

New Fiction from Adrian Bonenberger: “Special Operations World”

No more than 10 percent of the United States military was special operations when I got out. Being in special operations or “specops” as it was known at the time was something to be proud of. There were Rangers and Special Forces and Marine Special Operations and Force Recon and the SEALs like me, and the boat guys who did infiltration aka infil operations for the SEALs, and the different task forces, and CAG (I’m sorry I don’t know what the acronym stands for) otherwise known as Delta Force. Then there were the pilots for helicopters and planes and who knows what else all. There was a lot of special operations, is my point, but that amounted to about (again) 10 percent of the military, maximum. Special operations meant something. It was special.

Now, man, whew. The number’s closer to eighty percent. No joke. Eighty percent of the military is special operations.



I had to join again, is how I found out. When I left the military to get an education and pursue a career—back when I had dreams like that—it never would have occurred to me that one day the military would be people wearing different colored berets and taking part in top secret missions to countries I'd never heard of. But the education I got outside didn't amount to much. And the career, working for some jackknife-grinning moke named Carl doing financial spreadsheets didn't go anywhere either. I guess I'm just unlucky that way.

So I slunk back down to the Army recruiter's office one cloudy Tuesday on my lunch break. I'd been posting on Facebook about how well things were going with my life and the job, but in reality it had been a mess. The beard and tattoo photos, the birthdays with kids, a promotion—sure, they'd happened, and online they probably seemed impressive to everyone who wasn't there, but living those moments had been stuffing my mouth full of ash. I needed back in "the game," as we special operators call it, but was so embarrassed that my former buddies would see me and find out that I couldn't make it on the outside. I asked the recruiter what openings they had.

“Anything except special operations,” I said, certain that they’d open the book for me.

The recruiter, a former sniper in the Ranger Reconnaissance, looked over my resume, and then laughed. “Buddy you want to go into the Regular Army? What are you going to do, water logistician?”

“Yeah,” I’d told him. “That sounds good.”

He’d jumped out of his chair. “The fuck do you think you are, squid, walking in here and asking to be a *water logistician*.” His face was all snarl, but I wasn’t afraid of him. Ranger Recon Sniper infiltration teams were tough, sure, but we special operations folks knew that the Rangers barked harder than they bit. I stood my ground.

“That’s right pal. Hook a trident up.”

“Look around. You notice anything?”

I scanned the room using my SEAL powers of observation, and realized something odd. Everyone was a Ranger or a Special Forces Green Beret, or a CAG sniper from Delta.

“What’d I walk into, special operations recruiting command?” I quipped.

I had, which made it all the more appalling how few options were open. There was a 10-year waiting list for water logisticians, and a bunch of other lousy jobs in the Army. They were the most coveted positions around, according to the recruiter.

I leaned over the desk and grabbed the Ranger by his lapels. “Listen, I don’t have time for your b.s. Are you telling me

that *everyone in the military is special operations?*”

He gritted his teeth. “Geddoffa me, you bum,” he said through clenched teeth. It was good special operations talk, strict, macho, and I appreciated it, so I let him go and dusted off his shoulders.

“Sorry, don’t mean to be sore. I’ve been out for a while, this seems really different from the military I was in before,” I explained, hoping to assuage his anger. It worked: he calmed down.

“Let me see what I can do,” he said. “I’ve seen your record. You did a lot of good work sniping terrorists when you were in. Saved a lot of special operators. And that still means something to us.” He tapped my file meaningfully. “We stand by our own here.”

He sat down in his beaten swivel chair, purchased by the limitless dark cash swilling about the special operations community (which to remind you here was basically the whole military at this point!!) and punched up the employment system only us JSOC / SOCOM folks had access to (again—literally eighty percent of the military). He scanned through the job listings for a minute, then turned to face me, his chin resting contemplatively on a pyramid made by his fingers and thumbs.

“How does this sound. Human waste disposal specialist. Fort Polk, Louisiana.”

His offer was not suitable, and I told him so.

“Let me hit you with this then, cowboy—more appropriate for

your skill set as a SEAL. Are you ready? Okay. Chaplain's aide. Comes with a two-year stabilization incentive. Fort Irwin, Kansas."

That wasn't it, either. I would've asked for things like infantry or armor, even artillery, but those jobs were long gone. The Germans and Poles handled those duties, now, and some Ukrainians. The professions I could've fit into were no longer available and hadn't been for years. "Got anything in communications? Signal, public affairs, anything like that?"

He laughed, a harsh and insulting laugh, the more so for its apparent sincerity. "Look," he said, wiping tears away, "I got one more opening. Veterinarian. You go around putting meds up the ass of sheep, donkeys, that sort of thing. Think you can handle that, hotshot?"

Now, normally, I'd have walked right out. But I could see what was what. If it was between cleaning actual human shit all my waking hours, having to sexually service some randy old clergyman (that's what chaplain's aides did and do, it's a fact, look it up) and slathering up sick animals with medicine to keep them walking, well, dang. I might not've made it in the real world, I might've been just another financial stock-whatever day-trading bro with a 29-year-old shift manager named Carl who was a cousin of Eric Trump or something screaming at me as though I was a child, and all of my SEAL skills might have come to naught, but dad didn't raise no fool.

"I'll do option number three," I said. And that's how I got back into the military, and learned how few people were outside special operations any more. It wasn't what I expected, but it wasn't

all bad, either.

The only thing I wish were different (apart from everything about my job) was

that there were fewer generals. I think the exact number is 19.8%, 19.8% of the

Army is generals. And I, dear reader... I am not one of them.