



ON TRACK

CONFERENCE OF DEFENCE ASSOCIATIONS INSTITUTE | L'INSTITUT DE LA CONFÉRENCE DES ASSOCIATIONS DE LA DÉFENSE

TOWARD 2030 PERSPECTIVES ON CANADIAN SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES



VOLUME 28 | JUNE 2022

ONTRACK VOLUME 28

JUNE 2022

ON TRACK is the official journal of the CDA Institute. Through its pages, the CDA Institute promotes informed public debate on security and defence issues and the vital role played by the Canadian Armed forces in society. ON TRACK facilitates this educational mandate by featuring a range of articles that explore security, defence, and strategic issues that may have an impact on the Canadian strategic interests and on the safety of its citizens. The views expressed in ON TRACK are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the CDA Institute.

CDA Institute / L'Institut de la CAD
900-75 Albert Street
K1P 5E7, Ottawa, ON
(613) 236 9903
www.cdainstitute.ca

Editorial Board:

Dr. Andrea Charron
Brigadier-General James Cox (Ret'd)
Dr. Irina Goldenberg

Dr. Rebecca Jensen
Dr. Eric Ouellet
Dr. Gaëlle Rivard Piché



Table of Contents

Introduction: Towards 2030 | Perspectives on Canadian Special Operations Forces | Gaëlle Rivard Piché

Page 4

Special Operations Forces (SOF) and Competition: Four Emerging Themes | H. Christian Breede & Kevin D. Stringer

Page 7

A Typology for Engaging in the Information Environment: Inform, Influence, Impose Operations (I3O) | Bradley Sylvestre

Page 13

“We Will Find a Way”: Recruiting, Training, and Sustaining Resilient Personnel in Canada’s Special Forces | Meghan Fitzpatrick

Page 20

Canadian Special Operations Forces Culture: A Double-Edged Sword | Erin Yantzi

Page 26

Towards 2030 | Perspectives on Canadian Special Operations Forces

Introduction

By Gaëlle Rivard Piché

Revealed to the public eye by the war in Afghanistan, modern Canadian Special Operations Forces (SOF) have generated much interest since the early 2000s. Like the rest of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), Canadian SOF now face a series of challenges that are forcing the organization to rethink its role, function, and priorities. First, the operating environment is rapidly changing. Strategic competition has replaced terrorism as the pacing challenge faced by Canada and its allies, and the Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) is experiencing these changes at home and abroad. The dynamic threat environment is leading CANSOFCOM to reimagine its role at the intersection of defence and national security where its unique capabilities provide essential support to CAF as well as other government departments and agencies in the detection, deterrence, and defeat of asymmetric threats to Canada, while also working abroad alongside partner forces in the defence of Canadian interests.

In parallel, the sexual misconduct crisis affecting the CAF and the ensuing conversation about military culture has generated significant institutional stress of which CANSOFCOM is not immune.¹ Moreover, the Canadian military continues to face a recruitment and retention problem. Pressure on morale and human resources coupled with a more demanding operating environment might force the CAF, and within it CANSOFCOM, to make difficult choices and bear additional risk in the defence of Canada's strategic interests.

This issue of OnTrack explores certain themes that will be particularly important as CANSOFCOM moves toward 2030 and beyond: the evolving operating environment and within it, the growing importance of new domains of operations (information, space, cyber, etc.), the health and wellbeing of CANSOFCOM members, and the promotion of a positive and effective culture that enables the organization in its roles and functions while adequately supporting its people. The articles present the work of researchers who are not all subject matter experts on all things SOF, but whose research interests and expertise can bring important insight to CANSOFCOM. Rather than focusing on what SOF can teach researchers, the objective of this issue of OnTrack is to showcase research that can help Canadian SOF navigate the murky waters ahead.

Christian Breede and Kevin D. Stringer open the issue by discussing their recent research endeavour on the future of SOF in great power competition. Based on their conversations with SOF experts and

¹ Louise Arbour, Report of the Independent External Comprehensive Review of the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces, (Ottawa, May 2022).

practitioners held over their 10-episode podcast series *Politics of SOF*, Breede and Stringer highlight four main takeaways. First, narrative warfare is becoming increasingly important for SOF, a topic Bradley Sylvestre further addresses later in the issue. Second, SOF is much more than the proverbial direct action that came to defined Special Forces during the so-called War on Terror. Third, based on their interview with Erin Yantzi who also contributed to this issue, culture is essential to understanding SOF success and failures as well as required transformation and adaptation in a fast-changing operating environment. Finally, SOF is increasingly called to act as a multi-dimensional integrator in coordination with the rest of the CAF and with its security partners and allies, foreign and domestic.

In the next piece, Bradley Sylvestre offers a new typology to better understand the information environment and how to operate in it. While this topic is certainly not limited to Special Forces, it is particularly important for CANSOFCOM to master this new domain of operations that is becoming increasingly critical to the evolving operating environment. Without it, it is difficult to conceive how CANSOFCOM can operate effectively and fulfill its core strategic functions: sense, signal, and respond.

The remaining two articles reflect on issues related to what CANSOFCOM describes as its “most precious resource and its greatest strength” – its people.² Meghan Fitzpatrick discusses the role and relevance of resilience in the training, selection, and management of SOF personnel in the context of ever growing



demand for SOF in Canada. Erin Yantzi then reflects on the strengths and weaknesses of SOF culture which she characterizes as a double-edged sword. Drawing on the conclusions of research looking at other western SOF organizations, she not only explores the Canadian SOF culture, but also how it relates to the broader CAF community and political decision-makers.

Together, these pieces offer diverse perspectives and new avenues for reflection on some of the key challenges CANSOFCOM is bound to face in the coming decade. Hopefully, they contribute to ongoing conversations among the Canadian SOF community and inform the development of innovative solutions to ensure CANSOFCOM continues to excel and maintain its competitive advantage in a complex and demanding operating environment.

Dr. Gaëlle Rivard Piché is a strategic analyst with Defence Research and Development Canada. Embedded with the Canadian Armed Forces, she provides direct decision-making support through evidence-based research on a wide range of topics, including threat

² CANSOFCOM, *Beyond the Horizon: A Strategy for Canada's Special Operations Forces in an Evolving Security Environment* (Ottawa, ON: Department of National Defence, 2020), 26.

analysis, defence planning, and the Arctic. She is also a fellow with the Conference of Defence Associations Institute (CDAI) and the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs (NPSIA) at Carleton University where she completed her Ph.D. in 2017. She was previously a Fulbright research fellow in the International Security Program at the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs (2014-2015) and the vice-chair of WIIS-Canada (2017-2020).

*As a defence and international security expert, her research spans across a wide range of topics. She co-authored two books on Arctic defence and security: *At the Gaps and Seams: Canadian Special Operations Forces in the Defence of North America* (with Nancy Teeple) and *The Newport Manual on Arctic Security* (with Walter Berbrick and Michael Zimmerman), both to be published in 2022. She previously contributed to edited volumes on Canadian foreign policy and Latin American politics, authored policy reports on the legacy of post-conflict interventions, and published her doctoral research in scientific journals, including *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, *International Journal*, and *Études internationales*. Her latest research on China's hostage diplomacy and its implications for middle powers was published in the *Texas National Security Review* in December 2021.*

The views expressed in this issue of ON TRACK are the authors' and do not represent DRDC, the Department of National Defence, the Canadian Armed Forces, or the Government of Canada.



Special Operations Forces (SOF) and Competition: Four Emerging Themes

H. Christian Breede & Kevin D. Stringer

Introduction

Following the near-global shutdown of economic, professional, and social life in response to the SARS-COV2 pandemic in March 2020, organizers of national security workshops, conferences, and public lectures had to seek ways of exchanging ideas.

Understandably, no longer could defence researchers and stakeholders gather and collaborate in the world's conference rooms and lecture halls in person. This article highlights one such alternative forum and delivery mechanism. We sought to continue the process of informing the public on pressing issues of defence and security, specifically in the special operations realm, while providing the key learnings that emerged from its exchanges virtually.

The Centre for International and Defence Policy (CIDP) at Queen's University in Canada launched the Kingston Consortium on International Security (KCIS) and as part of this effort, we published eight episodes (and counting) of the Politics of Special Forces Podcast. The series covers a broad range of less-discussed topics centred on one guiding question: what role should special operations

forces (SOF) play in national security as decision makers begin to rebalance towards competition between great powers? As a bit of a novel twist, a short policy brief accompanies each episode.

The inspiration for this series resulted from a conversation between the two authors over a set of unique, but lesser-known issues relating to SOF employment, such as their role in peacekeeping operations,³ resistance operations,⁴ and Arctic operations.⁵ Both partners realized the need for catalyzing a fresh and comprehensive discussion on the strategic and operational employment of SOF in great power competition after decades of countering violent extremist organization (CVEO) activities. Two lines of inquiry seemed important. First, does the concept of SOF as the “force of choice”⁶ need to be revisited? Second, what capabilities and expertise does SOF offer in the context of great power competition (GPC)? In this brief article, we will present the conceptual framework that guided the podcasts’ and policy papers’ design as well as summarize four key learnings to-date that emerged from our conversations.

Methodology

After virtually connecting in the Summer of 2020, we began exploring options for how we could engage with the various questions that we felt were under-explored within the current literature and indeed public discourse on what role SOF could or should play given renewed great power competition. Settling on the format of a podcast with an accompanying policy paper was equal parts serendipity and necessity. We both expressed surprise at our mutual ignorance of each other’s work on SOF, suggesting a deficit of impact, visibility, and influence from our various articles. While perhaps we were not reading enough (or reading in only niche areas), we wanted to create something that would expand our knowledge and that of others in understudied areas of SOF activities. In addition, as conferences and workshops were unrealistic objectives for the foreseeable future due to COVID travel constraints, we agreed upon the idea of creating a podcast series to reach both civilian and military leadership wrestling with the employment of SOF.

The series focused on capturing conversations with stakeholders and analysts within the field in a manner that could be quickly ‘mobilized’; meaning to not only be consumed, but hopefully also provoke further thought, conversation, and perhaps even shape future practices. The objective was to

³ H. Christian Breede, “Special (peace) operations: Optimizing SOF for UN missions,” *International Journal*, 73(2), 2018, 221–240.

⁴ Kevin D. Stringer, “Building a Stay-Behind Resistance Organization: The Case of Cold War Switzerland Against the Soviet Union” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 85 (2nd Quarter 2007), 109-114.

⁵ Kevin D. Stringer. “The Arctic Domain: A Narrow Niche for Joint Special Operations Forces” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 78 (3rd Quarter 2015), 24-31, and “Competing in the Arctic through Indigenous Group Engagement and Special Reconnaissance Activities,” *Modern War Institute’s Project 6633 / US Army 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) Polar Essay Contest*, [Competing in the Arctic through Indigenous Group Engagement and Special Reconnaissance Activities - Modern War Institute \(usma.edu\)](#), 8 June 2021.

⁶ The term force of choice comes from a book of the same title by Bernd Horn, J. Paul de B. Taillon, and David Last. *Force of Choice: Perspectives on Special Operations* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004).

execute a ten-part podcast series along with a short, informative, written product to accompany each episode. The written product took the form of policy brief as part of the KCIS Insights series.⁷ Through the production of both audio and written content, we hoped to improve consumption and amplify the impact of the ideas and learnings that emerged. The podcast and policy paper series provide a multinational perspective on SOF for policy makers and military leaders to consider for the usage of SOF in the future, especially in the GPC campaigning environment.

A secondary objective was to avoid pure American or Canadian military perspectives on the subject. Rather, the series sought to explore eclectic western yet SOF relevant, themes like the SOF's role in counter threat financing, SOF's capabilities in military assistance, and even the significance of SOF culture in the current international security environment transition period. Canadian, U.S., Belgian, and Israeli contributors, both military and civilian, ensured the desired cognitive diversity to the subject. From the podcast discussion and policy papers to date, four key learnings emerged that speak to the central question of the role of SOF in the competition space.

Key Learnings

The four key learnings include: 1) the important role of SOF in narrative competition; 2) the observation that SOF are more than just direct action; 3) the significant role of SOF culture for organizational reform,

success, or failure; and 4) the concept of SOF as a multi-dimensional integrator.

In episode 7 with Dr. David Ellis from the U.S. Joint Special Operations University in Tampa, Florida (JSOU), we explored in detail the idea of narrative, and more specifically the role that SOF could play in what is increasingly being called narrative warfare (NW).⁸ The logic behind the inclusion of SOF in NW is quite clear. SOF's traditional roles – alongside direct action – include many tasks that tend to fall into irregular warfare (IW) and while not the exclusive purview of SOF, tasks such as foreign internal defence (FID) or unconventional warfare (UW) are certainly part of the IW mission set. Moreover, the concept of the narrative – meaning the collection of ideas and concepts that codify meaning to events and behaviours – is very much intertwined with IW. As a concept, IW is about gaining influence and the act of constructing alternative narratives and deconstructing existing adversary narratives is a way in which actors can gain and maintain such influence. As SOF play a central role in IW, understanding the utility of narratives as a tool for gaining this influence is critical. Our interview with David Ellis and his KCIS Insights brief explore this topic in detail.

The second observation noted during this project was that what constitutes both a special operation and what is asked of special operations forces is far broader than what popular culture or even conventional wisdom suggests. While direct action activities (raids, rescues, and kill or capture missions), which

⁷ KCIS *Insights*, online at <https://www.thekcis.org/publications/insights>, accessed 22 Nov 21.

⁸ Ajit Maan, "Narrative Warfare," *RealClearDefence* (27 Feb 18), online at https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2018/02/27/narrative_warfare_113118.html, accessed 17 Nov 21.

are engagingly recounted in popular books, television series, and movies, are indeed part of the operator's mission set, this podcast series has confirmed that SOF are applicable and valuable for a far broader set of missions. In short, SOF do far more than just kick in doors. In fact, in the seven episodes recorded to date, very little time was spent on the topic of direct action. This outcome is not to say that direct action is not important. Quite the opposite is true. The ability to conduct activities such as high value target raids and hostage rescue are imperative. Moreover, during an era of primarily C-VEO operations which have typified the post-9/11 operating environment, such actions were conducted almost as a matter of routine. However, as the strategic emphasis has now rebalanced towards GPC, direct action plays a reduced role due in no small part to the risk of escalation that GPC now poses. Direct action has been replaced with other SOF tasks such as special reconnaissance and partner capacity building, to name but a few. Indeed, the expansion of what constitutes a special operation and, as a result, what is asked of SOF is itself expanding. Our interviews and KCIS Insight papers with U.S. Army Colonel Sara Dudley, Dr. Gaëlle Rivard-Piché, Dr. Bernd Horn, and Dr. David Ellis demonstrate the breadth of tasks that could constitute a special operation. What such an expanded view of special operations looks like leads directly to the third and fourth learnings that we observed as part of this initiative.

Culture – meaning the ideas, values, and identities that are reproduced over generations– is a feature that both shapes military organizations and is leveraged by military organizations to conduct activities.⁹ SOF organizations are no different. While a country's military ethos will certainly influence a SOF organization as much as it does other services, SOF are emerging as a unique branch in many cases, sitting along – as equals – the traditional branches of the army, navy, and air force.

However, as is true with the three traditional branches of services, SOF too have their own unique set of cultural attributes that can at best support or at worst undermine the overall national military ethos. This alignment is especially important in cases where SOF organizational culture runs afoul of not just the national military ethos, but that of the country in general. Indeed, the Canadian experience with the Canadian Airborne Regiment¹⁰ or the more recent example of the Australian Special Air Service¹¹ are but two examples of this misalignment of cultures with tragic outcomes. The interview with Erin Yantzi from the University of Waterloo and her KCIS Insights piece made this point quite clear and highlighted the tremendous value of examining organizational cultures in SOF units to ensure their alignment to positive national, societal, and military values while demonstrating that SOF cultural uniqueness can also complement broader cultural practices and beliefs.

⁹ H Christian Breede, ed. *Culture and the Soldier* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2020).

¹⁰ Commission of Inquiry into the Deployment of Canadian Forces to Somalia. *Dishonoured Legacy: The Lessons of the Somalia Affair* (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 1997).

¹¹ Paul Brereton. Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force Afghanistan Inquiry Report (Canberra: Government of Australia, 2020).

The fourth observation is that SOF serve an increasingly valuable role as multi-dimensional integrators at both the operational and strategic levels. SOF can place themselves at a nexus for connecting joint, multinational, conventional, and interagency actions in a GPC context. Given the SOF unconventional mindset and approach, cross-cultural capabilities, and long experience during the C-VEO years in working with multinational and civilian organizations, SOF are well suited to convene a range of organizations to address great power adversary challenges. This role goes far beyond the stereotypical and tactical direct-action utilization of SOF. In fact, the integrator role fits into the SOF soldier-diplomat profile for conducting operational level and higher military assistance (MA), which NATO defines as the broad task of training, advising, mentoring, and partnering to support and enable friendly assets.¹² For example, SOF involvement in counter-threat finance, special warfare, and resistance activities depends heavily on exercising its integrator role and expertise.

Conclusion

While the Politics of Special Forces podcasts and their accompanying KCIS Insights papers aim to attract a multinational defence and SOF readership, several of the series outcomes offer insights and thoughts for evaluation of and by the Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM). First, CANSOFCOM may want to consider the SOF integrator role it could play in the NATO, Arctic, and Asian contexts. As a North American force with

strong NATO ties, it could offer a potentially different and unique approach and perspective to Arctic and Asian security concerns in contrast to the United States. CANSOFCOM may also be better positioned to lead as an integrator in several international situations, especially if it shifts from the Middle East and Africa. Second, as a small force, CANSOFCOM should contemplate its mission portfolio outside of direct action, particularly in the special warfare sphere. Its involvement in Latvia allows experimentation in this area. Third and related is the question of CANSOFCOM capabilities, current and future, in the narrative warfare space. This latter topic seems to be a generic weak point in most SOF organizations when confronted with Russian and Chinese information warfare efforts. Finally, CANSOFCOM reflection and evaluation of its own culture could lead to an overall strengthening of the organization. In short, the Politics of Special Forces Podcast series, an offspring of COVID-induced restrictions on SOF intellectual exchange and knowledge development, provides a forum and vehicle for debate and new thought on the future of SOF and its role in great power competition. The co-producers hope the contribution has been helpful.

H. Christian Breede is currently a staff officer at the Canadian Defence Academy and visiting professor in the Terrorism, Risk, and Security Studies programme at Simon Fraser University. He holds a PhD in War Studies from RMC and has published on the topics of military culture and security policy. He holds the rank of Major in the Canadian Army and

¹² NATO Standardization Office. *Allied Joint Publication (AJP)-3.5 (B), Allied Joint Doctrine for Special Operations* (Edition B, Version 1). Brussels, Belgium: North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2019, 7-8.

has deployed experience in Haiti and Afghanistan.

Colonel Kevin D. Stringer, Ph.D., U.S. Army (Retired) *has spent the past decade as a Eurasian Foreign Area Officer and Army strategist in the special operations community. He served as a military faculty member at the U.S. Army War College in 2021. He is an Associate Professor at the General Jonas Žemaitis Military Academy of Lithuania and a Lecturer on Strategy at the University of Northwestern Switzerland.*

A Typology for Engaging in the Information Environment: Inform, Influence, Impose Operations (I3O)

Bradley Sylvestre

Canada and its allies increasingly rely on systems theory to enable analysis, synthesis, and inquiry in relation to the information environment (IE). Specifically, systems theory helps decompose and better understand interacting elements and key functions within the IE.

This article briefly details key working papers that apply systems theory in the IE developed by the United States Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence (OUSD)(I), subsequently developed into courseware, known as IE Advanced Analysis (IEAA). Importantly, IEAA is attended by Canadian personnel responsible for conducting activities in the IE. Recognizing that this courseware does not clarify the types of operations military forces could undertake in the IE, this article then proposes a typology consisting of Inform, Influence, Impose Operations (I3O). Compatible with existing military planning, targeting, and decision-making concepts and practices, I3O

represents a functional typology that can enhance the military's ability to maneuver in the IE across the spectrum of operations. Such maneuverability will be especially crucial for Canada's Special Operations Forces (CANSOF) as it adopts more sensing and shaping functions in a threat environment characterized by strategic competition.

Applying Systems Theory in the Information Environment

While the IE continues to grow in importance, it is an extremely broad and complex concept. In Canadian doctrine, the IE is defined as "the information itself, the individuals, organizations and systems that receive, process and convey the information, and the cognitive, virtual and physical space in which this occurs."¹³ Acknowledged in the definition is that the IE has multiple functions within the operational environment. However, the very presence of multiple functions, and their interrelationships, means clear assessments of the IE are difficult to execute. Moreover, failure to situate the IE in the broader operational context risks unintended effects and failure to achieve the objective. Thus, systems theory has been highlighted by Canada's allies as offering tools that help to decompose and understand systems in the IE and identify opportunities for change.

Systems theory is characterized by a multidisciplinary approach that focuses on understanding how individual components influence each other within an overall system, where a system is "a set of interacting

¹³ Department of National Defence/Canadian Armed Forces, *Policy on Joint Information Operations* (2018): 2.

elements that form a whole entity.”¹⁴ One pathway to understanding the basics of systems theory is to consider a variety of systems. A simple system is one that has a single path to a single output. To produce said output, there is one, and only one, way to do so – the infamous ‘staff solution.’ A complicated system is one that has multiple paths to a single output. To arrive at said output one has multiple options to consider, however, there remains only one correct solution – the infamous ‘course of action (COA) selection.’ A complex system consists of multiple paths to multiple outcomes. To complicate matters further, consider a complex adaptive system that changes based on inputs, and as a result of these inputs, a variety of outputs exist.

In 2012, the (OSUD(I)) developed a working paper offering a methodical approach for characterizing the IE using systems theory.¹⁵ It provides a thought model that integrates key concepts of systems theory with existing joint doctrine constructs like the Joint Operational Planning Process (JOPP) and Joint Intelligence Preparation of the Operating Environment (JIPOE) to enable

analysis, synthesis, and inquiry in relation to the IE. This thought model also offers intelligence and planning professionals the capability to define and understand functions and relationships within the IE, enabling characterization, forecasting, targeting, wargaming, and assessment.¹⁶ The following year, a second working paper was published outlining the tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) of the methodical approach.¹⁷

While neither working paper was widely distributed, it was adopted by the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) and developed into courseware by OUSD(I) for training military and civilian personnel responsible for conducting activities in the IE. Referred to as IE Advanced Analysis (IEAA), the course continues to run under the direction of the U.S. Air Force.¹⁸ Importantly, individuals working in the IE at Canadian Joint Operations Command (CJOC) are expected to have taken the IEAA course.

Inherently, the IE is both a complex adaptive system and the decision making element of the operational environment. The IE is also

¹⁴ Peter B. Checkland, *Systems Thinking, Systems Practice* (New York: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 1981; New York: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 1999), A3; Office of the Undersecretary of Defense: Special Capabilities Office – The Initiatives Group. *Applying Systems Theory to Characterize the Information Environment* (2012): 6.

¹⁵ Office of the Undersecretary of Defense, “Applying Systems Theory to Characterize the Information Environment,” pp. 1-24.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 3.

¹⁷ Office of the Undersecretary of Defense: Special Capabilities Office – Initiatives Group, *Information Environment Assessment Handbook* (2013): 1-23.

¹⁸ JMark Services, “Information Environment Advanced Analysis,” accessed 20-June-2022. www.jmarkservices.com/information-environment-advanced-analysis-course/.



thought to underlie other war-fighting domains (air, land, sea, space, cyber). As the Canadian definition demonstrates, the IE is characterized by the integration of cognitive, virtual, and physical dimensions.¹⁹ Of these, the cognitive dimension includes decision makers within an operational environment, while the virtual dimension encompasses the “processes for managing and using information including data”²⁰ and the construct(s) (e.g., legal, socio-cultural,

religious, etc.) a decision maker relies on when determining a COA. Lastly, the physical dimension includes infrastructure that enables mechanisms that support decision making. Specifically, this includes the infrastructure to observe, orient, decide, and act (OODA) in the IE.

¹⁹ Canadian doctrine uses the term ‘virtual,’ whereas the working papers discussed in this article use the term ‘informational.’ These terms are merged in this article. Department of National Defence/Canadian Armed Forces, “Policy on Joint Information Operations,” p. 2; and Office of the Undersecretary of Defense, “Applying Systems Theory to Characterize the Information Environment,” p. 4.

²⁰ Brett Boudreau, *The Rise and Fall of Military Strategic Communications at National Defence 2015-2021: A Cautionary Tale for Canada and NATO, and a Roadmap for Reform* (Calgary: Canadian Global Affairs Institute, 2022): 16. https://assets.nationbuilder.com/cdfai/pages/5026/attachments/original/1651540950/The_Rise_and_Fall_of_Military_Strategic_Communications_at_National_Defence_2015-2021.pdf?1651540950.

Operationalizing Information

Information, defined as unprocessed data of every description,²¹ serves as an instrument of national power when used to shape events, strategies, national will, and international perceptions.²² Alternatively, information functions as a source when the possession of specific information enables a comparative advantage that allows national leaders to shape, or react to, domestic and foreign events.²³ Militarily, information as an instrument of power has often taken the form of propaganda, psychological operations, information operations, and perception management. Most, if not all of these, have arguably fallen out of favour for more chic and trendy *guerre de jour* such as Narrative Warfare, Cognitive Warfare, or Strategic Communications (StratCom). While each of these terms concentrate on affecting one or more dimensions of the IE, they suffer from a variety of definitional, and thus doctrinal debates.²⁴

Information, and the ability to operationalize said information, are often considered among

the most important factors in achieving the desired outcome in a given situation.²⁵ Across tactical, operational and strategic levels, knowledge of various forces at work accords leverage that can be directly translated into power through decision making.²⁶ As is often the case, better decision making enables greater chances for success. Significantly, it is important to consider how this process of translating knowledge into power, or decision making, can be influenced.

A recent RAND report highlights the value of using systems theory to impose or exploit complexity on an adversary's decision making by targeting conditions in the IE.²⁷ In this context, to "impose or exploit complexity is to take an action that increases an aspect of the complexity of the environment in a way that makes it more difficult for an adversary to make decisions or to operate."²⁸ In essence, applying systems theory to an adversary's decision making could enable actions that shape conditions in favour of friendly forces. Thus, to engage in the IE is to undertake activities that exploit conditions producing deliberate negative or positive effects.

²¹ Defence Terminology Bank, "Record 18621: Information," accessed 20-June-2022.

²² John Bokel, *Information as an Instrument and a Source of National Power* (Washington D.C.: National Defense University, 2003). <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA422060.pdf>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Boudreau, "The Rise and Fall of Military Strategic Communications at National Defence 2015-2021."

²⁵ Bokel, "Information as an Instrument and a Source of National Power," p. 2.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Sherrill Lingel, Matthew Sargent, Timothy R. Gulden, Tim McDonald, and Parousia Rockstroh, *Leveraging Complexity in Great-Power Competition and Warfare: Volume I, An Initial Exploration of How Complex Adaptive Systems Thinking Can Frame Opportunities and Challenges* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2021). https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR500/RR589-1/RAND_RRA589-1.pdf.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 2.

Negative effects may entail starving an adversary of the information on which they base decisions, while positive effects could be directed at partners (potential or otherwise) to shape or reinforce the perceptions they maintain.²⁹ The value proposition highlighted here has clear implications for CANSOF as it embraces a sensing and shaping role in the evolving security environment.

Noting how adversaries increasingly use information to erode physical overmatch, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) released the Joint Concept for Operations in the Information Environment (JCOIE) in 2018. The JCOIE identifies Information as the seventh joint function, and aims to “[address] the role of information and focuses on how information can change or maintain the drivers of behaviour.”³⁰

Proposing a New Typology: Inform, Influence, Impose Operations (I3O)

Without making explicit reference, the JCOIE hints at a major key to succeeding in the IE – maintaining agency. In this sense, agency is the ability to independently OODA on a selected COA. In other words, agency refers to the ability to take action or to choose what action to take.³¹ Yet, the JCOIE makes no reference to how different types of operations

could be undertaken by military forces in the IE, leaving existing definitional debates to fester. In light of this gap, introduced here is the idea that military forces should adopt Inform, Influence, Impose Operations (I3O) as a typology based on the degree of agency afforded to the target audience. Inspired by the efforts of the aforementioned OUSD(I) working papers, IEAA courseware, and JCOIE, this typology aligns closely with existing planning, targeting, and decision making concepts and practices, and is explained in further detail below.

Inform Operations communicate knowledge of some particular fact and are intended to be conducted under existing conditions in the IE against target audiences with full agency, allowing independent COA selection. An example is the use of a Public Affairs and/or a Combat Camera capability to inform a domestic audience by increasing the amount and access to information via social media about military forces deployed on overseas missions. The target audience(s) would maintain full agency regarding how to process or act upon such information. It is important to note that Inform Operations must be developed in accordance with the socio-cultural frame of friendly forces.

Influence Operations induce, without apparent exertion of force, by targeting conditions in the IE such as narratives, access

²⁹ Ibid, p. 6.

³⁰ U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Concept for Operating in the Information Environment (JCOIE)* (2018): iii. https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/joint_concepts_jcoie.pdf.

³¹ Cambridge Dictionary, “Agency,” accessed 20-June-2022. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/agency>.

to information, and amounts of information.³² Such operations would reduce the agency of a target audience, guiding them towards the selection of a COA that produces a more favourable outcome for friendly forces. Activities undertaken in the IE in support of Influence Operations would likely have attribution mechanisms embedded, enabling activities to be conducted openly, discreetly, covertly, or clandestinely. Because activities in support of Influence Operations aim at targeting the access, amount, and functionality of the informational element presented to target audiences, it will likely involve the deconstruction of currently held narratives and the construction of a new narrative favourable to friendly forces. An example is the delivery of cognitive effects against German decision making by the Allies during Operation Mincemeat as part of the deception planning for Operation Husky during WWII.³³ In this case, the London Control Station (LCS) increased the access and amount of information available to target audiences, delivering a cognitive effect designed to induce a positive COA selection.³⁴ Ultimately, the LCS succeeded in convincing German decision makers that the Allies intended to invade Greece and

Sardinia, leading to the reallocation of forces away from Sicily, the actual target of the Allied invasion.

Impose Operations are applied authoritatively and are orchestrated to remove all agency of the target audience and force capitulation to a narrative beneficial to friendly forces. On 15 August 1945, Japan's Emperor Hirohito addressed his nation using radio for the first time, announcing the surrender of Japan.³⁵ While the Emperor never used the word 'surrender' and continued to justify Japan's earlier aggression, he also advocated for worldwide "prosperity and happiness."³⁶ Additionally, he cited "a new and most cruel bomb" as a reason for surrender.³⁷ As is the case regarding Influence Operations, Impose Operations will necessarily be conducted in the socio-cultural frame of the target audience. The scenario discussed above entailed the deconstruction and reconstruction of a narrative for the internal daily restoration of the imagined community amid the unconditional surrender to the Allies.

³² Narrative is defined as "a spoken or written account of events and information arranged in a logical sequence to influence the behaviour of a target audience." Defence Terminology Bank, "Record 695975: Narrative," accessed 20-June-2022.

³³ Jon Latimer, *Deception in War* (London: Lume Books, 2020), 129-31.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Atomic Heritage Foundation, "The Jewel Voice Broadcast," 04 December 2021. <https://www.atomicheritage.org/key-documents/jewel-voice-broadcast>.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

Relevance for Canada's Special Operations Forces (CANSOF)

In 2020, the Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) released its strategic vision, *Beyond the Horizon*. Highlighting the evolving security environment, CANSOF pitched itself as a 'gaps and seams force' at the nexus of national security and national defence.³⁸ Within this space, CANSOF shapes the operational environment, including "both the battlespace and the adversary," to create favourable strategic outcomes.³⁹ As the IE becomes increasingly important, CANSOF can harness systems theory and I3O to expand Canada's strategic options across all domains.

in the IE with a central focus on affecting agency. Ultimately, this clarity will enable organizations like CANSOF to maneuver with more certainty and efficacy across the spectrum of operations.

Bradley Sylvestre recently completed a Master of Arts in International Affairs at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs (NPSIA), specializing in intelligence. Previously, he obtained a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) from the University of Waterloo where he majored in political science and double minored in history and public policy. His research interests include hybrid threats and Arctic security, among other topics related to national defence and national security.

Conclusion

Current efforts to apply systems theory in the IE do not consider the types of operations military forces might undertake. The I3O typology fills this gap and provides value by conforming very closely to existing military, planning, targeting, and decision-making concepts and practices. As the IE becomes a more competitive space, CANSOF and their partners will increasingly engage in the IE. With a strong basis in systems theory and methodical approaches developed by Canada's allies, the I3O typology prescribes the types of operations that can be undertaken

³⁸ Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM), *Beyond the Horizon: A Strategy for Canada's Special Operations Forces in an Evolving Security Environment* (2020): 20. https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/dnd-mdn/documents/reports/2020/dgm-19719-bm8_cansofcom_stratgicplan_en_v8.pdf.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 21. Also see Gaëlle Rivard Piché and H. Christian Breede, "Adapting Special Operations Forces Employment in Great Power Competition: Reflections on the Future of Canadian Special Operations Forces," *Insights* 1, no. 5 (2021): 1-5. <https://www.thekcis.org/s/KCIS-INSIGHTS-Rivard-Piche-Breede-June2021.pdf>.

“We Will Find a Way”: Recruiting, Training, and Sustaining Resilient Personnel in Canada’s Special Forces

Meghan Fitzpatrick

Over the past twenty years, armed forces globally have invested heavily in recruiting, training and sustaining ‘resilient’ personnel, capable of adapting to a volatile, complex and ambiguous operational landscape.⁴⁰ This is especially true of the Special Operations Forces (SOF) community, whose members are specially chosen to execute tasks that are uniquely physically and psychologically demanding. This article will examine how Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) currently selects and equips members with the skills and mindset necessary to achieve high levels of ‘resilience.’ In addition, it will reflect on the challenges the Command will undoubtedly face in fielding such a force in the future. For the purposes of this article, resilience can be understood as “the ability to both maintain



and return to previous levels of well-being and functioning or even thrive when faced with a notable stressor, adverse experience, or traumatic event in training, garrison or operational environment or at home.”⁴¹

CANSOFCOM’s primary purpose is to, “provide the Government of Canada with agile, high-readiness Special Operations Forces capable of conducting...operations in defence of Canada both at home and abroad.”⁴² In doing so, personnel must tolerate elevated levels of risk and endure harsh, austere conditions. To find individuals capable of surviving and succeeding in such an environment, the Command recruits from within the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF).⁴³ And like other Special Forces, CANSOFCOM sets rigorous standards for those who wish to be considered. In the 2016 edition of the Pre Selection Physical Fitness

⁴⁰ Bradley C. Nindl et. al, “Perspectives on resilience for military readiness and preparedness: Report of an international military physiology roundtable,” *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport* 21 (2018), 1116.

⁴¹ Isabelle Richer and Christine Frank, “Facing Adversity and Factors Affecting Resilience: A Qualitative Analysis of the Lived Experiences of Canadian Special Operations Forces,” *Journal of Special Operations Medicine* 20.4 (2020), 52; and Technical Cooperation Program Human Resources Performance Group: Technical Panel 21 on Resilience. *Summary report of TTCP HUM AG21* (Washington, DC, 2017).

⁴² CANSOFCOM, *Beyond the Horizon: A Strategy for Canada’s Special Operations Forces in an Evolving Security Environment* (Ottawa, ON: Department of National Defence, 2020), 8.

⁴³ Unlike other CAF occupations, there is currently no direct entry into Canada’s Special Forces upon recruitment from the general population.



Training Program for Joint Task Force 2, the authors frankly acknowledge, “extremely high levels of personal physical fitness and motivation are critical,” and that the assessment process “evaluates performance while placing candidates under intense... stress.”⁴⁴ This approach is supported by scientific research that suggests physiological well-being contributes to overall resilience and capacity to ‘bounce back’ from trauma. Goldenberg and Saindon reinforce this contention in a 2018 chapter on the subject, explaining that while “all military missions are difficult and potentially dangerous, the missions assigned to SOF units tend to be particularly demanding—they can last from a

few hours to several weeks in geographically and politically hostile, uncertain, and complex environments (Melkonian and Picq, 2010). SOF personnel often experience sleep deprivation (Lieberman et al., 2001), and are sometimes required to engage in continuous combat operations for periods exceeding twenty-four hours in difficult physical conditions (Tharion et al., 2003).⁴⁵

However, physical toughness is not enough. Resilience, as it is currently conceived, also has a significant psychological component. What is more, poor mental health can seriously impede operational effectiveness. Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries,

⁴⁴ Howie Wenger, *Joint Task Force Two Special Operations Assaulter: Pre-Selection Physical Fitness Training Program* (Ottawa, ON: 2016), v.

⁴⁵ Irina Goldenberg and Mathieu Saindon, “The Resilience of SOF Personnel,” in Eds. Jessica Glicken-Turnley, Kobi Michael and Eyal Ben-Ari, *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century: Perspectives from the Social Sciences* (Oxford, UK: Taylor & Francis, 2018).

psychological casualties have been a consistent feature of the battlefield from shell shock to battle exhaustion and post-traumatic stress disorder.⁴⁶ And this continues to be the case. For example, a 2012 study of CAF members on deployment to Afghanistan revealed almost 10% of respondents to a survey, “exceeded civilian criteria for symptoms of acute traumatic stress, major depression, or generalized anxiety,” and almost “one-half with a mental health problem perceived occupational dysfunction as a result.”⁴⁷ A review of mental health in the CAF published two years later in 2014 showed that about 1 in 6 Regular Force members “reported symptoms of at least one of the following disorders: major depressive episode, panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and alcohol abuse or dependence.”⁴⁸ What is more, a report released by Statistics Canada in May 2022 stated that, “Compared to the general Canadian population, military members [continue to] exhibit a higher prevalence of depressive disorders, anxiety

disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder.”⁴⁹

Over the last two decades, efforts have been made to mitigate these numbers and improve overall well-being through CAF-wide programs like the Road to Mental Readiness (R2MR), which is an educational initiative designed to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health problems and prepare military members for the psychological impact of deployment.⁵⁰ Similarly, SOF members are required to complete the Special Operations Mental Agility (SOMA) course. Like R2MR, SOMA is intended to improve literacy in this area. It also equips members with physical strategies (paced and diaphragmatic breathing), and cognitive strategies (reframing, imagery, self-talk etc.) that have been shown to reduce the impact of stress on functioning.⁵¹

Due to rigorous selection and training, SOF personnel are already naturally resilient. Indeed, “SOF operators present a psychological profile characterized by

⁴⁶ See Edgar Jones and Simon Wessely, *Shell Shock to PTSD: Military Psychiatry from 1900 to the Gulf War* (UK: Psychology Press, 2005).

⁴⁷ The study surveyed 1572 members of the Canadian Armed Forces. Bryan G. Garber, Mark A. Zamorski and Rakesh Jetley, “Mental Health of Canadian Forces Members while on deployment to Afghanistan,” *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 57.12 (2012), 736.

⁴⁸ Caryn Pearson, Mark Zamorski and Teresa Janz, “Mental Health of the Canadian Armed Forces,” *Statistics Canada: Health at a Glance* (Nov 2014), 1.

⁴⁹ Rachel A. Plouffe, Aihua Liu, J. Don Richardson and Anthony Nazarov, “Validation of the mental health continuum: Short form among Canadian Armed Forces Personnel,” (Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada, 18 May 2022), 3.

⁵⁰ D. Fikretoglu, A. Liu, A. Nazarov, and K. Blackler, “A group randomized control trial to test the efficacy of the road to Mental Readiness (R2MR) program among Canadian military recruits,” *BMC Psychiatry* 19.1 (2019), 1–14.

⁵¹ CANSOFCOM, *Special Operations Mental Agility Participant Notebook* (Ottawa, ON: DND, 2017).

hardiness, greater social adjustment, greater emotional stability, and greater self-confidence and self-esteem, which is strongly in line with personal characteristics found to be linked with resilience in military populations.”⁵² In addition, personnel regularly report higher levels of unit cohesion and job satisfaction than conventional force counterparts.⁵³ Having said that, the high intensity environment in which members work is not without its pitfalls. In 2020, Richer and Frank of Canada’s Director General Military Personnel Research and Analysis (DGMPRA) completed a detailed qualitative analysis of the lived experiences of Canadian SOF. Conducting over seventy in-depth interviews, Richer and Frank’s findings demonstrate that the Command naturally selects members with qualities that may enhance their ‘resilience.’ However, a continually high operational tempo and demanding performance-based culture are chronic stressors that can and often do, have long-term consequences. Many participants in the study felt they had little time to recover from deployments, and the demands of the job meant it was difficult to balance personal and family obligations. One participant noted,

that the “‘we will find a way’ ethos of the organization had [also] created a drive to succeed that could harm the individual.”⁵⁴ The same participant further remarked that “‘we will find a way,’ sometimes, it feels like “‘We won’t take no for an answer.’”⁵⁵ This means that the same qualities that make SOF effective can also encourage a climate where members fear letting other team members down, or showing what may be perceived as signs of physical and psychological ‘weakness,’ and potentially undermine career progression, amongst a variety of other outcomes.⁵⁶

There is also evidence that the last few decades of sustained deployment are having a negative impact on some segments of the military and SOF community internationally. For instance, there were 117 suicides within US Special Operations Command from 2007-2015, which represents an overall rate of 39.5 per 100,000. This was higher than the rate recorded for the US military as a whole at the time (22.9 per 100,000).⁵⁷ While a 2017 study completed by the American Association of Suicidology concluded that the risk of suicide within Special Forces had since

⁵² Richer and Frank, “Facing Adversity,” 52.

⁵³ M. De Beer M, and A. van Heerden, “Exploring the role of motivational and coping resources in a Special Forces selection process,” *SA J Ind Psychol* 40.1 (2014), 1-13.

⁵⁴ Richer and Frank, “Facing Adversity,” 56.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Nick Turse, “US Commandos at Risk for Suicide: Is the Military Doing Enough?” *New York Times* (30 June 2020) *Updated 22 June 2021.

dropped substantially due to selection standards and training, suicide rates tripled the following year in 2018.⁵⁸ Experts debate the reason behind these “historically heightened suicide rates,” including both organic and psychological causes.⁵⁹ No matter the exact origin, the authors of a 2019 article for the *Journal of Special Operations Medicine* argue that, “the [US] military’s insistence on resilience could be interpreted as shifting responsibility for the effects of chronic physiologic and neurologic stress to Servicemembers [who are] characterized as not being positive enough in thought or resilient if they succumb to PTSD or suicide to stop their suffering.”⁶⁰ There are no such equivalent studies that establish the risk of suicide within Canada’s SOF and military suicide rates outside of the United States remain relatively low in comparison to the general population. However, there has been a recent rise in suicide rates that requires careful monitoring. In 2020, the Canadian Armed Forces reported its highest number of suicides since 2014 and comparable militaries like the United Kingdom have also noted a rising level of suicides amongst army males since 2017.⁶¹



There remains limited scholarly literature available on the impact and role of resilience in SOF. To date, it has not been clearly demonstrated to “reduce suicide risk or...to improve mental health outcomes.”⁶² Quantitative studies in military forces often differ widely in how they define and conceptualize ‘resilience’ and measure it.⁶³ While resilience programs may contribute to the creation of a generally positive and supporting environment, there are still substantial gaps in the scientific data that have yet to be filled.

SOF globally recognize the centrality of the soldier to their operational success. In CANSOFCOM’s 2020 strategy, the authors acknowledge that, “they define the organization’s depth and potential,” and that their “dedication, talent and realized efforts

⁵⁸ Kate Rocklein Kemplin, Olimpia Paun, Dan Godbee and Jonathan Brandon, “Resilience and Suicide in Special Operations Forces,” *Journal of Special Operations Medicine* 19.2 (2019), 57.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ “Armed Forces reports 20 military suicides last year, largest number since 2014,” *CTV News* (8 April 2020); David Boulos, *Report on Suicide Mortality in the Canadian Armed Forces (1995-2019)* (Ottawa, ON: Surgeon General, 2020); and Ministry of Defence, *Suicide in the UK Regular Armed Forces: Annual Summary and Trends (1 Jan 1984-31 Dec 2020)*, (UK: MoD, 25 March 2021).

⁶² Kemplin et. al, “Resilience and Suicide,” 62.

⁶³ Ibid.

must be supported, recognized and leveraged through the exchange of value and loyalty between the individual and the Command.”⁶⁴ It is clear that CANSOFCOM already recruits exceptional individuals who receive advanced training and function in highly-cohesive and team oriented environment. Like the rest of the CAF, the Command has also focused on providing coping skills intended to further boost pre-existing ‘resilience.’ However, there are still cracks in the foundation that have yet to be addressed.

As the 2020 DGMPRA study revealed, CANSOFCOM members often experience chronic stress due to unresolved issues associated with operational tempo, and a demanding work culture. While some of these issues may never be fully resolved, they must be mitigated to ensure long-term viability and lessen the risk of mental illness and suicide. Resilience is also a less robust concept than it appears and greater research is needed into its role within Special Forces. Over the next decade, the Command is set to grow by over 600 personnel.⁶⁵ Moreover, CANSOFCOM is supposed to, “Embark on a Command wide review of its personnel policies,” and that “investments will be made in recruitment, selection and retention initiatives.”⁶⁶ This is an opportune moment to pause and reflect on how to recruit, train and sustain Canada’s Special Forces today and in the future.

Dr. Meghan Fitzpatrick is a Strategic Analyst with Defence Research and Development Canada and an Adjunct Professor of War

Studies at the Royal Military College of Canada. Specializing in military mental health and resilience, her work has appeared in such distinguished publications as Oxford University’s Social History of Medicine and Taylor & Francis’ War & Society. She is also the author of Invisible Scars: Mental Trauma in the Korean War (2017). In addition, she has spoken at numerous international conferences, including as a keynote speaker for International Military Testing Association. Dr. Fitzpatrick’s current research looks at how military forces navigate and respond to the increasing complexity of the modern operational and information environment, including building resilience on an individual and organizational level. Since joining DRDC, she has received recognition for this work, including the Centre for Operational Research and Analysis Award for Outstanding Achievement in Defence Analysis (2020).

⁶⁴ CANSOFCOM, *Beyond the Horizon*, 23.

⁶⁵ Department of National Defence, *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada’s Defence Policy* (Ottawa, ON: Government of Canada, 2017), 40.

⁶⁶ CANSOFCOM, *Beyond the Horizon*, 19.

Canadian Special Operations Forces Culture: A Double-Edged Sword

Erin Yantzi

Military culture, central to an institution oriented towards the application of violence, is often a double-edged sword. The culture created within a military organization can have positive and negative consequences for its members, the military institution and its effectiveness, and government. Both “lived”, daily culture and formal organizational culture can magnify and reinforce values, beliefs and behaviours which may tip between healthy and unhealthy, or aligned and unaligned to the military’s mission, ethics, and the relationship between a country’s military and government. This article will explore some of the ways in which Canadian Special Operations Forces’ (CANSOF) culture is a double-edged sword both internally within Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) and its units, internally within the Canadian military, and how CANSOF culture has been impacted and impacts the institution’s relationship with political decision-makers. The elements of culture described create double-edged swords: both positive and negative outcomes,

or are perceived as either a positive or negative qualities of CANSOFCOM.

Basis for Understanding CANSOF Culture

CANSOF culture is understood here from an anthropological perspective, and as (then italicize) beliefs and values within a group that transform into attitudes, which are expressed as behaviours, and these beliefs and values persist over time despite changes in group membership.⁶⁷ CANSOF culture is reflective of, and shares similarities with, other countries’ SOF organizations’ culture;



⁶⁷ English (2004), 12, as cited in Emily Spencer and Bernd Horn, *Working with Others: Simple Guides to Maximize Effectiveness*, (Winnipeg, Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2012), 23.

CANSOFCOM is a part of the Global SOF Network⁶⁸, which is an “imagined community of choice”.⁶⁹ SOF members identify and abide by certain ways of behaving, thinking, and embodied meanings which they learn inside their organization and their units.⁷⁰ In addition, the internal, “everyday” SOF culture exists within and is framed by larger formal structures.⁷¹

In addition, SOF culture has been shaped by what SOF has been asked to do and accomplish in the past. Winslow, in her study of the Canadian Airborne Regiment, makes an astute observation of the role of decision-makers and their policies and culture: military culture is “a dependent variable shaped by the Canadian policy of maintain a combat force.” along with the associated values which shape belief and behaviour.⁷² The decision of a government to have and use military shapes the institution’s ethos to center on combat, thus orienting organizational values and goals to make and maintain a combat-ready and effective military.⁷³

To apply to the case of CANSOFCOM, CANSOF culture is the dependent variable which is in part shaped by a Canada’s policy of having a high-readiness, discretionary, “no fail” force able to undertake special operations. This is also reflected within CANSOFCOM’s 2015 strategic plan which describes its “enabling organizational culture” that is fast, precise, flexible, agile and adaptable.⁷⁴ There is an internal culture required for CANSOFCOM and its units to deliver results and undertake certain missions which they train and select for, year after year, over and over again. CANSOF culture is created from what they are asked to do and what they have accomplished, and what CANSOFCOM and its unit emphasize and require – both organizationally and culturally – to achieve this.

The Double-Edges of Culture

This article discusses CANSOF culture as it is presented by “insiders”⁷⁵ within Canadian

⁶⁸ Christian Leuprecht and H. Christian Breede, “Beyond the Movies: The Value Proposition of Canada’s Special Operations Forces,” (Ottawa: Conference of Defence Associations Institute and Macdonald-Laurier Institute, 2016), 4.

⁶⁹ Tone Danielsen, *Making Warriors in a Global Era: An Ethnographic Study of the Norwegian Naval Special Operations Commando* (Lanham, Maryland, Lexington Books, 2018), xxvi.

⁷⁰Danielsen, *Making Warriors*, xxx.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Donna Winslow, “Misplaced Loyalties: The Role of Military Culture in the Breakdown of Discipline in Peace Operations: Organizational Crisis,” *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 35, no.3 (1998): 350.

⁷³ Winslow, “Misplaced Loyalties,” 363.

⁷⁴ CANSOFCOM, *Consolidating the Objective* (Ottawa, ON: Department of National Defence, 2015) 28.

⁷⁵ Christian Breede, “Special (peace) operations: Optimizing SOF for UN missions,” *International Journal* 73, no. 2(2018), 224.

defence press publications, and CANSOFCOM research and education publications, along with its strategic documents. Overarchingly, SOF organizations are made up of members that are consistently described as mature, motivated professionals, who are intelligent out-of-the-box thinkers, capable of dealing with ambiguity and getting the job done, and relied upon by decision-makers for their discretion, “no fail” approach, while being “low cost” and innovating within the field.⁷⁶ These members both reflect the SOF organization’s values in their individual attributes and behaviours, and their relationship to one another within the group. For CANSOFCOM, people are “the Command’s most precious resources and its greatest strength.”⁷⁷

Understandably then, the double-edge of CANSOF culture is first experienced internally within CANSOFCOM and its units. CANSOF operators value their tight community and shared ethos, where their difficult selection and training are in the pursuit of excellence⁷⁸ and to be “masters of their tradecraft”.⁷⁹ However, the culture that creates strong bonds based on the pursuit of being the best at what they do can have positive and negative outcomes on individual members’ resiliency. Positively, SOF culture, as described in Danielsen’s ethnography of Norway’s Marinejegerkommandoen’s (MJK), can keep SOF operators safe and mentally healthy through social practices that allow them to “switch off” within the family-like context of SOF teams.⁸⁰ Likewise, the most recent study of resiliency among Canadian SOF personnel show that social environment

⁷⁶ For a selection of such literature, see Burgos, “Pushing the easy button: special operations forces, international security, and the use of force,” *Special Operations Journal* 4, no. 2(2018); Bernd Horn, “The evolution of SOF and the rise of SOF Power,” in *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century: Perspectives from the Social Sciences*, ed. Jessica Glicken Turnley, Kobi Michael and Eyal Ben-Ari (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018) 15-27; Christian Leuprecht and H. Christian Breede, “Beyond the Movies: The Value Proposition of Canada’s Special Operations Forces,” (Ottawa: Conference of Defence Associations Institute and Macdonald-Laurier Institute, 2016); Mike Rouleau, “Special Operations Forces: Shaping the Area of Operations,” in *Special Operations Forces: A National Capability*, ed. Emily Spencer (Kingston, Ontario: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2011), 87-93; Eitan Shamir and Eyal Ben-Ari, “The Rise of Special Operations Forces: Generalized Specialization, Boundary Spanning and Military Autonomy,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, no. 3 (2018).

⁷⁷ CANSOFCOM, *Beyond the Horizon: A Strategy for Canada’s Special Operations Forces in an Evolving Security Environment* (Ottawa, ON: Department of National Defence, 2020), 26.

⁷⁸ Emily Spencer, “The special operations forces mosaic: a portrait for discussion,” in *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century: Perspectives from the Social Sciences*, ed. Jessica Glicken Turnley, Kobi Michael and Eyal Ben-Ari (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 30.

⁷⁹ Mike Rouleau, *Between Faith and Reality: A Pragmatic Sociological Examination of Canadian Special Operations Forces Command’s Future Prospects* (Kingston, Ontario: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2012), 25.

⁸⁰ Danielsen, *Making Warriors*, xxxi, 135.

and commitment to team members aids in individual resiliency.⁸¹ However, a SOF culture which reinforces commitment to the team and unit can have negative consequences: Richer and Frank note that strong work ethic also prevents operators from taking time to recover.⁸² The emphasis and value of displaying excellence and being there for fellow team members may prevent SOF operators from “slowing down”, another important piece of resiliency which may not currently exist within units and the organization’s culture. In addition, being supported and committed to a team and the work, along with the initial resiliency-aiding social practices of SOF culture, may mask the consequences of a high operational tempo culture.

Next, the double-edge of CANSOF culture can be seen in CANSOFCOM’s perceptions of self versus perceptions of the organization by outside military members. Characteristics of CANSOF, which are created by CANSOFCOM’s unique structure within the larger military and their culture as it appears to others, “create perceptions that SOF members are somewhat devious” and project elitism.⁸³ While CANSOFCOM institutional and individual member’s pursue excellence within an organization that has afforded them the ability to be structurally and culturally



distinct from the rest of the Canadian military, others within the Canadian military perceive the institution and individuals as reinforcing their own “specialness”, resulting in elitism. As argued by Ouellet, what allows CANSOFCOM to be effective, at the same time negatively affects their legitimacy within the larger military institution.⁸⁴ Therefore, the perceptions of CANSOFCOM’s “way of

⁸¹ Isabelle Richer and Christine Frank, “Facing Adversity and Factors Affecting Resilience: A Qualitative Analysis of the Lived Experiences of Canadian Special Operations Forces,” *Journal of Special Operations Medicine* 20, no.4 (2020), 53, 57.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 56.

⁸³ Eric Ouellet, “The self and the mirror: Institutional tensions and the Canadian Special Operations Forces,” in *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century: Perspectives from the Social Sciences*, ed. Jessica Glicken Turnley, Kobi Michael and Eyal Ben-Ari (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018) 185.

⁸⁴ Ouellet, “The self and the mirror,” 185.

doing things” can be negative, resulting in the lack of understanding and legitimacy between conventional forces and CANSOFCOM.

Finally, the double-edge sword of CANSOFCOM’s success, owed in part due to elements of its culture which is reflected and reinforced by SOF operators/assaulters, could be seen in its relationship with political decision-makers. For the past twenty years in the context of Western counter-terrorism, SOF organizations and Commanders have done well at “selling” SOF as a “product”, thus allowing SOF more autonomy as organizations and additional resources from political decision-makers.⁸⁵ For CANSOFCOM, at the beginning the selling-point was JTF-2’s participation in Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001-2022, which created Canada’s credibility within the world of Western SOF and gained the unit support at leadership levels⁸⁶, where a short time later, CANSOFCOM was created. To political decision-makers, SOF has become a force of choice with their ability to rapidly deploy, have a small footprint, conduct high value operations, all while being an inexpensive “cost-to-strategic-effect ratio”.⁸⁷ Not just in

the kinetic realm, but as warrior-diplomats, SOF are a “unique political tool” in a government’s toolbox.⁸⁸

Returning to Winslow’s analysis which lends itself to this double-edge sword discussion, SOF culture is shaped by a country’s desire to have quick, responsive, discretionary force able to achieve what perhaps others or the conventional military cannot, and in turn this is accomplished in part by using the culture created for such missions. However, the qualities – such as culture – “that make SOF a ‘tool of choice’”, also make SOF an “easy button” for policymakers to push for seemingly immediate results, which raise operational and strategy concerns.⁸⁹ This is first experienced at the operational level, where SOF organizations’ current operational tempo and a culture that emphasizes mission above all has left SOF unable to pause and think critically about how mission tempo is affecting them.⁹⁰ In addition to the negative effects of a high-tempo environment and culture on SOF members and organizations, the very success that is enabled by the culture puts SOF in a position to be overused, or to be overestimated by decision-makers.⁹¹ This

⁸⁵ Shamir and Ben Ari, “Rise of Special Operations Forces,” 352.

⁸⁶ Bernd Horn, “The Canadian Special Operations Forces’ Legacy,” in *Special Operations Forces: A National Capability*, ed. Emily Spencer (Kingston, Ontario: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2011), 50-52.

⁸⁷ Spencer, “The special operations forces mosaic,” 33.

⁸⁸ Jessica Glick Turnley, “Warrior-diplomats and ungoverned spaces: Narratives of possibilities,” in *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century: Perspectives from the Social Sciences*, ed. Jessica Glick Turnley, Kobi Michael and Eyal Ben-Ari (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 41.

⁸⁹ Burgos, “Pushing the easy button”, 110.

⁹⁰ Taft et al., “SOF culture is the mission,” 11.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 360.



could also cause unalignment between political decision-maker's perceptions of what CANSOFCOM can and cannot do, leading to disappointment and frustration by both political decision-makers and CANSOFCOM when CANSOF is unable to "live up to" expectations.

The Future

This article attempts to begin to fill a gap recognized by Burgos, where research is needed "on the political and cultural factors that tend to enhance the desirability of special forces"⁹² by examining the impact of

CANSOF culture's double-edge by paying attention to "tensions and contradictions"⁹³ that result from the use CANSOFCOM. As CANSOFCOM prepares for a new environment shaped by competition, they must pause and ask critical questions of the cultural impact, since its inception more than fifteen years ago, of being an organization oriented towards counter-terrorism while promoting itself to gain legitimacy and carve its place within the larger Canadian military and political environment. As argued elsewhere, the study of SOF culture is an opportunity for SOF organizations to learn, grow and practice reflexivity.⁹⁴ Asking critical questions about the role(s) of

⁹² Russell A. Burgos, Burgos, "Pushing the easy button," 124.

⁹³ Ouellet, "The self and the mirror," 185.

⁹⁴ Erin Yantzi, "The Question of SOF Culture," Insights 1, issue 8 (The Kingston Consortium on International Security, 2021).

CANSOF culture is important to maintain or create healthy, strong structures and organizations. Researchers, CANSOFCOM, and decision-makers should pay attention to whether CANSOF's culture is aligned with its mission and environment⁹⁵, and examine the double-edges of culture that exist within and because of CANSOF's previous and present missions and environments. The first step towards this is for CANSOFCOM to recognize its culture's double-edges.

Erin Yantzi recently completed her Master of Arts in Political Science at the University of Waterloo where her graduate research examined CANSOFCOM's narrative of self and its purposes. Her Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Peace and Conflict Studies, and Anthropology thesis "Embodying Refusal: Resistance, Pathologization, and Mental Health Exemption in the Israel Defence Forces" is published in Critical Theory and Social Justice Journal of Undergraduate Research (2019).

⁹⁵ Drawing upon Leonard Wong and Stephen J. Gerras, "Culture and Military Organizations," in *The Culture of Military Organizations*, ed. Peter R. Mansoor and Williamson Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 26.