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The Origin of Wildfire by MARYANNE MOLL

The onset of 1993 saw the formal activation of the Special Operations Battalion of the Special Action Force. Manned by 45 commissioned officers and 428 non-commissioned officers to effectively manage seven different companies, the battalion was tasked to combat the sudden rise of sophisticated criminal activities in the country. Aside from the headquarters and Service companies, there was the Anti-Terrorist Company, The Rapid Search and Rescue Company, the K9 Company, the Explosives and Ordnance Company, and the Light Armor Company. Also a training battalion, the SOB, based in Metro Manila, was capable of operation nationwide. It was placed under the leadership of then Chief Inspector Felizardo M. Serapio, Jr.

The creation of the SOB came in the wake of the series of eight coup-de-etats staged between 1986 to 1989 by oppositionists during the administration of then President Corazon Aquino. The SAF then was primarily an anti-coup force, effectively containing the rebel forces until the unrest is abated, and clearing the coup areas before the country could return safely to normal. Upon the assumption of Fidel Ramos as President in 1992, threats, although largely subdued, were still present. The SAF Troopers were feeling restless for activity, so trainings were intensified, and the courses were done in Batangas.

The Anti-Terrorism Unit of the SOB was trained for land, sea, and air operation. Highly skilled, its strength and capability was put to the test when just a month after the SOB was activated, the ATU Company successfully assisted Task Force Habagat of the Presidential Anti-Crime Commission in neutralizing a particularly vicious group of terrorists in San fernando, Pampanga. In April, a seaborne operation was conducted for the Bureau of Customs which resulted in the successful freeing of the cargo vessel Star Ace from the possession of hostile goons. Certain hostage situations also called for the expertise of the ATU Company, such as in Batangas when the PACC again solicited the help of the ATU to resolve a hostage drama, and in Sta. Mesa, where ex-military men were apprehended.



Upon its activation, the SOB had a six-year developmental plan. There began the trainings for underwater demolition, seacraft assault, and light armor courses. Equipment buildup in armaments, communication, and protective and rescue paraphernalias were acquired, pursuant to its needs. The series of successes of the SOB proved that it was worthy of its image as the elite unit of the SAF. It was given vehicles, equipment, and lived in the force headquarters in Metro Manila, whereas the troopers of the other battalions were deployed all over the country. A guarded competition among the battalions ensued, basically questioning why there had to be an elite battalion within an already elite force. After a series of renamings – From Special Operations Battalion, to First Battalion, to Special Recon Battalion, then back to First Battalion – the SOB still survives now as the Rapid Deployment Battalion.

The RDB's setup is still the same as that of the SOB from 1993, but with a more evolved combination of companies. Nicknamed "Wildfire," the RDB is faster that ever. The K9 continues

to provide support with well-trained police working dogs for tracking, explosives detection, narcotics detection, and guarding. The Explosives and Ordnance Division and the Light Armor units remain with the same tasks but with higher capability and responsibility. Now expert snipers make up the Extended Range Support Unit, expanding the power of the RDB. The RASER is now the DEER, or the Seaborne and Mountain Platoons. The ATU is now the Crisis Response Group, specially trained for unconventional warfare and handling of emergencies in the urban setting.

Thirteen years after its activation, the spirit and mission of the SOB is still alive. The wildfire now burns brighter and spreads even faster, with the advent of new technology and improved trainings, and backed by a history of constant success. And its very first Battalion Commander has also returned to the SAF as its fifteenth Commander.