

“There is a Word I Need to Learn:”

ODA 741 and Colombian National Police Training at Espinal

by Kenneth Finlayson



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

THE Colombian *Policía Nacional* (National Police or CNP) have historically played a major role in the nation’s on-going effort to combat narcotics trafficking and terrorism. A long-standing program of training assistance by the United States, featuring Special Forces soldiers from the 7th Special Forces Group (SFG) is an integral part of the CNP training program. Training for the majority of the CNP personnel takes place at the Gabriel Gonzalez Police Cadet School located in the town of Espinal, approximately sixty miles southwest of Bogotá. This article will outline the structure and mission of the CNP and examine the experience of operational detachment alpha (ODA) 741 from A Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th SFG, as it trained the CNP at the police training base in Espinal, Colombia, from 1 July to 30 September 2006.

es among eleven police administrative districts covering the country. When he took office, President Uribe began a program to increase the strength and presence of the police in all parts of the country. At the time of his inauguration, 160 municipalities in Colombia had no police presence. In these towns, the CNP were driven out by the FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*).

In his testimony before the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control on 3 June 2003, General James T. Hill, the commander of U.S. Southern Command, described the advances:

“President Uribe faces enormous challenges, but he is using his mandate to put deeds behind his words. He has only been in office for eight months, and turning the government from a conciliatory posture to an aggressively focused one is not an easy task. He is increasing military and police end-strength. . . . The government has developed a plan to protect travelers along the major roadways. He is pushing the military and the police to regain control of areas and neighborhoods dominated by the narco-terrorists.”⁴ President Uribe’s promise to double the size of the Army and the CNP drove the rapid



Then Secretary of State Colin Powell reviews the Colombian National Police during his visit in December 2002.



Colombian President Alvaro Uribe Vélez visits with President George W. Bush during Uribe’s visit to the United States in March 2004.



Colombian National Police Emblem



CNP instructor badge



Granadero Badge



Carabinero Emblem

Formed as part of the Colombian Ministry of Defense, the CNP was established in 1891, but was confined to the capital city of Bogotá.¹ The original force was about 450 men, organized with the assistance of a commissar of the French National Police.² Traditionally the police acted as a Liberal Party counter-balance to the predominately Conservative influence within the military in the “give-and-take” of Colombian politics.³ In 1962, the independent departmental police forces in the rest of the country were joined to the CNP in Bogotá to form a single national police force. Previously, the separate police forces had been maintained by each of the country’s thirty-two departments (states). In 2000, President Alvaro Uribe Vélez directed a reduction that divided the force-

expansion of the forces.

By 2006, police outposts in all municipalities had all been manned and the strength of the CNP had grown to more than 160,000.⁵ The police are now present in all 1,098 of Colombia's municipalities.⁶ The increased police presence, the country-wide employment of the police special units, and a determined drug reduction program has reduced the influence of the narco-terrorists and begun the process of decreasing the production of narcotics in the country. The growing of coca in the traditional locations has been curtailed, forcing the drug traffickers to move to more remote locations which are more difficult to detect. It has also led to a switch to the growing of opium poppies used to produce heroin. Cultivation of the coca plant fell 30 percent from its high in 2004 and cocaine production was reduced from 490 metric tons to 430 tons. The U.S.-supported crop-spraying program of the CNP eradicated 135,000 hectares (333,585 acres or 521 square miles) of coca and 3,000 hectares (7,413 acres) of heroin poppy in 2005.⁷ Under the Andean Counterdrug Initiative, \$310 million was appropriated by the United States to support counterdrug and security assistance in 2005.⁸

The CNP is three main entities working in rural areas, the first two being the *Granaderos*, the basic entry-level police volunteers, and the *Carabineros*, mobile squadrons who possess specialized training in maintaining order in the rural areas, security to the main highways, and counter-insurgency training to protect municipal police outposts. The third element is the *Junglas* (hoon-glas), described as "the jungle commandos" by Captain Steve McAdam*, the team leader of ODA 741.⁹ In Bogotá, other specialized police units cover traffic control and the personal protection of judiciary members.



This UH-1 Huey helicopter is used for training at the CNP training center at Espinal.

The *Granaderos* are the first tier of the CNP. They are trained in the basic police-work skills and are the first-line "beat-cop" patrolmen. They constitute about ten percent of the CNP and, since 2003, their numbers have increased by more than 16,500.¹⁰ As with all members of the police force, they are volunteers. A dedicated recruitment effort begun in 2000 was expanded to include every part of the country. Currently about 10,000 new recruits are brought into the police force annually.¹¹ The *Granaderos* are stationed in the rural municipalities in units that vary in size from 46 to 169 policemen.¹² The United States has funded the CNP with over \$100 million over a five-year period beginning in 2003. During this same period, the Colombian government funded the CNP at \$600 million.¹³ The situation in Colombia, however, calls for a more sophisticated and highly trained police element to confront the problem of the narco-terrorist. For this mission, the CNP uses the *Carabineros*.

The *Carabineros* are rural police elements organized into sixty-two 150-man mobile squadrons.¹⁴ They are "double" volunteers being drawn from the ranks of the *Granaderos*. They are advised and assisted in the field by members of the Narcotics Affairs Section of the U.S.



The Junglas role in the drug eradication program includes the location and destruction of the jungle laboratories that produce cocaine from the coca plants.



The entry doors to the Junglas cadre classroom were painted with "before" (antes) and "after" (después) images of the Junglas recruits. On the right is the artist in the "after" (después) photo.



Granadero rappelling tower with the emblem of the Granaderos at Espinal.

Embassy. Between 1999 and 2001, over eighty police stations were closed down because of the FARC threat. This prompted an expansion of the *Carabiniero* program. More highly trained in the tactical application of counter-insurgency, and often working in concert with the Army, the *Carabineros* are the unit of choice for the CNP to provide law and order in the outlying areas after the illegally-

armed groups are forced out. The unit tasked with the mission to initially regain government control in the contested areas is the *Junglas*. The *Junglas* evolved in 1989 as a company of highly-trained volunteers. The CNP recruits *Junglas* from throughout the entire force. However, many of the police volunteers start out as a *Granadero*, volunteers to move up to the *Carabiniero* ranks, and ultimately becomes one of the elite *Junglas*. The CNP fields three 166-man airmobile *Jungla* companies of these "triple volunteers," whose mission is to interdict drug operations and restore to government control any municipalities that fall to the insurgents.¹⁵ In terms of deployment, the *Junglas* provided the first-strike capability for destroying the drug labs that produce cocaine and for attacking the high-value targets (HVTs). The *Carabineros* secure and control the contested area and prevent the return of the FARC until such time as it is sufficiently under government control to reintroduce the *Granaderos* as the permanent police presence. The missions of the *Junglas* and the *Carabineros* require extensive training. It was at the Gabriel Gonzalez School that ODA 741 established its base of operations in June 2006 (SF has been working



Statue of the elite Junglas at the CNP training site at Espinal.

at Espinal in various capacities since 1989).

"Our mission is to integrate with the CNP and advise on training techniques and suggest improvements in the different POIs [programs of instruction]," said McAdam. "This is a great opportunity to expand our footprint. We are working with the cadre of the *Carabineros*, and teaching advanced skills to the *Junglas*."¹⁶ In the view of Staff Sergeant Roy Kennedy*, the *Junglas* were "more high-speed, comparable to a SWAT team back in the states."¹⁷ On this rotation, the ODA was not working with the *Granaderos*, whose training program was being handled exclusively by the Colombian police cadre previously trained by Special Forces personnel under the "train the trainer" concept. ODA 741's missions entailed advising and assisting the *Carabiniero* cadre and actively teaching the *Junglas* in small-unit tactics and individual soldier skills. Working with both courses simultaneously presented unique problems for the team.

ODA 741 was reinforced for the mission at Espinal with three members of ODA 745. Master Sergeant Karl Merriman*, the team sergeant for ODA 741, worked diligently to assimilate the attached members. Half the team members were products of the Special Forces 18X pro-



A typical classroom building used at the CNP training center in Espinal.



Sign at the entrance to the Jungla area at the CNP training school in Espinal.



Carabineros doing push-ups prior to commencing training at Pijaos.

gram that brought them into Special Forces from basic training and were on their first deployment. Even with the three additional soldiers, Merriman commented that, "Twelve men are insufficient. Supporting these two courses simultaneously could easily take two or three ODAs."¹⁸ Stretching the ODA to the limit resulted from the CNP decision to compress the seven-week *Carabiniero* course into two weeks. The months following the May 2006 Presidential elections in Colombia placed a heavy burden on the CNP. They had to have a presence in all parts of the country to protect the candidates and prevent disruption of the election process. Hence the decision was made to compress the course to make more *Carabineros* available.

Seven hundred-fifty *Carabineros* were getting refresher training on land navigation, map reading, patrolling, demolitions, and marksmanship in a POI that had the Colombian cadre and their American counter-parts constantly scrambling to accomplish all tasks to standard. Normally eighteen *Carabiniero* squadrons were trained at Espinal annually.¹⁹ At the same time, other members of the team were teaching advanced infantry skills to the fifty-man *Jungla* class.²⁰ While the training tempo was unrelenting, the quality and motivation of the Colom-



The homemade "barbeque bomb" uses burlap as wadding.

bian policemen made the experience very rewarding.

"These are very capable, intelligent young guys," noted Staff Sergeant Jack Coleman*, who worked with the Colombian cadre on land navigation. "They were using the Garmin Etrex GPS [global positioning system] and the cadre translated the English instructions into Spanish as we went along. Interestingly, their training aids were U.S. Army maps."²¹ Staff Sergeant Mark Foreman* remarked, "Even with the compression of the training schedule, the cadre did a good job. The three guys I worked with were excellent. And the troops like to see the American presence."²²

For the young American soldiers, a positive "can-do" attitude was often their strongest trait. Sergeant Barry Bishop* felt that "being personable with the troops was important. These guys look to us as the experts, so you can't be distant."²³ CPT McAdam reminded his team, "not to take over the training, and to be professional."²⁴ Training with the *Junglas*, Staff Sergeant Michael Alstott* reiterated the importance of interacting with the Colombians. "There can't be any 'Ugly Americans' out here. This is what I'm here for and the Special Forces guys have touched almost everyone in the police force."²⁵ When the police went to training, they counted on the Americans



The rolling terrain of the Pijaos training area. The buildings in the background are the original estancia, now the home of the CNP officer in charge of the training area.



The small out building at serves as the ammunition supply point at Pijaos.



Colombian demolitions experts prepare a demonstration of the "barbecue bomb" made from propane tanks.

being there with them.

The primary training site for the CNP at Espinal was at a training area known as Los Pijaos (P-House), a large *finca*, or estate, in the hills. A superb training area of rolling hills and fields, Pijaos had once been an extensive ranch owned by an innovative and prosperous Colombian. Large herds of cattle and sheep were grazed on the land, and the owner built a dam and a system of canals and installed a small hydro-electric plant to provide electricity to the *finca*. As he became wealthy, the rancher was targeted by the FARC, who demanded "taxes." Rather than submit to the extortion, the owner left the area, but not before leasing his *finca* to the Colombian government, which turned the facility into the primary CNP training area.²⁶ The former estate house became the home of the officer in charge of the facility, and the various outbuildings became part of the infrastructure to support training. The area is ideally suited for all types of training, having locations for a variety of marksmanship ranges, demolitions sites, live-fire exercises, patrolling, and land navigation training. It was at Pijaos that the *Carabineros* and *Junglas* honed their skills.

There has been little permanent construction at the facility since the former ranch became the CNP train-



Captain Steve McAdam, team leader of ODA 741, with "barbecue bombs" made from propane cylinders.*

ing site. The troops bivouac on a bare, rocky plateau. A rudimentary hut and covered pavilion is the mess hall. The universal fixture at U.S. training areas, the "roach-coach," consists of a family selling homemade food and soft drinks from the back of a small pickup truck. The troops are trucked out to the site and move about the area on foot. Near the demolitions area is a small building that serves as an ammunition supply point. On display outside are several of the FARC "barbecue bombs" made from propane tanks. A demonstration of this weapon is part of the *Carabineros* training. During demo training with the *Carabineros*, SSG Coleman found the Colombian cadre to be very knowledgeable and capable, but "Americans tend to respect the power of the demo more. They [the Colombians] are not casual around the demo, but we try to make them safer."²⁷ As busy as the team members were with the police, they still found time to train on their own.

With an eye toward the team's next major deployment, MSG Merriman and CPT McAdam arranged for horses and mules for pack training and riding. "I went to my counterpart in the *Carabineros*, Captain Pereda. At one time, he was one of the top equestrians in Colombia. He called back to his old boss in Bogotá and arranged to



Carabineros conducting demolitions training at the Pijaos training facility.



Carabineros moving up to the bare, rocky plateau that serves as their bivouac site.

have horses and mules brought out,” said McAdam.²⁸ The *Carabineros* still have horse-mounted elements and the animals were trucked down from Bogotá and kept in the stables at Espinal. In addition to the basic riding and pack animal training, the team worked on marksmanship and individual and collective skills necessary for its next deployment. As is typical for Special Forces soldiers “downrange,” the team members honed their language skills.

Near the entrance to the rough dirt road into the Pijaos training area was a small truck stop on the highway. Lunching in the *parador*, the small open-air restaurant, SSG Coleman confidently placed his order with the waitress without consulting the menu. When his meal arrived, the unidentifiable food [tripe soup] bore no resemblance to what he thought he had ordered. “There is a word I need to learn,” he remarked after the waitress explained what he had ordered.²⁹ He manfully ate the meal. Once again, experience proved to be the best teacher.

Because the CNP is part of the Colombian Ministry of Defense, Special Forces soldiers can train law enforcement personnel. For this young ODA, working with the CNP will stand the team in good stead for the future. The regular rotation of 7th SFG through the CNP School ensures that every policeman in Colombia continues to be touched by the American Special Forces trainers. ♣

Endnotes

- 1 Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment–South America, 22 April 2005, <http://www.janes.com/Search/documentView.do?docId=/content1/janesdata/sent/samsu/>.
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- 17 Staff Sergeant Roy Kennedy*, ODA 741, A Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 21 July 2006, Espinal, Colombia, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 18 Master Sergeant Karl Merriman*, ODA 741, A Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 22 July 2006, Espinal, Colombia, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
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