

Special Operations Command (SOCOMD) Culture and Interactions: perceptions, reputation and risk

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Executive summary

The current study was initiated by Major General Jeff Sengelman, Special Operations Commander – Australia (SOCAUST), to assist his efforts to continue a program of learning and development, structural and organisational realignment and strategic planning within SOCOMD. It aims to provide a snapshot of how well the SO capability effectively integrates, operates and co-ordinates with other ADF and whole-of-government (WoG) capabilities in support of Australia's national security.

Following a series of interviews with key external and internal stakeholders and partners and a review of literature and other public sources (media), a complex and discordant picture emerged.

There are *resoundingly positive messages from WoG partners* about the 'outstanding' tactical capability of Australia's SOF and their achievements in Afghanistan and Iraq. While the depiction by one commentator of SOF as 'soldier diplomats' may be idealised, a number of interviewees described SOF as professional, dedicated, driven, capable and able to 'get the job done'. They were described by well-informed commentators as the force of first choice, having a 'central and vital' role to play. There was also no shortage of autobiographies, glamorised documentaries, publicity for awards and medals and other glowing depictions as elite warriors and heroes to contribute to a positive image.

At the same time, however, *much of the capability is not deeply understood* and there are some *significant gaps in knowledge*. While the need for operational secrecy is understood, a number of partners would welcome opportunities for further two-way education to remedy this. SOCOMD's current role in Domestic Counter Terrorism (DCT) was generally regarded as augmenting civilian capacity (i.e. as sought by and directed by state authorities in the first instance) and there were mixed views on the possibility of an expanded role.

Further, while the positive appraisal from external interviewees formed their dominant discourse, they frequently alluded, often obliquely or in *sotto voce*, to a more complex, nuanced or darker side or set of impressions. In this space also sit media reports of 'skylarking' and other more disturbing incidents, generally scant on details and with little or no official response, contrasting strongly with the positive publicity mentioned above. This appeared to manifest in a persistent lack of trust co-residing with admiration and appreciation.

It was in the discussions with Defence insiders that the *sotto voce* became something much louder, elaborated and difficult to ignore. They revealed deep internal tensions and described a constant rivalry and antipathy between SOCOMD's two dominant units, the SASR and 2CDO, with the SASR depicted as holding 2CDO in contempt as inferiors. They suggested that SOCOMD did not command or impartially advocate on behalf of the whole capability. They also felt that enablers were invisible, disrespected and not valued for their role. And that, due to the number of well-placed SAS alumni in senior positions, there was marketing and protection afforded to the SAS 'brand' at the expense of the SOF brand. A number of interviewees felt that the unplanned genesis of SOCOMD – in response to extant and plausible threats rather than by recourse to any deliberately planned and executed strategy - had led to duplication of capability rather than a suite of complimentary and strategically informed and aligned SOF capabilities.

In addition, a number of internal interviewees, while speaking highly of the SOCOMD capability, provided unverifiable accounts of extremely serious breaches of accountability

and trust. Some of these related to policy, process and governance failures – like loss of weapons, unacceptable WHS practices, poor audit results, injudicious and wasteful practices in resources management, less than transparent or compliant acquisition practices etc. (It was also acknowledged that this may be in the process of being improved). Even more concerning were allusions to behavior and practices involving abuse of drugs and alcohol, domestic violence, unsanctioned and illegal application of violence on operations, disregard for human life and dignity, and the perception of a complete lack of accountability at times. These were acknowledged to be enormous and difficult challenges, not simple to remedy. It was clear that they went well beyond ‘blowing off steam’ and that there are problems deeply embedded in the culture.

Conceivably, these kinds of behaviours and internal tensions are the source of the disquiet conveyed by WoG stakeholders and they inevitably limit trust and receptiveness to SOCOMD playing a role wider than the tactical ‘pointy end’ one that it is currently appreciated for.

While a full examination of SOCOMD culture was beyond the scope of the current study, some aspects of selection and leadership are briefly considered in an effort to provide insight into the issues that emerged in interviews. The SF selection course is arduous, elite and exclusionary, tending to favour ‘type A’ personalities, who will ‘push, push, push’, and it leaves limited room for diversity of skills, attitudes or gender. Commentators and internal interviewees alike drew attention to the importance of strong leadership. Some interviewees felt that senior leadership had been partisan in favour of SAS as mentioned, or had left the problem to be resolved at the working level, which had not occurred. Others felt that there was a deep impediment to change because of the extent to which leaders with SOF backgrounds, highly placed throughout the ADO and beyond, were compromised by their own participation or complicity in problematic behaviours of the past.

Potential responses to effect organisational change, offered by internal interviewees, included a strong no tolerance message from management; and appointment in the future of a SOCAUST from outside the organisation – given the management focus of the role. In line with others, this study recommends further analysis, to gain a fuller appreciation of internal cultural problems, their causes and response options.

The problems identified present major challenges and will resist simple or cosmetic solutions. Nevertheless, setting them out in this way provides an important opportunity for further examination and reflection. Given the high value of the capability, and desirability of maintaining and strategically shaping it in new directions as security risks and needs indicate, this would seem to be critical.

1. Introduction

Background

Over the past decade, the demands of the ADF's global and regional operations have seen an unprecedented growth in Australia's Special Operations capability. Special Operations Forces (SOF or SO) became the 'capability of choice' for the Australian Government, especially in more threatening environments such as Iraq and Afghanistan¹.

It has been argued that Australian SOF are most effective as a strategic tool, and must constantly adapt and redefine themselves, while protecting and adhering to the core values, premises and employment principles that define their organisation².

The strategic position of the Australia's SOF capability has been the subject of continued discussion over the last decade, with a number of books, papers and reviews examining their function, transformation and future. In addition there has been a continued stream of commentary regarding their organisational culture.

The present study aims to better understand whether and how well the SO capability effectively integrates, operates and co-ordinates with other ADF and whole-of-government (WoG) capabilities in support of Australia's national security. To do this the investigator sought the experiences and perceptions of key internal and external stakeholders to provide insight and analysis. In addition, a literature review and media analysis were conducted to build a picture of the evolution of SOCOMD and the public and political discourse that may have informed and shaped some of the external stakeholder opinions (see appendix 1 for an overview of the methodology).

MAJGEN Jeff Sengelman, Special Operations Commander – Australia (SOCAUST), initiated this study primarily to afford him strategic situational awareness around a number of key issues. The SOCAUST indicated that he sought to use the situational awareness to aid him in decision support to address a continued program of learning and development, structural and organisational realignment and strategic planning within SOCOMD to build on the work done by previous commanders.

At the outset of the study, SOCOMD staff conveyed their impression that there might be some dissonance between current expectations of the SOF capability and the reality of what SOCOMD does and can offer. Current staff felt that having partners gain an improved understanding of the role, capability, remit and limitations of SOCOMD would enable more authentic jointery in and for SOCOMD, strengthen SOCOMD's potential as a strategic actor in WoG responses to security threat, and improve command and control relationships between SOCOMD and other decision bodies as well as key external actors to more optimally meet emerging issues. Additionally, they felt there was also a need for partners to better understand the role SOCOMD plays in commanding, leading and managing the SO capability as a whole in an effort to enable optimal strategic and operational effects for government.

¹ Davies, Andrew (2014) *A Versatile Force: The future of Australia's Special Operations Capability*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Canberra.

² Langford, Ian (2014) *Australian Special Operations: principles and considerations*. Army Research Paper Series, no. 4. Canberra.

The collection of empirical data was aimed at informing an analysis of the following:

- The perceptions of SOCOMD: their capability, role, remit and limitations;
- The implications of the tension between perception and reality with regard to SOF capability, and the genesis of this dissonance, if any;
- The impact these tensions may have on capability delivery and how SOCAUST operates within the context of the greater ADO;
- Differences between process and policy knowledge with regard to SOCOMD capabilities;
- Emerging issues.

During the interviews further questions emerged. These included:

- What had informed external participants views of SO if they had not had direct contact with them?

Combining the resulting analysis from the interview data with other key documents and relevant artifacts the study also sought to understand:

- How the identity of SOCOMD has been shaped and the implications of this identity;
- How SOCOMD should be strategically positioned to better support national interests;
- What the barriers to authentic jointery are for SOCOMD; and
- How command and control relationships between SOCOMD and other decision bodies (i.e. FORCOMD, AHQ, JOC, and NSC) can be modernised/better defined and transformed to meet emerging issues.

During the course of the research for this study it became apparent that to understand and make sense of the perceptions held by SOCOMD stakeholders one needed to understand their individual and collective vantage points. There are essentially three vantage points by which to characterise the stakeholders, these being:

- Influential external stakeholders – these are decision makers within close proximity to national security from within the greater machinery of government, including politicians, law enforcement officials and senior bureaucrats (PM&C, DFAT, ASIO, AFP);
- Influential internal stakeholders – these are senior decision makers from within the Australian Defence Organisation (ADO) who have a direct influence on, and close proximity to SOCOMD (Defence Senior Leadership Group); and
- SOF Insiders – these are a cohort of senior SOF operators with contemporary experience of working within SOCOMD in leadership roles³.

Key findings from recent studies

A number of examinations of SOF structure, role and capability have been conducted in recent years whose findings are relevant to the present study.

The evolution of Special Forces

The changing nature of SO capability has been outlined by Horner (2002)⁴, Brailey (2005)⁵, and more recently McPhedran (2010)⁶, Davies et al (2014)⁷ and Macklin (2015)⁸ While these

³ During the course of data collection for this study the chief investigator had the opportunity to speak informally with a number of junior ranking soldiers and officers. Any reference to their attitudes or experiences are referenced accordingly. It is important to note however that the broad findings in this study relate to perceptions and experiences of more senior ADO and external participants.

titles have limited value in providing a critical perspective of SOCOMD, or SOF more broadly, they provide an overview of how SOF has transformed extensively over the last twenty years at strategic, operational and tactical levels. Brailey (2005) argues that SOF “have now truly moved from being a marginal, though at times important, component of conventional military strategy to being a central and vital element of any war fighting or security calculus”. Horner concludes his extensive history of the SAS noting the regiments historical ability to adapt to change and look to the future, and Macklin (2015) reaffirms this in his description of how Special Forces have risen to the forefront of military priority as the way of the future of Defence preparedness.

The prioritisation of SOF has given rise to suggestions that there has been a subsequent displacement of Regular Army (specifically Royal Australian Infantry Corps). This has been dismissed as internal jealousy by some (Macklin 2015) and a warranted and continued concern by others, potentially signaling the beginning of the decline of the Infantry corps (Hammett 2008)⁹.

The function of Special Operation Headquarters (SOHQ)

A 2015 study by the Defence Science and Technology Organisation (DSTO)¹⁰ provided a Special Operations Headquarters Functional Analysis. The three month study was based on interviews with staff, a survey of staff, historical data, plus an analysis of literature on organisational performance and change management.

Significantly, the study found the: need for improved integration with ADF enablers and strategic influence with Whole of Government; lack of clear roles and responsibilities, priorities and tasking; disruptive effect of physical separation of some Special Operations Head Quarters (SOHQ) elements and external agencies; lack of planning for strategic influence; high frequency of communication with diverse agencies; some inconsistency between structural groupings and roles of SOHQ.

Of particular relevance to the current study, the findings from the staff survey indicated the

- need for a strategic plan to deliver a clear and common message that is communicated to wider defence; and a strategic support cell to help develop policy and further strategic priorities and engagement with stakeholders and enablers; and
- potential to improve relationship with other agencies, enablers and stakeholders by being more joint, improving communication mechanisms and by building trust through increased collaboration, avoiding duplication and possibly divesting some functions.

Interestingly, in the final appendix J (at p80) the report includes (in its description of emergent themes from interview data) reference to the need for a *culture review*. It states that culture influences problematic behavior within SOHQ, for example alcohol use, distrusting outside organisations and attempting to manage too many roles. It suggests SOHQ values reputation to the degree that it obstructs processes; that it has a sense of learned helplessness; and compliance management could be taken more seriously.

⁴ Horner, David (2002). *SAS: Phantoms of War*. Allen & Unwin.

⁵ Brailey, Malcolm (2005) *The transformation of Special Operations Forces in contemporary conflict: strategy, missions, organisation and tactics*. Working paper (Land Warfare Studies Centre (Australia)) ; no.127.

⁶ McPhedran, Ian (2010). *Soldiers without borders: beyond the SAS*. Harper Collins: Australia.

⁷ Davies, Andrew (2014) *A Versatile Force: The future of Australia's Special Operations Capability*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Canberra.

⁸ Macklin, Robert (2015). *Warrior elite*. Hachette Australia.

⁹ Hammett, Jim(2008). 'We were soldiers once: the decline of the Royal Australian Infantry Corps?' in *The Australian Army Journal*. 5(1) P39-50.

¹⁰ Now titled Defence Science and Technology Group (DSTG)

The above points were taken into consideration during the analysis for the present study. Although our study had a different focus, many of the same issues were raised and validated.

Principles and considerations of Australian Special Operations

LTCOL Langford's article (2014) examining the principles and considerations of Australian SO makes a number of key points relevant to the present study.

Langford argues that a clear set of employment principles for SF is needed due to a number of factors, including that:

- SO and SF in Australia are currently defined by a loose set of mottos, self-descriptions and provisional military doctrine – none accurately describing them;
- Many elements of the federal and state government and ADF claim to conduct SF like activities; and
- Other nation's definitions of SF are often used inaccurately to define Australian SF and SO.

Langford suggests that Australian SF personnel have evolved from the toughened commandos of SF in WWII to personnel who "require language proficiency, cultural awareness, political sensitivity and the ability to use information age technology in combination with extant military and weapon skills – in essence they must be 'soldier-diplomats'." (2014:13)

He outlines the distinctiveness of SF in the Australian context as being captured in a set of premises providing a framework to support SF's potential future evolution, including:

- SF are a military capability with political unity;
- SF are part of the Army and ADF and subject to the obligations inherent in the profession of arms;
- SF operate at the very edge of technological and philosophical development;
- SF rely on conventional force capabilities – they are complementary, integrative and mutually supportive force multipliers;
- SF are relevant and employable at the strategic, operational and tactical levels of war;
- SF organizational culture encourages creativity, adaptability, flexibility and high performance in personnel and organisations;
- SF are enhanced by selectivity in personnel and technology;
- SO concentrate on the human aspects of warfare;
- SF have a deep and enduring relationship with the Australian intelligence community, other coalition SF and relevant security force providers across the operational spectrum;
- SO is a precious and vulnerable capability. (2014: 14-18).

On building a Special Forces Culture, the paper says "the skills required to preserve the traditional SF war-fighting capability will multiply as the future operating environment becomes increasingly 'crowded, connected, collective, lethal and constrained'" and there remains a need to better define SF organisational culture. Importantly, Langford suggests the need for strong participative leadership; that SF culture be built on a leadership model that is participative in nature but relies on example-based leadership to inspire obedience from those in the organisation. He argues that SF culture will collapse into dysfunctional behavior if commanders and leaders fail to inspire their subordinates through personal example.

While including a somewhat idealised depiction of SF, Langford's paper acknowledges the potential for arrogance or aloofness bred from a cult of elitism to develop and nurture an 'in group' mentality, with a lack of trust of outsiders. Similar themes emerged throughout the course of the present study.

In response to Langford's paper, LTCOL Gleiman (2014) alerts to the risk that some readers might come away with unrealistic expectations of SOF, which are not a "panacea for Australia's strategic challenges". He warns against confusing enthusiasm with actual capability.

Gleiman suggests that real changes in Australian SOF need to be made to meet challenges in Langford's paper. Australia needs to reassess how it selects, educates, organises and commands its SOF, as well as (given the small size of SOF) to seamlessly incorporate enabling capabilities from the conventional force and from allies.

Character strengths and selection

The qualities Langford alludes to (i.e. soldier diplomats) are a tall order for any organisation that also needs to be highly specialised in counter-terrorism missions. Issues raised by both Langford and Gleiman point to a number of pertinent questions: Do Australian SF really have the depth of people, the training and education facilities, and the talent-management system to be able to do everything they say they can? Are the non-SOF elements of the ADF being effectively leveraged to integrate necessary talent and enablers? Are different skill sets needed for indirect action and direct action and are, or can, Australian SF be enabled to do both?

A 2015 prospective study of character strengths as predictors of selection into Australian SF emphasises that character is a more decisive factor than physicality when it comes to successful applicants¹¹. The most highly (self) ranked character strengths that correlated with successful course completion were *team worker*, *integrity*, and *persistence*. Together, these three strengths predicted the likelihood that an individual applicant would be ultimately selected. Of particular interest were other character strengths that had little impact on completion (e.g. *self control*, ranked number 5) or, conversely, predicted incompleteness of the course (e.g.. *good judgment*, ranked 12, and *social intelligence*, ranked 19).

In light of findings in this present study, questions could be asked about the correlation or overlap of the notion of *teamwork* and *group commitment*, particularly in relation to protecting the 'brand' of SF. This is perhaps one of many 'fine lines' worthy of further exploration, broadened even further to examine other blurring of lines most commonly only explored in pop culture¹².

The questions that the above studies raise centre around the capability, role, identity, and culture of SOF. How SO soldiers and officers, and the capability they provide, figure in the perceptions of external and internal stakeholders is the main focus of this study. Whether 'soldier diplomats', 'warrior elite', 'trained psychopaths' or something all together different, the following chapters provide a detailed analysis of the opportunities, challenges and limitations of the current state.

¹¹ Gayton, S & Kehoe, J (2015) 'A Prospective study of character strengths as predictors of selection into the Australian Army Special Force'. *Military Medicine*, 180, 2:151.

¹² For example Dutton (2012) goes some way to explore the commonalities between SAS (UK) and psychopaths: Dutton, Kevin (2012). *The wisdom of psychopaths*. Random House: London.

Overview of report structure

This report begins with an overview of the external perceptions of the capability, role, and remit of SOCOMD in Chapter Two. Influential external stakeholders, be they ministers, senior bureaucrats from PM&C, DFAT, ASIO or AFP, or owners of other key relationships, had varied, and at times contradictory, understandings. Common however were often ambiguous allusions to SOCOMD, or SF, limitations. Overwhelmingly, external perceptions of SF referred to the sum of its parts, and not to individual units within the command. The term SF (and by extension SOCOMD) was also mainly associated with an SASR type capability.

Chapter Three turns from external stakeholders to internal ones (senior members of the ADO). It examines more closely perceptions of the role and identity of the two dominant units – SASR and 2CDO. In doing so it relies heavily on the perceptions of influential internal stakeholders. In addition however it sheds light on the visibility of the internal tensions to external stakeholders, and the constraints this places on receptiveness to SOCOMD having a greater strategic influence and role. The chapter also explores the marketing and protecting of the SF, or rather SASR, brand.

Issues of reputation and risk that were raised by interview participants are outlined in Chapter Four and describe issues of leadership, accountability and trust.

Finally, the culture of SOF is discussed in Chapter Five, relying heavily on interviews from SOF insiders. The conclusion can be found in Chapter Five.

2. External perceptions of the capability, role and remit of SO

Significantly, this study has been about trying to understand what influential external stakeholders understand the SOF capability to be: *what they do, how they do it and how (or where) they fit*. Depending on the interview participant's vantage point (i.e. government, agency, role, prior experience etc.), knowledge of SOF and the command varied.

Overwhelmingly external stakeholders had very limited knowledge of the difference between units that make up SO, and unless they had prior experience (in uniform), had little appreciation for the difference between SASR and Commandos, for example. Perceptions of the capability were of the SO collective rather than separate entities within the organisation (but seen mainly through an SASR capability prism).

Some influential internal stakeholders had greater visibility and therefore understanding of the SO capability. With this visibility came a more realistic perception, some criticism, and opinions not about *what they do* but what they *should* or *should not* be doing.

An outstanding capability

The group of influential external stakeholders interviewed tended to have a very positive and at times stereotyped view of SOF capability. They were 'like Rambo, a capability of last resort' or 'like James Bond, intelligent and secretive'. This oversimplified dualism did not do justice however to their broader understanding of SOCOMD's potential as a strategic actor. They held positive views of the abilities, both intellectual and physical, of the Australian SOF community and were generally of the view that the personnel they meet and interact with are intelligent, thoughtful and unassuming, and are good to work with.

"They are among the best in the world for what they do". (External stakeholder)

"They are extremely impressive" (External stakeholder)

"They have always had very good leaders" (External stakeholder)

"They are an excellent capability." (External stakeholder)

"My personal view, any SF person that I have dealt with are normally the most unassuming, non-arrogant, calm, measured Army officers that I would ever have met." (External stakeholder)

At times more detailed descriptions of what the SOCOMD capability involved were somewhat limited, and contradictory.

"So I think they are at that high end, very tactical out-there-in-the-field response at times of war, or to do specialist operations in support of really secret, sensitive type missions offshore. Onshore I really don't know. I really don't know their remit or if they even have one compared to a lot of other parts of the Army and Defence Forces" (External stakeholder)

"I guess I probably have a view that they're a niche capability, they are sort of someone you'd try and get when its something trickier than your standard operation. It's strategic rather than tactical. Now I don't know whether my perception of that is right or wrong". (External stakeholder)

"I guess the fact that they're called Special Operations tend to entrench in people's minds the word special and makes sure that you think, oh there's something different about them. I think that'd be true in the public's eye as well. I mean once you put special in front of someone's title people think, 'oh, what do they do that's special?' Is it the equipment, is the

training, is it the role they're undertaking? It's probably all three I guess – but I think that would be a pretty widely held view.” (External stakeholder)

“Taking out people? But I still think there's rules of engagement. I totally think there are those rules, and the teamwork in really tough conditions. I imagine people being out on patrols for days at a time in really shitty situations in Afghanistan, or other places like that around the world, very discreet, very small teams, sometimes individuals, but usually small teams getting out or whatever, and then coming back in and... yeah, that's how I sort of imagine it, Andy McNab type stuff.” (External stakeholder)

“There's no question of 'could they do that?' I mean obviously we're talking about options and things, but there's just the sense that they are an extremely effective capability that you can apply with confidence to whatever it is. There's never a question of whether they can do it.” (External stakeholder)

“I guess from our experience it's always been seen very much from the physicality side of it, rather than from the intellectual side of it, and obviously you know that's a perception – I'm sure they have extraordinary problem solving skills as well, but ... that's not the perception you have from the outside looking in. You think, no, these guys are the serious end of the business.” (External stakeholder)

Gaps in knowledge

With the exception of a few deep specialists, such as AFP Counter-Terrorism operatives and some NSC advisors, most senior external stakeholders interviewed did not have robust and detailed knowledge or understanding of the full spectrum of the capabilities resident within SOCOMD. They appeared to know just enough about the capability in broad-brush terms, such as the existence of CT, TAG (East and West), special recovery, clandestine operations etc.

“I have very little domestic understanding of what they do” (External stakeholder)

“I have no understanding [of what the capability is] whatsoever. I feel a bit embarrassed about that actuallyI feel like I need a month embedded in Defence to learn about it all.” (External stakeholder)

“I think they do less recon and surveillance now, and more mainstream combat?” (External stakeholder)

“I'm a bit ignorant of numbers of people in SOCOMD, or where the bases are, except for the one in WA.” (External stakeholder)

“I think they (SF) might be overused, but I don't really know. That's just my sense.” (External stakeholder)

“I'm comfortable with my understanding of their capability, although most of DFAT wouldn't necessarily know what their [SOCOMD] capability is.” (External stakeholder)

“Well I think at the operational level, like there's a fairly good understanding of what their capability is. So like in the TAG, so you know your domestic Tactical Assault Groups, they predominantly do the same thing as PTG, but I think the difference with them is the scale on which they can do things, along with their things like their logistical support, like helicopters and planes and things like that.” (External stakeholder)

“I mean the profile that they have developed by virtue of having been in Afghanistan and Iraq and so forth has meant they're seen as the most capable part of the Defence Force so you give them the most difficult job.” (External stakeholder)

Influential internal ADO stakeholders also described their understanding of SO capability. For some, their understanding was best summed up as one interviewee described it: “strategically aware of SOCOMD, but tactically naïve”. Broadly, this group of internal interview participants were generally very knowledgeable of SOF capabilities, and when and

where they should be employed. They had significant exposure to SOCOMD, its capability, capacity, leadership and community of practice. Without exception they had a very high opinion of the SOF spectrum of capabilities and the SO personnel's ability to execute those capabilities under most circumstances. They also had a very clear understanding of the policy basis for the employment of SOF. In addition internal stakeholders had visibility of the evolution of SOCOMD, both its capability and its challenges.

"I think it's changed, and my view is that they use to be very specialised and were utilised as a specialised tool in effect. Through the late '80s, '90s, and perhaps just into the 2000s, they became the answer for everything, and were viewed as being *the* solution, not *part of* the solution, for almost any military response. And in that, perhaps it's unfair, but I think in some respects they lost their way and were Jacks of all trade and masters of only a few." (Internal stakeholder)

"They've moved from what might have been, not a novelty, but an adjunct organisation, to something now which is a little more front line in terms of the broader capability of the Defence office. Before it was, 'Oh, we could think about Special Forces'. Now it's, 'Think about Special Forces, and then what else can be done', sort of thing." (Internal stakeholder)

"I don't have any romantic view of it, but frankly the nature of what we ask them to do, and the manner in which they need to deliver a result, which is more immediate and more, well it can be more fatal than other parts that Defence would normally expect to execute, drives a sense of having to think differently. And as a consequence of that, those that have that opportunity, and are naturally therefore creative in how they do things, will always test stuff, rules and everything else ... I mean you've got to be agile. You know, to do that, you've got to be innovative, to do that you need to be a risk taker, to do that you need to understand how you manage risk. More importantly you need to accept risk, which is not what large parts of this organisation do. In fact we have bred risk management out of a lot of people; we've done it just by going to matrix management for a start, because we've obfuscated the accountability piece." (Internal stakeholder)

"I mean they love the mystique. And the government loves it and everybody loves it. So they can't pretend that they haven't benefited...from the brand." (Internal stakeholder)

Gaps in the knowledge of external stakeholders were rationalised by them as 'not needing to know' and an assumption that the right people had the right knowledge at the right times to make sure decisions were made accordingly.

"The nature of what they do is secret so often I just think, I don't need to know" (External stakeholder)

"The full range of capability doesn't need to be understood. It is well understood where it needs to be." (External stakeholder)

"I know the popular perception of SAS - 007 etc. - and I'm happy with having that." (External stakeholder)

"I understand where SOCOMD fits, I understand where the TAGs are, I understand... you know I had a better understanding once I went to the [Operation] and you know that SASR were there, and you know some of their capability, and the logistics there and stuff like that...But, yeah, having said that, like does it matter that I don't? And it may matter up the stack how it all sort of fits together. But well the fact that I don't hasn't caused ... it hasn't caused me an issue" (External stakeholder)

There was a view internally that when the opportunities presented themselves, it would be good to uplift the base level of knowledge of politicians and senior bureaucrats through such avenues as capability briefings, demonstration and site visits to bases and exercises for example. From interviews with external stakeholders the findings from this study confirm that this would indeed be welcomed.

For one interviewee his prior knowledge from working in Army meant he was able to educate colleagues about realistic expectations of SOF:

“I do it on two levels. One is educating them about what they can do for us, and I say ‘for us’ because they are generally in a support role, particularly in a domestic sense. And also on the other side which is to balance off that perception that you know they can’t do everything, because I know they can’t do everything.”

Policy framework

The policy basis for decision-making about the employment of SOF was relatively well understood by both internal and external stakeholders interviewed. However, with the exception of a few policy doyens, there was not a clear, defensible and robust understanding of this policy framework grounded in the constitution, legislation and law.

External interviewees generally categorised the SOF roles as belonging to either international off-shore deployments or as Domestic Counter Terrorism (DCT). Interestingly, there was not much detail elucidated or forthcoming on the decision basis for off-shore employment of SOF, however they seemed to hold a relatively consistent view that DCT was the responsibility of State Police followed by the AFP, when such a handover was requested by the State and agreed to by the Commonwealth. Their view on the role of SOF in DCT was not of being given responsibility for any given situation, but as augmenting the specialist DCT capacity and resources to supplement the police effort. There was a consistent view that in these instances, primacy for command and control would reside with the police. A number of interviewees used the 2014 Martin Place café siege¹³ as an example of blurred, or on the contrary, very clear, jurisdictional boundaries.

“The difference is the police officer’s shooting because they’re defending the people in the cafe and themselves, because that’s just what they do. The military guys are going in to shoot the terrorist...They’re not necessarily doing it to defend themselves. Now that’s in the simplest terms as it can get. In reality though the result’s the same. The argument between who should and shouldn’t do something still comes back to capability – assets: boats, planes, parachutes etc. - and capacity: more people on the ground for reinforcement - and this is where we still have, I wouldn’t say we have arguments about it, but that’s where that blurred line is.” (External stakeholder)

“Well it actually is very clear. It is very clear. The call out provisions are very clear. You know they were building mock-ups of the Lindt Cafe out in Holsworthy. Now, you know, I don’t have a problem with that. That’s sensible planning, if they’re going to go in the middle of the night when New South Wales police throw their hands up and go, ‘Sorry, it’s too much for us’, that’s good. But the actual authorities are very, very clear – very clear.” (Internal stakeholder)

“Desk top exercises have been done enough to make sure they know their remit within Australia”. (External stakeholder)

“I do have a reasonable understanding of our counter-terrorism architecture and so forth. I think the thing is that they have to be prepared to be sort of pigeon-holed and essentially kept in that sort of tactical level *as directed* area. Because it’s very, very complicated in terms of the law enforcement intelligence. And then, when you start putting in the Commonwealth government level and the State government level, and so forth... I mean we did one of these exercises and it was one of these scenarios where a tanker was hijacked somewhere in the Barrier Reef ... turned out to be terrorists and then there was radioactive material on-board and so forth. Now the resolution of it was of course you know parachuting in some special forces to ... fix it all. And I remember the SOCOMD

¹³ <http://www.news.com.au/national/martin-place-cafe-siege-police-storm-cafe-and-kill-gunman-sheik-man-haron-monis--report/news-story/a1e51d29469209ffa62684e648441043>

representative said, well you know everybody makes this assumption that we're gonna come and fix it all, but where's the mandate? What's the legal basis and so on? And you know it's this very complicated legal framework where you know the State Police have jurisdiction up to a certain point." (External stakeholder)

"The point I'd make is simply to say that, well, you know agencies work well when they have clearly defined roles and responsibilities and so you can get the best out of them. Where you start to have ambiguous relationships over who does what and with what and... you know, that can become complicated. So, you know ASIS has some very well established and tested mechanisms to get approval from government for its operations ... less so in the case of SF guys, which really require the CDF to come and provide cover for them in a sense almost to do what they do. And I think that was emerging as a problem. I'm a few years out of date in terms of current knowledge, although I don't think the problems have gone away as such." (External stakeholder)

Augmenting civilian capability in domestic counterterrorism (DCT)

Rather than cooperating or interoperating with other agencies, interview participants described SF as augmenting civilian capability (when the civilian assessment was that this would assist). This could be due to the fact they were perceived to operate within their own silo and not as part of the broader 'team' or it could be that there simply isn't an adequate understanding of how they can cooperate and interoperate.

"So I sit really squarely in the 'team Australia' type approach, rather than, I don't know, rather than let's sort of, yeah, silos and here's where you stop, and here's where you begin. I just go if you've got things that are going to solve the problem, then we need you, and what are the mechanisms to get you and bring you, and bring that capability to bear on whatever the problem is. They seem, to me, they are a bit 'team SF'". (External stakeholder)

"I think if you bring in Army or Special Forces, it means that you've exhausted your own resources, and those of the other state and territory jurisdictions to resolve it in a civil way, so then it gets to that we can't cope, or it's going on too long, or we need specialist skills to support" (External stakeholder)

"Probably some of the numbers and some of the technologies and the transport, and the other capabilities that they would bring with it could assist us". (External stakeholder)

"Some of the intel capacities that they have are really critical. Working with each other I think works really well in sharing those skill sets. And, yeah, as I said, worse case scenario, some of those high end skill sets with the snipers and the other ... those sorts of tactical people are really useful also." (External stakeholder)

"And it's not so much necessarily that the Commonwealth has to step in to take over, it's actually because we're rotating in resourcing, not necessarily taking over the planning or whatever it is that they're doing. And even when you look at Army you know helping clean up after a cyclone its resourcing more than anything, you've got tired state services that sort of thing, so it's not even necessarily they're going to do anything different, it's actually just that they're a resource." (External stakeholder)

There was limited commentary on how SOF operated offshore with other agencies.

Future roles for SOCOMD: Counterterrorism

There was an assumption that the role of SOCOMD and SOF would continue to evolve, particularly in response to emergent and changing environmental threats. Counterterrorism (CT) was often cited as an example of where the future capability of SOCOMD may lie. Others, though, emphasised the need for the command 'staying within its lane' and not 'over-reaching' or intruding into domestic roles.

“With Defence it’s been hard because there’s no single sort of coordination point or entry point on CT. But I think SOCOMD has a definite role to play in CT. Whether they are the best sort of liaison point for Defence, I’m ... I can’t really answer.” (External stakeholder)

“The capabilities that they have that could be applied to counter-terrorism. I mean, I think that’s definitely something that needs to be sort of explored and articulated. But there also needs to be a discussion within Defence and between Defence and other agencies as to where the parameters might be in terms of when you use them and when you don’t. And how far the sort of... how... whether there are limits to how innovative and creative they should be allowed to be.” (External stakeholder)

“My impression is that they actually do have that strategic dimension. And I suspect that’s not something we’ve really exploited, you know on the CT front. But they obviously do have those tactical capabilities and that sort of tactical mandate at the forefront. But their obvious limitation is the policy and legal framework within which they have to operate. And I suspect that in terms of their capability, the policy framework may not be keeping pace. They may be slightly ahead in the sense that we may not really be ready to fully utilise ... I mean in terms of the point that I was making before ... because we could start doing things we’ve never done before using them.” (External stakeholder)

“I’d say SOCOMD’s probably the most flexible capability that’s out there in terms of application because you can just pick them up and apply them and they do have, as much as they belong to Army, you can see their roles in other sort of capabilities. So there’s an application of Special Forces that can actually be quite flexible and adaptable and probably more so than pieces of kit.” (External stakeholder)

“They still need to focus on domestic threat but they need to focus their efforts on what they do well and that in my view would be countering threat not in Australia. My view is that unless we’re under all-out war in Australia, Defence don’t have a role on Australian shores, apart from supporting us if we need capability. They have roles to play, they have roles to play in hostage rescue and all that sort of stuff if something occurs offshore and that’s the space, so I know it’s probably a hard, and a bitter pill for them to swallow, but in terms of the capability, they need to keep the capabilities that they have for war fighting because any day that’s what we pay them for.” (External stakeholder).

“Its [SOCOMD’s] role will evolve, dictated by technology, circumstance and the politico-strategic narrative.” (External stakeholder)

There was confusion however in how this is shaping up internally:

“The talk during this year has been that that’s Commando business [DCT]. SAS are very much more sort of the special recovery operations, more an off-shore focus. But again if you read the SOCAUST directive, it’s a bit blurred. ... There has been a lot of talk but there has been no definitive update in writing.” (SOF Insider)

Strategic positioning

How SOCOMD should be strategically positioned to better support national interests by recourse to a strategy led operating model, was not able to be clearly described by any interviewees. There appeared to be a view that there was no coherent or strategy driven whole of SF capability view. Any gap in knowledge regarding how they fit strategically was often described as due to a lack of communication and education between SOCOMD and other agencies and government.

“Government needs to have a greater understanding of what they do; there is currently limited government knowledge” (External stakeholder)

“SOCOMD would benefit from an exposé to other government departments on what they do i.e. DFAT; i.e. adding to consular planning. There needs to be two way education; AFP liaison network could add to SOCOMD” (External stakeholder)

“I could honestly say I don’t have a feel for what Special Forces would do ... I understand what they’re doing at the pointy end so I understand when they’re, I certainly have a feel for operational deployments, I have a feel for what they can do in a crisis situation, that sort of thing. In terms of what sits behind that I just assume that they’ve got strategic planning and training (laughs) and things in place and a sense of direction of where they’re heading.” (External stakeholder)

“So I guess the question I would have is how much of what they do is being rolled into this whole sense of the strategic future that we’re looking at the moment, where there’s global power shifts with China and those sort of things but there’s also a real change in the way that non-state actors are playing in the world. So does their strategic planning and things that they’re looking at fit into those shifts in global power. I don’t have a feel for that, I just assume that they’re going to be across it.” (External stakeholder)

There was a perception that SF personnel generally have a limited broader or strategic perspective on the ADO and its roles and responsibilities as an agency within the whole of the machinery of Government. Further, it was felt that SF leaders and inter-agency representatives had a limited appreciation for the importance of whole of government strategic and political acumen and savvy required at that level.

“I think being on operations for a long time has probably been a good thing for them, because it’s helped develop capability, and a lot of high end capability. But from a cultural point of view I probably have felt that with doing it all in Afghanistan, that they started to forget that the world doesn’t revolve around them, there’s actually a broader context within which we’re doing operations. And there were a couple of instances I think towards the end of the time where it started to become obvious, they felt that they were probably, not more important than they really are, but forgetting the fact that they’re a part of a broader organisation.” (Internal stakeholder)

“It’s this constant pushing, pushing, pushing, pushing. Now they all say, ‘Well we understand the operational environment and we’re seeing opportunities and rah-rah-rah.’ The government doesn’t want opportunities; the government wants its intent met. And if the CDF puts some bounds around things, then just accept the bounds that are put around things and get on with it, stop pushing all the time, because all it does is undermine, ultimately it undermines confidence. ... There’s a number of, you know, ways that they do business, they’ve got to have ‘the bag’, and ‘I’m not wearing a uniform’, and give me a break, you know? If they could come in with pixelated faces, they would.” (Internal stakeholder)

“They think they’re very strategic, but actually they’re not at times. Some of them are ... but there’s, you know, it’s this constant pressure of trying to push and push and push which actually, what they don’t realise, is it actually alienates senior decision makers because everything they say is viewed through the lens of “what are you trying to achieve?”, not “how are you trying to contribute to the mission that we’ve given you?”. Rather it’s what’s the hidden agenda here? Where is the opportunity for SOCOMD to do more or you know to show how important they are?” (Internal stakeholder)

“So I guess just in terms of professionalism, they’re professional at what they do, but one of the concerns or issues from the [external agency] perspective that we often get is when things go wrong in theatre ... how do we manage that? They are good at what they do but they can’t do everything. There are some things they are just not trained in. So when, or if, something goes wrong, it can get messy very quickly. They don’t necessarily have the political savvy to handle a foreign policy issue for example. It’s very different from a civilian context to what they’re use to when they’re at war.” (External stakeholder)

“The military are good at knocking things down, not so good at negotiation.” (External stakeholder)

“Junior [SOF] people don’t have good political antenna yet are placed in positions to take political risks. Captains and Majors have not had training necessarily to understand for example what cabinet might be prepared to tolerate as far as foreign policy. They know zip!” (External stakeholder)

“They have this particular, I guess, personality as a part of the Defence Organisation ... so ... which in some cases sort of is about being distinct and being aloof and so forth from the rest of ... you know, and I suspect at times that will be a limitation. I mean the very thing that makes them potent is also the thing that perhaps can make them the odd person out in the room. And I think that’s exactly the double-edged nature of it.” (External stakeholder)

There were perceived barriers to authentic jointery for SOCOMD, most often described as seeing themselves as outside (or as bigger) than the Defence enterprise. How command and control relationships between SOCOMD and other decision bodies (i.e. FORCOMD, AHQ, JOC, and NSC) can be modernised or better defined and transformed to meet emerging issues was described as reliant on developing a coherent and holistic narrative:

“... So I think one of the things that the Command needs to sell, is it needs to sell the capability as a package, and the capability is not about the shooter, the capability is about the effect, and everyone being able to contribute to that side. And that’s part of the bit that we’ve kind of struggled with in that narrative.” (SOF Insider)

Sotto Voce

Noteworthy was while influential external stakeholders generally had a positive outlook and perception of the Australian SOF community and capability, there was an undertone of a *sotto voce*: ‘but...’ very close to the surface. Unpacking the reasons for this ‘but...’ with any degree of fidelity was not possible by analysing the interview comments from this group alone. Insight into some of the assertions is given further on in the report when taken into context with comments from internal stakeholders and SOF insiders. In addition, how external perceptions could be informed by broader public discourse on SOF is explored later in this chapter.

The below selection of quotes point to a genre of vague comments made during interviews. Often they were made at the conclusion of the interview, were made in loosely veiled ‘jest’, or were qualified with assertions that their perception or anecdote was undoubtedly out of date and had limited currency in the current environment. The interviewee rarely offered up further particulars. These comments were made with such regularity across interviews that they warranted further consideration. They alluded to issues of trust of and within the command, elitism and exclusivity, of a history of lack of accountability, and ultimately a dysfunctional organisational culture.

“SOCOMD are impacted by personalities of leadership; there can be an over eagerness. ... There have been times when SOCOMD would come and see us separately and would say ‘don’t tell CA just yet, but we think there’s an opportunity over in [location]’. Tensions emerge when that’s not calibrated right. Probably doesn’t happen now. I don’t know. But yeah, it makes you wonder.” (External stakeholder)

“There are deeper more subtle issues; something in the psychology of it all.” (External stakeholder)

“They don’t need to be put in their place or anything, but they just haven’t been subjected to the same scrutiny as the rest of the organisation.” (External stakeholder)

“It’s more gripped up now, not as much scope for freelancing. They do see themselves as the right tool for every job though and they go job hunting. It was mostly at the Major and Captain level...makes defence hierarchy look like monkeys.” (External stakeholder)

“The environment is changing but there is a need to reinforce their [SOCOMD’s] strategic trust at senior political levels and senior Defence levels that they are not going to go off the reservation.” (External stakeholder)

“They need to be purer than the driven snow, if and when they do get opportunities.” (External stakeholder)

“Angus [Campbell] is in a good position to grip this up. ... Need to have a few hanging offences, I think, to really send the message.” (External stakeholder)

“They [Army] need a solid period of mainstream, responsible leadership. It will be vitally important who comes after Angus [Campbell], and after Jeff [Sengelman].” (External stakeholder)

“Ex SOCOMD leaders have told me to ‘watch SOCOMD’... its alarming that’s their view. You think – what the hell is going on in there?” (External stakeholder)

“Well the big story of the decade’s been all of those deployments into Afghanistan and I think it has changed the organisation in some ways. It’s probably started to reinforce some of their own myths of specialness and ... I think you know, it’s also produced a harder, less flexible organisation a bit too sold on its own propaganda.” (External stakeholder)

The construction of knowledge of SOF

How external perceptions of SOCOMD have been informed largely depends on stakeholders direct exposure to the Command, or elements within it. Many of the external participants interviewed had not had any such exposure. The experiences of colleagues and peers are no doubt shared in and across external agencies, particularly if they are negative or reinforce an already dominant discourse. While exploring that possibility was out of scope for the present study, another powerful knowledge gateway – stories of SOF in the media – was able to be explored.

SOF in the media

For an organisation that is often defined by secrecy it is surprising how often SF have featured in the mainstream media over the last decade or so. This has been both intentional – numerous autobiographies from ex-soldiers; publicity around Victoria Cross (VC) and Medal for Gallantry winners, and far from it – allegations, reports of misconduct and investigations have emerged regularly into the public arena.

As one interviewee wryly mused:

“You’ve heard the one about the pilot flying a commercial plane over Afghanistan? He announces to the passengers over the intercom: ‘and if you look to your left you’ll see we are flying over Afghanistan, and all those little lights are the open laptops of our special forces soldiers, hiding in their fox holes, writing their memoirs’.” (Internal stakeholder)

Another interviewee described the transition from “strategic invisibility to strategic visibility” when referring to the rate of self-publicity that SF had generated. There have been at least 20 books published since 2009 (listed in Appendix Two), and while few are endorsed by Army, that point is of little salience when publicity machines take over.

These autobiographies reinforce the dominant discourse of SF as ‘warrior elite’, ‘tough’, ‘extreme’, ‘secretive’, as ‘heroes’, ‘extraordinary’ and ‘amazing’. Rarely do they delve into organisational culture beyond the hyper masculine, Alpha male discourse. Rather they act only to add to the mystique and ‘specialness’.

An alternative narrative can be found when looking at stories featuring SF that were not intentional. Since 2000¹⁴ allegations of, at one end ‘unacceptable behavior’ and ‘skylarking’ and at the other, a lack of respect for human life and dignity, ‘death squads’, war crimes, cover-ups and botched investigations. (See Appendix Three for an overview of examples).

Of concern is that when you aggregate these ‘weak signals’¹⁵, they point to a consistent pattern of unacceptable behavior and dysfunctional culture. This is explored further in Chapter Four on reputation and risk.

There was a perception from inside SOF that the ‘lid’ was firmly fixed on some of their internal tensions. On the contrary, it seems that there is public knowledge of some of these issues, that continue to have implications for how the Command is perceived.

Visibility of internal tensions

Internal tensions within the command were described by interviewees as far more visible than Army would like to think. ‘Tensions’ referred to the dysfunctional relationship between Commandos and SASR, and will be explored in more detail in the following chapters.

“So when I was in Afghanistan I had 25 different countries working for me, 2,500 folks, I had 5,000 Afghan partners, they were all a little bit different in their own way, but I tell you, they all knew how bad the SOTG was in terms of the relationships internal. They all knew. Even the Afghans knew.” (SOF Insider)

“People [SOF] go out and they deal with the other organisations, they bag each other out, they air their dirty laundry. And it reminds me a little bit of the sort of early 2000 relationship, particularly Second Gulf War, 2003/04, the relationship between SBS and 22 SAS in the U.K. They had a lot of problems.” (SOF Insider)

“I think they’re [SOF] pretty forward-leaning in terms of pushing themselves forward. I mean I haven’t had so much of an issue with that., One thing I would say in the spirit of being sort of frank and fearless ... is that I think one of the things that we find is that some of the sort of creative tensions and competitive rivalries within the Defence Organisation sometimes get played out externally to partners and so ... you know we sometimes hear some of that criticism coming from within the Defence Organisation itself.” (External stakeholder).

There is little doubt that these stories - of reported or alleged misconduct and internal organisational issues - seep their way into the consciousness of both Government and the public, and go some way to explain the *sotto voce*; the ‘but’ when describing SOCOMD’s capability and role.

One interviewee summarised the knowledge he had gained from SOF in the mainstream media:

“SO are like bikie gangs, defining themselves by their outsiders; by exclusion and exclusivity. ... It’s seen as a black art – mission focused, obscure all ills; very disciplined in the combat environment yet rules are ambiguous, bent and broken.” (External stakeholder)

While this may just be a ‘perception’, a senior SOF insider reflected:

“And it doesn’t matter, a perception is, as we know, is as good as truth. And then occasionally there are things that happen that reinforce it, but that doesn’t mean it happens all the time.” (SOF Insider)

The overall picture emerging from external perceptions of SOCOMD’s capability, role and remit, is complex and multi-faceted. Influential external stakeholders from ministers to

¹⁴ The researcher only examined media from 2000 onwards due to time constraints..

¹⁵ Mendonca, S, Cardoso, G & Caraca, J (2012) ‘The strategic strength of weak signal analysis’ in *Futures* 44(3) p218-228 accessed at <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0016328711002564>

senior bureaucrats acknowledge SOCOMD provide an outstanding capability at the tactical 'pointy' end of operations, but have varied and contradictory understandings of its role and capability. Knowledge of what SOCOMD does is, on the whole, broad-brush and there are apparent and widespread gaps in knowledge. The ambiguous 'sotto voce' allusions to limitations recurred in discussions.

Despite its defining secrecy, SOCOMD's mixed presentation in the media – as heroes and as hooligans clearly has an impact on stakeholder impressions and may underpin their disquiet.

Evidently views are mixed on the question of whether SOCOMD may have a greater role to play in counterterrorism. There is no clear vision for how SOCOMD should be strategically positioned to better support national interests, and a perception that SOCOMD personnel similarly had little grasp of other agency roles, including in the ADO, or a well developed political or strategic perspective.

The perception that SOCOMD needs to do more to communicate and sell its capability and openness to two-way exchanges to improve mutual knowledge may provide opportunities to build understanding and influence in the future. However, building trust may also involve answering the concerns and reservations expressed.

A clearer picture of some of the underpinning tensions and limitations associated with SOCOMD will emerge in the following chapters.

3. The identity and role of Australian SOF

Several characteristics are broadly attributed to the Australian Special Forces (SF) capability and community, and seem to be the dominant features of the identity or *brand* of SF. These are not outliers, but are relatively consistently held perceptions by both internal and external stakeholders at the senior (strategic) level.

These include:

- That Australian SF are exceptionally good at what they do in their own lane, and that there are none better;
- That they are custodians of a recognised and respected ‘high-end premium capability’;
- That they see themselves outside (or as bigger) than the Defence enterprise;
- That SF personnel generally have a limited broader or strategic perspective on the ADO and its roles and responsibilities as an agency within the whole of the machinery of Government;
- That their leaders and inter-agency representatives have a limited appreciation for the importance of whole of government strategic and political acumen and savvy required at that level;
- That SF advisors and liaison officers are more akin to enthusiastic touters and hawkers (and sometimes rogue freelancers) who think that they are ‘the right tool for every job’;
- That they push the limits of their legitimate mandate and/or authority to a wearisome extent;
- That they can’t be trusted as they have afforded themselves low levels of corporate and personal accountability;
- That most if not all of their transgressions and ‘sins’ are generally well hidden from view and are forgiven and buried swiftly when surfaced; and
- That the very characteristics that give them their strengths are also their greatest weakness.

SOF are situated as *elite* and *exclusive*, much to the annoyance of the broader ADO:

“It’s grown up over time that they forget they’re a part of Army, I think ... so I think they see themselves different to Army, and they are, they have a different skill set, but it doesn’t mean that they’re not a part of Army, you know ... it depends on the Special Forces leadership, to understand and reinforce that they’re a part of the organisation.” (Internal stakeholder)

In a visit to an SO base during the data collection period for this study one junior officer, when asked by the investigator (SC) if he would ever return to an infantry unit, remarked “*No way! The rules here are just different. I could never go back*”.

Rather than a definitive identity some argued that there was a distinct lack of both an identity and a culture, and that this was the root cause of organisational problems:

“... everyone has different views about what an SF soldier should be. There’s the Hollywood view, there’s the internal dynamic view, there’s the view based on benchmarking against broader SOF organisations, which I think has contributed to part of the problems within SO Command, i.e. benchmarks against what the Brits have done, or the U.S. did, or whatever, we took the bits we wanted to take, as opposed to taking an organisational view.” (SOF Insider)

SOF may conjure up different images to different people – but as noted in the preceding chapter, for many outsiders, including external stakeholders as revealed through interviews, it is an image associated exclusively or mainly with the SAS(R) – the Special Air Services Regiment (jumping out of helicopters behind borders etc.). However SOCOMD, established in 2003, incorporates not only SASR, but Special Operations HQ, 1st Commando Regiment, 2nd Commando Regiment (2CDO), Special Operations Engineer Regiment, Special Operations Logistics Squadron, Special Forces Training Centre and the Parachute Training School.

The lack of awareness that many external stakeholders have about the range of units that make up SOCOMD is consistent with their lack of in depth understanding of the role and capability. This association of SASR with SOF (and not other units) is significant – and also features in internal tensions and rivalries which quickly manifested during discussions for this study.

To the external observer, SOCOMD does not seem to ‘Command, Lead and Manage’, and more crucially, impartially advocate on behalf of a whole of capability, based on the discipline of a well understood and coherent capability framework. The perceived lack of a coherently articulated or well-understood SOF capability narrative is symptomatic of this void.

There appears to be at least three factors that have contributed to this. Firstly, the intense rivalry between the two dominant units within the command – SASR and 2CDO; secondly, the invisibility and disrespect experienced by SO enablers; and thirdly, the marketing and protecting of the SOF, or rather SASR, brand at the expense of ‘brand SF’. The following analysis details the visibility of the internal tensions to external stakeholders, and the implications of this for SOCOMD being an effective strategic actor.

SASR vs Commando

There is, without doubt, incredible conflict, tension, mistrust and dislike between SASR and Commandos (CDOs). This theme has clearly been communicated by interviewees who, at various times, have described the relationship as being almost completely broken down. The prevailing view seems to be that the SAS operatives have a collective belief that *‘all Commandos are failed SAS try-outs, and given half a chance they would rather be in SAS’*. This message seems to be reinforced by all levels of the SOF community from influential leaders to the lowest level of operators. The most telling comments have been from people on the periphery of this community who have to deal with the dysfunctional fallout resulting from these tensions, such as duplication of effort, lack of administrative efficiency, wasted resources, poor governance and ultimately reputation damage.

Some interviewees emphasised that a significant proportion of Commando personnel deliberately chose to be a Commando over an SAS operative as they are more drawn to the characteristics required of a CDO capability element, chief among which is a sense of collectivism (as opposed to the individualism of the SAS operatives). There is a view that these traits in CDOs manifest themselves in being a part of and being more reliant on a team of people. The significant consequence of this tension seems to be erosion in, and suboptimal delivery of SOF capability outcomes to Defence and ultimately Government.

One SOF Insider eloquently described the internal dynamics as ‘like an Indian caste system’, where SAS are ‘at the top’ and enablers are the ‘untouchables’. Extending this metaphor, the interviewee further explained:

“And when they put a guy in the leadership team, in the Command, who wasn’t SF at all – *at all* - my god it was like an untouchable was sitting at the high table at a Brahman wedding!”
(SOF Insider)

“So the big thing here is that it’s still a federation in as much there is still this tension between the Commandos and SAS and it’s frankly destructive. So you know, the Commandos look at everyone else and go ‘who the fuck are you?’ SAS look at Commandos and go ‘who the fuck are you?’ and there is just this tension between the two. I do work in both areas, but ridiculously I am not allowed to tell the West about what we are doing here and the West don’t want to the East to know what they are doing. Anyone can clearly see, if they collaborated, there would be huge capability gains and efficiencies.” (SOF Insider)

“This (tension) seems to be deeply, deeply, entrenched in the Command and just, you know everyone goes ‘mmm that’s the way it is’.” (SOF Insider)

“I remember the first time we all saw the new SOCAUST, so General Sengelman had his Commando wings on ... and one of my colleagues says to me ‘oh well I don’t respect him anymore if he is wearing Commando wings’, wow ... I think, you are a Major, if that is what you think then where are the rest of us to go?” (SOF Insider)

“... everyone knows about the tension ... something simple like exercise Talisman Saber, just painful, completely, so they are at different ends of Darwin, which is not a huge sprawling metropolis, but its enough, and to my knowledge there wasn’t one planning group between them ... well if you ask SAS they’ll say its because there’s so many Commandos who tried the SAS selection course, didn’t get through, therefore did the Commandos, so they are not as good.” (SOF Insider).

“So the Squadron and Company commanders are the same vintage, they all know each other. But from what I see there is no respect between the two. No respect. So they’ll be civil to each other. They’ll even invite each other to their weddings but behind close doors, ‘oh, Commando, what can you expect’ and until we get rid of that I don’t think you are going to change it.” (SOF Insider).

The attitudes toward each other permeate to the treatment of others in the organisation, setting a pattern of behavior that is deemed acceptable:

“So, yeah, we had plenty of our own issues, and I spent a lot of time with my own leadership, and my own commandos, saying again, ‘Fellas, you know, there’s a few of you who have started to ... you’ve grown beyond the underdog status, again you had the confidence because you know what you’re capable of, your ability to hold that in check is part of your strength, but when you start being a dickhead, or like them, and then treating the Reserve commandos for example, or the engineers, the way you’ve been treated, then you’re no better’.” (SOF Insider)

“They were reasonably good at self regulating, but we had our share of those people who were no different in terms of that antagonising behaviour, or the undermining commentary. It just wasn’t on the same scale. I think the commandos still had the memory of how they were treated. It’s still very, very raw, and so in the main it was kept in better check, and in moderate terms there was probably a high level of professionalism, and a lower level of rock star status demonstrated, because no-one was necessarily reinforcing it, unlike SAS where everyone’s reinforcing it.” (SOF Insider)

“You know all the relationships, and barriers, would all then permeate throughout the organisation, to either then facilitate the sustainment of that paradigm, or corrupt the potential of the whole thing. And it’s tragic, because for so long our greatest enemy has been ourselves.” (SOF Insider)

There was a sense from some that concerns had been repeatedly dismissed by the leadership.

“I got to a point where I sort of said to [senior officer], ‘Sir, this is borderline out of control. We need to basically zero the relationship. We’ve talked about this is the stuff I’m getting from overseas, from my U.S. counterparts, my U.K. counterparts, this is what’s coming through the Operator network, you know all these things are equal, SO Command looks like shit, our two units have basically made a mockery of it, which is something that SAS and SBS

use to be remembered for, and we weren't. And basically we need to basically zero it up'." (SOF Insider)

An alternative viewpoint was provided by one SOF Insider who pointed to a lack of leadership rather than cultural tensions between the two units as the overwhelming organisational issue. This is explored in the next chapter.

The invisibility of SO enablers

Closely mirroring the above-mentioned notion of us versus them between SAS and CDOs, appears a theme where the support and enabling functions of the SOF community are not valued for the capabilities they provide. Noteworthy is that in all of the interviews at all levels, there was a complete exclusion and invisibility of the Reserve SOF element in 1 CDO Regiment. While the interview sample for the support and enabler elements was limited, the resulting analysis clearly depicts an organisation that culturally, behaviorally and structurally (pay, conditions and employment policy) is set up to value the 'pointy end' and systematically and commensurately devalue the enablers.

"It's nothing to do with the role. Infantry guys don't join SAS and Commandos because they don't want to, they want to be a part of that big Army team, they don't want to operate in a small group, they wanna be with their platoons, their companies. But they don't want to be treated like third class citizens. And that's created a tension." (SOF Insider)

"It's not going to change [us vs them tension] unless the headquarters can actually do some commanding. Do some leading. They are not the commanders on the ground but they shouldn't just be acting as a sort of filter, they should lead. They don't provide the direction and, until the headquarters provides the direction, the units are just gonna crack on doing exactly what they want." (SOF Insider)

"Commandos aren't as bad as SASR, you know, they aren't as elitist. We've had SAS who won't let our guys touch their bags. It's ridiculous. We are here to support, that's our job and we are ok with that. But we are not ok with being treated like lepers." (SOF insider)

Marketing and protecting 'Brand SAS' at the cost of 'Brand Australian SOF'

Another emerging theme was that the Australian SOF 'brand' was synonymous with the SAS 'brand'. Interview participants emphasised that the dominant and influential players in the SOF community have invariably been SAS alumni. Accordingly, they have always seen the SOF capability from those lived experiences and vantage points. This is seen as slowly changing with the increase of the number of CDO officers at the senior leadership as well as planning HQ levels. That said, a damaging consequence of this phenomenon is seen as a widely held belief by the CDO fraternity that SOCOMD and successive SOCAUSTs have been pre occupied with protecting 'Brand SAS', hence the reluctance and inability to reform and evolve SOCOMD into a contemporary and strategically informed and aligned capability.

"No one in and of themselves I think is 100%, you know, the factual basis of Commands issues and culture. I've come to the conclusion that human systems are inherently complex, and our blessing is our curse in so far as you've got highly intelligent, highly driven, outcomes focused men and women – predominantly men of course, alpha males – who have generated a capability from a traditional baseline of alpha male type, you know we need to go in there and, at all cost, you know win, achieve the mission, and we do that by a combination of guile, encouraging audacity, and hopefully intellect.

And there have been times in the past when those first two were far more dominant than the last one, intellect. I think we are starting to see a sort of shift in that paradigm, but in and of itself it's not become the dominant character or component. If it did, then I think we'd probably see a greater balance in terms of perceptions of capabilities across the Command, because for too long – and of course you know strength is our

weakness – but for too long the tribalism, and the parochialism, and the opinion of what capability is and is not has undermined SO Command’s ability to be the sum of its parts.” (SOF Insider)

“We’ve got an Australian leadership who has half an idea, right, and they’re comfortable that you’re kicking goals, keep going. You’ve got a SOCAUST who’s trying to keep a lid on everything, and again keep it on the rails, who’s also driven by his own opinion. You’ve got some who are more to the centre, some who are just SAS all the way, and some who are not. And I don’t like to give a grey answer, but at any one time I could pick a number of different variables. The constants were though, that those who came from the SAS fraternity and that only, were fiercely protective of it.” (SOF Insider)

“We had leaders who were the product of their upbringing, and you know up until essentially General Sengelman, almost all the pre-leadership had lived an SAS existence, from start to finish. All great and eminent men, all strong minded, big opinions, big ideas, some who had a greater belief in the sum of parts than others, but none of them cracked the code, and I don’t think any of them really wanted to. I think some of those leaders were borderline criminal in their approach, and their parochialism was worn so obviously on their sleeve that it completely undermined the capability. When a private soldier, you know a private or trooper can tell you what that person’s about, how they behave, what they’re not doing, and how there is an imbalance, you know you’ve got a problem.” (SOF Insider)

One of the key insights arising from this chapter on SOF identity and role is that while both external and internal stakeholders may have a clear set of characteristics that they associate with SOF, this does not necessarily (if at all) correspond with characteristics applying to the whole of SOCOMD. It is important to bear this in mind when examining such descriptions/ characteristics and what they mean for the capability as a whole. For some, evidently it is a subset of SOCOMD being described, namely SASR. This is clearly the case for the external stakeholders who basically associate SASR with the expression SOF. For others it may be a broader collective, although there remains a degree of obscurity around this.

The internal tensions that were revealed, and perceptions of rivalry and privilege, in which certain regiments are more highly valued (whether objectively, in their own estimation, or in the perceptions of those who feel less valued – or all these) are all serious issues for the performance of SOCOMD as a joint capability. Furthermore, there is little doubt, as the interview data suggests, that these have affected the image projected into the wider WoG security community.

4. Reputation and risk

Issues of reputation and risk that were raised by interview participants are outlined in this chapter and describe issues of leadership, accountability and trust. Importantly they also describe some of the frustrations from internal stakeholders.

Accountability and trust

A number of internal interviewees spoke extensively about issues of accountability and trust in SOCOMD. However, the tenor of the conversation had two very distinct forms. The first was centered on accountability with regard to policy, process and governance failures. That is to say that there were (and arguably still are) a pattern of concerning practices that do not conform to the level of accountability and compliance required of a Defence unit or organisation. Loss of weapons, unacceptable WHS practices, poor audit results, injudicious and wasteful practices in resources management, less than transparent and/or compliant acquisition practices are but a few such failures alluded to. However, interviewees were also quick to point out that a new remediation directive by DCA to SOCAUST (2015) may result in some good changes.

Secondly, and more concerning was the emergence of yet another *sotto voce* accountability, and trust factor around unacceptable behaviour. Like the previously mentioned ‘but...’ phenomenon, this was concerning as there was no ‘on the record’ defensible evidence that could be used to pin point the sentiment. However, in other ways, it could be reasonably triangulated (for example multiple media stories). It seemed in the main to allude to a disturbing pattern of unacceptable behaviour and practices committed by SOF personnel centered around alcohol and drug use, domestic violence, unsanctioned and illegal application of violence on operations, disregard for human life and dignity, and ultimately a perception, at times, of complete lack of accountability.

“... you know, that (being bigger than the enterprise outside it) manifests itself in things on operations, and things that were happening over in Campbell Barracks as well, with the audits that went through the missing weapons, all sorts of things that were happening. And it appeared lip service was being given to some things, and people weren’t taking things as serious as they should have, again feeling like there’s less accountability for day to day stuff because we’re the frontend Force.” (Internal stakeholder)

“I think someone once said to me ‘Special Forces, love them like brothers, watch them like children’”. (Internal stakeholder)

“... they cannot help themselves, they’re not content with being given a role, go off and *just* do that role”. (Internal stakeholder)

“So you know I think it all comes down to this, you know it comes down to one word, it comes down to *special*, and that actually is the root of many of the cultural issues – we’re special in what we do, we’re different, we’re better, therefore the rules don’t apply to us and we can basically do what we like.” (Internal stakeholder)

“I know there were over the last 15 years some horrendous things. Some just disgraceful things happened in Kabul ... very bad news, or just inappropriate behavior, but it was pretty much kept under wraps. It was only when a few things kind of leaked out last year, a couple of people’s lives unraveled pretty quickly. But they have been very good at keeping a lid on it and not, by and large, exposing what’s happening within the SOCOMD banner to the rest of Army.” (SOF Insider)

“I think it was a lot about protecting people as well, as in, this has always happened so therefore who’s just fucked up, or I did that so I can’t ... I did that when I was there three years ago, so I really can’t discipline him. There is a lot of that, this is what we have always done. ...” (SOF Insider)

“I don’t mind the banter, but underneath that banter is a broader issue, and I think the real issue is concern about compliance with what is seen as important, versus compliance with everything. So the SO perspective would be, ‘We’ll comply with what is important,’ and this was the case, and I think it’s changing, I know it’s changing because I’ve seen people being sacked and stuff like that now,. There is less of the ‘Hey, I don’t need to comply with not drinking here, because I’m from SO, and I’ll get away with it’.” (SOF Insider)

The reputation of the prevailing dominant identity of SOCOMD was reflected poorly in many comments from influential internal stakeholders. It is important to note that these same interview participants spoke very highly of the SOCOMD capability and the efforts that the command was going to in order to address some organisational issues.

The below comments are representative of some of the negative perceptions described to the interviewer.

“Sometimes they over-reach on the domestic side. It reflects SOCOMDs culture.”

“They have an over eagerness to be involved more internationally and it should be constrained.”

“I think very highly of their capability ... but they have become the spoilt kid in the family and there needs to be some resetting.”

“They have a propensity to get to politicians, to abuse their access to power, and I’m sick of it.”

“They use being close to power for their own end. It’s an abuse of power. It’s infuriating.”

“It is layers down the chain who are the problem. They take advantage of access and self promotion; it says something about the culture.”

“It takes a lot for SF to keep their feet on the ground.”

“Go back to first principles – should we assume it’s the best/they are the best?”

“It’s been a mentality of ‘bury your own’.”

What began as a sotto voce of concern, and was barely, but consistently, articulated by external stakeholders, when further elaborated by internal stakeholders and SOF insiders, often off the record, reached a crescendo which it is impossible to ignore – especially when combined with the internal tensions and dysfunction discussed in the preceding chapter. Although the SOCOMD capability is clearly admired and valued by outsiders and insiders, its reputation is being tarnished even if the precise dimensions of the stain are difficult to discern. It is difficult to imagine that it does not result in suboptimal capability and it clearly poses risks that go much deeper given the sensitive nature of the work that is undertaken in the field and its implications for national security.

The suppression or limited visibility of the kinds of problems alluded to (and spilling occasionally into the press) may have an operational justification (impossible to establish for the purposes of this study), but there is little doubt that it has spilled into the consciousness of external partners. It conceivably limits willingness to contemplate an expanded role for SOCOMD in domestic counterterrorism or other strategic areas relevant to national security.

5. The culture of SOCOMD

Historical shaping agents of SOF

As explained in Chapter Three, SOCOMD is made up of a number of SOF units which do not have a unified sense of identity. SOCOMD was established in 2003, but fully operational only in 2007. It is modelled on the equivalent commands in the US and British militaries. Although SOCOMD is relatively new, the Australian military has included a range of special forces and special operations units since 1941, each with distinctive cultures and histories.

SASR was formed in 1957, originally modelled mainly on the British SAS, drawing on a range of WWII unit and company experiences. From that point the capability essentially existed and grew inside an isolated bubble in Perth. It evolved in a somewhat fragmented and piecemeal fashion in response to extant and plausible threats, as opposed to by recourse to any deliberately planned and executed strategy. This ad hoc development pattern seemed to have continued with the formation of the full time Commando capability firstly through the re-raising of 4 RAR through to its re-badging as the 2nd CDO Regiment.

Some interviewees outlined in great detail how the CDO capability was grown in an ad-hoc manner and never as a part of a planned capability. Some described it as a difficult birth that produced a *'red-headed step-child who no one wanted or loved'*. History seemed destined to be repeated in that without clear direction and left to its own devices, the CDOs evolved in a manner, form and function of their own making. It was widely believed among this group that this unplanned genesis had led to duplication of capability rather than a suite of complimentary and strategically informed and aligned SOF capabilities.

“Now whether they had the vision of doing Special Ops Command, or you know greater Special Forces capability, or something else, I don't know. But I do know that when we came into being, even though there was a fairly eloquent paper written, which, when you go back to it, actually did a reasonably good job of saying this is what commandos probably should be to start off with, the execution was anything but that. So again, the resources weren't put in there, and I think the passion was just not there.

And this is important I think to go over in part, because it gives you references or cues to some of the reasons why we are where we are today. So in '97 you could have taken two approaches, you could have said to SAS, 'You've got an opportunity to grow your little brother basically in the image that is ultimately mutually beneficial to you, set the conditions for your own growth and development, because they might come through you to them, and they will enable your operations, and it'll be a holistic system.' There's a logic in that. But from the beginning SAS actually said, 'Perhaps they're trash, the misfits of their, particularly their NCO.'” (SOF Insider)

“The way they began, it gave, you know, they established this sort of underdog status, and it gave them a degree of freedom because, hey, there's nowhere further to go than down here. So the unit, I think, started building itself, and of course it had to adapt.

So all through those experiences there were mistakes, and there were failures or faults, and issues. But in experiencing that environment, you know the commandos built up a degree of their own resilience, and their own unique character and culture and capability. Now you can imagine that over in SAS land, some of that grated.” (SOF Insider)

“When I look at the reason why we are where we are today, it's because our start point, which is when SAS ... well it was basically '97, so when we started to professionalise the modern Special Operations community, and it wasn't about SAS and a couple of enablers on the east coast, it was the fact we just did it wrong, and the vision was myopic, and then we

never nurtured. And then we did carry that through to varying degrees with the advent of the Instant Response Regiment Special Ops Engineers, the Parachute Training School, and in the Special Ops Logistics Squadron, SFTC – another one – SFTC was created under Training Command, it wasn't even a Special Ops asset, you know, that took a while to arrest control. Again, this de-synchronised, unbalanced, inequitable growth, and meant that at each stage it had to build from the inside out within each of those stovepipes, while everyone sort of fought a shadow war of attrition against the others for either dominance, or narrative, or limited resources, or other things.” (SOF Insider)

The rivalry discussed in Chapter Three and further elaborated in the interviewee accounts above, can be seen as at least in part a consequence of the separate, ad hoc evolution of the different units. They have not been designed deliberately to compliment each other or prevent duplication. They have been brought together under a single SOCOMD umbrella, in different geographic locations, each with a strong separate sense of their own identity and values sans a centrally aligned purpose. Their adoption into a single family is at best a work in progress and it seems apparent that considerable time and effort will be required to build a more productive sibling relationship and mutual respect based on a unified common purpose.

Selection and commitment

Many SOF insiders described the SAS and Commando selection processes as one of the most influential elements of their culture. Langford (2014) summarises its effect:

“An intimate bond among those who belong to the selected group is generated through shared hardship and danger. This sense of separation from the military mass encourages the emergence of SF units that are more akin to militant clans than military organisations. If unchecked, arrogance or aloofness bred from a cult of elitism develops and nurtures an ‘in group’ mentality that tends to be dangerously inwardly focused. The group then trusts only those who have passed the rigorous selection standards and tests. These negative aspects often arise from an emphasis on the exclusivity of the ‘warrior cult’ and nurtures an unassailable belief that ‘only those who have done it know, or can be trusted, or more dangerously yet, can give direction’. In order to defeat this organizational challenge... SF commanders must emphasise self-discipline and hierarchy; they must prioritise the group over the individual, and use specific rituals and symbols to convey important meanings and transitions.” (2014:31)

One SOF Insider explains some of the less than ideal characteristics he sees as correlating to Type A personalities:

“It's [the culture] a product of the journey. And you can anchor the journey in SO Command's journey, then overlay it with operations continuously since '98, and then probably coloured or flavoured it by generational shift. So you know I'm of the belief that again it goes with the Type A personality we consistently recruit, who have some addictive qualities anyway, which again is sometimes why they're so determined, so committed, and they're so extreme in their method of living, and hence why they'll smash through barriers, where others would falter.

When you've obviously lived literally that high octane lifestyle, where you've got the power of God, and you come home victorious again and again and again, I think there is a correlation with both coping, but also then the sustainment of that high, and the fact that, 'yeah I'll take ecstasy, cocaine, heroine, whatever, that's cool, I'm in control, I can stop when I want.' Or 'Hey, that's helping me keep up with everyone else, because I'm feeling a bit busted now, I'm a bit tired.' Or 'I'm not sleeping well, and the combination of these things works. But I'm OK, because I can manage it'.” (SOF Insider)

Selection is elite and exclusionary and leaves limited room for diversity of skills, attitudes or gender.

“I used women on clandestine missions in [operation] because we needed them. And U.S. SOCOMD are using them for the same thing, too, because they need them. And if you’re going to go down more the discreet path, you know three blokes with big watches and beards doesn’t cut it too well.” (SOF Insider)

Leadership

There is a relatively widely held view that the difficulties within SOCOMD, meaning the dysfunctional relationship between SAS and CDOs, accountability and trust related issues, misuse of resources and ultimately lack of a coherent strategic vision, have all been as a result of a reluctance by the leadership to deal with the issues. There is a view that successive SOCAUSTs have fallen on the SAS loyalty side of the equation and have essentially disregarded the tell tale signs of the dysfunction. There is also a perception that senior well-placed alumni are now in positions of power and have a lot to lose, were the true extent, nature of and pervasiveness of the issues to publically surface.

“OK, so go back to the start: so there’s the units, so originally there was just SAS, no problem, you know landscape is clear, get on with the job. Introduced 4RAR (commando), create a higher headquarters with a bit more muscle, after having been beaten up over the Blackhawk crash, and then all of a sudden you’ve got competition, both a Headquarters that wants to control you more, and another unit on the block. And then as that unit evolves, hmm, they’re stealing our thunder, and it just created that classic rivalry.

And then through a number of factors, but ultimately I think inadequate leadership, it just perpetuated the problem, it didn’t solve the problem. SOCAUST should have solved this problem many years ago, but didn’t. Which comes back to the SOCOMD leadership style, about at a tactical level it’s all very matey/matey, which I think has gone too far, but we didn’t grow strong strategic leaders. So I think some early SOCAUSTs, my personal view, weren’t strong enough in providing organisational and institutional level leadership to really understand how to build a system of Special Operations and align the roles and responsibilities and the cultures to deliver the capability upwards – they just managed it. And that’s allowed the problems to perpetuate.” (SOF Insider)

“I know the story intimately, I now look at what’s happening now, and I’ve seen some quite entitled people in their beliefs and their behaviour, and quite frankly the problem has been a lack of leadership. It’s been buddy/buddy, we’re all mates, and we all call each other by our first names.” (SOF Insider)

“It is true to say that there is a rivalry between the units that at times potentially becomes unhealthy, but good leadership will fix that. You know, we have examples of where the units are integrated in training and producing good results. The real issue is that people are too lazy to analyse the real problem. Instead they default back to ‘oh it’s the tension between the units’. It’s bullshit. Leadership have just been too lazy, or preoccupied, to face it.

And where there are individuals who want to be antagonistic, that’s what you have leaders for. And what has been missing is the moral courage at the senior levels to do the right thing. And I mean I’m not going to name names. But I could. And the biggest weakness I have observed is the non-transparency in decisions regarding senior appointments, and the subsequent impacts that’s had on the organisation. So it’s a leadership problem, not a commando versus SAS thing, you know.” (SOF Insider)

“Army hasn’t owned this problem. This has been SOCOMD, sort it out; SAS, sort it out; commandos, sort it out. This has been, right from the outset, an Army problem, and Army hasn’t, in my view, provided the leadership to help it succeed, and/or you know help it resolve its problems, i.e. to help it succeed. And as a consequence Army has been tarnished in the process.” (SOF Insider)

Leadership context

During the interviews and research for this body of work it became apparent that when

people referred to SOF 'Leadership' they were referring to higher level leaders, i.e. SOCAUSTs, COs of SF Regiments, and at the lowest level perhaps Squadron Commanders. However, themes emerged in informal conversations conducted by the investigator with a broader group of stakeholders¹⁶ that pointed to a more stratified 'leadership context' in SOF organisations and especially SAS operatives working in small team patrols. That is to say, a 'Patrol Commander', who the investigator was led to believe is usually of a Sergeant rank, seems to have far more power, influence and agency on the behaviour of an SAS team and consequently the formation of a bottom up culture. The influence of a more 'senior' or 'strategic' leader in shaping the working culture of such an organisation may be limited.

Context and proximity of leaders to work situations, particularly where the work is of an extremely dangerous nature, seem to have more direct correlation with the leaders influence on their followers. The importance of leadership context has been analysed before and provides useful insight into possible drivers of behavior.

Osborne et al (2002) argue that leadership style, effectiveness and ultimately influence is "inextricably rooted in contexts"¹⁷. Leadership and its effectiveness, in large part are dependent upon this context. Change the context and leadership effectiveness changes. Sweeney (2010), found that soldiers would re-evaluate the level that they trusted their leaders and their leader's perceived level of competence prior to deploying on combat operations¹⁸. The context of leadership was changing prior to deploying on operations and thereby followers were entering into a context where they had higher level of 'outcome dependency' based on the behaviour of their leaders.

Hannah et al (2009) argue that extreme events give rise to extreme contexts in a leader-followership¹⁹. They define an extreme event as a "discrete episode or occurrence that may result in an extensive and intolerable magnitude of physical, psychological, or material consequence to or in close physical proximity to members of a group". This in turn gives rise to an extreme context where leadership is occurring in close proximity to this perceived or actual extremity, and thereby has a significant bearing on the leader-followership calculus. Others²⁰ have argued that a further micro context that needs to be considered is the phases of extreme event participation and the speed at which one can expect to move through this cycle, these phases being:

- Anticipation of involvement,
- Effective functioning in situ, and
- Post-hoc functioning.

The above analysis needs to be considered when causality for behaviour or cultural change/reinforcement within SOF is being evaluated or explained. It would be valid to conclude that a small SOF team finds itself in extreme contexts (danger/action/consequences) in a highly dynamic environment (fast cycles). In this instance, a highly credible, highly trusted and competent leader within very close proximity

¹⁶ For example ex-SOF personnel

¹⁷ Osborne, R, Hunt, J, & Jauch, L (2002). 'Toward a contextual theory of leadership' in *The Leadership Quarterly*, 13(6) p797-837

¹⁸ Sweeney, P. J. (2010). Do Soldiers reevaluate trust in their leaders prior to combat operations? *Military Psychology*, 22(S1), S70.

¹⁹ Hannah, S. T., Uhl-Bien, M., Avolio, B. J., & Cavarretta, F. L. (2009). A framework for examining leadership in extreme contexts. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 20(6), 897-919.

²⁰ Campbell, D. J., Hannah, S. T., & Matthews, M. D. (2010). Leadership in military and other dangerous contexts: Introduction to the special topic issue. *Military Psychology*, 22(1), 2-15.

would offer the best outcome for the whole group who finds themselves in a highly 'outcome dependent' operational context. It would therefore be valid to attribute disproportionately greater levels of influence to such a leader in a leader-follower interaction than one would to a more 'senior' leader within lesser proximity to the situation and context. Accordingly, it could be argued that the behavioural and therefore 'culture and climate' of the Australian SOF community is very much shaped, reinforced and cultivated by this relatively invisible group of very influential (and not necessarily greatly experienced) leaders:

“SAS has always been protected, in terms of what they can do, what they can get away with. I tell you what, I’d hate to be an officer going there now, with NCOs that have 12 to 15 operational tours, and a young captain who may not have any.” (SOF Insider)

Organisational change

A number of interview participants had suggestions for how organisational change could be accomplished:

“I think you’ve just got to come down like a, you know like a ton of bricks on the people who have been noncompliant and get rid of them. And you don’t need to get rid of very many. But at the moment, the officers have got away with it scot free.” (Internal stakeholder)

“I think the conditions are being set to change, but again it doesn’t guarantee change. So Jeff Sengelman, and the people he’s had working alongside him, are giving the Command the best chance of breaking the cycle. And I guess it’s like gravitational pull, I’m not convinced yet that we’ve got enough momentum to break the gravitational pull, because if the next SOCAUST comes in and is anti Jeff Sengelman, you know it’s fickle enough that he could reverse that.” (SOF Insider)

“You need somebody who can essentially disrupt the system through a discontinuity. I don’t think SOCAUST – I’d get shot for this – I don’t think necessarily SOCAUST needs to be from Special Forces. The Americans don’t. So the guy who was Commander U.S. SOCOMD, this is three or four years ago, now he’s a pilot, C-141 pilot, didn’t do any selection courses, he was all right, you know, because he’s selected for being a senior officer, not for being a dude who passed the SAS or commando selection course when they were 22.

...Because, if you’re good at your job, you should be OK. But promotion and success and two different things, and some people don’t realise that until it’s too late. They’ll give up success in order to get promoted, you know.” (SOF Insider)

“Depending on where you sit in that sort of kaleidoscope of the organisation depends on your opinion of culture, and how the Army’s management of cultural change, is being conducted. And as a [Rank] at the time, there were so many things I saw which were double standards at best, and were inhumane at worst, you know. But what do you say?” (SOF Insider)

Interviewees spoke of the risks of no change occurring:

“Well, just it’ll show that Jeff Sengelman is just like the others, and he hasn’t done anything about it. It’ll be reputational issues that will continue to bubble away, regardless of what the senior leadership say. And the people that are known to be bad are in the system and they’re getting promoted and going forward.” (SOF insider)

“It will undermine our capability, and our ability to realise our potential. And the one thing that worries me above everything else is we’ve got away with it to now, because the level of operations that we’ve been allowed to do has been below our threshold of capability and comfort. It was piss easy. You know even the stuff that SAS are doing around the world, it’s hanging it out there a bit, but you know not that hard, and everyone else is changing the narrative every other day, and we’re well behind, and we’ve got a whole bunch of people, men and women who are, I think, willing and capable, but do need to be enabled and empowered, and so the trust and faith that they’re trying to create from the senior

leadership is part of that, but also then putting that other bullshit aside and saying it is what it is, today we look like this, tomorrow we look like that, you know...SAS guys doing unconventional operations, commandos doing SRO, you know offshore recovery, and tomorrow SAS doing SRO, commandos doing clandestine operations, whatever it is, let's be big enough to just kept shifting those and recognise that you work perennially on part of the 'special', and we work the other part, occasionally they overlap, and very occasionally they actually kind of, they swap. Let's be good with that.

You know, and we often joke, you're only as good as your next gig. And there's a truism in that. And, yeah, it falls in the ADF full stop, you can do 10,000 great things, you make one mistake, people will remember that, and they may hang you for it." (SOF Insider).

"Run silent, run deep, you know. It's always the mystique. Submariners have been caught out when they had troubles maintaining submarines to the right level, and that kind of invincibility was tarnished, and now they've been brought more into the fold because the myth has been changed.

But it's when something goes wrong that those challenges really hit home. You know, if we had a series of incidents where the SAS couldn't produce the results that were expected, I think they would be exposed quite rapidly, and I think then the level of oversight, the level of understanding, would be their biggest downfall, because they haven't marketed themselves appropriately." (Internal stakeholder)

Challenges to achieving change were articulated as being larger than just SOCOMD or the current ADO:

"And it has got to that point of wickedness, wickedness in so far as it would take a lot more than General Sengelman to fix this; it would take all of us. When I say all of us, I mean *all-of-us*. So we have SAS and commando people leaving the military, right, and they go into private security, and then they've got the Embassy gig in Kabul or something like that, and you get the SAS/commando thing playing out there, and then it manifests in a number of ways. You've either got the operators on the ground, the ex-operators on the ground, and they're on their teams, and they kind of gravitate to the commandos over here, and SAS over there, or when they're engaging with the head of mission and all the other VIPs have come through, they're pitching all sorts of shit about, 'This is the reality of SO Command, or SAS, or commandos.' Or in some cases they were shit operators who got kicked out, and then they're representing the brand, not only the brand of the unit, the brand of the Command.

And that circles back around to that guy in DFAT who then says, 'Yeah, SO Command, not so sure'." (SOF Insider)

"I think we need to tap those [ex-service] parts, because that is still affecting us, it's part of the culture, you know it links into the drugs and the alcohol, and because you've got in Service guys who looked up to those guys who are now out, and in some ways think what they're doing is cooler, because they're out there on the ground, whereas they're behind the wire. And when they come home they try to maintain the rage, or this, that and the other thing, you know partying in Coogee, or Freo. You know the cycle perpetuates itself. And so again, it challenges you to break the cycle." (SOF Insider)

Australian SF can be described as having begun, at least to some degree, in aspirational imitation of their more influential big brother – the early British special operations capability in SAS and SBS. This *prima facie* seems a reasonable place to start, however it could be argued that these origins needed to be supplemented by a cohesive and aligned path of evolution. By all accounts this didn't and hasn't happened to date. Instead the process of 'selection' has taken on more seminal agency in deciding the path of evolution of the Australian SOF capability rather than cohesive strategy.

Leadership has also been a significant causal factor in the development of the Australian SOF capability from its historical origins to date. SOCOMD is a relatively new addition and the

strategic leadership offered by SOCOMD seems to possibly have less influence in the shaping of capability and culture than that of the *tactical leadership* within the units.

This study has offered a theoretical explanation as to why this may be happening by introducing the importance of proximity and context as key factors that influence the role of leadership in shaping behaviour, climate, and ultimately culture. In reality this translates to the fact that SOCOMD's influence could be described as having a 'weak force gravitational pull'; and it will need to work extremely hard and innovatively to overcome the 'strong force gravitational pull' that renders disproportionately more influence to the local and more proximal leadership of the units, particularly SASR.

While there may be no simple or rapid solutions to the problems identified and described, addressing them will be important for building the trust and confidence of WoG stakeholders/partners as well as for the capability itself. The current situation holds inherent risks, not only for sub-optimal delivery of capacity, but potentially for national security and/or strategic/ political interests, given the sensitive nature of deployments.

6. Conclusion

As stated at the outset, this study was commissioned to assist SOCAUST's efforts to better understand whether and how well the SO capability effectively integrates, operates and coordinates with other ADF and WoG capabilities in support of national security. Insiders felt that there might be a gap between what partners knew and expected of SOCOMD's expertise and capability and the reality of what SOCOMD could do. It was rightly recognised that addressing any misperceptions would be critical if SOCOMD wished to play a greater, or different, role in partnership with others, to address emerging challenges to national security in the future.

Through the interviews with *influential external stakeholders* (in PM&C, AFP, DFAT and ASIO), including individuals at working level, in senior leadership positions, and at ministerial level, *major gaps in knowledge about SOCOMD's capability indeed readily became apparent*. There was widespread appreciation for the tactical achievements of SF in Afghanistan and Iraq. It was also well recognised that SF were often highly dedicated, driven and capable professionals. However, very few interlocutors exhibited a detailed understanding of the role or capability of SF or of the range of units and their different capabilities within SOCOMD. Gaps in knowledge were often ascribed to the confidential or clandestine nature of the work undertaken by SOCOMD (a limited 'need to know'). The image of SF collectively was most closely associated with the role associated with SASR. Despite clear admiration, and some openness to further information exchange, a subtle level of disquiet and lack of trust was also discernable, if not part of the dominant discourse.

It was in interviews with Defence insiders that the more troubling picture emerged. They described an *organisation rift by internal tensions and rivalry* (especially between SASR and commando units), a pattern of *elitist/condescending behaviours towards support personnel*, perceptions of *senior leadership failure* and cover-ups – real or imagined, and *misdemeanors or more serious offences* in the field, as well as a *culture of drug and alcohol abuse*. While it is impossible in the context of this study to gain a full appreciation of such issues, or to verify accounts provided, there is no doubt that there are major issues of morale and performance involved – at the least.

Some of the problem behaviours described by interviewees have spilled into the public arena, for example through widespread media reports of skylarking and other incidents, contrasting strongly with the intentional positive presentation (e.g. awards, autobiographies, authorized documentaries etc.). To date these have been relatively scant on detail and scrutiny has been limited (with limited institutional response), but there are clear indications of an impact on stakeholder perceptions, revealed through sotto voce comments. There is also potential for greater impact and damage, should further incidents come to light.

As noted previously, although Australia has had a range of SF and SO since 1941, SOCOMD is relatively young. The nature of SO capability has transformed extensively over the last 20 years, rising to the forefront of military priority. Despite SF successes, SOCOMD today is far from the unified and coherent Command that its designers intended. Its composite elements have been separately shaped in their own ad hoc or organic manner, contributing to possible overlap and obscurity in respective roles, and a degree of competition and rivalry that appears to be damaging and constraining effectiveness.

SF's rigorous and arduous selection processes have been key in defining the culture as well as the capability. A preponderance of driven, type A personalities may have been a key

component of SF tactical outcomes and successes, but is also conceivably exacerbating the internal disharmony and dysfunction described. As a number of commentators have noted, strong leadership is critical in this mix, but while the main focus of interviewees was on the most senior leadership, the circumstances of many SO personnel mean that in reality leadership in the field, by relatively junior operatives, may have the greatest impact. Any leadership issues and responses therefore need to be considered and calibrated right throughout the organisation.

Evidently the current situation is not static and the fact that this study and other analyses have been commissioned/ undertaken shows openness to change and improvement. A number of useful practical ideas have been raised by others (e.g. to restructure SOHQ, provide greater clarity with respect to roles and responsibilities and reduce duplication, improve communication and create conditions for greater strategic oversight and influence). It is clearly SOCOMD/ SOCAUST's intention for the organisation to develop and evolve in a way that maximises its utility and value. This study seeks to contribute to this constructive process.

As SOCOMD looks to the future, it faces questions about what role it will be needed and best equipped to play, internationally and domestically, in protecting national security, and what skill set, training, education and talent-management systems it will need for any direct and indirect action required. These questions, which are being asked by other commentators and analysts, have provided an important context for the stakeholder relationship and perception questions examined in the current study and will also be critical in designing a forward strategy for the organisation.

Various stakeholders and research materials have alluded to the idea that SOCOMD and the Australian SOF capability need to develop a more coherent and cohesive sense of identity and forward strategy that is both aligned and nested into the ADO and more importantly the greater Australian security architecture. This and the sotto voce theme are probably the most oft repeated and surfaced issues within this report. The seminal artifact that seems to be missing from the equation is a strategy led operating model for SOCOMD and the Australian SOF capability. Such a well-considered operating model will give SOCOMD a unifying vision, purpose to its transformative journey and cohesion to its hitherto disparate subordinate capability elements. That said, it is probably easier said than done.

The serious internal cultural problems revealed in this report present major challenges for SOCOMD and will resist simple or cosmetic solutions. The problems, of themselves, are beyond the scope of this study, but they have a clear impact on risk and reputation that is directly relevant to the way that SOCOMD works with and is viewed by partner agencies (as well as more broadly for national security and/or strategic/political interests). Identifying these issues and challenges provides an important opportunity for further examination and reflection. Given the high value of the capability, and desirability of maintaining it and strategically shaping it in new directions as security risks and needs indicate, this would seem to be critical.

Appendix 1. Methodology

Introduction

Qualitative research is social research in which the researcher relies on text data rather than numerical data, analyses those data in their textual form rather than converting them to numbers for analysis, aims to understand the meaning of human action²¹, and asks open questions about phenomena as they occur in context rather than setting out to test predetermined hypotheses.

Sample size

Small scale interview based research is intentionally conceptually generative. It is the nature of exploratory studies to indicate rather than conclude. That is, such studies formulate propositions rather than set out to verify them²².

Interview based studies are a labour intensive method of research whereby the researcher is completely immersed in the field collecting data until 'saturation' is reached. Saturation is the point at which no new concepts, themes, issues or problems are emerging from respondents.

The question of sample size is important because the use of samples that are larger than needed is an ethical issue (because they waste research funds and participants' time) and the use of samples that are smaller than needed is both an ethical and a scientific issue (because it may not be informative to use samples so small that results reflect idiosyncratic data and are thus not transferable)²³.

Estimating the number of participants in a study required to reach saturation depends on the quality of data, scope of the study, nature of the topic, amount of useful information obtained from each participant, the use of shadowed data (participant's reflections on others experiences), and the study design used. A sample size between 30-60 is generally accepted as optimal for rich, valid qualitative data²⁴.

This study had a sample size of 30. Although relatively small, the number of interview participants reflected the size of the Special Operations community. This community of national security and defence specialists are at executive levels in their organisations and are limited in number. In addition a number of formal interviews and informal discussions with current and ex-serving Army, and SOF in particular, soldiers and officers were conducted to contextualize and validate themes emergent in the analysis.

Recruitment

Information for participants was sent out to a targeted sample that represented various vantage points across the national security and Defence environment. These included senior stakeholders in PM&C, ASIO, AFP, DFAT, and the ADO.

²¹ Schwandt, T.A., *The Sage dictionary of qualitative inquiry*. 2nd ed. 2001: Sage.

²² Crouch, M. and H. McKenzie, *The logic of small samples in interview-based qualitative research*. Social science information, 2006. **45**(4): p. 483-499.

²³ Francis, J.J., et al., *What is an adequate sample size? Operationalising data saturation for theory-based interview studies*. Psychology and Health, 2010. **25**(10): p. 1229-1245.

²⁴ Morse, J.M., *Determining sample size*. Qualitative health research, 2000. **10**(1): p. 3-5.

Emails were sent out individually via The Chief of Army, inviting participants to volunteer for an interview. Dr Crompvoets was identified as the person who would be conducting the interview.

Interviews

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted. Interviews were framed by a schedule of open-ended questions designed to elicit participant's experiences and perspectives.

Questions underpinning the analysis

- What are the perceptions of SOCOMD from external actors (TBC): their capability, role, remit and limitations?
- What is the role, capability, remit and limitations of SOCOMD as felt by internal actors (TBC).
- What are the implications of the tension between perception and reality?
- What is the genesis of this dissonance, if any?
- What impact do these tensions have on capability delivery and how SOCAUST operates within the context of the greater ADO?
- How has the identity of SOCOMD been shaped? What are the implications of this identity?
- How should SOCOMD be strategically positioned to better support national interests?
- What are the barriers to authentic jointery in/for SOCOMD?
- How can command and control relationships between SOCOMD and other decision bodies (i.e. FORCOMD, AHQ, JOC, and NSC) be modernized/better defined and transformed to meet emerging issues?

Appendix 2. SOF autobiographies

2015

Macklin, R. (2015). *Warrior elite*. Hachette Australia.

Walker, F. (2015). *Commandos: Heroic and deadly ANZAC raid in World War II*. Hachette Australia.

Zimmerman, J. (2015). *The promise: Three wars, two mates*. Australia: Pan Macmillan.

2014

Donaldson, M. (2014). *The crossroad: A story of life, death and the SAS*. Australia: Pan Macmillan.

Macklin, R. (2014). *Redback one: The true story of an Australian SAS hero*. Hachette Australia.

Palmer, C., & Macklin, R. (2014). *SAS insider: An elite fighter inside Australia's toughest and most secretive combat force*. Hachette Australia.

Thomlinson, D. (2014). *Without warning: A soldier's extraordinary journey*. Australia: HarperCollins.

2013

Cantwell, J., & Bearup, G. (2013). *Exit wounds: One Australian's war on terror*. Melbourne, Australia: Melbourne University Publishing.

Freeman, B. (2013). *Walking wounded: The inspirational story of how the Kokoda track is helping our wounded soldiers*. Australia, Sydney: Pan Macmillan.

Jordan, P. (2013). *The easy day was yesterday: The extreme life of an SAS soldier*. Australia: Big Sky Publishing.

2011

Cleary, P. (2011). *The men who came out of the ground*. Hachette Australia

Mullins, N. (2011). *Keep your head down: One Commando's brutally honest account of fighting in Afghanistan*. Australia: Allen & Unwin.

2010

Maylor, R., & Macklin R. (2010). *SAS Sniper: Inside the world of an elite marksman (Also called SAS Sniper: The Rob Maylor Story)*. Hachette Australia

Fennell, K. (2010). *Warrior training: The making of an Australian SAS soldier*. Australia: Random House.

Lee, S. (2010). *18 hours: The true story of an SAS war hero*. Australia: HarperCollins

2009

Everett, D., & Flett, K. (2009). *Shadow warrior: From the SAS to Australia's most wanted*. Australia, Penguin.

Fennell, K. (2009). *Warrior brothers: My life in the Australian SAS*. Australia: Random House.

Mullins, N. (2009). *How to amputate a leg*. Australia: Allen & Unwin.

2007

McPhedran, I. (2007). *The amazing SAS: The inside story of Australia's Special Forces*. Australia: HarperCollins.

2002

Thompson, P., & Macklin R. (2002). *Kill the tiger: The truth about Operation Rimau*. Hachette Australia.

2001

O'Farrell, T. (2001). *Behind enemy lines: An Australian SAS soldier in Vietnam*. Australia: Allen & Unwin.

Appendix 3. Overview of SOF in the media

Date	Title	Source/ additional information
2/11/2000	Australian SAS 'used torture in East Timor'.	Multiple articles over three years surrounding the theme of misconduct in East Timor. Dutter, B. (2000, November 2). Australian SAS 'used torture in East Timor'. <i>The Telegraph</i> . Retrieved from http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/australiaandthepacific/australia/1372891/Australian-SAS-used-torture-in-East-Timor.html
4/10/2002	Defence to probe claims of SAS torture, murder.	Forbes, M., & Jolliffe, J. (2002, October 4). Defence to probe claims of SAS torture, murder. <i>The Age</i> . Retrieved from http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/10/03/1033538723862.html
10/3/2003	Officers reputation at stake over "\$2 million witch hunt'.	Mottram, M. (2003, March 10). Officers reputation at stake over "\$2 million witch hunt'. <i>The Age</i> . Retrieved from http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/03/09/1047144870575.html?from=moreStories
7/7/2003	Amputation, execution, suicide: Timor troops accused.	Snow, D. (2003, July 7). Amputation, execution, suicide: Timor troops accused. <i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i> . Retrieved from http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/06/06/1054700386418.html
4/6/2005	Operation protect, as SAS comes under fire.	Snow, D. (2005, June 5). Operation protect, SAS comes under fire. <i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i> . Retrieved from http://www.smh.com.au/news/National/Operation-protect-as-SAS-comes-under-fire/2005/06/03/1117568381387.html
1/11/2006	Aust military rejects E Timor misconduct accusations.	Nucifora, M. (2006, November 1). Aust military rejects E Timor misconduct accusations. <i>Australian Broadcasting Corporation News</i> . Retrieved from http://www.abc.net.au/news/2006-11-01/aust-military-rejects-e-timor-misconduct/1299728
29/6/2007	SAS crew received 'inferior training'.	SAS crew received 'inferior training'. (2007, June 29). <i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i> . Retrieved from http://www.smh.com.au/national/sas-crew-received-inferior-training-20070629-15s.html
4/5/2008	Troops accused of passing captives to Afghan torturers.	Hyland, T. (2008, May 4). Troops accused of passing captives to Afghan torturers. <i>The Age</i> . Retrieved from http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/troops-accused-of-passing-captives-to-afghan-torturers/2008/05/03/1209235234218.html
22/5/2008	Tania Zaetta denies SAS sex allegation.	Multiple articles over consecutive days surrounding sex allegations made against Tania Zaetta during her trip to Afghanistan. Tania Zaetta denies SAS sex allegation. (2008, May 22). <i>Brisbane Times</i> . Retrieved from http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/articles/2008/05/22/1211182950562.html
10/12/2008	Australian SAS units function as death squads in Afghanistan.	Multiple articles surrounding Afghanistan Civilian killings. Cogan, J. (2008, December 10). Australian SAS units function as death squads in Afghanistan. <i>World Socialist Web Site</i> . Retrieved from https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2008/12/asas-d10.html
11/5/2009	Military in Afghan cover-up.	McKenzie, N., & Sweeting, A. (2009, May 11). Military in Afghan cover-up. <i>The Age</i> . Retrieved from http://www.theage.com.au/national/investigations/military-in-afghan-coverup-20090510-az9p.html
12/5/2009	Australia's Vietnam-style killing program in Afghanistan.	Sparrow, J. (2009, May 12). Australia's Vietnam-style killing program in Afghanistan. <i>Jeff Sparrow</i> . Retrieved from http://jeffsparrow.net/articles/australias-vietnam-style-killing-program-in-afghanistan/

June 2009	Australian death squads in Afghanistan.	Chitts, H. (2009, June). Australian death squads in Afghanistan. <i>Direct Action</i> . Retrieved from http://directaction.org.au/issue12/australian_death_squads_in_afghanistan
17/4/2010	Soldier breaks his silence on torture.	Soldier breaks his silence on torture. (2010, April 4). <i>The Morning Bulletin</i> . Retrieved from http://www.themorningbulletin.com.au/news/soldier-breaks-silence-truth-about-water-torture/511205/
28/8/2010	Commandos Pay Political Price.	Uzunov, S. (2010, August 8). Commandos pay political price. <i>Scoop World Independent News</i> . Retrieved from http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/WO1008/S00486/commandos-pay-political-price.htm Link broken to original SBS incident broken
27/9/2010	Commandos to fight Afghan charges over and defend reputation.	Multiple articles surrounding incident of civilian deaths over two years. Kelly, J. (2010, September 27). Commandos to fight Afghan charges over and defend reputation. <i>The Australian</i> . Retrieved from http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/defence/three-former-soldiers-charged-over-afghan-civilian-deaths/story-e6frg8yo-1225929938025
25/5/2011	Commandos finally get justice.	McCormack, T. (2011, May 25). Case dropped against commandos over civilian deaths in Afghanistan. <i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i> . Retrieved from http://www.smh.com.au/it-pro/commandos-finally-get-justice-20110524-1f2dl.html
14/2/2011	Army to change live-fire training after death.	Epstein, R., & McKenzie, N. (2011, February 14). Army to change live-fire training after death. <i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i> . Retrieved from http://www.smh.com.au/national/army-to-change-livefire-training-after-death-20110213-1as4r.html
20/2/2011	Afghanistan war exclusive – Australian Special Forces wage their secret war.	McPhedran, I. (2011, February 20). Afghanistan war exclusive – Australian Special Forces wage their secret war. <i>The Daily Telegraph</i> . Retrieved from http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/afghanistan-war-exclusive-australian-special-forces-wage-their-secret-war/story-e6frewt0-1226008721839
4/4/2011	Gay haters target commando regiment.	Baker, R., McKenzie, N., & Oakes, D. (2011, April 4). Gay haters target commando regiment. <i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i> . Retrieved from http://www.smh.com.au/technology/technology-news/gay-haters-target-commando-regiment-20110413-1de7r.html
27/5/2011	Afghan fighters train Australian special forces.	Kilroy, D. (2011, May 27). Afghan fighters train Australian special forces. <i>Storyful</i> . Retrieved from http://storyful.com/stories/765-afghan-fighters-train-australian-special-forces
13/3/2012	Smith tight-lipped on SAS claims.	Multiple articles surrounding the topic of SAS mission in Africa. Griffiths, E., & Bourke, E. (2012, March 13). Smith tight-lipped on SAS claims. <i>Australian Broadcasting Corporation News</i> . Retrieved from http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-03-13/smith-on-sas-operations-in-africa/3885868
13/3/2012	Secret SAS squadron sent to spy in Africa.	Epstein, R., & Welch, D. (2012, March 13). Secret SAS squadron sent to spy in Africa. <i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i> . Retrieved from http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/secret-sas-squadron-sent-to-spy-in-africa-20120312-1uwjs.html
30/8/2012	Five Australian soldiers killed in Afghanistan.	Multiple articles across all media regarding soldiers killed in Afghanistan. Welch, D., & Ireland, J. (2012, August 30). Five Australian soldiers killed in Afghanistan. <i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i> . Retrieved from http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/five-australian-soldiers-killed-in-afghanistan-20120829-251og.html
2/3/2013	Mystery surrounds incident in Afghanistan.	Ireland, J., & Snow, D. (2013, March 2). Mystery surrounds incident in Afghanistan. <i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i> . Retrieved from http://www.smh.com.au/national/mystery-surrounds-incident-in-afghanistan-20130301-2fbze.html
7/3/2013	Killer commando: America poaches Australia's toughest man.	Multiple articles relating to Paul Cale across websites over a two week period. Shorten, K. (2013, March 7). Killer commando: America poaches Australia's toughest man. <i>news.com.au</i> . Retrieved from http://www.news.com.au/national/killer-commando-america-poaches-australias-toughest-man/story-fncynjr2-1226592161560

8/5/2013	Australian soldiers accused of misconduct.	Multiple articles spanning over two years relating to the mutilating body incident. Wroe, D. (2013, May 8). Australian soldiers accused of misconduct. <i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i> . Retrieved from http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/australian-soldiers-accused-of-misconduct-20130508-2j8a1.html
29/10/2014	SAS corporal could be charged for cutting off hands of Taliban fighters in Afghanistan.	Brissenden, M. (2014, October 29). SAS corporal could be charged for cutting off hands of Taliban fighters in Afghanistan. <i>Australian Broadcasting Corporation News</i> . Retrieved from http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-10-29/charges-considered-after-taliban-fighters-hands-cut-off/5849090
8/11/2014	Defence's silence is loud and clear.	Brown, J. (2014, November 8). Defence's silence is loud and clear. <i>The Saturday Paper</i> . Retrieved from https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/opinion/topic/2014/11/08/defences-silence-loud-and-clear/14153652001216
9/5/2013	Defence reveals details of a major battle.	Blenkin, M. (2013, May 9). Defence reveals details of a major battle. <i>The Australian</i> . Retrieved from http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/latest-news/defence-reveals-details-of-major-battle/story-fn3dxiwe-1226638680596
23/6/2013	Decorated Australian special forces soldier dies during operation in Afghanistan.	Decorated Australian special forces soldier dies during operation in Afghanistan. (2013, June 23). <i>news.com.au</i> . Retrieved from http://www.news.com.au/national/decorated-australian-special-forces-soldier-dies-during-operation-in-afghanistan/story-fncynjr-1226668220425
12/7/2013	Videos about Australia's role in Afghanistan.	Zammit, A. (2013, July 12). Videos about Australia's role in Afghanistan. <i>The Murphy Raid</i> . Retrieved from http://andrewzammit.org/2013/07/12/videos-about-australias-role-in-afghanistan/
5/8/2013	Inside the world of Australian special forces in action and at play.	Welch, D. (2013, August 5). Inside the world of Australian special forces in action and play. <i>Australian Broadcasting Corporation News</i> . Retrieved from http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2014/s4061544.htm
23/8/2013	Courage and training won the day for coalition special forces patrol in operation Katnook.	McPhedran, I. (2013, August 23). Courage and training won the day for coalition special forces patrol in operation in Katnook. <i>news.com.au</i> . Retrieved from http://www.news.com.au/news/national/courage-and-training-won-the-day-for-coalition-special-forces-patrol-in-operation-katnook/story-fntzoymf-1227533247043?sv=71c1fb5c384bb256f5209e1eb7776b1 <i>Note that this article came out at the same time as the mutilating corpse story was tapering out.</i>
25/9/2013	Protesters break into Victoria Swan Island training base.	Akerman, P. (2013, September 9). Protesters break into Victoria Swan Island training base. <i>The Australian</i> . Retrieved from http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/defence/protesters-break-into-victorian-swan-island-sas-training-base/story-e6frg8yo-1226726676128
25/10/2013	How our VC hero Mar Donaldson and his SAS mates tracked down and killed the Taliban war lord.	Rule, B. (2013, October 25). How our VC hero Mar Donaldson and his SAS mates tracked down and killed the Taliban war lord. <i>The Daily Telegraph</i> . Retrieved from http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/how-our-vc-hero-mark-donaldson-and-his-sas-mates-tracked-down-and-killed-the-taliban-war-lord-intent-on-killing-prince-harry/story-fni0cx4q-1226747643483
22/3/2014	Former SAS soldier relieves the nightmare of his selection course.	Former SAS soldier relieves the nightmare of his selection course (2014, March 22). <i>The Australian</i> . Retrieved from http://www.theaustralian.com.au/subscribe/news/1/index.html?sourceCode=TAWEB_WRE170_a_GGL&mode=premium&dest=http://www.theaustralian.com.au/life/weekend-australian-magazine/former-sas-soldier-relives-the-nightmare-of-his-selection-course/story-e6frg8h6-1226857291889&memtype=anonymous
22/4/2014	Soldier sheds light on secretive SASR.	Hutchinson, G., & Kennedy, J. (2014, April 22). Soldier sheds light on secretive SASR. <i>Australian Broadcasting Corporation News</i> . Retrieved from http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2014/04/22/3990028.htm
16/6/2014	Cameron Baird: Commando's break code of silence to give Australian story exclusive insight into battle which claimed VC hero's life.	Cameron Baird: Commando's break code of silence to give Australian story exclusive insight into battle which claimed VC hero's life. (2014, June 16). <i>Australian Broadcasting Corporation</i> . Retrieved from http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-06-16/commandos-break-silence-on-vc-hero-cameron-baird-s-death/5524934

2/7/2014	Australian Special Forces soldier died in Afghanistan in non-combat related incident.	<p>Multiple articles leading up to his funeral on the 16th July.</p> <p>Cox, L. (2014, July 2). Australian Special Forces soldier died in Afghanistan in non-combat related incident. <i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i>. Retrieved from http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/australian-special-forces-soldier-dies-in-afghanistan-in-noncombat-incident-20140701-3b7ba.html</p>
4/8/2014	More than 180 Australian Defence Force members sacked for misconduct in past year, figures show.	<p>McDonald, A. (2014, August 4). More than 180 Australian Defence Force members sacked for misconduct in past year, figures show. <i>Australian Broadcasting Corporation</i>. Retrieved from http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-08-05/more-than-180-defence-force-members-sacked-for-misconduct/5647980</p>
22/8/2014	Topless barmaids ban ignored at SAS base.	<p>Multiple articles found across a 6 month period on this topic.</p> <p>Callinan, R. (2014, August 22). Topless barmaids ban ignored at SAS base. <i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i>. Retrieved from http://www.smh.com.au/national/topless-barmaids-ban-order-ignored-at-sas-base-20140822-1073eg.html</p>
2/1/2015	Peptides and topless barmaids: Army silent on investigation.	<p>Callinan, R. (2015, January 2). Peptides and topless barmaids: Army silent on investigation. <i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i>. Retrieved from http://www.smh.com.au/national/peptides-and-topless-barmaids-army-silent-on-investigation-20150101-12ghf9.html</p>
11/9/2014	US wants SAS to fight jihadists.	<p>US wants SAS to fight jihadists. (2014, September 9). <i>The West Australian</i>. Retrieved from https://au.news.yahoo.com/thewest/a/24959056/us-wants-sas-to-fight-jihadists/</p>
20/9/2014	Film shows what makes the Australian SAS special.	<p>Rule, A. (2014, September 20). Film show makes the Australian SAS special. <i>Herald sun</i>. Retrieved from http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/film-shows-what-makes-the-australian-sas-special/news-story/2d727391cdfcc2c0c140d484014837c2</p>
3/10/2014	Australian forces to have boots on Iraq soil in days.	<p>Multiple articles found on the topic of Aussies fighting in Iraq over consecutive days</p> <p>Australian forces to have boots on Iraq soil in days. (2014, October 3). <i>Sunshine Coast Daily</i>. Retrieved from http://www.sunshinecoastdaily.com.au/news/australian-forces-will-have-boots-iraq-soil-days/2408066/</p>
9/10/2014	Swan island protesters claim they were hooded and stripped at ASIS base.	<p>Multiple articles surrounding the Swan Island Protestor incident.</p> <p>Milligan, L. (2014, October 9). Swan island protesters claim they were hooded and stripped at ASIS base. <i>Australian Broadcasting Corporation News</i>. Retrieved from http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-10-09/adf-to-probe-claims-of-treatment-of-anti-war-protesters/5802818</p>
21/10/2014	Special forces soldier pulled handgun on Australian spy during drinking session in Afghanistan.	<p>Multiple articles surrounding the handgun incident across a number of months.</p> <p>Uhlmann, U. (2014, October 21). Special forces soldier pulled handgun on Australian spy during drinking session in Afghanistan. <i>Australian Broadcasting Corporation News</i>. Retrieved from http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-10-21/soldier-pulled-gun-on-spy-while-drinking-in-afghanistan/5828160</p>
4/11/2014	Elite special forces soldier arrested in Surfers Paradise with 'white powder' facing charges.	<p>Wuth, R. (2014, November 4). Elite special forces soldier arrested in Surfers Paradise with 'white powder' facing charges. <i>Gold Coast Bulletin</i>. Retrieved from http://www.goldcoastbulletin.com.au/news/elite-special-forces-soldier-arrested-in-surfers-paradise-with-white-powder-facing-charges/story-fnj94j0t-1227111860311</p>
15/12/2014	Sydney siege: Three dead after commandos storm café.	<p>Multiple articles surrounding the Lindt Café Siege.</p> <p>Sydney siege: Three dead after commandos storm café. <i>British Broadcasting Corporation News</i>. Retrieved from</p>

18/12/2014	Women eligible to join Australia's special operations command.	http://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-30485355 McAlister, M. (2014, December 18). Women eligible to join Australia's special operations command. <i>Sofrep</i> . Retrieved from http://sofrep.com/38909/women-now-eligible-join-australias-special-operations-command/
9/1/2015	Tony Abbott confirms Australia's Special Forces are training and assisting elite Iraq security accused of 'major war crimes'.	<i>Multiple articles surrounding Special Forces working with Iraq security.</i> McNab, H., & Piotrowski, D. (2015, January 9). Tony Abbott confirms Australia's Special Forces are training and assisting elite Iraq security accused of 'major war crimes'. <i>Daily Mail</i> . Retrieved from http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2904291/Tony-Abbott-confirms-Australian-Special-Forces-training-assisting-elite-Iraqi-security-service-accused-major-war-crimes.html
7/6/2015	Army run by special forces officers.	McPhedran, I. (2015, June 7). Army run by special forces officers. <i>news.com.au</i> . Retrieved from http://www.news.com.au/national/army-run-by-specialforces-officers/news-story/a969154609cfb304c7430d5e88f5dd67
24/7/2015	Australia's crimes in Afghanistan.	O'Shea, L. (2015, July 24). Australia's crimes in Afghanistan. <i>Redflag</i> . Retrieved from https://redflag.org.au/article/australias-crimes-afghanistan
6/8/2015	Allies 'should kill any westerners who join ISIS on battlefield'.	Allies 'should kill any westerners who join ISIS on battlefield'. (2015, August 6). <i>The Australian</i> . Retrieved from http://www.theaustralian.com.au/subscribe/news/1/index.html?sourceCode=TAWEB_WRE170_a_GGL&mode=premium&dest=http://www.theaustralian.com.au/in-depth/terror/allies-should-kill-any-westerners-who-join-isis-on-battlefield/news-story/adb51411afb9c57c13aa618e46c5&memtype=anonymous
20/8/2015	Defence fines \$220,000 for training death of commando and wounding of comrade.	Inman, M. (2015, August 20). Defence fines \$220,000 for training death of commando and wounding of comrade. <i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i> . Retrieved from http://www.smh.com.au/national/defence-fined-220000-for-training-death-of-commando-and-wounding-of-comrade-20150820-gj3olg.html
22/8/2015	Andrew Hastie, Liberal byelection candidate, was in charge of troop probed for chopping hands off Taliban.	<i>Multiple articles across a month surrounding Andrew Hastie and two incidents.</i> Wroe, D. (2015, August 22). Andrew Hastie, Liberal byelection candidate, was in charge of troop probed for chopping hands off Taliban. <i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i> . Retrieved from http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/andrew-hastie-liberal-byelection-candidate-led-troop-probed-for-chopping-hands-off-taliban-20150821-gj52lj.html
3/9/2015	SAS documentary gives a rare glimpse inside Australia's secretive and elite military unit.	Greene, A. (2015, September 2). SAS documentary gives a rare glimpse inside Australia's secretive and elite military unit. <i>Australian Broadcasting Corporation News</i> . Retrieved from http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-09-03/sas-film-gives-rare-glimpse-inside-elite-unit/6745134

Note: All incidents featured in more than one article on any given day, however only examples have been noted in this table. The phrase 'multiple articles' has been used when there were in excess of 5-10 articles found on the one topic. In many instances titles could be found, but links to further information broken.