Thriving Amidst Chaos

Applying the Lessons of Special Forces To the Business World

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A Special Forces combat unit descends into an Afghan village, or “qalat, (pronounced “kalat”) in the Farah Province to conduct a raid. Taking down a qalat is a complex undertaking. The troops face unknown dangers around every corner, behind every door, on every rooftop. Snipers, suicide bombers, improvised explosive devices, all-out assaults by enemy forces. They have to rely on the team, the planning, and past experience to keep them safe and accomplish their mission.

At first glance, the battlefield and the business world may seem light-years apart. But the similarities between the realm of military operations and that of the marketplace are remarkable. Both military units and businesses face enormous uncertainty and fast-moving developments. Both face competition seeking to dominate the space. Both utilize the familiar plan-staff-execute-evaluate lifecycles. But with the unforgiving battle environment, there is no room for shortcutting how they manage that cycle. That said, companies—even small ones—can benefit from how SEALs, Green Berets, and Delta Forces approach their work.

Introduction
About the Author

Brian Richardson grew up in Northern Wisconsin, where he was ingrained with a love and respect for nature by his grandfather. From his earliest memories he had a fascination with all things military and participated in the Civil Air Patrol in junior high and high school. Brian attended Norwich University in Northfield, VT, and he enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps reserves as an Infantry Rifleman his sophomore year.

Immediately after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Brian was activated and deployed to the Balkans in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. In 2003 he was part of the invasion force for Operation Iraqi Freedom. He was conditionally released into the U.S. Army to attend the Special Forces Assessment and Selection course in 2004 upon returning home from Iraq. Brian completed the Special Forces Qualification course as a Special Forces Medic and deployed to Iraq with 10th Special Forces Group.

Brian was honorably discharged in 2009 and worked as a Personal Security Specialist and medic for the Department of State in Baghdad, Iraq, as part of the ambassador’s protection detail. Brian joined the Colorado National Guard in 2010 and worked for GORUCK, a company specializing in endurance gear and events, as the Lead Cadre and Director of Capstone Events. He remained in the Colorado National Guard after being discharged from active duty and deployed with the 3rd Special Forces Group to Afghanistan. Upon his return he re-connected with his former teammate Matt Carmine and started the company Origins Training Group in their home state of Colorado. Origins teaches outdoor survival skills and works with Team Concepts Boulder, a business dedicated to helping create high-performance organizational teams.
Forbes, Fast Company, and Entrepreneur magazines, among others, have carried stories written by Special Operations veterans explaining how business leaders can apply military skills and disciplines. They have written about focus, determination, the willingness to ask for forgiveness rather than permission, staying calm amidst chaos, empowering yourself and the team around you, and adapting quickly to changing conditions.

Beyond these characteristics, Special Forces groups have a particular approach to each phase in what we might call, the “Combat Management Lifecycle.” In concept, it mirrors the same management lifecycle phases a business would use: planning, staffing, executing, and evaluating. But the Special Forces approach emphasizes meticulous attention to detail; highly selective staffing; rigorous preparation; focus on the mission goals along with flexibility and adaptability; and immediate and thorough after-action evaluation.

In this publication we take a step-by-step look at each of the lifecycle phases and how Special Forces approach them. Then we suggest how business firms might benefit from similar approaches in the competitive marketplace environment.
Planning: the War and the Mission

Like businesses, Special Forces groups conduct both strategic and operational planning. They must understand the overall (market) context for their operations and prepare for specific missions within that context.

At the strategic level, Special Forces must understand their roles in the larger framework of force deployment and operations. They study intelligence. They look at the political, socioeconomic, cultural, and military landscape. They clarify the desired end states. They identify potential risks. They define the battle space much as businesses define the marketplace in which they operate. They define force structures and resource requirements. They may use a model known as the “Five Paragraph order,” a way to clearly define instructions to a unit. This approach is also known as SMEAC—situation, mission, execution, administration and logistics, and command and signal.

Paying meticulous attention to strategic factors can make the difference between success and failure to a mission. In Iraq, the need to enlist the support of local populations to assist U.S. units affected weapons and tactics used by Special Forces to engage enemy elements without harming civilians. Similarly, understanding cultural values can avoid mistakes that might alienate local groups. For example, foreign men might be forbidden to directly address local women in conversation, so they must either question local men through appropriate interpreters and/or use female team members.

Similarly businesses may use sophisticated planning and evaluation methods and tools, especially with complex projects. They may use a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis, or prepare a comprehensive business plan using, for example, the Small Business Administration’s plan structure. The SBA structure has detailed recommendations for preparing a three- to five-year roadmap. Like the SMEAC structure, the SBA plan includes market analysis, organization and management, definition of service or product lines, marketing and sales approaches, and financial resource requirements. Businesses also might have to consider cross-
cultural factors if they plan to operate internationally or in different populations in the U.S.

**When planning for a specific mission**, Special Forces place heavy emphasis on details and simulate the mission as much as possible. In some cases, Special Forces teams have recreated entire villages to rehearse operations and anticipate potential problems. Even when there isn’t time or space for such elaborate preparations, Special Forces units may use a handy soccer field to go through operational movements. The Special Forces Qualification course culminates in the final phase, called, “Robin Sage.” This is a program based on a fictitious country that may span several domestic jurisdictions and involve numerous federal and local agencies. The objective is to create a fully immersible environment that closely simulates reality—the concept of “train like you fight.”

Special Forces emphasize rehearsal and simulation of operations to consider possible problem points. They look at details; they may have outside “enemy forces” engaging in role-playing scenarios to exploit potential weaknesses. And they use feedback from past missions.

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**From the Field:**

“On one particular “Robin Sage” mission, we were tasked with infiltrating a town and conducting a meeting with one of the local populace. We decided to operate as a three-man cell to avoid showing a large presence. During our planning and rehearsal phase, we sat in the actual vehicle we were going to use for the mission and talked through what actions everyone would take during as many situations we could imagine: appearance by local law enforcement, vehicle accident, detours, mechanical malfunction, traffic, etc. Then we packed all the equipment and gear we would be using and physically walked through those actions. We learned that what we thought was feasible while talking out aloud just didn’t pan out. We made adjustments to our plans and even decided to select more appropriate gear for this mission.

It paid off. As soon as we entered the town limits, we were followed by a local police cruiser. We went through our rehearsed actions and determined this met the criteria for aborting the mission. The flashing strobes and blue lights told us this was going to get worse. The police officers ordered us to exit the car with the intent to search us and the vehicle. Things moved fast from there, and long story short, we made it back to our team “alive.” What I can say is that later that night during the de-brief, the police officers involved in that scenario told us they would be changing the procedures they use to conduct traffic stops and were very grateful that this was only a training exercise and not reality. I thought to myself, ‘but that was reality’.”
Staffing is perhaps the most critical phase of the Special Forces cycle, because each team member depends on the others to make the right decisions under extreme stress. Although many people may think of military cadres as by-the-book stereotypes, Special Forces teams seek out highly motivated and qualified individuals who can improvise and accomplish their missions even when field conditions change. Every soldier gets basic training and indoctrination. Those who go on to become Special Forces members are recruited and encouraged to be creative individuals who can deal with ambiguity with often minimal guidance.

The tone is set during the extended training periods the troops experience. One hears little yelling and screaming at trainees—the emphasis is on calm decision-making. In addition to the notoriously rugged physical, weapons, and specialty training, Special Forces recruits are given ambiguous situations in which to work. The situations are psychological as well as physical challenges, and they may have little obvious military connection. For example, in one scenario, male recruits may be required to go into a perfume store to select the right kind for their “significant others.” Or they might be dropped in the woods and told to “run until they stop.” The point is to put them into awkward or unfamiliar circumstances to figure out how to succeed through ambiguity.

Special Forces team members—even team leaders—are evaluated and ranked by their peers. They place heavy emphasis on performance and on who they would want to have with them in tough situations. As Richardson puts it, “You don’t have to be drinking buddies with your team members, but you do want someone you can trust when the going gets rough.”

Team members gauge the person, not just the soldier. Though a team may have a consistent group of core members, they can be augmented by persons with specific skills to each mission. Teams may include males, females, or people from any ethnic group. So building effective, well-functioning teams is critical to success.
The emphasis on individual creativity extends to Special Forces uniforms and equipment. They often embellish their wear with personal touches. They can obtain non-standard equipment or modify standard issue. Depending on mission requirements, Special Forces might have clothing, weapons, or vehicles tailored to their needs. Often they will not look or act like regular soldiers.

In the business world, hiring managers pay much attention to education, past job experience, and technical qualifications. Given today’s computerized selection methods, people with resumes that don’t match keywords may not even be considered by a human being. But traditionally businesses have not taken, or perhaps felt they had, the time to evaluate potential hires under a variety of conditions.

That could be changing. Often business use internships, temp-to-hire, or trial schemes to evaluate potential employees. Inc. magazine recently reported on the pros and cons of “try-before-you-buy” hiring. It referenced an article in the New York Times on the subject, and it noted that these new “temp-to-hire” regimens intentionally put candidates under stressful situations—for example, one in which they had to complete a lot of work in a short time period. Inc. noted that these trials may not work for all kinds of positions—for instance, for sales that take a long time to develop or for executive positions for which the candidates have a long track record. Inc. and the Times also reported that candidates who have gone through such a process tend to remain with the company longer.

But such programs need to be designed carefully. Consider what you are trying to achieve: a team of qualified persons who can perform together effectively even when faced with uncertainly, stress, or chaos. So just having them complete a project, even a stressful one, may not give you the information you need.

Special Forces emphasize not just stress, but also ambiguity, in their hiring and training, to test an individual’s creativity and ability to improvise when needed.

From the Field:

“When I arrived at Camp Mackall in May 2004, I had only one objective: pass selection. That was the same goal of 150 other men who wanted to become Green Berets. We knew it would be one of the most physically and psychologically challenging phases of our lives, but we were clueless as to how that would specifically play out. Details on the course are guarded and often change after each training cycle. Aside from being in a specific place with specific gear, little guidance was offered. Boundaries were all self-imposed. As mentioned earlier, unlike other military courses in which you are being yelled at for being too weak or slow, the Special Forces instructors spoke in calm, almost disinterested tones.
At the end of the first three weeks, I was told to grab my gear and get on a bus, with no further instructions. One by one, more guys limped up the steps and found seats. The thirty of us who sat on that bus did not know whether we had even passed selection. We traded theories about what this bus ride meant. Finally, someone asked the bus driver where we were going. He said, “We’re heading back to Ft. Bragg. You guys made it. Get some sleep.” I realized that the people on board shared certain characteristics: we were all highly self-motivated and able to deal with ambiguity. I had witnessed terrific physical specimens fall by the wayside because they did not have the mindset for dealing with the unknown.

Furthermore, being part of a high performance team was paramount. Those who were not team players had been booted during all-important peer evaluations. In those, candidates were tasked to rate each other on whom they would desire to go with into combat. If your name appeared near the bottom, it was your time to go home. New peer evaluations took place after each major training phase and followed you through your entire course career. We all had our moments of darkness, but what the training cadre were looking for was consistency and the ability to adapt within different environments. The objective was to select people who could thrive in chaos and, in some cases, be creators of chaos.”
Field Marshall Helmuth von Moltke (the Elder) is credited with coining the axiom that “…no plan of operations extends with any certainty beyond the first contact with the main hostile force.” Perhaps not totally true, but as those who have read harrowing accounts of Special Forces missions know, chaos can indeed hold sway over the battlefield. The same can hold true for the marketplace. Innovative competitors can introduce disruptive technologies, products, or approaches. The economy can nosedive. Key employees can leave.

Here is where selecting the right people pays off. When chaos reigns, you need team members who can stay calm, mission-focused, but adaptable to the reality around them. This is why Special Forces test potential job candidates in ambiguous situations, to see if they can adapt under pressure in the absence of specific guidance.

Chaos demands creativity.

Special Operators use a mix of ancient practices, special tricks, and new technologies to survive and succeed in hostile environments. They start with the mission plan they created as a basis, then they make adjustments as required. It may be necessary to adjust mission goals, but the focus remains on achieving those goals unless it becomes absolutely impossible to do so. In extreme cases, surviving the mission becomes the preeminent objective.

For businesses, the ability to thrive through change is an essential characteristic of successful entrepreneurs. Some companies do this by continually introducing new technologies. Some companies are, themselves, major market disrupters, such as those that provide social media platforms.
Some may have to literally re-invent themselves in order to survive—a sort of productive reconstruction. But they need the same ability as Special Forces in remaining focused, calm, and adaptive to the realities of the marketplace.

Special Forces succeed through chaos by calmly adapting to ambiguity and change while continuing to focus on achieving mission goals.

From the Field:

“Chaos is the fluid nature of reality. It is not inherently an evil concept. I think of chaos as having too little information (ambiguity) while experiencing sensory overload. The result of mismanaging chaos is stress. Stress can create negative symptoms in human beings. In Special Forces we sometimes hear the phrase “stress inoculation.” By that we mean that Green Berets are more resilient to stress because we have been exposed to high doses of it during our selection process, and we have developed healthy management systems. Being a Green Beret means being a high performer and being able to come up with creative solutions to accomplishing the mission in the midst of chaos.

On my last trip to Afghanistan, our team was partnered with an Afghan Special Forces team. Over several months we developed a rewarding relationship by living and working together going after Taliban. When their tours of duty ended, we held an emotional ceremony, they left our camp, and we were partnered with a new Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) team. The rapport-building began immediately with introductions at a bountiful dinner of roasted goat and endless cups of chai.

The next morning we got a secured message from higher command that the ANSF team leader with whom we just had shared dinner was the brother of a high value target, who was known to have killed U.S. and coalition forces in the past. In addition, there was intelligence (albeit unverified) stating that this same guy was planning to conduct an insider attack on the Americans with whom he was working.
Needless to say, the following weeks were stressful. Did the ANSF team leader influence his whole team or just a select few? We had to play it cool and continue to develop rapport, train, share information and spend sleepless nights next to one or more battle-hardened Afghan Special Forces soldiers who might be plotting to kill us. It became apparent that we had to get this person replaced, in spite of the delicate political position we might face in doing so.

We still had to accomplish our mission sets in our area of responsibility; there were no time-outs. It got to the point that “leaving the wire” and going out on missions was more of a relief than eating dinner in the dining hut. Without going into specifics on how this dilemma resolved, we did replace the ANSF team leader, and in the process, we exploited his position to learn more about insurgent activity. So out of a totally unanticipated situation, we fashioned a win-win outcome through creative thinking.”
Evaluation: Immediacy, Candor, and Detail

Special Forces groups begin the review process immediately after completing an operation. The team leader may not even give members time to shed equipment and change clothes. Experiences are captured while the details—all the details—are fresh. They compare execution to planning and call out any discrepancies in accomplishments compared to goals. In particular, they note improvisations in tactics or equipment that seemed to work so that these changes can be recycled into the next planning phase—perhaps run up the line of command for inclusion into training doctrine.

One important feature is personal accountability. Team members “own” their mistakes and candidly discuss everyone’s performance. They are each rated by the group, not for purposes of placing blame, but to improve execution. Of course, over time performance is used in consideration of promotions or out-placement, but the emphasis is on honest evaluation for the good of the team and the mission.

Each unit’s experiences are then channeled up to higher headquarters. Here they are collected to assess overall impact to the Special Forces mission and perhaps to improve theater-wide performance based on lessons learned. Any necessary lessons learned or intelligence gained is disseminated as quickly as possible to other units for their use in mission planning.

Performance reviews in the business world have long been problematic. They are often focused on financial and employee performance. And they are too often seen as confrontational and dreaded by both employees and managers. *Inc.* has also reported that some companies have begun focusing on evaluating teams: That is, looking at how departments, not just individuals, perform against goals. *Inc.* cites the importance of allowing individuals to self-evaluate and to evaluate the performance of the team as a whole.
The review phase is seen as crucial to the success of the unit, and when lives are on the line, there is a premium placed on detail and openness. That’s because lessons learned are incorporated into future planning. Recreating mistakes can cost lives.

Special Forces place heavy emphasis on immediate, detailed evaluation of the mission so that even the smallest details and impressions are preserved. The team expects candor and accountability, not for punishment, but for potentially life-saving learning.

From the Field:

“Taliban don’t like the dark because we own the night. That also means we start our missions when our circadian rhythms are telling us it’s time to go to sleep. You perk up enough when things get interesting and the adrenaline surges, but by the next morning we get that battle lag. By the time we make it back to camp, all we want to do is eat, shower, and sleep. Special Forces pride themselves on enjoying the finer things in life while living in austere environments. Which is why like clockwork when enter the camp gate, our team leader comes up on the radio and tells everyone to get 100% accountability of their gear and go immediately to the operations center (OPSCEN) for de-brief and after action report (AAR). He continues, “That does **not** mean go take a shower, grab food, and show up in your slippers.”

This practice of conducting immediate evaluation is called, “hot-washing.”

The OPSCEN is small and poorly ventilated, so crowding a full A-Team of dirty, sweaty, tired, alpha males is not particularly appealing to anyone. But we do it anyway. We sit in a circle and go from one guy to the next talking through his perspective of the mission. Every time we do this, we learn that each of us sees different things than the other teammates—even if we were attached at the hip for the whole mission. Next, we go over deficits, both from the mission planning side and then individual performance during the mission. This is kept as objective as possible, and most of the time—if you are the one under the lens—you take it as a challenge to be the best at whatever it was you messed up and move on. Finally we talk through the learning points that we will sustain and infuse into our next planning cycle.

The team leader and intelligence members send their reports up to higher commend levels so that lessons learned get disseminated to all the other teams in country. Sometime later in the afternoon we get the luxury of that shower and rack time. But not until we’ve thoroughly evaluated the mission in as near real-time as possible.”
Conclusions

The Special Forces “Combat Lifecycle” mirrors the phases of the business lifecycle in many ways. But the unique ways in which they plan the war and the mission, staff their teams, execute their missions, and evaluate their actions can be instructive to businesses operating in a highly competitive marketplace. In particular, Special Forces:

- begin with a comprehensive picture of the wartime objectives, their roles, and how the mission fits in. Then they emphasize rehearsal and simulation of operations to consider possible problem points. They look at details, they may have outside “enemy forces” engaging in role-playing scenarios to exploit potential weaknesses. And they use feedback captured from past missions.

- place a premium on an individual’s creativity and ability to improvise when needed by testing their abilities to handle ambiguous situations.

- succeed through chaos by calmly adapting to ambiguity and change while continuing to focus on achieving mission goals.

- place heavy emphasis on immediate, detailed evaluation of the mission so that even the smallest details and impressions are preserved. Moreover, each member owns his or her actions. The team expects candor and accountability, not for punishment, but for potentially life-saving learning.