

Canadian
Forces
College

Collège
des
Forces
Canadiennes



Regaining the Initiative: CANSOFCOM in the Public Domain

Major Anonymous

JCSP 49

Service Paper

Disclaimer

Opinions expressed remain those of the author and do not represent Department of National Defence or Canadian Forces policy. This paper may not be used without written permission.

© His Majesty the King in Right of Canada, as represented by the Minister of National Defence, 2023.

PCEMI n° 49

Étude militaire

Avertissement

Les opinions exprimées n'engagent que leurs auteurs et ne reflètent aucunement des politiques du Ministère de la Défense nationale ou des Forces canadiennes. Ce papier ne peut être reproduit sans autorisation écrite.

© Sa Majesté le Roi du Chef du Canada, représenté par le ministre de la Défense nationale, 2023.

CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE - COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES

JCSP 49 - PCEMI n° 49
2022 - 2023

Service Paper – Étude militaire

Regaining the Initiative: CANSOFCOM in the Public Domain

Major Anonymous

“This paper was written by a candidate attending the Canadian Forces College in fulfilment of one of the requirements of the Course of Studies. The paper is a scholastic document, and thus contains facts and opinions which the author alone considered appropriate and correct for the subject. It does not necessarily reflect the policy or the opinion of any agency, including the Government of Canada and the Canadian Department of National Defence. This paper may not be released, quoted or copied, except with the express permission of the Canadian Department of National Defence.”

« La présente étude a été rédigée par un stagiaire du Collège des Forces canadiennes pour satisfaire à l'une des exigences du cours. L'étude est un document qui se rapporte au cours et contient donc des faits et des opinions que seul l'auteur considère appropriés et convenables au sujet. Elle ne reflète pas nécessairement la politique ou l'opinion d'un organisme quelconque, y compris le gouvernement du Canada et le ministère de la Défense nationale du Canada. Il est défendu de diffuser, de citer ou de reproduire cette étude sans la permission expresse du ministère de la Défense nationale. »

REGAINING THE INITIATIVE: CANSOFCOM IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

AIM

1. Special Operations Forces (SOF) have been the force of choice in the military to conduct counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency operations since 9/11. They have been enjoying recognition and fascination from the public, never seen before in modern history. This spotlight has brought awareness to this lean, agile, flat and strategic asset, but it has also blurred the narrative and exposed missteps to the public eyes. This service paper will demonstrate the need for a better communication strategy for the Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) to increase public awareness of its value proposition and remain a trusted partner in defending Canada.

INTRODUCTION

2. CANSOFCOM has dedicated significant effort to increasing awareness of its capabilities and achievements since its creation in 2006. To do so, they have adopted a diversified approach focusing on technical briefs related to operations, embedded journalists and the publication or collaboration on books. As a matter of fact, several books have been published by the CANSOFCOM Education and Research Center. As an example, *We will Find a way*, written by Bernard Horn, highlights the history of SOF from a Canadian perspective and their major operations since 1993¹. CANSOFCOM has also contributed to books written by journalists, such as *Mission de l'ombre*, by Fabrice de Pierrebourg, describing CANSOFCOM's role in Afghanistan and Iraq². CANSOFCOM has also opened up certain training events and operations to embedded journalists³. Nevertheless, those efforts have been unable to keep up the pace of emergence in the information domain of ex-SOF operators and non-governmental SOF specialized platforms⁴ monopolizing the internet space.

3. Since the beginning of the *Global War on Terror*, SOF operations and SOF operator accounts presence in the media have increased exponentially within western society, but primarily in the United States. These stories have been brought to public light in the forms of movies, television series, documentaries, and books. Furthermore, the emergence of social media has also seen the expansion of SOF-related podcasts, where hosts are interviewing ex-SOF operators and other high-level Intelligence and Law Enforcement agents. *Cleared Hot*⁵, *Shawn Ryan Show*⁶ and *Combat Story*⁷ are a few examples of SOF-specific podcasts that feature primarily *Five Eyes* ex-operators. CANSOFCOM has seen, over the last years, several ex-

¹ Horn, 'We Will Find A Way: Understanding the Legacy of Canadian Special Operations Forces'.

² De Pierrebourg, Overdrive, and Overdrive ebook, *Missions de l'ombre: Les opérations spéciales de la grc, du scrs et des forces armées*.

³ Hamamdjian, 'Canada's Secret Military Task Force Unveiled'.

⁴ Webb, 'SOFREP'.

⁵ Stumpf, 'Cleared Hot'.

⁶ 'Shawn Ryan Show'.

⁷ Fugit, 'Combat Stories'.

operators and Command ex-members being invited on those podcasts, generally talking about their career in the CAF and CANSOFCOM, the selection and training process and key operational highlights. Although typically remaining vague and not disclosing other CANSOFCOM members' personal information, they are definitely playing in a dangerous area regarding what constitutes the interest of the public and the safeguarding of classified information. Perhaps, they are also potentially perpetuating negative myths associated with SOF in general and do not always accurately represent the current CANSOFCOM values and members' opinions. Although not necessarily negative in terms of general awareness of CANSOFCOM from the public, these single way of communicating the CANSOFCOM brand is at the risk of not fully representing the CANSOFCOM values and priorities of the current operating environment.

DISCUSSION

Information domain from a doctrinal perspective

4. The operating environment has seen the emergence of a new domain for military operations. The information domain is the one that this service paper will unpack regarding the CANSOFCOM brand and public perception. The notion of strategic communication is defined from a Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) view as a widespread understanding of the Canadian population regarding the CAF while protecting Operational security (OPSEC). It is also viewed as a bridge between public diplomacy and operation to ensure the coherence of narrative within the public domain⁸. DND's responsibility resides within the Assistant Deputy Minister - Public Affairs (ADM(PA)) for strategic national-level communication. It is fair to assume that CANSOFCOM public affairs section is responsible for maintaining its public communication in line with ADM (PA). This is a challenge as CANSOFCOM is unique regarding the level of OPSEC necessary to keep its edge on its adversaries. Also, it must be balanced with the transparency that the Canadian public deserves regarding the activities of CANSOFCOM while maintaining OPSEC.

OPSEC has a fundamental of SOF

5. OPSEC is an essential fundamental of SOF doctrine and key to maintaining its agility and reach within the spectrum of conflict⁹. Operational security aims to protect the Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs), strengths and capabilities of SOF elements. It is vital to maintain this fundamental during the planning, execution and post-operation activities of any SOF activity. It is also key to minimizing the risk of an inadvertent leak by applying the "need to know" concept within their own units. The relationship between safeguarding the secrecy of SOF and the fading of that requirement over time is also key. TTPs, size and capabilities are evolving, and perhaps the risk of jeopardizing future operations is significantly degraded as time goes by. CANSOFCOM operations conducted over twenty-five years ago logically have very little operational security requiring safeguarding besides personal information regarding former

⁸ Canada. Department of National Defence, 'B-GJ-005-300-FP-001, CFJP 3.0 - Operations.'

⁹ NATO, 'Allied Joint Doctrine for Special Operations'.

operators involved. This brings the proposition of declassification of past operations, based on time and proper vetting process, to increase transparency and awareness with the public.

The SOF operator image

6. The secrecy and specialized nature of CANSOFOM and other SOF have generated interest from the media and the general population since their foundation. The fact that most SOF units are not following the same dress and deportment standards as their conventional counterpart is often a prime catalyst for this interest. For example, in 2004, pictures emerged of CAF members deployed to Haiti dressed in a way that attribution to CANSOFCOM was hard to dispute¹⁰. Furthermore, TV series, video games and movies have augmented the mythic view of SOF regarding their conduct on and off duties. The images of SOF operators not following the normal code of conduct and the formality of the conventional military regarding rank, dress and equipment, and grooming standard has been reinforced through popular culture and the media. It is also known that former special forces soldiers have been key advisers in the development of *first-person shooter* video games¹¹. This has augmented the place of SOF in the general population but has also reinforced negative myths associated with SOF.

Media vs Military

7. Free-Press and Free-Speech are fundamental principles to our democracy and Canadian values. Within these principles, the media plays a key role as they have for mission to report the truth to society. On the other hand, the military has a mission to protect the national interest at all costs, based on safeguarding operational information. The military and the media are key pillars of democracy, and both play a key role in peace and during conflicts. But they also are in constant opposition as their aims and roles are fundamentally opposed; secrecy versus full transparency¹². SOF and the media relationship is furthermore problematic, based on limited available information regarding SOF activities in general.

Quiet-professional Ethos

8. Within SOF units, culture is a key component to maintaining a very high level of operational focus, purpose, and effectiveness. This culture is reinforced differently depending on the units, but it is generally conveyed to operators via a creed or an ethos, a guideline on principles that should be embodied on and off-duties as a way of life. Interestingly enough, based on the secrecy surrounding their missions and day-to-day OPSEC requirements, most SOF units have several principles regarding the quiet-professional expectations. For example, the *Navy Seals* Ethos mentioned: “not advertising their work nor seeking recognition for actions”¹³. Additionally, it mentions the principle of trust, loyalty, and integrity and that this ethos must be earned daily. Regarding Navy Seals, it is fair to assume that active members are following this code of conduct during their careers. However, from a statistical standpoint, the number of

¹⁰ De B Taillon, ‘Canadian Special Operations Forces: Transforming Paradigms’.

¹¹ Mantello, ‘Playing Discreet War in the US: Negotiating Subjecthood and Sovereignty through Special Forces Video Games’.

¹² Lt Col Ashraf Abdullah Yussuf, ‘The Armed Forces and the Media: Bangladesh Perspectives’.

¹³ US Navy Official website, ‘Seal Ethos’.

retired *Seals* books increased by 200 percent following the raid on Osama bin Laden¹⁴. In his Master of Science in Defense, Forrest Crowell focused his research on the loss of the quiet-professional mentality within the *Navy Seals* community and quoted that *Seals* have a tendency to follow the *Market Ethos* rather than the *Seal Ethos* as many of them have decided to turn their military service in a cash-in opportunity.¹⁵

9. The argument for those ex-military members to go on their post-military career path based on their SOF curriculum could be that many ex-Senior officers have done the same. As an example, in 2010, Col (Ret) Pete Blaber released a book called *The Mission, the Men, and Me: Lessons from a Former Delta Force Commander*¹⁶, exposing USSOF's previous mission and many unit-specific details. Another example is a book describing how Task Force 714 was able to defeat Al Qaeda in Iraq, *Transforming US Intelligence for Irregular War: Task Force 714 in Iraq*¹⁷. However, it is fair to assume that both those who went through the Department of Defense's vetting process but fundamentally different in their aims. The argument is that Task Force 714 book was done in cooperation with the Joint Special Operation University (JSOU) and under the umbrella of academic research. The Blaber book could be characterized as business-oriented, aimed primarily at turning a former SOF career into profit. The differentiation is key and needs to be reinforced within SOF units' chains of command.

10. Ex-SOF operators' presence in the public domain brings multiple problems and challenges beyond the fact that they have stopped to follow their ethos. The first challenge is that they no longer represent their communities regarding operational priorities and missions and are not privy to the day-to-day institutional context. The fact that they use their former role in SOF as a "qualification" within their public appearance is causing significant risk as their comments, view, and opinion can be associated with their former Unit. This can even bring additional problems when ex-members expose personal views that are or could be interpreted as extremist or anti-government. This is something that is affecting SOF allies around the world, which can be very detrimental to the brand and confidence in SOF from the public, as those ex-members are not representing the current community whatsoever. Supremacy ideology movement is another vital challenge within SOF and elite police teams and is typically linked to a toxic culture, lack of leadership and lack of diversity¹⁸. CANSOFCOM is keeping its culture as its primary focus, which has led to positive outcomes, but former members' opinions in the public space are potentially creating some fratricide effects on the credibility of the Command.

¹⁴ Crowell, 'Navy SEALs Gone Wild: Publicity, Fame and the Loss of the Quiet Professional'.

¹⁵ Crowell.

¹⁶ Blaber, OverDrive, and OverDrive ebook, *The Mission, the Men, and Me: Lessons from a Former Delta Force Commander*.

¹⁷ Shultz and Votel, *Transforming US Intelligence for Irregular War: Task Force 714 in Iraq*.

¹⁸ Koehler, 'From Superiority to Supremacy: Exploring the Vulnerability of Military and Police Special Forces to Extreme Right Radicalization'.

Setting the example as a deterrence measure

11. In 2012, Matt Bissonnette released a book called *No Easy Day*, recounting his *Navy Seals* career and the accounts of the Raid that killed Osama bin Laden¹⁹. The book generated millions in profit but sparked negative reactions within the Special Operation community, judging that the book was against the discretion ethos of SOF. However, the book was not submitted to the Pentagon for vetting against disclosing classified information. The Department of Justice also conducted a criminal investigation looking at the disclosure by Bissonnette of classified information. Following the investigation, the department did not bring any criminal charges but instead settled with Bissonnette for 6.8 million USD, the profit gained with the book. This case is interesting as it created the foundation and reinforced the process of former US servicemembers to vet their work prior to release. Although Canadian laws and processes are different, this is something that needs to be investigated from a legal and process standpoint to protect CANSOFCOM's classified information from former members' actions.

CONCLUSION

12. In conclusion, SOF forces worldwide have been the force of choice in the *Global War on Terror*, which brought awareness to their value proposition and many risks from a branding standpoint. Trust is the key fundamental in CANSOFCOM's value proposition, and it needs to be carefully safeguarded with the government but also with the public. The information domain has become increasingly challenging based on its reach, widening of its sources and real-time access to it. This is going to be key in future conflicts, but it also needs to be carefully addressed from an institutional perspective. CANSOFCOM needs to reinvigorate its place within the information domain to maintain its positive perception from a public perspective. A deliberate strategic communication plan should be crafted to directly message CANSOFCOM's role, values, ethos and effects in defence of the national interest. A failure to adapt would lead to external entities taking the monopoly of the public messaging, which would be very damaging long-term for CANSOFCOM and the CAF.

RECOMMENDATIONS

13. Based on the evidence highlighted in this paper, there are several recommendations that should be looked at to address the changes in the information domain from an institutional perspective:

- Create and fund Unit level historians' positions in collaboration with the CANSOFCOM historian to maximize the capture of current operations with a long term-view of education within and outside CANSOFCOM at the classified level.
- Establish a mechanism to declassify past operations with a proper vetting process.
- Establish innovative ways to disseminate declassified operations thru various means.

¹⁹ Drew, 'Ex-SEAL Member Who Wrote Book on Bin Laden Raid Forfeits \$6.8 Million'.

- Establish a process for members retiring to clearly identify the expectations of CANSOFCOM if they intend to conduct public communication with regard to their CANSOFCOM career.
- Continue to invest in the CANSOFCOM culture with a special focus on operators at the early stage.
- Reinforce through the chain of command that CANSOFCOM members have agreed not to be publicly recognized for their achievements. The quiet-professional mentality needs to be applied throughout an operator's life, not only while in service.
- Invest in academic collaboration with Canadian Forces College and Joint Special Operation University to augment scholarly research and history books on past CANSOFCOM operations and activities.
- Continue collaboration with journalists through embed programs while weighing the OPSEC restraints.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Blaber, Pete. *The Mission, the Men, and Me: Lessons from a Former Delta Force Commander*. New York: Berkley Caliber, 2008.
- Canada. Department of National Defence. 'B-GJ-005-300-FP-001, *CFJP 3.0 - Operations*.' 2010.
- Canada. Department of National Defence. 'Strong, Secure, Engage. Canada's Defence Policy'. DND, 2017. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/canada-defence-policy.html>.
- Crowell, Forest. 'Navy SEALs Gone Wild: Publicity, Fame and the Loss of the Quiet Professional'. Naval Postgraduate School, 2015. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA632178.pdf>.
- De B Taillon, J Paul. 'Canadian Special Operations Forces: Transforming Paradigms'. *Canadian Military Journal* 6, no. 4 (2005): 67. <http://www.journal.forces.gc.ca/vo6/no4/doc/operations-eng.pdf>
- De Pierrebouurg, Fabrice. *Missions de l'ombre : Les opérations spéciales de la GRC, du SCRS et des Forces armées*. 2022. <https://editionslapresse.ca/products/missions-de-lombre>.
- Drew, Christopher. 'Ex-SEAL Member Who Wrote Book on Bin Laden Raid Forfeits \$6.8 Million'. *The New York Times*, 19 August 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/20/us/bin-laden-book-seal-team-6.html>.
- Fugit, Ryan. 'Combat Stories'. Accessed 24 February 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/@CombatStory>.
- Hamamdjian, Daniele. 'Canada's Secret Military Task Force Unveiled'. CTV, 24 August 2012. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/canada-s-secret-military-task-force-unveiled-1.929414?cache=sbklajmajdo>.
- Horn, Bernd. 'We Will Find A Way: Understanding the Legacy of Canadian Special Operations Forces.' 2012. https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2018/mdn-dnd/D2-405-2018-eng.pdf.
- Koehler, Daniel. 'From Superiority to Supremacy: Exploring the Vulnerability of Military and Police Special Forces to Extreme Right Radicalization'. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*. 20 Jun 2022: 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2022.2090047>.
- Yussuf, Lt Col Ashraf Abdullah. 'The Armed Forces and the Media: Bangladesh Perspectives'. *NDC Journal*, 2003. <https://ndcjournal.ndc.gov.bd/ndcj/index.php/ndcj/article/view/11/9>

Mantello, Peter. 'Playing Discreet War in the US: Negotiating Subjecthood and Sovereignty through Special Forces Video Games'. *Media, War & Conflict* 5, no. 3 (2012): 269–83. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635212459451>.

NATO. 'Allied Joint Doctrine for Special Operations'. NATO Standardization Office, August 2019.

'Shawn Ryan Show'. Accessed 25 February 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/@ShawnRyanShowOfficial>.

Shultz, Richard H., Jr, and Joseph L. Votel. *Transforming US Intelligence for Irregular War: Task Force 714 in Iraq*. Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvxkn6cv>.

Stumpf, Andy. 'Cleared Hot'. Accessed 24 February 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/@ClearedHotPodcast>.

US Navy. 'SEAL Ethos'. Accessed 1 March 2023. <https://www.nsw.navy.mil/NSW/SEAL-Ethos/>

Webb, Bandon. 'SOFREP', 1 March 2023. <https://sofrep.com/>.