



2012-059

John C. Fredriksen, *Fighting Elites: A History of U.S. Special Forces*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2012. Pp. ix, 392. ISBN 978-1-59884-810-6.

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This is a disappointing book, doubly so because of its author's earlier work on the organizational history of American armed forces and the recent prominence of special operations forces in current US wars. John C. Fredriksen (PhD, Providence College), an independent historian, has written some thirty reference books on various subjects, including many on military history. He describes *Fighting Elites* as

an attempt to provide meaningful coverage of American special forces, particularly from a reference standpoint. This is a somewhat complex subject, given the multiplicity of units involved across time, so I employ a relatively straightforward organization. The first part consists of three chronological chapters discussing various units ... during the periods 1676-1918, 1941-1945, and 1946-1991. The first chapter is arranged chronologically, including coverage prior to America's founding, while the next two chapters consist of alphabetical listings of units by service name. Each chapter consists of a broad historical discussion of the unit with a separate section, "Defining Activity," highlighting a particular battle or endeavor with special operations overtones. The chapter ends with an extensive listing of bibliographic citations, including all the latest literature, to promote further research. Part II of the book provides an overview of contemporary special forces and is divided into 13 individual chapters, each covering an individual branch of the Special Forces, alphabetically by service. Each chapter then delineates five major points: introduction for context, organization, training and personnel, weapons and equipment, and known activities. As before, each chapter concludes with a bibliography of the latest available resources. Finally, the book concludes with an extensive chronology of known events in special operations history and a general bibliography covering operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. In sum, I sought to provide a handy, one-stop reference guide to the history of U.S. Special Forces, one that affords extensive historical and bibliographical coverage yet is easy for lay readers to access and inculcate. To that end, I believe I have succeeded. (ix)

I believe he has not succeeded. The book's needlessly complex organization leads to redundancies and contradictions that make it difficult to use as a reference. Furthermore, the inclusion of units that are questionably "special" or "elite" and others dating back as far as the seventeenth century packs book with irrelevant material and makes it overlong. Finally, the lack of source citations, frequent factual errors, many typos, and an inappropriate "gee whiz" prose style raise serious doubts about the reliability of the work.

Consider, for example, the accounts of Operation Urgent Fury in Grenada. The invasion is covered in nine different places from the viewpoint of six different special operations forces, with no single evaluation of their combined performance. In one place, the "[Air Force] elite Combat Control Team ... clandestinely arrived and deployed overhead" (152), to guide the troop-carrying transports to their drop zone. In another "the lead aircraft suffered navigation problems, and the armada straggled in out of their assigned order" (160), delaying the drop of the Rangers. The final chronology has three entries for Navy SEAL (Sea, Air, and Land) operations during the invasion of Grenada, but none for those of the other seven thousand troops involved (361). (A common thread in the coverage is the repeated misspelling of the key objective on Grenada as the Point *Salinas* [read Salines] airfield.)

The definitions of and distinctions between special and elite are murky, starting with the book's very title and continuing throughout: "Special purpose units, loosely defined, are any aggregate of military personnel, uniformed or not, operating in manners differently from prescribed tactics or procedures utilized by the majority of other units.... [They are] clearly identifiable as having a special purpose ... [and] capable of achieving strategic and tactical objectives usually beyond the purview of conventional units, whereby imagination, not military dogma, plays an inordinate role..." (3).

Using this definition, Fredriksen starts with the militia company that Capt. Benjamin Church of Plymouth formed in 1676—“60 Englishmen and 140 Indian auxiliaries, all volunteers and well versed in irregular warfare,” whose victories “sealed the fate of Metacomet’s rebellion [also known as King Philip’s War]” (7). Church’s use of indigenous forces became “a pillar of modern special operations techniques” (vii) and “a standard tactic of American special forces throughout the wars of the 20th and 21st centuries” (8). But, “the advantages ... [of such] units were by and large forgotten”(viii) and their “little favor among conventionally minded national leaders”(vi) casts real doubt on the putative influence of seventeenth-century special operations on those of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Fredriksen later writes that “Special purpose-type units had all but been forgotten by the United States since 1918, but the advent of World War II witnessed their dramatic rebirth.... The period 1939–1945 thus occasioned a blooming of diverse American special forces...” (65). That period would also have been a far better starting point for his book.

The author’s flexible definitions give him wide license to select a variety of units as elite or special. Of the War of 1812, which he knows particularly well, Fredriksen writes that the Regiment of Light Artillery and the Regiment of Riflemen were shown to be elite by their black uniform collars and cuffs (29). He also designates them as special because their weapons differed from those of other artillery and infantry units (23, 28). Leaving cuffs and collars aside, if a different type of weapon makes a unit special, what about the machine gun battalions of World War I and the cannon companies and chemical mortar battalions of World War II? The book needs tighter definitions to prevent this sort of sprawl in identifying both the characteristics and the origins of special units.

The volume’s lack of source citations, whether in the text or in notes, means its author must demonstrate accuracy and judgment to ensure acceptance of his presentation of facts, evaluations, and conclusions in such a complex and controversial subject area. That Fredriksen fails to meet this requirement is evident from the cumulative effect of the following sample of errors in his text.

In 1759, “Rogers’ command ... struggled into Fort Four (Woodville, New Hampshire)” (12). Wrong: it was *Woodsville*—Fort Four is some sixty miles south, at Charlestown, NH.

Submarine *Turtle* of 1776 “consisted of two large oak staves...” (22). Wrong: it was two large oak *shells*—a stave is a narrow strip of wood.

John C. Fremont’s nickname, the Pathfinder, remains in use and “denotes elite reconnaissance personnel within the U.S. Army” (33). Wrong: army pathfinders mark drop and landing zones for incoming aircraft—they are not “reconnaissance personnel.”

A photo caption states that US sharpshooters of the Union Army used “Spencer rifles,” while the text on the same page says “Sharps rifles” (40). The caption is wrong—the two rifles are very different and the sharpshooters used the Sharps.

“The Civil War ended on April 9, 1865” (47). Wrong: it had no official ending—the last significant Confederate force surrendered on 23 June 1865 in present-day Oklahoma.

The 2nd Marine Raider Battalion landing on Makin Island on 16 August 1942 “constituted America’s first offensive action of the Pacific War” (102). Wrong: the division landed on Guadalcanal and seized the airfield there on 7 August 1942.

“In January, 1941 ... Colonel Graves B. Erskine, U.S. Army, originated a plan...” (103). Wrong: Colonel Erskine was a Marine who served thirty-six years and retired with four stars.

“Civilian Irregular Defense Groups included South Vietnamese soldiers and local tribesmen” (165). Wrong: they did not include South Vietnamese soldiers.

(In a photo caption), “U.S. Army special forces ... parachuting into the mountainous Central Highlands to observe Communist troop movements” (171). Wrong: special forces did not jump into the Central Highlands—the jumper pictured, who has neither weapon nor rucksack, is obviously making a training jump.

(In the Chronology entry for 5 January 1961, “President John F. Kennedy begins the process of founding ... the Navy SEALs and the Army Green Berets” (352). Wrong: the Army 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) was activated on 19 June 1952.

In addition to these easily correctable mistakes, I counted fifteen typos in the first 155 pages. Clearly, someone was in a hurry to get this book published. It is too long, badly organized, and riddled with errors of fact. I cannot recommend it as a “one-stop reference guide to the history of U.S. Special Forces reference.”