

# Non-state Special Operations: Capabilities & Effects

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# Defining Special Operations

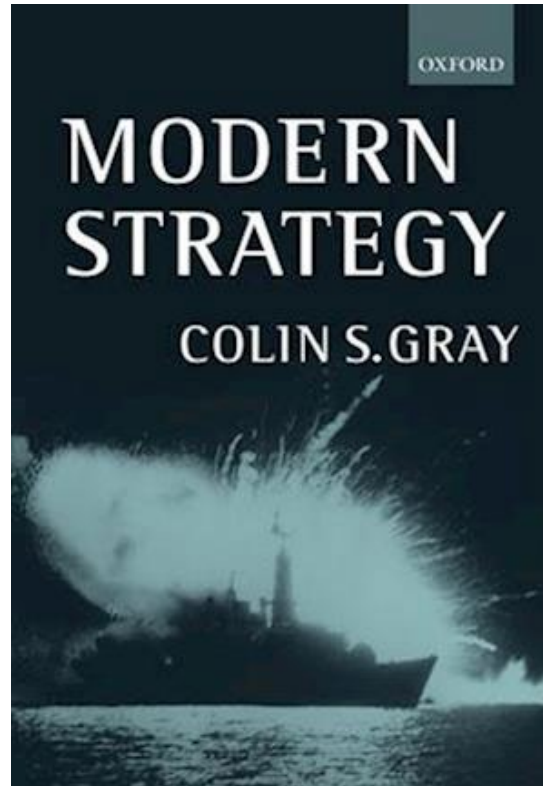
- **Special Operations** — Activities or actions requiring unique modes of employment, tactical techniques, equipment, and training often conducted in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments.
- **Special Operations Forces** — Those Active and Reserve Component forces of the Services designated by the Secretary of Defense and specifically organized, trained, and equipped to conduct and support special operations.

Source: Joint Publication 3-05

# Why do actors use special operations to generate desired outcomes?

## Primary Claims:

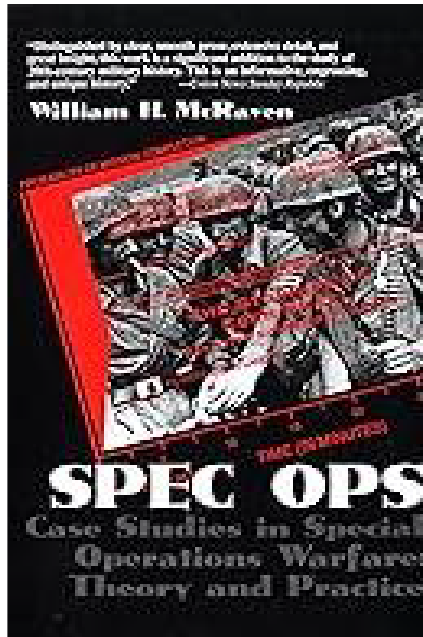
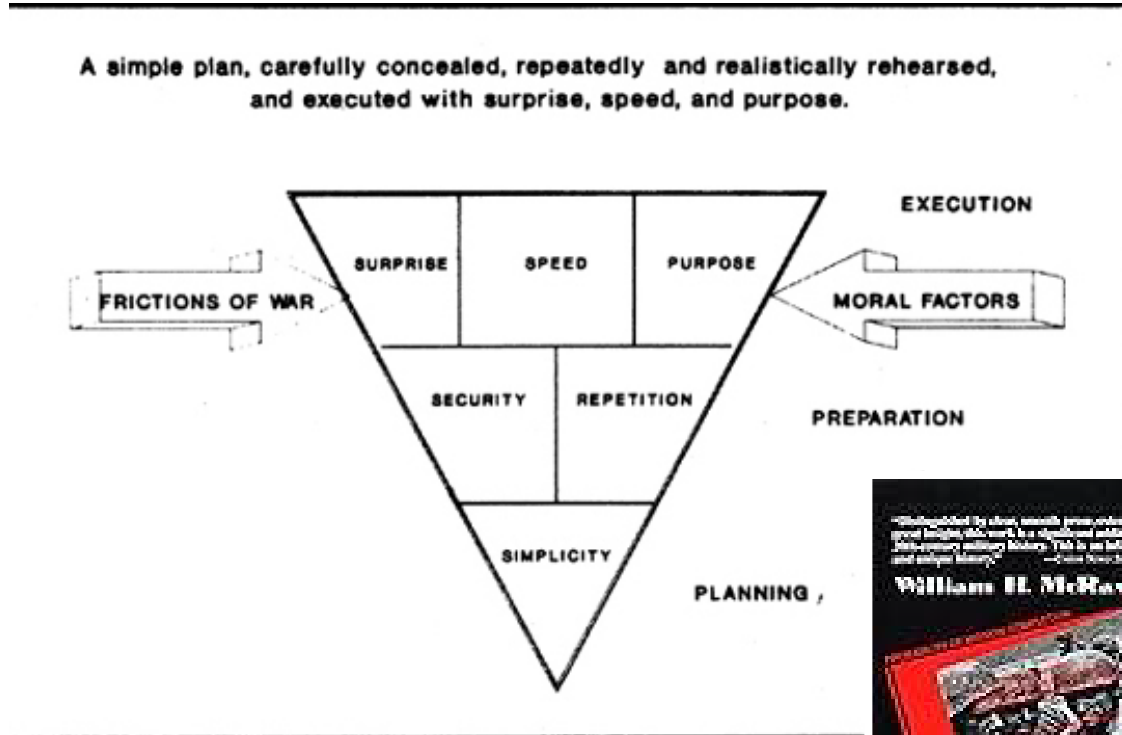
- **Economy of Force**
- **Expanded Choice**



## Secondary Claims:

- **Innovation – Develop new techniques & technologies**
- **Morale - Bolster Supporters**
- **Humiliation of Enemies**
- **Showcase Competence – Skill & Guile**
- **Shape future efforts**
- **Reassurance –Political Reliability**
- **Control escalation**

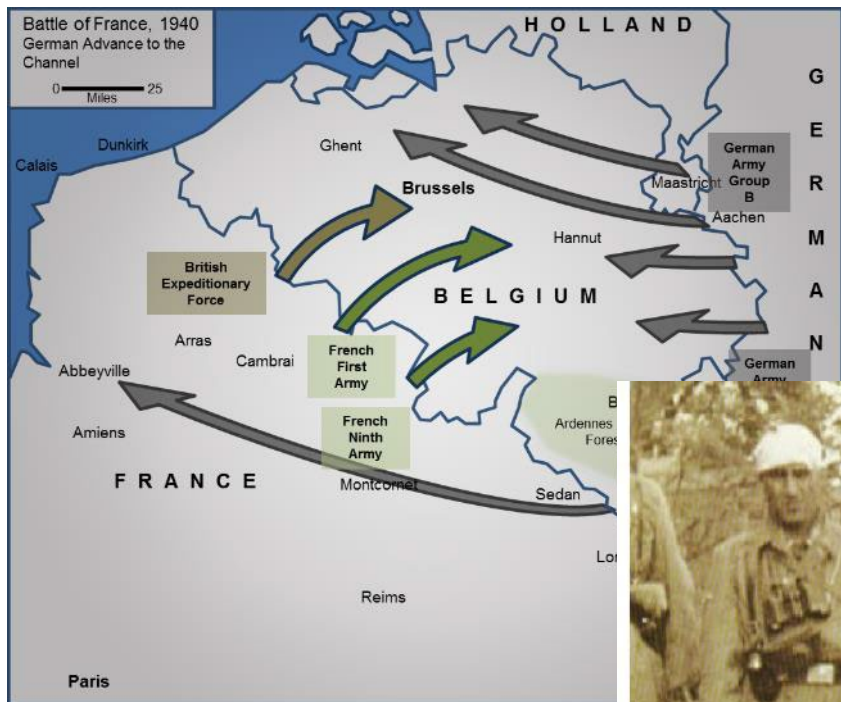
# Execution - Special Tactical Engagements



- Resources
- Practice
- Competence
- Increase certainty in execution
- Politically Reliable Outcome



# The Great Special Operations Exemplars



## German Glider Assault

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Eben Emael,  
May 10<sup>th</sup> 1940



Figure 8. Photograph of Oberfeldwebel Wenzl



## Operation Chariot British Commando Raid

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St. Nazaire Dry-Dock  
March 28<sup>th</sup> 1942

# Adapting Special Operations to Violent Non-State Actors (VNSA)



*Doolittle Raid, 1942*



*Mumbai Attack, Taj Mahal Palace Hotel, 2008*

## VNSAs typically...

- operate with low-risk tactics (du jour actions)
- have resource challenges
- have similar strategic challenges that states do in employing force
- cannot resource standing SOF capabilities

## VNSA Special Operations response:

- adapt and innovate
- democratization of technology, media, and knowledge
- **Hypothesis:** these events are increasing in frequency & impact

# What are VNSA Special Operations?

1. a high-risk and well-resourced specialized tactical military action that is...
2. a departure from normal tactics and...
3. intended to create outsized (operational or strategic) effects.



*Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) fighter disguised as Iraqi SOF, filmed during the Haditha Raid, 2012*



# Identifying VNSA Special Operations



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2023-10-07 09:24:10



# Actor Goals: Why do actors engage in conflict?



**Ideology**



**Self-Interest**

# **Actor Agency:**

## **How do military forces generate desired outcomes?**



**Directly**



**Indirectly**

## ACTOR GOALS

## Independent Group

**ACTOR**  
**AGENCY**

## Patron/ Employer

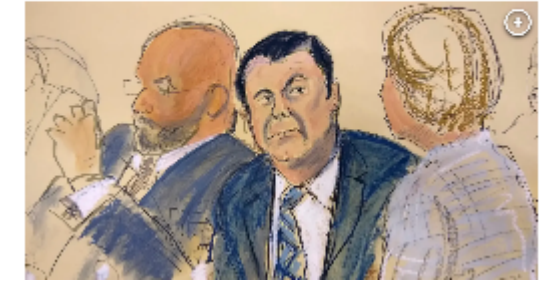
## Self interest

## Criminal Groups/Cults

## Mercenary Groups

## El Chapo's botched hit on rival cartel leader killed six: testimony

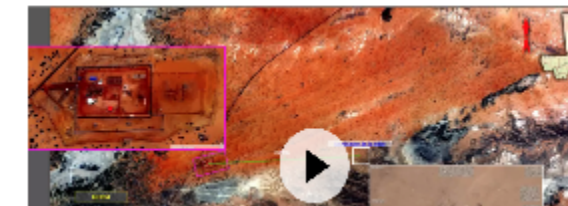
By: Frank A. DeGregory, CFP® and Julia C. Marchant, PhD November 5, 2013 | 400.com



## France says mercenaries from Russia's Wagner Group staged 'French atrocity' in Mali



ISSN 0013-788X/95/0005-0000\$10.00/0



Karbala PJCC Jan 2007

## U.S. Says Iran Helped Iraqis Kill Five G.I.'s



Brig. Gen. Kevin J. Bergner on Sunday in Baghdad.

*Photograph by Ali Hashemi, Iraq/Ansa*



# How can we see Violent Non-State Actor Special Operations?



# **Evidence of VNSA Special Operations**





# Militant Groups

- **Large Scale Raid**

- Exemplar: Haditha (Islamic State, Iraq 2012)
- Others: Manda Bay drone airfield (al-Shabaab, Kenya 2020); Ship capture (Houthis, Red Sea, 2023)

- **Prison Breakout**

- Exemplar: Acre Prison (Irgun, Palestine 1947)
- Others: Hasakah Prison (Islamic State, Syria 2022); Kuje Prison (Islamic State, Nigeria 2022); Abu Ghraib (Islamic State, 2013), Sarposa (Taliban, Afghanistan 2008)

- **Plunging Attack**

- Exemplar: U.S. Embassy (Viet Cong, South Vietnam 1968)
- Others: Mumbai (LeT, India 2008); 9-11 (Al-Qaeda, US 2001)



# Acre Prison Breakout

## Irgun (Palestine, 1947)

- Extensive reconnaissance
- Smuggled bombs inside prison
- Organized prisoners before break
- Ruse to gain access (British uniforms)
- Blocking forces to isolate
- Indirect fire to suppress reaction force
- Vehicles waiting for escapees
- Hide plan
- British embarrassed; key militants returned to fight



*Irgun unit dressed as British soldiers moving to Acre prison*

# Proxy Groups

## Deep Operations

- Exemplar: Lawrence & Aqaba (Arab Revolt/British, Palestine 2017)

## Spectacular Gambit

- Exemplar: Marine/French Barracks (Hezbollah, Lebanon 1983)

## Hostage Snatch

- Exemplar: Karbala PJCC (Asaib ahl al-Haq/IRGC-QF, Iraq 2007)



# Karbala PJCC

## AAH (Iraq, 2007)

- Directed by sponsor (Iran)
- Lebanese Hezbollah advisor
- Trained in Iran for hostage operations
- Executed several; this was second
- Planned, rehearsed
- Goal: capture US servicemen
- Ruse: American uniforms
- Exfiltration foiled, mission failure
- Planning documents captured



*Planners of PJCC Raid: al-Dulaimi, Abu Karrar, Laith Khazali*



# Criminal Groups and Cults



- **Leadership decapitation (Chapo disco)**
  - Exemplar: Christine Disco (Tijuana, 1992)
- **Monopoly Move**
  - Exemplar: The Artichoke Wars (Coastal California, 1930)
- **Apocalypse triggering event**
  - Exemplar: Soldiers of Heaven (Zarqa, Iraq, 2007)

# Mercenaries



**Coup de Main Assault**

Grande Comoros, 1978



**Military Assistance**

Executive Outcomes  
Angola, 1993-1994  
Sierra Leone, 1995



**Wagner Group**

Where does it fit?



# What can we learn from VNSA employment of Special Operations ?



From the creators of "The Bridge On The River Kwai."  
Columbia Pictures presents The SAM SPIEGEL · DAVID LEAN Production

## LAWRENCE OF ARABIA

- demonstrates the diffusion of basic military skill and democratized tactical technologies from states to VNSA
- indicates how the prowess of common tactical techniques can help achieve outsized effects when they are arranged and well-executed
- allow us to see and study how VNSAs conduct campaigns
- serves as a lens to better understand Special Operations concepts at large that MAY apply to state-organized actions