



*Captain Gary Prado Salmón  
on parade with B Company  
2nd Ranger Battalion.*

# “The ‘Haves and Have Nots’: U.S. & Bolivian Order of Battle”

By Kenneth Finlayson



**When** they arrived in Bolivia in April 1967, the 8th Special Forces Group Mobile Training Team (MTT) commanded by Major (MAJ) Ralph W. "Pappy" Shelton was literally the "tip of the spear" of the American effort to support Bolivia in its fight against a Cuban-sponsored insurgency. The 16 men represented a miniscule economy of force for the 1.4 million-man U.S. Army in 1967 that was fighting in South Vietnam and which was the bulk of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces defending Europe against the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact. In stark contrast was the Bolivian Army, a 15,000-man force of ill-trained conscripts with out-moded equipment, threatened by an insurgency. This friendly order of battle article will look at the United States Army forces, in particular those units and missions supporting the U.S. strategy in Latin America. It will then examine the Bolivian Armed Forces after the 1952 Revolution and the state of the Bolivian Army when MAJ Shelton and his team arrived to train the 2nd Ranger Battalion. It was clearly a case of the "Haves and Have-nots."

The United States Army of 1967 was a formidable force of thirteen infantry divisions, four armored divisions, one cavalry division, four separate infantry brigades, and an armored cavalry regiment.<sup>1</sup> In the Continental United States (CONUS) were two divisions (the 82nd Airborne and the 2nd Armored Division). The 25th Infantry Division was based in Hawaii (forward-deployed in Vietnam). In Alaska was the 172nd Separate Infantry Brigade. The 1st Special Forces Group was based in Okinawa, Japan, and the 7th Special Forces Group at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Two infantry divisions, the 2nd and 7th, were stationed in South Korea.<sup>2</sup> The bulk of the U.S. Army was deployed to Vietnam or stationed in Europe.



*Special Forces Major Ralph W. "Pappy" Shelton commanded Mobile Training Team BL 404-67X that trained the Bolivian Ranger Battalion in 1967. A decorated Korean War veteran, Shelton was on his last deployment before retirement.*

*United States Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) was the unified command responsible for Latin America. Defense of the Canal Zone, the administration of the U.S. Military Assistance Program and directing U.S. forces during hemispheric military exercises were the primary responsibilities of the command. Map by D. Telles.*



*U.S. Southern Command Patch*



*U.S. Army Forces Southern Command SSI*



*8th Special Forces Group Flash*



Five infantry divisions (the 1st, 4th, 9th, and 25th), one partial airborne division (the 101st), the 1st Cavalry Division and the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, and three separate infantry brigades (the 196th, 199th, and 173rd Airborne) were in South Vietnam, where U.S. forces numbered roughly 400,000 in August of 1967.<sup>3</sup> Special operations forces, under the control of 5th Special Forces Group (5th SFG), in 1967 numbered 2,745 personnel.<sup>4</sup> In Europe, the U.S. Army had declined from a peak in 1962 of 277,000 to roughly 220,000 in 1967. Seventh Army had two Army Corps, the Vth and VIIth, composed of four infantry divisions (the 3rd, 5th, 8th, and 24th) and two armored divisions (the 1st and 3rd), and the 10th Special Forces Group. Elsewhere, smaller U.S. Army contingents performed economy of force missions. This was the case in Latin America.

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—GEN Robert W. Porter

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Central and South America were the responsibility of the United States Southern Command (SOUTHCOM). The Commander, General (GEN) Robert W. Porter, defined his tasks as “Defense of the Panama Canal, administering the Military Assistance Program (MAP) for Latin American countries, directing U.S. participation in hemispheric defense exercises, mapping and charting activities, and directing disaster relief and search and rescue operations.”<sup>5</sup> SOUTHCOM was the only unified command with its own security assistance office. That indicated how important the command considered military assistance to the countries of Latin America.

The Army component command of SOUTHCOM was U.S. Army Forces Southern Command (USARSO), based at Fort Amador, in the Canal Zone of Panama. USARSO was commanded by Major General (MG)

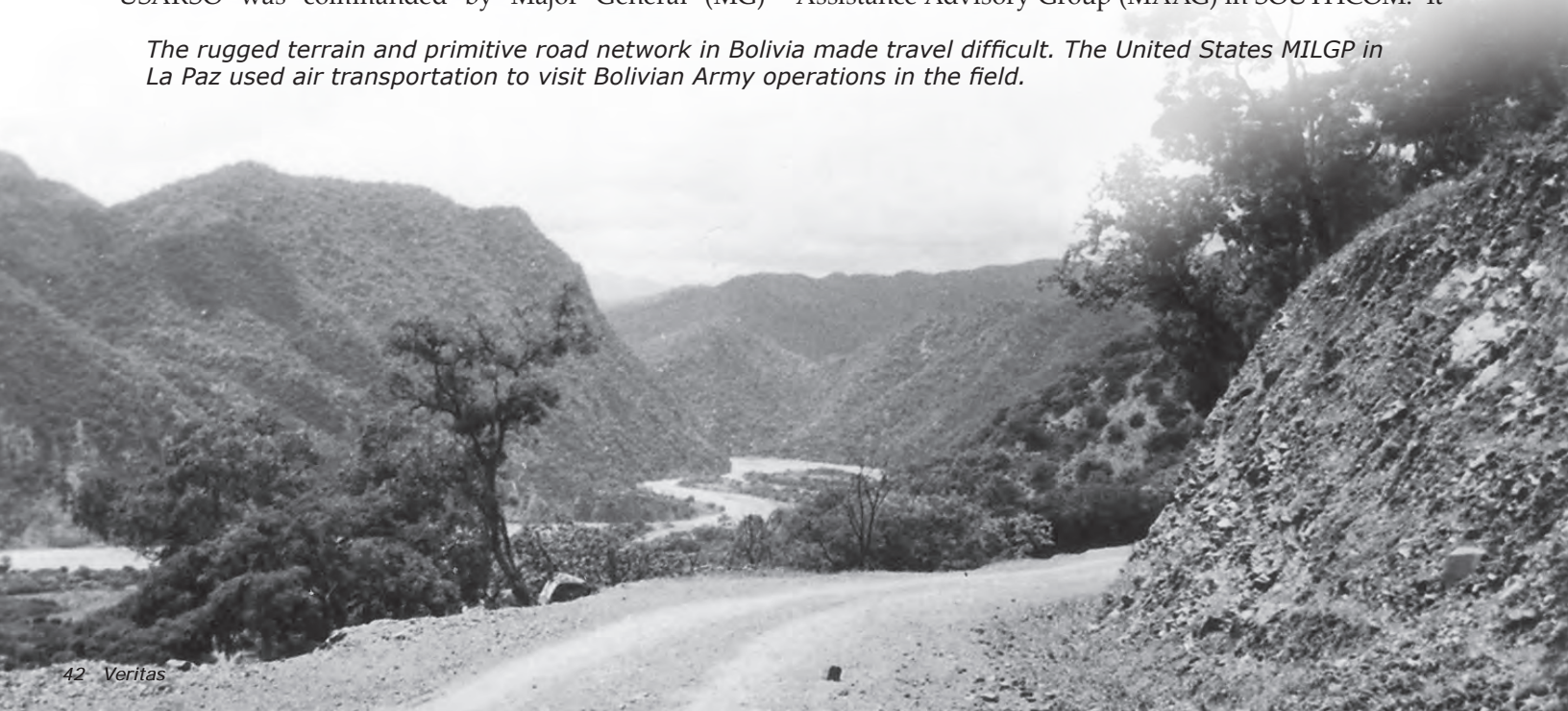
## ***Non-military Organizations Operating In Bolivia***

While the Shelton MTT trained the Bolivian 2nd Ranger Battalion at La Esperanza, other non-military U.S. organizations were also working in Bolivia. Principal among these were the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Peace Corps and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). USAID is an independent Federal Government agency that extends assistance to countries recovering from natural disasters, trying to escape poverty, and engaging in democratic reforms. The Peace Corps, created by President John F. Kennedy in 1960, sends volunteers worldwide to teach agricultural techniques and promote education. In 1967, there were 225 Peace Corps volunteers in Bolivia with several working in the vicinity of La Esperanza. The Central Intelligence Agency was active throughout Latin America helping friendly governments confronted by Communist insurgencies. The Shelton team had contact with CIA personnel assigned to the embassy in La Paz.

Charles L. Johnson.<sup>6</sup> The 193rd Infantry Brigade had three battalions, one airborne, one mechanized, and one light infantry. Other major USARSO units were the 4th Missile Battalion (HAWK), 517th Air Defense Artillery Regiment, the 470th Military Intelligence Group, the 3rd Civil Affairs Group, U.S. Army School of the Americas, and the 8th Special Forces Group configured as a Special Action Force (8th SFG SAF).<sup>7</sup> The primary focus of USARSO was the defense of the Canal Zone.<sup>8</sup> The Army was represented in U.S. Military Groups (MILGP) throughout Latin America.

A relatively new concept in 1967, the MILGP and the Defense Coordination Office replaced the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) in SOUTHCOM. It

*The rugged terrain and primitive road network in Bolivia made travel difficult. The United States MILGP in La Paz used air transportation to visit Bolivian Army operations in the field.*





was a joint organization. As described by GEN Porter, "We have military groups in 17 Latin American countries, ranging in size from 5 persons in Panama to 103 in Brazil. The main thrust of the MILGP effort is to assist the host country armed forces in developing their internal security capability."<sup>9</sup> When the 8th SFG advanced echelon (ADVON) went to Bolivia, they learned how the MILGP provided support, mostly by liaison.

The MILGP was the "doer" for military support on U.S. Ambassador Douglas Henderson's country team. Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Joseph Rice headed the MILGP detachment in Cochabamba advising the Bolivian Army NCO Academy, the *Escuela de Armas*, and the Bolivian Airborne School. He assumed the role as Ranger Battalion Project Officer. Visiting units outside La Paz was difficult because of the terrain and the primitive Bolivian road network. The mission of the MILGP was to assist the Bolivian military with its internal security. This was critical because Bolivia's military was ill prepared to combat the growing internal insurgency.

In 1967, the Bolivian Armed Forces had three services, the Navy, the Air Force, and the Army. The National Police Corps, *Cuerpo de Policia Nacional*, under the Ministry of the Interior was the same size as the Army and had a national security role. The Navy, (*Fuerza Naval Boliviana*) which included the Marines, was an 1,800-man force with four small patrol boats (purchased from the United States) patrolling Bolivia's part of Lake Titicaca and its major river systems.<sup>10</sup> The Air Force, (*Fuerza Aérea Boliviana*) numbered less than 4,000 personnel. It had a mix of World War II and Korean War-era aircraft such as the B-25J Mitchell bomber, C-47 Skytrain, F-51D Mustang, and T-28A Trojan trainers. In 1967 the Air Force had Hiller and Sikorsky helicopters.<sup>11</sup> The 15,000-man Army (*Ejército Boliviana*), the largest of the three services, was responsible for combating the guerrillas. It was not well equipped for the counter-insurgency mission.

Bolivia's disastrous defeat by Paraguay in the Chaco War (1932-1935) still affected the Army in the 1960s.

*The Special Forces MTT members conducted an airborne proficiency jump with the Bolivian Airborne School students at Cochabamba in October 1967. In the background is a Korean War-era F-51D Mustang, one of the mainstays of the Bolivian Air Force in 1967.*



*The Bolivian Army had long suffered from poor training and antiquated equipment. The influx of U.S. military equipment and personnel rapidly improved their capability in the 1960s. These U.S. WWII-era M-1 81 mm mortars with lightweight base plate were part of the Military Assistance Program given to the Bolivian Army.*

Chaco veterans were instrumental in the success of the 1952 revolution that brought the *Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionaria* (MNR) party to power. The MNR actually dismantled the Army after taking power, replacing it with "Peoples' Militias" for three months.<sup>12</sup> Reestablished in July 1953, the new Bolivian Army was oriented more towards conducting civic action projects than the national defense. Eight Army divisions (of U.S. brigade size) were posted regionally throughout the country. However, most of the 15,000 soldiers were building roads and supporting agricultural programs. Only 3,000 manned the small company-sized *cuartels*, principally in the *Altiplano*.<sup>13</sup> The operational readiness was in constant turmoil because each year half of the soldiers came to the end of their service. Fortunately, road building and planting potatoes did not require modern weaponry, for the Army was sorely lacking in equipment.



*Bolivian Airborne School Patch*



When the Special Forces team arrived to train the Bolivian Rangers, the standard infantry rifle was a Czech-made 7.62 mm Mauser. In the Ranger Battalion these were replaced with U.S. M-1 Garands and Carbines. Staff Sergeant Wendell Thompson trains a Bolivian infantryman with his Mauser on the range.



The Czechoslovakian ZB-30 7.92 mm light machine gun was used until replaced by the U.S. .30 caliber M-1919A6. Sergeant First Class Harold T. Carpenter instructs a Bolivian gunner during the deployment of the Mobile Training Team BL 404-67X.

The Bolivian Army at this time possessed a hodge-podge of weapons from a variety of sources. The standard rifle for the Bolivian soldier was the Czech-made Mauser 7.62 mm rifle left over from the Chaco War.<sup>14</sup> The Army's crew-served weapons were primarily pre-World War II Colt and Vickers 7.65 mm water-cooled heavy machine guns; Czech ZB-30 7.92 mm light machineguns; French 82 mm mortars and some 75-mm howitzers.<sup>15</sup> In 1959, the first shipment of American post-Korean War weapons arrived as part of the military assistance program to Bolivia. A battalion's issue of .30 caliber Garand M-1 rifles and M-1 carbines, Browning Automatic Rifles (BARs), M-1919A6 light machine guns, 60 mm mortars, 57 mm recoilless rifles, and 3.5-inch rocket launchers were the first installment of a growing American investment.<sup>16</sup> The United States provided

***“Subversion [insurgency] was treated in a very superficial theoretical framework, without a clear directive from the general staffs or the formation of specific plans aimed at combating the rise of the guerrilla focus.”<sup>24</sup>***

— Captain Gary Prado Salmón

over 12 million in Military Assistance Program dollars to Bolivia by 1967.<sup>17</sup> In the 1960s, Bolivia made slow, incremental progress in improving the Army's capability.

The Bolivian Army's eight divisions were the size of U.S. Army brigades (less than 2000 men each) and were made up of conscripted *campesinos* (country people), mainly Indians from the high *Altiplano* and the lowland jungles. For the Indians, completion of their Army service entitled them to full citizenship and coveted identification cards. Consequently, morale among the draftees was generally good, but their level of training was poor.

The severely constrained budget of the Bolivian Army prevented effective training of the new soldiers. Military spending (roughly \$28 million) accounted for only 2.2% of Bolivia's Gross Domestic Product, which in 1967 was estimated at \$1.287 billion.<sup>18</sup> While Shelton's team struggled to obtain basic soldier items such as canteens

and load-bearing equipment from the US MILGP, the Bolivian Army had no field rations for its soldiers.<sup>19</sup> The state of Bolivia's army, considered one of the weakest in Latin America, made it a prime target for revolutionaries. However, Che's dream of mounting a successful insurgency was destroyed when the U.S. trained a counterinsurgency force to eliminate the guerrilla threat.

With the influx of the \$12 million in American military aid in the 1960s, the Bolivian Army was able to motorize some infantry battalions and create a special high-altitude assault battalion with soldiers from the *Altiplano*.<sup>20</sup> They made significant advances in the schooling of the officers and non-commissioned officers. With the assistance of the United States, they established an airborne school and battalion and a Non-commissioned Officer's

School in Cochabamba. For all the services, the training of officers began with a five-year basic course at the Gualberto Villarroel Military College in La Paz.<sup>21</sup> Each December the school commissioned about 95 cadets as second lieutenants to fill the Armed Forces. The graduation year groups (*promociones*) identified officers throughout their military careers. The reorganization of the Army after the 1952 Revolution ostensibly opened the officer corps to all the Bolivian ethnic groups. However, the reality was, the officer corps was still predominately of European descent with few indigenous officers in 1967. Officers and noncommissioned officers attended courses at the U.S. Army-run School of the Americas in the Canal Zone. After the Academy, Army officers attended career branch schools, a two-year staff course for promotion to major, and ultimately the National War College.<sup>22</sup> This education strengthened the Officer and

NCO Corps, but it did not adequately address how to combat an insurgency.

Captain Gary Prado Salmón, the B Company commander in the 2nd Ranger Battalion said, "Subversion [insurgency] was treated in a very superficial theoretical framework, without a clear directive from the general staffs or the formation of specific plans aimed at combating the rise of the guerrilla *focos*."<sup>23</sup> Bolivian Army officers had a European war mindset and training exercises in 1966 were "narrowly framed within the context of conventional war, as if the hemisphere were not being shaken by the explosions of guerrilla violence stretching from Guatemala to the Andes," according to Prado.<sup>24</sup>

Prado's "explosion of violence" came when Cuban guerrillas ambushed a Bolivian Army patrol and inflicted heavy casualties in March 1967. The President of Bolivia's response was to ask the U.S. to organize and train a Ranger Battalion to defeat the insurgency. That request brought MAJ Shelton's team to Bolivia. The unit the Americans trained ultimately sealed the fate of Che Guevara's nascent guerrilla movement. ♣

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## Endnotes

- 1 Lieutenant General Bruce Palmer, Jr., "The Army Green Book," *Army Magazine*, October 1967, 107.
- 2 In the case of the 1st Infantry Division and 2nd Armored Division, a brigade from each was forward deployed in Europe. In 1965 the 101st Airborne Division sent its 1st Brigade to Vietnam from its base at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, before the entire division went in 1967. Also at Fort Campbell was the 6th Infantry Division, activated in November 1967 and deactivated in July 1968. The 6th never received its full complement of troops.
- 3 George L. MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive: October 1966 to October 1967* (Washington DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1998), 14-15; Frank S. Basset, "The Army in Vietnam," *Army Magazine*, October 1967, 57.
- 4 This was more than twice the size of the normal Special Forces Group. 5th SFG was the command (minus operational control) headquarters for all Special Forces activities in Vietnam from 1964 to 1971. Francis J. Kelly, *U.S. Army Special Forces: 1961-1971* (Washington, DC, Department of the Army, 1973), 82.
- 5 General Robert W. Porter, "Look South to Latin America," *Military Review*, June 1968, 84. USSOUTHCOM was based at Quarry Heights, Panama Canal Zone. In the 1960s, the United States spent \$1.09 billion on MAP in Latin America. The leading recipient was Peru at \$124 million. Bolivia at \$20.9 million was at the low end of the spectrum. Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America: A Comparative Study of Insurgents and Regimes Since 1956* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 73.
- 6 Palmer, "The Army Green Book," 39.
- 7 Department of the Army Annual Historical Summary 1969, The Center of Military History, <http://www.history.army.mil/books/DAHSUM/1969/chII.htm>.



*Captain Gary Prado Salmón commanded Company B, 2nd Bolivian Ranger Battalion. His unit captured Che Guevara on 8 October 1967. Prado retired as a Major General in the Bolivian Army.*

- 8 The composition of the 8th SFG Special Action Force was a Group Headquarters Company, two Special Forces Companies (A&B), a Communications Company (E Company), the 9th Psychological Operations Battalion, the 148th Engineer Detachment, the 550th Military Police Detachment, the 255th Medical Detachment, 801st Military Intelligence Detachment and the 401st Army Security Agency Detachment. It was located at Fort Gulick, Panama Canal Zone.
- 9 Porter, "Look South to Latin America," 84-85.
- 10 <http://www.armada.mil.bo/>.
- 11 In 1967, the Air Force had 82 AT-6 Texans, 33 C-47 Skytrains, 26 F-51D Mustangs and 13 Mitchell B-25 Bombers in its inventory. There were 3 Hiller UH-12B and 4 Sikorsky UH-19B helicopters. [http://www.aeroflight.co.uk/waf/Americas/Bolivia/Bolivia-af\\_all-time-chron.htm](http://www.aeroflight.co.uk/waf/Americas/Bolivia/Bolivia-af_all-time-chron.htm).
- 12 Robert J. Alexander, *The Bolivian National Revolution*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1958), 145-146.
- 13 Alexander, *The Bolivian National Revolution*, 152.
- 14 Gary Prado Salmón, *The Defeat of Che Guevara: Military Response to Guerrilla Challenge in Bolivia*, (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1987), 21. The Czech Mauser was the primary rifle, with Mausers manufactured in several countries such as Argentina also in the inventory.
- 15 Prado, *The Defeat of Che Guevara: Military Response to Guerrilla Challenge in Bolivia*, 21; Frank A. Moyer, *Special Forces Foreign Weapons Handbook* (Boulder, CO: Panther Publications, 1970), 74.
- 16 Prado, *The Defeat of Che Guevara: Military Response to Guerrilla Challenge in Bolivia*, 21-22.
- 17 John D. Waghelstein, "A Theory of Revolutionary Warfare and Its Application to the Bolivian Adventure of Che Guevara," Masters Thesis, Cornell University, July 1973, Table B, unpublished copy, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 18 Herbert S. Klein, *Bolivia: The Evolution of a Multi-Ethnic Society* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), 323: [www.nationmaster.com/graph/eco\\_gdp-economy-gdp&date=1967](http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/eco_gdp-economy-gdp&date=1967).
- 19 After Action Report, MTT BL 404-67X, 22 December 1967, 4-5, copy USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 20 Prado, *The Defeat of Che Guevara: Military Response to Guerrilla Challenge in Bolivia*, 23, 213.
- 21 <http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-1653.html>.
- 22 John Keegan, *World Armies*, 2nd Ed. (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Company, 1983), 59-63; <http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-1653.html>.
- 23 Prado, *The Defeat of Che Guevara: Military Response to Guerrilla Challenge in Bolivia*, 25.
- 24 Prado, *The Defeat of Che Guevara: Military Response to Guerrilla Challenge in Bolivia*, 25.