



Introduction

by Charles H. Briscoe

On Monday morning, 3 April 1967, Colonel (COL) Magnus L. Smith, the 8th Special Forces Group (SFG) commander in the Panama Canal Zone, was directed by U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) to prepare a mobile training team (MTT) for a “classified” mission. *[At this time all SF MTT missions were classified until completed unless labeled very sensitive. In that case the National Security Act twenty-year classification review rule applied].* The 1967 Bolivia MTT-BL 404-67X training mission fit the “classified very sensitive” category.¹

The mission was significant. A Ranger-qualified SF captain/major was to lead the element. Despite having only two SF companies assigned (the standard was three for an SF group), the 8th SFG at Fort Gulick on the Atlantic side of the isthmus, was the Special Action Force (SAF) for Latin America. At the time, there were only two Ranger-qualified captains or majors available; one was on Vietnam orders (Captain (CPT) Duane Boyer, B Company) and the other was the Group S-3 (Operations Officer), Major (MAJ) Ralph W. Shelton, who assigned MTT missions.²

“I wasn’t specially-selected; it was simply ‘luck of the draw’ that I was the only one available that met the criteria. We tried to get CPT Boyer delayed, but Department of the Army (DA) wasn’t about to do that. So, I was the guy,” said MAJ Shelton. “COL Smith told me that we were to train a Ranger Battalion for the Bolivians because the country was being threatened by Communist insurgency. An [Bolivian] Army unit had already been chewed up by a bunch of guerrillas. We didn’t know that Che Guevara was there. I was sent over to SOUTHCOM at Quarry Heights (across the isthmus) for details. I was given license to pick my sixteen-man team, but we were to deploy as quickly as possible.”³ That was the Bolivia mission for 1967. Personal thumbnail biographies up to 1967 and photos will be used to identify personnel interviewed. The bios reflect the experience that these SF soldiers “brought to the table” for the Bolivia mission.

This issue of *Veritas* will explain the 8th SFG missions to Bolivia in 1967: to organize and train a Ranger Battalion; to train nine infantry rifle companies in small unit tactics

and counterinsurgency (COIN) operations and afterwards; to advise the Airborne Battalion and to teach COIN operations to junior officers at the Combat Arms School in Cochabamba.⁶ The capture of Ernesto “Che” Guevara and the annihilation of the Cuban-led guerrilla insurgency by the SF-trained Bolivian Rangers demonstrated the value of COIN training and validated the precepts of foreign internal defense (FID). However, the significance of this training mission was overshadowed by an escalating social turmoil that threatened America (the Detroit riots and civil rights demonstrations in Washington) and the huge Communist offensive throughout South Vietnam beginning in November 1967 and extending through January 1968 (popularly known as the Tet Offensive of 1968).


Considering this SF mission in the context of the greatest period of social upheaval in American history, the 1960s, the reader can better appreciate how important, complex, and sensitive this assignment was. Instead of complicating the history with the myriad of works that have been published afterwards, many of which are sensational, hypothetical or polemic, like the diaries of Che Guevara, official Cuban Communist Party accounts, and intelligence officer memoirs, the old Mission Area Analysis (MAA) format will rely almost entirely on what was available to the 8th SFG soldiers preparing for the mission in 1967. It is not our intent to analyze why the mission succeeded, why the Bolivians were able to eliminate the insurgency, nor why Che and his Cuban-led effort to start a continental revolution in South America failed. MTT-BL 404-67X will be explained as Major “Pappy” Shelton and his fifteen-man team understood the mission then.

To amplify this Mission Area Analysis approach the five paragraph military field order format will be followed: **Situation** [Friendly Order of Battle (military elements by type & size) with attachments], Enemy Order of Battle (insurgents & local Communist Party), weather, and terrain); **Mission; Execution** [Concept of Operation from highest to lowest levels (how the mission will be accomplished)]; **Administration & Logistics; Command & Control** (Chain of Command and Communications).

The **Situation** will address the significant events of the 1960s in the U.S., the world, Latin America, and Bolivia



COL Louis L. Felder replaced COL Magnus L. Smith as the 8th SFG Commander.



MAJ Ralph W. “Pappy” Shelton

DOB: 8 November 1929
 POB: Corinth, MS
 HS: GED
 DLI: Spanish

Army: Joined in 1947; trained as a tank crewman; Japan, 1948-1950, 1st Cav Division; Korea, 1950-1951, Inf Sqd Ldr & Plt Sgt, G Co, 19th Inf Regt, 24th Inf Division, Silver Star, WIA twice; 1952-1955, Fort Gordon, GA, 1955, Guard Cdr, Disciplinary Barracks; Germany, 1957, Inf Plt Sgt, 8th Inf Division; SFC to OCS 1957; Fort Jackson, SC, 1958-1960 BCT Co XO & Cdr; Korea, 1960-1961, Inf Plt Ldr & Co Cdr, 1/4th Cav, 1st Cav Division; Fort Bragg, NC, 1961 joined SF; White Star in Laos, 1962; 1963 Inf Off Advanced Course & DLI Spanish; Panama, 1964-1967, 8th SFG, Panama riots (1964); Dominican Republic (1965); late 1966 8th SFG S-3.⁴

before and during the 1967 mission. They provide the reader with the necessary context. Interviews of nine surviving MTT veterans will provide realism and make the contents of the other four paragraphs more interesting and personal. The elements of the five paragraphs will be presented in normal order.

This introduction will be followed by an article on the mission preparation done by the SF team in Panama and the reconnaissance conducted by the advance echelon (ADVON) in Bolivia. A tourist sketch of the country in 1967 will cover geography, weather, the key historical events, demographics, the political situation, and the economics. That will be followed by an historical summary of major world events of the turbulent 1960s, concluding in 1967.

Still, the mid-1960s were the height of the Cold War. An American-led Western world faced a divided Soviet and Chinese Eastern Bloc. Communist-supported “wars of national liberation” had erupted worldwide making COIN training the primary task of Special Forces’ FID mission. This article will show how prevalent insurgencies were by 1967, where they were, how the “domino effect” philosophy determined U.S. foreign policy (anti-Communist) in developing countries, and how Washington was dealing with these Cold War threats. Combined together these factors determined how President René Barrientos Ortuño’s request for immediate military assistance would be answered in the late spring of 1967.⁷

After his popular election in 1966, President Barrientos had requested additional military training for the Bolivian Army during an official visit to Washington. In the early 1960s, an SF MTT organized and trained an airborne

MTT-BL 404-67X Roster

MAJ Ralph W. Shelton – Commander

- (1) CPT Edmond L. Fricke – Executive Officer/S-3
- (1) CPT LeRoy Mitchell – Executive Officer/S-3
- (2) CPT James Trimble – S-1/S-4
- (3) CPT Margarito Cruz – S-2
- (3) 1LT Harvey W. Wallender – S-2
- MSG (SGM) Oliverio Gomez – Team Sergeant
- MSG Roland J. Milliard – Intelligence Sergeant
- SFC Ethyl W. Duffield – Demolitions Sergeant
- (4) SFC Daniel V. Chapa – Light Weapons Sergeant
- (5) SFC Richard A. Kimmich – Light Weapons Sergeant
- (5) SFC Johnnie E. Reynolds – Admin Supervisor/S-4
- (4) SFC Hector Rivera-Colon – Heavy Weapons Sergeant
- (2) SFC Harold T. Carpenter – Heavy Weapons Sergeant
- (6) SFC Roger L. Kluckman – Communications Supervisor
- (6) SFC William R. Bush – Communications Supervisor
- (7) SSG Jerald L. Peterson – Medical Specialist
- (7) SFC Robert L. Owens – Medical Supervisor
- SSG James A. Hapka – Medical Specialist
- SSG William W. Burkett – Radio Operator
- SSG Wendell P. Thompson Jr. – Radio Operator
- SGT Alvin E. Graham III – Radio Operator
- SGT Byron R. Sigg – Radio Operator

Legend

- (1) CPT Mitchell replaced CPT Fricke 3 Oct 67
- (2) SFC Carpenter replaced CPT Trimble 30 Aug 67
- (3) 1LT Wallender replaced CPT Cruz 3 Oct 67
- (4) SFC Chapa replaced SFC Rivera-Colon 24 May 67
- (5) SFC Reynolds replaced SFC Kimmich 3 Oct 67
- (6) SFC Bush replaced SFC Kluckman 19 Jun 67
- (7) SFC Owens replaced SSG Peterson 3 Oct 67⁵

***Note: This is the official roster for MTT-BL 404-67X. The sixteen-man MTT used two C-130 Hercules to carry them and their supplies and equipment for 179 days TDY (temporary duty) to Bolivia in 1967. Missions beyond 180 days required a PCS (permanent change of station).*

battalion at Cochabamba. It was to be the first of several elite units oriented for mountain, river, and jungle warfare. Bolivian officers had been attending COIN courses at the School of the Americas in Panama as well. Since Bolivia was not facing an immediate insurgent threat in late 1966, the COIN training for infantry units was programmed for 1968. That scheduled training was pushed forward when Army patrols in southeast Bolivia were ambushed by foreign-led insurgents in early March 1967.

President Barrientos wanted a Ranger battalion organized and trained to combat the insurgent threat as soon as possible. The mission was created, and the United States Military Group (MILGP) in La Paz coordinated an ADVON visit for 8th SFG personnel while the main body in Panama began its preparations. Following these activities will be sections associated with Mission Prep; Enemy Order of Battle (the Bolivian Communist party, Cuba's role in the hemisphere, the exploits of Che Guevara); Friendly Order of Battle (the Bolivian armed forces, other ongoing U.S.



Bolivian President René Barrientos Ortuño. Note that he is wearing the Bolivian Ranger badge atop the decorations on his left breast pocket.

military training in Bolivia, Peace Corps volunteers, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

Then, the articles will be chronological: establishment of the training base at La Esperanza; organization, training, and graduation of the Ranger Battalion; prep for the follow-on training mission; the capture of Che Guevara by the Rangers; the training of nine infantry companies in COIN operations; civic action activities of the SF team; and SF in Cochabamba. The conclusion will be based on MAJ Shelton's AAR and SOUTHCOM briefing. An epilogue covers the aftermath of SF's first successful COIN mission and Cuba's "martyrdom" of Che Guevara that raised him to mythological status. The succeeding article explains the 8th SFG mission preparation in Panama while the ADVON was in Bolivia getting briefed by the MILGP in La Paz before searching for the best training site in the operational area. ▲

Charles H. Briscoe has been the USASOC Command Historian since 2000. A graduate of The Citadel, this retired Army special operations officer earned his PhD from the University of South Carolina. Current research interests include Army special operations during the Korean War, in El Salvador, and the Lodge Act.

Endnotes

- 1 Ralph W. Shelton interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, Sweetwater, TN, 4 April 2007, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited as Shelton interview with date.
- 2 Shelton interviews, 4 April 2007 and 13 April 2007.
- 3 Shelton interview, 4 April 2007.
- 4 Shelton interview, 12 April 2007.
- 5 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), 10 December 1967, hereafter cited as MTT BL 404-67X Report, 10 December 1967.
- 6 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.
- 7 Henry Butterfield Ryan. *The Fall of Che Guevara: A Story of Soldiers, Spies, and Diplomats* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 91.