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A Recommendation for Quiet Professionals

by Dave Maxwell

There are two schools of thought in Special Operations regarding writing for publication. On one hand, there are those who suggest SOF operations and experiences should remain in the shadows known only to those within the community. On the other, there are those who argue the SOF story should be told in detail to ensure the proper recognition for, correct employment of, and sufficient resourcing for SOF. I am a believer in a modified version of the second school—with one very important caveat.

Quiet Professionals must put less emphasis on the “quiet” and more on the “professional.” As members of SOF, we have a professional responsibility to write and publish and share our experience with each other, the rest of the military and the interagency team as well as to inform, and yes, even influence, policy and decision makers. At the same time we have a responsibility to read and learn from the writings of our joint and interagency partners as the experiences of all must be cross-leveled, understood, and integrated. As the old proverb goes, “intelligent men learn from their mistakes and wise men learn from the mistakes of others.”

I encourage every SOF officer and non-commissioned officer to write because all military operations, including Special Operations, are a thinking man’s—as well as woman’s¹—game! While every Officer and NCO has a valuable contribution to make, writing is a craft that must be practiced to be perfected. Colonel John M. Collins, US Army (Ret.), has written an excellent guide for authors entitled “Warlord’s Writing Tips.”² The guide offers suggestions on research, organization, style, and review that all writers should commit to memory. Not surprisingly, COL Collins is the father of another mantra many in special operations have internalized: the Five SOF Truths.

Over the last few years, I have had the privilege of reviewing a number of papers written by Special Operations officers and non-commissioned officers for *Small Wars Journal* and other publications. Many have been very important and informative and have been published; some were not. However, in reviewing all these papers, there was a common theme that needs to be addressed. Not all papers had this theme of course but a number did in their initial drafts and those that continued with this theme were, thankfully, not published.

This theme, for lack of a better phrase, is “chest thumping.” The subtle—and sometimes not so subtle—suggestion was that SOF are the superior force particularly as it pertains to Irregular Warfare. Use of phrases such as the “premier force,” “force of choice,” “SOF are the

¹ One such development are the Cultural Support Teams who have been tasked to support Army Special Operations to engage female populations. For more information, see “Cultural Support Teams,” *United States Army Special Operations Command*, <http://www.soc.mil/CST/CST.html>

² John M. Collins, “Warlord’s Writing Tips,” *Small Wars Journal*, April 16, 2011, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2011/04/warlords-writing-tips/>

optimal force,” or “SOF are optimized for wars of the 21st Century or Irregular Warfare” are often counterproductive and may hurt SOF more than help. We must be careful to avoid statements that would damage our ability to inform and influence. Personally, I have quoted T.E. Lawrence, who wrote “Irregular Warfare is far more intellectual than a bayonet charge,” which has been misinterpreted as special operations have a monopoly on brains and conventional operations are only brawn. This idea is offensive to any military professional who knows that the full spectrum of military operations require an intellectual rigor that is lost on those who do not think strategically, practice operational art, nor employ the complex tactics that exist in all our services in *both* regular and special operations forces. Without explanation or context, using Lawrence’s quote may have alienated fellow warfighters as well as policy and decision makers.

We tend to use these “chest thumping” phrases for two reasons: one is a legacy of SOF and the other is the product of a “Darwinian bureaucratic survival mechanism.” However, we should understand that SOF are not at risk of going away or being marginalized today. Special Operations have been codified in law since 1987³, and SOF are and will remain a part of the joint and interagency team and a tool in the national strategic toolkit regardless of whatever inter-service and intra-service rivalries may have persisted. Yet, the pre-1987 perceptions of SOF being under attack by non-SOF organizations and the Services have continued to this day and are evident in many of the writings of SOF personnel almost as if this characteristic is part of their DNA. I suspect most authors are not even consciously doing it as this “innate characteristic” has been passed down from generation to generation of SOF professionals.

However, this “chest thumping” is a vestige of the past that undermines the necessary and important task of SOF to inform and influence. The bottom line is that USSOCOM “experiment,” while perhaps not perfect, has served our nation and its strategic interests well and has demonstrated that SOF have made significant contributions and achieved significant effects *as part* of the joint and interagency team. When closely examined, even the “SEAL operation” against Bin Laden will be touted as the most successful *joint* special operation in recent history, will be shown to be a joint and interagency operation and not a SOF unilateral one.

SOF professionals need to write and tell the SOF story. They need to inform and influence; they need to share their experiences and contribute to strategic thought. However, we must do it in such a way as to build, reinforce, and sustain the great joint and interagency team we have today. There is no need for an unhealthy Regular versus Special Operations Force "rivalry" or "we-they" mindset. SOF are well respected, accepted, and valued. Even in the future fiscally constrained defense environment, SOF will more than likely be sufficiently resourced. It is not required for authors to point out the value of SOF anymore. To Special Operations officers and NCOs: please continue to write, contribute to strategic, operational and tactical thought, and read and embrace the writings of our joint and interagency partners. Most importantly, let’s leave the chest thumping to others who might be writing on the outside looking in.

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³ 10 U.S.C. § 167.

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