



—THE SPECIAL FORCES PROFESSION—

BY PAUL J. TOMPKINS Jr.

Special Forces have a single subject that is at the core of their profession and it is not Unconventional Warfare. The distinction must be clear; Resistance or resistance movement is the subject of the profession, UW is one of several means of engaging resistance movements.

It is imperative in any profession that those who constitute the body of said profession are fully educated on the subject of their expertise. This subject is the reason why the profession exists in the first place. For example, all medical doctors work on the human body in some capacity, the body being their subject. All culinary experts work on food and all plumbers work on pipes. Every medical doctor begins their professional journey by study-

ing human anatomy, the subject of the medical profession. They study the parts, system, functions and characteristics of the human body. Without this knowledge a doctor cannot determine what is right or wrong, what is normal and what is abnormal or what is working correctly and what is not. He or she would be guessing at the cause of an affliction or wrongly conclude nothing at all is amiss. This doctor would be failing in his profession. In addition to anatomy, doctors study the techniques and procedures of how to work on their subject. How a doctor engages with and analyzes the patient's problem or how he runs his office are examples of how he works on the subject. Therefore the subject of what a doctor works on is the human patient and the method is how he or she delivers the care.

For Special Forces it has been long argued that the established purpose and

organizational design of Special Forces is for UW. Special Forces was designed to support insurgencies, it was the best force to counter an insurgency, assist others to counter insurgencies (Foreign Internal Defense), and to counter terrorists (counterterrorism). Viewing these core activities in this light has translated into a generational understanding that the subject of the profession is unconventional warfare. Contrary to this belief, the majority of missions SF has performed over the past 60 Years was FID, not UW. While it is true that the organizing principle for SF was UW, and its structure is operationally relevant today, UW and FID are concepts of execution; a means, not the subject. The subject that the means is being applied to is a resistance or resistance movement. In all of these cases, Special Forces are supporting or countering a resistance, either directly or indirectly.

Carl Von Clausewitz, in his treatise on warfare, states emphatically that before all else you must first know the type of war you are addressing. In Joint Pub-

Special Forces candidates participate in a sand table exercise with guerrilla forces during Robin Sage, the final unconventional warfare culmination exercise for the Special Forces Qualification Course at the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY K. KASSENS

lication 1, there exists only two types of warfare, traditional and irregular. All of the core activities of Special Forces considered above are categorized in JP 1 as IW. They may be executed singularly as the main effort such as in Syria in 2015 or as a supporting effort to traditional war as seen in the Kurdish support to the 2005 U.S. invasion of Iraq. Regardless of the execution of the IW activities, Traditional War and Irregular Warfare remain two significantly different types or warfare.

Joint Publication 1 states that the mechanisms of victory for traditional warfare are to close with the enemy, destroy his will or capability to fight and occupy his terrain. This type of warfare is fought on the physical terrain. The occupation of the enemy's terrain is essential. In IW, however, there are no mechanisms of victory listed. Irregular warfare is uniquely a competition to maintain one's legitimacy while gaining the support of the population. It is a battle of narratives conducted to sway the majority of the population. It is not about the destructions of will or the occupation of terrain. This type of warfare occurs in the minds of the population. It may manifest itself in physical actions but those actions are only designed to reinforce the narrative. The exception to this is when a resistance movement has transformed into a traditional warfare-like composition and is capable of challenging the government or other opposition forces on equal status, which Mao calls the "war of movement" phase. Whether the resistance has achieved peer status or continues to challenge asymmetrically, the resistance must gain the majority support of the population in order to succeed. We can conclude from the framing of JP 1 that Special Forces primarily conducts IW. This is their form of warfare, not the subject of their profession. To summarize, Special Forces' primary form of warfare is IW, the means of conducting that type of warfare is through the execution of UW, FID, COIN and CT.

Understanding that COIN, FID, CT and UW are how we work on our subject, we can then derive the subject from analyzing what those activities are being conducted against. Counter-

insurgency is the effort of a governing power to eliminate a violent organized resistance to its governance and existence. The thing that is being affected by the activities and operations is the insurgency. Whereas, the conduct of FID is the U.S. (generally SF) assisting the security forces of a foreign state to counter an insurgency. In this case the security forces of the country are conducting COIN and the supporting country forces are conducting FID. This is most commonly based on an Internal Defense and Development strategy. Counterterrorism, on the other hand, is fundamentally different as it is the countering of a tactic. In essence, it is the elimination of the leadership, facilitator and militant actors of a resistance organization. Finally, when conducting UW, the external sponsor is supporting a resistance movement, generally in the form of an insurgency.

In all of these cases Special Forces is working either against, or in support of, a resistance movement. COIN, FID, CT and UW are the means of working on a resistance organization. Resistance or resistance movement is the core base object or thing that is being affected or worked on, making it the subject of the Special Forces profession. Therefore, it is imperative that the Special Forces professional studies and is knowledgeable on resistance organizations, their parts, systems and functions. A Special Forces Soldier must also be well versed in the doctrine of how to support or counter them. It is with the full knowledge of the resistance organization's parts, systems and functions, coupled with the relevant doctrine, that enables the professional to employ the art necessary to accomplish the nation's objectives. Otherwise he is just guessing: Would you go to a doctor who hasn't studied human anatomy? 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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DEFINITIONS

Profession: A trusted, disciplined and relatively autonomous vocation whose members provide a unique and vital service to society, without which it could not flourish, provide this service by developing and applying expert knowledge, and establish and uphold the discipline and standards of their art and science, including the responsibility for professional development and certification. (*ADRP 1, 14 June 2015*)

Unconventional Warfare: Activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary and guerrilla force in a denied area. Also called UW. (*JP 3-05.1*)

Resistance movement: An organized effort by some portion of the civil population of a country to resist the legally established government or an occupying power and to disrupt civil order and stability. (*JP 3-05*)

Counterinsurgency: Comprehensive civilian and military efforts designed to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and address its root causes. Also called COIN. (*JP 3-24*)

Foreign Internal Defense: Participation by civilian agencies and military forces of a government or international organizations in any of the programs and activities undertaken by a host nation government to free and protect its society from subversion, lawlessness, insurgency, terrorism and other threats to its security. Also called FID. (*JP 3-22*)

Counterterrorism: Activities and operations taken to neutralize terrorists and their organizations and networks in order to render them incapable of using violence to instill fear and coerce governments or societies to achieve their goals. Also called CT. See also antiterrorism; combating terrorism; terrorism. (*JP 3-26*)