

Colombian Special Operations Forces

by Kenneth Finlayson

**Pseudonyms have been used for all military personnel with a rank lower than lieutenant colonel.*

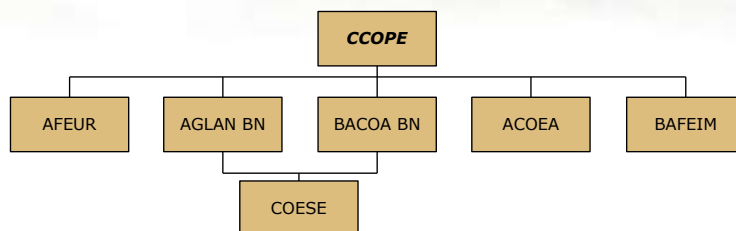
THE Colombian military has a variety of special operations forces (SOF) committed to the on-going conflict with the narco-terrorist elements in the country. American advisors work closely with the different units and serve at several command and control headquarters. This article will introduce several Colombian SOF elements, comparing them as appropriate to like elements and commands in the U.S. military.

Located in Bogotá, the *Comando Conjunto de Operaciones Especiales* (CCOPE pronounced See-Coh-Pay) was created in 2002 to serve as the command and control headquarters for all Colombian military special operations forces.

The organization and mission of the CCOPE is roughly comparable to that of a miniaturized version of the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.¹ The CCOPE is commanded by a colonel who reports directly to the commander of the Colombian Joint Staff. An American officer is routinely assigned to serve with the CCOPE.

Major Ricardo Ramírez* of Special Operations Command, South (SOCSOUTH) was the U.S. military liaison officer (LNO) to the CCOPE during the spring and summer of 2006.

"The CCOPE, like other Colombian units, has a very small staff. The deputy commander, an O-6 [colonel], doubles as the Chief of Staff and there is one lieutenant colonel that is both the J-1 and J-4 handling personnel and logistics. About twelve non-commissioned officers fill out the rest of the positions."² Five battalion-size units, known by their initials as the AFEAU, the AGLAN, the BACOA, the ACOEA, and the BAFEIM, and another service command and control



The task organization of the CCOPE.

headquarters, the COESE, make up the CCOPE. The subordinate units span the land, sea, and air aspects of SOF, and are tailored for specific missions.

Within the CCOPE organization, the unit tasked with the counter-terrorism mission is the *Agrupación de Fuerzas Especiales Anti-Terroristas Urbanas* or AFEAU (Af-Ā-You). This joint unit is the oldest counter-terrorism unit in the Colombian military, formed in the wake of the November 1985 seizure of the Palace of Justice by the terrorist M-19 group. Its mission is to target terrorist units and high-value targets in the urban areas as they are identified and confirmed, and react to terrorist attacks as they occur. Traditionally, C Company, 3rd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (7th SFG) has trained with the AFEAU, usually by two Joint-Combined Exercise and Training events each year at the AFEAU headquarters in Bogotá.³ The nature of the AFEAU mission tends to keep the unit image low-key. More recognizable among the CCOPE units is the *Lanceros*.

The Colombian unit most closely resembling the U.S. Army Rangers is the *Agrupación de Lanceros* (AGLAN, pronounced Ag-Lan). Commonly referred to as the *Lanceros*, the group is made up of five fifty-man companies, lettered A through E. In each company is a squad of scout snipers and there is a separate reconnaissance element in the battalion headquarters.⁴ The first compa-



FUERZAS MILITARES DE COLOMBIA F.T.C.S.

The coat of arms of the Colombian Military.



AFEAU Insignia

Colombian SOF

IN addition to the special operations forces (SOF) CCOPE (*Comando Conjunto de Operaciones Especiales*), there are other SOF units in the Colombian Army. One, the *Brigada de Fuerzas Especiales*, the Special Forces Brigade, is modeled after the Special Forces Groups of the U.S. Army. Another is a special unit whose principal responsibility is the conduct of anti-terrorist missions.

These strategic assets are controlled by the *Brigada de Fuerzas Especiales*, the Special Forces Brigade of the Colombian Army. Composed of four battalions, these highly trained units are experts in jungle warfare and are particularly adept at direct action missions. They have a long history of training with the U.S. Special Forces and most officers are graduates of the Special Forces Qualification Course conducted at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.



SF Brigade patch

tance of U.S. Army Captain Ralph Puckett Jr., the *Lancero* course is the most highly respected Ranger training in Latin America. The current course lasts seventy-three days and is a grueling test of stamina for the participants. Candidates come from all countries of Latin America as well as the United States, France, and Great Britain. The successful completion of the course, marked by the coveted *Lancero* badge, is an honor recognized throughout the continent.

As the *Lanceros* represent the Colombian Army equivalent of the U.S. Army Rangers within the CCOPE, the BACOA performs missions similar to the U.S. Army Rangers. The *Batallón de Comandos Ambroseo Almaeda* (BACOA, Back-Õ-Ah) is composed of three lettered companies. The A and B companies of the BACOA are 74-man units divided into three sections: a mountain section, an urban section, and an amphibious section. The C Company is a fifty-man unit composed of six reconnaissance and sniper sections.⁸ Working closely with the BACOA, Major Ramírez described the mission of the companies as “Direct action in A and B companies. C company is for reconnaissance, both strategic and tactical.”⁹ While in many respects akin to U.S. Army Special Forces, Captain Roberto Gómez* of A Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th SFG (A/2-7) sent three team members to be integrated as advisors to the *Lancero* group reconnaissance elements.⁶ The 250-man *Lancero* group is about half the size of a 580-man U.S. Army Ranger battalion.⁷

To fill the *Lancero* units and train small-unit leaders for the Colombian Army, there is *La Escuela de Lanceros* (the *Lancero* School). The *Lancero* School, like the U.S. Army Ranger School, is a leadership school that trains junior officers and enlisted men in direct action and reconnaissance missions for *Lancero* units and the Army divisions. Formed in 1955 with the assistance of U.S. Army Special Forces, the *Lancero* School was the first of its kind in Latin America. The *Lancero* School was the first of its kind in Latin America. The *Lancero* School was the first of its kind in Latin America. The *Lancero* School was the first of its kind in Latin America.

The *Comando de Operaciones Especiales Del Ejército* (COESE pronounced CÕ-Ess-Ã) functions in a manner similar to that of the U.S. Army Special



Numerous monuments on the unit history are located around the *Lancero* training area at Tolemaida. This stone commemorates the 50th Anniversary of the founding of the *Lanceros*.



Graduates of the *Lancero* Course receive the coveted *Lancero* badge. This soldier with a large boa on his shoulders, typifies the image of the *Lanceros*.



The *Lancero* School is the most prestigious Ranger-type school in Latin America.



Statue of the *Lancero* at the unit training site at Tolemaida.



U.S. Army Special Forces soldiers training BACOA troops on the range at Tolemaida.



The BACOA use the fast-rope technique of insertion during missions. Here BACOA troops train at Tolemaida with their Special Forces advisors.

Operations Command.¹¹ It is the Army branch of the CCOPE much like USASOC is the Army Service Component within the U.S. Special Operations Command. The COESE primarily functions as a force provider for the two battalions.¹² Since the CCOPE is a joint command organization, it contains Colombian Air Force and Naval Special Operations units, the ACOEA and BAFEIM.

Headquartered in Bogotá, the *Agrupación de Comandos de Operaciones Especiales Aéreas* (ACOEA or Ah-Coh-Ah) is the special operations aviation component of the CCOPE. A relatively new unit in the Colombian SOF community, the primary mission of the ACOEA is to provide sniper teams that can shoot from helicopters. The unit also possesses a combat search and rescue capability.¹³ In the U.S. Army SOF community, the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment is the unit that most closely resembles the ACOEA, although the ACOEA does not perform the troop-carrying, insertion, and attack missions that the 160th does.¹⁴

The *Batallón de Fuerzas Especiales de La Infantería Marina* (BAFEIM pronounced Bah-Fi-Eem) is the Colombian special Marine force. Maintaining a headquarters in the old city of Cartagena on the northwest coast of the country, the three companies that make up the 253-man BAFEIM battalion are focused on operations in the coastal waters and riverine networks of Colombia.¹⁵ Like their Army counterparts in the BACOA Battalion and *Lancero* Group, U.S. special operations personnel have assisted the BAFEIM in training. U.S. Navy SEALs are routinely assigned to advise and assist the BAFEIM on counter-drug and counter-terrorism missions in the coastal waters of the country.¹⁶ Another highly capable element of the CCOPE, the BAFEIM is the maritime element of the three-service organization that makes up the Colombian special operations com-

mand. While the CCOPE elements have numerous capabilities, their employment is often hindered due to lack of transportation, notably rotary wing aviation, and the difficulty of coordinating CCOPE operations in concert with the conventional Colombian Army divisions. This is a function of the Colombian command structure.

The Colombian Army has divided the nation into seven districts with an Army division serving in each. The division commander enjoys the same level of autonomy and control over military operations in his AOR (area of responsibility) that a U.S. Joint Task Force (JTF) commander (such as the commander of JTF-Afghanistan) has. All units operating in and national operations that take place in the division AOR become his responsibility. This autonomous arrangement often makes the deployment of the CCOPE units into a particular division AOR difficult, especially for time-sensitive missions.

“The CCOPE is a strategic tool,” said Major Ramírez. “One action, one mission by the units of the CCOPE may well have national implications.”¹⁷ Just like it is with the U.S. Army, conventional force commanders often do not understand the capabilities and limitations of special operations forces assigned to work in their AOR. It is the responsibility of the SOF to explain to their conven-



The Naval element of the CCOPE is the BAFEIM. These highly skilled troops are experts in operations in the sea and rivers of Colombia, performing insertion missions in the manner of the U.S. Navy SEALs.



Map depicting the Areas of Responsibility of the Colombian Army divisions.

<http://www.Ejercito.mil.co>

tional commander how SOF can be a force multiplier. Major Ramírez recalled a briefing for the 4th Division commander done by the staff of the BACOA Battalion. The commanding general of the division had resisted CCOPE units operating in his AOR. “The BACOA staff presented a first-class briefing on the unit capabilities and the plan for a proposed high-value target mission. When they finished, the division commander said, ‘I am a great fool. That is

the best briefing I have ever been given.’ He immediately directed his staff to work closely with the BACOA. That briefing really opened the doors for the CCOPE units to gain access to the 4th Division area.”¹⁸ Not all of the CCOPE problems were as easily solved as that.

The CCOPE faces funding constraints. The units that make up Colombian SOF were largely created “out of hide” from existing elements. As such, the CCOPE does not have a separate budget and depends on the services to fund training and new equipment. The programs that place U.S. advisors with the CCOPE units do fund training ammunition and equipment. This helps to off-set some of the funding shortfalls the CCOPE faces. In his assessment of the CCOPE, Major Ramírez describes the CCOPE as “well trained and can do the mission. They are good in the jungle and have their TTPs [tactics, techniques and procedures] down pat.”¹⁹ The presence of the U.S. Army Special Forces advisors serves to strengthen

already-capable units. Colonel Edward M. Reeder Jr., 7th SFG commander, noted of the Colombian SOF, “Colombia’s military today is proven to be an exceptional fighting force, as was evident in the most recent *FUERZAS COMANDO 06* international counterterrorist Olympics in Paraguay, where they received top honors among fifteen nations from Latin America and the Caribbean as well as the United States.”²⁰

As the Colombian military executes its multi-year campaign (Plan

Colombia) to eliminate the narco-terrorists, the special operations units of the CCOPE have a crucial role in the accomplishment of that mission. The CCOPE units are not large in size and are deficient in some assets such as helicopters that would make their employment more effective. As the Colombian Army addresses these shortfalls, the SOF units of the CCOPE will play an increasingly prominent role in the ongoing narco-terrorist war in their country. ▲



Rigorous training such as building rappelling is common in the AFEAU.

Endnotes

- 1 Command Briefing, AOB 740, A Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group, 19 July 2006, copy, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter AOB 740 Command Briefing.
- 2 Major Ricardo Ramírez*, Special Operations Command, South, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 26 July 2006, Homestead Air Reserve Base, FL, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 3 Ramírez* interview.
- 4 Ramírez* interview.
- 5 <http://www.Ejercito.mil.co/index.php%3Fidcategoria%3D92&sa=X&oi=translate&resnum=1&ct=result&prev=/search%3Fq%3DColombia%2BLanceros%26hl%3Den%26lr%3D>.
- 6 Captain Roberto Gómez*, A Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 19 July 2006, Bogotá, Colombia, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 7 Ramírez* interview.
- 8 AOB 740 Command Briefing.
- 9 Ramírez* interview.
- 10 Gómez* interview.
- 11 AOB 740 Command Briefing.
- 12 Ramírez* interview.
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- 14 AOB 740 Command Briefing.
- 15 AOB 740 Command Briefing.
- 16 Ramírez* interview.
- 17 Ramírez* interview.
- 18 Ramírez* interview.
- 19 Ramírez* interview.
- 20 Colonel Edward M. Reeder Jr., 7th Special Forces Group, e-mail to Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 10 January 2007, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.



U.S. Army Special Forces practice rappelling at Tolomaida prior to training with their Colombian partners.