

THE NAVY SEAL COMMANDOS: A CASE STUDY OF  
MILITARY DECISIONMAKING AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

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PREFACE

This rough first-cut has seven sections. They are:

- I. Introduction
  - II. Background
  - III. The Problem and Evolution
  - IV. Incentives/Evaluation
  - V. Constraints
  - VI. Analysis
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I. INTRODUCTION

This is a rough first-cut, as much intended to place my ignorance in a framework as to set down what I have so far learned. The SEALs are Navy Commandos operating in Vietnam. Last summer I spent several weeks with them, and brought back quite a bit of material, lore and observations.

I am writing of the Navy, the Marines and the Army separately in this first go-round to avoid deleting differences in an effort to force all three analyses to fit one rationale.

In the text I have included comments indicating where my knowledge is nil and where I think I should know more, so that Andy and others can track and check my direction more easily.

## II. THE BEGINNINGS

SEALs are an offshoot from the Navy frogman program; they were designed in the early sixties, when the sexy force procurement stocks in the bull market of Kennedy/MacNamara general purpose forces were guerrilla-oriented and beret-wearing. How the concept was sheperded through the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Congress I am still trying to determine, for the mission of the SEALs (Sea-Air-Land Commandos) exceeded the charter of the U.S. Navy. SEALs were supposed to come from the sea, get across the beach, and in small, quick raids strike at enemy targets inland. According to Congressional charter, however, the U.S. Navy had no jurisdiction to prosecute a land war by infantry tactics beyond the high water mark.

(Of course, the U.S. Air Force Commandos in Vietnam have no legitimate authority for their infantry operations either. It seems that the services tolerate mission infringements and are more concerned about the size than the legality of intrusions.)

SEALs were all qualified frogmen from the U.S. Navy's Underwater Demolition Teams who had volunteered for more extensive training, which consisted mainly of jump school at Fort Bragg and the U.S. Army Infantry Ranger School. They enjoyed jumping but considered Ranger School an indignity. In their collective estimation it was more a character-building-through-harassment course than a decent scouting and patrolling exercise. The SEALs had all successfully completed the UDT Hell Week and so scorned the toughness of Ranger School as second-rate while yet resentful at being yelled at by instructors who had not been through the superior rigors of Hell Week. The SEALs lasting impression of Ranger School was that it was a good boot camp for ROTC second lieutenants but not of benefit to themselves either in mental attitude or acquired skills.

Nevertheless, the graduation diplomas certified the SEALs were proficient in infantry tactics and no longer just frogmen. This record served as part of the curriculum vita for the SEAL program and was frequently cited in official correspondence and press releases.

By 1962 there were two SEAL bases, one at Norfolk, Virginia, and the other in Coronado, California. Each base housed about 40 SEALs, with tours of duty averaging one year and personnel shuttling between SEALs and UDT a common occurrence. Rarely, however, did either an officer or an enlisted man leave the SEAL/UDT community to accept assignment within the regular Navy. Since SEALs were a new branch, most of the officers were young and since the branch scarcely numbered 100, commanding officers were lieutenants (average age: 28) or lieutenant commanders (average age: 32). This age factor was to have a marked effect in combat development.

In the halcyon years of the early sixties, the SEAL training program was strongly oriented toward marine activities, with land exercises mostly of a beach reconnaissance sort. The SEALs had high intraservice logistic and travel priority and so were not restricted to just one training area. They often, for instance, finagled trips to the Caribbean, (because, they said, the water was clear there.) Yet what was lacking was a selection of training sites, equipment, and tactical employment oriented towards the most probable place where they would fight: Vietnam.

This is not to indulge in prediction by hindsight. As early as 1962, the SEALs had officers and men assigned in Vietnam, with the mission of training South Vietnamese in the techniques of beach reconnaissance, barrier clearing, explosives and raids. The SEAL experience reflected the phenomenon noted in regard to the U.S. Marines: a curious hiatus between ill-suited peacetime training on the one hand and valuable war experience concurrently available within the same organization. In the SEAL case there seem to have been three reasons for their lack of adaptation. First, the SEALs believed they had to be well-balanced in their training, so as to carry out a variety of missions in any part of the world. This attitude seemed to preclude a training program restructured so as to cover adequately all the essentials while concentrating most heavily on the most probable course of employment. Second, there was uncertainty regarding the SEAL mission in Vietnam. It began as an advisory/training effort to teach the South Vietnamese the tools of the SEAL trade. In the early sixties, however,

those tools were designed for use against hostile shores, which in the South Vietnamese case meant pointing north. Third, the SEALs were oriented toward operations, not staff. Consequently they were light in the sort of planning which may have gradually pointed the way for them to undertake training changes. The details of their training plans away from home bases followed a standard procedure, whereby little creativity was demanded of the planners, who were usually staff officers from the regular Navy, unused to SEALs and unwilling to hand them wild schemes based on assumptions rather than knowledge. It was easier for everyone just to fill in the blanks of the standard operations orders, a standard developed from World War II and Korea.

When U.S. combat forces went into Vietnam in 1965, the SEALs went ashore also, then not as advisors but as part of the fleet. They kept their advisory role, but that became a secondary mission. What most concerned them was their operational role. Like the U.S. Marine reconnaissance units, the SEAL first starts were not successful or encouraging. Basically, the SEALs had expected that when they were used it would be as the tip to a U.S. Marine spearhead backed by the logistics and fire support shaft of the U.S. Navy. While in training they had often worked alone because a battalion of Marines could not be available to give dressing to a SEAL landing, the SEALs when first placed in a combat environment naturally considered themselves part of a bigger picture.

The trouble in Vietnam, however, was that nobody told them what the bigger picture was, let alone how they fitted into it. What strikes me as most remarkable about the SEAL story is their performance and their ability to learn and adapt in a decentralized, suboptimizing environment. With one critical exception, nobody not a SEAL gave them sound operational orders, and they never did receive reasonable explanation of the business they were about. Into 1969 the SEALs remained a sound tactic in search of a strategy. //

### III. THE PROBLEM AND EVOLUTION

The problems facing the SEALs rapidly disabused them of pre-combat concepts, without as rapidly replacing them with a new doctrine, thus reality left the SEALs floundering for approximately a one-year period, from March 1965 to March 1966.

SEAL problems and development owed much to geographical location. In March of 1965 when one SEAL platoon of two officers and 12 men went ashore, they were placed under the staff cognizance of COMNAVFORV (Commander, Naval Forces Vietnam), because no one was quite sure how to use them. The Navy was given four principal missions: first, to prevent enemy resupply by boat along the 400-mile coastline of South Vietnam; second, to interdict enemy sampan movement along the 1000 miles of inland waterways in the delta (IV Corps); third, to keep open the main channel through the 25 miles of the Rung Sat (Iron Trees) swamp between Saigon and the South China Sea; and fourth, to support U.S. Marine amphibious landings by the SLF (Special Landing Force) battalion(s).

For this fourth task the SEALs seemed admirably suited. Yet their employment was not to detract from the mission of the UDT team assigned to the SLF, so the SEALs were to go in a few days ahead of the SLF and clandestinely observe the enemy. Just a few hours before D-Day the UDT team would swim ashore, clear beach obstacles, and at H-Hour the Marines would storm ashore and assault the targets discovered by the SEALs.

The attempt to execute this scenario turned into a colossal fiasco. In late 1965 under the code name Jackstay, a U.S. Marine battalion prepared to assault amphibiously the Rung Sat swamp with the objective of destroying a supposed Viet Cong battalion which posed a threat to all shipping traffic headed to or from Saigon. Two days previous to this scarcely concealed assault, the SEALs paddled rubber rafts to the shore from their small mother crafts and began the game of hide-and-seek with the enemy.

It was not an experience they were anxious to repeat. The Rung Sat was a brackish, foul smelling morass of dead trees, twisted roots

and vines, red ants, crocodiles, snakes and mosquitos. The tide rises and falls 15 feet, and at its high mark there are few patches of dry ground and none not mud. That the SEALs' attempts to make their way afoot did not result in drownings is attributable only to their excellent conditioning and remarkable swimming abilities. That the Viet Cong did not annihilate them is attributable to the enemy's surprise and natural belief that hundreds more were right behind them.

The SEALs saw the enemy in small groups here and there, startled faces, a quick ducking behind trees, the clamber into sampans, subsequent sniper fire from a different direction. Only the SEALs were afoot, as the Viet Cong in the Rung Sat and throughout most of the delta rely on sampans for mobility, since canals in IV Corps are as numerous and interconnected as streets in New York City. For the SEALs it was a walk-swim-walk-swim exercise in frustration against an enemy who outnumbered and outmaneuvered them.

By the end of the first day the SEALs had been properly disabused of the notion that they would find the Viet Cong clustered in a large camp with just a few outguards after the fashion of some bygone war. What they discovered and what they subsequently reconfirmed throughout their delta area of operations was that the Viet Cong usually operated with a wide dispersal pattern, with concentration within narrow geographical limits reserved for special moves such as attacks.

Not only were the SEALs not finding large targets for the landing forces, they were by dusk targets themselves as the Viet Cong, having gauged the small force in their neighborhood, came hunting. In this fashion the SEALs learned another lesson: blackness equalizes size by favoring both ambush and escape. The Viet Cong had their difficulties finding the SEALs who, in the last resort, could always return to the water, -- and that night did. As the enemy forces closed in tighter and tighter, the SEALs slipped into the water and pushed silently away from the banks. In this submarine fashion they watched the enemy beat the bushes without success.

With the coming of the Marines, the SEAL facet of Jackstay ended, although they stayed on as scouts and reconnaissance units, and some of them spent another night in the water to avoid being trampled when

an enemy company leaving the area walked right through their observation post. The remainder of the operation was characterized by confusion, aimless shooting, savage tides and bugs, and lack of coordination or accomplishment. The SEALs decided that their future in Vietnam did not lie with the amphibious forces. The U.S. Marine reconnaissance units, it will be recalled, discovered more conceptual error than truth in their employment as the non-offensive intelligence source for later exploitation by infantry units. So too the SEALs came to look with cynicism upon the concept which called for them to be the non-offensive intelligence source. They too learned that the terrain and enemy and friendly tactics rendered that concept invalid as a general rule.

Furthermore, amphibious landings were rather rare (only three in 1965), and that left a considerable amount of dead time. Since the SEALs were controlled by COMNAVFORV, whose headquarters were in Saigon, the SEALs were billeted at the nearest Naval facility. This was Nha Be, at the headwaters of the Rung Sat swamp. The SEALs entered the swamp for the same reason Military claims to climb mountains. They were simply unable to resist the challenge. They were not driven by any orders from high command; they went for the adventure of it. The idea of strike operations in the Rung Sat was supported by NAVFORV since one of their tasks was to keep the Rung Sat channel free from enemy attacks. Because they were organizational orphans and could not rely on outside reinforcements and had no pressure on them from above, the SEALs sought a style of fighting which would minimize their own casualties, not maximize those of the enemy. This led them to look upon the night as a means of protection, so that if on their forays they encountered an enemy too numerous, they could hide or run away.

They began their night ambush routine using the entire platoon of 14 men and in their excitement and uncertainty exercised excellent noise and movement discipline. As one of the enlisted men recalled about those early ambushes: "It's hard to describe how nervous we were. We'd go into that swamp thinking the VC were everywhere and could move as quietly as snakes. We'd sit in an ambush for four hours without moving. Our legs would go to sleep, our faces would be swollen by mosquito bites, we'd be wet and cold and miserable. But move?

Hell no! The guys at base and in the Army had filled us so full of sea stories about the VC we thought they were ten feet tall and would just gobble us up if we made one false move."

The current which runs against a credible performance spurred by false perceptions is reality and after several months of night work in the swamps, the SEALs had come to recognize that there were far fewer enemy than they had thought, that these enemy usually travelled by vulnerable sampan, that the enemy rarely numbered over ten, and that his most common reaction to an ambush was to attempt to escape, not to attack the ambushers.

The SEALs gradually developed a standard pattern based on their acquired knowledge of the enemy and the terrain. It was this: they would send out an ambush comprising five to twelve men. Sometime between dusk and midnight the ambushers would take a special, small boat down a main waterway and at some designated point the helmsman would cut the bow into shore and run aground. (The steepness of the banks minimized the possibilities of running hard aground.) The ambush team would hop off the bow into the mud and thickets. Then the boat would back off to midchannel and chug back and forth the rest of the night awaiting the return of the team. The boat did not attract attention because the Navy patrolled the main waterways regularly at night. The ambushers would move overland usually to a smaller canal and wait. When a sampan came chugging along, it was all over. Sometimes fishermen unused to anyone but VC moving at night would be the victims. The SEALs claimed to operate under the assumption that anyone moving after curfew was fair game. In actuality they became discriminatory about their strikes. Moreover, the word of their presence spread fast, and the fishermen ceased their nocturnal movements. The VC continued to move, however, but not as frequently or carelessly. In the Rung Sat there were 400 canals and when the SEALs struck a few times at the most obvious crossings, the enemy changed their movement patterns the contact rate fell off.

The SEALs were something like the American Indians in that both groups were hunters who followed the game. By early 1966 the SEALs had expanded to six platoons, still decentralized in decisionmaking

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and employment and so still motivated only by a peer group pressure to seek out the enemy. Having mastered the skills of river ambush, the SEALs began to wander far afield, paying scant attention to MACV-set operational boundaries and having no staff to do the necessary coordination and checking for them. From MACV's point of view, the SEALs began to look more and more troublesome. Army commanders complained about them being in their areas unauthorized. (And occasionally doing a better job at night than the authorized ambushes.) There was the danger the SEALs might shoot up some friendly forces. Finally, MACV staff officers were concerned lest the SEALs sometime get themselves stuck in a shoot-out with a larger enemy force and be annihilated due to lack of proper coordination.

To bring them to curb, a non-Navy officer highly placed on the MACV staff took two actions. First, he suggested that the Navy place their burgeoning SEAL program under the operational control of the Navy River Patrol Base Task Forces, thus tying the SEAL activities in with the Navy patrol boat program for controlling the main waterways of the delta.

Second, he brought the SEALs into the intelligence loop of the CIA. The CIA had been running a private war. In each of Vietnam's 44 provinces there was a 50 to 100 man Vietnamese unit called the PRU (Provincial Reconnaissance Unit). PRUs were supposed to collect intelligence, conduct assassinations and other ungentlemanly activities for the GVN (Government of Vietnam.) The hooker lay in the organizational set-up. PRUs were paid by the CIA and recruited from the unacceptable fringes of the Vietnamese society: ex-VC, ex-convicts, ex-Rangers, etc. They were outside the regular GVN chain of command and were supposed to take their orders from the province chief. Since it was the CIA who trained and paid them, however, in too many cases they shunned the GVN altogether. Thus when they went out on a mission, their conduct was justifiably suspect and their overall results questionable. The PRUs were also irritating the U.S. military with their disregard for boundaries and coordination, and their CIA affiliation.

So the MACV staff officer's second action in regard to the SEALs was to suggest a SEAL be detailed to each PRU unit in the delta for

purposes of tactical advice and military operational coordination. (He used Army and Marine personnel for the same purposes outside the delta. In early 1966 the delta had no U.S. infantry units permanently stationed there.) In this way everybody benefited except the Viet Cong. The regular SEAL platoons at the River Patrol Bases received hard intelligence which cut down on the random nature of their work. The local GVN officials were more receptive to PRUs when they had an American with them to supervise their behavior. The PRUs gained in logistics and fire support through their SEAL advisor. The CIA was allowed to retain control over the PRUs, who otherwise would have been disbanded due to combined GVN/MACV pressure. And MACV had established through the SEALs some leverage over what had been previously regarded as a rather high-handed CIA meddling in a military war.

In general, this combination--SEAL platoons attached to River Patrol Bases with tie-ins to the CIA--worked well in that it decreased the friction the SEAL presence had been before creating. But the SEALs did not develop beyond the tactical level. In briefings to very senior officers the SEALs stressed their small size--under 100 men--and their remarkably high kill ratio and total enemy kills. This seemed sufficiently impressive to all visitors and the question of where their role fitted into the campaign strategy for the delta was not raised. On the strength of their kill ratios, MACV requested the Navy to double the SEAL units in country while yet alternative uses for the SEALs or alternatives to the SEALs were not discussed.

So about the SEALs there arose a mystique of the supercommandos, performing in ways which could not be copied. The SEALs let the myths about their work live on, so that they were held in awe within the Naval establishment up to and including the admiral. The platoons were sent to Vietnam on six-month temporary duty tours, not the full year tours of other services. Although they came back more frequently than would they had they stayed for twelve months, their average turnaround time was 20 months, or one year out of every 40 months, a situation preferable to the U.S. infantry turnaround of one year out of 36 months.

Expansion of the SEALs was thus constrained by their small total number (400) and their tour of duty. No one suggested (and they

certainly did not volunteer) a longer term, thus supposedly limiting expansion to the enlargement of the total SEAL force. This, however, took considerable time and money. SEAL training took over 14 months and cost per capita \$14,000.

Any radical change, such as bringing in outsiders or cutting down the training, was rejected by the SEALs and by the Navy. For a while in 1967 an attempt was made to have the SEALs train U.S. Army LRRP (Long-Range Reconnaissance Patrols) in their line of work. The U.S. 9th Infantry Division had moved into the delta and the Army staff originally held the same illusion the Marine staff had when they launched Operation Jackstay in the Rung Sat swamp; i.e., send LRRPs out along the waterways to find the enemy, then followup with battalion Riverine force. This illusion died when the LRRPs did not find the enemy properly concentrated in strength sufficient to warrant a Riverine strike. And whereas the Marine recon had to stay with their jobs even when first efforts failed because the enemy threat seemed dangerous, the LRRPs did not have the same external source of motivation or higher command influence. The enemy threat against the Riverine force was nil, and alternative means of gathering intelligence were deemed sufficient: helicopters, infrared, agents, etc.

Some effort was still made to have the LRRPs use SEAL methods with the mission of killing (harassment) rather than intelligence, or rather, intelligence would become a nice-to-have byproduct. This attempt to create independent strike teams in the SEAL mode failed for two reasons. First, the SEALs disliked the idea that the LRRPs they trained would be used to take their hunting grounds away from them. A SEAL platoon of 14 men might cut a swath encompassing 150 square miles and three provinces and the River Patrol Bases were natural logistics rendezvous spots for the Army Riverine forces. There were not a plethora of good, hard targets along the main, well-patrolled rivers, so that intelligence they did receive the SEALs were opposed to sharing even with men they had just trained, rather like a pro-football team trying to keep out the rookies. Second, the LRRPs disliked the idea of the strike team work. There was the natural Army/Navy antipathy and the SEALs were the trainers and so in charge, with more than a

slight memory of Ranger School harassment. And I think the trouble went deeper than that. The U.S. 9th Division was new in country and not a volunteer group. While the LRRPs were mainly volunteers from the draftees, they had been previously trained in large units and used to the comforting knowledge that help was never far away, even when out on patrol. That was not so in SEAL country. While helicopter gunships could provide excellent fire support, the possibility of ground reinforcement in a night contact turned sour was low, if not nil. Each LRRP night ambush was on its own until daylight or until it could return to the river and the boats.

Because of their background and their training, the LRRPs did not develop the same aggressive attitude towards ambushing that the SEALs had. Moreover, there were a few disasters at the start of the program, (which had not been true in the SEALs early days.) A LRRP team going in on an ambush one night leaped from the stern of the boat and five soldiers drowned in eleven feet of water. Another night a LRRP team was ambushed and lost a man. Trying to return to the main river and the boats, two others nearly drowned in the narrow but deep canals.

This combination of factors ran against the LRRPs and resulted in their non-employment in a delta role resembling that of the SEALs.

So in the years 1967 to 1969, the SEALs continued on their own, a small, elite, isolated band, with their own rules and their own incentives. As I know them, I think they are a magnificent example of a tactic in search of a strategy.

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IV. INCENTIVES/EVALUATION

1. The frequency of patrols was left to the discretion of the individual platoon commanders. Seldom were they told when or how to run a mission (in contrast to the Marine case). They gauged their pace by each other and by the opportunities. While the SEAL average was one patrol per man per month, some platoons averaged three and others .3.

The reason for the substantial diversity is found in the orientation of the SEALs toward contact and killing. Their supposed mission of intelligence-gathering is largely ignored because information is so quickly perishable and they are not connected directly with any reaction forces. So they concentrate on the sudden hit. Therefore when they have a good hunting area, they will go out frequently because they know their chances of striking are high, and to strike is the name of the game. Conversely, when they have a poor hunting area such as the Rung Sat, they are less inclined to go out and get wet and stinking and bitten for no payoff.

2. The SEALs were a close-knit elitist group who shunned outsiders and disliked Vietnamese. They came to Vietnam by platoons, worked as platoons and returned to the U.S. (either Coronado or Norfolk) by platoons. In the U.S. they worked and trained and lived and played together. They were rough, high-spirited and elderly. Their average enlisted rank was E-6 and age was 23. They saw their officers on liberty much more often than was common in the Navy and rejected most other officers. The SEAL officers in officer clubs stuck together, got drunk together, tolerated rather than accepted other officers and in turn were envied and either avoided or adulated. Officers and men alike expected to spend almost their entire careers within the SEALs/UDT. They were not bothered by or interested in the performance and evaluation procedures of the regular Navy. They had their own code, with the officers grading all the men, and all the officers being rated by the head SEAL (a lieutenant commander), who was thereby the only SEAL who was rated by a non-SEAL.

NOT TRUE  
OF MOST  
OR LATER IN  
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3. What kept the SEALs going? No higher command was watching them carefully. They had no love or admiration for the Vietnamese,

no belief in the war, no belief even in victory. They felt the VC were good, tough soldiers, far better than their GVN counterparts. They did not see the GVN improving. In 1968 they had more operational (VC) territory to work in the Delta than in 1966.\* Death and wounds walked among them, smiting in capricious and ironic fashion just when they felt safe or content.

It seems only peer group pressure drove them on. That and the knowledge that they were different from other Navy men, and so wherever they went, they could walk swaggering because others were saying: "They're SEALs." They did not stalk to prove themselves; they were beyond that. They went out into the swamps at night because not to go would have been inexcusable to the others. They had a collective value system which emphasized physical hardiness and courage. They liked action. There is a certain kind of man to whom the tug of adventure and competition is irresistible. The SEALs exemplified that type. They liked to fight.

4. The SEAL officers liked to josh any of their own who had graduated from the Naval Academy but they were shrewd enough in official reports to note openly that particular alma mater when it was appropriate to a SEAL officer mentioned in the dispatches. The SEALs were mavericks within the Navy, and they sensed that their organizational future would be helped if Naval Academy admirals knew Naval Academy officers were among the SEALs.

5. Tactical anecdotes are called "sea stories" in Navy parlance, and they are at a premium in the Navy and in the SEALs in Vietnam for two reasons. First, the war is recorded on a daily, spot report basis, with situation reports (sitreps) required of each infantry patrol, each air sortie, each naval river patrol. So the individual action can take on an accent which can be far beyond its significance if it were fitted

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\* I am not commenting on the objective (who knows?) accuracy of these statements; but they are the perceptions of dozens of SEALs in combat areas as related to me in long conversations.

into some overall structure.\* Lacking such a strategic framework, however, the atypical anecdote serves incorrectly as the typical example used to prove progress or efficiency or what have you. The SEALs brought home many hairy sea stories. Their sitreps lent zip and excitement to the dreary call-ins by LSTs and other nautical commands. One lively SEAL sitrep could make up for many other SEAL failings.

This leads us to the second reason why anecdotes were highlighted: they saved the pride of the admirals. When men who fight wars gather to talk, almost regardless of their rank, they lay stress on war fighting, on the clash of men in the night. To be without such sea stories in the presence of generals would put admirals at a disadvantage, lacking any naval battles. It would be as bad as not having a football team.

In a sense, (and I do not mean to derogate anybody) the SEALs were a football team, thus not to be traded to a non-Navy source. The SEALs had a bad organizational year in 1966, tripping over the jurisdictional boundaries of Army units, ambushing VC in territory claimed by other allied units, -- from the point of view of MACV, just running helter-skelter. On working out a role for them, MACV tried to leave them under Navy control. Had that not worked, however, I think MACV would have removed the SEALs from Naval operational control to erase a negative performance rating. What MACV would not do would be to remove the SEALs to improve their positive performance in the prosecution of the war.

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\* (This was true in the Marine case also. Two incidents confirmed the faith of the top Marine generals in the small units. In the first case, 18 Marines on a patrol were attacked by an NVA regiment. When it was over, 6 of the 18 were dead and the other 12 wounded; the regiment was decimated. One Medal of Honor, two Navy Crosses, 15 Silver Stars and 18 Purple Hearts were awarded the patrol, -- a record hand-out. In the second case, five Marines stalked and smashed with artillery an NVA battalion, escaping unscathed themselves. The commanding general had that story written down and read to all recon units in Vietnam. He personally delivered it to a meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the fall of 1966. The members of that patrol received only letters of commendation, not medals, however.)

## V. CONSTRAINTS

1. The SEALs had remarkable geographical and bureaucratic freedom of maneuver. No one higher up in the Naval command quite knew what to do with them. So, in accordance with the organization principle of risk minimization, Naval commanders left the SEALs to their own devices and plans, being unwilling to issue orders on rank rather than knowledge and run the risk of catastrophe. Where Naval commanders felt in their element, they would bear down, perhaps overly so in compensation for the tactical leeway accorded by default. So, for instance, when the SEALs used a new SEAL boat to skim up the Bassac River to visit another SEAL unit, they caught hell from the Navy captain to whose River Patrol Base they were attached for gas consumption, speed in excess of shake-down procedures, reckless driving and unauthorized use of his property. Yet that night the SEALs used the same boat in the same manner for a mission, and the captain said not a word.

2. The SEALs disliked being under the operational control of the River Patrol Bases because they wanted even more room to work the coastal areas. The coastal areas, however, were a separate Naval command and the River Base commanders were loath to relinquish their nominal command relationships, for thereby they were deprived of their football teams. The SEALs, however, had reporting responsibilities to the Unconventional Warfare Section of COMNAVFORV (Command-Naval Forces Vietnam) and that section in turn reported to the top admiral, who also was interested in his teams' scores. The SEALs were therefore able to send message traffic explaining their reasons for wanting to raid the coast. The River Base Commanders through a separate channel were asked why they opposed the move. But because of the separate reporting channels, the SEALs could buck their nominal commanders without breaching Naval regulations and without requesting mast. The admiral in the coastal case decided in favor of the raids but the SEALs were careful not to push their River Base commanders too far, for they were reliant upon his support for food, shelter, gasoline and maintenance facilities.

## VI. ANALYSIS

1. Analysts often tend to dismiss anecdotes as trivial, whereas military commanders place high faith in them. Anecdotes are the touchstones of reality. They tell what happened, as opposed to theory or plans. Analysts are mistaken to ignore them and use only statistics for two reasons. First, war is more psychological than physical and fixation with numbers can prevent an analyst from understanding the nature of conflict. Second, out of averages do not come substantial changes. Kuhn wrote about the progress of science being dependent upon bursting out of old paradigms under the goad of significant aberrations. In war correct change is dependent upon a proper recognition of such aberrations --anecdotes--while the statistical averages form the old paradigms.

The Navy commanders, however, were not linking anecdotes with analysis in any such fashion. They were content with tales of derring-do for the satisfaction the retelling brought in wardroom messes and for the feeling of a hazardous job well done by members of their own service. More dangerous yet than this stultifying smugness was the substitution syndrome of the part for the whole and the consequent failure to place the anecdote in perspective.

The SEALs were tactics in search of a strategy, hunters plying their trade without knowing what sort of impact they were having on the market. What has concerned me most about the SEALs is their lack of a coherent strategy, a lack that is attributable to the Navy high command and the organizational nature of the war. What can an admiral be expected to know of ground warfare and the employment of American commandos in Vietnam? Yet what admiral can be expected to jeopardize his career and downgrade his service by voluntarily relinquishing operational command of the SEALs?

## VII. CONCLUSIONS

The SEALs desperately needed a strategy and corresponding criteria which would have provided for their optimum employment. This they did not have and the only way it might have been forthcoming would have been to remove the SEALs from Naval command. When the SEALs went into the Rung Sat swamp, for instance, no one asked how many ambushes were would interdict what percentage of possible enemy movement, or what the tradeoff might be between such ambushes and sensor fields.

Were there alternative uses for their tactical skills besides their disjointed and decentralized forays? I think there were, and have written of one such in Appendix A.