
Nunca Camino Solo:

Security Force Assistance Operations in the Competition Phase

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Security Force Assistance Brigade (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's article "Security Startups: Rethinking Security Sector Reform in the Sahel," "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."¹ While recently supporting operations in the U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) area of responsibility (AOR), advisor teams working for U.S. Army South (ARSOUTH) created conditions for operational sustainability. In a short four months, they achieved global effects. From a military perspective, advisor teams are the lean, efficient, and savvy answer to prolonged multinational partnerships, achieving 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

In February 2020, 1st SFAB was tasked to provide four advisor teams (comprised of 10-11 personnel) supporting SOUTHCOM's enhanced counter-narcotics operations in Colombia. Four advisor teams and a battalion tactical assault command post (TAC) deployed to Colombia in June 2020 following a two-month delay due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Advisor teams were assigned to partner with Colombian Army joint task forces (JTFs) and the Colombian Army Counter-Narcotics Brigade (BRCNA). They were instructed to assess the operational tempo of Colombian forces and to gain an 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

Four advisor teams were positioned across the country



of Colombia in areas where the highest amounts of cocaine production occurs. Teams occupied a footprint in remote locations where they immediately established communications, a mission command node, and medical capabilities; they also tied into the force protection plan of their partnered force. Teams led by a captain (or major) and a sergeant first class immediately began the assessments needed to gain situational understanding and generate a plan for advising. The three major successes for the advisor teams were combat power allocation, medical evacuation refinement, and access to updated imagery for planning purposes.

Advisor teams spent time analyzing disposition of platoons across each area of operations (AO) and compared that to historical trends for cocaine eradication. Once complete, the teams 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 rearranging 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 of his forces and their 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, the advising efforts resulted in a tripling of cocaine eradication outputs on a daily basis while generating combat power for other security activities.

Following the establishment of their footprint, advisor teams executed a medical evacuation rehearsal drill involving the Colombian Army and Air Force. While both services had a plan to evacuate casualties in place, the rehearsals helped improve efficiencies in the processing of paperwork and requests for transportation assets. Advisors advised on the refinement of the medical evacuation plan and executed multiple no-notice drills to ensure proficiency and understanding. These efforts proved successful when a Colombian soldier, wounded by an improvised explosive device (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 to start developing a prolonged field care training plan meant to be taught by Colombian Army doctors to tactical elements.



Photos courtesy of the 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade

Advisor Team 1313 and Colombian Army Soldiers review reports.

The biggest challenges faced by our Colombian partners were 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 used outdated Google imagery to execute planning for operations. Advisor teams studied the military intelligence hierarchy and identified assets underutilized by the Colombian military. With this information, advisor teams were able to coach their partners on how to conduct a 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 the establishment of a mission command node centrally located in Bogota. This node allowed advisor teams to focus primarily on advising and not administrative reporting requirements to multiple headquarters elements. Operationally, the TAC was able to gain an understanding of how the Colombian Army allocated coca eradication goals and helicopter blade hours. This was done through interactions with the Jefatura de Operaciones (JEMOP), which is equivalent to the U.S. Army Forces Command. Additionally, the TAC and the BRCNA advisor team viewed the initial stages of developing a new counter-narcotics division.

During the four-month deployment, Colombian Army units primarily focused on eradication. 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 allowed the TAC to understand how eradication goals were 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 was made 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 earlier in their careers, military commanders may have had 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 struggled to maintain an operational tempo they were previously familiar with. Although unable to increase blade hours, the teams advised partner commanders on ways to request additional hours. Primarily using a “return on investment” mentality, advisors encouraged commanders to demonstrate expected outcomes associated with those requested additional blade hours. Although the TAC was not able to see the fruition of these requests, advisor teams reported that JTF commanders are talking in terms of effects to be achieved with the additional resources gained.

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 through the advisor team partnered with the BRCNA, the relationships built will allow engagements with the future commander of the new division. Advisors 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. Upon development of the CONAT, advisor teams will have touchpoints at echelons across the Colombian Army, be able to fully track counter-narcotics efforts, and offer feedback to commanders.

Strategic Effects Achieved

The SFAB achieved great value to the operational environment. The mere presence of advisor teams continued to strengthen relationships with a key partner in South America while simultaneously preserving operational readiness of U.S. Army BCTs. The employment of SFAB advisor teams was a low-cost means of maintaining presence amongst allies while offering advice on operational and tactical improvements.

The original request for forces in Colombia asked for four advisor teams over the course of four months to support U.S. 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 the rapport developed, effects achieved, and confidence gained, the government and military of Colombia invited additional advising efforts for months to come. Additionally, other South and Central American countries took notice, submitting their own requests for advisor teams. The increase in advisor capabilities across Central and South 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. Employment of advisor teams prevents the BCT from deploying a leader-heavy formation forward to support 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, JTF 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. For example, one team's advising efforts resulted in the partner force re-allocating combat power and developing plans to triple coca field eradication efforts. The partner force eradication efforts averaged around 78 hectares a week. After refinements to combat power array, eradication efforts averaged around 234 hectares. This increase in eradication represents roughly \$4.6M (street value) of cocaine from being distributed globally. Every time the Colombian military eradicates a coca field or destroys a processing lab, it makes a dent in the financial pocket of dealers and cartels. Advisor teams are partnered along the way, advising ways to improve staff processes which increase eradication outputs and achieve national goals.



An NCO with Team 1313 meets with his Colombian Army counterpart.

Conclusion

Operations in Colombia were 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. Within weeks of arrival to the outstations, advisor teams were told to cease activities due to a political environment questioning the legality of our presence and pending Colombian congressional approval. Teams constantly competed with negative social media posts, tweets, and articles. They remained focused even after being threatened by known internal threat actors. Advisors consistently demonstrated their professionalism in the face adversity.

In 2017 the Army created SFABs to advise foreign partners and relieve operational stress on BCTs. To achieve this, five active duty brigades and one National Guard brigade were created between 2017 and 2019. Following early deployments to Afghanistan, SFABs became regionally aligned in 2020 across five component commands. Small groups of advisor teams are currently employed globally, with recent experiences in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, U.S. Africa Command, and SOUTHCOM. 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."

Notes

¹ David Carl, "Security Startups: Rethinking Security Sector Reform in the Sahel," *The Defense Post* (4 August 2020), accessed from <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2020/08/04/security-startups-sahel/>.

MAJ John Ford currently serves as the executive officer (XO) of the 3rd Squadron, 1st Security Forces Assistance Brigade (SFAB) at Fort Benning, GA. His previous assignments include serving as the XO of the 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT), 2nd Infantry Division, Joint Base Lewis-McChord (JBLM), WA; XO of the 8th Squadron, 1st Cavalry Regiment, 2-2 SBCT; XO of the 5th Squadron, 15th Cavalry Regiment, 194th Armor Brigade, Fort Benning, GA; commander of Headquarters and Headquarters Troop, 1st Squadron, 32nd Cavalry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division; and commander of Charlie Troop, 1-32 CAV. MAJ Ford earned a bachelor's degree in agricultural mechanics from Stephen F. Austin State University and a master's degree in adult, occupational and continuing education from Kansas State University.

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