

“Conducting the Orchestra:”

AOB 740 in Colombia

by Kenneth Finlayson

IT is not uncommon for a single twelve-man Special Forces operational detachment alpha (ODA) to be the sole unit deployed for an advisory and training mission overseas. The team coordinates its activities through the U.S. Military Group (MILGP) who oversees all U.S. military forces in country. The size and complexity of the mission in Colombia is beyond the capability of a single team. A Special Forces (SF) company is deployed to Colombia to control the multi-team missions and provide the interface with the MILGP, Special Operations Command South (SOCSOUTH), the State Department’s Narcotics Affairs Section (NAS), and the Colombian Army’s Special Operations units. This article will examine the command and control role of A Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (SFG) during its deployment to Colombia in 2006. Since 2004, the mission of U.S. Special Forces units in Colombia has been adjusted to accommodate the change from a solely counter-narcotics mission to one that is focused on counter-narcoterrorism training for the national police and the Colombian army.

The result of this “expanded authority” for U.S. forces in Colombia has been greater attention to enhancing the Colombian security forces’ ability to “find, fix, and finish” narco-terrorists in support of the Colombian counter narco-terrorist strategy.¹ In the case of A Company, 2/7 SFG, this translated into a mission to train, advise, and assist both the Colombian Special Operations Forces (SOF) and the Colombian National Police (CNP) during its rotation from July to October 2006. A Company’s mission involved working with the BACOA (*Batallón Comando*) and the *Lanceros (Agrupación Lanceros)* at the Army training base at Tolemaida, the Colombian Army Special Forces Brigade at Larandia (and six outsites), and with the CNP’s *Carabineros* and *Junglas* at the Gabriel Gonzalez Police Training School at Espinal.² The Special Forces company (-) organized for the deployment as an advanced operating base (AOB). The multiple training locations dictated by the mission stretched the unit’s capabilities to the maximum.



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

Normally, the mission in Colombia would be directed by a Special Forces battalion headquarters. The battalion staff would function in its doctrinal role as a forward operating base (FOB) providing command and control of AOB(s) operating at the various locations. However, the 7th SFG’s Global War on Terrorism requirements precluded deployment of the 2nd Battalion headquarters



Map of Colombia highlighting training sites.

Expanded Authority

AFTER 11 September 2001, Congress passed House Resolution 4775, legislation specifically designed to fund operations in Colombia that targeted the narco-terrorist factions. This “**expanded authority**,” was codified by National Security Presidential Directive 18 in November 2002.¹ Under expanded authority, the U.S. military was allowed greater latitude for coordination with the Colombian military, including the sharing of intelligence and coordination of Psychological Operations specifically targeting terrorist organizations. The expanded authority allowed Special Forces soldiers working with the Colombians to actively assist the Colombian government in fighting the counter-narcoterrorists, whereas prior to the directive, the Special Forces were limited to counter-drug operations.²

HR 4775: 2002 Supplemental Appropriations Act for Further Recovery From and Response To Terrorist Attacks on the United States (Enrolled as Agreed to or Passed by Both House and Senate)

Chapter 3, Department of Defense; SEC. 305. (a)(1) In fiscal year 2002, funds available to the Department of Defense for assistance to the Government of Colombia shall be available to support a unified campaign against narcotics trafficking, against activities by organizations designated as terrorist organizations such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the National Liberation Army (ELN), and the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), and to take actions to protect human health and welfare in emergency circumstances, including undertaking rescue operations.³

- 1 National Security Presidential Directive 18 in November 2002 is classified Secret, copy, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 2 Captain Hector Baca-Ibarra*, 1st Psychological Operations Battalion, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Jones Jr., 20 November 2004, Raleigh, NC, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 3 HR 4775, 2002 Supplemental Appropriations Act for Further Recovery From and Response To Terrorist Attacks on the United States (Enrolled as Agreed to or Passed by Both House and Senate), <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/F?c107:l:/temp/~c107XPJtKf:e42615>.

in this role. The mission required the AOB to perform duties normally handled by the battalion staff. To accomplish this mission, the AOB commander, Major John H. Norman*, augmented the AOB operations center with ODA 744 to run around-the-clock operations and task organized his other teams, ODAs 741, 745, and 746, as well as one attached team, ODA 753, to cover the training requirements at three major training locations and several outsites.³ A second attached team, ODA 723, was supported by the AOB while working on a sensitive SOCSOUTH mission. The AOB was also supporting an ODA in Paraguay performing a Joint/Combined Exchange Training mission (JCET), an ODA in Chile on a Humanitarian Demining Assistance mission, and a portion of one ODA (a “split team”) in Ecuador on a JCET. In



Lancers preparing for demolitions training at Toleraida.

addition, ODA 725 from AOB 730 was conducting a JCET in Panama and reported to AOB 740.⁴ The AOB provided command and control for these ODAs during their missions and direct support to the ODAs in Colombia.

Captain Roberto Gómez*, the ODA 744 team leader serving as the operations center director, described the AOB mission: “It is to provide support to the ODAs in the outstations. We handle all their support requests and prepare the standard SITREP [situation report], the ‘commander’s eyes’ report each day.”⁵ Supporting the requirements from the teams occupies the night-shift personnel in the AOB. The AOB operations center had to maintain 100 percent accountability and communications with the dispersed elements of the company.

The communications network established by the AOB was wide ranging. It included continuous communications with all ODA elements at the outstations, with the teams in Paraguay, Chile, and Panama, the 7th Group Headquarters at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and SOCSOUTH in Florida. This included both voice communications and digital connectivity. Operations in Colombia were run using a web-based system that provided digital links to all the sites and the AOB much as they do in Afghanistan and Iraq. The high threat environment in Colombia required 100 percent accountability of U.S. personnel at all times and constant communications with all teams. The AOB also kept track of all U.S. military personnel temporarily in country, such as a team of Marines on a site survey for an upcoming deployment and the crew of an Air Force MC-130 stranded in Bogotá awaiting a spare part.⁶



Banner erected by the cadre in the training area of the Special Forces Brigade at Larandia—a common practice in Colombia.



Carabineros in training at the National Police training area near Espinal.

While in country, these personnel maintained regular contact with the AOB.

The transportation of supplies to support the outlying teams was done primarily by air. This mission received a major portion of the AOB's attention. Ammunition and supplies brought into Colombia were required to clear customs. Sergeant First Class Soren A. Sjogren*, the S-3 Air (aviation operations), met all the aircraft, dealt with the Colombian customs personnel, and prepared the extensive paperwork required. Properly clearing the ammunition and supplies into country was the first step in supporting the teams. Getting it into the hands of the users was the second.

Colombia is a nation the size of Texas and California combined and vast tracts of the country are roadless. In many areas, the threat posed by the narco-terrorists reduces the use of available roads and that usage is restricted to daylight hours. This places a premium on air transportation for personnel and supply. A precisely synchronized "air bridge" of U.S. Air Force transport aircraft and contract air carried the bulk of the supplies required—most notably ammunition. Coordinated well before the deployment by Chief Warrant Officer 4 Solomon Delaney* of the 7th SFG S-3, the maintenance of this resupply pipeline required a constant dialogue between the AOB and the 7th SFG headquarters at Fort Bragg, as well as with the teams at the outsites and in Paraguay, Chile, and Panama. Ammunition had to be stored, handled, issued, and accounted for daily. Because of the many different types of ammunition involved, two soldiers from the AOB were dedicated to the mission of running the ammunition supply point (ASP) in Tolemaida.

Staff Sergeant Allan Stillman* was attached to AOB 740 from ODA 746 to serve as an ammunition specialist at the U.S. ASP at the Tolemaida training base. Here, he worked with ODA 745. He arrived in Tolemaida with the team on 12 July 2006, aboard a U.S. Air Force C-17 that delivered twelve pallets of ammunition to be used by the U.S. and Colombian forces.⁷ Assisted by Sergeant Donald Revere*, a wheeled-vehicle mechanic and the forklift driver who moved the ammunition, Stillman inventoried the ammo, separated it by type, and stored



Ammunition for the ODAs in the outlying sites was stored and maintained by ODA 746 at the Ammunition Supply Point at Tolemaida.

it in the CONEXes that constituted the ASP. All three of the major U.S. training sites in Colombia were supplied from the ASP. On occasion, Stillman and Revere delivered ammunition to the ODA at Larandia using contract fixed wing airlift coordinated by the AOB.⁸

For Revere, when he was not driving "Atlas," the rough-terrain forklift that was used at the ASP, he was the primary "fleet" mechanic at Tolemaida servicing a High Mobility Multi-Purpose Wheeled Vehicle (HUMMWV), a John Deere six-wheeled "Gator," and several contract pickup trucks.⁹ Revere arranged for gasoline with Colombian base operations personnel at Tolemaida, negotiated local purchase of necessary spare parts, and assisted the ODA members during the training.¹⁰ Periodically, Revere and Stillman returned to the AOB in Bogotá in conjunction with the delivery of ammunition and coordinated new requirements. The ammunition requirement shows how the scope of the AOB mission extended beyond routine administrative and logistics tasks.

A major function of the AOB S-4 (logistics) personnel was establishing and monitoring contracts. Virtually every aspect of the operations in Colombia depended to some degree on contract support. Housing the personnel in Bogotá, transportation in the city and out to the unit sites, cell phones for all personnel, and office equipment for use in the AOB were only some of the support requirements covered by contracts. Contracts were initiated through the Embassy and had to be cleared through the Embassy security personnel, but the burden fell to the AOB to make sure the contracts were renewed on time and the proper services provided. A continuous focus for the AOB was the need to practice force protection procedures. U.S. personnel in Colombia essentially live and work in an "armed camp."

For the U.S. troops in Colombia, force protection is a



U.S. Air Force C-17 aircraft provided a substantial portion of the airlift to supply the operations in Colombia.



"Atlas," the rough-terrain forklift, provided the ammunition handling capability at the ASP in Tolemaida.

vital and on-going operation. Colombia is the number one nation in the world for kidnapping. The illegally-armed groups practice this on a huge scale to fund their operations. Three American contractors working in Colombia were kidnapped following the crash of their light plane in February 2003, and are still in captivity. The Special Forces elements take extensive precautions to preclude the possibility of their soldiers being kidnapped. Policies such as no alcohol consumption in country, use of the "two-man rule" for any movement, the employment of armored vans for transportation, and the careful inspection and frequent changing of contract living quarters are just some of the precautions necessary in Colombia. Every individual traveling within Bogotá and to the outstations is required to follow a detailed travel plan and check in with the AOB according to a fixed schedule. Travelers carry a "skat bag" with communications and personal protection equipment should the need arise to escape a kidnapping attempt. Every member rehearses the escape and evasion plan as part of this preparation. All the company personnel in country practice marksmanship training twice a week and every member rehearses the procedures for a medical evacuation or to execute a quick reaction force (QRF) mission to rescue an American.¹¹ ODA 746 was the first choice for a QRF by virtue of its location near the airfield in Tolemaida. The force protection threat is determined by the MILGP and the Embassy security personnel and the AOB conforms to the established threat level.

First Lieutenant Brandon Gorham* commanded the Military Intelligence Detachment supporting the AOB. His primary mission was running the force protection program of the AOB in Bogotá and disseminating the necessary intelligence to the teams at the outlying sites so that they could exercise proper precautions. To accomplish this, he had a desk in the Embassy Intelligence Fusion Center to coordinate the intelligence collection process. "I deal with the MILGP, the NAS [Narcotics Affairs Section], the DAO [Defense Attaché Office] and everyone else I can talk to."¹² Using both U.S. and Colombian intelligence gathering assets Gorham provided the commander a very complete intelligence picture. Like

the rest of the soldiers manning the AOB, to be effective he had to get away from the "hands-on" aspects of intelligence collection and function as a staff officer supporting the teams in the field.

Master Sergeant Raymond E. Ruíz*, who was responsible for running the operations center night shift, commented that the AOB "functioned in the role of coordinator. We do what we can to take the burden off the teams. The ODAs feel the real vibrations when they are stretched."¹³ In addition to handling the requirements for aviation support, ammunition, and equipment for the teams in the field, the AOB performed numerous "housekeeping" details. A steady stream of visitors from the 7th SFG, SOCSOUTH, and SOUTHCOM meant picking up VIPs at the Bogotá International Airport, bringing visitors through customs, arranging lodging and providing transportation, as well as the constant requirements associated with force protection. It was the versatility of the troops manning the AOB that made this possible.

"You have to learn to conduct the orchestra, not play the instruments." That was the Battle Captain's Creed, in the words of Master Sergeant Keith Jordan* who aptly described the role of the U.S. Army Special Operations personnel at AOB 740 in Colombia.¹⁴ When the AOB handed off the mission to AOB 730 of C Company, 1st Battalion, 7th SFG, it had gained valuable experience running a complex and sensitive mission. It was excellent preparation for upcoming deployments in the Global War on Terrorism.

AOB 730 inherited the operations and support requirements, contracting mission, and extensive communications network from AOB 740. AOB 730's mission placed an emphasis on training and advising the *Centro de Retrenamiento Táctico Del Ejército* (CERTe, "Sir-Tay"), the instructor cadre of the Colombian Army's Non-Commissioned Officers Academy.¹⁵ In addition to the main operation at Tolemaida, AOB 730 supported six outstations with instructor/trainers, as well as teams in Paraguay, Ecuador, and Peru.¹⁶ Colonel Edward M. Reeder Jr., the commander of the 7th SFG, described the mission of the Group in Colombia in this manner: "The 7th Special Forces Group's commitment to the Colombian counter-narco-terrorist mission represents an unparalleled investment with the SOUTHCOM theater of operation, which has been a critical part of the Global War on Terror. Over the past two decades, the 7th SFG(A) has been exceptionally successful in Colombia, assisting in the security and safety of our Partner Nation through our charter of training, assisting, and advising the Colombian Army and National Police. This progress can be measured directly by the dramatically improved stability of Colombia. The Colombian security picture today stands in stark contrast of the difficult and violent days of years past."¹⁷ For the Special Forces soldiers on the ODAs, advising, assisting, and training the Colombian forces is the essence of their mission. For those serving in the AOBs, the vital mission in Colombia entails diplomatic liaison and constant coordination to enhance Colombia's

capacity to succeed in the fight against narco-terrorism while providing the command and control of the units for SOCSOUTH. ▲

Endnotes

- 1 Command Brief, AOB 740, A Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group, 19 July 2006, briefing Bogotá, Colombia, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 2 Command Brief, AOB 740, A Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group, 19 July 2006, briefing Bogotá, Colombia, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 3 Major John H. Norman III*, A Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 23 July 2006, Bogotá, Colombia, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 4 Chief Warrant Officer 4 Solomon Delaney*, 7th Special Forces Group, e-mail to Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 13 December 2006, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 5 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.
- 6 Gómez* interview.
- 7 Staff Sergeant Allan Stillman*, ODA 744, A Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 20 July 2006, Tolemaida, Colombia, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 8 Stillman* interview.
- 9 Sergeant Donald Revere*, Headquarters Support Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 20 July 2006, Tolemaida, Colombia, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 10 Revere* interview.
- 11 Norman* interview.
- 12 First Lieutenant Brandon Gorham*, Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 24 July 2006, Bogotá, Colombia, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 13 Master Sergeant Raymond E. Ruiz*, A Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 23 July 2006, Bogotá, Colombia, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 14 Master Sergeant Keith Jordan*, ODA 744, A Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 23 July 2006, Bogotá, Colombia, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 15 Command Brief, AOB 730, C Company, 1st Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group, October 2006, briefing Bogotá, Colombia, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 16 Chief Warrant Officer 4 Solomon Delaney*, 7th Special Forces Group, e-mail to Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 13 December 2006, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 17 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.

