



November 2024

SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES

Additional Oversight Could Help Mitigate High-Risk Training Accidents

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-106321](#), a report to Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

SOF personnel prepare to accomplish challenging missions by performing high-risk training activities. However, serious accidents involving SOF personnel have raised questions about the safety of these activities.

Senate Report 117-130 includes a provision for GAO to review SOF training accidents. This report examines trends from fiscal years 2012 through 2022 in reported on-duty, non-combat accidents, including training accidents, involving SOF personnel. The report also describes GAO's assessment of the extent to which (1) SOCOM has developed an approach to effectively oversee SOF high-risk training, and (2) the SOF service components have addressed SOCOM's oversight requirements for high-risk training.

GAO analyzed accident data from fiscal years 2012 through 2022; reviewed training, risk management, and safety documents; and interviewed officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making six recommendations including that SOCOM analyze safety data to identify high-risk training areas, re-evaluate its training assessment program, and establish milestones for the four SOF service component commands to complete updates to their policies that include SOCOM's high-risk training oversight requirements. DOD agreed with the recommendations.

View [GAO-25-106321](#). For more information, contact Diana Moldafsky at (202) 512-2987 or MoldafskyD@gao.gov.

November 2024

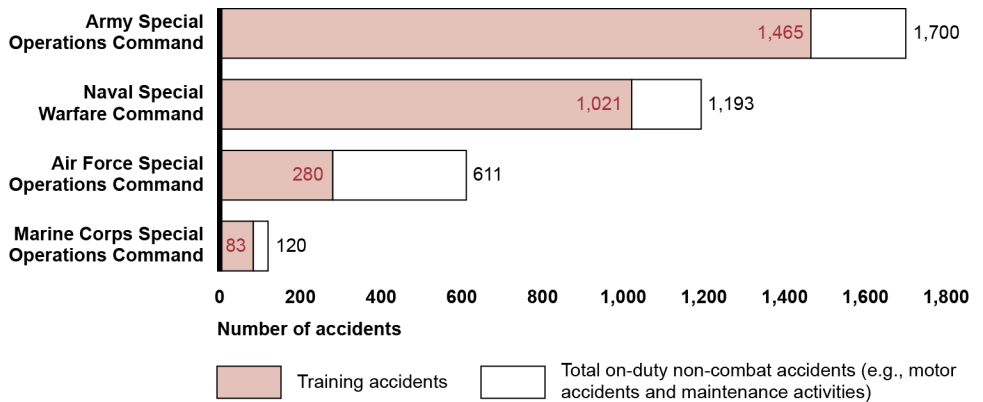
SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES

Additional Oversight Could Help Mitigate High-Risk Training Accidents

What GAO Found

About 80 percent of the over 3,600 reported on-duty, non-combat accidents involving special operations forces (SOF) personnel occurred during training activities in fiscal years 2012 through 2022, according to military service safety center data. About 40 percent of the total reported training accidents occurred in two high-risk training areas, parachute training and combat dive training. Also, the data show that over 80 percent of training accidents were reported as due to human error. Factors that were commonly present and contributed to these accidents included failure to adhere to training standards and complacency.

Reported Number of On-Duty, Non-Combat and Training Accidents Involving Special Operations Forces Personnel, Fiscal Years 2012-2022



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-25-106321

Note: Active-duty personnel (approximate): Army: 36,000; Navy: 11,000; Air Force: 17,000; Marine Corps: 3,500.

U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) established a formal program to oversee SOF high-risk training to increase standardization and help mitigate risk. The command designated seven training areas as high risk in 2022 but has not analyzed accident trends in those training areas nor in other areas that could be high risk, according to officials. As a result, SOCOM may miss an increase in issues related to safety within training programs that are not already designated high risk. Further, SOCOM has not fully implemented a key oversight component of its formal program that standardizes SOF training activities to help mitigate risk. SOCOM plans to expand the program's scope, but the command has not reevaluated its ability to accomplish an expansion and identify resources for this program. As a result, SOCOM is not positioned to ensure that the SOF service components are mitigating safety risks in their high-risk training programs.

GAO found that the four SOF service components varied in addressing SOCOM's seven oversight requirements for high-risk training in their respective policies. But none fully addressed all seven or had established milestones to do so. By not establishing milestones for the SOF service components, SOCOM does not have reasonable assurance of an effective approach to safety with standardized oversight across the service components to mitigate training risks.

Contents

Letter		1
	Background	4
	GAO Analysis Shows Most Reported Non-Combat Accidents Involving SOF Personnel Occurred during Training and Were Caused by Human Error	9
	SOCOM Has Not Performed Key Analysis and Completed Observations to Effectively Oversee Its High-Risk Training Program	22
	SOF Service Components Have Not Yet Fully Implemented SOCOM's Oversight Requirements for High-Risk Training	27
	Conclusions	34
	Recommendations for Executive Action	34
	Agency Comments	35
Appendix I	Objectives, Scope, and Methodology	37
Appendix II	Reported Number of Class A Through D Training Accidents Involving Special Operations Forces by Country, Fiscal Years 2012-2022	46
Appendix III	Comments from the Department of Defense	48
Appendix IV	GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments	51
Tables		
	Table 1: Key Department of Defense (DOD) and Military Service Responsibilities for Accident Reporting, Training, and Safety for Special Operations Forces (SOF)	7
	Table 2: Department of Defense (DOD) Accident Classes, Fiscal Years 2012 through 2022	8
	Table 3: U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) Oversight Requirements for High-Risk Training for Special Operations Forces Service Components	28

Table 4: Extent That Policies of Special Operations Forces' Service Component Commands Addressed SOCOM's Oversight Requirements for High-Risk Training	29
Table 5: Reported Number of Special Operations Forces Class A through D Training Accidents Involving Personnel by Country, Fiscal Years 2012–2022	46

Figures

Figure 1: U.S. Special Operations Command Structure	5
Figure 2: Seven High-Risk Training Areas Designated by U.S. Special Operations Command	6
Figure 3: Reported Number of Class A through D On-Duty, Non-Combat and Training Accidents Involving Special Operations Forces Personnel by Service Component, Fiscal Years 2012–2022	9
Figure 4: Reported Number of Class A through D Training Accidents Involving Special Operations Forces Personnel, Fiscal Years 2012–2022	11
Figure 5: Reported Number of Class A through D Training Accidents Involving Special Operations Forces Personnel within and Outside the United States, Fiscal Years 2012–2022	12
Figure 6: Reported Number of Class A and B Training Accidents Involving Special Operations Forces and the Resulting Military Deaths, Fiscal Years 2012–2022	13
Figure 7: Percentage of Reported Class A through D Training Accidents Involving Special Operations Forces Personnel by Service Component, Fiscal Years 2012–2022	14
Figure 8: Reported Number of Class A through D Training Accidents Involving Special Operations Forces Personnel by Training Category, Fiscal Years 2012–2022	15
Figure 9: Reported Number of Class A through D Training Accidents Involving Special Operations Forces Personnel by Service Component, Fiscal Years 2012–2022	16
Figure 10: Present and Contributing Human Error Factors Cited in Reported Class A and B Accidents Involving U.S. Army, U.S. Navy, and U.S. Marine Corps Special Operations Forces Personnel, Fiscal Years 2012–2022	20

Abbreviations

AFSOC	U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command
ASD SO/LIC	Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict
DOD	Department of Defense
MARSOC	U.S. Marine Forces Special Operations Command
NSW	U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command
SOCOM	U.S. Special Operations Command
SOF	special operations forces
USASOC	U.S. Army Special Operations Command

This is a work of the U.S. government and is not subject to copyright protection in the United States. The published product may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without further permission from GAO. However, because this work may contain copyrighted images or other material, permission from the copyright holder may be necessary if you wish to reproduce this material separately.



November 21, 2024

The Honorable Jack Reed
Chairman
The Honorable Roger Wicker
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate

The Department of Defense (DOD) relies on special operations forces (SOF) to advance and protect the national security interests of the United States. SOF personnel are selected from conventional U.S. military forces and trained to undertake difficult and specialized missions—such as unconventional warfare, special reconnaissance, security force assistance, and direct action. To accomplish these missions, SOF individuals and units perform high-risk training, which the U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) defines as a set of activities that expose the individual to the potential risk of serious injury, permanent disability, or death.¹

However, serious accidents during on-duty, non-combat situations involving SOF personnel have raised questions about the safety of high-risk training activities.² These reported accidents include the deaths of eight service members in a crash of a U.S. Air Force Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft while training off the coast of Japan in November 2023, a Naval Special Warfare service member during Basic Underwater Demolition/Sea Air and Land training in 2022, and a U.S. Army Special

¹U.S. Special Operations Command Directive 350-1, *U.S. Special Operations Command Joint Military Training* (Mar. 8, 2022). For the purposes of this report, we define training as activities personnel perform to maintain their physical condition; to maintain proficiency in SOF related skills, including driving or flying platforms that are used for missions; and formal training events, courses, and simulations.

²For purposes of this report, on-duty, non-combat accidents refer to accidents that occurred while personnel were on-duty but were not in combat, including accidents that occur during training and other activities. Examples of these types of accidents that occur outside of training include those that occurred as a result of a lack of situational awareness in day-to-day activities, such as falling downstairs, slipping, dropping items on limbs, and running into objects; motor accidents, such as accidents when making deliveries, or moving from one location to another; maintenance activities, such as when using tools or heavy machinery; and equipment damage or mechanical issues such as fire, accidents in the motor pool, or engine failure.

Operations Command service member during military free fall training in 2020.

Senate Report 117-130, accompanying a bill for the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, includes a provision for us to review SOF training accidents.³ This report: (1) examines trends in reported accidents involving SOF personnel in on-duty, non-combat situations, including training from fiscal years 2012 through 2022, and reported causes. In addition, this report evaluates the extent to which (2) U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) has developed an approach to effectively oversee SOF high-risk training, and (3) the SOF service components have addressed SOCOM's oversight requirements for high-risk training.

To address our first objective, we analyzed data for fiscal years 2012 through 2022—the most recent data available during our review—to determine trends in accidents involving SOF during on-duty non-combat and training activities, such as the number of accidents by class, year, and training type.⁴ We also analyzed narrative descriptions of accidents to identify contributing factors, such as human and environmental factors. Overall, we determined the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of identifying general trends in the reported number and severity of accidents by meeting with Army, Navy, and Air Force officials who report, maintain, and use the accident data to understand how the information is

³S. Rep. No. 117-130, at 242 (2022). The Department of Defense refers to accidents that occur outside of engagement with an adversary as "mishaps". A mishap is an unplanned event or series of events that results in damage to DOD property; occupational illness to DOD personnel; injury to on- or off-duty DOD military personnel; injury to on-duty DOD civilian personnel; or damage to public or private property, or injury or illness to non-DOD personnel, caused by DOD activities. Throughout this report we will use the term "accident" to mean mishap. Department of Defense Instruction 6055.07, *Mishap Notification, Investigation, Reporting, and Record Keeping* (June 6, 2011) (incorporating change 2, June 11, 2019).

⁴DOD categorizes accidents by severity. For fiscal years 2010 through 2019 the thresholds were: Class A accidents were the most serious and involve a death, permanent total disability, or damage greater than or equal to \$2 million. Class B accidents resulted in a permanent partial disability, three or more personnel receiving inpatient hospital care, or damages of \$500,000 or more, but less than \$2 million. Class C accidents resulted in injury or occupational illness that resulted in one or more lost workdays not including the shift being worked when the injury occurred or damages of \$50,000 or more but less than \$500,000. Class D accidents resulted in a recordable injury not otherwise classified as Class A-C or greater than \$20,000 but less than \$50,000 in damages. This guidance was updated on October 1, 2019, with upward adjustments made to each of the cost thresholds.

used and to help us assess its reliability and completeness. We also performed electronic testing of the data to check for missing values and internal consistency.

To address our second objective, we reviewed SOCOM guidance on joint military training to identify key controls that the command uses to oversee high-risk training. We further discussed these steps with training and safety officials from SOCOM and the SOF service component command. We compared the steps that SOCOM takes to implement these controls with SOCOM guidance and *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*.⁵ Specifically, we determined the control activities component of the federal internal control standards was significant to this objective.

To address our third objective, we analyzed SOF service component command policies governing their respective SOF training programs.⁶ We interviewed personnel from each of the SOF service component commands to determine the extent they have high-risk training programs and to identify the key policies they use to govern SOF training and specifically high-risk training. We compared these SOF service component command policies for overseeing SOF high-risk training with applicable SOCOM oversight requirements. We conducted a two-analyst content analysis in which we compared the components' policies with SOCOM's oversight requirements and assessed the extent to which the components addressed each requirement.

⁵U.S. Special Operations Command Directive 350-1 and GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 2014).

⁶U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) Regulation 385-1, *USASOC Safety Program* (Oct. 3, 2017); U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School (USAJFKSWCS) Supplement 1 to USASOC Regulation 385-1, *USAJFKSWCS/USASOC Safety Program* (Jan. 9, 2019); Air Force Special Operations Command Memorandum, *2024 AFSOC High Risk Training (HRT) Policy for Category 1 Personnel: Special Tactics Personnel* (Jun. 13, 2024); Air Force Special Operations Command, *AFSOC Non-Aviation High Risk Training Policy* (Dec. 15, 2022); Air Force Special Operations Command Instruction 90-802, *Tactical Ground Operations Risk Management* (Mar. 10, 2023); Commander, Naval Special Warfare Command Instruction 1500.1, *Naval Special Warfare High-Risk Training Safety Program* (Oct. 23, 2015); and Marine Forces Special Operations Command Order 5100.2D, *High Risk Training Order* (Jan. 30, 2023). In June 2024, after the conclusion of our audit work, the Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) issued a new high-risk training policy. According to AFSOC officials, this policy superseded its December 2022 high-risk training policy. This report describes both the December 2022 and June 2024 policies, as the 2022 policy was in effect at the time of our audit work, and the 2024 policy is currently in effect.

We also compared these SOF service component command policies for overseeing SOF high-risk training with *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*.⁷ Specifically, we determined the components of the control environment and control activities of the federal internal control standards were significant to this objective. See appendix I for additional information on our scope and methodology.

We conducted this performance audit from October 2022 to November 2024 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

SOCOM's Responsibilities and Organizational Structure

In its role as a combatant command, SOCOM's principal function is to prepare SOF to carry out assigned missions and activities under the command of the geographic combatant commander in the geographic area where the activity or mission is to be conducted.⁸

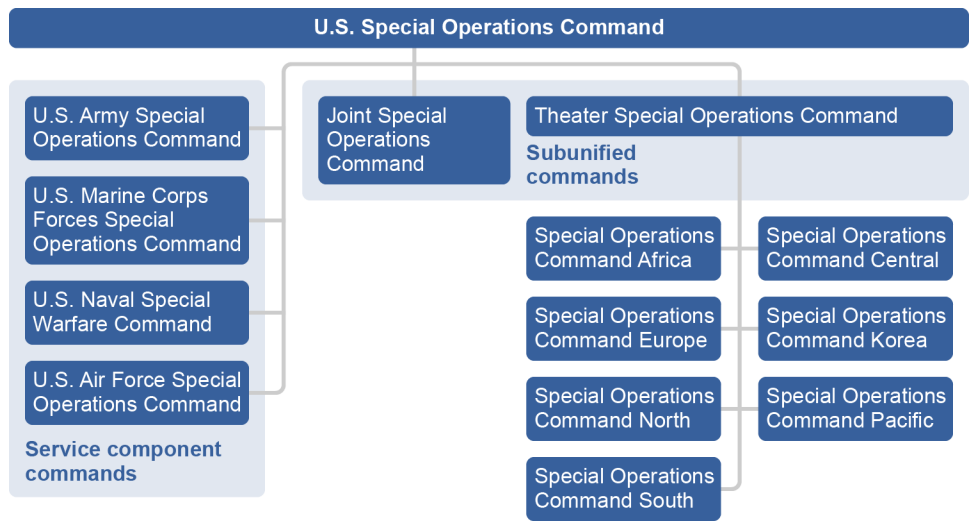
Among other responsibilities, SOCOM is designated as the joint force provider for SOF. In this role, SOCOM identifies how SOF should be used to support joint operations, training, and exercises, in coordination with the military services and other combatant commanders.

SOCOM comprises a headquarters organization, four SOF service component commands, and various sub-unified commands. Figure 1 illustrates SOCOM's current command structure.

⁷U.S. Special Operations Command Directive 350-1 and [GAO-14-704G](#).

⁸See 10 U.S.C. § 167(a) and (d).

Figure 1: U.S. Special Operations Command Structure



Source: Department of Defense. | GAO-25-106321

High-Risk Training

SOCOM's responsibilities for training include conducting joint training exercises; ensuring assigned forces are trained and interoperable with conventional forces; and developing recommendations to the Chairman regarding strategy, doctrine, tactics, techniques, and procedures for the joint employment of SOF. The SOCOM Commander is responsible for providing SOF service component commands and others with priorities and guidance for the development, execution, and assessment of joint training and education programs.

As part of its responsibilities, SOCOM defines High-Risk Training as all basic or advanced, individual or collective training, which exposes the individual to the potential risk of serious injury, permanent disability, or death. Figure 2 provides additional information on the seven training areas SOCOM has designated as high-risk in 2022.

Figure 2: Seven High-Risk Training Areas Designated by U.S. Special Operations Command

Airborne Operations (Parachuting)



An operation involving the air movement of combat forces and their logistic support for execution of a tactical, operational, or strategic mission. Examples include static line jumping, military free fall, and high-altitude low-opening.

Sniper



Delivery of precision fire in close proximity from concealed positions at extreme ranges in hostile, denied, and politically sensitive environments and under conditions beyond the capability of conventional snipers.

Combat Dive



Actions taken to arrive at a prescribed time and location into an area of operation undetected to conduct missions underwater or at the waterline. Examples include open and closed-circuit underwater breathing apparatus.

Special Operations Urban Combat



Encompasses skill sets required to successfully conduct urban infiltration/exfiltration movement, including building and/or room assault and clearance and alternative methods of entry and prisoner handling.

Joint Terminal Attack Controller



A qualified service member who from a forward position directs the action of combat aircraft engaged in close air support and other offensive air operations. Examples include surface-to-surface and sea-to-surface fires.

Vertical Lift Operations



Exiting or hooking up to an aircraft using various methods in an area that may not provide suitable landing conditions. Examples include fast rope insertion/extraction system and ladder.

Mountain Operations



Tactical application of technical knowledge, skills, and equipment to navigate extreme linear terrain such as rivers, streams, gorges, and canyons and environmentally restricted vertical terrain and obstacles in extreme weather conditions and environments.

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information; U.S. Navy/Staff Sergeant Alexandria Gomez, U.S. Army/Sergeant Connor Mendez, U.S. Air Force/Staff Sergeant Jose Miguel Tamondong, Special Operations Command Korea/Sergeant Yeonung Kim, Specialist Deldravin Sykes-Robinson, U.S. Marine Corps/Sergeant Henry Antenor, and U.S. Air Force/Tech Sergeant Efren Lopez (photos from top to bottom, left to right). | GAO-25-106321

SOCOM conducts oversight of SOF training, including high-risk training areas through its Special Operations Training Assessment Program.

According to its directive, SOCOM uses the program to:

- apply existing training policy during the assessment and observation of SOF service component training and recommends changes to training programs;
- develop assessment and observation reports that cover relevant training and safety issues, among others;
- ensure that training is in compliance with relevant SOCOM directives;
- ensure compliance and accurate reporting on overall SOF training readiness;
- certify the standardization of SOF training; and

- certify that high-risk training programs are conducted in accordance with critical task lists, applicable DOD policy, safety standards, and SOCOM oversight requirements.⁹

Another SOCOM directive requires SOF service components to conduct oversight of high-risk training by ensuring that: (1) oversight of high-risk training is not to be delegated below the first O-5 in the chain of command, (2) all high-risk training shall have a completed and signed risk assessment prior to training being conducted, and (3) SOF components and sub-unified commands shall have a comprehensive policy that builds upon training requirements, techniques, safety guidance, emergency procedures and expectations.¹⁰

Key DOD Roles and Responsibilities

DOD has established offices with responsibilities related to reporting and recording accidents, training SOF, and establishing safety protocols. Some of the key offices are listed in table 1.

Table 1: Key Department of Defense (DOD) and Military Service Responsibilities for Accident Reporting, Training, and Safety for Special Operations Forces (SOF)

Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict	Exercises authority, direction, and control of the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM), for special operations-peculiar administration including the training, readiness, and organization of special operations forces, resources and equipment, and civilian personnel. ^a
SOCOM Directorate of Operations, Training and Education Division (J3-Training & Education).	Serves as SOCOM's Office of Primary Responsibility for the development, coordination, and publication of SOF joint training and education policy. Develops, publishes, and maintains SOCOM's training publications. Provides SOF subject matter expertise to DOD regulations and policy on SOF service component command range and training area agreements, regulations, policies, requirements, standards, capabilities, restrictions, and limitations. Executes SOCOM's Special Operations Training Assessment Program.
SOCOM Joint Safety Office	Administers SOCOM's Joint Safety Program and ensures the Commander and appropriate SOCOM leadership are informed of the status of critical command-wide and joint SOF safety issues, including operational and training accidents, investigations, and corrective actions. Distributes critical SOF service component safety information, issues, and recommendations from SOCOM headquarters to all components. Provides periodic accident summaries, trends, and analysis of selected SOF accidents. Advises the Commander on differences in component policies and procedures.
Army Combat Readiness Center ^b	Conducts analysis, training, and the development of systems that prevent accidental loss of resources. Serves as the repository for Army accident data.

⁹U.S. Special Operations Command Directive 350-33, *Special Operations Training Assessment Program* (May 13, 2022).

¹⁰U.S. Special Operations Command Directive 350-1, *U.S. Special Operations Command Joint Military Training* (Mar. 8, 2022).

Naval Safety Command ^b	Conducts analysis to identify hazards and reduce risks to people and resources. Serves as the repository for Navy and Marine Corps accident data.
Air Force Safety Center ^b	Develops safety programs, policies, goals, and objectives, and establishes guidelines to support and assess effectiveness of the accident prevention program. Serves as the repository for Air Force accident data.
SOF Joint Command Safety Officers	Assists in establishing and promoting the safety culture for each of the SOF service component commands. Manages and provides oversight of the command's safety programs, assists in accident investigations, processes accident reports, and submits safety recommendations to the SOCOM Joint Safety Office.

Sources: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) and U.S. Special Operations Command documents. | GAO-25-106321

^aSpecial operations peculiar refers to equipment, material, supplies, and services required for special operations missions for which there is no service-common requirement.

^bWe refer to these three entities as the military department safety centers throughout this report.

Military Accident Severity Classes DOD categorizes accidents by severity, with Class A accidents being the most severe, and Class D accidents being the least severe. Accident severity is determined based on criteria regarding the cost of damages or injuries resulting from the accident. In October 2019, DOD adjusted the monetary thresholds for accident classes upward (see table 2).

Table 2: Department of Defense (DOD) Accident Classes, Fiscal Years 2012 through 2022

Class of accident	Cost of damages	Injuries
Class A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fiscal years (FY) 2020 through 2022: Greater than or equal to \$2.5 million or resulted in a destroyed aircraft FY 2012 through 2019: Greater than or equal to \$2 million or resulted in a destroyed aircraft 	Death or permanent total disability
Class B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FY 2020 through 2022: \$600,000 or more, but less than \$2.5 million FY 2012 through 2019: \$500,000 or more, but less than \$2 million 	Permanent partial disability or inpatient hospital care for three or more individuals
Class C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FY 2020 through 2022: \$60,000 or more, but less than \$600K FY 2012 through 2019: \$50,000 or more, but less than \$500K 	Injury or occupational illness that results in a lost workday(s) not including shift being worked when injury or occupational illness occurred
Class D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FY 2020 through 2022: \$25,000 or more, but less than \$60K FY 2012 through 2019: \$20,000 or more, but less than \$50K 	Any recordable injury or illness that does not meet the threshold for Class A, B, or C

Source: Department of Defense Instruction 6055.07, Mishap Notification, Investigation, Reporting, and Record Keeping (June 6, 2011) (incorporating change 1, Aug. 31, 2018) and Assistant Secretary of Defense for Readiness Memorandum, Revision to Accident Severity Classification Cost Thresholds and Recording of Injury and Fatality Costs (Oct. 15, 2019). | GAO-25-106321

Note: The military services also define accident classes that fall below the Class D thresholds. For example, the Air Force categorizes work-related accidents as Class E if they involve damage or injury that does not meet Class D criteria.

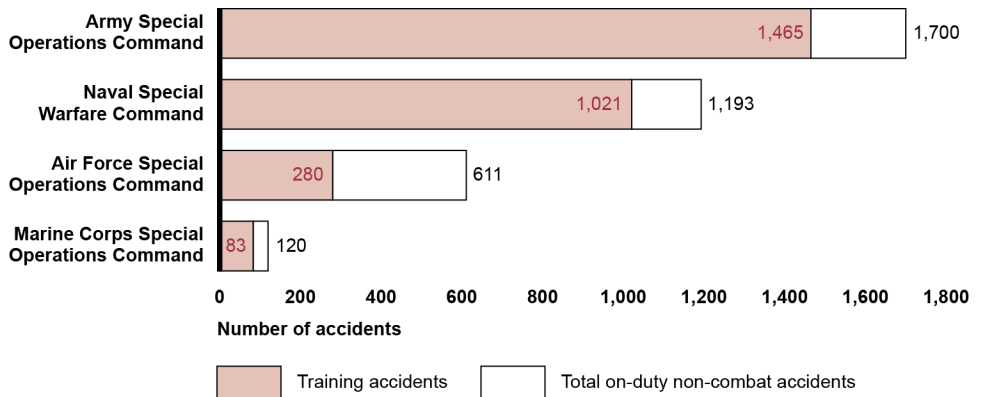
GAO Analysis Shows Most Reported Non-Combat Accidents Involving SOF Personnel Occurred during Training and Were Caused by Human Error

From fiscal years 2012 through 2022, about 80 percent of the 3,624 reported on-duty non-combat Class A through D accidents that involved SOF personnel occurred during training, according to military service safety center data. About 40 percent of the total reported training accidents occurred in two high-risk areas—parachute training and combat dive training. Human error made up about 86 percent of reported causes for the Class A through D training accidents that we analyzed. The most commonly cited examples of factors that were present and contributing to these accidents included failure to adhere to training standards and complacency, overconfidence, or indiscipline.

About 80 Percent of Reported On-duty Non-Combat Accidents Involving SOF Personnel Occurred during Training

SOF personnel were involved in 3,624 on-duty, non-combat Class A through Class D accidents in fiscal years 2012 through 2022, according to military service safety center data. Of the 3,624 reported accidents, we found that about 80 percent occurred during training activities (see fig. 3).¹¹

Figure 3: Reported Number of Class A through D On-Duty, Non-Combat and Training Accidents Involving Special Operations Forces Personnel by Service Component, Fiscal Years 2012–2022



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-25-106321

¹¹For the purposes of this report, we refer to SOF training accidents as accidents that involved SOF personnel and that occurred during training activities or events, such as activities personnel perform to maintain their physical condition, proficiency in SOF-related skills, or the driving or flying of platforms that are used for missions, and specific training events such as unit-level training events, and formal training events, courses, and simulations. SOF units and personnel, like other military forces, spend most of their time conducting training activities when they are not deployed for operational missions, according to a DOD official.

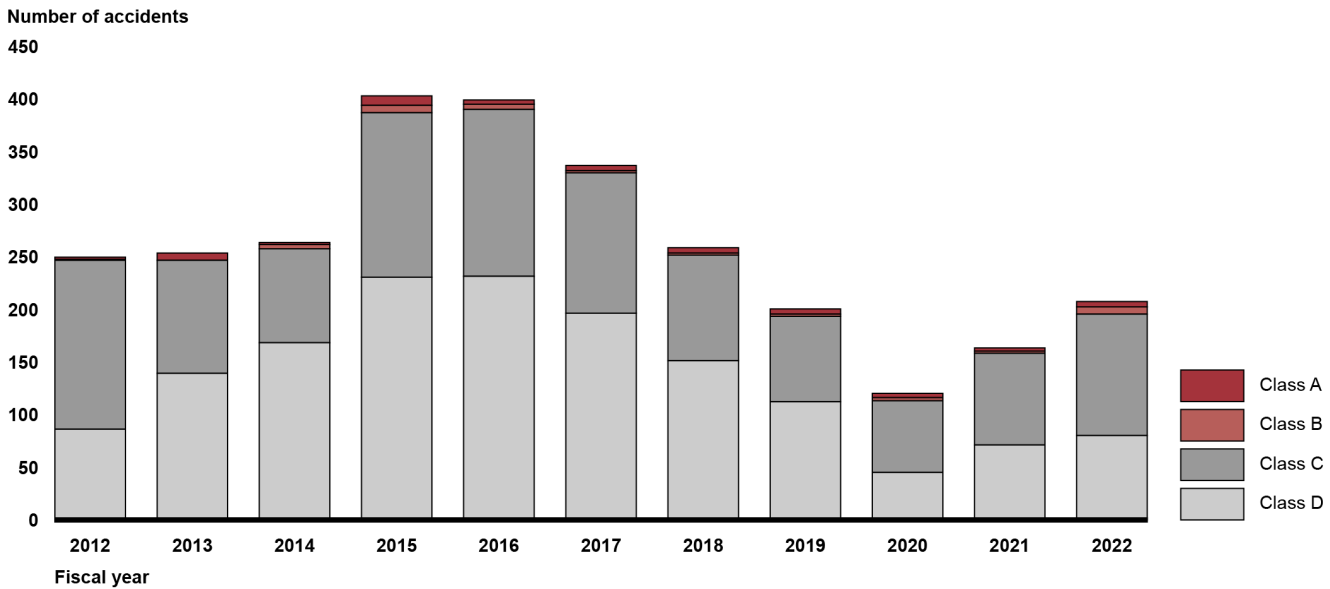
The disparity in numbers of reported accidents between the SOF service components may be due in part to the differences in the size of these forces, based on information provided by SOCOM and U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) officials. Specifically, USASOC has approximately 36,000 active-duty personnel, U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command (NSW) has approximately 11,000 active-duty personnel, U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) has approximately 17,000 active-duty personnel, and U.S. Marine Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC) has approximately 3,500 active-duty personnel.

We further analyzed these data to determine trends in reported accidents by year, locations in which accidents took place, fatalities, serious accidents (i.e., Class A and Class B), and training categories.

Accidents by year. Our analysis found that the annual number of reported on-duty non-combat and training accidents involving SOF personnel fluctuated from fiscal years 2012 through 2022. For example, the reported number of such accidents ranged from about 183 to 482 per year and averaged about 329 reported accidents per year. Further, our analysis found the reported number of these accidents decreased in fiscal years 2016 through 2020 and increased in fiscal years 2021 through 2022.

The reported number of training accidents involving SOF personnel ranged from approximately 120 to 402 and averaged about 259 reported training accidents per year. Similarly, our analysis found that the total reported number of training accidents decreased in fiscal years 2015 through 2020, and then increased in fiscal years 2021 through 2022 (see fig. 4).

Figure 4: Reported Number of Class A through D Training Accidents Involving Special Operations Forces Personnel, Fiscal Years 2012–2022



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-25-106321

The SOF service component commands noted several factors for the trends in training accidents. The increases in reported accidents in fiscal years 2014 through 2016 and from fiscal years 2020 and 2022 may be attributed to increased reporting of Class C and D accidents, according to Army Combat Readiness Center and USASOC officials. These officials explained that the increased reporting was a result of the Army implementing new data and reporting systems and coincided with an increased emphasis on accident reporting and education. These factors resulted in a significant uptick in reported Class C and Class D accidents, according to Army Combat Readiness Center officials. The increased reporting in fiscal years 2014 through 2016 also resulted in more effective lessons learned that the Army shared across the force to reduce these types of accidents, these officials stated.

In fiscal year 2020, the number of reported training accidents dipped to the lowest level in the 11-year period of our review. The low number of reported accidents in this fiscal year is related to restrictions in training activities due to COVID-19, according to officials from SOCOM and the SOF service component commands. Further, SOCOM and Army Combat Readiness officials noted that the increased number of reported training

accidents after COVID-19 may be due to personnel trying to make up for training time and knowledge lost during the pandemic restrictions. Army Combat Readiness Center officials also stated that the number of reported training accidents since fiscal year 2020 was in line with the number of reported accidents that occurred in years preceding the pandemic.

Location. Our analysis found that almost 90 percent of reported Class A through D training accidents involving SOF personnel from fiscal years 2012 through 2022 occurred in the United States (see fig. 5). Outside of the United States, reported training accidents occurred in 22 foreign countries. Of the reported training accidents that occurred in foreign countries, about 63 percent of those occurred in three countries—Japan (23 percent), Germany (21 percent), and the United Kingdom (19 percent). See appendix II for a detailed breakdown of accidents by country.

Figure 5: Reported Number of Class A through D Training Accidents Involving Special Operations Forces Personnel within and Outside the United States, Fiscal Years 2012–2022

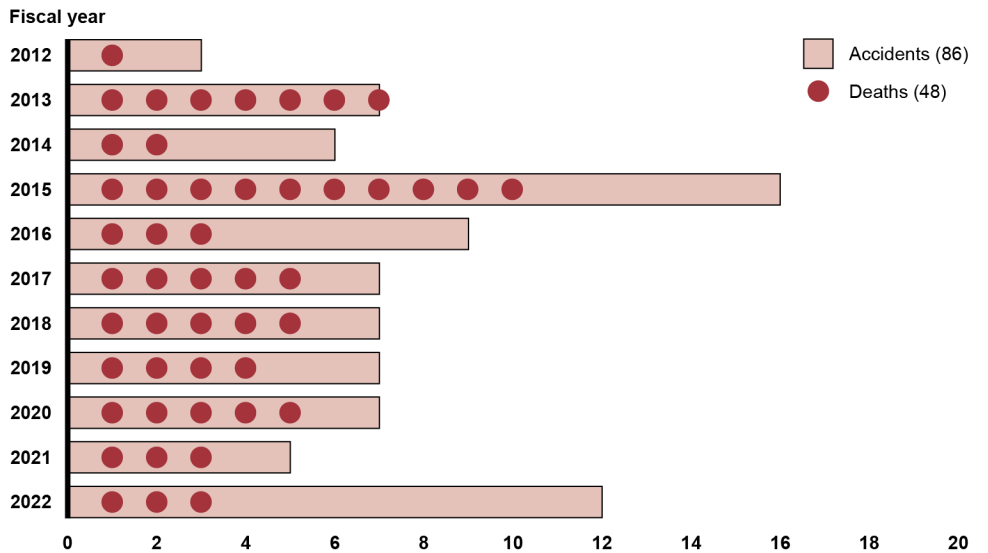


Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-25-106321

Fatalities. Our analysis found that there were approximately 86 reported serious training accidents—Class A and Class B accidents—which resulted in 48 reported fatalities from fiscal years 2012 through 2022. There were also 12 reported fatalities that occurred during on-duty non-combat scenarios that were not related to training. Examples of fatalities resulting from reported accidents that occurred during on-duty, non-combat scenarios but not during training include those resulting from underlying health issues, such as cardiac arrest, as well as reported accidents that occurred during transportation from one area to another, such as motor vehicle accidents.

The highest number of overall reported fatalities occurred in fiscal year 2015, with 10 training fatalities occurring from nine Class A accidents. (see fig. 6).

Figure 6: Reported Number of Class A and B Training Accidents Involving Special Operations Forces and the Resulting Military Deaths, Fiscal Years 2012–2022

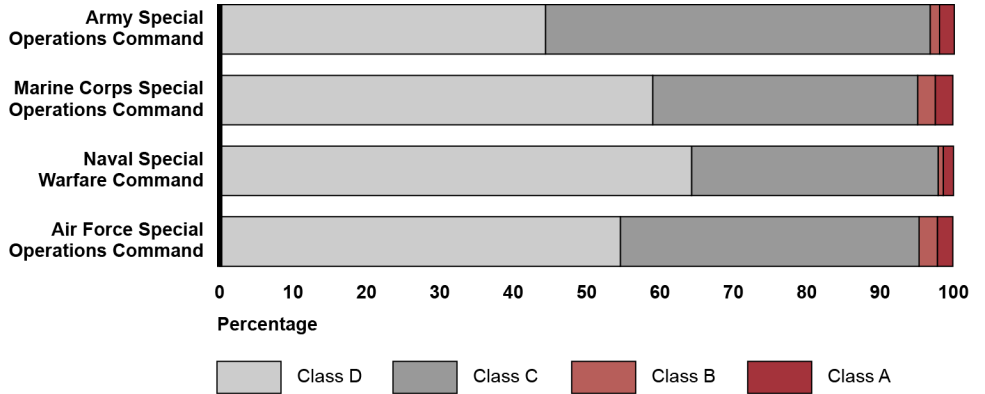


Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-25-106321

During fiscal years 2012 through 2022, about 33 percent of the total reported fatalities occurred during parachute training. Over 60 percent of the total reported parachute fatalities occurred from fiscal years 2012 through 2015. In response to the parachute training fatalities, in 2015, SOCOM suspended parachute training and created a working group to examine and address concerns surrounding these accidents. According to SOCOM officials, they changed policy, doctrine, and operations for parachute training and implemented parachute safety recertification training requirements. Subsequently, from 2016 through 2022, reported parachute training fatalities made up about 13 percent of the reported SOF service component command fatalities.

Serious accidents. We found that reported Class A and Class B accidents combined made up about 3 percent of the total reported SOF service component training accidents. On average, SOF personnel experienced about eight combined Class A and B reported training accidents per year in fiscal years 2012 through 2022. Similarly, we found that combined Class A and B accidents made up 5 percent or less of total reported training accidents for each SOF service component (see fig. 7).

Figure 7: Percentage of Reported Class A through D Training Accidents Involving Special Operations Forces Personnel by Service Component, Fiscal Years 2012–2022

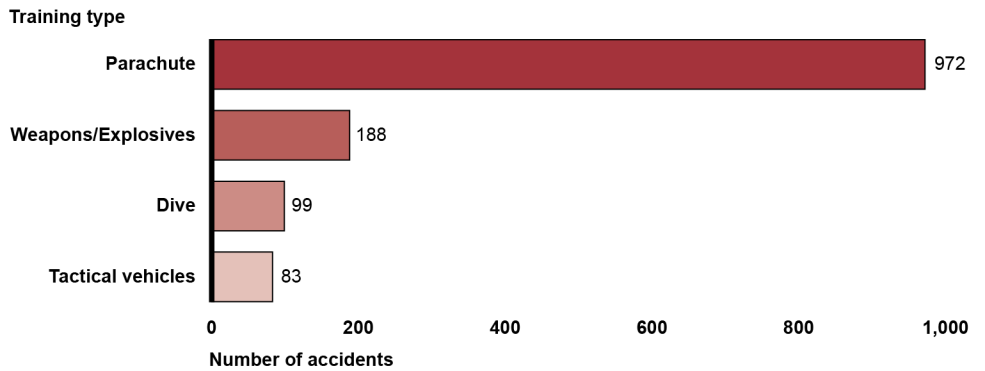


Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-25-106321

Specifically, our analysis found that USASOC averaged about four reported Class A and B combined training accidents per year in fiscal years 2012 through 2022. NSW averaged two, AFSOC averaged one, and MARSOC averaged less than one.

Training categories. Training accidents that occurred in two high-risk training areas (parachute training and combat dive training) accounted for about 40 percent of reported Class A through D training accidents. Also, our analysis found that parachute training accounted for about one-third of all reported Class A through D training accidents, and about one-third (16) of the overall (48) reported training fatalities. Figure 8 shows training categories with the greatest number of Class A through D accidents, according to our analysis.

Figure 8: Reported Number of Class A through D Training Accidents Involving Special Operations Forces Personnel by Training Category, Fiscal Years 2012–2022



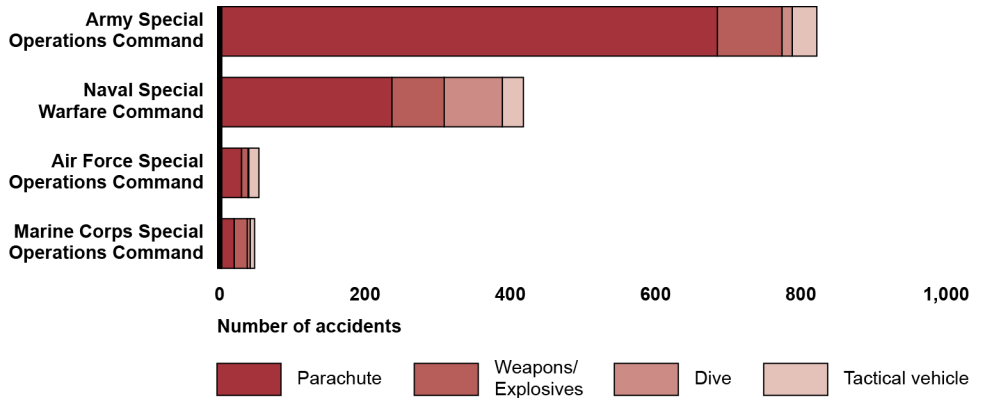
Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-25-106321

Note: For each training category, examples of specific training types include: Parachute (Static Line, Free Fall), Combat Dive (using open and closed-circuit underwater breathing apparatus to conduct over-the horizon/over the beach water passages), Tactical Vehicle (All-Terrain Vehicles, Light Tactical All-Terrain Vehicles), and Weapons or Explosives (Sniper, Breaching). Examples of specific types of injuries that occur during these accidents include parachute injuries resulting from landing hard on the ground or cutting away a parachute, dive injuries due to exposure or issues with the diving equipment, tactical vehicle injuries involving rollovers and vehicle maneuverability, and weapons or explosives injuries due to weapons malfunctions.

Reported training accidents that did not fall under these four categories included accidents that occurred during physical training, pool or swim training, initial qualification training, land navigation training, and weapon system platform-specific training, among others.

Among the SOF service component commands, USASOC had the highest reported number of Class A through D training accidents in these categories: parachute, tactical vehicle, and weapons or explosive training. NSW had the highest reported number of training accidents in the combat dive category (see fig. 9).

Figure 9: Reported Number of Class A through D Training Accidents Involving Special Operations Forces Personnel by Service Component, Fiscal Years 2012–2022



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-25-106321

SOCOM's safety program policy acknowledges that realistic training and training safely are not mutually exclusive concepts. The policy further states that leaders must ensure that their personnel are trained and capable of safely executing high-risk, realistic scenarios critical to maintaining operational skills.¹² Officials from the SOF service component commands stated the number of reported SOF training accidents in the training categories shown above was relatively small when considering the number of rigorous and intense training events SOF personnel conduct each year. SOF units and personnel, like other military forces, spend most of their time training when they are not deployed for operational missions, according to a DOD official.

Additionally, the disparity between accidents in different training categories may also be due in part to the differences in the focus of training between the SOF service components, according to information provided by officials from SOCOM and the SOF service component commands. Specifically, SOCOM assigns service components as lead components, designating them as subject matter experts for specific training categories.¹³ USASOC is the lead component for parachute,

¹²U.S. Special Operations Command Directive 385-1, *U.S. Special Operations Command Joint Safety Program* (May 12, 2021).

¹³U.S. Special Operations Command Directive 350-1.

Special Operations Urban Combat, and the SOF sniper course, whereas NSW is the lead component for the combat dive course.¹⁴

These designations can affect the amount of training that the SOF service components conduct in certain training categories. For example:

- USASOC and NSW performed an average of over 100,000 parachute jumps per year, according to USASOC and NSW officials. Army SOF and Navy SOF personnel were involved in approximately 685 and 237 total reported parachute training accidents, respectively, from fiscal years 2012 through 2022.
- USASOC expended an average of over 48 million ammunition rounds and explosives per year for their weapons and explosives training events from fiscal years 2021 through 2023, according to USASOC officials.¹⁵ Army SOF personnel averaged about eight reported weapons and explosives training-related accidents from fiscal years 2012 through 2022. Similarly, MARSOC expended an average of 7 million ammunition rounds and explosives per year for their weapons and explosives training events, and Marine Corps SOF personnel averaged about two reported weapons and explosives training accidents from fiscal years 2012 through 2022.
- USASOC personnel drove an average of over 1 million tactical vehicle miles per year from fiscal years 2012 through 2022 and NSW personnel drove an average of over 250,000 tactical vehicle miles per year from fiscal years 2014 through 2022, according to SOF service component officials.¹⁶ Army SOF and Navy SOF

¹⁴U.S. Special Operations Command Manual 350-3cc, *Special Operations Forces Baseline Interoperable Airborne Operations (Parachuting) Training Standards* (Nov. 16, 2022); U.S. Special Operations Command Manual 350-7, *U.S. Special Operations Forces Baseline Interoperable Standards, Special Operations Urban Combat* (Nov. 12, 2020); U.S. Special Operations Command Manual 350-30, *U.S. Special Operations Forces Baseline Interoperable Training Standards, Sniper* (Jul. 12, 2021); and U.S. Special Operations Command Manual 350-25, *Special Operations Forces Baseline Interoperable Training Standards, Combat Diving* (Nov. 16, 2022).

¹⁵USASOC officials stated that their database does not keep historical data past three years, however expenditure numbers have remained consistent throughout the years.

¹⁶These tactical miles include only those miles driven on vehicles that are equipped with an odometer, according to a USASOC official.

personnel averaged about three reported tactical vehicle training accidents per year from fiscal years 2012 through 2022.¹⁷

- NSW conducted an average of over 40,000 dives per year according to officials, and NSW personnel averaged seven reported dive training accidents annually in fiscal years 2012 through 2022. Similarly, AFSOC conducted an average of over 3,600 dives per year according to officials, and AFSOC personnel averaged less than one reported dive training accident per year in fiscal years 2012 through 2022.

Human Error Was the Most Common Reported Cause of Training Accidents

Human error made up about 86 percent of reported causes for all USASOC, NSW, and MARSOC Class A through D training accidents, according to our analysis of reported accidents.¹⁸ The most commonly cited examples of factors that were present and contributing to these accidents included failure to adhere to training standards and complacency, overconfidence, or indiscipline. We found that about 70 percent of reported USASOC, NSW, and MARSOC Class A, and 64 percent of Class B training accidents were attributed to human error. Also, we found greater percentages of USASOC, NSW, and MARSOC Class C (87 percent), and Class D (86 percent) reported training accidents were attributed to human error.

By contrast, we found that material failure—such as equipment failure—made up about 3 percent of the reported causes for USASOC, NSW, and MARSOC Class A through D reported training accidents involving personnel. According to our analysis, most reported training accidents that were attributed to material failure were Class A (4 percent) and Class B (7 percent) accidents. Further, environmental factors—such as heat and cold-related injuries—made up about 3 percent of the reported causes of training accidents for classes C and D. The three SOF service

¹⁷We previously reviewed Army and Marine Corps tactical vehicle (e.g., tanks, trucks) accidents from fiscal years 2010 through 2019 and steps taken to prevent them. We made nine recommendations to DOD to help prevent these accidents. DOD has taken some steps and has other planned actions to implement the recommendations, but it has not fully addressed them. See GAO, *Military Vehicles: Army and Marine Corps Should Take Additional Actions to Mitigate and Prevent Training Accidents*, [GAO-21-361](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jul 7, 2021).

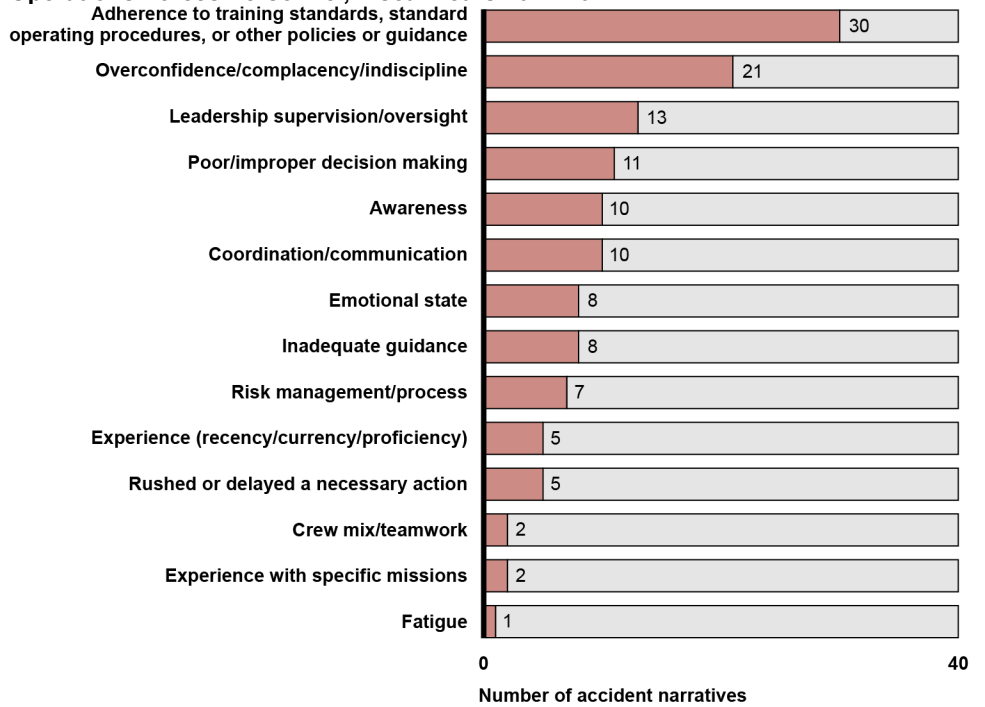
¹⁸Though the military service safety centers identify causal factors for accidents, these factors are not identified for every Class A through Class D accident and therefore the percentages will not add up to 100 percent. We did not report causal factor information for AFSOC training-specific accidents due to limitations in the level of detail provided by the Air Force Safety Center.

component commands did not attribute environmental factors as the causal factor for Class A or B accidents from fiscal years 2012 through 2022.

We further analyzed available training accident narratives for 40 USASOC, NSW, and MARSOC Class A and Class B training accidents from fiscal years 2012 and 2022 that identified one or more human error factors as being present and contributing to the accidents.¹⁹ Based on our analysis, we found that “failure to adhere to training standards, standard operating procedures, or other policies or guidance” (30 narratives) and “overconfidence, complacency, or indiscipline” (21 narratives) were cited as present and contributing factors in more than half of the reported training accident narratives we reviewed. Other factors cited included “leadership supervision” (13 narratives), and “poor or improper decision making” (11 narratives), as shown in figure 10. Almost every available narrative we reviewed (38 narratives) cited at least one of these four factors.

¹⁹A total of 40 of 73 USASOC, NSW, and MARSOC Class A and Class B training accidents included narratives with human error factors identified as being present and contributing to the accident. We did not analyze causal factor information for AFSOC training-specific accidents due to limitations in the level of detail provided to us by the Air Force Safety Center.

Figure 10: Present and Contributing Human Error Factors Cited in Reported Class A and B Accidents Involving U.S. Army, U.S. Navy, and U.S. Marine Corps Special Operations Forces Personnel, Fiscal Years 2012-2022



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-25-106321

Note: We did not report present and contributing human error factors for Air Force Special Operations Command training-specific accidents due to limitations in the level of detail provided by the Air Force Safety Center. Additionally, accident narratives can include more than one factor, therefore the number of present and contributing factors in the figure do not represent the number of accidents analyzed.

This is consistent with our prior findings on military accidents. In our reviews of accidents involving tactical vehicles and National Guard helicopters, we found that human error made up most of the reported causes in the accidents that were analyzed.²⁰ For example, the Army and Marine Corps reported that human error factors such as driver error, mindset, complacency, and overconfidence were the most common human error factors that were present and contributed to tactical vehicle accidents. In a review of Army National Guard helicopter accident investigation narratives, we found that not following training procedures,

²⁰GAO, *National Guard Helicopters: Additional Actions Needed to Prevent Accidents and Improve Safety*, GAO-23-105219 (Washington, D.C.: Mar 14, 2023) and GAO-21-361.

situational awareness, and overconfidence were all cited as present and contributing factors in most of the narratives.

However, in conducting the analysis shown above, the Army's Combat Readiness Center and the Naval Safety Command were unable to provide us with accident narratives containing present and contributing factors for 30 of 73 Class A and B training accidents for USASOC, NSW, and MARSOC due to data quality issues.²¹ As a result, we were unable to report on human error factors associated with those accidents. We have reported on similar limitations with the military services' safety data that hinders the analysis of accident trends. We reported in 2018, for example, that the military services' safety centers did not collect standardized data as part of their accident investigations.²² Further, in 2023, we reported that Army officials were unable to provide accident narratives for some accidents because of blank entries in its database. Army officials previously stated that this could be due to improper data entry, failure to forward final reports to the Army Combat Readiness Center, or loss of entries due to data migration from a previous system to the current information management system.²³

In 2018, we recommended that DOD take steps to help ensure that the safety centers collect standardized data elements for aviation accidents and identify relevant training-related data to collect as part of any update of the aviation data elements, among other things. DOD concurred with our recommendations, and as of February 2024, DOD has taken some steps to implement these recommendations.

²¹Not all accident narratives provided by the safety centers included present and contributing human error factors, such as accidents caused by material factors. We excluded these cases from our analysis.

²²GAO, *Military Aviation Mishaps: DOD Needs to Improve Its Approach for Collecting and Analyzing Data to Manage Risks*, [GAO-18-586R](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 15, 2018).

²³[GAO-23-105219](#).

SOCOM Has Not Performed Key Analysis and Completed Observations to Effectively Oversee Its High-Risk Training Program

SOCOM designated seven high-risk training areas in 2022, but the Command had not determined if these high-risk designations account for the areas with the greatest risk of accidents that occurred during training. SOCOM also established a formal program to standardize certain SOF training activities and to oversee SOF high-risk training to help mitigate risk. However, the Command has not implemented all of the existing components of this program despite plans to increase the program's scope by adding an additional biennial inspection of each of the command's SOF service component commands.

SOCOM Has Not Determined If Existing High-Risk Training Areas Account for Areas with the Greatest Numbers of Training Accidents

SOCOM established a formal program to oversee SOF high-risk training because the command recognized that certain training activities require an increased level of standardization across the SOF service components to help mitigate risk, according to SOCOM officials. In 2022, SOCOM has designated seven high-risk training areas, but we found that the command had not analyzed accident data to identify any trends in those areas. According to its directive, airborne operations, combat dive, joint terminal attack controller, mountain operations, sniper, special operations urban combat, and vertical lift operations (rotary wing and tilt rotor infiltration and exfiltration) are designated as high risk by the SOCOM Commander.²⁴ SOCOM officials told us that Command leadership designated high-risk training areas based on a common sense interpretation of what constitutes a dangerous training activity.

SOCOM officials told us the high-risk training program enables the Command to manage risks effectively and enforce training standards during challenging training conditions. Further, the command's training directive states high-risk training activities require an increased level of standardization to help mitigate inherent risk and that certain training activities that expose SOF individuals to a higher risk during training are self-identified through trends in accidents. An official with the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (ASD SO/LIC) told us that it is important to continually review the

²⁴U.S. Special Operations Command Directive 350-1, *U.S. Special Operations Command Joint Military Training* (Mar. 8, 2022). The directive states that high-risk training refers to the overall activity and not a risk assessment level after mitigation measures are put in place. Other skill sets and training may be high risk based on the results of comprehensive operational risk management assessments.

high-risk training area designations to ensure SOCOM's approach mitigates risk during these types of training activities but also that it does not impose unnecessary impediments to tough, timely, and realistic training.

Our analysis of reported accident data identified some potential disconnects between what SOCOM designated as high-risk training areas compared with accidents that occurred during other types of training activities. For example, some training areas designated by SOCOM as high-risk, such as sniper, had very few reported accidents while other training areas that SOCOM has not designated as high-risk, such as tactical vehicles training, had many more reported accidents. In fiscal years 2012 through 2022, SOF personnel were involved in a total of five reported sniper training accidents, with no Class A or B accidents and no fatalities. Conversely, SOF personnel were involved in 83 reported accidents during tactical vehicle training, with 12 Class A and B accidents and 10 fatalities.

SOCOM Directive 350-1, *U.S. Special Operations Command Joint Military Training*, states that high-risk training is all basic or advanced, individual or collective training which exposes the individual to the potential risk of serious injury, permanent disability, or death or as identified by the SOCOM Commander due to negative safety trends. Federal internal control standards state that management should periodically review policies, procedures, and related activities to determine effectiveness in achieving an entity's objectives or addressing related risks.²⁵

SOCOM officials stated they had not determined if the high-risk training areas designated in 2022 were the areas with the greatest risk that a training accident will occur because they did not perform an analysis of negative safety trends. Instead, officials stated the command relied on professional military judgment to identify high-risk training areas. Despite this reliance, officials stated analyzing accident data to identify negative safety trends may help SOCOM with oversight of high-risk training conducted by the SOF service component commands.

Without performing additional analysis of negative safety trends in SOF training when designating high-risk-training areas, SOCOM may miss an increase in issues related to safety within non-high-risk-designated

²⁵[GAO-14-704G](#).

programs. By doing so, SOCOM could ensure that SOF service components have the required higher levels of oversight to mitigate risks during high-risk training.

SOCOM Has Yet to Implement All Components of Its Training Assessment Program and Plans to Expand Its Scope

SOCOM established a Special Operations Training Assessment Program (training assessment program) to conduct the oversight of SOF training and the interoperability of equipment and forces to carry out assigned missions. According to its directive re-issued in 2022, the training assessment program provides a framework to certify the standardization of SOF training and is used to assess and observe the execution of selected SOF skills training in schools and skill acquisition courses and training.²⁶ The program is comprised of Joint SOF Assessment Teams and Joint SOF Observations Teams.

- **Joint SOF Assessment Teams (assessments).** During these assessments, subject matter experts assess SOF skills acquisition training and certify that high-risk training programs are conducted in accordance with critical task lists, applicable DOD policy, safety standards, and SOCOM oversight requirements. SOCOM produces reports for each assessment that can recommend certification or non-certification of training and provide data for trend analysis and recommendations for training improvements.
- **Joint SOF Observations Teams (observations).** During these observations, subject matter experts observe a skill during training and document training, safety, and other insights for trend analysis and training improvements. According to a SOCOM official, observations often serve as a proactive method for SOCOM, in conjunction with the subject matter experts, to identify training and safety issues before they become more severe or endemic in a high-risk training program.

However, SOCOM has not fully implemented the observations component of its special operations training assessment program. On an annual basis, SOCOM determines the planned number of assessments and observations it will conduct based on inputs, including the command's training enterprise conference. Prioritization of assessments and observations is based on command direction, a framework to

²⁶U.S. Special Operations Command Directive 350-33, *Special Operations Training Assessment Program* (May 13, 2022). The program also assesses SOF service component and Theater Special Operations Command compliance with the Joint Training System. This four-phased process is outlined in Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Manual 3500.03E and is intended to align joint training strategy with assigned missions to produce trained and ready individuals, units, and staffs.

biennially assess all training programs that require certification, readiness concerns, operational and combatant command requirements, program health, and previous observations. In fiscal year 2023, for example, SOCOM resourced over a dozen SOCOM personnel and over \$767,000 in travel costs to perform its training assessment program.

This amount has been insufficient to fully implement the number of scheduled observations that are part of the training assessment program, according to SOCOM officials.²⁷ We found that from fiscal years 2021 through 2023, SOCOM conducted all of the 54 scheduled assessments, averaging about 15 assessments per fiscal year. During these 3 fiscal years, SOCOM assessed high-risk parachute training for each of the SOF service component commands; dive training for the Army, Navy, and Air Force; and sniper training for the Army and Marine Corps, among others.

In one of its fiscal year 2023 assessment reports, for example, SOCOM highlighted shortcomings that resulted in undue stress and fatigue among the instructors and students during a June 2023 assessment of USASOC's Military Free-Fall Parachutist Course. SOCOM officials stated they subsequently worked with USASOC officials to implement additional safety protocols and best practices to improve the course, such as reducing the student-to-instructor ratio to improve the quality of training and reducing the number of jumps the course instructors conducted each day of the course, according to SOCOM officials.

However, we found that SOCOM completed 18 of 30 scheduled observations during the same 3 fiscal years. Officials told us that subject matter experts from SOCOM and the SOF component commands prioritized the resources for the training assessment program toward completing the assessments rather than scheduled observations during this period. This is because the assessments are the more formal effort that results in certification or decertification of training activities, according to these officials.

ASD SO/LIC and SOCOM officials told us that SOCOM is adjusting its approach to overseeing the SOF service component commands' training programs, including revising the training regulation to include expanding the training assessment program. Specifically, the command is planning to include an additional element in the training assessment program that

²⁷The number of personnel does not include subject matter experts from the SOF service component commands that would be accounted for in SOCOM's travel costs for its program.

would require SOCOM to conduct biennial inspections of the headquarters elements of each of the four SOF service components, in addition to the recurring assessments and observations of individual training programs.

According to an ASD SO/LIC official, safety for high-risk training begins with oversight of SOF service component commands, and SOCOM officials stated the main aim of this additional oversight would be to ensure the SOF service component commands are performing their own inspections of high-risk training. Additionally, the officials explained that, while SOCOM is focused on high-risk training, the component commands should be assessing their unit level and other training activities in high-risk and other training areas. The officials told us the new inspections would help ensure that the SOF service components perform this oversight.

Federal internal control standards state that management should periodically review policies, procedures, and related control activities for continued relevance and effectiveness in achieving the entity's objectives.²⁸ If there is a significant change in an entity's process, management reviews this process in a timely manner to determine that the control activities are designed and implemented properly.

Resource constraints and other command priorities have hindered completion of all components of the training assessment program, according to SOCOM officials. Nevertheless, SOCOM plans to expand the scope of the program. However, SOCOM has not reevaluated the training assessment program to determine the number of assessments, observations, and additional inspections of the SOF service component command headquarters necessary to implement the program's goals and determine its funding needs. SOCOM officials agreed that a reevaluation of the training assessment program would be useful.

By reevaluating the training assessment program to determine the number of assessments, observations, and inspections of the SOF service component command headquarters that can be conducted and the related resources that are needed, SOCOM would be positioned to achieve the program's objectives and help to ensure the SOF service

²⁸[GAO-14-704G](#).

components are conducting high-risk training programs in accordance with its requirements to mitigate risk during training.

SOF Service Components Have Not Yet Fully Implemented SOCOM's Oversight Requirements for High-Risk Training

Beginning in 2022, SOCOM directed the SOF service components to implement seven requirements for oversight of their high-risk training, but we found none of the components fully addressed these requirements.

SOCOM Has Established Requirements for SOF Service Components to Oversee High-Risk Training

SOCOM has previously identified that the SOF service components had not comprehensively documented high-risk training oversight requirements in their respective policies. For example, the command's Inspector General found in 2020 that the SOF service components did not have stand-alone policies for high-risk training; standardized, prescribed, or codified oversight responsibilities; and consistent government oversight of contractor-led training, among other observations.

In addition to the SOCOM Inspector General's findings, service reports detailing accident investigations point to similar findings of unclear oversight responsibilities. For example, an Air Force investigation of a combat dive school fatality in 2020 identified outdated and unclear risk management guidance for implementing risk mitigation measures.²⁹

Further, the Navy's investigation report of a 2022 training fatality during its Basic Underwater Demolition/Sea, Air, Land course stated that, among other things, NSW high-risk training guidance did not clearly delineate oversight responsibilities from the command down the chain of command, and it also identified deficiencies with emergency action plans and risk assessments.³⁰ The report stated that no direct link was found between a safety or high-risk training program deficiency and the fatality, but it

²⁹Air Force Combat Dive School, *United States Air Force Ground Accident Investigation Board Report* (May 20, 2020).

³⁰RDML Benjamin Reynolds, USN to Commander, (CUI) Naval Education and Training Command, *Command Investigation Into The Facts and Circumstances Regarding Safety and Medical Oversight of Basic Underwater Demolition/Sea Air And Land (Bud/S) Class 352*, (Nov. 18, 2022).

concluded that the inconsistent implementation of safety programs led to an accumulation of unidentified and unmitigated risks, which contributed to the service member’s compromised health condition. The report recommended improving the management and execution of safety and high-risk training through additional oversight, such as reviews of existing risk assessments and an outside review of high-risk training safety.

In response, SOCOM officials told us they updated SOCOM Directive 350-1 in 2022 to incorporate the SOCOM Inspector General findings as requirements for the SOF service components.³¹ Specifically, SOCOM directed the SOF service components to implement seven requirements to oversee high-risk training summarized in table 3.

Table 3: U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) Oversight Requirements for High-Risk Training for Special Operations Forces Service Components

- Responsibility for oversight shall not be delegated below the first O-5 in the chain of command^a
- All high-risk training requires government (military or government civilian) oversight. At a minimum, the first O-5 in the chain of command shall be responsible for training oversight and will review all training to ensure it complies with SOCOM safety standards and SOCOM 350-series training publications.
- All contracted training for high-risk training skillsets for military personnel is still considered military training and shall have government oversight. Leadership shall ensure all contracts and programs are adjusted for compliance with updated USSOCOM policy and publications.
- Components shall review the initial qualification and skill acquisition training or courses biennially, or whenever there is a change in contract or significant changes to the training objective.^b The reviews can include periodic site visits, in-depth schedule and lesson plan reviews, or course audits.
- Component leadership is ultimately responsible for the conduct and compliance of sustainment training, including contracted programs and training, in accordance with SOCOM policy and publications.^c
- All high-risk training shall have a completed and signed risk assessment prior to training being conducted in accordance with SOCOM safety program policy and other service and component policy.^d
- Components shall have comprehensive policy that builds upon training requirements, techniques, safety guidance, emergency procedures and expectations specific to the component command’s equipment and/or skills but remains in compliance with SOCOM policy and publications for high-risk training. Commands shall integrate high risk training policy into existing publications.^e

Source: U.S. Special Operations Command Directive 350-1, *U.S. Special Operations Command Joint Military Training* (Mar. 8, 2022). | GAO-25-106321

^aMilitary officer grade O-5 refers to a lieutenant colonel in the Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps and a commander in the Navy.

^bInitial qualification and skill acquisition training is any training or course that results in a skill qualification upon completion.

^cSustainment training is any training beyond initial qualification and skill acquisition training such as training at the unit level.

³¹U.S. Special Operations Command Directive 350-1, *U.S. Special Operations Command Joint Military Training* (Mar 8, 2022).

^dSOCOM's safety program is set forth in U.S. Special Operations Command Directive 385-1, U.S. Special Operations Command Joint Safety Program (May 12, 2021).

^eAccording to this directive, in the absence of component or sub-unified command comprehensive policy or publications, other existing, approved policy being used shall be identified in writing.

None of the SOF Service Components Have Fully Addressed SOCOM's Oversight Requirements for High-Risk Training

We found that none of the SOF service components addressed all of SOCOM's oversight requirements for high-risk training in their respective high-risk training and related policies, as shown in table 4.

Table 4: Extent That Policies of Special Operations Forces' Service Component Commands Addressed SOCOM's Oversight Requirements for High-Risk Training

SOF Service Component Command	SOCOM High-Risk Training Oversight Requirements						
	Training oversight not below the first O-5 chain of command ^a	Government oversight (civilian or military) to ensure compliance with SOCOM policy ^b	Government oversight of contracted training	Biennial review of programs of instruction for initial qualification and skill acquisition training ^c	Responsible for the conduct and compliance of sustainment training ^d	Signed risk assessment prior to executing training ^e	Comprehensive policy specific to component commands ^f
U.S. Army Special Operations Command	○	○	◐	●	●	●	●
U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command	●	●	●	◐	●	●	●
U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command	◐	○	○	○	●	●	○
U.S. Marine Corps Special Operations Command	●	◐	●	◐	●	●	◐

- = the component fully incorporated or addressed the requirement in policy
- ◐ = the component partially incorporated or addressed the requirement in policy
- = the component did not incorporate or address the requirement in policy

Source: U.S. Special Operations Command Directive 350-1, *U.S. Special Operations Command Joint Military Training* (Mar. 8, 2022) and GAO analysis of SOCOM and SOF Service Component Command information. | GAO-25-106321

^aMilitary officer grade O-5 refers to a lieutenant colonel in the Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps and a commander in the Navy.

^bAccording to SOCOM Directive 350-1, at a minimum, the first O-5 in the chain of command shall be responsible for training oversight.

^cInitial qualification/skill acquisition training is any training or course that results in a skill qualification upon completion.

^dSustainment training is any training beyond initial qualification/skill acquisition training such as training at the unit level.

^eSOCOM's safety program is set forth in U.S. Special Operations Command Directive 385-1, U.S. Special Operations Command Joint Safety Program (May 12, 2021).

^fAccording to SOCOM Directive 350-1, in the absence of component or sub-unified command comprehensive policy or publications, other existing, approved policy being utilized shall be identified in writing.

Each of the SOF service components have specific high-risk training policies or a policy that they use primarily to oversee high-risk training. Although the SOF service component command policies did not address all of SOCOM's oversight requirements, component officials told us they approached addressing these requirements in different ways. For example:

USASOC. We found that USASOC fully addressed four oversight requirements and partially addressed the requirement for government oversight of contractor-led training. However, its safety policies did not address requirements related to the level of military and government oversight for high-risk training.³² USASOC officials stated that training oversight is addressed in the component's training manuals and that they rely on SOCOM's inspections and training assessment program to ensure that the component's training oversight follows SOCOM guidance. However, according to these officials, the manuals do not specify that oversight of all high-risk training begins at the O-5 level of command, and these approaches do not emphasize the component's responsibility for overseeing high-risk training as stated in the SOCOM directive.

NSW. We found that NSW fully addressed six oversight requirements, but its high-risk training and safety policies partially addressed SOCOM's requirement for a biennial review of training programs of instruction for initial qualification and skill acquisition training.³³ NSW's policies direct the component to conduct annual safety reviews that include a review of the

³²U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) Regulation 385-1, *USASOC Safety Program* (Oct. 3, 2017); U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School (USAJFKSWCS) Supplement 1 to USASOC Regulation 385-1, *USAJFKSWCS/USASOC Safety Program* (Jan. 9, 2019).

³³U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command Instruction 1500.1, *Naval Special Warfare High-Risk Training Safety Program* (Oct. 23, 2015); and U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command Instruction 5100.4, *Naval Special Warfare Safety Management System Program* (Nov. 30, 2021).

curriculum to a limited extent, and to conduct training course assessments once every 3 years. However, these reviews are focused on training safety rather than lesson plan reviews and course audits.

AFSOC. We found that AFSOC fully addressed two oversight requirements, but its high-risk training policy partially addressed the requirement related to level of military oversight for high-risk training. AFSOC did not address government (military or civilian) oversight of training, government oversight of contractor-led training, biennial reviews of training programs of instruction for initial qualification and skill acquisition training, or all elements of a comprehensive policy, such as training requirements, techniques, safety guidance, emergency procedures and expectations, as directed by SOCOM.³⁴

AFSOC officials stated the importance of risk management in overseeing training, and highlighted risk management policy and multiple other policies for oversight of high-risk training. For example, AFSOC officials stated they use DOD directives, the U.S. Air Force's and AFSOC's risk management policies, and SOCOM's safety and training policies as well as the command's and other service components' training guidance to oversee high-risk training.³⁵ However, this decentralized approach does not ensure that AFSOC consistently implements all of SOCOM's oversight requirements for high-risk training.

MARSOC. We found that MARSOC addressed four oversight requirements, but its high-risk training policy did not fully address requirements related to government (military or civilian) oversight of training to ensure compliance with SOCOM guidance and training publications, the biennial review of training curriculum for initial

³⁴Air Force Special Operations Command, *AFSOC Non-Aviation High Risk Training Policy* (December 2022); Air Force Special Operations Command Memorandum, *2024 AFSOC High Risk Training (HRT) Policy for Category 1 Personnel: Special Tactics Personnel* (Jun. 13, 2024); and Air Force Special Operations Command Instruction 90-802, *Tactical Ground Operations Risk Management* (March 10, 2023). In June 2024, after the conclusion of our audit work, the Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) issued a new high-risk training policy. According to AFSOC officials, this policy superseded its December 2022 high-risk training policy. Our analysis includes both the December 2022 and June 2024 policies, as the 2022 policy was in effect at the time of our audit work, and the 2024 policy is currently in effect.

³⁵For example, AFSOC noted that they use Department of the Air Force Instruction 90-802, *Risk Management* (April 1, 2019) (incorporating Department of the Air Force Guidance Memorandum to DAFI 90-802, Oct. 4, 2023) and Department of the Air Force Pamphlet 90-803, *Risk Management (RM) Guidelines and Tools* (March 23, 2022) to oversee high-risk training.

qualification and skill acquisition training, or all elements of a comprehensive policy.³⁶

MARSOC officials stated the command reviews the high-risk training policy annually and plans to update it to address the SOCOM requirement to review high-risk training programs. They stated that other elements of a comprehensive policy are included in standard operating procedures and training manuals, and not necessarily in its high-risk training policy. However, this is not consistent with SOCOM's comprehensive policy requirement because all elements required by SOCOM for a comprehensive policy are not found in MARSOC's high-risk training policy.

Officials from the SOF service component commands told us they understood the need to enhance their policies to address SOCOM's oversight requirements and stated they were in various stages of updating their respective policies. However, the four components had not established specific milestones for completing these efforts.

For example, NSW officials stated they were revising the component's safety program policy to better align with SOCOM guidance, clarify contractor oversight, and incorporate additional information, including lessons learned from prior accident investigations. MARSOC officials stated that the component reviews directives every year and updated its order in November 2022 and January 2023 to incorporate changes from SOCOM's Directive 350-1. The officials stated that next scheduled review of potential changes will be in January 2025.

Also, during the course of our review, AFSOC updated its high-risk training policy in June 2024 that outlines categories of personnel who conduct high-risk training and includes risk management requirements that align with SOCOM's oversight requirement for signed risk assessments, among other things.³⁷ Further, according to AFSOC officials, the command held a training symposium in June 2024 during which officials discussed findings to address high-risk training requirements. As a result of the symposium, officials stated they are working to revise the command's high-risk training policy to ensure

³⁶Marine Forces Special Operations Command Order 5100.2D, *High Risk Training Order* (Jan. 30, 2023).

³⁷Air Force Special Operations Command Memorandum, *2024 AFSOC High Risk Training (HRT) Policy for Category 1 Personnel: Special Tactics Personnel* (June 13, 2024).

compliance with SOCOM training and AFSOC risk management policy but did not give a time frame for when these revisions would be completed. These officials stated they also plan to add a chapter in the command's risk management policy to standardize AFSOC high-risk training activities, and to provide guidance for units conducting high-risk training.

SOCOM Directive 350-1, issued in March 2022, directs the SOF service components to follow oversight requirements for high-risk training.³⁸ This directive states that certain training activities expose individuals to a higher risk of death, permanent disability or loss during training, and these high-risk training activities require an increased level of standardization to help mitigate inherent risk. Further, the directive states that the SOF service components are responsible for engaging in proactive oversight of training.

Federal internal control standards state that an entity's management documents its oversight responsibilities in policies, and periodically reviews policies and procedures for continued relevance and effectiveness in achieving the entity's objectives or addressing related risks.³⁹ The periodic reviews should take place in a timely manner when a major change occurs to an entity's processes. Further, the standards state that an oversight entity is responsible for overseeing the remediation of deficiencies and for providing direction to management on appropriate time frames for correcting deficiencies.

SOCOM officials stated that the SOF service components do not have their high-risk training oversight procedures fully documented in policy and the components have often relied on informal processes to convey how they are conducting oversight. SOCOM issued its updated directive in 2022 that contained new oversight requirements for the SOF service components to implement. However, SOCOM did not specify a time frame by which the SOF service components should implement the oversight requirements. SOF service component officials stated they have not fully incorporated the new requirements in their policies, or established specific milestones to do so, because of workload challenges and ongoing safety policy changes by their service that affect high-risk training.

³⁸U.S. Special Operations Command Directive 350-1.

³⁹[GAO-14-704G](#).

By not establishing milestones for the SOF service components to incorporate SOCOM's oversight requirements in their respective high-risk training policies, SOCOM does not have reasonable assurance of an effective approach to safety with standardized oversight across the service components to mitigate training risks.

Conclusions

SOF personnel conduct high-risk training to prepare for challenging missions aimed at supporting the nation's security interests. This training has sometimes resulted in serious accidents across the force, leading to severe injuries and fatalities. Of the over 3,000 on-duty non-combat accidents the military services reported from fiscal year 2012 through 2022, over 80 percent occurred during training. About half of these reported training accidents happened in four training categories: parachute, dive, tactical vehicle, and weapons or explosives training.

To mitigate risks and improve its oversight of these types of training activities, SOCOM performs several activities, including designating which high-risk training activities require an increased level of oversight and instituting a training assessment and observation program. However, SOCOM has not conducted analyses of negative safety trends or reevaluated its training assessment program in light of plans to expand the scope of these activities. Without performing these aspects, SOCOM may miss opportunities to identify safety issues or to mitigate risk during training activities.

Further, the SOF service component commands have not fully incorporated SOCOM's oversight requirements in their own policies. While the commands are in various stages of updating them, SOCOM has not established milestones to ensure the components complete these efforts. By not doing so, SOCOM does not have full assurance that each of the SOF service component commands possess an approach to safely conduct training and to mitigate risks.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making the following six recommendations to DOD:

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, performs analyses of negative safety trends when designating SOF high-risk training areas in future updates to its training directive. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, in consultation with the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, reevaluates

the training assessment program to determine the number of assessments, observations, and inspections of SOF service component commands and the related resources that are needed to achieve the goals of the program. (Recommendation 2)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, establishes milestones for the U.S. Army Special Operations Command to complete updates to its high-risk training policy that include SOCOM's high-risk training oversight requirements. (Recommendation 3)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command establishes milestones for the U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command to complete updates to its high-risk training policy that include SOCOM's high-risk training oversight requirements. (Recommendation 4)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command establishes milestones for the U.S. Marine Corps Special Operations Command to complete updates to its high-risk training policy that include SOCOM's high-risk training oversight requirements. (Recommendation 5)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command establishes milestones for the U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command to complete updates to its high-risk training policy that include SOCOM's high-risk training oversight requirements. (Recommendation 6)

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to DOD for review and comment. In its comments, reproduced in appendix III, DOD agreed with our recommendations. DOD also stated that our report should reflect the fact that SOF personnel who are not deployed spend the majority of their time in training. We updated the report to provide additional context on this point. DOD also provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to appropriate congressional committees; the Secretaries of Defense, Army, Navy, and Air Force; the Commandant of the Marine Corps; the Commander of the U.S. Special Operations Command; and other interested parties. The report is also available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov/>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-2987 or moldafskyd@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix IV.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Diana Moldafsky". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Diana Moldafsky
Acting Director, Defense Capabilities and Management

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

This report: (1) examines trends in reported accidents involving Special Operation Forces (SOF) personnel in on-duty, non-combat situations, including training, from fiscal years 2012 through 2022, and reported causes, and evaluated the extent to which (2) U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) has developed an approach to effectively oversee SOF high-risk training, and (3) the SOF service components have addressed SOCOM's oversight requirements for high-risk training.

We focused our analysis on accidents that occurred during on-duty, non-combat situations and training specifically involving SOF personnel.¹ We excluded accidents involving active-duty personnel in the conventional forces, which comprise a larger percentage of personnel within the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps. Our analysis also excluded accidents that occurred off-duty or did not involve personnel (such as accidents involving uncrewed aerial vehicles and other equipment).

For objective one, we analyzed data for fiscal years 2012 through 2022 to determine trends in SOF on-duty non-combat and training accidents, such as the number of accidents by class, year, SOF service component command, and training type.² We received data on all reported on-duty non-combat accidents, some reported off-duty accidents, and some accidents that occurred during combat situations involving SOF personnel that occurred during fiscal years 2012 through 2022 from the Army Combat Readiness Center, the Naval Safety Command, and the Air

¹For purposes of this report, on-duty, non-combat accidents refer to accidents that occurred while personnel were on-duty but were not in combat, including accidents that occur during training and other activities. Examples of these types of accidents that occur outside of training include those that occurred as a result of a lack of situational awareness in day-to-day activities, such as falling downstairs, slipping, dropping items on limbs, and running into objects; motor accidents, such as accidents when making deliveries, or moving from one location to another; maintenance activities, such as when using tools or heavy machinery; and equipment damage or mechanical issues such as fire, accidents in the motor pool, or engine failure.

²The Department of Defense (DOD) refers to accidents that occur outside of engagement with an adversary as "mishaps." A mishap is an unplanned event or series of events that results in damage to DOD property; occupational illness to DOD personnel; injury or death to on- or off-duty DOD military personnel; injury to on-duty DOD civilian personnel; or damage to public or private property; or injury or illness to non-DOD personnel, caused by DOD activities. Throughout this report, we use the term "accident" to mean mishap. Department of Defense Instruction 6055.07, *Mishap Notification, Investigation, Reporting, and Record Keeping*, (June 6, 2011) (incorporating change 2, Jun. 11, 2019). We included data from fiscal year 2012 through fiscal year 2022, which was the most recent full year of data available at the time of our analysis.

Force Safety Center.³ To isolate the on-duty non-combat accidents, we manually reviewed the data to identify references to off-duty and combat-related accidents. We then used the information from the manual review to exclude the off-duty and combat-related accidents from the analysis.

We met with Army, Navy, and Air Force officials who report, maintain, and use the accident data to understand how the information is used and to help us assess its reliability and completeness. We also performed electronic testing of the data to check for missing values and internal consistency. Based on officials' statements, we determined the reporting for Class A and Class B accidents was likely more complete than reporting on less serious accidents. Specifically, according to Air Force Safety Center officials, quality control for accident investigations differs depending on accident severity.

According to Army Combat Readiness Center officials, there was increased education on reporting from fiscal years 2014 through 2016, and increased emphasis on reporting Class C and below accidents after fiscal year 2020. These efforts likely account for some of the increase in reported numbers of Class C and Class D accidents after fiscal years 2014 and 2020. We note these limitations in the report where relevant to the findings. Overall, we determined the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of identifying general trends in the reported number and severity of accidents over time and identifying the reported number of on-duty non-combat accidents involving SOF personnel, the approximate number of reported training accidents involving personnel, and the severity of these accidents over time, as well as additional characteristics such as training type and category.⁴

Because the databases the military services use to track accident data do not use standardized language to identify specific types of training, or training categories, we analyzed SOCOM and SOF service component command training policies and guidance documents for examples of language used to describe training. To do so, we identified high-risk training categories defined by SOCOM and the individual SOF service component commands. We also utilized prior GAO work on DOD

³As the Marine Corps falls under the Department of the Navy, the Naval Safety Command is responsible for keeping records of Marine Corps accidents, according to Naval Safety Command and Marine Corps Special Operations Command officials.

⁴For the purposes of this report, we use the term *trend* to refer to the number of accidents and characteristics of those accidents reported over time or summarized for the period covered by our review.

accidents.⁵ Using this analysis, as well as prior GAO work, we identified four general training categories for reporting purposes (parachute, dive, weapons/explosives, and tactical vehicles). We did not calculate accident rates for our analyses of training categories because there is not a widely accepted standard to measure the rate of accidents for these activities.

We then developed a keyword search methodology. We analyzed SOF service component command data to identify which variables within the datasets included information related to whether an accident occurred during training. Using these variables, we identified acronyms, synonyms, and other keywords that generally identified training accidents and keywords that generally identified accidents that did not occur during training, such as falling downstairs or dropping items on limbs. We used the variable analysis and the combination of keywords to identify training accidents. An analyst and methodologist then reviewed the accidents identified by these keywords. We identified additional specific keywords, such as “static line” and “dive”, to determine whether the accidents identified as training fell under the four general training categories we developed based on an analysis of training policies, guidance documents, and prior GAO work.

Additionally, we manually recoded some accidents to reconcile accidents that had multiple keywords within the values or narratives and were therefore identified by the automatic keywords process as being in multiple categories. Two analysts independently coded the accident categories for these accidents. Any discrepancies in the coding of the two analysts were discussed and reconciled by the analysts. Further, for the datasets that did not have a variable that identified the number of fatalities, we manually analyzed Class A accident narratives to determine the fatality counts in each accident.

We used the results of the keyword search, manual analysis, and information on training provided by the SOF service component commands to calculate sums and cross-tabulations for various factors,

⁵GAO, *Military Aviation Mishaps: DOD Needs to Improve Its Approach for Collecting and Analyzing Data to Manage Risks*, [GAO-18-586R](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug 15, 2018); GAO, *Military Vehicles: Army and Marine Corps Should Take Additional Actions to Mitigate and Prevent Training Accidents*, [GAO-21-361](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jul 7, 2021); GAO, *National Guard Helicopters: Additional Actions Needed to Prevent Accidents and Improve Safety*, [GAO-23-105219](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar 14, 2023).

such as SOF service component, accident class, number of fatalities, and accident type.

To examine causal factors, we reviewed prior work on accident causes and analyzed identified causal factors for Class A and B SOF service component command training accident narratives. To determine factor categories, we referred to prior reporting that identified present and contributing human factors and updated them based on additional review of accident narratives. We identified 73 Class A and Class B reported training accidents that involved SOF personnel and available accident narratives that contain present and contributing factor information related to human factors. A total of 40 out of 73 Army, Navy, and Marine Corps reported Class A and B training accidents included narrative information containing present and contributing factors related to human factors.⁶

Due to the format of data the Air Force Safety Center provided to us, we were unable to include Air Force Special Operations Command information in our analysis of causal factors in reported training accidents. Two analysts independently conducted this analysis by reviewing the available accident narratives and coding the type of human factors involved into a spreadsheet. Any discrepancies in the coding of the two analysts were discussed and reconciled by the analysts. The analysts then examined the results to identify the most common human-related causal factors.

We shared drafts of our preliminary data tables and findings with safety and special operations officials from SOCOM, the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force to validate the process we used and the reasonableness of the results. These officials agreed with our approach and the reasonableness of the results.

To address our second objective, we identified and reviewed SOCOM guidance on joint military training to identify key controls used to oversee high-risk training.⁷ Specifically, we reviewed SOCOM's approach to designate specific training activities as high-risk and interviewed SOCOM

⁶We have previously reported that Army officials were unable to provide narratives for some accidents because of blank entries in its database. Army officials previously stated that this could be due to improper data entry, failure to forward final reports to the Army Combat Readiness Center, or loss of entries due to data migration from a previous system to the current information management system. See [GAO-21-361](#).

⁷U.S. Special Operations Command Directive 350-1, *U.S. Special Operations Command Joint Military Training* (Mar 8, 2022).

training and SOF service component command officials. We compared the approach with SOCOM's directive on high-risk training and federal internal control standards.⁸ We determined the control activities component of the Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government was significant to this objective, specifically the associated underlying principle that management periodically reviews policies, procedures, and related control activities for continued relevance and effectiveness in achieving the entity's objectives or addressing related risks.

We also identified and reviewed SOCOM's training assessment program to oversee training administered by the SOF service component commands and interviewed SOCOM training officials responsible for the program. We compared the approach with SOCOM's directive on the assessment program and federal internal control standards.⁹ We determined the control activities component of the *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* was significant to this objective, specifically the associated underlying principle that management periodically reviews policies, procedures, and related control activities for continued relevance and effectiveness in achieving the entity's objectives or addressing related risks.

To address our third objective, we identified and reviewed SOCOM guidance on joint military training to identify high-risk training oversight requirements.¹⁰ We identified seven high-risk training oversight requirements for the SOF service component commands to implement and interviewed SOCOM officials about the purpose and intent of the oversight requirements. We also interviewed personnel from each of the SOF service component commands to determine the extent they have high-risk training programs, and to identify the key policies they use to govern SOF training and specifically high-risk training. We obtained testimonial evidence to determine the extent the SOF service component commands address SOCOM's oversight requirements high-risk training.

To evaluate the extent to which the SOF service component commands addressed seven high-risk training oversight requirements as directed in

⁸U.S. Special Operations Command Directive 350-1; GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2014).

⁹U.S. Special Operations Command Directive 350-33, *Special Operations Training Assessment Program* (May 13, 2022); [GAO-14-704G](#).

¹⁰U.S. Special Operations Command Directive 350-1.

SOCOM Directive 350-1, we analyzed the components' high-risk training policies and other safety, or risk management policies officials identified as guidance they use. We conducted a two-analyst content analysis in which we compared the components' policies with the seven oversight requirements and assessed the extent to which the components addressed each requirement. One GAO analyst conducted this analysis, coding the information and entering it into a spreadsheet, and a different GAO analyst checked the information for accuracy. Any initial disagreements in the coding were discussed and reconciled by the analysts. The analysts then tallied the responses to determine the extent to which the requirements were addressed.

We determined the component "fully met" the requirement if the policy included evidence that clearly described the specific oversight requirement; "partially met" the requirement if the policy included some evidence or description of the specific oversight requirement; and "did not meet" the requirement if the policy did not provide evidence to describe or address the requirement in a clear manner. We shared our findings with the SOF service components to validate the policies and process we used, and the reasonableness of the results. These officials agreed with the reasonableness of the results. During the technical comment period, an Air Force Special Operations Command official provided us with an updated version of the command's high-risk training policy from June 2024.¹¹ We reviewed the policy to determine whether the command met additional SOCOM oversight requirements and adjusted accordingly.

We compared SOCOM's approach to overseeing SOF service component efforts to address its high-risk oversight requirements with SOCOM's joint training directive and federal internal control standards.¹² We determined the control environment and control activities components of the Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government were significant to this objective, specifically the associated underlying principles that (1) an oversight body is responsible for overseeing the remediation of deficiencies and for providing direction to management on appropriate time frames for correcting deficiencies, and (2) management periodically reviews policies, procedures, and related control activities for

¹¹Air Force Special Operations Command Memorandum, *2024 AFSOC High Risk Training (HRT) Policy for Category 1 Personnel: Special Tactics Personnel* (Jun. 13, 2024).

¹²U.S. Special Operations Command Directive 350-1; [GAO-14-704G](#).

continued relevance and effectiveness in achieving the entity's objectives or addressing related risks.

To address our objectives, we interviewed officials, obtained testimonial evidence, and, where appropriate, obtained documentation, from the following organizations:

- Department of Defense
 - Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict
 - Office of the Inspector General

- U.S. Special Operations Command
 - Directorate of Operations, Training and Education Division (J3-T&E).
 - Joint Safety Office
 - Office of the Inspector General
 - Joint Special Operations Command
 - Special Operations Command-Africa
 - Special Operations Command-Central
 - Special Operations Command-North
 - Special Operations Command-South
 - Special Operations Command-Pacific
 - Special Operations Command-Europe
 - U.S. Army Special Operations Command
 - 1st Special Forces Command
 - Army Special Operations Aviation Command
 - U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School
 - 1st Special Warfare Training Group (Airborne)
 - Army Special Operations Forces Assessment and Selection
 - 2nd Special Warfare Training Group (Airborne)

- Military Free-Fall School
- Close Quarters Combat, Sniper Operations, and Specialized Breaching
- Special Forces Underwater Operations School

- Director of Safety

- U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command
 - Naval Special Warfare Center
 - Naval Special Warfare Development Group
 - Naval Special Warfare Group 1 and Training Detachment
 - Naval Special Warfare Group 4
 - Naval Special Warfare Group 8
 - High Risk-Training Safety

- U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command
 - A3 Directorate
 - 24th Special Operations Wing, Air Force Special Tactics
 - Director of Safety

- U.S. Marine Forces Special Operations Command
 - Assistant Chief of Staff, G-7
 - Director of Safety
- Army
 - Office of the Staff Judge Advocate
 - Combat Readiness Center
 - Functional Area 49, Operations Research and Systems Analysis
 - Data and Analysis Center, Research, Studies, and Analysis

- Navy/Marine Corps
 - Naval Safety Command
 - Expeditionary and Special Warfare
 - Data and Analytics
 - RMI Requirements
- Air Force
 - HQ Air Force Safety
 - Aviation Safety Issues
 - Air Force Safety Center

We conducted this performance audit from October 2022 to November 2024 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Appendix II: Reported Number of Class A Through D Training Accidents Involving Special Operations Forces by Country, Fiscal Years 2012-2022

This appendix provides information on the countries in which reported Class A through D training accidents involving Special Operations Forces took place during fiscal years 2012 through 2022 (see Table 5).

Table 5: Reported Number of Special Operations Forces Class A through D Training Accidents Involving Personnel by Country, Fiscal Years 2012–2022

Country	Class				Total
	A	B	C	D	
United States	41	27	1,067	1,351	2,486
Afghanistan			5	4	9
Australia		1	2		3
Djibouti		2	1	1	4
Germany			18	9	27
Greece				4	4
Honduras			1		1
Iraq			5		5
Japan	2		12	16	30
Jordan				1	1
Kenya			1		1
South Korea			2	2	4
Lebanon				1	1
Malaysia				1	1
Niger	2				2
Philippines			1		1
Somalia			2		2
Spain			1		1
Thailand			2		2
Tunisia			1		1
Ukraine			1		1
United Arab Emirates			2	2	4
United Kingdom			5	19	24
Total	45	30	1,129	1,411	2,615

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-25-106321

Note: The table excludes where the country the accident occurred in was not reported or did not have data, was listed as “other”, or was classified. On-duty non-combat accidents refer to accidents that occurred while personnel were on-duty but were not in combat, including accidents that occur during training and other activities. Examples of these types of accidents that occur outside of training include those that occurred as a result of a lack of situational awareness in day-to-day activities, such as falling downstairs, slipping, dropping items on limbs, and running into objects; motor accidents,

**Appendix II: Reported Number of Class A
Through D Training Accidents Involving
Special Operations Forces by Country, Fiscal
Years 2012-2022**

such as accidents when making deliveries, or moving from one location to another; maintenance activities, such as when using tools or heavy machinery; and equipment damage or mechanical issues such as fire, accidents in the motor pool, or engine failure. For the purposes of this report, we refer to SOF training accidents as accidents that involved SOF personnel and that occurred during training activities or events, such as activities personnel perform to maintain their physical condition, proficiency in SOF related skills, or the driving or flying of platforms that are used for missions, and specific training events such as unit level training events, and formal training events, courses, and simulations.

Appendix III: Comments from the Department of Defense



SPECIAL OPERATIONS /
LOW INTENSITY CONFLICT

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
2500 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-2500

OCT 30 2024

Ms. Diana Moldafsky
Acting Director, Defense Capabilities and Management
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington DC 20548

Dear Ms. Moldafsky,

This is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the GAO Draft Report GAO-25-106321SU, "SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES Additional Oversight Could Help Mitigate High-Risk Training Accidents," dated September 27, 2024 (GAO Code 106321SU). DoD encourages GAO to provide additional context throughout the report reflecting the fact that SOF personnel who are not deployed spend the majority of their time in training.

Attached is DoD's response to the subject report. My point of contact is Ryan W. Reilly who can be reached at ryan.w.reilly.civ@mail.mil and (703) 614-8423.

Sincerely,

Erin M. Logan
Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense
for Special Operations Policy and
Programs



GAO DRAFT REPORT DATED FEBRUARY 6, 2017
GAO-25-106321SU (GAO CODE 106321SU)

“SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES ADDITIONAL OVERSIGHT COULD HELP
MITIGATE HIGH-RISK TRAINING ACCIDENTS”

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS
TO THE GAO RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command performs analyses of negative safety trends when designating SOF high-risk training areas in future updates to its training directive.

DoD RESPONSE: The Department concurs with this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense should ensure the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, in consultation with the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, re-evaluates the training assessment program to determine the number of assessments, observations, and inspections of SOF service component commands and the related resources that are needed to achieve the goals of the program.

DoD RESPONSE: The Department concurs with this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command establishes milestones for the U.S. Army Special Operations Command to complete updates to the component’s high-risk training policy that include SOCOM’s high-risk training oversight requirements.

DoD RESPONSE: The Department concurs with this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION 4: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command establishes milestones for the U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command to complete updates to the component’s high-risk training policy that include SOCOM’s high-risk training oversight requirements.

DoD RESPONSE: The Department concurs with this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION 5: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command establishes milestones for the U.S. Marine Corps Special Operations Command to complete updates to the component’s high-risk training policy that include SOCOM’s high-risk training oversight requirements.

DoD RESPONSE: The Department concurs with this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION 6: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command establishes milestones for the U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command to complete updates to the component's high-risk training policy that include SOCOM's high-risk training oversight requirements.

DoD RESPONSE: The Department concurs with this recommendation.

Appendix IV: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Diana Moldafsky, (202) 512-2987 or moldafskyd@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Matthew Ullengren (Assistant Director), Adam Hatton (Analyst-in-Charge), Christopher Gezon, Alexandra Gonzalez, Grant Mallie, Richard Powelson, Paulina Reaves, Michael Silver, and Yoki Moody Wong made key contributions to this report.

GAO's Mission

The Government Accountability Office, the audit, evaluation, and investigative arm of Congress, exists to support Congress in meeting its constitutional responsibilities and to help improve the performance and accountability of the federal government for the American people. GAO examines the use of public funds; evaluates federal programs and policies; and provides analyses, recommendations, and other assistance to help Congress make informed oversight, policy, and funding decisions. GAO's commitment to good government is reflected in its core values of accountability, integrity, and reliability.

Obtaining Copies of GAO Reports and Testimony

The fastest and easiest way to obtain copies of GAO documents at no cost is through our website. Each weekday afternoon, GAO posts on its [website](#) newly released reports, testimony, and correspondence. You can also [subscribe](#) to GAO's email updates to receive notification of newly posted products.

Order by Phone

The price of each GAO publication reflects GAO's actual cost of production and distribution and depends on the number of pages in the publication and whether the publication is printed in color or black and white. Pricing and ordering information is posted on GAO's website, <https://www.gao.gov/ordering.htm>.

Place orders by calling (202) 512-6000, toll free (866) 801-7077, or TDD (202) 512-2537.

Orders may be paid for using American Express, Discover Card, MasterCard, Visa, check, or money order. Call for additional information.

Connect with GAO

Connect with GAO on [Facebook](#), [Flickr](#), [X](#), and [YouTube](#).
Subscribe to our [RSS Feeds](#) or [Email Updates](#). Listen to our [Podcasts](#).
Visit GAO on the web at <https://www.gao.gov>.

To Report Fraud, Waste, and Abuse in Federal Programs

Contact FraudNet:

Website: <https://www.gao.gov/about/what-gao-does/fraudnet>

Automated answering system: (800) 424-5454 or (202) 512-7700

Congressional Relations

A. Nicole Clowers, Managing Director, ClowersA@gao.gov, (202) 512-4400, U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7125, Washington, DC 20548

Public Affairs

Sarah Kaczmarek, Managing Director, KaczmarekS@gao.gov, (202) 512-4800, U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7149 Washington, DC 20548

Strategic Planning and External Liaison

Stephen J. Sanford, Managing Director, spel@gao.gov, (202) 512-4707 U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7814, Washington, DC 20548



Please Print on Recycled Paper.