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OFF THE RANGE, INTO THE JUNGLE

Optimizing Special Forces in a Combined Operation.

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In August 2017, a combined Panamanian-Colombian force embarked on Operation OSO II, a targeted clearance mission in the famed Darien Gap. This operation, and the supporting role played in it by two Special Forces Operational Detachments-Alpha, serves as an excellent example of how to optimize U.S. Special Operations Forces' role in the U.S. Southern Command Theater of operations. This also exemplifies the ability of U.S. Special Forces working within the SOUTHCOM area of responsibility to synchronize efforts between two countries with similar problem sets. The two SFODAs from 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) deployed to Central and South America, the primary AOR for 7th SFG(A), for a counter-narco terrorism mission. The focus of both detachments was to build partner nation capacity through specialized training designed to enhance and build the host nation's security capabilities. To accomplish this task, the detachments would push their efforts into increasing interoperability between internal security and governmental departments, bolster communication laterally among these partner force agencies and U.S. agencies, and assist in driving the partner forces' operations and intelligence cycle to fully encompass the domestic assets available, thus strengthening unity of effort within each country.

The SFODA in Panama was the fourth team to partner with Panamanian forces on a CNT mission in recent history, and their priority partner was Panama's premier border protection force: the *Servicio Nacional de Fron-*

teras (SENAFRONT). The SENAFRONT's Eastern Brigade is located in the small remote town of Meteti, Panama, which is situated at the mouth of the famed Darien jungle.⁰¹ This is the location in which the detachment lived and conducted all CNT activities with the unit. The detachment in Colombia was partnered with the 7th Division of the Colombian Army, who primarily operated in the Northern tier of Colombia; including the Darien Gap border region with Panama.⁰² Additionally, both detachments operated with Civil Affairs Teams, Military Information Support Teams (MISTs), and Naval Special Warfare teams in their respective countries; strengthening the SOF approach and assisting the SFODAs with non-lethal methods and activities.

A COMPLEX ENVIRONMENT WITH A COMPLICATED PROBLEM

The Terrain: The Darien Gap is where Central and South America come together at the Panama-Colombia border. It is a vast rain forest well known for its remoteness and the illicit trafficking routes that cut through the thick jungle vegetation. A vast swath of jungle, spanning more than 60 miles in length of almost impenetrable jungle, the Darien Gap encompasses the total landmass between where the Pan-American Highway stops in both Panama and Colombia. The Darien Gap lacks roads, infrastructure, and governmental influence from either Panama or Colombia.



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Drug cartels and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) guerillas have historically used the Darien as a staging point for criminal activities, as well as a viable land route to conduct illicit trafficking from the South American continent into North America.⁰³ Furthermore, Panamanian and Colombian security forces have had a difficult time projecting influence into the area due to the terrain and the lack of accessibility.

For Special Operations Command-South, the command responsible for the employment of Special Operations Forces in Central and South America, the border region of the Darien is of high importance. It is a natural chokepoint from South America into Central America and rife with trans-regional/transnational threat networks. Specifically, the Clan de Golfo Cartel has a dominant presence in the area specializing in cocaine and illegal mining.⁰⁴ A prevailing threat for the U.S. in this area is also the movement of special interest aliens, which the Assistant Secretary for International Affairs and Chief Diplomatic Officer for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Office of Policy, Alan Bersin, defines in his written congressional testimony as a population that, “consists of unauthorized migrants who arrive in the United States from, or are citizens of, several Asian, Middle Eastern, and African countries.”⁰⁵ DHS commonly refers to these countries as Special Interest Countries and migrants from these countries, “may include migrants who are affiliated with foreign terrorist organizations, intelligence agencies and organized criminal syndicates.”⁰⁶ These individuals have been known to use this geographic choke point as the movement corridor from South America into Central America with a final destination being the U.S., which is a security concern for all nations along this pathway.

The Forces: Panamanians have traditionally conducted security operations in the Darien by projecting influence through a combination of persistent presence in remote communities and sporadic interdiction operations. During these operations, the SENAFRONT frequently nets undocumented immigrants and SIAs moving from Colombia into Panama. On the Colombian side of the border, the CNP and Colombian Army use similar tactics to exert nominal control. Both countries target narcotic production and facilitation areas, while attempting to deny T3Ns freedom of movement through terrain denial and interdiction operations. Conducting interdiction operations in the Darien; however, is similar to finding the proverbial needle in the haystack due to the dense jungle terrain hindering access coupled with an entrenched illicit early warning network in the local population that alerts traffickers of security force activities. In response, the Panamanians and Colombians established multiple combined border outposts on a mountain ridgeline that is a natural and political divide between the two countries, with an agreement from both governments to establish more posts in the future.⁰⁷ The outposts are designed to act as sentinels over the land crossing

and enable both countries to project security forces from those locations.

Historically, the Panamanian government and security forces have been reactive in nature to criminal activity in the Darien. Intelligence is developed and disseminated from the top, as opposed to subordinate units and commanders feeding intelligence upwards based on information gathered during operations. This creates an intelligence gap that hinders the development of productive targets needed to drive operations. The SENAFRONT normative is to react to HUMINT provided information about illicit activity in the border region, which in turn generates an interdiction operation. The results have been inconsistent, due primarily to the challenges posed in conducting surgical interdiction operations in dense jungle terrain.

In contrast, the Colombians have a lengthy history of training engagements with the United States, namely United States Special Forces, beginning with the fight against communist expansion in Operation LAZO and transitioning into the fight against the FARC and prevalent drug trade.⁰⁸ The institutional design of Colombian and U.S. Army intelligence and operations are very similar, and this has contributed to their development of a



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Both Panamanian and Colombian patrols conduct final PCC/PCIs prior to departing into the Darien Gap.

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Colombian soldiers prepare to depart for Operation OSO II.

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Standing on the border near the Gulf of Uraba, Colombia can be seen in the distance. The Gulf of Uraba is a battleground for anti-narcotics operations in northern Colombia.

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well-fused partnership. In both Panama and Colombia, USSF typically deployed and trained their partners on marksmanship, basic patrolling, land navigation, communication, medical skills, and engineer tasks. However, the Global War on Terrorism has pulled a large portion of USSOF to the U.S. Central Command AOR, and that has affected the overall personnel strength available for SOUTH-COM rotations and the ability to achieve effects at a more operational level. With a refocus on the AOR, 7th SFG (A) is transitioning from the historical flat range and small unit tactics mindset to a concept of expanding and strengthening our host-nation partners operations and intelligence cycles at a higher level. This will in turn strengthen our partners' ability to provide security and governance within, while optimizing the employment of the limited USSOF available for deployment to the region.

The Whole Picture: The Darien Region has evolved from a narcotic highway to an avenue of a more diverse and complex criminal activity that encompasses drugs, weapons, stolen goods, illegal mining and human smuggling (i.e., SIAs). This has been recognized as a substantial threat to the U.S. due to the porous border that facilitates ease of illicit trafficking through multiple pathways with the potential to continue to the southern border of the U.S.⁰⁹ Considering the difficult terrain, a developed threat network, lack of ongoing shaping operations in the area, and the general lack of cooperation among internal agencies, both partner forces and the SFODAs had a difficult path to navigate in order to develop a combined plan against the illicit networks operating in the region.



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A COMBINED APPROACH

To truly assist the partner force in building operational capacity and open the aperture in which USSF operates in Panama, the detachment working with the SENAFRONT sought to develop a deliberately planned operation and maintain involvement from planning through execution. The operation would be designed to shape the operating area, provide the SFODA with knowledge into previously unobserved partner force capability gaps, and energize international security cooperation in the Darien Gap. By the partner force choosing to become pro-active, using bottom-fed intelligence could drive subordinate commanders to nominate operational targets that truly degrade and deter illicit activity in the Darien. The Panamanians were already manning border outposts with the Colombians. The natural evolution of the relationship was to begin coordinated, deliberately targeted combined operations. Moreover, the two countries had an established operational relationship through a series of bilateral maritime interdiction training exercises that had been conducted over the previous years;¹⁰ this would expand that relationship into the terrestrial domain.

Operation OSO II was developed by the SENAFRONT, with USSF mentorship, to target a known location that has been used by the Clan de Golfo cartel as an exchange and facilitation area for narcotics, weapons and human smuggling. After further mission refinement, the SENAFRONT decided that in order to



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achieve maximum effects, the Colombians should conduct a simultaneous operation on their side of the border. SENAFRONT leadership contacted Colombian Army leaders from the 7th Division in Medellin, Colombia, to see if there was mutual interest, and to begin coordination. Because the scale of the operation was so large compared to previous operations in the Darien, USSF personnel from both Panama and Colombia decided to observe the execution phase of the mission from a secure border outpost that would serve as the operations center for the mission. This was the first operation in recent years that USSF in Panama would observe mission activities from a forward position, which for legal purposes would be considered the last covered and concealed position.

International Planning: Once the Panamanians confirmed that the Colombians were interested in participating and that planning would begin, the detachment reached out to the SFODA working in Medellin to begin coordinating efforts to synchronize planning and execution details. Embassy and TSOC approval was still required for the detachment in Panama to move forward to the secured border outpost during the operation. To obtain approval, the Detachment Commander in Panama, with the assistance of the Office of Defense Cooperation, presented the U.S. Ambassador to Panama the full Operation OSO II mission brief. The Ambassador viewed the operation as a great opportunity to assist Panama in achieving bilateral security cooperation, while building internal security capacity, and approved the plan. Additionally, SOCSOUTH approval was needed in order for USSF to position



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Members of the Panamanian SENAFRONT and Colombian Army personnel work side-by-side sharing intelligence and refining the plan during a planning conference in Carepa, Colombia.

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SENAFRONT personnel conduct static load training under the supervision of USSF prior to a night air insertion exercise. This training event aided in building interoperability between SENAN pilots and SENAFRONT ground elements; which greatly set the conditions for successful night insertion during Operation OSO II.

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USSOF observe as the SENAFRONT and Colombian Army leadership rehearse the ground tactical plan at the border outpost the night prior to mission execution.

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An SFODA member looks out into the Darien jungle during insertion to the border outpost.

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forward at the outpost. The SOCFWD-CENTAM Commander briefed the concept to the SOCSOUTH staff and commander for approval, and the concept was reviewed to ensure all activities were legal and within operational authorities. The SENAFRONT was informed of the approval, and they immediately began seeking authorization from their chain of command, which in the end went up to the Presidential level. This was followed by a multilateral planning conference in Carepa, Colombia, between the Panamanian SENAFRONT, Colombian Army and detachment leadership from both countries. The conference was a success as it enabled all parties involved to share intelligence, synchronize the ground tactical plan and resolve logistical friction points. The planning conference also acted as a springboard for the SFODA in Colombia to obtain the U.S. Ambassador to Colombia's permission for participation due to the operation's potential to bolster international security cooperation between Colombia and Panama. Operation OSO II was finalized as a seven-day operation to be executed Aug. 26– Sept. 1, 2017.

Into the Jungle: The only way to reach the border outposts is by air. For Operation OSO II, the U.S. State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement provided three helicopters to lift the SENAFRONT and USSF partners from an airbase in Meteti to the remote border outpost. This was a groundbreaking event for INL, as they are involved in training Panamanian security force pilots from the Servicio Nacional Aeronaval and each helicopter would be co-piloted by SENAN pilots during insertion for the operation. The SENAN pilots had not previously delivered

a ground force to a remote location in support of a named operation. So, in order to set the conditions and build interoperability between the pilots and ground force for the operation, the SENAFRONT and the INL-trained SENAN pits conducted a series of air mobility training events that culminated in a night insertion exercise in close proximity to the SENAFRONT's Meteti base. As a result of the training, the INL and SENAN pilots were able to conduct the Operation OSO II insertion under night vision goggles during hours of limited visibility, validating their capability to support future Panamanian security operations. Following the Panamanian insertion, the Colombians were inserted to the remote outpost via their own military helicopters. A total of four USSF personnel (three from Panama and one from Colombia), and a member of the US MIST team from Panama, were located at the outpost for the duration of the operation. The MIST team had worked with their SENAFRONT counterparts to pre-plan messages for various contingencies, and would provide reach back to the dissemination source if needed. Prior to the patrol's departure, USSF observed the Panamanian and Colombian forces through all pre-mission checks, including communications and the final patrol brief.

Throughout the execution of Operation OSO II, USSOF remained at the secured border outpost acting as the operations center, and were able to observe both the Panamanian and Colombian's processes for battle tracking, communications, medical readiness and logistical support. Detachment leadership in Medellin, Colombia, positioned themselves with the Brigade Commander and Division Operations Officer at the 7th Division Headquarters, while detachment members from the SFODA in Panama, were positioned at the SENAFRONT base in Meteti, Panama with the Eastern Brigade headquarters. Both detachments positioned at their respective partner force headquarters were able to observe the higher headquarters' ability to assay information, analyze the tactical situation and revise the plan when needed. The USSF personnel were able to provide ground truth to both the U.S. Embassies and host-nation command elements, and provide recommendations based off of USSF reporting from the secured outpost. This greatly aided in reducing the friction points for the mission. For the duration of Operation OSO II, USSOF were the bridge that flattened communications from the border outpost to mission command elements in both countries. This assisted both partner forces' ability to react quickly to information coming



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USSF assists the SENAFRONT in marking the HLZ at the border outpost in preparation to receive the ground force during hours of limited visibility.

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The SENAFRONT conduct a pre-mission communications exercise with the Colombian army.

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A SENAN pilot gives the air mission brief prior to insertion to the border outpost.

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The combined SENAFRONT and Colombian Army patrol following the successful clearance of the objective.

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ON THE OBJECTIVE, THE PANAMANIAN SENAFRONT AND COLOMBIAN ARMY CLEARED THEIR RESPECTIVE AREAS AND FOUND EVIDENCE OF CARTEL ACTIVITY, ILLEGAL MINING AND POSSIBLE HUMAN SMUGGLING.



key partners for conducting command and control of a multi-national operation at the tactical level. The need for SFODAs to build an operational level capacity with host nation forces is critical. If our partners cannot develop their own targets, understand the dynamics of the enemy, and carry out their own missions, then we have not created a capable or sustainable force. Through more operations and opportunities such as Operations OSO II, USSOF have the ability to assist in a more effective development of our host nation partners. The mutual relationship between the U.S. and our partners satisfy our most important security objective — protecting the homeland. **SW**

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from the ground forces. By synchronizing communications between all elements, USSOF were provided observation into how each partner force receives and reacts to information updates during a real-time operation.

On the objective, the Panamanian SENAFRONT and Colombian Army cleared their respective areas and found evidence of cartel activity, illegal mining and possible human smuggling (this was assessed based on evidence found and the state of the cartel camp). Additionally, the Panamanian SENAFRONT had several follow-on targets to be planned and executed. This would continue the momentum of Operation OSO II and include the incorporation of Colombian forces to further disrupt the numerous crossing routes within the Darien Region.

THE RIGHT TOOL FOR THE JOB

Operation OSO II highlighted the ability of USSF to drive operations through a multi-national combined mission with a viable force to affect a threat network. Both detachments involved with this operation had demonstrated that USSF was the connective tissue to unify two countries to operate together, while building partner force capacity to combat narco-terrorism and T3N's. The Panamanian-Colombian operation further bolstered international security cooperation and enabled both partner forces to disrupt aggressive cartel activity, the movement of illicit materials by T3N's and human smuggling. More importantly, the SFODAs were able to establish their ability to be more than trainers, but rather the force multipliers that possess the capacity to coordinate, drive planning and prepare

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