



## "To hell with the paperwork:" deciphering the culture of the Air Commandos

Title	"To hell with the paperwork:" deciphering the culture of the Air Commandos
Item Type	Thesis
Authors	Hoffman, Justin
URI	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/10945/3839">https://hdl.handle.net/10945/3839</a>
Publisher	Monterey, California. Naval Postgraduate School
Date Issued	2008-12
Download date	2026-04-13 20:04:01
Link to Item	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/10945/3839">https://hdl.handle.net/10945/3839</a>

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**MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA**

**THESIS**

**"TO HELL WITH THE PAPERWORK:" DECIPHERING  
THE CULTURE OF THE AIR COMMANDOS**

by

Justin Hoffman

December 2008

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE		Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instruction, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302, and to the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Project (0704-0188) Washington DC 20503.			
1. AGENCY USE ONLY (Leave blank)	2. REPORT DATE December 2008	3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED Master's Thesis	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE "To Hell with the Paperwork:" Deciphering the Culture of the Air Commandos		5. FUNDING NUMBERS	
6. AUTHOR(S) Justin R. Hoffman		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Naval Postgraduate School Monterey, CA 93943-5000		10. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING /MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) N/A		11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES The views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.	
12a. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited		12b. DISTRIBUTION CODE A	
13. ABSTRACT (maximum 200 words) This thesis adopts an organizational design framework proposed by Vijay Sathe in order to explore the culture of the historic Air Commandos. The organizational culture of the Air Commandos is important because it nurtures the attributes that help define today's Air Force special operations forces. Throughout this thesis, three overwhelming themes emerge regarding the basic assumptions and beliefs (the organizational culture) of the Air Commandos. Each of the themes provides insight into the internal integration of the Air Commandos and suggests how they negotiated their external environment. The shared beliefs and basic assumptions of the Air Commandos include: Humans are the most critical resources in an organization; innovation, improvisation, and adaptation are more important than advanced technology; successful mission accomplishment is more important than adherence to standard military conventions.			
14. SUBJECT TERMS Air Commando, Organizational Culture, Air Force Special Operations Command, Carpetbaggers, Special Operations, Aderholt, Cochran, Alison		15. NUMBER OF PAGES 95	16. PRICE CODE
17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT Unclassified	18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE Unclassified	19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT Unclassified	20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UU

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**"TO HELL WITH THE PAPERWORK:" DECIPHERING THE CULTURE OF  
THE AIR COMMANDOS**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF SCIENCE IN DEFENSE ANALYSIS**

from the

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## ABSTRACT

The title of this thesis refers to a quote attributed to General "Hap" Arnold as he parted ways with the two commanders of a newly created unit that would soon become designated the 1st Air Commando Group. Having already coined the force as his "air commandos," General Arnold's parting words to John Alison and Phil Cochran were, "To hell with the paperwork; go out and fight" (in Kelly, 1996, p. 15). Perhaps no statement better captures the essence of what it meant to be an Air Commando. This thesis adopts an organizational design framework proposed by Vijay Sathe in order to explore the culture of the historic Air Commandos.

The organizational culture of the Air Commandos is important because it nurtures the attributes that help define today's Air Force special operations forces. Throughout this thesis, three overwhelming themes emerge regarding the basic assumptions and beliefs (the organizational culture) of the Air Commandos. Each of the themes provides insight into the internal integration of the Air Commandos and suggests how they negotiated their external environment. The shared beliefs and basic assumptions of the Air Commandos include: Humans are the most critical resources in an organization; innovation, improvisation, and adaptation are more important than advanced technology; successful mission accomplishment is more important than adherence to standard military conventions.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

To the memory of the Airmen who lost their lives in the crash of Wrath 11. In sacrificing their lives for the greater good of our country, they embodied the best of what it means to be a modern-day Air Commando.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. A DARK NIGHT IN ALBANIA

A painting hangs in the upstairs lounge of the 7th Special Operations Squadron (SOS) at RAF Mildenhall, United Kingdom, depicting an airdrop to a team of Air Force Special Tactics personnel standing amongst a debris field on a snow covered mountain in Albania. The debris field is all that remains of Wrath 11, a MC-130H Combat Talon II aircraft that crashed on the mountain during a low level training mission. The perspective of the artist is looking out the back of the cargo compartment of an aircraft as it flies over the crash site. Loadmasters, secured to the aircraft by their harnesses, sit on the ramp as they watch a single parachute float down. Suspended beneath the parachute is a bundle containing a host of personal items that will serve as a makeshift memorial to the fallen crewmembers of Wrath 11.

The crew of Wrath 11 was assigned to the 7th SOS, 352nd Special Operations Group, RAF Mildenhall, UK. The unit is part of the Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC.) AFSOC was established at Hurlburt Field, Florida, in May 1990, as the USAF component of USSOCOM. The command's public affairs office reports there are currently over 16,000 active duty, civilian, Air National Guard, and Air Force Reserve personnel assigned to AFSOC. These airmen are organized within one numbered air force, two active duty wings, one Air Force Reserve wing, one National Guard wing, two overseas groups, and several other direct reporting units.

AFSOC operates various fixed wing and tilt-rotor aircraft to include the MC-130E/H/P/W, AC-130H/U, EC-130, CV-22, and PC-12. It also conducts unmanned aerial vehicle operations utilizing the MQ-1 Predator. Regarding the command's mission, the public affairs office reports,

The command's SOF are composed of highly trained, rapidly deployable Airmen, conducting global special operations missions ranging from precision application of firepower, to infiltration, exfiltration, resupply and refueling of SOF operational elements (Air Force Special Operations Command Public Affairs Office, 2008).

The command currently conducts these missions in ongoing operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as in many other countries throughout the world.

Although under the administrative control of AFSOC, the crew of Wrath 11 was under the operational control of the Special Operations Command Europe (SOCEUR) on the night of the accident. They were tasked with performing training missions as part of a Joint Combined Exercise Training (JCET) deployment to Tirana, Albania. On the evening of March 31, 2005, the crew departed their temporary base at Tirana-Rinas airfield on a night tactical mission intending to accomplish the following events: Night Vision Goggle (NVG) and radar terrain following/terrain avoidance low-level procedures, airdrops, and blacked-out landings.

Low illumination compounded by unfavorable visibility complicated Wrath 11's transition to NVG low-level operations as they approached steep terrain after their departure from Tiranas. The Air Force's Accident Investigation Board (2005) concluded that the aircrew "did

not identify and utilize what would have been the necessary start climbing point to climb over a 5500 foot saddle that was the controlling terrain" along their flight path. The aircraft "impacted the ground near a ridgeline at approximately 5700 feet above sea level."

None of the airmen onboard the MC-130H survived the impact. The crash of Wrath 11 proved to be the deadliest in the Air Force during 2005. Furthermore, the tragedy represented the fourth loss of a MC-130H Combat Talon II aircraft over the previous three year period (none of which were attributable to enemy action.)

#### **B. AFSOC'S MISSION REVIEW**

The Air Force Safety Center classifies the most serious aviation accidents as "Class A Mishaps." These are accidents that produce a fatality or in which aircraft are destroyed (or damaged in excess of a certain dollar amount.) The Safety Center then converts the raw numbers of accidents into a rate (mishaps per 100,000 flight hours) that is used to monitor the health of flying programs throughout the major commands of the Air Force.

The Air Force Special Operations Command led the entire Air Force in FY 2005 with a Class A Mishap Rate of 10.35. This rate was well above the Air Force's average of 1.49 for FY 2005 (Air Force Safety Center, 2005). Closer examination revealed that since September, 2001, AFSOC reported 18 Class A mishaps across its fleet of eight disparate weapon system types (Headquarters Air Force Special Operations Command, 2005). This accident total was unacceptably high; something clearly had to be done.

In order to change AFSOC's vector, the commander, Lieutenant General Michael Wooley, took immediate action. A host of safety stand-downs, reviews, and initiatives were put in place to right the ship. The cornerstone of this process was the implementation of a thorough "Mission Review." This study was comprehensive in nature; it examined all functions in the command, expanding its scope beyond those weapon systems involved in the most recent mishaps. Most significantly, the review "focused the command on changing current conditions to prevent future mishaps" (Headquarters Air Force Special Operations Command, 2005).

Colonel Carroll Greene, the Chief of Operational Psychology at AFSOC, was instrumental in the completion of the 2005 Mission Review. His original tasking led to two years of follow-on research that looked into the organizational culture of AFSOC. His work was the impetus for a strategic communication campaign within the command itself; the centerpiece of the campaign was a message from Lieutenant General Donald Wurster (the new commanding general) entitled "AFSOC's 13 Critical Attributes of Success." A poster was made for each attribute, and the posters were disseminated for display in organizations across the command (see the Appendix for a list of the attributes.)

The 13 attributes supposedly provide the definition for what it means to be a modern-day Air Commando (the heritage of the Air Commandos will be provided in Chapter III.) Closer examination, however, reveals that these attributes are no different from the attributes required

for success in any major command in the Air Force, or for that matter, in any other branch of the military. They are generic in nature and fail to distinguish how being an Air Commando is different from being an Airman (a term similar to soldier or sailor, used when referring to a member of the USAF.)

While AFSOC's 13 Critical Attributes of Success fail to clearly differentiate an Air Commando from an Airman, the decision to implement the program is commendable. The program provides a clear message to the rank and file that the senior leadership of the command recognizes the vital importance of organizational culture. When compared to the other service components resident within USSOCOM, culture, arguably, plays a more important role in defining what is special about AFSOC.

### **C. THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE IN AFSOC**

To understand the importance of organizational culture in AFSOC, an appreciation must be gained for the defining characteristics of special operations forces (SOF) in general. Various authors such as Vandenbroucke (1993), McRaven (1995), Tucker & Lamb (2007), and Adams (1998), as well as the service doctrine documents complement each other in providing commonalities indicative of the defining characteristics of special operations forces. A distillation of the literature suggests that special operations forces possess three unique characteristics: special attributes, special requirements, and a special purpose.

Special operations forces have a special purpose in that they are typically founded to pursue important

political or military strategic objectives that are too costly or risky to attempt with general purpose forces. Special operations forces possess special attributes such as speed, surprise, and security that are required for achieving McRaven's concept of relative superiority. Finally, they exhibit special requirements such as special training, uniquely modified equipment, and the assessment and selection of their personnel.

AFSOC has always been labeled a notable exception to the rule that special operations forces must have an assessment and selection program. Such discussions have hinged on the concept that "AFSOF might be viewed as being defined more by special platforms than by special operators" (Spulak, 2007, p. 12). The concept of "self selection"—one's own desire to volunteer for or stay in AFSOC—has also been used as an explanation (p. 12). Recent studies, however, suggest that AFSOC might not need a universal assessment and selection program due to the very nature of the desired attributes themselves—perhaps they are actually behavioral, and not character, traits. To consider this possibility, two reports by Robert Spulak and Jessica Glicken Turnley will be examined.

Robert Spulak (2007) presents his theory of special operations in a report authored for the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) at Hurlburt Field, Florida. The thrust of his argument hinges on the premise that it is personnel, not assigned missions or technologically advanced equipment, that defines special operations forces (p. 13). Personnel attributes are important to Spulak because he asserts that they permit the development of

special qualities (p. 10). Although SOF assesses and selects recruits with respect to personal attributes, Spulak states that such character attributes are "necessary but not sufficient to explain the origin of SOF" (p. 14).

In a JSOU report entitled *Retaining a Precarious Value as Special operations Go Mainstream*, Jessica Glicken Turnley (2008) builds upon Spulak's work. She discusses the implications of the different types of attributes:

When viewed from the outside, the specialness of SOF often gets characterized as behavioral, rather than character, traits. This tendency is an important distinction. Character traits are indicators of the potential for certain types of behavior. Behavior can be learned through training and other mechanisms. (p. 14)

Glicken Turnley advances the formulation of a behavioral definition for SOF.

In her argument, Glicken Turnley references comments by Vice Admiral Cebrowski, Director of the Office of Force Transformation in the DoD from 2001 through 2005. Specifically, she notes that in his remarks on SOF, none of the defining characteristics he identifies are character based (p. 15). She concludes by saying, "If the defining characteristics are *behavioral*, in theory different training, equipment, or organization could allow the general-purpose military to become more SOF-like" (p. 16). This is particularly relevant to AFSOC because, in the absence of a command-wide assessment and selection process, most of its aircrew members, although subsequently trained for their specific mission sets, are in fact "regular" members of the "general-purpose" Air Force when they enter the command.

In summary, although character traits are a defining quality of most special operations forces, behavior might best explain the essence of what makes AFSOC "special." It is through the organizational culture of an organization that desired behaviors are developed and reinforced. Spulak (2007) reinforces this claim by saying, "Another, perhaps more important, factor is the culture of SOF that nurtures and develops the appropriate attributes" (p. 12). Because of this need to nurture and develop desired attributes, organizational culture is of paramount importance to AFSOC.

#### **D. ABOUT THIS STUDY**

This study endeavors to examine the historic Air Commandos of the Second World War and Vietnam through the lens of their organizational culture. In his study project for the US Army War College, Colonel Jerry Thigpen (1991) asserts that, "Today's [Air Force] special operators fit the mold of their predecessors" (p. 1). This research attempts to further explore what exactly that mold is. A thorough investigation into the heritage of the Air Commandos is important because the command clings to their enduring legacy, even when the command's espoused values differ from those of the original Air Commandos.

A desire to chart this perceived gap between the "ideal" culture promulgated through programs such as AFSOC's 13 Critical Attributes and the "real" culture representative of the legacy and heritage of the Air Commandos serves as the motivation for this study. This research contributes to that exploration by attempting to

decipher the "real" culture of the Air Commandos. Specifically, this study will attempt to address the following research questions:

- Who were the Air Commandos?
- What was the organizational culture of the Air Commandos?

In order to provide the background necessary to answer these two questions, the reader will be introduced to the concept of organizational culture in Chapter II. A framework for analysis will also be presented. The framework will be applied in Chapter III in attempting to decipher the culture of the Air Commandos after the reader has been introduced to their heritage. The study concludes with Chapter IV and the presentation of recommendations and other considerations.

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## II. ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

### A. CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING

Spulak's theory underscores the importance of organizational culture and its criticality in nurturing the attributes that define special operations forces. Because AFSOC does not have a universal assessment and selection program, organizational culture is a primary mechanism through which desired behaviors are developed and reinforced. This chapter will review the basics of organizational culture, discuss ways of deciphering it, and conclude by introducing a conceptual framework with which the following chapter will analyze the legacy of the Air Commandos.

#### 1. Definition

In *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, Edgar Schein (1985) transforms the concept of corporate culture from an abstract idea into a useful tool for managers, leaders, and students alike. Considered the seminal work on the topic, the book provides a deep conceptual understanding of an often elusive and misunderstood phenomenon. Schein not only defines culture, but discusses its importance and functions, as well as how leaders can shape and transmit it.

There have been numerous attempts to capture the essence of what organizational culture is. Although the term is openly used and most can agree that it exists and is important, there is often disagreement on its exact definition. Schein suggests that much of the confusion

stems from the fact that many people's definitions are in fact "*reflections*" of an organization's culture, but not the "essence" of it. Examples of such reflections include rituals, demeanors, norms, philosophies, policies, rules, feelings, and climates (p. 6). Schein acknowledges the importance of these manifestations, yet asserts that they fail to adequately address the essence of culture.

Offering a richer definition of culture, Schein states the term represents

the deeper level of *basic assumptions* and *beliefs* that are shared by members of an organization, that operate unconsciously, and that define in a basic 'take-for-granted' fashion an organization's view of itself and its environment. These assumptions and beliefs are *learned* responses to a group's problems of *survival* in its external environment and its problems of *internal integration*.

Because they solve these problems reliably and repeatedly, the assumptions and beliefs are thereby taken for granted.

Similarly, Vijay Sathe (1985) defines organizational culture as "the set of important assumptions (often unstated) that members of a community share in common." The assumptions he refers to are internalized beliefs and values; because beliefs and values are the determinants of attitudes and behaviors, they serve as "analytically a more powerful concept" (p. 13). Sathe draws attention to the elusive nature of culture because it is "unseen and maybe unheard." (p. 10). Sathe's contribution to the definition of culture is complementary to Schein and is consistent with the views of other scholars on the subject.

Meryl Reis Louis (1985) isolates three basic components of organizational culture from the various definitions: content, group, and the relationship between content and group. She identifies content as "a set of common understandings." In discussing the group component, she states that the culture represents a distinctive group—"a community or population, a society or class, a unit." Finally, Louis contends that there is a relationship between the content and the group that is unique, that there is "content peculiar to the group" (p. 74). Similarly, Louis' contribution is reinforced by Joanne Martin (2002) in identifying two common theoretical features of definitions: "the use of the word 'shared' and a reference to culture as that which is distinctive or unique to a particular context." (p. 56).

## **2. Importance and Function**

The importance of culture, then, is that it solves the group's "basic problems of (1) survival in and adaption to the external environment and (2) integration of its internal processes to ensure the capacity to continue to survive and adapt" (Schein, 1985, p. 50). By successfully accomplishing the organization's core mission in the external environment, group members generate activities and interactions that lead to the formation of norms and sentiments within the internal system of the organization. A reciprocal process is started and sustained whereby such norms and sentiments then influence activities and interactions in the external environment.

These activities and interactions compose the actual experiences of the people in the organization. Initially

the environment "influences the formation of culture, but once culture is present in the sense of shared assumptions, those assumptions, in turn, influence what will be perceived and defined as the environment." (p. 51). Sathe (1985) therefore concludes that "the content of culture derives from a combination of prior assumptions and new learning experiences." (p. 14).

### **3. Impact of Leaders**

Schein (1985) asserts that one of the most important functions of leaders is the creation, management, and destruction of organizational culture. He suggests that culture and leadership are indeed "two sides of the same coin" (p. 2). Leaders shape an organization's culture as their "prescriptions for how to do things are adopted" (p. 222). They embed and transmit culture with their charisma and by articulating a clear and vivid vision within their organization (p. 223). Schein introduces the possibility that "*the only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture* and that the unique talent of leaders is their ability to work with culture." (p. 2).

The values and intentions of leaders are coded within the culture of an organization and "are passed on to new members as 'the correct way to define the situation.'" (p. 50). This culture provides members of a group with an integrated, historical perspective from which they are able to build an identity. According to Sathe (1985), "Founders put their imprint on the culture by bringing in people who share certain beliefs and values with the founder, and these people will eventually share others" (p. 14). In *Bureaucracy*, James Wilson (1989) adds that this "imprint is

the deepest and most lasting when the founding executive has a strong personality and a forcefully expressed vision of what the organization should be." (p. 96). Because it permeates thoughts, perceptions, and feelings, culture provides meaning to the situations the members encounter (Schein, 1985, p. 44). Therefore, according to Schein, culture has a profound contribution on the effectiveness of an organization.

## **B. DECIPHERING ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE**

In *Organizational Research Methods*, Paul Brewerton and Lynne Millward (2001) assert that "organizational plans are often ineffective because of the incompatibility of those plans with organizational culture(s)." This suggests that "there must be a 'fit' between planning and the beliefs, values and practices within the organization." (p. 136). A fit can only be found through analysis and that requires the operationalization of the conceptual basis of organizational culture.

The process through which organizational culture is deciphered and operationalized is important because inadequacy results in errors of analysis. This leads to misunderstanding and the possible overstatement of potential benefits. As James Wilson (1989) contends, "critics argue that culture is little more than a mushy word used to dignify the hunches and intuitions of softheaded writers" (p. 92). It is imperative, therefore, that researchers define culture in the same way that they operationalize the concept. Or, as Joanne Martin (2002) implores, it is critical that readers "examine what researchers actually study when they claim to be studying culture." (p. 64).

Schein (1985) issues a similar warning by insisting that researchers must distinguish between the essence of culture (the basic assumptions) and the observation of manifestations of culture (values and behaviors.) In an attempt to avoid conceptual confusion, he advances the notion of three "levels" of culture: basic assumptions, values, and artifacts and creations (p. 14). He defines these levels and discusses their interactions.

"Basic Underlying Assumptions" constitute the heart of Schein's concept of the essence of culture and are the key to understanding "what is going on and why" (p. 21). He suggests that such basic assumptions "have become so taken for granted that one finds little variation within a cultural unit. . .members would find behavior based on any other premise inconceivable." They guide behavior and tell group members how to perceive and think; their potency lies in that they are nonconfrontable and nondebtable (p. 18). Although they are admittedly hard to locate, such assumptions can be brought to the surface through interviews conducted as part of an extensive longitudinal study of an organization. Since such a professional effort is beyond the scope of this academic study, it is reassuring to see Schein assert that, "If we examine carefully an organization's artifacts and values, we can try to infer the underlying assumptions that tie things together." (p. 20).

The second level of Schein's cultural analysis consists of values. He defines the term as "convictions about the nature of reality and how to deal with it" and as someone's "sense of what 'ought' to be, as distinct from

what it is." (p. 15). Values that are "susceptible of physical or social validation, and that continue to work reliably in solving the group's problems, will be transformed into assumptions." (p. 16).

An organization's "espoused values" are important as well. These "predict well enough what people will say in a variety of situations but which may be out of line with what they actually *do* in situations." Schein warns that in the study of organizational culture, "one must discriminate carefully between those that are congruent with underlying assumptions and those that are, in effect, either rationalizations or aspirations" (p. 17).

Incongruence between what people say and what they do contribute to a condition known as organizational pain. In *The Age of Design*, Jeff Conklin (1996) introduces the term as a condition of "chaos, uncertainty, and overload" that is both "pervasive" but yet "hidden" within an organization. It is "caused by the mismatch between our beliefs about life and work and the reality we experience." This pain is not discussed, "not the subject of major studies, and there are no programs or initiatives to ease" the pain. Furthermore, "The pain remains hidden from our sensibilities inside an outmoded and crumbling belief system" of values (p. 2).

Values, then, serve a normative or moral function in an organization. They guide members of the group on how to act in certain situations (p. 16). Values that are transformed into an ideology or philosophy can then help the organization overcome uncertainty in their environment. Schein contends, "Such values will predict much of the

behavior that can be observed at the artifactual level." (p. 17).

Artifacts constitute Schein's final, and most easily observed, level of analysis. Technology, art, and visible and audible patterns of behavior define this level (p. 14). Artifacts are the manifestations of an organization's physical and social creations. According to Louis (1985,) the symbols are the manifestations that are given most attention; myths, legends, stories, sagas and other linguistic symbols are prime examples (p. 84). Schein warns "whereas it is easy to observe artifacts. . .the difficult part is figuring out what the artifacts mean, how they interrelate, what deeper patterns, if any, they reflect." (p. 15).

In the same vein as Schein and Martin, Vijay Sathe (1985) admits that culture "cannot be easily measured or directly observed." He states that "Other evidence. . .must be taken into account to infer what the culture is." While conceding that the process is subjective and there are no "exact answers," he nonetheless offers a systematic framework for deciphering the phenomenon (p. 16). Investigated in the following section, this will be the conceptual framework used to conduct the analysis in this study.

### **C. FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS**

The framework for deciphering culture that Vijay Sathe (1985) provides in *Understanding Culture and Related Corporate Realities* is the methodology adopted in examining the organizational cultures of the historic Air Commandos in the following chapter. The analysis investigates the

historical evidence—Sathe contends that it “must be taken into account” in concert with the current evidence in order to develop an adequate understanding. Most importantly, the “validity of the diagnosis” cannot be judged “by its correctness as determined by some objective criteria”; on the contrary, the purpose of the analysis is solely to identify “useful insights” for recommendations and conclusions (p. 16).

Sathe’s framework provides a systemic method for inferring the content of culture. The culture of an organization generates shared things, sayings, doings, and feelings that manifest as various objects, talk, behavior, and emotions. These various manifestations of culture (communications, justifications, and behavior) are distilled in order to identify a more concise set of beliefs and values. These beliefs and values may be further interpreted in order to infer meanings regarding the all-important shared assumptions of an organization (p. 17). Figure 1 depicts an adapted form of Sathe’s framework that will be used as the basis of analysis for this study.

In examining cultural manifestations, both implicit and explicit forms of communication must be investigated. As previously mentioned, various manifestations might include customs, ceremonies, special language, folklore, logos, dress, and décor. Perhaps more importantly, missing manifestations should also be investigated; their omission could identify what is considered taboo within an organization. To assist the “distilling” process of deciphering a culture, Sathe recommends that three basic questions be explored (p. 18).

*"What Is the Background of the Founders and Others Who Followed Them?"* The backgrounds and personalities of key leaders make an imprint on the culture of an organization. The resulting clues reveal much about the content of a culture (p. 19).

*"How Did the Organization Respond to Crises or Other Critical Events, and What Was the Learning from These Experiences?"* Sathe contends that culture evolves as a result of how an organization deals with stressful periods. Investigating crises and critical events can help identify how assumptions were formed and might help in determining the order of such assumptions (p. 19).

*"Who Are Considered Deviant in the Culture? How Does the Organization Respond to Them?"* Identifying deviants helps to identify the boundaries of a culture. Sathe suggests that understanding why certain people, practices, or things are rejected reveals important cultural assumptions (p. 20).

The next chapter of this study will seek to examine the Air Commandos through the lens of the preceding three questions. In answering each question, the conceptual framework depicted in Figure 1 will be applied in an attempt to ascertain one or more of Schein's three levels of organizational culture. In pursuing this objective, it is anticipated that some form of useful insight will be generated with respect to the organizational culture of the Air Commandos. The results will then be presented to see if any conclusions or recommendations can be drawn.

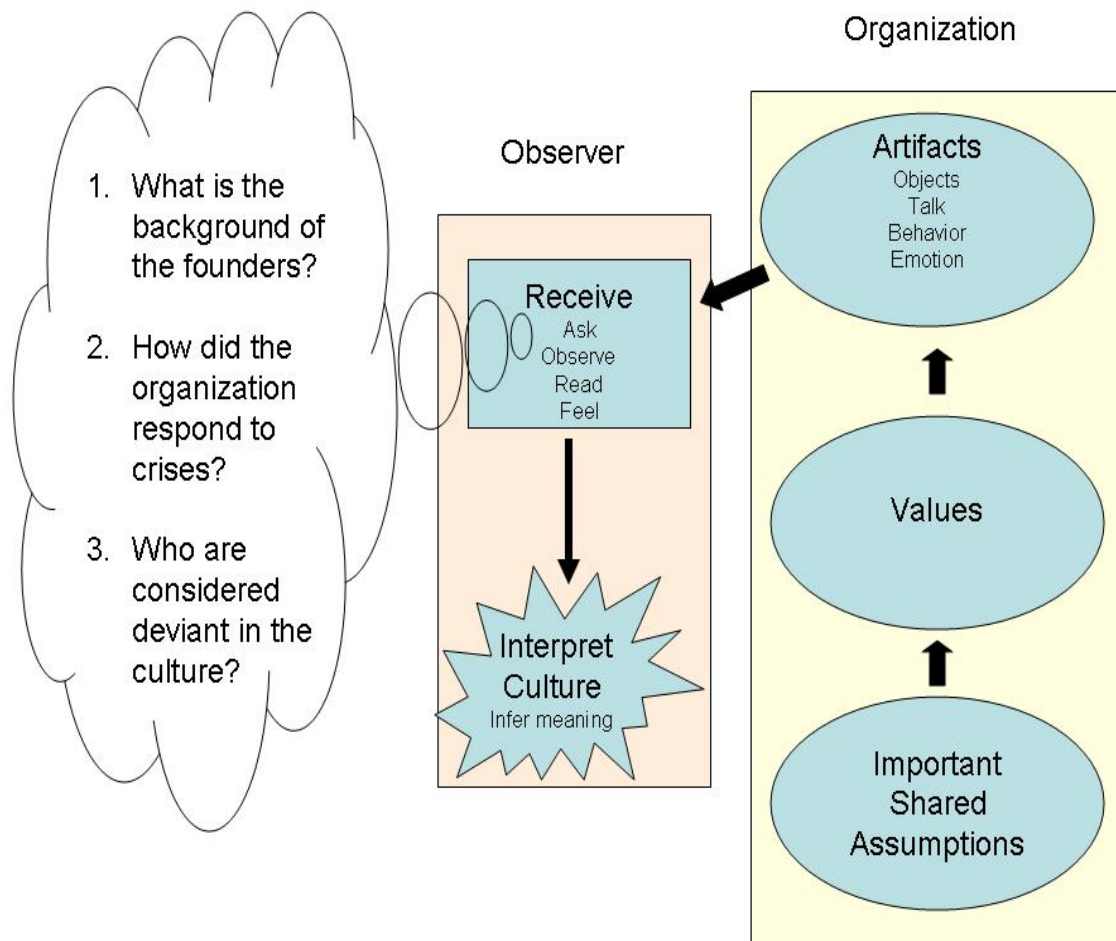


Figure 1. Framework of Analysis (After: Sathe, 1985)

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### **III. DECIPHERING THE CULTURE OF THE AIR COMMANDOS**

Chapter II presented an introduction to the concept of organizational culture and developed a framework for analysis. This chapter attempts to decipher the culture of the Air Commandos. Prior to doing so, their heritage will first be examined. This legacy will focus on the Carpetbaggers and Air Commandos of the 1940s as well as the Air Commando wings of the Vietnam War. Once this contextual background has been presented, the framework of analysis presented in the previous chapter will be applied to the legacy of the Air Commandos.

#### **A. THE LEGACY OF THE AIR COMMANDOS**

The history of the Air Commandos is rooted in the operations of the Army Air Corps in World War II; specifically, the legacy was formed around the exploits of the Chindits in the Pacific theater and the Carpetbaggers in the European theater. However, airpower had been employed in support of unconventional operations as early as 1916 during Pershing's pursuit of Pancho Villa. It was also used by the British in support of TE Lawrence's Palestine campaign during World War I (Thigpen, 1991, p. 5).

The first US airmen to be officially labeled as "Air Commandos" flew combat missions in support of an all-British ground force in Asia during World War II. However, they were not the first American airmen to build a heritage centered on unconventional warfare. In fact, that heritage began during the trench warfare of World War I when covert missions were flown by aircraft that carried secret agents

safely across the lethal dangers of "no-mans-land" in order to land in farmers' fields behind enemy lines (Moore, 1992, p. 9). But it was not until the 1940s that the widespread use of aircraft was adopted for the execution of clandestine operations.

The British were the first to conduct "special duties air operations" during the Second World War. The Royal Air Force (RAF) flew Lysander, Hudson, and Halifax aircraft across the European continent in order to establish "vital links with clandestine organizations in enemy held territories." Such missions were flown by specialized squadrons stationed at bases in Britain, North Africa, Italy, and Corsica. While the RAF commenced clandestine operations in 1940, it wasn't until 1943 that the US Army Air Force (AAF) followed suit and "quickly learned from the developed expertise of the RAF" (Verity, 1978, p. 8).

### **1. The Special Flight Section**

The AAF flew its first clandestine special operations missions from bases in North Africa. Flying in support of the Office of Strategic Services' (OSS) base of operations in Algiers, the first mission was flown on the night of 20 October, 1943 (Moore, 1992, p. 20). The specially trained crew and highly modified B-17 were one of three assigned to the Special Flight Section attached to the Twelfth Air Force's Fifth Bombardment Wing (p. 18).

The first "Air Commando" mission took the aircraft from Blida Airfield (near Algiers) across the Mediterranean Sea and to a small drop zone in the French Alps near Lake Geneva. The mission was flown at night and culminated with the aerial delivery of ten containers of ammunition,

weapons, and supplies to French resistance Maquisards under the supervision of a British agent. German anti-aircraft artillery fire hit the B-17 on the way home resulting in the destruction of two of the aircraft's four engines; regardless, the aircraft and crew successfully completed the AAF's first special operations mission of the Second World War by recovering the aircraft on an emergency landing strip in North Africa (p. 20).

The commander of the OSS, Brigadier General "Wild Bill" Donovan, had long envisioned commencing clandestine air operations into France from his London base, not from Algiers. The OSS first requested AAF support in infiltrating and resupplying agents from England in February 1943 (p. 22). However, Major General Ira Eaker, commanding officer of the Eighth Air Force, resisted the notion of giving up his much needed bombers for such "nickeling" missions that took combat power away from his main effort of conducting a strategic bomber offensive against Germany (p. 13). The lengthy bureaucratic battle that ensued was only solved in September 1943, when the Joint Chiefs of Staff approved the transfer of surplus B-24s from a disbanded antisubmarine warfare unit to the OSS/AAF special operations program code-named Project CARPETBAGGER (p. 25).

## **2. The Carpetbaggers**

The first two Carpetbagger squadrons (the 36th and 406th) were activated in November 1943, and flew specially modified B-24s from RAF Alconbury in East Anglia, England, under the colors of the 482d Bombardment Group (Pathfinder). Under the command of Lieutenant Colonel

Clifford Heflin, the unit moved to Watton aerodrome and eventually to Harrington, where two additional squadrons were added. Eventually, the Carpetbaggers were designated the 492d Bombardment Group in 1944 (Warren, 1951, p. 498). Their end-strength consisted of more than sixty B-24 and five C-47 aircraft (Haas, 1997, p. 5).

The Carpetbaggers primarily flew specially modified B-24 Liberator aircraft. The airframes were painted shiny black and blackout curtains were installed in an effort to conceal their visual signature during night low-level flying. Turrets were removed and a special hatch was installed from which parachutists could be dropped. Blister windows were added to aid with visual pilotage and special navigation and communication equipment was installed (p. 499). Fully loaded, the massive machines could carry approximately three tons of supplies, two parachutists, and up to ten 4,000-leaflet bundles (p. 502). The crews operating these converted bombers underwent an extensive training regimen.

Special training was required due to the immense difference in mission sets. The crews had originally been trained to fly at high altitude in formation during daylight while conducting their strategic bombing missions. In contrast, they were now being asked to fly low-level at night with fewer visual navigation reference points while conducting aerial resupply and infiltration missions. Aircrews planned all missions in "minute detail" resulting in "maximum coordination of effort." (p. 501). Furthermore, because they were working in support of a clandestine OSS program, secrecy, security, and discipline were in high demand. As one historian claims, "In no other work is the

individual crew as directly affected by leakage of information as in this particular project" (Parnell, 1987, p. 21).

The first Carpetbagger mission to France took place on the night of 4 January 1944. Typical missions included aerial resupply, leaflet drops, infiltration of agents, and exfiltration of agents, partisans, and casualties. Aerial resupplies were often flown in mountainous terrain during unfavorable weather conditions with little illumination. The pilot would descent to 700 feet above the ground, slow his aircraft close to stalling speed, and begin to play a complicated game with the ground reception party regarding the conveyance of an authentication signal. Often the signal would come in the form of a dimly lit fire or a flash from a pocket flashlight (Warren, 1951, p. 502). Detection by the Germans meant almost certain death for the partisans and agents. Therefore, some of the agents and packages were dropped onto blind drop zones that were both unmanned and unmarked (Thigpen, 2001, p. 4).

At the peak of operations in July 1944, the four Carpetbagger squadrons flew 397 sorties, dropped 4,680 containers, 2,909 packages, and 1,378 bundles of leaflets; additionally, they inserted 62 special agents behind enemy lines (Warren, 1951, p. 499). By the end of the war, they were credited with successfully completing 1,860 missions out of 2,857 attempted by delivering over 30,000 packages and containers and inserting over 1,000 agents into enemy-held territory (p. 500). It is estimated that the Carpetbaggers' resupply missions maintained "about 13,500 Maquis in south-central France" (p. 503). For this reason, their successful contribution to the war effort was "to

keep alive the resistance movement" in France (p. 505). After the successful campaign over France, the Carbetbaggers continued flying missions into Denmark, Norway, and Germany itself (Thigpen, 2001, p. 4).

In an Air University paper entitled "The Cinderella Front," Paul Freeman (1997) describes a similar AAF special operations campaign assisting partisan and resistance movements in Italy and the Balkans. The USAAF contributed the 62d Troop Carrier Group to a combined multinational unit designated as the 334th Wing (p. 21). Flying C-47 Dakotas, these Air Commandos conducted resupply and mass evacuation missions. This special operations wing eventually grew into a larger unit designated the Balkan Air Force (BAF.) By the end of the war, the BAF had delivered in excess of 16,500 tons of supplies and evacuated over 19,000 people using special duty aircraft. While historians openly debate the impact of the partisans on the overall war effort, the impact would have been much less without the support of the aerial resupply (p. 40).

The legacy of the Air Commando, then, began with special air operations in the European and Mediterranean theaters during the Second World War. These unconventional warfare campaigns supported the OSS and bolstered support for various resistance movements throughout Europe. In Asia, a different script was unfolding. It is there that the legacy of the Air Commando was cemented by the exploits of the 1st Commando Group in the China-Burma-India theater of operations.

### 3. The 1st Air Commando Group

The 1st Air Commando Group was formed under the personal direction of General Henry "Hap" Arnold, Commanding General of the USAAF, in 1943, at the insistence of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. At the Quebec Quadrant Conference in August of 1943, President Roosevelt was introduced to Brigadier General Orde C Wingate of the British Army. Wingate outlined his plan for a renewed attack on the Japanese in Burma; essentially, it was a beefier version of Operation Longcloth which had failed, in part, due to a lack of air support from the Royal Air Force (Kelly, 1996, p. 12). President Roosevelt enthusiastically supported the new plan and offered to provide air support to Wingate's Chindits. This arrangement would allow the AAF to "demonstrate yet another aspect of air power—the ability to support sizeable Army units behind enemy lines." (p. 13).

Wingate had a reputation for his prowess in the conduct of unconventional warfare. He came to Asia with the extensive guerilla warfare experience of fighting the Arabs in Palestine and the Italians in Libya. With a keen ability to "ignite other men," Wingate's plan to attack the Japanese in Burma centered on the employment of a raiding force with the ability to "operate alone far behind enemy lines, moving stealthily through the jungle to chip away at the enemy's supply lines—and his morale." (p. 10). Wingate named his unorthodox force after a dragonlike creature of Burmese myths—the Chindits (p. 11).

General Arnold selected Lieutenant Colonels Phil Cochran and John Alison to lead the AAF effort (code-named

"Project 9") of supporting Wingate's Chindits. The two co-commanders were given high level support and virtual "blank checks" for the formation of their composite force of transport, bomber, fighter, and glider aircraft. Cochran and Alison assembled a force of 523 volunteers and 348 aircraft (Haas, 1997, p. 8). Having already coined the force as his "air commandos," General Arnold's parting words to Alison and Cochran were, "To hell with the paperwork; go out and fight" (in Kelly, 1996, p. 15).

Alison and Cochran began training their new force on 1 October, 1943, in North Carolina (p. 18). The program focused on low-level flying with particular emphasis on blacked out operations at night. The aviators attempted to innovate employment methods for gliders—an untested concept at the time for the AAF (p. 19). The unit also adopted the most state-of-the-art equipment they could find such as new mobile hospitals, experimental rockets, alternate uniforms, and modified weaponry and ordnance delivery systems (Mason, Bergeron, and Renfrow, 1994, p. 16). They also experimented with the possible combat uses of helicopters, although sufficient quantities were never acquired (Kelly, 1996, p. 19). Training was cut short in November 1943, when the newly formed force, now designated the 5318th Provisional Unit (Air), was given orders to pack up and ship out to India.

The men and equipment of the 5318th Provisional Unit closed on two airfields, Lalaghat and Hailakandi, in the Assam district of the eastern India/Burma border region in December. A grass strip served as the runway and the facilities and quarters consisted of bamboo huts. On 29

December, the 5318th Provisional Unit began training with the Chindits. In early January 1944, a successful glider operation was conducted during which 400 Chindits were landed near Lalitpur (p. 21). Afterwards, however, a training accident produced both British and American casualties. A message from Wingate's headquarters quickly restored confidence: "Please be assured that we will go with your boys any place, any time, any where" (Mason, Bergeron, and Renfrow, 1994, p. 25).

On 3 February, Cochran led a flight of P-51 Mustangs on the group's first combat mission, and, on 12 February, the unit's B-25 bombers flew their first combat sorties. Additionally, during this period, 700 British casualties were evacuated by the unit's light planes from the Arakan front (p. 24). In preparation for the Chindits' big push—Operation Thursday—the Air Commandos assembled a fleet of aircraft consisting of 150 troop gliders, 100 light planes, 30 P-51 Mustangs, 12 B-25 bombers, and 13 C-47 transports (p. 23).

In *Defeat Into Victory*, Field Marshal Viscount Slim (1956) recalls the guidance he gave as the commanding general of the British Fourteenth Army to Wingate prior to the launch of Operation Thursday. Wingate's Chindits were to cut the communications of the Japanese 18th Division, "harassing its rear, and preventing its reinforcement", create a "favourable situation for the Yunnan Chinese forces to cross the Salween and enter Burma", and inflict the "greatest possible damage and confusion on the enemy in North Burma." (p. 259). The tasks of the Air Commandos, therefore, were to stage the actual air invasion and

provide resupply, medical evacuation, and close air support to Wingate's ground forces. The intent was to avoid "the enormous physical toll of weeks of marching in the jungle" that plagued the British during Operation Longcloth (Mason, Bergeron, and Renfrow, 1994, p. 10). Operation Thursday would complement the ongoing conventional Allied efforts of battling the Japanese in Burma.

Operation Thursday was touted as "the most audacious single operation of the entire war in the CBI" (Haas, 1997, p.8). Just after darkness on 5 March, 1944, a force of 80 gliders carrying Chindit assault forces and their supplies departed India for their landing zone (designated "Broadway") 200 miles behind Japanese lines in the Burmese jungle. The blacked-out aerial invasion force encountered significant turbulence over the Chin Hills mountain range (Mason, Bergeron, and Renfrow, 1994, p. 29). Decreased flight performance due to overweight cargo loads compounded the pilots' difficulties resulting in the loss of 17 gliders after they broke loose from their tow aircraft (p. 31). Despite this setback, the assault force continued.

Col Alison piloted one of the first gliders into the landing zone. The landing area was rougher than expected resulting in much damage to the gliders. Of the 37 gliders that landed at Broadway, only three were flyable. Many gliders missed the landing zone altogether and crash landed in the jungle. Due to the chaos, Alison broke radio silence and transmitted an abort message back to Cochran and Wingate (p. 32). The follow-on glider sorties were recalled. Despite the damage, 539 Chindits and 29,972 pounds of supplies had been successfully inserted that

night; casualties included 28 fatalities and 30 men requiring medical evacuation. More importantly, there was no Japanese opposition (p. 33).

The Japanese had been fooled by a few wayward gliders that experienced premature release; several of these gliders landed near Japanese field headquarters creating an unplanned diversion for the main assault force that lasted for over a week. This lack of opposition allowed the Chindits to build a hasty runway in the jungle on their first day at Broadway; over 100 sorties were flown into Broadway on the second night, thereby allowing the entire assault force to close (p. 33).

Once on the ground, Wingate's force sought targets of opportunity. The Chindits were supported by close air support from the Air Commandos. On 8 March, P-51 Mustangs destroyed 27 Japanese fighters, seven bombers, and one transport on the ground. The fighter pilots returned to base and then flew additional attack sorties in the unit's B-25s (p. 35). By the end of the day, the Air Commandos had notched up 48 enemy aircraft—a figure representing over 40% of all Japanese aircraft destroyed in the CBI theater up until that time (p. 36).

Operation Thursday concluded on 11 March. During its six days and nights, the Air Commandos supported the Chindits' assault by carrying 2,083 troops, 16 horses, 136 mules, and 104,681 pounds of supplies deep into Burma (p. 36). The unit's light aircraft played a crucial role by conducting timely medical evacuations to the remote stretches of jungles where the Chindits operated. Additionally, the Air Commandos made history by flying the

first helicopter combat rescue missions into Burma; a total of 23 sorties were flown resulting in the rescue of 18 commandos (p. 37). Night resupply airdrops kept the highly mobile Chindits with stocks of rations, ammunition, and other field necessities. The first use of rockets in combat contributed to the advancements made in "aerial artillery" during close air support missions (p. 39). Finally, the Air Commandos supplied the Chindits with current battlefield intelligence and served a critical link in the movement of commanding officers around the battlefield. Later in March, the unit received official designation as the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group.

From March until May 1944, the Air Commandos successfully served as the "backbone" of the Chindits' invasion by providing air support "from airfields 150 miles behind enemy lines." (p. 41). With monsoon rains oncoming, the unit saw their last action on 19 May, when they shot down their last two Japanese aircraft (p. 43.) Over their three-month campaign, the Air Commandos delivered 2.5 million pounds of cargo (primarily at night,) evacuated 2,200 personnel, and destroyed 20% of all Japanese fighters and bombers in Burma (p. 45). An Air Force study concluded that under "Cochran and Alison's exceptional leadership, American air power proved that it could be ready and willing to meet any challenge, any place, any time, anywhere." (p. 45).

#### **4. Post WWII through Vietnam**

The USAAF lost most of its capability to support unconventional warfare operations during the demobilization that followed the Second World War. In 1947, the Central

Intelligence Agency (CIA) was created as successor to the OSS which was disbanded in 1945 (Thigpen, 2001, p. 5). In response to the CIA's requirement for the long-range air transport of agents and supplies into Soviet-occupied areas, the Air Force established the Air Resupply and Communications Service (ACRS) in 1951.

The ACRS "was responsible for USAF unconventional warfare (guerilla warfare), direct action (commando-type raids), strategic reconnaissance (intelligence gathering), and PSYWAR [psychological warfare] operations." Three wings were eventually established under the newly formed command; the squadrons flew specially modified B-29, C-119, SA-16 (amphibian), and H-19A (helicopter) aircraft (p. 7). Operational missions were flown in various theaters from forward deployed locations in Korea, Japan, Libya, the Philippines, Iran, and the United Kingdom.

One noteworthy mission occurred inside Soviet airspace involving a SA-16 conducting a night amphibious exfiltration mission flown in 1956 (p. 9). Other typical missions included the infiltration and resupply of agents behind the lines in North Korea (p. 6). After a short break following the Korean conflict and classified employment during various Cold War dust-ups, AFSOF was employed en masse during the Vietnam War.

A small detachment consisting of 151 specially trained AFSOF airmen and 16 extensively modified aircraft was deployed to Bien Hoa, South Vietnam, in November 1961, under the code name "Farm Gate" (Corum and Johnson, 2003, p. 246). The official mission for the deployment was to train South Vietnamese pilots; however, the aircrews soon

found themselves flying their aircraft in combat (Chinnery, 1994, p. 69). In fact, Farm Gate, a detachment from the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron (CCTS) at Hurlburt Field, Florida, became the first Air Force unit to conduct combat operations in Vietnam (Haas, 1994, p. 43).

"Jungle Jim" was the code name given to the 4400th CCTS. The unit was activated in April 1961, as the USAF's response to President Kennedy's call for the creation of a counterinsurgency (COIN) capability to deal with the numerous wars of liberation of the 1960s. The initial cadre included 352 officers and enlisted men as well as 32 specially modified propeller-driven aircraft; the aircraft inventory included C-47s, B-26s, and T-28s (p. 42). The mission of the unit was to "fly operations against guerillas, either as an overt Air Force operation or in an undefined covert capacity" (Chinnery, 1994, p. 67). After an initial deployment to West Africa, the Air Commandos of the Jungle Jim program soon found themselves in Vietnam (p. 68).

In response to the escalation of the war in Vietnam, Jungle Jim's Farm Gate detachment found itself in high demand. Soon after its arrival in country, Farm Gate was permitted to engage in direct attacks on the Viet Cong so long as a South Vietnamese observer was onboard each of its aircraft. These rules eventually became more relaxed as the Air Commandos trained the Vietnamese in the tactics, techniques, and procedures necessary for conducting close air support, interdiction, airlift, evacuation, and reconnaissance missions (Corum and Johnson, 2003, p. 246).

As the demand for a larger South Vietnamese air force grew, so did the demand for more Farm Gate volunteers. As a result, the Air Staff doubled the size of the 4400th CCTS to include authorizations for 790 personnel and 64 aircraft. The unit was re-designated the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group. In April 1962, the group changed names to the Special Air Warfare Center (SAWC) and authorizations increased to 860 personnel and 82 aircraft (p. 247). The increased strength of the SAWC allowed the unit to provide the Farm Gate detachment with more resources thereby enhancing combat effectiveness.

By the end of 1962, the Air Commandos of the Farm Gate detachment had tallied an impressive score by successfully completing 4,040 flights in support of the Government of South Vietnam. During one week in November, crews airdropped 9,000 pounds and air landed 7,000 pounds of supplies during the execution of 70 combat support missions. During an interdiction mission on 23 November, one aircrew alone was credited with destroying a munitions factory and 26 boats while producing 281 enemy casualties. By the new year, the detachment was credited with expending over 500,000 items of ordnance resulting in 3,381 enemy casualties and the damage or destruction of 4,151 structures and 405 boats (Chinnery, 1994, p. 72). Furthermore, Farm Gate aircrews were attributed with producing 38% of Viet Cong casualties during the first eight months of 1963 (Corum and Johnson, 2003, p. 250). The success of Farm Gate, coupled with the escalation of the overall American effort, resulted in the expansion of AFSOF's participation in Vietnam.

Air Commandos of the Special Aerial Spray Flight and the 12th Air Commando Squadron (ACS) led the aerial defoliation effort known as Operation Ranch Hand (Chinnery, 1994, p. 73). Using C-123 Provider cargo aircraft specially modified with the MC-1 Hourglass spray system, aerial spray missions commenced on 13 January, 1962 (Corum and Johnson, 2003, p. 255). In May 1962, it was reported that "of twenty-one areas sprayed, air-to-ground visibility had improved by 70 percent and ground visibility by 60 percent" and that "defoliation had prompted the surrender of 112 Viet Cong guerillas who had been frightened by the chemical spraying" (p. 256). Despite its anecdotal success, Operation Ranch Hand was eventually terminated due to immense controversies and opposition from the State Department.

Besides aerial defoliation, other unique mission sets matured during AFSOF's experience in Vietnam including the use of helicopters for rapid infiltration, exfiltration, and combat search and rescue missions, fixed-wing aircraft for the aerial refueling of helicopters, and aircraft specially modified for use in psychological operations. These capabilities were demonstrated during the execution of Operation Kingpin on 21 November, 1970. This well-known raid on the abandoned Son Tay prison, 23 miles outside of Hanoi, was flown by Air Commandos in MC-130E, HC-130P, HH-3, HH-53, and A-1E aircraft (Gargus, 2007, p. 269). Although the mission failed to bring prisoners of war (POWs) home, it succeeded by sending a "powerful message to the whole world" and resulted in the consolidation of POWs in Hanoi thereby boosting morale and strengthening the will of American captives (p. 264).

Other specially selected AF pilots joined the ranks of the "Ravens" of the Steve Canyon program. These men flew light aircraft for the CIA in support of the secret war in Laos while being administratively assigned to the 56th Special operations Wing in Thailand (Robbins, 1987, p. 31). These men "fought with obsolete propeller aircraft, the discarded junk of an earlier era, and suffered the highest casualty rate of the Indochinese War." Their mission was to "fly as the winged artillery of some fearsome warlord, who led an army of stone-age mercenaries in the pay of the CIA" (p. 1). No development had more of an impact on AFSOF, however, than the evolution of the aerial gunships.

The first AC-47 Gunship entered service with the Air Commandos in 1965. Under the code name Operation Sixteen Buck, a fleet of 20 AC-47s was assigned to the 4th Air Commando Squadron. Given the call sign "Spooky," these devastating machines used their side-firing miniguns to "respond with flares and firepower in support of hamlets under night attack, supplement strike aircraft in the defence of friendly forces and provide long endurance support for convoys" (Chinnery, 1994, p. 99). Eventually, two Spooky squadrons were activated before the AC-47's replacement by the more advanced AC-119 and AC-130 gunships. By the time of their retirement, AC-47 gunships had defended over 6,000 hamlets; in the first six months of 1969 alone they were credited with killing 1,473 enemy personnel (p. 103). Fueled in part by the evolution of the gunship, AFSOF experienced tremendous expansion during the Vietnam War.

The 1st Air Commando Group expanded to wing status in May 1963 (Haas, 1994, p. 44). In March 1964, AFSOF veteran Colonel Harry "Heinie" Aderholt, affectionately known as "Air Commando One," took command of the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Wing (Trest, 2000, p. 134). The leadership of Heinie Aderholt will be examined further in Chapter V, but by October 1965, the re-designated 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Wing had acquired an inventory of 117 aircraft. The expansion of AFSOF increased the training requirement of the SAWC to an annual rate of 1800 maintenance personnel and 1285 aircrew (Chinnery, 1994, p. 124).

The Air Commando units in Vietnam ultimately expanded their fleets to include O-1, A-1E, U-10, C-47, AC-47, CH-3C, AC-119, A-37, MC-130, and AC-130 aircraft. The mission sets of the Air Commandos included aerial resupply, combat airlift, close air support, photographic reconnaissance, interdiction, search and rescue, psychological warfare, flare drops, and forward air control (p. 125). At the height of the effort in Vietnam, AFSOF had grown to 19 flying squadrons with 550 assigned aircraft. In a similar trend to previous wars, demobilization efforts at the end of hostilities resulted in an AFSOF inventory of a mere 40 aircraft by 1974 (Corum and Johnson, 2003, p. 273).

AFSOF experienced a period of transition over the course of the two decades following the demobilization after the Vietnam War. The period is generally characterized by Susan Marquis (1997) as indicative of the "U. S. Air Force's long history of ignoring SOF." The beginning of this transition period, therefore, serves as a

logical break point in delineating the end of the historical Air Commando era and the beginning of modern AFSOF.

This section described the heritage of the Air Commandos. Without an appreciation for the context of their operating environment, it is difficult to assess the culture of an historical organization. The following section, therefore, builds upon that heritage by applying the cultural framework introduced in Chapter II.

## **B. APPLICATION OF THE CULTURAL FRAMEWORK**

### **1. What is the Background of the Leaders?**

The previous chapter explained the absolute importance of leadership in the shaping of organizational culture. In fact, Sathe's first question in deciphering organizational culture is "*What is the background of the founders and others who followed them?*" This section will explore that question by focusing on three well-known leaders from the Air Commando heritage: Phil Cochran, John Alison, and Heinie Aderholt.

#### **a. Phil Cochran and John Alison**

At the time of their selection as co-commanders of Project 9, Lieutenant Colonels Phil Cochran and John Alison had extensive experience as fighter pilots. Both men flew the P-40 Warhawk. While they had been roommates during previous stateside assignments, their combat experience occurred in different theaters.

Cochran's seasoning occurred in North Africa where he achieved aerial combat victories against the

Germans. He was renowned for his "initiative and imaginative use of air power." These qualities served him well in developing new tactics to counter the Germans. For his exploits in North Africa, he was awarded the Silver Star and the Distinguished Flying Cross with two oak leaf clusters (Mason, Bergeron, and Renfrow, 1994, p. 9).

Alison's previous war time achievement was also impressive. Prior to his interview with General Arnold, he had already become a fighter ace by tallying seven aerial victories while fighting the Japanese in China. He was most notably known and "respected for his leadership and strong organizational skills." More importantly, he brought to his new posting useful knowledge from his past experience in the CBI theater of operations regarding Japanese equipment and tactics (p. 9).

Cochran and Alison both grew up in middle class, working families. Born in Erie, Pennsylvania, Cochran graduated from Ohio State University in 1935 (Boltz, 2001, p. 24). It was during his Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) classes in Columbus where "his life-long habit of paying little attention to military appearance standards and formality began." (p. 25). After working his way through school, Cochran diligently pursued acceptance into the Army Air Corps cadet flying school program.

It was during initial flight training at Randolph Field, Texas, that Cochran first met John Alison. Alison was born to the son of a logger in Micanopy, Florida, on 21 November, 1912 (p. 41). Although diminutive in stature, he excelled at both academics and athletics. He attended the University of Florida in Gainesville where he graduated in

1935 with a degree in Industrial Engineering (p. 43). When they first met, Cochran, an upperclassman in the flying program, served as a mentor to Alison, an underclassman.

Alison's interactions with Cochran during flight training and the subsequent encounters between the two highlight one of Cochran's most enduring trademarks—"his desire and ability to teach." Later in life, Cochran reflected on a personal trait of his that "makes me want to tell the other fellow what I have learned. I can't stand to see somebody who wants to know something that I know, and not give it to him." (in Boltz, 2001, p. 47). After graduation, Alison followed Cochran to Langley Field, Virginia, where the two flew P-40 Warhawk fighters.

After their initial assignment to Langley, Cochran and Alison traveled separate paths prior to their reunion as co-commanders of the 1st Air Commando Group. Despite this, their interim exploits reveal several behavioral traits that help define the two. In turn, these traits form their leadership styles and help answer Sathe's first question.

Cochran cut his teeth in the North African theater of operations serving as the squadron commander of various pursuit (fighter) squadrons fighting against the Germans. Wholeheartedly believing that the best way to improve his pilots' performance was to train them the way they would fight, Cochran implemented innovative and thorough training programs in the units he commanded (p. 28). These initiatives served as the benchmark for the training programs adopted by the Northwest African Training Command and later the First Air Force (p. 40). Cochran's

intensity resulted in medically diagnosed "cumulative fatigue" that required extensive treatment; it also underscores another trait of his—intense devotion to his men.

Throughout his career, Cochran pushed himself to the limit out of concern for the well-being of the men under his command (p. 37). In that manner, he never failed to sing the accolades of those who worked for him. Once, after a key victory in the campaign, Cochran commented, "our people, our boys and pilots, are wonderful. Without the spirit of the 'plain American guy' you couldn't have done it. It would be just impossible." (in Boltz, 2001, p. 38). After he returned to the States, Cochran's passion for his people continued:

Not only did he get to know the pilots and their families, but he also drank beer at night with them—all the while talking to them about what they were doing right and wrong. Cochran sensed their eagerness to learn and did all he could to satisfy their appetite. (p. 40)

Cochran's achievements in North Africa reveal more than just his ability to lead by example. Perhaps most importantly, the campaign revealed his superior judgment and "ability to read a situation, determine what adjustments were necessary and make the necessary changes—even if it meant things were not done 'by the book.'" (p. 35). Out of necessity and in exchange for increased combat effectiveness, Cochran disregarded what the book said when it came to living conditions and grooming standards. Putting his men and equipment in a position to take the fight to the Germans meant that they couldn't live in the "most luxurious of living conditions" (p. 34). Operating

from pup tents and living quarters dug into the sides of ravines ensured that Cochrane received little supervision. More importantly, it set the conditions so he could demonstrate his stellar initiative and technical competence by creating new concepts for close air support and aerial interdiction (p. 36). The resulting success caught the attention of his commanding generals and paved the way for his reunion with John Alison.

Like Phil Cochran, Alison was well known for his technical competence; reports suggest that "Alison's flying skills are legendary." (p. 41). His combination of academic and practical experience paid off during his nearly three-year journey across Europe and Asia with the Lend-Lease program (p. 48). Without the assistance of technical manuals or interpreters, Alison taught English, Russian, and Persian pilots how to fly the P-40, A-20, and B-25 aircraft (p. 54). His experience, coupled with his "gentlemanly way," built an appreciation for cultural sensitivity and coalition warfare (p. 59). Working with small teams or often alone, his Lend-Lease program taught him to be independent and allowed him the opportunity to exercise and display sound judgment (p. 51).

Alison's successful display didn't go unnoticed, and he was sent to China in 1942 where he was given command of the 75th Fighter Squadron of the famed 23rd Fighter Group's "Flying Tigers." In becoming an ace, he cemented his reputation as a strong, highly competent leader by knowing the capabilities of his pilots and being "right beside them during the tough situations." (p. 58). Like Cochrane, he was innovative, particularly in formulating

night fighting techniques against the Japanese (p. 59). His success led to a promotion and command of the 367th Fighter Group (p. 60).

Several personal qualities emerge after reviewing Alison and Cochran's successes as fighter squadron commanders and as co-commanders of the 1st Air Commando Group. Both men demonstrated a keen sense of vision, practiced good communications skills, had an ability and desire to teach, upheld the highest level of integrity, and led by example "from the front." Furthermore, each one showed deep care for the well-being and development of their subordinates, exhibited the highest levels of technical competence, and proved adaptive, flexible, and innovative (p. 106). Likewise, Brigadier General Heinie Aderholt, commander of the Air Commandos in Vietnam, demonstrated many of these same qualities.

***b. Heinie Aderholt***

Brigadier General Harry C. "Heinie" Aderholt was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1920 (United States Air Force, 1975). His father, a railroad fireman, perished in a train crash when Heinie was nine years old. For the rest of his adolescence, he helped his mother and six siblings support the family. It was during these formative years that he learned his family's "traits of pride, loyalty, and tenacity" that provided the cornerstone for his military successes (Trest, 2000, p. 2).

Aderholt joined the Army Air Corps during the Second World War and flew B-17s and C-47s in North Africa and Italy (p. 5). Upon returning home from the war and completing instructor pilot training, he was assigned to

Maxwell Field, Alabama, where he served as a staff pilot for the Army Air Forces Eastern Flying Training Command. It was at Maxwell where he "found a home" in the Air Force upon its birth in 1947 (p. 5). It is there that he met and married his wife.

Aderholt also served as the commanding officer of a segregated black squadron at Maxwell. Under his command, the squadron flourished; the men's accomplishments served as a "source of great pride and satisfaction" throughout his military career. It was during his time at Maxwell that he "really learned more there about leadership and about people' than at any other time in his career." (p. 19).

Heinie Aderholt left Maxwell to fly C-47s in the Korean War. He commanded the Special Air Warfare Detachment of the 21st Troop Carrier Squadron from July 1950, until September 1951 (United States Air Force, 1975). In that capacity, he served as "point man" for covert air operations in Korea. He made a lasting impact on the development of clandestine air warfare tactics, techniques, and procedures through the success of his audacious and "in-your-face" secret missions over the denied territory of North Korea.

Heinie's experiences in Korea cemented his belief that his place as a leader was "in the cockpit and out there on the flight line with the men, leading them, working with them, and caring for them" (Trest, 2000, p. 50). Aderholt's selfless dedication and "guts, perseverance, and ingenuity had sustained UNC [United Nations Command] clandestine air operations when conditions were at their worst in the war." (p. 51). His impressive

service drew the attention of officials at the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) who offered him an assignment at the Air Force's detachment to the organization (p. 52).

Upon his return to the States, Aderholt was assigned to the 1007th Air Intelligence Service Group in Washington, DC (United States Air Force, 1975). As part of the organization, he was on loan to the CIA's Air Training Branch. Aderholt was charged with establishing and operating a clandestine air training program at Camp Perry (Trest, 2000, p. 55). After eighteen months in the training business, Heinie itched for a return to operations. With the Korean conflict winding down, however, he spent the next few years hopping between assignments in South Carolina and Germany before returning to Washington in 1957 as a special warfare staff officer (United States Air Force, 1975).

Aderholt returned to the 1007th Air Intelligence Service Group (renamed the 1040<sup>th</sup> USAF Field Activity Squadron in 1959) in the fall of 1957 (Trest, 2000, p. 75). For the next two-and-a-half years, he worked at CIA headquarters "developing and testing special light aircraft for covert operations, formulating tactics and training requirements for aircrews flying secret missions, and developing plans for tactical air support of paramilitary actions" (p. 74). Heinie's work at the agency was so impressive that he garnered the favor of Richard Bissell, the head of the CIA's covert operations. Bissell stated that Aderholt "was an outstanding officer who had 'handled and accomplished projects on his own,' which normally required the work of a whole team of officers." (p. 78).

It was natural, therefore, that Aderholt became the go-to man when something needed to be fixed. In 1960, Aderholt was sent to rehabilitate the agency's detachment on Okinawa.

Aderholt was assigned to Okinawa in January, 1960, where he commanded the 1095th Operational Evaluation Training Group (United States Air Force, 1975). Taking over a lackluster operation, Heinie quickly shook things up by firing the "troublemakers and deadwood" and reinvigorating the personnel who stayed (Trest, 2000, p. 85). Using C-118 and C-130 aircraft and a forward operating location in Takhli, Thailand, Aderholt commanded the Tibetan airlift during which the CIA supported the armed resistance movement against the Chinese Communist forces that had invaded the country (p. 91). As this mission wound down, the unit shifted focus to protecting U.S. interests in neighboring Laos (p. 98).

It is during this new tasking that "he contributed to the pioneering of special air warfare techniques, and was instrumental in developing the Laos airfield complex known as Lima sites." (United States Air Force, 1975). Living in austere conditions in remote areas, he used his "incredible energy and staying power" to inspire his men to give more than they thought possible (Trest, 2000, p. 103). Heinie's experience in Asia and with the CIA had given him enviable expertise in irregular warfare. This expertise was in high demand as the conflict in Vietnam heated up. Not surprisingly, Aderholt soon

found himself with transfer orders to the Special Air Warfare Center (SAWC) at Eglin AFB, Florida, in August 1962 (p. 124).

Although the SAWC had been in existence for a couple of years prior to his arrival, Aderholt was credited with "getting the Air Commandos and special air warfare moving in the right direction." When it came to special operations, Heinie "fought tirelessly for the right people, planes, and equipment to carry the mission out." Specifically, he was noted for a "can-do" attitude and his unique ability of coordinating and selling special air warfare capabilities to Army Special Forces thereby "helping to develop special air warfare doctrine and procedures throughout the defense department." (p. 131). As the "patriarch of special operations in Southeast Asia. . . .Aderholt was 'the only one who had any concept of what we should be doing.'" (p. 130-131).

Aderholt formalized his reputation as "Air Commando One" over the course of his next few assignments from 1964 to 1968. In March 1964, he assumed command of the 1st Air Commando Wing at Hurlburt Field, Florida. He boosted the esprit-de-corps and morale of the unit; as one officer noted, his troops "would follow him any place, any time." (p. 134).

Following his tenure as wing commander, Aderholt was sent to Clark Air Base in the Philippines where he served as deputy commander of the 6200th Materiel Wing (United States Air Force, 1975). He quickly made a name for himself at Clark by implementing an innovative program that put a stop to the excessive levels of crime that had

plagued the base (Trest, 2000, p. 160). He also set a new benchmark for the support function in that he "was always there for the men in combat and always had a helping hand for those in need." (p. 166).

While stationed at Clark, Aderholt was selected for temporary duty with the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, where he set up and commanded the Joint Personnel Recovery Center (United States Air Force, 1975). In navigating the uncharted territory of personnel recovery, the new organization encountered numerous "problems without precedents they could turn to for answers." As one subordinate officer noted, Aderholt "had the uncanny ability of getting people involved to the extent they were eager to get back on the job even when they were exhausted. 'He convinced you that you could make things happen'" (Trest, 2000, p. 171).

Following his work with the JPRC, Aderholt was sent to Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, where he stood up the 56th Air Commando Wing in April 1967 (p. 182). Exhibiting "dynamic and fearless leadership" Heinie consolidated the special air warfare units in Thailand under his command despite a lack of personnel and poor facilities (p. 183). Using prop-driven aircraft, the new wing conducted low-level night interdiction missions in the skies over Laos and North Vietnam; the wing experienced unparalleled success in slowing the infiltration of the enemy along the Ho Chi Minh Trail (United States Air Force, 1975).

A fellow colonel in the 56th Air Commando Wing noted that "Aderholt flaunted 'a shameless disregard for his own career by attacking incorrect principles and

actions taken by his senior officers." The colonel also reported that "Aderholt's superior leadership inspired everyone in his command to accomplish feats 'even they themselves thought impossible" (Trest, 2000, p. 184). Such sentiments were commonplace for those who served under Aderholt throughout his lengthy career.

Many themes emerge when considering the leadership of Brigadier General Heinie Aderholt over his four decades of uniformed service. His official performance reports include descriptions such as "stong-minded," "extremely frank," "intensely devoted to duty," and "strong courage in his convictions." Personal accounts suggest that he had "great bureaucratic courage," "a huge, compassionate heart," and was "utterly frank and frugal" (p. 77). Subordinates report that Heinie was "spring-loaded with energy" and seemed to be "everywhere at once." A "go-getter," he "took a special interest in the younger officers and gave them room to grow." (p. 86). Furthermore, "In his drive to get things done, Aderholt never let hurdles like regulations or protocol stand in his way." (p. 107).

In examining Heinie's relationship with his aircrews, he never asked them "to fly missions that he would not fly himself." When off-duty, he made it a point to visit the officer and NCO clubs in order to drink and socialize with his men; he emphasized that such time honored rituals "played extremely important roles in esprit de corps and camaraderie among the Air Commandos" (p. 136).

The following section investigates the characteristics of the men that legends such as Aderholt, Cochran, and Alison commanded.

**c. The Followers**

The Air Commandos described earlier in this chapter clearly had the imprint of their leaders stamped upon them. Most of the characteristics and personal attributes provided in the descriptions of Alison, Cochran, and Aderholt were assumed by their men as well. These men, however, had several characteristics that separated them from their peers in non-special operations units.

The most obvious characteristic of the first Air Commandos is that they were all volunteers. Not everyone could join the ranks of these special units because of the special authority regarding the selection and retention of personnel that was given to the early commanders. In more recent years, the personnel system has merely assigned aircrew members to AFSOF units. This was not a common occurrence in the Air Commandos because "in the early days you had to volunteer or be invited to join" (Chinnery, 1994, p. 78).

Even when they were invited to join, recruits often went through a screening or evaluation process. For example, Alison and Cochran developed a screening process to ensure the force accepted "no castoffs from other units, no 'trouble makers'" (Y'Blood, 2001, p. 8). By carefully selecting personnel, leaders were able to provide their subordinates with increased discretion when it came to rules compliance in the unit's austere operating environment (such conditions weren't always conducive for

strict adherence to regulations.) Additionally, Alison and Cochran could also ensure they accepted volunteers that "possessed more than one skill."

The 1st Air Commando Group was also able to create a "lean, self-sufficient force" of the "highest caliber people." (Mason, Bergeron, and Renfrow, 1994, 11). According to Aderholt, "every commando 'pulled more than his own weight". Cooks and medics assisted with the movement of aircraft around the field while every member of the Air Commando force was able to use radios and call in air strikes if required. One member recounted that, "I had a dozen jobs I could do, and there was no saying that you couldn't do a certain thing." (in Bailey, 1997, 11).

The Carpetbaggers were selected in a similar manner whereby their recruitment depended upon "their backgrounds, characters, and military records" (Parnell, 1987, p. 21). An Air Commando from the Farm Gate era recalls being "evaluated and tested" by a "psychiatrist" as well as going through other physical and mental assessment exercises (Chinnery, 1994, p. 79). Such evaluations often served as a prerequisite for entry into the classified programs of Air Commando units.

The clandestine and covert nature of many Air Commando missions brought about a requirement for sensitivity and secrecy among many of the units. "The secrecy in which they operated" meant that the Air Commandos often "took on a certain character which set them apart from the usual combat units"(Parnell, 1987, p. 20). This character manifested in zeal for the "unknown, the untested, the unusual" (Y'Blood, 2001, p. 9). A byproduct

of being part of something "special," the early Air Commando units often exhibited a higher degree of esprit de corps and morale.

The Air Commandos had a tight esprit de corps that developed from being part of an elite unit. Their intense training, specialized aircraft (often vintage, not the most technologically advanced,) and shared experiences all contributed to its development. This unique sense of esprit de corps often manifested in debauchery at bars and officer's clubs across their respective theaters of operations. Christopher Robbins (1987) suggests that Air Commandos were at home in establishments where "The clientele was exotic and somewhat rowdy." (p. 28). As Heinie Aderholt attests, "The enthusiasm with which they flew was the enthusiasm with which they drank" (in Trest, 2000, p. 136). The high morale of the Air Commandos often manifested in relaxed "standards of military discipline and appearance" as well (Mason, Bergeron, Renfrow, 1994, p. 18).

In preparing the 1st Air Commando Group for war, Cochran and Alison authorized their men to wear non-standard uniform items, including airborne troop uniforms and Marine Corps footwear. These modified uniform configurations made it easier for the men to work efficiently in austere operating environments even though they were not in compliance with regulations (p. 16). The men also wore beards; one visitor commented that "no two men wore the same uniform, while almost all were growing

beards" (Y'Blood, 2001, p. 11). This solicited a witty directive from Cochran to his men that is quite telling of life in the Air Commandos:

Look, Sports, the beards and attempts at beards are not appreciated by visitors. Since we can't explain to all strangers that the fuzz is a gag or 'something I always wanted to do' affair, we must avoid their reporting that we are unshaven (regulations say you must shave) by appearing like Saturday night in Jersey whenever possible. Work comes before shaving. You will never be criticized for being unkempt if you are so damn busy you can't take time to doll up. But be clean while you can. Ain't it awful? (in Y'Blood, 2001, p. 12)

The Air Commandos of the Vietnam-era adopted alternative standards for dress and personal appearance as well. In this instance, however, they acquired official permission for the unique uniform. The distinctive uniform featured an Australian-style bush hat, jump boots, and bloused green fatigues complete with a blue scarf. The combination was approved on the "basis of the hat's operational value and boost to morale" (Trest, 2000, p. 129). Similarly, some men assigned to the 56th Air Commando Wing wore "a T-shirt, jeans, and flying boots" while conducting their sensitive missions in Laos (Robbins, 1987, p. 29). Relaxed standards of appearance resulted from "The realities of the battlefield [that] demanded again and again that the rules be broken." (p. 19).

Earlier accounts of Alison and Cochran described the 1st Air Commando Group's disdain for rules; the tight operating schedule for the force's training, equipping, and employment made rule-following problematic. Perhaps some of the most disliked rules during the Vietnam conflict were

the Rules of Engagement (ROE.) Often illogical and open to multiple interpretations, Air Commandos were sometimes left with the unenviable choice of "doing a really poor job or breaking the rules." (p. 18). As a result, the Air Commandos "never let hurdles like regulations or protocol" stand in their way (Trest, 2000, p. 107). In this manner, they seized opportunities to take full advantage of innovations in equipment, tactics, techniques, and procedures.

## **2. How Did the Organization Respond to Crises?**

Chapter II revealed that culture evolves as a result of how an organization deals with stressful periods; the investigation of these critical periods can help identify how basic assumptions were formed. The Air Commandos best responded to crises in a proactive manner. Since most of the written accounts of the Air Commandos were recorded documents about their exploits during times of conflict, much of their documented history indeed describes their response to crises and has been presented earlier in this study. This section, therefore, will highlight a few historical examples to reinforce how the Air Commandos responded to crises.

The story of the 1st Air Commando Group during the Second World War provides numerous examples of how the organization responded to crises through innovation, improvisation, and adaptation. Cochran and Alison were required to improvise with recruiting, organizing, and equipping the unit from its inception. General Arnold's

original mandate and imposed timeline simply did not provide the luxury of complying with established procedures.

The visionary leadership of Cochran and Alison provided direction to the Air Commandos when rules could not. The two men were able to negotiate excessive bureaucracy and the "battle of ideas" by effectively "Cutting across parochial lines" and taking full advantage of the diversity it produced; in this manner, they were able to create a "fully integrated and self-contained fighting unit" while confronting the crises of limited time and political infighting (Torres, 1997, p. 13). Furthermore, by "Throwing the rule book aside, they improvised tactics and modified aircraft on the spot, relying on their hand-picked, highly trained, and motivated personnel to overcome difficulties." (Alnwick, 1984).

The 1st Air Commando Group overcame the crisis resulting from their reduced strength and minimum resources through flexibility. Colonel Alnwick (1984) states that the unit's "ratio of maintenance men to aircraft is unheard of in most modern air forces; the difference was due to the careful selection of personnel from among highly talented volunteers." The group's leadership encouraged and sometimes demanded that their maintenance personnel were capable of performing more skill sets than their particular specialization required. Likewise, pilots were checked out in every type of the unit's aircraft.

Adaptive and innovative equipment, tactics, and procedures allowed the Air Commandos to succeed in a hostile jungle environment where their British predecessors had

failed. Specifically, the unit had to confront the crisis of delivering large quantities of heavy and oversized equipment to austere jungle locations to a mobile force of commandos. Aerial delivery techniques of the day were not yet advanced to the point of being able to accomplish the feat. Similarly, the "dense and inhospitable" jungle was not initially accessible to large equipment-laden transport aircraft. The Chindits, however, could not be successful in their mission unless they were inserted and resupplied in such terrain. The Air Commandos confronted the crisis by adopting gliders as a means to fly in the large quantities of heavy equipment and personnel (Torres, 1997, p. 13). Other innovations pioneered by the Air Commandos included the use of combat search and rescue helicopters and various advancements in munitions and their delivery. Their innovative tactics, techniques, and procedures proved useful to the Army Air Corps later in the war during the invasion of Normandy.

In the European Theater, the Carpetbaggers confronted crises with a similar zeal for innovation and adaptation. Responding to the dire need for reinforcing resistance movements deep within enemy-held territory, the Carpetbaggers produced non-standard variants of typical AAF aircraft by using existing technology to make adaptations. These Air Commandos then pioneered and implemented innovative tactics, techniques, and procedures to fully exploit the capabilities of their unique aircraft. Examples include the advanced development of night, black-out low level techniques and aerial delivery procedures to blind drop zones.

Like their counterparts in the CBI Theater, the Carpetbaggers addressed the crises of under manning and the inherent danger in their high risk missions by ensuring that all men were well versed at performing tasks outside of their primary specialty. Ben Parnell (1987) states that each man was "competent in at least two positions as a crew member of the airplane." (p. 21). Such characteristics were not unique to the Air Commandos of the Second World War, but were rather representative of a trend that continued during Vietnam.

The exploits of Heinie Aderholt and the Air Commandos of the Vietnam era provide a vivid illustration of the organization's unique response style to crisis events. Aderholt's response was typically bold and forceful with that of his subordinates being characterized by unflinching devotion to the orders of their leaders. More importantly, Aderholt and his fellow commanders confronted crises by leading from the front.

During his tenure as commander of the 56th Air Commando Wing, the runway and ramps at Nakhon Phanom had become severely fouled with rocks and shavings from the pierced steel planking runway. As a result of ingesting these foreign objects through their prop arcs, the wing's aircraft experienced undue damage to their propellers creating a crisis that endangered the unit's aircrew and ramp personnel. As opposed to issuing passive safety guidelines, Aderholt confronted the problem directly by ordering all personnel to the ramp one Sunday morning. Demonstrating their sincere commitment to every facet of the Air Commando mission, Aderholt and his junior

commanders inspired their troops by leading the 4,000 Air Commandos on a "FOD walk" to pick up the unwelcomed rocks and debris. Of course, the refreshments in the form of beer he provided to the participants reinforced morale in the troops and made the entire spectacle even more memorable (Trest, 2000, p. 187).

One way the Air Commandos alleviated the personal stress caused by never ending crises was through frequent participation in morale-boosting activities at the clubs and bars on the various bases. While wing commander, Aderholt ordered the club to stay open 24 hours a day in order to accommodate personnel who worked during the establishment's normal operating hours. He believed that drinking and socializing in clubs "played extremely important roles in esprit de corps and camaraderie among the air commandos" (in Trest, 2000, p. 136).

While some of the best known drinking stories emanate from the Vietnam era, members of the 1st Air Commando Group of the Second World War (including their leader, Phil Cochran) were reported to have engaged in similar exploits. In fact, his counterpart Alison attempted to protect one of his pilots who had a ground accident after flying while inebriated (Boltz, 2001, p. 100). The Carpetbaggers organized similar activities as well, albeit in the very different social environment of wartime England.

By most accounts, the men seldom "crossed over the threshold of military courtesy in the free moments of socializing" (Trest, 2000, p. 154). In return, the leaders were able to invigorate "contagious enthusiasm and dedication" in the men so that they may better overcome the

challenges of the crises they faced (p. 149). By providing visionary leadership from the front, the leadership empowered the men to overcome crises that "even they themselves thought impossible." (p. 184). Realizing the emphasis the Air Commandos put on the human component of military service helps answer Sathe's question regarding who is considered deviant in the culture.

### **3. Who are Considered Deviant in the Culture?**

In the world of military culture, deviance is often attributed to personnel that reside outside the dominant subculture. In this regard, Air Commandos themselves were deviant to the dominant conventionally-minded culture of the Army Air Corps and Air Force. Carl Builder describes such relationships when he introduces the concept of "altars of worship."

Builder (1989) defines an altar of worship as the principle that a military service reveres and cherishes the most (p. 18). He suggests that "The Air Force could be said to worship at the altar of technology. The airplane was the instrument that gave birth to independent air forces" (p. 19). In the era of the Air Commandos, the Air Force worshipped at this altar by pursuing the development and acquisition of the fastest and most technologically-advanced aircraft and through its insistence on centralized command and control.

The Air Force's pursuit of the fastest fighters and the centralized control of airpower ran counter to the culture of the Air Commando. Although the Air Commandos appreciated the technology of aircraft, they often flew vintage or surplus aircraft and placed most value on the

innovation of individual aircraft components and tactics, techniques, and procedures. This dependence on innovation placed a premium on the technical competence, work ethic, and character of the men in the organization. With the Army's emphasis on the concept of service and the human element of warfare, "AFSOF personnel represent a curious blend of the Army and Air Force altars of worship" (Koskinas, 2006, p. 11). Over time, therefore, it was the hardcore personnel of the conventional Air Force itself and the processes they produced that became deviant in the culture of the Air Commando.

The disagreement between Heinie Aderholt and General William Momyer during the Vietnam conflict serves as a poignant illustration of who was seen deviant in the culture of the Air Commando. As the commander of the Tactical Air Command, Momyer was a strong proponent of the exclusive nature of jet technology and high-performance fighter aircraft. He was quoted as saying, "Where there is shooting. . .I don't believe the USAF should be involved with 'so-called' low performance aircraft delivering firepower" (Trest, 2000, p. 13). This conviction was counter to the culture of the Air Commandos who prided themselves in using "whatever capabilities were available to get the job done, and when the needed capabilities were not there, they improvised." (p. 12). Part of life as an Air Commando was the constant battle against conventionally minded airmen who saw no glamour in flying low and slow in direct support of soldiers on the ground.

The direct support provided to the Chindits in Burma by the 1st Air Commando Group is an example of the

decentralized control of airpower. By fragmenting the air assets to act in a direct support capacity, the Air Commandos were able to satisfy Wingate's requests in a timely and accurate manner. This intimate relationship between members of the air component and the personnel they were supporting became the norm for Air Commando operations. The Carpetbaggers were employed in a similar manner in support of the OSS in the European theater and operations in Korea followed suit as well. Since centralized control is one of the key tenets of airpower, such decentralized arrangements were not readily accepted by the respective conventional air commanders in each theater. The Air Commandos experienced resistance from those who would not accept such decentralized arrangements. Such antagonists were clearly deviant in the culture of the Air Commando.

Stories from within the organizations of the Air Commandos provide more examples of people seen as deviant from the Air Commando culture. With emphasis on the importance of the human component, leaders who did not take care of their troops were clearly seen as deviant. During the Vietnam era, a squadron commander at Hurlburt Field was relieved of his duty because he would not socialize with his troops after work at the club (Trest, 2000, p. 137). While other lesser incidents have been recorded, this account clearly illustrates the importance of taking care of the troops to the Air Commandos.

Personnel who blindly followed rules and regulations were deviant in the culture of the Air Commandos as well. This paper has reported the Air Commandos' disdain for

paperwork, their frequent bending of rules, and their commonly accepted variations in dress and personal appearance. Air Commandos did not simply break rules for the sake of breaking rules, rather they did so in the interest of mission accomplishment; they sought to avoid failures that "were the result of thinking stuck in traditionalism, mired in parochialism, and therefore averse to revolutionary ideas" (Torres, 1997, p. 39).

This section has investigated the organizational culture of the Air Commandos by asking the three questions introduced in Chapter II. With reference to the framework (Figure 1,) this chapter has identified and described various artifacts and values representative of their historic legacy. The following chapter will conclude this study by identifying the basic assumptions and shared beliefs that served as the foundation for the culture of the Air Commandos.

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## IV. CONCLUSION

This study has investigated the organizational culture of the historic Air Commandos. In Chapter II, three "layers" of organizational culture were presented. The previous chapter examined the top two layers—artifacts and values. This chapter digs deeper by presenting three shared beliefs and basic assumptions of the Air Commandos. While Chapter III described "reflections" of their culture, the next section attempts to present the "essence" of it.

### A. THE ESSENCE OF THE AIR COMMANDOS

Shared beliefs and basic assumptions represent the essence of an organization's culture. Such insights are gained through the distillation of the organization's values and artifacts. Shared beliefs and assumptions are the heart of culture and help the organization solve its basic problems of survival in the external environment and integration of its internal processes.

Throughout the previous chapter, three overwhelming themes emerged regarding the basic assumptions and beliefs of the Air Commandos. Each of the themes provides insight into the internal integration of the Air Commandos and suggests how they negotiated their external environment. The shared beliefs and basic assumptions of the Air Commandos uncovered over the course of this study are: Humans are the most critical resources in an organization; innovation, improvisation, and adaptation are more important than advanced technology; successful mission accomplishment is more important than adherence to standard military conventions.

## **1. Humans are Most Critical**

The human element was the most critical resource in Air Commando organizations. Contrary to Carl Builder's assertion that the Air Force has always been obsessed with high technology, the Air Commandos were indeed obsessed with the technical competence, work ethic, and character of their men. Chapter III provided numerous accounts about how the Air Commandos placed priority on the morale and operational proficiency of their men. Leaders were committed to leading by example and from the front. Inspired by their leaders' compassion and commitment to teach and train, the Air Commandos exhibited genuine concern for the well-being of the men and their families. They realized that without competent and ready operators, the greatest military technology in the world is of little value. This shared belief that "humans are more important than hardware" is common to other SOF elements and has been established as a "SOF Truth" by USSOCOM (2007, p. 1).

## **2. Innovation is Paramount**

Innovation—the ability to make changes to their already established aircraft, equipment, and processes—was of paramount importance to the Air Commandos. They maintained the combat viability of their vintage or surplus aircraft by adopting innovative modifications to equipment, tactics, and procedures. Perhaps no other examples better illustrate the Air Commandos' belief in innovation than the evolution of the C-47 gunship during Vietnam, the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group's use of gliders during Operation Thursday, and the conversion of B-24 bombers by the Carpetbaggers into aerial delivery and agent infiltration platforms. The

three examples were detailed in Chapter III and required the implementation of innovative tactics, techniques, and procedures in addition to the equipment modifications in order to achieve mission success.

### **3. Mission Success Trumps Military Convention**

The Air Commandos firmly believed that successful mission accomplishment was more important than blind adherence to the standards of military convention. Chapter III provided accounts of the flexibility of the Air Commandos during the enforcement of rules, regulations, and standards of dress, appearance, and conduct. This flexibility was enabled to some degree by the implementation of an assessment process through which personnel were selected. It is important to note, however, that none of the examples in Chapter III seemed to indicate a predisposition for breaking rules for the sake of breaking rules, but rather only when such rules served as an impediment to mission accomplishment. Unlike the claims of some critics, therefore, the Air Commandos did not seem to be "above the rules," rather they valued the flexibility and their commander's prerogative in complying with the "spirit" of directives instead of acting in accordance with the strict interpretation of regulations. As discussed in Chapter III, the Air Commandos also bucked contemporary Air Force (or Army Air Force) convention by believing in the necessity for the decentralized control of their unique brand of special operations airpower. The efficacy of decentralized control for today's special operations

airpower is important to the United States' current War on Terror and is a topic for further consideration and research.

## **B. THE FUTURE OF THE AIR COMMANDO CULTURE**

Chapter I began with a vignette regarding a painting that hangs in the 7 SOS at RAF Mildenhall, UK. The painting pays tribute to fallen Air Commandos who were lost during a training accident in Albania. Another painting entitled "Carpetbaggers" hangs in a different location in the same squadron building. This painting depicts a squadron aircraft (MC-130H) performing a resupply airdrop onto a snow-covered field somewhere in Europe. A ghostly image of a specially modified B-24 Liberator shadows the MC-130H. The painting recognizes the heritage of American special air operations in Europe. Furthermore, it serves as a visual reminder that modern-day members of the 7 SOS trace their lineage as Air Force special operators back to the Carpetbaggers of the Second World War. Most importantly, however, it reflects the importance of the Air Commando culture to members of the contemporary AFSOC community.

Organizational culture is critically important in AFSOC. It promotes desired behaviors in the command's personnel that define what it means to be an Air Force special operator. This study has provided insight into the historic culture of the Air Commando; AFSOC's Mission Review of 2005 and the resultant 13 Attributes provided insight into the contemporary culture of the command.

Instead of describing the rich assumptions and beliefs of contemporary AFSOC, however, the 13 Attributes seem to

be more like guidelines and standards of behavior for the Airmen in AFSOC: Embody the 13 Attributes and one will stay out of trouble and will get promoted. The 13 Attributes, therefore, are a bit lacking as an indicator of contemporary organizational culture. Future research should attempt to close this gap.

Future research should attempt to more precisely decipher the contemporary culture in AFSOC today. The command should solicit the help of qualified professionals in accomplishing a longitudinal study of the organizational culture of AFSOC. The results should then be compared to the culture associated with the legacy Air Commandos to see if discrepancies arise. Since the command today speaks of its personnel as Air Commandos, discrepancies might serve as a hidden source of organizational pain.

The concept of organizational pain was introduced in Chapter II. Organizational pain occurs when there is a difference between our espoused values and our real values; when it exists, it is detrimental to an organization. Chapter III documented many practices of the Air Commandos, particularly involving the use of alcohol and rule breaking, that are not tolerated in AFSOC today. If other disparities become apparent, the value of molding the modern day Airmen of AFSOC after the legacy Air Commandos should be questioned. Does the wholesale adoption of the culture and legacy of the historic Air Commandos produce more harm than good in AFSOC today?

It is one thing to recognize organizational heritage, it is quite another to integrate that legacy by adopting their culture as that of a modern day organization. Perhaps

the command could mitigate complications by redefining what a modern day Air Commando is—in terms other than those borrowed from a self-help book. Should this prove to be too difficult given the term's historical baggage, perhaps the command should seek to rebrand itself through association with a different culture (such as a reversion towards "Quiet Professionals.") Whatever decision the command arrives at, it should be reinforced with a proactive education and training program.

Culture must be more than just a poster, pamphlet, or slogan; it must be inculcated throughout the command through its incorporation into all of the command's initial and recurrent training programs. Before an AFSOC Airmen reports to their unit for duty, they must be indoctrinated into the culture of the command. Future research should investigate the mechanisms and best practices requisite to the development of such programs. By promoting and reinforcing desired behaviors, AFSOC will be better able to build the attributes and qualities that Spulak discusses in his theory of special operations. Well nurtured organizational culture is critical to the development of the AFSOF of the future.

## APPENDIX

**What Makes an Air Commando?**

To answer this question, we asked a diverse group of our most experienced enlisted and officer warriors to take a hard look at the personal qualities that distinguish our elite Air Commandos. They identified thirteen personal characteristics every Air Commando must have in order to achieve success. If you have spent any length of time in this command, these characteristics will not surprise you. However, our younger Airmen, and people new to AFSOC, may not be as aware of these critical characteristics and the "make or break" effect they have on a warrior serving in this command. AFSOC Airmen must envision their mission accomplishment through the use of these characteristics. This will ensure consistency in values, good judgments, and ultimately, mission success. That is our standard. As leaders, it is our responsibility to make these thirteen characteristics central to the vision of service in AFSOC. These thirteen Critical Attributes of Success represent the consolidated opinions of more than 100 respected, experienced AFSOC leaders.

**Critical Attributes of Success**

- Integrity
- Self-Motivation
- Effective Intelligence
- Self-Discipline
- Perseverance
- Adaptability
- Maturity
- Judgement
- Selflessness
- Leadership
- Skill
- Physical Fitness
- Family Strength

It should be every AFSOC warrior's goal to make these Critical Attributes of Success a part of their life. Developing and using them requires courage and a willingness to step out of mediocrity, and into excellence. When we do so – we often have to leave some of our old ways behind. We may even have to leave behind some people whose standards are not as high as we would like – or, whose personal focus on the future is not very sharp – or, those whose loyalties fluctuate with their own personal convenience. Help your Airmen set a positive course for their own future, AFSOC's mission success, and our nation's position in the Global War on Terror, depend on it.

An Air Commando is a type of person, not a type of job. All of the jobs our Airmen perform are crucial to AFSOC's success. What really makes an Air Commando is a person's heart and their personal determination to apply these thirteen critical characteristics to their daily life. According to our most experienced AFSOC warriors, the distinguishing factor in the Air Commando identity is not AFSC, but rather the courage and determination to exercise the thirteen AFSOC Critical Attributes.



"What Makes an Air Commando?" AFSOC, 2007

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