

Official Statement by Lieutenant General (Retired) Michael K. Nagata, US Army
House Armed Services Sub-Committee on Intelligence and Special Operations Hearing:
"SOF Culture and Climate: The Future of the Force"
26 March 2021

I am honored to participate in today's important hearing. My remarks today are based on my more than three decades of service in US Special Operations Forces (SOF).

On the topic of Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) as they relate to SOF, my perspective is based on having been one of the few Asian-American Officers to rise to Flag Rank during a SOF career, and I wish to provide two suggestions related to this effort.

First, over my own career, I was responsible for the recruiting, assessment, selection, and training of future SOF personnel on two occasions: once as the commander of the US Army's Special Forces Qualification Course, and second as Commander of a Special Mission Unit. I learned from those experiences the difficulty we had in attracting a more diverse volunteer population. Perhaps counter-intuitively for some observers, I recall that our greatest challenge was not the pass/fail rate among diverse volunteers, but rather identifying larger numbers of suitable diverse candidates that either wanted, or could be persuaded, to volunteer. In my view, there is a significant shortage of objective, scientific research into the question of whether there are important differences between what attracts a more diverse population to volunteer for the grueling experience of SOF Assessment & Selection, compared to what attracts our traditional demographic mix. Said another way, in 1984 when Lieutenant Michael Nagata began the Special Forces Qualification Course, I remember being only one of two Asian American volunteers. Today, I still do not know why.

Second, I often hear today discussions over the need for more SOF personnel that are conversant with the cultures and languages of our Near Peer Adversaries... one example being a lament I heard over why, in an era where our greatest strategic challenge is China, we do not have more SOF that can speak Chinese. While I certainly consider that an important question, I believe it is also too narrow. We must remember that much of today's Great Power Competition is essentially a contest between the United States and countries like China or Russia over strategic influence with other nations, communities, ethnic groups, and the like that are neither Russian, Chinese, or American. In such cases, SOF's success will have less to do with understanding Russian, Chinese, or any other Near Peer Competitor's culture or language, and far more to do SOF's ability to have deep understanding and language compatibility with African, Middle Eastern, South Asian, Pacific Island and Archipelago, or European and even Western Hemisphere cultures and countries that we are today competing to preserve or strengthen our influence with, against our strategic foes.

Regarding the Health of SOF, I wish to emphasize two related realities.

Firstly, SOF's well-being and durability requires a constant balancing act between antagonistic impulses. Said differently, maintenance of the health of this force is a lot like trying to balance an egg on one end, only constant effort and attention will prevent it from falling in any direction. By way of personal example, during my career I would be repetitively deployed for many months, even years, at a time and typically in harm's way. The strain on me personally, but more importantly, the strain that this created for my family, has left scars that I still live with. Yet, on the other hand, I and thousands like me volunteered for SOF, and remained for a career in SOF, because I yearned to do these very things. The strains and stresses of those missions not only made me stronger, better, and more effective than I could have ever been otherwise, they created friendships, memories, and outlooks that have enriched, and continue to enrich, every day of my life. Do I regret the costs and damage that my long absences created? Yes, I do. But, if I could turn back the hands-of-time and had the power to significantly alter my trajectory, would I? Paradoxically, the answer is mostly no, and I might have decided to pursue a different career path if that trajectory had been different.

Second, there is an important problem that undermines the search for ways of ensuring the health of SOF. It may surprise you, but here also is a profound shortage of real, empirical, long-term research on what the effects of deployments, prolonged combat, exposure to blast and trauma, family separation, and so on, are for SOF. I know some would argue there is substantial research on all of these topics for the US Military broadly, but I believe almost none of that is specific to the experiences of SOF, and therefore do take into account the often very different aspects of SOF culture, the nature of our deployments and operating environments, and the consequences of physical and psychological stresses and traumas amidst these differences. If I am correct in this assertion, then we are probably today in a classic logic trap, that "one cannot solve a problem if one is unable to understand that problem".

Finally, on the Future of SOF, I frequently hear in Washington DC these days how SOF must "pivot" away from Counterterrorism in the interest of "doing more" in the arena of Great Power Competition. I understand the impulses that drive such assertions, but I think they are at best misleading, and at worst quite wrong.

The main reason is because we are witnessing a growing convergence between our Near Peer Adversaries and organizations that can be characterized as Terrorist or Extremist, or at least Non-State, but increasingly powerful and militarily capable actors. Two examples are instructive:

In Yemen today, the Houthis, who just a few years ago were a relatively obscure tribal group, are today a highly capable and powerful military proxy of Iran. The Houthis today can successfully employ surface-to-surface ballistic missiles, long-range weaponized and swarm drone attacks, and precision-guided anti-ship missiles.

A few years ago, in the Ukraine and Crimea, "Russian Ethnic Separatists" demonstrated the ability to employ "first world" military and intelligence technology, sophisticated air defense systems, and highly effective cyber operations, in cooperation and concert with Russian

Government efforts, including the “Little Green Men” who we all know today were Russian military Forces.

Proxy warfare is as old as mankind because it has always been convenient for Nations or Kingdoms to have **someone else** do their bleeding and dying for them. In today’s world of rapidly advancing Technologies, whose costs are falling so quickly that anyone with a credit card may have them, the attractiveness of such non-state or terrorist actors as powerful proxy tools is proving irresistible. Consequently, America should expect that challenging a Near Peer Competitor will also bring us into confrontations with these proxies, including terrorists and extremists, that will again require many of the skills that SOF developed in the Counterterrorism arena, whether that be the precision-strike abilities of SOF, or the abilities of SOF to effectively compete the classic “struggle over hearts and minds”, instead of bombs and bullets.

In closing, I wish to thank the Committee for allowing me the opportunity to provide a small contribution to today’s hearing, and I look forward to your questions.