



AHEAD OF THE GUNS

SOF IN CENTRAL AMERICA

BY LIEUTENANT COLONEL ROBERT M. KIRILA

“This nation expects to have forces that can respond to the sound of guns with speed and skill and discipline whenever and wherever they are needed. This nation also expects to have forces who can operate with knowledge and wisdom well ahead of the guns in order to prevent violence from erupting.”

— Admiral Eric T. Olson

Introduction

Fifty-two days after returning from Afghanistan, the men of Company A, 1st Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) deployed to the Central American region of the U.S. Southern Command. What they quickly realized was that the perspectives and methods of fighting a network and influence-oriented enemy in combat had significant parallels to the permissive, non-combat conditions found in Central America.

Central America exists as the land bridge between North and South America. It consists of 9 to 10 countries depending on where one draws regional lines. All of these countries share a common language, a 500 to 600 year common history, and *mas o menos* (more or less) a common culture. Politically, however, the previous 100 years shaped them in different ways. In that time, the United States has been the greatest political, economic and military influence in the region, creating a population that vacillates between attraction and aversion. Today, the region is generally pro-American and the environment is best characterized as permissive for U.S. interests and citizens.

That is not to say that threats to the U.S. national and regional interests do not exist. In fact, a clear and present danger does exist in our own hemisphere.

The purpose of this article is to illustrate how a single Special Forces advanced operations base changed a paradigm of simultaneous but tactically and perhaps even operationally uncoordinated U.S. government activities in Central America to a coordinated and wittingly networked and multinational campaign that aligned joint, interagency and combined forces from every country in Central America. The joint force has the ability to respond to the ever-increasing influence of transnational criminal organizations, the new specter of radical Is-

lamic growth in the western hemisphere and the emergent humanitarian crises, which are analogical outgrowths of corrupt or inept governments and their disenfranchised people. Advanced Operations Base Caribbean and Central America acted as the strategic bridge in Central America by being the omnipresent knowledge broker who had access and credibility with decision makers in every U.S. Embassy, the U.S. Special Operations Command and host-nation senior military and/or public officials.

Setting

While the focus and might of the United States military remains on the Middle Eastern conflicts in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria and elsewhere, a small contingent of special-operations forces have been quietly involved in assisting and developing greater security much closer to home.

The Monroe Doctrine. Nearly 200 years ago, President James Monroe declared a policy whereby the United States would look upon interference in the Western hemisphere as acts of aggression requiring the U.S. to intervene. At the time, this policy though somewhat unenforceable, was largely greeted with positive response in the region.

As recently as 60 years ago, President John F. Kennedy reiterated the efficacy and relevancy of the Monroe Doctrine at an Aug. 29, 1962 news conference:

“The Monroe Doctrine means what it has meant since President Monroe and John Quincy Adams enunciated it, and that is that we would oppose a foreign power extending its power to the Western Hemisphere, and that is why we oppose what is happening in Cuba today. That is why we have cut off our trade. That is why we worked in other ways to isolate the communist menace in Cuba. That is why we will continue to give a good deal of our effort and attention to it.”



MULTINATIONAL BOOM Panama City is the capital and largest city in Panama and is an important hub for international banking and commerce. In recent years Panama's economy has experienced an economic boom giving it the fastest growing economy in Central America. *Wiki Creative Commons photo*

Threat

Despite an alarming lack of media coverage, the gravity of the security situation in Mexico and its regional neighbors is significant. In each of the past two years, there have been more violent deaths and more weapons recovered in Mexico than any other place on earth. The rise of TCOs and their resultant impact upon the governments throughout Central America and South America have created another threat to stability in the region.

The principal and most urgent threat to the United States is the drug trade and its generation of a 1,000 mile area of an unstable population on the southern border of the United States. Drug trafficking, once dominated by Colombian cartels, is now dominated by Mexican criminal organizations like Los Zetas and the Sinaloa and Gulf cartels. In fact, the Mexican cartels have expanded the business model to become the major players in cocaine trafficking worldwide, with operations in Europe, Africa and Asia. This expansion has generated massive amounts of profit and firmly establishes these cartels as illicit multinational corporations that are run by intelligent and ruthless chief executives. These super-empowered non-state actors compete and collaborate globally.

Cocaine and other major narcotics are moved from South American regions through Central America and the Caribbean and onward to the United States and Europe. Mexican cartels have taken advantage of the high state of corruption or low level of competency that exists in many of the local, regional and sometimes national-level governments throughout Central America.

In El Salvador and Honduras, murder rates are amongst the highest in the world. Transparency International, a nongovernmental organization and sponsor of a global-corruption index, evaluates the level of corruption in Honduras and Nicaragua in the bottom third of the global population alongside such notables as Pakistan, the Philippines and Uganda. Guatemala might be worse than them all. Correspondent to this low rule-of-law indicator, the Latin American gangs that originated in El Salvador are on the rise again. This time; however, the gangs have gone international and extend from Canada into Colombia. It is a logical construct that these gangs will establish ties or amalgamate their activities into the more organized and resourced drug-trafficking organizations operating in legal and pseudo-legal status in every nation in Central America.

The Growing Multinationalism in Central America

Globalism has affected the nations of Central America in many ways but perhaps the most significant is the growing multinationalism.

Twenty years ago the populations in most of the Central American countries were static and composed primarily of people of the same historical lineage and presence in the country.

Today there are large and growing populations of Chinese, Lebanese and Indian people living in every nation in Central America. Categorically, each of these demographics represents a significantly different culture, linguistic route and world view. Chinese and Lebanese banks can be seen in every major city and mosques have achieved even greater penetration reaching out into the countryside. There are now stores and service providers who speak no Spanish and cater only to the parochial interest of their national clientele. Competition and dischord amongst these new groups and historically resident groups has lead to widespread frustration and distrust.

Illicit activities historically germinate and flourish in the environmental conditions found throughout Central America. Organizations like Hezbollah and Los Zetas all enjoy overlapping constituencies in places like Panama, Belize, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Guatemala. Although not yet explicitly witnessed it is that significant concern that this competition remains steady and evolves and by extension provides opportunities for nontraditional actors like al-Qaeda and its affiliates access to elicit transportation and financial infrastructure established by drug-trafficking organizations.

The observed nexus between demographically diverse populations, drug-trafficking organizations, low rule-of-law and the physical and financial infrastructure they establish and the violent-extremist organizations strategic aims in the region present a clear and present danger to the sovereign government's regional stability and national security of the United States.

It is in this geo-political situation that the U.S. military and interagency partners find themselves. This article presents examples of how U.S. joint SOF under the command and control of Advanced Operating Base Caribbean and Central America in coordination with agency partners, are effectively achieving U.S. national-security objectives.

Task Organization

The theater special-operations command for U.S. Southern Command is SOCSOUTH, which is responsible for planning and executing mission command for Operation Enduring Freedom-Caribbean/Central America. AOB-CENTAM is located in Soto Cano, Honduras, a base Special Forces have been operating out of for the past 30 years. Today, AOB-CENTAM operates alongside Joint Task Force Bravo and commands and controls SOF in nearly every country in Central America, from Guatemala to Panama.

AOB-CENTAM has evolved over the years into a joint special-operations organization consisting of Special Forces operational detachments, military information support teams, a civil-military support element, Air Force Special Operations Intra-Theater Airlift, 160th Special Operations Aviation, Navy special-warfare elements including a SEAL platoon, special boat teams, Naval small craft instruction and technical training elements and Air Force Special Operations Squadron Elements. All of the elements are deliberately assigned to locations throughout Central America in support of the theater-engagement strategy of the commander, United States Southern Command. AOB-CENTAM maintains coordination authority with seven country teams, JTF-Bravo, Joint Interagency Task Force South, the 407th Military Intelligence Battalion

OEF-CCA is accurately described as joint, in that USSOF military elements and other government entities participate. It can also be characterized as interagency as a result of the involvement of the Drug Enforcement Administration, U.S. Agency for International Development and SOUTHCOM Military Groups in planning, coordinating, and/or executing. Finally host-nation diplomatic, military and other agencies all directly or indirectly participate. This plan, set into action by multiple agencies constitutes the interweaving of a series of long-term activities and operations that clearly exceed the objectives of individual engagements or even annual plans. AOB-CENTAM accomplishes this interweaving of agendas and objectives by personally meeting with, coordinating, synchronizing and demonstrating the achievements of the disparate objectives to local, national and regional policy makers.

Building Capability and Capacity

The commander's stated objective of building capability in Central America is broadly defined as developing partner-nation units capable of independent, combined or multinational-networked operations. Building capabilities and capacity with and through PN forces is the logical and positive outcome of USSOF foreign-internal defense

“A military campaign is a term applied to a large-scale, long-duration, significant military-strategy plan incorporating a series of interrelated military operations or battles forming a distinct part of a larger conflict often called a war.”

and various other U.S. governmental agencies that support U.S. objectives. In some of the U.S. Embassies, a special-operations liaison package is embedded to provide information and synchronize the diverse efforts.

Regardless of organization, all of the elements manifest the underlying philosophy that at its heart reflects the long historical record of Special Forces in Central America. Through and with ... is the simple, but elegant, statement that frames every mission in CCA.

Mission

AOB-CENTAM commands and controls and synchronizes USSOF in Central America alongside partner-nation military and paramilitary forces to disrupt terrorist activities thereby protecting the southern border of the United States from penetration. The OEF-CCA strategy emphasizes a combined counterterrorist training approach whose purpose is to build capabilities amongst our PN forces. The key to success for our forces is tied to how effectively we are able to work through and with the host-nation security forces of the region. The lines of operation for all of the elements under the mission command of AOB-CENTAM are: build capability and capacity, build influence and counter transnational threats.

While it may be doctrinally incorrect to describe AOB-CENTAM's efforts in Central America as campaigning, a review of the characteristics of campaign development yields a slightly different conclusion.

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activities. FID is one of seven ARSOF core tasks and involves training, equipping, advising and assisting. The unique skills organic to SOF elements described contribute to the development of PN capabilities with a long-term objective of a PN capability to conduct unilateral operations against threats to national or regional security.

FID in Central America is funded using either joint-exchange for training or counternarcotics mission authorities as directed by the commander, SOUTHCOM. The two missions are similar in the sense that the U.S. Special Operations Command deploys in support of the theater-security cooperation plan to train with PN forces. However, JCETs and CNTs differ in operational authority. JCET authorities only sanction USSOF to train with PN forces to enhance USSOF capabilities. CNT authorities provide the deploying USSOF element the ability to train, advise and assist PN forces on tactical threats affecting the region or country's internal security. The strategic implications of the advise and assist role requires USSOF to fully understand the theater, regional and country-team strategies in order to ensure that its advisory role remains operationally focused within the boundaries defined by the geographic combatant commander's engagement plan.

The current operational deployments vary dependent upon the PN capability, the country-team capacity and regional needs and priorities. Most CNT operations in CENTAM are deployed as a persistent presence, or every day of the year. SOF are usually able to aid the country teams by identifying PN shortfalls in domains such as operations, logistics, communications and leadership. The country teams in turn use Foreign Military Funding and other resources to assist in the provision of material solutions to PN operational short-

comings. Because so many of the Central American governments cannot compete financially with the local or regional illicit narcotraffickers, foreign aid or assistance subsidizes their efforts.

The priority for building capability also results in episodic engagements or short-term operational deployments. Building a specific capability to counter a clearly defined or emerging threat becomes the operational focus of these missions. The deploying elements conclude these deployments by assessing the capability of the unit they are training with because the AOB has a responsibility for notifying the SOCSOUTH commander when persistent or episodic engagements have culminated. Team, detachment and AOB assessments are now based on the operational capability of the unit in contrast to the assessment of the comprehension and ability to employ the training or capability received. This is a critical difference and requires constant reinforcement by the AOB commander.

Finally the AOB commander is responsible for making recommendations on future force employment and PN force identification to reach long-term regional security objectives. Special operators as a result of their living and working relationships with the PN forces are perfectly situated to identify individuals and units for future USSOF partnerships. The very same operators are also responsible for objectively analyzing and assessing unit operational parameters and collaborating with the PN special operations leadership to develop a long-term focused capability plan. Sometimes this process, or lack thereof, is indicative of a unit unable or unwilling to commit to the achievement of those objectives deemed critical to the SOCSOUTH strategy.

“ARSOF, by design, can be a strategic-bridging force where our people instinctively and creatively look to build relationships and connect capabilities across domains and paradigms.” — Lt. Gen. John Mulholland

Building Influence

The multinational nature of the most significant regional threat in Central America defines the focus of AOB-CENTAM. Synchronizing USSOF with other U.S. governmental agencies becomes a central mission for the AOB commander and his staff. The Department of Defense’s role is to build the capability of PN forces to detect, deter and disrupt the illicit networks in breadth and depth along the Pan American Land Bridge. The capability building effort is not specifically restricted to PN military. In many countries, USSOF trains anti-drug units, police and other internal security forces.

The build-influence line of operations is comprised of three categories: Educate and actively liaise with all elements of the U.S. country teams, find commonality of security objectives and positively influence key leaders and policy makers in the region. The method for achieving these objectives require aggressive and persistent information sharing.

Educate and Actively Liaise. One of the first activities the AOB conducted was a regional tour in which key leaders and subordinate bureaucrats in U.S. embassies and PN senior military leaders were provided a joint SOF capabilities briefing. These briefings served the dual purpose of educating those who could influence USSOF operations but also demonstrated a desire by the PN military to collaborate and share information. These face-to-face meetings demonstrated the competencies of USSOF and enabled them to seize the initiative in building influence in the various departments and echelons of bureaucracy within every embassy and PN defense organization. In two instances, AOB liaison elements in embassies were established to maintain the connective tissue so important to information sharing and collaboration. This was not universally required because many of the U.S. Embassies in

Central America have former special operators serving as civilians and foreign area officers within the country team. The underlying message in all of our efforts in CENTAM was efficiencies gained by a synchronized pursuit of our national objectives.

Finding Commonality. Critical to finding commonality with key leaders was the demonstration of our understanding of their objectives and concerns, whether diplomatic, economic, defense or informational. AOB-CENTAM leadership specifically planned during pre-mission training activities to influence senior leaders by studying and internalizing such policy guidelines as exist within the National Defense Strategy, the Global Force Management Plan, the Southern Command and SOCSOUTH strategy the individual ambassador’s mission strategic resource plan and the respective military group commander’s long-range objectives. The effort, though exhaustive, proved to be invaluable time and time again as our AOB commander or his representative was able to interrelate with senior U.S. and PN officials due to his understanding of their stated objectives.

Demonstrating Value. Another fundamental objective of building influence is to demonstrate value. ARSOF must be capable of providing ground combatant commanders, ambassadors and PN senior civilian and military leadership with a full range of options otherwise unavailable that will assist in achieving the desired effects across geographic expanses, political affiliations or fiscal constraints. AOB-CENTAM demonstrates value to the U.S. Government and PN senior leadership alike by developing the legitimacy of the units with which it is associated. This is a significant undertaking where corruption and low rule-of-law apply so broadly. USSOF deliver legitimacy by developing competency and subsequent credibility of PN security forces in the eyes of the local and national population.

The integration of CMSE, MIST and public affairs teams whose message is synchronized with U.S. and PN themes is another effective method to demonstrate value and positively influence decision makers. Collaborative planning ensured USSOF operations paralleled the country team’s internal information operations and mutually enhanced already established themes and trans-regional messages. SOF enablers focused on enhancing the image of the PN through institutional building projects, PN-run community medical programs and published articles highlighting the PN’s recent operational accomplishments.

Counter Transnational Threats

One of the principles of National Defense Strategy over the past 11 years has been countering transnational threats. USSOF contribute and assist in this pursuit by advising and assisting PN forces in the disruption and deterrence of special-interest aliens and or drug-trafficking organizations by providing accurate, timely and insightful reporting to SOCSOUTH, JIATF-South and the Military Groups. As knowledge brokers, USSOF can collaborate with other intelligence disciplines in the development of assessments and forecasts as well as passively collect information as it pertains to the daily activities and people with whom they interact. As advisers, USSOF bring new technical skills and experiences gained from operating against networked combatants in places like Afghanistan.

Deterrence, or the threat of punishment to an individual or organization, is pursued in two main categories. Direct deterrence involves the direct physical and legal presence at the local, regional and international levels. In many of the countries of Central America, this deterrence is supported mainly through the legal and paramilitary arms of government. AOB-CENTAM had little direct involvement in

this avenue. Indirectly, however, AOB-CENTAM contributed to the professionalism of the federal security forces throughout the region on a persistent basis. The limiting factor in this effort is the inability of many of these countries' small security forces to absorb long-term training opportunities.

Disruption, or the interruption of illicit transportation infrastructure, is pursued by two general categories. USSOF contribute to the local and regional disruption of SIAs largely through their persistent engagement with all of the counter-drug agencies and national military organizations responsible for interdicting illicit actors and organizations.

Concurrent to SOF operations the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Coast Guard and PN naval assets are interdicting the flow of SIA trafficking. JIATF-South plays a key role in providing information and intelligence in order to optimize geographically and logistically constrained resources.

Astride the land bridge, the DEA in coordination and conjunction with PN counter-drug, counter-terrorist or police forces are interdicting land-based routes that support and SIA trafficking. JTF-Bravo contributes with its aerial capabilities, transporting PN forces and provides direct-mission support.

Persistent engagement and coordination with JIATF-South has resulted in operational intelligence that the AOB became proficient in developing in a coordinated manner, weaving authorities and PN capabilities together to achieve results not previously possible. Physically being on the ground in every country in the region and sharing "eyes and ears" atmospherics with all of the key military and civilian leaders garners credibility and influence with SOUTHCOM, SOCSOUTH and the ambassadors. The military groups are another important part of the AOB regional-engagement plan. Typically commanded by O6-level officers, these organizations work for the ambassador and represent SOUTHCOM interests. Repetitive and close interpersonal coordination by the AOB commander with the military group commanders enabled USSOF to more effectively achieve SOCSOUTH regional objectives and connect the individual country's action plan and mission-strategic resource plan with regional-security objectives.

This influence is notable because AOB CENTAM has very little actual authority to make all these actions and activities occur. Instead, previous performance, initiative and creative problem solving by AOB and SFODA leadership led to occupation of a leadership role that was dependent upon its ability to coordinate multiple agendas, requirements and personalities. Whether acting as an adviser to the commander of JTF-Bravo, educating and training U.S. Embassy staffs in every country, helping the JIATF staff tighten their operational understanding of the international trade dynamics or hosting Congressional delegations and highlighting the capabilities and shortcomings



SYNCHRONIZED EFFORT An operations officer with Special Operations Command-South, briefs military officials from nine countries at the start of a joint exercise. U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Alex Licea

of the existing partner-nation governments and their correspondent security forces, the AOB commander and his small staff wielded significant influence in the region.

Summary & Conclusion

The Special Forces AOB, as a mission-command element, is the decisive element of special operations in Central America. As the commander of SOF operations, he has become the nexus of the informal connective tissue that links U.S. national and regional objectives with PN goals and military and paramilitary capabilities. As a knowledge broker, he provides senior military and political leadership with the ground truth few others can provide. This is especially true in contingency operations where his forces are agile and purposefully built organizations that can act more quickly than any other U.S. government element in the region. This is exactly the function that Lt. Gen. John F. Mulholland referred to in his "ARSOF 2018" article as the strategic bridge that connects simultaneous, but disparate efforts, across multiple domains and disciplines. As has been demonstrated countless times in successive decades, a small group of intelligent and creative Special Forces officers and noncommissioned officers developed and executed a multinational plan that far exceeded the size and scope of their limited task organization and operational authorities. They did this the old-fashioned Special Forces way, by building credibility through demonstration of value, via perseverance, rapport building, information sharing and persistent presence on the ground advising and assisting. **SW**

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