



# PANAMA

BY JANICE BURTON





The Isthmus of Panama, also known as the Isthmus of Darien, lies between the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean and links North and South America. The country itself is ethnically diverse, and the population is massed mostly in urban areas such as the Panama City and Colon.

The Republic of Panama is a sovereign state, much like the United States, with three governmental bodies: legislative, executive and judicial. Unlike many of its neighboring countries, Panama has a progressive economy, and is considered by many to be one of the most stable in America, and is tied to finance, tourism and logistics based around the Panama Canal.



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From 2002 to 2009, the country's Gross Domestic Product doubled, from stimulation to the economy largely through foreign investment and tourism. According to the UN, the country has the highest per capita income in Central America, coming in at just under \$14,000 annually.

That being said, Panama is still a country of the have and have-nots. Traveling from the city's gleaming downtown replete with high rises and fine dining, you can easily find yourself in neighborhoods that even security forces are hesitant to patrol. A missed turn going from downtown to the U.S. Embassy can land you in El Chorrillo, a neighborhood that you wouldn't want to be in during the day, and definitely not at night. Outside of Panama City, Colon, a port city located on the coast, is often considered a war zone with rival gangs fighting for control.

The Darien Gap is an ungoverned space that separates Colombia and Panama. Its high crime rate is due in part to a presence of Colombian guerrillas and the drug trade. Today, it is used as route to move people through the area. During a recent patrol between

Colombian forces and Panamanian security forces, refugees from Africa were found moving through the gap headed north toward Mexico.

It is the flow of people through the country that U.S. Special Operations Forces focus on, as they work to protect the Southern Approach. Stopping the illicit movement of people throughout South America into Central America and on into Mexico is a major task for SOCSOUTH. Panama is key in this effort.

Panama is one of two countries in the SOCSOUTH area of operations that does not have a standing army, instead Panama has a paramilitary security force, which is comprised of armed police and internal security forces, as well as a small maritime and air force known as the Servicio Nacional Aeronaval or SENAN. Another element, the SENAFRONT is the police force whose job it is to "plan, organize and direct all actions that guarantee the security of the territory within the sovereign jurisdiction of Panama's borders." These two organizations are the partners that American forces train and work with in Panama.

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Cargo ships enter the Miraflores Locks in the Panama Canal to be lowered from the Pacific Ocean. The Panama Canal, which is approximately 51 miles long between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, was cut through one of narrowest saddles of the isthmus that joins North and South America. Ships from all parts of the world transit daily through the Panama Canal with some 13 to 14 thousand vessels passing through it every year, connecting 160 countries and reaching some 1,700 ports in the world.

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A mobile training team from 7th SFG(A) works with police and security forces in Panama, training on methods used to collect biometrics and gather evidence and combining those techniques with tactical training.

STORY PHOTOS: U.S. ARMY PHOTOS BY JENNIFER G. ANGELO



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While *Special Warfare* was in Panama, a mobile training team from the 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) was on the ground to work with these elements on gathering evidence, identifying those persons moving through the country illegally and strengthening security within the region. They not only worked on tactical training, but also on the collection of evidence, which allows the partner forces to identify the makers of drugs flowing through the region, how to use technology to identify people passing through the country by the use of biometric technology. The U.S. Soldiers learned the technology through training at the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and Schools advanced training, and now use it give another tool to their partners in Panama.

A Sergeant First Class assigned to 7th SFG(A) led the MTT to Panama.

“The ODA requested we come down and conduct a site exploitation training class with the Panamanian force to help them better understand site exploitation, biometric enrollment and the illicit pathways that run through Panama to help stop drug trafficking, human trafficking and special interest alien trafficking,” he explained.

The team worked with three different police units: the regular force, the SWAT force and the force focused on intelligence. The SWAT force is the tier one element in Panama and is known as UTOA.

“They understand the basics of site exploitation and they go all around the country to interdict all of the threats, but the more they understand the process-



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01 A team of Panamanian Police prepare to enter a building during a culmination exercise that combines training learned in the classroom and on the range to test their operational skills.

02, 03 Members of the Panama police force gear up to put tactical skills to the test during a culmination exercise conducted by a mobile training team from 7th SFG(A).

04 A U.S. Army Special Forces Soldier from 7th SFG(A) works with members of the police force in Panama, training on methods used to collect biometrics and gather evidence.

05, 06 Skills learned in the classroom are put to the test during the final culmination exercise.

es, the more successful they will be whether they are the force collecting the evidence or the force not.”

The team also worked with the Panamanian force to help them identify smuggling routes, where they stop and who has been there. He noted that using biometric profiling they can stop the smugglers from crossing the borders into other countries. U.S. forces cannot do that in country because they do not have the authority or permissions, that is why it is impertative that partner forces are enabled with the skills to do it.

Following the training, he said he felt the students had a good understanding of the tactics and techniques and that it was now up to them to practice and refine standard operating procedures into a more cohesive plan for execution. More iterations of training are also in the planning stages.

“The next step is for the participants to go back to their units and conduct train the trainer with their subordinates so the force as a whole understands the process,” he said. “Another big thing that came out of the training was that three different units were included and they were able to build bonds, which fostered a sense of ‘Yes, we can work together,’ which creates a great partnership.”

He added, “It’s a wonderful thing for guys in 7th Group to be able to come down here multiple times during their career and build rapport with the units. We can provide initial training for their new members, but we also train senior members whom we



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have worked with in the past and they really appreciate the relationship.”

Col. Javier Cardona, Chief Security Cooperation Office in Panama, knows a lot about those long-term relationships.

“It’s really a team effort,” explained Col. Javier Cardona, Chief Security Cooperation Office in Panama. “Upon arriving in Panama, we (special operations forces) figured out the units on the ground. We had some SOF elements - Psychological Operations and Civil Affairs - who were already doing engagements based on the authorities they were working on. We



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quickly identified the need for a more permanent presence in order to address current threats and concerns of the region. We recognized the growing threats of the transit zones. Panama is the first first gate for the passage of illicit networks throughout the region.”

Col. Cardona explained that his long-standing experience in the SOCSOUTH AOR as a member of the 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne), helped him better understand the problems and allowed him to begin working with SOCSOUTH to create a SOF engagement plan for Panama. Key to that permanent presence was the creation of the Special Operations Forces Liaison Element and the naming of a Special Operations Liaison Officer on the ground. From that beginning, SOF forces established two elements in the form of operational support teams: one from Special Forces and another one from the Naval Special Warfare Group.

Cardona believes the success of SOF in Panama is tied to the increase in operational readiness of the partner-nation forces. He explained that the relationships built between U.S. SOF and the partner-nation made a significant impact on the skills of the partner nation.

“We not only engage with special mission units in the country, our forces quickly came on the ground to conduct assessments to train other security elements. I will tell you that the success story in Panama today is the increased operational readiness of our partner nation's security forces. To tell you to tell you the extent of how SOF has expanded our presence here in Panama, you have to understand that our forces are now engaging



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with the national police and their special unit UTOA, which is a maritime narcotics unit. We have engaged with the national counterterrorism force. We have also engaged with the SENAFRONT, which is the border security force. We work with a mobile strike forces and the special forces to conduct long-range regional operations. U.S. SOF working with the partner nation forces works because we bring the language skills and the cultural understanding. We have long-standing background and knowledge in the area. And, most importantly, we also enjoy the necessary authorities.

A key success story in Panama was the ability of the partner nation to generate its own organic operation and deploy forward with Colombian forces for operations in the Darien Gap.

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Skills learned in the classroom are put to the test during a culmination exercise with a mobile training team from 7th SFG(A).

## HISTORY OF U.S. ARMY SPECIAL OPERATIONS IN PANAMA

U.S. Army Special Operations Soldiers have a long history with the country of Panama, beginning with the establishment of the 8th Special Forces Group in 1963 at Fort Gulick, Panama. The primary mission of the group was counterinsurgency training for the Armies of Latin America. The training was conducted under the auspices of The School of the Americas.

In the Spring of 1962, an advanced party from Co. D, 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne), based out of Fort Bragg, North Carolina, traveled to the Panama Canal Zone to lay the groundwork for the establishment of the 8th SFG (A). After the initial coordination was conducted, augmentation teams arrived in country and became known as the Special Action Force.

In January 1963, Col. Arthur D. "Bull" Simons took command of Company D, 7th SFG (A), and it, along with the SAF, was officially redesignated as the 8th Special Forces Group (Airborne), which included a Military Intelligence Detachment, a medical detachment, a military police detachment, an engineer detachment and a psychological operations battalion. The group was also responsible for operating an NCO Academy, an Airborne School and an Underwater Operations Schools for U.S. Army South, as well as the Jungle Operations Training Center. Later, the unit was tasked with developing and maintaining a HALO School.

While not conducting training, the 8th SFG (A) participated in several notable operations, including the organization of a mobile training team that trained and advised the Bolivian Ranger Battalion that captured and killed Che Guevara. They also trained counterinsurgent units in Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador that killed three of Guevara's lieutenants.

MTT's from the 8th Special Forces Group also assisted the Venezuelan Army in the construction of a jump school. They trained the first students and the cadre for follow-on classes. They also trained Dominican Republic Army units in counter-guerrilla warfare. And, at the U.S. Army Airborne School at Fort Sherman, SF Soldiers trained Guatemalan airborne personnel.

In 1972, the 8th Special Forces Group (A) was deactivated and its members were assigned to 3rd Bn., 7th SFG (A). In 1999, all military bases in Panama were turned over to Panama, along with the Panama Canal.



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Another success story is the increase in advanced training of partner-nation forces. Cardona said the training elements were able to push the envelope with a recent multi-service counterterrorism exercise, which was conducted by a Crisis Response Force from the 7th Special Forces Group.

"On a national level of training, the enthusiasm and motivation to progress by the partner forces is what we see every day," he explained. 

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