

Running head: LIFE AS A SPECIAL FORCES COMPANY SGM

Life as a Special Forces Company SGM

SGM David M. Garner

United States Army Sergeants Major Academy

SMNRC Class 34 Phase II

MOS 18Z

Company Sergeant Major, 09/19/2006 – 06/20/2008

01/10/2009

Unclassified

Company SGM, 7th Special Forces Group, 2d Bn, C Co

Abstract

For 20 months I had the honor to be the Sergeant Major in a Special Forces Company. A SF Company consists of six Operational Detachments (Alpha) or ODAs and one Operational Detachment (Bravo). This story will unveil the good, bad, and sad times of 92 Green Berets during a deployment to Colombia in support of Operation Willing Spirit (OWS) and a deployment in support of Operation Enduring Freedom Caribbean-Central America (OEF-CCA)

Life as a Special Forces Company SGM

The heart of Special Forces is the Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) or A-team. On September 19th 2006 I took over as the new Company Sergeant Major of C/2/7th SFG (A). The Company had just returned from an eight month rotation in Afghanistan during which a team sergeant from ODA 765 had been killed in action. This had been the Company's only casualty and the guys took it hard and so did I, we had been good friends for nine years. After the normal 45 day refit process and 30 days leave the company was ready to deploy again.

It did not take long before the word to deploy again came from higher. In early December my company was tasked to provide two ODAs to augment another battalion in 7th Group for the next rotation to Afghanistan. This was a difficult decision to make since all the ODAs had just returned from Afghanistan and were now on leave. The decision was made to call the team sergeants and team leaders of the two ODAs off of leave and tell them in person. It was a somber moment when they arrived in the company area, it was like they knew what was coming. When the company commander and I informed them that they were to return to Afghanistan in six months, they all smiled and in unison said "good, we like it over there." At that moment I knew my tour as a Company Sergeant Major was going to be a rewarding one, to be in charge of such brave and professional NCOs and officers was a privilege.

As the company returned from leave in the first week of January of 2007, we were already getting prepared for a five month rotation to Colombia. This mission was two-fold, part of the mission was to train the Colombian military units in counter-terrorism techniques and the second part was to be in support of Operation Willing Spirit. This

operation was an important one for obvious reasons, to help rescue the three American contractors who were captured by Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). The men of C/2/7 were upbeat and proud to be a part of this deployment. We left for Colombia the last week of April and once we conducted our transfer of authority (TOA) with A company, 3rd Battalion 7th Special Forces Group, the ODAs wasted no time commencing training with the Colombians. The next five months was an experience I will not soon forget. Working closely with the U.S embassy and all the inter-agencies that are out there was a real eye opener, but once we figured out a way around the bureaucracy and red tape, day to day operations ran smoothly. Sadly, we were not able to assist with locating and rescuing the three Americans, we came close a few times but were never able to get a pinpoint location. The hostages were finally liberated on 2 July 2008 and our sister company B/2/7th SFG(A) was there to assist with the operation.

We redeployed back to Fort Bragg, NC on 30 September 2007 and began our refit process once again. Less than a month after returning, tragedy struck the company. Our CBRN NCO had committed suicide. I received the call early Sunday morning to come to battalion and start the notification process. The next duty day I informed the company about what had happened and as I expected there was shock and disbelief. The unit went through the normal grieving process and once that was done we “re-cocked” and focused our attention to the next mission coming up.

Operation Enduring Freedom Caribbean-Central America (OEF-CCA) was a typical SF mission, train the Partner Nation forces in counter-narcotics/counter-terrorism techniques, however, it had one spin to it, set up the first permanent Advanced Operating Base (AOB) in Soto Cano, Honduras. Soto Cano Honduras is home to Joint Task Force-

Bravo (JTF-B) whose primary mission is to support and conduct joint, combined and interagency operations in the Joint Operations Area (JOA), to enhance regional cooperative security initiatives and support democratic development. JTF-Bravo supports U.S. interests in Central America. My intuition told me that we would probably not be well received when we arrived in Soto Cano for the simple fact that Special Operation Forces had not been in that Area of Operations (AO) for years and that there would be some friction between us and the conventional units that were stationed there. Once we began arriving my "gut feeling" was right.

Our AOB mission was to be the Command and Control (C2) for all Special Operation Forces in Central America. We had ODAs in seven different countries and we coordinated all logistical needs for them. This was no small task for a ten man AOB or B-team but somehow, as always, we made it happen. As we began our planning and preparation for the five month deployment in mid January of 2008 my company suffered another loss of a fellow brother in arms.

On a cold January morning as the High Altitude Low Opening (HALO) team (ODA 764) was conducting a "routine" jump from 10,000 feet something went horribly wrong. The team exited the aircraft and all chutes opened and everything appeared to be going as planned but as they were making their final approach to the Drop Zone (DZ) one of the team members collided with another jumper about 100 feet off the ground. For some unexplainable reason the member of the team who caused the collision "cut away" his main canopy and fell to his death. Normal military freefall procedures dictate if a jumper is below 1,000 feet they should not "cut away" their main canopy because this does not allow sufficient time for the reserve parachute to properly inflate. As the Special Forces medics

desperately tried to save his life, the ODA Commander informed the Company Commander and me regarding what had happened. We began to inform battalion about the incident. At 1300 hrs that day the Soldier was pronounced dead at a local area hospital. This event shocked the SF Community because thousands of freefall jumps are conducted by HALO teams every year and normally nothing happens. A Special Forces Soldier knows the danger involved in his occupation, we accept it and try not to dwell on it, but when a Soldier dies in a training accident it is reminder that the profession we have chosen is a dangerous one.

The last memorial was completed for our fallen brother and training and preparation began again for OEF-CCA. The company deployed to their respective countries in February and started training. As I said before my "gut feeling" was right when we arrived in Honduras, but not all the units were reluctant to help us. The JTF-B leadership was more than happy to have us. The Commander of JTF-B knew what our capabilities were and was anxious to use us. The biggest threat to the AOB was, believe it or not, the Military Police unit that was stationed there, for some reason they despised us and at times made our life on Soto Cano difficult. One example that comes to mind is the day we were coming back from the range. Apparently, they have a rule that you can't ride in the back of pick-up truck while on base, this was news to me. As the MPs tried to pull us over for this minor infraction that only applied to SF guys, I told my driver to keep going until we got to our compound. This was probably the only car chase in Soto Cano's history. With speeds reaching 8 MPH we finally reached our destination. I went to talk to the MP who had given chase and was not surprised to find him fairly upset. I explained to him that we were not aware of this rule and that I had seen other units doing the exact same thing.

As the conversation started to heat up my guys began to “circle the wagons” meaning they were not going to let anything happen to their SGM. As the situation escalated and more MPs began to show up and my guys wearing full kit and M-4s slung over their body armor I knew I had to do something. I pulled the MP aside and told him that this harassment was going to stop now, it was unprofessional and if I had to I would press charges against him. The MP knew I was right and that he and his fellow MPs had been intentionally harassing my men and he even admitted it, needless to say the situation was resolved and life returned to normal.

We redeployed at the end of May and I knew this was going to be my last deployment with the men of Charlie Company. Upon returning to the United States I was going to be the new S-3 SGM for 2d Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group which I didn't want to do but my Company Sergeant Major time was up and it was time to move on. The only silver lining to the move was that I would stay with the Battalion.

As I look back on my time as the Company Sergeant Major it was the best time I have ever had in the military. There were times I was mad, sad, and happy, but the majority of the my tenure I was extremely happy and proud to have served with some of the finest NCOs and officers the Army has to offer.

