



01

# SOTF-77

A model for component support to combatant commands.

BY MAJOR DAN HENDRIX

## SOF IN THE CONTACT LAYER

Global security threats outside of Declared Theaters of Active Armed Conflict, have evolved as security resources continue to be focused on conflict zones. Threats are intangible and diffuse; they are geographically unconstrained and operate in legal and political gray zones. Security challenges in the Western Hemisphere lie primarily in the *contact layer* and the *homeland layer* in the Global Operating Model as defined in the 2018 National Defense Strategy, which drives constant and regional engagement of SOF both in the tactical tasks of defending the

Southern approaches to the U.S., and makes deployed SOF key players in competitive global strategy.<sup>01</sup> Theater Special Operations Commands must now, more than ever, navigate an increasingly complex global environment and weave strategy and operational art into a tapestry of diplomatic, political, economic and cultural concerns. As these challenges increase the need to engage at the operational and strategic levels, these division/numbered Air Force/Naval task force-level staff headquarters must concurrently provide direct support to tactical elements that are four and five echelons down and have limited organic support capabilities. Experience has shown

that this gap between radically different levels in the hierarchy presents an obstacle to effective and responsive support. This article highlights a conceptual shift in SOF organization designed to bridge the gap between strategically focused two-star staffs and tactical, major-led Special Operations Commands-Forward commanding the deployed force.

## EVOLVING RELATIONSHIPS TO MEET MODERN CHALLENGES

As Congress debates the relevance of the organizational structures and command relationships outlined in the *Goldwater-Nichols DoD Reorganization Act of 1986*, the realities of geopolitics are forcing an evolution of the systems that support deployed SOF and are reevaluating the responsibilities of force providers (service components) and force employers (combatant commands). This article presents an overview of Special Operations Task Force 77, a battalion-level CONUS-based and Component-run

element that provides administrative, logistic, communication and intelligence support directly to Special Operations Command-South. This echelon, currently at its initial operating capability, provides supplementary support to SOF operations outside of DTAACs by operationalizing service component staff capacity with no personnel tempo costs. This intermediate support staff is a progression of a historical relationship between 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) and SOCSOUTH. SOTF-77 is headquartered on 7th SFG(A)'s base at Eglin Air Force Base, Florida.

The majority force provider for SOCSOUTH is 7th SFG(A). As geographically oriented elements that share a theater with a small SOF footprint, 7th SFG(A) and SOCSOUTH maintain historically close ties. Decades of successive deployments have resulted in united efforts to maximize effectiveness and take advantage of economies of effort and scale. SOTF-77 evolved through these relationships and is an outgrowth of long-standing force provider support efforts to support its deployed personnel by supporting the TSOC. In order to manage both CENTCOM and SOUTHCOM/NORTHCOM requirement since 9/11, 7th SFG(A) employed a force generation model that dedicated a single battalion to Western Hemisphere Theater Campaign Plan Support. This battalion, known colloquially as the "Theater Support Campaign Plan Battalion," provided oversight to the deployment, organization and administration of operational detachments-alpha bound for SOUTHCOM and NORTHCOM from 7th SFG(A) in order to centralize and economize deployment preparation and support activities. TSCP Battalion responsibilities included:

- Oversight of individual pre-deployment requirements
- Procurement of supplies for deploying detachments and companies
- Inter-theater transportation coordination and management
- Deployment specific training requirements

- Oversight of field ordering officers and pay agents executing operational funds purchases
- Maintenance, logistics and communications support during deployment

TSCP Battalions did not:

- Exercise OPCON over deployed forces
- Hold Uniformed Code of Military Justice authority
- Provide Intelligence Support

That the TSCP Battalion provided a limited set of SOTF level support functions to area operations bases in the SOUTHCOM AOR

## CONTACT LAYER

Environment of the Global Operating Model where Joint Forces will be postured and employed to compete more effectively below the level of armed conflict.

## HOMELAND LAYER

Environment of the Global Operating Model where Joint Forces will be postured and employed to compete to defend the homeland.

was understood but lacked formal recognition. It was simply the extension of a force provider's role to organize, train and equip forces into the operational employment phase. It allowed the TSOC staff to remain operationally focused on planning, coordinating and executing special operations while the force provider was assured that downrange forces were getting the best support possible. Since 2015, however, two major developments in SOUTHCOM highlighted the gap that existed between the company-level special operations commands forward and the Joint Forces Component Command -level theater

special operations commands, and drove the creation of a formalized intermediate level of support that became SOTF-77.

## DRIVERS OF CHANGE

First, a renewed focus on countering violent extremists in SOUTHCOM expanded operational requirements at the SOCFWDs. Previous mission sets were counter-narcotics training operations that focused on the development of national capabilities for foreign governments in support of Title 22 (State Department) initiatives. This revitalized countering violent extremists effort demanded SOCFWD engagement on regional and trans-regional efforts that directly contribute to U.S. national security requirements. This in turn increased the need for intelligence analysis and fusion beyond the SOCFWD's capability.

In parallel to the widened scope of the SOCFWD's mission set, the geographic dispersion of the TSOC's operations greatly expanded due to the increase in the number of Special Operations Forces Liaison Elements in theater. SOFLEs, single person elements that provide SOF expertise at U.S. Embassies to both U.S. Country Teams and host-nation security leaders, have dramatically expanded the SOF footprint into previously untapped areas. These economy of force options have relatively high impact compared to the resources they require. Unlike ODAs and other SOF team-sized elements, they do not have embedded staff functions and require outsized backside support compared with team-sized units.

The result of this was a paradigm shift in the relationship between the TSOC and 7th SFG(A) that resulted in the standup of a SOTF to act as an administrative supplement between the SOCFWDs and the TSOC staff. SOCSOUTH is in the process of solidifying the support relationship between itself and 7th SFG(A) through a formal Request for Support that will be staffed up through COCOM and SOCOM channels and back down

01  
A Green Beret assigned to the 7th SFG(A) guides a member of the Honduran TIGRES during a shooting drill as part of joint combined exchange training. The TIGRES are a counter-narcotic and counter-trafficking force. As National Security Challenges increase so does the need to support global operations for SOF units with limited organic support elements. SOTF-77 is an organization designed to bridge the gap between the strategic higher headquarters and the SOF Forward deployed tactical force.

U.S. ARMY  
PHOTO BY CAPT.  
THOMAS CIESLAK

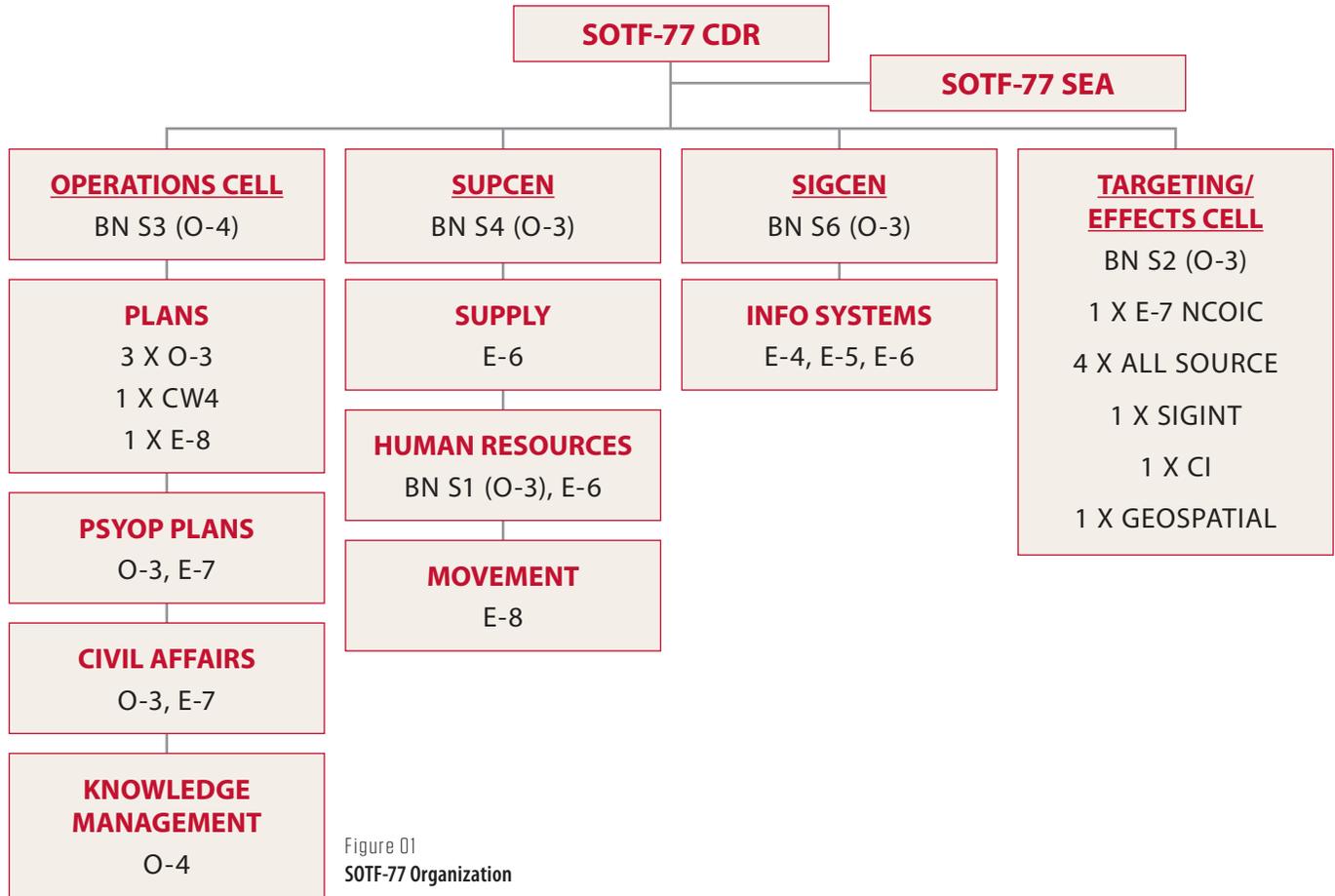


Figure 01  
SOTF-77 Organization

through component staffs. The result will be a supporting relationship in which the SOTF provides direct support to the TSOC.

## COMREL

Command relationships did not change. The TSOC continues to exercise OPCON over all forces in theater. Special Operations Commands-Forward, who are still task organized under the TSOC, exercise TACON of all assigned forces. Though deployed ODAs are administratively moved from their parent battalions to the SOTF, parent battalion commanders retain most ADCON authorities. In fact, more important than a change in organizational *structure*, the SOTF is a success because of changes it drove in organizational *culture*. Prior to the creation of SOTF-77, TSCP responsibilities were secondary functions to the SF Battalion's primary mission to organize, train and equip. Now a select staff of more than 30 personnel conduct

full-time downrange support during their duty day without affecting their PERSTEMPO. As a result, the SOTF made support to current operations more focused and more responsive at a lower cost.

## STAFF FUNCTIONS

SOTF-77 is organized in a similar manner as a deployed SOTF. During the deployment preparation phase, all Soldiers are attached to SOTF-77 for personnel management and it administratively supports all 7th SFG(A) personnel deployed in the SOUTHCOM AOR.

### SUPCEN

The SOTF-77 Support Center provides administrative and logistical support to all 7th SFG(A) Soldiers prior to deployment. This support includes processing all operational funds for individual ODAs, supporting CL II and CL IX procurement, managing fuel cards to be used with contracted vehicles, coordinating all necessary OCONUS contracts, and oversee-

ing all deployment transportation and associated joint inspections. These requirements were previously split between parent battalions, the TSCP Battalion and Group Staff.

TSOC P11 and P2 funds that support downrange missions continue to be disbursed to 7th SFG(A) Comptroller and 7th SFG(A) Operations at the group level. This in-house management of TSOC funds is unique among force provider/force employer relationships, and it allows for responsive management of funds to meet the requirements of the deployed force.

Finally, the SOTF-77 Support Center hosts a monthly logistic sync with deployed AOBs, personnel from SOCSOUTH, Army South, Naval Special Warfare, contracting and 7th SFG(A) SPO and GRP S4. This tracks all pre-deployment administrative duties and provides the AOBs with a venue to request support for any logistical issues. Additionally, this meeting allows the SOTF-77 SUPCEN the opportunity to assist the

02

Partner forces receive a command update brief during exercise Southern Star in Chile. Global engagement means having a global presence. As security concerns become increasingly interconnected, TSOCs will balance increased requirements for strategic engagement with increased support requirements. SOTF-77 demonstrates how force employers can leverage component staffs to enhance their mission. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY STAFF SGT. OSVALDO EQUITE

SOCSSOUTH J4 in quickly getting those issues resolved.

### TARGETING AND EFFECTS CELL

The Targeting and Effects Section of SOTF-77 provides support to SOCSOUTH in three main areas: threat analysis, managing/answering requests for information and asset validation assistance. All members of the intelligence team collaborate with their counterparts at the group, TSOC, joint and interagency levels to ensure that the TSOC commanders have accurate and up-to-date analysis of the threat picture in Central and South America. SOTF-77 intelligence professionals also work with deployed teams directly to provide in-depth threat briefs prior to each team's deployment. They continue that support relationship during the team's deployment by providing reach-back capabilities to answer requests for information. This support culminates once the deployed team returns to their home station where they are debriefed and relevant information is captured and disseminated.

### OPERATIONS CELL

SOTF-77 Operations section synchronizes the efforts of the SOCFWDs, SOFLEs and JIIM partners in Central and South America. SOTF-77 members work to develop nested network targeting efforts with mutually supporting courses of action. This provides inter-theater coordination between the SOCFWDs and the TSOC to ensure deployed units are not duplicating efforts. Most importantly, the SOTF acts as the continuity of effort between the SOCFWDs to ensure company-level deployments continue towards a common end state. This has served to limit priority changes that commonly occur during transitions and disrupt progress along key lines of effort.

### SIGCEN

The SOTF-77 Signal Center has been instrumental in providing communication support to operations in the SOUTHCOM and NORTHCOM areas of operation since its inception. Many of

the communication practices and equipment employed by SOF are not common to conventional organizations. These communicators have been integral to the advancement of theater objectives through the implementation of technology and resources in the AOR. The SIGCEN consists of the supporting battalion's S6 and Signal Detachment. The SOTF-77 SIGCEN provides a consolidated location and point of contact for all communication focused mission preparation for deploying units.

To accommodate these requirements, the SIGCEN is organized into three teams consisting of communicators from each communications specialty. This infrastructure serves two purposes: first it gives the teams the ability to train and prepare for all forecasted communication requirements, second it enables the SOTF to deploy a team to respond to issues within eight hours of notification.

having a global presence. As security concerns become increasingly interconnected, TSOCs will balance increased requirements for strategic engagement with increased support requirements as forces are spread more thinly, across greater areas, and have less organic support. Special Operations Task Force-77 demonstrates how force employers can leverage component staffs to enhance their mission. Service Components and combatant commands have a shared interest in the success of deployed units of action. Components can no longer view the forces they organize, train and equip as, "fire and forget," once they are OPCON to a combatant command. Combatant Commands will greatly benefit from a fused approach to downrange support, which will allow them to focus more of their attention on engaging the strategic fight against international, fluid security threats and ensure flexible support to forces forward. **SW**

## SHARED EQUITIES: COMPONENT SUPPORT TO COMBATANT COMMANDS

Global engagement means

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maj. Dan Hendrix is a Special Forces Soldier assigned to 4th BN, 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne).



**NOTES** 01. U.S. Department of Defense. (2018). *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of The United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*. Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense.