Tough Test for Secret Warriors

Air Force special operators must fight terrorists and transform themselves—at the same time.

By Adam J. Hebert, Senior Editor

A series of AC-130 gunship attacks against suspected terrorist training areas in Somalia seemingly came out of the blue in January. The air strikes targeted Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, the alleged mastermind behind the 1998 embassy bombings in Africa that killed 225 people.

This special operation was conducted with the support of Somalia's embattled government—but prior to the first gunship strike on Jan. 7, few knew there was even a US special operations presence in the region.

This is how it often is for the Air Force's secretive special operations forces. Growing worldwide demand and unique skills needed for the war on terror put AFSOC in the throes of what is shaping up as one of the greatest evolutions in the command's illustrious history.

External military and internal organization demands have put unprecedented pressure on the service's elite 13,000-strong commando force. Demand for the air commando's unique skills has been so high around the globe that many missions have to be turned down for lack of manpower and equipment. USAF's special operators are heavily engaged in worldwide combat operations, carrying the war to terrorists both as active combatants and in long-term advisory missions.

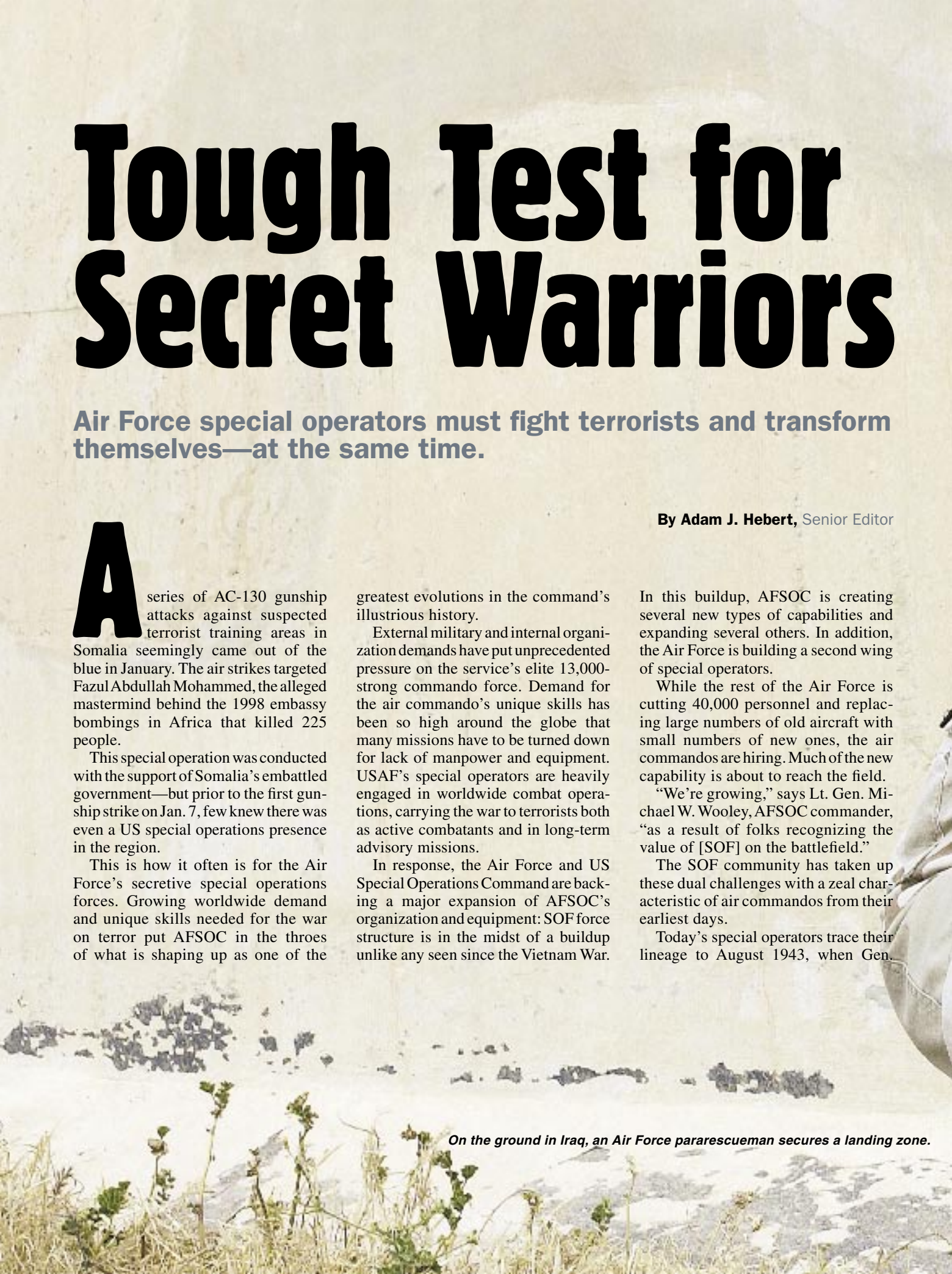
In response, the Air Force and US Special Operations Command are backing a major expansion of AFSOC's organization and equipment: SOF force structure is in the midst of a buildup unlike any seen since the Vietnam War. In this buildup, AFSOC is creating several new types of capabilities and expanding several others. In addition, the Air Force is building a second wing of special operators.

While the rest of the Air Force is cutting 40,000 personnel and replacing large numbers of old aircraft with small numbers of new ones, the air commandos are hiring. Much of the new capability is about to reach the field.

"We're growing," says Lt. Gen. Michael W. Wooley, AFSOC commander, "as a result of folks recognizing the value of [SOF] on the battlefield."

The SOF community has taken up these dual challenges with a zeal characteristic of air commandos from their earliest days.

Today's special operators trace their lineage to August 1943, when Gen.



On the ground in Iraq, an Air Force pararescueman secures a landing zone.

USAF photo by SSgt. Aaron D. Allmon II

USAF photo by TSgt. Lee Schading

AFSOC's gunships, such as the AC-130 seen here, are continuously modernized. Plans call for delivery of four newly updated AC-130Us this year.

Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, Commanding General of Army Air Forces, directed two veteran fighter pilots, Lt. Col. Philip G. Cochran and Lt. Col. John R. Alison, to build a self-reliant composite fighting force to support British operations in Burma. (See "The All-American Airman," March 2000, p. 52.) Thus was born the 1st Air Commando Group, whose spirit has lived on in various units, guises, and locations for more than 60 years.

Battlefield Value

The air commandos' wide range of specialized capabilities have brought a high operations tempo.

Battlefield airmen assigned to special tactics teams work independently or in small groups on the ground, calling in air strikes, performing pararescue missions, and providing combat weather data in the field. A variety of specialized aircraft move commandos into and out of hostile territory, refuel other SOF aircraft and, in the case of the gunships, provide devastating fire in support of ground troops.

At the other end of the spectrum, battlefield airmen are using small UAVs to provide tactical intelligence to American troops on the ground. SSgt. Ben Hannigan, a combat controller, said he has used small UAVs, such as the Pointer or Raven, overseas to survey a compound and see whether it might contain a "person of interest."

These small aircraft were also used to reconnoiter the dangerous roads in front of convoys. The video imagery, which is of the same quality as from a handheld video camera, is provided directly to the operator in real time.

The goal, Hannigan said, is for every deploying battlefield airman to have his own personal UAV.

Meanwhile, other air commandos are engaged in long-term missions around the globe, offering counterinsurgency training to friendly nations. They help other nations stamp out terrorism within their borders, train them in aviation tactics, and integrate foreign air forces into coalition missions.

When the US was attacked on Sept. 11, 2001, AFSOC was optimized for executing short-duration missions. The training and readiness the air commandos had in place has allowed the airmen to accommodate an increased operating tempo.

"We don't make any apologies or whine about operations tempo," Wooley said of this change of course. "This is exactly what we train to do."

The strong sense of mission helps the air commandos deal with an optempo that regularly has them deployed to war zones for half the year.

"They know they are contributing ... every day," said CMSgt. Michael P. Gilbert, AFSOC's command chief master sergeant. "There is no question about whether what they are doing matters. It is very easy for them to connect the dots."

Gilbert pointed out, "I don't think anyone anticipated a five-year special operation," but, he said, the command is likely to wear out its aircraft before it wears out its people.

AFSOC has essentially reached a "set deployment requirement," he said, so that air commandos who have already deployed numerous times can now be scheduled for home-station assignments such as training the younger airmen.

Daily Battle

Col. Timothy J. Leahy, vice commander of 1st Special Operations Wing, said AFSOC must maintain its training pipelines, but demand for aircraft overseas is so high that it is "a daily battle" to find the sorties, even when efforts are made to fence them off.

Finding aircraft for gunship training

USAF photo by SSgt. Greg L. Davis

CMSgt. Eddie Alicea fires a heavy machine gun from an MH-53J Pave Low during a training mission over the Eglin Range, Fla.

USAF photo by Capt. Tom Montgomery

In Niger, a 6th SOS rotary wing aviation advisor uses text messaging and a tactical radio to communicate with his unit and Niger Air Force helicopter crewmen.

in particular is "a tough nut to crack," said Gilbert, but the problem is relieved somewhat by the fact that AC-130 crews fly operational missions overseas almost every night. That on the job experience helps offset the lost training.

High wartime demands create other sources of friction. Vice Adm. Eric T. Olson, deputy SOCOM commander, told the *Baltimore Sun,* "More of our force than we'd like" is devoted to the shooting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which means commandos are "underrepresented globally."

Leahy said SOF commanders must carry out a balancing act with their deployed forces. There are missions air commandos can perform because they are on the battlefield, but there is also a need to hold back some capability for missions only AFSOC can perform. Sometimes, a different, non-SOF aircraft can perform a mission that at first glance would go to the air commandos.

The command operates small numbers of a wide variety of aircraft, so there is precious little held in reserve. "You don't see line after line" of the same types of aircraft on the ramps at Hurlburt Field, Fla., Leahy noted.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the 6th Special Operations Squadron, AFSOC's combat aviation advisory unit which helps train foreign air forces. The squadron currently flies UH-1 helicopters, one Russian-built Mi-8 helicopter, one Soviet-made An-26 transport, and several C-130 variants, along with a few other unusual types.

The 6th SOS flies whatever aircraft are flown by nations seeking help in fighting terrorists. The squadron trains foreign air forces in the tactics needed to fight terrorism on their own soil and take part in international operations.

The squadron sent small teams to some 15 nations in 2006, said Lt. Col. Bo LeMay, 6th SOS director of operations.

In recent assignments, USAF special operators have schooled Filipino airmen in nighttime troop insertion missions, Chad's Air Force in C-130 low-level delivery tactics, and Niger's aviation arm in air-drop and advanced helicopter operations. Many other locations and missions are classified.

"In most places where terrorists exist, [US military] force is not a viable option," said Col. John D. Jogerst, commandant of the USAF Special Operations School. As events since 9/11 have shown, terrorists often gather surreptitiously within "legitimate host nations with functioning governments."

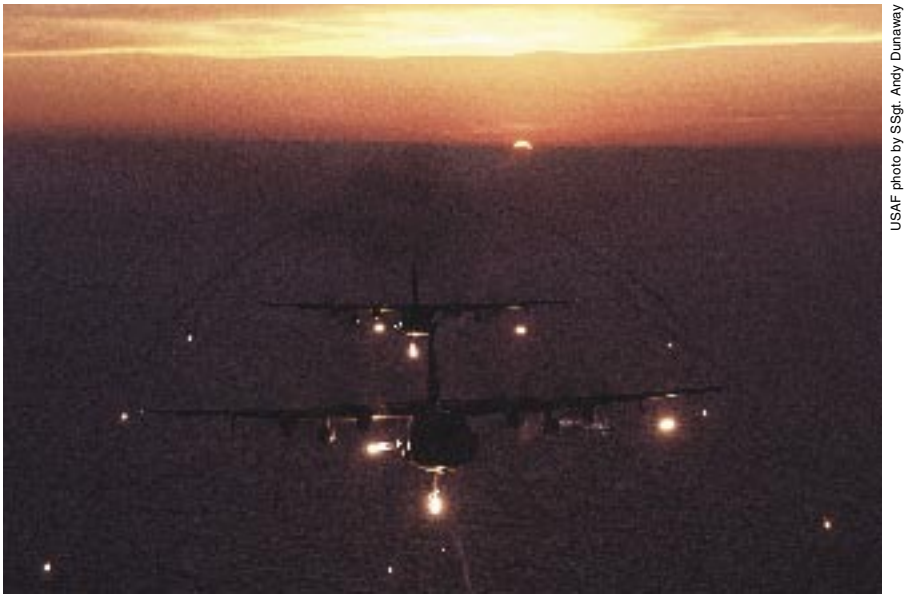
Part of the reason air commandos are so valued is because of their regional expertise. At Hurlburt, the dedicated special operations school has a broad range of courses that help deploying commandos understand threats they will face and political and cultural environments in which they are to operate.

"The staff and faculty of the school deploy regularly," Jogerst said. In December, one was on a UN observer mission and two were in Iraq.

High Leverage

By helping the foreign air forces perform counterterrorism missions on their own, officials say, a deployment of 15 US troops now can prevent the need to send 15,000 troops later. "We understand that we can't kill our way to victory," SOCOM's Olson said.

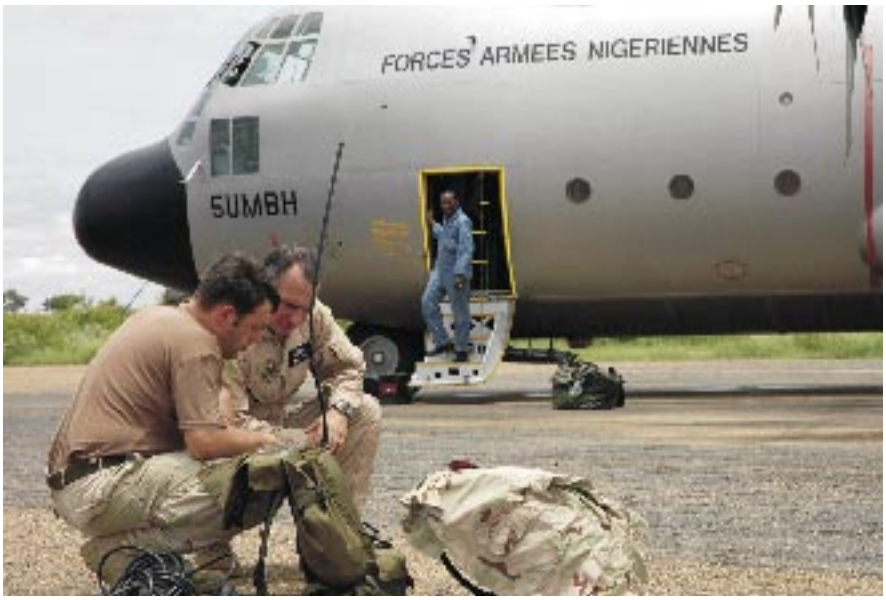
The 6th SOS has played a key role in building up the new Iraqi Air Force from scratch and trained more than 100 airmen to serve as embedded advisors to the fledgling air force. In 2005, four AFSOC air commandos and one Iraqi airman died in a crash in eastern Iraq. (See "Aerospace World:



USAF photo by SSgt. Andy Dunaway

A pair of MC-130 Combat Talons fly off the Florida coast at dusk. AFSOC has placed new mobility aircraft at the top of its wish list.

USAF photo



Air commandos train foreign air forces for counterterrorism missions. Here, a USAF deputy mission commander and maintenance instructor set up ground communications in Niger.

Four Airmen Die in Iraqi Crash," July 2005, p. 16.)

Not all of the pressures are operational in nature. AFSOC is up against an array of internal challenges, too, as it grows and realigns to better meet requirements.

In 2005, shortages of personnel and equipment forced the 6th SOS to turn down more than half of its requested missions. SOCOM commander Army Gen. Bryan D. Brown therefore directed that AFSOC double the size of the combat aviation advisory unit to meet the growing need for these operations. The squadron should grow to 230 personnel by the end of the year, and the mission will likely be split between Hurlburt and Cannon AFB, N.M.

AFSOC is the smallest of USAF's major commands. Officials anticipate "modest growth" in the command's end strength over the next few years, but the missions and equipment will see dramatic change.

At present, the command has only one US-based operational wing, the 1st SOW at Hurlburt. The wing reclaimed its historical name only last year; before then, it was the 16th Special Operations Wing.

A Second Wing

The previous designation, however, has not been retired, only suspended until this October when it will be bestowed on a brand-new special operations wing.

This newly created 16th SOW—only the second to be based in the United States—will be formally reactivated at Cannon. It will have access to the large and underused Melrose Training Range, a major step forward.

Hurlburt is "pretty close to the point where, to build something, you have to tear something down," said Leahy of the 1st SOW. Wooley agreed. "We are out of room at Hurlburt Field," he said, noting that the addition of the wing at Cannon will fulfill a decade-long plan to base an SOF wing west of the Mississippi.

From its base in the Florida panhandle, the 1st SOW has to support training operations throughout the United States, a fact that leads to movement and flying-time problems.

At Cannon, AFSOC will create "mirror image" capabilities east and west, Wooley said. Gunships, CV-22 Ospreys, special tactics units, SOF refuelers, and ground trainers will be present at both Hurlburt and Cannon, though the exact arrangement of units is still in flux.

Wooley called the Melrose range the "crown jewel" of the command's western infrastructure. It will give AFSOC a dedicated training range with the altitude and desert conditions similar to those that the air commandos are likely to encounter in the US Central Command area.

The AFSOC chief noted that the command's Predator UAV force will be at Cannon. The 3rd Special Operations Squadron is currently based at Creech Air Force Base in Indian Springs, Nev., and is flying MQ-1s borrowed from Air Combat Command.

The squadron eventually will control AFSOC's own fleet of Predators. The command's full capability of about 24 will be in place in 2011, with a mix of both MQ-1 Predator and MQ-9 Reaper UAVs.

A new intelligence squadron—AFSOC's first—was established last year to process this UAV intelligence and distribute it to the commandos in the field. (See "Aerospace World: AFSOC Activates Intel Squadron," October 2006, p. 16.) Lt. Col. David Hambleton, commander of the 11th Intelligence Squadron, noted that the benefit of having a special ops intel unit works both ways.

Special operations forces in the field are more willing to "open up" with details

Photo by Guy Aceto

The 6th SOS flies a wide range of specialized aircraft used by other nations. Shown here is the squadron's Russian-built Mi-8 helicopter.

about their mission and needs to fellow commandos, he said, while the operators in the intelligence shop will have a better understanding of what the forces in the field are trying to accomplish and how they operate.

One member of the 11th, Capt. Loree Filizer, earned a Bronze Star for "actions leading to an air strike" that killed a known terrorist in June 2006.

The command is assessing its long-term intelligence needs, Hambleton said, and is concluding that heavy current requirements are not a temporary thing but rather a permanent situation. The 11th's staff is expected to grow from 38 persons today to about 150 in a couple of years.

Officials noted that targets and locations are often observed for long periods. SOCOM can identify patterns and then establish a terrorist's habits and contacts—a time-consuming process that Hambleton compared to a stakeout.

UAVs and intelligence personnel can keep watch and help coordinate an attack as special operators, "riding in the back of AFSOC aircraft, ... go in and finish them," said Leahy.

The intelligence squadron reports to AFSOC's warfighting headquarters. This headquarters—soon to be named 23rd Air Force—is designed to have both reachback capability and a deployable command and control system, said Col. Michael W. Callan.

Pickup Game No More

Callan hopes that, in a few years, AFSOC will have a dedicated, deployable C2 capability that will end the "pickup game" that repeatedly occurs when air operations center personnel need to deploy to support a combat operation.

New hardware will help ease the demands on aircrews as well. The CV-22 Osprey will take on part of the infiltration and extraction mission from AFSOC's ancient MH-53s, with smaller aircrews and a reduced maintenance requirement.

Today's MH-53 Pave Lows are old—the fleet averages 36 years of age—and some even flew in the famed Son Tay prison raid in North Vietnam in 1970. Wooley said the command will retire all of them by 2008. The mission will be transferred to Army MH-47s for heavy lift missions and Air Force CV-22s for rapid movement missions.

Wooley said 2008 is a "firm mark on the wall" for the MH-53 retirement, as the command is not buying spare parts to last beyond then.

SOF Actions Since Vietnam War

Year Denotes Start of Operation

1975 - Response to seizure of *S.S. Mayaguez,* Cambodia
1975 - Operation Eagle Pull, evacuation of Cambodia
1975 - Operation Frequent Wind, evacuation of South Vietnam
1980 - Operation Eagle Claw, hostage rescue in Iran
1981 - Response to kidnapping of US Army Brig. Gen. James L. Dozier, Italy
1983 - Operation Urgent Fury, hostage rescue, Grenada
1983 - Operation Big Pine, Honduras
1983 - Operation Bild Kirk and others, El Salvador
1984 - Response to kidnapping of President Jose N. Duarte's daughter, El Salvador.
1985 - Response to hijacking of TWA Flight 847
1985 - Response to hijacking of ship *Achille Lauro,* Mediterranean Sea
1986 - Operation El Dorado Canyon, US raids, Libya
1986 - Response to bombing of Pan Am Flight 73, Scotland
1987 - Operations Earnest Will, Prime Chance I, Persian Gulf
1988 - Operation Golden Pheasant, Honduras
1989 - Operation Safe Passage, Afghanistan
1989 - Operation Poplar Tree, El Salvador
1989 - Response to coup attempt on Philippine President Corazon Aquino
1989 - Operation Just Cause, Panama
1990 - Operation Promote Liberty, Panama
1990 - Evacuation of US Embassy, Liberia
1990 - Operation Desert Shield, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq
1991 - Operation Desert Storm, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq
1991 - Operation Eastern Exit, Somalia
1991 - Operation Provide Comfort I, II, II, Turkey, Iraq
1991 - Operation Northern Watch, Turkey, Iraq
1991 - Operation Sea Angel, typhoon relief, Bangladesh
1991 - Operation Desert Calm, Saudi Arabia
1991 - Operation Southern Watch, Kuwait
1992 - Operation Provide Promise, Italy, Yugoslavia
1992 - Operation Restore Hope, Somalia
1993 - Operation Continue Hope I, II, Somalia
1993 - Operation Deny Flight, Yugoslavia
1994 - Operation Restore Democracy, Haiti
1994 - Operation Uphold Democracy, Haiti
1994 - Operation Support Hope, Rwanda
1995 - Operation United Shield, Somalia
1995 - Operation Deliberate Force, Italy, Yugoslavia,Bosnia
1995 - Operation Joint Endeavor, Italy,Yugoslavia, Bosnia
1996 - SAR support for Secretary of Commerce Ronald H. Brown, Croatia
1996 - Operation Assured Response, embassy evacuation, Liberia
1997 - Operation Silver Wake, embassy evacuation, Albania
1997 - Evacuation of civilians, Republic of Congo
1999 - Operation Allied Force, Serbia and Kosovo
2000 - Operation Atlas Response, flood relief, Mozambique
2001 - Operation Enduring Freedom, Afghanistan

Organization

Warfighting HQ

Air Force Special Operations Forces
Hurlburt Field, Fla.

Wings

1st SOW
Active
Hurlburt Field, Fla.

16th SOW
Active (planned)
Cannon AFB, N.M.

919th SOW
Air Force Reserve Command
Duke Field, Fla.

193rd SOW
Air National Guard
Harrisburg Arpt., Pa.

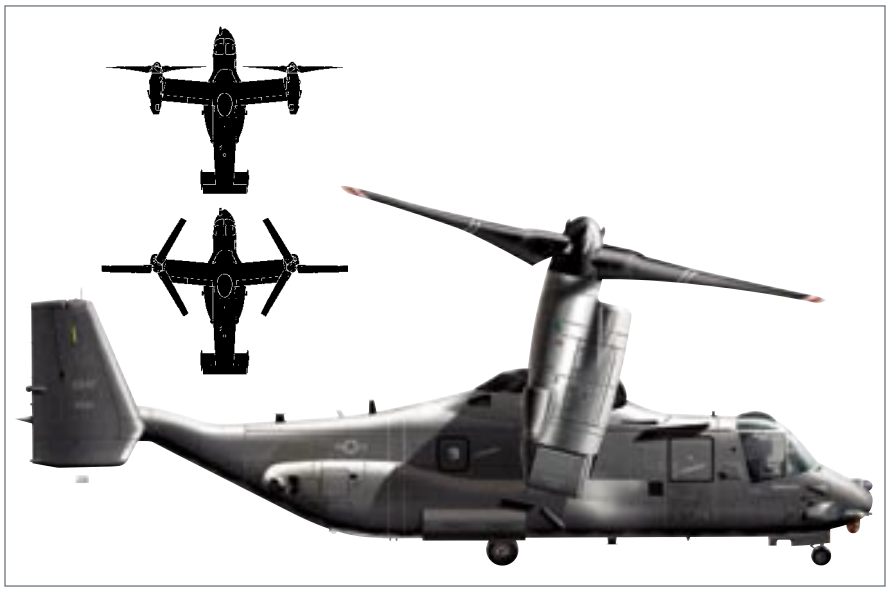
Groups

352d SOG
RAF Mildenhall, Britain

353d SOG
Kadena AB, Japan

720th Special Tactics Group
Hurlburt Field, Fla.

Staff illustration by Zaur Eylanbekov



The first operational CV-22s, as illustrated here, are beginning to arrive. Plans call for two tilt-rotor squadrons at Hurlburt Field, Fla., and two more at Cannon AFB, N.M.

The Pave Low is not even AFSOC's oldest aircraft. That distinction belongs to its 10 MC-130E Combat Talons, which are 42 years old, and 19 MC-130P Combat Shadows, which are 38 years old.

Plans call for purchasing a dozen MC-130Ws—but five MC-130s of various configurations have already been lost in the war on terror. AFSOC officials call the purchase an "interim solution" to AFSOC's mobility problems.

Old aircraft are "increasingly difficult and expensive to operate," noted Col. Billy Montgomery, AFSOC director of plans, programs, and requirements. As special operations forces and aircraft inventories continue to expand, the need for additional airlift and refueling capability is increasing.

The interim requirement is for 37 new MC-130-type aircraft to perform the infil-exfil and resupply mission. Ongoing studies of special operations mobility and refueling requirements are likely to lead to a requirement for 61 aircraft, Wooley said.

As new aircraft come on line, "we'll start with Talon Is and retire them one-for-one until they're gone," said Wooley. "Then we'll retire Shadows."

Enter the Osprey

The CV-22, AFSOC's highest-profile acquisition program, is likely to assume part of the mission currently performed by the MC-130. Unlike the MH-53, the Osprey can keep up with C-130s on missions and can transport troops into tight locations with its vertical takeoff and landing capability. AFSOC last year moved the 8th Special Operations Squadron, which will become the first operational CV-22 unit, to Hurlburt from nearby Duke Field.

The operators are anxious to get their hands on the CV-22, to figure out the best ways to employ an aircraft that offers a unique blend of helicopter and fixed-wing attributes. With engine nacelles that pivot in flight, the Osprey combines turboprop speed with rotorcraft utility. (See "The Osprey Factor," August 2001, p. 66.)

The CV-22 program grew out of the 1980 Desert One debacle, the hostage rescue effort in Iran that failed in part because the US had no aircraft with sufficient speed and range to fly from the Arabian Gulf to Tehran in one "period of darkness." The Osprey was designed to solve this problem.

Lt. Col. Theodore Corallo, 8th SOS commander, said the Air Force's CV-22 is scheduled to become operational in 2008 but that SOCOM would like the capability as soon as possible. Plans director Montgomery said there will be two CV-22 squadrons at Hurlburt and two at Cannon.

Wooley added that he is trying to accelerate the purchases, so that AFSOC can get its complement of 50 aircraft two years sooner than the current date of 2017 because "we really need that aircraft on the battlefield today."

The command has a requirement for more than 50 Ospreys, he added, but, for the time being, 50 is "the number."

For the gunship community, four new AC-130U aircraft have already been built; final outfitting and integration will continue through 2007. These aircraft will carry 30 mm Bushmaster guns rather than the 25 mm and 40 mm weapons found on today's AC-130Us. (See "The Night Shift," December 2006, p. 44.) The new weapons (the same caliber as the gun on the A-10) promise greater accuracy and reliability.

Montgomery said developmental problems with the 30 mm belt-feed system have been solved, and the entire fleet of 21 AC-130Us will have the new weapons by the end of 2010.

The dual 30s may someday also be added to AFSOC's eight AC-130H Spectres. ■

USAF photo

Some 6th SOS air commandos mug for the camera with army regulars in a sub-Saharan nation.