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America's Secret Military Forces

'Special operations' is glamorous—and controversial.

Shortly before dawn on April 25, 1980, the most ambitious peacetime commando raid in U.S. military history lay in smoldering ruins in the Iranian desert—grim testimony to America's seeming impotence against terrorist threats. The botched hostage-rescue attempt was attributed to insufficient helicopter support, inadequate planning, confusion over command and failure to use the best resources the military afforded. Since then, the Reagan administration has undertaken an intense effort to revitalize America's elite, secret "special operations forces" for just such counterterrorist missions and other angry little wars. But five years after the fiasco at Desert One, there are serious doubts—even among administration officials directly involved—that the United States could successfully field such a mission today.

The special-forces buildup itself has been shrouded in secrecy. Manpower has grown from 10,000 to 15,000, and the units' budgets have more than doubled—to \$500 million last year. But some of the appropriations have been disguised in the defense budget—just as some of the personnel sport civilian haircuts or false insignia to camouflage their movements. The units themselves range in and out of the shadows—from the relatively well-known Army Rangers and Green Berets to Task Force 160, the Army's secret helicopter unit whose existence was revealed for the first time only last year. Other special-operations units include Delta Force, the counterterrorist commandos involved at Desert One, and "psyops"—psychological operatives assigned to win hearts and minds behind enemy lines. In the Navy, the SEALs—Sea, Air and Land Soldiers—are expert in underwater demolition and reconnaissance. And the Air Force's First Special Operations Wing is trained and equipped to transport special-operations troops in and out of hostile territory.

Grab Bag: The activities of the units are even more closely guarded. U.S. counterterrorist personnel have assisted or observed as many as 50 hostage situations around the world in the last five years, as

recently as the hijacking of a Kuwaiti airliner in Iran last December. (One Task Force 160 pilot on standby deployment for the Los Angeles Olympics last summer was asked about his mission by a National Guardsman. "If I tell you, I'll have to kill you," he replied.) A grab bag of other special-operations forces—including Delta Force and Task Force 160—was used in the assault on Grenada—and their presence was one of the reasons the Reagan administration banned reporters from the early hours of the conflict. Last year three con-



A Green Beret in training at Fort Bragg: No overall strategy?

gressional committees investigated charges that such units have been used in combat in Central America in violation of the War Powers Act. Congress found no evidence to support the charges, and U.S. officials vigorously deny that the special-operations personnel have done more than advise and train indigenous forces there.

More details about the nation's "secret armies" may come to light this spring when the House and Senate Armed Services Committees begin a new round of inquiries—this time, to determine why the military has lagged in responding to Reagan's revitalization order. "[By 1983] we found that people were dumping water on our heads and telling us it was raining," fumes Assistant Secretary of Defense Noel Koch, head of the revitalization effort. "There was no progress on this—nothing." The problems range from inter-service rivalries to the military's

long-standing ambivalence about special-operations forces in general. Even helicopter support remains uncertain. Of nine Air Force choppers specially designed for counterterrorist operations, only seven are functioning—one fewer than were planned for the Iran mission. In the meantime, the Army's Task Force 160 has been trying to duplicate the Air Force's capabilities without its sophisticated gear. As a result, the unit has suffered a startling number of casualties in training accidents (page 24).

There have been some improvements under the Reagan initiative—most notably, a host of new military technology worthy of James Bond's "Q." Using a sort of underwater garage and a series of "swimmer delivery vehicles," Navy SEALs can leave a submerged submarine and carry out reconnaissance and demolition operations without ever surfacing. Portable satellite-linked communications terminals now enable commandos in remote desert regions to call anywhere in the world and even receive copies of intelligence data, maps and photographs. NEWSWEEK has learned that when Sudanese rebels kidnapped five Western relief workers in 1983, two Delta Force officers using a suitcase-size receiver obtained photos of vast uncharted desert areas and pinpointed the rebel compound. Perhaps the most controversial weapon was developed even before Reagan and is now prepositioned in Germany: a nuclear land mine one-twelfth as powerful as the bomb at Hiroshima. A smaller version—the "backpack nuke"—can stop an enemy advance, crater a landing strip or destroy key tactical targets.

Avionics: Helicopter technology has also improved since the Iran fiasco. In fact, better equipment was available at the time. NEWSWEEK has learned that if there had been indications that Ayatollah Khomeini

planned to kill the hostages, the U.S. military was prepared to attempt a second rescue—Operation Honeybear—using nine Sikorsky HH-53 helicopters designed for search and rescue missions.* Outfitted with airborne refueling capabilities and avionics including terrain-following and avoidance radar, the HH-53s are far better equipped to navigate through a sandstorm like the one that hobbled Desert One. What's more, the Air Force has outfitted some HH-53s and some Combat Talon choppers with Stealth-like radar-resistant properties.

But that helicopter capability is at the heart of the biggest special-operations dispute in the administration. Last May, without consulting the Pentagon's civilian leadership, the Air Force and Army proposed to

*The HH-53s, stationed in New Mexico, were not used in the original mission because the military preferred the Sea Stallions already on the nearby carrier Nimitz.