



SPECIAL ACTION FORCE

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# ASIA

by Eugene Piasecki

On 7 May 1954, the Vietminh victory over French forces at Dien Bien Phu was a major success for Communist-supported insurgencies and independence movements from imperial powers. The U. S. Army determined to educate its leaders about counter-guerrilla warfare and pacification and to develop strategies and tactics to counter insurgencies. Although President Dwight D. Eisenhower favored a national security strategy of nuclear deterrence, General (GEN) John E. Dahlquist, Chief of Army Field Forces, realized an alternative had to be formalized. He tasked the Psywar Center at Fort Bragg, North Carolina as early as 4 March 1954 to “assume responsibility for *all* matters concerning guerrilla warfare and counterinsurgency (COIN) as the ‘primary agency for the development of doctrine, tactics, and techniques.’”<sup>1</sup> It was also to publish the training literature on guerrilla warfare to educate commissioned and noncommissioned officers. Known by the ‘umbrella’ term Special Warfare, the military and paramilitary measures, when consolidated, included unconventional warfare, counterinsurgency, and psychological warfare. This was reinforced by the Army Chief of Staff, GEN George H. Decker, in his ‘Strategic Army Study, 1970’ (STARS-70) in December 1960.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this article is to explain how the 1st Special Forces Group (1SFG) (Airborne), addressed the Special Warfare counterinsurgency challenges in Southeast Asia (SEA).

After being inaugurated as the 35<sup>th</sup> President of the United States on 20 January 1961, President John F. Kennedy shifted America’s national security strategy from nuclear deterrence to flexible response.<sup>3</sup> Flexible response called for America’s military to field forces that were task-organized to deal with conflict at any level. In STARS-70, GEN George H. Decker confidently stated that the U. S. Army was “uniquely capable of confronting the Communists face-to-face in the struggle for freedom in

the less developed countries.”<sup>4</sup> To support the new strategy, the Army needed a unique and more adaptable Special Forces organization. The result was the formation of several regional Special Action Forces (SAFs).

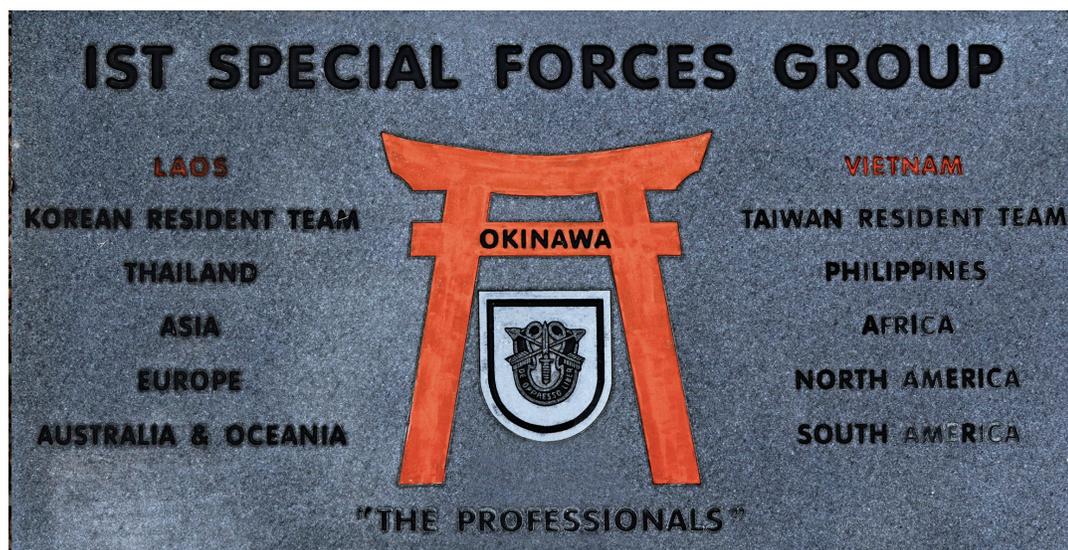
Turning the fight against Communism into a Special Warfare national crusade, the Kennedy administration began codifying its intentions with a series of documents called National Security Action Memoranda (NSAM). Among the more significant of these, NSAM 182 Counterinsurgency Doctrine (August 1962), provided the following strategic policy guidance:

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“The President has approved the document entitled ‘U.S. Overseas Internal Defense Policy,’ (USOIDP) which sets forth a national counterinsurgency doctrine for the use of U. S. departments and agencies concerned with the internal defense of overseas areas threatened by subversive insurgency, and has directed its promulgation to serve as basic policy guidance to diplomatic missions, consular personnel, and military commands abroad; to government departments and agencies at home; and to the government educational system.”<sup>5</sup>

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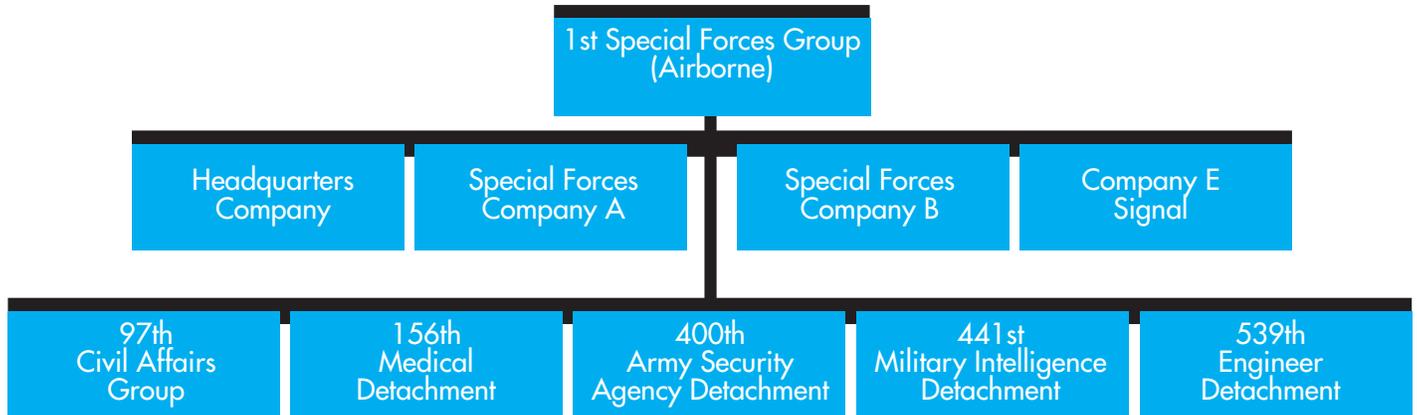
Acting on “the presumption that counter-insurgency programs (also known as ‘internal defense programs’) should not be limited to military measures but should also involve as necessary such additional dimensions as economic development, police control, and effective local government,” individual embassy Country Teams coordinated with host nations to prepare their respective Internal Defense Plans (IDPs).<sup>6</sup> Unified Commands allocated personnel and materiel resources to support Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG)-managed IDPs, as well as provided input to national military FID plans. To implement these plans and



President John F. Kennedy regarded U.S. Army Special Forces as the organization best suited to defeat worldwide Communist insurgencies.

This stone, located in the USASOC Memorial Plaza, is dedicated to the 1st Special Forces Group and their service in Southeast Asia from 1957 to the present.

# Special Action Force Asia



The base SAFASIA unit was the 1st Special Forces Group. It was augmented by conventional Civil Affairs, Military Intelligence, Army Security Agency, Engineer, and Medical detachments to train, advise, and assist host nation country forces in the full spectrum of FID activities.



Colonel Francis J. Kelly commanded the 1st SFG and SAFASIA between 1964 and 1966. He then commanded the 5th SFG in Vietnam from 1966-1967.

initiatives, the SAFs were assigned to their respective Army Component Commands and placed under the Operational Control (OPCON) of their overseas Unified Commands since Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOC) did not exist.<sup>7</sup>

Designed to meet the challenges presented by Communist-supported ‘wars of national liberation,’ the original direct action mission of the SAF was changed to foreign internal defense and development (FID) and focused on training, advisory support, and operational advice and assistance to host countries engaged in counterinsurgency operations.<sup>8</sup> To accomplish this, the Army provisionally organized four SAFs, each centered on an active Special Forces Group that was already oriented toward a specific geographic area. The first SAF to be organized was SAF Latin America (SAFLA) in 1963 centered on the 8<sup>th</sup> SFG (A) at Fort Gulick in the Panama Canal Zone. SAFLA was followed in 1964 by forming SAF Asia (SAFASIA) around the 1<sup>st</sup> SFG (A) on Okinawa; SAF Middle East (SAFMIDEAST) by the 3<sup>rd</sup> SFG (A); and SAF Africa (SAFAFRICA) using the 6<sup>th</sup> SFG (A) as its base. The 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> SFGs were stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

In SAFASIA’s case, its chain of command started at the Unified level with the Pacific Command (PACOM) in Hawaii and ended on Okinawa with the Army Component of the Ryukyu Command (USARYIS). With the strategic guidance established by NSAM 182, SAFASIA’s doctrinal operational organization originated from the 12 December 1963 Army Field Manual 31-22, *U. S. Army Counterinsurgency Forces*.<sup>9</sup> As the Commander, 1<sup>st</sup> SFG (A), Colonel (COL) Francis J. Kelly, also became the Commander, SAFASIA when the 97<sup>th</sup> Civil Affairs (CA) Group, 156<sup>th</sup> Medical (Med) Detachment, 400<sup>th</sup> Army Security Agency (ASA) Detachment, 441<sup>st</sup> Military Intelligence (MI) Detachment, and 539<sup>th</sup> Engineer Detachment were attached to the 1<sup>st</sup> SFG.<sup>10</sup> This task organization was not just unique to the requirements in Asia, but became a model for the other SAFs, reflected President Kennedy’s flexible response doctrine, and addressed the countermeasures against Communist insurgent warfare as well as a nation-building counterstrategy.<sup>11</sup>

SAFASIA soon found itself rapidly task organizing and deploying its assets to assist other Southeast Asian nations such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, and Taiwan.<sup>12</sup> Among the first units deployed from the 1<sup>st</sup> SFG (A) were SF ODAs on temporary duty (TDY) to South Vietnam to advise the Vietnamese Special Forces units involved in training the Vietnamese Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG). These were followed by additional elements that were dispatched to Thailand to train units of the Royal Thai Army, Thai Border Police, and the Royal Thai Army Volunteer Force (The Black Panther Division) that eventually conducted combat operations in South Vietnam.<sup>13</sup> One of the key elements of every SAF mission was to negotiate the mandated approval process required before being allowed to enter another country. Starting with an invitation from a host country to provide assistance, the SAF could neither

This is the 1st SFG Distinctive Unit Insignia worn between 1957 and 1960. The *Torii* gate recognizes its service on Okinawa. The three arrows colored pale blue, dark blue, and green denote SF's abilities to infiltrate by air, sea, or land. The crossed arrows reflect the unit's lineage with the First Special Service Force. The globe with rings represents the motto "Anywhere, Anytime, Anyplace"; and the Latin phrase "*Ubique sed Nusquam*" — "Everywhere, yet Nowhere."



Beret Flash for the 46th Company formerly stationed in Thailand.



Beret Flash for the 39th Special Forces Detachment stationed in South Korea.



Colonel Charles M. Simpson III commanded the 1st SFG and SAFASIA from 1969-1971. He authored the book *Inside the Green Berets, The First Thirty Years: A History of the U.S. Army Special Forces* published in 1983.



accept nor begin to execute the mission it had been asked to perform until that nation's U. S. Ambassador and the Chief of the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) granted approval.<sup>14</sup>

This approval process for the 1<sup>st</sup> SFG to deploy teams soon became a formality as individual Southeast Asian countries began to realize the positive benefits they were receiving from SAFASIA security assistance and civic action missions. One example of this was the 'AUMEE' series of exercises between American and Nationalist Chinese Special Forces on the island of Taiwan that simulated conducting unconventional warfare on the Chinese mainland.<sup>15</sup> As retired Sergeant Major (SGM) Gilbert R. Turcotte remembered, "After jumping onto Henry 7 Drop Zone on Taiwan we were required to establish communication with headquarters, 1<sup>st</sup> SFG on Okinawa once we had cleared the DZ."<sup>16</sup> That ability to make long-distance communications shots was an important mission element. Also during the same period, COL Kelly and SAFASIA deployed a modified C/B Team to Lopburi, Thailand. As the forerunner to D Company, 1<sup>st</sup> SFG, and later the 46<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Company, many of the civic action projects undertaken by this task-organized element during the period were completed in conjunction with military training missions.<sup>17</sup> Rounding out these early 1<sup>st</sup> SFG (A) efforts was the establishment of the Resident Detachment-Korea. Activated as a 'combat-deployable' element of Combined Forces Command, the Detachment's orientation and mission changed when it was assigned to Korea as a training unit with a Foreign Internal Defense Mission and eventually redesignated as the 39<sup>th</sup> SF Detachment.<sup>18</sup>

Even though the 1<sup>st</sup> SFG continued to send ODAs to Vietnam during the 1960s to support the 5<sup>th</sup> SFG (A), it also deployed SAF teams throughout the rest of Asia to confront the noncombat elements of counterinsurgency. This was especially true in Thailand. Troops from the SAFASIA 539<sup>th</sup> Engineer and 156<sup>th</sup> Medical Detachments under U. S. AID direction trained numerous Thai elements to build roads, operate and maintain heavy equipment, and institute public health, sanitation, and medical care procedures.<sup>19</sup> These FID missions continued to be performed until American policy toward Southeast Asia changed during the Nixon administration. The shift toward 'Vietnamization' and the official U. S. - Hanoi peace talks in Paris, France, caused SAFASIA to reduce its military training across Southeast Asia.

The impacts of these initiatives soon became apparent to all SAFASIA elements especially after COL Charles M. Simpson III assumed command of the 1<sup>st</sup> SFG (A) on 14 June 1969.<sup>20</sup> Drawing upon the civic action experience he had gained as an SF company commander with the 10<sup>th</sup> SFG (A) at Bad Toelz, Germany, COL Simpson emphasized 'nation-building' skills, and formed Disaster Assistance and Relief Teams (DART) for use throughout eastern Asia. The DARTs were created from existing SAFASIA assets and consisted of a twelve-man ODA augmented by two,

**“Teams from the 1<sup>st</sup> Special Forces Group were literally lifesavers during both calamities. ... The DARTs saved lives and salvaged livelihoods, and earned America many friends.”** – MSG Jake Jacobson



The Philippine Presidential Unit citation was awarded to the 1st SFG for its disaster relief efforts on Central Luzon in July and August 1972.

1<sup>st</sup> SFG surgeons and four to six medical NCOs from the 156<sup>th</sup> Medical Detachment.<sup>21</sup> Shortly after their creation, DARTs went into action and proved their value. Two examples particularly stand out. The first was the response to the floods in Pakistan in 1971, and the other was to assist Filipinos on Luzon after a typhoon flooded most of that island in 1972. As MSG Jake Jacobson recalls: “teams from the 1<sup>st</sup> Special Forces Group were literally lifesavers during both calamities. Operating rescue boats, inoculating civilians, distributing food, and directing rebuilding efforts, the DARTs saved lives and salvaged livelihoods, and earned America many friends.”<sup>22</sup> In recognition for this latter effort, the 1st SFG (A) was awarded the Philippine Presidential Unit Citation.<sup>23</sup>

Throughout his command tour, COL Simpson balanced SAFASIA's civic action and tactical training requirements. One thing that COL Simpson absolutely insisted on was that all 1<sup>st</sup> SFG (A) deploying elements ensure that these opportunities inspired the credibility of those being assisted and “any after action photographs had better show only brown faces in the front rows and white faces in the rearmost row.”<sup>24</sup> This guidance was incorporated by SF ODA 112 during its participation in the joint Republic of Korea (ROK) - U.S. Special Forces Exercise, FOAL WING I, and culminated with elements of the Group Headquarters participating in Command Post Exercise FOAL EAGLE 70. Both of these exercises integrated American and South Korean personnel in performing the necessary command and staff responsibilities to successfully execute combined unconventional warfare (UW) operations.<sup>25</sup> Closer to home in the three Ryukuan Island Groups, SAFASIA's engineers and medical/dental teams became familiar visitors. They repaired or replaced existing water systems to improve hygiene and sanitary conditions, and conducted sick calls. Additionally, SAF veterinarian teams treated 700 animals for various diseases and ailments, and suggested American animal husbandry techniques to local animal owners and farmers.<sup>26</sup>

SAFASIA Special Forces elements that were not deployed off Okinawa between December 1969 and March 1971 maintained their training readiness by participating in Exercise SAGE WARRIOR at Camp Hardy, Okinawa. Consisting of three phases, the purpose of SAGE WARRIOR

was to determine each ODA's operational readiness level. Phase I consisted of detachment-conducted military occupational specialty (MOS) training and cross training. That culminated with all detachment members taking a series of written tests on their cross-trained SF skills. Phase II tested individual confidence and physical conditioning. It included a 100-meter swim and five-mile run. Phase III tested the detachment's collective performance. This involved the SF Company infiltrating an ODA into an Unconventional Warfare Operations Area (UWOA) from the sea, contacting a guerrilla band, training that organization in the skills necessary to strike a simulated missile site, and exfiltration by helicopter.<sup>27</sup>

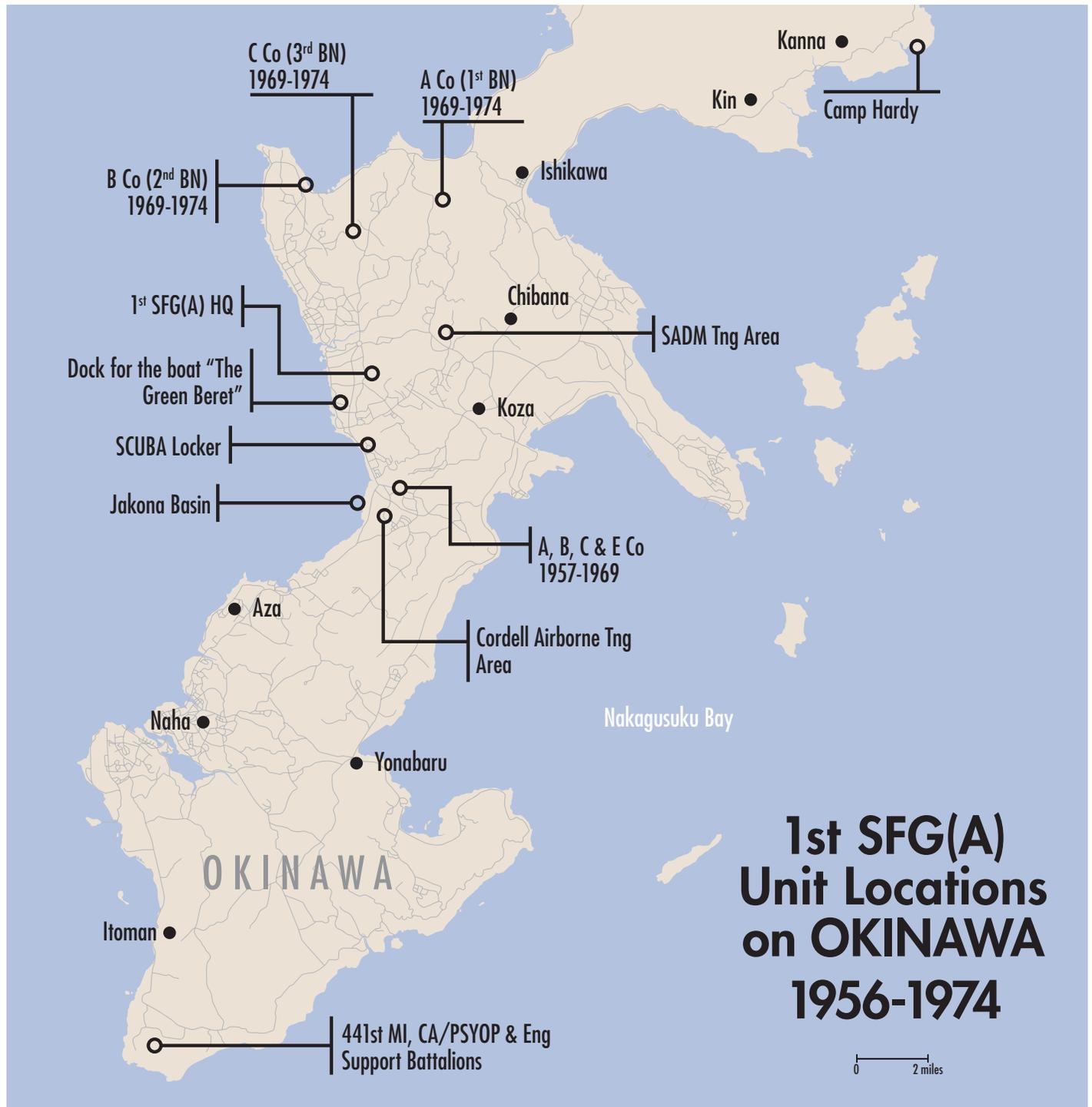
To what extent the results of Exercise SAGE WARRIOR determined whether an individual or ODA deployed on a mission is unknown. The program was discontinued in March 1971. This did not mean that SAFASIA Special Forces individual and operational element capabilities were not assessed. Starting in the summer of 1971, two new programs were implemented. The first determined individual deployability and lasted three-weeks. A series of tests evaluated the primary MOS and cross-trained skill levels of each Special Forces soldier newly assigned to the 1<sup>st</sup> SFG (A). Building on the individual skill assessments, a collective unit evaluation was used [Operational Readiness Test (ORT)]. Unlike SAGE WARRIOR which evaluated only two ODAs per month, this improved ORT could simultaneously evaluate an Operational Detachment B (ODB) and three ODAs during a fifteen-day field training exercise (FTX).<sup>28</sup>

Added to these military tasks was COL Simpson's additional requirement that all SAFASIA ODAs attend a special school that taught them basic construction skills: brick-laying; simple carpentry; and how to mix and pour concrete. These skills began paying huge dividends after the first training cycle. Philippine President Ferdinand E. Marcos requested American assistance to complete his ambitious school construction program. Using this as a dual-1<sup>st</sup> SFG and SAFASIA training opportunity, a tailored force package was selected and deployed to the Philippines for six months. Comprising this element was an ODB for command and control, six ODAs to perform on-site work supervision duties, and several engineer officers from the

539<sup>th</sup> Engineer Detachment for technical expertise. Besides providing the SF ODAs the chance to live and work with foreigners to achieve specific tasks and goals in a strange environment, radio operators were able to practice their long-range communications capabilities from ODA to ODB and from ODB to Manila and Okinawa.<sup>29</sup>

In spite of all the positive military and Civic Action contributions that the 1<sup>st</sup> SFG (A) and SAFASIA had made in the Far East, under the command of U.S. Army Ryukyu Islands and under the operational control of U.S. Army Pacific they were a political target because of its theater

wartime mission.<sup>30</sup> As a result, on 17 June 1971, when the Reversion to Japan of the Ryukyu and Daito Island Agreement was signed in Washington and Tokyo, the future of 1<sup>st</sup> SFG (A) and SAFASIA was sealed.<sup>31</sup> Inactivated at Fort Bragg, NC on 27 June 1974 (28 June 1974 on Okinawa), it happened at a time that the only U.S. Special Forces presence in Asia was reduced to the small detachment of Special Forces-qualified soldiers in Korea. This absence of a permanent Special Forces presence in Asia was short-lived. The international political and military situation caused the United States to reevaluate its strategy, reactivate



the 1<sup>st</sup> SFG (A) in 1984, and forward-base the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion back on Okinawa. Unfortunately, the 1960's SAF concept became a casualty of the post-Vietnam force reductions, and while retained as a 'Security Action Force' in FM 31-20 *Doctrine for Special Forces Operations* (April 1990), this concept never became reality. ▲

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## Endnotes

- 1 Michael McClintock, "Toward a Doctrine of Special Warfare," *Instruments of Statecraft: U. S. Guerrilla Warfare, Counterinsurgency, and Counterterrorism, 1940-1990*, 18. Accessed on 11 December 2012, [http://www.statecraft.org/chapter\\_2.html](http://www.statecraft.org/chapter_2.html). Army Field Forces was the WWII fore-runner to the Continental Army Command (CONARC) and today's U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) and U. S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC).
- 2 Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942-1976* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History United States Army, 2007), 198.
- 3 Elliot V. Converse III, *Rearming for the Cold War, 1945-1960* (Washington, DC: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2012), 596. President Eisenhower's 'New Look' policy and strategy stressed nuclear weapons, along with the deployment of the first operational guided missiles to provide security and make it possible to reduce military spending (vi). On the other hand, 'flexible response,' which had been articulated as early as 1956 by General Maxwell D. Taylor, represented a 'balanced' military capability that included strong conventional forces (596).
- 4 Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942-1976*, 165. This quote is from: Presentation, General Decker to General Staff Council, 25 Nov 60, subject: The U.S. Army and National Security, 1960-1970, 11, DCSOPS, 1960, RG 319, NARA.
- 5 U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, Volume VIII, National Security Policy, Document 105, 24 August 1962, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v08/d105>. Accessed on 24 February 2017.
- 6 U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, "U.S. Covert Actions and Counter-Insurgency Programs," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, Volume XXIV, Africa, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v24/actionstatement>. Accessed on 24 February 2017.
- 7 Dr. Charles H. Briscoe and Eugene G. Piasecki, Information Paper to CG, USASOC, "U.S. Army Special Action Forces (SAF)," 17 July 2012, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 8 *Field Manual 31-22, U.S. Army Counterinsurgency Forces* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, 1963), 20.
- 9 Memorandum from the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Politico-Military Affairs (Kitchen) to the Counselor and Chairman of the Policy Planning Council (Rostow), 12 March 1964, Department of State, Records Group 59, S/PC Files: Lot 70 D 199, National Archives and Records Administration.
- 10 John P. Foster, "Headquarters Special Action Force Asia, 1<sup>st</sup> Special Forces Group (Airborne), 1<sup>st</sup> Special Forces, History 1969-1971," USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, 6. COL Francis J. Kelly was also the commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Special Forces Group on Okinawa.
- 11 Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942-1976*, 225.
- 12 Master Sergeant (R) Harold 'Jake' Jacobson, e-mail to Eugene G. Piasecki, 24 February 2017, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 13 Foster, *Headquarters Special Action Force Asia*, 7.
- 14 Charles H. Simpson III, *Inside the Green Berets, The First Thirty Years A History of the U. S. Army Special Forces* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1983), 70.
- 15 "1<sup>st</sup> Special Forces Group History, 1956 – 1974," DVD, 2 March 2011, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, 34-35.
- 16 SGM (retired) Gilbert R. Turcotte, C Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Special Forces Group (Airborne), interview by Eugene G. Piasecki, 25 June 2015, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. SGM Turcotte, a radio operator himself, also stated that although each radio operator was required to be able to send and receive 15 words per minute (WPM) to graduate from SF Training Group, once he reported to the 1<sup>st</sup> SFG, he had to demonstrate the capability to send/receive 18 WPM to be assigned to an ODA.
- 17 "1<sup>st</sup> Special Forces Group History, 1956-1974," 33.
- 18 1<sup>st</sup> Special Forces Group History, 35. The 39<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Detachment was originally activated in Berlin, Germany on 1 September 1965. It remained there to perform an unconventional warfare mission until it was inactivated on 1 October 1984. Special Forces Detachment-Korea (SFD – K) was inactivated and reflagged as the 39<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Detachment in Korea on 16 October 2005. The 39<sup>th</sup> SF Detachment has remained the longest standing deployed Special Forces Operational Detachment (SFOD) in Army Special Forces history, and assumed the training and other missions previously performed by SFD-K.
- 19 Simpson, *Inside the Green Berets*, 93.
- 20 Foster, *Headquarters Special Action Force Asia*, 8.
- 21 Simpson, *Inside the Green Berets*, 187.
- 22 Jacobson e-mail, 24 February 2017.
- 23 Headquarters, Department of the Army, General Orders No. 11, Washington, DC, 23 April 1973. The Philippine Republic Presidential Unit Citation was awarded to the United States Army Disaster Assistance Relief Team (DART) for meritorious participation in disaster relief operations in flood-stricken provinces of Central Luzon in July and August 1972.
- 24 COL (retired) Allan W. Keener, former 1<sup>st</sup> SFG (A) adjutant, e-mail to Eugene G. Piasecki, 14 July 2015, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 25 Foster, *Headquarters Special Action Force Asia*, 9-10.
- 26 Foster, *Headquarters Special Action Force Asia*, 10.
- 27 Foster, *Headquarters, Special Action Force Asia*, 19.
- 28 Foster, *Headquarters, Special Action Force Asia*, 20-21.
- 29 Simpson, *Inside the Green Berets*, 194.
- 30 Simpson, *Inside the Green Berets*, 218.
- 31 "Reversion to Japan of the Ryukyu and Daito Islands Agreement Signed at Washington and Tokyo June 17, 1971. *Treaties and Other International Acts*, no. 7314 (1972): 446. The terms and conditions that established the basis for this treaty are explained in Department of State Bulletin 15 December 1969. At that time President Richard M. Nixon and Japanese Prime Minister Eisaku Sato determined the fate of the 1<sup>st</sup> SFG when they mutually agreed that "the United States would retain under the terms of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security such military facilities and areas in Okinawa as required in the mutual security of both countries." (555).