Special Operations Joint Fires Evolution

Toward a More Agile and Responsive Force

SOF	Special Operations Forces
JFE	Joint Fires Element—the section within a SOF headquarters coordinating fire support for SOF teams
JACE	Joint Air Coordination Element—(new term) the air component's command and control element located at the SOF headquarters to assist integrating air support to SOF operations
JSOTF	Joint Special Operations Task Force—a task-organized SOF headquarters and force for a particular operation
SOCOM	Special Operation Command—a unified command with global responsibilities to train, equip, and in some circumstances execute special operations; has many service-like responsibilities

Introduction

A historic grievance against special operations forces (SOF) has been lack of integration with other warfighting components—"SOF doesn't play well with others." SOF have frequently viewed themselves as a strategic force for missions directly supporting the joint force commander. However, SOF commanders have realized that they can and should additionally support the operations of other components—land, air, and sea—just as those components support SOF and each other. This shift in emphasis led to dramatic improvements in SOF joint fires integration in Iraq and was largely based on the experiences, good and bad, during operations in Afghanistan the previous year.

SOF made great progress integrating joint fires by borrowing ideas and creating unique approaches in three distinct battlespaces during Operation Iraqi Freedom. The creation of SOF Joint Fires Elements (JFEs) and use of the air component's Joint Air Coordination Elements (JACEs) cemented these successes and should be the model for future joint operations.

Prior to Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, SOF headquarters worldwide knew of the need to integrate into the joint fires system. Joint publications for

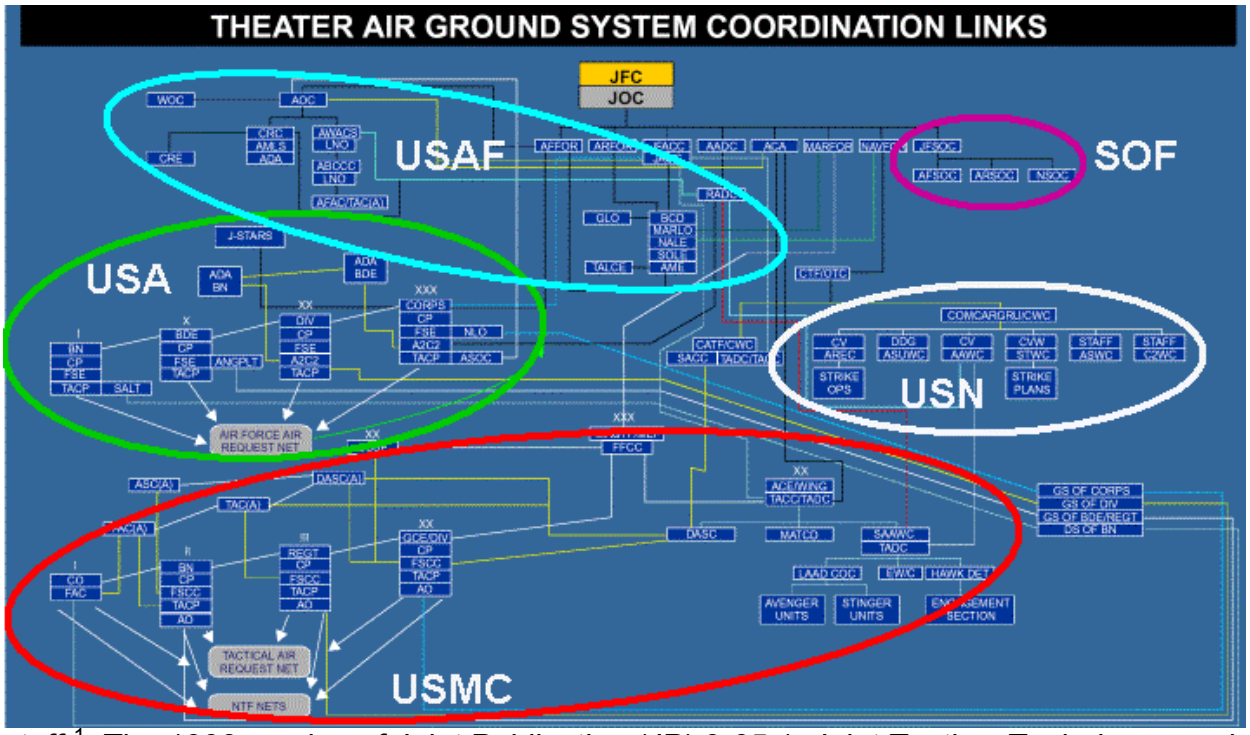
special operations (the JP 3-05 series) illustrate how SOF headquarters should include joint fires expertise in both mission planning and execution. However, even during the brief planning after 11 September 2001, SOF headquarters were reluctant to seek outside joint fires assistance, because they wanted to keep operations small and light, without fully understanding what they were missing. SOF initially resisted outside assistance at tactical and operational levels; they deployed teams without terminal attack controllers and did not seek qualified operational planners/executers for the staff. However, based on their frank battlefield assessment, SOF realized their errors and took immediate steps to improve. SOF and the air components built a small, but effective, team to integrate operations. This fusion of air and SOF became the initial model for Operation Iraqi Freedom. However, Iraq was much more complicated because SOF operated in three different environments, each with unique integration issues. In northern Iraq, SOF was the supported command preventing northern Iraqi units from reinforcing Baghdad. In the west, SOF supported the air component's operation to prevent SCUD launches. And in the south, SOF supported the land forces in their drive to Baghdad. These varied supported and supporting relationships required unique solutions to joint integration, and each serves as a model for future SOF joint fires integration.

The next challenge is to institutionalize these successes. Both Afghanistan and Iraq were fought under the same geographic combatant command—Central Command—with the same air, land, maritime, and special operations component headquarters. While the other theaters have seen and heard of the successes, they require detailed explanations on the "why" and "how" SOF improved so they can adapt these lessons to future operations. SOF also face a new role in the war on terrorism

transcending traditional boundaries, for which US Special Operations Command (SOCOM) will receive an increase in personnel. Using some of those positions to reinforce this joint fires success will yield long-term results. One important characteristic is the close relationship between SOF and the conventional air component. SOCOM and the Air Force should create a habitual relationship between their subordinate commands so they are better poised for more agile responses to the next crisis.

Prior to Operation Iraqi Freedom

Since at least 1993, joint doctrine on special operations has included incomplete references to fire support elements in a Joint Special Operation Task Force (JSOTF)



staff.[1] The 1993 version of Joint Publication (JP) 3-05.1, Joint Tactics, Techniques and Procedures for JSOTFs, showed a fire support element in the operations section, but listed no duties or responsibilities. By 1998, SOF had made few moves to better integrate joint fires. This is best seen in the Theater Air-Ground System from JP 3-09,

Joint Fire Support. The diagram shows the links for each Service to leverage other Service's fires. The Army has an extensive system marrying its organic fires (artillery, missiles, and helicopters) with Air Force close air support and interdiction using Tactical Air Control Parties attached to Army units down to the battalion level. The Marine Corps has a similar arrangement connecting its air and ground fires as well. The Navy links its strike aviation and missiles with the other services. Each of these paths flow through the air component's joint air operations center to ensure the air portions of the campaign are synchronized. The circle in the upper righthand side of the diagram highlights the special operations component. SOF connect to no one but each other—reinforcing the view of fighting its own war.

Between 1998 and 2001, this started to change. In the year preceding the war in Afghanistan, some special operations headquarters realized their shortfall in operational fires expertise during Joint Chiefs of Staff exercises and began to take steps to fix this deficiency. However, by September 11, 2001, these steps were insufficient. The updated version of JP 3-05.1 was under revision as the war in Afghanistan started and includes a more detailed discussion of the functions of the fire support element in a JSOTF—coordinate boundaries, represent SOF activities to other commands and agencies such as the Joint Targeting and Coordination Board, prevent fratricide, etc. This publication also recommends a fire support annex to the JSOTF operation order and standard operating procedures. None of these were in place, however, as Afghanistan began so SOF learned these lessons by experience.

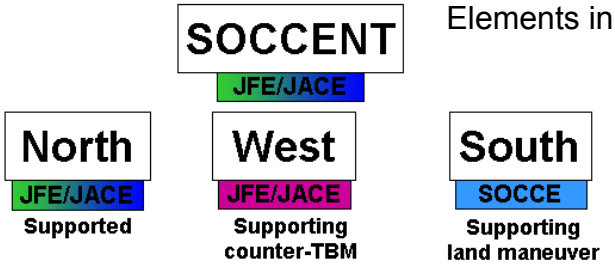
Task Force Dagger, the initial Afghanistan JSOTF formed around the core of an Army Special Forces group headquarters, faced problems using joint fires at both the tactical and operational levels of warfare. The first few teams deployed without terminal

attack controllers—Air Force troops trained and certified to control close air support. Unsuccessful close air support in the first few days of ground combat demonstrated the need to get experts on the ground so the JSOTF commander deployed trained ground controllers. They had an immediate positive effect on the campaign.[2] Within days, every Special Forces team had a qualified terminal attack controller[3]. This posed a new problem as these air-savvy ground controllers sent air support requests back to the JSOTF. There was no one in the JSOTF headquarters to do the operational integration—including joint fires in the campaign planning, collating/submitting subordinate fires requests, and deconflicting other components' operations.[4] While the special operations component did have a liaison element at the air component to assist in this matter, the JSOTF came to rely almost exclusively on the liaisons for all its deconfliction and integration. This had limited success, but was not the complete answer because the liaison cell was located with the air component in Saudi Arabia leaving the JSOTF with no resident expertise to incorporate fires in the campaign.

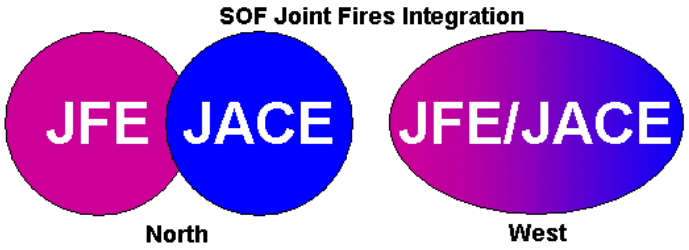
Fortunately, the air component commander recognized this lack of expertise and deployed a small element of the same type the Air Force uses to support conventional Army maneuver. As with the controllers on the battlefield, this addition was a dramatic improvement and resulted in immediate improvements in the coordination and integration with the air component. The teams on the ground felt the change when close air support became readily available. This Air Force element, now called the JACE, gave SOF what it lacked organically—the ability to plan and coordinate joint air fires.

Operation Iraqi Freedom

With Afghanistan still on-going, Central Command and its components focused on planning the war with Iraq. Based on the success of the Joint Air Coordination Elements in Afghanistan, Special Operations Command Central (SOCCENT), 9th Air Force (9th AF), and 3rd Army—the special operations, air, and land component headquarters respectively[5]—set about building a joint fires architecture for the war in Iraq. SOCCENT fought on three fronts—North, West, and South. In the North, SOF attempted to prevent Iraqi units from moving away from the their positions to reinforce Baghdad. These Iraqi units fortified an unofficial boundary between Iraqi forces and the Kurds. In the West, SOF supported the air component commander's effort to prevent Iraq from using theater ballistic missiles (SCUDs and other types of long-range missiles). SOF in the South supported the land component commander's mission to conquer Baghdad and eliminate specialized Iraqi forces, such as the Republican Guard. Each of these fronts required unique approaches to joint fires integration, so SOCCENT, 9th AF, and 3rd Army developed tailored packages for each.

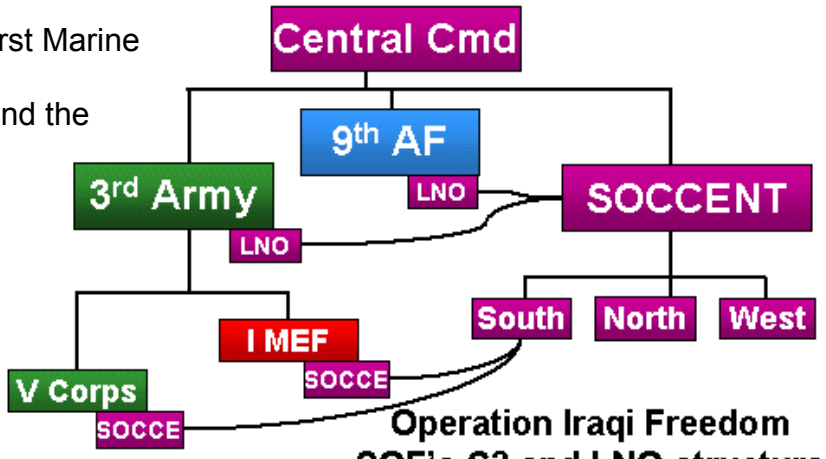


In the North, where the SOF commander was the supported commander, the air component deployed a JACE to the JSOTF (the subordinate SOF headquarters to the SOCCENT) and the JSOTF developed its own robust JFE. While these two organizations worked very closely together, they maintained separate identities because the JACE was solely focused on air operations while the JFE was focused on all lethal and non-lethal effects. In the West, where SOF supported the air component



in the counter-SCUD mission, the JFE and the JACE fused into a single, homogeneous body. This worked because all western SOF operations focused on one mission—there was no need to distinguish between the two bodies. In the South, SOF used a completely different structure to integrate into the land component.

Integrating into the land battle presented some unique challenges. First and foremost was the two different organizations subordinate to 3rd Army had different organizations for fires. The First Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF) and the Army's Fifth Corps (V Corps) used different processes for their deep operations where SOF would be supporting them. Rather than attempt to create a one-size-fits-all solution, SOCCENT and its subordinate commands created a flexible system of command and control as well as liaison elements to ensure that SOF supported both 3rd Army and its subordinate commands.



Operation Iraqi Freedom
SOF's C2 and LNO structure

SOCCENT and 3rd Army exchanged liaison officers ensuring each had a personal conduit for information. By mutual agreement, SOCCENTs subordinate commands sent command and control elements to V Corps and I MEF. Each of these special operations command and control elements (SOCCEs)[6] took tactical control of teams operating in the areas of the ground forces to ensure that all SOF operations were fully integrated. The V Corps SOCCE also saw a need to maintain a presence at the subordinate divisions to keep those commanders, whom the SOCCE directly supported, informed on SOF operations. The SOCCE commander deployed small ad

hoc liaison elements to the subordinate divisions for this. This flexible integration worked effectively as SOF supported 3rd Army in front of and behind the non-linear operation. Using this scheme, SOF conducted reconnaissance on critical lines of communication in advance of the Army's 3rd Infantry Division enroute to Baghdad as well as supported I MEF with AC-130 gunships in rear areas eliminating Saddam's so-called *fedayeen*.

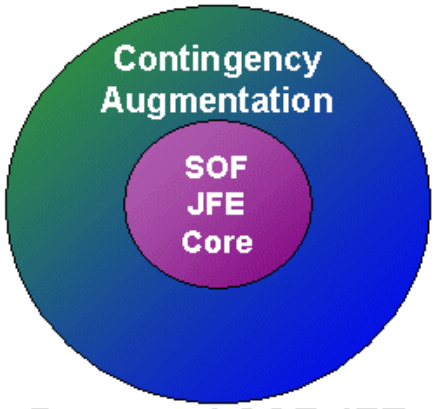
SOF solved their unique integration challenges with innovative, effective solutions. These methods diverged from each other, but were tailor-made for different battlespaces with different missions. While for many the war in Iraq was a single unified effort, it was not for SOF. SOCCENT fought on three unique fronts with different objectives and requirements. Altogether, SOF nominated over 5200 targets as part of this process. SOF captured the northern oil fields with one-third of the Iraqi oil reserves, assisted in preventing any TBM launches, and captured the key southern oil distribution point in preparation for a conventional force. These successes were due, in large part, to the agile thinking of the SOCCENT, 9th AF, and 3rd Army joint fires architects who designed this system.

SOF Joint Fires Future

SOCCENT learned some painful, but beneficial, lessons from Afghanistan through Iraq. The remaining challenge is to institutionalize these lessons—to make them "lessons learned." By improving the joint fires expertise in SOF headquarters, formalizing the SOCOM-Air Force link, and updating joint doctrine, these lessons will last. They will then be incorporated into routine training to ensure that each successive generation of operational warfighters understands how joint fires works. More important than cementing these solutions in place, we must train those who follow us on how we

came to these solutions, so they can adapt and overcome their new and unique problems as they develop.

Currently, none of the theater special operations commands have a standing JFE to better prepare them to make this leap in ability. Theater SOF headquarters are small and lightly staffed with little fires expertise. This is also true of the SOF headquarters which formed many of the recent JSOTFs. By creating a standing SOF JFE in each theater, there will be resident expertise during deliberate planning as well as exercise development. This will ensure that each theater special operations command establishes and maintains those links to its sister components as well as rehearses the processes during operational battlestaff and field training exercises. This standing JFE wouldn't need to be as large as the JFEs for Iraq (which had as many as 21 people in one command). With only four experts in separate joint fires fields (Army fire support, Marine Corps artillery, Air Force and Navy CAS/Interdiction), each SOF command would have a core body of experts to develop standard operating procedures, incorporate joint fires into deliberate planning (operational and concept plans), and include these concepts in routine exercises. SOCOM is preparing to absorb a large number of new positions to fight the global war on terrorism. Moving a handful of these positions to the theater special operations commands for JFEs will accomplish both tasks since improved joint fires integration will also significantly help against terrorism. The USMC is also working with SOCOM to integrate some



Proposed SOF JFE

Marine forces into SOF. With their deep expertise in joint fires, the USMC should also see this as an excellent opportunity to lend their expertise to the SOF headquarters staffs. By developing this three-legged joint fires effort, SOF can ensure the long-term survival of the process which brought great success in Iraq without the lengthy learning process which preceded it.

The other half of the success story was the USAF's Tactical Air Control Parties—particularly the JACEs. For many years, SOF have successfully used Air Force enlisted terminal attack controllers to augment special operations, even using some permanently attached to Special Forces groups as trainers. But it was the direct support relationship of the JACEs to the JSOTFs headquarters which is new and noteworthy. SOCOM and the Air Force should formalize this arrangement for routine training—tactical and operational—as well as contingencies. A formal SOCOM-Air Force agreement linking specific special operations headquarters with specific Air Force tactical air control units, possibly geographically oriented, would allow each party to develop a habitual working relationship with the other so they could agree on the tactics, techniques, and procedures before a contingency erupts.[7] Without a formal agreement, recent successes will rapidly fade and will need to be relearned at the same risk to the mission and the force as Central Command went through in the last two years.

All of this must also be incorporated into joint doctrine as proven methods for successful integration. The joint fire support doctrine[8] is due for revision and the joint special operations doctrine[9] is in revision right now. These are the first places SOF should incorporate these new methods. Eventually, other joint doctrine will need to be revised such as Joint Targeting (recently released), Joint Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Close Air Support (in final coordination), and JSOTF Operations; the

other Services may modify their Service doctrine as well to reflect their contributions to this collaborative effort.

The combination of getting the right joint fires expertise in the SOF headquarters, formalizing the SOCOM-Air Force link, and updating joint doctrine should institutionalize these successes and make our nation more prepared for the next conflict.

Conclusion

SOF made dramatic progress in joint integration by the end of combat operations in Iraq. No longer viewed as fighting their own war, SOF was fully involved with the other components as both a supported and supporting component throughout the campaign. A major part of this success was the joint fires integration which started before the Afghanistan campaign and culminated in Iraq.

SOCCENT learned valuable lessons in Afghanistan and, through a collaborative effort with 9th AF and 3rd Army, created a unique and effective joint fires network of joint fires elements, joint air coordination elements, liaisons, and command/control elements at multiple command levels which worked exceptionally well. SOF fought on three separate fronts in Iraq and developed different joint fires solutions for each front tailored to the specific circumstances. SOF was the supported effort in the North, so they linked their JFE to the JACE in a traditional method used by the Army—side-by-side integration. SOF supported the air component in the West, so the JFE and JACE merged. The complex SOF support to the land component in the South required a more detailed infrastructure of command and control elements and liaisons which ensured appropriate representation and expertise.

SOF learned much in these last two conflicts—valuable insights that need to be passed on to others today and tomorrow. By creating new standing joint fires elements

in the theater special operations commands and subordinate SOF units, formalizing the SOCOM-Air Force links, and aggressively changing doctrine, SOF can institutionalize these successes and improve future operations.

Competent SOF cannot be created after crises occur—these steps are essential to be prepared for the next crisis.

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[1] JP 3-05.1 Joint Special Operations Operational Procedures, Aug 1993; p C-7. This was updated in December 2001.

[2] TACs were employed immediately after a failed attempt to secure the town of Mazar-E-Sharif in northern Afghanistan. The resulting re-attack proved devastatingly successful as the bombs were accurate and well-coordinated. This positive result was repeated as SOF and their Northern Alliance hosts swept down to Khandahar in the next few weeks.

[3] Task Force Dagger used both Air Force Special Tactics Combat Controllers and Air Force Enlisted Terminal Attack Controllers. While there are significant differences in these career fields, they train and certify identically for close air support and will be treated the same in this article.

[4] These issues were not related to the fratricide incidents, however. Those were tactical mistakes such as passing to the aircraft the friendly location in latitude and longitude rather than in reference to the enemy location to prevent mistakenly being targeted, as happened in November 2001 during the successful battle for Mazar-E-Sharif

[5] SOCCENT became the Combined Special Operations Component Command (CFSOCC). 9th Air Force became the Combined Forces Air Component Command (CFACC). And 3rd Army became the Combined Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC).

[6] Naval Special Operations used a Naval Special Warfare Task Unit (NSWTU) as its command and control element. Although the names are different, the roles and functions were similar.

[7] While the existing tactical air control party units are already assigned to specific Army units, it is possible to cross-align these units. For instance, align the SOF headquarters in Korea with an Air Force unit which routinely supports an Army division not slated to go to Korea, such as one located in Germany. While this

will increase the burden on such units, this type of change is required to make SOF and the Air Force more agile for future contingencies.

[8] Joint Publication 3-09, Doctrine for Joint Fires Support, was published in May 1998 and is due for review.

[9] Joint Publication 3-05, Doctrine for Joint Special Operations, was published in April 1998 and is in Final Coordination now.