Monday morning, 3 April 1967, Colonel (COL) Magnus L. Smith, the 8th Special Forces Group (SFG) commander in the Panama Canal Zone, was directed by U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) to prepare a mobile training team (MTT) for a “classified” mission. [At this time all SF MTT missions were classified until completed unless labeled very sensitive. In that case the National Security Act twenty-year classification review rule applied]. The 1967 Bolivia MTT-BL 404-67X training mission fit the “classified very sensitive” category.

The mission was significant. A Ranger-qualified SF captain/major was to lead the element. Despite having only two SF companies assigned (the standard was three for an SF group), the 8th SFG at Fort Gulick on the Atlantic side of the isthmus, was the Special Action Force (SAF) for Latin America. At the time, there were only two Ranger-qualified captains or majors available; one was on Vietnam orders (Captain (CPT) Duane Boyer, B Company) and the other was the Group S-3 (Operations Officer), Major (MAJ) Ralph W. Shelton, who assigned MTT missions.

“I wasn’t specially-selected; it was simply ‘luck of the draw’ that I was the only one available that met the criteria. We tried to get CPT Boyer delayed, but Department of the Army (DA) wasn’t about to do that. So, I was the guy,” said MAJ Shelton. “COL Smith told me that we were to train a Ranger Battalion for the Bolivians because the country was being threatened by Communist insurgency. An [Bolivian] Army unit had already been chewed up by a bunch of guerrillas. We didn’t know that Che Guevara was there. I was sent over to SOUTHCOM at Quarry Heights (across the isthmus) for details. I was given license to pick my sixteen-man team, but we were to deploy as quickly as possible.” That was the Bolivia mission for 1967. Personal thumbnail biographies up to 1967 and photos will be used to identify personnel interviewed. The bios reflect the experience that these SF soldiers “brought to the table” for the Bolivia mission.

This issue of Veritas will explain the 8th SFG missions to Bolivia in 1967: to organize and train a Ranger Battalion; to train nine infantry rifle companies in small unit tactics.
and counterinsurgency (COIN) operations and afterwords; to advise the Airborne Battalion and to teach COIN operations to junior officers at the Combat Arms School in Cochabamba. The capture of Ernesto “Che” Guevara and the annihilation of the Cuban-led guerrilla insurgency by the SF-trained Bolivian Rangers demonstrated the value of COIN training and validated the precepts of foreign internal defense (FID). However, the significance of this training mission was overshadowed by an escalating social turmoil that threatened America (the Detroit riots and civil rights demonstrations in Washington) and the huge Communist offensive throughout South Vietnam beginning in November 1967 and extending through January 1968 (popularly known as the Tet Offensive of 1968). Considering this SF mission in the context of the greatest period of social upheaval in American history, the 1960s, the reader can better appreciate how important, complex, and sensitive this assignment was. Instead of complicating the history with the myriad of works that have been published afterwards, many of which are sensational, hypothetical or polemic, like the diaries of Che Guevara, official Cuban Communist Party accounts, and intelligence officer memoirs, the old Mission Area Analysis (MAA) format will rely almost entirely on what was available to the 8th SFG soldiers preparing for the mission in 1967. It is not our intent to analyze why the mission succeeded, why the Bolivians were able to eliminate the insurgency, nor why Che and his Cuban-led effort to start a continental revolution in South America failed. MTT-BL 404-67X will be explained as Major “Pappy” Shelton and his fifteen-man team understood the mission then.

To amplify this Mission Area Analysis approach the five paragraph military field order format will be followed: Situation [Friendly Order of Battle (military elements by type & size) with attachments], Enemy Order of Battle (insurgents & local Communist Party), weather, and terrain); Mission; Execution [Concept of Operation from highest to lowest levels (how the mission will be accomplished)]; Administration & Logistics; Command & Control (Chain of Command and Communications).

The Situation will address the significant events of the 1960s in the U.S., the world, Latin America, and Bolivia before and during the 1967 mission. They provide the reader with the necessary context. Interviews of nine surviving MTT veterans will provide realism and make the contents of the other four paragraphs more interesting and personal. The elements of the five paragraphs will be presented in normal order.

This introduction will be followed by an article on the mission preparation done by the SF team in Panama and the reconnaissance conducted by the advance echelon (ADVON) in Bolivia. A tourist sketch of the country in 1967 will cover geography, weather, the key historical events, demographics, the political situation, and the economics. That will be followed by an historical summary of major world events of the turbulent 1960s, concluding in 1967.

Still, the mid-1960s were the height of the Cold War. An American-led Western world faced a divided Soviet and Chinese Eastern Bloc. Communist-supported “wars of national liberation” had erupted worldwide making COIN training the primary task of Special Forces’ FID mission. This article will show how prevalent insurgencies were by 1967, where they were, how the “domino effect” philosophy determined U.S. foreign policy (anti-Communist) in developing countries, and how Washington was dealing with these Cold War threats. Combined together these factors determined how President René Barrientos Ortuño’s request for immediate military assistance would be answered in the late spring of 1967.

After his popular election in 1966, President Barrientos had requested additional military training for the Bolivian Army during an official visit to Washington. In the early 1960s, an SF MTT organized and trained an airborne
battle in Cochabamba. It was to be the first of several elite units oriented for mountain, river, and jungle warfare. Bolivian officers had been attending COIN courses at the School of the Americas in Panama as well. Since Bolivia was not facing an immediate insurgent threat in late 1966, the COIN training for infantry units was programmed for 1968. That scheduled training was pushed forward when Army patrols in southeast Bolivia were ambushed by foreign-led insurgents in early March 1967.

President Barrientos wanted a Ranger battalion organized and trained to combat the insurgent threat as soon as possible. The mission was created, and the United States Military Group (MILGP) in La Paz coordinated an ADVON visit for 8th SFG personnel while the main body in Panama began its preparations. Following these activities will be sections associated with Mission Prep; Enemy Order of Battle (the Bolivian Communist party, Cuba’s role in the hemisphere, the exploits of Che Guevara); Friendly Order of Battle (the Bolivian armed forces, other ongoing U.S.

**Note: This is the official roster for MTT-BL 404-67X. The sixteen-man MTT used two C-130 Hercules to carry them and their supplies and equipment for 179 days TDY (temporary duty) to Bolivia in 1967. Missions beyond 180 days required a PCS (permanent change of station).**

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**Endnotes**

6. John D. Waghelstein, telephone interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 12 June 2007, Bristol, RI, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.