

Special Forces vs SFAB: *It's Not a Competition*

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On 8 February 2018, the 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade (SFAB) officially activated on Fort Benning, GA.¹ This event signified a substantial shift in the way the Army intended to meet its overwhelming advising requirements evident over 16 years of war at that time, not to mention the numerous requests from nations all over the globe to conduct combined training. Unfortunately, what should have been a celebration of a new Army capability quickly mired into a series of high profile iconography faux pas: The new unit's beret color was conspicuously similar to the green shade of the Special Forces (SF); the unit patch resembled an inverted "recondo" badge (a Vietnam-era award for passing a rigorous SF-led reconnaissance school); and even the unit name, "Legion," was reminiscent of the 5th Special Forces Group's "V Legion."² To settle the controversy, Pentagon leaders designated a new color of beret, altered the unit's patch, and even changed the unit's name. It was an inauspicious start, but it didn't stop there.

Questions persisted from veterans' groups and the greater U.S. Army enterprise focusing on the purpose of this unit: Was this the Army's attempt to supplant the Green Berets with a more conventional force?³ From a cursory look, it appears that SF and SFABs have a similar mandate, but a more thorough examination into what the SFAB concept really is shows that nothing could be further from the truth. SF and SFABs are completely and utterly different in their unit organization, purpose, and desired effects. As a force entirely dedicated to, and dependent on, partnering with and building conventional foreign security forces, the SFAB is neither designed, equipped, nor trained to execute the kind of irregular warfare and special operations missions that have defined the lineage of the Special Forces. Instead, SFABs fill a capability gap that the Department of Defense has been struggling with since the earliest days of the Global War on Terrorism: how to train, advise, and assist large-scale conventional foreign militaries over the long term. In comparison, the U.S. Army Special Forces are a force designed for maximum flexibility across the spectrum of indigenous-focused special operations, oriented towards smaller footprints and outsized effects. This article seeks to define these differences for a wider audience, informing decision makers and the general public of what these formations really do in the modern era. Those differences start in the fundamental building blocks of each organization.



From a cursory look, it appears that Special Forces (left) and Security Force Assistance Brigade (right) units have a similar mandate, but a more thorough examination into what the SFAB concept really is shows that nothing could be further from the truth. (U.S. Army photos)

UNIT ORGANIZATION

U.S. Army SF Structure

The U.S. Army Special Forces' unit of action is the operational detachment–alpha (ODA). This formation of 12 Special Forces Soldiers forms the building block for all SF operations.⁴ The ODA is organized with a captain as the detachment commander, with a subordinate warrant officer and a senior enlisted advisor as leadership. The rest of the ODA is composed of an intelligence sergeant and two Soldiers of each occupational specialty — weapons, communications, engineer, and medical. Due to its unique structure, the ODA is able to split into two separate elements for better dispersion or to gain greater battlefield awareness. As per Field Manual (FM) 3-18, *Special Forces Operations*, “all other SF organizations are designed to command, control, and support the ODA.”⁵

Due to the unique capabilities and expectations of SF Soldiers, the SF ODA can operate either with an indigenous force or independently as the mission dictates. An ODA's primary functions consist of:

- Plan and conduct SF operations separately or as part of a larger force.
- Infiltrate and exfiltrate specified operational areas by air, land, and sea.
- Conduct operations in remote or denied areas for extended periods of time with a minimum of external direction and support.
- Develop, organize, equip, train, and advise or direct indigenous forces up to battalion size.
- Train, advise, and assist other U.S. and multinational forces and agencies.
- Plan and conduct unilateral SF operations.
- Perform other special operations activities as directed by higher authority.⁶

Key to this widely varying list of functions is that the ODA must maintain flexibility. This concept is the bedrock of SF operations, which is the fundamental purpose behind the long Special Forces training pipeline. SF Soldiers and teams must be able to perform ALL of those listed functions, often in remote or denied areas with minimal direction and support, to meet the requirements of an SF mission.

This concept of flexibility permeates through the Special Forces groups' structure at echelons above ODA as well. The Special Forces company headquarters, also known as the operational detachment–bravo (ODB), provides an intermediate level of mission command that is able to coordinate the significant amount of available resources from an SF battalion to the ODA level. Composed of 15 personnel organically, the ODB often takes on additional attachments to build out a mission command node while deployed and is able to coordinate with indigenous forces up to regimental size. This small size allows the ODB to rapidly respond to crises and establish a mission command node quickly, in contrast to the battalion, which is a much larger organization. Composed of the battalion support company (BSC) and the forward support company (FSC), the SF battalion maintains more than 200 personnel between the two, providing sustainment and mission command capability to highly dispersed ODAs and ODBs. Although not usually an advising or partnering element, the SF battalion headquarters nevertheless enables the flexibility of the ODAs and ODBs through the establishment of a special operations task force (SOTF), providing a wide range of enablers. This stands in stark contrast to an SFAB formation, which is much smaller and very tailor-made for its specific missions.

SFAB Structure

In contrast to SF formations, SFAB advisor teams are structured in such a way to support specific warfighting function requirements for a conventional partner force. The fundamental advising unit in the SFAB is the maneuver advisor team (MAT), composed of 12 Soldiers, which is the only true similarity to an SF ODA. Specifically designed to advise a conventional maneuver partner force battalion or higher, the MAT is composed of two sections, one focused on maneuver and the other focused on sustainment. Because of this, the MAT is not capable of performing split-team operations since there is no redundancy between operational specialties. A MAT also cannot operate independently, as the required sustainment and support structure simply does not exist within the SFAB construct. Lastly, MATs are not capable of operating in a denied area, which requires special training. The strength of the MAT lies in the conventional expertise of its individual Soldiers in their Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) skills,

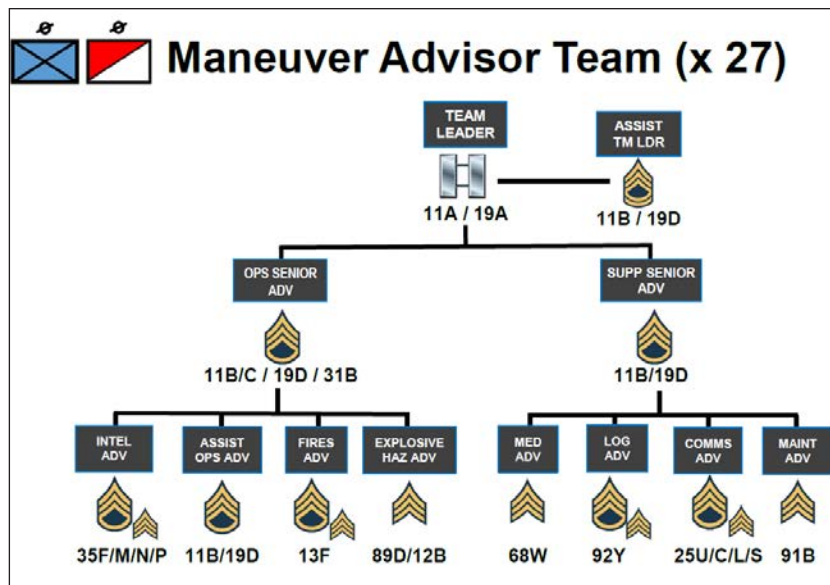
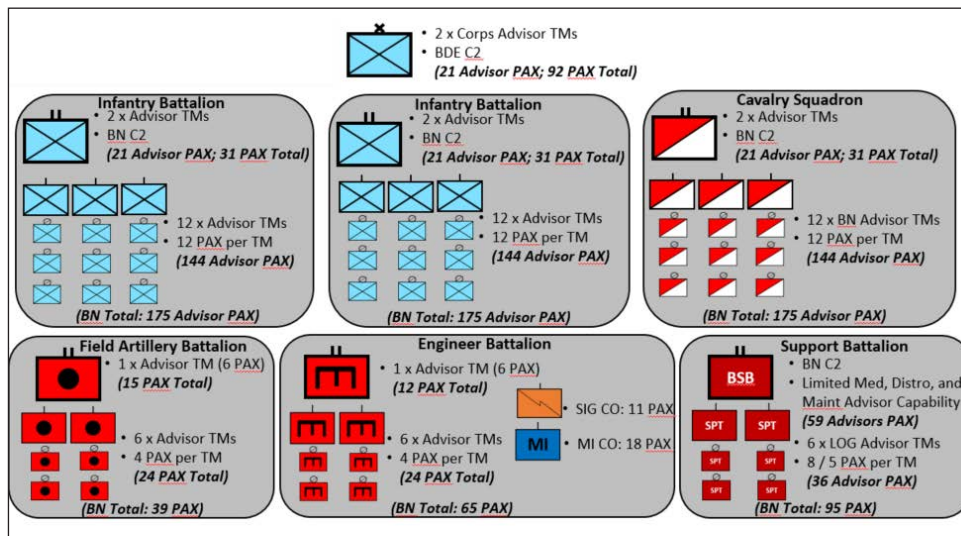


Figure 1 — Maneuver Advisor Team Organization

tempered in their previous Army assignments, which means that SFAB personnel do not go through the lengthy training pipeline required to train an SF Soldier.⁷ A new advisor arriving to an SFAB formation is already assumed to be skilled at his or her MOS, and therefore the training focus for MATs is to sharpen the skills already there and learn techniques for training a partner on those skills.

In addition to the MATs, SFAB formations contain advisor teams of other specialties and echelons intended to advise more specific types of formations and conventional echelons. Within the brigade, the 4th, 5th, and 6th Battalions are home to specialty advising teams focused on fires, engineering, logistics, military intelligence, and signal. Each separate SFAB command echelon is also primarily an advising organization, with company advisor teams (CATs) commanded by majors and advising brigades and above, and battalion advisor teams (BATs) commanded by lieutenant colonels intended to advise divisions and above.⁸ As with the MATs, each of these echelons is less flexible than its SF equivalent but has a more specific purpose and intent. Also in contrast to SF organization, company and battalion headquarters advisor teams in SFABs lack the personnel to provide mission command at the scale of an SF battalion. For example, an SFAB maneuver battalion's headquarters company comprises only 31 personnel in comparison to an SF battalion's combined FSC and BSC count of more than 200 personnel.

Figure 2 — Security Force Assistance Brigade Overall Organization



UNIT EMPLOYMENT METHODOLOGY

Special Forces for 2021 and Beyond

In early 2020, COL Ed Croot, chief of staff for the 1st Special Forces Command, published a paper highlighting how the Special Forces community has responded to adapting requirements from the nation over the last two decades of war. His thesis detailed how Special Forces have shifted missions from the influence-based approach in the 1980s-90s, to counterinsurgency and high-intensity combat operations during the Global War on Terrorism, and now towards Great Power Competition in the modern era. He wrote that this has resulted in a force that has separated along three distinct “identities” based on each of those approaches. His paper recommended immediate action to rectify this within the 1st Special Forces Command to support morale, modernization, and readiness.⁹

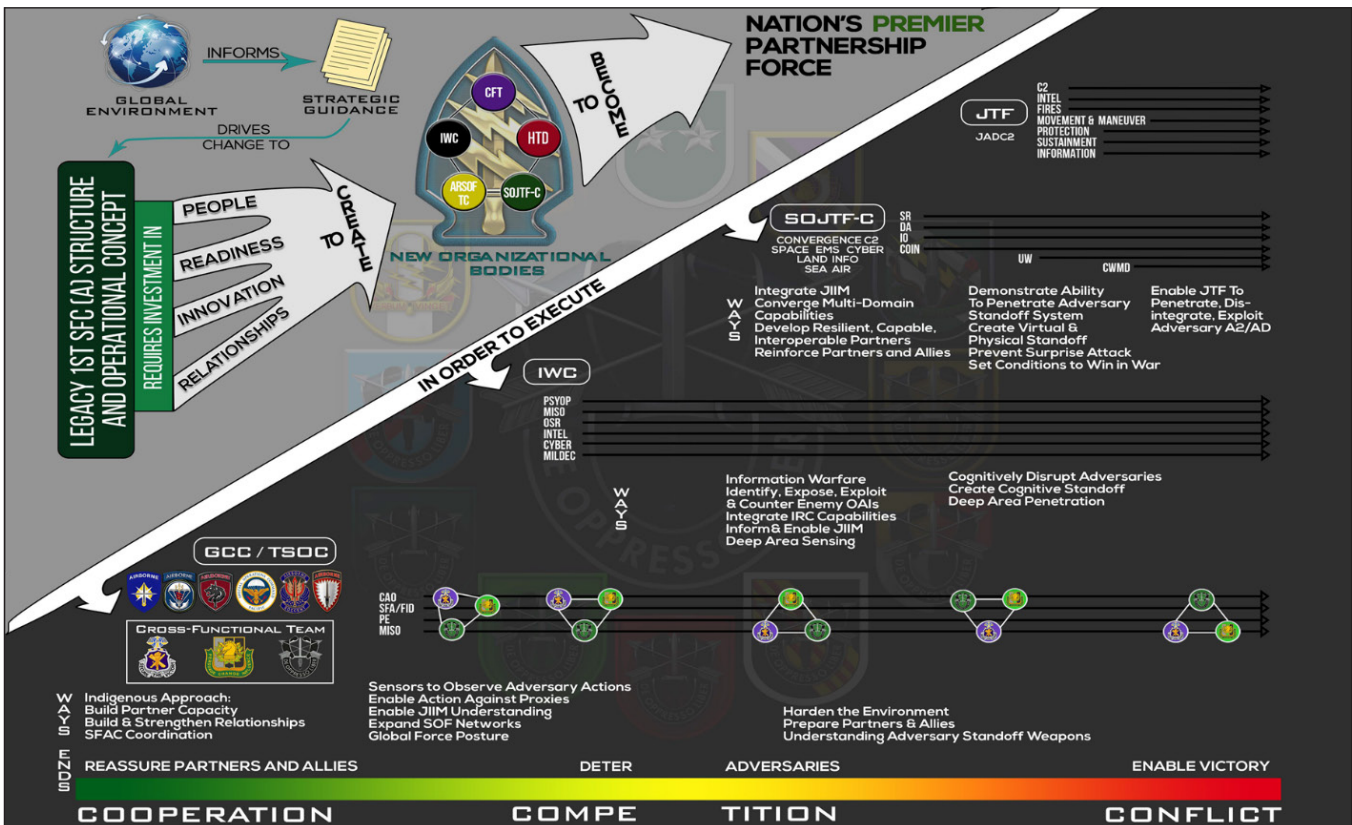
As a result of this study, MG John Brennan, commanding general of the 1st Special Forces Command (Airborne) (SFC), crafted and published his vision in October 2020 with an eye towards the future. This vision document defines Special Forces as “the Nation’s experts in the indigenous approach who specialize in supporting or defeating resistance movements.”¹⁰ Furthermore, it identifies 1st SFC’s priorities along five efforts:

- 1) Creating an Information Warfare Center;
- 2) Establishing a Special Operations Joint Task Force for Contingencies (SOJTF-C);
- 3) Normalizing cross-functional teams;
- 4) Re-designating Special Forces crisis reaction force companies to hard target defeat companies; and
- 5) Building a new Army Special Operations Forces Training Center (ARSOF-TC).¹¹

All of these priorities are uniquely catered to the strengths of the 1st SFC, but the concept of cross-functional teams is the most significant shift, as it clearly aligns SF operations with Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations (PSYOP) lines of efforts. As per Figure 3, within the spectrum between cooperation to conflict, Special Forces’ role shifts according to the position on the spectrum.

In each echelon of the spectrum, these cross-functional teams play different roles. In cooperation, they serve as “strategic sensors and influence networks against those who seek to undermine our partnerships.”¹² In competition, they “deter conflict by out-maneuvering our adversaries across multiple domains simultaneously, expanding

Figure 3 — 1st SFC(A) Future Operating Concept



our physical access and influence.”¹³ And lastly, in war they “leverage a robust network of JIIM [joint,interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational] partners and surrogates to produce effects against adversaries in complex, austere, and sensitive environments.”¹⁴

Within all of these concepts, two common themes run throughout:

- 1) Special Forces will refocus on the indigenous approach, utilizing unique technologies and organizations to achieve effects; and
- 2) The desired effects will be based on the adversary.

This is the primary difference in purpose between the Special Forces’ modern employment concept and the SFAB employment concept. Modern SF are oriented towards direct, adversary-based outcomes utilizing an indigenous approach, enabled by cross-functional teams, innovative technology, and a flexible command structure. As will be shown below, the SFABs are different; reliant on the Theater Army Service Component Command (ASCC) and partner force organic support structures, and focused entirely on partner-based outcomes with a more indirect effect on adversaries.

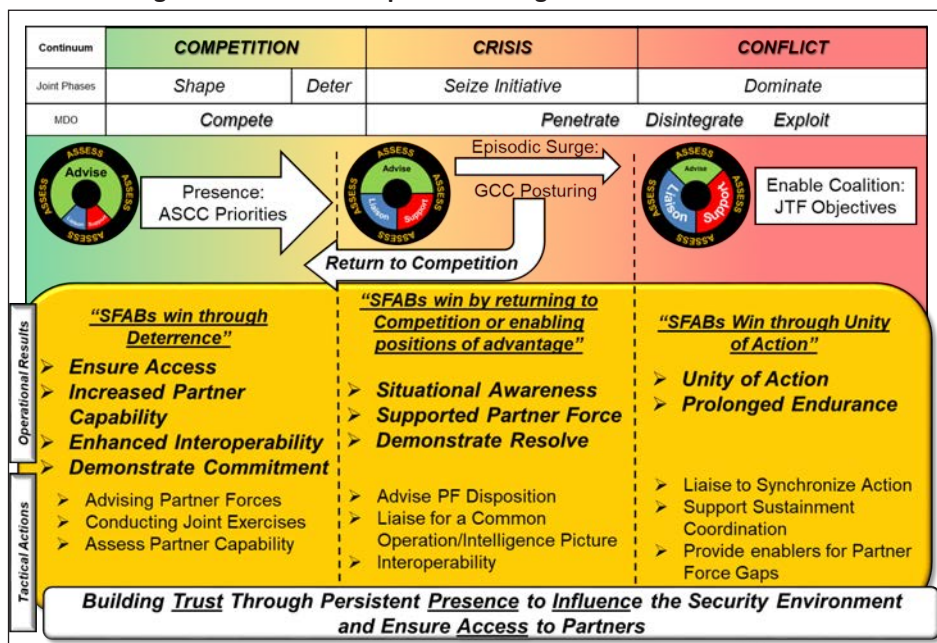
SFAB Employment Concept

SFABs are small in comparison to brigade combat teams (BCTs) and even in comparison with an SF group. Typically retaining approximately 800 assigned personnel, an SFAB simply does not have the personnel numbers to provide the kind of mission command nodes that a BCT or SF group can field. As a result, the SFAB employment concept is focused on small numbers of senior Soldiers advising at the echelon of highest impact while leaving mission command functions mostly at the ASCC level. In SFAB formations, battalions serve as the lowest level of mission command and are severely limited in terms of personnel to run an operations center. As a result, SFABs often partner with either a foreign partner force or U.S. element that already has a mission command node.

In the most recent concept document from the Security Force Assistance Command (SFAC), SFABs have a mission in every phase of the conflict continuum (see Figure 4). Each one of the phases places differing emphasis between the four fundamental SFAB functions of advise, support, liaise, and assess, with an equivalent emphasis on all four only in the conflict phase. The most common phase of this continuum will be in the competition phase, which will require persistent presence.

Persistence is a challenge given the SFABs’ small numbers, so each brigade has aligned its subordinate battalions into force packages (FPs) that rotate in and out of theater every six months. These FPs are composed of a maneuver advisor battalion in its entirety and one specialty battalion headquarters with six total specialty advisor teams of each type (see Figure 5).

Figure 4 — SFAB Concept for Winning in the Conflict Continuum



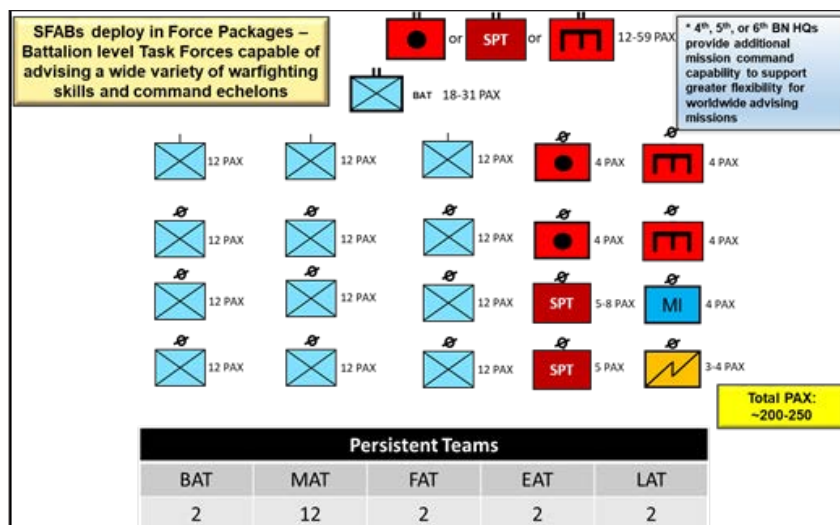


Figure 5 – Example Force Package Graphic

How these force packages are arrayed within theater is entirely dependent on the ASCC mission and the situation within that corner of the world. Some SFABs are oriented towards persistent presence at all times, while others are far more episodic in terms of how often they can get involved with overseas partners. The employment methodology, partner units, and effects are unique to each theater. The common themes in competition, though, are clearly depicted in Figure 4, which depicts SFAB end results as “increased partner capability,” “enhanced interoperability,” and “demonstrating commitment.”¹⁵ Note also that this partner-based outcome approach applies even in the conflict spectrum, where the end states for crisis and conflict include “supported partner force,” “unity of action,” and “demonstrating resolve.”¹⁶ This is the starkest difference between SFAB and SF, and one that bears out with recent operational experiences.

VIGNETTES

Before 2020, the concepts in this article were only aspirational, as there was little operational experience to provide feedback. Now, with the first 1st SFC cross-functional teams having executed missions and the first SFAB units having advised according to regional alignment, there are now real-world examples from which to draw lessons.

Special Forces Cross-Functional Teams Vignette

Within the “A Vision for 2021 and Beyond” document, there is an excellent vignette that encapsulates the potential of SF cross-functional teams (CFTs). In this example, a Special Forces ODA, Civil Affairs team (CAT), and PSYOP detachment all work in concert to identify and prevent a Chinese influence operation in the fictional country of Naruvu.¹⁷

The vignette begins with the CAT noticing a billboard with Chinese characters near the local Naruvian port while driving to its Naruvian government contact office. After taking photos of the billboard, the CAT shows them to the SF ODA and the PSYOP detachment to come up with a plan to identify the billboard’s origins. Each element utilizes its indigenous contacts and organic assets to gather information. The SF ODA queries one of its regular contacts in the Naruvian commandos, the CAT puts forth the question at a local development meeting, and the PSYOP detachment researches Chinese advertisements on local social media showing interest in the port.¹⁸ Utilizing the information gathered from these meetings, the CFT sends its reports through U.S. Special Operations Command Africa and back to the Fort Bragg-based Information Warfare Center (IWC) for analysis. The enterprise is able to trace the advertisements back to a Chinese construction conglomerate that was preparing to initiate work on the port, a future key node in the Chinese belt and road initiative and also likely future site for Chinese naval activity.

With Chinese activities illuminated, the 1st SFC now implements plans to inhibit development with a multi-pronged approach. Utilizing civil-economic information that the CAT gathered during its development meetings with Naruvian officials, the IWC coordinates with JIIM partners in Naruvu to set up job fairs to provide employment opportunities to disaffected Naruvian workers angry at Chinese hiring and employment practices, reducing the labor pool for the port project by 60 percent.¹⁹ Simultaneously, the SF ODA supports local workers’ protest efforts

to further highlight Naruvian labor discontent within the news cycle. A week later, Naruvian security officials discover an illegal weapons cache that they are able to trace back to a subsidiary of the Chinese construction conglomerate. Enabled by U.S. Special Forces, the Naruvian security forces surveil and later enter the construction conglomerate's headquarters, discovering a blueprint for Chinese port expansion that included concrete footings specifically designed for CSA-9 surface-to-air and DF-25 shore-to-ship missiles.²⁰ With all of this information on hand, the Naruvian government seizes the conglomerate's land and ends the expansion plans.

SFAB in Tunisia Vignette

While the SF CFT vignette shows how effective U.S. SOF can be when focusing special operations capabilities on an adversary's actions, the recent experience of the SFAB task force in Tunisia shows how effective U.S. conventional forces can be when focusing efforts on the foreign partner.

The 1st SFAB's Tunisia Advising Team arrived in country in August 2020 with the goal of achieving positive effects and setting follow-on conditions for the next SFAB unit by October 2020. It was a tall order, but one that was achievable with a good plan. The task force commander, LTC Isaac Rademacher, immediately determined that the key to success would be starting with an in-depth assessment of the partner's situation, with follow-on efforts focused on quick wins before the end of the fiscal year.

What BAT 120 discovered was a mismatch between the amount of U.S. investment into Tunisia and the ability of the U.S. Embassy Office of Security Cooperation (OSC) to take advantage of it.²¹ In summary, the small OSC staff of six to eight U.S. military personnel did not have the capacity to address the rapidly expanding U.S. materiel and systems commitments coming in from both U.S. Africa Command and the U.S. State Department. This had resulted in experimental elements like the Tunisian Joint Operations Command Center (JOCC) possessing U.S. technical solutions but lacking both in purpose and in Tunisian military personnel to man it. The BAT further identified a command structure that was stove-piped between three separate Tunisian joint task forces, none of which reported to any convening higher headquarters, which prevented a common operating picture and unity of effort between the three of them. Between these observations and other, more tactical observations regarding air-to-ground integration (AGI) processes, military intelligence education, and counter-improvised explosive device (IED) training opportunities for the Tunisian Groupe des Forces Speciales (GFS), BAT 120 was able to provide a course-correction recommendation to the U.S. Embassy and the Tunisian military.

As a result of BAT 120's efforts, the Defense Attaché (DATT) and the OSC combined efforts to promote a strategic shift for the Tunisian military to achieve "readiness for current and future threats, synchronize investments to achieve optimal return, and cultivate efforts to achieve regional and U.S. interoperability."²² The DATT and OSC announced this strategic shift to the Tunisian military leadership on 6 October 2020 at the 34th annual Joint Military Commission. With this announcement, the U.S. Embassy team and Tunisian military charted a new path forward that would build on each other's strengths and make full use of the resources available.

Conclusion

Both of these vignettes show a path to the future where there are ample opportunities for both U.S. Special Forces and SFABs to have significant effects, especially given each force's very distinct sets of capabilities and authorities. The example SF cross-functional team vignette lays out a scenario that an SFAB clearly could not replicate. Likewise, the SFAB vignette in Tunisia highlights a scenario where subject matter experts in a wide variety of conventional military skills, such as military intelligence, mission command, and engineering, can make use of their experiences effectively by applying their already extensive know-how to a foreign partner's problem set. These vignettes also highlight the clear benefits on both sides of the spectrum between adversary-based outcomes and partner-based outcomes. Each offers effects that benefit the strategic situation for U.S. partners, while effecting outcomes in different ways.

In closing, the differences between SF and SFABs are strengths, not weaknesses. The differences in unit organization and methods of employment offer options for policy makers and military commanders that were simply not available in the past. As new employment methodologies continue to evolve across the spectrum of U.S. foreign advising efforts, both SF and SFABs will continue to build their reputations as essential elements of U.S. power in the era of global competition.

Notes

¹ U.S. Army, "1st SFAB Hosts Activation Ceremony; Heraldry Announced," Army News Service, 8 February 2018, accessed from https://www.army.mil/article/200244/1st_sfab_hosts_activation_ceremony_heraldry_announced.

² Rick Montcolm, "Tabs and Badges and Berets, Oh My! The Big Distraction the Army's New Advisory Unit Really Didn't Need," Modern War Institute, 1 November 2017, accessed from <https://mwi.usma.edu/tabs-badges-berets-oh-big-distraction-armys-new-advisory-unit-really-didnt-need/>.

³ The following article is one of many articles online that discuss the question of the SFAB's purpose with respect to the U.S. Army Special Forces. This article, written by a Special Forces officer, provides a structured analysis of why the U.S. Army established SFABs before the operating concepts and doctrine were in place: Tim Ball, "Replaced? Security Force Assistance Brigades vs. Special Forces," *War on the Rocks*, 3 February 2017, accessed from <https://warontherocks.com/2017/02/replaced-security-force-assistance-brigades-vs-special-forces/>.

⁴ Field Manual (FM) 3-18, *Special Forces Operations*, February 2015, 4-19.

⁵ *Ibid*, 4-19.

⁶ *Ibid*, 4-21 and 4-22.

⁷ Army Techniques Publication 3-96.1, *Security Force Assistance Brigade*, 2020, 1-15.

⁸ *Ibid*, 1-14 – 1-18.

⁹ COL Edward Croot, "There is an Identity Crisis in Special Forces: Who are the Green Berets Supposed to Be?" (Army War College Fellows Strategy Research Project, U.S. Army War College, 2020).

¹⁰ 1st Special Forces Command, "A Vision for 2021 and Beyond," 5.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 8-9.

¹² *Ibid*.

¹³ *Ibid*.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁵ Thomas Shandy, "SFAC – What Does Winning Look Like in the Continuum of Conflict," Security Force Assistance Command, 29 September 2020.

¹⁶ *Ibid*.

¹⁷ "A Vision for 2021 and Beyond," 12.

¹⁸ *Ibid*.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 13.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 13.

²¹ Isaac Rademacher, "Winning the Advising Effort in Tunisia," 26 October 2020.

²² *Ibid*.

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