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TOTAL IMMERSION

Language, Culture, and the Colombian Military

by Jared M. Tracy and Charles H. Briscoe

Extract — Total cultural immersion must be anticipated if U.S. soldiers are to fully benefit from a foreign military course, as evidenced by two U.S. Army Psychological Operations (PSYOP) soldiers attending a recent Colombian PSYOP course. Total immersion has three inextricable links: language nuances (country and region); national culture; and military culture. Pre-Mission Training (PMT) must address these aspects to capitalize on the advantages of placement. PMT-focused, operationally experienced PSYOP veterans ought to attend partner nation courses. Or, send an experienced PSYOP/Civil Affairs (CA)/Information Operations (IO) officer/sergeant to advise and assist as an exchange professional.

Two 1st Psychological Operations (PSYOP) Battalion (POB), 8th PSYOP Group (POG) soldiers, an officer and non-commissioned officer (NCO), graduated from the eleven-week Colombian Army (COLAR) 'Military Sensitization Missions' [*Misiones de Sensibilización Militar (MISEM)*] course on 3 July 2018.¹ Captain (CPT) James P. Bronson* and Sergeant (SGT) Ross J. Roberson*, having recently completed the PSYOP Officer and NCO Courses at Fort Bragg, NC, were diverted from the Military Information Support Team (MIST) with the Special Operations Command, South (SOCSOUTH) Forward (SOC-FWD) Andean Ridge (AR) in Bogotá, Colombia. They were enrolled as students to evaluate and assess COLAR alignment with current U.S. PSYOP doctrine.² To do this they had to fully understand the missions and activities of *Acción Integral y Desarrollo* [Integral Action & Development (AID)]. The COLAR combined PSYOP, Civil Affairs (CA), and Public Affairs Office (PAO) functions to improve relations between the government and citizens during the national transition to peace after almost sixty years of insurgent war.³

The experiences of the two American soldiers selected to attend this basic AID course will reveal the criticality of pre-mission training (PMT) before starting a foreign course. Total immersion entailed quickly learning Colombian Spanish language nuances, adjusting to its national culture, flexibility with COLAR training idiosyncrasies and living in their military school environment. Though good Spanish speakers according to U.S. military standards, each spoke versions unique to their learning locale and native country of the instructor. The challenges associated with understanding Colombian idiomatic phrases and meanings of words were compounded by the COLAR technical military vocabulary.⁴

They had to develop that understanding quickly to avoid offending instructors and fellow students, or embarrassing themselves. SGT Roberson* grew up in Arizona with Mexican Spanish, and learned Chilean Spanish as a Mormon missionary.⁵ CPT Bronson's* four years of high school Spanish in Colorado were improved by Spanish taken in the PSYOP Officer Course. PMT for Roberson* focused on his initial MIST assignment to Peru and the *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining



SGT Ross J. Roberson* and CPT James P. Bronson*, B Company, 1st POB, 8th POG, attended the COLAR PSYOP Course from April to July 2018.



Escuela de Misiones Internacionales y Acción Integral (ESMAI) coin with PSYOP emblem on reverse, presented to CPT James P. Bronson*

Path) insurgency in that country. Bronson* received no PMT, having just graduated from the PSYOP Officer Course. Total immersion was “on-the-job training (OJT) with a fire hose,” commented CPT Bronson*, a U.S. Air Force Academy graduate who learned Mandarin Chinese as a cadet.⁶ Their assignments in Colombia were changed to accommodate a ‘spur-of-the-moment’ AID class invitation, a significant, short notice honor. However, short notice compromised administrative coordination by the MIST which, in turn, led to a rough few weeks at the beginning.⁷ For the two U.S. military students, the pressure of the total immersion “fire hose”



A statue on the COLAR School of International Missions and Integral Action (*Escuela de Misiones Internacionales y Acción Integral [ESMAI]*) campus, where CPT Bronson* and SGT Roberson* attended the PSYOP Course. The symbol on top bears close resemblance to the U.S. Army PSYOP Branch Insignia (above right).

increased significantly with having to learn military terminology while adapting to daily life in a COLAR school environment.⁸

Their first course formation was enlightening. CPT Bronson* was in the officer class and Roberson* was in the second of two NCO classes. The curriculum for officers and NCOs was the same, which helped the co-billed Americans, but there were no course books. At the first 0630 hours inspection, tactical officers cited the two of them for not having the 'required' *antigoles* (penalty) package and not wearing black socks. Both men were quite bewildered until an *antigoles* packet was produced by a COLAR student and explained. It was a plastic bag that contained a comb, toothbrush, nail clippers, small notebook, pen, and pencil. Black socks were COLAR regulation wear.⁹ There were more 'surprises' to come.

Students await the Friday dress uniform inspection outside of the *ESMAI*.



Each day something physical was inspected—ranging from finger nails, haircuts, and toe nails and foot condition to uniform fit, trouser lengths, and headgear cleanliness. Regularly baffled by the morning inspection ‘craziness,’ the Americans did not understand the purpose or rationale for what was being inspected.¹⁰ They later learned that the inspections reinforced what COLAR officers and NCOs were expected to do as leaders and professionals in a conscript military. They were responsible for taking care of the conscript soldier in an Army that was in a constant state of reconstitution, every six months during peace, and annually in wartime.¹¹

Eighty-five percent of the COLAR were conscripts from the lower class; rural peasants (*campesinos*) and people from the city tenements (*barrios*). The only volunteers were officers, draft-eligible citizens who paid to attend the Colombian Military (COLMIL) Sergeant School, and those draftees who chose to remain as professional soldiers (*profesionales*) following their mandatory service.¹² The ‘fire hose’ of total immersion was mitigated after two weeks when a COLAR ‘sponsor’ was assigned to assist them with language and cultural differences. Because the PSYOP MIST was fully engaged at the embassy, it

was another several weeks before *per diem* costs—meals, Colombian cell phone, COLAR identification cards, and travel—were arranged. MIST liaison visits had to be done after classes because, following the morning inspection, the three groups (about 80 personnel) were marched directly to class which started at 0700 hours... without breakfast.¹³

Meals and physical training (PT) brought more surprises. Most of the lunch hour was spent standing in line at the school cafeteria for a tortilla smeared with refried beans. Supper was usually purchased ‘out of pocket’ at the local Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC)—equivalent outside the *cuartel* (military base). During the first week, CPT Bronson* and SGT Roberson* went hungry all day until peanut butter and crackers became the breakfast and lunch staple. After the initial PT test, that element got little emphasis despite being scheduled three times a week in the afternoons. So much for getting rid of total immersion stress with regular exercise. As they adjusted to the school environment and their understanding improved, the two Americans realized that PSYOP constituted less than fifty percent of this initial course.¹⁴

Blending their Civil-Military Relations course with PSYOP and public affairs to create *AID* was deliberate.¹⁵ Why did the COLAR get assigned this vital national postwar mission? The institution most trusted and respected by *Colombianos* is the COLAR, not the Catholic Church, nor the elected national government. Considered the most objective and reliable, official COLAR histories are ‘materials of choice’ in grammar and high schools (*colegios*) and universities.¹⁶ Unaware of how big an impact the COLAR had on Colombian culture, and its postwar mission of improving relations between the public and national government, CPT Bronson* and SGT Roberson* could not appreciate the purpose behind morning inspection rituals and the heavy non-PSYOP periods of instruction.¹⁷



The Colombian flag, National Anthem, and emblem are prominently displayed as a conspicuous reminder of COLAR national focus.



Community engagement was a critical aspect of the PSYOP Course, as the COLAR ‘bridged the gap’ between the Colombian government and the people.



CPT Bronson* makes a presentation in a typical classroom environment at the PSYOP Course.



MISEM students participate in the culminating exercise, the *jornada*, at a local *barrio*.

Responsibility and image were vital elements of professionalism. Their importance was ingrained in all schools' curricula. Daily inspections, creed recitations, demonstrated knowledge of national government and military organization, and the singing of the national anthem before classes were integral to building the COLAR image.¹⁸ "It may not seem significant, but when the Colombian public sees that all soldiers know the words of the national anthem and are proud to sing it in public, that garners respect and sends a message," said a Special Operations Liaison Officer (SOLO) escorting a general and three field grade officers to MacDill Air Force Base, Tampa, Florida, for an international

professional development presentation. "You saw that all four were proudly singing their national anthem at the closing ceremony."¹⁹ School attendance provides another opportunity to remind and reinforce what is expected of COLAR officers and NCOs. Even demeaning tasks serve to refocus 'temporary' students.²⁰

"Though *el aseo* (the equivalent of police call and grounds maintenance) was a regular pain for everyone, sergeant and officer students worked together. We quickly found that 'litter bugs' were not common in the COLAR—much different from Fort Bragg," said SGT Roberson*. "Attending classes and studying without a book was a challenge for us. A female government civilian was writing

Acción Integral doctrine while we attended class, and we were called in to provide comments and suggestions.”²¹

Despite the lack of *AID* manuals, COLAR instructors liked to use technology. “They posted notices, class changes, and assignments via cell phone applications (apps). Our class leader sent cell phone pictures to the cadre to show that we were working during ‘aseo’ time. Since this method was expensive with our U.S. cell phones, the MIST provided us a Colombian phone to reduce the personal financial burden,” commented SGT Roberson*. “The lack of a textbook forced us to share class notes since we were getting sixty-five percent of what was presented in class.”²² As the COLAR students began to plan the culminating field exercise, their *jornada* in a Bogotá *barrio*, the two American PSYOP soldiers realized that the headquarters approval of the physical site started the reverse planning.

“Instead of the *jornada* being designed to influence audience behavior afterwards and analytics used to measure success, students planned a *barrio* entertainment event,” commented CPT Bronson*. “While the COLAR students knew their audience, the reason for PSYOP and CA activities was lost. There was nothing lasting behind the *jornada*, and the project misled the *AID* soldier aspirants, creating misunderstanding for the officers. Our PSYOP doctrine focuses on external audiences, but our tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) can apply to an internal audience,” if those authorities existed.²³ Regardless, all student groups had to perform their *jornadas*.

“What it devolved into was ‘party planning,’” added SGT Roberson*. “In my NCO group *jornada*, I performed as one of the clowns who entertained the kids with simple tricks. I put on grease paint, a wig, and rented costume. Colored pencils, school tablets, and coloring books with *AID* logos were passed out along with candy. The parents,



COL César Alberto Karán Benítez, *ESMAI* Commandant, discussed doctrinal revisions with CPT Bronson*, then attending the *MISEM*.

primarily mothers and grandmothers because the men were working, enjoyed seeing the children laughing and happy. How ‘happy’ we made those *barrio* kids during party hour was how success was measured. Lasting or long term effects were ‘not in the books.’”²⁴

Though the absence of post-*jornada* evaluation was politely explained to COLAR students and instructors by the two Americans, it did not resonate until discussed with the school commandant, Colonel (COL) César Alberto Karán Benítez, and his *AID* doctrine writer. “We had a very good exchange,” explained CPT Bronson*. As graduates of the first COLAR course that was developed ‘live,’ the Americans admitted that it was a tough learning experience, but worth the effort.²⁵ COL Karán commented: “We did things that we thought were fine, but when we saw how [the U.S.] did them, we realized we could improve the process significantly. The same happened to them.”²⁶ In reality, total immersion proved tougher than it sounded. While CPT Bronson* and SGT Roberson* ‘survived’ Colombia and COLAR total immersion, and graduated from the course, it could have been more fulfilling for both parties.

The following ‘takeaways’ came from the soldiers’ attendance at the *MISEM*:

[TAKEAWAYS]

- » U.S. PSYOP and CA are limited to external use; COLAR *AID* is internal-oriented.²⁷
- » Field experienced, bilingual U.S. PSYOP veterans ‘officially licensed by COLAR’ as course evaluators/students can help instructors prepare ‘task, condition, standard’ lessons as well as develop course curricula specifically for Colombia.²⁸
- » Total cultural immersion is very intense; PMT and coordination of administrative details will reduce personal stress on students in foreign training courses.²⁹

POST SCRIPT

U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) endorsed the recommendation by CPT Bronson* and SGT Roberson* to create an Information Operations (IO) exchange officer position for Colombia. ▲

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Endnotes

- 1 B Company, 1st Psychological Operations Battalion (POB), 8th Psychological Operations Group (POG), After Action Report (undated): 1B10, ESMAL, Bogotá, Colombia, 13 April – 3 July 2018, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited as B/1/8 POG AAR; Myriam Ortega, “U.S. Service Members Train in Colombia,” *Dialogo: Digital Military Magazine* (10 August 2018), <https://dialogo-americas.com/en/articles/us-service-members-train-colombia>.
- 2 CPT James P. Bronson*, interview by Charles H. Briscoe, 31 October 2018, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by name and date; CPT Charles D. Parson*, SFC Alex Fuentes*, and SGT Ross J. Roberson*, interview by Briscoe, 16 August 2018, hereafter cited by name and date; CPT Charles D. Parson*, interview by Briscoe, 19 September 2018, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by name and date.
- 3 CPT Chance D. Panter and SFC Alejandro Fuenteszamorá, “ESMAL: The Future of Colombia’s PSYOP,” *Special Warfare* 31/3 (July-September 2018): 80.
- 4 Parson* interview, 19 September 2018.
- 5 Parson*, Fuentes*, and Roberson* interview, 16 August 2018.
- 6 Bronson* interview, 31 October 2018; Parson*, Fuentes*, and Roberson* interview, 16 August 2018.
- 7 SFC Alex Fuentes*, interview by Briscoe, 2 June 2018, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by name and date.
- 8 Parson*, Fuentes*, and Roberson* interview, 16 August 2018.
- 9 B/1/8 POG AAR; Bronson* interview, 31 October 2018; Parson*, Fuentes*, and Roberson* interview, 16 August 2018.
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- 11 LTC Kenneth S. Morley, interview by Briscoe, 8 November 2017, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by name and date.
- 12 Morley interview, 8 November 2017; Fuentes* interview, 12 June 2018.
- 13 B/1/8 POG AAR; Bronson* interview, 31 October 2018; Parson*, Fuentes*, and Roberson* interview, 16 August 2018.
- 14 B/1/8 POG AAR; Bronson*, 31 October 2018; Parson*, Fuentes*, and Roberson*, 16 August 2018.
- 15 Panter and Fuenteszamorá, “ESMAL: The Future of Colombia’s PSYOP,” 80.
- 16 CPT Serge W. Monteggo*, interview by Briscoe, 6 July 2018, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by name and date.
- 17 B/1/8 POG AAR; Bronson* interview, 31 October 2018; Parson*, Fuentes*, and Roberson* interview, 16 August 2018.
- 18 B/1/8 POG AAR; Fuentes* interview, 12 June 2018.
- 19 Monteggo* interview, 6 July 2018.
- 20 Fuentes* interview, 12 June 2018.
- 21 B/1/8 POG AAR; Parson*, Fuentes*, and Roberson* interview, 16 August 2018.
- 22 B/1/8 POG AAR; Parson*, Fuentes*, and Roberson* interview, 16 August 2018.
- 23 B/1/8 POG AAR; Bronson* interview, 31 October 2018.
- 24 Bronson* interview, 31 October 2018; Parson*, Fuentes*, and Roberson* interview, 16 August 2018.
- 25 B/1/8 POG AAR; Bronson* interview, 31 October 2018.
- 26 Ortega, “U.S. Service Members Train in Colombia.” *COL César Alberto Karán Benítez is the Commandant of the School of International Missions and Integral Action [Escuela de Misiones Internacionales y Acción Integral (ESMAI)]*.
- 27 B/1/8 POG AAR; Parson*, Fuentes*, and Roberson* interview, 16 August 2018.
- 28 B/1/8 POG AAR; Fuentes* interview, 12 June 2018.
- 29 B/1/8 POG AAR; Parson* interview, 19 September 2018.

Graduates received a certificate like this one presented to CPT James P. Bronson*.

