

# “Welcome to Bolivia, MTT-BL 404-67X”

by Charles H. Briscoe



*Left to right – SGT Byron R. Sigg, CPT Barry McCaffrey, aide to MG William DePuy, Special Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities (SACSA), and SFC Daniel V. Chapa during the general's visit to La Esperanza, 7-9 August 1967.*

*Three* weeks after being alerted for the Bolivia mission, the 8<sup>th</sup> SFG MTT's main body flew from Howard AFB, Panama on 29 April 1967 to organize, equip, and train an elite Ranger Battalion. Two C-130 Hercules cargo aircraft carried fourteen SF officers and sergeants, personal and unit equipment, training materials, and supplementary foods to support a deployment for up to 179 days, the maximum allowable time for a temporary duty (TDY) assignment. The mission was to train and prepare a special infantry element to defeat a foreign-led insurgency in remote southeast Bolivia. It was not an unusual assignment. U.S. Army Special Forces teams had been serving as "force multipliers" training foreign troops to counter insurgency throughout the region and in Southeast Asia since the early 1960s. The SF soldiers had to learn all they could about the host country, its armed forces and police, and the guerrillas. Since these small mobile training teams (MTTs) were the "tip of spear" of U.S. national strategy, they had to have solid support to accomplish their missions. With SF teams deployed throughout Latin America, the 8<sup>th</sup> SFG operations center (OPCEN) maintained a 24-hour communications watch. The sensitivity of the Bolivia mission required communications personnel with the highest security clearances. The 8<sup>th</sup> SAF (Special Action Force, Latin America) had 401<sup>st</sup> ASA (Army Security Agency) Detachment radio operators in the OPCEN when MTT-BL 404-67X launched.<sup>1</sup>

"It was a long non-stop flight, but we landed on the dirt airstrip at Santa Cruz, unloaded everything and put it aboard the waiting 8<sup>th</sup> Division [Bolivian] trucks, and headed north to La Esperanza. It took more than the usual

*Dorys Roca and family in La Esperanza.*



*MAJ Ralph "Pappy" Shelton talks with SFC Ethyl Duffield (left) and MSG Oliverio Gomez (right) at La Esperanza.*

hour and a half to drive there, but we finished unloading shortly before sunset. Talk about a long day, that was one," said MAJ Ralph "Pappy" Shelton.<sup>2</sup> "As we taxied to the small terminal, I spotted MSG Milliard and SFC Rivera Colon waiting for us. They were wearing their green berets; 'So much for a low profile!' The major dealt with this by having all of us put on our berets. Supposedly, it was important that we make a grand entrance," said SGT Graham. "So we put on our berets. But after that, we wore them only on special occasions: when we introduced ourselves to the new battalion, when visitors came, and during ceremonies."<sup>3</sup> The following is a description of La Esperanza by Dorys Roca, who lived there in 1967:

"La Esperanza had somewhere between a hundred and two hundred people living there when the Americans and the Bolivian Rangers came to town in 1967. Only a few *indios* [Indians] lived in the village. Most men worked out of town and came home on weekends to be with their families. There were a lot of people here in the early 1960s before the sugar mill went out of business. Still, we had no electricity and got our water from the well in the plaza where the kiosks were," said Dorys Roca, who later married SF Sergeant Alvin Graham. "Our house had three rooms filled with beds for the fourteen

*Departing Santa Cruz airport with the trucks crammed with equipment and supplies. The two C-130s are in the background.*





*The Santa Cruz bus stop by Hugo's kiosk in La Esperanza.*

of us. Because we had no heat, we slept huddled together. The cooking was done in an outside adjacent shed. Every family had an outhouse. We used a nearby lake to wash and do laundry. Once or twice a year we rode the morning or afternoon bus or hopped a truck to Santa Cruz to buy shoes and clothes. There was a church, but the priest was responsible for several villages. You would call him a 'circuit rider,' I guess. But, every Christmas and All Saints Day everyone walked in a procession around the town. School was year round. No one had a car or truck; one either rode a horse or walked. Children were delivered by a midwife. Compared to the States, living conditions were primitive, but daily life, though simple, was pleasant.<sup>4</sup>

Some of the SF soldiers on their first MTT were quite surprised. "I was amazed that the sugar mill still had buildings with roofs. We brought tents expecting nothing. The original power lines [220/240 volts DC (direct current)] were still there so we could hook up our generator and have lights in our houses. I had seen no telephone poles nor power lines alongside the road to La Esperanza, so that was a nice



*SSGs James Hapka (left) and Jerald Peterson cooking over a stove in the team quarters.*



*The sugar plantation had a well and storage cistern for water.*

surprise," remarked SGT Graham. "When we drove into town, the local people were smiling and seemed happy."<sup>5</sup> SSG Hapka's first impression of the mill town was: "Lord have mercy! Other than some houses, there was no electricity, no running water, and only rudimentary sanitation."<sup>6</sup> CPT Edmond L. Fricke, the MTT deputy and operations officer, described La Esperanza as "a town with 15 or 20 families, with a few dirt streets over which cowhands occasionally drove thundering herds of cattle that covered the houses in huge clouds of dust. It seemed to have been made for a Western movie. Close your eyes," said Fricke, "and think about *Guns smoke* [a popular 1960s television Western]."<sup>7</sup> It did not really matter because the mission eliminated thoughts of a social life anyway.

After the unloading was done and MAJ Shelton had assigned everyone to a building for sleeping, MSG Milliard and SFC Rivera Colon briefed everyone on the latest guerrilla activity south of Santa Cruz and then gave the team a tour of the area. "The only Bolivian troops there were a small security force. We took the team around and pointed out the areas available for training and showed them where the marksmanship ranges were going to be built by Harry Singh's crew," said MSG Milliard.<sup>8</sup> "On the tour we pointed out where the Frenchman, Régis Debray, was being held prisoner. It was a one-story, dilapidated building that looked like an old horse stable. The guard outside was armed with a 7.62 mm Mauser. The Bolivians moved Debray out the next day," said SSG Thompson.<sup>9</sup> "By the time we finished, the biting bugs were out in force. No one had to be reminded to set up his mosquito net. While we had a meal of C-rations, MSG Gomez announced the night's guard detail, and we went to bed," said Milliard.



*Plantation building where Frenchman Régis Debray (inset) was temporarily held before his trial in Santa Cruz.*

"The first Rangers began arriving in small increments. And when they did, they came in several truckloads at a time."<sup>10</sup> In the meantime, the SF soldiers established camp and got ready for their initial classes.

Since American soldiers were most vulnerable in a foreign country while they were getting settled, the SF leaders had to build rapport with the community authorities and develop an informal early warning system to protect themselves against guerrilla threats. While the rest of the team were setting up communications, taking care of field sanitation, and preparing camp the next day, MSG Milliard introduced MAJ Shelton, CPT Fricke, and CPT Margarito Cruz to the local dignitaries and shopkeepers of La Esperanza. Though the mayor (*alcalde*) Erwin Bravo, a small businessman, was the ranking person, the school teacher, Jorgé, was the most respected personality. The Catholic priest only came by occasionally.<sup>11</sup>

The Americans had to explain the following: why they were there; what their mission was in La Esperanza; how long they'd be there; and what kind of training was to be conducted. They emphasized their concern for the safety of the townspeople; the medical capabilities that SF brought; and that MAJ Shelton was in charge and responsible for his soldiers. He was the man to see about any problems. They needed to hire a cook and helper, arrange to have laundry done, haircuts, and buy small sundries as a start. "Winning the hearts and minds' of the community was the first step towards accomplishing the mission and insuring our survival. Afterwards, we were given a 'tour' of the village that included introductions to some of the folks and, not surprisingly, ended at the old schoolhouse," said MSG Milliard.<sup>12</sup>

"That quickly established the civic action project in



*MAJ Ralph "Pappy" Shelton used his guitar to build rapport with the people of La Esperanza.*

my mind because the existing school accommodated 240 children of all ages who lived in and around the village. Jorgé and his wife provided what little grade school education the local population received. The people didn't have much, but they were proud of their little settlement and rightfully so," said MAJ Shelton.<sup>13</sup>

"I spent most of that first week, just 'hanging out' as they say today, being friendly, to make the locals comfortable with me, and showing that we posed no danger. It's amazing how much information you can get by just talking with people. By the end of the week, I carried my Gibson guitar along. I can't play that well, but the men could. It seems like they learned at birth. That ole guitar did the trick," chuckled Shelton. "The truth is that was our primary intelligence collection method until we could train some Bolivian Rangers. Then, it became secondary to the intelligence 'agents' trained by CPT Cruz and MSG Milliard. But it had become a routine, so I kept it up."<sup>14</sup>

"MAJ Shelton wanted to promote good relations with the locals by giving them as much business as possible. Hugo and his wife ran the nearby kiosk (*kiosko*) selling grain alcohol, beer, sodas, and sandwiches. He became our barber and shoe repairman and also pulled teeth for the people. Local women did the cooking, laundry, and cleaned our quarters," said SFC Carpenter.<sup>15</sup> The SF established good communications with the locals but radio "commo" with Panama and La Paz proved much more difficult.

The MTT's primary radio was supposed to be the SF standard AN/GRC-109. SFC Roger L. Kluckman, the SF communications supervisor, tried a variety of techniques. He installed the AT-292 antenna on the top of the tallest building, tried a field expedient directional antenna, and asked the MILGP in La Paz to relay traffic to Panama with little success. The "back up" radio, a commercial Collins KWM2A single sideband CW (Morse Code) and voice radio with its 1,000 watt linear transceiver, became the primary. Good CW and voice "commo" were established with Fort Gulick by 5 May 1967 after adjusting report times. The best link to La Paz was using the Collins.<sup>16</sup>

"We used the AN/GRC-109 to connect the Ranger Battalion to 8<sup>th</sup> Division in Santa Cruz. Situation reports (SITREPs) from 8<sup>th</sup> Division kept us informed about the

*Replacement of the old school would be the major civic action project for MTT-BL 404-67X.*





Left to right, SFC Richard A. Kimmich, SSG William W. Burkett, and SFC William R. Bush relaxing at the kiosk.



MSG Oliverio Gomez talks with some of the La Esperanza residents.

guerrilla contacts. A sergeant in the MILGP who was a Ham radio enthusiast (Call Sign: CP1DS) arranged to get the MTT a Bolivian license, 'Call Sign: CP6HY.' The 'CP' stood for Bolivia. Then we 'hammed' with him nightly. My parents became so used to my nightly MARS radio-telephone call through W1AZP, a Sikorsky Helicopter employee living in Stratford, Connecticut, that my Dad got upset when I didn't call," laughed SSG Wendell Thompson.<sup>17</sup> "Late at night, SFC (William R.) Bush, who replaced SFC Kluckman when his wife learned that she was having twins, talked with the radiomen on the SS *Queen Mary* as it sailed down the east coast of South America, through the Straits of Magellan and up the west coast of South America to Long Beach, California, where it was to become a tourist attraction. Since I spoke Russian, Sergeant Bush would dial in Moscow so that I could listen to the Communist news," remembered MSG Oliverio

Gomez, the team sergeant.<sup>18</sup> By then, the Bolivians were settled in the sugar mill warehouse, and it was time to start training.

"The Ranger Battalion had been organized much like U.S. Army infantry battalions in WWII. Since it had a very small headquarters, company officers were assigned additional staff duties. There was a small radio section and a reconnaissance platoon at battalion level. The rifle companies had four platoons (called *secciones*): three rifle platoons and a weapons platoon equipped with French 82 mm mortars. There were four nine-man squads in a rifle platoon: three rifle squads carried predominantly 7.62mm Czechoslovakian-made Mauser rifles; the weapons squad had two Czechoslovakian (BRNO) 7.92 ZB-30 light machineguns (predecessor to the famous British Bren gun of WWII). The other men in the weapons squad, carrying Mausers, served as assistant gunners and ammunition bearers. Squad leaders, selected by their peers, wore red epaulets (tabs) on the shoulders of their uniform shirt. The Ranger companies operated with about 140 personnel," said SFC Chapa.<sup>19</sup>

1LT Harvey W. Wallender (left) replaced CPT Margarito Cruz in October 1967. Here SFC Daniel Chapa and he talk with the "agents."



CPT Margarito Cruz, MTT S2 Officer



CPT James Trimble, MTT S1/S4 Officer

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"It was better than Christmas in La Esperanza when the 'new' WWII and Korean War-vintage weapons arrived from Panama," said MAJ Shelton.<sup>20</sup> "Initially, we didn't get enough .30 cal M-1 Garands and .30

cal BARs (Browning Automatic Rifles) to equip all rifle platoons, so one rifle platoon per company carried their old Mausers and magazine-fed ZB-30s light machineguns. The new .30 cal M-1919A6 light machineguns and 3.5 inch rocket launchers went to the weapons squads in each rifle company," related SFC Chapa.<sup>21</sup> But the Bolivians were a long way from firing weapons in early May 1967. ♣

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## Endnotes

- 1 William G. Mullins, Sr. interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 20 May 2008, Fort Bragg, NC, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited as Mullins interview and date.
- 2 Ralph W. Shelton, telephone interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 10 October 2008, Sweetwater, TN, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited as Shelton interview with date.
- 3 Alvin E. Graham, telephone interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 16 October 2008, Phoenix, AZ, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited as Graham interview with date.
- 4 Dorys Graham Roca, telephone interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 22 October 2008, Phoenix, AZ, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. *Dorys Roca was fifteen years old when the Americans came to La Esperanza. She had only been shopping in Santa Cruz and lived away from home for several months while tending a sick relative in Montero. She felt lucky to get a job cleaning the quarters and doing the laundry of the Americans. "It was kind of scary with the Americans there and several hundred Bolivian soldiers wandering around our village on the weekends, though we did have a policeman and a jail," said Dorys Graham Roca. Mrs. Graham Roca became a U.S. citizen in Phoenix, AZ, on 21 September 1971. She has never returned home.*
- 5 Graham interview, 16 October 2008.
- 6 James A. Hapka, telephone interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 3 November 2008, Lawton, OK, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited as Hapka interview with date.
- 7 CPT Edmond L. Fricke quote from Henry Butterfield Ryan. *The Fall of Che Guevara: A Story of Soldiers, Spies, and Diplomats* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 91.
- 8 Roland J. Milliard, telephone interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 20 October 2008, Dracut, MA, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited as Milliard interview with date.
- 9 Wendell P. Thompson, telephone interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 7 January 2008, Pickerington, OH, hereafter cited as Thompson interview with date and Jerald L. Peterson interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 6 April 2007, Fort Bragg, NC, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited as Peterson interview and date. *Régis Debray had been captured on 20 April 2007 with Ciro Roberto Bustos, an Argentine revolutionary and artist, and George Andrew Roth, a free-lance English-Chilean photographer/writer, shortly after they left Che Guevara's camp. Ryan. The Fall of Che Guevara, 72.*
- 10 Milliard interview, 20 October 2008.
- 11 Milliard interview, 15 October 2008.
- 12 Milliard interview, 15 October 2008.
- 13 Shelton interview, 13 April 2007 and MTT-BL 404-67X, 8<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group (Airborne), 1<sup>st</sup> Special Forces, Special Action Force, Fort Gulick, Canal Zone, Situation Report (SITREP) SUBJECT: Report of Mobile Training Team to Bolivia (RCS CSGPO-125) dated 29 May 1967, hereafter cited as 8<sup>th</sup> SFG MTT-BL 404-67X SITREP with date.
- 14 Shelton interview, 13 April 2007 and 8<sup>th</sup> SFG MTT-BL 404-67X SITREP dated 29 May 1967.
- 15 Daniel V. Chapa, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 18 April 2007, Fort Bragg, NC, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited as Chapa interview with date and Harold T. Carpenter, telephone interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 18 November 2008, Las Vegas, NV, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited as Carpenter interview with date.
- 16 8<sup>th</sup> SFG MTT-BL 404-67X SITREP dated 29 May 1967.
- 17 Thompson interview, 7 January 2008 and Carpenter interview, 6 November 2008.
- 18 Oliverio Gomez, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 14 November 2008, Pacific Grove, CA, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited as Gomez interview with date and Graham interview, 21 October 2008.
- 19 Daniel V. Chapa and Jerald L. Peterson, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 11 April 2007, Fort Bragg, NC, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited as Chapa and Peterson interview with date.
- 20 Shelton interview, 12 April 2007.
- 21 Chapa and Peterson interview, 11 April 2007.



*SSG William W. Burkett demonstrating how to hold the 3.5-inch AT rocket launcher.*

*SSG Wendell Thompson checks the weapon positioning of a left-handed Bolivian Ranger firing a 7.62 Mauser.*

