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## The Use of Pseudo-Operations in the AFPAK Theater

by Ronald Holt

*What would be the effect if we had small integrated groups of former Taliban and US Special Operators working together, masquerading as Taliban, living off the villagers as the Taliban do, and feeding USSOCOM actionable HUMINT?*

This short paper is designed to be a “thought-piece” with the purpose of stimulating “out of the box” ideas. Pseudo Operations involve recruiting and training ex-insurgents to operate as insurgents and produce intelligence, cause enemy casualties, and create distrust between the local population and the insurgents. Such on the ground intelligence gives a deeper picture of enemy intentions, infiltration routes and support amongst the local population. Real-time intelligence can lay the groundwork for successful direct actions missions. Sometimes pseudo-operators will disguise themselves as members of adjacent countries’ military in order to operate in enemy sanctuaries. In this paper I will argue that Pseudo-Ops might be of use given the current situation in AFPAK and particularly in southern Afghanistan and in areas of Pakistan such as North Waziristan or even Baluchistan.

My argument is based on the following issues: 1) the need for fresh tactics as the Taliban morphs, (2) our over-reliance on SIGINT and need for HUMINT, (3) the border sanctuaries in Pakistan, (4) poor communication and loose organization amongst the various “Taliban,” (5) Pashtun tribal customs and social organization along the Durand Line and in southern Afghanistan, and (6) pseudo-ops are primarily Intel gathering and then capture [for more Intel] and kill as a last resort or unusual opportunity.

While drones and various Task Force-type operations have proved to be somewhat successful at neutralizing Taliban leadership, the older leaders are often quickly replaced by younger more technologically and politically savvy true-believers. Getting down to the shadow government/infrastructural level of the Taliban has not been as successful due to poor on the ground intelligence and not being able to hold and consolidate rural areas. Pseudo-Ops groups can interact with enemy sympathizers and even form their own networks amongst them. Besides Intel, targeting and recon missions, pseudo-ops can also include: “snatch” missions, assassinations, psychological ops, various “dirty” tricks [forged documents, offending local customs and false rumors], and hunt and kill operations.

### **THE RHODESIAN MODEL**

The most successful model of pseudo-ops was the impact made by the Selous Scouts during the Rhodesian fight against communist terrorist insurgents. The Scouts were described to the public as a “Combat Tracking” unit and tracking was one of their major skills. But, in reality, they were a multiracial pseudo-ops and ground recon unit. They have been credited with providing the intelligence that lead to 70% of all the kills and captures of terrorists during the

Rhodesian conflict [the majority of the kills were on external raids]. In addition to pseudo-ops, they also set up OPs to monitor village activities, set ambushes and did interior and cross-border recon missions.

The Scouts and Special Branch would often “turn” the captured terrorists and almost immediately the new pseudo operators would “introduce the group to contact men and in general establish their bona fides with the local population.”<sup>1</sup> In other cases the terrorists would be “turned” and integrated into small units that would pretend to be terrorist units in order to get intelligence from terrorist sympathizers in villages and would actually meet with real terrorists. The white, non-African-speaking, members of the group would often stay back in hide positions as a security/commo/observation element when the black African team members entered villages. Their knowledge of terrorist SOP was so good they would occasionally berate the real terrorists for not following proper procedures and inform them of the latest recognition codes!! Blending in with the local population and the terrorists proved to provide an intelligence windfall. Pseudo-OPs AOs would be frozen to conventional units activities to prevent friendly fire episodes. Operating with little support in cross-border operations the Scouts and Rhodesian SAS sometimes formed pseudo columns of vehicles either acquired from local countries supporting the terrorists or disguised Rhodesian vehicles and drove across various borders to decimate terrorist training camps or headquarters. Deep penetration raids by Pseudo- columns into terrorist safe havens such as Quetta and other sanctuaries might prove feasible.

Once the various Taliban factions become aware of the pseudo-operators we might see distrust, suspicion, red on red firefights, and chaos increase within the enemy. During the Rhodesian conflict Special Branch and Military Psychological Operations also worked extensively with the local “spirit mediums” in order to convince the tribal peoples that their ancestral spirits were on the side of the government. The psychological side of the AFPAK situation might be enhanced by ‘pseudo mullahs” preaching a very non-violent form of Islam and perhaps creating their own madrasses. Currently little is being done to counter the 18,000 + madrasses in Pakistan which provide for an unlimited source of manpower to the Taliban.

Unfortunately for the Rhodesians, their intelligence apparatus was woefully slow to digest and disseminate actionable intelligence. In addition they were severely limited in aircraft and helicopters and they were slow to change from a police mentality to the military mentality in the face of terrorist atrocities. Special Branch controlled pseudo-ops intelligence and rarely passed on information to the Directorate of Military Intelligence. However, successful collaboration often occurred when the Scouts often called in air strikes or the RLI [Rhodesian Light Infantry] or other Fire force elements to assault detected terrorist campsites and even terrorists on the move. When detected the terrorists would often “bombshell” or break up into small groups moving in various directions. The RLI became expert at dropping Paras or heliborne troops into “stops” or blocking positions along obvious escape routes.

## ***CAVEAT***

Needless to say, this type of warfare requires someone above and beyond the average special forces soldier. They need to be able to live off the local economy and gain rapport with

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<sup>1</sup> See Cilliers, 126.

the turned Taliban and be able to speak Pashto or other local languages. The recruited ex-terrorists also need to have a “spirit of adventure” and group loyalty.<sup>2</sup> There were instances in the Rhodesian War where turned terrorists turned back and killed their army comrades as they slept.

Given the bias of today’s media, legalistic questions, and “world opinion” it is a real question whether the utility of pseudo ops would be overwhelmed by bad publicity. Of course care would also have to be taken in order for pseudo-ops not to get out of hand. Any activities that ultimately degrade the legitimacy of the counterinsurgency effort are not worth the small advantage they may give one. Pseudo-Ops might be another tool in our counter insurgency tool chest; but unless they contribute to the safety of the population and to a coherent long-term strategy, they will make no difference in the long run.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See [http://selousscouts.tripod.com/pseudo\\_terr\\_gang.htm](http://selousscouts.tripod.com/pseudo_terr_gang.htm)

<sup>3</sup> See Jamestown Foundation, Pakistan’s Troubled Frontier

