



AIR FORCE DOCTRINE PUBLICATION (AFDP) 3-05
SPECIAL OPERATIONS

**AIR FORCE SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES MISSION
PREPARATION CONSIDERATIONS**

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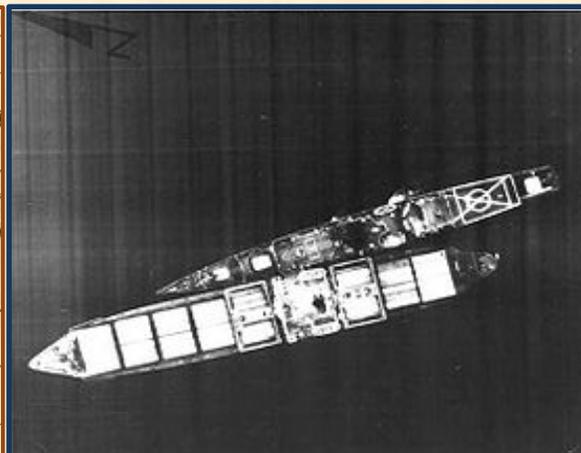
This section offers some planning considerations when preparing for the employment of [Air Force special operations forces](#) (AFSOF) elements in combat. Historically, AFSOF tasking has ranged from missions that called specifically for AFSOF capabilities, to missions where AFSOF was the only force that could accommodate due to time constraints or mission location. Regardless of how or why AFSOF are tasked, the tasking authority should be provided with a candid assessment of AFSOF capabilities, limitations, and risks associated with mission execution.



AFSOF missions are often high-risk and high-payoff operations, have limited windows for execution, and require first-time success. Given the limited size and sustainability of AFSOF, adequate support is vital to the success of the mission. Mission rehearsal is a key critical element of mission preparation.

AFSOF are employed as part of a joint [special operations forces](#) (SOF) package. As a result, AFSOF mission and sustainment planning considerations often should be coordinated and integrated with joint SOF, other joint, multinational, or other government agency partners. Failure to properly coordinate requirements can severely impact mission effectiveness.

The Mayaguez Incident



On 12 May 1975, the SS Mayaguez, an American-owned freighter, was boarded and seized by Cambodian forces while in international waters off the coast of Cambodia. The next day, the ship was taken to Koh Tang Island while the ship's crew was taken to another island for interrogation. The operation to take back the ship and rescue the crew highlights what can happen if reaction time is short, force selection is ad hoc, previous joint training is not done, and mission rehearsal cannot occur in the time available.

The plan called for 11 Air Force helicopters (six HH-53 Air Rescue Service and five CH-53 special operations helicopters) to support Marines in an assault on Koh Tang Island and to board and retake the Mayaguez itself. It was assumed that the ship's crew was being held on Koh Tang Island and the rescue force was told to expect only a handful of lightly armed Khmer Rouge soldiers.

The operation began on the morning of 15 May 1975. Retaking the Mayaguez went smoothly. The operation at Koh Tang Island, however, soon deteriorated into what one helicopter pilot described as "absolute and utter chaos." As it turned out, there were about 300 Khmer Rouge dug in on the island with heavy weaponry. By the time the first assault was completed, all but one of the original assault helicopters had been destroyed or damaged. Ironically, about three hours into the first assault, the Cambodians gave the entire crew of the Mayaguez back to forces from the USS Holt; the original problem had been solved. The Marines on Koh Tang Island, however, had to be reinforced and then extracted. These operations lasted through the night. In the end, US casualties were 15 killed in action, three missing in action, and about 49 wounded in action.

—*A Very Short War*, John F. Guilmartin

MISSION REHEARSAL

Rehearsal of special operations is a fundamental SOF principle. Often, repeated rehearsal of certain mission elements is necessary because personnel and essential tasks differ from mission to mission and because of the possible strategic implications of these missions. Operations may bring together a group of specialists who have worked together infrequently, or not at all. In addition, the specific tasks required may not have been practiced together or integrated in the required sequence. Rehearsals help reduce the risk to special operations mission success by revealing plan shortfalls. Training and rehearsals of the mission are integral to operations because of the complexity and risk.

LANGUAGE, REGION, AND CULTURE CONSIDERATIONS

AFSOF face an expanding and dynamic operational environment requiring the ability to operate across a wide range of regional and cultural contexts. Understanding the operational environment is critical to success. Cross-cultural competence and foreign language proficiency increase efficiency and lower risks to SOF core missions. Selected AFSOF personnel normally have basic cross-cultural training to avoid misunderstandings that may prolong or complicate mission accomplishment.

Language and cultural competence skills are supplemented with an increased understanding of regional, country-specific, and local political and military dynamics. Regional education includes basic education on geography, demographics, economics, politics, and selected historical events. Particular emphasis is placed on the specific political and military context in which the US foreign policy requires the use of military force. This context goes beyond pre-deployment intelligence briefings, and examines the stability and legitimacy of the host nation governance structures. This knowledge can be critical to operational effectiveness. Commanders should plan and optimize cultural, regional, and language training requirements to provide the most significant training in the most effective manner.
