

Forging Special Forces

The JFK Special Warfare Center and School

By Steven Hartov

Deep inside a forest of black Hemlocks and tight thorn bushes, two masked gunmen squat beside a cold campfire at their mountain redoubt, awaiting the delivery of an American hostage. The terrorists peer into the foggy night, but they aren't worried about being taken by surprise; no rescuers could sneak up through the tresses of brambles surrounding the camp, and only a slim dirt road leads to a locked steel gate 900 feet below. Soon, a Suburban carrying five terrorist compatriots and the wounded hostage will arrive at the gate, and the American will be dragged up the mountain to his fate.

At the base of the mountain, the steel road gate gleams in dim moonlight, but there's no hint of the ten U.S. Army Special Forces operators lying in the brush just meters away. They're wearing dark civilian slickers, gripping their M4 carbines and M9 pistols, their faces camouflaged, helmets buckled tight, comms muted. The detachment leader eyes the gleaming padlock on the gate and smiles; just one hour earlier, two of his men used a bolt-cutter to snap the terrorist's lock off the gate. The new lock that's hanging there now is identical, but only the SF officer holds the key.

The terrorists' Suburban suddenly appears, lights doused and engine idling, exactly as a local informant said it would. The groans of the hostage can be heard from inside, and a terrorist emerges to open the padlock—he can't seem to fathom why his key won't work, and then the Americans assault in a choreographed stampede. The vehicle's doors are flung open,

gun barrels jammed into chests and shocked faces. The enemy combatants are slammed to the ground, gagged and flex-cuffed, and the hostage is carefully eased out by the team medics; blood oozes from a nasty head wound and the white tips of his broken collarbone can be seen through his pierced flesh. He's been shackled with a thick motorcycle chain, but the SF men make quick work of it with a massive bolt cutter.

A large panel van coasts to a halt on the nearby two-lane blacktop. In less than a minute, the hostage is loaded aboard, along with his rescuers, and the vehicle slips away, heading for a helicopter landing zone. The five terrorists lie in the dirt, squirming beside their empty Suburban.

The "Quiet Professionals" have just pulled off another classic SF mission.

There are very few institutions of higher learning which demand successful completion of an exercise like this as part of their graduating requirements, but at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, hostage rescue is just a small part of the curriculum for U.S. Army Special Forces candidates. USAJFKSWCS (often referred to as "Swick"), is most commonly associated with the Special Forces Qualification Course ("Q" Course), but the school's capabilities and offerings are much broader than that; it is undoubtedly the most sophisticated complex for the study of unconventional warfare anywhere in the world.

What began as a small instructional facility



A Special Forces team blows a door and charges into the shoot house during CQC training at Range 37, Fort Bragg.

Photo: Steven Hartov

just after the official birth of the “Green Berets” in 1952, has grown into a sprawling university across Fort Bragg, with off-site extensions as far away as Key West, Florida, and Yuma, Arizona. USAJFKSWCS is best-known for turning enlisted volunteers into members of 12-man Operational Detachment Alphas (ODAs), and officer-volunteers into ODA leaders, but what is less commonly known is the school’s ongoing management of an SF soldier’s education and career. A career Special Forces member will be coached, mentored, guided and further educated until he has a remarkably broad resume of skills and experience, and will hopefully return to guide younger men through some of the toughest military challenges in the world.

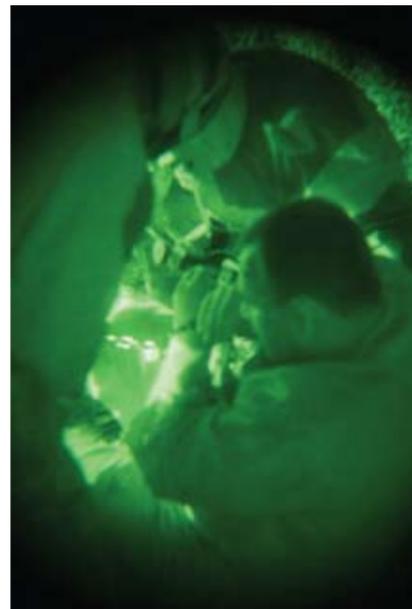
Up until the last decade, the Green Berets were comprised, for the most part, of experienced and seasoned volunteers from other branches of the Army. The five U.S. Army regular Special Forces Groups, or SFGs (there are two additional National Guard Groups) operated quietly in their geographically distinct areas of responsibility, and with the exception broader conflicts, such as the Invasion of Panama or Operation Desert Storm, the measured incubation of Special Forces soldiers at USAJFKSWCS was sufficient to supply the demand. However, with the launching of both Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, Special Forces found themselves in the uncharacteristic position of being pushed to the front of major conventional operations. It had taken many decades for the rest of the Services to understand the true value of small teams of dedicated, educated, language-skilled and indigenously-focused operators; but there it was: Special Forces could deliver a “bang for the buck” like no other units in the inventory. The JFK Special Warfare Center and School soon found itself with a requirement to turn out rough and ready Green Berets like never before.

Today, JFK processes approximately 750-800 Special Forces graduates each year, an exceptionally modest number for a national military that fields about 2,300,000 men and women at arms; but U.S. Army Special Forces are not your average soldiers. The Q-Course, averaging a year long, is bisected into two tracks; one for officers and one for NCOs, with each course replete with a careful mix of brain and brawn challenges.

The officers—like those executing the simu-

(Top): An SF officer candidate secures an HLZ after a simulated hostage rescue.

(Left & Right): A hostage role-player displays realistic-looking wounds; SF operators free him from shackles using a bolt cutter.



Photos: Steven Hartov.

lated hostage rescue—are the 18-Alphas (18-A); volunteers ranging in ages from mid-20s to early 40s, and already experienced in leadership skills while serving in other branches of the Army (and occasionally as transfers from other Services). An 18-A cannot volunteer directly for SF; he must first spend at least two years serving in another branch in a leadership role, and be a promotable 1st lieutenant. Then, these men face a year of constant training, evaluation and testing without letup, never knowing until the last week of the Q-Course if they’ll finally wear the vaunted Green Beret. While many similar subject matters are covered in the Q-Course for both officers and enlisted men, the 18-A course puts great emphasis on small unit leadership, tactics, planning, and interoperability with indigenous foreign forces, as ultimately the goal is to turn out ODA team leaders.

The Q-Course for enlisted personnel prepares men to become fully functioning members of the 12-man team, with concentration in one of the military occupational specialties (MOS) required by the ODA: 18-Bravo, Weapons Sergeant; 18-Charlie, Engineering Sergeant; 18-Delta, Medical Sergeant; 18-Echo, Communication Sergeant. These four MOSs are duplicated on a team for redundancy-

Photos: Steven Hartov.



(Above): Q-Course training for the 18-Charlie MOS (Engineering Sergeant) means handling high-explosives like this bundle of C-4, and detonating it effectively.



backup; an additional MOS, the 18-Foxtrot, Intelligence Sergeant, is usually acquired by a member who is already expert in another field. And finally on the ODA, the 18-A team leader has a deputy commander (180-Alpha) and a team master-sergeant (18-Zulu).

For all Special Forces candidates, the adventure begins with a 19-day Assessment and Selection (SFAS) at Camp McCall, North

Carolina. Candidates must pass batteries of psychological and physical tests, including long-distance swims wearing boots and fatigues, long-distance runs, rucksack marches and land navigation. But the focal point here is more than a candidate’s physical abilities; he must demonstrate attributes of intelligence, motivation, maturity and integrity, as well as the core requirement for all SF candidates—the ability



to function well in a team environment. At the end of SFAS, a board meets to select the most qualified candidates, who are then immediately assigned to one of the five SFGs, because language instruction for a particular AOR will begin almost immediately with the Q-Course.

The Q-Course, for both officers and enlisted, comprises many more mental challenges than physical—theoretically, any fine high-school athlete could endure the physical rigors. The SF core tasks are sophisticated, and high-risk. With areas of emphasis such as Unconventional Warfare (UW), Foreign Internal Defense (FID), Direct Action (DA), Special Reconnaissance (SR), Counterterrorism (CT) and Counter-Proliferation (CP), just some of the capabilities to be acquired include: small units tactics; high-tech communications, explosive ordnance, sniping, hand-to-hand combat, world-wide weaponry, basic parachuting, free-fall parachuting, closed-circuit underwater operations, close air support, emergency medicine, and conversant fluency in one of the ten core foreign languages. There is very little time in the Q-Course for relaxation or reflection; it's the ultimate "brain drain" where constant focus is essential—a wandering mind could have dire consequences for a man and his entire team.

The Q-Course is divided into six phases for officers and most enlisted MOSs:

Phase I: 2 weeks of Orientation, Intro to Branch (MOS), SF History, SF Core Missions, Emergency Medicine, Adaptive Training Leadership (ATL), Methods of Instruction, Negotiation and Mediation.

(Top): All Q-Course candidates must pass rigid, timed tests on a wide variety of worldwide weaponry.
(Center, Bottom): 18-Bravos (Weapons Sergeants) work on the basics of mortar handling, and let fly.

Phase II: 18-24 weeks of Language Block I (language blocks consist of six hours intensive instruction each day, in one of: Chinese, Korean, Tagalog, Indonesian, French, Arabic, Farsi, Russian, Thai or Spanish. There are also "contingency" languages for immediate needs), and Use of Interpreters.

Phase III: 12 weeks of Small Unit Tactics, SF Tactics/Marksmanship, Survival Evasion Resistance & Escape School (SERE takes students through wilderness and weather survival, land navigation and attempts to evade pursuit, which ultimately fail. Students are then captured, incarcerated in a "POW" camp and subjected to simulated pressure tactics, intimidation and interrogation), SF Common Skills and Land Navigation.

Phase IV: 14 weeks of specific MOS training and Whole of Government Operations.



Phase V: 4 weeks of Advanced Special Operations Techniques (ASOT), Whole of Government Operations, Language Block II, and the Unconventional Warfare Culmination Exercise, “Robin Sage.” This Field Training Exercise (FTX) is the penultimate test of all skills covered throughout the Q-Course, and has been transpiring in the mountains and towns of North Carolina for over 30 years. Robin Sage simulates deployment to the foreign country of “Pineland,” and encompasses airborne insertion, operating in ODAs, training indigenous forces (role-players) and direct action missions.

Phase VI: 1 week of Graduation and Out-Processing.

For 18-Deltas (medics), the Q-Course is extended to 80 weeks of training, with 46 weeks of MOS training alone. SF medics are regarded as top tier anywhere in the world, and the Special Warfare Medical Group and Joint Special Operations Medical Training Center (JSOMTC) conduct all training for SF medical sergeants, Rangers, U.S. Navy SEALs, and the USMC’s Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC).

With a remarkably packed schedule of instruction, USAJFKSWCS constantly buzzes with activity, and has hundreds of officers and enlisted personnel managing its regimental construct (see graphic). Major General

Thomas R. Csrnko currently commands JFK SWCS; in his office stands a life-size cutout of John Wayne in Vietnam jungle fatigues, adding a further imposing air to the similar impression Csrnko makes. Prior to taking over USAJFK-SWCS, Csrnko was Commanding General of U.S. Army Special Forces Command (Airborne), giving him a clear perspective as both “customer” and “supplier” of JFK’s product.

“There is no wall between the School House and Special Forces on the other side of post,” Csrnko explains. “We talk all the time. The instructors talk all the time. There’s constant communication between the operating force and this institution, whether it’s at the instructor level or the command level, and that’s what makes us as dynamic as we are.”

With more than 27 years as a Special Forces officer, Major General Csrnko was essentially



(Top): Major General Thomas R. Csrnko, Commander, U.S. Army JFK Special Warfare Center and School.

(Center): Military free fall training at Yuma, Arizona. All SF soldiers must be airborne-qualified, and ODA members must be advanced parachutists.

(Bottom): Q-Course students undergo underwater training at the JFK facility in Key West, Florida.





(Above): MAJ Pete Kranenburg runs the sniper and SFARTAEC training. (Top; Bottom): SF snipers open fire on targets at the shoot house, while an ODA fast-ropes into the assault.



raised on the SF “culture,” which shows in both his sense of purpose and command style. There’s a degree of informality in his manner, coupled with little patience for any bureaucracy that might impede his mission. Much like any ODA, or its team leader, the Center and School has to be flexible and fast moving.

“We could keep a student here for 2, 3, or 4 years of training, and just prepare them for an entire litany of tasks, but then that doesn’t support the operating force,” says the general, emphasizing the practical need for speed. “We have a limited amount of time that we can train, and we want to focus our efforts on what’s critical for that soldier to know when he joins that A-team. The most effective way we do that, is to ask the operating force to tell us the training requirements, and then we design the programs of instruction to do that. We’re able to do that quickly, so if there’s an immediate need from the battlefield, we can adjust our course material to accomplish that.”

Major General Csrnko puts great emphasis on and faith in his cadre of instructors. In turn, his instructors realize they’re shouldering a great responsibility as they develop future SF soldiers and leaders. These men are not career teachers, but veteran ODA operators rotated into the JFK system for the express purpose of imparting knowledge from their combat and field experiences. The relatively new “18-Xray Program” has added another element of complexity to their training mission. 18-Xrays are SF candidates coming directly from civilian life. They undergo basic infantry training and advanced individual training, then come



Photos: Benjamin Aber, JFK/SWCS/Steven Harlow.

straight to USAJFKSWCS and the Q-Course, so instructors must deal with the full spectrum of students from veteran Army NCOs to college grads just out of Northwestern or Harvard.

But the Q-Course is merely the beginning of an SF soldier's training, and throughout his career he can expect to return to SWCS for advanced instruction. For example, SF Groups will hand-select certain ODA members for specialization in sniping or close quarters combat (CQC), whereupon they in-process at JFK for seven-week training modules. Currently, Major Pete Kranenburg commands Company D, 2nd Battalion, overseeing the Special Forces Sniper Course (SFSC) and Special Forces Advanced Reconnaissance Target Analysis Exploitation Techniques Course (SFARTAEC). With a wealth of real-world sniper and assault experience and multiple tours down range, Kranenburg knows what it takes to build an SF sniper and close-quarter combatant.

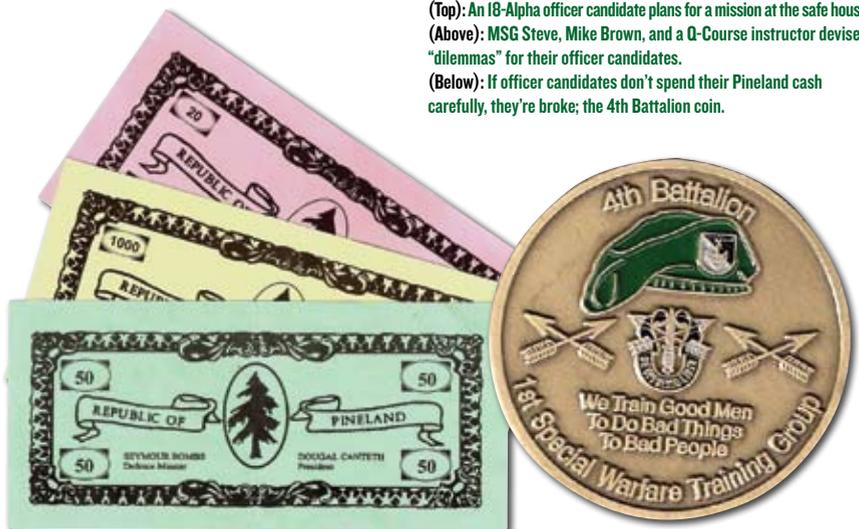
"For the average courses, which come together at the end of the cycle for a live-fire graduation FTX, we'll bring in 32 sniper candidates and pair them off into 16 teams, and we'll bring in 52 assaulters," Kranenburg explains. "For the first weeks of the course, we bring the snipers right back down to iron sights on the M24; optics only magnify bad habits if a sniper's making errors on the basics." The snipers eventually move onto the "gas operated guns," the SR-25 or M110 SASS in .308 caliber, while also learning camouflage, stalking and surveillance techniques. "What's different now is that it's not a lot of on-your-belly shooting. We emphasize shooting from many different positions."

The assaulters go through a very intensive module in all elements of CQC, and can then expect to be tasked to a "Commander's In-Exteris Force" (CIEF) upon returning to their Groups. The CIEF, tasked with direct action missions, is a specialized ODA and can be called upon by the senior commander of any area of responsibility (AOR) in which the Group is operating. Special Forces Operational Detachment Delta (commonly known as "Delta Force") is regarded as the "ultimate" CIEF.

"The guys that come through this course are experienced; some of them already have six-to-eight combat rotations," Kranenburg adds. "These days, all the theories have been tested in fact, through tens of thousands of real-world assaults and sniper missions, so we've got this course down to a science. The book is written; it's almost like the Constitution." Although Kranenburg is a man of action, he is completely committed to his



(Top): An 18-Alpha officer candidate plans for a mission at the safe house. (Above): MSG Steve, Mike Brown, and a Q-Course instructor devise "dilemmas" for their officer candidates. (Below): If officer candidates don't spend their Pineland cash carefully, they're broke; the 4th Battalion coin.



mentoring assignment. “I’ve been an assaulter and a sniper and I loved it, but I love this too; teaching it to other people. It’s a great satisfaction to see a guy come through here and in just seven weeks, be able to do some amazing things.”

Back out in the North Carolina woodlands, Master Sergeant “Steve” is the chief instructor running a complex exercise for 18-Alpha officer-candidates. This phase is Advanced Special Operations Training (ASOT), and Steve has a large team of ODA members serving in the training cycle, as well as civilian contractors—all SF veterans. The instructor team is ensconced in a non-descript building at a remote Air National Guard facility, where they’re making life difficult for a 12-man detachment of officers nearing the culmination of their Q-Course.

The officer-candidates have infiltrated into the “The Republic of Pineland,” and have set up in a safe house on the banks of a large lake. They’re tasked with back-to-back missions and problems, while opposed by the insurgents of a terrorist organization called “God’s Right Hand Brigade” (GORHAB). Local North Carolinians, who’ve been quietly supporting the training efforts of the Green Berets here for decades, willingly serve as role-players, informants, facilitators and problematic interlopers. At any time, MSG Steve might call the local police department and ask the cops to pull over a van full of his candidates, or ask a lakeside neighbor to suddenly knock on the safe house door in the midst of mission planning. Adding these unexpected surprises to required tasks such as hostage rescue or counter-WMD missions keeps the candidates constantly thinking, reacting and problem-solving.

“Everything in this exercise is dilemma-based, sort of like ‘The Amazing Race,’” says MSG Steve. “We want to make sure that people understand that with the asymmetric battlefield we’re on today, we’re trying to train detachment commanders who are adaptive and flexible and can think unconventionally to solve problems and execute operations.”

Working alongside MSG Steve is contractor Mike Brown, a retired SF team sergeant who joined the Green Berets back in 1967. With a total of 17 years in overseas deployments, Brown is there not only to offer his advice and experience, but to reinforce the classic SF “culture,” reminding both instructors and students to remain rooted in SF basics.

(Top): At the Regimental First Formation, Q-Course graduates are about to don their Green Berets for the first time, and be toasted by their commanding officers.

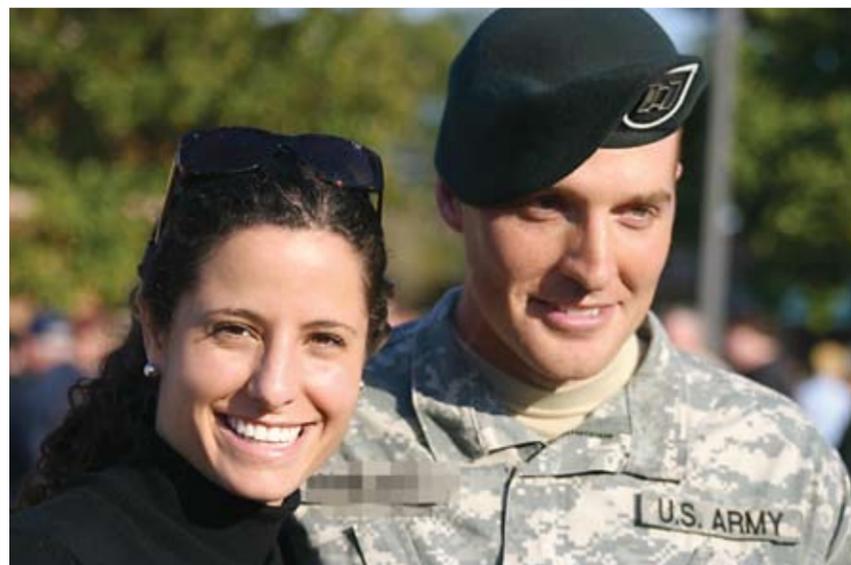
(Bottom): A new Special Forces spouse celebrates the graduation of her husband.

“These instructors are ODA guys and they’d always rather be doing that,” says Brown, “but they know that it takes good instructors to put out good students.” Brown takes out his 4th Battalion, 1st Special Warfare Training Group coin. On the back is an inscription:

“We teach good men to do bad things to

bad people.”

At the lakeside safe house, the 12 officer candidates are feeling pretty good about their successful hostage rescue, but there’s no let-up in Ops Tempo. In the basement of the house, a pool table is covered with humming laptops and tactical maps. Planning boards obscure the walls,



Photos: Steven Harrow

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transport crates bristle with M4s and M9 pistols, toy vehicles are strewn on the floor over a makeshift “sand table.” For weeks now, the candidates have been averaging four hours of sleep per night, and must be prepared at any minute to be thrown another mission or dilemma.

On the last night of the exercise, MSG Steve has turned into “Doctor Evil,” setting up a problem that’s going to be difficult to solve with any pre-planned solution. The bulk of the team has been deployed—lightly armed—to follow-up on an intel source’s claim that a missile has been hidden at a sprawling container yard. They’ve left one man to guard the safe house, and as evening falls, Steve and Mike Brown cross the cold lake in a fishing boat, climb the back stairs to the house and pound on the door. The safe house “babysitter” answers.

“Word just came down from higher,” says Steve. “There’s a coup in-country, government’s been overthrown. You’re outta here in ten minutes.”

The student shows no panic, making quick decisions and deliberate moves. He grabs his “go bag,” some Pineland cash and his NOD, then he hustles downstairs to the basement. His team has already decided what to do in a case like this; he makes a pyre of the laptops,



Q-Course graduates in Class-A’s solemnly receive their diplomas, Yarborough knives, and hefty responsibilities.

maps and weapons, then pulls the pin on a simulated thermite grenade, setting fire to the house. His last move before E&E will be to use the house’s land line and alert his team via their Iridium phone, because there’s no cell service out here.

But upstairs, Master Sergeant Steve has quietly cut all the land lines. The student reappears and picks up a phone, but gets no dial tone.

“There’s no service anywhere,” says MSG Steve. “Entire country’s out.”

The student hangs his head for a moment.

He can't alert his men, and time's up. He follows Steve and Mike down to the boat and climbs in, and as they rumble away over the dark waters of the lake, he's desperately trying to pull up service on his cell. At the other side of the lake, he'll follow his E&E plan, meeting up with a guide and hiking for miles over a mountain in the dark. But he'll never get cell service. What will happen to his team? How will he alert them? Will they return to the flaming safe house and be immediately taken prisoners, or worse?

Those are the problems faced every day and night in the Q-Course. There are no pat answers, and Master Sergeant Steve is already thinking about the next conundrum he's going to devise.

"We're doing the best we can to put a commander on the detachment who can think outside the box, take advice from his subordinates, use good risk assessments before taking on any operations, and make sure he's mitigating those risks as best he can to bring his soldiers home safely. This is a dangerous business and always has been."

Mike Brown agrees, and makes a point that goes to the heart of the USAJFKSWCS mission.

"We're producing the next general, there's no doubt about that. We have to be on our mark. We don't have time for mediocrity, because the next Special Forces general is coming out of this course." ■

(Top): These two 18-Alphas show their pleasure and pride at becoming SF officers.

(Bottom): Four brand new ODA members; just the beginning of the risks and rewards of serving in Special Forces.



JFK SWCS STRUCTURE



SWCS (2-Star General)

1st Special Warfare Training Group

(Colonel)



Special Warfare Medical Group

(Colonel)

Joint Special Operations Medical Training Center (JSOMTC)
All training for SF Medical Sergeants and all other SpecOps medics,
including Rangers, SEALs, USMC MARSOC



1st Battalion	2nd Battalion	3rd Battalion	4th Battalion	Support Battalion	DOTD	DSOE	NCO Academy	WOI
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment & Selection Small Unit Tactics (SUT) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> SERE Robin Sage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advanced Skills SFARTAEC Course SF Sniper Course Underwater Operations Key West, FL Military Freefall Yuma, AZ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Civil Affairs PsyOps Languages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All MOS Training: 18-Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Echo 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manages Students, Logistics, Drivers, Trucks, Food 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Directorate of Training & Doctrine Develops and writes all doctrine for Army Special Operations and Programs of Instruction at the Center and School 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Department of Special Ops Education Oversees Language Program, incorporates Civilian Education, Naval Post Graduate School, Army War College 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All basic and advanced NCO training. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Warrant Officer Institute Warrant Officers train here specifically for SF professional career tracks.

Photos: Steven Harrox