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Special Forces in El Salvador and Afghanistan

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Abstract

This paper will compare and contrast Special Forces counter insurgency operations (COIN) during the 13 year war in El Salvador and the current war in Afghanistan. This writing will use some examples from a Special Forces Operational Detachment ALPHA (SFODA) engaged in COIN operations in vicinity San Miguel, El Salvador in 1984 and my experiences as a Special Forces operator conducting COIN operations in the country of Afghanistan.

Thesis Statement: The role of Special Forces in today's counterinsurgency operations are better than those in El Salvador due to more intense bilateral operations and personnel interaction with indigenous forces.

El Salvador

From January to April 1984 ODA-7 was sent to the country of El Salvador in order to conduct Small Unit Tactical Training (SUTT) with elements of the third brigade of the El Salvadoran Army. The purpose of this training was to bolster Salvadoran military power against the anti-government guerillas and to help ensure the successful execution of the El Salvadoran presidential election as per guidance from the United States Ambassador to El Salvador. (Veritas Vol.3, No. 3 2007)

The role of Special Forces elements in El Salvador was to provide training to the El Salvadoran Army. This training consisted of planning and operations which went in to basic patrol orders production for junior leaders. Intelligence training was conducted for the purpose of establishing probable enemy courses of action, potential enemy locations and more importantly to help synchronize operations between the various El Salvadoran elements that were conducting operations against the anti-government guerrillas. Operations classes were provided to the third brigade staff in order to, again aid in the synchronization of El Salvadoran forces and current intelligence about the locations and activities of the FMLN operators. The majority of this training was provided by the 18A (detachment Commander), the 18 F (detachment Operations and Intelligence Sergeant), and the 18Z (detachment Operations Sergeant). The detachment 18F (Assistant Operations and Intelligence Sergeant) also established the detachments information and intelligence collection plan. This plan aided the El Salvadoran

staff in their planning process, alert status and provided the detachment with information that directly affected their force protection measures and alert status.

The 18Bs (detachment Weapons Sergeants) provided weapons training on the various weapons systems in country which included 82 millimeter mortars, 60 millimeter mortars, the 1911 pistol, the M-16 and M-14 rifles, the M-79 grenade launcher, the 90 millimeter recoilless rifle and RPG-2, the BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle), the M-1919A6 (Browning light machinegun), the 3.5 inch rocket launcher as well as other weapons systems. These weapons sergeants along with the detachment operations sergeant and the detachment engineers assessed the third brigade's defenses and directed their additions and improvements.

The 18Cs (detachment Engineer Sergeants) provided demolitions training and training to counter mines and booby traps. The detachment engineers, as stated before, directed and helped improve on the third brigade's defenses and infrastructure. Some of these defenses included the emplacement of M18A1 claymore mines, barbed wire and concertina wire obstacles and Foo-Gas charges. The infrastructure improvements revolved around billeting and support structures such as the brigade headquarters, chow hall, etc.

The 18Ds (detachment Medical Sergeants) provided basic and advanced combat trauma care training to the El Salvadoran soldiers as well as the detachment members. Their other duties included the overall sanitation of the third brigade area, supervised the brigade's aid station as well as improvements to the aid station. These medics also provided advanced medical care for the detachment as well as seriously sick or injured El Salvadoran Soldiers and performed medical services for some of the local populace.

The 18Es (detachment Communications Sergeants) provided tactical communications training to the third brigade's soldiers. These communicators also established communications systems for the brigade's headquarters in order to help with the coordination of operations, calls for indirect fires and MEDEVAC for the El Salvadoran forces. They also established the detachment's communications network that linked them to the higher headquarters in country and with their parent unit in Panama that reported to the Group headquarters in Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

All of the detachment members assisted in all facets of training and the detachment's tactical plans if they were to be attacked. The end state of this mission was the establishment of the brigade's QRF (Quick Reaction Force), the brigade's Long Range Reconnaissance company, the infamous Atlacatl Battalion that was implicated in a series of "atrocities" during the following year and the safe conduct of the national elections. The down fall to this mission was the inability of the Special Forces soldiers to be allowed to conduct combat operations with their counterparts during their tour in country except if they were attacked at their location which did occur on the day after the national elections.

Afghanistan

From June to January 2005-2006 ODA-344 was sent to the country of Afghanistan in order to conduct COIN and combat operations with elements of the (ANA) Afghan National Army and (ASF) Afghan Security Forces. The purpose of this combat deployment was to conduct bilateral combat operations, bolster the Afghan military power against the Al Qaeda/Taliban insurgents and to and help ensure the successful execution of the Afghan provincial

elections as per guidance from United States Central Command (CENTCOM) and national directives.

The role of Special Forces elements in Afghanistan was to provide training to the Afghan forces and to conduct combat/COIN operations bilaterally with these forces. This training consisted of planning and operations which went in to basic patrol orders production for junior leaders. Intelligence training was conducted for the purpose of establishing probable enemy courses of action, potential enemy locations and more importantly to help synchronize operations between the various Afghan elements that were conducting operations against the Anti – Coalition Militants. Operations classes were provided to the Afghan National Army in order to, again aid in the synchronization of Afghan forces and current intelligence about the locations and activities of the Anti-Coalition Militants (ACM) operators. The majority of this training was provided by the 18A (detachment Commander), the 18 F (detachment Operations and Intelligence Sergeant), and the 18Z (detachment Operations Sergeant). The detachment 18F (Assistant Operations and Intelligence Sergeant) also established the detachments information and intelligence collection plan. This plan aided the Afghan Army officers in their planning process, alert status and provided the detachment with information that directly affected their force protection measures and alert status. These MOSs were also directly involved with the conduct of combat operations with these HN forces and provided intelligence support as well as fire support coordination. (interview, CPT Anthony George and MSG Brian King 2008)

The 18Bs (detachment Weapons Sergeants) provided weapons training on the various weapons systems in country which included 82 millimeter mortars, 60 millimeter mortars, the Kalashnikov rifle variants, the COM-BLOC series grenade launcher, the RPG-7 and RPG-2, the RPD squad machinegun, the PK series machinegun, the 107mm rocket and launcher as well as

other weapons systems. These weapons sergeants along with the detachment operations sergeant and the detachment engineers assessed the ANA and ASF's defenses and directed/ funded/ assisted in their additions and improvements. These Weapons Sergeants were also directly in charge of ASF companies for combat operations. (interview, MSG Brian King and SFC Jason Creekmore 2008)

The 18Cs (detachment Engineer Sergeants) provided demolitions training and training to counter mines and Improvised Explosive Devices (IED). The detachment engineers, as stated before, directed and helped improve on the Afghan defenses and infrastructure. Some of these defenses included the emplacement of M18A1 claymore mines, barbed wire and concertina wire obstacles and Foo-Gas charges. The infrastructure improvements revolved around billeting, generator support, sewage and support structures such as the chow hall, helicopter landing areas etc. These Engineers were assistant ASF element leaders to the 18Bs. (interview, SSG Justin Porter and SSG Jason Jones 2008)

The 18Ds (detachment Medical Sergeants) provided basic and advanced combat trauma care training to the Afghan soldiers as well as the detachment members. Their other duties included the overall sanitation of the Afghan Army/ ASF areas, directly in charge of the aid station as well as improvements and construction of the aid station at their A-Camp. These medics also provided advanced medical care for the detachment as well as seriously sick or injured Afghan Soldiers and performed daily medical services for the local populace. These medics also directly supported combat operations with the detachment's Afghan counterparts. (interview, SFC Matthew Campbell and MSG Brian King 2008)

The 18Es (detachment Communications Sergeants) provided tactical communications training to the Afghan soldiers. These communicators also established communications systems for the Afghan and Pakistani elements in order to help with the coordination of operations, calls for indirect fires and MEDEVAC for the Afghan forces. They also established the detachment's communications network that linked them to the higher headquarters in country and with their parent unit in Bagram Air Force Base, Afghanistan who reported to the Group headquarters in Fort Bragg, North Carolina that reported directly to the United States Special Forces Command (USASFC); the major subordinate command. These communicators also directly supported combat operations with the detachment's Afghan counterparts. (interview, SFC Vincent Hansen and SSG Jeffrey Bochey 2008)

All of the detachment members participated in all facets of training, direct combat operations and the detachment's tactical plans. The end state of this mission was the establishment of the a better prepared, more professional ANA, the ASF soldiers, under the direct control of the detachment were demobilized and integrated in to the ANA as well as the Afghan National Police, the safe and secure conduct of the Provincial elections, and most importantly the shutdown of several key border crossing points used by the ACM. The particular success of this mission was the ability of the Special Forces soldiers to conduct combat operations with their counterparts during their tour in country, this bolstered the confidence of the Afghan forces.

Conclusion

The role of Special Forces in today's counterinsurgency operations are better than those in El Salvador due to more intense bilateral operations and personal interaction with the

indigenous forces. The incident of the “atrocities” with the El Salvadoran Atlacatl Battalion probably could have been avoided by having Special Forces advisors on these combat patrols. The intense bilateral operations and the personal interaction today with the Afghan forces has increased their ability to conduct successful COIN and internal stability operations

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