Conceptualizing Special Operations Tactical Athletes

Who are those guys?

Association for Applied Sport Psychology 28th Annual Conference, New Orleans, LA

Craig M. Jenkins, Ph.D. ABPP
LTC, US Army
Board Certified Health Psychologist

Gary Denham, M.Ed.
US Navy, Retired (SEAL)
Disclaimer: The material presented are the opinions of the presenters’ and do not necessarily reflect the policies of the Department of Defense or USSOCOM, nothing presented will be sensitive in nature. All studies cited are open source and published, my portion was cleared through Public Affairs channels.

This Brief is UNCLASS
There is the myth....
.... and there is reality
SOF Core Activities

- Direct Action
- Special Reconnaissance
- Unconventional Warfare
- Foreign Internal Defense
- Civil Affairs Operations
- Counterterrorism
- Psychological Operations
- Information Operations
- Counter-proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction
- Security Force Assistance
- Counterinsurgency Operations
- Activities Specified by the President or SECDEF

http://www.socom.mil/Pages/AboutUSSOCOM.aspx
Unit Types

- Guys on the ground
- People who get them to work
- Information and Influence
- Other Support
Humans are more important than hardware
Quality is better than Quantity
Special Operations Forces cannot be mass produced
Competent Special Operations Forces cannot be created after emergencies occur
Most Special Operations require non-SOF assistance
Key Human Dimensions

- Intellect
- Cognitively style
- Physical ability
- Hardiness
- Moral compass
- Attitude
Intelligence

- Better than average to superior range on IQ measures
- There is a range but rarely is a guy purely “average”
- Language
Cognitive style

- Functional intellect
- Decisive
- Cognitive flexibility
- Social intelligence and cultural attunement
Physical Ability

- Endurance
- Strength
- Coordination
- Flexibility
Hardiness

- Difficult to overstate but relates to performance
Adrenaline During Survival School

NP-Y During Survival School

Dissociation Prior to and after Survival School Stress

**Resilience & vulnerability** Morgan, et al.

**Resilient individuals**
- High
  - High NP-Y
  - Galanin
  - DHEA
  - Testosterone
- Low
  - HPA axis
  - LC/NE activation
  - CRH

**Vulnerable Individual**
- High
  - High Estrogen
  - Dopamine
  - HPA axis
  - LC/NE activation
- Low
  - Low NPY
  - Galanin
  - DHEA
  - Testosterone
Discomfort

- Regularly operates with discomfort
- Environmental (hot, cold, wet, dry)
- Discomfort tolerance (heavy awkward gear, noisy)
- Fatigue

“….embrace the suck!”
Moral Compass

- Integrity
- Does the right thing in ambiguous situations
Creeds...
Attitude

- Confident
- Positive perspective
- Achievement focused
- Challenge and excitement seeking
Other Characteristics

- Frequently married with children
- Low debt, and good credit
- Low rates of psychopathology
Gallup marketing survey invited 1,200 students from classes 263-274. 33% responded resulting in a total of 391 individuals responded – 216 HWCs and 175 DORs.
Leadership

A piece of spaghetti or a military unit can only be led from the front end. General George S. Patton
SOF is an Identity
The Long Haul...

- Operators can stay in the organization for as long as 20 years.
- Experience is important and pays off on the mission.
- Leadership is investing in long haul efforts.
Injury

- Never really thinks he will become injured
- Aggressive in rehabilitation
  - Must outline the limits of activities
  - Must ensure he understands the progression
### SOF Conceptual Model For Resilience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ASSESS AND SELECT</th>
<th>TRAIN</th>
<th>MONITOR</th>
<th>TREAT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Volunteer</td>
<td>• Tough, realistic training</td>
<td>• OPTEMPO / PERSTEMPO</td>
<td>• Organic SMEs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Intelligence</td>
<td>• Smart and relevant to utilization</td>
<td>• Deployment length</td>
<td>• Concentric circle model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Motivation</td>
<td>• Consideration of OPTEMPO/PERSTEMPO impacts</td>
<td>• Predictability</td>
<td>• Coordinate treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Physical Ability</td>
<td>• Targeted training for personal/family problems</td>
<td>• Longevity and stability</td>
<td>• Monitor readiness for commander</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Personality Attributes</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Leadership (command climate)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Resilient</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Stress hardy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Get AND keep the right people”

“Optimizing Performance”

“Keep Them Healthy & Make Them Stronger”

“Help Them Up When needed”

### OPTIMIZING PERFORMANCE

- Organizational climate, unit morale, team dynamics, individual performance, operational readiness, combat effectiveness, retention, recruitment, reduction of operational risk, reduction in buffoonery (UCMJ), stronger families, etc.
Whole Person Performance Enhancement Model

Mission
Physical
Mental/emotional
Spiritual
Family/Relationships
Unit
Performance and Resilience Programs

Southwick and Charney from Yale conclude, based on interviews with former POWs SF instructors as well as civilians who have persevered through great adversity, that following factors are important for resilience:

- Realistic optimism
- Facing fear: an adaptive response
- Moral compass, ethics and altruism
- Religion and spirituality
- Social support
- Role models
- Physical training
- Brain fitness
- Meaning, purpose and growth

Program Recommendations

Johns Hopkins’ recommendations for evidence-informed programs outlined, integrated, multicomponent interventional models.

- Importance of leadership
- Foster group cohesion and identity
- Identification with higher ideal
- Realistic Training
- Family integration
- Pastoral integration
- Build confidence and hardiness

Sport and SOF Similarities

- Competitive
- Focus on excellence
- Practice (training)
- Conditioning (mental, physical...)
- Confidence
- Drive
- Injuries do occur
- Own languages
Sport and SOF Differences

- Defined activity
- Sport season
- Can be individual or team
- Narrow leadership needs
- It is a game

- Spectrum of activities, often ambiguity
- Everyday is game day
- Always team
- Leadership potential for most
- Ultimate concerns (existential)
RECAP.....