

An Operational Detachment explains its capabilities during a "Gabriel Demonstration" at Fort Bragg, 1964.

## THE A TEAM NUMBERING SYSTEM

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From 1952 until 2006, each Special Forces Group (SFG) developed its own internal standard operating procedures (SOP) based upon its mission, area orientation, and specific equipment requirements. While these same factors contributed to Special Forces' reputation as a unique, independent, and highly individualistic society, they also created confusion among both the conventional U.S. Army and SF veterans about the way each SFG designated its subordinate maneuver echelons. The early SFG commanders personalized field and garrison policies and procedures for their respective units based on their experience and training. This was especially true when numbering the Special Forces basic maneuver element, the Operational Detachment A (ODA). Over the years, several attempts were made to establish a uniform designation system, but it was not until 2006 that U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) implemented a standardized ODA numbering system. This article explains the evolution of this ODA numbering system beginning with the 10th SFG.

In April 1952, the Psychological Warfare (Psywar) Center was established on Smoke Bomb Hill, Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The Center had a provisional Psychological Warfare School with Special Forces and Psywar Departments, a Psywar Board for research and development, and the 6th Radio Broadcast and Leaflet Group. When the Department of the Army was given responsibility for organizing guerrilla forces in early 1952, the Office of the Chief of Psychological Warfare directed by Brigadier General (BG) Robert A. McClure and the Psywar Center became the proponents for that initiative. [1] Having been allocated 2,300 positions from the fourteen recently deactivated Airborne Ranger Infantry Companies in 1951, the Center built the original SFG Table of Organization and Equipment (TO&E) which was approved on 14 May 1952. On 20 June 1952, the 10th Special Forces Group, consisting of a Headquarters and Headquarters Company (HHC) and three Special Forces Companies, was activated. [2] The HHC contained the Group staff and organic support elements. It provided limited command and control and service support to the three SF companies. Each SFG was also composed of FC, FB, and FA Teams. All three levels of SF teams were deployable command and control elements.

1 Gordon L. Rottman, *US Army Special Forces 1952-84* (London: Osprey Publishing, 1985), 6-7.

2 CSM (ret) John E. Kessling, interview by Eugene G. Piasecki, 10 October 2009, Fayetteville, NC, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. In 1952, before enlisted SF volunteers were assigned to FA, FB, or FC Teams in the 10th SFG, they were assigned to a numbered SF Operational Training Detachment to undergo ATP (Army Training Program) Special Forces Training. M/SGT John E. Kessling was one of these soldiers and was assigned to the 18th SF Opn Det B. On 25 February 1953 he successfully completed ATP Special Forces Training (mobilization) (tentative) and was among the earliest SF course graduates to be awarded the prefix 3. The prefix 3 was the designation added to a soldier's basic military occupation specialty code (MOS) that signified he was qualified to be considered for Special Forces assignments.

The FC Team was commanded by a Lieutenant Colonel in garrison and in the field and corresponded to a provisional Battalion Headquarters to provide command and control for its organic four to five FB Teams (commanded by Majors), and their subordinate four to ten or more FA Teams (commanded by Captains). In garrison, the FC Team was augmented by an administrative detachment and provided administration and training for the FB and FA Teams. FB Teams in garrison functioned as a headquarters for its assigned FA Teams. When deployed, FB Teams were responsible for a specifically assigned region in a particular country and provided command and control to all FA Teams operating in their area of operations. The original TO&E of 1952 also established the FA Team as the basic unit of SF with fifteen personnel assigned. [3] FA Teams were capable of organizing, equipping, training and advising indigenous guerrilla companies, battalions, or regiments up to 1,500 men.


3 Rottman, *US Army Special Forces*, 19.

The original TO&E remained effective until 1960 and was the basis for activating the 77th SFG in 1953 (became 7th SFG in 1960) at Fort Bragg and the 1st SFG on Okinawa in 1957. By 1960, Special Forces had matured and organizational changes were needed to improve the SFG capabilities and reduce dependence on conventional Army service support. The June 1960 TO&E removed the "F" as part of the designator for all operational echelons and elements. The SF Provisional Battalion (FC Team) became simply the C Team or ODC in the field; the FB Team became the B Team or ODB; and the FA Team became the A Team or ODA. The echelons of Command and Control in descending order were C to A. The second and most dramatic change was the reduction of the fifteen-man FA Team to a twelve-man A-Team or ODA. Of all the operational changes made to Special Forces, this one has remained in effect the longest and has proven to be the most successful in all environments and for all SF missions from combat to humanitarian relief operations. The third expanded the Group HHC by adding a number of service support elements and an SF Signal Company for higher echelon communications support. [4]

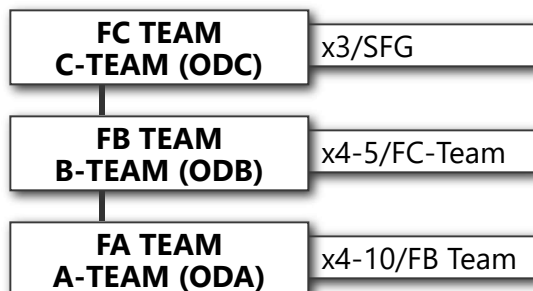
4 Rottman, *US Army Special Forces*, 21.

The 1960 TO&E was used to activate the 5th SFG in 1961 and the 3rd, 6th, and 8th SFGs in 1963. While the SFG TO&E called for three SF companies, some groups operated with only two companies (8th SFG in Panama). The 3rd and the 6th structure remained unchanged during the short time they were active in the 1960s. The forward-deployed SFGs such as the 8th in Panama and the 5th in Vietnam, task organized to meet the requirements of combating "Wars of National Liberation." By 1972, SF was no longer in South Vietnam and the U.S. Army was undergoing a post-war reduction. In an effort to reduce friction in the post-Vietnam Army, the SFG staffs were reconfigured more like conventional combat brigades. The lettered SF companies became numbered battalions (but ODCs in the field), and ODBs became lettered companies in their battalions. The only organization that remained unchanged, except for its numbering system, was the ODA. Although its strength was still twelve Special Forces qualified soldiers, each ODA was assigned to a lettered company and identified by a specific number from one to six that represented its affiliation to the numbered battalion and designated its SFG, ODB, and assignment within that ODB.

Even though this ODA identification system continued to cause confusion (each SFG had retained its own ODA numbering system) it enjoyed the greatest longevity, 1972 through 2006. Ever increasing roles predicated changes especially when SF was committed to fighting America's Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). By 2006, the Department of Defense recognized that in order to maintain the required OPTEMPO, the Army needed more SF soldiers. In September 2006, the Department of the Army authorized a fourth SF Battalion with eighteen more ODAs for each active SFG. This "plus up" prompted USASOC to simplify and standardize the entire active SFG numbering system.

Understandably, this latest system is not perfect, but it is simple and helps identify each ODA/ODB/ODC according to the code. Even though the numbering system has changed over the years, the SF ODA, the backbone of Special Forces has remained the same. 

## Special Forces Organization | 1952-1960



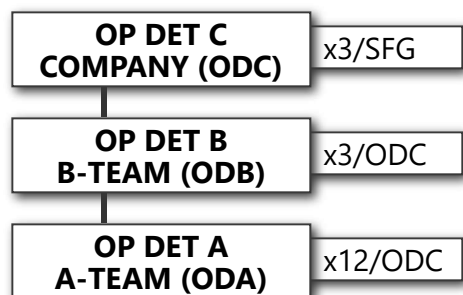
- Authorization authority: TO&E 33-510 (May 1952)
- The Psywar Center labeled the first echelon SF Teams (ODAs) as "FA Teams" and based their strength on the 15-man OSS Operational Groups (OG) of World War II.\* [5]
- FA Teams were numbered beginning at 1 and continued in order until all teams were designated, i.e. FA Team 1 to FA Team 70. (10th SFG in 1952)
- FA Teams, controlled by FB Teams, were capable of advising and supporting a guerrilla unit as large as 1,500 personnel. [6]
- Each FB Team commanded and controlled two or more FA Teams.

\* Major force structural element.

5 COL William Ewald, former Commander, FC1, 77th SFG, telephonic interview by Eugene G. Piasecki, 5 May 2009, Fort Bragg, NC, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. When asked about the origins of the term FA, FB, and FC for the teams assigned to the 77th SFG, COL Ewald stated the team designations were determined by the Psywar Center and assigned to the Group's internal organizations.

6 Charles M. Simpson III, *Inside the Green Berets. The First Thirty Years. The United States Army Special Forces* (California: Presidio Press, 1983), 36. FB Teams were designed to control an area command within a denied country and to control two or more FA Teams. FA Team strength was 15 men and included two officers and thirteen enlisted men. The enlisted members of the FA Team were skilled in operations and intelligence, light and heavy weapons, demolitions, radio communications, and medical aid.

## Special Forces Organization | 1960-1971



Authorization authority: TO&E 31-105D (June 1960)

- **Reduced the size of the FA Team to 12 men\*** and removed the "F" prefix designation for all SF Teams. (FC to C; FB to B; FA to A)
- Assigned four ODAs (former FA Team) to each ODB (former FB Team) for a total of 12 ODAs per SF Company (ODC) the former FC TEAM. [7]
- Each ODA was now identified by three numbers that specified

the company (ODC), the ODB in the company, and the specific team in that ODB. For example in 1963, **ODA-312** indicated:

- 3 C Company, 1st SFG
- 1 ODB 31
- 2 The second ODA assigned to ODB 31. [8]

*\*Major force structural element.*

7 Rottman, *US Army Special Forces*, 21. In 1964, the Operational Detachment C (ODC/C-Team), commanded by a Lieutenant Colonel, served as the equivalent to a conventional battalion headquarters. Operational Detachment B (ODB/B-Team), commanded by a Major, served as the equivalent to a conventional company headquarters with three ODBs assigned to an ODC. Originally six ODAs were assigned to each ODB, but by November, the number of ODAs per ODB was reduced to five. The ODA was now comprised of two officers (one Captain, the ODA commander and a First Lieutenant, the Executive Officer) and 10 noncommissioned officers. Two noncommissioned officers were trained in each of the five Special Forces functional areas: weapons, engineer, medical, communications, and operations and intelligence. Cross training in the different skills among the detachment members was a continuous process.

8 Master Sergeant (ret) Lowell W. Stevens, Sr., e-mail to Eugene G. Piasecki, 31 August 2009, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

10 Stevens e-mail, 31 August 2009. Sometimes when a team was relocated and assigned a completely new designation, the team number often remained the same and provided the only link of continuity between the old and new ODA missions and/or locations.

This system remained relatively consistent in all SFGs with the exception of the 5th SFG after it went to South Vietnam on 1 October 1964. For a brief period in late 1968, ODAs in the 5th SFG had fourteen men rather than the authorized twelve. The additions were a First Lieutenant (1LT) Civic Action/Psychological Operations Officer and a Specialist Fifth Class (SP5) Civic Action/Psychological Operations Specialist.

At times ODA numbers were switched or reassigned as SF personnel changed locations based on the military and political situation in Vietnam, 5th SFG OPTEMPO or special mission assignments. The numbers in sequence for **ODA-257 (Pleiku area)** reflected these elements:

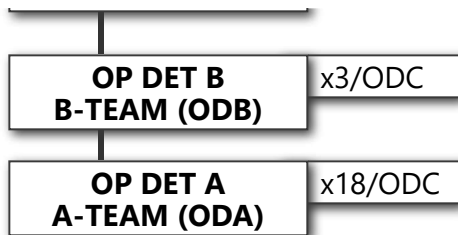
- 2 Represented the Corps Tactical Zone (1 to 5) in which the ODA operated.
- 5 Was the second digit of the parent ODB (in this case B-25).
- 7 Identified the specific team among those ODAs assigned to B-25. [10]

This system remained in effect in RVN until 31 March 1971 when the 5th SFG returned to Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

## Special Forces Organization | 1972-2006



- Authorization authority: TO&E 31-105H (June 1970)



- SF Groups reorganized three SF companies into three numbered battalions of **three ODBs, each with six ODAs.\***
- ODAs continued to be identified by a three digit numbering system, but the coding changed to reflect the SF Group, ODB and ODA number in each ODB:

- For instance, in the case of **ODA-716**:

- 7** Signifies that the ODA is part of the 7th Special Forces Group.
- 1** Places it in A Company, 1st Battalion, 7th SFG. (*NOTE: sequential, ascending ODB numbers remained the same.*)
- 6** Designates it as the 6th detachment assigned to that company.

*\*Major force structural element.*

Under this system, each ODA's number delineated its parent unit:

The **1st** Number signified the Group (0=10th SFG; 1=1st SFG; 3=3rd SFG; 5=5th SFG; 7=7th SFG; 9=19th SFG; 2=20th SFG). The **2nd** Number represented the ODB (1st Battalion: A=1, B=2, C=3; 2nd Battalion: A=4, B=5, C=6; 3rd Battalion: A=7, B=8, C=9). The **3rd** Number specifies the actual ODA in each ODB (1 to 6).

*NOTE: ascending sequential numbering for ODBs.*

*NOTE: In most SFGs, ODA numbers that ended in "4" like A-364 often indicated that the team specialized in High Altitude Low Opening (HALO) parachute operations and the "5," like A-355 reflected that the ODA specialized in Underwater Operations using self-contained underwater breathing apparatus (SCUBA).*

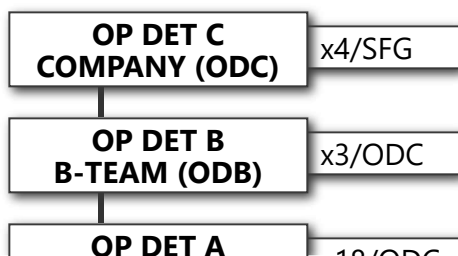
Attempts to standardize ODA numbering for all SF Groups failed until Department of the Army (DA) approved a fourth battalion for all active duty SFGs. This action caused U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) to standardize ODA numbering in November 2006 with implementation by 1 January 2007. [\[11\]](#) The 19th and 20th SFGs of the U.S. Army National Guard (ARNG) will not adopt the four digit system until they have been authorized an additional battalion. [\[12\]](#)

<sup>11</sup> Mr. Patrick D. Snyder, DCS, G-35 Plans Readiness and Programs Branch, USASOC, e-mail to Eugene G. Piasecki, 18 August 2009, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

<sup>12</sup> Mr. Patrick D. Snyder, DCS, G-35 Plans Readiness and Programs Branch, USASOC, e-mail to Eugene G. Piasecki, 18 August 2009, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

## Special Forces Organization | 2007-Present

### (Active Component Only)



- Authorization Authority: TO&E 31-815G ( October 2007)
- The four digit ODA numbering system reflects the addition of **a fourth battalion to each active duty SFG.\***
- ODAs are identified by the SFG, the battalion, the company and the team number in that ODB.

**A-TEAM (ODA)**

X18/ODC

- Under this system **ODA-3423** signifies:
  - 3** The ODA is assigned to 3rd SFG.
  - 4** The ODA is in the 4th Battalion (ODC).
  - 2** The ODA is in B Company (ODB) of the 4th Battalion.
  - 3** Is the 3rd ODA of B Company, 4th Battalion.

*\* Major force structural element.*

Under this system, ODA numbers delineate specific parentage: The **1st** digit identifies the Group (0=10th SFG; 1=1st SFG; 3=3rd SFG; 5=5th SFG; 7=7th SFG). The **2nd** digit represents the battalion (1st Battalion=1; 2nd Battalion=2; 3rd Battalion=3; 4th Battalion=4). The **3rd** digit provides the ODB number to which the ODA is assigned (A=1; B=2; C=3) [each ODB ends in 0, i.e. 10=A; 20=B; 30=C] (i. e. 3230 designates the ODB of C Company, 2nd Battalion, 3rd SFG). The **4th** digit is that particular team number in the ODB (1 to 6).

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