

**RESOURCING FAMILY WELL-BEING  
WITHIN THE SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMUNITY**

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## **Executive Summary**

The U.S. elite war-fighting forces and their families show signs of significant strain following 16 years of sustained combat deployments. Special Operations Forces (SOF) need both health and resilience to achieve U.S. national security objectives (Thomas, 2017). Leveraging family well-being is a critical element of force readiness because it greatly impacts force health and retention in U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM).

Utilizing Hobfoll's Conservation of Resources theory (1989) to identify and frame sources of stress; stress in the Special Operations context springs from social isolation, high operational tempo, and unique pressures associated with hyper-masculine, high-performing, small teams. These force characteristics impact families with a chronic loss of resources caused by diminished control and social support and high chronic and crossover stress. The unique strains of the Special Operations community indicate there is a great need for resources that align with self-care principles, designed with a promotion-focus, to counter psychological distress and encourage force and family health and achievement. These resourced family interventions should utilize decentralized channels of delivery to effectively reach and engage SOF families.

## **Introductory Notes from the Author**

After over 10 years as a military spouse, mostly spent in the Special Operations Community, many friends and acquaintances reached-out for advice on managing constant military-life stress. Following dozens of these experiences, a group of friends and I decided to explore the issue more formally and launched a website ([www.thepushformilitaryspouses.com](http://www.thepushformilitaryspouses.com)) to collaborate. As we began unpacking milspouse mental wellness and well-being within the broad military community, we noticed conventional spouses, spanning all service branches, seemed to struggle more with acute depression and anxiety while Special Operations spouses handled stress distinctly differently and more quietly. This paper sought to better understand this difference, and to further conceptualize how we might be able to better impact family health, balance, contentment and achievement.

I began with the Special Operations community because it is a much smaller and more homogenous and geographically concentrated military population than any segment of conventional forces. There were no public studies regarding SOF family well-being. As a result, I sought diverse experience of SOF spouses, and confirmed the lived experiences through media and official reports and testimonies. The following paper is what I learned.

# Resourcing Family Well-Being

## Within the Special Operations Community

“We will never be able to organize for success if we don’t take great care to preserve our force.... Everything we do as a command is entirely dependent on those highly-skilled people that make up the Special Operations community, and those highly-skilled people rely on strong family support in order to operate forward in complex environments.”

–Adm. McRaven, 2014

### A Magnificent but Fraying Force

America’s elite warfighters have been at war since the twin towers were struck on 9-11-2001. The U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) selects, trains and oversees these special Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps warfighters, more commonly recognized as Special Forces, SEALs, commandos or special operators. Special Operations Forces (SOF) maintain a high operational tempo and deploy in small teams to complex, highly political and austere environments with little military support. Operators are typically highly committed and **choose to serve 20 to 30** years before leaving active service (Cronk, 2014). However, USSOCOM mission needs outweigh SOF manpower, and the tempo’s toll on the force is evident (Wood, 2016). Force readiness is essential; health and retention are necessary because the recruitment, **selection and qualification process of an operator may take up to 5-years** (Cronk, 2014).

Recognizing the stressful force demands, Admiral Olsen, USSOCOM Commander, 2007-2011, initiated a force health and readiness study. Completed in 2011, it detailed an alarming increase of substance abuse, traumatic brain injury, PTSD, divorce and suicidal behavior. It indicated **post 9-11 mission demands were causing unprecedented strain** within the force (Cronk, 2014; McRaven, 2014). Prior to these findings, SOF leadership presumed operators compartmentalized stress and were less prone to distress documented in conventional forces many years prior.

Admiral McRaven, Commander of USSOCOM, 2011-2014, swiftly responded to the striking findings and created the Preservation of Force and Family (POTFF), a force-wide initiative to comprehensively improve well-being through physical, mental, spiritual and social programs provided to support resiliency within the force and their family (Wood, 2016). One POTFF program goal is strengthening marriages because marital strife tends to distract an operator, and it often impacts performance or retention (Wood, 2016). Bluntly put, family stress can contribute to mission success or deadly mistakes.

In its first 5 years, the POTFF's efforts made notable strides toward de-stigmatizing mental and physical healthcare in the force. However, USSOCOM struggles to engage and influence families (Wood, 2016).

## **Military Family Influence and Force Readiness**

Military families influence performance, deploy-ability and retention of service members in all service branches and units (Savych, 2009). Studies examining the impact of repeated deployments on retention indicate that service members value deployment-related hardship, as long as their family remained supportive. Family health and commitment to service are critical factors for service member retention (Savych, 2009), but their impact is less understood in the relatively new all-volunteer military force structure (Blue Star Families and Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2017).

Providing military family support is a unique readiness challenge that is complex, costly and too often generalized into broad categories such as military move-associated job loss or deployment-related issues. The DoD broadly resources families with everything from acupuncture to tax support to help minimize the burden of strain inherent to military service, but these benefits are contingent on stable appropriations, characterized by

excessive bureaucratic processes and frequently restricted by rank, duty station or service branch. In recent years, the Department of Defense (DoD) focused efforts to improve spouse education, employment and childcare needs (Savych, 2009). The family support offered is good; but its application is not universally relevant to all military contexts.

Conventional military life-related hurdles differ from SOF family challenges. Conventional families experience strain while their spouse serves within a military unit where the broad group performance is the organizational focus. They value institutionalized guidelines and procedures for discipline, customs and courtesies and ceremony that recognize their shared values. Conventional forces also move to fulfill new duties at another military installation every 2-3 years (Weinstock, 2016).

***Resources needed by SOF families align with peculiar force characteristics. As a result, many of these DoD or service branch-specific resources go underutilized by SOF families who are unaware they exist; they don't align with family needs; or the burden to engage is too high (Hobfoll,1989).***

# SOF Stress in Context

Resourcing well-being to support USSOCOM force resilience is not a quick or easy readiness fix. Home and family life rest outside the area of SOF control, but improved well-being requires an understanding of home stress. Hobfoll's Conservation of Resources (COR) theory addresses stress in context and explains individuals possess a motivation to "obtain, retain and protect" beneficial resources. According to research, these resources may be as tangible as adequate food, luxury items, or a vehicle; or they may align more with intangible energies such as affection or having a feeling of purpose (Hobfoll, 2001). This framework examines stress within its nested context to identify strain stemming from a resource loss, threat or stagnation. (Halbesleben, et al., 2014). COR theory asserts that **strain stems from social pressure, rooted in values, inherent to set identities and sub-cultures** (Hobfoll, 2001). These are key considerations for understanding distress in Special Operations families, as SOF units endure sustained stress in the post 9-11 era.

## Identifying Needs for Well-Being

COR theory helps identify and understand sources of strain, while strategic management and motivation theories inform the organizational response. Motivation literature suggests that well-being is tied to achievement; and achievement requires autonomy, relatedness and competence (Hobfoll, 2001). These three criteria align with self-care guidelines and are necessary for healthy habits that facilitate life balance and satisfaction. Additionally, research indicates possessing **a sense of control is critical** for motivation. It stimulates efforts toward goal achievement (Hobfoll, 2001). Accomplishment is also considered a resource gain. It energizes individuals to invest the resources needed to strengthen traits such as self-efficacy, optimism, learned resourcefulness, coherence, and personality hardiness (Hobfoll, 2001; Nemecek, et al., 2015). Interestingly, **hardiness - an ability to problem solve, adjust and adapt despite adversity** -- is a quality sought by USSOCOM in both operators and their families (Wood, 2016).



Military life-related stress can contribute to anxiety, depression, burnout or other psychological distress. Spouses can grow so accustomed to accommodating demands from resource fluctuation or loss that they lose their capacity to sense who they are. However, self-care is associated with preventing and managing psychological distress through a comprehensive routine of physical fitness, nutrition, sleep, social connectedness, and goal-setting. These habits enable health, balance and individual accomplishment (Smith, 2017). Health and well-being programs can influence and enable the broad SOF community when designed around relevant sources of strain. The principles of COR theory help identify sources of stress and frame key considerations for effective, strategically resourced interventions (Halbesleben, et al., 2014).

Special Operations characteristics impact the relevance of resources directed at SOF families. To grasp the SOF family culture, it is essential to acknowledge how operators and their families rank and value resources (Hobfoll, 2001). SOF values begin with the men and the mission. Families also often believe the service member's work is meaningful, rewarding and necessary; and therefore, spouses support their special operator where they see need. They typically value the stability associated with Special Operations units, because they can establish valuable routine, relationships and livelihood (Wold, 2015).

***Moving forward, what characteristics are important when resourcing SOF family well-being? And, what impacts the timing of resources and interventions?***

## **The Men and the Mission**

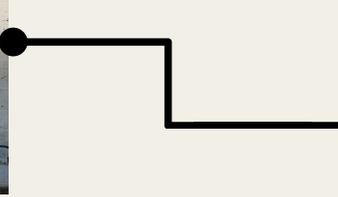
Special Operations units take pride in the distinct **qualities that demand a precise fit** for selection and qualification to serve within a unit. While each unit possesses a unique organizational personality, they all share a broad, peculiar organizational culture characterized by: **secrecy, duty station stability, elite performance, small-unit**



Special Operators Training

**focus and a high operational tempo.** Operators value the challenges and personal sacrifices that accompany their essential work. These broad SOF traits are essential to understand SOF-peculiar family stress.

USSOCOM values their forces' small unit, high-impact capabilities which translate into an organizational culture that focuses on success and hand-waves bureaucratic red tape and unnecessary procedure. Operators expect peers to be consistently professional, mature and competent; and therefore, there is little tolerance for error. These qualities



Special Operations units globally deployed on irregular missions.

intensify the hyper-masculine, reputation-driven culture present throughout the broad SOF community (Westman and Etzion, 1995). This normalizes challenges and family stress within the broader culture. Special Operations families frequently have less experience with and exposure to conventional military family services. Consequently, they are less aware and expecting of resources and find other ways to adjust to stress.

Military leaders typically react to stress when it hinders performance. Consistent, high-performance in complex situations is a hallmark trait and expectation of a SOF operator. This is distinct from conventional military units where small unit elements are responsible for mentoring and training service members for basic performance and discipline. Small units in Special Operations do not have time or tolerance for poor discipline or low performance. Struggling operators are quickly removed from operational teams where reputations develop fast. The expectation of elite performance attracts service members to Special Operations and reinforces a hyper-masculine culture. Studies indicate **hyper-masculine cultures amplify the negative effects of stress** by invalidating signs of weakness (Westman; Mina; Etzion, 1989). In SOF, the stigma for seeking any mental or physical healthcare is so strong, **operators often wait over 13 years to seek help with non-catastrophic injuries** (Searcey, 2016).

***Families are essential to changing these trends, but it calls for bold and innovative approaches for family well-being designed to fit the SOF context.***

## Normalized Stress

Special operators place less value on ceremonies outside those that honor, recognize or memorialize fallen comrades or their “Gold Star Families.” Operators typically view ceremonies as “not mission essential” obligations that draw them away from coveted family time. This SOF peculiar trait helps normalize stress inherent in SOF. This is a distinct characteristic and would likely invite judgment from conventional military families who recognize hardships with frequent ceremonies, unit events, special programs and coping strategies and tools

such as daddy dolls, deployment books and countdown calendars (Weinstock, 2016). This cultural gap between SOF and conventional forces can isolate the Special Operations community from the greater DoD community resources, and it intensifies the need for SOF community connectedness. Special Operations families may connect more seamlessly with civilians than conventional military families if they sense less judgement from civilians about SOF culture and family norms.

# SOF-Peculiar Family Challenges

## High Tempo & Small Unit Connections

Friendships and community initially begin on small teams. Operators rely on their families and reciprocal support within the tight-knit SOF community. This historically supportive community is a SOF point of pride, but it is dependent on individual team-families connecting and enabling one another. Most spouses assume all traditional home and family duties because of the high professional demands on operators. According to studies on military-family dynamics, this relationship is common (Eran-Jona, 2011); however, the **SOF tempo intensifies the demands on the spouse** at home. Reflecting this strain, many SOF families consider their “normal” routine as the time when their spouse is away serving on military duty (Conan, 2012).

**Blue Star Families' 2017 family lifestyle survey found time spent away from family was the primary reason service members were opting to leave active duty.**

USSOCOM mission requirements dramatically impact family resources when small team dynamics. The current operational tempo means each year service members spend **7-10 months, or more, away from family training or deployed** (Turse, 2017). In recent years, operators frequently move to

new teams to fulfill specific mission requirements instead of “growing-up” on a single, small unit (Turse, 2017). These broad changes impact both the service member and family sense of control and connectedness-- two characteristics essential for self-care and self-efficacy.

Families adjust to sustained stress by using coping mechanisms where they establish or learn a less traumatic way of thinking about their stress. Research indicates one strategy known as reframing is often shaped with a preventive mindset, and it is a chronic resource loss that can contribute to burnout. Studies also suggest **burnout can cross-over from one spouse to the other** (Hobfoll, 2001). However, positive friendships and goal-setting help mitigate stress. The broad SOF community should be exposed to information promoting balance and active coping strategies to counter these intangible resource strains often induced by SOF peculiar culture.

## Homesteading

Special operators often homestead and stay within the same unit for long periods of time. SOF families are typically independent, flexible, resourceful and service-oriented. Seeking stability, they blend into local communities and rely less on formal military organization and installation support than their conventional military counterparts. SOF commonly homestead and invest in property, or often opt to live in areas further from the military installation. The high operational tempo facilitates more remote homesteading because operators are deployed or training so often that the burden of a daily commute is less of a lifestyle consideration.

**“We are always at war.”**

- Gen. Votel, USSOCOM Commander, 2014 to the U.S. Senate

This peculiar trait is one reason traditional, conventional resource channels may not align with the SOF family context. Living further from a military installation is a distinct characteristic of the SOF community, and it impacts the family motivation and utilization of standard DoD and service branch resources. Whether or not families choose to use applicable resources depends on their awareness, ease of use and proximity to benefits. SOF family awareness to resources often begins on the small team, and it reflects the connectedness of families within the teams and the teams to their next level of command (Wold, 2015).

## Cross-over Stress

Special Operations families are first to witness an operator’s stress symptoms, frequently materialized in the form of mood swings, emotional detachment, substance abuse or other negative behaviors (Searcey, 2016; Thomas, 2017). These circumstances can initiate a cycle of cross-over stress between the operator and their family. Research conducted on members of the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) and their families indicates that a primary stress for military families is cross-over stress, which often induced burnout in the military spouses studied regardless of rank, education or family support (Westman and Etzion, 1995). Interestingly, a top source of cross-over stress for the IDF families studied was emotional detachment or mood following military-related absences. Israeli military families attempted to support their military spouse by responding to their mood, but they struggled to be able to promote their own goals and well-being in the process (Westman and Etzion, 1995)

There are countless testimonies and USSOCOM data that recognize the phenomena of cross-over stress as a common experience in the SOF community narrative (Searcey, 2016; Votel, 2014). One senior noncommissioned officer and his spouse tried to draw attention to the phenomenon and de-stigmatize it in a SOF program the called “The Chris and Lisa Show.” However, the program was a powerful stimulate for intervention, but it was not an institutionalized or long-lasting program (Conan, 2012).

Families adjust to crossover stress, as they do to other SOF-related strains, by using coping mechanisms to help self-regulate, displace and manage stress; but psychologically these techniques are a resource drain. These mechanisms help

families manage day to day tasks, but the sustained resource loss wears against personal goals and can contribute to burnout (Hobfoll, 2001). This stress compounds in the short timeframes that exist between training and deployments where few operators are home long enough for a family to adjust. Research suggests post deployment reintegration takes 3-6 months (Weinstock, 2016, Marek, 2012; Votel, 2014), but **SOF remain in a constant deployment cycle**. Over time, chronic family resource loss outweighs the value of military service and family satisfaction. Crossover stress is possibly a critical resource drain contributing to the ultimate exhaustion of the SOF family (Hobfoll, et al. 2012).



Weinstock, 2016.

I found him separating himself from us, kind of putting up walls to either protect himself ... in a prepared state of mind constantly ready to go to the next mission. So it became ... as the years passed.

-Lisa Faris (Conan, 2012)

Burnout from cross-over stress may explain why families sometimes seemingly quit without warning, leaving the service member confused about what went wrong.

***These findings re-inforce the need for self-care skills in the broad SOF community.***

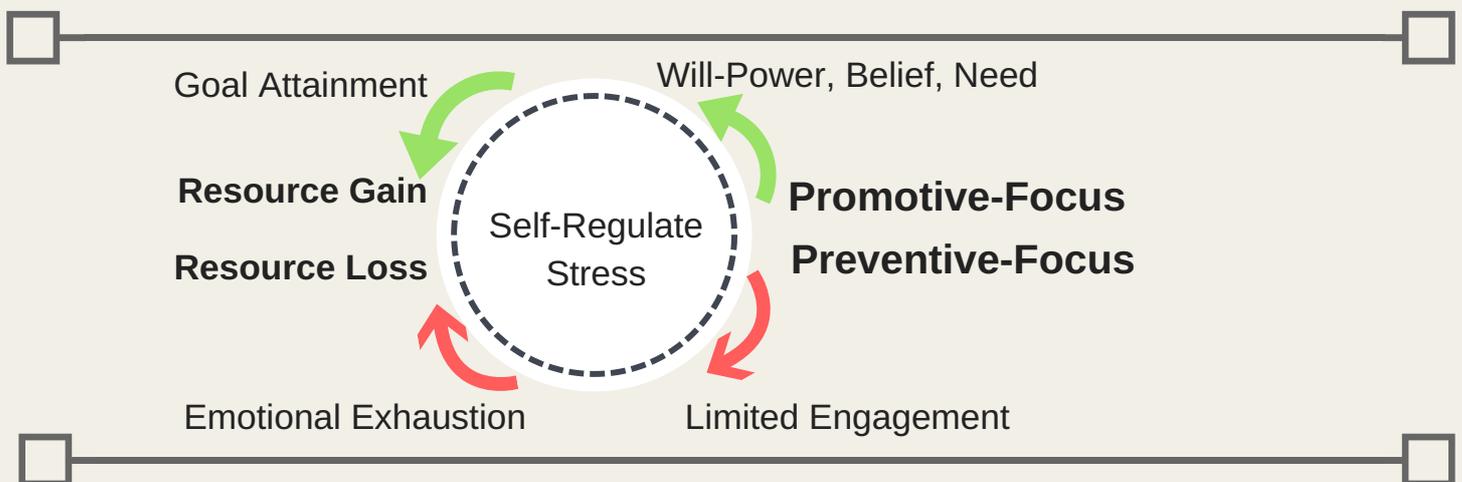
# The SOF Family Fit

## Readiness through Well-Being

Force and family well-being are among USSOCOM's top five priorities, because it is essential for force readiness. Retaining the health and talent of SOF is paramount to USSOCOM success, and retaining family support is necessary element to ensure force readiness (Thomas, 2017; Votel, 2014; McRaven, 2012). To improve force resilience and retention, USSOCOM and the broad SOF community should utilize a comprehensive approach to family well-being to enable personal and family achievement through **resources that assist, empower, educate, and otherwise equip family members** to adjust to peculiar challenges that accompany inherent SOF stress.

## Designed to Promote and Enable Self-Care

Interventions that support family well-being should incorporate self-care considerations such as goal-setting, connectedness, balance and positive health habits that include rest, physical fitness and a healthy diet (Halbesleben, et al, 2014). This type of goal promotion creates an energy that families can build on to improve health and well-being, and it may serve to enhance the family's sense of autonomy and compensate for the unpredictability present within the SOF lifestyle.



USSOCOM and the broad SOF community should be selective and mindful of the design of family resources and interventions. A promotion-focus is an important strategic design characteristic for broad force and family resiliency programs and resources. Family resources designed with a promotion-focused, may enable active coping skills and habits that assist with long-term family support special operators need to remain in SOF (Weinstock, 2016). Research suggests a promotion-focus can “broaden and build” an individual's capacity to obtain resources while a prevention-focus is associated with less positive coping mechanisms that frequently lead to negative psychological outcomes

associated with limited engagement and emotional exhaustion (Hobfoll, 2001). Resources shaped with a prevention-focus may actually increase the strain experienced by SOF families.

*This begs the question, do conventional deployment-related coping strategies (daddy dolls, count-down calendars and other widely recommended tools or strategies) negatively influence SOF families?* The common use of self-regulation and cognitive reframing as coping mechanisms for normalized and cross-over stress exemplifies the need for SOF family exposure to interventions designed with a promotion-focus that seek to enable self-care principles and fit SOF culture.

## **Resource Timing and Delivery**

To counter family strain, USSOCOM and the broad SOF community need to engage families through **decentralized channels** and comprehensive methods (Villanueva, 2005). Resources should be **exceptionally versatile** to promote and enable aspects of self-care with minimal barriers. COR theory research indicates that interventions have the most potential when initiated before a loss of resource occurs (Halbesleben, et al., 2014). This principle is uniquely challenging in the post 9-11 SOF context as losses are normalized and the impact is isolated to small teams of operators at one time. Support for decentralized design is evident by the chronic strain experienced through short-notice deployments and military training, caring for young children, (Savych, 2008) or the time and energy required to travel or attend traditional resources or interventions at typical military brick and mortar outlets. **Virtual applications, in particular, are a decentralized channel that may ease strain** imposed by time, distance or other life constraints. However, it is notable that virtual resources may not always support meaningful social connections, but they remain critical to family well-being.

## **Concluding Thoughts and Recommendations**

Strategically supporting SOF family well-being will continue to be a unique challenge for military leaders, but promoting and enabling support is a necessary foundation for improved and sustained force health, readiness and retention. Family support may be key to identifying and responding to early threats to force health such as post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injuries or other struggles. Families are the most underutilized support asset within Special Operations that if left under-resourced may become its biggest readiness threat. However, decentralized interventions that promote self-care may provide significant opportunity for progress toward improved force readiness.

## Recommendations

1. To improve force readiness, USSOCOM or the broader SOF community should utilize a comprehensive approach to family well-being to enable personal and family achievement.
2. Resources should be exceptionally versatile to promote and enable self-care principles with minimal barriers.
3. Resources should provide assistance to empower, educate and otherwise equip family members to adjust to peculiar challenges that accompany stress inherent to SOF.
4. A promotion focus is an important strategic design characteristic for broad force and family resiliency programs and resources.
5. Further research is needed to better understand and promote active coping strategies for SOF families who live in a context where there is a high and chronic resource loss.

## Glossary of Terms

1. U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM): Joint military command responsible for training and equipping all Special Operations units in the Army, Navy, Airforce and Marine Corps.
2. Department of Defense (DoD): The department within the executive branch responsible for national defense and all military organizations.
3. Special Operations Forces (SOF): A term used to describe all special operations personnel together. It should not be confused with "Special Forces" which specifically references qualified Army operators only.
4. Preservation of the Force and Family (POTFF): A force-wide initiative to comprehensively improve well-being through physical, mental, spiritual and social programs to support resiliency within the force and their family.
5. Special operator or operator: Term used to identify a special operations qualified military service member. Other terms sometimes used to identify operations are: elite fighter, commando, Navy SEAL or Army Green Beret.
6. Conventional Military: All military service members trained to engage in official, overt force on force or conventional combat. Examples include broad military occupations such as infantry, surface warfare, engineers, etc.
7. Service Branch: Term indicating the Army, Navy, Airforce, Marine Corps and Coast Guard are separate national defense entities within the Department of Defense.
8. Daddy dolls: Small, military-themed dolls developed for military children to hold while their parent is deployed or otherwise away on military duty. These dolls often allow for a picture of the military parent to personalize the doll.
9. Countdown calendars: Calendar countdown tools and methods often used to count down the number of deployment days to zero.
10. Gold Star Families: Immediate family members of a service member who died serving on military duty.

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