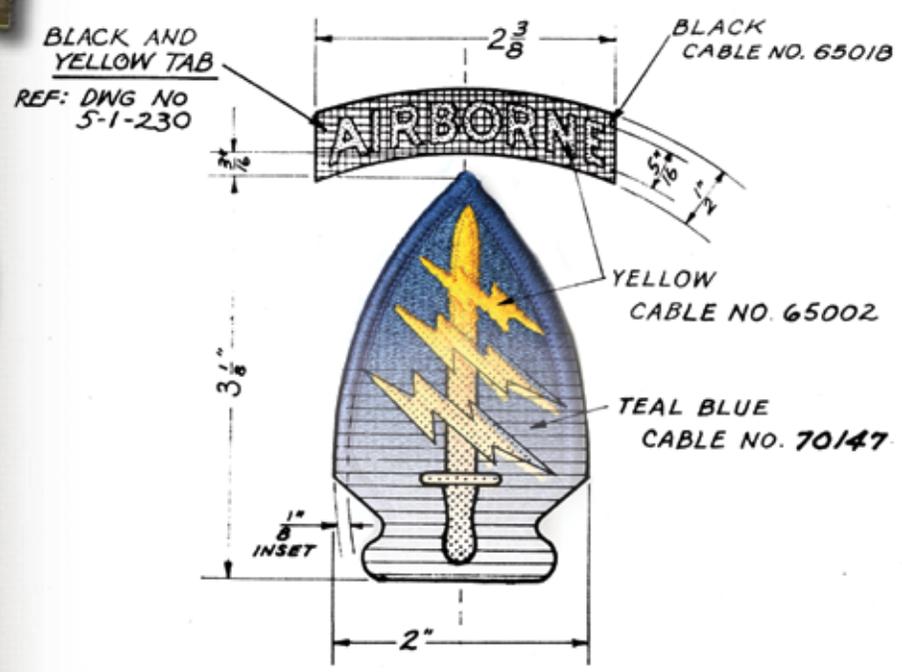


The Special Forces Patch: *History and Origins*

by Troy J. Sacquety

THE Special Forces distinctive shoulder sleeve insignia (SSI) is well known in U.S. military circles, but its origin is not. From its inception in 1952, Special Forces (SF) sought a distinctive symbol to distinguish itself from other Army units. The most significant symbol is the Green Beret. This article, however, will address the origins of an equally important identifier of Special Forces, its shoulder sleeve insignia (SSI).

Colonel Aaron Bank was the first commanding officer of the U.S. Army Special Forces. Bank served in the Special Operations branch of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in World War II as the commanding officer of Jedburgh Team PACKARD, and in Laos as the commanding officer of Team RAVEN. The OSS did not have an approved SSI.¹ As a result, personnel who had been detailed to the OSS from the U.S. Army and who were airborne qualified chose to wear the Airborne Command SSI on the right sleeve as their combat patch.² After Bank formed the 10th Special Forces Group (SFG), and while Special Forces was assigned to the Psychological Warfare Center, many Army OSS veterans joined the organization. The majority of these OSS veterans had served in either the OSS Special Operations (SO) or Operational Group (OG) branches and had become airborne qualified during the war.³ The requirement for SF personnel to be airborne qualified, ideally with





Colonel Aaron Bank was the first Commanding Officer of the 10th Special Forces Group. He served in France and Laos with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in WWII.

Lieutenant Colonel Jack T. Shannon was Colonel Bank's executive officer in the 10th SFG and remained at Fort Bragg to become the interim commanding officer of the 77th SFG. In WWII, he served with the OSS in France on the inter-Allied BERGAMOTTE mission, and in Burma with Detachment 101.

Colonel Edson Raff was the Commanding Officer of the 77th Special Forces Group. In WWII, Raff led the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion when it jumped into North Africa in 1942 during Operation TORCH.

combat experience, also attracted WWII paratroopers and veterans of the First Special Service Force. They were already familiar with the Airborne Command patch from their Airborne and Glider School days during the war. Thus, this patch was adopted by the Special Forces and worn by the newly formed 10th SFG before its movement to Germany in late 1953. Because this patch was already associated with another organization, the Special Forces soldiers soon wanted their own distinct insignia.

The first Special Forces insignia was not a shoulder patch. Instead, it was the background oval for the parachute wings. In WWII, the various airborne units had adopted distinctive background ovals in their unit colors for their parachutist or glider wings. These ovals identified the wearer as a member of a specific unit, and the SF soldiers wanted this distinction as well. On 20 August 1952, Colonel Bank requested that the Department of the Army authorize a distinctive background oval for the 10th SFG (Airborne). This was approved on 19 September 1952.⁴

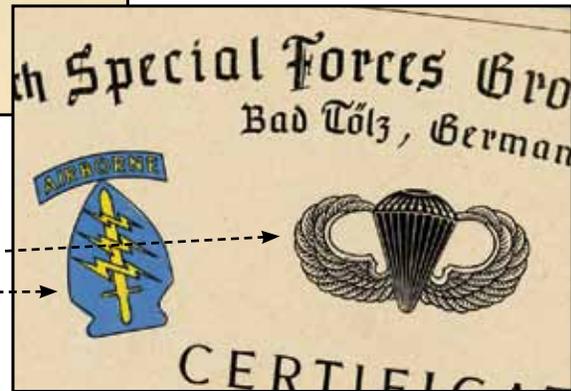
When the bulk of the 10th SFG moved to Germany in September 1953, the remaining SF personnel at Fort Bragg formed the cadre around which the 77th SFG was organized. Though they were no longer part of the 10th SFG, the initial 77th SFG troopers still wore the 10th SFG oval. In early 1954, Colonel Edson Raff succeeded interim commander Lieutenant Colonel Jack Shannon as the head of the 77th. Raff decided that his unit should have its own



Captain Herbert R. Brucker, one of the original 10th Special Forces Group members, in 1952. He is wearing the Airborne Command SSI. He is also wearing collar brass meant to signify the 10th SFG, but which was "borrowed" from the 10th Infantry Regiment.



The 77th SFG Oval (top) and the 10th SFG Oval (bottom).



Sergeant Major Gordon Shearer, then a Sergeant First Class, received the certificate at top from the 10th SFG in 1956. Notice that the 10th is still using the Airborne Command SSI. The next year, Shearer received another certificate. The Special Forces SSI had been added, but the airborne tab is not the one approved in 1958.

background oval. On 23 March 1954, he requested that an oval be based on the colors—teal blue with a diagonal yellow stripe—of the authorized “distinguishing flag” of the 77th SFG, which had been created and approved by the Department of the Army.⁵ On 16 June 1954, the 77th SFG background oval was approved.⁶ This measure was still insufficient.

The 77th SFG again took the initiative. A design for an SSI, submitted by Captain John W. Frye of the 77th

SFG, was approved by the Army on 22 August 1955.⁷ Frye’s design remains the SSI worn today. In 1955, the symbolism of the patch was officially recorded by the U.S. Army Institute of Heraldry. That description reads: “The arrowhead alludes to the American Indian’s basic skills in which Special Forces personnel are trained to a high degree. The dagger represents the unconventional nature of Special Forces operations, and the three lightning flashes, their ability to strike rapidly by air, water, or land. Teal blue and yellow are the colors of unassigned units.”⁸

On 20 November 1958, after some experimentation with airborne tab colors—including yellow letters on teal to match the SSI—the patch was amended to add the airborne tab as an integral part of the SF SSI. The airborne tab, a black background with the word “AIRBORNE” in yellow letters, was to be placed $\frac{3}{16}$ of an inch above the SF insignia.⁹

The patch was originally authorized to be worn by active duty Special Forces personnel only. This created problems with the Army Reserve and National Guard SF detachments. Consideration, but not approval, was given to allowing these USAR and ARNG units to wear the SSI, but possibly with a “different color background” than that of the active duty units.¹⁰ On 2 March 1960, the issue was resolved by the Department of the Army. The Special Forces SSI would be worn by all Army SF detachments.¹¹ With the formation of U.S. Army Special Forces Command in 1989, that headquarters adopted the basic SSI.

Soldiers of the Special Forces were immediately



There are many examples of theater-made versions of the SF Shoulder Sleeve Insignia. These two were made in the Republic of Vietnam.



The sign from Exercise FORMER CHAMP, held in 1968 on Taiwan. Notice that the Republic of China's Special Forces badge looks very similar to that of U.S. Army Special Forces.



The Special Forces SSI as amended in 1958.



A close up of the Republic of China Special Forces insignia. This example is a small metal pin.

recognized by their new insignia. Their professionalism inspired foreign militaries worldwide. An example of this inspiration was found in the USASOC History Office files—photographs of “FORMER CHAMP,” a 1968 combined U.S./Republic of China (ROC) exercise on Taiwan. The photographs show the insignia of U.S. Special Forces and Republic of China (Taiwan) Special Forces side-by-side. The ROC’s Special Forces had adopted a patch similar to that worn by the U.S. Army Special Forces that trained them. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.

The insignia and headgear of Special Forces are important identifiers that mark a soldier as belonging to an elite organization. Many may recognize various SF insignia, but few know their historical background. The history of its insignia is as much a part of the legacy of Special Forces as are its operations. ♣

I would like to thank the following for their help in this article; Mr. Caesar Civitella, Mr. Les Hughes, Mr. Geoffrey Barker, and Mr. Harry Pugh for providing critical comments; Mrs. Jane Hess, daughter of LTC Shannon, for the photo of her father, and SGM Gordon Shearer (ret) for the use of his certificates.

Endnotes

- * The introduction page features Special Forces Sleeve Insignia (SSI) from the earliest days of SF to the most current. Included are theater-made examples from the Gulf War and Vietnam. Also shown is a pre-1958 SF patch with the blue airborne tab, and at the top, one of the post-1958 examples. At the bottom is the current Army Combat Uniform (ACU) SSI. Thanks to Mr. Harry Pugh for providing these examples.
- 1 The OSS had a proposed design, the spearhead patch, but it was never approved. A modified design is used as the patch for USSOCOM.
- 2 For a brief time, Special Forces wore the Third Army patch with an airborne tab. Geoffrey T. Barker, *A Concise History of US Army Special Operations Forces With Lineage and Insignia* (Fayetteville, NC: Anglo-American Publishing, 1988), 143.
- 3 Caesar Civitella, telephone interview by Troy J. Sacquety, 16 April 2007, Fort Bragg, NC, notes, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. Mr. Civitella said that the Airborne Command patch was worn for security/

cover purposes. The Airborne Command patch was typically worn by stateside personnel involved in training activities.

- 4 Arthur Dubois, letter to Colonel Aaron Bank, subject “Distinctive Insignia,” 19 September 1952, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. These ovals were sometimes worn on the unofficial beret.
- 5 Colonel Edson D. Raff, letter to Office, Quartermaster General, Washington DC, “Authorization for Distinctive Wing Background,” 2 March 1954, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 6 Arthur E. Dubois, letter to [Colonel Raff], subject “Distinctive Background Trimmings for Ground Badges,” 16 June 1954, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Quartermaster General, Washington DC, “Authorization for Distinctive Wing Background,” 2 March 1954, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 7 Lieutenant Colonel Ian Sutherland, *Special Forces of the United States Army: 1952–1982* (San Jose, CA: R. James Bender Publishing, 1990), 412–13.
- 8 Major John G. Goodlett Jr., “Shoulder Sleeve Insignia and Tab for the Special Forces Groups (Abn),” 20 November 1958, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 9 Goodlett Jr., “Shoulder Sleeve Insignia and Tab for the Special Forces Groups (Abn),” 20 November 1958, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 10 Colonel George M. Jones, letter to Colonel William H. Kinard, 15 September 1959, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 11 Colonel T.J. Marnane, “Shoulder Sleeve Insignia for Special Forces Detachments,” 2 March 1960, (also see LTC James S. Cook, Jr. “Shoulder Sleeve Insignia and Tab for the Special Forces Groups (Airborne),” 13 Jan. 1960, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.



The current ACU (Army Combat Uniform) Special Forces SSI. It includes the Special Forces Tab, which was approved in 1983.