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How Ambiguity Results in Excellence: The Role of Hierarchy and Reputation in U.S. Army Special Forces

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This article explores how group reputations get made and unmade within the strictures of an elite military organization. For instance, within teams there are both formal and informal pecking orders. Above teams there exist layers of command and control. "Need to know" and information flows are critical to the construction of A-team identities both among teams and for commanders' consumption. Yet, the view from within teams and of teams is never the same. From within, teams are thought never to be equal. From above they are expected to be interchangeable. As this article describes, hierarchy is actually bolstered by such different perspectives, and teams work better as a result.

Key words: military organization, U.S. Army Special Forces; US, North Carolina

Political anthropologists have long recognized the power that can be squeezed from ambiguity (Balandier 1970) and the significance of indeterminacy lurking in even the most rigid-seeming social structures (Moore 1978). F. G. Bailey, for one, has devoted a lifetime to examining strategems, spoils, rule-making, rule-breaking, and gamesmanship, while always taking into account the individual and the persistence of individualism (Bailey 1969, 1993).

Arguably, no institution brings together individualism and conformity or indeterminacy and rigid structure better than does the military. Yet, the United States armed forces have seldom been described, let alone analyzed by political anthropologists. Sociologists have studied numerous aspects of army organization and army life. But the benefits the army gains from soldiers taking advantage of the same structure the army uses to take advantage of them has not been well explored. Thus, in addition to describing the workings of a particular unit — U.S. Army Special Forces (popularly known as the Green Berets) — I argue that it is the ambiguities embedded in army structure, which help account for excellence.

The ethnographic information presented in this article was gathered during formal fieldwork conducted with the 3rd Special Forces Group at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina in 1991-92 (see Simons 1997).[1] More than a year was spent in team rooms, out in the woods, on patrols, in training exercises, at firing ranges, and in various schools with soldiers. I was able to speak to individuals singly, but given the group nature of work (which it was not my goal to interrupt), I concentrated primarily on observing intra- and inter-team dynamics. Unlike SF soldiers themselves, I was able to shift my point of view from team to team, and could ask questions of commanders beyond the team level. Because I was an anthropologist, too, soldiers afforded me the opportunity to do whatever they were doing without holding me to their standards. Participation-observation at this micro level thus privileged me in numerous ways. Most studies of the armed forces, and even Special Operations, tend to be interview-driven analyses which plumb officers' perspectives (e.g., Collins 1994; Marquis 1997) or, when soldiers' viewpoints are elicited, it is generally by survey or questionnaire (e.g., Brooks and Zazanis 1997).

The potential, then, for different points of view not to be granted equal weight cannot be overstated, particularly since two formal hierarchies exist in the U.S. Army, each of which is uniform across units, on all posts, in peacetime as well as during war. Officers (captains, majors, lieutenant colonels, colonels, and generals) belong to one order and enlisted personnel (privates, corporals, and sergeants, or as in the case of Special Forces, non-commissioned officers [NCOs]) inhabit another.[2] The relationship between officers and NCOs is, by definition, unequal. Officially, technically, and legally, all officers outrank any NCO. However, not even modern armies can control for

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inconsonance, and within units, off paper, and because officers and NCOs work together, these hierarchies intersect. In certain situations, senior sergeants are practically duty-bound to control junior officers, while informal pecking orders will time and again subvert the official order if the same men do not sit atop both.

On the one hand, the army seems to have perfected an ingeniously hierarchical system which demands perfectly interchangeable parts, interchangeability, along with redundancy and standardization, being military ideals. On the other hand, outdoing "the other guy" is also a military ideal. How — we should wonder — does an organization like Special Forces, which is designed to attract the best conventional soldiers the army produces, manage to standardize such competitive men? How do theory and practice work out their differences?

The short answer is: thanks to enduring structure and routinized mobility. The longer answer depends on the ambiguities we find as we travel up and down the chain of command, which, tellingly, no soldier does.[3]

SF and the Army

Since 1987 Special Forces (SF) has existed as its own branch of the U.S. Army, with a structural stature equivalent to that of armor or the infantry. Administered, financed, and supplied much like any other service arm, it is SF's soldiers, missions, and organization which set it apart.

SF soldiers are volunteers three times over: for the army, for airborne training, and for Special Forces Assessment and Selection (SFAS). SFAS represents the first phase of testing and training through which all future SF soldiers must pass, and precedes the Special Forces Qualification Course (Q Course). Altogether there are three different phases during which individuals are taught various skills, and then field-tested on their ability to apply them, and the Q Course is the one school that every SF soldier attends, though within it soldiers are also streamed into various specialties: leadership (if they are officers), engineering, communications, medic, and weapons training (if they are enlisted).

SF's five mission areas include unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, special reconnaissance, direct action, and civic action. Currently, most active duty SF soldiers engage in far more foreign internal defense (FID) missions than any other type, and on FID missions SF soldiers teach foreign forces everything from parachuting to first aid and latrine building. However, SF is probably best known for its direct action role. Popularized by Hollywood and pulp fiction accounts, ambushes, raids, "sneak behind enemy lines, shoot-'em-up" action continues to fascinate (and repel) members of the public. Even after the Gulf War the few declassified direct action missions SF soldiers undertook received far more media attention than more mundane military training of Kuwaiti and coalition forces, or the humanitarian assistance provided Kurds by soldiers in northern Iraq (Atkinson 1993; Waller 1994).

Still, what most distinguishes SF soldiers is less what they do or are trained to do than how they are organized: in teams. Teams are designed to function as coherent, self-contained, self-sufficient units. While SF is one among only a handful of elite units to field teams (rather than squads or platoons), and is the only armed forces unit which trains to train others in military skills, it is also distinct in that NCOs comprise over 85% of its operational troop strength. In most army units NCOs oversee privates and corporals; in SF there are no privates or corporals. As a result, status differentials are flattened. But SF also tends to attract career soldiers. Consequently, it can be considered among the most stable and mature forces in the U.S. arsenal, if not the most professional.

Structure and the Chain of Command

Teams — technically referred to as Operational Detachments Alpha, ODAs, or A-teams — are SF's operational units. They conduct the missions. Twelve Special Forces soldiers comprise an A-team. Six A-teams (along with a support, or B-team) exist in a company. Three companies (along with a battalion headquarters detachment and a battalion support company) constitute a battalion. Three battalions (along with a headquarters and headquarters company, and a support company) make up a group. Currently there are five active-duty Special Forces Groups.[4] Each group, with its three battalions, is structurally identical. In fact, structurally, every battalion, company, and team is identical. Actually, even the structures teams are housed in are identical.

For instance, consider 3rd Group's area. 3rd Group, whose military theater of operations is sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean, is one of two groups garrisoned at Ft. Bragg, NC. Ft. Bragg is a big sprawling open post, located in what soldiers fondly refer to as the armpit of North Carolina. The soil is sandy, there are endless stands of pine trees, and whole swathes of the base have been declared off-limits to training in order to protect habitat for the red-cockaded woodpecker. Otherwise, Ft. Bragg duplicates much of what can be found on any other large army post.

In this setting, elements of 3rd Group occupy more than half a dozen red brick buildings, specifically designed for SF and built for 3rd Group in the early 1990s. The group staff is located in one neat, red brick structure, while each battalion staff occupies a similar single-storied building. All three battalions, likewise, have separate quarters, though in substantive terms battalions do not really exist; only their constituent companies do.

Pick any battalion building. Three separate entrances lead to three separate company areas. Nor does it matter which you choose to enter. In each of the three company hallways you will find the exact same configuration: three sets of facing double doorways, and through any of these doorways the same, identically proportioned cinderblock and linoleum rooms. Here you have reached the essence of SF: the team room.

While teams are nested in companies, which in turn nest in battalions and groups, most soldiers spend the bulk of their time with their teammates, either in their team rooms or out in the woods. Companies may sometimes train together, but battalions generally only gather for formations, and when the entire group coalesces it is invariably for a ceremonial event, and these tend to be rare.

Another way to think about this nesting is to imagine an inverted pyramid. Teams are the point, but they sit at the bottom. Pressing down on them from above is the group commander, (who is a colonel), his staff of officers, their support staffs, and endless paperwork. Because the group commander is so

insulated, though, he rarely interferes directly. Also, to the outside world he represents the group; his responsibilities tend to carry him outward rather than inward. It is his battalion commanders who have more of an everyday presence in the companies and among the men, though even this is just a hovering presence because commanders at the battalion level are also surrounded by staff and wind up trapped in their headquarters, bogged down with planning. Their contact with the teams is invariably formal. Only company commanders (who are majors) routinely interact with team members, while this is largely a function of where their offices are located, just inside the company's entryway. Otherwise, paperwork and decision-making also keep them behind desks and around tables, in staff meetings, and at the beck and call of their immediate supervisor, the battalion commander.

Virtually all of the paperwork and planning concerns control. From the perspective of those doing the managing, everything they do is in support of the teams. From the teams' perspective, however, the echelons of officers who supervise them continually constrain and thwart them, though there is at least one more way to consider how the layers of command create inversions and differences in points of view.

If we reinvert the pyramid, as any table of organization would, we find that from the bottom-up there are twenty-seven team leaders (who are captains), nine company commanders (majors), three battalion commanders (lieutenant colonels), and a single group leader (colonel). From the top-down this means the colonel is all-powerful but far-removed. Next, in terms of who should have power over the teams, is their battalion commander, followed by their company commander, and team leader. However, we might also expect the team leader to be the officer with the greatest influence because he is on the team, followed by the company commander who is physically nearby, and the battalion commander who is at least around from time to time. In reality, though, power does not flow quite so evenly as either reading would suggest. Instead, soldiers view their company commander (a major) as the most pivotal officer.

Battalion (like group) commanders are just too distant. Although they are likely to recognize the last names and faces of their soldiers, they cannot always put the two together. Nor do they have reason to. According to military rules, soldiers communicate in channels, which means following (and not leapfrogging) the chain of command. If a soldier has a problem he should see his captain first, then his major.[5] Ideally, his problem should never come to the lieutenant colonel's attention. Captains and majors, meanwhile, consolidate and protect their own positions by keeping problems (and rumors of problems) within the company.

As in so many organizations, image is important, but particularly so at the company level since lieutenant colonels have three companies competing for their favor. One might think this would be even more attenuated for majors, who have six teams under their purview, but majors are not only too close to the teams to be taken in by "bells and whistles" or "dog and pony shows," they also have too large a stake in not being fooled. Teams, too, recognize that majors are their brokers. Thus, when they refer to their major and no one else as the CO, or commanding officer, they lay bare their sense of where power pools. Significantly, the officer who is closest to them in the chain of command, the team captain, is regarded as the least powerful figure in the hierarchy. And though this would seem to run counter to how the chain of command is supposed to work, it is precisely what command requires.

Captains and Team Sergeants

On paper, every SF ODA includes 12 men: a captain, chief warrant officer, and ten sergeants. The division of labor is such that the captain is responsible for the team and represents it to the world of officers beyond the team room, while the chief warrant officer acts as the team's administrator, or paper pusher. The team sergeant, as the senior-ranking enlisted man, then concerns himself with the world of men within the team room; the assistant operations sergeant is his administrator, and helps him with planning. Of the eight remaining men, two are medics, two are engineers, two are communications sergeants, and two are weapons sergeants.

So much built-in redundancy allows for tremendous flexibility. Various individuals can be absent and the team can still function. Teams can also, effectively, be split in two. The chief warrant officer can substitute for the captain, and the assistant operations sergeant can easily fill in for the team sergeant. At the same time, either medic, engineer, communications, or weapons sergeant will do.

Because this is the army, though, what might appear to be mirror-image duality just isn't. The captain always outranks all other men on the team, while the team sergeant always outranks the assistant operations sergeant, and among every other twosome, one medic, one engineer, one communications, and one weapons sergeant is senior. Soldiers are slotted into roles according to their military occupational specialty (MOS) as well as time in grade. This preserves order and prevents direct competition among men on the teams. With the structure completely fixed, roles never change. Only the personnel passing through them do.

However, not everyone passes through roles at the same rate. NCOs can remain on teams for years; captains rarely stay on teams beyond two. Consequently, it is conceivable that the captain may be the youngest man on his team, with much less soldiering experience then any other team member. Without exception, the team sergeant and assistant operations sergeant will be older and more militarily savvy than the team's official leader. Also, their careers revolve completely around the team. The captain's career, on the other hand, can be boosted by the team's accomplishments, but all officers are forever propelled upward — and away from life inside the team rooms. A successful captain may come back as a major, to command the company (and six teams), but his two years on an ODA mark the only time he will spend at ground level, out in the woods, intimately involved with 11 SF soldiers.

In one sense, this means that captains' and NCOs' interests differ. In another sense, though, their interests cannot help but converge. This is because individual success is always measured by the success of the team, and team success is determined by which teams receive which missions. The ideal for every captain is to win for his team not only whatever missions there are, but also the best missions. This is also NCOs' goal for their captain and themselves, since missions are what they live (and are willing to die) to perform.

There are two more twists to the relationship between teams and their captains. First, for the team to work smoothly, NCOs

need captains who understand them. From the NCO point of view, what young captains need to be taught during their tour with the ODAs is to respect NCOs. All else follows from this. If an officer is willing to accept the suggestions of more experienced soldiers, then this not only affords NCOs considerable leverage, influence, control, and comfort, but once an officer has learned to trust NCOs he essentially unleashes them. They will use all their skills to perform as expected, and then — if they are really eager — they will keep pushing the envelope to surpass expectations.

Second, it is not just captains who compete with one another for promotion. Teams, too, continually jostle for the missions that there are. Yet teams are identically structured. Something has to set them apart. What the soldiers believe sets them apart is their captains, while if the captains are quick-studies what generally sets them apart are the team sergeants.

The best team sergeants are master manipulators. Not only is it their task to keep everyone motivated, but they have three different constituencies to please. In addition to gaining the team captain's confidence, the team sergeant must win over the rest of the team. He has to motivate the NCOs to work for the captain so that the team, as a team, will impress higher command. Among these three constituencies (the captain, higher command, and the team's NCOs), NCOs are probably the hardest individuals to please. This is because regardless of their personal likes or dislikes, all SF soldiers share the same goal: they want their team to be not only the best team it can be, but the best team in the company, the battalion, and preferably the group. This way, they assure themselves, they will get the best missions.

Such yearning makes for extremely critical NCOs, and of team sergeants especially. For instance, good team sergeants, as far as soldiers are concerned, should schedule plenty of team training. Team training keeps them busy. Also, all soldiers know that training is what commanders want to see. But good team sergeants recognize that in addition to helping bond and hone the team, practicing fieldcraft, infiltration techniques, teaching, and other Special Forces skills also subtly reminds the team's official leader — the captain — that though he may be in charge, he is not better than any soldier in all spheres. Essentially, training can serve to gently help put him in his place: in the lead but not ahead.

In fact, training achieves innumerable subtle effects, with an added kicker. The more the team trains the better it becomes; the better the team, the more kudos the team sergeant earns. The team captain receives high marks whenever he, too, appreciates the value of good training. But because this is the team sergeant's bailiwick, it is still the team sergeant who, intentionally or not, secures his own reputation whenever the team trains well.

Still, a good team sergeant also understands that "higher authority," as it is referred to in the army, cannot care about a team sergeant's reputation, or even a captain's career. Decision-makers cannot afford to dwell on individuals to this extent. In this sense, nothing a team sergeant orchestrates really matters. But in another sense, it is how all the various practice patrols and other exercises add up — added to all the other training — which determines the ODA's reputation. Who this reputation then comes to the attention of depends on who has made it: the team's captain or its team sergeant.

The way the officer-driven chain of command works, commanders beyond the company level are far more likely to be interested in captains than in team sergeants. Officers mentor other officers, socialize with them, politic, backscratch, line up favors, establish alliances, patron-client ties, and information nets. But also, battalion and group commanders do not have as many opportunities to interact with team sergeants as they do with captains. Therefore, at the team level it behooves everyone to treat captains-in-the-rough like diamonds-in-the-making whenever possible.[6]

Junior as well as senior NCOs can cite instance after instance to back up their belief that ultimately officers count, they do not. Yet, despite this conviction, NCOs still act as though officers do not count and only they — NCOs — make SF work.

Reputation and Illusion

SF soldiers openly admit to being arrogant. In fact, many regard self-assurance as one of the hallmarks of being a SF soldier. I commonly heard, "every SF soldier always thinks he's right." Even more revealing, though, is how prideful soldiers can be about their teams. This was more than apparent in the company where I conducted the bulk of my fieldwork. There, teams exhibited markedly different personalities, yet soldiers could be found on all teams who defiantly regarded their own team as, indisputably, best.

Team members on ODA 309, for instance, never doubted their superiority. As a whole, the team fostered an ethos which valued hard work.[7] It never mattered why, individually, various team members adhered to this ethos. That one member worked hard because he sought the team sergeant's approval, while another worked hard because he happened to be on a team which valued hard work, or that a third needed to continually prove to himself that he could outdo others never detracted from the team's overall aim: to train beyond "by the book." If the patrol route took the team through a swamp, everyone filed through the swamp. If the exercise required that the team stay tactical (no tents, lights, stoves, nor amenities), the team stayed tactical.

In contrast, for members of ODA 300 (or at least the dominant members on it), outmaneuvering rather than outperforming the standard was typical. When members of this team went to the field they always tried to carry pillows. Whenever possible, too, they would escape the field to carouse in town. On recertification tests (meant to assess individual skills) team members would make concerted efforts to cheat as a group. In fact, a number of older NCOs on ODA 300 cited what they were taught in the Q Course — "if you ain't cheating you ain't trying" — to justify their behavior. As far as they were concerned, that was supposed to epitomize SF, and if they got caught then they were wrong, but the objective was to not get caught. For them, unconventionality was its own reward.

However, there was at least one relatively recent arrival on this team who did not particularly care for his teammates' attitude. He would have preferred training honestly and hard. He kept hoping that ODA 300, which temporarily had no captain, would be assigned an officer or even a new team sergeant who would come in and straighten things out. However, until then — Sergeant Ross also realized — he had little choice. This was the team he had been assigned to. As a result he tried to be a good sport and an amiable team player.

Meanwhile, Sergeant Ross was the only member of ODA 300 that the "workaholic" members of ODA 309 would have readily accepted. In no small measure this was because Sergeant Ross at least seemed to share 309's ethic and because he always made a point of telling 309 members that he wished his team was more like theirs. For 309, then, Sergeant Ross' disgruntlement simply confirmed their own impressions: that hands-down they were the better team. So much for teams' internally consistent logic.

Not only did ODAs 300 and 309 exhibit radically different attitudes, but excelling by beating the system meant two completely different things on each team. From 300's point of view camaraderie was best achieved through clever play; for 309 camaraderie grew out of hard work. Nor was there anything reconcilable about these two views. As a result, each team strove to make a name for itself in a markedly different fashion, which also meant that the men on each team wound up appearing as though they were of two disparate types — 309 was full of ants while 300 was full of grasshoppers — though in reality such typecasting was far more situational than fixed. Sergeant Ross was proof of this: he would have preferred being on 309, but never gave any hint of this to his own teammates on 300. As a good SF soldier he simply adapted to the hand he had been dealt.

In reality, all SF teams require soldiers who can accelerate from laziness to action, and are clever or devious or serious, depending. This is what the range of SF missions demands. Different teams just happen to run with different moods at different times. In a sense, they have to. If every team is identically structured, so that on paper all teams are interchangeable, how else do teams attract commanders' attention except by playing off one another?

But though this might be a structural given, it is not a strategy teams consciously adopt. Teams willfully set out to show one another up, but not by calculating how their members should act vis a vis soldiers on other ODAs. Rather, a team's ethos is determined by where its own critical mass lies. On ODA 309, for instance, the official and unofficial pecking orders jibed. The team sergeant was the most forceful and charismatic person on the team, and he purposely highlighted the captain's strengths in order to have a strong partner, so that together they would present a united front, and appear a perfectly complementary pair. The fact that the team lacked a chief warrant officer hardly mattered. By contrast, ODA 300 had only its chief as leader. However, he provided too little leadership, while the team sergeant proved equally ineffectual. Team members joked that he was retired on active duty (or ROAD). Thus, two lower-ranking sergeants found themselves able to exert all sorts of pressure on their teammates. Separately they each had strong personalities, but also they both saw eye-to-eye. Consequently, they became a force unto themselves, and by dint of example convinced enough other members of the team that cutting corners was not just fun, but fine.

And nothing, as it turned out, occurred to prove them wrong. In terms of plum assignments, ODA 300 did do just as well as ODA 309, although there was also a reason beyond the self-laudatory reasons 300 members often cited. ODA 300 was a specialty team, the only team in the company qualified in HALO (high altitude low opening) jumping (a specialized mode of infiltration). No wonder it received certain types of missions. Small wonder, too, that members then felt special enough to breach the rules (including the rule of hierarchy) whenever possible. Nor did 300 members regard opportunism as laziness. Instead, they routinely prided themselves on cleverness, and offered *this* as further proof of their specialness.

The Chain of Command and Information Flows

Without question teams develop team room tunnel vision. This almost can't be helped. Teams exist in a highly constrained world. But it is also one in which company members interact — in the company bathroom, in the company hallway, on company exercises. As individuals, SF soldiers are continually shunted off to different schools to learn new skills, or to other teams to plug holes. Thus, loose connections persist throughout the organization. Plus, all SF soldiers have been trained to gather information. In the field they have to be able to respond to events quickly, often based on scanty intelligence — exactly the same sorts of skills they can then apply in garrison. Trained to be survivalists, team members never know when what they have heard may prove useful, while since potentially anything can be usable, why not indulge in swapping rumors and gossip. Not surprisingly then, higher command has real reason to never divulge too much.

Knowledge in the armed forces is often compartmentalized. In elite units like Special Forces, where the work is often classified, "need to know" is strictly adhered to. At the same time, such compartmentalization is also part and parcel of how hierarchy works. The higher up the chain of command officers move the more they become privy to. The farther down the chain of command soldiers sit, the less they need to know, presumably because they have no choice but to do what they are told. Practically speaking, "need to know" and the compartmentalization of knowledge help confound potential enemies and cut down on the secrets men captured in war can spill. But also, simply structurally, privileged knowledge sets apart those who can know it from those who should not.

Indeed, the entire officer-enlisted divide is predicated on the significance of knowledge, who possesses it, and to what degree. Typically, NCOs do not have college degrees; officers do. But also, officers and SF NCOs (among whom college degrees can be found) privilege different types of knowledge. Officers steep themselves in strategy, tactics, military history, and other book-learned lore. SF NCOs, on the other hand, value experience. Part of this has to be considered self-select, while part results from what officers above the rank of captain, as opposed to NCOs, do. Officers manage; NCOs deploy. NCOs are also hands-on teachers. Books cannot shoot or heal. Books are also not very useful to "the indig" — the indigenous peasants, villagers, and illiterate soldiers — with whom SF ODAs often deal.

Consequently, on several levels, and largely because they are so schooled, officers and soldiers see the world quite differently.

Because teams are not privy to higher command's decisions the assumption at the ODA level is that all decisions are based on one of only two things: impressions of a) the team leader and b) the team as a coherent whole. Teams often do not realize that far less revolves around them — the team — than they would like to think. Often they read too much into decisions. More often they just do not know enough, not having all the

information higher command does. Actually, information cuts all ways. Often ODA members actually have more information about their peers than commanders do, and do not realize that partial information can seem more than sufficient from on high.

Whether battalion and group staffs realize the extent to which second-guessing takes place in team rooms is unclear. There is not a great deal of honest information which flows either up or down the chain of command. Up the chain flattery seems to color everything. Down the chain "need to know" continually narrows what is disseminated. Again, too, the very nature of hierarchy tends to pre-determine perspectives. Higher command does not need to worry about what teams think; teams follow orders. From command's point of view motivating teams thus requires little effort.

Whether higher command consciously recognizes the effects of its manipulation of the information flow, it works to commanders' advantage to have all teams thinking that decisions are made as arbitrarily as teams assume, dependent on personality and displays of readiness. Otherwise, how could officers keep everyone marching forward on the same treadmill? Explaining little to NCOs encourages them to read into every situation and to presume that choices are made on the basis of something over which they have some control, like comportment or ability. Without question, too, forcing teams to compare notes in order to try to figure out what is "really" going on only pushes all of them to try harder, to know more, and to do better.

At the same time, commanders themselves walk a fine line. They, too, have superiors to answer to. Therefore, they should assign missions to the teams they consider their best. The teams' success will only rebound to their credit. However, the image they really want conveyed up the chain (as they choose) is that any of their teams would do just as well; all are outstanding. To their superiors they cannot afford to appear partial or deficient.

A second catch comes if the battalion and company commanders do not see eye to eye. Sometimes they hold very different philosophies. For instance, one might value innovative training while another wants to see nothing but strenuous workouts. Generally, they try not to reveal too many of their differences to the teams. Not only is full honesty contrary to command, but often there is no "good" reason for commanders to be at odds. Sometimes their differences reflect little more than personal preferences, and technically teams are not supposed to train to preferences, but to standards. However, it is also impossible to convince teams that commanders do not favor certain styles, certain regimens, or specific officers. How else explain why that other team got *the* mission?

Essentially, experienced NCOs as well as most captains recognize that if they read between the lines and then edge just beyond what is ordered they (too) might curry favor. This means that, being ambitious, teams perpetually attempt to surpass the standard. Which inflates expectations. Which raises the stakes. Which is good — for command. Otherwise, if teams were left to think that being rewarded were simply a matter of meeting the standard, hierarchy would quickly lose its edge.

This should be one proof that the system, as it has evolved, is remarkably clever. But there is also a second proof. This one is more elementary and elegant still: in unconventional warfare there is no "right" way to perform a mission. Or rather, there can be as many good plans as there are teams and any or all might succeed. The ultimate test is an actual mission. The problem is only one team will receive it. From higher command's point of view, which one does not much matter. From the teams' point of view, which one is all that counts.

The greatest ambiguity for ODAs, then, is never precisely knowing the answers to who, what, where, when, or why specific teams are chosen, yet having to approximate "how" in order to beat out others' approximations. The system offers team members some choice about means, but no choice about ends. Commanders, meanwhile, have plenty of choice regarding teams, but no choice about having to choose. Consequently, no matter how much teams may act as though they are separable, they chase excellence and stay on edge thanks to being scrutinized together. From without, their identical structure makes them seem interchangeable enough. From on high, their commanders are compelled to view them as equally competitive. But from within and below, being considered identical is completely unacceptable. Structure may be standardizable. But not men.

Such a conviction, of course, is completely self-congratulatory. Team members cannot help but peg their egos directly to excellence; these are men in groups (Tiger 1970), and men in elite groups on top of that. In other words, just being *on* an SF team boosts egos. With ego so involved, ambiguity has no place. From without, meanwhile, one has to wonder: could this be any neater or more convenient? Probably not by design.

NOTES

[1]The material presented here also appears in *The Company They Keep: Life Inside the U.S. Army Special Forces*, which offers a broader ethnographic account of Special Forces.

[2]There is one further hierarchy, that of chief warrant officers. Chief warrant officers fall somewhere between officers and non-commissioned officers in terms of duties and responsibilities.

[3]In fact, even those individuals who begin their careers by enlisting and then attend Officer Candidate School are not sent back to their same units while, as officers move forward in rank, they too are sent away (at least temporarily) to circumvent the problems inherent in status adjustment. I am grateful to Louis Hicks for reminding me of just how closely linked mobility is to standardization.

[4]1st, 3rd, 5th, 7th, and 10th. Each is responsible for operating in a different military theater of operations.

[5]Of course, most problems are dealt with by team sergeants and the company sergeant major, who are responsible for interceding on a soldier's behalf with the officer chain of command. But sometimes problems cannot be contained by NCOs and either come (or are brought) to commanders' attention.

[6]Of course, too, no one is more skilled than senior NCOs at quickly undermining (and torpedoing) captains whom they consider dangerous to either the teams or SF.

[7]All ODAs are referred to by a three-digit number. Each numeral has a specific meaning and the entire number identifies a single team. Knowing an ODA number allows you to identify a soldier's Group, battalion, company, *and* team. ODAs 309 and 300 are actual teams. These particular numbers are contrived.

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