

Commandos Around the World

Most nations have some kind of commando unit, usually a hundred or so specially selected and trained troops. Often, the British or American commando units (SAS/SBS, Special Forces) are called in to conduct training and create a commando capability for some countries. As a general rule, the larger the nations armed forces, the more likely they are to maintain a useful commando force. This is because the commandos are usually recruited from people already in the military. Leaders for commando units are selected from those who have served in the commandos. The smaller commando forces in most nations tend to vary quite a bit in quality, depending on how good the current leadership. Larger nations have a larger pool of troops to select from and thus are able to maintain quality in their commandos. But in many smaller nations, the local commandos are, at best, a SWAT team with fancy equipment than capability. Thus the following list is not exhaustive.

Argentina has some anti-terrorist units and special units to deal with criminal gangs. Some of these men are trained to commando standards, but they are primarily intended for police work in Argentina. There are two commando companies.

Austria formed the Gendarmerieeinsatzkommando (Police Special Command or GEK) Cobra in 1978 in response to growing terrorist acts within Austria. A very well trained and equipped, but small, organization that only operates within Austria.

Australia has their own SAS (Special Air Service) commandos, including a platoon who can operate from the sea (like U.S. Navy SEALs). Australian SAS have a close relationship with U.S. Special Forces and SEALs. The Australian forces consist of the 1st SAS Regiment (500-600 active duty and reserve troops), 1st Commando Group (about 250 troops) and the 4th Royal Australian Regiment (several hundred commandos) and several companies of LRRPs.

Belgium came out of World War II with a battalion of commandos who had trained and operated with British commandos. The commando tradition continues, with a Para-Commando regiment and some LRRP units.

Canada formed Joint Task Force Two as an anti-terrorism commando unit

in 1993. Has a strength of about 200 men.

China has formed two "Special Warfare Groups" that are trained for commando type operations. Little is known about them, but they involve several thousand troops.

Finland has a long tradition of commando type operations. They currently have 400 troops in Ranger Warfare Companies. These men perform LRRP duties and commando type raids. There is also a battalion of paratroopers trained for Special Forces type work, mainly behind enemy lines (ie, in Russia) if there should be another war. There is also a 40 man Bear Force for hostage rescue work.

France has several elite combat units, but only one, the 1st Para-Commando Regiment (about 300 troops) that are of commando quality. These troops are the same quality as the SAS or U.S. Special Forces. The French armed forces also have a number of support units for their commandos (special helicopters and the like.)

Germany's KSK (Kommando Spezialkraefte, or "Special Commando Force"), was created in 1994 and became operational in 1997, is getting it's first combat experience in Afghanistan. About a hundred KSK troops are in Afghanistan, and more are expected. The KSK were modeled on the British SAS and U.S. Special Forces. The unit was formed after 11 German citizens were trapped in Rwanda in 1994 and it was realized that there was no German military unit available to rescue them from chaos then existing in Rwanda. By 2000, KSK had about a thousand members. Recruits were drawn from existing airborne units and British SAS advisors helped devise the training program. Since the unit was officially formed on April 1, 1996, they are nicknamed "the Jokers." It is not known if anyone used the phrase "send in the clowns" when KSK was ordered to Afghanistan. In addition to KSK, there are also three companies of LRRPs and a counter-terrorism unit (GSG-9, about 250 troops.)

India first formed a commando force, composed largely of Tibetan exiles, after getting the worst of it in a 1962 border war with China. As relations improved with China over the years, the "Special Frontier Force" (SFF) switched from its original mission of stirring up guerilla operations inside China, to counter-terrorism. Size (about 10,000 troops) and organization (six battalions, each of six 123 man companies plus a headquarters) of the units has not changed much in 40 years. Training is still rigorous, but there are fewer Tibetans in the unit now. There is also a Para-commando battalion, used as a quick reaction force. A small (about a hundred men) National Security Guards force is organized and trained to deal with hostage situations. A very competent outfit. There are 1200 Marine Commandos, who sought assistance from British Royal Marine Commandos and U.S. SEALs to set up their two year training program.

Israel has a large force of commando troops for a country its size. There are two small battalions of Arabic speaking troops used for undercover operations and raids into the Occupied (Palestinian) territories). Sayeret Shimshon (Unit 367) is assigned to the Gaza Strip, while Sayeret Duvdevan (Unit 217) takes care of the West Bank. There are four companies of Ranger type troops (Palsar) that normally each support one of the four elite infantry brigades of the army, and two more to support armored brigades. There are also three LRRP companies (Special Command Teams), with one assigned to each of the army's corps headquarters. Lotar Eilat and Unit Yamam are two hostage rescue units (each under 100 troops.) These units are also used as commandos (as when there is a lot of violence with the Palestinians.) There are also several hundred highly trained LRRP troops assigned directly to intelligence units. The navy has a SEAL unit (Shayetet 13) of about 400 men. This unit is more selective than the other commando units, with about 80 percent of it's candidates failing the training course, compared to about 50 percent with other units. The navy also has a company size unit of divers (similar to U.S. UDT). The police force also has over a thousand specially trained men who are a cut above your usual SWAT teams.

Italy experienced some horrific home grown terrorism in the 1970s. That has passed, but there is an ongoing problem with organized crime (the original Mafia). As a result of that they created two elite counter-terrorism units. The GIS is actually a police unit of about a hundred men. The Navy has a SEAL type unit (COMSUBIN) with about 250 men.

Japan has a 200 man Special Assault Team for counter-terrorist and hostage rescue missions.

South Korea has the 707th Special Missions Battalion with about 300 men (and a few women) trained for counter-terrorist and hostage rescue missions. There are seven Special Forces brigades, that are meant for service in North Korea in wartime. These units are actually a cross between U.S. Rangers and Special Forces. The South Korean Special Forces will try and provide information on enemy rear area operations. North Korea has some 22 Special Forces brigades. In the case of both nations, the major problem will be getting Special Forces into the enemy rear area. If either side (most likely the South) get command of the air and sea, they will have Special Forces in enemy territory. U.S. SEALs and Special Forces provided assistance and trainers when their South Korean counterparts were formed. Many American operators consider some of the South Korean commando training even tougher than that found in American special operations schools. The Koreans have long had a tradition of toughness, and the concept of highly selective commando units who went through brutal training, had a lot of appeal in South Korea.

Netherlands has an SAS type unit, the KCT (Army Commando Troops).

This small battalion has one company of commandos and two of LRRPs. There is also a 25 man Special Boat Section that is similar to US SEALs and British SBS. The BBE (Special Intervention Force) has about a hundred troops used for counter-terrorist work and hostage rescue.

New Zealand has a small SAS unit (about 50 men) that train to the same standards as the British SAS.

Norway has a Ranger/LRRP battalion and a smaller unit of SEALs (which regularly trained with U.S. SEALs). Norwegian Rangers are very experienced in mountain and cold weather operations. A Norwegian Ranger detachment served in Afghanistan in 2002.

Russia has a LRRP company and a parachute (commando) company assigned to each combat division (although not all have them.) Beyond that they have about 8,000 Spetznaz (in seven brigades.) Some of these brigades are trained so that their troops operate in battalion or company sized units for reconnaissance duty. Other are trained to operate as in smaller (9-12 man teams) for classic commando operations.

Sweden has a small battalion of Airborne Rangers that operate like the SAS (in five man units behind enemy lines.) There are also several companies of Coastal Rangers, who are trained as commandos to retake coastal islands and forts captured by the enemy. The SSG is a small (less than a hundred men, all officers) that perform hostage rescue missions and provide security for top leaders.

Thailand has a 144 man SEAL unit, which has trained with American SEALs. There are also some LRRPs and elite infantry.

Turkey has three commando brigades (about 5,000 troops), but these are more like U.S. Rangers in function. The commandos have a lot of practical experience from the ongoing war with Kurdish separatists.

United Kingdom - The country that invented the modern commando concept has three battalions of Royal Marine Commandos and about 200 SAS commandos. The 21st SAS is a reserve unit that frequently has members called to active service. The 22nd SAS is an active duty regiment (which, in British parlance, is a battalion size unit.) There is also the SBS (Special Boat Service) which is similar to the U.S. SEALs, but keeps a lower profile. SBS operates up to 20 kilometers inland and many of their operations have been mistakenly reported as SAS. SBS has about 120 men and recruit from the Royal Marine Commandos. Since September 11, 2001, Britain has begun hiring retired SAS personnel as "contract workers" to perform some of the intelligence jobs that SAS usually handles.

United States has the largest array of commando type troops. All are

organized into the Special Operations Command (SOCOM). This organization has some 45,000 troops assigned, but only a small proportion are "operators" (gun carrying commandos). This main operator units are Delta Force (about 400 elite commandos for counter-terrorism, hostage rescue and any operation requiring the services of a small number of very good operators.) The Special Forces comprises five Special Forces Groups, each with about 1,200 troops. There is a Ranger Regiment of 2,200 troops. The air force has several hundred commandos who rescue downed pilots and provide air controllers (to call in bombing strikes) for ground units. The air force also has a lot of people operating and supporting special operations aircraft, requiring the services of some 12,000 personnel. The Navy has their SEALs and supporting units (about 2,000 men).