WHINSEC Tactical Training

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People ask me what I do, and for a long time I simply stated, "I work at the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC)." However, after receiving consistent blank looks I now reply, "I train men to go into the jungles of Colombia and fight." It registers. Simple in nature, but undeniably true, the men I train either pull triggers or support those who do.

We train soldiers and police from almost every country in the Western Hemisphere. The majority of the foreigners we train are Colombians. Most Americans have no idea of the brutal nature or the consistency of killing in this country. In comparison to the Colombian Army, our losses in Iraq are small.

I was the Director of Tactics and Special Operations (DTSO). This department has the mission to train soldiers in combat and combat support operations. We conduct all the high-risk operations within the institute: airborne, fast rope, close quarters battle (CQB), special demolitions and others. There are three main divisions in DTSO: the Special Operations Detachment, Combat Services Support Division, and the Military Intelligence Detachment. These three units are responsible for their particular areas, which are described below.

Special Operations:

This division is responsible for our Counter Drug Operations Course (TAC-6). TAC-6 is designed for mid-level NCOs and junior officers. It is an interagency course which combines infantry, military police, and Drug Enforcement Agency training. However, the meat of the course is infantry training. We teach operational planning and skills such as: advanced marksmanship, land navigation, infiltration/exfiltration techniques, first aid and patrolling. Think of it as a specialized Ranger course and you are pretty close to the mark.

A graduate of TAC-6 will have the skills necessary for planning, leading, and executing a tactical operation. This planning focuses on the platoon level and below. We emphasize individual skills and squad operations. Graduates will be able to do the following: select and engage targets from ranges 50 to 200 meters, navigate using map and compass on legs of 200 to 6000 meters, and operate as a member of a fire team, squad and platoon. We teach and reinforce skill sets from the simple (camouflage, basic radio communications) to the complicated (insert by air assault and FAST rope operations). This individual has to be able to operate in a rural, semi-permissive or non-permissive environment. In this environment, he must have the ability to subdue and apprehend suspects and secure a crime scene. This also entails collecting evidence, and destroying illicit sites and materiel not used as evidence.

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What does the above really mean? We train soldiers and police to do direct action missions. In their home countries, our students conduct live missions in ugly places. Usually this involves a raid on a drug lab that is located in guerrilla territory and heavily defended. Due to the violence of action, casualties are common. Once the objective is taken, they must be able to do the police work of apprehension and collection of evidence for criminal prosecution as well as intelligence. They also must be able to destroy what is left behind, whether it's a chemical-filled drug lab or a clandestine airstrip.

Combat Service Support:

The CSS division consists of an engineer section and a medical section. These two units conduct the Engineer Course (TAC-8) and the Medical Assistance Course (TAC-7). Both courses are intensive in specialized training. They prepare soldiers to go on live missions with infantry units. These soldiers must be prepared, just like our medics and sappers, to patrol and live in the field with the infantry.

The TAC-8 course teaches: land navigation, mountaineering, special demolitions, light construction and survival. They also conduct FAST Rope and air assault operations. Special attention is given to booby traps and the clearing of mines. We are also leveraging knowledge gained with IEDs. Though this is a new concern with our Army, the Colombians have faced this threat for years.

The course is only 10 weeks long. Nevertheless, it is knowledge and skill intensive. It is built to enhance the capabilities of the average engineer at the NCO and junior officer level. In essence, it is the U.S. Army Sapper course in modified form. The final exercise involves the building of actual structures on a demolition range, and insertion to an unknown point. Then, the students patrol back to the range, conduct surveillance, raid the structures, and using demolitions, destroy the target.

The Medical Assistance Course (TAC-7) is one of the most essential courses we teach. For combat medics, I know of no other training that is equal to it. TAC-7 is a combination of fieldwork and classroom instruction. We teach both male and female soldiers in a six-week curriculum. The students learn the fundamentals of medication administration (i.e., morphine and other high-level medications). They also work with moulage kits, animal cadavers and other training devices to learn the intricacies of ballistic wounds, combat surgery and suturing techniques. The cadre also coordinates for guest instructors (doctors and senior physician assistants) from Martin Army Community Hospital to enhance training.

One of the most important classes

students receive is evacuation of casualties. We place emphasis on mountaineering and use Ranger Training Brigade facilities at Fort Benning and Dahlonega, Georgia, to conduct this training. In essence, we produce an EMT "plus" medic, who not only serves combat units; but like his civilian counterparts, can assist noncombatants as well.

Military Intelligence:

Military intelligence Division conducts the Intelligence Officers Course (TAC-2) and the Counter Narco-Terrorists Analyst Course (TAC-10). Both of these courses involve Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield (IPB) and the intelligence cycle. We structure the courses to show a systems approach to intelligence.

They emphasize techniques and procedures to process and analyze intelligence in a rapid and effective manner. TAC-10 emphasizes a Common Operating Environment (COE) doctrine and methodology. Whatever you want to call it, Small War, MOOTWA or COIN, it is the meat and potatoes of the training. Small unit actions and seemingly isolated incidents are pieced together to decipher how the enemy operates and determining his intentions and future operations. Both courses use the Joint Conflict And Tactical Simulation (JCATS) exercises to enhance training.

The two main areas of focus are the Commander's Intelligence Requirements and the limits of collection. Both are key. We ensure students understand that the first area is the basis of true needs and effective intelligence. Their work can and will affect everything that follows in subsequent tactical operations. For the second area, we ensure, from the U.S. perspective, that students understand there are certain boundaries that are not crossed. Legal and ethical considerations are always highlighted.

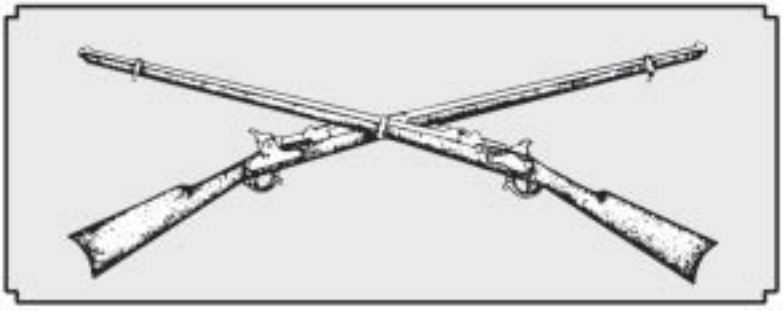
Our Legacy

In essence, WHINSEC is an economy of force mission and a combat multiplier. The importance of even the simplest training event cannot be over emphasized. In many cases, the students who come to us have poor combat skills. From fire team "react to contact" drills to PCIs and patrol orders, we truly show these soldiers "what right looks like" and therefore help them to survive.

The professional and personnel benefits of being assigned to WHINSEC are obvious. There are Brazilian, Colombian, and Chilean Special Forces NCOs and officers assigned to the department. These individuals are highly professional and have taught their U.S. counterparts different techniques and procedures. This environment truly opens one's eyes to different worlds.

My officers and NCOs also work with interagency and joint staffs. We are linked into the U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) Commander's Theater Engagement Plan. Our tactical programs directly support US. policy in the region. We also teach the most comprehensive human rights and law of land warfare training within the Infantry and Special Forces community. With the Global War on Terrorism, we are now developing relationships with U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM) and WHINSEC's links to Latin America and Canada dovetail directly with the NORTHCOM mission of Homeland Security. By our very existence, the members of our department have an inherent opportunity for professional growth and education as U.S. soldiers.

We also are paid more than a standard TRADOC instructor. A WHINSEC soldier has the potential to make $200 in language pay and $150 in parachute pay. This is combined with an excellent opportunity for schooling. Fort Benning is the home of all the infantry schools. Slots to Ranger, Pathfinder, etc are common. For officers, WHINSEC is home to a resident Command and General Staff Officer Course (CGSOC). The opportunities to assist in overseas TDY operations in the SOUTHCOM AOR are also available. All the above factors increase one's perspective and professional abilities.

The intention of this article is to inform the reader. WHINSEC's mission is often misunderstood or unknown, but we are an integral part of the war effort. The United States' reliance on coalition forces will not end. Today, El Salvadorians and other Western Hemisphere countries have units in Iraq and Afghanistan. WHINSEC has trained many of these soldiers or the leaders who planned their deployments and orders. The traditional problems south of our borders will not be resolved in the near future. If anything, they will probably increase. Homeland Security issues now direct international coordination on all fronts. Traditional approaches to security of our northern frontiers and shores are obsolete. Because of the in-depth and multifaceted training we do, WHINSEC has been and will continue to be a valuable asset in both the war against drugs and the war against terrorism.

Lieutenant Colonel Robert G. Fausti has served in the U.S. armed forces for more than 20 years. He has served with both conventional and Special Operations units. LTC Fausti is a graduate of Ranger, Jumpmaster, Pathfinder and the U.S. Marine Corps Scout Sniper Instructor Course at Quantico, Virginia. LTC Fausti graduated magna cum laude from Northern Illinois University and has a master's degree from Vanderbilt University.