

## Chapter 22

# ROLE OF THE THEATER SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT

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### Introduction

A Theater Special Operations Command (TSOC) is a one- or two-star subordinate, unified command of US Special Operations Command. TSOCs perform broad, continuous missions uniquely suited to special operations forces (SOF) and the capabilities they bring to the fight. The secretary of defense has assigned operational control of the TSOCs and their attached SOF tactical units to their respective geographic combatant commanders via the Global Force Management Implementation Guidance.<sup>1</sup>

While the geographic combatant command-aligned TSOCs vary widely in their task unit organization, and day-to-day operational activities, all TSOCs incorporate functional medical staffs designed to support and advise the commander on all aspects of health service support. The role of the physician assistant (PA) in the medical staff varies from senior primary care clinician, to deputy surgeon, to medical operations officer, or any combination thereof.

While there may be some slight variations in each TSOC (mainly due to manning, assigned forces, and geographic responsibility), the PA duties will be inherently similar. Filling a TSOC PA position is both rewarding and challenging. The assignment provides a unique joint force opportunity for the tactical PA to expand their operational acumen, and serve in a post that often bears both operational and strategic importance.

## **Unit Structure**

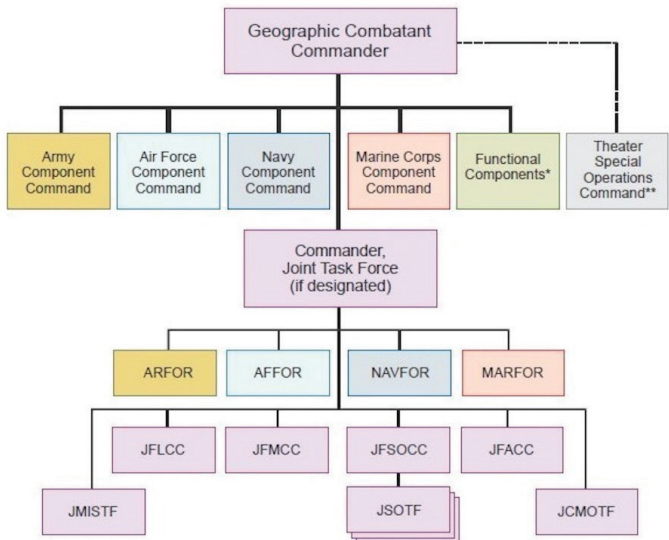
Figure 22-1 shows an example of a TSOC organizational structure, although they vary. Each TSOC has a unique set of component commands, but the command relationship between the TSOC, US Special Operations Command, and the geographic combatant command remains the same (Figure 22-2).<sup>2</sup>

In some cases, the PA is assigned as the command surgeon, without a physician or additional deputy on staff (eg, Special Operations Command North). As the TSOC surgeon, the PA is medical advisor to the commander. The PA is also responsible for the entire medical directorate along with the previously stated responsibilities. The TSOC PA position is rewarding and career enhancing, unique within the PA (65D) career field. The TSOC PA for Special Operations Command Africa serves as the command PA and the deputy surgeon for clinical services and any other patient-related issues. Another medical officer, the operations deputy surgeon, is the lead medical planner.

For example, within Special Operations Command Africa, the command PA provides the “care there” clinical focus—honing in on clinical operations on the continent of Africa. A second PA (a US Army Reserve officer) works in the surgeon cell and focuses on “care here”—specifically in-garrison medicine and preservation of the force and family. This second PA position is not part of the baseline manning document and may not be filled. As a result, the command or TSOC PA must be familiar with all clinical duties, because they may have to assume both roles at any time.

## **Supervision**

TSOC PAs traditionally practice medicine as general medical officers or within their trained specialties. The TSOC surgeon typically supervises these officers.<sup>3-5</sup> Depending on the unit’s organizational structure, the TSOC PA may oversee other assigned or attached PAs, special operations medics, and additional medical and human performance enablers (eg, preventive medicine personnel and a preservation of the force and family team). Sometimes, the TSOC PA may be the senior medical staff member, requiring an intermediate



\* Functional component commanders report to the establishing JFC (GCC or CJTF).  
 \*\* CDRTSOC may also function as a JFSOCC and/or commander of a JSOTF, JMISTF, and/or a JCMOTF.

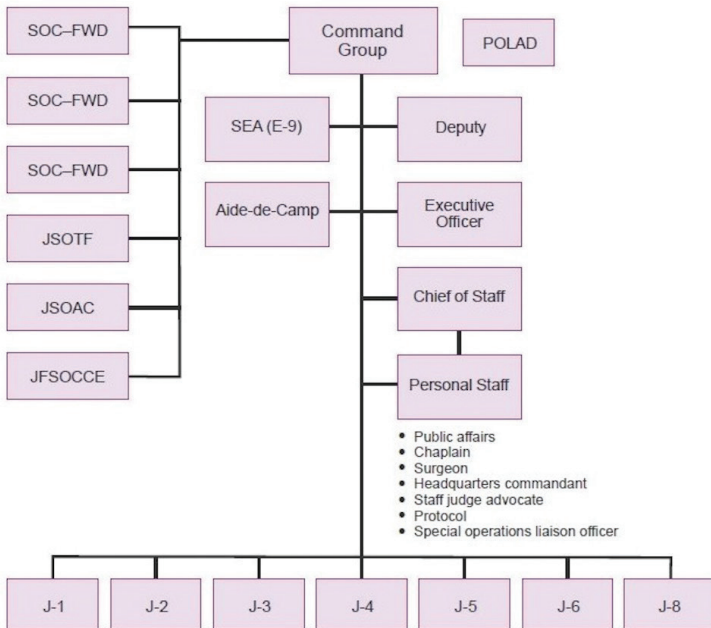
Legend

AFFOR	Air Force forces	JFSOCC	joint special operations component commander
ARFOR	Army forces	JMISTF	joint military information support task force
CDRTSOC	commander, theater special operations component	JSOTF	joint special operations task force
CJTF	commander, joint task force	MARFOR	Marine Corps forces
GCC	geographic combatant commander	NAVFOR	Navy forces
JCMOTF	joint civil-military operations task force		
JFACC	joint force air component commander		
JFC	joint force commander	—————	combatant command (command authority)
JFLCC	joint force land component commander	- - - - -	operational control
JFMCC	joint force maritime component commander	—————	as designated

**Figure 22-1.** A notional organization chart that demonstrates the command structure and relationships of the different directorates in a Theater Special Operations Command. The surgeon falls under the personal staff (or special staff).

Reproduced from: US Department of Defense. *Special Operations*. DOD; 2014. Joint Publication 3-05, Figure III-2.

rater on official evaluations. In most TSOCs, the PA’s rater will be the TSOC command surgeon, and the senior rater will be the TSOC chief of staff or TSOC commander.<sup>2</sup>



Legend

J-1	manpower and personnel directorate of a joint staff	JFSOCCE	joint special operations command and control element
J-2	intelligence directorate of a joint staff	JSOAC	joint special operations air component
J-3	operations directorate of a joint staff	JSOTF	joint special operations task force
J-4	logistics directorate of a joint staff	POLAD	political advisor (Department of State)
J-5	plans directorate of a joint staff	SEA	senior enlisted advisor
J-6	communications system directorate of a joint staff	SOC-FWD	special operations command-forward
J-8	force structure, resource, and assessment directorate of a joint staff		

**Figure 22-2.** A notional organization chart that demonstrates the command relationships within a geographic combatant command. The geographic combatant commander has operational control over the Theater Special Operations Command.

Reproduced from: US Department of Defense. *Special Operations*. DOD; 2014. Joint Publication 3-05, Figure III-3.

## **Roles and Responsibilities**

### ***Primary Care Manager***

The PA is responsible for the routine care of TSOC headquarters staff and their families. Duties may include functions such as facilitating completion of everyday medical readiness requirements and conducting routine physical examinations, sick call, and referral management. The PA often creates and maintains a deployable medical package (a modular, lightweight equipment set) for use in providing medical support for short-notice missions in their area of responsibility.

### ***Deputy Command Surgeon***

As the executive officer to the TSOC command surgeon, the PA is responsible for deputy director-level engagements and serves as a director in the surgeon's absence.

### ***Human Performance Coordinator***

The PA leads and facilitates the human performance team, which is made up of individuals in a variety of subspecialties, such as physical therapists, strength and conditioning coaches, athletic trainers, performance dietitians, and behavioral health specialists.

### ***Medical Planner***

The PA is the lead for health service support on operational planning teams, which develop operational and strategic policies and plans. In this role, the PA coordinates with higher and adjacent headquarters' medical staff. The PA also advises and reviews subordinate unit concepts of operation for both risks to mission and risk to force. Focus areas include medical support packages, the type of care available in the local hospitals, the level of care available on the mission, and the medical equipment needed.

### ***Medical Exercise Planner/Scenario Controller***

The PA serves as the lead medical exercise planner for joint and multinational special operations exercises. Duties include developing

plans, determining resource requirements, and executing complex medical scenarios. At the end of each exercise, the PA provides relevant feedback to the training audience.

## **Requirements**

The requirements to serve as a TSOC PA are the following:

- National certification and good standing with the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants.
- Eligible for credentials at a servicing military medical treatment facility.
- Current in all skills mandated by the individual critical task lists.
- Rank of major (recommended).
- Possess outstanding written and oral communication skills.

## **Desired Skills and Attributes**

Desired skills and attributes of a TSOC PA include the following:

- Top secret-sensitive compartmentalized information security clearance.
- Graduate of Intermediate Level Education.
- Knowledge and experience in the training and scope of practice of special operations medics working throughout the joint force.
- Working understanding of the geographic area of responsibility, including relevant historical and current events, goals, opportunities, threats, military structures, and organizations.
- Working knowledge of US special operations core activities and the nuances of medical support to these operations.
- Understanding of the US Transportation Command and Defense Health Agency medical care, evacuation infrastructure, capabilities, and processes across the geographic area of responsibility.
- Knowledge of the capabilities, limitations, strengths, and weakness of joint force deployable medical treatment capabilities (eg, forward resuscitative surgical team, ground surgical team, emergency resuscitation surgical team, special operations surgical team, and special operations resuscitation team).
- Expertise in tactical combat casualty care.

- Working knowledge of the Joint Trauma System clinical practice guidelines, fundamentals of damage control resuscitation, and prolonged field care.

## **Training**

- Joint Special Operations Medical Orientation Course
- NATO Special Operations Medical Planning and Support Course
- Flight surgeon and dive medical officer certifications
- Other recommendations by geographic area of responsibility
  - Operational Clinical Infectious Disease Course (3-day course)
  - Tropical Medicine Course (Special Operations Command Africa, either a 5-day or 1-month course)
  - Medical Management of Chemical and Biological Casualties Course and Medical Management of Radiologic Casualties Course (Special Operations Command North)

## **Recommended Certifications**

- Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation Instructor
- Advanced Life Support
- Pediatric Advanced Life Support
- Advanced Trauma Life Support

## **Opportunities and Experiences**

- Opportunity to engage, liaise, and learn from the whole US special operations joint force as well as partner and allied nation SOF.
- Broadening opportunity—working directly at the operational level and serving as a vital link between strategic policy and the “doers” at the tactical level.
- Geographic area of operations focus—opportunity to gain specific knowledge and expertise in the foreign policy goals, opportunities, and threats to a particular geographic area.

## **Lessons Learned**

TSOC PA hours are often long, with many weekends spent on call as SOF continue their missions across the globe. TSOC PAs must be

versatile and proficient in their clinical skills. They must be adept at communicating across multiple platforms, and with commanders and operators at all levels. The position will challenge TSOC PAs in the areas of casualty evacuation, medical evacuation, communication, and logistics. The mission seldom slows, so excellent time management skills that enable a reasonable family–work life balance are critical. If a TSOC PA knows something that may be important to the mission, they must speak up; if they do not know something, it is their duty to ask. Lives are often at stake, and as a professional, the PA must always place the soldier and the mission before personal pride.

## **Tips for Success**

These tips for success can set up a rewarding tour:

- PAs should understand the operational environment and help the command team understand the medical risks. They should recommend risk reduction and mitigation activities that do not adversely affect the overall mission.
- Medical counterparts across the regionally aligned forces must be identified and integrated into each mission. If their supporting contributions are not planned and incorporated into the medical objectives they can hinder progress.
- Medical objectives must nest within command priorities. While seemingly obvious, medical lines of effort sometimes do not support directed priorities and threaten the credibility, resourcing, and relevance of the TSOC medical staff.
- PAs should always seek to expand and reinforce their medical knowledge at every opportunity.
- It is important to balance the requirement to provide primary medical care for patients with the operational and staff aspects of the TSOC PA job.

## **Conclusion**

The TSOC PA is a very fast-paced and challenging position, albeit extremely rewarding. The position provides an excellent opportunity to straddle both the clinical and operational worlds of special operations. PAs will likely serve in both a health care delivery and primary trainer



capacity, but also be heavily involved in operationalizing SOF medicine across the joint force. Special operations, under the TSOC proponent, have certain mission relevance as they are constantly engaged in all facets of special operations, across the full spectrum of military operations. The PA position offers a broadening opportunity, and a chance to serve in an operational-level joint headquarters, working alongside some of the finest officers and noncommissioned officers across both the joint SOF, and allied or partner nation SOF.

## **References**

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