

## Special Operations Command (SOCOMD) Culture and Interactions: Insights and reflection

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This paper presents reflections on some data gathered as part of a report for SOCOMD into its interactions with whole of government agencies, and other key stakeholders.

As with any research I conduct for Army, I approached the SOCOMD culture and interactions study as a naïve observer. My methods of data collection and analysis are grounded in almost two decades of professional academic experience, as a sociologist and qualitative researcher. The research I conduct follows a distinct pattern of scoping, questioning, empirical data collection, contextualizing preliminary findings through extensive reading, analysis and constant critical reflection. Further to this, and because the methodology used is qualitative (rather than quantitative) and open to being dismissed as 'subjective' to those ignorant of the discipline, validation of findings is a critical step in the research process. Validation is similarly done in a process that may look ad hoc to those unfamiliar with research, but again follows a distinct pattern. Validating the research findings forms part of the 'contextualising' mentioned above ie extensive reading of reference and other materials, but importantly also comes through a more informal process of testing hypotheses and questioning.

Often the interview participants selected (by or for me) in a study represent a particular group of stakeholders, or come with a similar set of experiences. Part of my job, as I see it, is to identify fact from fiction, when emotion might cloud reason, and when particular experiences have impacted someone's opinion to such an extent that their view on the subject in question is tarnished and of limited use in gathering a general view on that topic. Having conducted in excess of 1000 in-depth interviews over the last few years I pride myself in my ability to determine, for want of a better phrase, the bullshit factor.

During the course of data collection for the SOCOMD study, in interviews with both senior external stakeholders and the Defence Senior Leadership Group, I spent much of the time trying to better understand the context of the comments that were made to me, comments that appeared vague, trivial, and incomplete. I wondered if it was because they were out of date and the story teller had no more contemporary anecdotes to draw from, and so was second guessing the currency of their beliefs in the current context. I wondered if my security clearance was not high enough to allow full visibility of the problem. On the one hand there was what seemed to be an over simplified polarity – SAS versus commandos. On the other a complex set of issues and structures for which I could never fully understand because I did not have the complete picture. I now think, more realistically, it is something in between those two extremes.

Because of this I requested to speak with some 'insiders' – current army personnel who had experience working in SF. The conversations I had with these members constituted a mix of 'on the record' and 'off the record' (ie not tape recorded) commentary. The conversations were candid and lengthy. There was an obvious level of anger and frustration when recollecting the history of the command (in particular the rivalry between SASR and 2CDO) and an acute sense of anger at a history of poor leadership. In some (definitely not all) of these conversations references to repeated issues of misconduct in SOF were made.

I had already conducted a significant amount of background research prior to these interviews (for example analysis of the last decade or so of various media stories on SF - misconduct, investigations etc, included as an appendix in the main report). Thus I was familiar with a number of the stories that had made their way into the public eye, or the

genre of behaviours they alluded to (for example those highlighted in the 7.30 report investigation into *The Fist*). Many of these stories have been rationalized by defence commentators as an uncomfortable, yet acceptable, component of young men in a warzone; the necessary "blowing off steam" behaviours that accompany having to do "the kinds of things they are asked to do".

There were other references however that were more alarming and for which "blowing off steam" is a grossly inadequate explanation for the behaviors that have occurred. And I don't doubt that they have indeed occurred.

As often happens when I am researching a particular topic, and a normal part of validating the collected data, a number of informal conversations were had with relevant people with knowledge and insights on SOF. Usually these are discrete conversations initiated by me, openly and honestly (ie I tell people I am doing the research and seek their opinion on background etc). Some times people in the organisation know that I am examining a particular issue or group and may approach me. These conversations are generally taken with a grain of salt, but I am a willing participant nonetheless.

In addition to the interviews conducted with people selected by SOCAUST I was approached by a number of people who had found out I was doing research with SOCOMD. These conversations were completely uncensored. In this group of people was a current junior member of SASR, someone from AHQ, and someone who worked for a support organisation outside of the ADO. These three distinctly different vantage points, each of which was completely independent from the other, referred to some of the same events and triangulated the authenticity of the stories.

There are many reasons why people make contact with a researcher such as myself. Usually it is because I am an outsider, and I am trusted (I think because I have nothing to lose or gain in putting forward particular findings). Mostly though its because people perceive that I can take the information and turn it into something useful, and make their voice or story heard.

Honestly, I feel ill equipped to provide a sophisticated analysis on the descriptions of events below. I am not a military lawyer, a psychiatrist, or psychologist. I have never been anywhere near a war. I have certainly interviewed many war veterans however, many of whom have PTSD, many of whom have suffered considerable trauma, and many of whom have described intimate details to me of the traumas they were exposed to. This is however the first time I had been told stories of this nature. So, again, I emphasize my position as a naïve observer.

The gravity of these descriptions does not simply come from the details of particular events, it comes from the emphasis that most often accompanied these stories – "*it happened all the time*". They referred to a disturbing regularity and normalization.

In the data collected for the study overall, there were countless references to exceptional soldiers and officers, who upheld Army values and whose character was unquestionably of high standing. This was one of the most consistently conflicting pieces of information I was given, because the obvious question is: why did they not intervene or do anything to stop what was happening? To this question came various answers that went something like:

- They were too high up the chain to see it
- The tempo was so high the priority was to just try to keep everything ticking over
- They did try to do something about it but were dismissed/marginalized/moved on
- They only saw one incident in isolation not the pattern over time
- Eventually they just left quietly

The scenarios detailed pointed to a number of significant and deeply concerning norms within SOF:

- The blurring of mateship with leadership
- The blurring of 'skylarking' with the normalization of deviance.
- The ineffectiveness of Senior Officers compared to junior, more decorated (and therefore with more 'street cred') patrol commanders.
- The shift from 'unacceptable behaviour' to war crimes
- The glorifying of these crimes as being a "good" soldier
- 'Competition killing' and 'blood lust'
- The inhumane and unnecessary treatment of prisoners
- Cover-ups of unlawful killing and other atrocities

In addition there were concerns voiced about the following:

- The diaspora of SOF alumni who are powerful, have a great deal to lose, and will no doubt fight to protect their personal reputation as well as the SF brand should they be implicated in any of the above.
- The precarious positioning of the current 'strong and positive' reputation of SF, which could unravel very quickly with the emergence of the details of some events/behaviours.

Having had a relatively quick look at the media relating to SF in recent years it appears that many atrocities have been documented in the media and yet seem to disappear shortly after they surface. When looked at together it paints a bleak picture, particularly with the below events added to the mix.

As for names. I was given one, maybe two, names at most. I was told though, repeatedly, "everyone" knows who the culprits are. I was given the impression that giving one name would be knocking over one very long line of dominos. One interview participant said *"It's not like you can point your finger at one person, you are having to point to half a dozen at a time because that's how many were there or definitely knew what was going on". Or "There is years of this stuff, and some of these guys are now in very, very senior positions in Government or elsewhere. They have a lot to lose, and a lot to threaten". And "If they didn't do it, they saw it. If they didn't see it, they knew about it. If they knew about it, they probably were involved in covering it up and not letting it get back to Canberra. And to make it even harder, if they didn't know about it, the question will be: why didn't you, because you should have. No one can win from asking questions, no one".*

Below is a list of events or scenarios described to me.

#### **Body count competitions and the use of the Joint Priority Effects List (JPEL)**

I was given the impression that there had been a large number of illegal killings (often gloated about), that had been reverse engineered using the JPEL – a "sanctioned kill list". I was told the JPEL has no accountability or legally defensible oversight and numbers of illegal killings were being reported by Afghanis to the Australians on a weekly basis. One Officer said to me that at the time he simply didn't believe the Afghanis but now looking back and knowing more, he knows it must have been true. Reports were also made to interpreters and NGOs, but their concerns were apparently muted by SF leadership (in Afghanistan). This was described to me as "one of the most insidious, abhorrent and shameful things we [Australian SF] could have been involved in".

Someone who deployed a number of times with SF remarked 2012 was by far the worst he had ever seen. He mentioned that the afghan interpreter they worked with kept reporting

that Australian SF were executing farmers, but no one ever followed anything up. Additional concerning comments included:

*"You need to conform to survive. If you do not conform you are not trusted. Soldiers would do 'bad stuff' to fit in. It becomes a part of the banter."*

*"Guys just had this blood lust. Psychos. Absolute psychos. And we bred them"*

*"These things do not happen in isolation. They (soldiers) become more confident over time when they are there and these behaviours become permissible and equated with being good and effective soldiers."*

#### **Direct Participation in Hostilities**

Like the JPEL 'Direct Participation in Hostilities' was another tool that was described to me that was used by Australian SF to commit "just about any atrocity that took their fancy". One example given to me related to 'squirters'. Apparently well crafted reports detail an SF patrol that will land in an Afghan village in a helicopter or two. The locals "squirt" meaning they run away from the helicopters. The SF open fire killing many of these men and boys (and sometimes women and children) shooting them in the back, while running away. Explanation – they were running away from us to their weapons caches. The question was often later asked: how many caches did you find? They always found *something* or had very plausible excuses about why they didn't find anything. Apparently JOC lawyers witnessed an ever increasing number of "sanctioned massacres" and the SF were able to do just enough to have a sufficient basis in law to justify their actions. Many SF lawyers who had "drunk the SF coolade" began assisting SF. The lawyers were described as being 'as bad' as the soldiers. I was given a list of names of 'good' lawyers who tried to shut down behaviors, and who have subsequently left the organisation as they couldn't reconcile their witnessing and participation in 'cover ups' of atrocities.

*"Patrol commander level is the worst. They were responsible for the worst of it. Core group of people who wield so much influence that officers find it very difficult to manage, especially if the patrol commander has been awarded medals for gallantry for example. They are hero worshipped and unstoppable".*

*"A lot of these soldiers have never done anything except soldiering. The rules they learn there are the rules. Executing bad guys is ok, no matter what."*

#### **Clearance Operations.**

Like direct participation in hostilities, clearance operations were the other major vehicle for "legal murder" as it was described to me, that happened with a degree of frequency. These incidents, I was told, have been formally reported to the ADF by observers from various reputable NGOs. Apparently Australian SF would arrive and cordon off a whole village; squirts would then be murdered in the above mentioned fashion. Then the women and children are locked in houses. Apparently in Pashtun culture guests/strangers are not entertained in their homes. For these people there are dedicated 'guesthouses' outside or on the edge of the village compound. So Australian SF would take the men and boys to these guesthouses and "interrogate" them, meaning tie them up and torture them. They would be there for days and the whole village would be deprived of food, water and medicines. There were no humanitarian corridors available for NGOs, no independent observers, no witnesses. I was given the impression that under these circumstances they could do anything at all they wanted to, and they very often did. When they left the village, the men and boys would be found dead, shot in the head, sometimes blind folded and throats slit. These are corroborated accounts.

*"It was sanctioned psychopathic behavior"*

Comparisons were made to My Lai and Abu Ghraib:

### Cover-ups

One disturbing example given to me involved an incident where SASR were driving along a road and saw two 14 year old boys who they decided might be Taliban sympathizers. They were stopped and searched and then their throats slit. The rest of the troop then had to "clean up the mess" by finding others to help dispose of the bodies. In the end the bodies were bagged and thrown in a nearby river. Again, it was impressed upon me that this was not an isolated incident.

Other comments highlighted contradictory messaging and the undermining of command.

*"They [leadership] really, really need to check who is getting public accolades and medals and stuff. It sends such a bad message and utterly reinforces the acceptability of the crimes people have committed. They do this shit and then get a medal and we all know what actually happened. It's a joke. Then they are treated like God by young guys and it all just repeats again and again and again".*

*"We had new guys doing stuff [unsanctioned kills] to try and get a name for themselves, to try to be in the 'in' group; to prove they could be trusted"*

*"It was all fucked up. I constantly struggled with my own personal tolerance framework".*

*"Any investigation into alleged misconduct was 'set up' to find the person not guilty."*

*"Drugs were rampant. Buying, selling, everything. There is a need to keep that intensity up, always be 'up'".*

*"In comparison to the other stuff, it's a joke when guys were getting sacked over alcohol or drug issues. Everyone knows it's a joke. No one cares about someone getting pissed and doing dumb shit or whatever, it pales into insignificance compared to what's really going on"*

### JOC lawyers

One person made a point of telling me that there were some very good lawyers at JOC who were very concerned about what was going on and that it had become 'so bad' that they eventually succeeded in changing the ROE (Rules of Engagement) concerning Direct Participation in Hostilities. However he said *"I don't think this new ROE did much though, as SF just got more creative in how they wrote up the incidents"*. I was given the names of several senior lawyers who had tried to do something but were 'probably shut down'. He noted that at least one lawyer left the Army after the deployment as he couldn't reconcile what had occurred.

I was told: *"Towards 2012/13, when they realized that the JOC lawyers were getting troublesome SF started to enlist their own lawyers, with the promise of being inside their 'elite tent' doing cool stuff in return for legally polishing their versions of events and the truth in a way that created enough doubt as to exonerate them...."*

### Concerns

What was disturbing to hear was that, at least according to the people who approached me, a lot of behaviour goes largely unchecked, and that there is a reluctance to intervene with ORs. They are *"a core group who is so strong and whose leadership is really stable"* and that

they have a *"Strong peer group at lower ranks and there is intense pressure to not report anything up"*.

I was told that to intervene would mean getting sacked. *"Its like your typical whistleblower, we all know what happens to them. I became a chameleon. I knew what I needed to do to survive"*.

This soldier also described to me that many of them knew what was happening was incredibly wrong. *"All the time, it was just like "What the f\*\*\*?!". Another mess to clean up. Bad shit happening. You'd just stand there while things were going on thinking, this is fucked. But what can you do? If they don't trust you, that's it, you basically get pushed out and its pretty much the end of your career"*.

I was not under the impression this was a case of 'everyone' behaving the same way. It seemed that for those whose 'tolerance framework it challenged they would invariably leave the unit.

The challenge as it was described is removing the 'bad' guys from the unit who are apparently 'all known to everyone'. There is a perception that the SLG know but 'don't want to know' so turn a blind eye.

One person I spoke to commented, *"War is dynamic and imperfect and the freedom and autonomy in SF is a double edged sword."* I don't doubt that. There seemed no agenda by interview participants to describe to me an exaggerated state of affairs. In fact it was quite the contrary, with stories told with little emotion and so matter of fact that I was left feeling quite disturbed.

I was told that there was a need to empower young, 'good' guys, not promote and reward the worst of them.

*"What was really concerning was everyone knew which SF units, Squadrons and patrols, and under which commanders most of the killings were perpetrated. The same names would pop up with remarkable frequency. A reasonable person would think, now that's odd, that name has popped up at a few incidents, the circumstances and witness accounts are very similar, hmmm there is a pattern here. That didn't happen, instead what happened was these patrol commanders, and it was mostly patrol commanders, would be rewarded with citations and medals for gallantry and worst still valour, as they were the ones in the thick of the action putting their life on the line. Go figure!"*

Most external stakeholders remarked that SOCOMD had a history of very strong leadership. This perception will be absolutely undermined by knowledge of the history of atrocities, the culture of concealment, and the absence of moral courage to do anything to change.

Whilst details of events were scant (ie no names), what wasn't ambiguous was a palpable sense of frustration and anger by those who knew what had occurred, and would probably continue to occur.

As stories trickle out, and they inevitably will, the legacy of SOF will perhaps no longer be the 'fine capability' held in such high regard politically and internationally. Rather it will be a story about accountability, trust and blood lust that will stain the organisation for a long time to come.

Prior to commencing this current study I knew little about SOF beyond the fact that they were 'elite soldiers' and that central to their culture was the exclusivity of passing 'selection'. As I learned more about the organisation, particularly in interviews with SOF insiders, I have been struck by the fact 'selection' has the highest degree of agency, not just in the beginning of someone's SOF career, but through their entire SF career and beyond.

Apart from determining just how 'special' someone is (SASR or Commandos), and their *informal* rank within SOCOMD, it creates bonds, it creates trust, and it creates fierce loyalty with the others who have passed it. It is the fundamental building block and basis of inclusion, exclusion and evolution.

Everything I've read about SOF applauds their intelligence and their ability to evolve, and many interviewees have made comments about doing what is needed to survive in SOF. Charles Darwin once commented: "*Intelligence is based on how efficient a species became at doing the things they need to survive*", he also lamented however, "*Great is the power of steady misrepresentation*". SASR and Commandos are not the products of natural selection. They are carefully and deliberately selected for a discrete set of characteristics. How they behave, how they are (mis)represented, and how they are rewarded raises a number of questions about what the organisation values, and, critically, the potential need to broaden the genetic pool from which they are drawn from.

Some people have mentioned that perhaps the current traits SF are selected against are obsolete; that the new paradigm and future strategic growth of the Australian SOF capability requires a soldier, diplomat, spy, humanitarian etc. One thing that is apparent beyond doubt is that the current path of evolution, through selection, is an anathema to their desired future.

The question I am left with is can anything be done with a whole lot of vague, nameless scenarios? Is the calculus that weighs up these behaviours against the national security imperative valid or faulty? Is it a pandoras box too complex and with too much organizational risk to prize open? I don't know the answers. My hunch though is that reputation risk does not stop at SOF, and is far greater than even Army.

