

Colombian Military Forces

by Troy J. Sacquety

THE purpose of this article is to provide an introduction to the Colombian Army. It will describe the military chain of command, the Colombian Army's main operational units, give a brief look at Colombia's special operations forces and the system of Army schools and address the reforms being embraced by the Colombian military under the auspices of *Plan Colombia*. The Colombian military is composed of three branches: the Army, Navy and the Air Force. The Army is the dominant service. All services play a role in the counter-insurgency campaign but their participation is minor in comparison to the Army. Those services will not be discussed in any detail.

The Colombian President is the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, while the Minister of Defense has operational and administrative control. Next in the chain of command is the military commander of the armed forces, which, given the Army's size and influence, has always been an Army three-star General. This is also the highest rank in the Colombian military. The Army is officially charged with the defense of Colombia from outside aggressors. In actuality its mission has undergone extensive restructuring since 1999, and is now almost completely focused on fighting the counterinsurgency.



General Mario Montoya Uribe, Commanding General of the Colombian Armed Forces

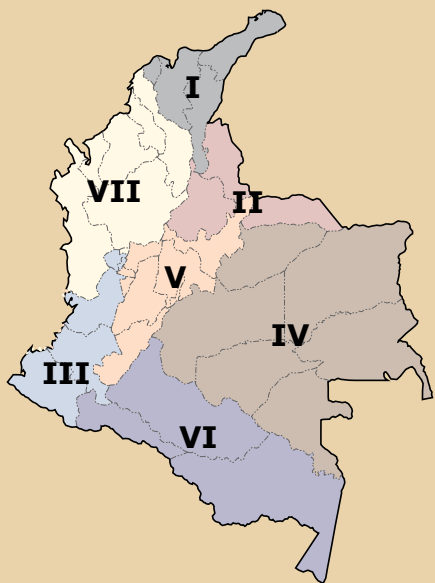
The Army is composed of 180,000 personnel in seven infantry divisions and a number of special units, compared to 23,000 in the Navy and 10,000 in the Air Force.¹ The 160,000-man Colombian National Police (CNP) is part of the Ministry of Defense and works with the Army in its internal-security role against the paramilitaries. However, the CNP is not considered part of the armed forces.

Since the start of *Plan Colombia* in 2000 and the beginning of *Plan Patriota*, in 2005, the armed forces defense budget has increased from two to five percent of Gross National Product (GNP) under President Alvaro Uribe Vélez.² Concurrent with the increase in budget is a growth in the size of the military and the police. Conscription fills the ranks of the Army, Navy, Air Force and National Police, with draftees incurring a two-year term of service at age 18. The National Service obligation has been attacked for its inequalities. For instance, conscripts with the equivalent of a high school education do not have to go into combat and the wealthy can buy their sons way out of service.³ There are volunteer enlistment options for both the Army and Navy, and those seeking a career in the Army may volunteer for the non-commissioned officer's school.

The army is organized into seven numbered divisions that are geographically-based around the country in regional Areas of Responsibility (AORs).⁴ A soldier



Colombian Army Division patches



Colombia's seven divisions are headquartered over a wide region of the country.



Brigada de Aviación del Ejército patch



Brigada de Apoyo Logístico patch



Fuerza de Despliegue Rápido (FUDRA) patch

is usually drafted into the division in his home region and it is possible for him to serve his entire career in a single geographic area. There is also an Aviation Brigade, the *Brigada de Aviación del Ejército* and the *Brigada de Apoyo Logístico* (Logistics Brigade) with a supply battalion, maintenance battalion, a *Batallón de Intendencia* which supplies clothing and footwear to the Army, and a separate logistics battalion supporting Joint Task Force–South.⁵ Colombian divisions are not uniform in structure and can have two to five infantry brigades. Each brigade is organized with three infantry battalions, a cavalry group for reconnaissance, one direct support artillery battalion, an engineer battalion and a service battalion. The Army is improving its mountain warfare capabilities as part of the counter-insurgency campaign and has fielded special battalions designed for combat in the *Alta Montaña* (High Mountains) in those divisions in the mountain regions. Presently only six of twenty-one brigades within the army are fully manned with the remainder under strength.⁶ The Colombian Army has no Corps headquarters. Each division is an autonomous entity within its AOR.

In addition to the divisional brigades in the seven territories, the Colombian Army has a number of special units with functional responsibilities. The Rapid Deployment Force, known as the *Fuerza de Despliegue Rápido* (FUDRA), created on 7 December 1999, has countrywide responsibilities. The FUDRA is composed of three mobile brigades and one special forces bri-

gade, and has organic UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters. These are separate from those in the Army Aviation Brigade, or *Brigada de Aviación del Ejército*, which provides rotary-wing airlift to the Army in addition to the FUDRA, and other counter-insurgency forces. The FUDRA is supported by a newly-created Military Intelligence Center that provides intelligence on insurgent units and their activities.

The counter-narcotics brigade or *Brigada Contra el Narcotráfico*, (CD Bde) was activated on 8 December 2000. The CD Bde, headquartered at Tres Esquinas, is composed of three large 900-man CD battalions, and works with the CNP to secure coca-producing areas for spraying as part of the aerial eradication program near the borders of Ecuador and Peru. The CD Bde works closely with the Narcotics Affairs Section (NAS) in the U.S. Embassy. There are similar mission-specific units in the Colombian Army.

Functionally-oriented forces include the *Agrupación de Fuerzas Especiales Antiterroristas* (AFEAU) or Special Forces Anti-Terrorist Group, designed to combat terrorist activities in urban environments, and the *Agrupación de Fuerzas Especiales Rurales* who perform a similar counter-terrorist mission in the rural areas. The *Brigada de Fuerzas Especiales*, or Special Forces Brigade, has four battalions capable of both airborne and counterinsurgency operations. A unit similar to the U.S. Army Rangers is the *Agrupación de Lanceros* or AGLAN, an elite strike force. U.S. Army Special Forces has a long history of assisting and training the Colombian Special Forces Brigade and the *Lanceros*.

Created by Colombian Law 282 in 1996, the *Grupos Acción Unificada por la Libertad Personal* (Groups of Action Unified for the Liberation of Persons) or GAULA are elite units exclusively dedicated to respond to kidnapping and extortion. These highly trained military units work closely with the national judiciary to



Brigada Contra el Narcotráfico patch



Agrupación de Fuerzas Especiales Antiterroristas (AFEAU) patch



The GAULA, or Grupos Acción Unificada por la Libertad Personal (Groups of Action Unified for the Liberation of Persons), was set up in 1996 to be a force responsible for recovering kidnap victims and to battle the kidnapers.



The M-113 is a U.S.-produced armored personal carrier and is in widespread use world-wide, seeing use in some forty-four militaries. It can carry eleven personnel and two crewmembers. Although it can be armed with a number of weapon systems, the most common are a heavy machine-gun or a grenade launcher.



The RG-31 Nyala, made by the South African firm of Land Systems OMC, is a multi-purpose mine-protected vehicle. It features a "V"-shaped hull and has high ground clearance.



A Colombian Marine mans his M-2 .50 caliber heavy machinegun. The Marines and the Navy perform operations along Colombia's rivers that assist in the Army in its counter-insurgency mission.

recover kidnapping victims and to capture the kidnappers. There are sixteen GAULA in the Army, two in the Navy, and ten in the National Police.⁷

The Colombian Army is equipped with a large stock of U.S. equipment such as the M-113 Armored Personnel Carriers, UH-60L Black Hawks and UH-1N Huey helicopters as well as a number of weapons systems from other nations.

These include Russian-made Mi-17 helicopters, and the Brazilian-made Cascavel EE-9 and Urutu EE-11 armored cars. The Army carries a variety of small arms, including the U.S. M16 and M2 .50 caliber machinegun. However, the main infantry rifle is the Israeli-designed Galil ARM 5.56 mm and the Galil AR 7.62 sniper rifle. Colombia is the only country licensed by Israel to manufacture the Galil. The Army is supplied by *Industria Militar*, the Colombian national military manu-

facturing firm.

The conventional infantry battalions are equipped with U.S. M1 81mm and M2 107mm mortars and the 120mm French-made Brandt heavy mortar. The infantry brigades have TOW (tube-launched optically-tracked wire-guided) anti-armor systems, 106mm recoilless rifles and 40mm air defense artillery systems. Colombian artillery battalions use the U.S. M-101 105mm towed howitzers. The mountain troops have the WWII vintage U.S. M-8 75mm pack howitzer. As in every Army, training is of paramount concern.

The Colombian Army has an extensive network of schools, mostly located in Bogotá, that train soldiers. Recruits undergo training at regional centers located at Bucaramanga, Pamplona, Ocana, Barranca bermeja, Sogamoso, Chiquinquirá, Villavieco, and Guaviare.⁸ The Military School of Cadets, known in Colombia as the *Escuela Militar de Cadetes "General José María Córdova,"* is the Army's officer academy (the Colombian equivalent of West Point). Students undergo a five-year curriculum, after which they receive a commission as a Second Lieutenant. The next level of professional school for officers is the National War College, the *Escuela Superior de Guerra*, which is open to all the services. Persons with specialized qualifications in medicine and law are commissioned as volunteers through



The EE-9 Cascavel armored car was developed by the Brazilian company, Engesa. It features a 90mm main gun, has a crew of three, and is extensively used by the Colombian cavalry elements.



The EE-11 Urutu is a 6x6 armored personnel carrier that was designed by Engesa, a Brazilian company, in the 1970s. It can carry up to twelve personnel, in addition to the driver.



The main battle rifle of Colombian forces is the Galil, as seen here.



A Colombian paratrooper in training takes his turn jumping from the 34-foot tower.

the Professional Officers Corps Reserve. They are generally selected and serve with the division near their homes.⁹

Non-commissioned officers have their own schools. The *Escuela de Suboficiales "Sargento Inocencio Chinca,"* the NCO school, was established at Tolemaida in 1968. According to General Carlos Ospina, the former commander of the Colombian military, the formation of the school resulted from the successful example of U.S. Army's Vietnam-era "shake and bake" Non-commissioned Officer Candidate Course.¹⁰ The next level of schooling

available for NCOs is the eight-week course at the Command Sergeants Major Academy in Bogotá. General Ospina established the school in 2003 after seeking U.S. Army assistance. U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) detailed senior U.S. Army NCOs to assist in developing the program.¹¹ Both the Navy and the Air Force have officer's academies and NCO schools of their own.

The Colombian Army runs schools for the major branches to train the soldiers in their occupational specialties. There are schools of Infantry, Cavalry, Artillery, *Lanceros*, Engineers, Communications, Civil Military Relations and a Parachute School for airborne troops. There is also a School of Logistics that trains supply and

maintenance personnel.¹²

As the article shows, the Colombian Army has a wide-range of capabilities to overcome the problems of an insurgent war. In the late 1990s many rural areas lacked a sustained military or police presence. This greatly aided the regrowth of insurgency and is something that Colombia must remedy as part of *Plan Patriota*. President Uribe has made government presence in the rural areas a centerpiece of his administration, and the Army, working in concert with the National Police has made great strides in this direction. There are now police in all Colombian municipalities and Army divisions are present and operating in every region. This has substantially eroded the power of the narco-terrorist insurgency.

The Colombian Army has formed units that have functional rather than regional responsibilities. For the special units, funding and material support remain a problem. The formation of the Command Sergeants Major Academy, the NCO School, the Professional Soldier's School and a growing professionalism in this largely conscript force are evidence that Colombia's Army is improving the leadership and quality of its units and are thereby making greater inroads against the narco-terrorist insurgency. ♣

Endnotes

- 1 Jane's Information Group, "Army, Colombia," 16 November 2006; "Navy, Colombia," 23 October 2006, "Air Force, Colombia," 5 December 2006, <http://www.janes.com>.
- 2 _____, "Executive Summary, Colombia" 24 August 2006, <http://www.janes.com>.
- 3 Angel Rabasa and Peter Chalk, *Colombian Labyrinth: The Synergy of Drugs and Insurgency and Its Implications for Regional Stability* (Washington DC: RAND, 2001), 104; Jane's Information Group, "Armed Forces, Colombia" 4 July 2005, <http://www.janes.com>.
- 4 Colombian Army, "Divisiones," <http://www.army.mil.co/index.php?idcategoria=69> (accessed 6 December 2006).
- 5 <http://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=es&u=http://www.Ejercito.mil.co/&sa=X&oi=translate&resnum=1&ct=result&prev=/search%3Fq%3Dcolombian%2BArmy%26hl%3Den%26lr%3D>, hereafter Translation 1 from <http://www.Ejercito.mil.co>.
- 6 Jane's, "Army, Colombia."
- 7 Translation 1 from <http://www.Ejercito.mil.co>.
- 8 Translation 1 from <http://www.Ejercito.mil.co>.
- 9 <http://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=es&u=http://www.Ejercito.mil.co/&sa=X&oi=translate&resnum=1&ct=result&prev=/search%3Fq%3Dcolombian%2BARmy%2B%26hl%3Den%26lr%3D>, hereafter Translation 2 from <http://www.Ejercito.mil.co>.
- 10 General Carlos Ospina Ovalle, former Commanding General, Colombian Armed Forces, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 6 October 2006, Bogotá, Colombia, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 11 Master Sergeant José Ruíz, "Colombia's New Non-Commissioned Officer Course a Success," *U.S. Southern Command Public Affairs Office*, [October 1943], found at http://www.dialogo-americas.com/Colombia_Officer.cfm.
- 12 Translation 2 from <http://www.Ejercito.mil.co>.



Colombian engineers stationed in Tolemaida display their equipment, including mine detectors, protective equipment, and an explosive-sniffing dog.