



NEWS FROM THE FRONT

“Nunca Camino Solo”¹

Security Force Assistance (SFA) Operations in the Competition Phase

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OVERVIEW

In 2017, Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs) were created to advise foreign partners and relieve operational stress on BCTs. To achieve this, five Active Duty brigades and one National Guard brigade stood up between 2017 and 2019.

The SFAB advisor teams are small units capable of rapid global employment, achieving tactical, operational and strategic effects while simultaneously generating a financial return on investment. SFABs and subordinate advisor teams are the Army’s answer to sustaining international partnerships while preserving brigade combat team (BCT) readiness. As an analogy, if viewed as a business venture, the SFAB is a startup. According to David Carl, “Startups initially must be lean, efficient, savvy, and above all, add value to the sector where competition is occurring. The end goal is fostering sustainability so that other advantageous opportunities can be seized upon when presented.”² Advisor teams working for U.S. Army South (ARSOUTH) recently created conditions for operational sustainability while supporting operations in the U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) area of responsibility (AOR). They achieved global effects in Colombia in a short four months. Advisor teams from a military perspective are a lean, efficient, and savvy answer to prolonged multinational partnership. They achieve tactical, operational, and strategic effects while preserving the combat readiness of BCTs. Advisor teams demonstrate significant value to the sector where competition is occurring.

THEATER ENTRY – SMALL UNIT EMPLOYMENT

Operations in Colombia are not without challenges. On arrival to Colombia, advisor teams went through a two-week quarantine period, followed by reception, staging, and onward integration (RSOI) activities.

Due to a political environment questioning the legality of our presence and pending Colombian congressional approval, advisor teams were told to cease activities within weeks of arrival to the outstations. Teams constantly competed with negative social media posts, tweets, and articles. They remained focused even after receiving threats by known in-country bad actors. Advisors consistently demonstrated their professionalism in the face of adversity.

In February 2020, the 1st SFAB was tasked to provide four advisor teams (comprised of 10-11 personnel) supporting SOUTHCOM enhanced counter-narcotics operations in Colombia. Upon further analysis, four advisor teams plus a battalion tactical assault command post (TAC) deployed to Colombia, in June 2020, following a two-month delay due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They were assigned to partner with Colombian Army Joint Task Forces (JTFs) and Colombian Army Counter-Narcotics Brigade (BRCNA) commanded by brigadier generals and a colonel respectively. SFA teams were instructed to assess the operational tempo of Colombian forces and to gain understanding of how intelligence flows within the commands. The purpose of the assessments was to identify ways operational efficiencies could be generated allowing for an increase in disruption against cocaine production and trafficking.

TACTICAL EFFECTS ACHIEVED

The four advisor teams in Colombia positioned in areas where the highest amounts of cocaine production occurs. Occupying a footprint in remote locations, they immediately established communications, a mission command node, medical capabilities, and tied into the force protection plan of their partnered force. Teams led by a Captain (or Major) and a Sergeant First Class immediately began assessments needed to gain situational understanding and generate a plan for advising. Three major successes for the advisor teams: Combat power allocation, medical evacuation refinement, and access to updated imagery for planning purposes.



Figure 1: Advisor Team 1313 and Colombian Army Soldiers Reviewing Reports³

Advisor teams spent time analyzing the disposition of platoons across each area of operation (AO) and compared that to historical trends for cocaine eradication. Once completed, they were able to advise partner forces through the same analytical process. This enabled partner forces to study their force disposition and look at options for re-arranging combat power. Teams advised the operations center on techniques used to track and project combat power, generating information that allowed the commander to gain better situational understanding on forces and effects on the “battlefield.” For the advisor teams, these skill sets allowed them to continue their parallel planning efforts while improving

staff-related skills useful across the Army. For our Colombian partners, these advising efforts contributed to a tripling of cocaine eradication outputs on a daily basis, while generating combat power for other security activities.

Following establishment of their footprint, advisor teams executed a medical evacuation rehearsal drill involving both the Colombian Army and Colombian Air Force. An established plan to evacuate casualties existed between the Air Force and Army. The rehearsals helped improve efficiencies in the processing of paperwork and requests for transportation assets. Advisors were able to recommend refinements to the medical evacuation plan contributing to our Colombian partners executing multiple no-notice drills demonstrating proficiency and understanding. These efforts proved successful when a Colombian Soldier wounded by an IED on a coca field was evacuated to a higher level of care with no issues. Teams were then able to build off the positive rapport built to start developing a prolonged field care-training plan meant to be taught by Colombian Army doctors to tactical elements.

The biggest challenge faced by Colombian partners was the flow of intelligence and receipt of targeting-related products. Specifically, units lacked updated imagery of their AO, making planning efforts difficult. Partner forces typically use outdated Google imagery to execute planning for operations. Advisor teams studied the military intelligence hierarchy and identified assets under-utilized by the Colombian military. With this information, advisor teams were able to coach their partners how to conduct thorough mission analysis and identify those same available resources. These resources provided access to better imagery required for planning, along with a database of previous operational results. Colombian partners increased their capability to plan small unit actions against drug labs, while also forecasting larger operations against multiple coca fields. The next step in the process is an assessment of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets – availability, resource allocation, and operational synchronization.

OPERATIONAL EFFECTS ACHIEVED

The late addition of the Squadron TAC facilitated establishing a mission command node centrally located in Bogota. Existence of this node allowed advisor teams to focus primarily on advising and not administrative reporting requirements to multiple headquarters elements. Operationally, the TAC gained an understanding on how the Colombian Army allocates coca eradication goals and helicopter blade hours accomplished through interactions with the *Jefatura de Operaciones (JEMOP)* – equivalent to U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM). Additionally, the TAC and the BRCNA Advisor Team viewed the initial stages developing a new counter-narcotics division.

During the four-month deployment, eradication was the primary focus of Colombian Army units. Coca eradication is a relatively new mission set for the Colombian military, only truly starting within the past two years. Advisor teams assisted with increasing eradication efforts and outputs. Access to the JEMOP, commanded by a Major General, allowed the TAC to understand how eradication goals are allocated across the Army. The goals for 2020 were equitably distributed across the formations, causing some units to task organize smaller echelons to other formations in order to meet eradication goals. A recommendation made is to simply conduct historical analysis of cocaine yields, adjust eradication goals by unit and area, and allocate forces appropriately for the next calendar year.

On visiting the advisor team outstations, the primary concern for JTF Commanders was a lack of helicopter blade hours available to support operations. At one time early in their careers, military commanders were used to having an abundance of aircraft and blade hours available to conduct

operations against threat forces and cocaine production. More recently, those hours decreased significantly and unit commanders struggle to maintain an operational tempo they are previously familiar with. Though advisor teams were not successful in increasing blade hours, they advised partner commanders on ways to request additional blade hours. Primarily using a “return on investment” mentality, commanders are encouraged to demonstrate expected outcomes associated with additional blade hours requested. Although the TAC was not able to see the fruition of these requests, advisor teams reported JTF Commanders talking in terms of effects to be achieved with additional resources gained.



Figure 2: Advisor Team 1321 and Colombian Army Staff Counterparts³

Most significant to counter-narcotics operations is the on-going development of a new counter-narcotics division (CONAT) from multiple existing brigades in the Colombian Army. This unit is meant to synchronize and resource counter-narcotics efforts across the country under one commander. Seen initially at the brigade level with the advisor team partnered with the BRCNA, relationships built up allow engagements with the future commander of this new division. Advisors are able to offer an increase in capability, allowing for targeting specialists and military intelligence advisors to observe and advise the development of the division level headquarters over the next few months. In developing the CONAT, advisor teams will have touchpoints at echelon across the Colombian Army, able to fully track counter-narcotics efforts and offer feedback to commanders.

STRATEGIC EFFECTS ACHIEVED

The SFAB achieved great value added to the operational environment. The mere presence of advisor teams strengthened the relationship with a key partner in South America, while simultaneously preserving operational readiness of U.S. BCTs. Employing SFAB advisor teams is a low-cost means of maintaining presence amongst allies while offering advice on operational and tactical improvements.

The original request for forces in Colombia was four advisor teams over the course of four months. The purpose was to support SOUTHCOM’s enhanced counter-narcotics operations. There were no guarantees the Colombian military or government would request additional partnership at the conclusion of the mission. Through rapport developed, effects achieved, and confidence gained, the

military and government of Colombia invited additional advising efforts for months to come. Moreover, other South and Central American countries took notice, submitting their own requests for advisor teams. The increase in advisor capabilities across South and Central America allows 1st SFAB to focus advising efforts in both the source and transit zones of narcotics operations. The construct of the SFAB allows for the preservation of BCT operational readiness. Employing advisor teams prevents the BCT from deploying a leader-heavy formation forward to support these type of international operations. In the case of the Colombia mission, a BCT would likely have deployed four company headquarters and a battalion headquarters forward to partner with Colombian Army Brigadier Generals, Joint Task Force staffs, and the FORSCOM-equivalent command. The SFAB forces actually employed represent one-third of one battalion, with the remaining two-thirds available for employment elsewhere across the AOR.

Financially, SFABs are a relatively low-cost option for maintaining presence and partnership with allied forces. As a vignette, one team’s advising efforts resulted in their partner force re-allocating combat power and developing plans to triple coca field eradication efforts. The partner force’s eradication efforts averaged ~78Ha a week. After refinements to combat power array, eradication efforts averaged ~234Ha. This increase in eradication represents roughly \$4.6M (street value) of cocaine from being globally distributed. Every time the Colombian military eradicates a coca field, or destroys a processing lab they make a dent in the financial pocket of dealers and cartels. Advisor teams are partnered along the way, enhancing ways to improve staff processes that increase eradication outputs and achieve national goals.



Figure 3: SFC Smith, Advisor Team 1313 and Colombian Army NCO Counterpart³

CONCLUSION

The SFABs following early deployments to Afghanistan are regionally aligned across five component commands since 2020. Currently, small groups of advisor teams with recent experiences in U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), and SOUTHCOM are globally deployed. These operations demonstrate the significant value of small advisor teams capable of rapid global employment, achieving tactical, operational and strategic effects while generating military “return on investment.”

Endnotes:

1. Spanish phrase translated in English means "*I never walk alone*"
2. David, Carl, *Security Startups: Rethinking Security Sector Reform in the Sahel*. The Defense Post, August 4, 2020, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2020/08/04/security-startups-sahel>
3. Photos provided and released by 1st SFAB on March 23, 2021