Review of *Relentless Strike: The Secret History of Joint Special Operations Command*


Like credible intelligence nonfiction, attempts to probe into the sensitive world of contemporary Special Operations Forces (SOF) activity provide numerous, often impenetrable, challenges for authors attempting to write factually accurate portrayals of such clandestine capabilities. However, from time to time, good writers with good access, good sources, and a little luck are able to piece together intricate and disparate sources to penetrate the veils of secrecy and operational security; Sean Naylor’s *Relentless Strike: The Secret History of Joint Special Operations Command* is one such publication.

The Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) is the coordinating body for America’s premier Special Forces units; it includes the Army’s Delta Force, the Navy’s SEALs, and the Air Force’s Special Operations Aviation Regiment. Naylor takes the reader on a journey that chronologically maps the evolutionary history of the Command, from the failed Iranian hostage rescue attempt in 1980, to the invasion of Grenada in 1983, to Panama and Manuel Noriega’s capture in 1989, to Desert Storm, Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Naylor intricately weaves lesser known rescues, renditions, and other direct action operations throughout the volume, in addition to the most well-known of all, the death of al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden in 2011.

The author’s research comes from a variety of sources including official documents, open-source/publicly available material, as well as a significant number of interviews with JSOC operators and commanders. Ten years earlier, Naylor had penned *Not A Good Day to Die* which chronicled his experiences as a reporter for the United States Army Times, where he was embedded with US forces during key periods of Operation ANACONDA, the first large-scale military action to involve large numbers of US conventional forces, as well as SOF. During this deployment, Naylor was able to interview a number of Special Forces participants, and clearly, these relationships developed and expanded, and have assisted immeasurably in *Relentless Strike*.

*Relentless Strike* is a dense text but it is not an academic volume. It captures the rise and evolution of JSOC without considering the overall strategic considerations that may have seen this expansion come about. The successful evolution of JSOC has much to do with operational successes post-Operation EAGLE CLAW in 1980, as well as the strengths of personalities in command of these forces, especi-
cially those who have demonstrated the very necessary political—strategic—sav-
vvy to be able to influence policymakers. This Naylor clearly illustrates; strength
of personality in the shape of William McRaven, Mike Flynn, and Stanley Mc-
Chrystal reflects prominent individuals who dominate the narrative, particularly
throughout the second half of the volume, and are at the forefront of JSOC’s pro-
gression. In *Relentless Strike*, Naylor shows us that despite JSOC having always
regarded itself as much more than a specialized, precision “blunt-force” tool used
to crack especially “hard-nuts,” it now appears to have successfully convinced pol-
cymakers of this also.

So, might the same SF—National Security nexus be presenting itself in
Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, or New Zealand? While Naylor’s book
focuses solely on the United States example, *Relentless Strike* may, in fact, give us
a glimpse into how the “Five-Eyes” SOF community has evolved over the last de-
cade and a half. Naylor specifically considers the expansion of SEAL TEAM 6 and
how in the space of 10 years the unit expanded from less than 500 “to more than
1500, of whom only about 300 were SEALs, with the rest consisting of roughly 800
other uniformed Navy personnel and about 400 civilians who together provided
administration, intelligence, logistics, communications, and other support.” Even
the smallest member of the “Five Eyes” SOF community—New Zealand’s Special
Operations Forces (NZSOF) has over the last 10 years quietly expanded their ca-
pabilities, roles, functions and, one might suggest, influence. Not only is there now
a New Zealand SAS Regiment, an aspiration that was less than 30 years earlier
regarded as a “pipe-dream” by one former senior SAS officer, NZDF’s SOC now
coordinates NZSOF up to the highest levels of government, directly linked to the
wider national security command authority. This is what we now see in Canada,
the United Kingdom, and Australia, which in many ways mirrors Naylor’s descrip-
tion of the rise of JSOC.

For those interested in the evolution of SOFs and military intelligence—
both collection and analysis—*Relentless Strike* offers insights into how this has
begun to be transformed in the twenty-first century. From the use of Predator
drones’ “Unblinking eye” constant surveillance, to the clandestine installation of
cyber café keystroke recognition software, the startling array of intelligence capa-
bility now possessed by JSOC units tells us something of the importance of intel-
ligence and the desire to have an independent capability rather than be reliant on
traditional partner agencies for such support. If we read Naylor’s book, one could
argue that JSOC’s solution to the intelligence challenges has been to create its very
own collection and analysis capability; SIGINT, HUMINT, surveillance expertise
that was once the sole bastion of the likes of CIA and NSA is now firmly part of
the US SOF machinery.

This particular evolution begs the question, how might the rest of a Nation-
al Security infrastructure feel about such developments? There are a number of
examples within *Relentless Strike* where the CIA clearly relied on JSOC to assist with operations—particularly in the early stages of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. If there is indeed political support for such an evolution of force in the United States, then is this development being mirrored around the world in other countries? One wonders whether others within the international Special Forces community have similarly followed suit and established dedicated intelligence collection and analysis capability beyond that which their traditional intelligence community partners have provided previously.

*Relentless Strike* offers an opportunity to understand the genesis of the United States’ twenty-first century Special Operations, and as such gives us some insight into the key operational deliverables available to American National Security policymakers, and even those other key members of what has become the international Special Forces global network. The painstaking detail, multiple, cross-referenced sourcing is commendable, and makes for a considerable, and thoroughly enjoyable, volume.

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