



2014-049

Robert L. Tonsetic, *Special Operations during the American Revolution*. Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2013. Pp. 272. ISBN 978-1-61200-165-4.

Review by Ryan Menath, US Air Force Academy (ryan.menath@usafa.edu).

In his second monograph on the American Revolution,¹ historian Robert Tonsetic offers a well crafted, detailed account of smaller-scale militia operations between 1775 and 1780 and tries to show that they featured the same skills, techniques, and principles evident in present-day Special Operations (SO) missions. Highlighting nine major raids, he describes how militias used tactics they had learned as frontiersmen to conduct operations with specific, immediate objectives.

While he does not recount any current day raids, the author does cite official Department of Defense (DOD) regulations to demonstrate the similarities with eighteenth-century practices. Some of his case studies concern well known episodes—for example, the patriot capture of Fort Ticonderoga and the American militia victory at King’s Mountain. Others are less familiar, like the privateer raids on Britain’s coasts (111–35), Col. Return Jonathan Meigs’s raid on Sag Harbor (196–98), and the capture of British General Richard Prescott at Newport, Rhode Island (199–205).

Tonsetic, a decorated US Army colonel (ret.), served as an infantryman and SO officer in Vietnam.² After earning a doctorate in education (1996), he taught at the graduate level for several years and has written five books. His background as both an SO operator and a military historian make him well suited to write a comparative study of special operations in distant periods of American history.

The book’s nine chapters present freestanding case studies in no particular order. These extend to both privateer and US Navy actions in the Atlantic and the Caribbean. Surprising omissions are some of the better known hit-and-run militia operations conducted by such men as Daniel Morgan or Francis Marion. On the other hand, it is refreshing to read about lesser known actions and individuals that contributed to patriot victory in the American Revolution.

Each chapter begins with background information on the relevant mission—its time frame, geographic and topographic details, etc. Then come discussions of the principal characters, the necessity for the raid, the planning of the operation, the selection of the men, and the actual carrying out of the mission. The author makes good use of both American and British firsthand accounts. Chapter 8, “The Whaleboat Wars,” typifies Tonsetic’s method; it treats several obscure expeditions in which small groups of men used whaleboats to carry out their missions. Thus, the discussion of “The Capture of General Prescott” (199–205) begins with background on British actions in and around Newport in 1776, with close attention to the role of Brig. Gen. Richard Prescott.³ When an American prisoner escaped from the British, he promptly reported to Maj. William Barton, commander of the Rhode Island militia. Tonsetic sketches Barton’s background and describes his choice of raiders based on their combat experience and expertise with small boats. Next come details of the successful mission to capture Prescott—the deeds of the raiders and their opponents, and the effects of weather conditions. Tonsetic then draws conclusions about similarities between the raid and modern SO doctrine regarding timely intelligence, speed of movement, secrecy, infiltration, exfiltration, and the hand selection of men.

1. The first was 1781: *The Decisive Year of the Revolutionary War* (Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2011).

2. See his *Warriors: An Infantryman’s Memoir of Vietnam* (NY: Presidio Pr, 2004), *Days of Valor: An Inside Account of the Bloodiest Six Months of the Vietnam War* (Philadelphia: Casemate, 2007), and *Forsaken Warriors: The Story of an American Advisor with the South Vietnamese Rangers and Airborne, 1970–71* (Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2009).

3. Viewed by his men as “pompous and arrogant” (200), Prescott allowed his troops to use many of the town’s trees, signs, and even grave markers for firewood.

Occasionally, Tonsetic cites official DOD directives to isolate similarities and differences between eighteenth- and twenty-first-century special operations.

Partisan warfare was not conducted along fixed lines using European-style tactics, but rather consisted primarily of skirmishes, ambushes, and attacks directed against enemy supply lines, lines of communications, and outposts in enemy controlled areas and contested areas. Current US military doctrine and terminology does [sic] not use the term partisan warfare, but ... two terms that are roughly equivalent to partisan warfare during the American Revolutionary War. The first is “irregular warfare.” The US Military’s Joint Publication (JP) 1-02⁴ defines irregular warfare as, “A violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population.” The same publication defines “irregular forces” as “Armed individuals or groups who are not members of the regular armed forces, police, or other internal security forces.” Another term, “guerilla⁵ warfare,” more closely parallels the American partisan warfare waged during the Revolutionary War. Guerilla warfare is defined today as “Military and paramilitary operations conducted in enemy-held or hostile territory by irregular, predominately indigenous forces.” A guerilla force is described as, “A group of irregular, predominately indigenous personnel organized along military lines to conduct military and paramilitary operations in enemy-held, hostile, or denied territory.”⁶ The major difference between present-day irregular and guerilla warfare, and partisan warfare waged during the Revolutionary War, is the type of forces employed. (136–37)

Although, strangely, Tonsetic does not quote the definition of “special operations” in JP 1-02,⁷ this paragraph does clarify the key terminology surrounding the subject. One wishes, however, that the author had included these baseline definitions earlier on, in the introduction or first chapter, rather than chapter 6. The chief distinction he makes is that paramilitary forces in the American Revolution were mostly militiamen recruited, trained, and controlled at the county or state level (137), while today’s SO forces are controlled by the Department of Defense.

A particular strength of the book is the rather full information given for leading actors in the book. For example, what we learn about his upbringing and education help us better understand men like Lt. Col. David Humphreys, whom George Washington ordered to abduct the Hessian General Wilhelm von Knyphausen (213–14). Tonsetic also stresses the advantages of technology in our day. Humphreys, for example, had to abort his mission in part for lack of accurate forecasts of weather and tides, things today’s SO forces may take for granted.

Tonsetic glosses over one critical point of contrast between then and now. Today’s SO personnel are trained differently from regular forces and assigned certain specific types of missions. They enter the selection process well aware of the difficult nature of these missions. Though Tonsetic cogently demonstrates the resemblances of missions in the American Revolution to modern Special Operations, he does not explore whether the Revolutionary patriots thought of themselves as different or unique compared with regular militiamen or soldiers in the Continental Army. That is, while the external aspects of participating in special missions are described in detail, the psychological aspects are not.

In *Special Operations during the American Revolution*, Robert Tonsetic instructively showcases militia raids and attacks against the British in the Revolutionary War and makes suggestive comparisons to present-day Special Operations. His engrossing book will appeal strongly to both undergraduates and general readers.

4. *Department of Defense Joint Publication 1-02: Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington: DOD, 2010).

5. Tonsetic consistently uses this spelling of the word instead of “guerrilla,” which appears in the DOD documents he quotes.

6. *Department of Defense Joint Publication 3-05: Special Operations* (Washington: DOD, 2011) GL-8.

7. “Operations requiring unique modes of employment, tactical techniques, equipment and training often conducted in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments and characterized by one or more of the following: time sensitive, clandestine, low visibility, conducted with and/or through indigenous forces, requiring regional expertise, and/or a high degree of risk. Also called SO.”