



The Special Forces Mission to Cochabamba, Bolivia 1967

by Charles H. Briscoe

In the summer of 1967, after MTT-BL 404-67X deployed to Bolivia to organize and train a Ranger Battalion at La Esperanza, the MILGP sent two personnel TDY to Cochabamba for 179 days to serve as advisors to the Airborne Battalion and Parachute School. The officer would also teach COIN (counterinsurgency) classes to Bolivian lieutenants and captains in *la Escuela de Armas* (The Combat Arms School) and the sergeant would instruct aspiring noncommissioned officers (NCOs) at the fledgling NCO Academy. Major (MAJ) John D. Waghelstein (who later commanded USMILGP-El Salvador and 7th SFG) and Master Sergeant (MSG) Gustavo Fabian were sent to fill those assignments. Since the Bolivian paratroopers could help a *coup d'etat*, they were based far from the capitol of La Paz like the Rangers were. The two SF worked for Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Joseph P. Rice, the head of the MILGP detachment in Cochabamba and project officer for the Rangers.¹ That Cochabamba element twice sent Sergeant First Class (SFC) Del Toro, to La Esperanza to teach vehicle maintenance to the Rangers and give driver training to a select few. Since the 8th Division issued insufficient fuel for the few trucks assigned, that effort was futile.² The only contact that MAJ Waghelstein and MSG Fabian had with the SF on the Ranger Battalion training MTT was supporting proficiency jumps to keep their parachute pay from being stopped.³ The Cochabamba assignment was not very demanding. Simply monitoring the progress of the Bolivian Army against Che Guevara and his guerrillas eventually proved too tempting for the two advisors when the Airborne Battalion was alerted to assist.⁴

MAJ Waghelstein and MSG Fabian arranged for a truck and a Bolivian paratroop sergeant to drive them, and the trio headed south towards the "Red Zone." Though they had an AN/PRC-10 radio, it proved useless in the mountainous terrain. Armed with a variety of foreign weapons, Waghelstein carried an Israeli Uzi submachinegun. The narrow "highway" from Cochabamba to Santa Cruz dated to the 1930s Chaco War. They started at 7,500 feet, climbed the precipitous one and a half lane road to 18,000 feet to cross the mountains, and then abruptly descended to 900 feet in the Amazon headwater region. Learning that some of the

*MAJ John D. Waghelstein near
Vallegrande in the "Red Zone".*



MAJ John D. Waghelstein, the SF advisor to the Airborne Battalion and Parachute School and COIN instructor at la Escuela de Armas (Combat Arms School) prepares to jump with a group of Bolivian airborne trainees at Cochabamba.

SFC Robert Owens, senior medic, jumped with Bolivian airborne students at Cochabamba. Female parachute riggers always jumped with the students. Their presence eliminated any "jump refusals" by the men.

MSG Gustavo Fabian studies the map in a small town while MAJ Waghelstein and Bolivian Sergeant Mars ask questions of the locals.

guerrillas had escaped the 8th and 4th Division cordons, the trio studied their map, selected the best egress route to Chile, and headed southeast towards that border.⁵ "We meandered, asking questions and scouting the dirt wagon roads that emptied into our selected egress route. Confident that any locals who had encountered the guerrillas would gladly tell us, we pushed south. It was an adventure for which I would ask forgiveness later. The survivors were evading, and they had several days head start on us. I don't think we ever got closer than a day behind them before they crossed into Chile," said Waghelstein. "Why did we do this? Sometimes you just get a 'wild hair' as all SF soldiers can attest to. That was one of my more exciting 'wild hairs,'" mused the retired colonel.⁶



While MAJ Ralph W. "Pappy" Shelton's men conducted the final field training exercise (FTX) in early September about ten miles south of Santa Cruz along the main highway, they did not accompany the Ranger Battalion when it went operational on 17 September 1967. They had already received another mission and returned to La Esperanza to prepare. The MTT was to provide four weeks of infantry tactics refresher and COIN training to nine separate infantry companies in three iterations.⁷ The only SF personnel that got into the "Red Zone," MAJ John Waghelstein and MSG Gus Fabian, were conducting a reconnaissance for the Bolivian Airborne Battalion that had been alerted to join the hunt for guerrilla escapees. ▲



MAJ Waghelstein, MSG Fabian, and Bolivian Sergeant Mars "surveyed" the rugged terrain along the suspected guerrilla egress route.

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- 2 MTT-BL 404-67X, 8th Special Forces Group (Airborne), 1st Special Forces, Special Action Force, Fort Gulick, Canal Zone. SUBJECT: Report of Mobile Training Team to Bolivia (RCS CSGPO-125), 29 June and 29 July 1967, hereafter cited as MTT-BL 404-67X Report with date.
- 3 Ralph W. Shelton, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 13 April 2007, Sweetwater, TN, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited as Shelton interview with date and MTT-BL 404-67X Reports, 29 July and 1 November 1967.
- 4 Waghelstein interview, 12 June 2007.
- 5 Waghelstein interview, 12 June 2007.
- 6 Waghelstein interview, 12 June 2007.
- 7 Shelton interview, 13 April 2007 and MTT-BL 404-67X Report, 10 December 1967.

Endnotes

1 John D. Waghelstein, telephone interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 12 June 2007, Bristol, RI, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited as Waghelstein interview and date.