

“Who taught these guys to shoot like Chuck Norris?”

ODA 746 in Tolémaida

by Robert W. Jones Jr.

NUMEROUS U.S. Special Forces (SF) teams have deployed to Colombia over the years to train Colombian Army elements at the sprawling base of Tolémaida. It was now time for Operational Detachment A 746. The element was stood up as the sixth operational detachment alpha (ODA) of A Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (2/7th SFG) in mid-October 2005. Besides being the newest ODA, 746 was also a “young”

18X

THE Special Forces Initial Accessions Program, better known as the 18X program, began in 2001 as an attempt to increase Special Forces recruitment. The 18X program allows a civilian “off the street” to join the Army with the intention of becoming a Special Forces soldier after two years of training. Prior to the establishment of the 18X program, soldiers, usually with two to four years of experience, would attend Phase 1, the Special Forces Assessment and Selection (SFAS) portion, the first hurdle to Special Forces qualification. The 18X recruit attends Infantry One Station Unit Training and airborne school at Fort Benning, Georgia. Once his training at Fort Benning is complete, the soldier travels to Fort Bragg to attend SFAS and if successful begins the Special Forces Qualification Course. Many 18X are not “off the street” civilians without a military background, but instead are prior service soldiers. They left the military after completing an enlistment and rejoined the Army specifically to be Special Forces and to serve their country.¹

1 Command Sergeant Major Michael S. Bresseale, “The 18X Program: Ensuring the Future Health of Special Forces,” *Special Warfare*, May 2004, 28–31.

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

team. It was made up of four experienced Special Forces non-commissioned officers (NCOs), a new ODA commander, and six recent graduates of the Special Forces qualification course who had entered the Army through the “18X program.” These newcomers to Special Forces joined the 7th SFG in late October and early November 2005. During the first nine months, Red Cycle (support) interrupted team training. This article discusses the first overseas deployment for ODA 746. It was also the first SF deployment for most of the team members.¹

The training mission was typical for Special Forces, but it was to be Phase II training. The ODA was to “train the trainer” to enable Colombians to instruct and evaluate their own soldiers in advanced infantry tactics and techniques. ODA 746 was assigned two mission sets: train selected soldiers of the Special Forces Brigade (*Brigada de Fuerzas Especiales*—BRFER) and the Commando Battalion (*Batallón de Comando Ambroseo Almaeda*—BACOA) in advanced infantry tactics, advanced marksmanship skills, and airmobile operations. While both units are part of the Colombian special forces, they are assigned to different commands; the Special Forces Brigade is part of the *Fuerza de Despeque Rápido* (FUDRA, the rapid deployment force) and is a national-level force controlled by Colombian Army Headquarters. The second unit, the BACOA, is the Colombian special forces unit assigned to the COESE (*Comando de Operaciones Especiales Ejército*). The COESE is the Colombian equivalent of a miniatur-



7th Special Forces Group beret flash



ODA 746 logo



Colombian SF Brigade insignia



BACOA symbol

ized U.S. Army Special Operations Command.³

Training foreign soldiers is always challenging. It is no different in Colombia. During the “train the trainer” classes, the Special Forces soldiers had to accept that their instructor students could be pulled out unexpectedly because their unit was going into combat. During the first week of training, five medics left training to rejoin their deploying units.⁴ The Colombian “battle rhythm” is typically ninety days in the field conducting security operations, followed by thirty days in garrison. During the garrison phase, the soldiers take leave and receive training. The ODA 746 mission in Colombia eventually evolved into assisting the Colombian instructors with sustainment training because of the operational tempo.⁵

The optimal training schedule prepared at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, was quickly adjusted when faced with reality at Tolemaida. Prior to beginning advanced marksmanship training, one of the first tasks was to assess the shooting skills of the students. The medics conducted both eye and ear screening for the Colombians; if they could not see the target, getting on the range was pointless. The Special Forces cadre then began with a simple “stress test” of shooting skills. It started with a short run that ended at the firing range. Then, the soldiers had to first engage several targets through a doorway before moving through the door into an open area to engage multiple targets. The stress test bypassed the usual anti-septic firing range that the soldiers had grown accustomed to and made the shooting realistic. During the stress test, it became evident that many of the Colombian soldiers had picked up bad habits, prompting one Special Forces NCO to ask, “Who taught these guys to shoot like Chuck Norris?” He meant “Hollywood” style—spraying the rounds from the hip, instead of aimed shots. These bad habits had to be corrected immediately.⁶

Shooting dominated the ODA 746 effort in Tolemaida. Together the team designed and conducted a basic shooting course for the Colombian special forces units. Within

Tolemaida

TOLEMAIDA is located about seventy kilometers southwest of Bogotá near the resort town of Melgar. Tolemaida is a large sprawling training base, sometimes called the “Fort Benning” of the Colombian Army. The base is home to infantry training, home of the Colombian Army *Lancero* (1955) and Airborne (1964) schools, and the Army’s major engineer unit. The Army base is colocated with the Colombian Air Force “*Capitán Teniente Coronel Luis Francisco Pinto Parra*” airbase and home of the Combat Air Command No 4 (*Comando Aereo De Combate No 4*). U.S. Special Forces have had a continuous training presence in Tolemaida for the past ten years.



The Lancero sign at Tolemaida.



The Lancero memorial statue in Tolemaida.

a few days, the Colombians, practicing good shooting techniques, were consistently hitting designated targets with well-aimed shots. The experience gained from the American instructors would be multiplied when the Colombian sergeants returned to their units to teach their soldiers these marksmanship skills.

One of the critical things that the Special Forces bring to training is more ammunition, and in large quantities.



An ODA 746 sergeant takes a BACOA Comando through the shooting course. To their rear another Colombian with an American shoot through a window facade.



View of the firing line. Colombians from the BACOA are armed with M-4 rifles.

The Colombian instructor/students shot more in a week than they typically did in a year. Ammunition management was critical to the advanced marksmanship training. An additional NCO, Staff Sergeant Allan Stillman*, a weapons sergeant (18B) from ODA 744, was attached to ODA 746 at Tolemaida specifically to manage the ammunition and insure accountability safeguards were in place. This responsibility had to be learned during the deployment. Managing large amounts of ammunition for units training in different parts of the country is not something a brand new 18B normally does. At Tolemaida, Stillman had a double management challenge—the ammunition used by the Colombians and the training ammunition for the U.S. Special Forces teams while deployed.⁷

Another attachment to the ODA was a mechanic, Sergeant Donald Revere*, from the battalion support company, 2nd Battalion, 7th SFG. Although the light-wheel vehicle mechanic (military occupation specialty 63B) was a veteran of two Afghanistan and one Colombia deployments, his duties were not limited to repairing the vehicles at Tolemaida. Being bilingual, Revere assisted several of the new Special Forces sergeants with classes. He also operated the forklift supporting Stillman with the ammunition. Revere's multiple talents proved invaluable at Tolemaida.⁸

For the 18Xs on their first deployment overseas, Tolemaida was a good environment in which to practice newly acquired skills and learn from the Colombians. Sergeant Douglas Franks* had enlisted right after high school graduation. The Idahoan graduated from the "Q" Course on 28 October 2005, as a Special Forces engineer (18C). Once assigned to the 7th SFG, he was cross-trained at the Special Warfare Center and School as a communications sergeant (18E) because there was a shortage of that specialty in the 7th Group. At Tolemaida, Franks worked communications and helped teach demolitions to the Colombians. "The Colombians were eager to learn, and we [the Americans] would show up early for scheduled training, not just to prepare, but to practice our Spanish," said Franks. He discovered that his Spanish basic language training had provided just that, the basics. He went to work identifying words and phrases needed to instruct the Colombians. His tactics, weapons, and demolitions dictionary quickly grew to over fifteen pages as training progressed.⁹

The demolitions training followed the crawl-walk-run system. Training began with a series of practice "dirt shots," literally blowing holes in the ground. Then, the Special Forces engineers taught wood, followed by steel cutting techniques. The training culminated in an exercise to clear a helicopter landing zone. This entailed cutting down several trees with explosives. Members of ODA 746 also prepared other specialty courses for the Colombians.¹⁰

One of the sub-tasks assigned to ODA 746 was to conduct sniper training. This was given to the weapons sergeants, Staff Sergeant Israel Estévez* and Staff Sergeant Daniel Cazadores*, both on their first Special



ODA 746 members and Colombians prepare demolition charges during training.



A Colombian special forces soldier sets charges on a tree. One challenge is to use just enough to clear the tree and not waste explosives.



After preparing and setting the charges, an SF sergeant oversees a Colombian soldier as they prepare to detonate the explosives.



BACOA snipers and Americans firing at the sniper range. The M40 sniper system is clearly visible.



ODA 746 soldiers fire the .50 caliber M82 Barrett sniper rifle.



BACOA snipers and Americans firing the M40 sniper system at the Tolemaida range.

Forces deployment. As the primary instructor, Estévez had two weeks to train the Colombian snipers. The range area provided by the Colombians enabled shots up to 800 meters, a good test for most snipers. Estévez prepared his first class before leaving Fort Bragg, based on the BACOA sniper teams having the American M40 sniper system (a 7.62 caliber Remington 700 rifle with scope). At the end of the two weeks, the Americans introduced the Colombians to the .50 caliber Barrett sniper system.¹¹ It was also an opportunity for the other ODA members to train with the weapons system. But, shooting was not the only training ODA 746 planned.¹²

The helicopter is key to quickly deploy forces in Colombia. The Colombians' major method of infiltration is by rappelling from a helicopter into small landing zones cut out of the jungle. ODA 746 introduced them to "Fast Roping" infiltration. The "Fast Rope" is a single thick rope that allows multiple soldiers to descend from a helicopter rapidly. This technique allows a Black Hawk helicopter load of soldiers to get on the ground in seconds rather than the several minutes via rappelling. While inexperienced in terms of their number of deployments, the ODA members were well trained in their various tasks.

Integrated into the training for the Colombians were team prepara-



Standard rappelling technique. This takes longer and exposes both the helicopter and the soldiers to enemy fire.



Practicing Fast Rope insertion using the Lancero school tower.



Soldiers descending on Fast Ropes. Multiple soldiers can descend on the same rope, unlike rappelling where only one per line can infiltrate.



Two members of ODA 746 ham it up for the camera during medical cross-training. One SF soldier needs to practice more often.

tions for a future deployment to Afghanistan. The ODA members planned and executed training to strengthen individual and team skills. The detachment commander, team sergeant, and operations sergeant designed the training program, emphasizing physical fitness and shooting as the baseline, knowing both were essential in Afghanistan. Thus, the classes the Special Forces soldiers presented to the Colombians reinforced specialties and provided cross-training to the others.

ODA 746 had only one soldier who had previously deployed to Colombia—an experienced operations sergeant, Sergeant First Class Edward Bennett*. It was his fifth deployment to Colombia dating back to 1996. After many years in the 7th SFG and a three year tour at the Special Warfare Center and School, Bennett shared two observations on the mission. First, the quality of the Colombian soldiers had improved over time. The majority of them were now “professional soldiers” who had already served their two-year conscription. They had reenlisted for a specialty, one of which was special oper-

ations. Second, the training and living facilities in Tolemaida had improved dramatically since 1996. The Colombian Army had dedicated considerable resources to improve the quality of life for the soldiers and their families, including housing and medical care. All told, ODA 746 did “. . . exactly what we came here to do,” said Bennett, which was “to improve the Colombians ability to conduct advanced marksmanship, tactics, and airmobile training.”¹³ ▲

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Endnotes

- 1 ODA 746 briefing, 20 July 2006, Tolemaida, Colombia, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Sergeant First Class Edward Bennett*, ODA 746, 7th Special Forces Group, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Jones Jr., 21 July 2006, Tolemaida, Colombia, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 2 “AOB 740 Historian Introduction Briefing, July 2006,” Bogotá, Colombia, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; **The COESE has a staff of less than fifty Colombian military.**
- 4 Staff Sergeant Daniel Cazadores*, ODA 746, 7th Special Forces Group, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 21 July 2006, Tolemaida, Colombia, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 5 **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).
- 6 Staff Sergeant Israel Estévez*, ODA 746, 7th Special Forces Group, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 21 July 2006, Tolemaida, Colombia, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 7 Cazadores* interview; Staff Sergeant Allan Stillman*, ODA 744, 7th Special Forces Group, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 21 July 2006, Tolemaida, Colombia, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 8 Sergeant Donald Revere*, 2nd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 21 July 2006, Tolemaida, Colombia, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 9 Sergeant Douglas Franks*, ODA 746, 7th Special Forces Group, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Jones Jr., 21 July 2006, Tolemaida, Colombia, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 10 Franks* interview.
- 11 **This is the M82 .50 caliber sniper system produced for the military by Barrett Firearms Company.**
- 12 Staff Sergeant Israel Estévez, ODA 746, 7th Special Forces Group, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 21 July 2006, Tolemaida, Colombia, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 13 Bennett* interview.



Illustration by Dan Telles

Team training with the 60mm mortar.