact with the Rhade Montagnard tribes in 1961. During their near decade in Southeast Asia, they worked with other groups, including the Khmer Cambodians, the Hoa Hoa, the Coa Dai, the Nungs, the Rhade, Thai, Lao, and the Kha and Meo minorities. The men shared the life of the natives they advised and assisted many innocent victims of fire, flood, famine, disease, and poverty. Many were highly-trained veterans of World War II and Korea, with experience in both hot and cold war missions all over the world.

The 5<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group emerged as the most highly decorated unit of its kind in the war. Decorations included 16 Medals of Honor (7 awarded posthumously), 1 Distinguished Service Medal, 84 DSC's, 814 silver Stars, 235 Legions of Merit, 46 Flying Crosses, 232 Soldier's Medals, and 13,234 Bronze Stars. The unit's colors fly the streamers of 231 campaigns—18 conducted in Europe, North Africa, and the Pacific during World War II and 13 during the war in Vietnam.

In a ceremony conducted at the Green Beret statue at the JFK Center on March 5, 1971, the 5<sup>th</sup> Group returned its colors after nearly a decade of combat. Although the mission in Vietnam has ended, the legacy remains.

Although Special Forces are highly trained for maximum effectiveness in wartime, they have demonstrated since their beginning that they can be an important asset to the nation during peacetime. After the Berets returned to Fort Bragg from Vietnam, they launched a campaign of intensified civic action projects. The program was called SPARTAN an acronym for "special Proficiency at Rugged Training and Nation-building." The 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Groups worked with Indian tribes in Florida, Arizona, and Montana to improve their living conditions and built roads and medical facilities for the tribes. Lower income groups in Hoke and Anson Counties of North Carolina were provided free medical treatment by SF medics. The Berets competed for the honor of retracing the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1804-1805 and also the Santa Fe Trail.

Special Forces active duty units included the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> SF Groups at Fort Bragg, North Carolina; the 10 SF Group at Fort Devens, Massachusetts; the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the 7<sup>th</sup> SF Group in Panama; 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 10<sup>th</sup> SF group in Bad Toelz, Germany; and one detachment in Berlin. The Green Berets are professionals in the business of helping others in peacetime and in war. They maintain their high standards of skills through devotion to duty and rigorous training.