

The Special Forces Warrant Officer, the Beginnings

This memorandum is composed for the Warrant Officers of Special Forces who, lacking a documented account of the establishment of their specialty, have asked that I record my recall of the event. Because almost all of the accumulated documents on this effort were later lost or destroyed this account is of necessity largely from memory.

The development of the Special Forces warrant officer specialty was an inherent element of the devising of the Special Forces officer and enlisted specialties. Although the recommended changes were conceived and refined successively, after the initial conceptual effort all of the proposed changes in Special Forces management were presented as an entity, as a program in fact. Probably naively the proposing officers never anticipated a partial adoption of their proposals and at no time did any of the senior officers who were considering them, whether supportive or opposed, suggest that only part might be adopted.

Although establishing the warrant officer positions was the most radical of the items in the proposed program there were very few events that were separate or were particular to the warrant officer proposal. Therefore this account contains much that is pertinent as background but is not of direct relevance.

J. H. Crerar, COL, USA Retired

Background

Although sometimes referred to as the '18 program' the more formal title was Special Operations Personnel Career Management Study. Initially this title was somewhat of a misnomer because what was known as 'the study' did not exist. It was not written until after the Chief of Staff of the Army (CSA), GEN. E. C. Meyer, had approved the general, roughly defined, concept and directed that specified elements of Headquarters, Department of the Army, be briefed on it. Until then the written documents consisted only of a DCSOPS decision memorandum to the CSA recommending that COL Charlie Beckwith form a study group to study special operations management problems plus approximately five hand lettered sheets of butcher paper used to brief GEN Meyer. This seminal decision memorandum to the CSA was signed by MG James Vaught of the Operations Directorate of DCSOPS and approved by the DCSOPS, LTG Glenn K. Otis. It was the outgrowth of a conversation between GEN Meyer and MG Vaught that included mention of the career hazards of commissioned officers that served in special operations. Although this memorandum said nothing about recommending structural changes it was worded broadly enough that the study group did not find it unduly limiting. The study group that conducted the study and its follow-on actions never exceeded two people. Initially these were COL Charlie Beckwith and COL J. H. Crerar. (COL Crerar was recalled from retirement to participate in this effort.) The group worked during July and early August 1981 to develop their list of personnel management related recommendations. Although there were a number of short trips to Washington, DC and other military sites, most of the early work was done at Fort Bragg, in the USIA Advisor's office in JFK Hall. The Commanding General of JFK Center for Military Assistance (JFKCENMA) was briefed frequently. The Center indicated little interest in the subject, posed no obstructions, and provided little support beyond use of the unoccupied office.

Various staff secretaries provided typing support, often at lunchtime or after hours, as personal favors to Colonels Beckwith or Crerar.

The Problem

The study addressed all Army special operations forces (SOF) units and recommended changes that were broadly applicable to them. The problem that led to the consideration of warrant officers, however, was particular to Special Forces. By the then current TOE the Special Forces Operational Detachment

A (SFOD A) was authorized a lieutenant as the detachment Executive Officer (XO)/second in command. This short assignment was sandwiched between required prior troop duty and selection for the branch advanced course. In the shared convictions of Colonels Beckwith and Crerar, lieutenants were in the Army to learn their profession. Their opportunities to learn the requisite skills and acquire experience in their branches and the Army while assigned to an SFOD A were minimal. As with few exceptions their prior military education was limited to a branch basic course and the Special Forces qualification course (then titled "UW Course") their contributions to the SFOD A usually were very limited. Justly or not they were often viewed as burdens on their detachments. Although the shortages of captains in Special Forces (SF), some dictated by the Officer Distribution Plan, often thrust these lieutenants into detachment command this was not a factor in the study group's proposals.

Examined Solutions

The study group first looked at various means to acquire more highly qualified lieutenants in the SFOD A. This led to determining the sources and qualifications of the current Special Forces officers. Not surprising ROTC, OCS, and direct commissioning predominated. There were disproportionately few Military Academy graduates. There were also a disproportionately large number of officers who had not yet completed college, indicating challenging or limited future careers. In discussions between the study group members they concluded that possessing military experience was the most critical factor in order for the detachment XO to make a contribution to the success of the SFOD A. This was adjudged as even more important than formal education. As lieutenants served only about four years before being selected for captain, roughly one year of which was consumed in schools, leave, and travel, there was no way that they could accumulate significant experience as commissioned officers. The study group therefore first looked at the number of officers being commissioned from OCS as most of them would have prior enlisted service. It was soon evident that, even in the highly unlikely event that a majority of these officers volunteered for Special Forces, the number would be inadequate. Including in this number all of those receiving direct commissions did not alter this conclusion. COL Beckwith suggested that Limited Duty Officers (LDO), similar to those in the Navy, who would be appointed from the ranks of senior SF non-commissioned officers (NCO) would offer a feasible solution. Investigation of this concept, including consideration of many "what if" possibilities confirmed that it was practical. A call to a formerly helpful Military Personnel Center (MILPERCEN) contact, LTC Walkley, established that LDOs had been proposed recently in another context and thoroughly 'shot down' by the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel (DCSPER), LTG Max Thurman. As gaining DCSPER approval was recognized as probably the single most critical step for improving special operations forces personnel management, this idea was discarded.

At this time COL Crerar recalled a conversation that he had about a year earlier with COL Paris Davis, then the Commander of 10th Special Forces Group, Airborne (SFGA). COL Davis described a casual exchange in which he had participated the previous Sunday in the 10th SFGA headquarters. The other participants were the Duty NCO and SFC Scott Herbert. The subject of the discussion was "how to improve Special Forces". At some point SFC Herbert had suggested the increased utilization of warrant officers, even down to SFOD A level. COL Davis cited this only as an example of SFC Herbert's imaginative thinking. At that time neither Colonel Davis nor Colonel Crerar viewed the idea seriously. This disregard of the idea was undoubtedly colored by the then common impression of the Warrant Officers Corps. The corps appeared to consist of two distinct groups: one of mature, experienced, subject matter experts in technical areas such as signal, personnel, supply, and maintenance, the other of very young aviation warrant officers more noted for their flying skills and combat fearlessness than for technical depth. Neither of these admittedly stereotypes seemed to offer much to fit the needs of Special Forces operational units.

Based on his recall of this conversation, COL Crerar suggested having a warrant officer on the SFOD A in place of the currently authorized lieutenant. COL Beckwith immediately dismissed the idea as being too radical but within a few minutes agreed that they should at least examine it. The more they examined the concept, the better it looked. Warrant officers would not only have the military experience that the lieutenants lacked but, as they would come, it was assumed, from the Special

Forces non-commissioned officers, they would have specific SF relevant knowledge and experience. They would also bring a highly desirable degree of stability to the SFOD A that was impossible with commissioned officers who had to move on to career supportive schools or positions after a year or two in detachments. In contrast the warrant officers could serve in a position in more than a single pay grade (WO1, CW2) and not have to move because of promotion. A combination of the subject contents of MOS 971 (Counterintelligence) and MOS 972 (Area Intelligence) best fit the SF requirements.

(At a later time COL Crerar would recognize another advantage of the warrant officer program. By siphoning off a number of the SF NCOs at mid-career, the warrant officer program assisted in reducing NCO promotion blockage at the higher enlisted grades. Historically this had rarely been a problem with SF NCOs. Shortages of senior NCOs in Special Forces units were nearly endemic and, as they all held standard Army career management field (CMF) designations (often incorrectly referred to as 'MOS'), they were often assigned outside of Special Forces as infantrymen, engineers, communicators and medical personnel. (The effects of this on the SF units and on the SF NCOs themselves are outside the scope of this paper.) With the institution of the proposed single CMF, Special Forces NCOs would no longer be moving outside of the SF community and now would be competing among themselves for promotions to senior grades. The NCOs successfully entering the warrant officer program, presumably at the grade of Staff Sergeant (E-6), reduced the number of contenders for a very limited number of higher positions and their related pay grades.)

Consideration of a warrant officer on the SFOD A included addressing a number of "what if" questions to insure that the study group was not proposing a program that was either unworkable or was a career dead end for the individual. The most important of these questions was where would the SF warrant officer go after detachment service. Although no detailed projection was developed, it was anticipated that senior SF WO positions eventually would be created at Special Forces battalion and group levels and in the theater special operations commands (SOC). An equally demanding question was where the SF warrant officer would go if he left Special Forces because of personal reasons (injury, family needs) or an administrative reason such as a SF force reduction. Based on his limited attache experience COL Crerar recommended that the SF warrant officer have strong intelligence credentials. These plus his regional, language, and organizational skills would equip him particularly well to fit into the intelligence field where there was a chronic shortage of qualified warrant officers. The career patterns, authorizations, and numbers assigned to various warrant officers MOS were examined. The study group also was recognized that this training would markedly improve the abilities of the SFOD A that at that time had very limited intelligence capabilities. As a check of its feasibility the proposal was discussed with a very few personnel experts. CW4 Harry Rider, who had both extensive personnel and Special Forces experience, was exceptionally helpful.

With absolutely no recognition that the substitution of warrant officers for lieutenants was a unit structural change and quite probably outside the intended authority of the initial study memorandum, the study group added this to their recommendations under the title "Operations and Intelligence (O&I) Technician." It was never challenged on the issue of its propriety.

Process

MG Vaught directed that the study group accompany him and brief the Chief of Staff when he made his farewell call on 18 August 1981 before leaving for a new assignment. The Chief of Staff was briefed on the entire project including the process, the resulting recommendations and their expected effect. The Chief of Staff asked only a few questions, none of them concerning the warrant officer proposal. At the end of the briefing he indicated that he had no objection to the proposals as presented. He directed that the study group brief them to the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence (ACSI), the commander of MILPERCEN, and the DCSPER. After leaving the Chief of Staff's office COL Beckwith announced that he was retiring in two weeks. For the next few weeks the study group consisted of only COL Crerar.

In early October BG James Moore, Director of Operations, Readiness and Mobilization, ODCSOPS, felt it was necessary to inform the newly assigned DCSOPS, LTG William Richardson, of the program prior

to scheduling the briefings of the ACSI, DCSPER and Commander MILPERCEN. (He also may have been concerned that this effort lacked a written record, in effect existing fully only in the minds of two officers, both of them retired.) He directed COL Crerar to draft a paper including as much detail as possible. Because of necessary references to classified units the final edition of this paper was classified. Its completion was delayed when COL Crerar, having completed his recall period, returned to Fort Devens to retire. His recall was extended; the first of three extensions. Because the DCSOPS distributed this paper widely in the Army Staff and its recipients distributed it yet more widely to their subordinates it came to be considered *the* Special Operations Personnel Career Management Study. Later for administrative convenience an unclassified version was drafted.

Reorganization

During this period Major Lyle Drake of DCSOPS, joined the study group. This was a product of his intense interest in the effort and was done without formal orders or directive and therefore was in addition to his normal extensive duties. Because of his long Special Forces career, his dedication to improving Special Forces and his intimate knowledge of the workings of the Department of the Army, his contributions over the next sixteen or so months were critical and quite possibly decisive to the program's success. COL Crerar and MAJ Drake became a close and highly complementary team. COL Crerar did the 'outside work', that is, he prepared, revised, and presented supporting papers in the Pentagon. He presented briefings both in the Pentagon and to special operations organizations throughout the Department of Defense. He visited the Navy and Air Force personnel management organizations to study their management of SO personnel. He also visited Army and joint SO organizations repeatedly to confirm the types, numbers, and grades of authorized, assigned, and projected special operations forces personnel. While there he answered numerous questions on the proposed program, and received feedback from the organizations' commanders. Almost every subordinate division and branch of each Army Staff directorate and each element of the Military Personnel Center were briefed, either formally or informally. These briefings often were the follow-up of an individual's telephone call requesting an answer a specific question.

MAJ Drake did the 'inside work.' He arranged appointments with Army Staff principals to include the time, place, and supporting equipment. More importantly he determined the positions of the various members of the principal's staffs relative to the proposals. With this knowledge the study group was often able to persuade or at least inform the subordinates of the specifics of the program, assuage their concerns, and often achieve their acquiescence if not their support. MAJ Drake's efforts frequently assured a friendly reception when the formal briefing occurred. At a minimum it identified those in opposition and their reasons, permitting the briefer to address these points in his presentation and either indicate their limited importance or dismiss them. Following each briefing Crerar and Drake discussed what the briefing had revealed as additional areas of concern, problems or aspects. They decided what should be added to the briefing, what should be revised, what new problems were identified, and what was the next step to be taken. On occasions these after action reviews occurred in the evening at Major Drake's home.

Opposition

Numerous individuals and some offices for reasons they undoubtedly considered valid were opposed to one or more of the proposals. An example was the ACSI that was opposed until assured that the SF warrant officers were not to be extracted from their already inadequate number of intelligence warrant officers. A few offices, once their original objections were met, posed additional ones. In some instances this was repeated a number of times, even on occasions in subject areas outside their responsibilities. One of the few offices offering continuing and consistent opposition to the proposals was the Warrant Officers Division of MILPERCEN. The division had received a copy of the study and called COL Crerar requesting that he come to their office and discuss it. After an extensive discussion, the division chief stated that the division was opposed to the concept.

He admitted that he thought that the proposal was workable but that, in the view of the Warrant Officers Branch's character as a corps of technicians, it was totally unacceptable. He stated that the specific problem was that in the absence of the commissioned detachment commander the warrant officer would be in command. COL Crerar argued that he thought that this position was unreasonable. As a warrant officer could command an aircraft with many senior people aboard and could command a ship of unlimited tonnage, it was inconsistent to object to a warrant officer commanding ten men. This argument had no effect. COL Crerar returned to the WO Division a number of times either at the division's request or to update them on his efforts. The reception and exchanges of views and information were friendly but, at least superficially, the division remained opposed. Whether this was, as stated, for consistency or reflected some organizational memory of the Korean War where, because of an Army experiment, warrant officers sometimes commanded rifle companies in combat, is moot. Although remaining opposed to the Special Forces WO proposal, the division went to great effort to be helpful. It designated a regular point of contact for this effort. It provided documentation and advice on warrant officer history, accessions, employment, and management. It provided statistics on appointment times, years of experience and on how long warrant officers typically stayed in the service after appointment. When on 15 January 1982 MG Arter (Chief of MILPERCEN), BG Roles, (OPD, officer management) and BG Gurley, (EPD, enlisted management) were briefed, the Warrant Officers Division representatives present did not pose any objections.

Decisions

After all of the other principal DA staff elements and MILPERCEN had been briefed on and agreed to or at least accepted the proposals' feasibility, the approval of LTG Thurman, DCSPER, was still pending. In the previous half year starting on 4 March COL Crerar had briefed LTG Thurman four times. At each session the general had accepted the content of the briefing and the answers to his previous queries and then posed additional new questions. Most of these questions were of a statistical nature, the general having little evident interest in operational or personal aspects. With the intent of ending these iterations and obtaining a final 'for' or 'against' decision, BG Moore requested a meeting with LTG Thurman. During this meeting LTG Thurman indicated that he sympathized with the goals of the study but did not think that the personnel numbers would 'work'. There was a moment of silence. Then Major Pat Toffler, one of the DCSPER staff officers, spoke up and said that he thought that they would work. LTG Thurman immediately directed that COL Crerar and Major Toffler verify that they would. This was accomplished later that day at MILPERCEN and LTG Thurman withdrew his objections. Major Drake quickly drafted a memorandum that was signed by both the DCSPER and the DCSOPS (LTG Richardson). It was sent to the Chief of Staff who forwarded with a marginal notation to the Secretary of the Army, the Honorable John Marsh. The critical paragraph read,

"We have agreed, after careful assessment, that a separate career system for Special Operations personnel is feasible and appropriate for enlisted personnel (CMF 18), warrant officers (MOS 018), and commissioned officers (SC 18)."

This was the essential decision. In the following months work groups that included representatives of numerous affected Army organizations assembled and discussed the impacts and the mechanics of implementation. Although Infantry Branch engineered removing the Rangers from the program and one recalcitrant corps commander would continue to record his objections, there was no retreat from the approved changes. In the following year formal implementing directives were proposed, negotiated, revised, and finally issued.

Unpublished work Copyright COL J. H. Crerar

*Warrant Officers Heritage Foundation 8/31/2004
On the web at www.usawoa.org/woheritage.*

[Use browser's BACK button to return to previous web page]