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Mullen Says Conventional Forces Must Learn From Special Ops Personnel

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MARINE CORPS AIR STATION NEW RIVER, N.C., April 2, 2008 – All servicemembers are going to have to become more like special operations troops as the war against terror continues, Navy Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said yesterday.

Mullen met with thousands of troops at the Army's Fort Bragg and Marine Corps's Camp Lejeune. He spoke to reporters traveling with him before returning to Washington.

Mullen visited the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, at Fort Bragg, and met with leaders of Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command, at Lejeune.

The Marines are new in the special operations forces business. "About two years ago, (they) made a decision to create special operations capabilities," Mullen said. "They have deployed twice to Afghanistan as a special operations capable company of Marines embedded in the Marine expeditionary unit. That is a significant commitment and change for the Marine Corps."

The Marine commitment has taken some of the pressure off U.S. Special Operations Command, allowing the command to apply itself to a higher level of capability, the chairman said.

All the services must learn from the special operations community, the chairman said. "I think all the services have to focus on more agility, more speed, more flexibility, less footprint, more precision," he said.

The services must develop flattened, decentralized organizations and combat constructs to get ahead of today's enemies and the enemies of the future, Mullen said.

Conventional Army and Marine Corps formations already are stepping into some special operations forces missions. Conventional forces provide trainers for military and police training teams in Iraq and Afghanistan, once the field of Special Forces soldiers.

Soldiers and Marines are also far more culturally attuned than in the past, and many are learning the languages of countries they are operating in.

“I don’t expect us all to become special operators, ... but I think we need to be paying attention to the characteristics of special operators in how they work organizationally and the speed that they have in the fight,” Mullen said. “We need to be much more capable of doing that.”

Mullen told reporters that he still sees too many procedures, policies and regulations that are attuned to peacetime, rather than war. “We take a regulation, and we make incremental changes to it to try to match it to the wartime situation that we’re in,” he said.

He said this is a problem in the personnel field in particular. The process for evaluating wounded warriors is an example. Officials tried to adjust the peacetime process to fit a wartime situation. “We’ve got to speed it up,” he said. “I hear this is in every warrior transition unit I visit. We’ve got to move this process more quickly. These young people who have sacrificed so much, they want to get on with their lives, and we owe them that. (They must be) properly (compensated) and prepared for their futures, whatever they are.”

The chairman said he sees a disconnect in career path adjustments and in ways the services deploy some of the forces. “I see it many times in administrative procedures,” he said. “It’s a frustration, and we need to modify many of our policies and procedures to reflect the fact that we are in our seventh year of war.

“We are a military at war and a country at war, and we need to capture that in our policies and procedures to support the men and women who are actually executing this.”