



## Pentagon report on Niger ambush demonstrates how completely out of touch senior military leaders are

BY JACK MURPHY 04.27.2018 [#EXPERT ANALYSIS](#)

The 6,000 page Pentagon report on the ambush in which [ODA 3212](#) was caught near Tongo Tongo, Niger, in October of 2017 is now complete; according to the Wall Street Journal, family members have been briefed and now Congressional leaders will be briefed prior to a sanitized version of the

report being released to the public. The report indicates exactly what was expected based on SOFREP's initial reporting of [the ambush](#) the day after it occurred: that U.S. military leaders were preparing to place the entire burden of the ambush on non-commissioned officers and junior officers, while the generals and colonels deferred responsibility. The Pentagon's plan to throw the ODA under the bus and blame risk assessments was underway before the remains of Sgt. La David Johnson had even been recovered.

According to a New York Times story published in March, Secretary Mattis and General Dunford knew that something was amiss with the Niger report early on. The [article states](#):

The two officials said Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., the Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman, are troubled that low-level officers are being blamed for the botched mission instead of senior commanders who should be aware when American troops are undertaking a high-risk raid.”

At that point, both men must have been aware of what the Pentagon was trying to do by deferring responsibility and placing the entire burden for the ambush on lower ranking soldiers. What corrective measures were taken as the report was being compiled, if any, remains unknown.

What we do know about the [Niger report](#) thus far demonstrates just how completely out of touch the Pentagon is with what soldiers on the ground actually experience. The report blames the ambush partly on a culture of risk taking, a culture that is deliberately cultivated in Special Operations soldiers as the Pentagon itself orders Special Forces ODAs to undertake dangerous missions. If the Pentagon's first priority is mitigating risk, then they should stop sending soldiers into war zones.

Another obvious comment from the senior officers who penned the report indicates that an officer copy and pasted information from a previously authorized concept of the operation (CONOP) document into the CONOP which was submitted for the October 4th mission in which ODA 3212 was ambushed. Why this surprises anyone defies explanation at this point. Such activities have been happening for years. At this moment, soldiers are no doubt conducting combat operations in which information in their CONOP was cut and pasted from somewhere else. In fact, junior officers are essentially forced to do this due to the amount of mandatory paperwork and bureaucracy that is forced upon them.

After a mission, junior officers have to compile what is known as an Operations Summary (OPSUM) which describes what happened on the mission and includes a storyboard — a collage of pictures taken by the soldiers on the mission to prove to senior officers that they actually did what they said they did, which in and of itself implies to the men that their leadership does not trust them. OPSUMs have to be submitted almost immediately after the team returns to base, sometimes within minutes of arriving back at a Forward Operating Base, tired and exhausted. In this scenario, higher headquarters is literally telling junior officers to lie to them by demanding such quick turn arounds on OPSUM report submissions. The Special Forces Captain is forced to fudge the paperwork because he is being asked to do something that can't realistically be done and everyone knows it.

The same goes for CONOPs which often have to be compiled quickly and require levels upon levels of approval. Senior leaders actually demand far more information from the ODA than they themselves can ever process. An embarrassing demonstration of this occurred years ago when an ODA member submitted a CONOP in which the enemy was described as “Sand Niggers.” It's one thing that racial epithets were used on the report, and it was unprofessional and not in line with Army values. However, the deeper lesson was that no one actually reads these reports. This one went all

the way up to Central Command (CENTCOM) in Tampa, Florida before anyone caught the racial slur. Another example occurred early on in the war against ISIS when Delta operators submitted a CONOP for them to go outside the wire with their Iraqi counter-parts when this was not an authorized part of their mission. That CONOP went all the way up to the White House before it was caught and the operators were told to stand down.

The phenomena of soldiers on the ground being overloaded with onerous, mandatory training has largely come to light due to the impactful work of [Dr. Leonard Wong](#) at the Army War College. His study found that soldiers have more mandatory training than they have training days in the calendar year, leaving soldiers overburdened and unable to coach, teach and mentor junior soldiers on their actual job. Thankfully, Secretary Mattis and Secretary of the Army Mark Esper have begun the process of reducing mandatory training. However, the bureaucracy thrust upon the sergeants and junior officers in combat remains.

Another indication of how out of touch the Pentagon is with their own troops is exemplified by their own press releases in the hours and days after the ambush. At first, the mission ODA 3212 was conducting was described as a recon mission, then a training mission, and finally they conceded that it was a capture/kill high value target raid. It seems inevitable that they would be out of touch — the headquarters for Africa Command (AFRICOM) isn't even in Africa, it is in Germany. For senior military officers, the lesson here will be to institute a deeper level of micromanagement, contrary to the de-centralized manner in which Special Forces is designed to operate. The potential political risk of an unconventional warfare campaign does not level out in the minds of senior officers and politicians. None of them wants another Benghazi on their hands.

CONOPs, OPSUMs and storyboards have been little more than finger drills for well over a decade, and that this comes as a surprise to the Pentagon in their Niger report indicates how completely out of touch they are with the men who work where the rubber meets the road. As planned from the beginning, [ODA 3212 and Captain Perozeni](#) will now have to be sacrificed at the alter of Pentagon politics; the man on the ground will be blamed for everything that went wrong so that the colonels and generals can remain on their career tracks unscathed.

*Featured image: Nigerien Armed Forces conduct a key leader engagement training with 20th Special Forces Group during Flintlock 18 in Niger, Africa on April 16, 2018. Flintlock 2018, hosted by Niger, with key outstations at Burkina Faso and Senegal, is designed to strengthen the ability of key partner nations in the region to counter violent extremist organizations, protect their borders, and provide security for their people. | U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Jeremiah Runser*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Jack Murphy** is an eight-year Army Special Operations veteran who served as a Sniper and Team Leader in 3rd Ranger Battalion and as a Senior Weapons Sergeant on a Military Free Fall team in 5th Special Forces Group. Having left the military in 2010, he graduated from Columbia with a BA in political science. Murphy is the author of *Reflexive Fire*, *Target Deck*, *Direct Action*, and numerous non-fiction articles about Weapons, Tactics, Special Operations, Terrorism, and Counter-Terrorism. He has appeared in documentaries, national television, and syndicated radio.