

Value Added: A/1/19th SFG in Iraq



by Robert W. Jones, Jr.

ONE of the hallmarks of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) is the integration of Reserve component units into the overall operation. During their participation in Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF), Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, 19th Special Forces Group (A/1/19th) demonstrated the ability of National Guard Special Forces (SF) teams not only to integrate with the Active force, but also to exemplify the Special Forces core values—especially versatility. In the words of one veteran sergeant, “19th Group broke the mold of old fat guys; the Guard [could] do the mission.”²

During initial call-up of National Guard Special Forces units after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, A/1/19th SFG provided individual replacement personnel for other units being deployed while the remainder of the company concentrated on previously scheduled peacetime training exercises. Eventually, twelve A/1/19th

soldiers deployed to Afghanistan in support of 3rd Special Forces Group (SFG).

In July 2002, the company was selected to conduct a joint combined exchange training (JCET) exercise in Malaysia. Training was centered around counterterrorism and emphasized close quarters combat and sniper skills.

While the company was still in Malaysia, it was notified that upon its return, the unit would mobilize and deploy to the Middle East. Contrary to expectations that A/1/19th would be sent to Afghanistan, the company command soon learned that the unit was being sent to Kuwait in support of Operation DESERT SPRING.

Operation DESERT SPRING (ODS) was the United Nations-approved ongoing contingency deployment developed after Operation DESERT STORM as support for Operation SOUTHERN WATCH—the enforcement of the No-Fly Zones in southern Iraq.³

VERSATILITY. Special Forces soldiers adapt quickly to rapidly changing environments, consistently operating and easily transitioning across the entire spectrum of conflict, from peace to war. [Special Forces are] truly a capability-based organization, providing the widest range of capabilities to accomplish assigned missions.¹

The Special Forces commitment for ODS was a reinforced company of between five and nine SF teams, operating as coalition support teams (CSTs) training and working with the Kuwaiti army. In the event of aggression by Iraqi forces, the Special Forces CSTs would provide support to the Kuwaitis, deconflicting any problems between coalition units and providing terminal guidance with close air support in order to defend the Kuwait-Iraq border.⁴ In order to meet the requirements of ODS, A/1/19th SFG was reinforced with a support slice from the group headquarters and a military intelligence Special Operations Team-Alpha (SOT-A), bringing the total force deploying to approximately 110 soldiers.⁵

Between 26 and 28 September 2002, A/1/19th SFG arrived in Kuwait and immediately set to work. Its primary mission was training and conducting liaison duties with elements of the Kuwaiti Armed Forces.

Some of the A/1/19th Operational Detachments-Alpha (ODAs) trained with the Kuwaiti 35th Mechanized Brigade and other conventional units, while others trained with the Kuwaiti Naval Commandos. One of the most important tasks accomplished was extensive close air support (CAS) training, including an urban CAS scenario on the Faylakah Island range complex. The company also conducted extensive demolitions and live fire training with Ground Mobility Vehicles (GMVs), the High-Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle (HMMWV, “humvee”) modified for desert operations.

In addition to the CST mission, by November 2002 the staff of A/1/19th began planning and training to support 5th SFG in the event of combat operations against Iraq under Operations Plan (OPLAN) 1003V. According to the OPLAN, two SF forward operating bases (FOBs 52 and 53) would operate in southern Iraq supporting the con-

Members of ODA 912 witnessed their first “Baghdad Sunrise” on 10 April 2003. They welcomed the dawn after spending hours hunkered down in a maintenance building in the Baghdad International Airport complex while 3rd Infantry Division and Iraqi defenders lit the night sky with tracer fire.

ventional force (the Coalition Forces Land Component Command or CFLCC) as it moved north to Baghdad.⁶

Under Major Greg Allen, A/1/19th began training for an SF liaison element (SFLE) mission with coalition forces. The SF planners' major concern was avoiding fratricide of ODAs conducting strategic reconnaissance (SR) and unconventional warfare missions beyond the forward edge of the battle area.⁷ Even as planning progressed, ODA 912 was given a special mission tasking to Coalition Forces Special Operations Component



As Special Forces Liaison Elements, the ODAs of A/1/19th were tasked with the difficult job of ensuring that 3rd Infantry Division and 101st Airborne Division did not mistake 5th Group's forward-deployed ODAs for enemy forces. In exchange for such deconfliction, the conventional forces provided ODA 915 with support, such as fuel for their GMVs.

Command (CFSOCC) headquarters.⁸ With ODA 912 at CFSOCC and a number of men still with 3rd SFG in Afghanistan, the rest of A/1/19th was assigned as SFLEs to both U.S. and coalition conventional ground forces.⁹

As war neared, the remaining five ODAs of A/1/19th began their SFLE missions. ODAs 911 and 913 were assigned to 1st Marine Expeditionary Force (1st MEF), primarily supporting the 1st Marine Division. ODA 915 became the SFLE for the 101st Airborne Division. To support both the British 1st Armored Division and the U.S. 3rd Infantry Division (3rd ID), ODA 914 operated as a "split team." The ODA commander and the team sergeant led the "A" split and supported the British. The "B" split of ODA 914 joined ODA 916 in support of 3rd ID, whose mission comprised the main effort of

Operation IRAQI FREEDOM: the assault on Baghdad.

With only one and a half ODAs to cover the entire 3rd ID, ODA 916 split into three teams, giving the SFLE four functioning splits. Each of the three ODA 916 splits consisted of four men and a single GMV, with one split each assigned to 3/7th Cavalry, the division cavalry squadron, and the lead brigades. ODA 914B also distributed its efforts among the 3rd ID units. While in their tactical assembly areas, the SF teams began coordinating with their assigned units. Much of the coordination was designed to prevent fratricide of forward-deployed SF teams operating in nonstandard vehicles.

As President Bush's deadline for action neared, ODA 916 conducted a detailed analysis of the 3rd ID plan, cross-referenced it with the 5th SFG (acting as Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force (CJSOTF)-West) plan, and made face-to-face coordination with the individual ODAs and 3rd ID units. During the coordination with the 3rd ID staff, battalion commanders identified the companies and platoons likely to be tasked with the on-order mission to conduct a relief and passage of lines. ODA 916 developed a training plan and practiced the drill with all of the designated platoons. The effort expended during the training proved worthwhile once hostilities commenced and the 5th SFG ODAs successfully infiltrated into southern Iraq.¹⁰

On the morning of 20 March 2003, coalition forces began the ground assault on Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq.¹¹ One of the first deconfliction missions conducted by ODA 914B with the 3rd ID concerned the linkup with ODA 555 in As Samawah. After conducting SR on the Qadasiyah Canal Bridges, ODA 555 was concerned that with 3rd ID units fighting throughout the city, they might be fired upon. ODA 555 maintained security and stayed in its hide site until ODA 914B could escort the team safely back to the 3rd ID's tactical command post.

As OPLAN 1003V was refined and supporting plans were developed at all levels, 1st MEF added to its combat power by creating Task Force (TF) Tarawa. Centered on the headquarters of the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade, and consisting of three infantry battalions and attached logistics, artillery, engineer, tank, reconnaissance, and light armored vehicle companies, TF Tarawa was of considerable size. Since all of A/1/19th's ODAs were tasked out, the company headquarters—Operational Detachment-Bravo (ODB) 910—task organized to become a sixth SFLE. The twelve soldiers quickly adapted and soon the mechanic manned the M2 .50 caliber machine gun and a rigger manned the MK19 40mm grenade

launcher, allowing ODB 910 to ride into action with the Marines. As TF Tarawa moved through Iraq, ODB 910 coordinated fire support with the various ODAs infiltrated into the area of operations, which numbered between five and ten teams at any given time.¹²

ODA 915 began its SFLE mission to the 101st Airborne Division by linking up with the division at Camp New Jersey in Kuwait. The team worked in shifts in the division's main tactical operations center (D-main) to coordinate space, to track the 5th SFG units with Blue Force Trackers, and to provide updates to the command.¹³ Once the 101st left Kuwait, ODA 915 conducted split team operations; ODA 915A accompanied Major General (MG) David Petraeus and the division tactical center, while ODA 915B followed about a day later with D-main.

Serving with the 101st occasionally provided an opportunity to do more than liaison work. Staff Sergeant (SSG) Ethan Hansen (pseudonym) represented the special operations forces (SOF) element in a war gaming session conducted by MG Petraeus. After the field-grade officers reviewed several scenarios for operations in An Najaf, MG Petraeus turned to SSG Hansen and asked, "SOF, what do you think?" Hansen replied, "Sir, this is what I would do," and explained a course of action. The assembled officers criticized Hansen's plan extensively, until they were cut off by the general: "Okay, this is what we

are going to do—exactly what [Hansen] said."¹⁴

After the division had moved north for approximately two weeks, ODA 915 was reassigned to CJSOTF-West, and subsequently attached to advanced operating base (AOB) 570 and two ODAs from 3rd Battalion, 5th SFG, in the vicinity of An Najaf. This spelled the end of ODA 915's SFLE mission and a chance to prove its versatility by taking on new missions. ODA 915's responsibilities in An Najaf included gathering intelligence and conducting raids on high value targets (important enemy personnel). On 10 April 2003, ODA 915 became the quick reaction force for an incident sparked by rival Muslim cleric Imam Abdul Majid al-Khoei, who attempted to enter the Imam Ali Mosque. Although the team arrived within minutes of the attempt, it was too late: al-Khoei had been stabbed to death by a mob. A warrant was later issued for the arrest of Muqtada al-Sadr for his role in the murder.¹⁵ ODA 915 also found itself locating and cleaning out weapons caches from local schools. The weapons, mines, mortars, and ammunition were consolidated, and some of the items were used to rearm the Iraqi police and the Civil Defense Corps.¹⁶

While the other five ODAs assumed SFLE duties, ODA 912 was selected for a special mission. In early December 2002, ODA 912 was assigned to CFSOCC with duty as a personal security team (PST) for Brigadier General Gary Harrell. The team immediately

Although not a lead combat team while serving as liaison to the 101st Airborne Division, ODA 915 suffered through the same elemental challenges as everybody else, including blinding sandstorms.



started training for this unusual mission, using the Diplomatic Security Service manual as a resource. The team flew to Qatar, where CFSOCC headquarters was located, and continued training. In anticipation of a move forward to Iraq, ODA 912 planned for various contingencies. The team also spent time in Qatar training a small detail of military police as a security force for the tactical operations center.

Although “stuck” in Qatar for three weeks while the rest of A/1/19th waged war, members of ODA 912 did finally make it to Iraq. On 10 April 2003, four team members and SOCCENT Command Sergeant

From peacetime training exercises to personal security details, locally patrolling on foot to planning a 101st Airborne Division’s operation, and palace renovation team to Special Forces liaison element, A/1/19th successfully completed every mission it was handed.

Major (CSM) Jay F. Lovelace loaded one GMV on an MC-130 from the Pennsylvania Air National Guard and flew to Baghdad International Airport (BIAP) in blackout conditions.¹⁷ The flight began uneventfully, but once it hit the Karbala Gap, the plane received heavy anti-aircraft and ground fire, including rockets. The soldiers later learned that their plane was only the second one to land at BIAP since the war began.¹⁸

A firefight between 3rd ID soldiers and Iraqi defenders blocked the SF soldiers and the sergeant major from moving directly from their plane to their final destination in the airport complex. While the 3rd ID continued its fighting in and around the airport, the newly arrived group found and secured a maintenance building on the west side of the airfield. The men joined several 3rd ID soldiers watching the red and green tracers flashing against the night sky, and soon saw their first “Baghdad sunrise”—a red sun rising through the dust and smoke of combat, outlined in the landscape of the city.

Once the rest of ODA 912 rejoined the advance party, the team secured one of Saddam’s small palaces (a “ballroom palace”) about one kilometer south of BIAP. The palace, which became CFSOCC forward headquarters, was three stories tall with thirty rooms, including several large ballrooms (perfect for the operations center), and a large pool within the compound. Once settled into its new team house (the pool cabana), ODA 912 added local patrols to its mission profile.

After the initial thirty days as SFLEs, A/1/19th began additional missions with FOBs 52 and 53. For the most part, these consisted of a 19th SFG team colocating with a 5th SFG team for increased capability. Combined, the two ODAs could then provide additional security and conduct missions. As major Iraqi resistance evaporated, the ODAs completed the transition from the SFLE mission and prepared to go home.

After ten months in the Middle East, the soldiers of A/1/19th began to redeploy home in June 2003. The ODAs first traveled by ground with their vehicles to Kuwait. Once vehicles and weapons were maintained and cleaned, they packed their equipment and began perhaps the most tedious part of any operation—waiting for a ride home. After spending three weeks at Camp Arifjan, A/1/19th finally returned home to Buckley, Washington.

In the course of a single deployment, A Company, 1st Battalion, 19th Special Forces Group tested and proved its own versatility. From peacetime training exercises to personal security details, locally patrolling on foot to planning a 101st Airborne Division’s operation, and palace renovation to Special Forces liaison element, A/1/19th successfully completed every mission it was handed. 📌

Endnotes

- 1 Department of the Army, *Special Forces Operations, Field Manual 3-05.20*, June 2001, 1–19.
- 2 Sergeant First Class Kenneth Gandy (pseudonym), AOB 910, A/1/19th Special Forces Group, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Jones, Jr., 2 October 2004, Fort Lewis, WA, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
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- 5 Sergeant Major Jerald Carlson, AOB 910, A/1/19th Special Forces Group, interview by Dr. Kenn Finlayson, 2 October 2004, Fort Lewis, WA, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 6 Linda Robinson, *Masters of the Chaos. The Secret History of the Special Forces* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), 245–273.

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- 8 CFSOCC for Operation IRAQI FREEDOM was Special Operations Command-Central Command or SOCCENT.
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- 10 Sergeant First Class Jay Paul Lang (pseudonym), ODA 916, A/1/19th Special Forces Group, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Jones, Jr., 2 October 2004, Fort Lewis, WA, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
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- 15 Ibid.
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- 18 Command Sergeant Major Jay F. Lovelace, SOCCENT HQ, interview by Dr. Kenn Finlayson, 2 October 2004, Fort Lewis, WA, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
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In mid-April, ODA 912 joined the 3rd Infantry Division at Baghdad International Airport (formerly Saddam International Airport). The airport complex was not only strategically vital, but also gave coalition forces temporary shelter preceding the liberation of Baghdad.

