

# Special Forces in Larandia: ODA 753 and the CERTE

by Robert W. Jones Jr.

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

**ONE** of the tasks given to A Company, 7th Special Forces Group (ODB 740) for its deployment to Colombia was to support the Colombian *Centro de Re-entrenamiento Táctico Del Ejército* (CERTE—Army Tactical Retraining Center). The CERTE is the organization responsible for sustainment training of the Colombian Army. The Colombian typical battle rhythm has units in the field for ninety days conducting security operations, followed by about thirty days of sustainment training before returning to the field and combat operations. The CERTE instructors travel to bases throughout the Colombian Army to retrain soldiers after field time and leave. The A Company Commander, Major John H. Norman\* assigned the mission to operational detachment alpha (ODA) 753.<sup>1</sup>

ODA 753's deployment into Colombia would center on assisting in the CERTE sustainment training. Special Forces ODAs frequently train for "split team" operations; dividing the ODA in half. However, ODA 753 would take that normal division to another level.<sup>2</sup> In a two month period ODA 753 would assist and advise the CERTE at six different sites, three concurrently. Each team task organized according to the mission requirements. This article describes the overall mission and experience of one Special Forces training team in Larandia.<sup>3</sup>

The Larandia base is located near Florencia, the capital of the Caquetá department, about 250 miles south of Bogotá. The base is located less than two hours drive south from the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) demilitarized zone in the center of the country, sometimes referred to "FARClandia" by the Special Forces soldiers. The primary means of transportation into the base is fixed wing air-

craft into the small airstrip. It is about a three-hour flight (CASA-212) from Bogotá. Because of the FARC activity in the area, Larandia is a closed base for the Special Forces soldiers. As one of the soldiers observed, "It's a good way to save money, you work all day with the Colombians, do some PT, plan the next day's activities, and then get some sleep."<sup>4</sup>

At Fort Bragg, ODA 753 prepared for the deployment. A detailed mission analysis identified the need for training and assistance teams at three different sites working concurrently. At the end of a month-long training cycle the teams would move to another site with the Colombian cadre and begin a new training cycle with the next unit. To prepare for the mission each of the soldiers reviewed their primary specialty skills and cross-trained in other specialties to better assist the Colombian instructors. They were validating the "train the trainer" concept. The three- and four-man teams spread out throughout Colombia, some going to army bases that had never had a U.S. Special Forces presence before.<sup>5</sup>

With the U.S. Special Forces serving as assistant instructors to the Colombians, language skills were very important. The soldiers had completed the basic four-month Spanish language course at the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, which provided the fundamentals of the language. The Americans practiced their language skills during training and while maintaining contact with the Colombian instructors and soldiers. At the end of the deployment the soldiers' knowledge of Spanish had improved dramatically.<sup>6</sup>

The team sergeant for Team 3 (and the ODA 753 operations sergeant) Master Sergeant Mitchell Little\* was



7th Special Forces Group beret flash



ODA 753 unofficial emblem



The Colombian Centro de Re-entrenamiento Táctico Del Ejército (CERTE—Army Tactical Retraining Center) is responsible for sustainment training of the Colombian Army.



# Training in



Entrance to one of the CERTE training sites. This training would compare to Common Task Training in the U.S. Army. The sign describes the task, condition, and standard for the training at that site.



Communications station prepared for training with the PRC-710 radio. This training site would compare to many in the U.S. Army.



After running from a previous station, these soldiers conduct calisthenics. Then they must accurately transmit a radio message in a specified time.



CERTE Instructors oversee a zero range at Larandia.



Colombian soldiers listen to a CERTE instructor prior to conducting IED detection training. This CERTE instructor has over ten years of combat engineer experience against the FARC.



# Larandia



**IED detection training at Larandia Here the soldiers use the mine detector to find IEDs.**



**Once something suspicious has been found a soldier may use a probe to find the explosives.**



**An alternate method is to use an explosive dog to find IEDs.**



**This "toe popper" IED uses a syringe to conduct the electric circuit.**



**Here a trigger device is hidden inside a discarded potato chip bag, waiting for someone to step on it.**



## ODA 753 Task Organization for the CERTE mission

### HQ (Tolemaida)

CPT 18A Det Cdr  
SFC 18D Medic

### Team 1 (Aguachica & El Cenizo)

SFC 18D Medic  
SFC 18B Weapons  
SSG 18E Commo  
SFC 18F Intelligence

### Team 2 (La Australia & Cupiagua)

SFC 18E Commo  
SSG 18B Weapons  
SSG 18C Engineer  
SSG 18B Weapons

### Team 3 (Larandia & Zarsal)

MSG 18Z Team SGT  
SSG 18D Medic  
SSG 18E Commo



*The reinforced ODA 753 would accomplish its mission at the six different sites shown above.*

familiar with this training scenario. An experienced 7th SFG veteran, he had already been deployed to Colombia, as well as other Latin American countries, and Afghanistan. But, this was his first deployment after three years as an instructor in the Robin Sage training exercise of the Special Forces Qualification Course. In addition to assisting the CERTE instructors, Little and his team spent a large part of the time coordinating logistics support for the Colombians.<sup>7</sup>

In order to complete the split mission, ODA 753 needed more personnel. While not ideal, one ODA from A Company provided the manpower to fulfill company missions. Most of the “fills” came from ODA 744. That team had been assigned a support role: augmenting the Company headquarters in Bogotá and teams in Tolemaida and Larandia. Both of the soldiers on MSG Little’s team were temporarily assigned for the CERTE mission.<sup>8</sup>

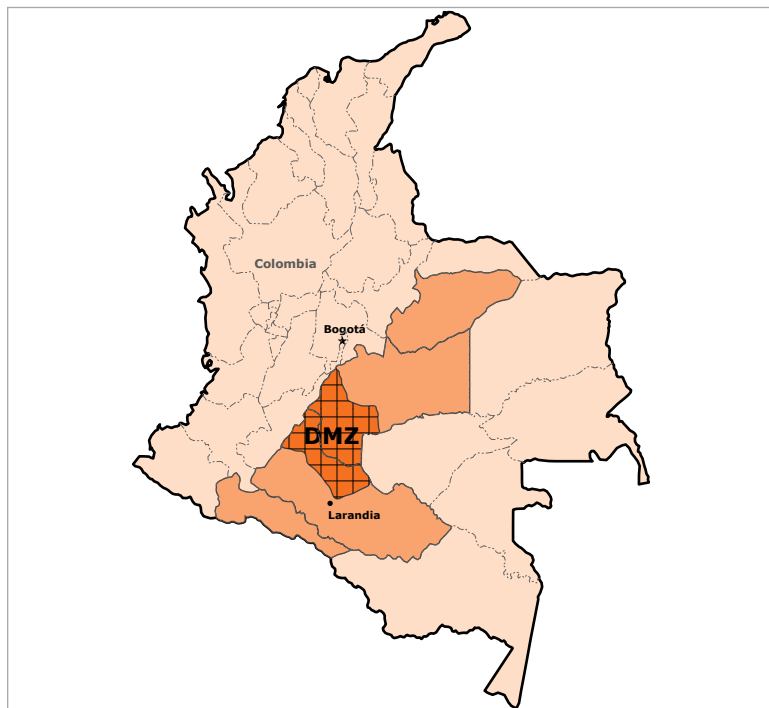
The second team member was the communicator, Staff Sergeant Thomas Lawless\*. From Washington state, Lawless had enlisted in the Army in 2004 under the Special Forces Initial Accessions Program, better known as the 18X program. On his first deployment with Special Forces, Lawless balanced daily communications requirements while acting as an assistant instructor to the Colombian cadre, primarily during marksmanship and communications training.<sup>9</sup>

The third team member was the medic, Staff Sergeant Clint Wilson\*. Medical care is always critical on a deployment, especially in remote areas, like Larandia. After enlisting in the Army in 2001 under a Ranger contract then Private Wilson discovered the 18X program as he

finished infantry training at Fort Benning. He was able to switch his assignment choice to Special Forces and joined the second 18X class in 2002. Wilson had already deployed to Colombia in 2005 for six months to support the Infrastructure Security Strategy (ISS) mission in the Arauca department. As a medic, he maintained medical readiness of the U.S. soldiers and the Colombians. Wilson also assisted in medic and first aid training. Most of his time was spent at the Colombian training sites and ranges. “Medics everywhere have a special bond. Their job is to share knowledge and training to complete the same task, taking care of people.”<sup>10</sup>

The CERTE followed a four-week training program. The first week, Phase 1, (unilateral training) consisting of human rights (three days with training scenarios), Psychological Operations, and then specialty training, communications, medical, and demolitions. Phase 2 (week 2) consisted of individual soldier skills, from weapons marksmanship to basic soldiering. Training transitioned into squad, platoon and company collective training during Phase 3. The program of instruction ended with a field training exercise emphasizing mission planning and actions on the objective. The final Field Training Exercise incorporated the skills and tactics reviewed and practiced during the previous three weeks.<sup>11</sup>

The CERTE instructors led by Major Santa Mariá and Captain Álvarez in Larandia were all combat experienced veterans of the ongoing guerrilla war. These instructors improved a well-developed four-week program of instruction (POI) based on their experience. One instructor took the standard POI for mines and booby



Map of Colombia showing the "DMZ/FARClandia" and Larandia.

traps (IEDs) and improved it, by including his and other instructor's collective experiences fighting the insurgents. Another instructor, Sergeant Ortega, had been a prisoner of war (a *sequestrado* or "kidnapped") of the FARC for eleven months. He escaped, made his way alone through the jungle, and returned to the army after seven days of escape and evasion. His experiences were incorporated into survival training.<sup>12</sup>

In Larandia, the team of eighteen CERTE instructors and the Special Forces advisors prepared to retrain of one of the counter-guerrilla battalions. Each Colombian Division contains a mix of infantry and counter-guerrilla battalions. A Colombian line infantry battalion is comparable in size to a U.S. Army battalion with between 500 to 700 soldiers. These battalions are usually tied to a geographic location to provide area security.



A member of FMTU-5 indicates that the Colombian Special Forces sniper is doing well.

Therefore, the unit would conduct local combat operations. These units are filled with conscripts doing their two years of mandatory national service. The counter-guerrilla battalions are different.<sup>13</sup>

Usually commanded by a Major, a Colombian Army *Batallón Contra Guerrilla* (BCG—counter-guerrilla battalion) is organized and trained to deploy rapidly to contested areas, specifically to fight guerrillas. Therefore, it is lightly armed and equipped to provide mobility. A BCG contains 200 to 250 soldiers, organized into four companies, each with two platoons. The unit is not committed to a specific department or territory and the division commander sends them anywhere in his area of responsibility. The majority of soldiers in the BCGs are professional soldiers, not conscripts.<sup>14</sup>

During the last part of its mission the ODA 753 teams assisted in the training of an airmobile company-sized quick reaction force (QRF) for each of the seven divisions in the Colombian Army. A company-sized QRF in standby enabled each division commander to react to rapidly changing tactical situations.

Because Special Forces are spread thin by other operational missions in Latin America and commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq other service units in U.S. Special Operations Command were preparing for SOF missions in Colombia. A training team from the newly formed Foreign Military Training Unit (FMTU), a newly assigned element of the Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC), arrived in September to assist the Colombians. The team, designated FMTU-5 provided a variety of training, but specifically advanced marksmanship. As the FMTU gains experience, it will take over some of the training missions in Colombia.

The deployment to Colombia will be one of many for the ODA 753 soldiers. At the end of the training cycle the Colombians would be better trained and prepared to return to combat. In return, the Special Forces soldiers gained valuable training experience working with the CERTE instructors. The deployment was best summed by SSG Lawless, "You can give someone all of the info and lectures, but you've got to experience it to really know what it's like."<sup>15</sup> ▲



Two Counter-Guerrilla Battalion logos from Larandia, both are part of the rapid reaction units in the Colombian Army.



The Foreign Military Training Unit is a new special operations unit and the first subordinate unit of Marine Special Operations Command.



MARSOC emblem





Members of ODA 753 Team 3 with FMTU-5 Marines in Larandia.



View of one of the new barracks built at Larandia using Plan Colombia funds.

## Endnotes

- 1 ODA 753 briefing, 23 July 2006, Larandia, Colombia, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; **Battle rhythm can be defined as "the procedures a unit does on a daily basis to prepare and operation in combat"** (Field Manual 3-05.301, Psychological Operations Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures, 31 December 2003, 2–20).
- 2 Department of the Army, Field Manual 3-05, *Army Special Operations Forces*, 20 September 2006, p. 3-4.
- 3 Master Sergeant Mitchell Little\*, ODA 753, 7th Special Forces Group, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 23 July 2006, Larandia, Colombia, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 4 Little\* interview.
- 5 Little\* interview.
- 6 Staff Sergeant Clint Wilson\*, ODA 753, 7th Special Forces Group, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Jones Jr., 23 July 2006, Larandia, Colombia, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Little\* interview.
- 7 Little\* interview.
- 8 Little\* interview.
- 9 Staff Sergeant Thomas Lawless\*, ODA 753, 7th Special Forces Group, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 23 July 2006, Larandia, Colombia, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 10 Wilson\* interview.
- 11 ODA 753 briefing; Little\* interview.
- 12 Little\* interview.
- 13 Background information on Colombian units provided by Major Mark Douglass\*, Planning and Assistance Training Team, 4th Division, Meta Department, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Jones Jr., 24 July 2006, Bogotá, Colombia, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 14 Douglass\* interview.
- 15 Lawless\* interview.

