“Who taught these guys to shoot like Chuck Norris?”

ODA 746 in Tolemaida

by Robert W. Jones Jr.

Numerous U.S. Special Forces (SF) teams have deployed to Colombia over the years to train Colombian Army elements at the sprawling base of Tolemaida. It was now time for Operational Detachment A 746. The element was stood up as the sixth operational detachment alpha (ODA) of A Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (2/7th SFG) in mid-October 2005. Besides being the newest ODA, 746 was also a “young” team. It was made up of four experienced Special Forces non-commissioned officers (NCOs), a new ODA commander, and six recent graduates of the Special Forces qualification course who had entered the Army through the “18X program.” These newcomers to Special Forces joined the 7th SFG in late October and early November 2005. During the first nine months, Red Cycle (support) interrupted team training. This article discusses the first overseas deployment for ODA 746. It was also the first SF deployment for most of the team members.

The training mission was typical for Special Forces, but it was to be Phase II training. The ODA was to “train the trainer” to enable Colombians to instruct and evaluate their own soldiers in advanced infantry tactics and techniques. ODA 746 was assigned two mission sets: train selected soldiers of the Special Forces Brigade (Brigada de Fuerzas Especiales—BRFER) and the Commando Battalion (Batallón de Comando Ambroseo Almaceda—BACOA) in advanced infantry tactics, advanced marksmanship skills, and airmobile operations. While both units are part of the Colombian special forces, they are assigned to different commands; the Special Forces Brigade is part of the Fuerza de Despeque Rápido (FUDRA, the rapid deployment force) and is a national-level force controlled by Colombian Army Headquarters. The second unit, the BACOA, is the Colombian special forces unit assigned to the COESE (Comando de Operaciones Especiales Ejército). The COESE is the Colombian equivalent of a miniatur-

Training foreign soldiers is always challenging. It is no different in Colombia. During the “train the trainer” classes, the Special Forces soldiers had to accept that their instructor students could be pulled out unexpectedly because their unit was going into combat. During the first week of training, five medics left training to rejoin their deploying units. The Colombian “battle rhythm” is typically ninety days in the field conducting security operations, followed by thirty days in garrison. During the garrison phase, the soldiers take leave and receive training. The ODA 746 mission in Colombia eventually evolved into assisting the Colombian instructors with sustainment training because of the operational tempo.

The optimal training schedule prepared at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, was quickly adjusted when faced with reality at Tolemaida. Prior to beginning advanced marksmanship training, one of the first tasks was to assess the shooting skills of the students. The medics conducted both eye and ear screening for the Colombians; if they could not see the target, getting on the range was pointless. The Special Forces cadre then began with a simple “stress test” of shooting skills. It started with a short run that ended at the firing range. Then, the soldiers had to first engage several targets through a doorway before moving through the door into an open area to engage multiple targets. The stress test bypassed the usual antiseptic firing range that the soldiers had grown accustomed to and made the shooting realistic. During the stress test, it became evident that many of the Colombian soldiers had picked up bad habits, prompting one Special Forces NCO to ask, “Who taught these guys to shoot like Chuck Norris?” He meant “Hollywood” style—spraying the rounds from the hip, instead of aimed shots. These bad habits had to be corrected immediately.

Shooting dominated the ODA 746 effort in Tolemaida. Together the team designed and conducted a basic shooting course for the Colombian special forces units. Within a few days, the Colombians, practicing good shooting techniques, were consistently hitting designated targets with well-aimed shots. The experience gained from the American instructors would be multiplied when the Colombian sergeants returned to their units to teach their soldiers these marksmanship skills.

One of the critical things that the Special Forces bring to training is more ammunition, and in large quantities.
The Colombian instructor/students shot more in a week than they typically did in a year. Ammunition management was critical to the advanced marksmanship training. An additional NCO, Staff Sergeant Allan Stillman*, a weapons sergeant (18B) from ODA 744, was attached to ODA 746 at Tolemaida specifically to manage the ammunition and insure accountability safeguards were in place. This responsibility had to be learned during the deployment. Managing large amounts of ammunition for units training in different parts of the country is not something a brand new 18B normally does. At Tolemaida, Stillman had a double management challenge—the ammunition used by the Colombians and the training ammunition for the U.S. Special Forces teams while deployed.

Another attachment to the ODA was a mechanic, Sergeant Donald Revere*, from the battalion support company, 2nd Battalion, 7th SFG. Although the light-wheel vehicle mechanic (military occupation specialty 63B) was a veteran of two Afghanistan and one Colombia deployments, his duties were not limited to repairing the vehicles at Tolemaida. Being bilingual, Revere assisted several of the new Special Forces sergeants with classes. He also operated the forklift supporting Stillman with the ammunition. Revere’s multiple talents proved invaluable at Tolemaida.

For the 18Xs on their first deployment overseas, Tolemaida was a good environment in which to practice newly acquired skills and learn from the Colombians. Sergeant Douglas Franks* had enlisted right after high school graduation. The Idahoan graduated from the “Q” Course on 28 October 2005, as a Special Forces engineer (18C). Once assigned to the 7th SFG, he was cross-trained at the Special Warfare Center and School as a communications sergeant (18E) because there was a shortage of that specialty in the 7th Group. At Tolemaida, Franks worked communications and helped teach demolitions to the Colombians. “The Colombians were eager to learn, and we [the Americans] would show up early for scheduled training, not just to prepare, but to practice our Spanish,” said Franks. He discovered that his Spanish basic language training had provided just that, the basics. He went to work identifying words and phrases needed to instruct the Colombians. His tactics, weapons, and demolitions dictionary quickly grew to over fifteen pages as training progressed.

The demolitions training followed the crawl-walk-run system. Training began with a series of practice “dirt shots,” literally blowing holes in the ground. Then, the Special Forces engineers taught wood, followed by steel cutting techniques. The training culminated in an exercise to clear a helicopter landing zone. This entailed cutting down several trees with explosives. Members of ODA 746 also prepared other specialty courses for the Colombians.

One of the sub-tasks assigned to ODA 746 was to conduct sniper training. This was given to the weapons sergeants, Staff Sergeant Israel Estévez* and Staff Sergeant Daniel Cazadores*, both on their first Special
Forces deployment. As the primary instructor, Estévez had two weeks to train the Colombian snipers. The range area provided by the Colombians enabled shots up to 800 meters, a good test for most snipers. Estévez prepared his first class before leaving Fort Bragg, based on the BACOA sniper teams having the American M40 sniper system (a 7.62 caliber Remington 700 rifle with scope). At the end of the two weeks, the Americans introduced the Colombians to the .50 caliber Barrett sniper system. It was also an opportunity for the other ODA members to train with the weapons system. But, shooting was not the only training ODA 746 planned.

The helicopter is key to quickly deploy forces in Colombia. The Colombians’ major method of infiltration is by rappelling from a helicopter into small landing zones cut out of the jungle. ODA 746 introduced them to “Fast Roping” infiltration. The “Fast Rope” is a single thick rope that allows multiple soldiers to descend from a helicopter rapidly. This technique allows a Black Hawk helicopter load of soldiers to get on the ground in seconds rather than the several minutes via rappelling. While inexperienced in terms of their number of deployments, the ODA members were well trained in their various tasks.

Integrated into the training for the Colombians were team prepara-
Two members of ODA 746 ham it up for the camera during medical cross-training. One SF soldier needs to practice more often.

Team training with the 60mm mortar.

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Endnotes

1 ODA 746 briefing, 20 July 2006, Tolemaida, Colombia, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Sergeant First Class Edward Bennett*, ODA 746, 7th Special Forces Group, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Jones Jr., 21 July 2006, Tolemaida, Colombia, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

2 “AOB 740 Historian Introduction Briefing, July 2006,” Bogotá, Colombia, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; The COESE has a staff of less than fifty Colombian military.

3 Battle rhythm can be defined as “the procedures a unit does on a daily basis to prepare and operation in combat” (Field Manual 3-05.301, Psychological Operations Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures, 31 December 2003, 2–20).

4 Staff Sergeant Daniel Cazadores*, ODA 746, 7th Special Forces Group, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 21 July 2006, Tolemaida, Colombia, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

5 Cazadores* interview; Staff Sergeant Allan Stillman*, ODA 744, 7th Special Forces Group, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 21 July 2006, Tolemaida, Colombia, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

6 Sergeant Donald Revere*, 2nd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 21 July 2006, Tolemaida, Colombia, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

7 Sergeant Douglas Franks*, ODA 746, 7th Special Forces Group, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Jones Jr., 21 July 2006, Tolemaida, Colombia, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

8 Franks* interview.

9 This is the M82 .50 caliber sniper system produced for the military by Barrett Firearms Company.

10 Staff Sergeant Israel Estévez*, ODA 746, 7th Special Forces Group, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 21 July 2006, Tolemaida, Colombia, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

11 Bennett* interview.