



Joint

SOF

Integration

SDO, Bogotá

by Charles H. Briscoe

U.S. Army Special Forces (SF) normally deploy Operational Detachment Bravo (ODB) headquarters to provide leadership and staffing for joint security assistance (SA) missions overseas. This article explains how the Special Operations Command South (SOCSOUTH) Forward (SOC-FWD) element in Colombia was 'nested' with the Senior Defense Officer (SDO) to reinforce the "one Department of Defense (DoD) voice" in the Bogotá Embassy.¹ Overlook the 'title changing' that has accompanied the theater special operations command (TSOC) practice of 'pushing' forward command and control (C2) elements into advanced regional locations.

It focuses on the ODB reorganization into a 'mini' Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF) in the spring of 2018 as mentioned in the preceding article, "Who's in charge down here?" The SA and counter narcotics (CN) training missions in Colombia have rotated between the 7th SF Group (SFG) and the Florida Army National Guard (ANG) 20th SFG for many years. This presentation will reveal how the mission command architecture was innovatively optimized for effectiveness, efficiency, and interoperability while making interdependence a key operating principle.²

As part of their pre-deployment site survey (PDSS), the A Company commander, 1st Battalion, 20th SFG, Major (MAJ) Ned T. Yardley*, an older direct commission ANG officer, met with the SOCSOUTH commander, Rear Admiral (RDML) Collin P. Green, at Homestead Air Force Reserve Base, Florida. Two things came out of their discussions: the authority of the SOC-FWD had been expanded to cover the Southern Cone countries (Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay) as well as those of the Andean Ridge (Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia); and the rear admiral wanted the Navy Sea-Air-Land (SEAL) officer to serve as the deputy. "Since the SOC-FWD in Colombia was his premier element, RDML Green felt that a SEAL serving as the

Rear Admiral Collin P. Green, Special Operations Command, South (SOCSOUTH) Commander. Below is the SOCSOUTH SSI.



deputy would be a joint SOF professional development opportunity and support better integration," said MAJ Yardley*. "After all, SF officers have to be flexible. It gave me something to think about on my flight to Bogotá."³

In Colombia, the 20th SFG major was met at the airport by the U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) Special Operations Liaison Officer (SOLO), SF Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Kenneth S. 'Scott' Morley, who provided a situation report (SITREP), orientation, and schedule of events. MAJ Jonathan W. Mendez*, B Company commander, 3rd Battalion, 7th SFG, current SOC-FWD commander, briefed him on current missions in the Southern Cone-Andean Ridge (SCAR) countries before the Civil Affairs (CA) and Psychological Operations (PSYOP) leadership explained their Colombian Military (COLMIL) engagements. "This was done in the cramped, narrow linear office space within the embassy, euphemistically called the 'bowling alley.' The 'tribal' separations were readily apparent," commented MAJ Yardley*. "I soon learned that this was not lost on the Senior Defense Official (SDO)."⁴

Field Artillery (FA) Colonel (COL) Robert A. Wagner, West Point '90, established the SDO/Defense Attaché concept for U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) in El Salvador, before his reassignment to Colombia in 2016 to do the same.⁵ His SOLO in San Salvador, now LTC Scott Morley, chose to accompany him.⁶ The two worked together to unify the DoD position in the embassy, in a country whose wartime government had ended the



20th Special Forces Group
Flash with DUI



7th Special Forces Group
Flash with DUI

thirteen year guerrilla war with *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN)* in 1992, only to lose political power in 2009. The two U.S. Army officers came to Colombia in the midst of peace negotiations between the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC)* and *Ejército de Liberación (ELN)* insurgencies which they had been fighting for more than sixty years. It was vitally important that the DoD personnel in Bogotá “speak with one voice and become fully integrated with the embassy departments and supporting agencies, as well as the COLMIL at all levels—tactical to operational to strategic,” stated COL Wagner.⁷

“I got my ‘marching orders’ from COL Wagner. I was to build synergy, integrate with the Country Team and its interagency partners, and flatten communications in the SOC-FWD. How COL Wagner was reorganizing, and why, were spelled out in his *Department of Defense (Team DoD–Colombia) Marching Orders*, the *Team DoD Integration Standard Operating Procedures (SOP)*, a very specific individual *Task Orders* for all assigned, and definitions of problems or threats,” said MAJ Yardley*. “I was to come back ready to fully integrate the SOC-FWD with the SDO. The *Task Orders* left no doubt on interface. There would be no ‘tribalism’ in the SOC-FWD. Functional staff ‘holes’ in logistics and personnel plus additional radios to cover the ‘out stations,’ would have to be filled by Group [20th SFG],” explained MAJ Yardley*.⁸ With very specific ‘marching orders’ for Colombia, he could focus on cultural immersion in a jungle environment during pre-mission training (PMT).

Thirty days at Fort Buchanan, Puerto Rico, was PMT ‘on the cheap.’ Air National Guard flights to and from San Juan, a transient barracks, and locally supplemented MREs (meals-ready-to eat) were sufficient. A day visit to *El Junque* rain forest had to suffice for a jungle orientation. Having worked overseas on JSOTF staffs in Afghanistan and Iraq, the SF Guardsmen used those experiences to adapt those capabilities and practices for the Colombia mission. The thirty days in Puerto Rico was sufficient to restore some thinking in Spanish to improve individual confidence in language skills.⁹

The relief-in-place (RIP) between the 7th SFG and the 20th SFG companies in Colombia was somewhat different. The National Guard SF personnel with equipment flew into Tolemaida on U.S. Air Force ‘rotator’ C-130 *Hercules* transport aircraft over several days. Radios from 7th SFG remained at the outstations until the 20th SFG communications package arrived. Half of the Operational Detachment Alphas (ODAs) in A Company were commanded by warrant officers. “Recruiting and retaining commissioned Guard officers in SF is difficult,” said Yardley*.¹⁰

While the SOC-FWD commander had a wealth of interagency talent in his SF unit, the paucity of commissioned officers prompted him to assess the CA and PSYOP leadership to fill key staff. Compiling the unique

team in the ‘mini’ JSOTF arrangement would ensure unity of effort and prevent tribalism. MAJ Yardley* drew on his experience as an executive management ‘head hunter’ in Dallas and Memphis.¹¹ The SF commander knew that the position requiring the most military experience was the operations officer and the CA leader had the most.

The five CA teams in Colombia were led by a former Combat Cameraman with service in the Balkans and with the 3rd and 20th SFGs. Commissioned into the Infantry after Officer Candidate School in 2005, MAJ David J. Masterson* had been an airborne rifle platoon leader (C Company, 2nd Battalion, 325th Infantry Regiment) in Iraq with the 82nd Airborne Division. Since volunteering for CA in 2007, Masterson* had been a CA Team Leader in Peru, the Executive Officer for the Caribbean AOB (Distributed Command and Control [DC2]), and had served in the 81st CA Battalion, which supported the Conventional Army. In June 2017, MAJ Masterson* took command of C Company, 98th CA Battalion. He had first worked with 20th SFG in 2000 as a Combat Cameraman.¹²

“MAJ Yardley* told me he wasn’t looking for a ‘good idea fairy’—nothing creative or magical. Focusing ‘inside the box,’ I was to figure out how to do things better, more efficiently, and make the best use of our functional capabilities. Doctrinally, while the SOC-FWD was not a JSOTF, we would operate like one. And, nobody turns down a good operations job,” commented MAJ Masterson*. “Yardley* was very astute. My assistant would be the PSYOP Team Leader.”¹³



West Point Football player, Field Artillery COL Robert A. Wagner, used his El Salvador SDO/DATT experience to best ‘shape’ that concept in Colombia. The U.S. Military Academy football team is called the Black Knights.



Captain (CPT) Charles D. Parson*, B Company, 1st PSYOP Battalion (POB), a 2010 graduate of Vanderbilt University's Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program, had gone to Air Assault and Airborne Schools as a scholarship cadet. As a Second Lieutenant (2LT) Parson* had been a 155mm towed gun battery platoon leader, a fire direction officer (FDO), and an Assistant S-3 in the 4th Battalion, 27th Field Artillery, 2nd Brigade, 1st Armored Division before assignment to 1st Battalion, 6th Infantry as a Fire Support Officer (FSO). His father had been the FSO for the 1st Squadron, 8th Cavalry in Vietnam. Six months of temporary duty (TDY) at Joint Task Force (JTF) Bravo in Honduras (coordinating command, control, and logistics for Medical Capability [MEDCAP] events) convinced then First Lieutenant (1LT) Parson* to volunteer for PSYOP in 2015.¹⁴

"MAJ Yardley* wanted fusion across the board. I had been in S-3 operations in the U.S. and Honduras, so it was a natural fit. The PSYOP team had very experienced, Spanish speaking NCOs (Non-Commissioned Officers) with multiple Latin American tours. My question was: 'Why had we not done this before in Colombia?' I ended up writing the weekly SOC-FWD Situation Report (SITREP) going to SOCSOUTH. It was reviewed by MAJ Masterson* before being approved by MAJ Yardley*. By May 2018, it was being read closely by RDML Green at Homestead. He was pleased with the joint unity of effort, ease of understanding, and messaged us to that effect in Bogotá. That's when we knew that we were doing what he and COL Wagner had wanted in the embassy—a seamless DoD team," reflected CPT Parson*. "That wasn't

true in the outstations. The PSYOP Support Element (PSE) North got it best. Peru got close by the time we rotated, but the others could not/would not 'break the tribal rice bowls.'"¹⁵ MAJ Yardley* also wanted intelligence-operations staff fusion ('ying & yang') to better integrate with interagency representatives on the country team.¹⁶

The best qualified candidate for SOC-FWD S-2 happened to be a warrant officer field artillery targeting technician [Military Occupation Specialty (MOS) 131A] assigned to the 98th CAB. The Colombian-born Spanish speaker, Chief Warrant Officer Three (CW3) Hector Asunción*, a graduate of the Colombian Army (COLAR) Sergeants School, had been deployed to Colombia to assist MAJ Masterson*. As the S-2, CW3 Asunción* quickly adjusted his targeting skills to address the human terrain audience, 'refugees' from Venezuela transiting Colombia bound for the United States via Central America, the Caribbean, and Mexico.¹⁷ Mixed into this 'river of humanity' were 'floaters'—nefarious individuals (drug 'mules' [carriers], smugglers, human traffickers, and possible terrorists) who merited questioning by Colombian authorities.¹⁸

Having an SF intelligence sergeant (MOS 18F) as his senior Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO), CW3 Asunción* was supported in multi-purposing CA and PSYOP detachments afield. They could capitalize on audience assessment and leadership identification skills. 'Observations and findings' from field sites near transit routes were shared with interagency representatives at weekly meetings. These efforts promoted a more viable "Rewards for Justice" program.¹⁹

U.S. Embassy in Bogotá



So, what are the **'TAKEAWAYS'** from this mission?

- » Reorganizing the Special Forces ODB into a mini-JSOTF is good practice and facilitates 'Joint-ness' and a one ARSOF team mentality.
- » ARSOF officers are resilient, innovative problem solvers who thrive on challenges.
- » Attachments can 'shore up' personnel shortages and fill critical staff posts if the SF commander knows what they 'bring to the table'; think ARSOF team, capitalize on talent, and consolidate 'tribal' reports into one.
- » Supporting means truly integrated/'nested' with the supported office, unit, command.
- » 'One face' professionalism betters the Force, the Army, and the Joint Commands.

Mexican-born Sergeant First Class (SFC) Alejandro Fuentes*, the PSYOP detachment senior NCO was a former Marine with three tours in Afghanistan. He had provided PSYOP support to Marine Special Operations Forces, foreign internal defense in Herat, and print development and products to twenty-nine teams across that country. SFC Fuentes* quickly realized that paying rewards for information on abandoned jungle drug processing sites, a long standing practice, was a waste of time and money. After querying Colombian police units and U.S. interagency elements, he suggested major changes. A better return on investment would be paying for information about threats to Americans, Colombian authorities, and non-government organizations (NGOs), locations of *FARC* and *ELN* weapons caches, and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in areas suitable for helicopter landings. The change addressed counter terrorism (CT) and CN. The accumulation of weapon serial numbers facilitated source tracking which all law enforcement elements appreciated.²⁰ SOC-FWD successes were noticed.

Weekly SITREPs quickly revealed that the SOC-FWD was fully 'nested' with the SDO in Bogotá. RDML Green expressed his satisfaction with "one DoD team voice" and praised the clarity of descriptive reports that facilitated understanding on what was being accomplished by the joint service team. The junior SEAL officer performing as the Deputy, SOC-FWD, was having his joint experience broadened by serving in an efficient and effective mini-JSOTF environment. The SOF elements were happy with how they were being portrayed in the collective report that was getting serious attention at Homestead Air Reserve Base in Florida.²¹ The SOC-FWD performance under MAJ Yardley's* leadership and tutelage represented true professionalism from the entire SOF team. 📌

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Charles H. Briscoe has been the USASOC Command Historian since 2000. A graduate of The Citadel, this retired Army special operations officer earned his PhD from the University of South Carolina. Current research interests include Army special operations in Latin America, the Congo, and the Lodge Act.

Endnotes

- 1 COL Robert A. Wagner, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 2 November 2017, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by name and date.
- 2 *The U.S. Army Strategy*, October 2018; Army G-3/5/7, *Force Structure Path to Army 2028*, November 2018.
- 3 MAJ Ned T. Yardley*, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe and Daniel J. Kulich, 1 August 2018, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by name and date.
- 4 Yardley* interview, 1 August 2018.
- 5 Wagner interview, 2 November 2017; Department of Defense Directive (DoDD) Number 5205.75, "SUBJECT: DoD Operations at U.S. Embassies," dated 4 December 2013, hereafter cited as DoDD No. 5205.75.
- 6 LTC Kenneth S. 'Scott' Morley, interview by Briscoe and Kulich, 27 October 2017, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by name and date; U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) Memorandum, SUBJECT: Codifying Relationships for Special Operations Liaison Officers dated 3 May 2013; COL Paul J. Schmitt, "Special Operations Liaison Officers: (SOLO) or Team Effort?" (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategy Research Project, March 2013), 11.
- 7 Wagner interview, 2 November 2017.
- 8 Yardley* interview, 1 August 2018.
- 9 Yardley* interview, 1 August 2018.
- 10 Yardley* interview, 1 August 2018.
- 11 Yardley* interview, 1 August 2018.
- 12 MAJ David J. Masterson* interview by Briscoe and Kulich, 12 June 2018, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by name and date.
- 13 Masterson* interview, 12 June 2018.
- 14 CPT Charles D. Parson*, interviews by Briscoe and Kulich, 16 August and 19 September 2018, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by name and date.
- 15 Parson* interviews, 16 August and 19 September 2018.
- 16 Yardley* interview, 15 November 2018.
- 17 Masterson* interview, 15 November 2018.
- 18 Parson* interview, 19 September 2018.
- 19 SFC Alex Fuentes*, B Company, 1st POB, interview by Briscoe, 12 June 2018, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by name and date; Parson* interview, 16 August and 19 September 2018; Masterson* interview, 12 June 2018,
- 20 Fuentes* interview 12 June 2018.
- 21 Retired LTC Daniel J. Kulich, USASOC Sensitive Activities Historical Collection (SAHC), interview by Briscoe, 16 May 2018, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by name and date; Yardley* interview, 1 August and 15 November 2018.