

# Despite problems, SOCom carries on

**Riddled by accusations of wrongdoing, SOCom says it won't let the alleged actions of a few keep it from its mission.**

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TAMPA - Seven months after President Bush ordered it to lead the war on terror, the Special Operations Command is stumbling.

In recent weeks, SOCom - the military arm that oversees the nation's elite commandos such as the Green Berets and the Navy SEALs - has suffered one setback after another. The headlines here and across the country tell the story:

--SOCom target of bribery investigation.

--SOCom hides \$20-million from Congress.

--SOCom role in 9/11 plot questioned.

--SOCom capabilities under fire.

The revelations raise important questions about the command. Chiefly, are the problems at SOCom

Former SOCom commander Carl Stiner said the string of problems are unusual but not unprecedented in the command's 18-year history.

Still, "anything like this is a distraction because they already have their hands full with the mission," said Gen. Stiner, SOCom chief from 1990 to 1993.

SOCom says it has everything under control, and that morale couldn't be higher.

"The Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines and civilians of USSOCOM are not allowing a couple of investigations into the actions of a few to distract them from performing their mission in the Global War on Terrorism," spokesman Ken McGraw wrote in an e-mail to the *St. Petersburg Times* .

Since 9/11, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has promoted using special operations forces, saying they are uniquely qualified for unconventional warfare such as the war on terror.

Members of such forces are older than members of conventional forces, speak multiple languages and study different cultures, operate covertly and in small groups, and execute some of the nation's most dangerous missions - from the jungles of Colombia to the mountains of Afghanistan.

"We're very fortunate to have the special operations forces at this particular time in the war on terror. Otherwise, we'd really be up the creek," said Stiner, who wrote the book *Shadow Warriors: Inside the Special Forces* with author Tom Clancy.

In Washington, however, signs of concern over SOCom's woes are everywhere.

Two weeks ago, Rumsfeld ordered an outside review of SOCom after hearing of "diminished capabilities" within the command in a briefing. The contents of the briefing, which focused on operational demands and future requirements, were first reported by the *Tampa Tribune* .

Congress, too, has weighed in.

Over the summer, the Senate Judiciary Committee held hearings into a secret program run by SOCom known as Able Danger.

According to published reports, Able Danger identified lead 9/11 hijacker Mohammed Atta as living in the United States a full year before the attacks. SOCom reportedly did not share the information with the FBI.

In a recent interview, SOCom commander Bryan "Doug" Brown said he did not think Able Danger had identified Atta.

Congress also has been frustrated by a criminal investigation into "parked funds" at SOCom.

According to documents obtained by the *Times*, officials at MacDill Air Force Base, where SOCom is based, inflated budget proposals at the request of the Pentagon three years ago to hide \$20-million from Congress.

The Pentagon inspector general completed a two-year investigation last month. The U.S. Attorney's Office in Tampa did not file charges.

The Senate Armed Services Committee and the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee have

requested a more thorough inquiry.

Of particular concern in Washington is the bribery scandal. William Burke, a private contractor at SOCom, recently pleaded guilty to bribery. In exchange for the payments, Burke gave preferential treatment to the clients of a co-conspirator vying to arm special operations forces.

Investigators from the Pentagon and the FBI are trying to determine if the scam left soldiers in the field with inferior equipment. A review of all contracts handled by Burke is under way.

Rep. C.W. Bill Young, chairman of the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, said what is troublesome is not knowing the extent of the damage caused by the scheme. "We don't know what the effect is yet on the equipment or whatever the contracts were all about," the Indian Shores Republican said. "That could get deeper and deeper."

Young, whose committee controls the Pentagon's purse strings, said he did not think SOCom's problems were hampering the mission.

He said special operations forces are not politicians but soldiers, trained to stay focused in the face of adversity.

That does not mean Congress is ignoring SOCom's problems.

"Obviously, anything like this in your organization is not good," Young said. "I know that probably folks who know something about these things have a little concern, and probably should."

At the Pentagon, Rumsfeld issued an endorsement of Gen. Brown and his staff. "The secretary has complete confidence in the senior leadership at SOCOM," spokesman Bryan Whitman said.

In an e-mail last week, McGraw, the SOCom spokesman, wrote that Able Danger was a "planning effort" carried out between October 1999 and January 2001 - *before* the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington.

He said Brown initiated the "parked funds" investigation, and that the U.S. attorney determined there was no criminal wrongdoing. He said Brown also initiated the bribery investigation.

"Gen. Brown and USSOCOM have visibly demonstrated a willingness to ensure allegations are thoroughly investigated and appropriate action is taken based upon the results," he said.

The outside review of SOCom is based on an agreement between Rumsfeld and Brown, McGraw said, "to look at obstacles to SOCOM's progress and rapid change."

Stiner said he had confidence in Brown - a friend - to resolve any problems at SOCom. "You've got to stay focused on the mission," he said, "and the commander will know what has to be done and do what's right."

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