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Unification Sought for Elite Units

Hill, Pentagon Move To Improve Forces For Antiterrorism

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A House subcommittee, hoping to streamline U.S. antiterrorist forces and to avoid fowlups, such as those that marred the Iranian rescue mission and the Grenada invasion, is preparing legislation to unify the Army Green Berets and Delta force, Navy Seals and other special forces under a single civilian command.

The readiness subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee is aiming to set up a Defense Special Operations Agency that would take over control of the elite forces from the individual services, although they would retain their service identities.

At the same time, the Air Force Military Airlift Command is completing a proposal calling for basing long-range aircraft and helicopters at bases abroad so they could more quickly rush the specialized outfits to the scene of a hijacking or other terrorist action.

The initiatives are part of the most sweeping effort in 20 years to gear up the U.S. military to counter terrorism, to fight "low-intensity" wars like the one in Grenada and to prepare to go behind enemy lines in the first days of a major war to disrupt transportation and organize resistance.

The Senate Armed Services Committee also is calling for reorganization of the special forces activities of the military. And the House Appropriations subcommittee on defense has dispatched a special team, including former combat pilots and FBI agents, to study special forces worldwide and submit a report to shape the Pentagon's budget going to Congress next month.

Rep. Dan Daniel (D-Va.), chairman of the readiness subcommittee, confirmed his panel has under "serious consideration" legislation to combine the elite combat forces under the Defense Special Operations Agency, patterned after the National Security Agency. The NSA deploys teams around the world as part of its electronic eavesdropping effort and earmarks money within the budgets of the various services to finance its activities.

The new organization would have a civilian director and a military deputy and would coordinate the training and deployment of about 10,000 men in the various special forces units of the armed services. The director would report to the secretary of defense.

The new agency would finance special forces, many of which would work in forward areas of the world under a theater commander; try to control crises swiftly by keeping special forces and their aircraft and weaponry on bases in easy striking distance of the likeliest trouble spots; and direct training exercises to rehearse the kind of assaults the intelligence community and military leaders consider most relevant to pressing problems, such as turmoil in the Philippines.

Daniel, who has long sought an overhaul of special forces, formed a panel within his subcommittee to conduct hearings and recommend changes.

"The big problem has been command and control," he said of recent operations in the "twilight zones" where special forces outfits operate.

He said the the Iranian rescue operation and Grenadian invasion suffered from a fractured command structure because the Pentagon allowed each service to carve out a piece of the action. In Grenada, he said, the services could not talk to each because they had different kinds of radios. And an Army unit, for lack of centralized command, landed at the airport in daylight

rather in darkness as planned. People got killed who shouldn't have gotten killed" because of the fowlups in command and control at Grenada, Daniel said, but he called the operation a "success" because the American students on the island were rescued.

The United States must organize for such "low-intensity warfare," Daniel said, "and soon. We cannot wait for reorganization of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and reform of the Defense Department."

He said too often the special forces—the Army's Delta counterterrorism team, Green Berets, Rangers, Navy Seals and both Army and Air Force special aviation units—have lost out in Pentagon budget as the admirals and generals spend most of their budgets to prepare for big wars.

"We cannot leave it to the luck of the draw as to who is the chief of staff in a given service at a given time," Daniel said. Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger, Daniel said, "has been completely cooperative" with the subcommittee in the search for a better way to run the special forces, although he has endorsed no specific plan.

The proposal to establish a Defense Special Operations Agency will be introduced early next year, Daniel said, if it continues to pass muster during the closed hearings by his subcommittee.

A group of military officers who have participated in special operations around the world are scheduled to list their needs at a hearing Wednesday.

The Delta force responded to the recent hijacking of an Egyptian airliner but got no farther than Sigonella, Sicily, on its way to Malta because of problems of receiving clearance to land in Malta. Navy Seals had an elaborate plan—and were in position to execute it from the Marine helicopter ship Guam—for wresting the Italian passenger liner Achille Lauro from hijackers but did not go into action.