

# U.S. Forces: The Major Command Structure

by Kenneth Finlayson

No nation in Latin America receives more attention from the United States military as does Colombia. The U.S. Army has a history of involvement extending back to the 1950s including Brigadier General William P. Yarborough's visit in 1962. Yarborough's recommendation for training and advising the Colombian military, included in his *Plan Lazo*, continues to be reflected in the U.S. missions and forces that are present in the country. This is most notably the case for the special operations forces (SOF) who have a long-standing advising and training mission with Colombian forces. This article will introduce the major American military commands which are focused on the mission in Colombia from the U.S. Southern Command at the theater level to the 7th Special Forces Group.

The U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) is one of the nine unified combatant commands within the U.S. Department of Defense. A four-star command, SOUTHCOM's area of responsibility (AOR) encompasses Central and South America, the Caribbean (except U.S. possessions, territories and commonwealths), Cuba, and the Bahamas and the territorial waters of each.<sup>1</sup> SOUTHCOM also ensures the defense of the Panama Canal and canal area. As a combatant command, SOUTHCOM is responsible for contingency planning, operations, and security cooperation within the AOR. All SOUTHCOM forces are in theater.

Navy Admiral James G. Stavridis, the commander of SOUTHCOM, took command on 20 October 2006, at the headquarters in Miami, Florida. He commands 1,200 military and civilian personnel from the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Coast Guard, and several other federal agencies.<sup>2</sup> SOUTHCOM is organized into a headquarters, staff directorates, compo-

nent commands, and military groups throughout the AOR. The headquarters relocated to Miami in 1997 from Panama, where SOUTHCOM and its predecessor, the Army's Caribbean Command, had been headquartered since 1904. SOUTHCOM's mission has remained constant over the years, with security assistance traditionally being a primary focus.

The SOUTHCOM mission is to conduct military operations and promote security cooperation to achieve U.S. strategic objectives.<sup>3</sup> To accomplish this, the services provide component commands; a Joint Special Operations Component (Special Operations Command South); two Joint Task Forces, JTF-Bravo in Honduras and JTF-GTMO (Git-mo) in Guantanamo, Cuba; one Joint Interagency Task Force; and security assistance offices in virtually every nation in the AOR.<sup>4</sup> (Security assistance offices in the Military Groups handle Foreign Military Sales and coordinate the International Military Education and Training programs).<sup>5</sup> The SOUTHCOM mission statement delineates the strategic mission goals. Only Colombia is singled out among the other nations in the AOR as important enough to warrant a specific goal: "Support the Colombian government's efforts to defeat terrorists, reduce drug trade, and gain control of Colombian territory, while adhering to the international human rights norms and the rule of law."<sup>6</sup> In Colombia, SOUTHCOM is represented by the Military Group (MILGP), located at the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá.

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



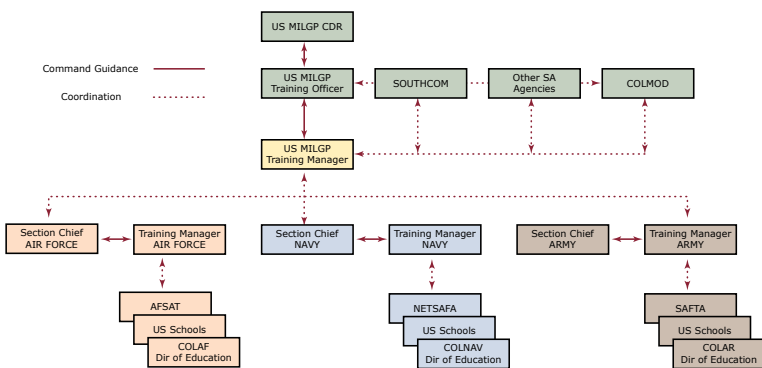
SOUTHCOM  
shoulder patch



Admiral James  
R. Stavridis



SOUTHCOM Area of  
Responsibility



*U.S. Military Group-Colombia Organizational Chart*

A fixture at U.S. embassies around the world, the Military Group is the primary liaison between the Department of Defense and the host nation. In keeping with the importance of the Colombian mission to the U.S. national strategy, the MILGP at the embassy in Bogotá is a robust joint organization. Commanded by Army Colonel Kevin D. Saderup, the primary mission of the MILGP in Colombia is to synchronize missions and requirements, gather intelligence, and coordinate the military operations involving U.S. personnel in Colombia.<sup>7</sup> Reporting to the SOUTHCOM commander, the MILGP commander controls a number of assets to assist the Colombians as well as U.S. forces operating in the country. He serves as the primary military advisor to the U.S. ambassador and his staff and is the central coordinating agency for military operations. An especially important mission is the implementation of the force protection plan for U.S. forces in country. The prevalence of kidnapping by the Colombian illegally-armed groups and the negative ramifications that the kidnapping of an American soldier make this a constant intelligence and monitoring mission for the MILGP.

Key supporting elements in the MILGP for all these missions are the Tactical Analysis Team, the PYSOP Support Element, and the Joint Planning and Assistance Team (JPAT). These elements help the Colombians with planning, intelligence gathering, and operational analysis to enhance the ability of the Colombians to conduct their military operations. The MILGP has oversight responsibility for all U.S. military units and personnel in country and coordinates directly with the different unit headquarters to plan and conduct operations in Colombia. In the case of Army SOF, that headquarters is Special Operations Command South (SOCSOUTH).

SOCSOUTH is located at Homestead Air Reserve Base, south of Miami, Florida. Originally based at Quarry Heights, Panama, the headquarters moved to the U.S. Naval Station, Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico, in 2000, and then relocated to its current home in Florida in 2003. Commanded by Brigadier General Charles T. Cleveland, SOCSOUTH is a subordinate unified command of SOUTHCOM and is the theater special operations functional component.



*SOCSOUTH  
shoulder patch*

SOCSOUTH is responsible for all SOF operating in the SOUTHCOM AOR. This includes Naval Special Warfare units, the U.S. Army 75th Ranger Regiment, U.S. Army Special Forces, Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations, the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, and U.S. Air Force Special Operations forces.<sup>8</sup> These units provide the forces that SOCSOUTH uses to accomplish its mission.

The SOCSOUTH mission is to “plan, prepare for and when directed, conduct special operations in support of Commander, U.S. Southern Command strategies, plans, and operations.”<sup>9</sup> In the case of Colombia, the size and complexity of the mission dictates special attention to forces deployed. Congressionally mandated force “caps” (ceilings) on military and civilian contract personnel were put in place in 2000 as part of the support to *Plan Colombia* as a method of controlling the number of U.S. forces in country. In 2002, Congress granted “expanded authority” to use funds earmarked for counternarcotics operations for a unified campaign fighting both drug trafficking and terrorist organizations in Colombia. Originally the force “cap” was 400 personnel; 200 military and 200 civilian contractors. In fiscal year 2005, the National Defense Authorization Act amended the law to double the size of the force “cap” to 800, equally divided between military personnel and civilian contractors.<sup>10</sup> This does not include foreign national contractors or personnel stationed at the U.S. Embassy and the MILGP.

As described by BG Cleveland, “Colombia is an economy of force mission. We have to make the most of the troops deployed. For the Special Forces guys, this means ‘train the trainer.’”<sup>11</sup> U.S. Army Special Forces (SF) soldiers of the 7th Special Forces Group (SFG) from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, have long conducted regular deployments to Colombia to work with SOF units and the Colombian National Police. By training the instructor cadre of these organizations, the Special Forces “footprint” is expanded beyond what the numbers of troops deployed could effect by just training Colombian soldiers and police. SOCSOUTH’s commitment to the mission in Colombia is unique in that the command has a small forward-deployed staff element in country to assist with the execution of the mission. SOCSOUTH averages seventy-five SOF deployments a year with an average of fifteen missions being conducted in seven countries each day.<sup>12</sup>

Unique among the countries of Latin America, SOCSOUTH has a forward element colocated with the MILGP in Bogotá, a reflection of the importance and scope of the mission in Colombia. This element serves as an extension of the headquarters in order to expedite the coordination and support required to maintain the forces in country. Colombia is one of the most critical SOCSOUTH missions and all service SOF units play a part in the SOCSOUTH



*Brigadier  
General  
Charles T.  
Cleveland*



### SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND SOUTH (SOCSOUTH)

SOCSOUTH is a subordinate unified command of U.S. Southern Command and serves as the functional component for special operations throughout the theater. SOCSOUTH is responsible for all Special Operations Forces (SOF) in the theater to include: Naval Special Warfare, Ranger Regiment, Army Special Forces, Special Operations Aviation Regiment, U.S. Air Force Special Operations, Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations forces. SOCSOUTH is a joint headquarters that manages more than 75 SOF deployments per year with an average of 15 missions in 7 countries on a daily basis from its HQ at Homestead Air Reserve Base. The command is composed of three permanently assigned operational units that are based in other locations in the southeastern U.S.

**Mission:** SOCSOUTH plans, prepares for, and when directed, conducts special operations in support of Commander, U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), strategies, plans, and operations.

#### SOCSOUTH Core Tasks

Command and control Special Operations throughout the U.S. Southern Command area of responsibility.

Establish and operate a Joint Special Operations Task Force.

Provide the theater crisis response force.



#### SOCSOUTH pamphlet

operations there. The forces most commonly deployed into Colombia are the Army Special Forces soldiers of the 7th SFG.

One of the oldest of the Army Special Forces Groups, the 7th SFG was activated on 20 May 1960. Built from the ranks of the 77th SFG at Fort Bragg, members of the 7th SFG saw action in Vietnam in the early 1960s. With the deactivation of the 8th SFG, the 7th SFG became the group focused on Latin America, a role that it has continued to perform. Headquartered at Fort Bragg, the four battalions (three line battalions and the Group Support Battalion)



77th SFG  
Distinctive Unit  
Insignia



8th SFG beret  
flash



7th SFG beret  
flash



Members of the 77th Special Forces Group in Training at Onslow Beach, North Carolina, 1953.

ion) of the 7th SFG deploy throughout the SOUTHCOM AOR in support of a wide variety of missions. And in the post-9/11 era of the Global War on Terrorism, the 7th SFG has joined other Army Special Forces groups in regular rotations to the U.S. Central Command theater. These rotations have significantly affected the size and scope of the unit deployments to the SOUTHCOM area.

Colonel Edward M. Reeder, 7th SFG commander, describes the “value-added” of the extensive engagement of the Group in Colombia. “The following represents the 7th SFG(A) benefits from the myriad operations in Colombia: increased foreign internal defense skill sets, better understanding of counter-narcoterrorist operations, executing complex and dynamic command and control, increased language skills with complete immersion with the partnered nation, and interacting with the U.S. Country Team and the most senior ranking officials from the Government of Colombia, are just some of the benefits of our ongoing efforts in Colombia.”<sup>13</sup>



Colonel  
Edward M.  
Reeder

In terms of the magnitude of the mission, Colombia is the largest and most complex in which the 7th SFG is involved. The detailed planning and coordination for deployments, the proper allocation of various funding sources, and the shipment of ammunition and equipment via Air Force aircraft require a major on-going staff effort on the part of the group. In the 7th SFG S-3 (Operations), Chief Warrant Officer 4 Solomon

Delaney\* provides the “institutional knowledge” and expertise to handle the Colombia mission. Widely known and respected in the SOUTHCOM AOR, Delaney is the key planner who puts the teams on the ground and supports



*The 7th Special Forces Group has a long history of training with the Colombian Army. Special Forces troops conducting marksmanship training on the range at Tolemaida.*

them in Colombia.

In the normal deployment of Special Forces ODAs (operational detachment alpha) into the different countries in theater, the mission dictates the size of the command and control and support forces in country. In many cases, the ODAs are the only elements in the country and the teams perform all the coordination and support operations through the MILGP at the embassy. The magnitude and importance of the Colombian mission, particularly in the post-9/11 “expanded authority” period, dictated the deployment of a command and control headquarters for the multi-team mission. This resulted in the 7th SFG establishing a forward operating base (FOB) from one of the three Special Forces battalions in Bogotá or, as has lately occurred due to deployment requirements, a Special Forces company configured as an advanced operating base (AOB). The complexities of



*Lancero Lane leads into the 7th Special Forces Group area on Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Lancers, akin to the U.S. Army Rangers, are one of the units trained by the 7th Group.*

the support requirements and the emphasis on force protection in Colombia are beyond the capabilities of the ODAs to manage without the additional resources provided by the AOB or FOB.

Colonel Reeder delineated the Colombia mission as: “The 7th SFG(A) will continue to focus efforts with our Colombian counterparts in the struggle against narco-terrorists and the Global War on Terror. Our commitment will remain steadfast and our holistic approach to operations and intelligence fusion with the Colombian Armed Forces and National Police will become stronger in the upcoming year. Our joint efforts with Colombia to secure its borders from illicit drug trade and narco-terrorists will continue to directly support the strategic goals and vision of the Commander, SOUTHCOM and the Command, SOCSOUTH to improve Colombia’s ability to find, fix and finish narcoterrorism.”<sup>14</sup>

Colombia is proving to be a valuable training ground for SOF operations in the GWOT. “The 7th Group is helping pioneer ways in which the U.S. government is going to have to fight the long war in places beyond Iraq and Afghanistan,” said Reeder.<sup>15</sup>

For more than fifty years, the U.S. military has played an active role in advising, assisting, and training the Colombian defense forces. Within the SOUTHCOM AOR, Colombia has dominated the U.S. strategy and received a significant share of the resources. The impact of the mission in Colombia is felt at every level of command, from the theater to the ODA. ♣

## Endnotes

- 1 U.S. Southern Command, <http://www.southcom.mil/home/>.
- 2 [http://www.southcom.mil/home/frm\\_NewsReader.aspx?NID=222](http://www.southcom.mil/home/frm_NewsReader.aspx?NID=222).
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- 4 <http://www.southcom.mil/home/>.
- 5 Headquarters, U.S. Southern Command, “Security Assistance Training Guide, 12th Edition,” January 2006, 1–2, <http://www.disam.dsca.mil/ITM/CoCom/Documents/Southcom-Guide.pdf>.
- 6 [http://www.southcom.mil/apps/home/frm\\_Contnet.aspx?MID=26](http://www.southcom.mil/apps/home/frm_Contnet.aspx?MID=26).
- 7 Colonel Kevin D. Saderup, Military Group—Colombia, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe and Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 24 July 2006, Bogotá, Colombia, notes, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 8 Special Operations Command South Command publication, May 2004, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 9 Special Operations Command South Command publication, May 2004, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 10 Connie Veillette, Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, “CRS Report for Congress, Andean Counterdrug Initiative (ACI) and Related Funding Programs: FY2006 Assistance,” 27 January 2006, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/60720.pdf>.
- 11 Brigadier General Charles T. Cleveland, Special Operations Command South, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 18 July 2006, notes, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 12 Special Operations Command South Command publication, May 2004, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 13 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.
- 14 Colonel Edward M. Reeder Jr., e-mail.
- 15 Colonel Edward M. Reeder Jr., e-mail.