



TRANSITION TO CIVILIAN LIFE

Additional Data Analysis and Reporting Would Improve Special Operations Forces Experiences

Report to Congressional Committees

September 2024
GAO-24-106587

Revised on September 30, 2024, to correct a typographical error on page 32.

Accessible Version

GAO Highlights

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Highlights of [GAO-24-106587](#), a report to congressional committees.

September 2024

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Why GAO Did This Study

Over the past two decades, DOD increased the size of SOF to combat threats of violent extremism, but DOD has recognized a need to refocus SOF to counter near-peer adversaries. According to officials, SOF service members must now decide whether to embrace the shift or leave the military to pursue other career options in civilian life.

The Joint Explanatory Statement accompanying the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 includes a provision for GAO to review SOF service members' use of DOD transition programs. This report assesses (1) the extent to which SOF service members participate in DOD's transition programs, (2) challenges they experience when they separate from active-duty, and (3) the extent to which DOD provides information on private-sector transition assistance support.

GAO reviewed relevant laws and policies and interviewed cognizant DOD officials and 5 private-sector organizations. GAO also spoke with a nongeneralizable sample of 11 active-duty discussion groups and 21 veteran SOF service members.

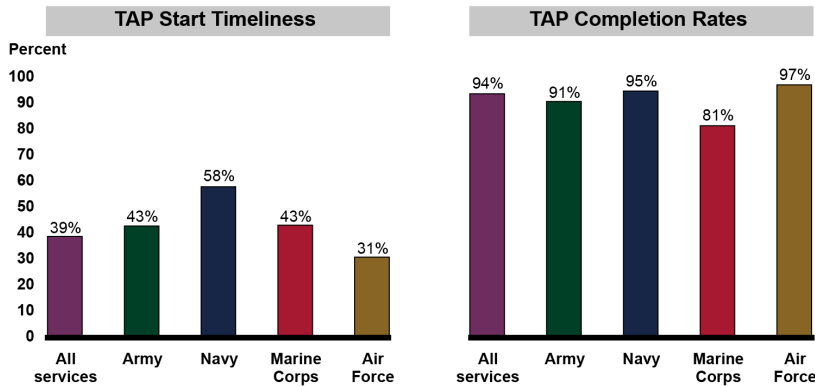
What GAO Recommends

GAO is making five recommendations to DOD, including to analyze TAP data of SOF service members and develop corrective action plans, as needed. DOD concurred with the recommendations.

What GAO Found

The Department of Defense (DOD) provides a variety of programs to help service members transition from the military to civilian life, including its mandatory Transition Assistance Program (TAP). GAO found that three of four Special Operations Forces (SOF) service component commands met DOD's completion goal of 85 percent but only about 39 percent of SOF service members started TAP on time, based on an analysis of available data from fiscal year 2023 (see fig.). Starting TAP on time is critical for service members to reap the full benefits of the program. GAO examined TAP data by different SOF characteristics, such as rank, class attendance, and years of military service, and found that those characteristics affected timeliness of both starting and completing TAP.

Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Timeliness and Completion Rates Among Special Operations Forces (SOF) by Military Service for Fiscal Year 2023



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-24-106587

Accessible Data for Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Timeliness and Completion Rates Among Special Operations Forces (SOF) by Military Service for Fiscal Year 2023

Military service	TAP Start Timeliness (percent)	TAP Completion Rates (percent)
All services	39	94
Army	43	91
Navy	58	95
Marine Corps	43	81
Air Force	31	97

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-24-106587

SOF service component commands do not analyze data on TAP, including by relevant SOF characteristics such as rank, because there is no requirement to do so. The SOF service component commands also do not develop corrective action plans to address any challenges identified by such an analysis. Without analyzing comprehensive data on TAP, the SOF service component commands may not have a complete picture of the magnitude and scope of any challenges facing SOF service members as they transition to civilian life, and why those challenges may occur.

SOF officials, active-duty service members, and veterans told GAO they experience a variety of challenges—such as high operational tempo; need to document medical issues; and loss of their SOF identity—as they separate from the military. These challenges can make starting, participating in, and completing TAP and other transition activities difficult, according to DOD officials.

Many private sector organizations also provide transition assistance to SOF. However, per policy, DOD does not endorse any private-sector organization, but provides information about Veteran Service Organizations and the National Resource Directory, according to the Military-Civilian Transition Office. DOD officials stated they have informal relationships with private sector organizations, and some SOF service members utilize them.

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September 25, 2024

The Honorable Jack Reed
Chairman
The Honorable Roger Wicker
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate

The Honorable Mike Rogers
Chairman
The Honorable Adam Smith
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
House of Representatives

Special Operations Forces (SOF) provide a unique portfolio of capabilities to address the nation's most complex and sensitive security challenges.¹ SOF service members also undergo cycles of extensive training and frequent combat deployments, which can strain their physical and mental well-being. Over the past two decades, the Department of Defense (DOD) increased the size of SOF, in part to meet the demand to combat threats of violent extremism and to advance and protect the national security interests of the United States. Organized under U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) and its SOF service component commands, SOF had grown to around 74,000 personnel as of fiscal year 2022.²

After two decades of combatting terrorism and violent extremist organizations, DOD and SOCOM have recognized a need to refocus SOF to counter growing threats from near-peer adversaries. Experienced SOF service members are now faced with the decision to embrace this change in focus and remain on active duty or separate from the military and pursue other career options in civilian life, such as employment, education, or retirement, according to DOD officials.

DOD provides a variety of transition programs, including DOD's mandatory Transition Assistance Program (TAP), to help separating service members, including SOF, transition to civilian life. TAP is designed to assist eligible service members transitioning to civilian life access veteran benefits and develop post-transition plans and goals, such as choosing a career path, finding employment, starting a business, or deciding which college

¹Special operations are military operations requiring unique modes of employment, tactics, techniques, and equipment. These operations are often conducted in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments and are characterized by one or more of the following elements: time sensitive, clandestine or covert approaches, conducted with or through indigenous forces, requiring regional expertise, and a higher degree of risk. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Pub. 3-05, *Joint Doctrine for Special Operations* (Sept. 22, 2020).

²We have conducted extensive prior work on SOCOM's efforts to support its forces' physical and mental well-being, including SOCOM's Preservation of the Force and Family (POTFF), which is discussed later in this report. For examples of our work in this area, see GAO, *Special Operations Forces: Actions Needed to Assess Performance of the Preservation of the Force and Family Program*, [GAO-23-105644](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 27, 2023) and GAO, *Special Operations Forces: Additional Actions Needed to Effectively Manage the Preservation of the Force and Family Program*, [GAO-22-104486](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 16, 2021).

or vocational school to attend. DOD estimates that more than half-a-million service members are expected to participate in TAP over the next few years.³

In addition to TAP, DOD has transition (or transition-related) programs at the department, command, and unit levels. These programs provide internship opportunities, skill development, and post-military employment assistance to supplement existing resources. Beyond DOD, there are also numerous private-sector organizations and entities that seek to assist transitioning service members.⁴

The Joint Explanatory Statement accompanying the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 includes a provision for us to review how SOF service members use of DOD transition programs.⁵ This report assesses: (1) the extent to which SOF service members participate in DOD's transition programs; (2) any challenges SOF service members experience when they separate from active duty; and (3) the extent to which DOD provides information on transition assistance provided by private-sector organizations, and SOF service members use transition assistance provided by private-sector organizations.

To address our first objective, we collected and analyzed TAP participation data provided by the Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) from fiscal year 2021 through fiscal year 2023. In the data we collected, all service members were assigned a unique identifier by DMDC. To ensure the reliability of the data we obtained, we reviewed it for completeness and conducted interviews with DMDC officials who are responsible for maintaining the data. We determined the data was sufficiently reliable for the purposes of analyzing and reporting on TAP data for active-duty SOF service members. To narrow our scope to SOF service members, we cross walked the data to specific SOF occupational specialties. We discussed occupational specialties with SOCOM, who provided a list of occupational specialties it considered to be SOF, which we used in our analysis.⁶ We conducted site visits with SOCOM and each of its SOF service component commands to discuss transition assistance for SOF.

To address our second objective, we interviewed officials from the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the military services, SOCOM, and the SOF service component commands to discuss challenges SOF service members face during their transition. In addition, we also interviewed private-sector organizations that support transitioning SOF service members, active-duty SOF service members that are currently transitioning, and SOF veterans. Based on these interviews, we identified common themes amongst the challenges.

To address our third objective, we reviewed DOD guidance and interviewed DOD and military service officials with SOCOM and its SOF service component commands to determine how and what information DOD shares

³We have conducted prior work on TAP. See for example, GAO, *Servicemembers Transitioning to Civilian Life: DOD Can Better Leverage Performance Information to Improve Participation in Counseling Pathways*, [GAO-23-104538](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 12, 2022). In this report, we recommended the military services develop corrective action plans to improve attendance in TAP classes and improve timeliness in completing TAP. DOD concurred with the recommendations. As of January 2024, these recommendations have not been implemented.

⁴For the purposes of this report, we use the term "private sector" to refer to a variety of organizations outside the government such as nongovernmental entities, not-for-profit organizations, and businesses. This definition roughly aligns with DOD's use of the term "non-federal entities." There are a multitude of organizations that aim to support SOF overall as well as specific organizations that cater to the various types of SOF, such as Navy SEALs or Army Rangers.

⁵168 Cong. Rec. H9481 (daily ed. Dec. 8, 2022).

⁶See Appendix I for a copy of the occupational specialties, by military service, that SOCOM provided.

about private-sector organizations, how it partners with them, and any limitations or challenges the officials cited in partnering with them.⁷ We also identified and interviewed a nongeneralizable sample of 5 private-sector organizations to discuss how these organizations solicit participation from SOF service members, the types of transition services they provide to SOF service members, and the types of challenges they observe SOF service members experiencing as they separate from the military. These private-sector organizations were selected using a snowball sampling technique. Specifically, we obtained the names of organizations through a combination of online research, interviews with DOD officials, and through interviews with private-sector organizations who identified other organizations that support transitioning SOF service members. The 5 private-sector organizations we selected were the organizations that were commonly identified.

To address each of our objectives, we conducted six officer and five enlisted discussion groups with a nongeneralizable sample of SOF service members currently going through the process of transitioning from military to civilian life to obtain illustrative examples of how they utilize DOD programs and resources outside of DOD to help them prepare for their separation from active duty. We also conducted interviews with a nongeneralizable sample of 21 recently separated SOF service members to discuss their experiences post-transition. These service members had separated from active-duty service after October 1, 2021. To identify SOF veterans, we drafted an online announcement requesting volunteers, which was circulated by the SOF component commands and private-sector organizations we interviewed. Based on these discussion groups with active-duty SOF service members and interviews with SOF veterans, we identified themes and responses.

We conducted this performance audit from January 2023 to September 2024 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

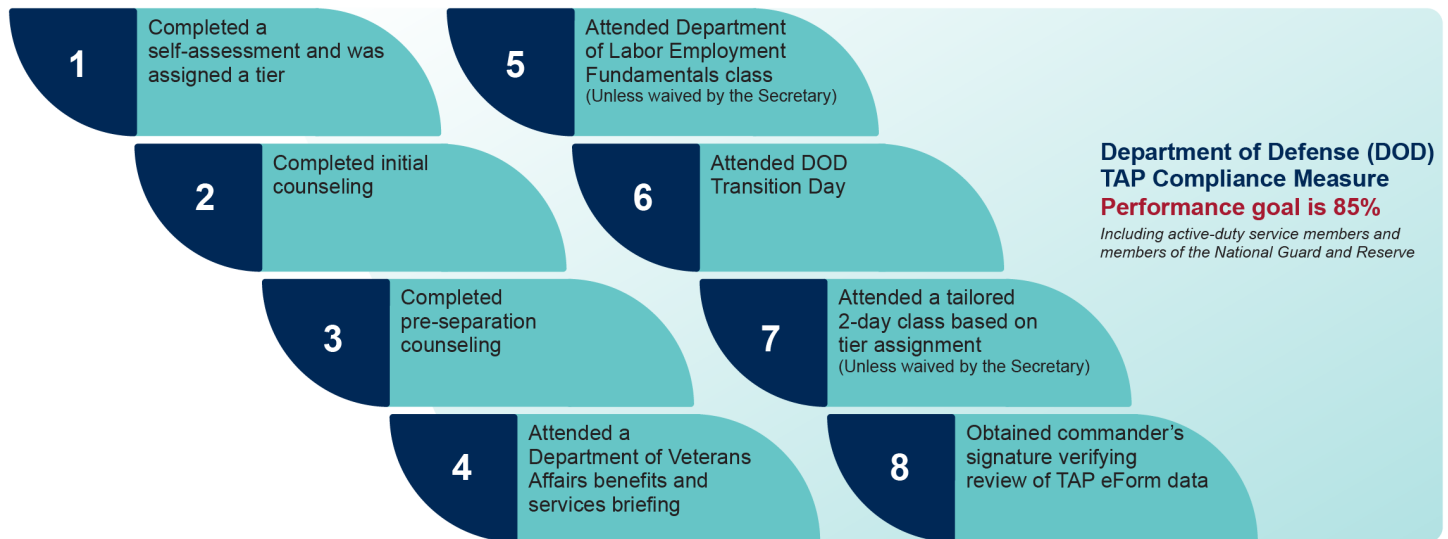
Overview of DOD-Wide Transition Assistance Programs

The VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 made participation in and completion of TAP mandatory for all separating service members regardless of whether they are designated as SOF.⁸ DOD's *2020 TAP Compliance Business Rules* lay out eight separate requirements throughout a service member's TAP lifecycle that together define TAP completion. DOD established an annual performance target of 85 percent for TAP compliance. Figure 1 depicts these TAP requirements.

⁷Department of Defense, DoD 5500.07-R, *Joint Ethics Regulation (JER)* (August 1993, Change 7, Nov. 17, 2011).

⁸VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011, Pub. L. No. 112-56, § 221 (2011).

Figure 1: DOD’s 2020 Transition Assistance Program Compliance Business Rules



Source: GAO analysis of DOD’s Transition Assistance Program information. | GAO-24-106587

Note: Service members are assigned to one of three tiers based on how well they are prepared for transition: Tier 1: Fully prepared and career-ready, requiring minimum transition support; Tier 2: Moderately prepared or career-ready, requiring some transition support; or Tier 3: Not fully prepared or career-ready, requiring maximum transition support.

TAP is DOD’s primary transition assistance program and is designed to prepare all service members for a successful transition to civilian life (see sidebar). Other programs, such as the SkillBridge program, DOD Credentialing Opportunities On-Line (COOL), and the United States Military Apprenticeship Program (USMAP) provide additional transition resources and opportunities that may be helpful for certain service members.

The Transition Assistance Program

Department of Defense’s Transition Assistance Program Definition

“The activities and curriculum that provide eligible service members with the targeted set of knowledge, skills, documentation, and assistance required to meet the career readiness standards before transition and enable a successful transition from active duty to civilian life”.

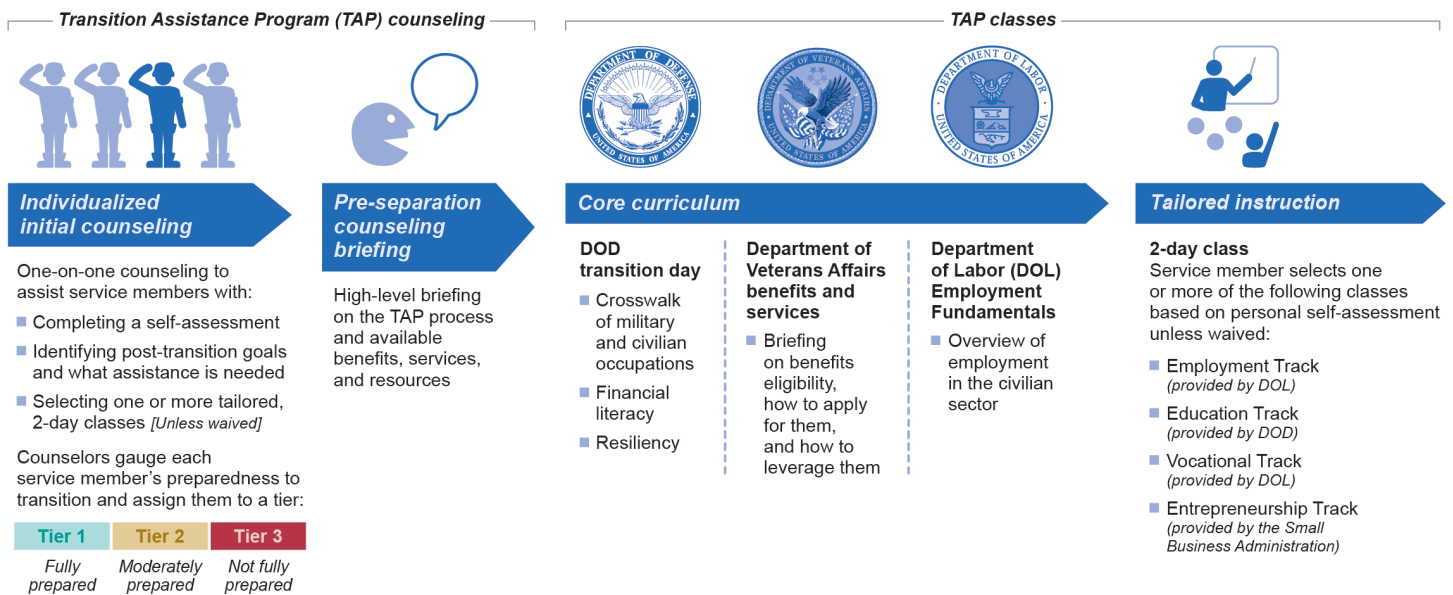
Source: GAO analysis of DOD Instruction 1332.35, Transition Assistance Program (TAP) for Military Personnel (Sept. 26, 2019). | GAO-24-106587

TAP is designed to assist transitioning service members in accessing veteran benefits and developing post-transition plans and goals, such as choosing a career path, seeking employment, starting a business, or deciding which college or vocational school to attend. While DOD and the military services are tasked with much of the program’s administration and execution, TAP’s curriculum is a collaborative interagency effort in partnership with DOD, the Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Labor, Department of Education, Department of Homeland Security, Small Business Administration, and the Office of Personnel Management.

Service members begin TAP by completing a self-assessment and attending an individualized initial counseling session (see figure 2).⁹

⁹Section 552 of the John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 mandated that the TAP program include a requirement for individualized initial counseling sessions for service members to take a self-assessment and receive information from a counselor regarding resources, among other things.

Figure 2: Overview of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Counseling Pathways



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) guidance; GAO (art); DOD, Department of Veterans Affairs, and Department of Labor (seals). | GAO-24-106587

Individualized initial counseling. Service members should receive individualized initial counseling no later than 365 days (1 year) before the service member is expected to leave military service, with some exceptions.¹⁰ During individualized initial counseling, counselors are to talk to service members face-to-face or by video conference about their post-transition goals and plans to determine the level of transition assistance service members require. Service members are then assigned to one of three tiers based on how well they are prepared for transition:

- Tier 1: Fully prepared and career-ready, requiring minimum transition support,
- Tier 2: Moderately prepared or career-ready, requiring some transition support, or
- Tier 3: Not fully prepared or career-ready, requiring maximum transition support.

The level of transition assistance service members receive depends on the tier to which they are assigned.

Pre-separation counseling briefing. Service members are to attend a mandatory briefing known as pre-separation counseling on available services, benefits, and transition-related deliverables, among other things. Pre-separation counseling should occur after individualized initial counseling and begin at least 1 year prior to anticipated separations, or as soon as possible for unanticipated separations or retirements.¹¹

¹⁰See 10 U.S.C. § 1142(a)(3) and (c)(2) and Department of Defense Instruction 1332.35, *Transition Assistance Program (TAP) for Military Personnel* (Sept. 26, 2019). For clarity, in this report we use “1 year” rather than 365 days. In the case of unanticipated separations or retirements, sometimes due to being wounded, ill, or injured in the line of duty, that occur 365 or fewer days before leaving active duty, service members should begin TAP “as soon as possible within the remaining period of service.” Prior to enactment of section 552 of the John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 which amended 10 U.S.C. § 1142, TAP was to be started no later than 90 days before the date of discharge or release from military service. Pub. L. No. 115-232, § 552 (2018).

¹¹See 10 U.S.C. § 1142(a)(3).

Core curriculum. Service members are to attend TAP classes following individualized initial counseling and the pre-separation counseling briefing. These include 3 days of core curriculum classes. The core curriculum classes cover topics such as financial readiness, translating military skills to a civilian environment, Department of Veterans Affairs benefits and services, and an overview of civilian employment.¹²

Tailored instruction. Service members must attend a 2-day class unless their participation is waived.¹³ The nature of the tailored 2-day class service members attend depends on their post-transition goals, which may include (1) employment, (2) education, (3) vocational training, and (4) entrepreneurship.¹⁴ Waivers are permitted for individual service members within groups or classifications that are unlikely to face major challenges in adjusting to civilian life. Similarly, waivers are permitted for service members possessing specialized skills who, due to unavoidable circumstances, are needed to support a unit's imminent deployment.¹⁵

TAP concludes with a capstone event designed to verify whether transitioning service members have either met Career Readiness Standards, and have a viable Individual Transition Plan or were referred to staff at another partnering federal agency or local resources for support services in the community where the service member intends to relocate.¹⁶ Per DOD Instruction 1332.35, to meet the Career Readiness Standards service members should provide evidence of, among other things, a post-separation financial plan, an individual transition plan, a completed resume or employment verification, and registration on Department of Veterans Affairs' online benefit platform.¹⁷

Commanders, or their designees, are required to ensure that service members who do not meet one or more Career Readiness Standards or who need further assistance are referred to an appropriate interagency party or another appropriate resource—a process known as the “warm handover.”¹⁸ Commanders, or their designees, are responsible for making the final decision as to whether the Career Readiness Standards have

¹²Section 552 of the John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 specified that 1 day of instruction cover preparation for employment, which is generally mandatory for all separating and retiring service members. Prior to this amendment, preparation for employment information was provided over 3 days.

¹³Under 10 U.S.C. § 1144(c)(2), the Secretary of Defense may waive the participation requirement. According to DOD Instruction 1332.35, the secretaries of the military departments have the delegated authority and flexibility to determine if a participation waiver is appropriate to exempt, as prescribed in section 1144(c)(2) of Title 10, U.S.C., a service member from attending the “two days of instruction” prescribed in section 1144(f)(D) of Title 10, U.S.C.

¹⁴Counselors help service members select the appropriate 2-day class during individualized initial counseling. The 2-day optional class on employment was added after the statutory amendment took effect.

¹⁵See 10 U.S.C. § 1144(c)(2) and (f)(1)(D).

¹⁶TAP is considered complete when a unit commander or commander's designee signs a form verifying, among other things, that they have reviewed the servicemember's Capstone review form.

¹⁷In all there are nine common Career Readiness Standards. Service members seeking to obtain a degree from an accredited institution of higher education or earn a credential from a certified career technical program or institution are required to meet an additional four standards, including completing a standardized individual assessment tool to assess aptitudes, interests, strengths, or skills, and comparing options for higher education or career or technical training.

¹⁸Commanders or their designees have been directed to ensure that service members who have not developed housing or transportation plans or who are separating under less than honorable circumstances receive warm handover referrals. See GAO, *Service Members Transitioning to Civilian Life: Agencies Can Improve Warm Handovers for Additional Assistance*, [GAO-24-106248](#), (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 21, 2024).

been met and that a viable Individual Transition Plan has been made. The commander's signature validates that a service member has successfully completed TAP.

Other DOD-Wide Transition Assistance Programs

In addition to TAP, DOD also administers a range of programs that provide targeted transition assistance opportunities and resources for individuals. For example:

SkillBridge program. DOD's SkillBridge program offers separating service members the opportunity to gain work experience with civilian organizations through training, apprenticeships, or internships during their last 180 days of service. Service members must have completed appropriate parts of TAP as directed by the military services and must gain approval from their unit commander to participate in the SkillBridge program. According to Army officials, the Army administers their SkillBridge program and refers to it as the Career Skills Program.

Credentialing Opportunities On-Line (COOL) program. We previously reported that COOL program helps service members obtain occupational credentials related to their military training and skills and translate them to civilian occupations.¹⁹ The COOL program's online platform offers service members information on credentialing opportunities that match their military occupations to civilian occupational credentials. The COOL program may also pay for expenses related to obtaining professional certification—such as books, tuition, and exam fees.

United States Military Apprenticeship Program (USMAP). The USMAP program provides hands-on training that allows service members to complete civilian apprenticeship requirements while on active duty and can provide more information to employers on service members' skills. The USMAP program is a formal military training program, which is a registered apprenticeship with the Department of Labor, applies to the trade-related military occupations, such as aviation and construction. According to DOD, documented apprenticeships, such as the USMAP program, can lead to better job prospects and higher wages for service members transitioning to civilian life.

Roles and Responsibilities for Transition Assistance

The Office of the Secretary of Defense and the military departments have specific responsibilities for delivering transition assistance to all separating service members.

Military-Civilian Transition Office (MCTO). The MCTO provides operational, administrative, and program oversight for transition and reintegration programs, to include TAP and the SkillBridge program. MCTO is

¹⁹See GAO, *Military and Veteran Support: DOD Has Taken Steps to Help Servicemembers Transfer Skills to Civilian Employment but Has Limited Evidence to Determine Program Effectiveness*, [GAO-22-105261](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 17, 2022). We use the umbrella term "credentials" to encompass (1) certifications; (2) licenses; and (3) certificates of completion of apprenticeships. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), a certification is a time-limited credential awarded by a non-governmental certification body based on an individual demonstrating, through an examination process, that they have acquired the designated knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform a specific job. It does not convey a legal authority to work in an occupation. According to BLS, a license is a time-limited credential awarded by a governmental licensing agency based on pre-determined criteria. The criteria may include some combination of education, assessments, or work experience. It conveys a legal authority to work in an occupation. According to DOL, a certificate of completion of an apprenticeship is a credential that conveys that the apprentice has successfully met the requirements of the apprenticeship program.

responsible for designing, overseeing, and evaluating TAP, and provides transition assistance policy, and program oversight to prepare service members for transitioning out of the military. MCTO reports to the Defense Human Resources Activity (DHRA), which, in turn, reports to the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness (USD P&R).

Definition of Special Operations Forces

"SOF are small, specially organized units manned by carefully selected people using modified equipment and trained in unconventional applications of tactics against strategic and operational objectives."

Source: SOF Reference Manual, 5th Edition, November 2023. | GAO-24-106587

Military departments. Each military department is responsible for implementing and administering TAP. To that end, each military service issued their own TAP guidance.²⁰ In addition, each military service is responsible for administering both local in-person and virtual TAP classes and reporting participant data to the Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC).

Overview of Special Operations Command and SOF Programs

SOCOM is the functional combatant command responsible for organizing, training, equipping, and providing fully capable SOF to defend the United States and its interests (see sidebar).²¹

The Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps each have a designated SOF service component to train, equip, and provide SOF from their respective services.²² In addition, SOCOM has administrative command of seven theater special operations commands as subordinate commands that perform broad, continuous missions uniquely suited to SOF capabilities.²³ The theater special operations command is the primary theater SOF organization to plan and control special operations and other SOF activities. The Secretary of Defense assigned operational control of the theater special operations commands and attached SOF tactical units to their respective geographic combatant commanders. Figure 3 outlines SOCOM's organization.

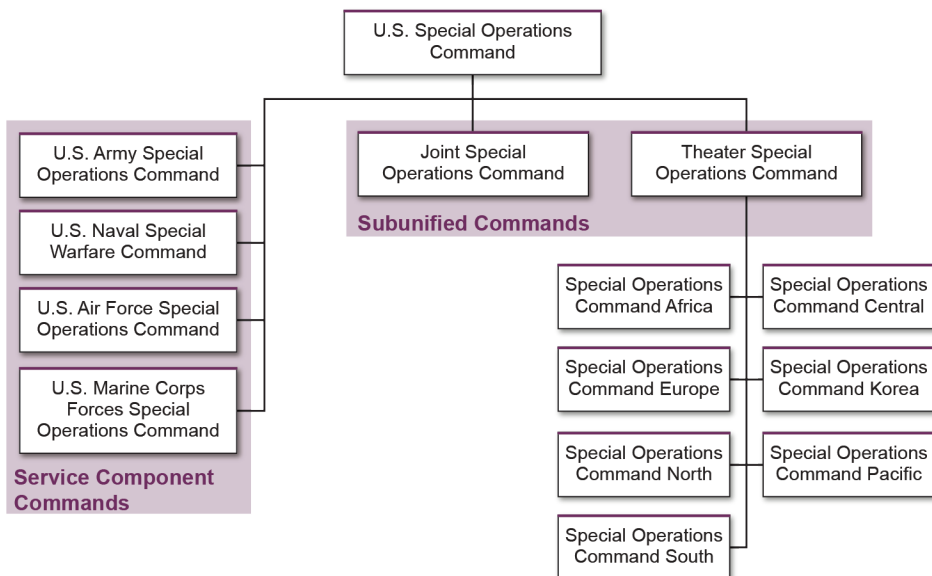
²⁰DOD Instruction 1332.35 and the following military service-level TAP policies: Army Regulation 600-81, *Soldier for Life – Transition Assistance Program* (May 17, 2016); Army Directive 2019-26, *Implementation of Changes to the Soldier for Life - Transition Assistance Program*; Office of the Chief of Naval Operations Instruction 1900.2D, *Transition Assistance Program* (May 1, 2023); NAVADMIN 223/19, *Changes to Transition Assistance Program* (Sep. 30, 2019); NAVADMIN 082/20, *Navy Transition Assistance Program Policy Update for COVID-19* (Mar. 23, 2020); Marine Corps Order 1700.31, *Transition Readiness Program (TRP)* (Dec. 30, 2015); MARADMINS 632/19, *Transition Readiness* (Nov. 13, 2019), and DODI 1332.35/Air Force Instruction 36-3037, *Transition Assistance Program (TAP) for Military Personnel* (Dec. 4, 2020).

²¹See section 167 of title 10, United States Code and DOD Directive 5100.01, *Functions of the Department of Defense and Its Major Components*, (Dec. 21, 2010) (incorporating change 1, Sept. 17, 2020).

²²SOF service components include U.S. Army Special Operations Command, Naval Special Warfare Command, Air Force Special Operations Command, and Marine Forces Special Operations Command.

²³SOCOM's seven theater special operations commands are: (1) Special Operations Command Africa; (2) Special Operations Command Central; (3) Special Operations Command Europe; (4) Special Operations Command Korea; (5) Special Operations Command North; (6) Special Operations Command Pacific; and (7) Special Operations Command South. TSOC's provide their combatant commands with staff expertise to plan, conduct, and support joint special operations.

Figure 3: Organization of U.S. Special Operations Command



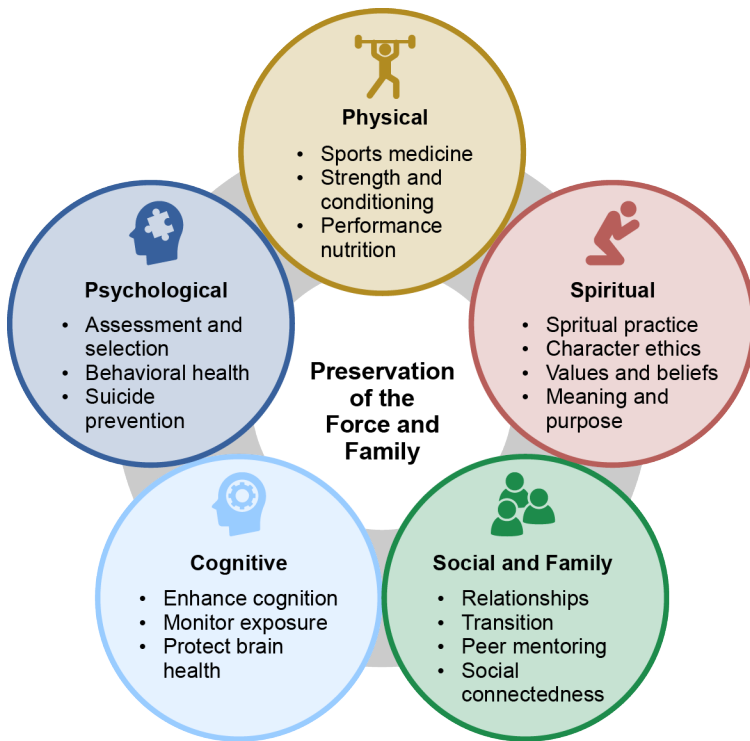
Source: Department of Defense. | GAO-24-106587

Preservation of the Force and Family (POTFF) program. SOCOM created the POTFF program in 2013 in response to recommendations from a task force assigned to identify the issues contributing to the strains and pressures of more than 10 years of multiple deployments and busy training schedules experienced by SOF and their families. The task force issued a report in 2011 that proposed major paradigm shifts in the organizational culture and behavior of the force. The task force also identified best practices to meet SOF’s continuous deployment and combat.²⁴

SOCOM’s five major areas of effort—or domains—within the POTFF program are physical; spiritual; social and family; cognitive; and psychological—each domain has multiple lines of effort to help achieve the desired end state. Figure 4 lists the five domains.

²⁴In our April 2023, work on the POTFF program, [GAO-23-105644](#), we recommended that SOCOM develop performance goals for the POTFF program, link the goals to strategic goals, and standardize data collection and analysis. DOD concurred with these recommendations but has not implemented them as of June 2024.

Figure 4: Preservation of the Force and Family Program Domains



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Special Operations Command information; GAO (art). | GAO-24-106587

SOCOM intends for the POTFF program to fill gaps in existing programs that are provided by the military services and defense-wide agencies. According to SOCOM officials, SOCOM only provides POTFF program resources when other programs common to the general-purpose forces do not meet SOF-peculiar needs.²⁵

The POTFF program’s Social and Family domain includes preparing SOF and their families for transitioning to civilian life. POTFF notes that transitions can create stress for SOF and their families; the intensity and unique nature of a SOF career make this line of effort crucial to overall human performance. SOCOM Directive 10-12 states that POTFF is designed to address SOF-peculiar demands and gaps in DOD and Service-provided services based on the uniqueness of SOCOM. Each SOF service component command and theater special operations command has a POTFF office and a POTFF lead who is charged with oversight and administering POTFF resources for the command. These POTFF program leads each collect and report data related to the provision of services by all POTFF staff to the central POTFF office located at SOCOM Headquarters.

Warrior Care Program. SOCOM created the Warrior Care Program in 2005 with the primary goal of assisting SOF service members in recovery and rehabilitation after sustaining serious wounds, illness, or injury in the line of duty, as well as their families.²⁶ Officials described the Warrior Care Program as non-medical in nature but one that advocates for SOF wounded, ill, or injured. Additionally, these officials stated the Warrior Care

²⁵SOCOM describes special operation peculiar needs as equipment, material, supplies, and services required for special operations missions for which there is no service common requirement. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Pub. 3-05, *Joint Doctrine for Special Operations* (Sept. 22, 2020).

²⁶The Warrior Care Program is sometimes referred to by a different name, Care Coalition.

Program focuses on assessing the physical and mental health needs of SOF service members and providing medical referrals for specialized care received elsewhere. Moreover, the Warrior Care Program is exclusive to SOF and those who are found “unfit to serve” by a medical evaluation board. Officials stated the Warrior Care Program also assists SOF with transitions. One of its main transition efforts is the Warrior Care Program Internship, according to officials. The Warrior Care Program Internship provides a unique pathway, entirely separate from the military services’ SkillBridge program, for SOF service members to explore post-military employment opportunities and gain experience within an industry or organization they are interested in.²⁷

Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (ASD SO/LIC) oversight. The ASD SO/LIC is responsible for overseeing the special operations-peculiar administrative matters relating to organizing, training, and equipping SOF. The POTFF director is required to submit an annual report on the program’s utilization and the extent to which program objectives are being achieved to the Commander, SOCOM, and ASD SO/LIC.²⁸

SOF Participate in DOD Transition Programs, but Lack of Data Analysis May Impede DOD’s Ability to Evaluate SOF’s Utilization

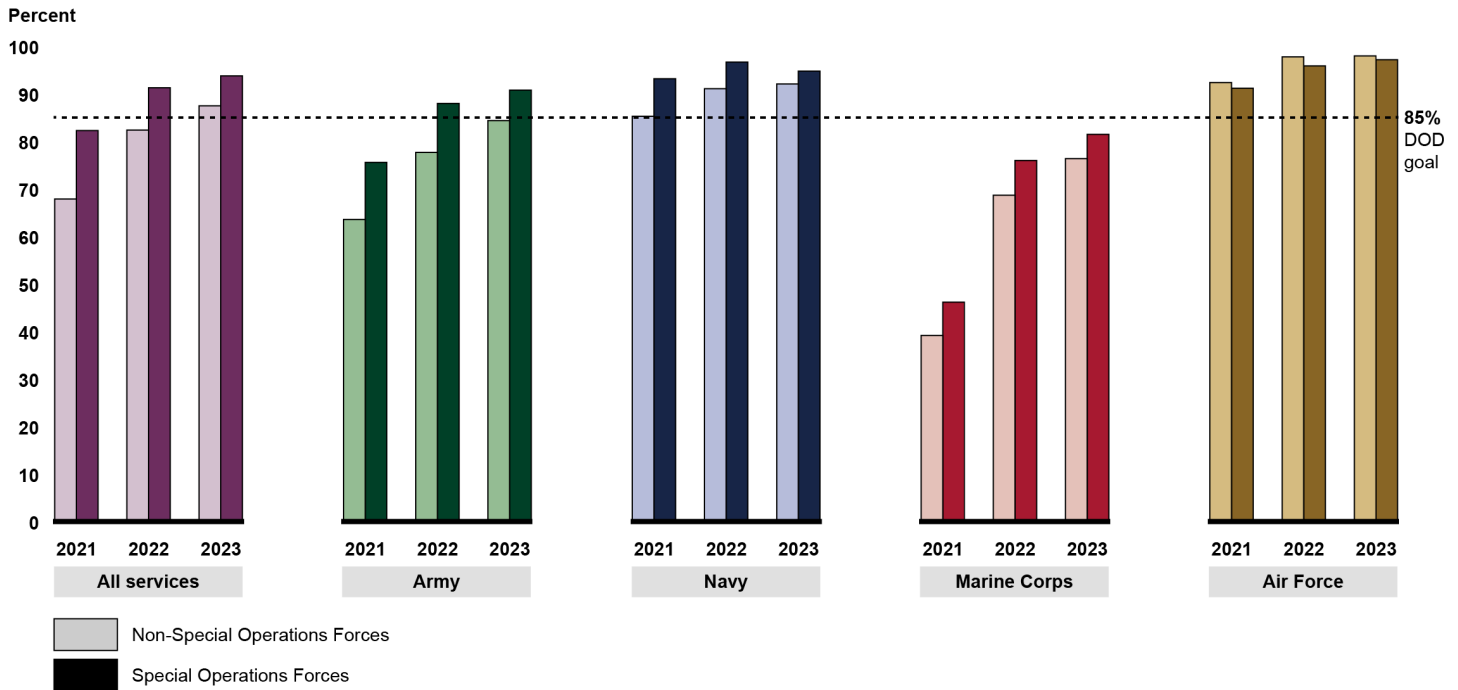
Most SOF Met DOD’s Transition Assistance Program Goal for Completion but Did Not Start on Time

Generally, SOF service members completed TAP at a higher rate than other service members according to our analysis, although there is variation by military service. From fiscal year 2021 through fiscal year 2023, approximately 7,000 SOF service members transitioned out of the military. Figure 5 shows the TAP completion rates for SOF and non-SOF service members in each military service for fiscal year 2021 through fiscal year 2023 in relation to DOD’s completion goal of 85 percent.

²⁷According to officials, the Warrior Care Program Internship is commonly referred to as the SOCOM Fellowship.

²⁸U.S. Special Operations Command Directive 10-12, *U.S. Special Operations Command Preservation of The Force and Family* (Jan. 7, 2023). The ASD-SO/LIC reports directly to the Secretary of Defense when exercising administrative authority, direction, and control of SOCOM administrative matters such as oversight of the POTFF program. 10 U.S.C. § 138 and § 167(f).

Figure 5: Transition Assistance Program, Completion Rates for Special Operations Forces and Other Service Members by Military Service for Fiscal Years 2021 through 2023



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-24-106587

Accessible Data for Figure 5: Transition Assistance Program, Completion Rates for Special Operations Forces and Other Service Members by Military Service for Fiscal Years 2021 through 2023

Military service	Fiscal year	Non-Special Operations Forces	Special Operations Forces	DOD Goal
All services	2021	67.8	82.2	85
All services	2022	82.3	91.2	85
All services	2023	87.4	93.7	85
Army	2021	63.5	75.5	85
Army	2022	77.6	87.9	85
Army	2023	84.3	90.7	85
Navy	2021	85.2	93.1	85
Navy	2022	91.0	96.6	85
Navy	2023	92.0	94.7	85
Marine Corps	2021	39.1	46.1	85
Marine Corps	2022	68.6	75.9	85
Marine Corps	2023	76.3	81.4	85
Air Force	2021	92.3	91.1	85
Air Force	2022	97.7	95.8	85
Air Force	2023	97.9	97.1	85

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data | GAO-24-106587

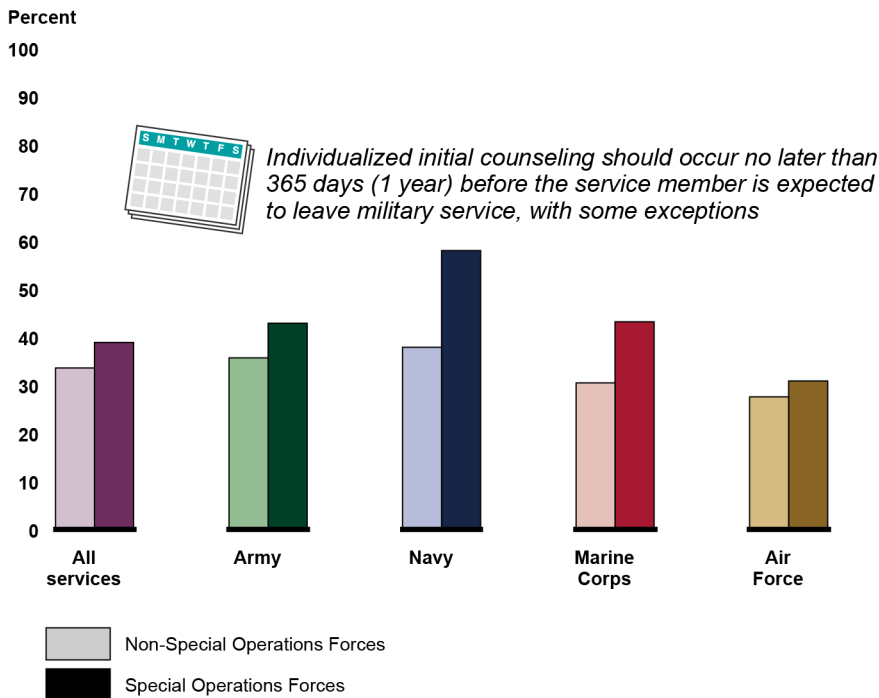
Three of the four SOF service commands met DOD’s completion goal of 85 percent for fiscal year 2023. However, Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command did not meet the goal for fiscal year 2021 through fiscal year 2023, but is trending upwards, according to our analysis.

For fiscal year 2023, we examined whether SOF and other service members adhered to TAP’s timeliness requirements of starting TAP no later than 365 days in advance of their anticipated separation date, excluding those on short-notice separations. We found that:

- The majority of SOF and other service members did not meet the requirement for starting TAP on time in fiscal year 2023;
- SOF service members were more likely to begin TAP at an earlier date than other service members, across the military services; and
- About 39 percent of SOF service members started TAP on time, compared with 34 percent of other service members in fiscal year 2023, according to our analysis.²⁹

Figure 6 shows the percent of SOF and other service members who started TAP on time.

Figure 6: Percentage of Service Members Who Separated in Fiscal Year 2023, That Started the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) On-time



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data; GAO (art). | GAO-24-106587

²⁹In December 2022, we reported that from April 2021 through March 2022, 25 percent of active-duty DOD servicemembers started TAP on time while 70 percent started TAP less than 1 year before their anticipated separation or retirement date. See [GAO-23-104538](#).

Accessible Data for Figure 6: Percentage of Service Members Who Separated in Fiscal Year 2023, That Started the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) On-time

Military service	Non-SOF	SOF
All services	33.5	38.8
Army	35.6	42.8
Navy	37.8	57.9
Marine Corps	30.4	43.1
Air Force	27.5	30.8

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-24-106587

Starting TAP earlier generally affords service members more time to plan and potentially utilize other transition programs and resources. Additionally, service members who start TAP late may also miss the chance to apply for disability benefits and obtain a disability decision from the Department of Veterans Affairs before leaving military service, according to DOD officials.³⁰ SOF officials stated they have placed an emphasis on transition planning for SOF service members and have prioritized enabling SOF service members to begin TAP early to increase the likelihood of a successful transition. SOF officials also noted they have developed and are implementing a 2-year transition timeline to help service members better plan for separation.

Lack of Comprehensive Analysis May Impede the Identification of Challenges and Prevent Corrective Actions and Oversight

According to DOD officials, neither the department nor the military services have conducted an analysis of available TAP data specific to SOF service members. As such, we analyzed available TAP data to ascertain how SOF demographic characteristics, tier level assignments, and paygrade/rank affected SOF service members' TAP participation and timeliness.

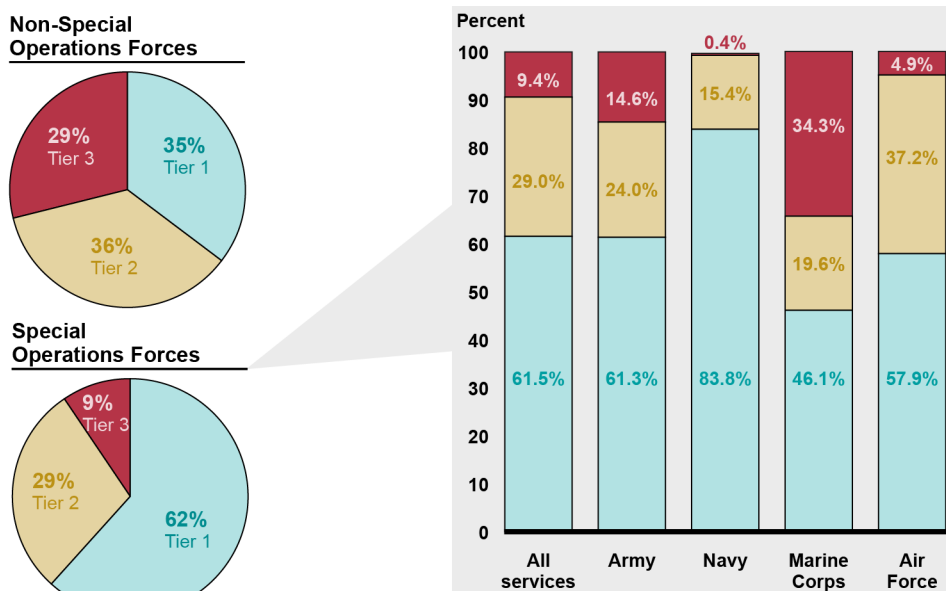
SOF characteristics. Our analysis of DOD TAP data found that several demographic factors distinguish SOF service members from non-SOF service members. For example, we found that for fiscal year 2023, on average, SOF service members were typically older, had served in the military longer, and had attained higher ranks or paygrades at the time of their separation than their non-SOF counterparts. For example:

- The average age at the time of separation for SOF service members was 34 years old compared with 28 years old for non-SOF service members.
- The average length of service for SOF service members was 13 years compared with 8 years for non-SOF service members.
- The most common paygrade at the time of separation for SOF service members was E7 compared with an E4 for non-SOF service members.

SOF TAP tier assignment. Our analysis of TAP data showed differences in SOF service member TAP Readiness Tier assignments compared with non-SOF service members. Figure 7 depicts the TAP Tier assignment breakdown between non-SOF and SOF service members in fiscal year 2023.

³⁰GAO-23-104538. Additionally, for example, we previously reported that servicemembers who start less than a year in advance may not have enough time to participate in the SkillBridge program and may miss opportunities to obtain a job upon leaving the military.

Figure 7: Tier Assignments for Special Operations Forces (SOF) and Non-SOF Service Members for Fiscal Year 2023



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-24-106587

Accessible Data for Figure 7: Tier Assignments for Special Operations Forces (SOF) and Non-SOF Service Members for Fiscal Year 2023

Non-SOF	Percent
Tier 1	35%
Tier 2	36%
Tier 3	29%

SOF	Percent
Tier 1	62%
Tier 2	29%
Tier 3	9%

SOF	All services	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force
Tier 1	9%	15%	.4%	34%	5%
Tier 2	29%	24%	15%	20%	37%
Tier 3	62%	61%	84%	46%	58%

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-24-106587

Note: Service members are assigned to one of three tiers based on how well they are prepared for transition: Tier 1: Fully prepared and career-ready, requiring minimum transition support; Tier 2: Moderately prepared or career-ready, requiring some transition support; or Tier 3: Not fully prepared or career-ready, requiring maximum transition support.

Specifically, in fiscal year 2023, we found that SOF service members were assigned to Tier 1 (fully prepared for transition) nearly twice as often than non-SOF service members during individualized initial counseling. This means that a larger proportion of SOF were eligible to receive waivers for the 2-days of tailored instruction classes. In contrast, far fewer SOF were assigned to Tier 3 (not fully prepared for transition) than their non-

SOF counterparts. When broken down by service, SOF assignment to Tier 1 rarely dropped below 50 percent, with the one exception being the Marine Corps.

SOF participation in TAP. Our analysis of SOF service member participation in TAP shows that Tier assignment has an impact on several aspects of the overall TAP experience. For example, while TAP policies vary by military service:

- SOF service members who were assigned to Tiers 1 and 2 are generally eligible to receive waivers that allow them to skip TAP's 2-days of tailored instruction classes requirement.
- For those assigned to Tier 3, attendance at 2-days of tailored instruction classes is mandatory across all military services.
- In fiscal year 2023, DOD data showed that about 54 percent of SOF service members received waivers for the 2-days of classes compared with about 30 percent of non-SOF service members. This is a significant increase in waivers since fiscal year 2021 when about 18 percent of SOF service members and about 10 percent of non-SOF service members received waivers for the 2-days of tailored instruction classes.

Our prior work on TAP found, among other things, that despite service-level policies mandating attendance for service members assigned to Tier 3, there were significant rates of absence from the 2-days of classes.³¹ Our analysis of TAP fiscal year 2023 data for SOF service members shows a similar trend. For example, of those SOF service members assigned to Tier 3, about 13 percent in fiscal year 2023 did not attend a mandatory 2-day track. Among SOF service members whose 2-day class attendance was not required (but still encouraged) by military service policies, about 29 percent of Tier 1's and about 44 percent of Tier 2's elected to attend at least one of the 2-day class options in fiscal year 2023. Table 1 depicts a breakdown of 2-day class attendance for SOF service members, by TAP Tier assignment, for fiscal year 2023.

³¹GAO-23-104538. As noted above, service members assigned to Tier 3, by program standards, are those assessed to be needing the most assistance to prepare for transition.

Table 1: Transition Assistance Program’s Two-Day Class Attendance Record for Special Operations Forces Service Members, Separating in Fiscal Year 2023

2-day class	Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3	Tiers Combined
Employment	21.8% (343)	31.6% (235)	54.2% (130)	27.7% (708)
Education	5.9% (93)	8.2% (61)	20.8% (50)	8% (204)
Entrepreneurship	7.8% (122)	10.1% (75)	11.7% (28)	8.8% (225)
Vocation	5.8% (92)	6.6% (49)	13.3% (32)	6.8% (173)
More than one	7.2% (114)	9.4% (70)	10.4% (25)	8.2% (209)
Overall attendance	Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3	Tiers Combined
At least one	29.3% (461)	43.7% (325)	86.6% (208)	38.9% (994)
None	70.7% (1,112)	56.3% (418)	13.3% (32)	61.1% (1,564)

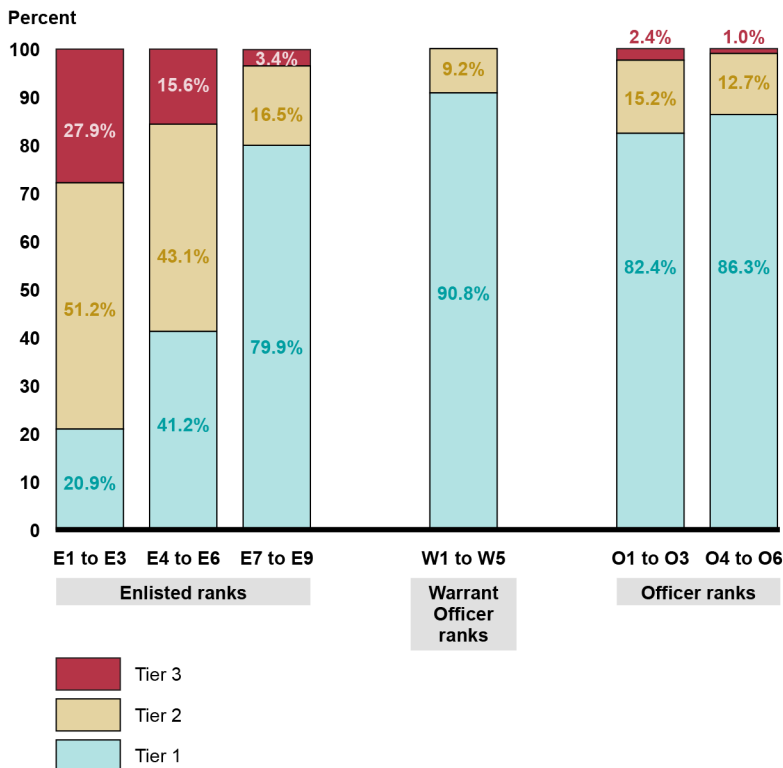
Source: GAO analysis of DOD data. | GAO-24-106587

Note: Service members are assigned to one of three tiers based on how well they are prepared for transition: Tier 1: Fully prepared and career-ready, requiring minimum transition support; Tier 2: Moderately prepared or career-ready, requiring some transition support; or Tier 3: Not fully prepared or career-ready, requiring maximum transition support.

Our analysis also showed that SOF service members received more exemptions for the Department of Labor core course on employment fundamentals in fiscal year 2023 than their non-SOF counterparts. According to DOD Instruction 1332.35, exemptions for the Department of Labor core course are given based on eligibility criteria such as a service member retiring after 20-years of qualifying service, documented evidence that the service member has civilian employment, or documentation that the service member has been accepted in a degree or accredited vocational training program. Based on our analysis, we found that about 8 percent of SOF service members received exemptions for the employment fundamentals course compared with 3 percent of non-SOF service members in fiscal year 2023.

SOF rank impacts tier assignments. Our analysis of TAP data shows significant differences between Tier assignment for SOF service members of different paygrades or ranks. For example, those SOF service members with higher paygrades or holding a higher rank were assigned to Tier 1 and Tier 2 more frequently than those with lower paygrades or having a lower rank. Figure 8 illustrates the paygrade or rank and Tier assignment for SOF service members in fiscal year 2023.

Figure 8: Special Operations Forces' Tier Assignment by Paygrade/Rank in Fiscal Year 2023



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-24-106587

Accessible Data for Figure 8: Special Operations Forces' Tier Assignment by Paygrade/Rank in Fiscal Year 2023

Tier	E1 to E3	E4 to E6	E7 to E9	W1 to W5	O1 to O3	O4 to O6
Tier 1	21%	16%	3%	0%	2%	1%
Tier 2	51%	43%	17%	9%	15%	13%
Tier 3	28%	41%	80%	91%	82%	86%

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-24-106587

Note: Service members are assigned to one of three tiers based on how well they are prepared for transition: Tier 1: Fully prepared and career-ready, requiring minimum transition support; Tier 2: Moderately prepared or career-ready, requiring some transition support; or Tier 3: Not fully prepared or career-ready, requiring maximum transition support.

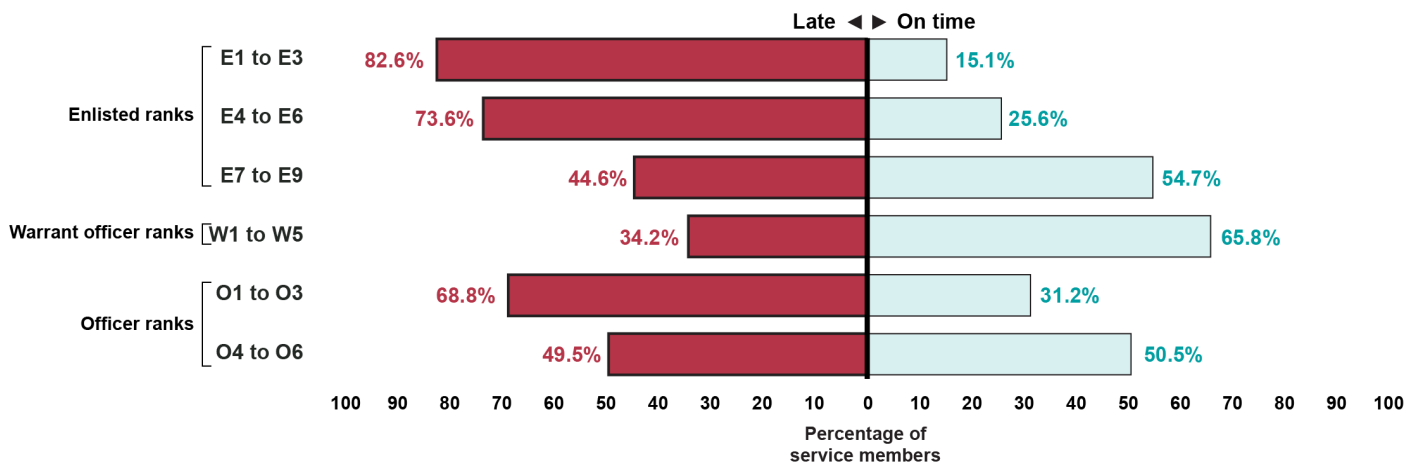
In fiscal year 2023, senior enlisted SOF service members (E7 to E9) were assigned to Tier 1 about four times more often than Tier 2 or Tier 3. Across the board, SOF officers and warrant officers were also assigned to Tier 1 significantly more frequently than Tier 2 or Tier 3.

SOF at higher ranks started TAP earlier than required. SOF who attained higher ranks tended to start TAP earlier and in advance of the 365-day requirement more often than SOF service members in lower ranks, according to our analysis of data of SOF service members. For example, in fiscal year 2023:

- Among enlisted ranks, about 15 percent of E1-E3 began TAP on time, while almost 55 percent of E7-E9 began TAP on-time.

- Among officer ranks, about 31 percent of O1-O3 began TAP on time compared with about 51 percent of O4-O6.
- Some SOF service members and veterans we met with also echoed this assessment. For example, one senior enlisted SOF service member stated he has control over his schedule allowing him to build in time for his transition. Similarly, a SOF veteran we spoke with stated that serving on a command staff as a senior officer allowed for him to have greater flexibility to address his TAP requirements. Figure 9 provides a breakdown of SOF service member ranks and their adherence to the DOD TAP timeliness standard.

Figure 9: Transition Assistance Program Start Times by Paygrade/Rank for SOF Service Members for Fiscal Year 2023



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information. | GAO-24-106587

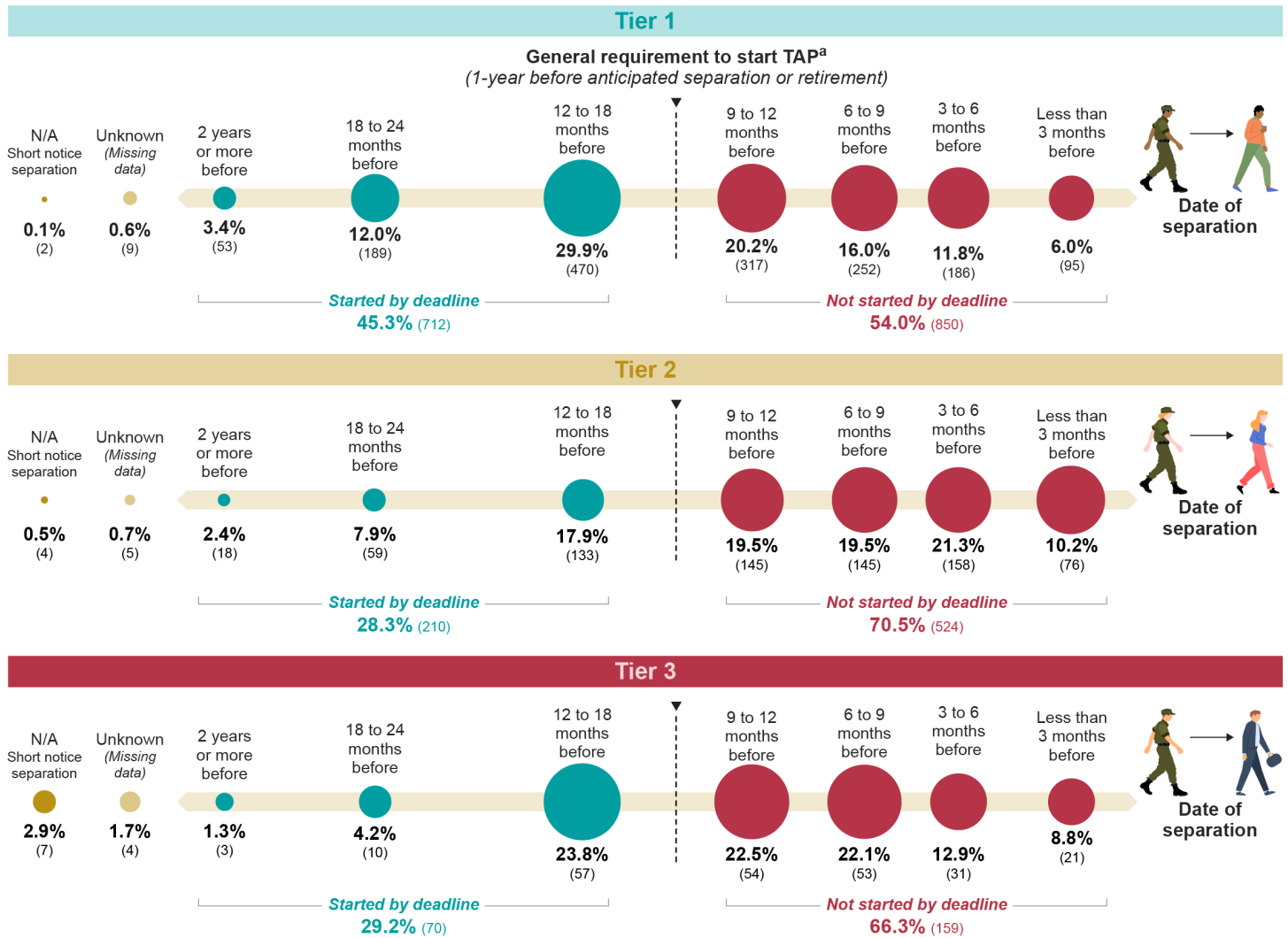
Accessible Data for Figure 9: Transition Assistance Program Start Times by Paygrade/Rank for SOF Service Members for Fiscal Year 2023

Category	E1 to E3 (percent)	E4 to E6 (percent)	E7 to E9 (percent)	W1 to W5 (percent)	O1 to O3 (percent)	O4 to O6 (percent)
Late	82.5	73.6	44.6	34.2	68.8	49.5
On time	15.1	25.6	54.7	65.8	31.2	50.5

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information. | GAO-24-106587

We also found that SOF service members who were assigned to Tier 1 during individualized initial counseling were able to start TAP on time more often than those SOF service members assigned to Tiers 2 or 3. Inversely, those SOF service members assigned to Tiers 2 and 3, who are typically required to attend more parts of TAP because they may need more transition assistance to become fully prepared to separate, had less time to leverage those resources. Figure 10 shows the average time it takes each Tier to complete TAP for fiscal year 2023 and the range in which those service members completed TAP.

Figure 10: Time Between Initial Counseling and Separation by Tier Assignment for Special Operations Forces Service Members in Fiscal Year 2023



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data; GAO (art). | GAO-24-106587

Accessible Data for Figure 10: Time Between Initial Counseling and Separation by Tier Assignment for Special Operations Forces Service Members in Fiscal Year 2023

Category	Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3
N/A	0.1	0.5	1.7
Unknown	0.6	0.7	1.3
2 years or more	3.4	2.4	4.2
18 to 24 months	12.0	7.9	23.8
12 to 18 months	29.9	17.9	22.5
9 to 12 months	20.2	19.5	22.1
6 to 9 months	16.0	19.5	12.9

Category	Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3
3 to 6 months	11.8	21.3	8.8
Less than 3 months	6.0	10.2	1.7

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-24-106587

Note: Service members are assigned to one of three tiers based on how well they are prepared for transition: Tier 1: Fully prepared and career-ready, requiring minimum transition support; Tier 2: Moderately prepared or career-ready, requiring some transition support; or Tier 3: Not fully prepared or career-ready, requiring maximum transition support.

In fiscal year 2023, about 71 percent of SOF assigned to Tier 2 and 66 percent of SOF assigned to Tier 3 (excluding those with short-notice separations) did not begin TAP on time, compared with 54 percent of SOF who were assigned to Tier 1.

Our analysis of DOD data on TAP, and SOF service members' data specifically, shows that there are challenges with SOF service members starting and completing TAP on time. Our analysis also shows issues with attendance in TAP's 2 days of tailored instruction classes and the effects of rank and tier assignment on an individual SOF service member's ability to start TAP on time.

SOF service component commands, which may be better positioned to address challenges, such as those identified above, have not conducted their own analysis of data on TAP including analyzing data by relevant SOF characteristics such as rank because it is not a requirement. Moreover, SOF service component commands cannot develop corrective action plans to address potential issues or challenges because of the lack of analysis of TAP data. Absent this analysis, the SOF service component commands cannot report data results and associated corrective plans to SOCOM or ASD SO/LIC to assess transition efforts and conduct oversight.

Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government state that managers should use quality information to achieve a program's objectives and make informed decisions.³² Moreover, a recent Army policy recognized the need to collect and report on TAP data and has begun to require Army service component commands to report on the TAP Career Readiness Standards.³³ While this policy is a positive step for the Army in tracking its TAP data, more comprehensive analysis is needed to have a fuller picture of SOF's participation in TAP. In addition, DOD officials noted that there is value in having comprehensive data analysis done by the SOF service component commands annually because it would help improve oversight.

Without analyzing comprehensive data on TAP, the SOF service component commands may not have a complete picture of the magnitude and scope of any problems or challenges facing SOF service members as they transition to civilian life, and why those challenges may occur. Further, the SOF service component commands may not be able to formulate any appropriate corrective plans to address the challenges identified, which would be important as each component command develops and administers additional TAP resources. Finally, reporting data on transition activities to SOCOM or ASD SO/LIC would strengthen their ability to execute their oversight responsibilities.

³²GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, GAO-14-704G (Washington, D.C: Sept. 10, 2014).

³³Headquarters, Department of the Army Ex-Ord 063-24, *Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Quarterly* (Jan. 11, 2024) directs Army service component commands, which includes U.S. Army Special Operations Command, to report TAP timeliness and compliance data to the Army Chief of Staff and Army Human Resources Command.

SOF Service Members Experience a Variety of Challenges During Their Transition to Civilian Life

SOF service members experience a variety of challenges such as high operational tempo, documenting medical issues, and loss of their SOF identity as they separate from the military. These challenges can make starting, participating, and completing TAP and other transition activities difficult, according to DOD officials. However, SOF also have access to SOF-specific benefits as they transition, such as various component command and unit programs, and SOCOM's Warrior Care Program.

Based on interviews with SOF officials and SOF veterans, and discussion groups with SOF service members, we identified the following common challenges that SOF service members may face prior to and during transition to civilian life.

High operational tempo. SOF officials, active-duty service members in seven of our 11 SOF service member discussion groups, and veterans we spoke with stated that a high operational tempo—stemming from multiple deployments and rigorous training schedules—may prevent SOF service members from being able to start TAP on-time, participate in transition activities such as the SkillBridge program, prior to separation. In addition, several of the SOF service members and veterans we spoke with noted there is also a tension within a command that is trying to balance operational and mission needs with the ability to support transition program requirements.

For example, SOF service members and veterans noted that there may only be one person filling a specific position making it difficult for commands to approve the SkillBridge program or for the SOF service member to focus on transition. Another SOF service member said being down one person could negatively impact the SOF unit. Some SOF service members noted they delayed starting TAP to deploy and support their fellow SOF. Likewise, SOF veterans that we spoke with stated that staffing shortages in their command also increased operational tempo. In another example, a SOF service member noted that they deploy “in garrison,” meaning that they run remote combat operations from their command center, all occurring from their home installation in the U.S. As a result, although they are physically present at their installation, they still have limited time to engage with transition programs.

Documenting medical issues. SOF officials stated that documenting service-related injuries prior to separating from military service is important so that these injuries are covered by veteran health benefits. Other SOF officials we spoke with stated that SOF often have significant injuries due to multiple deployments and that SOF require more comprehensive medical care and documentation of injuries at the end of their military service. We heard during five of the SOF service member discussion groups that it is challenging to address medical issues during transition because of factors such as having enough time remaining to schedule appointment. Seven SOF veterans we interviewed also stated that having sufficient time to document injuries was a challenge. Moreover, six SOF veterans said they did not disclose injuries so they could continue to deploy. According to SOF service members and veterans, it is important to be seen as team players and supportive of their fellow SOF and units, resulting in SOF service members often ignoring or hiding health issues.

As a result of not disclosing injuries earlier, SOF service members and SOF veterans stated that SOF are faced with the challenge of having to schedule multiple doctor's appointment, seek out specialists, schedule

surgeries, or take other actions to properly document all service-related injuries prior to separations. SOF service members explained that waiting until the end is a challenge because it can take months to schedule appointments and treatment.

Loss of SOF identity. According to SOF officials, the loss of the SOF identity post-separation, can be a particular concern for SOF service members. These officials stated that SOF service members may not recognize SOF identity loss as an issue until after they separate. We heard during two of the SOF service member discussion groups and from four veterans with whom we met that transitioning from military services requires an individual to focus on themselves, contradicting the mentality they held throughout their career which focused more on being a team player.

SOF specific transition benefits. SOF officials and service members stated that being part of the SOF community provides additional benefits when separating from the military beyond what non-SOF service members may receive. For example, SOF service members have exclusive access to SOF-specific transition programs and resources from SOCOM and at the component command and unit levels. From our discussion groups with active-duty SOF service members and interviews with SOF veterans, participants often told us that the Warrior Care Program was a great benefit to them. One SOF veteran told us that the Warrior Care Program was “hands down the best experience” in his transition.

DOD Does Not Endorse Private-Sector Organizations; SOF Service Members Utilize These Additional Resources

DOD Has Informal Relationships with the Private-Sector to Help SOF Service Members Transition to Civilian Life

DOD guidance prohibits the department and its personnel from explicitly endorsing private-sector organizations.³⁴ Consistent with this guidance, DOD, SOCOM, and its SOF service component commands informally coordinate and maintain relationships with private-sector organizations for the purposes of providing additional transition assistance services. TAP provides transition information from interagency partners and information on non-DOD resources for transition assistance, such as information about Veteran Service Organizations and the National Resource Directory, according to MCTO. TAP officials we met with stated that they do not have the capacity to adequately examine the thousands of private-sector organizations or their resources to determine if those private-sector organizations are truly able to meet the needs of separating service members. Both active-duty and veteran SOF service members we spoke with stated that TAP and other DOD programs do not discuss private-sector organizations, and these service members and veterans found out about private-sector organizations through their peer-to-peer networking or other informal channels.

Although DOD prohibits its personnel from explicitly endorsing private-sector organizations, DOD officials stated that they maintain relationships with some types of organizations to help transitioning service members. Examples include Veteran Service Organizations, which are non-governmental organizations that assist veterans with a range of services and are recognized by the Department of Veterans Affairs. Military

³⁴DOD Regulation 5500.07-R. *Joint Ethics Regulation*. However, DOD Instruction 1332.35 directs military department TAP personnel to encourage installation commanders to permit access to Veteran Service Organizations and military service organizations to transition assistance-related events and activities in accordance with DOD guidance.

installations also engage with state and local governments as well as local business organizations to provide any transitioning service member with networking opportunities, access to career fairs, or access to other career skills services. For example, we previously reported that installations developed relationships with the local government or private-sector employers to help connect service members with potential jobs in the local area, according to installation officials.³⁵ In addition, officials at Fort Liberty stated that they participate in local hiring events with over 100 employers to help separating service members find employment. Likewise, officials at MacDill Air Force Base, stated they also host hiring events and engage with area employers.

Additionally, the Warrior Care Program provides tailored resources and connections to both federal and non-federal entities for eligible (wounded, ill, or injured) SOF participating in the Warrior Care Program. The program evaluates and establishes its own memorandums of understanding with private-sector organizations for Warrior Care Program internship opportunities, according to Warrior Care Program officials.

SOF component commands have also taken steps to connect separating SOF service members with private-sector organizations, while not specifically endorsing any one organization. For example:

- USASOC's Transition Readiness Standard Operating Procedure (1) identifies resources that can escort each soldier through transition milestones leading up to their transition, predominately veteran support/benevolent organizations; (2) identifies that unit transition programs should enable soldiers' access to these resources no later than 12 months from their official transition date; and (3) notes that units should consult with local Staff Judge Advocate/ Judge Advocate General representatives to ensure communications are ethical and legal.³⁶
- The Naval Special Warfare Command's Readiness for SOF Transition (R4ST) program's transition website provides links to certain external private-sector organizations that provide additional transition assistance, but officials noted that these links do not constitute endorsement by Naval Special Warfare Command.

SOF Service Members Use Transition Assistance from Private-Sector Organizations on a Voluntary Basis

According to, SOCOM and SOF service component commands, SOF service members can and do leverage transition assistance resources provided by private-sector organizations. DOD officials stated that they do not track SOF service member participation with these organizations because they are external to DOD and because service member participation with these organizations is voluntary.

As stated above, DOD does not specifically endorse private-sector organizations and as such, DOD officials and SOF service members we spoke with explained that SOF personnel find out about private-sector organizations that provide additional transition assistance through peer-to-peer networking and word-of-mouth.

We identified over 40 different private-sector organizations that reported providing some type of transition assistance to separating SOF service members. Some of these organizations reported supporting any SOF

³⁵GAO, *Military Personnel: DOD's Transition Assistance Program at Small or Remote Installations*, [GAO-21-104608](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 21, 2021).

³⁶U.S. Army Special Operations Command, *Transition Requirements Standard Operating Procedure* (Apr. 2, 2023).

service members, regardless of military service. Other organizations we identified focused on helping a specific subset of SOF, such as Army Green Berets or Marine Raiders.

Of the organizations we identified, we selected 5 private-sector organizations to meet with to discuss the types of services they provide to transitioning SOF service members, the challenges they see SOF service members face during transition, and what transition needs or gaps they see their organization filling that DOD does not provide. These 5 organizations identified as non-profit 501(c)(3) organizations and were staffed by SOF veterans with a vision towards assisting their fellow SOF service members.

Private-sector organizations officials we spoke with stated that they provide an array of different transition assistance supports to separating SOF service members, including in-depth transition classes that go beyond the information provided by DOD's TAP. Private-sector organization officials also stated that they help with resume writing, networking, and interviewing skills, as well as help separating SOF service members understand medical benefits, and try to connect them with potential employers.

Officials with these private-sector organizations also identified several challenges SOF service members may face when they transition to civilian life. These include: 1) the loss of their military identity; 2) mental health challenges such as suicide; 3) understanding the health and medical benefits available to SOF veterans; and 4) help translating SOF skills and experiences into resumes.

Through our discussion groups with active-duty SOF service members and interviews with veterans, we found that most SOF service members we spoke with were engaging with at least one private-sector organization. For example, of the 21 interviews that we conducted with SOF veterans, 17 stated they engaged with private-sector organizations. These veterans stated that the private-sector organizations provided better resources, helped them network, and provided a more personalized experience. All four of the SOF veterans that we interviewed that did not participate with private-sector organizations, stated that they either were not interested or that they did not have enough time during their separation process.

Conclusions

SOCOM and the SOF service component commands, through the POTFF program, have articulated a need to continue to support SOF service members through their entire service lifecycle, including SOF service members' transition out of the military at the end of their career. SOCOM and the SOF service component commands provide additional, supplemental transition resources and programs unique to the SOF community, such as the Warrior Care Program. Unit-led programs are also being developed, and there is a vast array of external, private-sector organizations that are also available to assist SOF service members during this critical life and career transition.

However, despite these efforts, challenges exist for SOF service members as they transition out of military service. It is imperative that service members planning to leave military service start accessing transition programs on time to fully leverage existing resources and transition activities. Not doing so can result in transitions that are not aligned with the department's current policy goals and milestones. TAP is a mandatory and key program to assist service members with transition to post-military life. Yet, the lack of a comprehensive analysis may impede the SOF communities' ability to fully identify potential issues and address them. While we analyzed data by variables such as rank and tier level, a comprehensive analysis by DOD and the SOF service commands may be beneficial to identify variables that we did not analyze such as gender,

ethnicity, or specific occupational specialty. Without taking steps to analyze available data on transitioning SOF service member's participation in TAP and reporting those results and any associated corrective action plans to both SOCOM and the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (ASD SO/LIC), DOD may not have full visibility of potential challenges experienced by transitioning SOF service members. This may hamper military leaders from being able to develop appropriate corrective actions.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making the following five recommendations to DOD.

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command directs the Commander, U.S. Army Special Operations Command, in coordination with the Army, to analyze data on TAP and TAP participation annually, including relevant SOF characteristics such as specific occupational specialties, and develop corrective action plans if appropriate. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command directs the Commander, U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command, in coordination with the Navy, to analyze data on TAP and TAP participation annually, including relevant SOF characteristics such as specific occupational specialties, and develop corrective action plans if appropriate. (Recommendation 2)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command directs the Commander, US Marine Forces Special Operations Command, in coordination with the Marine Corps, to analyze data on TAP and TAP participation annually, including relevant SOF characteristics such as specific occupational specialties, and develop corrective action plans if appropriate. (Recommendation 3)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command directs the Commander, U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command, in coordination with the Air Force, to analyze data on TAP and TAP participation annually, including relevant SOF characteristics such as specific occupational specialties, and develop corrective action plans if appropriate. (Recommendation 4)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command collects and submits to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (ASD SO/LIC), annually, a report on TAP data and any corrective action plans and any other transition activities identified by the SOF component commands. (Recommendation 5)

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to DOD for review and comment. In its written comments, reproduced in appendix II, DOD concurred with our recommendations. DOD also provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees and the Secretary of Defense. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

Letter

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (404) 679-1893 or Williamsk@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix III.



Kristy Williams
Director
Defense Capabilities and Management

Appendix I: U.S. Special Operations Command Identified Career Fields for Special Operations Forces

To identify Special Operations Forces (SOF) service members for the purposes of our data analysis and for our discussion groups and structured interviews with veterans, we discussed with officials from U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) which military occupations for each SOF service component command it considered to be SOF.

SOCOM identified the following military occupations by SOF Service Component Command as SOF service members. Table 2's list excludes any other personnel who may be in a SOF unit but provides support:

Table 2: U.S. Special Operations Command Identified Occupational Specialties by Special Operations Forces Service Component Command.

Service Component Command	Officer	Enlisted
U.S. Army Special Operations Command	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11A (V) – Ranger Officer • 15A/B (K4) – Special Operations Pilot • 18A – Special Forces (SF) Officer • 180A – Special Forces Warrant Officer (WO) • 37A – Psychological Operations Officer • 38A – Civil Affairs Officer • 152C (K4) – WO Pilot (OH-6) • 153E (K4) – WO Pilot (MH-60) • 154E (K4) – WO Pilot (MH-47) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11x (V) • 18B - SF Weapons Sergeant (Sgt) • 18C – SF Engineer Sgt • 18D – SF Medical Sgt • 18E – SF Command Sgt • 18F – SF Intelligence Sgt • 18Z – SF Senior Sgt • 37F – Psychological Operations Enlisted • 38B – Civil Affairs Enlisted
U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 113x – SEAL Officer • 715x – SEAL WO • 717x – SWCC W 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SO – SEAL Enlisted • SB – SWCC Enlisted
U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command	0370 – Special Operations Officer (SOO)	0372 – Critical Skills Ops (CSO)
U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11SX – Special Operations Pilot • 11UX – Remotely Piloted Aircraft (RPA) Pilot • 12SX – Special Operations Navigator / Combat Systems Operator • 12UX – RPA Pilot • J15WX –Special Operations Weather Officer • 18SX – RPA Pilot • 19ZXX – Special Warfare Office 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1A1X1 – Flight Engineer • 1A2X1 – Aircraft Loadmaster • 1A3X1 – Airborne Mission Systems • 1A9X1 – Special Missions Aviation • 1U0X1 – RPA Sensor Operator • 1Z1X1 – Pararescue • 1Z2X1 – Combat Control • 1Z3X1 – Tactical Air Control Party • 1Z4X1 – Special Reconnaissance

Source: U.S. Special Operations Command. | GAO-24-106587

Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Defense



SPECIAL OPERATIONS /
LOW INTENSITY CONFLICT

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
2500 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-2500

Ms. Kristy Williams
Director, Defense Capabilities and Management
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington DC 20548

Dear Ms. Williams,

This is the Department of Defense response to the GAO Draft Report, GAO-24-106587, "TRANSITION TO CIVILIAN LIFE: Additional Data Analysis and Reporting Would Improve Special Operations Forces Experiences," dated August 2, 2024 (GAO Code 106587).

My point of contact is Dr. Yuko K. Whitestone. She may be reached at 703-614-4701 or via email at yuko.k.whitestone.civ@mail.mil.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Erin M. Logan".

Erin M. Logan
Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for
Special Operations Policy and Programs

Enclosure:
The DoD response to the GAO Draft Report, GAO-24-106587, 'TRANSITION TO CIVILIAN LIFE: Additional Data Analysis and Reporting Would Improve Special Operations Forces Experiences.'

**GAO DRAFT REPORT DATED AUGUST 2, 2024
GAO-24-106587 (GAO CODE 106587)**

**“TRANSITION TO CIVILIAN LIFE: ADDITIONAL DATA ANALYSIS AND
REPORTING WOULD IMPROVE SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES EXPERIENCES”**

**DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS
TO THE GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE RECOMMENDATION**

RECOMMENDATION 1: *The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command directs the Commander, U.S. Army Special Operations Command, in coordination with the Army, to analyze data on TAP and TAP participation annually, including relevant SOF characteristics such as specific occupational specialties, and develop corrective action plans if appropriate.*

DoD RESPONSE: Concur.

RECOMMENDATION 2: *The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command directs the Commander, U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command, in coordination with the Navy, to analyze data on TAP and TAP participation annually, including relevant SOF characteristics such as specific occupational specialties, and develop corrective action plans if appropriate.*

DoD RESPONSE: Concur.

RECOMMENDATION 3: *The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command directs the Commander, U.S. Marine Forces Special Operations Command, in coordination with the Marine Corps, to analyze data on TAP and TAP participation annually, including relevant SOF characteristics such as specific occupational specialties, and develop corrective action plans if appropriate.*

DoD RESPONSE: Concur.

RECOMMENDATION 4: *The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command directs the Commander, U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command, in coordination with the Air Force, to analyze data on TAP and TAP participation annually, including relevant SOF characteristics such as specific occupational specialties, and develop corrective action plans if appropriate.*

DoD RESPONSE: Concur.

RECOMMENDATION 5: *The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command collects and submits to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (ASD SO/LIC), annually, a report on TAP data and any corrective action plans and any other transition activities identified by the SOF component commands.*

DoD RESPONSE: Concur.

Accessible Text for Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Defense

Ms. Kristy Williams
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U.S. Government Accountability Office
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Washington DC 20548

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Sincerely,

Erin M. Logan
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DoD RESPONSE: Concur.

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DoD RESPONSE: Concur.

Appendix III: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Kristy Williams (404) 679-1893 or williamsk@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Vincent Balloon (Assistant Director), James Krustapentus (Analyst-in-Charge), Tracy Barnes, Arturo Barrera, Brenda S. Farrell, Suellen Foth, Amie Lesser, Grant Mallie, Kyle O'Brien, Patricia Powell, Clarice Ransom, Paul Schearf, and Kiley Wilson made key contributions to this report.

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