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# THE RELEVANCY OF ROBIN SAGE

BY MAJOR ADAM WOYTOWICH



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*“This is another type of war, new in its intensity, ancient in its origin — war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins; war by ambush instead of combat; by infiltration instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of enraging him. . . . It requires in those situations where we must encounter it . . . a whole new kind of strategy, a wholly different kind of force, and therefore a new and wholly different kind of military training.”*  
— President John F. Kennedy, West Point Commencement Address, 1962<sup>01</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Since 1952, the U.S. Army has conducted various manifestations of formal unconventional warfare training. Guerrilla warfare-inspired exercises under such names as Gobbler Woods and Cherokee Trail operated over the next two decades in the states of West Virginia, Georgia and North and South Carolina.<sup>02</sup> By definition, UW consists of “operations and activities that are conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary and guerrilla force in a denied area.”<sup>03</sup> In 1974, what is now known as “Robin Sage,” the U.S. Department of Defense’s premier UW exercise, held its first training iteration. While Robin Sage has undergone numerous changes and program-of-instruction modifications since its inception, the Special Forces Qualification Course culmination

exercise remains a relevant and necessary gate for entry-level U.S. Army Special Forces Soldiers in the 21st century.

This article provides an overview of the Robin Sage CULEX, particularly how the exercise trains and assesses its students in the conduct of the U.S. Army Special Forces’ primary mission of UW. This article also links Robin Sage initiatives to the former U.S. Army Special Operations Command Commanding General’s vision outlined in Army Special Operations Force’s blueprint for future operations entitled, *ARSOF 2022*. As a bow to the exercise’s civilian role players, a few vignettes will demonstrate how these patriotic civilians uniquely test the students’ ability to navigate the Human Domain and provide for the overall support of the exercise. Finally, the article offers a snapshot of a Robin Sage cadre team sergeant’s duties and responsibilities, as well as some of the challenges and benefits associated with training SF students.

## ROBIN SAGE OVERVIEW

The fictional basis of the Robin Sage scenario occurs in Atlantica, a large island a few hundred miles off the eastern seaboard of the United States. An invasion occurs by the United Provinces of Atlantica against the northern province of the Republic of Pineland, an ally of the United States. As a result, the United States commits to the conflict and obligates forces to help restore the territorial integrity and legitimate government of the ROP. To facilitate a credible backstory to the introduction of Special Operations Task Force-91 into the Pineland theater of operations, members of 1st Battalion, 1st Special Warfare Training Group (Airborne) partnered with the Johns Hopkins University's Applied Physics Laboratory in 2012 and created a 133-page book, which is distributed to SFQC students, entitled, *Atlantica: A Concise History*. The book covers the history of Pineland, its government, significant events and key persons. It is in the northern province of the ROP that the students will undergo one of their final tests in the SFQC as they infiltrate by various methods to include ground, air and maritime operations, or a combination thereof.

Company D, 1st Battalion, 1st SWTG (A) plans and executes the SFQC CULEX and is overseen by an SF major and sergeant major. The unit is task-organized as a company headquarters, a north and a south field team. Each field team has the capacity to run six student operational detachment alphas and is led by an SF major or captain, chief warrant officer 2 or 3, and a post-SFODA operations master sergeant. The ODAs, comprised of 12-14 students each, are led by two cadre team sergeants, typically an SF master sergeant and a sergeant first class.

The company conducts six Robin Sage iterations annually and the course is currently 30 days in length, with roughly 120-144 students attending per class. While Robin Sage is phase four of the six SFQC phases, it is considered the CULEX for a student striving to earn the Green Beret. The central objective of the course is to take all of the skills learned in the SFQC and apply them to a UW mission set within a non-permissive environment. The future global operational environment is one characterized as a balance of power between state and non-state actors, and less as a fairly predictable pre-9/11, Cold War-era where superpowers competed. Thus, the need for a variety of strategic options, such as UW, should be made available to our nation's senior decision makers.<sup>04</sup>

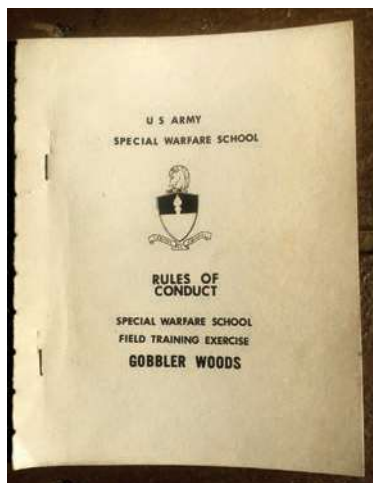
A Green Beret's UW education actually begins in phase one of the SFQC, known as the SF Orientation Course, run by Company A, 4th Battalion, 1st SWTG (A). Following successful completion of Special Forces Assessment and Selection, a student proceeds to SFOC and learns the fundamentals of UW in a classroom environment. To put this introduction to UW education into practice, the SFOC students then serve as members of the guerrilla force that the Robin Sage students work through and with during the field portion of the CULEX. This IUW construct is beneficial for the SFQC students as it provides them with an operational and strategic framework that they will train under for the rest of their time in the course. Moreover, they gain an understanding of the importance of the UW mission set early in their training pipeline.<sup>05</sup>

The Robin Sage exercise is divided into four major parts. The first consists of a series of classes including UW fundamentals, sabotage, subversion, negotiations and cross-cultural communications. The second part of the CULEX occurs at a training location about a mile west of Camp Mackall owned by Oak Grove Technologies, LLC. There, the students conduct their mission rehearsal exercise. During the MRE, the students refine their team standard operating procedures and plan and execute a series of dilemma lanes. Examples include: meet a guerrilla chief, attend a sector command meeting and conduct a key-leader engagement.

The purpose of the MRE is to expose the students to predicaments and altercations that they will encounter in Pineland. The third part of the exercise occurs in the



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The Welcome To Pineland Sign has greeted Soldiers vying to become Special Forces for many decades. U.S. ARMY PHOTO

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A map depicting the territories of the fictional island of Atlantica.

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The Pineland Resistance Force flag. The PRF is the guerrilla force loyal to the ROP that Robin Sage students work through and with during the CULEX.

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*Atlantica: A Concise History*. A 133-page book that covers the history of Pineland, its government, significant events and key persons.

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Robin Sage traces its roots back to the 1950's when the Special Warfare School conducted Gobbler Woods, a field training exercise.

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detachment's isolation facility at Camp Mackall, where they will conduct detailed mission planning and present a commander's concept brief and a briefback to a guest commander. Finally, the students conduct their 12-day field training exercise in Pineland over a 10,000 square mile area (roughly 1/5th the size of North Carolina), encompassing 19 North Carolina counties and six Congressional Districts. During a Robin Sage class, anywhere from 900-1,150 total personnel (consisting of students, cadre, observers/controllers, contractors, volunteer role players and student guerrilla role players) will maneuver in and around the area of operations.

Key points of the exercise occur at what the cadre refers to as "time warps" which are based on phases four through seven of UW: organization, buildup, employment and transition. These leaps in time help convey to the students that a UW campaign would occur over a much longer period of time than the 12 days allocated in the program of instruction without having to spend additional training time, funds and resources to do so. A caveat to these time warps is that the FTX portion of Robin Sage is an outcome-based training laboratory and very few things happen notionally. The decisions and actions of the students ultimately drive them towards mission success or failure. So, for instance, if the student ODA does not train their guerrilla force on proper emplacement of explosives to sabotage an air defense artillery delivery system, then the guerrillas will not demonstrate any proficiency in that task, regardless of what phase of UW the students are in based on the time warps.



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Throughout the SF CULEX, candid and formal written counseling sessions are provided to each student a minimum of four times from the cadre team sergeants. It is a monumental task for the cadre and critically important for the development of the students. This emphasis on counseling is a vehicle for the "teach, coach, mentor, assess" approach taken by all CTSs. Counseling helps ensure the students have a clear picture of where they stand as the course progresses. The foundation for assessment, beginning in SFAS and continuing throughout the SFQC, lies in the eight ARSOF attributes (integrity, courage, adaptability, capability, personal responsibility, perseverance, professionalism and being a team player). Robin Sage is no exception. Any attribute deficiencies in Robin Sage are identified as early as possible and the student is



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Students learn mule packing techniques.

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An After-action Review is conducted following a mass-casualty event. The Robin Sage exercise requires coordination between many

U.S. ARMY PHOTOS BY  
STAFF SGT. JACOB A. BRAMAN

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A cadre member conducts a performance counseling session during the CULEX.

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A night airborne infil.

U.S. ARMY PHOTOS



ability to conduct sustained UW, and through the creation of the Office of Special Warfare under the command of U.S. Army Special Forces Command, as well as the redesign of the SF Group 4th Battalions, the force is moving in the right direction.<sup>09</sup> On the same parallel, the academic underpinning for Robin Sage has and always will be UW, and the mission set nests within special warfare, one of two ARSOF critical capabilities.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the SFQC CULEX ties directly into an ARSOF 2022 priority: optimizing special operations forces, conventional forces and joint, interagency, intergovernmental and multinational interdependence.<sup>11</sup>

The ARSOF critical capability of special warfare is defined as, “The execution of activities that involve a combination of lethal and non-lethal actions taken by specially trained and educated forces that have a deep understanding of cultures and foreign language, proficiency in small unit tactics, subversion, sabotage and the ability to build and fight alongside indigenous combat formations in a permissive, uncertain or hostile environment.”<sup>12</sup> The conduct of special warfare requires expertise in intangible abilities like relationship

counseled accordingly. This allows for a plan of action to be developed and permits enough time for the student to, hopefully, correct any attribute deficiencies.

A project report published by the Education Support Cell of the Training, Leader Development and Education section, U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, identified that in the past, success in Robin Sage was more about surviving the exercise and not necessarily learning or retaining important elements of UW. The report states that Robin Sage had become more of an “experiential” activity and was not at the “guided experiential” level of learning.<sup>06</sup> In order for guided experiential learning to occur, “purposeful and deliberate halts will need to be scripted into the lanes to ensure students have the opportunities for discussion and reflection.”<sup>07</sup> CTSs now take the time for tactical pauses that allow for both the Robin Sage students as well as the IUW student guerrillas to understand and retain what is occurring in their Pineland deployment. These learning halts typically occur at the aforementioned time warps of the ODA’s UW campaign.

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The longer a recurring military training exercise carries on, particularly one specific to a mission as complex as UW, the greater the chance for degradation to its practicality and applicability to real world missions. This can be attributed to the constant changes seen regarding geopolitical constraints, national policy limitations and transnational threats to U.S. security interests.<sup>08</sup> Considering the amount of time Robin Sage has been in existence, a fair question to pose is, is the SFQC CULEX properly preparing its graduates to overcome the persistent and emerging challenges of the global operational environment as ARSOF continues to move forward in the 21st century? An appropriate litmus test can be found within the pages of ARSOF 2022, the document published in 2013 encompassing the vision and intent of Lt. Gen. Charles Cleveland regarding the future of ARSOF. ARSOF 2022 identifies a gap in the force’s



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building, cultural understanding, adaptive decision making and critical thinking. While in Robin Sage, the students will live, eat, sleep, train and fight with and through their resistance counterparts. The ODA's UW-centric mission becomes a forcing function for the students to exhibit their expertise in tactics, sabotage and subversion because they must advise and assist their guerrilla force in becoming proficient in these areas. If the students are lacking in these capabilities or lack the aptitude to effectively teach these capabilities to their partner force, the ODA's mission is at risk of failing.

As Gen. Ray Odierno, former Chief of Staff of the Army, stated when speaking of SOF, "Conflict is a human endeavor, ultimately won or lost in the Human Domain."<sup>13</sup> In this context, the Human Domain is about understanding and fostering influence among key persons.<sup>14</sup> Scenarios involving human interaction with various attitudes, education and backgrounds occur constantly in Robin Sage. A student ODA commander might be forced into a discussion with his guerrilla chief and resistance sector commander as to how his detachment will assist with transition following the end of major combat operations. The two might then question the captain's credibility to speak on such matters, and cite the U.S.'s failure to conduct transition properly following Operation Iraqi Freedom. Simultaneously, the weapons sergeant could be discussing means of increasing guerrilla base security with a local gas station attendant who could alert the ODA if UPA vehicles are seen in the area. The communications sergeant might also be speaking with a Pineland radio station employee, determining how resistance propaganda can be broadcasted to assist with recruiting fence-sitters to the resistance force. Scenarios like these happen continually and throughout the exercise, testing the students' ability to communicate cross-culturally, build partnerships and exhibit cognitive problem solving in the Human Domain.<sup>15</sup>

A priority for ARSOF is to optimize SOF/CF/JIIM interdependence to "better enable seamless application of combat power across the spectrum of responsibility."<sup>16</sup> Robin Sage has ongoing initiatives that directly link to these three categories. Internally within ARSOF, Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations Soldiers are integrated into the exercise. They



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provide their respective capabilities briefs to the students during the first week of classes and assist with answering any CA/PO-related requests for information during mission planning. Additionally, PO has aided with integrating information operations into the exercise by creating a series of Pineland newspapers. The newspapers help highlight actions, positive or negative, of the ODA and its guerrilla force, in a manner that remains in line with the spirit of the scenario.

In the past, CF partners from the 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions participated in Robin Sage, mainly in role as the ODAs' guerrilla force or posing as enemy UPA forces. However, the high operational tempo over the last 15 years has diminished CF's role in Robin Sage. Recently, CTSs have capitalized on meaningful opportunities to incorporate CF brethren back into the exercise. Several Robin Sage lanes have helped foster CF interoperability by integrating Infantry platoons, principally from the 82nd Airborne Division, to serve as the spearhead of CF during the transition phase of UW. One example encompasses a combined ODA/guerrilla raid near a UPA airstrip. Following the raid, a platoon of 82nd Infantryman conduct an airfield seizure, representing the introduction of CF into the theater of operations.



**SCENARIOS INVOLVING HUMAN INTERACTION WITH VARIOUS ATTITUDES, EDUCATION AND BACKGROUNDS OCCUR CONSTANTLY IN ROBIN SAGE.**



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**Robin Sage students conduct an illicit weapons negotiation. Scenarios such as this one taking place in a tire store are a common occurrence in Pineland.** U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY STAFF SGT. JACOB A. BRAMAN

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**ODA Meeting with Sector Commander and Guerrilla Chief.** U.S. ARMY PHOTO

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**An IUW guerilla renders care to a civilian rolepayer during a mass casualty exercise.** U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY STAFF SGT. JACOB A. BRAMAN

In the joint realm, some CTSs have incorporated U.S. Air Force Tactical Air Control Party Airmen from 14th Air Support Operations Squadron, Pope Army Airfield, into mission planning and through the Robin Sage FTX. This initiative exposes the ODA to working alongside a joint partner. Conversely, the Airmen get a unique opportunity to communicate with aircraft during aerial resupply and lethal operations in a UW training environment.

Robin Sage is also in dialogue with interagency partners through the SF officer detailee program. The intent is for Robin Sage students to receive an interagency capabilities brief focused on UW during the first week of the exercise. The intent is for students to gain basic situational awareness of interagency partners' role in UW, particularly in the early phases leading up to the students' infiltration into Pineland.

Seeking shared security interests and cultivating relationships with partner-nation forces is absolutely key to special warfare.<sup>17</sup> Robin Sage capitalizes on the integration of foreign national partners through a program managed by the command's International Military Student Office. Each Robin Sage class averages six-to-eight international officers and NCOs from such countries as Jordan, South Korea, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Mexico and Colombia, among others. The international students are imbedded on an ODA and serve in the position they would hold based on the military occupational specialty trained in during the previous SFQC phase. They take part in the military planning process and remain with the ODA until the end of the exercise.

## CIVILIAN ROLEPLAYERS: THE HEART OF ROBIN SAGE

It is just after 1 p.m. on a busy street in Hoke County, North Carolina. A young stock boy employed at a local market walks into the store's back warehouse to retrieve additional products. The stock boy brushes past a group of three men in the large, dimly lit storeroom. The boy grabs two bags of livestock feed, and quickly returns back to the storefront. Other than a slight smile and a head nod, little acknowledgement is made to the men clearly standing next to a pile of AK-47 rifles, an M240B machine gun, and a half dozen 105mm artillery rounds. One might expect the boy to nervously run to alert authorities and make them aware of the illegal

activity just witnessed. In reality, the boy as well as all of the store's employees are briefed on what training is actually occurring: a negotiation between two students and a role player acting as an illicit gun runner. The students are attempting to purchase weapons for their resistance force in the organization and build-up phases of their UW campaign. In the Pineland scenario, however, the students should key in to the boy's passive and friendly nature and recognize that he is likely a sympathizer to the resistance. This provides believability to the scenario as to why they would be conducting an illicit activity on that particular store's property. Although a relatively simple feature as far as backside support is concerned, the incorporation of the stock boy adds a sense of realism to the exercise that is difficult to replicate in most military training environments. The civilian role players help get the students into the mindset that they are operating in another country and, in turn, help add to the unique nature and profoundness of the exercise.

The spectrum of civilian role players in the exercise extends from salaried independent contractors to middle school-aged children volunteers. One example of the depth of volunteer role players occurs at a mass casualty training event. The scenario is centered on a protest outside a school where students and their families are expressing dissent toward the local authorities. As tempers flare, the police begin firing at the protestors and tossing explosives into the crowd. A few members of

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the ODA's guerrilla force at the rally are injured, and bring as many as 20 victims with varying trauma injuries with them back to the base camp, as government-sanctioned hospitals are not willing to treat them. The ODA has no idea what is in store for them.

Prior to the mass casualty event, the role players meet at the house of Robin Sage volunteer, Patti Freeman. Freeman is highly skilled in medical moulage, the art of creating lifelike bodily wounds to assist in providing shock desensitization and realism to medical professionals in training.<sup>18</sup> Freeman spends the next few hours emplacing fake burns, gunshot wounds and blast injuries onto all of the volunteer casualties.

Following the moulage session, the injured students and family members move by vehicle towards the guerrilla base in groups of three to four persons. Each wave of patients arrives at the G-base with increasingly more severe injuries. With little lead time, the ODA and medically trained guerrillas begin assessing injuries, and treating patients based on level of priority. The role players, particularly the younger children, do their best to exhibit convincing acting skills. One young girl in particular with minor third degree burns is able to draw more medical attention than required due to her uncanny ability to cry on cue. Although the event definitely stresses out the ODA, the primary objective is to test the ODA's medical cross-training, internally and amongst their guerrilla force, as well as validate the medical network the ODA developed in their sector. Following the mass casualty event, the ODA realizes that their base has just been compromised by 20 or so civilians, and must now contend with the decision to remain in place or move to their alternate guerrilla base.

In addition to role playing, civilian volunteers provide use of their private land, which encompasses the vast majority of the property operated on during the CULEX. Additionally, they serve as members of the auxiliary, serving as transportation and intelligence assets to the ODA and guerrilla force of a particular sector. Take Ronnie Parsons (aka "T-Bone") for example. His grandfather allowed the U.S. Army to use nearly 60 acres of his property in the late 1950s; land that is now owned by Parsons and still in use for the SF CULEX today. He recalls observing with absolute astonishment an aerial resupply bundle falling under a parachute canopy from a C-123 aircraft over one of his grandfather's

fields. He attributes that very moment as his motivation to start supporting the exercise into what would become an impressive 58-years of support and counting. As a 9-year-old boy, he served as a member of the guerrilla force, carrying an M1 rifle out on missions which he proclaimed was "better than the Boy Scouts."<sup>19</sup> As a licensed pilot flying a U.S. Air Force U-10, Parsons provided air support to the exercise from 1967-1975, conducting message pick-ups, message drops, resupply bundles and downed pilot missions for students in training. Parsons continues to offer his property for cadre to establish their camps as well as student ODAs to set-up primary and alternate guerrilla bases.

Parsons, the volunteers at the mass casualty scenario and the role player at the market, like so many of the patriots who continually volunteer for the CULEX, do so out of sheer love for their country and military. Without the North Carolina citizens who support the exercise, the quality of training that Robin Sage offers its students would be nowhere near the caliber it provides today.

## THE VITAL ROLE OF THE CADRE TEAM SERGEANT

The CTSs are undoubtedly the center of gravity for the Robin Sage exercise. Their experience, knowledge, as well as their creativity, imagination, interpersonal skills and passion for teaching and assessing their future SF brothers ultimately drive the



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Major General James B. Linder (left), USAJFKSWCS commanding general participates in Robin Sage as a role player. U.S. ARMY PHOTO.

exercise. The successful development and sustainment of each of the 12 Robin Sage lanes are directly proportionate to the time and effort expended by the CTSs, and each is given a high level of flexibility and autonomy to do so. A CTS consistently conducts meetings with land owners and learn the personalities of his role player force in order to employ them properly. In essence, that CTS is honing his own UW skillsets in the process. If a CTS fails to maintain rapport with the local population or develop the human and physical infrastructure in the area, then that lane's effectiveness as a training venue will suffer. To do the job correctly, the CTS must build his area complex, a vital subset to the grand scheme of UW. During the tenure of a Robin Sage CTS, he will refine techniques in counseling and mentoring subordinates, an important skill to have as a future SF ODA operations sergeant. Robin Sage CTSs take on an awesome responsibility and carry out their duties to the best of their abilities, recognizing that their efforts are shaping and influencing potential teammates."<sup>20</sup>


CTSs must be in the grade of sergeant first class or master sergeant and are hand-selected by the company sergeant major. They should be in good standing with the unit they are departing as the company requires a high level of maturity and trust in each CTS. Law enforcement agency coordination and de-confliction is another major part of a CTS's responsibilities, specifically ensuring LEAs are always aware of student movement or lethal operations in a particular area. The company invests in its CTSs by allowing ample time between classes to attend schools such as the Special Forces Network Design Course, the Special Forces Operational Design Course, Special Forces Advanced Reconnaissance, Target Analysis and Exploitation Techniques Course, among others. The intent is for all CTSs returning back to an SF Group be better trained in UW, polished in the military decision making process, well versed in mentoring subordinates and overall a more vital asset to an ODA than they were arriving for their first duty day at Camp Mackall.

## CONCLUSION

The Commanding General, USAJFKSWCS, Maj. Gen. B. James Linder, attended the Robin Sage MRE in November 2015. He observed a dilemma involving a member of the resistance pulling out a pistol and threatening to shoot an unarmed non-combatant. The ODA commander was forced to quickly assess and tactfully deescalate the situation before a law of armed conflict violation was committed; an incident serious enough to risk the ODA's ability to work with that partner nation force in the future. As a testament to the validity of the exercise, the CG relayed to the students that he had experienced a situation virtually identical to the one they had just seen. Instead of a training area in North Carolina, his "dilemma" occurred eight months prior while serving as Commander, Special Operations Command Africa. Before departing, the CG left the students and cadre with a powerful message:

**YOU WILL RE-LIVE THE SCENARIOS AND DILEMMAS IN ROBIN SAGE FOR AS LONG AS YOU WEAR THAT TAB. IT'S NOT ALWAYS ABOUT RIGHT AND WRONG ANSWERS. IT'S ABOUT THE CONSEQUENCES TO THE DECISIONS YOU MAKE. THAT'S ROBIN SAGE.**

"You will re-live the scenarios and dilemmas in Robin Sage for as long as you wear that tab. It's not always about right and wrong answers. It's about the consequences to the decisions you make. That's Robin Sage."<sup>21</sup>

Robin Sage is helping to fill the UW gap identified in *ARSOF 2022*, providing trained SF Soldiers to successfully conduct the critical capability of special warfare. Moreover, through ongoing initiatives, the course is helping to build and maintain SOF/CF/JIIM interoperability. The commitment of the Robin Sage cadre, civilians and role players in providing the SF Regiment with elite Soldiers capable of operating in a denied environment is steadfast. Most importantly, the relevancy of Robin Sage in the training of our nation's foremost UW warriors remains intact. 

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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