

SEAL Team SIX - The Secret Team That Killed bin Laden

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From Ghazi Air Base in Pakistan, the modified MH-60 helicopters made their way to the garrison suburb of Abbottabad, about 30 miles from the center of Islamabad. Aboard were Navy SEALs, flown across the border from Afghanistan, along with tactical signals, intelligence collectors, and navigators using highly classified hyperspectral imagers.

After bursts of fire over 40 minutes, 22 people were killed or captured. One of the dead was Osama bin Laden, done in by a double tap -- boom, boom -- to the left side of his face. His body was aboard the choppers that made the trip back. One had experienced mechanical failure and was destroyed by U.S. forces, military and White House officials tell *National Journal*.

Were it not for this high-value target, it might have been a routine mission for the specially trained and highly mythologized SEAL Team Six, officially called the Naval Special Warfare Development Group, but known even to the locals at their home base Dam Neck in Virginia as just DevGru.

This HVT was special, and the raids required practice, so they replicated the one-acre compound at Camp Alpha, a segregated section of Bagram Air Base. Trial runs were held in early April.

DevGru belongs to the Joint Special Operations Command, an extraordinary and unusual collection of classified standing task forces and special-missions units. They report to the president and operate worldwide based on the legal (or extra-legal) premises of classified presidential directives. Though the general public knows about the special SEALs and their brothers in Delta Force, most JSOC missions never leak. We only hear about JSOC when something goes bad (a British aid worker is accidentally killed) or when something really big happens (a merchant marine captain is rescued at sea), and even then, the military remains especially sensitive about their existence. Several dozen JSOC operatives have died in Pakistan over the past several years. Their names are released by the Defense Department in the usual manner, but with a cover story -- generally, they were killed in training accidents in eastern Afghanistan. That's the code.

How did the helos elude the Pakistani air defense network? Did they spoof transponder codes? Were they painted and tricked out with Pakistan Air Force equipment? If so -- and we may never know -- two other JSOC units, the Technical Application Programs Office and the Aviation Technology Evaluation Group, were responsible. These truly are the silent squirrels -- never getting public credit and not caring one whit. Since 9/11, the JSOC units and their task forces have become the U.S. government's most effective and lethal weapon against terrorists and their networks, drawing plenty of unwanted, and occasionally unflattering, attention to themselves in the process.

JSOC costs the country more than \$1 billion annually. The command has its critics, but it has escaped significant congressional scrutiny and has operated largely with impunity since 9/11. Some of its interrogators and operators were involved in torture and rendition, and the line between its intelligence-gathering activities and the CIA's has been blurred.

But Sunday's operation provides strong evidence that the CIA and JSOC work well together. Sometimes intelligence needs to be developed rapidly, to get inside the enemy's operational loop. And sometimes it needs to be cultivated, grown as if it were delicate bacteria in a petri dish.

In an interview at CIA headquarters two weeks ago, a senior intelligence official said the two proud groups of American secret warriors had been "deconflicted and basically integrated" -- finally -- 10 years after 9/11. Indeed, according to accounts given to journalists by five senior administration officials Sunday night, the CIA gathered the intelligence that led to bin Laden's location. A memo from CIA Director Leon Panetta sent Sunday night provides some hints of how the information was collected and analyzed. In it, he thanked the National Security Agency and the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency for their help. NSA figured out, somehow,

that there was no telephone or Internet service in the compound. How it did this without Pakistan's knowledge is a secret. The NGIA makes the military's maps but also develops their pattern recognition software -- no doubt used to help establish, by February of this year, that the CIA could say with "high probability" that bin Laden and his family were living there.

Recently, JSOC built a new Targeting and Analysis Center in Rosslyn, Va. Where the National Counterterrorism Center tends to focus on threats to the homeland, TAAC, whose existence was first disclosed by the Associated Press, focuses outward, on active "kinetic" -- or lethal -- counterterrorism missions abroad. Its creation surprised the NCTC's director, Michael Leiter, who was suspicious about its intent until he visited.

That the center could be stood up under the nose of some of the nation's most senior intelligence officials without their full knowledge testifies to the power and reach of JSOC, whose size has tripled since 9/11. The command now includes more than 4,000 soldiers and civilians. It has its own intelligence division, which may or may not have been involved in last night's effort, and has gobbled up a number of free-floating Defense Department entities that allowed it to rapidly acquire, test, and field new technologies.

Under a variety of standing orders, JSOC is involved in more than 50 current operations spanning a dozen countries, and its units, supported by so-called "white," or acknowledged, special operations entities like Rangers, Special Forces battalions, SEAL teams, and Air Force special ops units from the larger Special Operations Command, are responsible for most of the "kinetic" action in Afghanistan.

Pentagon officials are conscious of the enormous stress that 10 years of war have placed on the command. JSOC resources are heavily taxed by the operational tempo in Afghanistan and Pakistan, officials have said. The current commander, Vice Adm. William McRaven, and Maj. Gen. Joseph Votel, McRaven's nominated replacement, have been pushing to add people and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance technology to areas outside the war theater where al-Qaida and its affiliates continue to thrive.

Earlier this year, it seemed that the elite units would face the same budget pressures that the entire military was experiencing. Not anymore. The military found a way, largely by reducing contracting staff and borrowing others from the Special Operations Command, to add 50 positions to JSOC. And Votel wants to add several squadrons to the "Tier One" units -- Delta and the SEALs.

When Gen. Stanley McChrystal became JSOC's commanding general in 2004, he and his intelligence chief, Maj. Gen. Michael Flynn, set about transforming the way the subordinate units analyze and act on intelligence. Insurgents in Iraq were exploiting the slow decision loop that coalition commanders used, and enhanced interrogation techniques were frowned upon after the Abu Ghraib scandal. But the hunger for actionable tactical intelligence on insurgents was palpable.

The way JSOC solved this problem remains a carefully guarded secret, but people familiar with the unit suggest that McChrystal and Flynn introduced hardened commandos to basic criminal forensic techniques and then used highly advanced and still-classified technology to transform bits of information into actionable intelligence. One way they did this was to create forward-deployed fusion cells, where JSOC units were paired with intelligence analysts from the NSA and the NGA. Such analysis helped the CIA to establish, with a high degree of probability, that Osama bin Laden and his family were hiding in that particular compound.

These technicians could "exploit and analyze" data obtained from the battlefield instantly, using their access to the government's various biometric, facial-recognition, and voice-print databases. These cells also used highly advanced surveillance technology and computer-based pattern analysis to layer predictive models of insurgent behavior onto real-time observations.

The military has begun to incorporate these techniques across the services. And Flynn will soon be promoted to a job within the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, where he'll be tasked with transforming the way intelligence is gathered, analyzed, and utilized.