Special Operations Command North

Leading Special Operations Forces into the North American Arctic

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Abstract

This article begins by describing how Special Operations Command North (SOCNORTH), as a theater special operations command, supports US Northern Command's (USNORTHCOM) primary mission of homeland defense. Next, it explains why deploying special operations forces (SOF) to the region signals the importance of the Arctic to US national interests, as the Arctic emerges as an arena for strategic competition. It then presents SOCNORTH's *Northern Approach* and how each vector within the plan achieves the objectives of enhancing integrated deterrence and layered defense. Finally, the article explains how SOCNORTH operationalized *Northern Approach* during exercise Arctic Edge 2022. The article concludes with a description of lessons learned being applied, tactics, techniques, and procedures put into action, and a vision for future SOF operations in the Arctic.

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Twenty minutes from the drop zone at Deadhorse, Alaska, the ramp on the US Air Force C-17 slowly opens, letting in a blast of Arctic air. The aircraft's cargo compartment air temperature has already been deliberately dropped to a balmy 32 degrees Fahrenheit to allow the eight US Army 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) [10th SFG(A)] operators to acclimate to the frigid Arctic temperature at altitude. For the past two and half hours of the six-hour flight from Colorado Springs, Colorado, the team members have been prepping for this jump as part of Special Operations Command North (SOCNORTH) support to exercise Arctic Edge. For testing purposes, each operator is wearing several layers of extreme cold-weather gear, consisting of new and old kit, all of which is meant to assist survival in the Arctic. The operators check one another's kits, which include oil-boat compasses, heated gloves and boots, and modified snowmobile face shields in addition to their weapons, communication and navigation equipment, and military-issued parachutes. When the ramp finally opens, the loadmasters and the team stare into the white abyss of the Alaska North Slope.

When the green light illuminates, the jumpmaster gives the exit command after spotting a solitary smokestack, the sole indicator among the all-white environment below. The eight members step off the ramp and into the white. The minus 100-degree Fahrenheit wind blasts each Green Beret, tearing away their modified snowmobile face shields, leaving each operator to contemplate the finer points of frostbite and temperature at which eyeballs freeze. After 40 seconds of freefall, the team pulls their ripcords, learning even canopy openings in the Arctic take longer, requiring an extra two to three seconds for full canopy deployment. Under canopy, the temperature hovers around minus 45 degrees Fahrenheit, causing the batteries in the GPS and communications devices to fail. The oil-boat compasses, which were intended to work in the extreme temperatures, are frozen, leaving the teams' aerial navigation up to the visual ground references without radio communication. With significant difficulty they steer their canopies, discovering in the process that their risers have frosted and their heated gloves limit dexterity and provide only minimal grip.

Despite these challenges, the team lands lightly onto the frozen North American tundra—part of a vast area that is rapidly emerging as an arena of great-power competition. This exercise has provided a list of lessons learned and informed the development of tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) that will ensure future US operations will succeed in the Arctic.

Figure 1: 10th SFG(A) Green Berets under canopy over Deadhorse, Alaska

SOCNORTH is the theater special operations command (TSOC) for US Northern Command (USNORTHCOM), organized, trained, and equipped by US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). SOCNORTH's mission is to plan, coordinate, and conduct special operations in collaboration with mission partners, to assure allies and partners, compete below the level of armed conflict, deter irregular and conventional threats, and set conditions to execute contingency operations to defend the United States and its interests. SOCNORTH is leading special operations forces (SOF) into the North American Arctic to support homeland defense through integrated deterrence with an enhanced SOF role.

SOCNORTH's plan to support USNORTHCOM in the Arctic, entitled *Northern Approach*, employs three vectors as a framework:

1. Inform Arctic capability requirements through specific Arctic operations, activities, and investments (OAI) to ensure SOF cannot only survive but also thrive in the region;
2. Demonstrate readiness to conduct special operations core activities with little to no notice; and
3. Prepare the environment by conducting activities in Arctic operational areas to set conditions for competition, crisis, and conflict.

This article begins by describing how SOCNORTH, as a TSOC, supports USNORTHCOM's primary mission of homeland defense. Next, it explains why deploying SOF to the region signals the importance of the Arctic to US national interests, as the Arctic emerges as an arena for strategic competition. It then presents

SOCNORTH's *Northern Approach* and how each vector within the plan achieves the objectives of enhancing integrated deterrence and layered defense. Finally, the article explains how SOCNORTH operationalized *Northern Approach* during exercise Arctic Edge 2022. The article concludes with a description of lessons learned being applied, TTPs put into action, and a vision for future SOF operations in the Arctic.

Special Operations Command North

SOCNORTH directly supports USNORTHCOM by advising the commanding general on SOF employment, integrating SOF into the theater campaign plan, and command and control (C2) of SOF during competition, crisis, or conflict. SOCNORTH is under the operational control of USNORTHCOM and is located at Peterson Space Force Base, Colorado Springs, Colorado. Each combatant command with a designated area of responsibility (AOR) is assigned a TSOC to C2 SOF, and it also serves as the combatant commander's SOF advisor to ensure unity of effort across various SOF equities and US Special Operations Forces (USSOF) entities operating in the AOR.[1] The USNORTHCOM AOR includes Canada, Mexico, the northern Caribbean countries and territories, the maritime approaches, and 49 of the 50 US states. Hawaii falls under US Indo-Pacific Command's (USINDOPACOM) AOR (fig. 2).

Figure 2. USNORTHCOM area of responsibility outlined in red

In support of USNORTHCOM, SOCNORTH is responsible for integrating SOF in defense of the homeland. USNORTHCOM's primary mission is to defend the homeland by detecting, deterring, denying, and defeating threats to the United States; conducting theater security cooperation activities with allies and partners; and supporting civil authorities.[2] To support this mission, SOCNORTH's day-to-day campaigning consists of planning, coordinating, synchronizing, and conducting special operations in collaboration with its mission partners to compete below the level of armed conflict, deter conventional and irregular threats, and set conditions to execute contingency operations.[3] This homeland defense role is unique to SOCNORTH and is an anomaly, as SOF are better known for working with foreign partners outside the United States. Additionally, there is no doctrine or established precedent for USSOF's role in homeland defense. As such, SOCNORTH is charting new territory by integrating SOF into the number one Department of Defense (DOD) priority. SOCNORTH understands the strategic influence SOF employment has during peacetime, steadystate operations, and is leveraging that influence to defend and enhance the security of the United States.

SOCNORTH plans, executes, and assesses SOF campaigns to demonstrate the ability and willingness of the United States to employ SOF in the Arctic, which provides decision makers a range of additional options to confront potential threats and can expand decision space during crisis. SOF's activities contribute to credible deterrence by enabling denial during competition, providing flexibility to deescalate in a crisis, and establishing the proficiency necessary to defeat adversaries in case of conflict. Linking these activities transregionally throughout the global SOF network and integrating SOF activities across the Joint Force, the interagency network, and with foreign partners is a textbook solution that enhances integrated deterrence and builds credible layered defense.

The Emerging Arctic and SOCNORTH's Northern Approach

The Arctic has emerged as an arena for strategic competition among the global great powers: China, Russia, and the United States. As the climate changes and sea ice recedes, there are and will be new opportunities to extract natural resources, establish new shipping routes, and expand commercial fishing. The increased access to this resource-rich environment by state actors and commercial agencies has created a national security challenge in the North American Arctic.

The Arctic comprises the northern portion of USNORTHCOM's AOR and is the United States' adversaries' closest approach to attack via air. Therefore, the region is critical to defending the homeland. Additionally, with portions of the Arctic split between US European Command (USEUCOM) and USINDOPACOM in the

Unified Command Plan (UCP), it designates USNORTHCOM as the DOD Arctic Capability Advocate.[4] With these responsibilities, USNORTHCOM tasks SOCNORTH to "identify, request, advocate for, and experiment with SOF capability and capacity to conduct operations in the Arctic within USSOCOM authorities."[5] To ensure this task is met, SOCNORTH created a *Northern Approach* framework as a guide for planning, executing, commanding, controlling, and assessing SOF OAIs in the North American Arctic.

To ensure USSOF are ready and able to defend along the northern flank, SOCNORTH developed an operational-level *Northern Approach* consisting of three vectors: (1) advance capabilities, (2) demonstrate readiness, and (3) prepare the environment. Over the past 20 years, special operations have largely focused on counterterrorism and counterinsurgency, leaving SOF's Arctic knowledge, capabilities, and readiness to atrophy following the Cold War. The three vectors are designed to overlap for maximum return on investment, ensuring SOCNORTH's OAIs are mutually supportive within each vector. To amplify the impact of special operations, information-related capabilities (IRC) support each vector to achieve information operations (IO) objectives. Figure 3 is a visual depiction of SOCNORTH's *Northern Approach*.

Deploying SOF to the Arctic signals the importance of the region to US strategic interests. SOF differ from conventional forces as they are built upon small units of action (UA) that conduct direct and indirect military actions that focus on operational and/or strategic objectives. These SOF UAs consist of specialized personnel equipped with sophisticated communications systems and equipment and are specifically trained for a broad range of infiltration, support, and exfiltration techniques to penetrate and return from hostile, denied, or politically and diplomatically sensitive areas.[6] That said, "SOF cannot be mass produced," which is one of the five SOF truths.[7] This truth is important because where the United States employs its limited SOF underscores the importance of the region to US national interests. By employing USSOF in the Arctic, the United States is highlighting to the rest of the world the strategic importance of the northern flank to the defense of the US homeland.

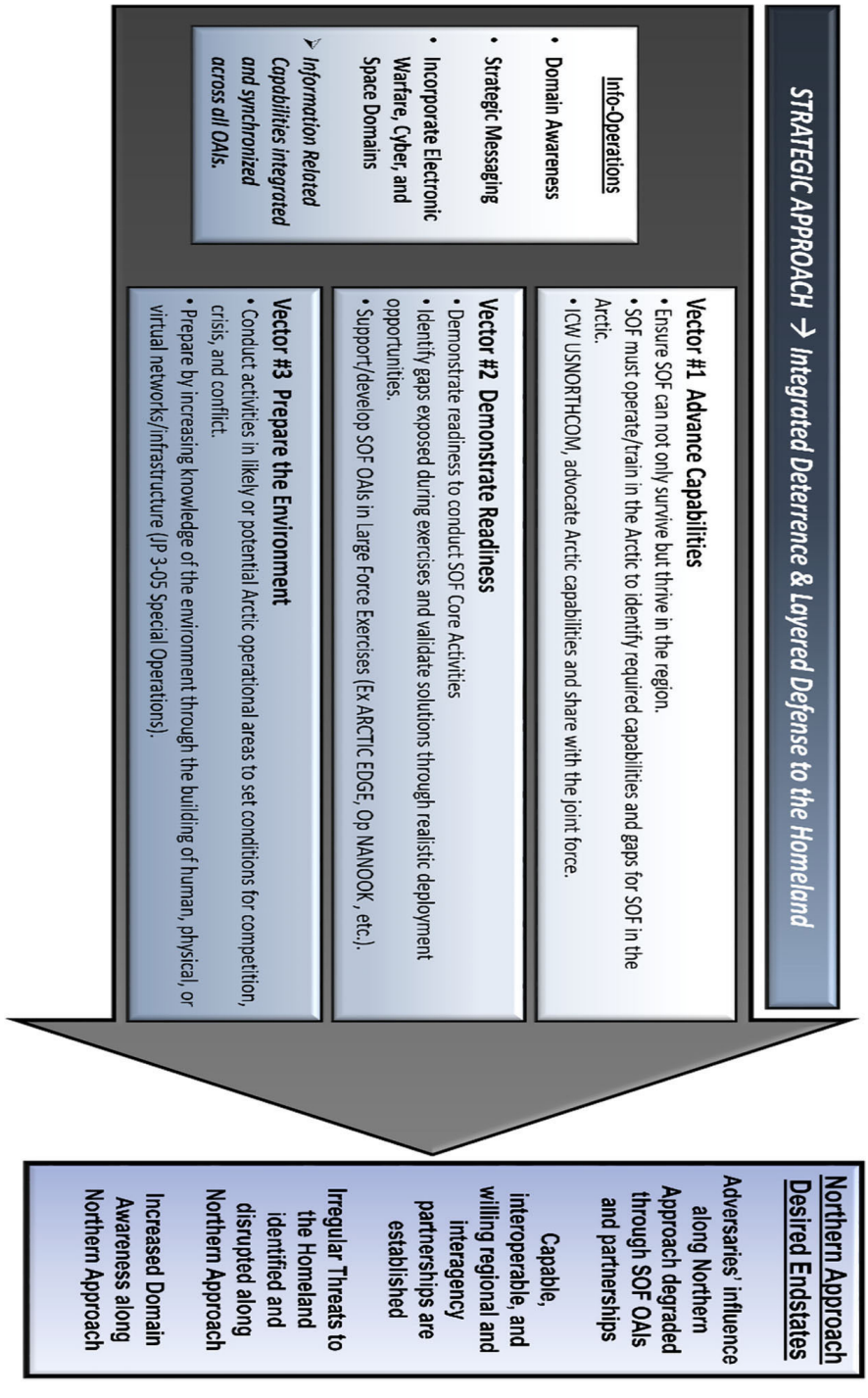

Figure 3. SOCNORTH's Northern Approach

Advance Arctic Capabilities

The Arctic represents one of the most challenging environments on the planet. In the North American Arctic, temperatures average below minus 20 degrees Fahrenheit in the winter.[8] Compound this frigid temperature with *polar night*, during which the sun does not rise or daylight is limited for two months, special operators face an extremely challenging and forbidding operating environment.[9] Just surviving in the Arctic requires extensive training and appropriate equipment prior to being deployed to the region.[10] However, to thrive in the Arctic, defined as the ability to conduct SOF's core activities, requires consistent immersion and operational experience in this environment. This aligns with another SOF truth, "Competent Special Operations Forces cannot be created after emergencies occur."[11] To be prepared for a crisis, or conflict in the Arctic, SOF must be properly manned, organized, trained, equipped, and experienced in advance to effectively operate and succeed in this complex and dynamic environment.

To assist with this, SOCNORTH creates opportunities for SOF to experiment and advance their Arctic capabilities through OAIs supporting homeland defense. These OAIs enable the SOF service components (USASOC, USNSWC, AFSOC, and MARSOC)[12] to develop and test concepts and equipment in support of their U.S. Code Title 10 mandate to man, train, equip, and educate. As described in the opening paragraphs, SOCNORTH conducted an exercise at Deadhorse, Alaska, in April 2021, where Green Berets executed military freefall (MFF) parachute and combat-dive operations as part of USNORTHCOM's exercise Vigilant Shield (fig. 4).

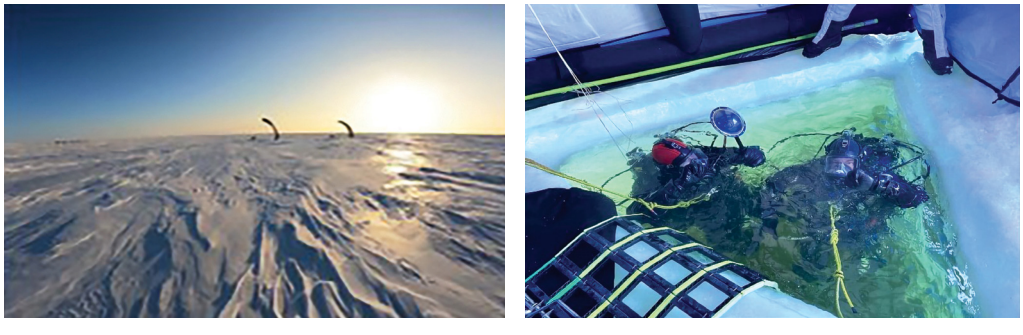

Figure 4. 10th SFG(A) conduct MFF into Deadhorse, Alaska (left), and 10th SFG(A) member conducts combat-dive operation through the ice (right).

The exercise allowed the 10th SFG(A) team to test MFF at extreme temperatures and execute dive operations through seven feet of ice. These exercise opportunities provided SOF units a venue to identify equipment and training gaps that must be corrected to ensure they are prepared for any future potential crisis

to include conflict in the Arctic. The lessons learned have been shared within the SOF community and with SOCNORTH's joint and combined partners to enhance Arctic capabilities across the force.

Demonstrate Readiness

SOCNORTH develops opportunities to demonstrate SOF readiness in the Arctic while building global integrated deterrence. Building upon the first vector of advancing capabilities in the Arctic, USSOF use the second vector to demonstrate readiness and operational reach. Over the past year, SOCNORTH demonstrated its Arctic readiness in exercises Arctic Edge, Ice-X, and Vigilant Shield, in addition to Operation Spartan Sentry and Canadian Armed Forces' (CAF) Operation Nanook. These large-scale combat force exercises and operations give SOF the opportunity to execute their core activities with the Joint Force, allies, and partners. Success within this vector displays the US focus on collective security efforts across the Arctic, which contributes to integrated deterrence.

In another example, 19th SFG(A) recently demonstrated its readiness during their participation in the CAF Operation Nanook Nunalivut. In February 2022, a team from 19th SFG(A) deployed to Tuktoyaktuk, Northwest Territories, in the Canadian Arctic, where the team integrated with multinational partners during a joint and combined defense and security operation to enhance interoperability.[13] 19th SFG(A) sent seven Green Berets to the exercise to gain experience in the Canadian Arctic, integrate with the CAF, test equipment, practice self--sustainment, and explore the Indigenous approach to extreme cold weather.

During the operation, the Special Forces team worked alongside the Canadian Rangers as they traveled 150 miles through the Yukon and serviced a Northern Warning System site. To prepare for the joint operation with the Canadian Rangers, the team conducted three months of predeployment training that included three weeks at Sweden's Sub-Arctic Warfare Center, mountain training in the Utah Rockies, and snowmobile training in the Uinta Mountains. During the operation, the team experienced temperatures as low as minus 58 degrees Fahrenheit, whiteout conditions with less than 10 feet visibility, and the new experience of "polar bear watch" each evening. Although these seven Green Berets were adequately prepared for the operation, these valuable skills will atrophy unless they continue to train and exercise in this region/environment. Additionally, maintaining Arctic/extreme cold-weather readiness is critical, as those with this experience will be replaced due to standard unit turnover (fig. 5).

Figure 5. 19th SFG(A) and Canadian Rangers pause on their long-range movement in the Canadian Arctic

The Canadian Rangers are part of the CAF's Reserves and are comprised largely of volunteers from the indigenous Inuit, First Nations, and Métis populations, as well as other ethnic groups from across Canada. The Rangers give Canada a light, self-sufficient, mobile force to support national security and public safety operations in the Canadian High North. This combined US–Canadian special operation demonstrated that 19th SFG(A) was able to successfully operate alongside and learn from the Canadian Rangers as they patrolled Canada's northern flank.

Preparation of the Environment

Ultimately, the third vector involves SOCNORTH campaigning in the far north to prevent or prepare for conflict within the region. Whenever SOF deploys to the Arctic, personnel gain knowledge of this harsh operating environment. The previously discussed 10th SFG(A) and 19th SFG(A) vignettes offer examples of SOCNORTH's objectives in the region. In addition to Arctic employment, SOCNORTH is also gaining vast knowledge of the environment by enhancing its relationships with military, civilian, government, and international partners who habitually live, work, and thrive in the Arctic. For example, the US Coast Guard (USCG) has been operating in the Arctic for more than 150 years.[14] SOCNORTH partnered with the USCG to exchange information; share lessons learned; and integrate SOF-capable platforms, people, and units into training, exercises, and operations. Additionally, SOCNORTH has an analyst embedded with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) field office in Anchorage to help the United States develop an understanding of the operating environment and potential strategic adversary actions and threats. Other interagency examples include working in conjunction with the USCG's Maritime Security Response Team and the National Park Service during exercise Arctic Edge 2022.

Along with its interagency partners, SOCNORTH shares knowledge and integrates with other Arctic nations' SOF. Norwegian, Danish, Swedish, and Finnish SOF have been operating in Greenland and the European Arctic for

generations, building vital experience and developing TTPs to successfully operate in the Arctic. SOCNORTH, in coordination with Special Operations Command Europe (SOCEUR), is developing relationships with these Arctic partners to learn from their experiences, e.g., lessons learned on personnel protective equipment, TTPs, and so forth. In addition to the Nordic partners, SOCNORTH partners with Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM). CANSOFCOM, which has also been focused on counterterrorism for the past two decades, has reoriented to the Arctic to support the region's strategic significance in the defense of Canada.[15] As a result of this reprioritization, SOCNORTH and CANSOFCOM are increasingly sharing intelligence and planning future combined exercises and operations in the North American Arctic. These multinational relationships, combined with continual presence in the Arctic, are critical to SOCNORTH's efforts in preparing the environment for potential crises and/or conflicts.

Arctic Edge 2022

SOCNORTH is investing heavily in their *Northern Approach* vectors, which USNORTHCOM's most recent combined homeland defense exercise, Arctic Edge, made evident in February and March 2022. Arctic Edge is a three-week, combined USNORTHCOM and CAF biennial exercise designed to demonstrate the two nations' abilities to rapidly deploy and successfully operate in the Arctic while defending North America and respective national interests. In the 2022 iteration, for the first time, USSOF played a significant role in this exercise, contributing more than 450 special operators from the Army, Navy, and Air Force to conduct operations along the air, land, and maritime approaches to Alaska (fig. 6). The Army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR) and Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) used this opportunity to test air assets in a variety of different environmental conditions to identify gaps that may require future research and development. Naval Special Warfare (NSW) teams conducted joint, integrated operations along both the northern and southern coasts of Alaska to protect critical infrastructure and report on priority intelligence requirements. To prepare the environment, 10th SFG(A) and 19th SFG(A) integrated with local law enforcement and tribal organizations to conduct a series of long-range snowmobile and dismounted snowshoe movements along the North Slope of Alaska and the Bering Strait. Furthermore, SOCNORTH integrated and synchronized IRCs into each activity to maximize their operational effects.

Subsequently, SOCNORTH efforts to command and control SOF during Arctic Edge demonstrated the command's ability to deploy as a Joint Force

Special Operations Component Commander (JFSOCC). SOCNORTH exercised its homeland defense mission by deploying its staff to Joint Base Elmendorf–Richardson in Anchorage, Alaska. There, they planned, directed, and evaluated all special operations during the exercise and integrated with other USNORTHCOM components. SOCNORTH demonstrated its readiness, facilitated integrated deterrence, and integrated SOF into USNORTHCOM's layered defense strategy.

Capable SOF in the North American Arctic

Nearly one year after 10th SFG(A)'s challenging MFF operation into Deadhorse, Alaska, SOCNORTH tasked a SEAL team to conduct another MFF in the Arctic as part of Ice-X and Arctic Edge. The SEAL team's MFF operation took place 160 nautical miles off the northern coast of Alaska over the frozen Arctic Ocean. The operation consisted of the team jumping out of a US Air Force C-130 and linking up with a US Navy fast-attack submarine, the USS *Pasadena*, after the submarine breached the ice (fig. 6).

Figure 6. SEALs MFF to link up with a submarine in the Arctic

The SEALs incorporated the lessons learned from 10th SFG(A)'s previous MFF operation by procuring new equipment and changing the TTPs they typically used in warmer environments. The difference between the two MFF events offers an example of how SOCNORTH's *Northern Approach* is helping to adapt SOF capabilities to meet the unique demands of the Arctic.

In the coming years, SOCNORTH will continue to hone and strengthen its ability to operate and thrive in the Arctic by pursuing more and increasingly challenging opportunities to work by, with, and through US partners and allies and Indigenous peoples. As SOF improves its capabilities, they will be better prepared

to deter, disrupt, deny, and defend against conventional and irregular threats to the safety of North America. ✪

BG Shawn R. Satterfield, USA

Brigadier General Satterfield assumed command of Special Operations Command-North on 10 July 2020. Prior to commanding SOCNORTH, Brigadier General Satterfield served as the commander, 20th Special Forces Group (Airborne). He has served in numerous additional assignments including as an operations officer with SOCSOUTH, as the first Regional Engagement Branch Chief for the Andean Ridge countries, Joint Special Operations Task Force–Gulf Cooperation Council Deputy Commander, Special Operations Joint Task Force-Iraq Deputy Commander, and Commander, Special Operations Detachment-Central. Brigadier General Satterfield is a graduate of US Army War College at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania.

Lt Col Sky B. Jensen, USAF

When the article was written, Lieutenant Colonel Jensen was serving as the chief of policy and Arctic planner in the J5 at Special Operations Command North. He is a graduate of the US Air Force Academy and holds an MS from American Military University, an MA from the US Naval War College, and an MPhil from the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies. Throughout his career, he deployed four times in support of Operations Iraqi Freedom, Enduring Freedom, and Inherent Resolve, flying more than 370 missions and saving 179 men, women, and children from battlefield injury. Lieutenant Colonel Jensen is currently serving as the director of operations for the 56th Rescue Squadron in Aviano, Italy.

Notes

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