

# “Who’s in charge down here?”

by Charles H. Briscoe

*“Speak with one voice and become fully integrated with the embassy departments and supporting agencies as well as the Colombian military at all levels—tactical to operational to strategic.”*



Bogotá MILGP Coin

**U.S.** Army soldiers, accustomed to a clear military chain of command, want to know who their boss is when away from home station. “Who’s in charge?” is often the first question asked by Army special operations forces (ARSOF) team leaders on temporary duty (TDY) in a foreign country. Five years ago the answer was often nebulous because the Department of Defense (DoD) had not addressed that issue in American embassies.

U.S. ambassadors traditionally selected their principal military advisor according to the most amiable personality—the Defense Attaché (DATT) or the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) or Military Group (MILGP) commander. Only a general officer-led MAAG escaped this problem. It was especially problematic during El Salvador’s thirteen year war.<sup>1</sup>

This finally changed in 2013. DoD specified that a clear military chain of command would be established in U.S. embassies abroad. DoD Directive Number 5205.75 (4 December 2013) was designed to eliminate the “dueling of colonels” between DATT and the U.S. MAAG and U.S. MILGP commanders vying to be the ambassador’s principal military advisor.<sup>2</sup>

To accentuate Senior Defense Official (SDO)/DATT special status, the Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) officially appoints the SDO with formal letters of introduction to the U.S. ambassador and the host country minister of defense. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) provides an appointment letter to his host nation counterpart.<sup>3</sup> U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), which has the oldest and best organized military assistance program in the world, promulgated this change in Latin America. The SDO/DATT is rated by the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) deputy and senior rated by the Deputy Commander, SOUTHCOM.<sup>4</sup>

While this article is centered on Colombia, our strongest regional ally, SOUTHCOM is the leading advocate of

clear military chains of command among the geographic combatant commands (GCC). Likewise, Latin America has six of the twenty-four U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) Special Operations Liaison Officers (SOLO) assigned to its countries.<sup>5</sup> There are over 150 officers and sergeants in the Military Personnel Exchange Program (MPEP) assigned to foreign military commands and schools worldwide. The SDO/DATT keeps track of these great American military contacts in country. So, who ‘jump started’ this concept for Latin America?

In the summer of 2014, Admiral John J. Audubon tasked Field Artillery Colonel (COL) Robert A. Wagner, West Point ‘90, to establish the SDO/DATT concept in El Salvador. It was his success there that led to a 2016 reassignment to Colombia, our strongest partner nation (PN) in the hemisphere.<sup>6</sup> That country’s government was heavily engaged in peace negotiations with the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC)* and *Ejército de Liberación (ELN)* after decades of insurgent warfare. It was critical that the DoD personnel in Bogotá “speak with one voice and become fully integrated with



COL Robert A. Wagner, SDO Colombia, and the U.S. Southern Command Seal.





the embassy departments and supporting agencies as well as the Colombian military at all levels—tactical to operational to strategic.”<sup>7</sup> COL Wagner scrambled to accommodate the idiosyncrasies of a nation with sixty years of ARSOF persistent presence, further ingrained with a Special Operations Command, South-Forward (SOC-FWD) command and control presence since Operation WILLING SPIRIT (OWS) in 2003.

The establishment of a SOC-FWD ‘operationalized’ the execution orders (EXORDs) from the JCS and SOUHCM for OWS. It expanded the persistent ARSOF presence into a U.S. SOF presence. OWS elevated the recovery of three American contractors held by the FARC to a national priority.<sup>8</sup> Still, the SOC-FWD element was originally intended to be temporary.

The interjection of a regional SOF headquarters with its brigadier general (BG) into the “dueling match” between MILGP and DATT colonels was unprecedented in the region. Latin America’s State Department (DOS) ambassadors prided themselves on controlling the U.S. military presence in ‘their’ countries. BG Charles T. Cleveland, SOCSOUTH commander, capitalized on a close personal and professional relationship with COL Simeon T. Trombitas, the MILGP Colombia commander, to garner support from U.S. Ambassador William B. Wood. It was fortuitous that the U.S. hostage situation had become very emotional in the States.<sup>9</sup>

As an operational commander with an EXORD, BG Cleveland could request national military assets (intelligence gathering platforms and forces) to support the Colombian military (COLMIL) efforts to locate the hostages and effect their recovery. He assured Ambassador Wood that his senior official could work in harmony with the MILGP, DATT, and COLMIL during OWS.<sup>10</sup> The combined effort from mid-2005 through March 2008 was a distinct OWS success.



Brigadier General (BG) Charles T. Cleveland, Special Operations Command, South (SOCSOUTH) commander and the SOCSOUTH shoulder sleeve insignia (SSI).

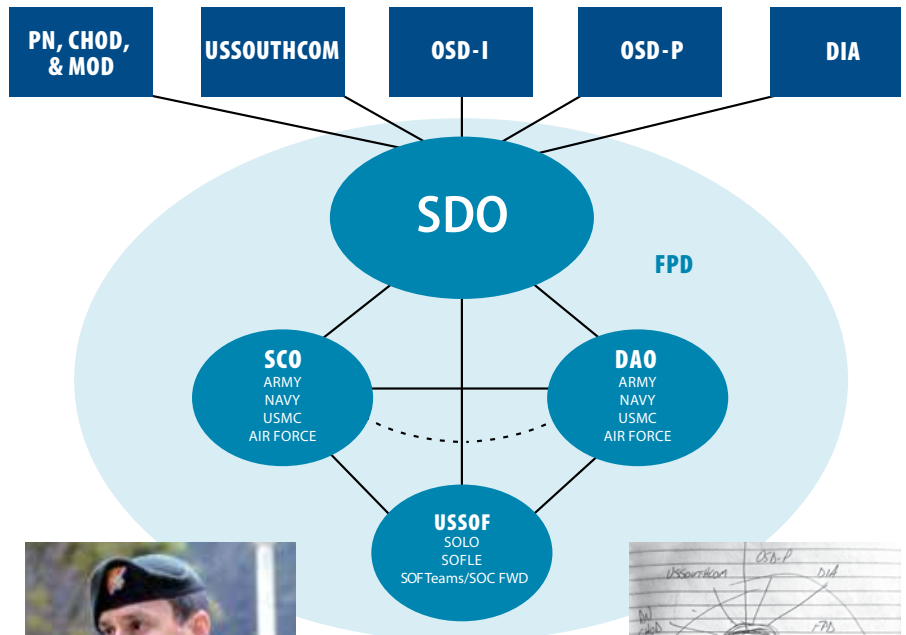


Brigadier General (BG) William Armando Mejia, El Salvador Army Chief of Staff greets Field Artillery Colonel (COL) Robert A. Wagner, U.S. Senior Defense Official.

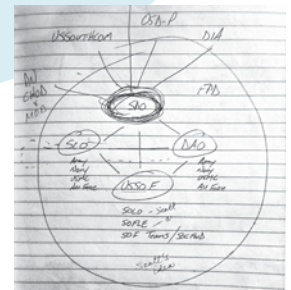


# LTC Morley's schematic depiction of the interconnectivity of military relationships in the embassy with USSOUTHCOM and SOCSOUTH

- PN** Partner Nation
- CHOD** Chief of Defense
- MOD** Minister of Defense
- USSOUTHCOM**  
United States Southern Command
- OSD - I** Office of the Secretary of Defense - Intelligence
- OSD - P** Office of the Secretary of Defense - Policy
- DIA** Defense Intelligence Agency
- SDO** Senior Defense Official
- FPD** Force Protection Detachment
- SCO** Security Coordination Office
- DAO** Defense Attaché Office
- USSOF** U.S. Special Operations Forces
  - SOLO** Special Operations Liaison Officer
  - SOFLE** Special Operations Forces Liaison Element
  - SOC FWD** Special Operations Command Forward



LTC Kenneth S. 'Scott' Morley, SOLO Colombia, 2016-2018. Morley's original sketch.



It was the unilateral Colombian Army (COLAR) *Operación JAQUE* that successfully recovered the FARC VIP hostages—three American contractors, Senator Ingrid Betancourt Pulecio, and eleven other Colombians—on 2 July 2008. *JAQUE* effectively nullified the rationale for OWS. The Special Forces (SF) Operational Detachment Bravo (ODB) that performed counter-narcotics missions had been kept separate from SOC-FWD during OWS. It became SOC-FWD-Andean Ridge (AR) in 2014.<sup>11</sup> This command and control change was factored by COL Wagner when he came to Colombia in July 2016.

The SOC-FWD-AR was a SOCSOUTH initiative as were the SOC-FWDs for Central America (CENTAM) and the Caribbean (CARIB). Interestingly, SOCSOUTH kept operational control (OPCON) of U.S. Navy SEALs advising and assisting in theater as well as the U.S. Special Operations Forces (USSOF) in the Southern Cone (SC) countries of South America until 2017. These three SOC-FWDs had OPCON of ARSOF, Air Force (AFSOF), and Marine (MARSOC) mobile training teams (MTT) and Deployments for Training (DFTs).<sup>12</sup> However, embassy coordination was a different matter.

In those countries having a SOLO (a USSOCOM asset serving the regional SOC) permanently assigned, or a

Special Operations Forces Liaison Element (SOFLE) on TDY, SOC-FWDs coordinated through them. The SDO (COL Wagner) had tactical control (TACON) for Force Protection (FORCPRO). It was his security officer who briefed all assigned and TDY military, not the embassy Regional Security Officer (RSO). This took the State Department out of the U.S. military authority chain.<sup>13</sup>

SDO/DATT nominees are recommended by two Under Secretaries of Defense—Policy and Intelligence. As the senior military representative of the SOUTHCOM commander and the ambassador, COL Wagner had the authority to 'deport' Soldiers, Airmen, Sailors, and Marines from Colombia for unbecoming conduct or misconduct on duty and off.<sup>14</sup> His 'action arm' was the SOLO, but could have been a SOCSOUTH Liaison Officer (SOFLO).<sup>15</sup>

The SOLO in Colombia was SF Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Kenneth S. 'Scott' Morley, who accompanied COL Wagner from El Salvador (2014-2016). While labeled the "single in-country point of contact (POC) for all U.S. SOF activity in a partner nation," the SOLO has no specific authority over SOC-FWD and deployed forces in country except by rank, experience, and relationships. However, he is the continuity for TDY military coming into and

leaving country. LTC Morley explained: “The SOLO has a bevy of senior officers trying to ‘boss/command’ him and he has to ‘move very delicately.’<sup>16</sup>

LTC Morley’s schematic showed how the SDO/DATT reorganization worked in Colombia. Having experienced the postwar political upheaval in El Salvador (insurgents losing the war and winning the peace), COL Wagner and LTC Morley knew that the COLMIL would face challenging times during the transition period. “I realized that the DoD team had to speak with one voice in the embassy. There had to be a shared vision in which parochialism had no part. We had to be creative with resources—time, money, and people. Instead of relying on the force of personalities to prevail in this fluid environment we had to pull together to leverage access, gain placement, and capitalize on opportunities,” said COL Wagner. “I measure the achievement of success by three indicators: networking in the embassy; productivity; and evidence of teamwork.”<sup>17</sup>

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— COL Robert A. Wagner, SDO

Getting beyond the ‘herding cats’ stage meant agreement on internal reorganization, the delineation of key tasks, and lines of effort (LOE). This required more than concurrence by the assigned colonels. Distinct missions, funding streams, and information sharing systems had to be preserved and conflicts of interest avoided without adverse impacts on DAO (Defense Attaché Officer) or SCO (Security Cooperation Officer) missions. Regular review and concurrence from Washington and Miami were critical. Thus, COL Wagner solicited comments on his “Marching Orders” in both locations.<sup>18</sup>

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“Colombia remains our strongest partner in the hemisphere. Strategic and operational environments are changing as evidenced by fluctuating political systems, budgets, and a variety of persistent criminal threats. All DoD tools available have to be efficiently leveraged and synchronized with the government of Colombia (GOC) and interagency partners—the State Department (DOS), its Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)—to support multiple LOEs and operational directives from USSOUTHCOM,” stressed Wagner.<sup>19</sup> There could be no wasted effort.

Communications within the SDO were flattened to improve information flow; weekly meetings were consolidated and reduced. COL Wagner did daily ‘drive bys’ with the colonels to maintain the ‘pulse.’ This ‘effects driven’ structure was a ‘bare bones’ Joint Staff (J2, J3, and J5) and a Ministry of Defense Advisor (MODA). To avoid delays, weekly Significant Activities

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# U.S. Government Agencies *Synchronized* with the Government of Colombia



**DoD**  
Department of Defense



**DOS**  
U.S. Department of State



**INL**  
DOS Bureau of  
International Narcotics and Law  
Enforcement Affairs



**DHS**  
U.S. Department of  
Homeland Security



**DEA**  
U.S. Justice Department Drug  
Enforcement Administration



**FBI**  
Federal Bureau of Investigation



**USAID**  
U.S. Agency for International  
Development

(SIGACTS) reports to SOUTHCOM were approved by the ‘most available’ colonel. Mutual trust, confidence, and agreement on ‘standing talking points’ were critical to keeping harmony and ensuring access,” related COL Wagner. “I also had a few ‘bonus’ players.”<sup>20</sup>

ARSOF permanent party and TDY personnel constituted the ‘bonus’ player pool. The SOLO, while regionally detailed to SOCSOUTH, was a constant. MPEP officers (two ARSOF) worked in the COLMIL joint special operations headquarters [*Comando Conjunto de Operaciones Especiales (CCOES)*] and the Air Assault School at Tolemaida. These two-year MPEP positions belong to the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School (SWCS) at Fort Bragg, NC. Having developed a very solid professional relationship with COL Wagner in El Salvador, LTC Morley was his ‘designated hitter’ and ‘trouble shooter’ with the SOC-FWD. This arrangement

worked smoothly because LTC Morley traveled to SOCSOUTH monthly for direct coordination.<sup>21</sup>

Based on the liaison workload in Colombia, the Deputy J-3, SOCSOUTH, convinced SOUTHCOM that a Army National Guard SOFLO was needed in Colombia. A second officer gave SOCSOUTH a 24/7 presence in Bogotá. The outstanding performance of the native Spanish-speaking infantry SOFLO merited re-validation of the requirement.<sup>22</sup> With the SOC-FWD, a SOLO, a SOFLO, and two SF MPEP officers in-country, the Army SOF leaders advising and assisting in Colombia have good support in the embassy.<sup>23</sup> And, the Latin American countries have a goodly number of U.S. military exchange officers and sergeants.

SOUTHCOM has five Army SF SOLOs in Brazil, Colombia, Peru, El Salvador, and Panama. U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM) has two Army SF SOLOs

covering Mexico and Canada.<sup>24</sup> Two of the three Army MPEP officer positions in Colombia are filled as is one Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO). A fifth Army MPEP aviation officer is pending. Brazil has three MPEP officers and an NCO. Two of four officer billets in Chile are filled. Mexico has one officer MPEP.<sup>25</sup>

In summary, there is one Army colonel in charge as the SDO/DATT in Colombia. In addition, numerous permanent party Army SOF personnel are assigned and/or attached to the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá. Coordination can be easily effected by TDY SF, Psychological Operations (PSYOP), and Civil Affairs (CA) team leaders. Now responsible for the SC countries of South America, the SOC-FWD-AR covering the Southern Cone (SOC-FWD-SCAR) is connected with the SOC-FWD at Homestead Air Reserve Base, Florida (SOC-FWD-CARIB) and SOC-FWD-CENTAM at Joint Task Force (JTF) Bravo in Honduras. The SDO/DATT organizational 'lash-up' in Bogotá, Colombia with its clean 'chain of command' is the SOUTHCOM regional model. Incidentally, one of the two MPEP officers is now the SOLO in Colombia, to provide good continuity. ▲

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## **Endnotes**

- 1 Retired COL John D. Waghelstein, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 12 June 2007, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Ft Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by name and date.
- 2 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; Department of Defense Directive Number 5205.75, "SUBJECT: DoD Operations at U.S. Embassies," dated 4 December 2013, hereafter cited as DoDD No. 5205.75.

- 3 Defense Institute of Security Management, *The Management of Security Cooperation*, 4-14; COL Paul J. Schmitt, "Special Operations Liaison Officers: (SOLO) or Team Effort?" (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategy Research Project, 2013), 4.
- 4 Schmitt, "Special Operations Liaison Officers: (SOLO) or Team Effort?" 5.
- 5 USSOCOM International Engagement Program Brief, 2 March 2018, copy USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 6 Wagner interview, 2 November 2017; DoDD No. 5205.75.
- 7 Wagner interview, 2 November 2017.
- 8 Retired MG Simeon T. Trombitas, interview by Briscoe, 10 November 2017, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by name and date.
- 9 Retired MG Trombitas and BG Hector E. Pagan, interview by Briscoe, 11 October 2017, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by name and date.
- 10 Trombitas and Pagan interview, 11 October 2017. **When U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) issued the Execution Order (EXORD) for Operation WILLING SPIRIT (OWS), the Special Operations Command, South (SOCSOUTH) forward command and control element was focused on working with the Colombian military (COLMIL) to rescue the three American hostages. The OWS mission was classified and treated as sensitive, 'need-to-know.' The Operations Center (OPCEN) of the Special Forces (SF) company and its attached Psychological Operations (PSYOP) and Civil Affairs (CA) team leadership worked in tents inside the embassy compound, but outside the embassy building. They were supporting MILGP Colombia requirements.**
- 11 Michel Martin and John Otis, "Hostages Rescued in Colombia After Long Captivity" at <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=92180214>, accessed 3/26/2018.
- 12 LTC Kenneth S. 'Scott' Morley, interview by Briscoe and Daniel J. Kulich, 27 October 2017, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by name and date.
- 13 Morley interview, 27 October 2017.
- 14 SOCSOUTH Message, SUBJECT: SOCSOUTH C-2 GUIDANCE dated 12 September 2014.
- 15 Morley interview, 27 October 2017; U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) Memorandum, "SUBJECT: Codifying Relationships for Special Operations Liaison Officers dated 3 May 2013.
- 16 Morley interview, 27 October 2017; U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) Memorandum, "SUBJECT: Codifying Relationships for Special Operations Liaison Officers," dated 3 May 2013; Schmitt, "Special Operations Liaison Officers: (SOLO) or Team Effort?" 11.
- 17 Wagner interview, 2 November 2017.
- 18 DoDD No. 5205.75, para 3.g.; Wagner interview, 2 November 2017.
- 19 Department of Defense. Office of the Senior Defense Coordinator, Colombia. "Team DoD – Colombia Marching Orders, November 2016 – April 2017 (as of 1 November 2016)," USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 20 Wagner interview, 2 November 2017.
- 21 Morley interviews, 27 October and 8 November 2017.
- 22 Retired LTC Patrick J. Lenaghan, Deputy J-3, SOCSOUTH, interview by Briscoe, 2 March 2017, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Morley interview, 8 November 2017.
- 23 Morley interview, 27 October 2017.
- 24 USSOCOM J3 International Fact Sheet: "Special Operations Liaison Officer (SOLO)," dated 24 April 2018.
- 25 U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) "MPEP Roster," dated 28 February 2018.