

USPH Today

Navy SEALs have become lucky charm for Obama

Special operations missions have had string of successes

By Aamer Madhani and David Jackson
USATODAY

WASHINGTON — President Obama has forged a special connection with the elite Navy SEALs unit responsible for some of the most prominent military operations of his presidency.

He met with the SEALs who killed Osama bin Laden last May, and the man who oversaw the operation, Adm. William McRaven, was a guest of first lady Michelle Obama at the State of the Union Address on Tuesday. The president hosted the cargo ship captain Richard Phillips, the Vermont man who was rescued by the SEALs in April 2009 from Somali pirates, Obama remarked during the State of the Union that one of his favorite possessions was an

And just a couple of hours after he received confirmation that American Jessica Buchanan and Poul Hagen Thisted, a Dane, were rescued by SEALs from Somali pirates, Obama remarked during the State of the Union that one of his favorite possessions was an

American flag the SEALs carried on the bin Laden mission.

"The SEALs are the elite of the elite, and it makes sense that he would latch on to them, because there's been success," says Edward Frantz, a presidential historian at the University of Indianapolis.

Obama hasn't been averse to the high-risk, high-reward operations that have led to some of his greatest national security successes. He has managed to roll the dice — and has succeeded — with the types of operations that have led to some of the biggest national security debacles of past presidencies.

Bill Clinton ordered Army Rangers and Delta Force troops into Mogadishu in 1993 to capture Somali warlord Mohammed Farah Aidid, an operation in which 19 U.S. soldiers were killed. Jimmy Carter ordered a failed 1980 mission to rescue U.S. hostages held in Iran; the collision of a helicopter and a transport aircraft killed eight troops and forced the operation to be abandoned. The Iran mission marked a low point in the Carter presidency.

"President Obama has shown himself to be willing to take risks with special operations forces — to a degree I don't think any other president has," said Bob Killibrew, a retired Army colo-



By Rich Clement, Bloomberg News

Elite forces to fare well in defense budget: President Obama and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta discuss revamped military strategy at the Pentagon on Jan. 5.

nel who worked in special operations in Vietnam and is now an analyst at the Center for a New American Security, a defense policy think tank.

John Hall, a military historian at the University of Wisconsin, noted that special operations forces have been

around since World War II, but they were initially designed to be stay-behind forces in Eastern Europe, a response to the Soviet Union.

President Kennedy later championed the Army's Green Berets, ushering in an era in which the Army became more

attuned to "flexible response"—a force that could not only help foment revolutions but also stabilize vulnerable allies, Hall said.

After the Iran debacle, a new focus was placed on improving the military special operators' capability to carry out surgical strikes, such as hostage rescues.

The units among the U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOC), which includes the SEALs, are secretive about their work, but their profile has been elevated since 9/11, Hall said.

"The most remarkable thing that has changed over time is the PR component — the idea these are the kind of operations that the administration thinks are going to be met with broad public approval," Hall said. "There's a desire to capitalize on whatever strategic communications benefit can be derived from these operations."

USSOC's 2012 budget was \$10.5 billion, including a \$3.3 billion overseas contingency operations budget, which was a 7% hike from 2011.

The Pentagon announced plans this month to cut \$487 billion in spending over the next decade, but Defense Secretary Leon Panetta said that SEALs and other elite forces will fare well in budgeting.

People
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1-26-2012