



Paratroopers and Special Forces Closer Than Ever: European Models and the Italian Case

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For a long time, airborne troops have been mainly associated with the large airborne operations of the twentieth century: thousands of men launched beyond enemy lines to capture bridges, airports, road junctions, and decisive positions.

That model has not completely disappeared, but **the contemporary battlefield has profoundly changed the conditions of their use**. Layered air defenses, drones, sensors, electronic warfare, and long-range fire capabilities make it extremely risky to concentrate large airborne formations on a single drop zone.

This does not mean that paratroopers have lost relevance. On the contrary, **their role is evolving**.

High readiness, projection capability, strategic mobility, the ability to operate temporarily isolated, and the possibility of being quickly inserted into hard-to-reach areas make **airborne**

troops particularly suited to sudden crises, initial entry operations, evacuations, and support of Special Forces.

Several European armies are translating this affinity into new organizational models. Germany is considering bringing together **its EGB paratroopers under the Kommando Spezialkräfte**; the United Kingdom **has permanently assigned a battalion of the Parachute Regiment to support the UK Special Forces**; Spain **has gathered paratroopers, Special Forces, helicopters, and mountain troops under a single divisional command.**

And Italy?

What NATO doctrine really says

Let's start by saying that in the Italian debate, the national distinction between Special Forces and Special Operations Forces has often been **improperly overlapped with the Anglo-Saxon classification “Tier 1” and “Tier 2”**. However, the latter does not constitute a doctrinal category of NATO.

In the Alliance's lexicon, we talk about Special Operations Forces, the SOF, that is, Special Forces defined by the capabilities possessed, the tasks assigned, and the operational standards achieved.

In short: either a unit is qualified as a Special Force, or it is not.

Having clarified this (non-existent) distinction, the central point concerns the relationship between airborne troops and Special Forces in NATO doctrine.

A particularly significant passage is found in **AJP-3.2 - Allied Joint Doctrine for Land Operations**, the NATO publication that establishes principles and guidelines for the employment of land forces in joint and multinational operations.

In Annex B, dedicated to the different types of land forces, the document initially distinguishes between heavy, medium, and light forces. Immediately after, it introduces an additional category: the **“specialist capabilities”**, that is, the specialist capabilities.

NATO includes:

- **Airborne troops;**

- **Amphibious Forces;**
- **Mountain troops;**
- **Reconnaissance Forces;**
- **Special Operations Forces.**

The criterion used is the terrain or environment in which a force operates, or the particular mode through which it is deployed. Airborne troops and Special Forces are not equated, but are placed in the same conceptual set of land capabilities that require specific training, organization, and modes of employment.

It is an important distinction. A conventional paratrooper unit does not become a Special Force just because it has high preparation or operates in depth. Selection, missions, procedures, chain of command, and strategic relevance of operations remain different.

However, the placement made by AJP-3.2 **shows that NATO does not consider airborne troops as simple light infantry transported by air**. They are a specialist capability, defined primarily by the ability to transfer a combat force and its logistical support directly into the target area, through aircraft landing or personnel and material drop.

The doctrine also recalls the limitations of these formations. Being generally light forces, they have less protection and heavy firepower compared to mechanized units. They can also be easily isolated. For this reason, airborne operations must be integrated with close air support, indirect fire, intelligence, logistics, and other enablers, foreseeing from the beginning reinforcement, resupply, recovery, or relief by heavier forces.

[AJP-3.2 EDB V1 E 2288Download](#)

Not Special Forces, but a natural bridging force

Defining paratroopers as “the glue” between conventional forces and Special Forces is a reasonable conclusion when observing the characteristics, tasks, and organizations adopted by various Alliance countries.

Special Forces are typically deployed in small units for sensitive tasks often of strategic importance. Their effectiveness also depends on the ability to prevent highly selected operators from being absorbed by activities that can be entrusted to adequately prepared conventional

units.

A support force can isolate a target, establish a security perimeter, protect a forward base, control access routes, participate in an evacuation, recover personnel, provide additional maneuver mass, or counter the reaction of opposing forces.

These are conventional tasks, but carried out in contexts where speed, autonomy, interoperability, and the ability to operate with procedures closer to those of Special Forces are required.

This is precisely where **airborne troops find a natural placement**. They can provide a larger force than special operators while maintaining a level of readiness and an operational culture rarely found in a normal infantry unit.

Germany: EGB towards the KSK

The German case is probably the one that most clearly represents the existence of an intermediate layer between conventional paratrooper infantry and Special Forces.

The Bundeswehr distinguishes between **Spezialkräfte**, the proper Special Forces, and **Spezialisierte Kräfte**, the specialized forces. The operators of the Kommando Spezialkräfte belong to the first category; the EGB soldiers belong to the second.

The acronym EGB stands for **Erweiterte Grundbefähigung**, an advanced qualification for special operations. Its members are mainly paratroopers, but also specialists and supports trained to cooperate directly with the KSK. The Bundeswehr itself presents them as personnel capable of performing more complex tasks than regular paratroopers, maintaining high readiness quotas.

The German Fallschirmjäger already today form the core of the Army's specialized forces. The Fallschirmjägerregiment 26 explicitly lists among its tasks tactical support for Special Forces operations, while Regiment 31 emphasizes the paratroopers' ability to fight independently within enemy-controlled territory.

According to a report on July 20, 2026, by the German specialized publication *Hartpunkt*, the four EGB companies, currently distributed between Fallschirmjägerregiment 26 and 31, could be consolidated into a single unit and transferred under the command of the KSK, with a possible

relocation in Baden-Württemberg.

At the moment, this is a project mentioned in the context of the reorganization of the German Army, not yet an official final decision. However, the direction appears significant: **to unite under a single command the components intended to support Special Operations, separating them from the two conventional paratrooper regiments.**

Germany would thus transform an already existing proximity on the training and operational level into a true organizational proximity.

The risk is to deprive the paratrooper regiments of some of the most qualified personnel. The advantage, however, would be evident: greater standardization, continuous training with the KSK, a shorter command chain, and an immediately available support capability.



German paratroopers with EGB qualification during the “Taurus 2024” exercise in the Grafenwöhr training area, engaged in an activity with an inflatable boat. Photo: Bundeswehr/Carl Schulze.

United Kingdom: 1 PARA at the service of the UK Special Forces

The British model is even more clear-cut.

The **1st Battalion, The Parachute Regiment**, does not belong to the normal structure of the 16 Air Assault Brigade Combat Team. It is permanently under the command of the **Director Special Forces** and forms the main core of the **Special Forces Support Group**.

The other battalions of the Parachute Regiment maintain the traditional role of airborne infantry and rapid reaction; 1 PARA is instead permanently assigned to support the UK Special Forces.

The battalion has not become SAS or SBS. It remains a paratrooper infantry unit, with its own recruitment and identity. However, its function is built around the needs of special operations.

This allows UKSF operators to focus on activities that require their specific qualifications, entrusting a selected and particularly prepared conventional force with protection, combat support, and the establishment of a broader security framework.

The British system demonstrates that the distinction between Special Forces and airborne troops can remain clear even within the same command chain. It is not necessary to transform a paratrooper battalion into a commando unit: it is enough to specialize it in cooperation with the latter.

This is an expensive model because it requires an entire battalion to permanently maintain high standards and procedures compatible with the UKSF. However, London deemed that the operational benefit justified the removal of 1 PARA from the conventional airborne brigade.



Paratroopers of the 1st Battalion, The Parachute Regiment, based in St Athan, Wales. The battalion is permanently assigned to the Special Forces Support Group (SFSG), the component tasked with providing direct support to the British Special Forces.

Spain: a single division for the most specialized capabilities

Spain has adopted a different solution.

Since January 1, 2021, the **División “San Marcial”** brings together under a single command:

- Brigada “Almogávares” VI de Paracaidistas;
- Mando de Operaciones Especiales “Órdenes Militares”;
- Fuerzas Aeromóviles del Ejército de Tierra;
- Mando de Tropas de Montaña “Roncesvalles”;
- Regimiento de Operaciones de Información n. 1.

The Paratrooper Brigade is not subordinate to the Mando de Operaciones Especiales. Both depend on the same division, along with the Army's helicopters, mountain troops, and information capabilities.

It is probably the model closest to the classification contained in AJP-3.2. The San Marcial Division indeed brings together many of the capabilities that NATO doctrine defines as specialized, assigning them to a single authority capable of coordinating their preparation and employment.

The BRIPAC retains its identity, structure, and conventional tasks. However, its proximity to the MOE and FAMET facilitates the formation of joint and interspecialty groups for immediate response operations, air assault, evacuation, and initial entry.

Madrid has therefore not assigned the paratroopers to the Special Forces but has created an organizational container in which the Army's most mobile and specialized capabilities can develop common procedures.



Spanish paratroopers of the Brigada “Almogávares” VI. Since 2021, the BRIPAC shares a single divisional command with the Mando de Operaciones Especiales and other specialized capabilities, the División “San Marcial”.

Three models, one direction

Germany, the United Kingdom, and Spain have chosen different solutions.

Germany has specialized EGB paratrooper companies for Special Operations support and is considering bringing them under the KSK.

The United Kingdom has permanently assigned an entire paratrooper battalion to the Special Forces Support Group.

Spain has kept the Paratrooper Brigade and Special Forces separate but has placed them, along with helicopters and other specialized capabilities, under a single division.

In all three cases, however, a common trend emerges: **the airborne troops are considered the most suitable conventional component to operate alongside the Special Forces.**

At the base, there is not only the prestige of the maroon beret or the shared tradition. There are concrete needs: high availability, physical selection, projection capability, light combat training, deep operations, and familiarity with air and helicopter insertions.

And in Italy?

Italy has a paratrooper tradition and a very high-level Special Operations component. However, the organizational solution adopted is different from those just analyzed.

The **Brigata Paracadutisti “Folgore”** remains a conventional Large Unit belonging to the Army's projection forces. It maintains the capability to generate airborne forces, infantry units, cavalry, artillery, engineering, logistics, and military parachuting training.

The Army's Special Operations component is instead gathered in the **COMFOSE**, a brigade-level command established in 2013 and responsible for the unity of training, preparation, procedural development, and acquisition of materials for the Special Forces.

Under its command are:

- **9th Paratroopers Assault Regiment “Col Moschin”**;
- **185th Paratroopers Reconnaissance Target Acquisition Regiment “Folgore”**;
- **4th Alpine Paratroopers Regiment**;

The paratrooper component is therefore strongly present even in the Italian special sector. The 9th “Col Moschin” and the 185th RRAO historically come from the world of the “Folgore”, while the 4th Ranger combines alpine specialization and paratrooper capability.

The **9th, the 185th, and the 4th are themselves Special Forces units, composed of selected personnel trained to conduct tasks specific to Special Operations**. They do not constitute a conventional mass dedicated to supporting special operators in the way a battalion of the Special Forces Support Group does in the United Kingdom.

Within the three paratrooper regiments, there are also reconnaissance platoons inserted into a company for each unit: the 10th Company of the **187th**, the 11th of the **186th**, and the 12th of the **183rd**. These units have advanced reconnaissance capabilities and are also enabled for TCL jumps.

However, these are numerically limited quotas, conceived mainly for the reconnaissance needs of their respective regiments. Due to size, structure, and available mass, they cannot represent an Italian equivalent of the British 1 PARA or the four German EGB companies, nor can they alone guarantee organic and continuous support to Special Operations.

Italy has thus chosen a fairly clear separation: on one side the Paratroopers Brigade “Folgore”, an airborne and projection conventional force; on the other the COMFOSE, with Special Forces, dedicated supports, and training structures.

It is a rational solution. It allows the “Folgore” to maintain its function as a Large Unit, without being transformed into a simple personnel pool for Special Operations. It also allows COMFOSE to concentrate resources and preparation on units qualified for tasks of operational and strategic relevance.

However, an intermediate zone remains.



Paratrooper scouts of the Folgore during a jump with free fall technique (TCL)

A possible Italian model

The Army could address the issue without creating a new Special Forces unit.

Around the time COMFOSE was established, a single divisional command with the “Folgore” Brigade was also hypothesized (which later happened in Spain in 2021), a solution at the time also supported by the highly authoritative Colonel Luciano Piacentini, former commander of the 9th “Col Moschin”, in an interesting article on *Analisi Difesa*, but the project did not follow through.

Today, one possibility would be to qualify a paratrooper battalion as a support force for Special Operations, keeping it organically within the Folgore Brigade but making it available, under certain conditions, for deployment under the operational control of COMFOSE or the competent joint command.

A lighter model could foresee a permanently certified company, which can be reinforced up to battalion level through quotas from other units of the Brigade.

The personnel would remain conventional paratroopers. They would not assume the qualification of Raider, Ranger, or Target Acquirer, but **would receive specific training to operate with the Special Operations sector.**

The risk of confusing elite and Special Forces

Any reflection on this topic must avoid a recurring misunderstanding: **not everything that is particularly trained belongs to the Special Forces.**

Airborne troops are historically elite units, but the term mainly indicates a military culture, a level of readiness, and a particular mode of employment. Special Forces are instead defined by the tasks assigned, the selection, the specific training, and the chain of command.

Bringing the two worlds closer does not mean erasing their boundaries.

On the contrary, a good integration model must preserve their respective identities. Special Forces should not be used as luxury conventional infantry; paratroopers should not be presented as raiders just because they operate alongside them.

The British experience shows that an infantry battalion can work steadily with the UKSF without becoming SAS. The German model expressly distinguishes between Spezialkräfte and Spezialisierte Kräfte. The Spanish structure keeps MOE and BRIPAC separate, while placing them under the same divisional command.

The functional separation is therefore compatible with strong operational integration.



Italian raiders of the 9th Paratroopers Assault Regiment "Col Moschin". The Special Forces constitute a tool of political-military significance, employed for high-value strategic operations in complex and sensitive contexts.

The return of high-intensity warfare

The war in Ukraine has brought artillery, armored vehicles, air defense, drones, and large masses of personnel back to the forefront. At first glance, this might suggest an exclusive return to heavy formations.

The reality is more complex.

Light and specialized forces continue to be necessary to quickly exploit a breach, occupy a decisive point, reinforce a threatened sector, conduct raids, operate on difficult terrain, and respond to distant crises before the arrival of heavy units.

Airborne troops cannot replace an armored brigade in prolonged combat. But an armored brigade cannot be projected with the same speed, inserted by air, or employed with the same flexibility.

The true strength, therefore, comes from integration. Light units must be supported by fire, intelligence, air defense, drones, electronic warfare, helicopters, and logistics. The Special Forces must be able to access the capabilities of the conventional component without losing speed or confidentiality.

In this system, paratroopers can represent the first available tactical mass between the small Special Forces detachment and the heavier conventional formations.

An organizational choice, not just an identity

In Italy, the relationship between “Folgore” and Special Forces is inevitably accompanied by historical and identity elements. The 9th and 185th still carry names and traditions linked to the paratrooper specialty. Many operators come directly from the airborne troops.

But the issue cannot be reduced to tradition.

We must ask ourselves which organization today guarantees the best operational capability.

The “Folgore” must continue to be a conventional Large Unit capable of fighting, projecting, and generating an airborne component. The COMFOSE must maintain autonomy, specialization, and priority access to the resources necessary for Special Operations.

However, between these two poles, a level of permanent integration could be strengthened, not based solely on occasional exercises or historical relationships between units.

Conclusions

The choices made by various European armies make this proximity visible.

Germany could reunite the EGB and bring them organically closer to the KSK. The United Kingdom has already assigned 1 PARA to the permanent support of the UK Special Forces. Spain has gathered BRIPAC, MOE, FAMET, and other specialized capabilities under the División San Marcial.

Italy has followed a different model, separating the Folgore from the COMFOSE and transferring units with their own capabilities and missions to the special sector.

This separation remains valid. **But it does not exhaust the issue.**

In a scenario where Special Operations must increasingly integrate with conventional forces, it might be appropriate to identify in the “Folgore” a component permanently prepared to support them.

Paratroopers are not Special Forces. Precisely for this reason, they can represent the most effective link between the narrow world of the latter and the overall power of the conventional Army.