

SELECTION FOR AMERICAN SF FOLLOWS BRITISH SAS MODEL

Club member Bill Garrison heads up the US Special Forces. Here one of his officers details how the British SAS has played a part in the development of this branch of the US Army

THE US Army's creation of a branch structure for Special Forces in 1981 was a benchmark in the history of American unconventional warfare. That structure is now firmly in place and doing well. A little known contribution made to the US Army's newest branch is the British SAS's, as well as other militaries', model for the selection of new officer and enlisted recruits.

That programme, called Special Forces Assessment and Selection (SFAS) is run by the US Army's John F Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Its success is a direct reflection of what military communities can learn from one another, and is testament to the close ties that have been established between the American and British Special Operations communities.

American Special Forces recruits, officer and enlisted, prior to 1989, used to directly enter training after the completion of a few entrance exams and a battery of physical tests. The result of a failure to examine potential candidates more closely was not unexpected – attrition rates from SF enlisted training were sometimes as high as 90%.

Officer attrition was never as high because officers attended a separate and less demanding course of instruction – something enlisted graduates were quick to remind their officers of when they felt the situation warranted.

This circumstance cost all parties concerned time and money. Movement to Fort Bragg for training was considered by the Army a permanent change of station move, with families, because SF training took longer than six months.

Training failures – most of whom were eliminated in the first phase of training – were subsequently reassigned to duties with the 82nd Airborne Division or with other units of the 18th Airborne Corps – many in specialties in which they were not trained. After all, the failure rate could not be anticipated accurately. This methodology was obviously not cost-effective, nor efficient or effective.

More importantly, SF went through a great deal of research and analysis when

creating the branch in an attempt to distinguish what made it different from the Army's other branches – to establish a unique identity and purpose.

Although the British SAS provided part of the base model for SFAS, the missions of American SF and British SAS are not identical. Therefore some refinement and



modification was warranted. SF also examined and integrated lessons learned from the Australian SAS, German GSG-9 and other like organisations.

Because both officers and enlisted soldiers attend the same SFAS programme of 23 days duration there are no complaints of favouritism. All are evaluated for similar capabilities and under the same criteria. It is important to note that there is no genuine pass or fail in SFAS. There are many physical and mental events which are graded. But all other things being tolerably equal, SFAS is as much an evaluation of character as anything else.

For example, SF candidates endure long road marches, sleep deprivation, night and day land navigation, patrolling, swimming tests, obstacle courses, working

singly and with groups, short and long distance runs and numerous problem solving events. All of these are attempted under the watchful eyes of senior non-commissioned officers who evaluate their performance. Candidates are not told how well or how poorly they have done on a given event. The uncertainty thus created adds stress to an already stressful situation and is all part of the evaluation process.

Months before a candidate's attendance at SFAS, he is provided with a recommended list of subjects to study and the best physical training programs to pursue. Beyond that, he is told little. Those soldiers who have a difficult time dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity will find SFAS extremely challenging. SF is looking for men of unusual confidence and self-assurance.

Those too accustomed to more conventional military thinking will generally not fare well.

SFAS, based in part on the British SAS model, and then further refined and modified for American SF, has proven itself invaluable over the last five years since its inception. Approximately 50 of those attending SFAS are permitted to enter the SF Qualification Course. Of that 50 who are permitted to begin training, the majority successfully graduate.

Of the remainder, who fail to make the grade, a number are invited by the evaluators to return, after further individual training, to make another attempt. The rest, most of whom are superb soldiers, are congratulated for their willing attempt to push themselves beyond their known limits, but are told as professionally as possible that not all are cut from the bolt of cloth that SF requires, and are returned, without prejudice, to their parent units.

The US Army, through the adoption of a SAS-like selection system, has saved money and time, mitigated unit turbulence and improved training. But most important, SF Branch is receiving the highest quality officers and non-commissioned officers in its history.

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