
As I Remember It: The SF/Golf Ball Analogy

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Out of sheer curiosity, I once cut open a golf ball to see how it was constructed. It was made up of three components: a rubber-ball core; a rubber string wound around the core; and a thin, dimpled, white outside cover. Several days later, I used the composition of the golf ball as an analogy in explaining the training of Special Forces soldiers. A number of “old timers” still remember the golf-ball story, although it is now a dozen years old.

Rubber ball

The first component, the rubber ball, symbolizes the Special Forces volunteer. Traditionally, he is a seasoned, responsible soldier who is highly qualified in a particular skill. He is healthy, is in excellent physical condition, and has already demonstrated a capacity to learn — after all, we are talking about an NCO or a captain.

The officer, as a rule, has graduated from college, has completed his basic and advanced courses, and has established himself in his branch. Many volunteers are already airborne-qualified and have attended Ranger School.

During Special Forces Assessment and Selection, or SFAS, the cadre of the JFK Special Warfare Center and School, or SWCS, assisted by technical personnel, will assess the volunteer to determine whether he has the proper motivation, character and temperament for serving on

an SF operational detachment.

Surprisingly, many volunteers are not selected to continue SF training. That does not mean that they are poor soldiers; it means that through a subjective evaluation, the SF proponent has determined that they are not the right people to serve in this unique unit. The volunteer who is selected during SFAS is an SF candidate, but he is not yet SF.

Rubber-string winding

The second component, the rubber-string winding, is analogous to the Special Forces Qualification Course, or SFQC. The emphasis of SFQC is on the five SF MOSs. The course also further develops the soldier’s warrior traits and prepares him for assignment to an SF operational detachment. After what seems to them like an endless period of time, the candidates who complete the SFQC attend the Regimental Supper, don their coveted berets in a memorable but simple ceremony, listen to a speaker who frequently qualifies as a cure for insomnia, and consume a reasonable meal. The next day, during the graduation ceremony, each SFQC graduate walks across the stage, receives a diploma, and listens to another speaker (several hours later, no one can remember what the speaker said).

At this point, are the soldiers SF-qualified? My response, regarding the vast majority of

those soldiers, is “not yet.” The reason for that response is that their training still has not adequately addressed the critical skills that distinguish SF-qualified individuals from other outstanding soldiers (such as Rangers and members of the airborne divisions). Yes, all of the graduates are tactically and technically proficient, but most of them still lack some critical SF ingredients.

Outside cover

The 336 dimples in the surface of the outside cover of a golf ball impart a back-spin that permits the ball to stay airborne twice as long as a smooth ball hit with the same force. The cover distinguishes the golf

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ball from all other balls. So it is with the third component of SF training — once armed with it, soldiers are truly SF. The third component has three elements: regional orientation, language proficiency and interpersonal skills. All three elements are critical to SF qualification, to SF’s ability to serve as a force multiplier, and to SF’s ability to work effectively with and through indigenous forces. A working knowledge of these elements will allow us to paint the landscape of our operational area.

• *Regional orientation.* Because each SF unit is focused on a specific region of the world, the soldiers who are about to join an SF unit must have some knowledge about their unit’s region. Their regional knowledge should include geography — not merely the knowledge of place names, but a working knowledge of the region’s climate, topography, drainage, natural vege-

tation, soils and minerals.

But regional knowledge is not limited to a region’s physical foundations. SF soldiers must also develop an appreciation for the region’s culture and society. In some areas of the world, religion is so pervasive that it practically *is* the culture. In such areas, government, law, food restrictions, family life, art and economic activity all fall under the prescription of religious teaching. As we have seen in recent times, cultures that are in the process of expanding are frequently stronger than those cultures with which they come into contact. Typically, the weaker cultures change substantially as a result of that contact. Perhaps the most widespread example of that process is the “Westernizing” of certain areas of the world, and Islam’s resistance to the change. SF soldiers should also understand the political dynamics affecting the people who live in the region.

• *Language.* Since SF’s inception, there has been an appreciation for the importance of language training in the SF community. Language training consumes a considerable amount of time and money. Language proficiency is a perishable skill that requires constant maintenance.

Simply put, a fully qualified SF soldier is bilingual. There can be no compromise on the language requirement. It is ironic that we have always provided incentive pay for a host of skills that are not mission-critical, but we have neglected language incentives until recently, and we are now applying those incentives inadequately. Maintaining language proficiency is a responsibility that must be shared by the institution, the unit and the individual.

• *Interpersonal skills.* The SF soldier’s mastery of interpersonal skills is critical to the achievement of effective SF operations. Unfortunately, the meaning of “interpersonal skills” is not always clear. Simply put, they are “people skills,” such as empathy, graciousness and the ability to read a social situation. We enhance relationships by understanding our feelings, empathizing with the feelings of others, and controlling our emotions. Interpersonal skills also include negotiation, the back-and-forth communication designed for reaching an

agreement when two sides have some opposing interests. Principled negotiation is an all-purpose strategy that SF soldiers must learn. Understanding negotiation techniques and developing negotiation skills are critical to the success of one's career and personal life.

SF soldiers must also have the abilities to persuade and to teach. SF uses those skills frequently — more frequently, in fact, than we use our weapons. Finally, it has been estimated that as much as 70 percent of all communication is nonverbal. When there is a conflict between what one says and what one's body language reveals, the nonverbal communication is more accurate. However, there are cultural nuances in nonverbal communication, and the person unschooled in those nuances often misinterprets what he sees. It is therefore crucial that SF soldiers study and recognize cultural and environmental differences.

Only when the soldier has a thorough knowledge of the third component can he be called SF-qualified. FM 3-05.20 (FM 31-20), *Special Forces Operational Techniques*, essentially states that in Chapter 1. However, despite the fact that that requirement has been established in doctrine, it still requires implementation and sustainment.

A legitimate question is, "Who is responsible for ensuring that SF training is accomplished? The SF proponent, SWCS, is responsible for stating clearly what SF candidates must learn and for providing the training-support materials necessary to accomplish that end. The proponent also identifies the skills that SF soldiers must master through operational assignments, individual self-study or self-development.

In meeting those responsibilities, the proponent defines the life-cycle model that will be followed. Major factors that influence the effectiveness and the success of institutional training are the proponent's accuracy in determining the duties required for a particular career and the proponent's effectiveness in setting the corresponding training standards. Our performance in institutional training has been spotty; although there are good explanations why, there is no excuse.

The contemporary conflict, at whatever

level, is essentially a "social conflict." The emphasis has shifted toward social, political and psychological factors, rather than military factors. This does not mean that military violence is being discarded, but rather that the use of violence will be complementary rather than controlling. Striking a proper balance of all three components will allow SF soldiers to operate effectively and to understand and master their complex environment. The balance of the three components is ultimately what makes SF unique. ✂

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