

SOF Collaboration with the Interagency

A Star Wars Bar Analogy

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“My concern is that as we draw down in Afghanistan, and we don’t have the opportunity that, unfortunately, war brings you to continue to work together, we’ve got to be careful about moving apart. The whole-of-government approach is absolutely crucial to getting after these threats. We’ve got to work together to make sure that those threats don’t end up on our shores.”

— Admiral William McRaven,
13 November 2013



The United States maintains the world’s predominant military force, and much effort is made to train combat leaders to tackle the numerous challenges that face our leaders on today’s evolving battlefield. As a nation, we are particularly adept at assembling cutting edge technology, tactics, procedures and equipment to counter recent threats that have not previously been experienced by the U.S. military. However, this focus on battlefield effectiveness may have prevented us from adequately preparing our special operations forces leaders to work together with our interagency partners, who are just as vital to securing our national policy objectives. We must invest in our future leaders’ ability to effectively collaborate with our interagency colleagues. If we do, it will provide SOF leaders with a better understanding of our future role in executing the nation’s policy objectives.

This article will discuss the complex environment SOF officers and NCOs face in the multifaceted organization of the embassy country team. We will draw upon lessons learned from these authors’ combined 11 deployments to IA environments—specifically embassies around the globe — in order to provide recommendations in three areas of focus: communication, culture and education. On those deployments, we experienced both tremendous successes and needless setbacks in each of those focus areas. Although some of these lessons are applicable to serving as a liaison officer to another U.S. Government agency, or perhaps within a fusion cell, this article focuses on the dynamics of a SOF team’s interaction within the country team. Our force requires preparation before entering and navigating the labyrinth of agencies and relationships within the U.S. country team. A central theme in this article is the importance of shared understanding with partner agencies. The mix, and sometimes clash of each organization’s cultures and norms can be likened to the oddities seen among the characters’ reactions to one another in the Star Wars movie bar scene. Only by taking the time to understand our IA colleagues, will we truly be able to execute our mission. In that regard, the following fictional narrative depicts real-world events over the last 12 years of combat outside of Iraq and Afghanistan. If you are a SOF officer, you may be familiar with the following scenario...

Imagine...

Imagine you have just redeployed from Afghanistan two weeks ago only to discover your command has selected you to fill a recently vacated embassy team leader position for a counter-terrorist mission in the CENTCOM region that has an advise and assist focus. You start your preparations by searching the SOCOM Joint Lessons Learned Information System database. The data available is sparse and you have no luck finding contact information for the knowledge manager for that region. You immediately contact your close network of peers to get the information. Through a friend of a friend, you are able to reach the assistant team leader of the mission who gives you a brief run down on the team's current operations. He provides a convoluted list of the vital interagency and partner nation personalities in the country and region. "Can you send me a turnover file?" you ask. It arrives over a week later, one hour before you catch your departing flight. You arrive in country to find the team in place is in multiple locations, undergoing a turnover and everything seems unnecessarily chaotic. Without the current team leader there to conduct proper introductions, you improvise and confidently introduce yourself to the country team and other senior officials. The usual dog sniffing contests begins, but you expected this. You immediately notice a high level of compartmentalization within the embassy and little connection to the host-nation partner force you are there to advise and assist. As you introduce yourself and listen to your new colleagues, you hear the usual litany of complaints regarding draconian budget cuts and understaffing which seem to be prevalent throughout each of your engagements.

The agenda for your first counterterrorism-focused meeting covers an extensive list of foreign fighters and possible connections to the U.S. homeland that you hope to help address immediately, although you have never worked on something so sensitive. Seated by rank, and informal cliques, various analysts and interagency representatives fill an uncomfortable room as the lead agency's operations director takes charge, similar to the uncertainty that Han Solo and Luke Skywalker faced during the bar scene in *Star Wars*. Many of the meeting attendees say nothing and those who do provide very little information pertaining to the group or connected to emerging threats. The meeting hastily disperses. You try and track down various representatives to verify their understanding of your mission only to find out that few care, and even fewer truly understand it. Already frustrated within your first 48 hours of "interaction," you email your command to clarify your boss's vague "go-forth-and-conquer" mission statement. Clarity comes in fits and spurts, but you are well accustomed to that.

Eventually, you get the opportunity to brief both the Chief of Mission and Chief of Station in a close-hold meeting. Tempted to produce a slideshow, you smartly decline and commit your talking points to memory. Before approaching the Ambassador you secure "buy-in" from both the COS and the FBI's in-country representative because your mission impacts and indirectly benefits them, although they happen to lack the specific resources to execute and because it's the COM's guidance. As you brief the Ambassador, you start to notice cues that he or she is hesitant to support your team's mission. You learn there is an ongoing U.S. Agency for International Development project in the area in which you seek to operate, and USAID does not want to spark an uprising. You look to the COS for back up, but quickly realize that both the COM and COS have demonstrated this hesitancy often, and they are smart enough to know when to back down. Dejected, you collect your notes and go back to your tiny embassy space (really just a glorified closet) to call your headquarters on the secure line before typing up your formal situation report. You update your boss on your progress only to get berated for your lack of "salesmanship." You hang up the phone and ask yourself "How many more months left in this deployment?" You leave the embassy to head back to your team house to consider your next move.

What Imagination Teaches Us

Some will read the above narrative and quickly lay blame and point out failures of mission, resourcing and leadership. That conclusion is overly simplistic and unproductive. Numerous specified and implied issues influence the dynamic of the complex interagency environment of any embassy's country team. The objective of the above scenario is to provide a relatable story from which to discuss proven techniques for improving SOF interaction within the country team environment.

Consider, for example, the evidence of several cultural biases that emerge during the scenario's assignment and transition process. The assistant team leader and headquarters staff each had clear expectations that the SOF leader would automatically 'know-how-to' approach the problem by applying previous standard operating procedures to an ambiguous mission tasking. The personal stereotyping between the IA organizations most likely led to a lack of sharing, ultimately making the discussion and collaboration uncomfortable. These cultural nuances led to challenges in communicating with the Ambassador and Chief of Station. Other considerations also influenced the Ambassador's decision to withhold support for the team's mission and then shifted the COS' position to that of non-support. In addition, many other issues could likely be listed if the narrative covered the remainder of the SOF leader's deployment. Overcoming these IA dilemmas with proven techniques should become the ultimate goal in improving the SOF team's interaction within the country team environment.

While the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq draw down, SOF continue to fight our nation's enemies at a rapid pace in places such as Yemen, the Philippines and the Horn of Africa. As Admiral McRaven (2012) stated in his *SOCOM 2020 Strategy*, "Our vision is a globally networked force of SOF, interagency, allies and partners able to rapidly and persistently address regional contingencies and threats to stability." We are not executing these wars in the large joint operations centers used in the combat zones. Instead, we are fighting irregular campaigns out of embassies with an array of daily interagency interaction. This includes daily meetings with representatives of the Department of State, CIA, FBI, USAID and representatives of the host nation or partner nation's government, in order to gain an understanding of their goals and objectives.

In 2012 Admiral McRaven succinctly stated in *USSOCOM 2020: Forging the Tip of the Spear*, “Success in the future demands unprecedented levels of trust, confidence and understanding — conditions that cannot be surged” (p. 3). To achieve the desired level of trust, SOF leaders have to establish and maintain credibility early in these relationships or we risk alienating our interagency colleagues and host-nation partners. This creates a unique challenge when junior or mid-level officers are thrust into a dynamic environment where they find themselves representing not only DoD, but perhaps the entire U.S. Government. Rarely do any of these individuals possess any formal interagency education and often have limited experience to prepare them for this type of situation.

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Defense attaches and foreign area officers attend Advanced Civil Schooling to gain cultural, economic and political understanding of the country and region where they will be serving, prior to their assignment to a new embassy. The SOF leaders who execute missions similar to the one above have often done so with little more than an abbreviated handover with their predecessor and some on the job training. Although SOF has a rather good track record when deployed with other agencies, there also have been numerous instances that resulted in operational setbacks with both IA and coalition partners. Most of these setbacks were preventable with some rudimentary codified training to prepare these otherwise capable SOF leaders for the inevitable challenges they encounter. Based on our experiences, SOF leaders need additional awareness in three crucial areas in order to improve their interagency collaboration: communication, cultural understanding and education.

Communication

The SOF Interagency Counterterrorism Manual (2011) advocates that SOF elements work to transcend the constraints of the traditional military component of

national power and become “3-D warriors.” The manual describes a 3-D warrior as “an individual with the skill sets and experiences to work with the interagency to produce diplomatic, defense, and development effects as required within any area of operations” (p. 1-2). Elaborating on this concept, the manual explains, “navigating the interagency environment requires special operations warriors to be guided by achievable expectations and to maintain high levels of situational awareness, display a willingness to listen and learn and exercise the skill of knowing when to lead, support or, when appropriate, enable others outside of the DoD to accomplish their objectives” (p. 1-3). These characteristics are vital to operating effectively within a complex system. Principally, the

3-D warrior is an astute observer and effective communicator.

Too often DoD leaders attempt to communicate with interagency colleagues in a directive manner similar to a platoon sergeant talking to a private. This technique is neither welcomed nor accepted by our colleagues in the DoS, FBI, CIA or other career government civilians. DoD officials have made common mistakes when attempting to communicate with our interagency partners. Ambassador Donald Yamamoto, former Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of African Affairs and currently Associate Dean Leadership and Management School at the Foreign Service Institute, recommends SOF personnel serve as advisers to the COM and provide military options. The following suggestions are ways we can improve this vital communication:

- **Tailor Every Briefing to Your Audience.** As described in the narrative, the team leaders must be conscious of the audience’s background and time in order to deliver the right message and work towards the common objective. This comes from the ability to know the audience or gather information ahead of time in order to tailor your message appropriately. If

you are briefing the Chief of Mission, your briefing will likely require little historical background due to his extensive knowledge of the region and continuous attention on the given topic. However, a briefing to a visiting congressional delegation or congressional staffer may require significant background. Do your homework, tailor your brief and try your best to leave out power point slides.

- **Know your audience and ensure your agenda pertains to the majority of the stakeholders.** The Chief of Mission may ask who the stakeholders are at the table. Unique issues have unique stakeholders. Appreciating the roles and responsibilities of various deputies and principles, combined with any knowledge of their stance on a particular issue, is crucial to developing trust and reliability within the country team. At a lower level, it is vital to pass only the information that pertains to the agenda of that meeting or discussion. Remember, the stakes are different for each stakeholder. For example, the regional security officer is focused on security, while USAID is focused on host-nation development. Know your audience!
- **Positional flexibility within the IA collaboration environment.** Be ready to step up or step down in a leadership role during embassy meetings. Many country teams collaborate in a tabletop discussion setting, and SOF leaders naturally want to take the lead. However, it may sometimes be best to take a step back and first analyze the situation. Always remain ready to assume the lead role in the absence of a designated lead agency representative or other formal meeting leader. Some groups may want or expect SOF personnel to take the lead. Check your ego. A humble, ‘hat-in-hand’ approach often reduces some prevalent negative cultural stereotypes of SOF.
- **“Over-Socialize” Your Concept.** Make an effort to visit each interagency stakeholder

in his or her setting. If you inbrief the COS, or other IA partner, on your mission, ensure you follow up and conduct a proper outbrief. This is a recurring theme after SOF deployments to embassies. Country teams are compartmentalized for security, so finding a balance between intrusiveness and remaining an outsider is crucial when building trust. Some personnel in agencies with limited traditional interaction with the military view DoD personnel as Hollywood caricatures: An insular group with aggressive Type-A personalities, a strange common language and similar haircuts. SOF is most successful when we are professional, likeable and approachable.

Techniques that are the cultural norm within the DoD community, such as using PowerPoint to represent all forms of data, are met with resistance and consternation by other agencies. These representatives sometimes prefer to type a memorandum or to host a meeting with nothing more than hand-written notes. Attempting to change cultural norms makes some military leaders appear overbearing and can lead directly to collaborative friction. Often, the country team will host meetings with no formal agenda or briefing slides. SOF leaders must succinctly clarify their objectives within these non-traditional military settings.

Additionally, the terminology used in these meetings can make the difference between success and failure of strategic DoD objectives. Military culture encourages the use of military acronyms and unit jargon to communicate large amounts of context and information concisely. We personally have witnessed many instances of accomplished military leaders failing to communicate with non-military personnel due to their overuse of acronyms and polarizing terms. If savvy leaders at the senior levels of the DoD can make these mistakes, imagine the level of setback which could occur when an officer at the O-3/O-4 level makes these same mistakes while representing the U.S. counterterrorism efforts against terrorists in Country X, with little preparation or education. Mitigating the effects of such miscommunication requires significant situational awareness and deliberate communicative effort.

To limit the U.S. military footprint in many of these countries, small teams of mid-level SOF personnel work from U.S. Embassies across the globe to execute SOCOM's global reach initiatives targeting key

terrorist nodes. Because these SOF leaders are given such high risk, "no fail" missions, they should be prepared to make decisions on the spot when confronted with time sensitive information from their interagency colleagues. These situations rarely allow SOF leaders the luxury of going back to consult their respective higher headquarters and seeking additional guidance. Conversely, these same leaders are expected to take often ambiguous guidance from their higher headquarters and translate it into the appropriate interagency vernacular to achieve the desired results. Sometimes SOF leaders must execute this decision-making even when U.S. national policy objectives are not entirely clear. A failure to effectively communicate a mission often results in the Chief of Mission, Deputy Chief of Mission or Chief of Station non-concurring with a proposed SOF activity. Such ineffective communication can have serious consequences for any short-term activities and devastating effects on the long-term strategy. Although SOF operators are historically comfortable in ambiguous situations, this is a tremendous responsibility to place on them without the benefit of training. To effectively communicate with our interagency colleagues, SOF leaders should study the cultural differences between DoD and other agencies. Only then can we acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses of each organization to further our nation's mission.

Cultural Understanding

It is important for SOF leaders to understand the roles, authorities and mission objectives of our interagency partners. Although each organization has a different purpose, we all have the shared responsibility of communicating and advancing U.S. policy objectives. Although DoD and the DoS have different charters, they both support overarching national policy objectives with the intent of achieving our Nation's Security Strategy. In the seminal classic, *Defense is from Mars, State is From Venus*, Army Col. Rickey Rife (1998) states, "Once we understand the differences in our two agencies (DoD and DoS) we are well on the way to capitalizing on our respective strengths and special skills" (p. 2). As Rife suggests, successful interagency collaboration requires that SOF leaders understand cultural differences and turn them into positive attributes. The DoS mandate is to keep our nation from going to war by extending national diplomacy, while the mission of

DoD is to fight and win our nation's wars. If SOF fails to understand the role and culture of DoS, then it is unlikely that effective collaboration will occur. Rife stresses "The various members of the country team bring to the mission their own respective organizational cultures, procedures, expectations, situational awareness and levels of expertise. Thus, there exists a strong tendency toward compartmentalization of the effort, with individual country team members frequently remaining within their comfort zones by exchanging information with and responding to direction only from their leadership back in the U.S." (p. 2-1). This describes a crucial dynamic of interagency relationships that, if recognized and understood, can foster enhanced understanding of individual incentives.

The following list demonstrates some of the cultural fundamentals and differences commonly found within the confines of the country team:

- **Know the Chief of Mission's Strategic Guidance.** The Chief of Mission is the President's representative to a given country. You must know his or her mission guidance, how the SOF mission nests within it, and how you can support it. The current Presidential Letter to Chiefs of Mission and the Mission Strategic Resource Plan are essential reading prior to arriving at the embassy. Remember, you are working with the COM, on behalf of the geographic combatant commander. As Ambassador Donald Yamamoto succinctly summarized this role, "[SOF Teams are in the embassy] are protectors of the flank and supporters of the mission."
- **Organizational Knowledge.** Knowing the roles, responsibilities and authorities of your partners in the interagency environment is vital to understanding how they fit into the Chief of Mission's objectives and ultimately the national policy objectives. Once you understand an agency's mission and local capabilities, natural areas for collaboration become evident, and can yield opportunity. For example, something as simple as offering to provide transportation to an area in which your team is working for an interagency colleague, who lacks organic transportation assets, can assist them with resources and trust and advance the overall U.S. effort.
- **Organizational Shared Understanding.** As you increase your organizational

knowledge, you begin to develop empathy. Empathy increases opportunities for collaboration and compromise. Some interagency representatives may oppose an initiative for a variety of reasons, but escalating the situation or venting within ear shot will only erode your credibility. If an individual blocks an initiative for petty reasons, it is best to step back and re-engage later. Find out the real reasons and see if you can assist. Understand their perspective and rationale before re-engaging. Often, the blockage occurs well above your colleague's level, so it is best to communicate these actions with your own chain of command.

- **Learn the historical ties.** Always remain cognizant of the long-standing ties agencies maintain with each other, with non-governmental organizations and with the partner nation. This will be unique in each overseas location. As a consequence of recurring SOF personnel turnover and short duration tours, history is often forgotten, and the host nation counterpart is cautious about DoD's long-term strategy in their country. Knowing who the original stakeholders were and currently are, and how a given initiative was spawned, will help preclude disputes over future partnerships. Some agencies have habitual relationships and operations that one SOF initiative could derail with devastating lasting impacts. However, SOF leaders must also learn to recognize why their interagency colleagues say "No." There is a difference between "No" as the easiest answer, and "No" because it is upsetting a historical relationship essential to the long-term country strategy.
- **Compromise is king in a country team.** Nothing is unilateral. Always have alternative courses of action and knowledge of issues to support cooperation. There are numerous instances of lost opportunities because an interagency colleague's first reaction was to non-concur because it was not their idea, or they wanted something different. Sometimes "No" just means "not that way," and the decision can be negotiated if flexibility and options are embedded in the plan. Through compromise, all agencies can achieve their primary objectives.
- **DoD has all of the resources.** Make every effort to exhaust your own means before seeking outside help. DoD is often viewed within the interagency environment as



STAR WARS SCENE Special operations forces participate in a joint planning meeting during an exercise at the Joint Readiness Training Center. U.S. Army photo.

a provider and enabler. Some agencies perceive the DoD as over-manned and over-resourced. Common knowledge of the DoD budget frequently leads to challenges when SOF asks others for support. SOF is often in a position to offer internal resources to our partners. Do not use the resources you control to establish a *quid pro quo* deal. Instead, use the resources at your disposal to support the COM's strategy. This often increases levels of interagency trust essential to future collaborative efforts.

Understanding the objectives of other agencies facilitates improved rapport, trust and support for SOF initiatives in that country. This process requires that SOF leaders take the initiative within the midst of uncertainty to seek improved understanding of the problem environment and seek adaptive methods to align disparate interests. Categorizing and enumerating every institutional and cultural difference in the interagency is outside the scope, and is not the intent, of this article. However, by becoming cognizant of existing organizational cultures it is possible to facilitate a sense of shared responsibility. With increased organizational culture awareness, insightful operators can align dissimilar individual desires, divergent agency viewpoints and other competing

perspectives to pursue a unified objective as per their guidance.

Education

We cannot continue to deploy SEAL and Special Forces commanders to embassies with inadequate preparation. The stakes are simply too high. A better approach is to educate these bright, capable leaders by providing them an optimal context of peer experiences within the embassy environment prior to their assuming a similar role. This could provide the necessary framework for capably dealing within complex interagency environments.

Educating leaders for dealing with the IA environment could vary based on that particular officer's career path, but all officers should have, at a minimum, a block of instruction during each service's Intermediate Level Education that discusses these USG agencies and how they operate. Anytime U.S. military leaders, of any rank, interact with IA colleagues, they must do so with a certain level of *emotional intelligence*. This is fundamental in understanding not only how different agencies work, but how SOF can work with them to support long term U.S. policy objectives. Quite simply, this is a goal every agency in the USG should share.

Some of the education would not have to be a formalized military professional devel-

opment program, but SOF could focus initially on capturing the lessons learned by the plethora of SOF leaders who have deployed to these areas and interacted with our IA colleagues. The lessons captured are legion, and they should be promulgated throughout the SOF community. Some organizations in the United States Army Special Operations Command and the Naval Special Warfare community have done a tremendous job capturing this data, but it often sits within the subordinate organizations. This does the rest of the community little good when they are trying to prepare teams for deployments to an embassy environment. For example, if an element from 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne) were to deploy to Country X for an advise and assist mission, they may not have contact information for the platoon in SEAL Team Five who operated in-country less than six months prior. SEAL Team Five could have vital information and insight into initiatives the COM supports, or that are not suitable in a formal after action review. As stated previously, these nuances could drive mission success or failure from the outset.

SOF commanders must ensure their subordinate leaders take the time to study the DoD authorities and approvals for the missions they are undertaking, so they can adequately represent this information to the COM or other representatives in the embassy. Additionally, these leaders should educate themselves on the authorities of the other agencies they could be working with in the embassy, and should visit DoS and CIA regional desks supporting these embassies. It is vital to reach out to the TSOC country desks and the country Defense Attaches prior to deploying. These extremely important meetings and introductions can provide indispensable information on those agency's objectives and authorities for the respective country.

The Defense Attaches and many agencies offer 'scene-setter' documents and cables, which provide the most current environments, achievements and challenges within the country. These are perfect reads prior to travel. Making the effort to travel to another partner agency's location also demonstrates a genuine concern for that agency's perspectives, and, in most cases, the regional desks will cable the country team to advise them of the pending deployment. Furthermore, you should make the effort to also back-brief the regional desks as a post-deployment procedure. This is a good way to develop shared

understanding and build the trust necessary for a successful deployment.

Conclusion

In a future rife with defense cuts, we will continually be asked to do more with less. According to Ambassador Yamamoto, DoD has an important role within the embassy team as "protectors of the flank and supporters of the mission." SOF can only afford to send its best to represent the SOF community during critical engagements with other agencies. Across the whole of government, special operations professionals will be required to work with all forms of national power to accomplish this nation's policy objectives. We owe it not only to our military, but to our Nation to educate the future leaders of SOCOM and provide them the tools they need to accomplish any task. If we invest early in our junior and mid-level officers, the nation will reap the benefits in the future.

SOF units traditionally use the Special Operations Debriefing and Retrieval System to capture lessons learned from operations and training events across the globe. Although great in theory, the SOF community has lacked a comprehensive effort to populate this database. This has resulted in reams of data sitting and collecting dust on unlabeled hard drives in team rooms, or stuffed in the back of staff safes across the SOCOM enterprise. Although this written data stashed in team rooms and on forgotten hard drives is valuable, it is not as important as the ability of a deploying team to spend a few minutes talking with someone who has recently been where they are going. The innovation design company, IDEO, suggests relying less on written AAR type databases since previous issues and historic problems often do not directly apply to new situations. Maintaining an updated list of knowledge managers can be more useful in getting an individual or unit, about to embark in a new embassy environment, up to speed and heading in the right direction towards success. If the SOF community maintained updated contact information for the teams that previously operated in a region or embassy, it would prove invaluable to the planning, preparation and success of future missions.

The SOCOM JLLIS is a good first step in standardizing the reporting from these trips. However, existence of this system is not well known, and it is not intuitive. Disseminating the availability and usability of this portal is also a vital step, as most previous databases have failed to remain relevant

once they became mismanaged or altogether ignored. Improving this existing system, or creating a more user friendly and accessible portal, will allow SOF leaders to learn from previous SOF experiences prior to deploying to a particular country. This may call for a combination of operational preparation of the environment reports, SODARs and AARs. These combined reports would provide instrumental information which could be indispensable to SOF leaders planning these operations. We can each be part of the solution by providing contact information on AAR and lessons learned reports to allow the SOF leader who follows behind us access to the experiences we did not take the time to write down. This may be the most valuable information provided to junior SOF leaders tasked to execute their first embassy-based mission.

Interagency collaboration problems are not DoD's alone. Each agency has a unique and defined responsibility to improve the process. SOF can take a step in that direction by setting the example and focusing on ways to improve how we collaborate with our interagency colleagues. The Star Wars bar may be a crazy, sometimes surreal place, but at least we can share the same space while working towards our nation's worthy cause of freedom and liberty. It has to start somewhere. Take the first step with us to improve interagency relations. **SW**

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Notes

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