

## **“Special Forces and Special Men”: Officer Recruitment and the Special Forces, 1961–1965**

### ***Introduction***

When the U.S. Army created the Special Forces in 1952, it produced an organization unlike any other in its ranks. Formed during the early Cold War, the new units attracted an eclectic mix of soldiers—mavericks from conventional airborne formations, foreign-born anti-communists from Eastern Europe, and veterans of the OSS and other elite World War II units. This unconventional collection of personnel gave the Special Forces a distinctive ethos marked by independence, risk-taking, and a sense of exclusivity.

From the outset, these men prided themselves on being “three-time volunteers”—for the Army, for airborne service, and for Special Forces. Their esprit de corps was exceptional, but to outsiders it often appeared as arrogance. Conventional commanders saw them as a clannish, self-contained fraternity resistant to authority and military orthodoxy. The resulting tension between individualism and institutional conformity shaped the relationship between Special Forces and the regular Army throughout the 1960s.

Most early Special Forces officers were combat veterans of World War II or Korea, many with airborne experience. A large proportion held reserve commissions and were largely indifferent to career advancement or the bureaucratic norms of the regular officer corps. They tended to reject the “ticket-punching” careerism common among officers seeking promotion. For them, service in Special Forces was not a career stepping-stone but a vocation.

The Army’s personnel system, however, was built around the mobilization model, designed to produce generalists capable of commanding large formations in conventional war. Officer management policies emphasized breadth of experience across multiple functional areas. From that perspective, Special Forces duty appeared narrow and professionally limiting. It focused on unconventional warfare, psychological operations, and, by the early 1960s, counterinsurgency—missions viewed as peripheral to mainstream Army operations.

In this framework, Special Forces officers faced significant professional disadvantages. An A-Detachment commander led only a dozen Americans; a command too small to satisfy the Army’s promotion criteria. Even though many directed hundreds of indigenous soldiers, such experience was not recognized as legitimate command time. The result was predictable: few ambitious regular officers volunteered for Special Forces duty, and those who did often found their careers stagnating.

Cultural friction compounded these structural barriers. Reserve officers who dominated the early units sometimes viewed the more conventional regulars as unwelcome outsiders and made little effort to integrate them. Many of these regular officers departed with negative impressions, reinforcing mutual distrust between Special Forces and the broader institution.

Before the early 1960s expansion, Special Forces remained little known within the Army. Recruitment was informal and often driven by enlisted personnel, who sought out officers they believed would adapt well to the unique demands of the mission. This practice fostered unusually

close relationships between officers and NCOs, producing a small-unit culture that emphasized competence and initiative over hierarchy. Rank carried less weight than skill and reliability—a hallmark of the Special Forces ethos that endured long after.

### **The Changing Focus of the Special Forces, 1960–1965**

The early 1960s brought a major shift in both mission and organization. Under President Kennedy’s directive to enhance U.S. counterinsurgency capabilities, the Army turned to the Special Forces as the logical instrument for “wars of national liberation.” In 1962, the Special Forces mission formally expanded beyond unconventional warfare to include counterinsurgency operations, and the Army’s special warfare establishment was reoriented accordingly.

Selection procedures for Special Forces officers during this period remained informal and uneven. Personnel managers evaluated candidates primarily on military record, education, and physical condition, with no standardized psychological screening. Recruiting qualified officers proved increasingly difficult: commanders were reluctant to release their best personnel, and the lengthy, demanding training pipeline deterred many volunteers.

The formal eligibility criteria for Special Forces service were straightforward rather than selective. Officers had to be in good standing—free from disciplinary action or investigation—pass a medical and physical fitness test, be under thirty-six years of age, possess at least three years of commissioned service, and hold or qualify for a SECRET clearance. Airborne qualification or willingness to attend jump school was required, along with swimming proficiency and a minimum remaining service obligation.

In addition to these basic standards, certain traits were considered desirable. Candidates were expected to volunteer, not be assigned, since unwilling participants were believed unlikely to succeed in demanding conditions. Proficiency in key foreign languages—particularly Asian and Middle Eastern—was highly valued, though rarely found. Officers from combat arms, especially the infantry, were preferred for their tactical experience and mentality, while those from support branches were thought less compatible with Special Forces culture.

In practice, however, selection standards were flexible and often adjusted to meet manpower needs. The Kennedy-era expansion far outpaced the Army’s ability to provide qualified officers, leading to relaxed standards and a decline in overall quality. In 1965, the requirement for three years of commissioned service was suspended, allowing second lieutenants to volunteer. Airborne qualification rules were also inconsistently enforced, and many units included “legs”—officers without jump wings—who nonetheless filled vital billets. Even the physical fitness threshold was lowered to increase throughput. Quantity, more than quality, became the guiding priority.

### ***Adjusting Standards: Officer Assignments and Training***

As officer shortages intensified, the principle that Special Forces service should be voluntary was gradually abandoned. By the mid-1960s, involuntary assignments had become common. The Army’s Military Personnel Center began placing officers in Special Forces based on institutional needs rather than personal choice. Many officers with prior airborne, ranger, or combat arms

experience—and linguists fluent in strategic languages—found themselves assigned to Special Forces against their will. Though not a majority, these involuntary assignees formed a significant minority within the officer corps.

While infantry remained the preferred source of officers, the rapid buildup for Vietnam forced the inclusion of personnel from other branches, including Signal, Quartermaster, Transportation, Military Police, and Engineers. This broadening reflected necessity rather than preference, as the Army sought to fill an expanding roster of billets amid heavy operational demands.

Despite these compromises, officer candidates were still required to complete Special Forces qualification training before assignment to a unit. The officer course served as both instruction and selection, testing leadership, endurance, and problem-solving under stress. Many failed to complete it. The rigor of the process, however, fluctuated with wartime requirements and was somewhat relaxed during the mid-1960s expansion.

Training took place at Fort Bragg's Special Forces School in the Special Forces Qualification Course—the “Q Course.” It comprised three phases. Phase I developed core skills and tested physical and mental resilience, eliminating those lacking motivation or initiative. Phase II provided specialty instruction in fields such as weapons, engineering, communications, or medicine. Phase III focused on unconventional warfare operations and mission planning. Attrition was traditionally high, ensuring that only the most capable officers graduated.

Initially, officers trained alongside enlisted personnel within units, but in 1956 the Army established a twelve-week Special Forces Officer Course. It mirrored the enlisted program while adding operational planning and intelligence instruction. Rank distinctions were deliberately minimized; second lieutenants and lieutenant colonels trained side by side in A-Detachment procedures.

The opening weeks of the officer course were especially demanding. Candidates underwent strenuous physical endurance tests, cross-country navigation exercises, and leadership evaluations under simulated field conditions. Night movements through the difficult terrain of Fort Bragg tested stamina and decision-making. These rigorous experiences helped offset the lower entry standards adopted during the Vietnam buildup and ensured that successful graduates possessed both resilience and practical competence.

### ***Conclusion***

Assessing the quality of Special Forces officers during the Vietnam era remains a complex task. Historians of the Special Forces generally maintain that, despite recruiting challenges and variable standards, the typical Special Forces officer was more motivated and adaptable than his conventional counterpart. Yet such claims are difficult to verify, as the Army lacked consensus on what constituted a “high-quality officer.”

From the viewpoint of Pentagon personnel managers, Special Forces officers rarely met the institutional model of professional excellence. Few possessed the broad command and staff experience considered prerequisites for senior leadership. By that metric, they appeared

unexceptional. Yet when evaluated by alternative criteria—initiative, adaptability, physical stamina, and readiness to accept risk and uncertainty—they compared favorably with many of their peers across the Army.

The Special Forces officer of the 1960s represented a distinct form of professionalism, grounded less in conventional career progression than in competence, flexibility, and self-reliance. Even as the Army struggled to define its relationship with this unconventional force, the officers who served within it helped build a culture that valued initiative over conformity and performance over procedure—a legacy that would outlast the Vietnam era and shape the modern Special Forces identity.

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