Delta Force, Washington's Invisible Hand. From the Foundation to the Missions That Changed History, Up to Maduro's Capture

Published on 03/01/2026

The capture of Venezuelan President **Nicolás Maduro** on the night between **January 2 and 3, 2026** is just **the latest act in a sequence of increasingly incisive actions**, conducted with "high value target" logic, typical of special forces.

In this context, according to reports from the authoritative CBS News, which had the opportunity to confer with U.S. Army officials, the mission was conducted by the **Delta Force**. A high-profile operation that also saw the support of the **160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment "Night Stalkers"**, a unit specialized in **insertions and extractions** in **high-threat environments**.

We are facing one of the most daring and politically sensitive raids of the last half-century, consistent with the Delta’s profile: clandestine missions, **high-value targets, and execution times reduced to a minimum.**

What the Delta Force Really Is

The Delta Force **(1st Special Forces Operational Detachment–Delta or 1st SFOD-Delta)** is a **Special Mission Unit** of the United States Army **(US Army)** specialized in **counter-terrorism**, **clandestine operations**, **capture or neutralization of high-value targets (HVT)**, **Close Protection / Executive Protection (CP/EP)**, and above all, in **missions that cannot fail**.

The unit falls under the **Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC)** and is based at **Fort Bragg**, North Carolina. Along with the **DEVGRU** of the Navy's **SEAL**, it represents the pinnacle of the United States' counter-terrorism and direct action capabilities.

Delta Force operators in civilian clothes engaged in the protection of General Norman Schwarzkopf during the Gulf War, 1991 - Copyright Staff Sergeant Dean W. Wagner

The Origins: The Lesson of 1970s Terrorism

The Delta Force was formally established on **November 19, 1977** at the behest of Colonel **Charles “Charlie” Beckwith** and Colonel **Thomas Henry**, inspired by the model of the **British SAS**, but with a marked priority on clandestine missions.

Beckwith, a U.S. Army officer who completed the **Ranger School** before serving in the **Special Forces**, had been advocating since the 1960s for a super-selective, autonomous unit

oriented towards direct action; however, the idea remained on hold for a long time until the escalation of international terrorism in the mid-1970s made a dedicated capability indispensable.

While waiting for Delta to reach full operational capacity, the **5th Special Forces Group** activated a “bridge” counter-terrorism unit, the **Blue Light**, to temporarily fill the gap. It was the response to an increasingly evident reality: a force was needed that could intervene **anywhere and in the shortest possible time**, with flexibility and precision, in the most sensitive and high-risk contexts.

Charles Beckwith, the "father" of the Delta Force - Copyright Gettyimages

Eagle Claw: The Failure That Changed Everything

In **1980**, the Delta Force was involved in the dramatic **Operation Eagle Claw**, the attempt to free American hostages held in the U.S. embassy in Tehran. The mission's failure was not due to tactical errors by the assault force, but to a **chain of technical and logistical events** culminating at the forward staging area known as *Desert One*. Unexpected delays, extreme environmental conditions, and mechanical problems reduced the number of available helicopters below the minimum threshold.

During refueling and repositioning maneuvers, a combination of **sandstorm, near-zero visibility, and difficult communications** led to a collision between an RH-53D helicopter and an EC-130 aircraft. The explosion and fire that followed caused the death of **eight U.S. military personnel**, forcing the immediate abandonment of the operation.

That failure deeply marked U.S. special forces and became the turning point for structural reform. From that lesson emerged a true operational revolution: the creation of an **air component dedicated exclusively to supporting special operations**. Thus, the **160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment "Night Stalkers"** was formed, today synonymous with night insertions, ultra-low altitude flight, and extreme precision. Since then, **Delta Force and Night Stalkers** have formed an inseparable duo, designed precisely to prevent aeronautical or coordination limitations from compromising missions of the highest strategic value again.

Commemorative monument for the fallen of the Delta Team at the Gunter Annex, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama - Copyright DoD photo, USA

The most famous operations

Throughout its history, the **Delta Force** has been deployed in some of the most sensitive and complex theaters on the planet, often in high-risk operations and almost always covered by the highest level of secrecy.

Among the deployments that have become public knowledge are:

- **Grenada (1983)** – *Operation Urgent Fury*, during which the unit took part in the initial phases of the U.S. intervention. For this operation, Delta Force was awarded the **Joint Meritorious Unit Award**.
- **Panama (1989)** – *Operation Just Cause*. Delta operators were key players in decisive missions, including the **attempted hostage rescue at Modelo Prison** and the operations

that led to the **capture of Manuel Noriega**. For their conduct in combat, the unit received the **Valorous Unit Award**.

- **Gulf War (1991)** – deployment in **special reconnaissance, direct action, and strategic target search** missions behind enemy lines.
- **Somalia (1993)** – *Operation Gothic Serpent*. The **Battle of Mogadishu** was one of the rare moments when a part of the Delta world emerged publicly. During the fighting on October 3, 1993, operators from **C Squadron** were involved in intense clashes. **MSG Gary Gordon** and **SFC Randy Shughart** were posthumously awarded the **Medal of Honor** for defending an isolated position to the last, protecting the downed Black Hawk pilot **Michael Durant**.
- **Peru (1997)** – support to local authorities during the **Lima hostage crisis**, one of the most complex anti-terrorism episodes in Latin America.

Alongside these known operations, Delta Force has been deployed in numerous **less documented** missions in the **Middle East, Europe, and Central America**, particularly in **counterterrorism, capture of High Value Targets (HVT)**, and support to strategic allies.

After September 11, 2001, the unit played a central role in the **Global War on Terror**. As part of **Operation Enduring Freedom** and **Operation Iraqi Freedom**, the 1st SFOD-D was engaged in combat operations in **Afghanistan** (October 4, 2001 – March 15, 2002) and in **Iraq** (March 19, 2003 – December 13, 2003), receiving the **Presidential Unit Citation** for both theaters.

One of the most significant interventions in recent years is the **raid of October 26, 2019**, conducted by Delta operators with the support of the **75th Ranger Regiment**, which led to the elimination of the Islamic State leader **Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi**.

The Battle of Mogadishu, the book ***Black Hawk Down*** by Mark Bowden, and the film of the same name helped bring global attention to a reality that, by vocation, lives in the shadows. However, as with all elite units, **most of the operations assigned to Delta Force remain classified**, and what is known represents only a fraction of its actual operational activity.

Delta Force operators in Mogadishu in the fall of 1993 - Copyright Gregg Ackley

Structure and internal organization

The structure of Delta Force is similar to that of the **22nd SAS Regiment**, which inspired its creation. In the book *Not a Good Day to Die: The Untold Story of Operation Anaconda*, military journalist **Sean Naylor** describes Delta as composed, in 2005, of **about 1,000 military personnel**, of whom **250–300** are specifically trained for **direct action** and **hostage rescue** operations. The rest of the personnel are employed in **combat support** and **service support** functions.

In his subsequent book (2015) *Relentless Strike: The Secret History of Joint Special Operations Command*, Naylor further details the internal organization of Delta Force, identifying the main operational elements:

- **Squadron A**
- **Squadron B**
- **Squadron C**
- **Squadron D**
- **Squadron E**
- **Squadron G**, specialized in **Advanced Force Operations (AFO)**, previously known as **Operational Support Troop (OST)**
- **Signal Squadron**
- **Combat Support Squadron**

- **Combat Development Directorate**
- **Selection and Training**

The **A, B, C, and D Squadrons** are assault squadrons (*sabre squadrons*). The **C Squadron** was activated around **1990**, while the **D Squadron** in **2006**. The **Combat Support Squadron** has been operational since **2005**. The **E Squadron**, activated in **1989**, is separately stationed at **Fort Eustis, Virginia**, where it operates as the **Aviation Technology Office**.

Within each assault squadron, there are **three troops**: two **assault** (Troop 1 and 2) and one **reconnaissance** (Troop 3). Each squadron is commanded by a **lieutenant colonel (O-5)**, assisted by an executive officer and a **Command Sergeant Major (E-9)**. The troops are led by **captains (O-3)** or **majors (O-4)**, assisted by **Sergeant Majors (E-9)** serving as *troop chiefs*.

Each **assault troop** is divided into **four teams**, each led by a **team leader** with the rank of **Master Sergeant (E-8)** or **Sergeant First Class (E-7)**, assisted by a deputy of equivalent rank. The teams generally consist of **five to seven operators**. The **reconnaissance** units, however, have **two teams**; it is believed that access to these roles requires **at least two years of operational experience** within the unit.

A Delta Force team in the Middle East (undisclosed location) – Source: Pinterest

Secrecy, cooperation, and operational myth

The Delta Force also operates with other allied special forces, European units, and NATO. Media coverage is limited and almost always mediated by third-party sources: many missions remain within the perimeter of **institutional confidentiality**.

Precisely for this reason, whenever the hypothesis of an action like the one **attributed to the extraction of Maduro** emerges, global attention focuses on a unit that embodies a simple and ruthless principle: **when the target is critical and the margin for error is zero, the Delta Force steps in**.

In an era marked by **hybrid conflicts** and a **war increasingly fought in the shadows**, the Delta Force remains what it has always been: **the ultimate tool of U.S. political will**, invisible when necessary, but **decisive in moments when error is not an option**.