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A Long Range Desert Group patrol in North Africa, ca. 1942.

Special Operations Forces

Who Has Seen the Wind? an Historical Overview of Canadian Special Operations

by Dr. Sean M. Maloney

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Who has seen the wind? Neither you nor I.

–W.O. Mitchell

Media reaction to revelations that Canadian special operations forces, specifically Joint Task Force

(JTF) 2, were conducting operations in Afghanistan in late 2001, and were involved in the capture of Taliban and Al Qaeda personnel in early 2002, was one of profound shock. Since the 1970s, Canadians have been conditioned to believe that the supposedly 'underhanded' aspects of national security policy execution – such as spying, propaganda, subversion, psychological operations and guerilla warfare – were activities morally beneath Canada. Indeed, many Canadians firmly believe that the Canadian Forces exist only to conduct UN peacekeeping operations based on the model of the 1956 United Nations Emergency Force in the Sinai, or to conduct relief operations to aid unfortunate Third World disaster victims. The realities of Canadian history do not support these narrow views. Canada has, in fact, a rich heritage of involvement in special operations, particularly during the Second World War. That this heritage does not conform to the public perception of the more extensive experience in special operations that exist in the British or American context speaks volumes about its covert, sporadic and ad hoc nature.

A note on definitions and parameters is appropriate here. It is not possible to perfectly superimpose the current American definition of special operations onto the Canadian experience. The Canadian experience is a combination of what American doctrine calls 'unconventional warfare' (the clandestine conduct of paramilitary and military operations in enemy-held, controlled or politically sensitive territory), counter-terrorism (specifically hostage rescue), security assistance, and irregular support to conventional operations in pursuit of an operational or strategic aim. Unlike the American experience and doctrine, Canadian psychological operation efforts, both strategic and tactical, have been generally separate from these other roles and missions, and will not be discussed in any great detail in this article. [1 \[#Anchor-Not-51229\]](#)

The Second World War

The Canadian special operations experience began when Canada was invited to supply personnel to Great Britain's Special Operations Executive (SOE) during the early days of the Second World War. This agency was the amalgamation of three overlapping organizations within the British government: Section D of the Secret Intelligence Service (MI 6), General Staff (Research), later called Military Intelligence (Research) (MI(R)), and Electra House (EH). All three organizations independently pursued special operations concepts and issues from 1938, in part because of a belief prevalent in the Chamberlain government that the rapid succession of Axis political victories in the late 1930s was somehow connected to so-called "Fifth Columns" of pro-Nazi traitors embedded in the target nations' societies. [2 \[#Anchor-Willia-60001\]](#)

The concepts that emerged bear some elaboration, for they provide excellent embodiments of special operations and the closest thing to a pre-JTF 2 Canadian understanding of special operations. Section D explored ideas of 'secret offensives,' which included the coordination of sabotage, labour unrest, propaganda, and economic inflation directed against an enemy nation. Later, enhanced Section D concepts called for the creation of a so-called 'democratic international' that would conduct industrial sabotage, labour agitation, propaganda, terrorist acts against traitors, the assassination of German leaders, economic boycotts, and the fomenting of riots. These concepts governed the activities of military personnel conducting operations without uniforms. [3 \[#Anchor-4159\]](#)

MI(R), on the other hand, dealt with uniformed activity, and used the term 'irregular warfare' to encompass a variety of operations, including the use of guerilla tactics. This was considered, "[the] preparation of projects involving the employment of special or irregular forces to assist or increase the effect of normally conducted operations, directly or indirectly." [4 \[#Anchor-Mackenzi-15576\]](#)

MI(R) postulated that there were three types of guerilla war that could be conducted in countries occupied by an enemy power: individuals or small groups working by stealth to sabotage industrial or military targets; larger groups employing military tactics and weapons to destroy a particular target; and large military organizations, such as partisan forces, formed to carry out broad offensive campaigns. [5 \[#Anchor-Ibi-23858\]](#)

MI(R) tended to focus on the technological and doctrinal developments that would be needed to

carry out any sort of programme conforming to these concepts. For example, the development of plastic explosives and the translation of manuals describing their use, specifications for rudimentary sub-machine guns, such as the Sten, and discussions on how to employ small raiding groups were prominent MI(R) activities. Indeed, the creation of the first so-called independent companies, later re-named the Commandos, was an outgrowth of MI(R) work.[6 \[#Anchor-Foo-30968\]](#)

Finally, there was Electra House (EH), whose specialty was 'moral sabotage', better known as propaganda. Led by the Canadian, Sir Campbell Stuart, EH conceptualized techniques which, when combined with the planned activities of Section D and MI(R), would augment the conventional 'regular' military efforts to destroy the will of the target enemy nation to continue the fight.

All three organizations, but most particularly MI(R), drew on historical experience for their work. Many of the planners had direct knowledge of some of the original special operations. The favoured experiences were T.E. Lawrence's engagements in the Middle East during the First World War, and specific attention was paid to Michael Collins's campaign against the 'Cairo Gang' in Ireland and subsequent IRA urban and rural guerilla operations. Orde Wingate's organization of the Jewish Special Night Squads to combat the Arab Revolt in the 1930s was another significant influence, as were the operations of Chinese guerillas against the Japanese in the late 1930s.[7 \[#Anchor-Ibi-40291\]](#)

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Badge of the 1st Special Service Force.

On 23 March 1939, Section D, MI(R) and EH merged to form the Special Operations Executive. SOE's importance was enhanced by Winston S. Churchill in 1940 when Great Britain and her empire were in dire peril after the fall of France. Churchill's quest for positive action, his "set Europe ablaze" dictum, influenced to an extent by his own experience against the Boers in the South African War, gave SOE the catalyst needed to take the war to the Axis powers. It was also intended to keep them

off balance until a re-entry by force onto the continent could be accomplished.

Ultimately, two streams of special operations emerged in 1940. SOE was responsible for clandestine subversive and guerilla operations inside occupied and enemy countries. Uniformed raiding units under the command of Combined Operations Headquarters (COHQ) were responsible for the destruction of military targets on the periphery of the enemy's 'Fortress Europe.' There was overlap at times: SOE assisted with intelligence gathering, liaison, and training in 1942 for the Bruneval raid against a German radar site, as well as the St. Nazaire raid against the Normandie dock, staged with the intention of denying it to the enemy as a battleship repair facility. [8 \[#Anchor-Se-57226\]](#)

Canadians were involved in both special operations streams, although the first experiences were with SOE. In addition to Campbell Stuart, who was eased out during the war's early innings due to age and obstinacy, the only senior Canadian figure involved with SOE was Sir William Stephenson. This colourful character was in charge of British Security Coordination (BSC), which was essentially a 'joint command' handling MI-5, MI-6 and SOE activities in the Western Hemisphere. BSC was heavily involved in SOE training, particularly at the shadowy Camp X located near Oshawa, Ontario. The official SOE history notes, however, that SOE did not operate in the United States and that Stephenson's activities on behalf of the executive were minuscule when compared with his MI-5 and MI-6 activities and liaison with 'Wild Bill' Donovan's American SOE equivalent, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). [9 \[#Anchor-Se-813\]](#)

Canada was closely integrated into Great Britain's war effort in every way: Canadians not only served in the indigenous Canadian forces, but also in the British Army, the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy in great numbers, alongside other Empire personnel from countries as disparate as Rhodesia and Malaya. Why Canada did not establish her own SOE in the way she maintained her own air force, navy and army is unclear, but was most likely due to cost, a lack of experience in the field, and a strategic vision that resulted in Canadian efforts being rolled into broader Imperial efforts. In 1940, SOE asked the senior Canadian army commander in England, General A.G.L. McNaughton, for Canadian volunteers. Apparently McNaughton initially had some reservations, but he acquiesced in 1941. Canadian volunteers from the uniformed services would be "loaned" to the War Office for duty with SOE. This agency recruited three types of Canadians: French Canadians for service in France, Canadians of Eastern European descent for operations in the Balkans, and Chinese Canadians for Asian operations. [10 \[#Anchor-Du-9445\]](#)

One can only estimate the total number of Canadians who served in SOE. Approximately 28 served in France, while another 56 served in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. A further 143 were active in the China-Burma-India theatre. Many more served in training and support capacities in Canada, England, Asia and the Middle East. Canadian RCAF and RAF personnel also served with some of the Special Duty Squadrons, units used to drop weapons and insert and extract SOE personnel. [11 \[#Anchor-MacLare-15724\]](#)

As with all special operations, the relatively small size of the Canadian contribution does not tell the full story nor does it capture the brutal and human nature of the activities. For example, there is the exceptional case of Gustave Bieler from Montreal's Régiment de Maisonneuve. Bieler was inserted into France by SOE in 1942. By the time he was captured in 1943, he had organized several sabotage groups that seriously disrupted German rail communications throughout the St. Quentin region and destroyed at least forty barges loaded with submarine components headed for the port of Rouen during the height of the Battle of the Atlantic. When captured, Bieler held out against particularly brutal Gestapo torture so steadfastly that the SS guards at Flossenberg concentration camp, where he was ultimately incarcerated, mounted an honour guard as he limped fearlessly to his death by firing squad.

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Canadian members of the 1st Special Service Force in Italy, 1944.

SOE was, by late 1942, desperately short of trained radio operators. Many Canadians serving with SOE hailed from the Royal Canadian Corps of Signals (RCCS). This being a dangerous job given advanced German DF capabilities, Canadians took great risks to bolster the rudimentary SOE communications system. For example, a Lieutenant Alcide Beauregard, at great personal peril, kept several SOE cells, known as 'circuits,' in operation until he was captured and tortured to the point of insanity. He was eventually murdered by the Lyon Gestapo along with 120 French resistance fighters. Notably, no Canadian SOE operator who was captured by the Germans survived incarceration. [12 \[#Anchor-Ibi-23105\]](#)

There were, however, many notable Canadian SOE successes. Canadian-led efforts seriously hindered the ability of the 1st and 2nd SS Panzer Divisions to intervene in Normandy in a timely fashion after 6 June 1944. Also, Canadian-led SOE operations attempted to disrupt the logistic structures supporting the V-1 and V-2 Blitz campaign against London in 1944. Canadian SOE personnel, many of them Spanish Civil War veterans of the Mackenzie-Papineau Brigade, also operated in Yugoslavia supporting Tito's partisans by providing weapons training, operations planning, communications and medical support, and by coordinating arms drops. [13 \[#Anchor-Ibi-30495\]](#)

The exploits of Force 136, somewhat loosely portrayed in the movie *Bridge On the River Kwai*, included operations in Malaya conducted by Chinese-Canadian NCOs, such as Norman Wong and Roger Chung. At least sixteen Chinese-Canadians dropped or landed in Sarawak to supply, train and lead native tribes in guerilla operations against the Japanese, events which formed the basis of another movie, *Farewell to the King*. [14 \[#Anchor-MacLare-38567\]](#)

The second special operations stream that emerged during the Second World War consisted of the theatre-specific raiding and reconnaissance units. The best known at the time were the Commandos, who conducted raiding operations from Norway to Greece, some of them at the battalion-level of effort. Airborne forces were also employed on occasion for raids, usually at the company level. In time, the employment of large-scale amphibious and airborne operations became standard and thus could be considered conventional military operations conveyed through a different medium, be it air or sea, rather than special operations.

Early in the war, however, regular infantry units were used in strategic raiding operations. The first such action involving Canadian forces was Operation "Gauntlet" in August 1941. "Gauntlet's" objective was to land on the island of Spitsbergen, deny coal production facilities to the Germans, destroy key meteorological stations supporting the U-boat war, and evacuate 2000 interned Russians. The force consisted of the Edmonton Regiment and a company from the Princess Patricia's

Canadian Light Infantry, the 3rd Field Company, Royal Canadian Engineers, and a machine gun company from the Saskatchewan Light Infantry. '111 Force', as it was known, was transported aboard the converted liner *Empress of Canada* and supported by two British cruisers and three destroyers. [15 \[#Anchor-47840\]](#)

The bulk of the planning was conducted at COHQ with minimal Canadian input, though the force units received amphibious assault training at the Combined Training Centre Inverary. Landing with minimal resistance, 111 Force conducted its demolitions and withdrew. The Germans were caught completely off guard and subsequently deployed scarce troop resources on other Norwegian islands to deter further raids. [16 \[#Anchor-Ibi-59627\]](#) The disastrous Dieppe Raid of 1942, a COHQ-planned and predominately Canadian-executed operation, demonstrated that amphibious operations of brigade size or larger were too unwieldy for strategic raiding. British attention shifted to other endeavours, such as the small-scale but effective Operation "Frankton" raid against shipping in the Gironde estuary by the Royal Marines' unit dubbed 'Cockleshell Heroes', which also occurred in 1942.



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Badge of the British Special Air Service Regiment

A number of British special operations forces emerged in the Mediterranean theatre, particularly in the Aegean and the Western Desert. These included the Special Boat Squadron (SBS), the New Zealand-dominated Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), and No. 1 Demolitions Squadron. All were involved in some form of clandestine or covert infiltration of enemy lines and the subsequent destruction of military targets deep in rear areas. The LRDG's primary function was as a theatre reconnaissance force, although it transported other special units to their targets. All three units were British formations that had small numbers of individual Canadian volunteers. [17 \[#Anchor-Alastai-3615\]](#)

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The most famous British special operations force to emerge from the Mediterranean that included Canadians was the Special Air Service (SAS). The SAS evolved from a desert raiding force, which had destroyed more German aircraft on the ground than the RAF destroyed in the air over Libya and Egypt, into a partisan support force working alongside SOE in the Balkans. Eventually, it expanded into a full brigade in Northwest Europe and Italy where it operated behind German lines, conducting jeep-borne raids as well as supporting and leading resistance groups. An effective operation in northern Italy led by a Canadian, Captain Buck McDonald, significantly disrupted enemy communications and seized the town of Alba deep in German-occupied territory. As with the demolitions squadron, the SBS and the LRDG, Canadian involvement appears to have been on an individual level, as there are no records indicating the existence of a Canadian national SAS sub-unit. [18 \[#Anchor-Pete-11346\]](#)

Although no Canadian SAS or SBS equivalent organization existed, Canadian commanders in Northwest Europe were not reluctant to use SAS resources to support the conventional battle as the Canadian Army fought its way through the Netherlands in the spring of 1945. General Harry Crerar, working with Brigadier J.M. Calvert of the SAS, devised Operation "Amherst," whereby 700 men from the SAS Brigade, mostly French and Belgian operators from the 2nd and 3rd Regiments de Chasseurs Parachutists, would be dropped by air in advance of the ground thrust. They were to "cause confusion in the German rear areas, help the Dutch resistance, and in other ways assist the progress of our divisions.... Their general task was the preservation of canal and river bridges on the 2nd Corps' axis of advance." The SAS was also to raid forward German air bases in order to disrupt enemy fighter cover and to provide operational-level intelligence and battlefield guides to the advancing First Canadian Army. [19 \[#Anchor-18606\]](#)

The SAS units fought continuously for the next seven days, capturing 250 Germans and preventing the destruction of the vital bridges. Canadian official historian Colonel Charles Stacey noted that at Spier, one of the field unit commanders, "having boldly captured the village with a small party, was rescued from imminent annihilation at the hands of far superior German forces by the timely arrival, in the best manner of films, of vehicles from the 8th Canadian Reconnaissance Regiment." [20 \[#Anchor-Ibi-25597\]](#) Although not a perfect operation, "Amherst" demonstrated to Canadian officers how special operations could have a positive influence on a conventional campaign.

The most famous raiding force from a Canadian perspective was the First Special Service Force (FSSF), better known as the Devil's Brigade. The concept of a combined Canadian-American unit emerged from COHQ deliberations in 1942. Headquarters planners wanted to destroy several of Norway's hydroelectric plants, which were being used to refine a variety of scarce ores needed for the German war effort. An added benefit was presumed to be the concomitant tying down of thousands of German troops because of the threat of future raids – troops that might have been employed against the Allies elsewhere. Additional missions envisioned by COHQ for the FSSF included the destruction of the Ploesti oil fields in Romania and an attack against Italy's hydroelectric capacity, which, it was hoped, could cripple the industrialized regions of the nation. [21 \[#Anchor-Josep-35821\]](#)

The FSSF initially mustered about 2600 personnel, although it usually fought with approximately 1700 effectives. About one-quarter to one-third of them were Canadian. The Force possessed an exaggerated structure of three 'regiments,' each consisting of two battalions of 200 to 300 men. Each 'battalion' had two companies, with each company consisting of three platoons of two sections. This non-standard structure was designed in part for deception and in part to permit dispersion. The FSSF had a significant demolitions capability, was partially mechanized with tracked over-snow vehicles, could be air dropped by parachute, and its personnel received amphibious, mountain and ski training. [22 \[#Anchor-Bot-43122\]](#)



Author's collection

Members of the Special Air Service Regiment near Cassino, Italy, 1944.

The FSSF was designed, structured and trained to smash large, scattered industrial targets deep in enemy territory. Several factors conspired to deny the FSSF its primary mission, however. The security of the Norwegian operation was compromised, and in any event, RAF Bomber Command viewed the existence and use of such a force as being contrary to its own interests. Combined Operations Headquarters, led by Lord Louis Mountbatten, did not want to worsen its already strained relationship with 'Bomber' Harris in the pursuit of other projects. [23 \[#Anchor-Springe-51324\]](#)

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Author's collection

SAS troopers searching for insurgents in Malaya, ca. 1955.

The FSSF was also later deployed to Kiska in the Aleutian Islands chain west of Alaska. This became a combined Canadian-American fiasco when several thousand troops landed on a supposedly Japanese-occupied island, which was, in fact, deserted. Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEF) then believed that the FSSF might have a role in raiding operations in Italy and the Balkans, perhaps supporting Tito's partisans. In any event, an Allied troop shortage in Italy brought the FSSF into a series of conventional operations. This eventuality occurred first at Mount Difensa, where the FSSF seized an important terrain feature and broke a strong point in the German defensive line, then at Anzio, where the unit acted in an economy-of-force role defending the critical Mussolini Canal zone. Aggressive FSSF night raiding, which involved units ranging in size from three men to a battalion, was so effective that the Germans apparently believed they were up against a reinforced brigade or a reduced division. However, after a number of other missions in Italy and southern France, the casualty rate was so high that the Force could no longer be sustained.²⁴ [\[#Anchor-Springe-60777\]](#)

Though extremely able, aggressive, specially trained and equipped for a unique mission, the FSSF functioned more as a small light infantry brigade rather than as a special operations unit during the Second World War.

What of the Allied use of airborne forces during the war? Canada contributed the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, which operated as part of the British 6th Airborne Division. The role of the airborne forces in eastern Normandy included the destruction of shore batteries, the seizure of bridges, and action as a blocking force to prevent the enemy from reinforcing units defending against the amphibious landing. These forces had no role in operating with guerilla or resistance units and did not operate in a clandestine fashion: SAS units were deployed in Normandy to handle those missions. The types of targets airborne forces were employed against were mostly operational and not strategic in nature.²⁵ [\[#Anchor-Se-3623\]](#)

What is one to make of Canada's Second World War special operations experience overall? For the most part, it consisted of individual efforts incorporated into Allied umbrella units. However, Canada did have significant light infantry experiences that overlapped to some extent with special operations. Notably, the use of special operations forces by Canadian commanders to support the conventional battle was significant toward the end of the war, when the size of Canada's conventional forces in the field permitted access to this capability.

The Cold War

Canadian interest in special operations forces did not carry over into the Cold War period in any systematic way. Consequently, the Cold War experience is a patchwork of activities, few of which were coordinated in any fashion.

From 1946 to 1955, Canadian defence planners focused some of their efforts on creating an airborne force for North American continental defence. The Mobile Striking Force (MSF) was essentially a light infantry brigade group that could deploy three airborne company groups by parachute and then follow-on battalions by glider. The MSF was fundamentally a light infantry force designed for operations in Canada's north, in Alaska, or in Iceland. It possessed a Pathfinder force, but this unit was given traditional airborne-oriented tasks. Embedded was a Canadian SAS company, but its role remains obscure and, in any event, it was not in existence for very long.²⁶ [\[#Anchor-Sea-14038\]](#)

The Canadian Army's two main Cold War commitments, 25 Canadian Infantry Brigade serving with UN forces in Korea, and 27 Canadian Infantry Brigade serving with NATO forces in Europe, were conventional formations. Successor formations to 27 Brigade in West Germany did, however, retain for a time a small unit of eight German-born Canadian soldiers with plans to use them to conduct sabotage and deep reconnaissance missions against Warsaw Pact forces operating against the Canadian brigade. This capability was of an almost tactical nature, however, and had been discontinued by 1970.²⁷ [\[#Anchor-Sea-21098\]](#)

The 1950s and 1960s are generally acknowledged to be the Golden Age of Western counter-insurgency efforts, endeavours that produced a plethora of special operations forces in Western armies. There does not appear to have been any doctrinal basis for Canadian special operations during this period, nor any centralized organization to provide Canadian forces with special operations skills.

Many counter-insurgency operations were brought on by decolonization, and specialist organizations were created to fight in them. For example, the SAS was reactivated to fight in the Malayan Emergency, while the French deployed the Commandos de Chasse against rebel forces in Algeria.²⁸ [\[#Anchor-Ton-58088\]](#) Canada had no colonies and was not directly involved with military forces in assisting Britain, France or Portugal in their decolonization wars. The use of UN peacekeeping as a surrogate force to fill power vacuums left by decolonization and to prevent Soviet-bloc encroachment was one Canadian contribution to the Third World stabilization effort during the Cold War. Special operations forces did not factor in these efforts, given the nature of peace observation and inter-positional peacekeeping prevalent at the time.²⁹ [\[#Anchor-Se-123\]](#)

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The development of the US Army's Special Forces in the 1950s was initially related to the planned conduct of SOE or OSS-like operations in the Soviet-controlled Eastern Bloc in the event of war, while the CIA created clandestine stay-behind organizations in Western Europe, including the NATO and neutral countries, in the event that they were overrun.³⁰ [\[#Anchor-Alfre-7483\]](#) Canada does not appear to have had any interest in these roles, probably due to budgetary constraints: most funds were dedicated to the creation and maintenance of Canadian nuclear deterrent forces. Canada, however, did send individual soldiers to undertake Special Forces training in the United States throughout the 1950s, and continues to do so today.³¹ [\[#Anchor-Ia-17808\]](#)

In time, the American Special Forces mission evolved to include security assistance training for Allied and friendly forces world-wide to resist Communist expansion.³² [\[#Anchor-Dougl-25379\]](#) There was similar Canadian activity in the 1960s when the Army deployed Military Assistance Programme (MAP) teams to Nigeria, Ghana and Tanzania. These teams consisted of Regular Army officers who, at the 'operational' level, trained the military personnel of these new Commonwealth countries to increase their professionalism. The strategic function, particularly of the 83-man team in Tanzania, was to maintain a Western presence to counter Soviet and Chinese-bloc political and military influence. This Programme was disbanded in 1971, when the Trudeau government disavowed its strategic value.³³ [\[#Anchor-xCanadia-31718\]](#)

In the field of hostage rescue, Canadian efforts were *ad hoc* and situation-specific. The first recorded hostage rescue mission involving Canadian forces occurred in the Congo in 1964. The UN operation was at the time acting as a Western surrogate force to stabilize the country and to prevent Communist interference. Soviet and Chinese-supported insurgents initiated a terror campaign against missionaries and aid workers, which included the seizure of hostages. The senior Canadian UN commander, Brigadier J.A. Dextraze, determined that the success of the UN effort lay in the stabilizing influence in the region generated by Non-Government Organizations (NGOs). He then formed a composite Canadian-Nigerian-Swedish airmobile rescue force, which conducted a retrieval campaign during which at least 100 people were forcibly extracted from the clutches of the insurgents during several operations.³⁴ [\[#Anchor-Sea-40591\]](#)



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Members of the SAS during the conflict in the Aden in the mid 1960s.

Canada's first domestic counter-terrorism campaign lasted from 1963 to 1971. While the nation's military forces were somewhat involved in intelligence-gathering activities against the leftist Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ) throughout the period, the principle of 'police primacy' dominated. There were no special operations forces created specifically for counter-FLQ missions. When the Army was finally deployed *en masse* in the fall of 1970 after the Pierre Laporte kidnapping, the Airborne Regiment conducted several airmobile cordon and search operations. These could, however, have also been considered conventional light infantry missions. [35 \[#Anchor-Sea-58867\]](#)



Author's collection

A member of the SAS in Afghanistan.

The tragic events of the 1972 Munich Olympics were not lost on Canadian planners, but the prevailing belief in the run-up to the 1976 Montreal Olympics was that 'police primacy' would dominate and the armed forces would be used in a supporting role. That said, Mobile Command planners responsible for the provision of this support formed several *ad hoc* quick response groups. Trained on a Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) model, and incorporating the existing sniper sections assigned to traditional infantry battalions, these ten-man sections were covertly deployed into a number of Olympic Games venues and athlete housing facilities. They were to respond immediately if any violent situation developed. These sections were apparently drawn from the conventional infantry and armour units assigned to security duties in each geographical region. At the end of the Olympic Games, they were integrated back into their parent units.[36 \[#Anchor-Intervie-702\]](#)

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Particular mention should be made of the formation of the Special Service Force (SSF) in 1976. The print media was quick to make what it believed to be connections with the SSF and the SAS when the Airborne Regiment moved from Edmonton, Alberta to Petawawa, Ontario, and received a new 'winged dagger' insignia, which borrowed heavily from British origins. Rampant speculation about further internal security operations in Quebec followed the move eastward. The SSF, as constituted in the 1970s and 1980s, was actually a rapidly deployable light infantry brigade designed for use on NATO's flanks as part of ACE Mobile Force (Land) and the Canadian Air-Sea Transportable (CAST) Brigade. The SSF also functioned as part of the UN Standby Battalion commitment. Despite its name and insignia, the SSF was not a special operations force, although its members did collectively and individually train with the SAS and US Special Forces.[37 \[#Anchor-Ro-8633\]](#) Specifically, combat divers from army engineer units and Fleet Diving Units conducted training exchanges with US Navy SEALs and the British Special Boat Squadron in the 1970s.[38 \[#Anchor-Authorx-17526\]](#)

The astronomical increase in international terrorist incidents in the late 1970s and into the 1980s did not seriously concern the Canadian government in terms of a direct threat to the nation and, therefore, there was no impetus to create a special operations capability for counter-terrorism. By 1985, that situation changed when terrorist acts were committed on Canadian soil. The response, after some debate, was to create the Special Emergency Response Team (SERT). This agency became a unit of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), although it was supported by Air Force transport resources. It trained with a variety of allied military and police forces for the hostage rescue role.[39 \[#Anchor-Davi-25818\]](#)

Activities During the 1990s and Beyond

The Canadian Forces entered the post-Cold War world without a special operations capability but, by early in the new millennium, had deployed a dedicated special operations force to fight Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. The publicly available specifics of how this force was created and how it was employed throughout the 1990s are not clear, although some journalistic efforts have delineated the broad outlines and shape of Joint Task Force 2 and its activities.[40 \[#Anchor-Ibi-33299\]](#)

Until the time of the Afghanistan deployment, however, temporary solutions were utilized. An incident involving the seizure of Canadian soldiers in Bosnia led to the creation of an *ad hoc* hostage rescue force, which was embedded within the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR II) in 1994. At the time, individual Canadians serving in UNPROFOR, who had been on exchange with the SAS, SBS, Special Forces and SEALs, were brought together with SAS and SBS personnel who were already operating in the region under British national control. Some refresher training was conducted and rudimentary plans were made to effect a rescue of captives, had the situation further deteriorated.[41 \[#Anchor-Sea-43093\]](#)

In addition to the hostage rescue role, increased national demand for the collection of timely, covert information and the direction of precision engagements emerged throughout the 1990s. It was evident to those examining the future of the Canadian Army that a gap existed in these capabilities and that the expansion of special operations forces was the best means to address the shortcomings. It was thought that pre-emptive action against terrorist threats directed against deployed Canadian forces might also be necessary, since relying upon Allied capabilities in this arena compromised independent action and sovereign control. Consequently, more and more effort was spent on expanding JTF 2's capabilities, and the unit's eventual deployment to Afghanistan reflects this state of affairs.

Conclusion

How should one define the Canadian special operations experience overall? Until the formation of JTF 2 in the 1990s, it was ad hoc, reactive and sporadic in its execution. In many ways, special operations are a strategic weapon: special operations demand a strong political context in which to operate effectively. During the Second World War, Canada was a young and very junior partner in the Allied camp and chose to follow Great Britain's lead in strategy formulation and execution with resultant effects on the lack of development of an independent Canadian special operations capability. Coherent and consistent Canadian strategic context was lacking. Though there were unstated strategic traditions that emerged in the 1940s, Canadian policymakers during the Cold War were struggling with the fundamental building blocks of strategic policy, such as nuclear weapons, naval forces, and air defence, and the associated problems of coordinating these elements with foreign policy aims. The more sophisticated analysis necessary for special operations forces to develop and thrive was simply not being done. A series of reactive or situation-specific attempts at a special operations capability followed, but there was no defined requirement for separate and independent means given Canada's strategic context.

When confronted with the realities of the post-Cold Warworld in the 1990s, a formal and dedicated special operations force was finally established and it is now part of Canada's ability to help protect Canadian national interests at home and abroad. The nature of conflict today and in the future should dictate that special operations forces have a permanent place in Canada's reservoir of operational capabilities.



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Notes

1. Note that these comments on the Canadian experience come nowhere close to reflecting the thirteen-line, all-inclusive official American definition of special operations. See William H. Raven, *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Novato: Presidio Books, 1995), p. 2.
2. William Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE: The Special Operations Executive 1940-1945* (London: St Ermin's Press, 2000), p. xix.
3. M.R.D. Foot, *SOE: The Special Operations Executive 1940-1946* (London: Pimlico Books, 1999), pp. 5, 18-19; and Mackenzie, pp. 4-5.
4. Mackenzie, p. 10.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 32
6. Foot, pp. 9-10, 14.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6; and Mackenzie, p. 32.
8. See William Seymour, *British Special Forces* (London: Sidgewick and Jackson, 1985), Ch. 1; and Mackenzie, p. 362.
9. See H. William Hyde, *The Quiet Canadian: The Secret Story of Sir William Stephenson*

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10. Due to the paucity of literature on Canadian SOE operations, the author is forced to rely upon Roy MacLaren's superbly researched *Canadians Behind Enemy Lines 1939-1945* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1983) for most of this section, although there is some information available in C.P. Stacey, *The Victory Campaign: The Operations in North-West Europe 1944-1945* (Ottawa: The Queen's Printer, 1960), pp. 635-637.
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 13. *Ibid.*, pp. 80 and 114. See also Brian Jeffrey Street, *The Parachute Ward: A Canadian Surgeon's Wartime Adventures in Yugoslavia* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1987).
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 17. Alastair Timpson, *In Rommel's Backyard: A Memoir of the Long Range Desert Group* (London: Leo Coopers, 2000); Vladimir Peniakoff, *Private Army* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1950); William Seymour, *British Special Forces* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1985); and MacLaren, pp. 287-299.
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37. Roy MacGregor, "The Armed Forces: In from the Cold," *Maclean's*, November 6, 1978, pp. 20-25; Dick Brown, "Hanging Tough," *Quest: Canada's Urban Magazine*, Vol. 7, Issue 3, May 1978, pp. 12-22. See also David Bercuson, *Significant Incident: Canada's Army, the Airborne and the Murder in Somalia* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1996). Note that the SSF of the 1970s was based on the SSF that existed in the early 1960s which had the same roles and missions but was incorporated into 2 Canadian Infantry Brigade Group.
38. Author's discussions with FDU and RCE personnel.
39. David Pugliese, *Canada's Secret Commandos: The Unauthorized Story of Joint Task Force Two* (Ottawa: Esprit de Corps Books, 2002), pp. 13-22.
40. Ibid.
41. Sean M. Maloney, *Chances for Peace: The Canadians in UNPROFOR, 1992-1995* (Toronto: Vanwell Publishing, 2002).



DND Photo IS2004-2138a by Sergeant Frank Hudec

Members of HMCS *Montreal's* naval boarding party coming aboard the Canadian Coast Guard Ship *Henry Larsen* during Exercise "Narwhal", August 2004.

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