



THE TURMOIL OF IDENTITY CRISIS: SPECIAL FORCES ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

By John Brennan, Steve Marks, Ed Croot and Ron Granieri August 04, 2020
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Ron Granieri: Welcome to A Better Peace the War Room podcast. I'm **Ron Granieri** Professor of History at the Department of National Security and Strategy at the U.S. Army War College and Podcast Editor of the War Room. It's a pleasure to have you with us. Since the formation of the 10th Special Forces Group Airborne in 1952, there's been a certain mystique around Army Special Forces. By 1962 President Kennedy called their headgear, the green beret, "a symbol of excellence, a badge of courage, a mark of distinction in the fight for freedom." Even as the range and role of special operations forces has grown within the Army and in the other services, the Green Berets maintain a special hold on the public imagination, immortalized in song by Barry Sadler and on film by John Wayne. Fame however is not the same as public understanding and even the most self-confident organizations experience identity crises as they age. Today, the Green Berets struggle with both public misperceptions about their role and internal tensions over their identity. Understanding and resolving this identity crisis should be of interest to anyone interested in effective special forces as a vital element in national strategy. Our guests **Major General John Brennan**, **Brigadier General Steve Marks** and **Colonel Ed Croot** are deeply familiar with both the role of the Green Berets and the challenges facing them going forward and join us today to discuss the nature of the identity crisis and possible solutions. To introduce our guests, Major General John Brennan is the Commanding General of 1st Special Forces Command. He has served in the special operations community since completing the Special Forces Qualification Course in 1995 and is a graduate of North Carolina State University, the Air Command and Staff College and the U.S. Army War College Fellows Program at University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. Brigadier General Steve Marks is the Deputy Commanding General of 1st Special Forces Command. The majority of his 28 years of service have been within special operations units and he is a graduate of the University of Missouri, the Army's Command and General Staff College, the Naval Postgraduate School and the U.S. Naval War College. Colonel Ed Croot is Special Forces Command's Chief of Staff. He is a Green Beret with 25 years of service in the Army and he recently completed a counter-terrorism and public policy fellowship at Duke University where he conducted research on the current culture and identity of the U.S. Special Forces. Welcome to A Better Peace, gentlemen.

RG: So, I want to start with a question for you General Marks if I may, who are the Green Berets?

SM: Well first of all I'd just like to say thank you very much for having us on your podcast. This is a great opportunity for us to one, highlight the great work of Colonel Ed Croot and what he worked on as part of his thesis for the War College. So, when you ask me what and who are the Green Berets, I would say that we are the nation's premier partnership force who specialize in the indigenous approach conducting operations by, with and through partnered forces. But for me personally, I go down and see the battalions and down at the company level and team level and when I talk to Green Berets, I have my own definition of who Green Berets are. So for me, Green Berets are quiet professionals. We are adaptive problem solvers, honorable warriors, masters of unconventional partnered operations all for a higher cause to free the oppressed. And so, I use that as a way to articulate for them, in my own terms, who we are and what we stand for. We were formed in 1952, out of the psychological warfare forces with some veterans of the 1st Special Service Force and Office of Strategic Services. We've involved, going all the way back to the Cold War, training anti-Soviet guerillas and Vietnam, we were instrumental in unconventional warfare and counterinsurgency operations and then most recently, in Afghanistan post 9/11 we were known as horse soldiers because of how we infiltrated and came in from the north of Afghanistan and conducted operations in the north. Our doctrinal missions are unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, security force assistance, counter-insurgency, counter-terrorism, direct action, counter-proliferation, special reconnaissance and preparation of the environment. So, a lot of core activities and so it's often hard to pinpoint exactly who we are. I think the chance for us to correct any of those misperceptions or misunderstandings is exactly what we are here to do. Myself, General Brennan and Colonel Croot. And that's why I think the fact that Colonel Croot was able to pinpoint that we were having an identity crisis and not only that oftentimes does the public get us wrong but often we get it wrong ourselves within our own community. And so, his efforts and his thesis of identifying the problem and then providing valuable solutions or recommendations has been instrumental for the overall community.

RG: Thank you, General. Let's turn to Colonel Croot. Based your research at the War College, what do you mean when you talk about an identity crisis? General Marks just listed a series of doctrinal missions. I suppose it shouldn't be surprising that an organization that has one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine possible doctrinal missions would have something of an identity crisis. But what do you mean by it based on your research?

EC: Yes, Dr. Granieri. I appreciate the opportunity as well and a long research project that I'm going to try to sum up in about three minutes. So, I think it's best to first start with what I saw personally as a professional Green Beret and I started to notice, it was unrecognizable, some things that I was hearing some of our younger Green Berets say. And as you heard General Marks mention, we are the premier partnership force but I had young sergeants and captains talking about unilateral operations and not valuing language and conversation, so I was concerned for about the last six or seven years that somehow we were losing our way. I then, as I went to the War College, they said, hey listen, at Duke, you need to pick a topic to research that you're passionate about and that can give back to your profession. And so, I was very passionate about this topic. I then started to read some articles that were mentioning identity crisis within special forces and then finally, when I read Lieutenant General Beaudette, the USASOC Commanding General's strategy in October of last year, he also said, hey we need to have a mindset change to get back to the strategic direction for what we need to be doing. And so, from

that point, I launched on looking at what is an identity crisis. Now, an identity crisis does not mean that something we can't recover from or it's irreversible by any means. It's very common. The definition of it is when there is a period of uncertainty or confusion that individuals or groups experience where their identity becomes somewhat insecure and it is usually due to a change in expectations of that group. And so, that was very recognizable to me. September 11th was a major strategic shift in which Green Berets were asked to go forward and conduct counterterrorism operations and at times, that became unilateral away from a partner. So, with that definition in mind, my research project ended up surveying 1,200 active duty Green Berets. The methodology and the design that Duke's PhD team helped me set up was to try and determine if we had misalignment between the 25 attributes and skills and missions that Green Berets are supposed to be able to conduct according to Title X law, our doctrine, and our policy, and the Green Berets themselves, their behaviors and beliefs. And so, we measured 25 of those archetypes and I found that 19 were misaligned to some degree in either Green Berets' beliefs or behaviors. So the audience can understand, I'll just give two quick examples. Language. We are directed by law to be able to have a language capability. 29% of the force don't believe that we need to have that skill and then a further 62% of our population are not maintaining that language. Another example: 34% reported beliefs that they are really not committed to a partnership approach and that it's often better to unilaterally accomplish that mission. And then another, final piece, hostage rescue. A skillset that other organizations are uniquely trained, manned and equipped to do, our force, 25% said yes, that's an appropriate mission for us. So, the final piece is, my research finding was that we have 3 sub-identities at work within Green Berets. 26% direct action, and what that means is that's more of the we do hostage rescue, it's better if we do things unilaterally, we don't value the partnership approach or language. A legacy identity which was about 28% and that group harkened back to pre-9/11 and that the Green Beret mission is simply to be forward, partnered, training forces and to be ready for a conflict role for unconventional warfare. And then finally, and I think this is a very positive sign, 46% or almost half of our force, I call them the modern identity, they do align with all 25 archetypes and they understand our modern role and what the NDS or the National Defense Strategy is asking us to do which is to be persistently, present, forward, competing daily with our partners against Russia, China, Iran and DPRK. And so, that's a good sign. So, the question then becomes, is there an identity crisis? I claim that there is and finally, that it is a good sign that about half of our force is there. So, the question is harkened for our command what we do about the other two identities or the other 50% of the force.

RG: I have to ask you one question about your study. How much of the feedback that you got from Green Berets was from written surveys versus were you able to conduct any interviews with young or experienced Green Berets?

EC: Yes, I was. It's a great question. It was a 44-question survey and then at the end of course the last question was, what else would you like to add to this? And of the 1,200 Green Berets that responded, I had probably about 250 that asked for follow-on discussions and what-not. And in addition, they produced over 100 pages of written feedback talking about their feelings on this problem.

RG: Fascinating. Very good. Thank you, Colonel Croot. General Brennan, I want to turn to you as someone with deep experience and the man in charge. Do you agree with Colonel Croot's findings? How did we get to this identity crisis if such exists from your perspective?

JB: Yes, I absolutely agree with Ed's findings. I wish he had done this survey back in the 90s frankly. Because we are really back to the future and we've had these micro identities since I was a team leader back in 3rd Special Forces Group in the 90s. You had folks, their identity was based on their team's mission. So, if you were an SR or a DA team, you were focused with special reconnaissance and direct action and the partnership piece was kind of an afterthought. And so, there was a bit of a difference in culture and how folks were training. The hard standard was always unconventional warfare and we would get back to that but based on a team's mission guidance letter, that's what they put their efforts into. And frankly, I had commanders that told me, hey, we speak two languages here, 556 and 762 being the caliber of our weapons. Never tell your partners everything they need to know because you will have to come back one day and potentially kill them. So, that kind of identity permeated in certain sects at the team level all the way up to battalion and group level. I totally agree with Ed's project. Now we have the data to back up what we think we already knew and then really the last 20 years of counterterrorism, we had to modernize and we had to adjust how we did business for the last 20 years to focus on counterterrorism, Al-Qaeda, with combat operations going on simultaneously to kill terrorists in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, as well as the Far East and the Philippines. So, that's been our focus. We modernized, we've learned a lot during the last 20 years, what works, what does not and we've, I think, adjusted our approach to that end. And now we have to kind of come back to what we were doing in the 90s which was peacetime competition, to understand the NDS threats that are out there and really provide that information to decision makers while simultaneously working with partners to be the partner of choice and to deter conflict in the future.

RG: General Brennan, your experience as a team leader. You got at a very interesting point there about the tension between the Green Berets' role as a trainer, a partner and as a direct actor. Obviously, it's a problem for a lot of educators in any kind of conversation. You have to be really good at the subject in order to teach it, but then once you try to teach it to someone, if you think it's important that something gets done, it's very easy to become frustrated with your students, if you were, that they're not doing the work and just to do it yourself. How did you as a team leader and how do Green Berets in general try to deal with the idea that yes, the mission is important but if it's to deal with a partner, that sometimes you have to let the partner either succeed or fail?

JB: That's a very good question because we are really selective and trained as type A personalities, so failure is probably the thing that our folks fear most in their life. And really, it's the leaders' jobs to keep the main thing the main thing. So, if the most important thing about our action is that our partners are successful, that's what has to happen. We cannot be the ones going through the door first. The bigger objective may be political and it may not be that tactical act right at that moment and we have to, as leaders, tell our subordinates that and make sure they understand that and because doing something that makes sense tactically might be gratifying at that time, you could actually fail the overall mission which is to make your partner successful or to keep the U.S. from being dragged into a conflict or to be able to obfuscate our hand in a specific operation. Does that make sense?

RG: It sure does. I can understand the challenge, especially, it is an interesting paradox that the very things that we train Green Berets to be able to do and to be, to be proactive, to be problem solvers, to remember what the problem is that you are actually trying to solve is a challenge. And that leads me back to you, Colonel Croot. Do you find that there are structural reasons for this identity crisis that have led us to where we are today?

EC: Yes. And I think again a little bit of context to answer that question. When I got all of these results, I struggled for about a month and half with what the force was telling me and I took a cut at it. Duke PhD team immediately responded to me that hey, listen you're confusing your cause, effect and your problem. And so, we really need to go back to the cultural and behavioral and identity sciences to help make sense of what you've found. There're some works out there, Dr. Schein from MIT widely recognized as a group cultural expert that most other behavioral scientists refer to and then a team named Fisher and Weakley. The two concepts that we need to understand is number one, when you talk about identity, ethic and culture, it's really important to understand that an individual's identity and ethic is formed as they are entering into adulthood and it's formed by the adults in their life as they were raised, and identity and ethic are also very very hard to change as the person gets older. Second concept is the concept of socialization. So, when an individual is coming into an organization, a culture, a group, they are going to go through three stages. First, pre-arrival, second, encounter, and third, metamorphosis. Now, we overlay in the military, recruiting base over pre-arrival, training and education base over encounter and operational base over metamorphosis. And so, when we look at those three stages, phases, the first thing that catches the attention of the scientists is wow, you are socializing across three different two-star commands. So, USAREC, where we recruit from, the Special Warfare Center, SWC, we call it here at Fort Bragg, our training and education base, and then third, when they get to General Brennan's organization the 1st Special Forces Command, our operations base. And so, on the first part of this, the recruiting message then has to be absolutely authentic to what you do because that's the type of person you are going to attract in their core identity and ethic. And so, if your recruiting message is not authentic, it will only cause confusion for the individual and problems for the organization later. And I just did a quick look, I did spend two years in the United States Army Recruiting Command, and so I looked back at the current message and I absolutely saw we were overrepresenting direct action in our recruiting message and underrepresenting that partnership role. And so, the next piece of this, and final piece is if you have differing identities throughout your organizations, there's going to be a problem when you are socializing individuals. So, let's take one of those staff sergeants that's only doing one tour of duty with special forces because he's disenfranchised if you will and getting out, that called and wanted to talk to me on the phone. He explained his experience like this: I was recruited to special forces to conduct direct action. When I got to the Q Course, the Qualification Course at Fort Bragg, I was a little confused as I went through and I learned about partnership and language and with and through approaches and actually had different instructors telling me different things. So, one instructor representing yes, it's about partnership. Another representing it's about unconventional warfare. Third, yeah, we do direct action. I only fired my weapon twice in the entire year-long Q Course so I was confused. Then when I got to my unit, I had a team sergeant that talked about direct action only, a team leader that talked about our role in competing with Russia and China when we go forward on our missions and then my company commander talked about unconventional warfare as our mission. And so, I ask you, Colonel Croot, who am I supposed to be? And what he described, when you apply that quote over what I saw in the research, you can see how if he was recruited direct action, that's what he was expecting. When he got to the Qualification Course and he didn't experience that, he was confused. When he got finally to his organization, he then gravitated to the like-identity of his direct action team sergeant and that's where he sought culture and comfort in a sub-identity, not the overall identity of the organization.

RG: Interesting. That is fascinating and we could have a whole podcast discussion on the question of recruiting command and what kind of messages are used to recruit but I'll set that aside for a second because I want to go to you, General Marks. Based on what Colonel Croot was just talking about is if there are problems with messaging, if there are problems with the presentation of the force, what role can or should the uniform senior leaders and the civilian leadership play in helping the Green Berets to make clear what their identity is and to overcome this current crisis?

SM: As Ed just mentioned, the employment of the force is a big part of reinforcing an identity, either good or bad. We can say all day that we need a modern SF identity to do what our nation is asking of us. But if we are constantly asked do nothing but counterterrorism or direct action strikes, that identity goes out the window pretty fast. One thing is, making sure we are given clear and achievable goals that fit within that modern special forces' identity framework, so our forces don't get pulled too far outside our lanes and where we provide the most value. We are already seeing this happening in places at Special Operations Command and U.S. Army Special Operations Command where our senior leaders are really starting to scrutinize the requests that are asking for special forces to either partner up with certain host nations and we are seeing that they are scrutinizing those missions and making sure that we are the right fit and we are the right force of choice. I believe that we are already moving in the right direction.

RG: That's good. And General Brennan, as the man at the top here, how do you see this specific role of the leadership of the special forces to shape this identity crisis, to deal with it?

JB: Well, I think first what we have to, and Ed's data has been invaluable in doing it and Steve has also helped me with the messaging to the troops as he has already talked about. So, we talk and we go out and engage with all the troops regardless of the formation. We have to have a common vision of who we are and what we are for. That goes from the recruiting piece all the way through onboarding once they are in their unit of action, all the way through to retirement really. So, who we are is quiet professionals, problem solvers who excel in ambiguity, and we are the partners of choice. Regardless if you are a Special Forces NCO, civil affairs officer, PSYOP NCO, that identity has to be the same and commonly understood by everybody. And then what we are for—we partner with resistance forces. We either create a resistance force to overthrow an occupying power or we enable a force to prevent someone from overthrowing them. At the end of the day, you boil it down, that's what we do. We use all the tools we have available to do that. And so just fixing that common baseline of understanding, I think is hugely helpful and then it requires repetition. And then we have to talk about how we are modernizing and really, I think it's back to the future, really, because when I first came in the Army, the Soviet Union was still around so competing with a great power is nothing new. And we play a key role in that and we have to message to our troops that we are vital across the entire spectrum of conflict whether we are just competing, or we are up. We have to train for large-scale combat operations at the end of the day but hopefully we never get there, and we are the force that helps prevent us from getting there and we are also the nation's value proposition because we can do things with a very small footprint with partners that don't require the U.S. government to send 18-year-old kids in tanks overseas to do. So, we're the means to that end. And I think we got to just keep continually messaging that to our troops. And they are seeing that in the types of missions we are getting because they are changing. Our footprints in Afghanistan and Iraq are shrinking which is providing us the opportunity to go back to what we used to do which was more the peacetime competition role.

RG: Right. Well, and as we approach the end of this conversation, believe it or not, some final thoughts. Colonel Croot, I want to turn back to you and say after all your research, obviously if people want to know exactly what you think, they should read your report after they listen to this podcast, but what is the message that you have for the Army and for the Joint Force based on what you've learned?

EC: Yes, sir. I think first and foremost, when we talk about identity crisis across the military, organizations, they go through this. There will be changes in expectations of them that they have to keep evolving toward. And so, I think the Army went through this 2010-2011. When you had tankers and artillery men not on their weapons systems but patrolling streets in Iraq, Afghanistan, etc. And the Army identified that and had to go through this process to modernize and make sure that the culture and identity of the organization started to move in the right direction. That's when they did the new series of ADPs. ADP 1 was created to define the Army. So, this is something that is important to all Army and Joint Forces and something that leaders need to keep a pulse on, number one. Number two, I cannot thank my leadership enough. There was not a single hesitation from General Beaudette, General Brennan, General Robison, General Marks in terms of conducting this research, having the access to our formation and asking the hard questions. And that leadership courage is critical for an organization to be able to keep the pulse on its own organization. So, you have to have that. General Clarke at SOCOM has also looked at this and said, hey, I think there's a message for the Navy Seals, I think there's a message for our brother Marines and MARSOC, that they also should probably take a deep look at their culture and identity. And then my final message is going to be for my fellow students, and it's not just at the Army War College or like-institutions but also to our entire professional development system and any officer, NCO or warrant officer that's going to embark on a research project, this is going to be meaningful. The research has driven change and that's what you asked me to do up front was pick something you are passionate about and what you think there is a problem about and so thanks to at the very beginning, Tim Nichols and the Duke team. Dr. Bolan and Phil Evans at the Army War College. You and Dr. Whitt at the War Room. You have provided all of the tools necessary for me to ask the hard questions and conduct valuable research that's going to help our force. For the other students out there, I encourage you to invest that year when you are in education to be a meaningful exploration of your profession because if you do a good job at it, there are leaders ready and willing to listen.

RG: That's fantastic. Thanks, Ed. We always appreciate the plug for both War Room but also the War College. That's a good distillation of what we hope officers come away from their War College experience with. Turning to you, General Marks. What message do you have for Special Forces Command, for all of the service people and units under your command?

SM: Well, so we are 1st Special Forces Command so we are the United States Army Special Operations Division. A lot of folks don't realize that we're 23,000 strong, we are 11 brigades and 47 battalions. So, we are the Army's largest division. We are uniquely organized, man-trained and resourced to operate in such complex and ambiguous environments. So, there are soldiers from three interdependent army special operations regiments that operate in small teams around the globe strengthening relationships with our partners and our allies. So, sometimes our name belies us a bit because of the fact that a lot of folks don't think about civil affairs and psychological operations as being included in the ARSOF division. But they are a valuable, valuable partner and they are part of the team and they achieved the same great success on the battlefield and with our partner forces across the globe. At any given time, pre-the new reality or

the new normal of COVID, we were operating around 3,000 soldiers from 1st Special Forces Command deployed throughout 70 different nations. I think as of Monday, we are around 52 different nations with just about 2,000 folks, soldiers deployed globally. So, we have some additional complexities, of course, when it comes to the question of identity. I would argue that the PSYOPS or the psychological operations and civil affairs formations have some of the same issues with propose, identity, culture as their special forces' counterparts. And so, our command is looking at all of our forces, we are a multi-dimensional team that amplifies the value of each of the regiments by placing our folks onto cross-functional teams and letting the strengths of each team shine. It's important that all of our forces are moving in the same direction with the same purpose and culture. That's why I think what Colonel Croot has identified and worked so hard for the last twelve and maybe even longer than that. His thesis has really shined a light on a potential problem. I think the fact that he recognized it early and was able to provide some solutions and that our senior leaders are listening to those recommendations that Colonel Croot provided is invaluable. And thank you very much for this opportunity.

RG: Oh, you bet sir. And General Brennan, I want to give you the last word. What does the future hold for Special Forces Command and for the Green Berets?

JB: Well, Ron, I think the future is very bright. Our forces are more in demand now than ever before despite the drawdowns in the combat zones. We've got nothing but requests for really things that we used to do but also for some unique things that we've never done before to help with our nation's security. In that vein, to do those things, we are modernizing all of our regiments. We have what are called DCRs, DOTMLPF Change Requests in, to restructure and reequip all of our formations to make them more pertinent in an A-to-AD environment to fight near-peer competitors. We also have a critical role in helping national leaders understand what's going on at the grassroots level all across the globe so we can compete and win if it comes to that. Obviously, we will do everything we can to deter large-scale combat operations for everyone's benefit, but at the end of the day, we are modernizing and moving forward and carrying the same message of who we are and what we are for across all of our formations so that we are a cohesive fighting unit. And really the power of our force is the power of combinations, so the partners we bring to bear across the joint interagency, intergovernmental and coalition are something that other divisions in the Army do not do. And that is what our value proposition to the nation is. We bring partners to bear at the right time and place to have the outsized effects.

RG: Alright, well thank you very much, General Brennan. Thank you, General Marks and Colonel Croot for joining us today on A Better Peace for this conversation. Unfortunately, we are out of time for today, but I hope that this conversation will inspire the listeners to explore these topics further and search up the very excellent research of Colonel Croot. Thank you to the three of you gentlemen for joining us today on A Better Peace and thanks to all of you out there for listening in. Please send us your comments on this program and all of our programs, send us suggestions for future programs. We are always interested in hearing what you think. We ask please, that you consider subscribing to A Better Peace if you have not already and also if you subscribe, to rate and review this podcast on the podcatcher of choice which helps others to find us. We are always interested in hearing from you and we're always interested in expanding our audience for all of our conversations. Until next time, from the War Room, I'm Ron Granieri.

