

Interview with the Author: John Dailey, Founding Member of Detachment One—Creating Marine Special Operations Forces during the Global War on Terror

By John Dailey with Jillian Emma Hatcher and Jeremy Carter | https://doi.org/10.65832/usmc0321

Disclaimer: The views in this article represent John Dailey's perspectives and do not reflect those of the United States Marine Corps, Marine Corps Special Operations Command, United States Special Operations Command, or the United States Military. This article has been reviewed by two intelligence professionals with over two decades of experience and has been deemed to have no classified materials.

Overview

In late 1983, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger ordered a comprehensive review of the United States (US) military operating procedures, based on OPERATION EAGLE CLAW (Iran, 1980) and OPERATION URGENT FURY (Grenada, 1983). In 1986, US Congress passed the Goldwater Nichols Act, which had several purposes, with two being to strengthen the civilian authority over the military and to increase the autonomy of the commanders of the Geographic Combatant Commands. In 1987, the US Congress passed the Nunn-Cohen Agreement, which created United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). A defining feature of these two pieces of legislation was increasing the Joint Force integration amongst the US military Services (Marines, Army, Navy, and Air Force). In 1987, each Service was asked to contribute units-of-action to create US Special Operations Forces (USSOF). The Marine Corps was notoriously the only service to not contribute to USSOCOM, by refusing to allow any of their units-of-action to become USSOF.

Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and the invasion of Iraq on March 20, 2003, the US needed to increase the capacity of their USSOF to conduct global operations in support of the Global War on Terror (GWOT). Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld directed the Marine Corps to create a unit-of-action to contribute to the GWOT through USSOCOM. In 2004, using Reconnaissance Marines from Force Reconnaissance as the backbone, the Marine Corps created Detachment (Det) One to validate as a "proof of concept" that the Marine Corps could conduct special operations immediately in the GWOT.

Unlike the US Army Rangers, US Army Special Forces, US Navy SEALs, and various US Air Force units, who were integrated into USSOCOM during times of peace (late 1980s), Det One had to form and perform during two active war zones. Det One was composed of four team leaders, with one being John Dailey. Recently John Dailey released his book, *Tough Rugged Bastards: A Memoir of a Life in Marine Special Operations*, detailing the creation of Det One and Marine Corps Special Operations Command (MARSOC). Notably, this year marks the twentieth anniversary of the formation of MARSOC.

Prior to Det One, you spent seventeen years in the Marine Corps, with eight years being in Force Reconnaissance, to include a successful deployment as a Platoon Sergeant in Force Reconnaissance to a combat zone (Afghanistan). What were some significant events that helped prepare you for the eventual assistance in the creation of MARSOC?

As cliché as it may sound, being good Marines first was the key to starting MARSOC. I think that it still holds true today. You won't be successful in special operations if you cannot perform the basics at a very high level: being on time, with the right equipment, and ready to execute. All Marines learn this requirement, but it was when I went to Force Recon that I truly began to understand it. Being trained to freefall or dive are just ways to get to work. Real brilliance in the basics means making habits of doing the little things that most people won't do. Sometimes these are things that some guys might feel are beneath them (i.e., inspections, rehearsals, or immediate action drills). Bringing that mindset to Det One, and then on to MARSOC, helped keep a consistent culture of accountability and a foundation in the fundamentals.

In the 1990s, you and your peers always talked about how the Marine Corps should be part of USSOCOM. Did you ever think it would ever happen? Were you ready for the moment when it happened?

Not being in USSOCOM gave us something to complain about, and there is a saying that a Marine who is complaining is happy. Seriously though, I think that it gave us a bit of an "underdog complex" and that made us work harder to prove to ourselves—and to the USSOF units that we often trained with—that we were as capable as anyone on the battlefield. During the '90s, we



Shown above is Second Platoon, First Force Reconnaissance Company in Forward Operating Base Rhino, Afghanistan, with then Brigadier General Mattis in November 2001. The United States Marine Corps was the first conventional forces into Afghanistan following the attacks on September 11, 2001.

lost a lot of Recon Marines to other Services. I certainly never thought that we would ever make the move to USSOCOM, and if the decision had been left up to the Marine Corps, we never would have. It took the tragedy of 9/11 to set the stage, but I do believe that we were as ready as we could be when the moment came.

On September 11, 2001, you were in Australia when you heard about the attacks on the US. Months later, you were fighting in Afghanistan. Can you describe the moment you discovered that America was under attack and the mindset prior to, during, and after your deployment to Afghanistan?

I watched the 9/11 attacks on a television above a bar in Darwin, Australia. It seemed surreal, and I don't think that it ever really sank in like it did for those who were back in the states. Within minutes of the strike on the first tower, we were rushing back to the ship and were at sea before the sun came up. From that point on, as we steamed towards Central Command's area of responsibility (the Middle East), we got very little in the way of updates. For most of the transit, the telephones and internet were turned off for security reasons. We had to make do with periodic updates announced over the one MC, (the ships public address system).



Shown above is members from Detachment One conducting pre-deployment training in Mercury, Nevada.

We did know enough to be some combination of excited, scared, and angry. It was obvious that we were going to serve as America's initial response to the attacks. We kept busy planning, preparing, checking equipment, and teaching classes. There was a great sense of urgency to make sure that we were ready for whatever was asked of us.

How did your experiences fighting in Afghanistan following the attacks on September 11, 2001, help prepare you to lead in Det One?

I learned so many lessons, and my experiences during that time certainly reinforced others that I already knew. The first was the criticality of every member of the team. It is easy, especially in special operations, to focus on the "operator" and forget that it takes so many Service members all doing their jobs to pull off a successful military operation. From the logistics personnel, to the intelligence specialists, the mechanics, and everyone in between. The operators get to do what I have always considered the fun stuff—and yes, the fun stuff is also the most dangerous—but without a great deal of support, the operators will never get on target with the necessary equipment and information to achieve the desired effect.

I also was able to "stress test" my leadership skills and philosophy. This step confirmed what I thought I knew: the unit that is great at the

fundamentals will succeed when bullets start flying. I also remember being grateful for all the challenging training that I had done over my career to that point. Every time that I faced a challenging situation, I was always able to look back and say, "_____ was harder than this," or, "I've been tireder, colder, and hungrier before. We'll get through it."

Afghanistan was also my first gunfight. What struck me then was how countless repetitions had developed conditioned responses in me and my guys. Action will always be faster than reaction, and hard, realistic training is essential to develop the autonomic response necessary to win. As the saying goes, "You will not rise to the occasion, you will default to your level of training."

Colonel Coates, Det One Commanding Officer, gave you guidance to pick a team of "tough, rugged bastards." How did you go about picking your team for Det One?

Being selected to form Det One was an incredible honor. I think we all realized that and understood that we were responsible for not only our own success or failure but that we were representing the Marine Corps and the Recon community on a bigger playing field. This was the moment we had always wanted; to prove that we were capable to perform in USSOCOM.

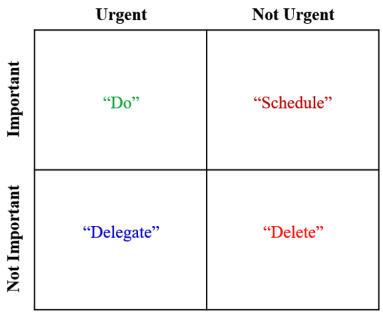
Within reason, I had the option of picking anyone from the recon community. I wanted to pick known quantities—guys that I had either served with personally or those known to me by reputation. Fortunately, before my Afghanistan deployment, I had worked in the 1st Force Training Cell and had the opportunity to put most of the available Marines through a training workup, so I knew whom I wanted immediately. I focused on picking hard workers and guys that I knew were tough. I also sought out those who had volunteered for Army Ranger school because as a Force Recon Marine, that was not a mandatory school, or really even necessary. But I knew that if someone had volunteered to go and had been successful, then they had the level of physical and mental toughness needed.

During the pre-deployment work up, you ensured that your team did the "no-glory" work (i.e., taking out the trash, washing the windows, etc.). What was the benefit of your team always doing this work?

The term I used for it was "we'll do windows"; meaning, of course, that we would not only do the least desirable jobs without complaint but also planned to seek them out. Tactically speaking, the reconnaissance of an objective was the least desirable task. The assault element would fly into the target, fast rope or land in proximity of the objective, blow the door off, clear the building, and then jump back on the waiting extract bird (helicopter) to fly home and get the glory.



Shown above is Team 4 from Detachment One in Baghdad, Iraq, in 2004.



Above depicts a simple "Eisenhower matrix" that the author used while preparing to deploy with Detachment One, conducting the first Marine Special Operations deployment, and creating Marine Corps Special Operations Command's Individual Training Course (now called Marine Raider Course).

Meanwhile, the recon team had been laying on their bellies, staring through optics for days, and often expected to patrol out during the next period of darkness.

It is the harder job, but as a sniper, I had always gravitated toward reconnaissance. Having the background as an assaulter allowed not only me but also Team-4 to understand and interpret what we were seeing in a way that would be most useful to the main effort's success, ensuring that our reconnaissance provided all the needed information to the assault force. Of note, by Team 4 consistently "doing the windows" throughout the workup, and through our proven competency, we did the first mission on our deployment, which means Team 4 did the first USSOF mission in Marine Corps' history.

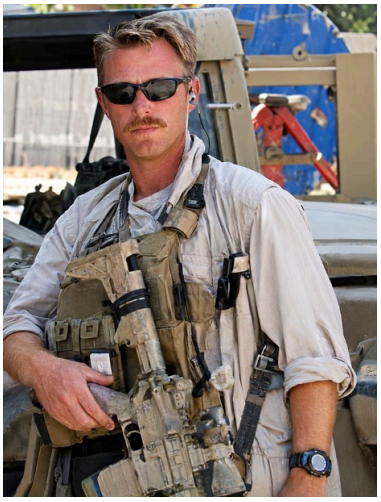
Prior to deployment, the task organization of Det One changed, resulting in you losing your assistant team leader, Gunnery Sergeant Sidney Voss. What was your mindset after losing your assistant team leader? How did you continue forward with the training and preparation for Det One's deployment?

The decision to reorganize was one that was made with the team leaders' input based on the missions that we were going to be conducting. Losing Sid was a blow. We had worked together for many years, and I trusted him fully; our relationship could operate off implicit communication. However, I volunteered to give him up for two reasons.

First, he was incredibly qualified and deserved to have a team. The second reason was based on something that I had been told years before, and that was if you are required to give up a team member for something, and the choice of whom to give up doesn't hurt, then you have probably not picked the right guy. Giving up Sid hurt, so I was confident in the decision. Additionally, I knew that the Marine who would step up into Sid's role was more than up to the task.

Det One was under the assumption that they would deploy to Afghanistan, consisting of rural, mountainous, sparsely populated terrain. However, during the workup, you were informed that you would deploy to Iraq, consisting of urban, densely populated terrain. What in your training enabled the success of Det One, despite the shift in mission prior to deployment?

I'm not sure if we were told or just believed that we were initially going to Afghanistan. It was well into our training—but not quite last minute—that we were tasked with deploying to Iraq under Naval Special Warfare Task Group One. It absolutely changed the remainder of our training plan. We began to focus more heavily on CQB [close quarter combat]. It was a skill that we all possessed, but it is also one that has to be refreshed frequently due to the level of shooting accuracy and speed required. There were also quite a few lessons learned coming in from other SOF components based off the fighting in Iraq that modified the tactics that we were using to some degree. The fundamentals didn't change, but it was clear that arriving to the target undetected, followed by securing and searching it quickly, were going to be key to success. This is part of what led to our decision to split out into six assault teams vice four.



Above is the author while conducting personal security detail for the Iraqi Interim Vice President in 2004.

Det One's deployment was a success, leading to the creation of MARSOC (established 2006). What lessons on leadership and preparation over your prior seventeen years of Marine Corps' service made this possible?

A lesson that has always served me well is that regardless of the size of the challenge or problem, is to break down the issue into its component parts, prioritize, and attack. The most successful people don't get everything done every day, but they always get the most important things done. I tend to get caught up in the churn of events, so I have to remind myself each day to use the Eisenhour matrix to classify tasks: important and urgent, important but not urgent, urgent but not important, and, finally, neither urgent nor important.

Following your redeployment back to the US, you were instrumental in creating MARSOC's Individual Training Course (ITC), where Marines spend ten months being trained and tested while trying to earn a spot in the formation. What were the challenges in trying to create ITC during the GWOT, with many Marines in the formation either training for a deployment or deployed to combat zones?

ITC was recently re-named MRC, the Marine Raider Course. A decision that I think was long overdue.

Creating the course was hugely rewarding but took an incredible effort by a lot of people. We were essentially violating the Fourth SOF Truth, "Competent Special Operations Forces cannot be created after emergencies occur." There was an understanding that we needed to provide the necessary training, but that was tempered by the requirement to fill the ranks. The first MARSOC units to deploy to combat were composed primarily of experienced Force Recon Marines, and that bought us some time to get the course running and start training Raiders. In the early days, the course length was limited to six months (the course is now ten months), so we had to prioritize the tasks that were going to be most relevant for the operational areas that Raiders were being deployed. Fortunately, in the early days, many of the Marines signing up also possessed some combat experience. That dynamic absolutely made our job easier.

When we were developing the course, we had to ensure that everything we were planning to teach was in the "urgent and important" category. The first graduates were not going to have the advantage of a lengthy unit training phase, so we had to make every training day count and give them the skills needed to make an immediate impact for their team in combat.

The other lesson that I tried to bring to Marine Raider Training Center (MRTC) is that leaders must lead from the front and hold themselves to the standards that they expect of those whom they lead. The command philosophy of Colonel Evans Carlson, the Commanding Officer of 2d Raider Battalion in World War II, was that rank comes with responsibilities, not privileges. I tried to keep that in mind.

You are still serving MARSOC as a civilian as the Training and Education Branch Director at the Marine Raider Training Center. You have seen every ITC/MRC class, from the program's creation in 2008 to its current classes in 2026. While the missions in MARSOC change, what never changes for the Marine hopefuls who desire to be a part of the community?



Marines from Detachment One at the twentieth anniversary celebration for Marine Corps Special Operations Command's creation.

Our Assessment & Selection focuses on the ten MARSOC Attributes: Integrity, Effective Intelligence, Physical Ability, Adaptability, Initiative, Determination, Dependability, Teamwork, Interpersonal Skills, and Stress Tolerance. Those are not subject to change. We need Marines who can solve hard problems. You have to be fit, smart, and thrive in conditions of uncertainty. But more than anything there must be an absolute internal commitment to waking up every day and doing what is necessary to the best of your ability. And you must have crystal-clear understanding of your personal motivations for choosing the life of a Raider. The course is long, hard, and at some point, it pushes everyone to their limit. We want it to, because we need them to go beyond their limit and—in doing so—realize that limits are self-imposed.

If you could do the preparation and deployment of Det One over again, what would you do differently and what would you do the same?

I truly believe that our training and preparation was solid. I don't think that I would change anything that was in my power to change at the time. The one thing that I would change would be trying to be more present during the experience. I find that this trait is common to the types of people who gravitate towards special operations: We are always trying to think ahead to the next step, the next mission, the next opportunity, to the point that we don't enjoy the incredible chance that we have to work with amazing people in utterly insane environments. I also would have taken a lot more photos. I have realized that I was never a photo guy, so I have had to rely on those who did to preserve the memories.

Any final thoughts on leadership?

The two fundamental priorities of Marine Corps leadership, in order of importance, are mission accomplishment and troop welfare**.** I hate to come across as an old guy talking about how things used to be harder, but I feel that we sometimes confuse those two priorities. I have always believed in the quote attributed to Erwin Rommel, "The best form of troop welfare is first-class training, for this saves unnecessary casualties." Taking care of the Marines under your care means doing everything in your power to help them build the skills needed to return home from a combat deployment. The best way to do that is to train hard, including long hours and nights away from home when necessary. I guess that I was also thinking of myself in a way. I never wanted to have to write a letter to the spouse of a Marine who died under my charge. Obviously, we can't control everything, but we can strive to control the controllables and that is best done by making, as Flavius Josephus said, our drills bloodless battle and our battles bloody drills.