

**Two Books on Special Operations Forces:
Oppose Any Foe: The Rise of America's Special Operations Forces**

Mark Moyar (Basic Books, 2017), 402 pp., notes, index.

Special Forces: A Unique National Asset

Mark D. Boyatt (Outskirts Press, 2016), 548 pp.

Reviewed by J. R. Seeger

As we enter the 16th year of combat initiated by the attack on the homeland on September 11, 2001, US Special Operations Forces (SOF) remain central to the way the US government prosecutes its undeclared war against terrorist networks. However, the definition of the SOF roles and responsibilities has become far less clear to policymakers over the past few decades and, to some degree, to commanders and operators inside SOF. From a doctrine standpoint, *Joint Publication 3-05—Special Operations* identifies 12 separate missions for the various units inside the US military that fall into the SOF category: direct action, hostage rescue, special reconnaissance, counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, counter-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, unconventional warfare, military information support operations (MISO, or psychological operations), security force assistance, foreign internal defense, humanitarian assistance operations, and civil affairs operations. Some of these are clearly identified as core missions for specific units, such as the Army's MISO and Civil Affairs units. The remaining 10 missions are the responsibility of the full complement of US Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps USSOCOM units.

For policymakers and intelligence professionals determined to understand how these unspecified missions are divided among the SOF units of the four services, Mark Moyar's book *Oppose Any Foe* serves as an excellent primer on the history of US special operations and the strategic decisionmaking involved in using SOF units. For intelligence professionals who have or will work with Special Forces teams, Mark Boyatt's book *Special Forces: A Unique National Asset* is equally important. Boyatt's book is focused on only one of the USSOCOM units, and he describes in detail what Special Forces teams and their higher commands are designed and trained to accomplish.

Moyar's work begins with special operations in World War II, works through Cold War SOF operations, and ends with a discussion of the use of SOF in President

Barack Obama's final term. The 11 chapters are arranged along a timeline, so readers can visualize the development of US SOF over 75 years. At the end of each chapter, Moyar summarizes the key points and offers his own views on events, people, and political context, and includes commentary on the successes and failures of the units involved. While not polemical, Moyar voices strong views on the interrelationship between policymakers and the operators who have to execute policies.

In *Oppose Any Foe*, he expands on themes first published in *National Review* and the *New York Times*. Moyar sees US SOF as a brilliant tactical tool available to the president, the US national security apparatus, and senior combatant commanders. But he cautions against using this brilliant tool to solve every problem, arguing that US SOF have in the past been overused as a strategic solution for national security challenges—where other tools might have been more effective, or incurred far lower risk to the SOF operators themselves.

Moyar offers valuable historical insight into what he calls the four enduring challenges of the entire complement of US SOF:

- the involvement of political leaders who lacked understanding of the Special Operations Forces they were creating and employing;
- the flexibility of special operations and the forces that conducted them—and how that flexibility can lead to overuse;
- disputation over the value of Special Operations Forces, which tends to focus on whether SOF is worth the cost to the larger military force; and
- the intense rivalry between Special Operations Forces and regular forces.

In the prologue to his book, Moyar concludes,

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These four challenges serve as the backbone of this chronicle of US special operations forces. The seventy-five year rise of special operations forces from humble origins in World War II to the present-day behemoth is, at bottom, a coming-of-age story . . .
(xviii)

This history provides the familiarization required to avoid the errors to which the historically deprived are especially prone, such as relying excessively on one's own intellect, leaping at the first historical analogy to rear its head, and grasping at facile theories drawn from dubious historical interpretations or abstract reasoning. (xx)

These errors often result in tragic loss of life for SOF operators. Moyar shows how, in both the successes and failures, tactical operations were directly affected by policy decisions in both major command headquarters and Washington.

While not stated explicitly in the text, it seems clear that Moyar sees all US special operations units as morphing into direct action units subordinate to the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), or succumbing to less well-funded and less well-trained versions of themselves. He suggests that both US civilian and military leadership need to become more fluent in the specific capabilities of USSOCOM units, if direct action and hostage rescue are to be their primary missions.

As with any general history book, *Oppose Any Foe* skips over certain bits of history that might be important to subject matter experts. Beginning with his discussion of World War II special operations, Moyar focuses almost exclusively on the US Army and Marine units that were designed to conduct “commando” style operations, a focus which effectively curtails any discussion of the contributions of specific individuals or of the US Army Air Force special operations units that supported these units. Similar omissions occur in other chapters; for example, the broader subject of Special Forces in Afghanistan in 2001 is largely subordinated to JSOC’s “man-hunting” capability, and Moyar fails to address the importance of OSS and CIA paramilitary and intelligence operations in partnership with US SOF. Instead, Moyar focuses attention on points of friction between SOF and OSS/CIA units. None of these omissions calls into question the value of the book, but pointing the reader to alternative

perspectives within the scholarly canon would have added nuance to Moyar’s overall position.

While *Oppose Any Foe* is mostly about strategic and doctrinal issues related to the history of US SOF, Mark Boyatt’s book *Special Forces: A Unique National Asset* concerns itself with the tactical history of US SOF. Boyatt, a retired senior Special Forces officer, has a clear perspective on the mission of US Army Special Forces (SF). He acknowledges the same 12 USSOCOM critical areas of special operations, but argues that Special Forces is a unique national asset primarily because it is the only part of the special operations community that is designed to conduct unconventional warfare. He points to the origins of SF and to the design of modern SF training to support the primacy of unconventional warfare in the SF mission. No other organization in the US military, he notes, has the same level of commitment to language and cultural training; none has the same doctrinal bias toward training—training that extends to equipping and, if necessary, leading indigenous fighters in battling US adversaries:

Special Forces is the only U.S. entity that is selected, assessed, organized, trained, and equipped to conduct unconventional warfare. The core uniqueness of SF is “through, with, and by.” This is the core purpose of Special Forces . . . Anything SF does “unilaterally,” the conventional forces can do. The same is true of SOF in general. It’s just a matter of degree and resourcing; for example, given resources, time, priority and focus, any combat unit can do unilateral direct action (DA). The SOF who have the direct action mission as a priority are certainly more adept with finesse and surgical precision at this mission than Special Forces. (53)

Just as Moyar’s book serves as a primer for the national security community on the history of special operations, Boyatt’s book is a primer on the selection, assessment, and training of the Special Forces professional. For intelligence professionals who do not have a military background, Boyatt’s book is essential reading for understanding US SF as an organization; the structure of SF teams; and the training and personality of both SF individuals and teams, together with their shared history and culture. Boyatt’s book includes 350 pages of appendices, with everything from case studies to OSS manuals that support his argument; these make it possible for read-

ers to gain a more complete understanding—with ample documentation—of points he raises throughout the book.

The Moyar and Boyatt books are by no means the only works that discuss strategic and tactical use of US special operations. Moyar's book is somewhat similar to Thomas Henrickson's *Eyes, Ears, and Daggers* (Hoover Institution Press, 2016) in its focus on strategic issues. Boyatt's is somewhat similar to Alfred Paddock's *US Army Special Warfare: Its Origins* (University Press of Kansas, revised edition, 2002), though Boyatt's is more current. Tactically speaking, James Stejskal's *Special Forces Berlin: Clandestine Cold War Operations of the US Army's Elite, 1956–1990* (Casemate, 2017) is a superior case study on the execution of a Cold War era NATO strategic plan.

What do all of these books have in common? They all argue for a more thoughtful assessment by policymakers on the use of Special Operations Forces and a larger strategic vision that includes SOF, conventional military forces, and civilian agencies and departments. They also argue for a clearer delineation of roles and responsibilities

among the various special operations units inside US-SOCOM. Each of these authors offers a deep historical context that traces the roots of special operations back to World War II, when strategic thinkers considered special operations a distraction, at best.

Both these books take the discussion forward 75 years—to the present, when USSOCOM units are most likely troops in combat operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. That context helps explain some of the institutional tensions that still exist among SOF, the conventional military, and the intelligence and diplomatic communities. Finally, all of these books point to the criticality of collaboration and cooperation—especially between SOF and the CIA. As we continue to face the “long war” against terrorist networks and ongoing tensions with strategic adversaries—in the shadow of political wrangling and budget battles in Washington—these are discussions that must take place both inside the policy community and with those military and civilian leaders who will carry out policy.



