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A Wide World of Winless War

by Nick Turse and Tom Engelhardt

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If you want a number, try 194. That's how many countries there are on planet Earth (give or take one or two). Today, Nick Turse reports a related number that should boggle your mind: at least 137 of those countries, or 70% of them, already have something in common for 2017 and the year's not even half over. They share the experience of having American Special Operations forces deployed to their territory. Assumedly, those numbers don't include Russia, China, Iran, Andorra, or Monaco (unless guarding global casinos is a new national priority for our casino capitalist president). Still, they're evidence of the great bet American casino militarism has made in these years – that elite special ops troops could do what the rest of the U.S. military couldn't: actually achieve victory in a conflict or two.

Think of the Special Operations Command (or SOCOM) as having won the lottery in these years. From thousands of elite troops in the 1980s, their numbers have ballooned to about 70,000 at present – a force larger, that is, than the armies of many nations, with at least 8,000 of them raiding, training, advising abroad at any given moment. In fact, these days it's a reasonable bet that if American war is intensifying anywhere, they're front and center. A year ago in Syria, for instance, there were perhaps 50 special operators helping anti-ISIS forces of various sorts. Now, as the battle for the Islamic State's "capital," Raqqa, intensifies, that number has soared to 500 and is evidently still rising. (Something similar is true for Iraq and undoubtedly, after the Pentagon dispatches its latest mini-surge of personnel to Afghanistan in the coming months, that country, too.)

As for money, SOCOM has certainly won the Pentagon's version of roulette. (Of course, in that version, everybody wins, even if some are more triumphant than others.) Between 2001 and 2014, the special ops budget increased by a not-so-modest 213%, and its budget has continued to grow since.

There's only one category in which the special ops bet has turned out to be anything but a winning hand and that's the subject of TomDispatch regular Nick Turse's latest report on the operations of SOCOM globally. I'm talking about actual victories, not exactly a winner of a category for the U.S. military in the twenty-first century. And by the way, given the astronomical growth and uses of America's Special Operations Forces and their centrality to the U.S. military story over the last nearly 16 years, aren't you just a little surprised that the best reportage on the phenomenon can't be found in the mainstream media, but in Turse's reports at TomDispatch? ~ Tom

Globe-Trotting U.S. Special Ops Forces Already Deployed to 137 Nations in 2017
By Nick Turse

The tabs on their shoulders read "Special Forces," "Ranger," "Airborne." And soon their guidon – the "colors" of Company B, 3rd Battalion of the U.S. Army's 7th Special Forces Group – would be adorned with the "Bandera de Guerra," a Colombian combat decoration.

"Today we commemorate sixteen years of a permanent fight against drugs in a ceremony where all Colombians can recognize the special counternarcotic brigade's hard work against drug trafficking," said Army Colonel Walther Jimenez, the commander of the Colombian military's Special Anti-Drug Brigade, last December. America's most elite troops, the Special Operations forces (SOF), have worked with that Colombian unit since its creation in December 2000. Since 2014, four teams of Special Forces soldiers have intensely monitored the brigade. Now, they were being honored for it.

Part of a $10 billion counter-narcotics and counterterrorism program, conceived in the 1990s, special ops efforts in Colombia are a much ballyhooed American success story. A 2015 RAND Corporation study found that the program "represents an enduring SOF partnership effort that managed to help foster a relatively professional and capable special operations force." And for a time, coca production in that country plummeted. Indeed, this was the ultimate promise of America's "Plan Colombia" and efforts that followed from it. "Over the longer haul, we can expect to see more effective drug eradication and increased interdiction of illicit drug shipments," President Bill Clinton predicted in January 2000.

Today, however, more than 460,000 acres of the Colombian countryside are blanketed with coca plants, more than during the 1980s heyday of the infamous cocaine kingpin Pablo Escobar. U.S. cocaine overdose deaths are also at a 10-year high and first-time cocaine use among young adults has spiked 61% since 2013. "Recent findings suggest that cocaine use may be reemerging as a public health concern in the United States," wrote researchers from the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration in a study published in December 2016 – just after the Green Berets attended that ceremony in Colombia. Cocaine, the study's authors write, "may be making a comeback."

Colombia is hardly an anomaly when it comes to U.S. special ops deployments – or the results that flow from them. For all their abilities, tactical skills, training prowess, and battlefield accomplishments, the capacity of U.S. Special Operations forces to achieve decisive and enduring successes – strategic victories that serve U.S. national interests – have proved to be exceptionally limited, a reality laid bare from Afghanistan to Iraq, Yemen to the Philippines.

The fault for this lies not with the troops themselves, but with a political and military establishment that often appears bereft of strategic vision and hasn't won a major war since the 1940s. Into this breach, elite U.S. forces are deployed again and again. While special ops commanders may raise concerns about the tempo of operations and strains on the force, they have failed to grapple with larger questions about the raison d'être of SOF, while Washington's oversight establishment, notably the House and Senate Armed Services Committees, have consistently failed to so much as ask hard questions about the strategic utility of America's Special Operations forces.

Special Ops at War

"We operate and fight in every corner of the world," boasts General Raymond Thomas, the chief of U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM or SOCOM). "On a daily basis, we sustain a deployed or forward stationed force of approximately 8,000 across 80-plus countries. They are conducting the entire range of SOF missions in both combat and non-combat situations." Those numbers, however, only hint at the true size and scope of this global special ops effort. Last year, America's most elite forces conducted missions in 138 countries – roughly 70% of the nations on the planet, according to figures supplied to TomDispatch by U.S. Special Operations Command. Halfway through 2017, U.S. commandos have already been deployed to an astonishing 137 countries, according to SOCOM spokesman Ken McGraw.

Special Operations Command is tasked with carrying out 12 core missions, ranging from counterinsurgency and unconventional warfare to hostage rescue and countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Counterterrorism – fighting what the command calls violent extremist organizations (VEOs) – may, however, be what America's elite forces have become best known for in the post-9/11 era. "The threat posed by VEOs remains the highest priority for USSOCOM in both focus and effort," says Thomas.

"Special Operations Forces are the main effort, or major supporting effort for U.S. VEO-focused operations in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, across the Sahel of Africa, the Philippines, and Central/South America – essentially, everywhere Al Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) are to be found…"

More special operators are deployed to the Middle East than to any other region. Significant numbers of them are advising Iraqi government forces and Iraqi Kurdish soldiers as well as Kurdish YPG (Popular Protection Unit) fighters and various ethnic Arab forces in Syria, according to Linda Robinson, a senior international policy analyst with the RAND Corporation who spent seven weeks in Iraq, Syria, and neighboring countries earlier this year.

During a visit to Qayyarah, Iraq – a staging area for the campaign to free Mosul, formerly Iraq's second largest city, from the control of Islamic State fighters – Robinson "saw a recently installed U.S. military medical unit and its ICU set up in tents on the base." In a type of mission seldom reported on, special ops surgeons, nurses, and other specialists put their skills to work on far-flung battlefields not only to save American lives, but to prop up allied proxy forces that have limited medical capabilities. For example, an Air Force Special Operations Surgical Team recently spent eight weeks deployed at an undisclosed location in the Iraq-Syria theater, treating 750 war-injured patients. Operating out of an abandoned one-story home within earshot of a battlefield, the specially trained airmen worked through a total of 19 mass casualty incidents and more than 400 individual gunshot or blast injuries.

When not saving lives in Iraq and Syria, elite U.S. forces are frequently involved in efforts to take them. "U.S. SOF are… being thrust into a new role of coordinating fire support," wrote Robinson. "This fire support is even more important to the Syrian Democratic Forces, a far more

lightly armed irregular force which constitutes the major ground force fighting ISIS in Syria." In fact, a video shot earlier this year, analyzed by the Washington Post, shows special operators "acting as an observation element for what appears to be U.S. airstrikes carried out by A-10 ground attack aircraft" to support Syrian Democratic Forces fighting for the town of Shadadi.

Africa now ranks second when it comes to the deployment of special operators thanks to the exponential growth in missions there in recent years. Just 3% of U.S. commandos deployed overseas were sent to Africa in 2010. Now that number stands at more than 17%, according to SOCOM data. Last year, U.S. Special Operations forces were deployed to 32 African nations, about 60% of the countries on the continent. As I recently reported at VICE News, at any given time, Navy SEALs, Green Berets, and other special operators are now conducting nearly 100 missions across 20 African countries.

In May, for instance, Navy SEALs were engaged in an "advise and assist operation" alongside members of Somalia's army and came under attack. SEAL Kyle Milliken was killed and two other U.S. personnel were injured during a firefight that also, according to AFRICOM spokesperson Robyn Mack, left three al-Shabaab militants dead. U.S. forces are also deployed in Libya to gather intelligence in order to carry out strikes of opportunity against Islamic State forces there. While operations in Central Africa against the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a brutal militia that has terrorized the region for decades, wound down recently, a U.S. commando reportedly killed a member of the LRA as recently as April.

Spring Training

What General Thomas calls "building partner nations' capacity" forms the backbone of the global activities of his command. Day in, day out, America's most elite troops carry out such training missions to sharpen their skills and those of their allies and of proxy forces across the planet.

This January, for example, Green Berets and Japanese paratroopers carried out airborne training near Chiba, Japan. February saw Green Berets at Sanaa Training Center in Northwest Syria advising recruits for the Manbij Military Council, a female fighting force of Kurds, Arabs, Christians, Turkmen, and Yazidis. In March, snowmobiling Green Berets joined local forces for cold-weather military drills in Lapland, Finland. That same month, special operators and more than 3,000 troops from Canada, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Kosovo, Latvia, Macedonia, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom took part in tactical training in Germany.

In the waters off Kuwait, special operators joined elite forces from the Gulf Cooperation Council nations in conducting drills simulating a rapid response to the hijacking of an oil tanker. In April, special ops troops traveled to Serbia to train alongside a local special anti-terrorist unit. In May, members of Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Iraq carried out training exercises with Iraqi special operations forces near Baghdad. That same month, 7,200 military personnel, including U.S. Air Force Special Tactics airmen, Italian special operations forces, members of host nation Jordan's Special Task Force, and troops from more than a dozen other nations took part in Exercise Eager Lion, practicing everything from assaulting compounds to cyber-defense. For their part, a group of SEALs conducted dive training alongside Greek special operations forces in Souda Bay, Greece, while others joined NATO troops in Germany as part of Exercise Saber Junction 17 for training in land operations, including mock "behind enemy lines missions" in a "simulated European village."

#Winning

“We have been at the forefront of national security operations for the past three decades, to include continuous combat over the past 15-and-a-half years,” SOCOM’s Thomas told the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities last month. "This historic period has been the backdrop for some of our greatest successes, as well as the source of our greatest challenge, which is the sustained readiness of this magnificent force." Yet, for all their magnificence and all those successes, for all the celebratory ceremonies they’ve attended, the wars, interventions, and other actions for which they’ve served as the tip of the American spear have largely foundered, floundered, or failed.

After their initial tactical successes in Afghanistan in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, America’s elite operators became victims of Washington’s failure to declare victory and go home. As a result, for the last 15 years, U.S. commandos have been raiding homes, calling in air strikes, training local forces, and waging a relentless battle against a growing list of terror groups in that country. For all their efforts, as well as those of their conventional military brethren and local Afghan allies, the war is now, according to the top U.S. commander in the Middle East, a "stalemate." That’s a polite way of saying what a recent report to Congress by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction found: districts that are contested or under "insurgent control or influence" have risen from an already remarkable 28% in 2015 to 40%.

The war in Afghanistan began with efforts to capture or kill al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. Having failed in this post-9/11 mission, America’s elite forces spun their wheels for the next decade when it came to his fate. Finally, in 2011, Navy SEALs cornered him in his long-time home in Pakistan and gunned him down. Ever since, special operators who carried out the mission and Washington power-players (not to mention Hollywood) have been touting this single tactical success.

In an Esquire interview, Robert O’Neill – the SEAL who put two bullets in bin Laden’s head – confessed that he joined the Navy due to frustration over an early crush, a puppy-love pique. "That’s the reason al-Qaeda has been decimated," he joked, "because she broke my fucking heart." But al-Qaeda was not decimated – far from it according to Ali Soufan, a former F.B.I. special agent and the author of Anatomy of Terror: From the Death of Bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State. As he recently observed, "Whereas on 9/11 al-Qaeda had a few hundred members, almost all of them based in a single country, today it enjoys multiple safe havens across the world." In fact, he points out, the terror group has gained strength since bin Laden’s death.

Year after year, U.S. special operators find themselves fighting new waves of militants across multiple continents, including entire terror groups that didn’t exist on 9/11. All U.S. forces killed in Afghanistan in 2017 have reportedly died battling an Islamic State franchise, which began operations there just two years ago.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq, to take another example, led to the meteoric rise of an al-Qaeda affiliate which, in turn, led the military’s secretive Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) – the elite of America’s special ops elite – to create a veritable manhunting machine designed to kill its leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and take down the organization. As with bin Laden, special operators finally did find and eliminate Zarqawi, battering his organization in the process, but it was never wiped out. Left behind were battle-hardened elements that later formed the Islamic State and did what al-Qaeda never could: take and hold huge swaths of territory in two nations. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda’s Syrian branch grew into a separate force of more than 20,000.

Meanwhile, in Yemen, after more than a decade of low-profile special ops engagement, that country teeters on the brink of collapse in the face of a U.S.-backed Saudi war there. Continued

U.S. special ops missions in that country, recently on the rise, have seemingly done nothing to alter the situation. Similarly, in Somalia in the Horn of Africa, America's elite forces remain embroiled in an endless war against militants.

In 2011, President Obama launched Operation Observant Compass, sending Special Operations forces to aid Central African proxies in an effort to capture or kill Joseph Kony and decimate his murderous Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), then estimated to number 150 to 300 armed fighters. After the better part of a decade and nearly $800 million spent, 150 U.S. commandos were withdrawn this spring and U.S. officials attended a ceremony to commemorate the end of the mission. Kony was, however, never captured or killed and the LRA is now estimated to number about 150 to 250 fighters, essentially the same size as when the operation began.

This string of futility extends to Asia as well. "U.S. Special Forces have been providing support and assistance in the southern Philippines for many years, at the request of several different Filipino administrations," Emma Nagy, a spokesperson for the U.S. embassy in Manilla, pointed out earlier this month. Indeed, a decade-plus-long special ops effort there has been hailed as a major success. Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines, wrote RAND analyst Linda Robinson late last year in the Pentagon journal Prism, "was aimed at enabling the Philippine security forces to combat transnational terrorist groups in the restive southern region of Mindanao."

A 2016 RAND report co-authored by Robinson concluded that "the activities of the U.S. SOF enabled the Philippine government to substantially reduce the transnational terrorist threat in the southern Philippines." This May, however, Islamist militants overran Marawi City, a major urban center on Mindanao. They have been holding on to parts of it for weeks despite a determined assault by Filipino troops backed by U.S. Special Operations forces. In the process, large swaths of the city have been reduced to rubble.

Running on Empty

America's elite forces, General Thomas told members of Congress last month, "are fully committed to winning the current and future fights." In reality, though, from war to war, intervention to intervention, from the Anti-Drug Brigade ceremony in Florencia, Colombia, to the end-of-the-Kony-hunt observance in Obo in the Central African Republic, there is remarkably little evidence that even enduring efforts by Special Operations forces result in strategic victories or improved national security outcomes. And yet, despite such boots-on-the-ground realities, America's special ops forces and their missions only grow.

"We are… grateful for the support of Congress for the required resourcing that, in turn, has produced a SOCOM which is relevant to all the current and enduring threats facing the nation," Thomas told the Senate Armed Services Committee in May. Resourcing has, indeed, been readily available. SOCOM's annual budget has jumped from $3 billion in 2001 to more than $10 billion today. Oversight, however, has been seriously lacking. Not a single member of the House or Senate Armed Services Committees has questioned why, after more than 15 years of constant warfare, winning the "current fight" has proven so elusive. None of them has suggested that "support" from Congress ought to be reconsidered in the face of setbacks from Afghanistan to Iraq, Colombia to Central Africa, Yemen to the southern Philippines.

In the waning days of George W. Bush's administration, Special Operations forces were reportedly deployed to about 60 nations around the world. By 2011, under President Barack Obama, that number had swelled to 120. During this first half-year of the Trump administration, U.S. commandos have already been sent to 137 countries, with elite troops now enmeshed in conflicts from Africa to Asia. "Most SOF units are employed to their sustainable limit," Thomas told members of the House Armed Services Committee last month. In fact, current and former

members of the command have, for some time, been sounding the alarm about the level of strain on the force.

These deployment levels and a lack of meaningful strategic results from them have not, however, led Washington to raise fundamental questions about the ways the U.S. employs its elite forces, much less about SOCOM's raison d'être. "We are a command at war and will remain so for the foreseeable future," SOCOM's Thomas explained to the Senate Armed Services Committee. Not one member asked why or to what end.